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## Cracking the code: accreditation of prior experiential learning and the discourses of higher education

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**Cracking the Code: Accreditation of Prior  
Experiential Learning and the discourses of  
higher education**

**Doctor of Education (EdD)**

**March 2004**

OPEN

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## Abstract

This thesis seeks to examine the process of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in a university in the UK, in order to discover how it is working. The starting premise is that APEL generally is not fulfilling expectations in terms of either benefiting students or widening participation. Nor has it taken on the emancipatory role, attributed to it by some of its promoters, of opening up institutions of higher education in terms of the control of knowledge and the recognition of knowledge gained in contexts outside the academy.

The approach taken to the research is qualitative, focusing on a single institution in some detail, with the researcher central to the process. Data take the form of documentation produced by the institution, taped seminars, texts produced by students and interviews with lecturers and students. All data are defined as texts and are analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics.

The conclusions find that the discursal practices of the academy and the social structures they represent and create constitute a constraint on the potential of APEL as an instrument for broadening the recognition of different types and sources of knowledge. Different approaches to assessment for APEL are proposed, drawing on experience and theory developed elsewhere.

## Chapter 1

### The autobiography of the problem

I'm really grateful for having done the APEL because ... coming back after having a break from uni that just gave me more confidence in what I'm doing and showed me the focus of where I want to go so it's good to know my experiences have counted (N)

... it's really added to my enthusiasm and for me it's exciting because I can move on quicker than I ever imagined (JH)

These are some students' comments on APEL. But what is APEL? The convention adopted in the UK is to use the acronym AP(E)L, with brackets round the 'E', to include both APL, meaning the accreditation of prior certificated learning, and APEL, the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning. This latter, the process of awarding credit for learning gained from experience outside of an educational context, has come to mean many things to many people, to embody great hopes for revolutionary changes in education, the painless acquisition of qualifications by previously unqualified workers, the transformation of the nature of knowledge and of the role of universities, and the recognition of new approaches to learning by students and teachers. These hopes and dreams have been realised to a very limited extent, but on a wide basis APEL has so far not fulfilled its promise and remains a minority activity in most of the educational contexts in which it takes place. My involvement with APEL started in 1992, when I was working in further education, with the advent of National Vocational Qualifications. It has continued since I moved into higher education, through work with refugees and asylum seekers, with mature students, and on various widening participation initiatives. I believe it to be both a valuable and interesting concept and a practicable and useful process, with emancipatory and developmental potential for people making the boundary crossing into education after periods of time spent in other activity. In undertaking this thesis I wanted to find out what is behind the limited take up of APEL in higher



education. I have chosen to do this by focusing on the microcosm in which I work and implement APEL, and, because my background is in language and literacy, I decided to do this by examining the APEL process through the medium of the texts which represent it in the institution, texts created by lecturers and students, spoken and written, for a range of purposes and at different stages of the APEL process. Surveys have been carried out detailing where and how much APEL is practised in higher education, how many and what kind of students are involved, what ways and means are used to implement it. My concern here is with what actually happens in the institution where I work. How does APEL work? What is not working in the process and why? What do the discourses used by the different participants tell me about the process? Through the use of discourse analysis methods, my aim was to describe the social practices within which APEL takes place, the interactions of the participants in the process and how they are constructed within it. I hoped that this would lead to practical suggestions for pushing back the boundaries which constrain its development, as well as to further research into its implementation. I was not aware of any previous research into APEL using discourse analysis and this approach seemed particularly relevant because of the representations of knowledge required in claiming credit.

In this chapter I start by tracing a brief history of the development of APEL and the ideas behind it. I discuss the findings of some of the surveys mentioned above and general issues around the implementation of APEL in the higher education context both in the UK and with reference to some other countries. APEL is located within a broader agenda in the UK, that of 'widening participation' and 'lifelong learning'. Does it have a role to play within this context? Having dealt with the broader issues, I describe some more detailed aspects of the implementation of APEL, in particular the discursive aspects of the process, what structures and procedures have been developed and documented, by whom, and how they work. The ethos of my own institution is an important factor in this research. I describe the student body, the University, its mission and its characteristics and the place of APEL within it. Finally I explain why I have chosen to draw on Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (1999) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Halliday's (1994a) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) in examining the APEL process.

## **The history of APEL**

The idea of awarding credit for learning gained from experience outside of an educational context first developed in the United States in the late 1970s with the setting up of CAEL (Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning, later the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning). Its aim was to find '... a way to do valid and reliable assessment of extra-college learning at affordable cost' (Keeton, 2000, p.32). In 1979 Norman Evans brought the idea to the UK, where, faced with a demographic downturn among 18 year-old school leavers, universities were looking for ways of attracting different people, particularly mature students. APEL was seen as a way of facilitating access for those who had not followed a traditional educational route. In 1986 Norman Evans founded the Learning from Experience Trust and:

The creation of CNAAs' CATS Registry gave the Trust the chance to put into action at higher education level the brief that it gave itself [...] to work on the borders between formal education and the world of work and life. (Evans, 2000, p.70)

The idea was that individuals should be helped and encouraged to reflect on and assess their own learning on re-entering education, in order to orientate themselves and clarify their goals. Out of this developed a secondary aim, that of gaining academic credit for learning from previous experience, as an additional bonus. Key texts in developing these ideas were Kolb's (1984) *Experiential Learning* and Boud, Keogh and Walker's (1985) edited collection, *Reflection, Turning Experience into Learning*. Kolb (cited in Weil and McGill 1989, p.9) described experiential learning as:

the process that links education, work and personal development

and he, as well as Boud, Keogh and Walker, focused on the processes of learning from experience. Their ideas have led to further developments in the field of experiential

learning and teaching which go beyond as well as encompassing the idea of awarding credit for such learning. Thus Weil and McGill (1989, p.3) describe experiential learning as including four 'villages' with Village One:

concerned with assessing and accrediting learning from life and work experience as the basis for creating new routes into higher education, employment and training opportunities, and professional bodies.

The other three villages they describe are concerned respectively with: experiential learning for bringing about change in post-school education, experiential learning as the basis for group consciousness-raising, and experiential learning for personal growth and development. Weil and McGill (1989, p.5) say that:

A frequently stated aim of APEL is to reduce inequalities in society and create new opportunities for so-called 'disadvantaged groups'.

As Evans (2000) has explained, the development of APEL in higher education in the UK was facilitated by the advent of Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) schemes under the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) in 1986. New universities in particular were keen to adopt the credit-based model, whose structure was deemed to lend itself to the award of credit for learning from experience. Universities, however, were keen to emphasise the difference between APEL as they perceived it and APEL as practised in further education through the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) schemes. In her paper 'More than one bite at the APEL' Butterworth (1992) makes a distinction between a credit exchange model of APEL in which the skills and knowledge of a learner are ticked off against a list of 'learning outcomes' with the main aim being to acquire credit, and a developmental model in which the emphasis is on the reflective process by means of which learning is derived from experience. This latter model is considered by some (Trowler, 1996, p.21) as more appropriate in a higher education context because it involves 'personal commitment' and 'the development of the mind'.

APEL is therefore defined as both a means of gaining credit within a CAT system and a developmental learning process with implications for both the nature of higher education teaching and study and for recruitment, in terms of who comes to university and what happens when they come. I will now go on to look at how widely and in what way APEL has been implemented in HE. In doing so I will refer, among other sources, to the Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC) one of the two main English credit consortia. The university in which I work is a member of this consortium, which includes an AP(E)L network among its activities. Participation in this network and in SEEC conferences, workshops and publications has played a considerable role in developing and informing my interest in APEL, providing opportunities to meet involved colleagues and discuss the practice of APEL in other member institutions.

### **Who does APEL?**

In 1999 SEEC carried out a survey on credit practice and APEL across the UK, receiving responses from 30 new universities, 35 old universities and 27 colleges of further/higher education. The responses demonstrated that most institutions had developed a consensual model of credit award based on a notional ten learning hours. They also indicated that 77% of the responding institutions linked the award of credit to the achievement of 'learning outcomes'. These developments had taken place since 1994 in response to the recommendations of the Dearing Report for a national framework of credit-based qualifications and clear programme specification in HE. The SEEC survey also found that 56% of responding institutions had established an institution-wide process for APEL by 1999, although only 43% included APEL procedures in their Quality Management handbook and only 27% had a code of practice for APEL.

In 2000 the Learning from Experience Trust conducted a research project entitled *Mapping APEL: Accreditation of Prior Experiential learning in English Higher Education Institutions* (Merrifield et al, 2000). They found that although 78% of the 107 responding institutions had APEL policies and almost all said APEL was consistent with their mission, it was difficult to obtain figures for students actually gaining credit through

APEL. Only fourteen out of the 52 institutions which agreed to provide more detailed data gave information and two thirds of these reported fewer than 100 per year gaining credit, although there were two 'rare exceptions' where over 1000 students had gained credit (Merrifield et al 2000, p.26). A second report from SEEC in 2002 shows that, of the 37 institutions in the Consortium, 74% see APEL as an important part of their Widening Participation strategy. Yet the report shows very low numbers of students taking up the opportunity of APEL: an average of 120 part-time students and 46 full-time students per institution, with over half of the institutions not expecting the numbers to grow in the next year. The report also found that:

... even where there is an institutional framework, APEL is not used across the whole of the institutions, but rather in isolated pockets, most notably health care and nursing (SEEC, 2002 p.17).

Merrifield et al's (2000) research found that although respondents were very positive about APEL a substantial minority had concerns about low student demand, the reliability and validity of APEL and the difficulty of grading and marking claims. In the report from another research project covering 5 countries, *Social Inclusion through APEL: A Learners' Perspective* (Cleary et al, 2002, p.6) the authors state:

In England and Scotland there is considerable rhetoric about the value of AP(E)L. In practice, however, it proved quite difficult to find case studies of APEL activity and to find learners who were engaged in APEL processes.

They found that participants in APEL in England described themselves mainly as 'working class' with few or no previous qualifications, were mostly in their 20s and 30s and included few candidates from ethnic minority groups. I have not found any other data on how many people from traditionally underrepresented groups are benefiting from the process but it seems unlikely, given the above data, that APEL is at present fulfilling one of the aims attributed to it, that of reducing inequalities in society (Weil and McGill 1989).

## **How is APEL done?**

In 1996 SEEC devised an *AP(E)L Code of Practice* (updated in 2002) with operational recommendations which has been adopted by 38 institutions in the UK, including the institution in which this research was carried out. They have also published a handbook on *How to do AP(E)L* (Wailey, 2002). In this context the APEL process revolves around the concept of 'learning outcomes' which are the means by which learning from experience is assessed. Wailey (2002, p.9) lists as one of the 'Guiding principles' the identification of learning through a 'Written clear statement of outcomes of learning'. These may be the learning outcomes which the institution has devised for all its modules as a part of a credit-based system, or in the case of APEL they may be learning outcomes written by applicants for credit, based on their own learning. Wailey (2002) includes instructions on how to write outcomes and a list of verbs used in writing them. The process of writing learning outcomes involves lecturers, students and assessors in a particular discourse, a pre-ordained way of describing and categorising knowledge, which determines their approach to the practice of APEL. This is not the only way to implement APEL and there are many examples both in the UK and in other countries of different approaches. Harris (1999, p.135) suggests that in a context of strong pressure for social change such as in South Africa:

... bolder attempts would be made to value prior learning in and of itself rather than solely in terms of its degree of fit with existing standards or curricula or with the cognitive capacities deemed to be required to succeed in traditional academia

Davies and Feutrie (1999) point out that in France the fact that APEL applicants are required to demonstrate intellectual and problem solving capabilities, rather than knowledge equivalent to that learnt on a particular programme, makes the process more flexible there than it generally is in the UK. Michelson (1996, p.3) describes how at Empire State College, State University of New York, because the college has no specific curricula as such:

students' prior learning could be recognised and ordered according to the contours of a given student's knowledge.

Here students give an account of their prior learning and then construct an individualised degree programme for themselves based on what they know already and what they wish to learn. The framework within which APEL is carried out in my university, however, follows the SEEC model and it is this discourse and its implications for the participants in the process and the institution in which it takes place that I examine in the research.

### **The context of the research**

The institution in which the research was carried out is a post-1992 university, located in an inner-city area, with a mission:

to provide the best possible educational experience leading to a range of employment, social and economic opportunities for the widest possible clientele.

At the time of the research there were approximately 13,000 students. More than 70% of these were from the London area, 75% were aged over 21 on entry, nearly 40% were from minority ethnic groups, 55% were female and 36% were part-time. The practice of APEL was first established in the University in the School of Community Health, Psychology and Social Work, instigated by the national requirement that all nursing programmes incorporate a process for accrediting experience. In 1995 a Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit (RAGU) was set up to help qualified and/or experienced refugees and asylum seekers to either resume studying, re-qualify or enter employment or training in the UK. This project incorporated APEL into a programme of Orientation and Personal Development, Educational and Vocational Advice and Guidance, English Language and Information Technology and many participants re-entered education either at the University or elsewhere with advanced standing or credit.

Credit for certificated learning had been standard practice in the University since the 1980s and procedures for the award of credit for learning from experience gradually evolved. There followed the development of the University AP(E)L Policy in 1995 and designation of a member of staff in each faculty with responsibility for APEL claims. In 2000 an APEL and Accreditation Board was established and an external examiner appointed. These developments were mainly brought about through the efforts of one member of staff in the Interfaculty Office, which dealt with students whose choices of modules meant their course straddled more than one faculty. This colleague also developed the APEL module 'Making Your Experience Count', which was validated in 1998 as a preliminary level undergraduate module open to any student, with the aim of helping and encouraging students to claim credit for learning from experience. Students who complete the module gain 15 credits and may then go on to claim further credit through the preparation of a portfolio. In 1999/2000 the module also started running as part of an accelerated BA in Business Studies, run in the evening for students who were working full-time.

All students at the University are entitled to claim credit for learning from experience and can get advice and help either by going to the AP(E)L subject tutor in their subject area, or by taking the module. Credit for prior learning can be 'specific', in that it relates to specific modules on the student's degree programme, or 'generic', when students claim credit for learning which does not match any module but attaches to one of the 'free modules' which form part of most degree programmes. Generic credit has been awarded for a range of learning including supporting asylum seekers, experiencing conflict and civil unrest, coping with a disability, complementary therapy, trade union activities and a range of advocacy and voluntary work. However although feedback from students taking the module and claiming credit has been positive, numbers of claims have never been very high. In 2001/2 the total number of students gaining credit through APEL was 78: 32 in Social Work, 15 in Business Studies, 5 in Community Nursing, 15 claiming for work placement modules, and 11 claiming credit for various other modules across the curriculum or free modules.



## **The research questions**

The question which posed itself to me was why more individuals from our particular student body of mainly mature students, many studying part-time, were not coming forward as APEL candidates. Even on the accelerated BA Business Studies, where students take the 'Making Your Experience Count' module as part of their course, very few take up the option of applying for further credit. This led me to decide to examine in detail the process through which students need to go to achieve a successful claim, how the process is presented to them and what happens when they go through it. I decided to study some of the texts dealing with APEL in the University, whether intended for students or staff, including those created by students whilst undergoing the process, to examine my own practice as a tutor on the module, and to interview students and lecturers involved. Because of the nature of the APEL process, involving the coming together of two spheres of activity, the academic environment and the students' lives outside the University, I chose to use CDA as a research tool. The aim of the research was to identify:

What happens in the APEL process.

How it is working in this institution.

What is not working.

Why it is not working.

As I worked on collecting data that would answer these questions, I realized that underlying my approach were two initial hypotheses:

APEL takes place in a negotiated space, where candidates are required to present their learning from experience according to academic criteria in order to meet the expectations of assessors.

Candidates have to accommodate discursively in order to succeed in gaining credit.

This led me to develop a more specific set of questions appropriate to the analysis of the range of data I had collected from documents, interviews and participant observations:

How are the expectations of the academy in terms of APEL conveyed in documentation, teaching and teaching materials?

How are they interpreted by assessors?

How are students' attempts to meet these expectations manifested discursively in the texts they produce?

How do students' and assessors' perceptions differ?

How might APEL be developed to make it more of an emancipatory process for those involved?

### **Structure of the thesis**

The structure of the resulting thesis is as follows. In Chapter 2 I review some of the literature related to the aims and purposes of higher education and how knowledge is perceived within it, how APEL interacts with this and issues around student identity in academic writing. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used and the reasons for the approaches taken. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 contain the analysis of the data as follows:

Chapter 4 describes the process of APEL in the institutional context as represented in documents developed within the University. This part of the study focuses on the procedures which have been established in the University, by means of a close examination of the documentation. The context of culture is described with details of the

writers, the 'ideal readers' (Fairclough 2001) and the intentions behind the texts, and how they position the different readers. The documents are looked at within the contexts in which they have been created and are used, and in the light of any underlying educational ideologies.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the student data. These represent student activity in a variety of situations on the 'Making Your Experience Count' module. In this section the language of the students, both spoken and written is analysed in terms of content and form and related to that of the documentation. The question of what students choose to include when describing their experience relates to what they have read, to what the tutor has said and to discussions that have taken place in seminars. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p.62) stress the importance of having a clear sense of 'how a discourse works in relation to other things'. This is an important aspect of the analysis here since I am looking at an area where the discourse of the academy and the discourses the students bring with them from the world outside the University come together, as well as how oral texts interrelate with written texts and influence them. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) use the terms 'genre', 'discourse' and 'voice' to locate discourses within a network of orders of discourse. They use 'genre' to describe language tied to a particular social activity, 'discourse' for language used to construct a particular perspective and 'voice' for language used by a particular group of people. In this research I discuss examples of what I call the 'genre' of APEL, the 'discourse' of the academy or the workplace, and the 'voice' of students or lecturers. The characteristics of these as evidenced in the data are explored. This leads to a description of some of the linguistic features of both spoken and written texts in terms of vocabulary, grammar and textual structures. Student interviews are also studied as a means of understanding how students produce the written texts and position themselves through them. I examine my own language, as the tutor, in one seminar and how it interacts with the students' language.

In Chapter 7 the data collected from academics is examined. This consists of detailed analysis of interviews with lecturers who have acted as assessors for APEL claims. The discourse used by academics, its relation to the documentation and the ways in which

they react to student language in the texts produced by students are studied. These data contribute further to the elaboration of the notion of a genre for APEL and also to descriptions of the discourses of the academy as opposed to those of the outside world. Lecturer perceptions of what is appropriate language for a claim for APEL are analysed in relation to expectations of academic writing outside the APEL context. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p.16) have elaborated on Kristeva's notion of 'interdiscursivity', defined as 'the social structuring of semiotic hybridity,' to describe how different forms and types of discourse are mixed in many situations and thus form the basis for the development of new discourse types. They stress that this intermingling of discourse types represents not only the interaction of different forms of expression but also the interrelation of different forms of social practice. I consider how different discourse types contribute to the practice of APEL.

In Chapter 8 I draw together the conclusions from the research and their implications for the future of APEL practice in the University and beyond and for future research. The research has been closely interrelated with my own professional practice and that of colleagues whose help and co-operation have been a vital part of the project. I am also deeply indebted to the students who inspired and have directly contributed to my study. I hope that the findings will serve to advance the development of the practice of APEL and its function as a genuinely groundbreaking activity and will lead to further research and development within and beyond my workplace.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature review**

As described in Chapter 1, APEL was conceived as a means of mediating the divide between formal education and learning outside teaching institutions, with the aims of recognising different forms of learning and bringing more and different people into higher education. It therefore impinges on questions about the nature of knowledge, the purpose of higher education, who participates in it and what knowledge they bring with them. In this chapter I will look first at definitions of knowledge and how they relate to the concept of APEL. I will then consider some views on higher education today and some of the changes that have been taking place in the UK in terms of ideology, policy and practice. I will consider what these changes may mean to academics and students in their experience of higher education, and what role APEL plays or might play in this.

### **The nature of knowledge**

Habermas (1972) describes knowledge as historically and socially constructed and directly linked to human interests. He divides those interests into three categories: technical, practical and emancipatory. According to Habermas these interests relate to problems of human survival. The first, technical interest, concerns control of the environment, it results in empirical knowledge which is developed in the domain of work. Practical interest has as its outcome to create and maintain social harmony by means of communication and the sharing of ideas. It results in the reaching of a consensus about what is valid knowledge on the basis of social norms. Emancipatory interest represents the need of humans to grow and develop, challenging constraints, whether self-imposed or arising through social forces or institutions. Its outcome is the generation of new knowledge. Habermas (1987) sees communicative action as the means by which new knowledge is developed, and distinguishes between the 'lifeworld' and 'systems' which shape each other, although he argues that in contemporary capitalist society systems are dominating the lifeworld more and more to the detriment of

communicative action. In Habermas' thought we therefore see a distinction between empirical knowledge and knowledge which is developed as a result of social consensus, although a line is not drawn between these two and there is the ongoing potential for the development of new forms of knowledge through interaction.

Some other dualist definitions of knowledge are Gibbons' (1994) Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge, which Judy Harris (2000, p.10), in her book *RPL: Power, Pedagogy and Possibility*, describes as follows. Mode 1 is:

knowledge produced by academics and scientists working within discrete disciplines in academic and research-based institutions

and Mode 2

knowledge which is socially constructed by multiple actors in specific and multiple local contexts

Harris perceives Mode 2 knowledge as 'gaining ground in contemporary education'. She also explains how Bernstein (1971,1996) distinguishes between vertical knowledge which is hierarchically organized and acquired through formal teaching, and horizontal knowledge which is informal in construction and acquired through life and experience. In an educational context, vertical knowledge is conveyed by means of 'collection code curricula' in which the content is clearly delineated to distinguish it from other disciplines. Horizontal knowledge, however, may enter into 'integrated code curricula' through dialogue, since these are defined as more permeable. Harris (2000) warns against seeing dichotomies as rigid and emphasizes the relative nature of these concepts. Jean Lave (1988) is also wary of a separation of knowledges, because of the consequent devaluation of what are seen as less formal forms of knowledge. Lave emphasises that all learning and knowledge development take place as part of social activity. However it is clear from the above definitions of knowledge that different forms of learning and knowing are generally recognized, with distinctions made between more structured and

formal forms and more unstructured and informal. Communicative interchange, or discourse, is defined as an essential instrument of change in the nature and composition of knowledge.

Lave and Wenger (1991) go further to propose a theory of 'legitimate peripheral participation', a social practice theory of learning, which questions the extent to which intentional instruction in itself causes learning. Based on the Marxist tradition of the theorisation of praxis and Bourdieu's (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, their argument is that practitioners in many areas of expertise, such as medicine, law, the academy, professional sports or the arts, learn through participation in communities of practice. They give examples of apprenticeships such as that of a traditional midwife in Yucatec, who learns her profession by observation and practice among other midwives, with little importance accorded to teaching. Lave and Wenger (1991) reject the different distinctions between types of knowledge described above, arguing that real learning only takes place within practice and that whatever communication takes place about this learning, including teaching, which is not integrated within the practice is secondary or marginal to the practice itself. This is interestingly exemplified in a study by Schmidt, Norman and Boshuizen (1990), who found that expert medical practitioners may do worse than final year students on tests of clinical reasoning, suggesting to them that either formal assessment tests do not test the kind of knowledge experts acquire over years in practice, or that experts do not use the formal knowledge they gained in medical school in their practice. McNair (1999, p.30) also sees the changes in approaches to the teaching of medicine in the UK today as an example of different understandings of knowledge and how it is gained. He argues that the introduction of problem based learning means that:

The focus of learning becomes the primary purpose of understanding and curing patients, not the secondary one of absorbing volumes of propositional knowledge or pleasing the teacher.

These theories of knowledge and learning have obvious implications for the practice of APEL, which is concerned specifically with recognizing knowledge gained outside of

formal learning and teaching situations, in relation to what kinds of knowledge have validity in a higher education context and how different kinds of knowledge are represented. They also raise issues about the purpose of higher education and its changing nature in the UK today.

### **The changing discourses of HE**

Ron Barnett (1999, p.168) suggests that there is a knowledge crisis in higher education, because academics have lost the near-monopoly they previously held with regard to definitions of knowledge. He says:

..in addition to the propositional knowledge produced internally in the academy has come knowledge-in-use in the wider world. In the process the academy is having to adjust its conceptions of knowledge..

Stephen McNair (1999, p.36) links this crisis with concepts such as lifelong learning and the marketization of education which threaten:

the traditional near monopoly of the university over ownership and transmission of established knowledge ..

Both Barnett (1999) and McNair (1999, p.37) see this as a potentially positive development, with McNair suggesting the possibility of a return to the European idea of a university as an academic community, which:

reflects the view that knowledge is socially constructed and the product of groups of people talking to each other, testing and refining their understanding of reality and truth.

However the increasing emphasis on transferable skills and competences, manifested in some universities by the development of modular schemes, CATS and the definition of



course content in terms of learning outcomes, is viewed by many as a de-personalising and consumerist approach to education which is in direct contradiction to the notion of higher education as a space in which new knowledge is created through discussion and dialogue.

Usher (1999, p.100) warns against the 'seductions of the texts of the new vocationalism' and draws on Foucault in analysing competence based education and training as '..a discursive practice that reconfigures skills as a means of social regulation ..' rather than '..a mechanism for creating a more skilled population.' He points out that the discourses of HE are changing, as are curricula, as part of a process of 'massification' and 'commodification', and at the same time links between industry and other sites of employment are increasing, with work experience and related pedagogical practices such as problem-based learning becoming more frequent. In this discourse of new vocationalism the:

Humanistic discourse of 'access', 'lifelong learning', 'personal development' and 'negotiated curricula' becomes reconfigured and incorporated within a managerial/behaviouristic discourse of 'delivery systems' and 'units of learning' (Usher, 1999, p. 106)

Thus changes to higher education in terms of moves towards closer links with the world outside can be seen negatively as the strategies of a materialistic and economic government seeking to create a flexible and manipulable workforce. However they can also be interpreted as moving towards a more involved and reciprocal teaching and learning environment open to different forms of knowledge.

Recent work by Crowther, Martin and Shaw (2000); Thompson (2000); and Stuart (2000) in *Stretching the Academy* discusses the ideology of 'lifelong learning' and 'widening participation' politically, in that they seek to get to the core of the government's rationale for seeking to open up higher education. Stuart (2000, p.33) contrasts, for example, the notion of lifelong learning as taking on '.. the needs of global capitalism' by upskilling

workers throughout their working lives, with its potential to enable communities to ‘... investigate and explore their knowledge and to then demand other knowledge.’ Stuart (2000, p.33) sees this as being ‘... about challenging the academy to allow active participation from a wide range of communities and individuals who will help to redefine the parameters of higher education itself.’ Crowther, Martin and Shaw (2000) talk about ‘Turning the discourse’ where a discourse ‘defines what can be said, which is based on what cannot be said, on what is marginalised, silenced and repressed’ (Edwards and Usher cited in Crowther, Martin and Shaw 2000, p.174), They give the example of the Really Useful Knowledge Programme which aimed ‘to give practitioners the time and opportunity to relate epistemological questions about what kind of knowledge counts, and who has the power to say so, to issues of social purpose and political action’ (p.180). McNair (1999, p. 36), also, sees lifelong learning as a means of changing power relations between learners and teachers and challenging:

the university’s monopoly over the validation of knowledge and of individual’s learning.

However APEL may be seen by academics as part of the process of undermining the traditional view of the university as the site of knowledge creation in a negative way, as part of the move towards competence-based education and ‘commodification’, particularly if it is implemented through CATS, modular systems and learning outcomes. Thus APEL, as part of the changes which are causing the ‘crisis’ in higher education, can be interpreted as either an emancipatory process which opens up higher education for those previously excluded and leads to the development of new knowledges, or a ‘dumbing down’ process which categorises learning in oversimplistic ways (see Butterworth, 1992, cited in Chapter 1, p.4).

### **The role of discourse**

Fairclough (1999, p. 80) sees the advancement of knowledge as the role of educational institutions, which should be spaces for argument and for opening up new knowledges,

however he points out that the dominant view of education (at least in the UK) at the moment seems to be that it should be a ‘... vocationally-oriented transmission of given knowledge and skills.’ Within this ‘transmission’ model of education the definition of ‘..what counts as knowledge or skill (and therefore what does not), for whom, why and with what beneficial or problematic consequences’ is problematic. At the same time Fairclough endorses Giddens’ (cited in Fairclough) view of present day societies as being characterised by reflexivity, a process of continuously evaluating and changing knowledges and discourses, evidenced in the current emphasis on ‘learning to learn’, ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘performativity’. For Fairclough what is important is that people should be aware of different discourses and how they work within social practices, in order to be in a position to bring about change. He argues (1999, p.74) that:

It is on the basis of [...] understandings of how discourse works within social practices that people can come to question and look beyond existing discourses, or existing relations of dominance and marginalisation between discourses, and so advance knowledge.

Fairclough sees people’s lives as being more and more shaped by external representations which determine how the world is, their place in it, what they do and how they see themselves. In present day societies there is increasing ethnic and cultural diversity, which has led to correspondingly different languages, dialects, communicative styles and discourses. Individuals need to work out who they are and how they relate to others in society. Part of this process is becoming aware of different discourses and being able to see them for what they are worth and use them or challenge them accordingly. This is a central issue in APEL: when candidates define their learning from experience and represent it in a form that gains recognition from the educational establishment, are they seeking to form an image of themselves that conforms to existing representations, and thereby gain a place within the academic community, or are they challenging existing representations in order to gain acceptance for new perspectives and push back the boundaries of convention? Fairclough cites problematic representations such as women or cultural minorities: others that have arisen in my APEL experience include

refugees/asylum seekers, ex-prisoners, disabled people or unemployed people, which have potentially negative connotations but may also be interpreted as incorporating valid and useful learning experiences.

Fairclough (1999) also raises the issue of how language has been 'commodified' in educational terms as one of a number of 'key skills' which need to be acquired and which once gained will open the door to infinite possibilities. Within this view '... it is assumed that there is a given and accepted way of using language to do certain things, as if discourse was simply a matter of technique'(p. 81). Fairclough sees this reduction of discourse to a skill as a means of imposing certain social practices by those in positions of power, since those who do not use discourse in the ways defined by 'communication skills' become excluded and other discourses are given a different social status. The 'skills' concept of language fits with the transmission view of education and the idea that there are certain ways of doing things which are appropriate and fixed. Fairclough's position is that discourses, like knowledge, '... are always provisional and indeterminate, contested and moreover, at issue in social relationships, within which all teachers and learners are positioned.' For him the most important factor is that they should be questioned and contested. His (2001, p.16) definition of discourse is 'language as social practice,' or 'an element of social practices, which constitutes other elements as well as being shaped by them.' Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999 p. vii) talk about the concepts of 'identity' and 'self' and how these '...tend to be associated with an interactional focus on people constructing their own individual and collective identities in discourse'. The APEL process makes this interaction into a conscious and deliberate construction of a particular identity. This could be seen as a risky process, in which candidates are expected to submit versions of their lives for scrutiny by academics with no particular expertise or allegiance to understanding what is being represented, or one in which a self which fits in with pre-determined criteria is manufactured for the purpose of gaining credit. It could thus be pushing back boundaries, or on the contrary creating new boundaries to which representations of experience have to conform.

## **'Performativity'**

If we accept existing representations and discourses as read and reconstruct ourselves in such a way as to fit in with them we not only fail to push back boundaries, and accept the status quo, we may also be guilty of what Stephen Ball (1999) calls 'fabrication'. Ball uses the term 'performativity' to describe the current culture in which performance measures are used to determine '... the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement.' This 'discourse of power' (Lyotard cited in Ball, 1999 p.2) is according to Ball the '... emerging form of legitimation in post-industrial societies for both the production of knowledge and its transmission through education.' A fabrication is a version of a person which, while not being untruthful, nevertheless does not really exist, but is created to meet certain criteria, as in the example of a CV or personal statement written in response to a specific job description and person specification. A fabrication aims to be effective first and foremost, rather than truthful. It reproduces and reinforces the demands of the criteria rather than contesting them and excludes any information which does not '...fit into what is intended to be represented or conveyed.' Ball sees this as a way of making ourselves 'user-friendly' and describes how we 'make a narrative of [ourselves]... we become rounded paragons with multiple strengths and infinite possibilities... we are engaged in an indexing, a tabularising of the self.' Ball sees this process as cynical and calculating and symptomatic of a profound shift in the way that we see and represent ourselves.

This is a dilemma confronting anyone embarking on the process of claiming APEL. Are they seeking to push back the boundaries of knowledge by gaining acknowledgement of learning not previously recognised as valuable in an educational context, and challenging the discourses of power by gaining recognition of alternative ways of representing knowledge? Are they struggling to get to grips with a discourse with which to fabricate themselves a persona which will be recognised and accepted within the constraints of an existing system? Or are they treading a fine line between the two, genuinely concerned to give a true representation of themselves, their knowledge and their learning, but at the same time determined to gain recognition for their achievements.

## **Problems with APEL**

Avis (1995) has pointed out some of the dangers inherent in the validation of learner experience in that value is often only accorded to certain forms of knowledge, that which is not deemed appropriate being discounted. This can often be attributable to the discourse in which the knowledge is presented. Another tendency is for experience to be individualised with the consequent loss of the '... idea of the collective construction and negotiation of experience and knowledge.' (p.175). The general tendency of educational institutions to devalue the importance and usefulness of personal experience has been widely commented on (Mezirow 1990, Stuart 1996). Michelson (1996) also argues that APEL operates within a deficit view of other than formal learning: 'Applicants are evaluated only within pre-determined norms for what kinds of knowledge are acceptable.' She stresses that 'It cannot be a neutral device' but will either contribute to the maintenance of traditional academic conventions or be a means of bringing other discourses into the academy (p.25). Stuart (1996 p.18) stipulates that schemes for APEL should be honest and make clear that credit will only ever be given for knowledge which fits a limited rubric. She also stresses the importance of schemes helping claimants explore the social construction of knowledge, so that they are not made to feel that '... their life experiences are being assessed rather than [...] aspects of their learning being matched against academic learning.' Stuart describes a 'life history approach' to APEL in which candidates make a structured examination of the learning experiences in their life, identify the learning for which they wish to claim credit, and then produce the evidence required, recognising the outcomes of these three stages as separate entities. Trowler (1996 p.28), however, has said that this process requires exactly the sort of qualities: confidence, facility of language use and in conceptual thought '...which have ensured that underrepresented groups remained underrepresented in higher education in the past.' He cites Barkatoolah as claiming that evaluators and assessors have a 'social prototype' against which candidates will be measured. Trowler (1996, p. 24) suggests that there is evidence that the process of reflecting on and objectifying experience for the purpose of APEL can result in '... an alienation of the learner from his or her experience through its

objectification' and a loss of personal control as a result of the transfer of knowledge and power over it to the assessor.

Two questions then pose themselves to the would be APEL candidate at the outset: What do I have to produce, in what shape or form, in order to gain recognition or credit for my learning from experience? and: Is it going to be worth my while, in terms of the personal investment and the work of putting together a claim? Most existing APEL practice in the UK requires candidates to produce some form of written submission to accompany any other evidence in the shape of documentation, visual or audio material or artifacts.

Candidates are generally committed to gaining credit, although some do value the APEL process for itself as a means of personal development and choose not to go through an assessment process. However at the starting point most candidates, however much learning from experience they have, will probably not have a clear idea of how to set about writing up this experience for assessment. Just as any other students do, candidates for APEL need to familiarize themselves with the 'rules of the game' and how to apply these to their own personal situation, deciding what knowledge to include, what to omit and how to present it. Like all new entrants to higher education they will find themselves having to use language with which they are not familiar, with features different from the language used in their personal and professional lives.

### **Issues of identity**

Roz Ivanič (1997) talks about the 'discoursal construction of identity in academic writing' because she believes that people's identities are implicated in all the literacy practices they undertake. She sees academic literacy not as a fixed set of practices but as open to contestation and change, although newcomers gain acceptance within a community by adopting its discourse practices. Thus writers position themselves differently in different fields of study, however individual writers also shift identity within a single piece of writing. Ivanič conceives of student writers as having three different selves; the autobiographical self representing the identity of the writer, the authorial self meaning the writer as perceived by the reader, and the discoursal self

expressed in the linguistic features which form the genre of a particular text. Student writers bring to their writing their own ideas and experiences, particular identities in terms of views of knowledge, as well as their awareness of the characteristics of academic discourse. In the case of APEL the struggle between these selves may be particularly acute, since the candidate may be attempting to express personal and professional experiences for an audience and in a genre which they do not associate with those experiences. Ivanič points out that in cases where students bring with them authority recognized outside from domains such as business or local politics, this often goes unrecognized in the academic community. A question which arises is the effect that attempting to write events from one's life-history for assessment for academic credit may have on one's perception of oneself and one's place in the world, the reconstruction of classed, raced and gendered identities, and how different people react in this situation.

Lillis, (2001, p.40) points out that the conventions of academic literacy work towards:

the exclusion of students from social groups who have been historically excluded from the conservative-liberal project of HE in the UK

precisely the candidates that APEL is supposed to be luring into universities. Lillis (2001, p.74) talks about the 'institutional practice of mystery' by which she means the fact that:

student academic texts are expected to be constructed in and through conventions which are often invisible to both tutors and students.

Lillis argues that 'the conventions surrounding the production of student academic texts' not only exclude certain people from higher education but also restrict 'what student-writers can mean and who they can be' (p.40). However she stresses that 'dominant practices and conventions, whilst powerful, are not fixed'. She suggests that two important questions facing higher education in the UK are whether the current discourse practices should continue to be maintained, and whether student-writers should be involved in discussions about alternative discourse practices (p.37). APEL is one way in



which students could be involved in such discussions and through which discourse practices could be changed.

Bourdieu (1977) has used the term 'cultural capital' to describe the linguistic resources of the dominant classes. The question can be posed as to whether any candidate for APEL without the necessary cultural capital is likely to be successful since they are unlikely to be able to express their knowledge in terms that will be acceptable to academics (see also Harris 1999). The power of scientific discourse and the disqualification of naive or popular knowledge described by Foucault (1980) also militate against the success of claims for credit for knowledge from experience. Recent research has supported the view that APEL, rather than being a means of opening up access to HE to a wider constituency, has tended to become a tool for those already advantaged to obtain further qualifications by an accelerated route. Thus Merrifield et al (2000) in their survey of APEL in HE institutions in the UK found that where APEL has been most successful is in postgraduate level study, where graduates with experience are able to claim credit towards further degrees. Likewise Harris (1999, p.125), in research carried out with candidates for APEL at the University of Cape Town, found that:

The most successful candidates had prior experience of 'status texts' as opposed to more oral literacies, (and) had experienced a high value placed on formal education within family/life...

If APEL is a process of 'translating outsider knowledge into academic currencies' (Michelson 1996) then the translator needs to be familiar with the destination discourse in order to carry out the translation. However in Challis' view (1996) it can constitute a basis for building good teaching practice, in which student input is recognised as of value in institutional development practice. The impact it has on lecturers and on the discourse of the academy may mean that APEL candidates really are pushing back the boundaries between the world outside and the university, if, as Stuart (1996, p.18) suggests, it:

challenges academics to engage with a 'real world', with a diverse group of students who can share a range of knowledges, experiences and desires with the academy.

The fact that a high percentage of universities offer APEL in some form means that it has at least become a topic of discussion and stimulated academics to think anew about those boundaries. This locates APEL as what Fairclough (2001) would define as 'a site of struggle', but it is inevitably a struggle in which the power is heavily weighted on one side, that of the academy, since it is they who ultimately define and decide what counts as valid knowledge. One way in which some universities do this is by means of learning outcomes.

### **Learning Outcomes**

The concept of learning outcomes has been developed as a means of making definitions of knowledge more accessible and knowledge itself more easily assessable, however not all academics view learning outcomes as a positive development. In many institutions in the UK, including the one where this research took place, all courses are modular and all modules are defined in terms of learning outcomes, which are seen as key to the implementation of APEL. For many practitioners of APEL, learning outcomes are the standard by means of which learning from experience will be measured. Betts and Smith (1998, p.89) argue that the process of mapping experience against the content of modules:

can only be accomplished successfully if learning outcomes have been explicitly identified in the module design.

and go on to say that:

The crucial issue as far as we are concerned is that the student must identify explicitly the learning outcomes against which mapping is to take place and the university must agree that these are appropriate and at the right level.

although they do mention the fact that some institutions allow students to propose personal learning outcomes which do not match existing validated modules. Betts and Smith (1998, p.90) see learning outcomes as representing a student-centred philosophy because:

learning outcomes are sufficiently transparent for the student to be able to put the case and prove that the outcomes have been met.

However this statement is potentially problematic. Firstly the concept of a learning outcome in itself may be difficult to grasp for someone from a non academic environment, in particular the nature and depth of the learning it represents. The words 'sufficiently transparent' assume a familiarity with the concept, the learning it represents and the context in which it is embedded. Secondly, the student is required to be able to make a judgement as to what quantity and type of evidence will match the learning outcomes in the view of an assessor. Learning outcomes involve a very specific way of conceiving and representing learning and knowledge, related to a particular culture, which an APEL candidate would have to be or become initiated into before being able to use them for the purpose of a claim against their experience. They form part of the conventions, described by Lillis (2001) as the practice of 'mystery', which have the effect of excluding certain people from the academic community.

As Hussey and Smith (2002, p.225) point out, the clarity and explicitness of learning outcomes are dependent on their being interpreted against 'a prior understanding of what is required' which is precisely what new entrants to university will not have. Hussey and Smith (2002) associate learning outcomes with modern management techniques and the commodification of learning, as a means of translating 'knowledge how' into 'knowledge

that' which would actually militate against the recognition of learning through participation advocated by Lave and Wenger (1991).

A striking aspect of learning outcomes is the very specific language they employ in delineating segments of knowledge or learning (see Wailey 2002 in Chapter 1 above, p.7). From Halliday's (1994b) perspective of language as a social semiotic, it is not possible to discuss the meaning that a writer is trying to convey without examining the linguistic forms in which it is conveyed. For Halliday this means not only the words but also the grammatical structures. This seems particularly relevant in the case of learning outcomes since they both purport to carry out a very specific task, that of categorising learning into clearly delineated notional segments, and use distinctive linguistic forms in order to do this. Because of these two aspects it is possible for learning outcomes to be used in quite the opposite way they were ostensibly intended, to make the recognition of knowledge more accessible to students. In establishing a new and different format for categorizing knowledge, they create another potential way of proving to certain people that they do not have knowledge or do not understand, or at least do not understand in the way they are required to in the context.

### **Reflections on the literature**

Looking back over the literature that has been discussed here, a division seems to emerge between optimists who see changes in higher education as opening up the ownership of knowledge, with the potential for the development of new forms of knowledge, and those who warn against the dangers of massification, consumerism and performativity. The first position is idealistic, although those who argue for it have a determination to bring their ideals into being through the development of concrete projects and actions such as the Really Useful Knowledge Programme (Crowther, Martin and Shaw 2000). Stuart (1996), coming from a very practical position of being honest to students about what they can expect in terms of APEL has moved on five years later (2001) to a position of challenging the academy and enabling communities to demand other knowledge. However in the present political climate in the UK this does not seem to be something

that will receive priority in terms of resources. The present government's strong commitment to the numerical target of 50% of 18-30 year olds with an experience of higher education has led to a focus on younger age groups, and the ethos of lifelong learning has slipped down the agenda. At the same time no extra resources are being allocated to universities and students are also having to bear a greater burden of expense for their studies. This means that lecturers are taking responsibility for larger and larger groups of students, most of whom are working part-time or full-time while they study and therefore spending less time in the university. This is not a situation which lends itself to the flowering of fruitful interchanges and dialogues between academics and students. Stephen Ball (1999) concurs with Stuart in challenging the cynicism surrounding the production and transmission of knowledge in post-industrial society, supporting the view that the recognition of knowledge needs to be in some way reclaimed by those who have been denied the right to do so. In so doing he reinforces Usher's (1999) views on the dangers of the new vocationalism as disempowering rather than empowering for those whose skills and abilities it is supposed to develop. Barnett (1999) is more optimistic in his belief that definitions of knowledge are becoming broader, but he does not address the issue of how individuals and groups may intervene in order to ensure an accepted and recognised place for their knowledge within the education system. Thus I see three dimensions to the knowledge question: the struggle for recognition of hitherto unvalued knowledge or knowledges, the struggle to broaden and open up the traditional knowledges defended by the academy, and the fight against the dumbing down of knowledge through vocationalism and competence based approaches.

Trowler (1996, 'under-represented groups remain underrepresented') and Barkatoolah (cited in Trowler, 1996 'social prototypes') express differing degrees of scepticism about the potential of APEL for having any impact in the struggle for recognition of new knowledges. Yet changes are taking place, such as the introduction of problem based learning, which recognize different ways of acquiring knowledge, in line with Lave and Wenger's (1991) distinction between situated learning which takes place in practice and the learning that takes place within educational establishments. And Michelson (1996) considers that APEL has the potential to play a role in changing approaches to knowledge

in the academy. This aligns her with Challis (1996), who in arguing that APEL can be a way of promoting good educational practice, endorses Mezirow's (1990) view that critical reflection is a means of challenging the ideologies of society reproduced by the education system.

In Fairclough's terms an emancipatory and revolutionary process could be implemented through the questioning of established frameworks and the development of discourse practices which genuinely serve as a vehicle for the explanation of the knowledge and aspirations of the new generation of candidates for higher education. His view of educational institutions as spaces for opening up new knowledges fits with the *Stretching the Academy* (Thompson 2000) view. Thus there are many who believe in the transformative potential of education in general and the specific potential of APEL as an emancipatory and revolutionary process. Ivanič and Lillis examine in detail how students can push back 'the boundaries of what counts as acceptable meaning within academia' (Lillis 2001, p.170) and Ivanič argues that the presence of different kinds of students exerts pressure on higher education institutions to place value on 'the full diversity of knowledges, wisdoms, ways of learning and ways with words' they bring with them (1997, p. 345). Avis (1995 p. 185), however, rejects '... absolutist conceptions of social justice' and points out that 'learners as well '...have stakes in particular positions in relation to knowledge which carry specific understandings of experience'. Avis points out the dangers of implying that there is only one correct interpretation of experience and of failing to recognise that there is a dominant discourse on courses such as APEL programmes which impinges on the meanings students are attempting to draw from their experience. His suggestion that an exploration of the discursive production of meaning is a way out of the trap where students may find themselves in attempting to reconstruct their experience aligns him with Fairclough, Ivanič and Lillis in terms of the role of discourse in education. Avis advocates an understanding of experience which incorporates fluidity and fragility, as a challenge to positivist approaches which attach fixed meanings and categories to knowledge. It could be argued that the latter is precisely what learning outcomes set out to do, and as I have said above, they can be interpreted as obstacles to the recognition of new knowledges as much as tools for its facilitation.

The understanding of what constitutes valid knowledge in the higher education context, the role of learning outcomes in determining this and the ways in which students and assessors approach these issues are the main focus of this research, with the texts created by those involved in the process forming the data and discourse analysis providing the methodology. There is hope for future change in the nature of higher education and for the empowerment of students and their participation in the development of new forms of knowledge and new ways of creating it. The wide acceptance of the principle of APEL is an indicator of this, although how it is put into practice remains problematic. The following chapters will focus on that practice and some of the problems associated with it.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The overarching perspective of this research is qualitative. I have not sought to collect data in the way that the surveys of APEL practice described in Chapter 1 have done. Schofield (1993, p.93) has described the goal of qualitative research as being:

... to produce a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with detailed study of that situation.

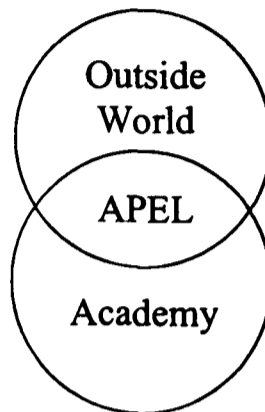
I have chosen to examine selected empirical data from a particular situation, on a small scale and on an exploratory basis. My aim was not to produce generalisable findings but to interpret the evidence in such a way as to enable me to make theoretical inferences about the APEL process and what happens to students and lecturers within it, in the hope that the concepts and conclusions which emerge may prove useful in developing the practice. In the following pages I describe how and why the data were collected, what they consist of, my involvement as an action researcher and its effect on the research process and the analytical procedures I have chosen to adopt.

### **Collection of the data**

My aim in collecting the data was to understand what happens when a student goes through the process of making a claim for APEL and to clarify how it works, what, if anything, is not working and why. During the period over which the data have been collected the focal point of the investigation has become the negotiated space in which, through the APEL process, the outside world comes into contact with the academy. The different kinds of data include representations of the three different areas in the diagram below, that is, the outside world, the academy, and the point at which these two overlap in the APEL process.



Fig. 3.1 Representation of the place of APEL in relation to the outside world and the academy



I have undertaken the research as a participant in the APEL process at the University where I work. My investigations have taken the form of action research, which has aimed to study both my own practice within the context of the implementation of APEL in the institution and the actions and reactions of others involved, including both students and colleagues. Kemmis (1993, p. 181) has described action research methods as placing 'the practitioner at centre stage in the educational research process.' This means that the research cannot pretend to be objective or value-free, since it is imbued with the values I bring to my role as teacher and researcher, and which are the motivating force behind my study. This is aimed at illuminating the process of APEL in the particular context in which I am involved and ultimately at bringing about changes in that process if and where it can be seen to be failing to fulfil its stated objectives. I cannot therefore pretend to be a disinterested observer, nor would I wish to do so. Nevertheless I have attempted to approach the data without pre-conceptions and to allow them as much as possible to speak for themselves, at the same time identifying any ideas and interpretations which may be distorted by ideologies, either pertaining to the institution or to higher education in general and ideas of who or what it is for. I would like to think that this research would not only fulfil an advocacy role in contributing to a greater understanding of the importance and relevance of prior experience at university, but also play a role in empowering the participants by confirming students' beliefs in the validity of their

learning from experience, and increasing the recognition of learning from experience by lecturers and their confidence in assessing claims.

For the last four years I have been a tutor on a module, 'Making Your Experience Count,' which is offered to all students as a free standing module and as a means of finding out about and getting support for the preparation of a claim for APEL. As a tutor I have had access to documentation on the module and on the APEL process. I have also had access to successive cohorts of students throughout the process through which they have gone in seeking to gain accreditation of their learning from experience. This has enabled me to collect both written and tape-recorded data at different stages of the process. It has meant that as a member of staff of the institution in which the research is being carried out, I have had access to other members of staff who have acted as advisors or assessors to candidates for APEL. However the internal perspective has its advantages and disadvantages. As someone involved in APEL for a number of years in an institution where attitudes towards the process vary considerably, my position is generally known and colleagues react to the research according to their own point of view, not as they would to an unknown outsider, but in the knowledge of the history of the development of APEL in the institution and my participation in that. As Hammersley (1994, p.7) points out, in ethnographic research the data collected will to some extent reflect the personal characteristics of the researcher, making them particularly subject to bias. Nevertheless, having recognised this, long-term inside knowledge of the institution, how it works and who the staff and students are has proved valuable in carrying out the investigation.

From an ethical standpoint, I have attempted to avoid taking advantage of my insider status in any way which could be considered dishonest. I have explained to all participants the aims of the research and the procedures by means of which I have sought to achieve them. I have committed myself to communicating the outcomes of the research to those involved before finalising or publishing any part of it and have promised to guarantee anonymity to all participants. Where I have collected students' work as part of the data they have always been informed of my intentions and have consented to the use of their work.

Collection of data has been systematic, but not exhaustive (Mitchell in Ellen 1984). I have not aimed to collect data from a whole cohort of students or a fixed number of lecturing staff within a particular age-group or discipline. Nevertheless, as I hope to demonstrate below, I have set out systematically to collect data from students and colleagues involved in the APEL process, taking samples at various different stages in the form of documents and recordings of formal and informal speech. These data have been collected to illustrate the different sections of the diagram (Fig. 3.1, p. 34) representing the outside world, the academy and the point, in APEL, where these intersect. I seek to justify as representative case studies of four students selected from the data, and to demonstrate how the different types of data included can be brought to bear on the hypothesis and questions which inform the research. My sample has therefore been chosen as a 'telling case' (Mitchell in Ellen 1984). Mitchell argues that the choice of a case study is based not on its typicality but rather on the fact that it serves to expose a particular theoretical relationship that is being argued. It is a means by which a theory may be developed rather than an illustration or an example.

The data were collected over a period of four years, from 1999 to 2002 and include the following:

1. Documentation produced by the institution

A publicity leaflet for APEL and the 'Making Your Experience Count' module at the University (Appendix 1)

The module description for 'Making Your Experience Count' (Appendix 2)

Two samples of course materials for 'Making Your Experience Count'

Assessment Details: Statement of Learning Outcomes for Workbased Learning module (Appendix 3)

Extract from handbook: Staff Guidance for APEL: Guidance for the assessment of prior experiential learning

These data were made available to me as a tutor on the module 'Making Your Experience Count' and as a member of the APEL and Accreditation Board of the University. The first, the leaflet, comes closest to the world outside the University, since it is distributed to mature students prior to their joining the University and seeks to attract them to the 'Making Your Experience Count' module. The other documents are more academically focused although they all relate to the sphere of APEL.

2. Data collected from students, consisting of taped seminars, presentations and interviews and written data produced by them (See Fig. 3.3, p. 41)

The data were collected from students from four different cohorts on the module 'Making Your Experience Count', three from 1999, three from 2000, five from 2001 and one from 2002. In all cases I was a tutor, on my own in 1999 and 2001 and with another lecturer in 2000 and in 2002. The 2000 cohort were taking the module as part of the accelerated evening degree in Business Studies. The 1999 and the 2001 cohorts were taking the module as one of their free choices. The 2002 cohort included both evening Business Studies students and students taking the module as a free choice. Students were informed of the research and were asked for permission to use their written work and/or tape-recordings of their participation in seminars, presentations and interviews. Two sets of presentations were recorded, in 2000 and 2001. Two seminars were recorded, both in 2001. Four students were interviewed. The interviews all took place in 2002 but two of the students were from the 1999 cohort, one from 2001 and one from 2002. The interviews were unstructured but four questions were used as prompts (see Appendix 5). The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

3. Taped interviews with six lecturers

These interviews were carried out in April and May 2002 after a staff development session on APEL at which a letter requesting volunteers was distributed. Nine people responded and six were eventually interviewed. Those who volunteered were each sent two portfolios produced by students for claims for credit, in advance of the interview, and

were asked to be prepared to comment on the creditworthiness of the portfolios in the interview (see questions in Appendix 6). The portfolios were copies of successful work by past students, which they had agreed to let us keep and use anonymously for research purposes. I attempted to choose portfolios whose content approximated the specialist areas of the interviewees, however this was not always possible, as choices were confined to the range of work which had been given to us by students. Interviewees were also informed that the interviews would be tape-recorded. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. These data, together with the documentation, represent the academic perspective on the APEL process, in particular the perspective of the assessors of the finished product which is the culmination of that process.

### **My position, as the researcher**

As a tutor on the module 'Making Your Experience Count' I was at the centre of the process which I am seeking to examine. Whilst giving me the advantage of easy access to the other participants and to written data, this also meant that I could not play the role of detached observer. This has had implications both for my own perspective and for how I may have been perceived by others in the process.

My own perspective, as a lecturer/tutor, has been one of advocacy for the students. As their lecturer I wanted them to succeed and gave them every encouragement. I also have a commitment to the concept and process of APEL as a means of widening participation and opening up the concept of knowledge in academia. Both of these commitments have coloured the research. I have been able to establish a relationship of trust with students which has made it possible to gain their consent to the recording of seminars, presentations and interviews in which they have participated and to my use of their written texts. Being a member of staff has made it easy to approach colleagues, both practically, in terms of having access to their details and being able to fit in with their timetables because of being on the premises, and psychologically, in that they know me and may have felt obligated or at least reluctant to refuse a request for help.

On the other hand, students who were unhappy with the process or who questioned its validity may have been reluctant to come forward, knowing my views. Likewise colleagues would also have been aware of my commitment to the process and some whom I know to have oppositional views did not volunteer to be interviewed. The data I have collected therefore represent a skewed perspective on the process of APEL in my institution, one which is informed both by my position as a participant researcher and by the perceptions of the other participants in the research of my position vis-a-vis APEL in the University.

### **Justification of the data collection process**

#### **1. Documentation produced by the institution**

In order to find out how the APEL process was functioning in the University I selected documents which serve the purpose of presenting the process, as practised in the institution, to the participants or potential participants: the students and the lecturers/assessors. In addition I proposed to examine two samples from the course materials for the module 'Making Your Experience Count' in order to find out how the details of the process of preparing learning from experience for accreditation were explained to students. My aim was to examine the documentation from a discourse analysis perspective, looking at the context of culture (Fairclough 2001) within which the documents are located and the ideologies and social structures which inform them. I wanted to look at the context of situation and the practices within which the documents are used, and the relationship of the different documents to each other, in particular the differences between the publicity leaflet, the module description, and the learning outcomes for the workbased learning module. These documents were selected from a range of documentation available on the practice of APEL because they have been designed and are used for particular purposes at particular points in the process where students' experience prior to entering the University is brought into contact, in different ways, with the systems of the institution:

Fig. 3.2 The nature and purpose of the documents

Document	Purpose or intention	Some possible interpretations of messages
Publicity leaflet	Informing students of the existence and nature of the module and the APEL process. Encouraging them to engage with it.	'This is what APEL is' 'This could be useful for you' 'Why don't you try it?'
Module description	Documenting the module on the University's database, for students and staff or outsiders	'This is what you will do if you take this module' (for students) or 'This is how this module conforms to the specifications laid down by the University' (for staff)
Samples of course materials	Taking students through a process of evaluation of their learning from experience and assisting them in applications for credit	'This is how it's done' 'It's not as simple as you think' 'You have to follow these instructions'
Statement of Learning Outcomes	Giving students a framework for describing learning from experience	'Write your learning outcomes like these' 'There is a special way of doing it'
Staff handbook – Section on Guidance for the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning	Informing staff of procedures for the assessment of claims for APEL	'This is how you assess it' 'This is a rigorous process'

These documents have been chosen because they set out procedures and give definitions, which I thought would be useful in assessing what happens in the process. I thought that an examination of the documents together with analysis of the work produced by students and extracts from seminars would enable me to assess whether anything was problematic about the process. In choosing these particular documents I excluded documents specific to particular disciplines which offer opportunities for APEL to their students such as Community Nursing, Education or Social Work, because the students I was working with were not studying within those disciplines. The documents chosen delineate the institutional view of how APEL should be done in general rather than in the context of any specific discipline.

2. Data collected from students

Fig. 3.3 Student data

Year	Student	Banner	Lifeline	Seminar	Presentation	Assignment	Port- folio	Interview
1999	C	√			√	√	√ √	√
	JM						√	√
	T	√	√			√		
2000	AL	√			√	√		
	E	√	√		√	√		
	P	√			√	√		
2001	JH		√	√	√	√	√	√
	AN	√		√				
	M	√		√	√	√		
	K	√		√	√			
	H	√		√	√			
2002	N					√	√	√



These data are listed in Fig. 3.3 above with the year when the students took the module listed on the left, followed by their initials and the activities for which data was collected in chronological order. APEL can be a long-term process and in some cases portfolios were submitted some time after the students had completed the module. Some students are still working on them (this is the reason why only one student from 2002 is included) and some are working on a second portfolio to claim credit for another module (JH and N), others have chosen to study all the modules on their course rather than claim credit. Two have graduated, one with APEL credit for two modules (C), the other with none (T).

Varying amounts of data from each student will appear in the analysis. The work of T in the 1999 cohort has been used in analysis of the banner and lifeline exercises, however she subsequently decided she wanted to study all the modules on her degree programme so did not produce a portfolio. AN's participation in the recorded seminars forms part of the analysis but as she subsequently dropped out there is no other data from her available. An analysis of the presentations and written assignments of the 2000 cohort, who were all studying on the accelerated BA Business Studies in the evening has been included, however none of them completed a portfolio in time for it to be included in this research. The data provide a sample of the work of a group of students which is fairly typical for this university: aged between 21 and 46, six white, four black and two Asian, two men and ten women, three full time and nine part time and three from outside the UK (but all from English speaking countries: Ireland, Sierra Leone and Australia). Their different life and work experiences and approaches to their studies provide a rich and varied collection of data and the range of issues they raise has the potential to contribute to an understanding of a variety of aspects of APEL as a practice.

### Written work

Over the period of four years of the research I systematically collected, with their permission, student written work from the Making Your Experience Count module. This included exercises carried out in the early weeks of the module to stimulate reflection on experience (the 'Banner' and the 'Lifeline') and the first written assignment on the

module which is an autobiographical account of the students' learning. Where students completed portfolios for credit these were also collected. As can be seen from the chart, data collection was patchy. This is due to a number of factors. Students' attendance was often erratic. Most students were working full time and were sometimes too tired to attend seminars or arrived late and missed certain activities. One student (AN) dropped out due to ill health. This meant that it was difficult to collect the same range of data for each student and suggests that the some of the students' experience of the process was also incomplete.

#### Tape-recorded data

I recorded two seminars in the smallest group of students (5) because the discussions were more participative because of the size of the group. The aim of the recording was principally to gain a perception of myself as a tutor and an understanding of my role in the process of enabling students to represent their learning from experience in academic terms, as well as examining their reactions and contributions. The data were therefore collected not only to show how students react in seminars but also to provide evidence of the teaching approach and the strategies used to introduce the discourse and concepts of the APEL process. I was thus the subject of my own research.

Student presentations were recorded as illustrative of an intermediate stage in the process between the discussions of the seminars and the first written account of experience produced by students in the assignment. Presentations constitute a formal oral version of the account of experience which is later written up in the assignment. The aim in recording the presentations was to compare them with the written version in terms of the discourse and also to compare the students' reactions to the different tasks.

Four students were chosen to be interviewed, on the basis of their having completed the portfolio as well as some of the other activities listed in the chart, so that their progress throughout the process of APEL had been recorded. As Mitchell (in Ellen 1984, p. 238) says; 'an extended case analysis ...typically covers the same actors over a series of

different situations.’ The interviewees are all mature students aged between 35 and 45. Three of them are women, one is black, one is white Irish and two are white British and one is disabled. One (C) was full-time and has now graduated and the other three are part-time and are still studying at the University.

Fig. 3.4 Student details

Name	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability	Degree
C	F	White British	No	Applied Psychology and Mass Communications
JM	M	White Irish	Yes	Applied Psychology and Irish Studies
JH	F	White British	No	History
N	F	Black British	No	English and Humanities Information Technology

However the study of these four students is not intended merely to serve as an illustration of what may happen in the process of preparation for APEL but rather as a means by which theoretical relationships can be made apparent. In analysing the activity of the students, my role as their tutor in the process of APEL, the interactions of both students and tutor with the documentation and the role of assessors with regard to the portfolios, I have sought to establish what is significant and thus draw theoretical conclusions about what happens in the process.

To summarise, a range of data have been collected relating to the process of APEL in the institution. These include documentation produced by the institution for a variety of related purposes, data collected from individual lecturers focussing on the process of APEL and particularly the assessment of portfolios, and data collected over a period of time from students who have undergone the process, including recorded spoken texts of individual students’ presentations and seminar discussions and written texts produced by students. Four students have been selected as case studies and have been interviewed.

### 3. Taped interviews with lecturers

The aim in interviewing lecturers was not to follow through assessments on the students I studied in the research but to get an idea of how lecturers in general put into practice the assessment of portfolios for APEL, and the relation between this practice and the guidelines for APEL offered in the handbook. The lecturers were doubly self-selected since, in the first place they had opted to attend a staff development session on APEL, and they had then chosen to respond to my request for volunteers to be interviewed. This had the advantage that the lecturers were informed about APEL and also had views and opinions on it which they wanted to express. However, it means that their views cannot be taken as representative of those of lecturers across the University. Rather they could be seen as being closer to APEL, and thus to the boundary between the outside world and the academy, than other colleagues who chose not to attend the staff development or did not take up the invitation to be interviewed. The lecturers had all read the two portfolios sent to them in advance of the interview and all gave critical appraisals of the work, making both positive comments and suggestions for improvements. The portfolios selected had been awarded credit, although the lecturers did not know this. The following disciplines were represented by the interviewees:

Informatics and Multimedia Technology

Biological and Applied Sciences (three lecturers)

Business

Area and Language Studies

In a previous study I interviewed colleagues who had designated roles with regard to APEL in their faculty. In this case none of the lecturers interviewed had a designated role so that the outcomes of the interviews were more representative of the scenario which could take place in a typical situation where a student applies for credit and is assessed by the lecturer deemed most appropriate according to the area of expertise for which credit is being claimed. They demonstrate that interest in APEL spans different faculties and is not confined to those allocated a specific role in the process by the institution.

### **Analytical method**

In defining discourse analysis Fairclough (1992) emphasises the importance of detailed attention to the processes of text production as well as to the text as product. Although I have collected quite a large quantity of data it is not so great as to prevent me making what Geertz (cited in Lillis, 2001) calls 'thick description'. Thus the analysis of the detail of the texts is embedded in a description of the context in which the texts are created and used. This is particularly true in the case of the student texts, since I was involved in the production of these on a weekly basis, however I have also attempted to set the texts which form part of the documentation on APEL and the texts resulting from the interviews within the overall context of the practice of APEL and the broader institutional practices of the University.

CDA has been criticised (Schegloff cited in Van Dijk, 1999, p. 459) as being 'short on detailed, systematic analysis of text' because of its focus on context, and Schegloff considers that it makes theoretical assumptions which are not justified by formal analysis. Hammersley (1997, p. 239) also argues that CDA analysts find what they are seeking and do not consider equally plausible alternative readings of texts. However Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p. 7) have responded to these criticisms by arguing that 'all analysis brings the analysts' theoretical preoccupations - and categories - to bear on the discourse' and that it is not possible to exclude this. They say (p.67) that 'CDA does not itself advocate a particular understanding of a text, though it may advocate a particular explanation' by locating the text within a particular social practice. Fairclough (1992, p.231) defines research projects in discourse analysis as ways of looking at social practice through the properties of texts, and in particular of looking at changes of practice. He describes analysis as involving a progression:

from interpretation of the discourse practice (processes of text production and consumption), to description of the text, to interpretation of both of these in the light of the social practice in which the discourse is embedded.

In describing the texts I draw on the concepts developed in SFL (Halliday, 1994a) to define features of the texts which enable me to categorise them as pertaining to a particular discourse. This has been particularly useful when looking at the language of learning outcomes which has developed in relation to assessment and the award of credit. APEL claimants are introduced to this language and have to use it to construct their claims, which then represent their learning in particular ways. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999 p. 139) have described SFL as a means of theorising language which looks at how 'meanings and expressions interface with the extra-linguistic' and how meanings specifically are connected to social life or 'the semiotic constitution by the social and of the social'. They describe text as social production which involves joint action, whether it is produced through dialogue or in written form, and which is thus a 'channel for socially driven changes in the language system'. However in their view SFL focuses too much on language and not enough on the social practices which form the context of the language. This means that texts are seen as being in a certain register or part of a certain genre, which leads to problems with describing hybrid texts. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999 p.144) see genre as:

a specifically discursive structuring or ordering of a social practice, a regulative device through which relations of power are realised as forms of control

and discourse as:

a construction or representation of one social practice from a particular perspective within another social practice

They define 'interdiscursivity' as the combination of different discourses and genres, and 'order of discourse' as an open system or a 'potential' from which different people will draw in different ways in different instances. But there is a tension between focusing on the instance in which the text is instantiated and focusing on the structure of the text, how it is realised. The first examines the links between discourse and social practice including

ideological effects and thus allows space for analysing issues around hybridity and change. The social practice under scrutiny here is that of APEL, which of itself demands hybridity, since its purpose is to bring information about experience outside education into the academic sphere, requiring students to incorporate some of the new discourse they are acquiring at University into their accounts of their learning from experience. The use of the discourse of learning outcomes is not confined to the practice of APEL, it nevertheless has been accorded a central role in the assessment of learning from experience and thus impinges strongly on the representations of their learning that students make in the process.

Ivanič (1997, p. 117), in researching the discoursal structure of identity in academic writing, suggests that ‘differences from one part of a text to another and boundaries between discourses are more interesting than global features and global comparisons from one text to another.’ Bearing this in mind, I have followed her example in using local analysis rather than global counts of linguistic features, and have used interview data to contribute to commentary on discourse types and the way they position their users. I refer to all exemplifications of the data as texts, using ‘texts’ in Halliday’s (1994a, p.24) sense of ‘instances of linguistic interaction in which people actually engage: whatever is said, or written, in an operational context’. Halliday describes texts in terms of three metafunctions: ideational, representing experience in the world, interpersonal, enacting social relations, and textual, forming texts. Every clause in a text embodies these three functions simultaneously and they are expressed grammatically through three major networks: transitivity, mood and theme. At the same time the functions are linked with the social dimension expressing respectively the field or activity of which the language forms part, the tenor or relationship between those communicating and the mode or way in which the communication is taking place. I have used these concepts to locate the texts I study, and have then focused on how differences in transitivity, mood and theme, as well as choices of vocabulary, contribute to the positioning of the creators and interpreters of the texts and the social practices of which they form a part. I have followed Fairclough’s (2001) example in making clear my

position as an advocate of APEL, however by focussing on specific features of the texts I hope to demonstrate that my findings have a sound basis in the data.

The chapters which follow describe the texts created within the institution which deal with various stages of the process of APEL (Chapter 4), the texts created by students during the process of developing claims for APEL (Chapters 5 and 6) and the texts created through interviews with lecturers (Chapter 7). In each I shall be examining a particular aspect of the process from a CDA perspective by:

1. Analysis of the social practices within which the texts are located:

Who were the participants in the creation of the texts

Who are the intended readers/hearers?

Where were they created?

For what purpose?

What ideologies inform the practices within which the texts are located?

2. Analysis of the discourse of the texts:

Which genres, discourses and voices can be identified?

From what orders of discourse do they draw?

Features which distinguish the genres, discourses and voices.

Instances of interdiscursivity and manifest intertextuality.

Linguistic analysis:    ideational function – field        }  
   interpersonal function – tenor } of the text  
   textual function – mode            }

Transitivity, mood, theme



## Chapter 4

### APEL in its Context

In this chapter I examine the texts which serve to define and delineate the APEL process within the context of the University, and offer some tentative interpretations of how these may be interpreted by readers. These are texts which have been drawn up by those working in the institution whose aim was to establish a procedure for undertaking APEL involving both lecturers/assessors and students, and to document the various stages of the procedure in such a way as to make it comprehensible and practicable for those involved. As texts created by academics they fall predominantly into the bottom section of the diagram in Fig. 3.1 (p. 34), the part that represents the academy, although in their stated intentions they cross over into the contested APEL section. Their aims include encouraging students to undertake claims for APEL (the publicity leaflet), describing strategies to them with the aim of helping them achieve this (module description, course materials and learning outcomes) and describing ways for staff to assess claims (staff guidance). These texts are considered here as examples of how academics intend APEL to work, or how they perceive it as potentially working. In examining them I look at how they represent the relationship of the institution to APEL and their authors' positions with regard to the boundary between insiders and outsiders which APEL purports to cross. I look for differences between the text designed to inform students about the process, those designed to take them through it and the information produced for lecturers/assessors, what these are and what their significance is for those involved. I also look at possible interpretations of how the writers position themselves and how they construct their readers. As described in Chapter 3, the texts represent different stages of the process and are designed for different addressees. By using tools from CDA I seek to locate them within the social practices of the University and identify the ideological positions which form the background to their creation. I also look at some of the finer detail of the texts using some of the tools of SFL, in order to exemplify how ideologies and social practices are instantiated through specific linguistic features. Through the analysis of these texts I gained an understanding of the place of the APEL process in the University and of how

the various participants may be positioned from the institutional perspective. This has provided a useful background to the examination of the texts produced by students in the following chapters.

### **Information for students**

Students can find information about AP(E)L in written form in the University's prospectus, on the web site or in a leaflet which explains the difference between APL and APEL, how much credit can be claimed and the difference between generic and specific credit. For students interested in APEL there is a second leaflet with information about the APEL module, which is entitled 'Making Your Experience Count'. This is included in enrolment packs and handed out at induction sessions or at open days/evenings, especially those aimed at mature students. Students can also find further details of the module on the University's website where all modules are described. Here I will examine the leaflet 'APEL: Making your Experience Count', the description of the module, two samples of course material from the module, and a set of learning outcomes from another module, the University's Work Placement module.

### **The leaflet 'APEL: Making your Experience Count'(Appendix 1)**

The aim of this leaflet is to encourage students to take the module with a view to eventually claiming credit for learning from experience. It draws intertextually on a marketing genre using a question and answer format and short cameos of previous successful students, and also on the genre of module description in incorporating a set of learning outcomes. It can thus be characterized as a hybrid text, its stated aim being to make a link between students' experience outside the university and their studies, placing it in the central overlapping space in Fig 3.1. The 'ideal subject' (Fairclough, 2001) may be constructed as mature, since the second line starts: 'If you are a mature student ..'. Three examples of students who have made credit applications are given, with the ages of the applicants: 23, 35 and 28, suggesting that you do not need to be very old to be considered experienced. Two of the examples are women and one of them is called

Davinder, which could be interpreted as indicating that people of different ethnic backgrounds apply and succeed. The field is informing new mature students about APEL and the module. The main premise could be construed as being that mature students would like to gain their degrees more quickly and at lower cost, since it says ‘... your existing qualifications and experience may be able to help you to reduce the time and money you need to spend to gain your qualification.’ This attributes an instrumentalist approach to undergraduates, implying that their purpose in entering university is to gain a qualification as quickly as possible rather than to develop an in depth knowledge of a particular field of study. The tenor is that of a person with inside information addressing someone new to the context. Terminology is explained and definitions are given, making it an introduction to a genre as well as to a system. The mode is written, but in a form designed to make information easily accessible, with sentences in bold typeface, short paragraphs, subheadings and bullet points. It takes the form of an A5 folded leaflet with only the title, four very short bullet points giving the module code, level, credit points and prerequisites, and the University logo on the front. On the back are practical information about cost, enrolment, and timetabling and a tear-off slip for those wanting to take the module.

The question and answer format seems to be designed to render the addressor more approachable to the addressee in the context of concepts which the writer perhaps perceives as quite difficult to grasp, for example:

How is this module relevant to me?

How does the exemption process work?

In the answer to the first question the concepts of ‘experience’, ‘exemption’, ‘skills and knowledge’ are introduced and in the answer to the second question the meaning of ‘exemption’ in the context of the credit accumulation and transfer scheme (CATS) is explained. ‘Skills and knowledge’ are again mentioned but whereas in the first answer it was the module, ‘Making your Experience Count’ that would provide the reader with ‘the

skills and knowledge needed to make a claim for exemption' here the leaflet talks about the reader demonstrating 'the skills and knowledge a module is designed to teach', meaning in this case whichever module the student is claiming credit for. In both these examples the words 'skills and knowledge' are used to describe something that is defined and taught by the University, although in the second case they could be describing something the student has already. This establishes the ideological position that it is the University which decides what constitute accreditable knowledge and skills, since this must match a package already pre-determined by the institution. The answer to the third question explains the concepts of 'experience' and 'experiential learning', which may include learning from: 'paid work, unpaid work, leisure activities and on the job training.' Subsequently the leaflet explains that experience in an area unrelated to the course being studied may be claimed against the free choice element of a course. Examples of successful applicants for credit given on the leaflet include someone who had 'worked in a junior management position for a popular restaurant chain', someone with 'extensive work experience as a telecommunications engineer' and someone who had 'worked as a residential social worker' and done 'a lot of voluntary work with young Asian women'. These examples suggest that what is likely to count for credit will be knowledge gained from some kind of formal work rather than the kind of knowledge and insights gained from other life changing experiences such as childbirth, bereavement, redundancy and unemployment, displacement and migration. Thus there is an implicit categorization of knowledge which may contribute to an image of the type of person who will be a suitable candidate.

Answers to the hypothetical questions are addressed to the reader by means of the second person pronoun 'you': 'If **you** have completed a recognized Higher Education course...', 'In some cases **you** may not be sure how relevant **your** previous experience is...', again creating a personal voice and possibly making the addressor more approachable. Throughout modality is used to express tentativeness, 'It **may** be possible to claim...', 'students **can** be exempted ...', '... any further credit which **might** be awarded' although in relation to the outcomes of taking the module it is used to express a more positive position: 'This module **will** help you identify ...' or 'When you have completed the

course you **will** have achieved ...'. Halliday (1994a) describes modality as expressing the interpersonal element of the text. Here the positive modality expressed by 'will' seems to express a confidence in the University system and in what it will teach on the module, which is not reflected in the statements about the possibility of the student gaining credit, suggesting a reluctance to raise any false hopes.

The leaflet lists the learning outcomes to be achieved through study of the module:

- An assessment of your own strengths, weaknesses, skills and abilities in relation to your chosen field of study.
- An action plan which identifies and articulates learning gained from experience and summarises its equivalence with formal academic learning
- A set of clearly defined goals for future development which are linked to plans for how these goals might be achieved
- An understanding of the requirements for the assessment of learning from experience and the development of the skills and understanding necessary to undertake such an assessment.

The introduction of the concept of learning outcomes in higher education has been discussed above in Chapters 1 and 2. In this chapter some of the forms they take are studied, as well as their significance in the APEL process. Learning outcomes tend to take the form of what Halliday (1994a) calls 'little texts'. These are texts which the context requires to be shortened (other examples are newspaper headlines or instructions) and which are therefore highly condensed, although as Halliday points out they may in fact be very long, as in the case of lecture notes. They also, according to Halliday, have a distinct grammar. This entails the omission of certain elements normally present, the nature of the text determining what is left out. In the examples above each learning outcome takes the form of a single very long nominal group with no participant and no

process (represented by a finite verb). There is ellipsis here; the sentence ‘When you have completed the course you will have achieved the following learning outcomes:’ precedes the list of outcomes so that in each of the examples above ‘You will have achieved ..’ is assumed to precede the nominal group. Most learning outcomes consist of an introductory sentence such as this one followed by a variety of forms of ‘little text’. However with the common use of learning outcomes the introductory sentence is sometimes omitted as shall be seen in an example below. The general effect of the representation of ‘skills and knowledge’ in this type of format is to de-personalise and systematize the information creating an abstraction from the reality of the lived experience which may be difficult for those not initiated into the process to undertake. Thus the ‘you’ which featured in the rest of the leaflet has disappeared from the learning outcomes with the exception of the first one.

While no very precise information is given about the form a claim for knowledge might be expected to take, the fact that there is an expected form is strongly hinted at in phrases such as ‘you can demonstrate’, ‘experience has to be matched’ and in the last two learning outcomes which require ‘An action plan which identifies and articulates learning ...’ and ‘... the development of the skills and understanding necessary to undertake such assessment.’ Words such as ‘identifies’, ‘articulates’ and ‘summarises’ suggest a specific formal requirement and ‘the development of the skills and understanding’ suggests that this will be something the student will have to acquire, rather than something which they might be bringing with them.

So on reading the leaflet, potential APEL candidates will probably have learnt how the University’s exemption process works and the meaning of some of the jargon of the institution. They may assume that certain types of work and voluntary activity may be valued, that there are certain ways of going about claiming credit and that they may need to take a module in order to be able to make a successful claim. They may also have gained the impression that a degree is a practical step to career advancement which is undertaken by people who are keen to progress in their profession as quickly as possible. Students whose interest is aroused by the leaflet may seek further information on the

University's web site. This information is also accessed by students who browse the site in the process of choosing their modules, or by students whose tutors have suggested to them that 'Making Your Experience Count' may be appropriate for them because they feel they have experience they could claim for, because they don't know what module to choose or because they are short of a module in order to graduate.

### **The description of the module (Appendix 2)**

All descriptions of modules on the website follow a specified format including Context, Aims and Objectives, Core Capabilities, Learning Outcomes, Content, Teaching and Learning Methods and Assessment Instruments. The module is thus placed firmly within the order of discourse of the education environment. Ostensibly, the descriptions are there to inform students about modules in order to enable them to make choices. However unlike in the case of the publicity material, the writer here does not have the option of drawing on a range of genres to create a text they feel is likely to attract a particular group of students, but must follow one very specific genre. In this field the description has to conform to the format in order to pass through a validation process. Although theoretically the information is addressed to the student, the discourse here is much more formal than in the leaflet and appears to address academics. Students are always referred to in the third person. Thus the section entitled 'Context' starts: 'Participants will tend to be mature students ...' as opposed to 'If you are a mature student ...' in the leaflet. It continues: 'Having completed this module students will be clear about the University Assessment of Prior Experiential learning process;' and 'Students will be introduced to theoretical concepts'. The tenor is therefore a little difficult to define. The first sentence under the heading 'Aims and Objectives' states 'The central aim of the module is to enhance equality of opportunity ...'. This and the final sentence of the paragraph '... the module also aims to support implementation of the University Policy for the Assessment of Prior Learning.' sound more like justification of the module in terms of the University's mission and policies than explanation for a student of the content of a module. Thus the dual purpose of the module description, to fulfill validation requirements and to inform students makes it perhaps rather ill-fitted for its second

purpose. The mode is written, the text is divided up into short paragraphs with a variety of headings, bold, capitalized or italicized, and the learning outcomes are numbered. Readers can click on an icon to get the timetable and on the word 'BOOKLIST' to find the reading list for the module.

In contrast to the leaflet the emphasis here is more on the knowledge and skills students will acquire relating to the process of APEL whilst studying the module than on the knowledge they may be bringing with them. Although the learning outcomes are for the same module as the one described in the leaflet, there are more of them and they are differently worded, again suggesting a different audience. The first one, interestingly says that students will be able to:

Understand the varied nature of learning and the concept of learning outcomes

making explicit that the concept may in fact not be transparent (cf Betts and Smith 1998 cited in Chapter 2). These learning outcomes focus on the students' understanding of the learning process and related theory and on them gaining the ability to 'identify' and 'articulate their learning' and 'demonstrate' its equivalence to formal academic learning. Students are expected to 'develop the required communication skills'. This is so that they will be able to 'write their own learning outcomes' and 'translate (their) prior experience into key academic skills'. In the module description there is very little to tell the reader what counts as knowledge for the purpose of APEL, but there is a very clear indication that there are formal requirements that will be expected in terms of communication skills, identifying, articulating and demonstrating learning, writing learning outcomes and translating experience. The use of the word 'translate' indicates that whatever the learning from experience being considered it will have to undergo a change of form if it is to be accredited. It will probably already have become clear to the reader that more is required than having worked in a paid or unpaid capacity, and that having learnt from experience in itself will not be sufficient to claim credit, the learning will need to be processed and presented in a particular way according to specific criteria. The experienced individual, perhaps with a high level of professional experience and/or a



wide knowledge of life situations and ability to deal with them has disappeared from view to become one of the 'students'.

The learning outcomes are formulated under the heading

Students will be able to:

and the six numbered outcomes all start with a verb: 'understand ...', 'identify and articulate ...', 'demonstrate ...' thus being examples of ellipsis, or of 'little texts' with a different element omitted from in the example above (p.54). For example:

demonstrate the equivalence of their own learning from experience with formal academic learning

Here the verb or process is present but the mood element and the actor/subject are omitted. An even more marked example of this type of text immediately precedes the learning outcomes in the module description in the shape of 'Core Capabilities'. This concept will probably be unfamiliar to readers new to the University since it does not seem to be widespread in the higher education sector. The University has developed a list of six core capabilities which it feels all students should be developing in the course of their studies. Every module in the curriculum must focus on two of these capabilities in addition to the subject content, with the aim that on graduation students will have acquired all six at an advanced level. In the case of 'Making Your Experience Count' the two capabilities focused on are:

Manage self and relate to others

Communicate effectively in context

In module descriptions core capabilities always appear in this form of verb/ process and object /goal or adjunct, sometimes with no preceding sentence to introduce them. In the text being described here they are introduced by the sentence: 'The module will develop

to threshold level the core capabilities below:’ so it is not so easy to be sure what has been omitted here, but we can guess it to be something like ‘The student will be able to ...’. Deixis, in the form of ‘his/her’, is also missing in the first example before ‘self’. This is another example of a literal de-personalisation of the activity described.

In the section on content the reader is informed that ‘... students will be able to articulate their prior learning within an academic context,’ and that they ‘... will be encouraged to see the process of experiential learning and reflection as a way of becoming autonomous learners actively involved in their learning.’ Under ‘Teaching and Learning Methods’ we are again informed that ‘The module aims to develop autonomous independent learning, both individually and in groups, with a view to fostering an aptitude for lifelong learning.’ This language also seems aimed more at demonstrating a commitment to the University’s policies and mission statement than at attracting and informing students. It would be interesting to know how many mature students buy into the ‘lifelong learning’ ethos. Do they already consider themselves lifelong learners by virtue of having come to university? Is it a concept which interests them? It seems unlikely that a student would come to university to develop an aptitude for lifelong learning, although this could easily be a by-product of their studies. Likewise have they come in order to learn to be ‘autonomous learners’? Another focus of the module is ‘the translation of the student’s prior experience into key academic skills and capabilities’. The notions of ‘articulation’ and ‘translation’ which reoccur in both documents suggest that the process of accreditation of learning from experience has a lot to do with language and that students will be spending some time on acquiring the ability to describe their experience in a particular way. There are several academic references in the ‘Content’ section and under ‘Assessment Instruments’ it is stated that ‘The emphasis will be on applying and using theoretical perspectives and insights introduced through the module.’ This suggests that there is a requirement for reading and acquisition of theory before learning from experience can be accredited. The module description thus appears to incorporate APEL into the existing practices of the University, not as something new and different which changes those practices but itself modified to fit the existing mould.

I described in the literature review in Chapter 2 how Fairclough (1999) has suggested that the setting up of ways of describing things which then become the accepted ways of doing it, so that others are no longer acceptable, is a means of imposing particular social practices. The language described above reflects a view of how it is appropriate to describe experience in a higher education context and at the same time implies that other ways of describing experience may not be considered valid. It also suggests that students do not know how to be students before coming to university, but that this is something they will have to learn whilst studying. There seems to be a code which students need to crack and apply to their own real life experiences and stories, to make a connection between the two and re-categorise what they know about themselves and their lives.

Readers will find some of the terminology introduced in the leaflet repeated and in some cases expanded on in the module description. 'Skills and knowledge' appear again along with 'abilities', 'understanding', 'learning from experience' and 'credit' so that there are some points of reference. However the voices and discourses of the two texts are very different, with the module description using academic discourse and an impersonal voice compared to the more informal discourse and personal voice of the leaflet. The content also differs in that apart from one mention under 'Context' to '...paid and unpaid work, in-company training, voluntary or community-based activities' there is no mention in the module description of what the student might be bringing with them, the focus being on what they will learn from the module. In terms of Fig. 3.1 then, the module description moves the reader very much from the outside into the academic domain, abandoning both textual features and content related to life outside the University. As we move further along this continuum, I next examine the texts used in the classroom to advance the process of transforming the students' learning from outside experience into a form acceptable to the academy as valid knowledge.

### **Two samples of course materials from 'Making Your Experience Count'**

The two sections of the course materials from the APEL module which I have chosen to analyse are one from week two of the programme entitled 'Demonstrating your

Knowledge' and one from week seven entitled 'Writing about Transferable Skills'. I have chosen these because they both occur at key parts of the course. This is also where readers will find out what the skills and knowledge referred to in the preceding texts refer to in the university context. The first, in week two, is the point at which, after the initial introduction to the course in week one, the fundamental concepts which underpin APEL, relating to the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired, are addressed in depth for the first time. The content of this section describes the ideas which underlie the notion of presenting knowledge in the form of a portfolio. The second occurs in week seven and constitutes the last concentrated input of information before the students go into the assessment process. It is followed by feedback tutorials on their first assignment, a group work session, a revision session and a session on future planning. In this second sample issues of 'transferability' and level of 'skill' are addressed. These materials were written by the module coordinator drawing on a number of other sources and are produced in a booklet which is given to all students at the start of teaching, along with a separate booklet of readings. These are the students' handbooks for the course, containing all the practical information (dates, assignments etc.) they need and quite a lot of the theoretical input, although there are reading lists to encourage them to read beyond the texts provided in the Reading Pack. The content of the handbook is discussed in seminars with some of the activities being carried out in seminars and others in the students' own time. Students have the opportunity to ask questions about the material and will not be studying it in isolation unless they are unable to attend seminars. The field of the texts is that of a teaching situation in a university, the aim being to convey information to students about a particular set of ideas and to encourage them in activities which relate to those ideas. They could be described as instructional texts; they assume that the students are not already familiar with the ideas they contain, and also that they may not be familiar with some of the vocabulary used. The tenor is that of a knowledgeable person transmitting information to people who are less knowledgeable in the area covered, a lecturer communicating to students, and varies between very formal and more friendly and familiar. The mode is written, incorporating various devices to make the text more accessible to the reader, such as short paragraphs, numbered indented points, bullet points, key terminology in bold print and quotes from other staff and other written

sources. There is manifest intertextuality in both texts, the first one drawing directly from other written sources for examples of taxonomies and the second incorporating quotes from other lecturers and employers.

**The first sample: Demonstrating your knowledge**

This section is preceded by and follows on from a section explaining the Kolb (1984) learning cycle. It starts off with a quote:

Credit is only awarded for demonstrated learning achievement and never for attendance or experience alone. (Robertson, 1994)

and the first part of the section is devoted to explaining this to students. The first paragraph is in a very formal voice, realized by the use of passive verb forms and lexical items associated with academic discourse, such as ‘underpinning the assessment of learning’ or ‘presented in the form of examinations or coursework’. However in the second sentence of the second paragraph the voice changes to a much more personal one with sentences such as:

Two people can have very similar experiences and learn very different things as a result and we all know someone who though repeating the experience time after time “never learns”.

The next sentence is formal:

Occupational titles can be very similar but a closer examination may reveal very different roles and responsibilities.

This is followed by two sentences in which the reader is addressed directly as ‘you’ and the sentence:

Some jobs have very grand titles for essentially routine functions, others very modest titles for roles demanding a high level of skill.

so that the whole paragraph gives a mixed message which while appropriate for a domain which serves to bring together the academic context and the world outside could be confusing for students learning to express themselves in the higher education environment. What I have designated the 'genre of APEL' because it incorporates lexical items and structures which are frequently and often uniquely associated with this field, is very much in evidence in this text. Thus we have 'experiential learning', 'learning from experience', 'learning gained through experience', 'learning which is unconsciously acquired', 'assessment of knowledge and understanding from experience' and 'reflective learning' and 'systematic reflection' which are specifically associated with APEL and items such as 'knowledge', 'evidence', 'skills', 'credit' and 'demonstrate' which are used with specific meanings in the genre as well as being used in other ways in other genres.

The second part of this section introduces students to a number of taxonomies for the purpose of enabling them to describe their knowledge. That the writer assumes the words 'taxonomies' and 'cognitive' may be new to the students is indicated by the translation in brackets in the sentence: 'One of the best known taxonomies (lists) of cognitive (intellectual) skills was developed by Bloom (1965)', thus positioning the writer as 'knowing' and the reader as 'not knowing'. Bloom's six categories are listed with an explanation for each and an example chosen to relate the abstract concept to a reality with which the student is presumed to be familiar, for example:

- **Synthesis**

Bloom defined this as the "putting together of elements and parts so as to form a whole, in such a way as to constitute a pattern or structure not clearly there before"

e.g. writing a critical report

Two more taxonomies are given, with explanations or examples, but there are a number of lexical items included without explanation which it might be assumed would be unfamiliar to students who needed explanations for 'taxonomies' and 'cognitive', such as 'tacit' or 'cybernetic'. The section ends with a task which requires the students to take an example from their own experience, think about it in relation to one of these taxonomies and think how they might demonstrate their learning. Thus in this section students would be acquiring a range of concepts related to knowledge, and elements of a genre for talking about their own knowledge in an academic situation. The different voices evident in the text could make for confusion, but also introduce a more relaxed and personal dimension which serves to make the process more accessible to students. The clear aim of the text is to equip students for the task of 'bringing the outside in', transforming outside knowledge into a form that meets academic criteria.

#### Writing about transferable skills

The dominant discourse in the section described above is academic, the text includes academic references and references to 'academically devised frameworks', 'the assessment of learning in higher education' and 'The language [...] commonplace in higher education' which indicate that one of the aims is to acculturate students into academic discourse. In this second section the predominant discourse is one which has fairly recently come to be used in higher education and then predominantly in post 1992 universities. This is the discourse related to 'transferable skills', which purports to link the world of higher education to the world of work. The text describes transferable skills as follows:

Transferable skills are general skills which are useful in a wide variety of contexts and contribute to successful performance. They facilitate learning and the transfer of more specific skills to new situations. They are variously called key skills, common skills, core skills, generic skills, interpersonal skills, life skills or transferable skills. There are a variety of definitions and lists of transferable skills but most include the following key areas:

Communication  
Problem solving  
Interpersonal skills  
Numeracy

There has been some debate about the concept of transferable skills (Holmes, 1998) and its relevance to higher education, nationally and in the institution described here. This text presents transferable skills in a positive light, as something that graduates need because they are what employers want. This could be interpreted as an assumption that students come to university because they want to be employed and that universities should be listening to what employers say. The text explains:

Many employers recruit graduates from any discipline in the expectation that they will have useful transferable skills. Graduates who know a lot but can achieve little are of limited use to others and liable to personal frustration.

This statement is followed by extracts from interviews with academic staff and one employer which explain how important it is for students to be able to analyse and explain the skills they have, for example:

You're more interested in how they can articulate what it was they did.  
(employer)

or

Some have done wonderful things but they don't know how to put it down and they certainly don't know how to express it ... (academic staff)

After the quotes the voice in the text changes to a more personal one and from this point on the reader is addressed as 'you'. The feel of the text is very different from the section



on 'Demonstrating your knowledge' described above, which presented information in an impersonal way with only three references to 'you' over as many pages. In 'Writing about transferable skills' the second page includes:

You will need to demonstrate

You may be required to

You should attempt to demonstrate

If you were applying for a job

You would draw up

You would attempt to generalize

These requirements are all connected with the necessity of demonstrating transferability. Students are asked to look at an incident from their own experience as expressed in their lifelines (see Chapter 5) and identify the skills they used or developed:

You want to be able to claim that you have already demonstrated certain skills and that these are transferable to other situations. You do this by drawing on further examples [...] and generalizing from these to other situations in order to support your claim for transferable skills.

This text demonstrates another concept held by some to be key in APEL, that of generalisability and transferability. Whereas the first section, 'Demonstrating your knowledge', appeared to position students as needing to acquire a set of academic concepts and the vocabulary to go with them, this section seems to perceive them as people with practical experience, most probably in the workplace, who may not know how to analyse or explain what they know how to do. In the first section frequently occurring lexical items were 'knowledge', 'learning', 'concepts' and 'judgement' here they are 'skills', 'transferable' or 'transferability' and 'demonstrate'. In looking at the samples of student work in the next chapter it is possible to judge the influence of these two genres on student thinking and expression. Meanwhile, the next text I examine is a

clear example of the latter genre, describing the learning outcomes for a work placement module.

### Statement of Learning Outcomes (Appendix 3)

This text forms part of the documentation for claiming credit for a work experience module, which the university offers undergraduates in the form of a work placement at the end of which they produce a report. Successful completion of this gains them credit for one module. Those who already have work experience may claim credit for this module by describing how their learning from past experience has met the learning outcomes for the module. These are listed in this text, along with instructions to students on what to include in their descriptions. The learning outcomes were drawn up to function as a generic set which it would be possible to use to describe experience in a broad range of workplaces and to claim credit on a range of courses. I have chosen to analyse the text as an example of learning outcomes. The field spans the world of work and the academic environment. The aim of the text is to elicit from students information on their workplace experience in such a form as to be acceptable in the academic context. A number of assumptions are made about the workplace: that a number of people work there, that communication takes place between them, that some kind of hierarchy operates (reference to 'colleagues' and 'superiors'). Thus as in the leaflet above, 'work' is constructed in a particular way, excluding some forms of work such as self-employment and consultancy or creative activity which may take place alone. The tenor is very much the voice of authority instructing a person without authority. It could be compared with some of the documentation that employees in the institution have to fill in as part of 'performance appraisal' and thus seems to belong to the culture established by the QAA and the introduction of quality control systems which require a tabulation of information, fitting it into boxes and ways of describing which are laid down by those appraising or assessing it (Ball 1999). The mode is written. The layout is a chart and the information is designed to fit into boxes and to fit onto one page only. It is contained in two columns: on the left are the learning outcomes, each in a box, and on the right, in italics, instructions on how to provide evidence of each of them. This layout could be

seen as conveying a message that any information provided should also be categorized and represented in a systematic form. The text demonstrates interdiscursivity in drawing on both workplace and academic orders of discourse.

These learning outcomes are yet another example of Halliday's (1994a) 'little texts' and follow a pattern described above (p.54). As in many learning outcomes the subject and the modal element of the verb are omitted, however unlike in the example above, here the deixis in the form of s/he is included. There is no introductory sentence, the learning outcomes stand on their own and include, for example:

Demonstrate s/he has operated effectively, both independently and with others

and

Evaluate critically his/her performance abilities

The sentences in the boxes on the right side of the text, under the heading 'Indicative Content' address the student directly. Nine of them take the form of imperatives:

Consider examples ...

Think about the degree to which ...

Remember this is advanced level ...

Five are questions:

How did you learn the job?

Did you encounter difficulties ...?

Have you changed the way you work?

The last section contains three sentences two of which contain expressions of obligation:

This should run through your work

Experiential learning requires you to ...

The whole therefore could be said to employ a prescriptive voice, implying that there is a very specific way to present the information required. At the same time the questions addressed directly to the student seem to represent a more personal voice and to some extent break away from the genre and make the concepts more accessible. The column labeled 'Indicative Content' gives a clear indication of the kind of words and concepts which would be considered appropriate for demonstrating, for example in the first row, that one has 'operated effectively ... independently and with others'. The terms: 'initiative', 'responsibility', 'time management', 'team working' and 'analysis of group roles' indicate the expectation of a breakdown into components, designated by a particular terminology, of what it is that constitutes effective operation. Likewise there is the implication in the second row that communication needs to have been considered in terms of a particular range of pre-determined aspects. It is also specified that a knowledge of theories and models of experiential learning is required. There is thus an apparent emphasis on the value of theoretical knowledge and the ability to apply it rather than on a purely practical knowledge of a workplace and the ability to function within it. The structure of the description, the division into learning outcomes, give evidence of the requirement of a particular form, lending that information meaning which it would not have if formulated differently, for example in a narrative or descriptive form.

These two sample texts give an idea of how students are inducted into the genre of APEL and the preparation of claims for credit for learning from experience, while being encouraged to take an academic approach to the description of knowledge and the creation of texts. They are designed to be used in seminars and are therefore mediated by tutors with students rather than being purely read as information like the first two texts described. The learning outcomes with the instructions for describing them, and the other texts looked at above, were written by academics for students. The final text I look at is written by academics for academics, in order to inform them about the process of APEL. It comprises of a section of a booklet entitled 'AP(E)L Staff guidance for the

Accreditation of Prior Study and the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning'. The section chosen is a small part of this booklet sub-headed 'Guidance for the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning'.

### **Information for staff**

#### **AP(E)L**

#### **Staff Guidance for the Accreditation of Prior Study and the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning**

This staff handbook for AP(E)L was written by one academic, to be made available to and read by all members of academic staff. It functions as a link between the University's AP(E)L policy and the implementation of the policy on a day-to-day basis by members of teaching staff. The handbook includes definitions of the terminology (APL, APEL etc.), guidelines for the award of APL credit, a description of the process for awarding APL, Guidance for the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning, which is the section which will be studied, here and a series of appendices. The basic premise behind the section on APEL seems to be firstly that APEL is a 'good thing', that it is desirable. This premise relates to the University's mission statement, which includes the advocacy of 'social justice', and its commitment to the widely promoted goal of 'widening participation' as well as 'Lifelong Learning', currently less in evidence. APEL fits into this ethos with its goal of recognizing learning wherever it has taken place. So a second premise could be that the University is a place which is open to and encourages students of all ages and from all backgrounds and that all lecturers subscribe to this ethos. A third premise is that the University is rigorous in its assessment and accreditation processes as a respectable academic institution.

#### **Section on Guidance for the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning**

The section of the document being examined is presented in the form of short numbered paragraphs grouped under headings picked out in bold. It is in the format of a manual

designed for easy access to information, but also includes some academic references at the end. The voice is formal and the discourse academic: no personal pronouns are used. The aims of the first section, entitled 'Introduction and pedagogic issues' appear to be threefold. One aim might be to convince lecturers of the desirability of APEL, to advocate its implementation on the grounds that it aims:

to recognize and give value to a diversity of experiences; to avoid repetition of learning already acquired and where possible to accelerate the student's rate of progress

It is also pointed out that a positive link has been made between APEL and student retention, a particularly important issue in this University, which had the poorest retention rate of any in the UK in the league tables for 2002. A second aim of the section seems to be to convince lecturers of the academic rigor of the process. Reference is made to the 'AP(E)L and Accreditation Board, to the fact that APEL '... always involves a formal academic assessment of learning evidence' and '... requires the student to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes through experience.' The third aim seems to be to introduce a number of caveats. Firstly 'It should be recognized that APEL in and of itself is not a socially inclusive process', secondly that 'Adult learning **may** not fall into neat modular categories' and thirdly that 'The language of formal theory and the language of practice **may** be quite different' so that the process of preparing evidence for assessment **may** not be straightforward. The use of modality here in the form of the word **may** in each of the above examples (my bold) seems to convey the message that APEL is perhaps not as straightforward as it sounds. There are three references to the University's AP(E)L Policy in this section, perhaps to lend authority and official status to the process, the final paragraph stating how the policy 'promotes flexibility of assessment opportunities' and how APEL has the potential to be 'a socially inclusive process' with 'a commitment to valuing a diversity of learning'.

The second section deals with 'APEL Accreditation Opportunities' which include Module Matching, Negotiated Credit and Work Placement Assessment. The writer is at

pains to emphasize the unlikelihood of learning from experience matching existing learning outcomes. Thus under 'Module Matching' it is stated that students are required to 'demonstrate that their experience has produced learning outcomes which **broadly** match those of existing modules.' It is then pointed out that 'Learning from experience will **not necessarily** reflect the sorts of theoretical knowledge often identified in syllabi.' Again further on it says 'Knowledge and skills derived from dealing with problems and practice outside the institution **seldom fit neatly** into the boundaries set by individual modules.' All these statements continue the tentative tone expressed by the use of **may** above with **broadly**, **not necessarily** and **seldom fit neatly** and appear to encourage lecturers/assessors to take a flexible approach. They are also warned that 'APEL students may be involved in a different assessment workload to students undertaking the same module in a taught mode'. It is later pointed out that 'It is not necessary to follow the standard assessment set out for the module and in many cases this will be inappropriate for the assessment of learning derived from experience.' The difference of the nature of learning from experience compared to learning on a module at the University is thus emphasized.

In discussing 'Negotiated Credit' the difficulty of creating learning outcomes is stressed: 'writing learning outcomes can be a daunting task' and again 'the portfolio ... requires an abstraction of learning from experience which students may find difficult and artificial.' It is pointed out that 'The process of writing learning outcomes is not assessed. The learning outcomes provide a description of the learning to be assessed.' Examples of sets of learning outcomes written by students are included in this section. The aim here seems to be to encourage assessors to focus on the learning and knowledge the student is presenting rather than the form of the submission.

The final section concerns 'The APEL Assessment Process' and deals mainly with a range of practical issues such as how assessment is carried out, by whom, when, where students and staff can find advice and guidance, the role of the AP(E)L and Accreditation Board and the fee. There are two references to SEEC credit level descriptors, as well as a reference to the qualification descriptors developed by the QAA, manifest intertextuality

designed perhaps to add weight to the argument for APEL by referring to outside bodies, as well as intending to assist assessors in their task and to lend respectability and authority to the process. There is also reference to the external examiner and to the procedure in the case of 'a failed APEL assessment', so that parallels with the assessment of other modules are drawn, perhaps to reassure lecturers of the validity of the process. In fact the process that has been agreed in the case of a student not being awarded credit is different from that of a student failing a module, since in the case of APEL the 'fail' will not be registered on the student's record, although in every other respect the procedure is the same, the student not being allowed to re-submit more than once. It seems unfortunate to me that in seeking to make the process conform to the regular assessment processes of the University, presumably to give it authority, the word 'fail' is used to describe an unsuccessful claim for credit. For a student to describe learning from experience and have it termed a 'fail' seems to accord the right to the academy to pass judgement, according to its criteria, on learning that took place outside its domain and within a framework which it may not be equipped to assess, and seems likely to have a demoralizing effect on the applicant or at least make some students wary of undertaking the process.

The text described above seems to reflect the unfamiliarity of APEL as an accepted part of the work of academics and the need for it to be explained and advocated. The tone of the text appears to suggest not that this is a right of students but that it is something more like a concession that should be accorded out of a commitment to certain ideals expressed in the University's mission statement and generally accepted by staff working there. It appears as an attempt to establish a new terrain, with reference to old established practices as a means of making the new acceptable. The readers are assumed to need reassuring that everything will be conducted according to the regulations and with the sanction of outside authority. New and different ideas such as students writing their own learning outcomes are introduced within a recognized framework, perhaps so as not to cause alarm. References to flexibility and hints that learning may be different from that defined by the academy seem to be presented in tentative terms.



What I have given in this chapter are my interpretations of the texts I chose, through the application of some of the concepts developed by Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) and Halliday (1994a). Readers approaching these texts from different perspectives would doubtless produce different interpretations, since it is the nature of texts to be interpreted according to the contexts in which they are perceived. Looking back on the texts I have described here, what is striking to me is how little of the world outside the University appears in them. The publicity leaflet seems to look outward in its voice, attempting to draw students in, but the other texts appear firmly situated within the academy, both in terms of their concern with policy issues, exemplifying equal opportunities, ----- implementing University policies and the mission statement, and in terms of creating a genre to accommodate outside experience within an academic context. In the texts which address students the concepts of learning outcomes and transferable skills are introduced giving the impression that the process is complex and that there is considerable learning to be done before the award of credit can take place. The border between the outside world and the space in which APEL can take place starts to look as if it could be quite difficult to cross. The following chapters will show how some students and lecturers reacted to these documents in the context of the APEL process and what effect, if any, they had on their approach to the introduction of outside learning from experience into the university system.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Students in the APEL process: Part 1 'Making Your Experience Count'**

This chapter contains an analysis of the data collected from students during the APEL process, including the interaction between students and tutor in a seminar situation and oral and written data produced by students at five different stages of the process. The analysis traces changes and developments in the discourses used by the students as they go through the stages, including to what extent and when they take on board not only the discourse of the University but also the genre of APEL, how these coexist, blend or interfere with orders of discourse from outside the University.

I examine the data drawing on both CDA and SFL. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) have explained how these two approaches complement each other, in that SFL focuses on language and the semiotic, whereas CDA frames the analysis of discourse within analysis of social practices. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (p.143) describe SFL as 'an account of what choices the text makes from the potential of the system', whereas CDA focuses on 'the dialectic between the semiotic and the social' (p.142). In the different sections of this chapter I attempt to locate each series of texts within a context, explaining by whom, where, how and why the texts were produced and what social factors interconnected with their creation. I then look at the texts, or parts of the texts in closer linguistic detail pointing out what features of the texts lead me to describe them as I do.

#### **Student activities**

##### **'My personal banner'**

This is the first activity that students are asked to carry out, in their first seminar on the APEL module 'Making Your Experience Count'. Students are at preliminary level at university, that is to say they are studying their first eight modules, and are studying between one and three other modules at the same time, depending on whether they are

full or part-time. This activity takes place at the end of a session in which they are introduced to the concept of APEL and systems in place for its operation at the University, and introduced to the module. It is therefore a session quite heavy on information input by the tutor. In contrast the aim of the activity, as stated in the instructions, is to be 'a way for you to express how you see yourself and the things that matter to you' (see Appendix 4). In the context of the seminar it is to bring the students' lives outside the University into the classroom and also to locate their studies within the context of their lives as a whole. In Halliday's (1994a) terms the ideational function is to formulate an image of themselves, and the interpersonal function is to communicate this to their fellow students and the tutor. These two functions are combined in the textual component, which takes the form of a piece of paper, a 'banner', which by its nature has the function of making something public, in this case to be displayed on the wall of the seminar room for all participants to look at. It therefore functions as a declaration of identity: 'this is who I am, in so far as I am able and prepared to share this with you'. Students are given a handout with an explanation of the aims of the 'My personal banner activity' (see Appendix 4) and two examples of banners, one in written form only and one including writing and drawing. They are asked to write or draw under four headings 'How I see myself now', 'What makes me happy', 'What I am most proud of' and 'How I would like to see myself in a year's time'. In the examples responses take the form of nominal phrases 'an evening out with the family' or prepositional phrases 'at a crossroads in my life' or in the illustrated example single nouns: 'volunteer', 'college'. These are further examples of what Halliday (1994a) calls little texts (see Chapter 4) and it is interesting to see how many of the students followed the model provided. Some preferred to write in full sentences and wrote a lot more than the examples. Several used illustrations, also drawing on the model and taking on board the 'banner' genre, or wrote simple lists of nouns under 'How I see myself now', for example:

1. Entrepreneur
2. Mother
3. Student
4. Worker

and:

Vicious circle: Mother-Work-Housework-Bill payer-etc.

Under the heading 'What are you most proud of' they wrote, for example:

Surviving what life throws at me

Keeping going under the hardest circumstances

My daughter passing GCSEs and A'levels

Others demonstrated a more formal voice relating to their work experience, juxtaposed with a very personal voice:

Creating a publication sold nationally and recently internationally to libraries and information providers/Watching my daughter wake up

Having achieved my goals that I have set myself: career, financial, personal/Still being happy

Although the clause structure is the same in the more formal and more informal examples, lexis such as 'creating, publication, nationally, internationally, information providers' in the first example and 'achieved, goals, financial, personal' in the second create a more professional voice so that interdiscursivity or hybridity is already occurring, reflecting the different orders of discourse students are drawing on outside the University before they begin to take on new genres within the institution.

The section under the heading 'How I would like to see myself in a year's time' is revealing in terms of aspirations, most of which concern work and/or property:

Have a better paid job and better job in general

Climbing the Natwest Tower

Successful career ... and job which I enjoy

Successful in new job promotion

New job, better paid

To have gained promotion in my company

Happier in my work

Own place, nicely decorated

Owning my own property

Starting to build my own house in the Gambia

The words that occur most frequently here are 'job' (five times) and 'promotion' (twice) and 'own/ing' (three times). Six out of the nine banners collected did not mention education at all under this heading. Those who mentioned study did so in terms of passing or progressing:

One year nearer to finishing this degree course

Passing exams

I would like to be in my third year and looking forward to achieving my degree

Progressing on this course

Many of them mentioned change or stress in response to the first question, 'How do you see yourself now?' so that the general impression given by their banners is one of people in a state of change, academic study perhaps representing a transitional period for them, in which they move from one stage of their lives on to the next, but which is not part of the main business of working, owning property, bringing up children, but something they pass through, bearing out the attribution to students of instrumentalist aims made in the leaflet (Chapter 4 p.52).

Only one person mentioned what she hoped to achieve in terms of what I would call a learning goal and that was:

Reach more maturity through the course

Only one mentioned education under 'What I am most proud of':

I am going to university because I want and not because my parents want me to

and only two mentioned it under 'What makes me happy':

Educating myself

Being successful as a student

Other things mentioned under this heading were: family (everyone), holidays/travelling/jet-setting (five), sports (four). Two people said 'making others happy', one said 'being successful in business' and one said 'clothes shopping'. One person wrote:

One thing that has always made me happy is seeing the happiness in the people around me, mainly my family. Every time they achieve a goal, break a barrier or

succeed in anything, my spirit is lifted and I cannot help but join in the excitement.

This student did not follow the format of the example and maintains a very personal voice by means of the thematic structure of the first clause with its dummy theme 'one thing' with the full meaning of the theme being expressed in the hypotactic clause 'that has always made me happy', as well as the expressions 'every time', 'spirit is lifted', 'cannot help but'. Where many students, given a model, emulate it in their response, some respond in much more individual ways indicating perhaps a greater willingness to take risks or a disinclination to conform to models. These may be people for whom the learning outcome based approach to describing learning, where knowledge is packaged under a series of headings, does not work particularly well, as will be seen in the descriptions of the portfolios in Chapter 6.

Students did not take long to write these banners, nor did they find it difficult. They eagerly expressed their thoughts and feelings on the paper, giving others a glimpse into their lives and their hopes and dreams. Nevertheless there was an analytical process going on here. They selected what to write and chose phrases that would encapsulate the essence of their existence, something not generally asked of students in a university. Many of them expressed pleasant surprise at being asked to do this activity, which did not fit with their expectations of academic study. This was designed to be the first step on the road to describing their learning from experience, of the process of bridging the gap between outside life and the academic world. The banners give a perception of the range of discourses students are drawing on in their lives outside university in the multiple roles they are filling in the context of work, relationships, family and other activities, and give some idea of the conflict this can set up. One student expressed it graphically, as can be seen in the first example in Fig.5.1 below:

Fig. 5.1 Examples of banners

①

My needs for learning & work

My Childrens needs and my need to be a good mother

= Stress - confusion

②

love: <sup>seeing</sup> my children develop.  
 achieving something that I have worked hard for and enjoyed making other people happy

③

My children  
 My sisters  
 Some of the work I have done  
 Helping my step-daughter find her feet at a time of difficulty for her

④ To be at peace with myself with regards to my internal conflicts  
 I tend to set unrealistic goals and often feel let down - or let other people down - I should try to lower my expectations of myself

How I see myself now

Lack ambition.  
 Vicars Circle: Mother-Work homework-Bill payer - etc...

What makes me happy

Being round my children.  
 clothes shopping.  
 Jet-setting.

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What I am most proud of

The feeling of being a well liked person  
 My daughter, passing GCSE + 'A' levels

How I would like to see myself

More confident  
 More socialable.  
 Progressing on this course  
 Ambitious.  
 Owning my own property  
 Happy



My comment above on the fact that less than half of the students mentioned education, and most of those did so in terms of strategic goals, indicates a perhaps misplaced expectation on my part that students are interested in education for its own sake, in terms of knowledge acquisition or formative outcomes. This may be symptomatic of an ideological difference between students and lecturers in their perception of the purpose of higher education. The activity gives a view of students as primarily workers and family members who are studying as part of a greater plan, whereas we, the lecturers, invariably refer to them as students and take that role as the starting point in our relationship with them.

### The lifelines

After the session described above, students on 'Making Your Experience Count' are asked to draw a 'Lifeline' for homework and are given two pages of instructions. The aim of the activity is to take the students one step further in reflecting on themselves, who they are and what events have been significant in their lives so far, and in many cases the resulting lifelines have been the starting point for the development of claims for APEL. Unlike the banners, the resulting text is not intended for public consumption although the tutor will ask to see students' lifelines individually and those who wish to are invited to show theirs to the rest of the group and talk them through it. Students are asked to draw a line which 'shows the "shape" of your life or a part of your life so far' to help them to:

- see what you have learned from your experience
- think about where you would like to take your future development

Some students draw horizontal lines, others vertical, others spiral or zigzag to show the ups and downs they have experienced. They are told that there is no requirement to include anything they do not wish to. Nevertheless many go into tremendous detail including elaborate ways of representing graphically how they experienced different events. In this activity they have moved on one step from the banner activity in that they

are asked to consider 'learning' and 'experience', two key terms in the APEL genre. Lifelines generally turn out to be intensely personal documents, including painful childhood experiences, bereavements, marriages, births, promotions, divorces and redundancies. Students are not shown any examples and entries tend to be written in a kind of note form without first person pronouns:

Won scholarship to high school

Travelled to Serbia

or with third person subjects and no verbs:

Childminding very unfulfilling

Father in England

Some of these clauses may appear not to express positivity or negativity yet their location on the lifeline indicates how the writer experienced them. 'Travelled to Serbia' appeared on a fairly high point of a fluctuating line, whereas 'Father in England' appeared below a straight line which separated positive and negative experiences. In this way information is conveyed not only by the printed word but also by the graphic design and layout of the text, adding an extra dimension to the textual function.

The writers sometimes expressed themselves in full sentences, it seems when describing particularly powerful personal experiences:

I got counselling immediately to help me get on and over things – really helped me to move on quickly and forgive. There is life without X and I can be happy

That was the night in October 1989 that I started to lose all illusions. It still troubles me greatly not. Black people are not credible and vs a white person apparently the white one will be believed. What about the truth?

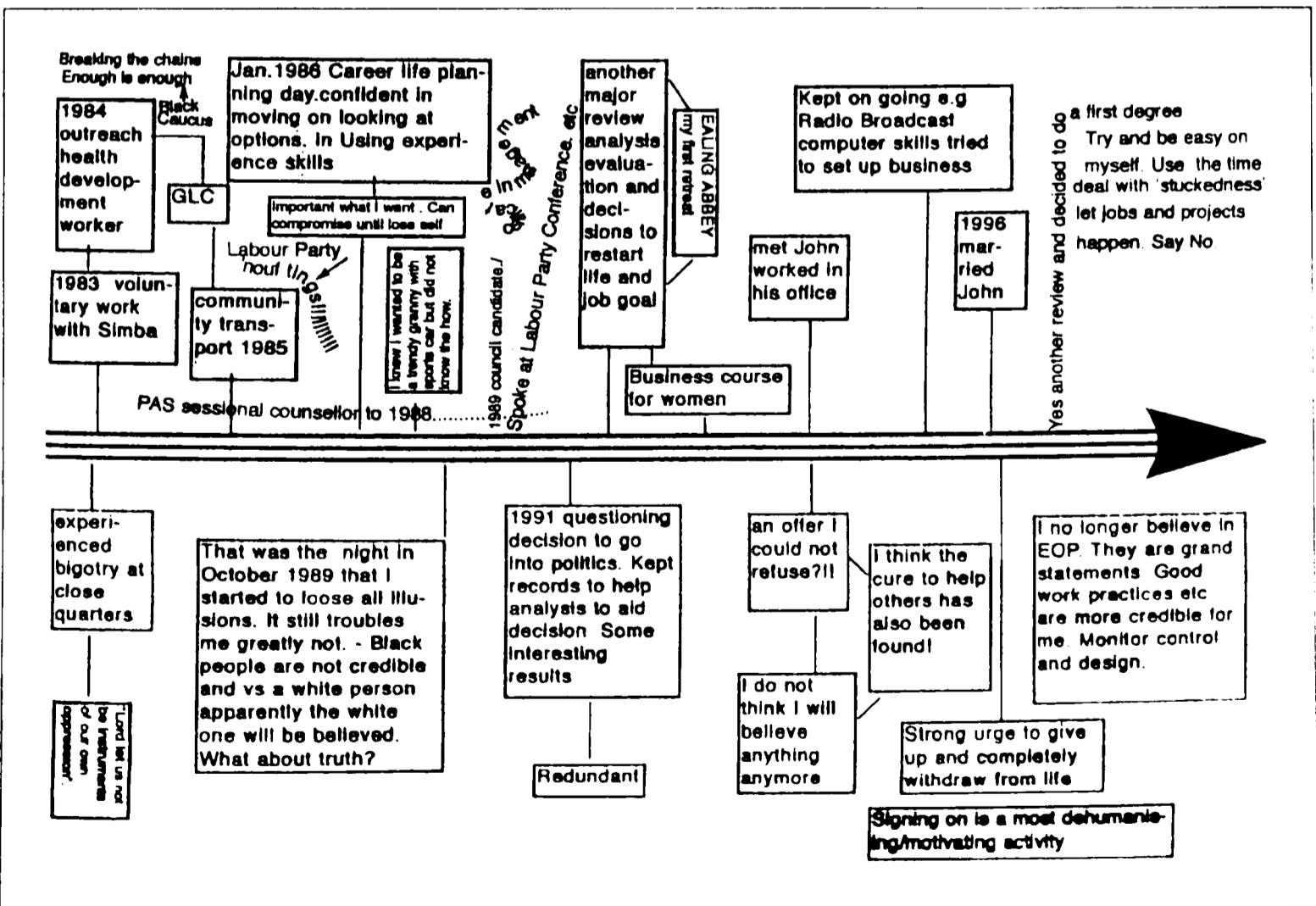
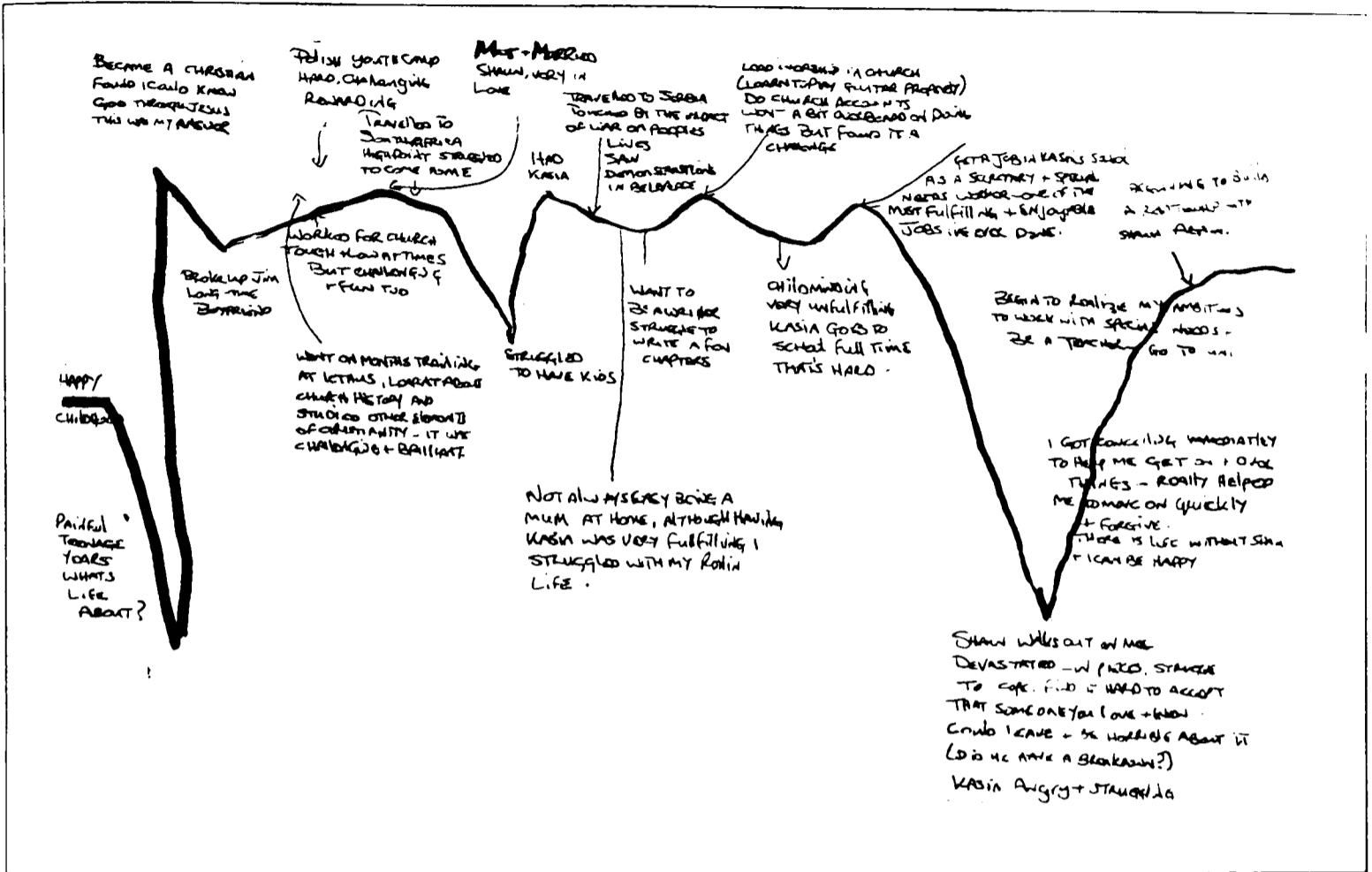
The voice in these texts is personal and whereas in the banner activity a positive angle is a factor of the construction of the task (a few students put negative comments under 'How I see myself now' but the other three headings tend to elicit a positive response) the lifeline activity appears to open the doors to exploration of traumatic episodes, perhaps because the rubric suggests looking at:

the best times and the worst times, the most challenging experiences, those which involved success/failure, risk/stress or pride/satisfaction.

The ideational function is to give an account of the salience of the writer's different experiences, the interpersonal may be to communicate this to the tutor and possibly to peers but it is firstly a document for the student's self, not necessarily to be shared. At this stage we are still very much in the discourse of the outside world, with no traces of academic discourse appearing in the students' texts. Yet retrospectively it is possible to see how this activity sows the seed of the examination of learning from experience which is required in the APEL process. In each of the two examples illustrated above, for example, key themes emerged from the lifelines which would influence strongly in one case the content of the student's first claim for APEL. One of the events listed on the student's lifeline was:

Became a Christian. Found I could know God through Jesus. This was my answer.

Fig. 5.2 Examples of lifelines



The student (JH in Chapter 6) later described how studying theology led her to running discussion groups and eventually to studying at university and successfully claiming credit on the basis of this experience. In the other case racism would prove to be a recurring underlying theme of the student's (T in Fig 3.3 p.41) degree studies, influencing her choice of modules, her choice of topics for research projects and her understanding and interpretation of the university experience throughout her three years of study. The unusual practices these two activities represent in the university context thus seem to serve their purpose of 'bringing the outside in' and making links between the different spheres through the discourse as part of the activity. In the next example, the practice which frames the discourse is much more conventional in the structuring of the roles of tutor and student.

## 2. Taped material of tutor and student talk

The recording I look at here was made in week three of the course. In the seminar the students are introduced to the Kolb (1984) learning cycle by the tutor by means of a diagram illustrating the four stages of the cycle: Concrete Experience, Observation and Reflection, Formation of Abstract Concepts and Generalisations, and Testing Implications of Concepts in New Situations. These stages are discussed and the process illustrated with examples, the point being made that learning may start at any of the four stages and that different people learn in different ways. Students are then asked to pick a significant point on their lifeline to consider from the perspective of the learning cycle, defining what they learned from the experience it represents, and what stages they went through in the learning process. The tape starts with the end of an explanation by the tutor (me) trying to encourage the students to analyse their learning process:

T.     what it is we are trying to do in this programme .. is to get people to think about ... their experience and then draw out of that ... sort of concrete things that you learnt which you can then apply in another situation .... and you were talking about dealing with people

S1. team work

T. team work

S1. solving conflicts

T. solving conflicts ... that and ...

S1. I was talking about making a decision ... about returning to study

T. Do you feel more confident about making decisions in your life as a result of that experience?

S1. Well I think that ... I believe that the decision I made was the right one, but at the same time I knew that it could have gone either ways.

T. But do you feel that as a person you are now more confident about your decision-making?

S1. Yes.

T. Because like we start from the particular, that particular instance, and then move away from there to looking at whatever it is you learnt in an abstract way, not in that situation, and applying it in another situation

What seems to happen here is that the tutor, having attempted to put across a model of the process of describing learning from experience, with the aim of eliciting examples from students, tries to get a particular kind of response from the student. She repeats the student's first two contributions as if to indicate approval, but the student has something else on her mind and introduces a new theme, her decision to come to university. The tutor then introduces the theme of confidence in an attempt to get the student to

generalize from this one experience, but the student still wishes to focus on the consequences of that particular decision. The tutor then repeats her question but this time nominalising and personalizing the phenomenon 'your decision-making' and manages to elicit an affirmative from the student. However one gets the impression of two people talking at cross purposes, each with their own agenda, and the tutor ends the dialogue by reformulating what she said at the beginning.

After summarising the stages of Kolb's cycle again the tutor then asks another student to describe an experience she has chosen as being significant in terms of learning. This student describes how she and her husband left their jobs and sold their home in Australia, bought a motorcycle and spent a year touring Europe. She says:

S2. It was a very big step in our lives to leave ... sort of the norm, what everybody considered was the norm, a suburban lifestyle and house and a dog and secure employment situation and just go on an adventure as we did but as a result of that experience

T. mm

S2. being able to step out of a comfort zone, and go into the unknown and um also experience emotions that perhaps we hadn't encountered before, like complete happiness that we were on holiday and doing lots of things but also sadness to be away from our families and anxiety and fear of the unknown and thoughts and feelings like that but as a result of that experience and having twelve months on our own and

T. mm

S2. I've been able to use that to advantage as in communicating with people that ... um are new to me, being more confident in myself to put myself into a challenging situation, challenging position um ... being ... um aware of other

people's positions and situations also different cultural experiences, people in different countries that spoke no English, being able to communicate to them so I've been able to apply that and um it's led me on to other things in life that perhaps I wouldn't have ever dreamed of attempting to do, because I know that I can do something that's completely different from the norm.

This student responds in a way which seems to correspond much more closely to the tutor's expectations. The tutor lets her speak uninterrupted apart from concurring noises and the student follows the model of describing the experience she is talking about and then going on to extract from that experience certain abilities which she describes herself as having gained from the experience. In the third paragraph of the extract the discourse shifts from that of a personal account of feelings to a much more formal description of characteristics which fits more with the language of a job interview or an application for a course. She picks up on the vocabulary with which students are starting to become familiar from the texts and the tutor's talk, using terms such as: 'communicating', 'confident', 'challenging situation', 'cultural experiences'. It may well be also that she has consciously or unconsciously taken in what was happening in the exchange with the first student and responded accordingly. In particular she picks up on the theme of confidence and the notion of applying what she has learnt in other situations.

This example illustrates the role the tutor takes in attempting to move the students on from a description of their experience to the practice required for APEL in the university context of analyzing it in a particular way. Both students have mentioned the decision making involved at key moments in their lives, decisions which have had important outcomes for them, and the tutor makes clear that having made such decisions in itself is not sufficient, she expects the students to elaborate on the process and the gains to them in terms of increased ability or knowledge. The process of generalizing from the particular, of disembedding the ability/knowledge of the student from the immediate context is intended to lead them towards the description of their learning in terms of learning outcomes or measurable chunks of knowledge which can be calculated for the award of credit. However it is evident from the above example that this involves not only



the acquisition of a genre to describe knowledge but learning to approach it and think about it in a particular way which fits in with the way lecturers think about it in this context.

The model in which the tutor starts off by giving an explanation, attempts to make clear what her expectations are, invites responses from the students, and responds to these with either approval or more explanation, positions the tutor as knowing and powerful and the students as novices. Already their knowledge and experience from the world outside has become something that of itself may not meet with approval. The tutor is evidently not satisfied with the response of the first student and reiterates her point, whereas the second student appears to have understood the rules of the game and applied them successfully in her two-stage account of the experience she has chosen and the outcomes she feels she has gained from it. The process has moved into the overlapping center of Fig. 3.1 where the outside comes into contact with the academy and the practices of the latter start to apply, certain kinds of knowledge are more valued than others and certain ways of presenting information become necessary.

The events described by the students quoted above were chosen by them from their lifelines and the rest of the tape consists of other students talking through their lifelines to the rest of the group. Listening to this from the perspective of what might be considered credit worthy experience in the academic context, it becomes apparent that the issues which are salient on lifelines do not immediately relate to the examples and descriptions of learning from experience given in the material provided by the university. Issues such as converting to Christianity, having trouble conceiving a child, being abandoned by a partner, suffering a serious illness, experiencing racism, moving from one country to another are described by students as experiences from which they have learned. In these lifelines it is unusual for educational experiences to be highlighted unless they have been negative, for example being bullied at school or failing exams, and work experience likewise tends to take a back seat. This is one of the anomalies which comes to light persistently through the APEL process, that the experiences which people feel have been most influential in their lives tend not to be recognized by the education system as

relevant. The experience described above of touring Europe on a motorcycle is an example of this, where the student proceeds to turn an apparently irrelevant experience into one which has resulted in relevant outcomes for her studies. Previous experience has shown that where the outcomes of an experience have led to a person taking up a particular role, such as motherhood leading to childminding and eventually primary teaching, or bereavement leading to someone going to counselling and then becoming a professional counselor, there is a recognition of the initial experience as a stage in a process, which seems to lend it validity. The onus is thus on the student to create from their experience a story that will fit with the discourse of the academy. The APEL tutor in the example takes on the role of guiding students in this task. By the time students reach the next stage, they are expected to have progressed a considerable way down this route, to be in the process of producing a written resumé of their experience and to be ready to give a formal oral presentation summarizing the contents of the resumé.

#### The oral presentations and written assignments

Students and tutors have been working together for seven weeks by the time the students are required to give the oral presentation of their resúmes. Some examples of the materials used in the sessions are described in Chapter 4. Students may already be familiar with the discourse from other contexts, especially if they have already studied for one semester or more, and as seen above the genre will have been introduced in seminars. The aim of the presentations is for students to outline their learning outcomes and give evidence to support these. They are seen as a way of testing out the material that is destined to form the written resumé, which will be formally assessed as part of the module. Many of the students have already written their resumé by the time they give their presentations. These are handed in the week after the presentations so that when listening to the tapes I was able to compare the oral and written versions of these texts.

By the time the presentations took place the students had formed a collective identity, even though some members did not attend regularly. The atmosphere in the room was always relaxed and lively with a lot of dialogue taking place. All the students who

presented claimed to be very nervous although most of them did not appear so. The audience of their peers and two lecturers was supportive and responsive and there was frequent laughter and applause. The presentation was a compulsory assessment element of the module but a mark was not awarded for it, it only had to be completed. Presenters wore a clip on microphone so that I could record them. They had been encouraged to use a visual aid in the form of a transparency and almost all of them did so.

What struck me on listening to the taped presentations with the written resumés in front of me was the close match between the two. This does not mean to say that the presentations were stilted or that students were reading from a text, although this was the case in one of the three examples I discuss here. In the other two examples the presentations flowed easily, the speakers appeared relaxed and the audience was entertained. The similarity between the written and spoken texts seems to indicate that their producers did not in this instance make a conscious distinction between the conventions of a written text and that of a spoken text. The texts were chronological narratives which included in each case a conscious element of reflection and analysis on the subject's learning, as required by the task. Different students chose different ways of approaching this. The extracts which follow are taken from the students' written submissions.

#### Text 1

This student (A in Fig. 3.3 p.41) describes himself in his presentation as 'a good communicator' and he speaks without hesitations, in a relaxed chatty style which greatly pleased his audience. The first part of his presentation consisted of his life story in factual terms, date of birth, arrival in the UK, colleges attended and so on. In the section cited below he starts to apply some of the concepts and language he has learnt on the module to his experience:

It is a long way from the dark suburbs of Sierra Leone to the bright, cosmopolitan and affluent cities of England; although as you can gather from the beginning of

my resumé that I have had some roller-coaster years; but as of phenomenal **LEARNING** experience to me. What makes me feel so confident that it is a learning experience? Well to substantiate this let me (take) you to one of the guru's definition of learning. According to (G.A.Cole Organisational Behaviour 1995 p 137) defines **LEARNING** as a process by which people acquire **knowledge, understanding, skills and values**, and apply them to solve problems throughout their daily life. The definition further explains that Learning is a process that engages an individual('s) emotional as well as intellectual dimensions and enables him or her to control, adapt to, their environment. I cannot see how one could better this definition in any (way) because it bears all the essential ingredients that makes an effective learning and its depends to the individual to adapt to this process to develop their own Learning Styles that will enable them to cope well in their learning process to acquire their required outcomes  
(All emphases are the student's own)

He uses a range of devices to establish a relationship with the reader through phrases such as:

as you can gather..

well...let me take you to...

where he addresses the audience using the second person, and also through use of the rhetorical question:

What makes me feel so confident that it is a learning experience?

and use of the first person to give his opinion:

I cannot see how one could better this definition in any way

As well as through some of the lexis used:

rollercoaster

phenomenal

guru

and the use of typographical devices to convey his emphases using the visual textual dimension to convey what he conveyed orally through intonation, stress, facial expression and gesture:

capitalisation with bold lettering in **LEARNING**

bold only in **knowledge, understanding, skills and values**

and underlining and initial capitals in Learning Styles

His enthusiasm and lack of experience lead him to straddle the formal/informal discourse boundary in several places for example in another extract:

In July 1997 I successfully completed my BTEC National Diploma with a Distinction final award result. Distinction! Marvellous, but is this as I always contemplated **THE ROAD TO FUTURE AND SUCCESS? OR THE ROAD TO CLOSED DOORS?**

Here he starts with a conventional written sentence, followed by one of only one word and an exclamation mark, then a sentence with the adjective 'Marvellous' in theme position followed by a two part rhetorical question emphasized by the use of capitals and with bold print added in the second part.

Punctuation and emphasis are used to establish the interpersonal role of the text in a way which is not normally acceptable in an academic context. At the same time he demonstrates an awareness of the requirement to conform to academic conventions in the sentence in the first paragraph cited above beginning: 'According to (G.A.Cole

Organisational Behaviour 1995 p 137)...’ where he includes a reference, demonstrating a familiarity with academic conventions albeit not yet fully internalized.

The paragraph demonstrates A’s awareness of some of the concepts described in the course materials, with the inclusion of definitions of learning, and of the relevance of these to his own experience. However he has not managed to apply the concepts to the various stages of his life nor has he fully mastered the discourse. It is an example of hybridity with its combination of features of spoken language, the range of lexis, the personal voice combined with features of academic language such as references and theoretical content, so that what proved a very successful oral presentation does not conform to academic criteria in its written form.

## Text 2

The text reproduced here in written form again reflects very closely the spoken version on tape, more surprisingly in this case since the text is partly in a kind of note form consisting to a large extent of clauses rather than complete sentences, omitting the personal pronoun ‘I’, although this sometimes appears. The presentation was delivered mostly in this abbreviated form more often associated with written texts (cf Halliday’s (1994a) ‘Little Texts’, Chapter 4) although on one or two occasions the speaker relaxed and elaborated a little on certain activities and the audience enjoyed these parts of the presentation. I had met her in a tutorial and suggested that she write her account in full sentences, but she only made some minor changes. Her aim seems to have been to follow a report type structure, with numbered headings and subheadings. The emphasis in her presentation and the written version is on the ideational dimension, conveying the information in as brief a form as possible with few concessions to her relationship with the hearer/reader. This is also demonstrated in the layout of the text with numbered sections, bullet points and truncated clauses. The framework of each section follows the same pattern as the one reproduced below, with the same subheadings, partly taken from the course materials in Appendix 3 based on Bloom’s Taxonomy. The discourse in 4.1

reads almost as a parody of jargon used in educational institutions, although evidently not intended as such.

#### 4. WORK

Started out in secretarial work. Work influenced my life, liked to be a business-woman. At 19 years old my goal was to get out of secretarial work before I am 40 years old and also get a degree. Start my own business and excel in the corporate world. Have now held more than 5 jobs one job lasted 8 years, worked as a Customer Relations Officer at London Electricity plc. I have also had quite a few secretarial jobs.

##### 4.1 Knowledge

An assessor would expect me to know and I know the terminology of the field, specific facts, knowledge of conventions, knowledge of trends, and sequences, knowledge of classifications and categories, knowledge of criteria, knowledge of methodology, knowledge of principles and generalizations, knowledge of theories and practice/structures

##### 4.2 Comprehension

I can convey to an assessor what I understand by:

- Translating/explaining what I know;
- Express, identify and interpret what I know;
- Discuss, extrapolate and locate what I know.

##### 4.7 Learning Outcomes

I am able to include:

- Knowledge and comprehension, the ability to apply knowledge in different situations.

The verbs: 'Express, identify, interpret' and 'Discuss, extrapolate and locate' sound as if they have come from a list of verbs for writing learning outcomes (cf Wailey, 2002 in Chapter 1). The fact that in this text they are not linked into the first paragraph in the section, which describes the context of the experience makes it difficult to know what they refer to. The reader is not told what the writer knows only that she knows and can express it. What is missing is the nature of the knowledge that the writer has acquired in the context she describes. There is a high degree of manifest intertextuality in that she appears to have drawn very literally on the course materials described in Chapter 4, which list and categorise types of knowledge.

This text illustrates the difficulty of applying new concepts to the analysis of experience and a failure on my part, as tutor, to explain adequately the application of the concepts. However it is also one of the dangers inherent in the application of learning outcomes, that they can easily become formulaic and meaningless if decontextualised (cf Hussey and Smith, 2002). This is another example of a hybrid text, in which the student includes a paragraph in a personal voice, albeit depersonalized by omission of the personal pronoun in all but two sentences, and informal discourse, followed by an attempt to describe the knowledge gained in formal academic terms, drawing heavily on course materials.

### Text 3

This example again shows a close correlation between the written and the spoken text, as illustrated by the following extract:

I made an application for a job at a McDonalds restaurant in my area and was soon working there on a part-time basis as a cashier. The job entailed serving customers in a professional manner and providing a high quality level of customer services. After going through the staff training at the so-called 'Hamburger University', I was submitted to the shop floor on the busiest working day of all – Saturday. This experience enabled me to come to grips with dealing with irate



customers and dodging trays of Big Macs that were sent flying by a staff individual. The policy at the restaurant was to always present yourself to the customers with a smile and a friendly attitude. However this was sometimes difficult to portray when I had burger sauce and lettuce stuck to my hair after burger incidents. The working atmosphere at McDonalds was accompanied by team challenges. It enabled me to partake in team building exercises such as selling the most burger combos in an hour or spotting a celebrity.

The text uses a narrative style in chronological order and includes a blend of descriptions of events:

I made an application for a job at a McDonalds restaurant...

and of explanations of activities:

...it was important to monitor stock levels and ensure any orders that were required were dispatched on time.

In the latter the discourse is that of the business and professional world, such as one would find in a job advertisement, for example:

The job entailed serving customers in a professional manner and providing a high quality level of customer services.

Language more frequently associated with oral texts appears in several places, often changing the voice in the middle of a sentence:

This experience enabled me to come to grips with dealing with irate customers and dodging trays of Big Macs...

It enabled me to partake in team building exercises such as selling the most burger combos in an hour or spotting a celebrity.

These two examples follow a similar structure with the job placed in theme position and the student as the subject of the hypotactic clause which conveys the new information, and it is in this part of the sentence that she switches into informal discourse, indicated by the use of gerunds and the choice of vocabulary: 'irate', 'dodging', 'burger combos' and 'spotting'.

The paragraph flows easily and the student seems comfortable with her personal/business language. It is difficult to see any influence here from the language of university or from the content of the module itself, but the text provides an interesting blend of personal and work related voices and formal and informal discourses. The text as a whole took the form of a 'life-story' or narrative including reflection on the activities and learning that took place and the student wrote five learning outcomes at the end of her account, maintaining her own personal style rather than conforming to the type of learning outcome illustrated in most materials (see Chapters 1 and 4) for example, she wrote:

I am able to develop and adapt techniques to better myself. I can communicate clearly and explain my requirements in a precise manner.

Some interesting issues arise from this brief glance at the texts. One is the very different outcomes, in the three cases, of the process through which the students have passed. In each case the discourse in the text is hybrid in nature with manifest intertextuality but in a different way. Text 3 includes few, if any, features of academic discourse. The student expresses herself confidently in a personal voice, integrating the language of the workplace. The other two students, in different ways, attempt to integrate some of the features of academic discourse they have encountered on their courses into their writing. Their examples show writers moving on from the description of personal experience to attempting to apply academic criteria to their work and to fit their knowledge into a new framework. They demonstrate some of the pitfalls that may await students and the

difficult task of the tutor in leading them from the representation of the 'outside world' to one which fits with the academy in terms of gaining credit. Text 2 in particular suggests that some of the materials used on the module, rather than stimulating the students to useful reflection might have the effect of stifling their voices and constraining them to adopt empty formulae in an attempt to produce what they think will meet the tutor's expectations.

Another issue is the lack of consciousness or perhaps lack of willingness to conform to the accepted separation of discourses for different purposes. In this sense the author of Text 2 perhaps shows more sophistication than the other two in that she has clearly delineated her initial section from the sections in which she describes learning outcomes and thus recognizes the different language used. The other two mix happily which does not detract from the clarity of their texts and in fact makes them more informative and accessible in this instance. However in academic terms they will be expected to develop more specialized discourses and in particular to be aware of the appropriacy of different genres in different situations. In the case of Text 1 the first stage could be the distinction between spoken and written forms as used in an academic context. In text 3 it is more a question of register, or genre.

The contrast between the discourse of the documentation examined in Chapter 4 and that of the students in the banners and lifelines is predictably significant. The presentations and resumés are examples of an intermediate stage in the process of 'translating' learning from experience into the APEL genre to fit with the requirements of the academy. There is evidence of conflict between the desire of the lecturers on the APEL module to encourage students to write freely and creatively about their experience, and their emphasis on the need for students to conform to a fairly narrow format to gain credit. This may work against 'redefining the parameters of higher education' or changing what can or cannot be said, and against encouraging students to construct 'their own individual and collective identities' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999 p.vii), and in favour of transmitting a particular discourse and getting students to restructure their experience into a predetermined mould, to fit with the practices of the institution.

## Chapter 6

### Students in the APEL process: Part 2 The portfolios

The student texts described in the previous chapter were all produced either in the group (banners, lifelines, seminar discussion) or prepared individually to be shared with the group (presentations/resumés). However the process of claiming credit for experience through preparation of a portfolio ultimately ends up being a solitary individual task. Only a third of the students who participated in the activities described above went on to complete a portfolio. One completed two, for two separate modules, two have completed one and are working on a second. One did not gain credit for the learning represented in the portfolio, but eventually went on to gain credit for a work experience module. None of the students on the evening BA Business Studies, where the module forms an integral part of the course, had completed a portfolio by the time this research was carried out, although subsequently some of them have done so. Here I look at the portfolios of the four students out of the twelve in the study overall who presented portfolios for credit (see Fig. 3.3, p. 41) and at the outcomes of the interviews I carried out with each of them. I give a brief account of each student's background in relation to their studies and their claim for APEL, in order to locate the production of the portfolio within the student's 'lifeworld'. As Lillis (2001, p.4) has pointed out 'they are students for only a part of their lives' and in APEL an important aim is to recognise the significance of the rest of their lives within the context of their university studies.

As a possible means of selecting samples of discourse for analysis Fairclough (1992, p.230) recommends a focus on 'cruces' or 'moments of crisis', on the grounds that these can show 'the actual ways in which people deal with the problematization of practices.' I focus on the learning outcomes here, since they are central to the assessment process and have also had a key role to play in the students' preparation of their portfolios. I have discussed in Chapter 5 how they were introduced to the concept through various texts, giving examples, and how they drew on these in their oral presentations and resumés.

Now I examine the final products of the APEL process and how they served the students' aims in seeking credit. Drawing on the practices of discourse analysis I focus on interdiscursivity and intertextuality at the macro level but also look at some micro aspects such as transitivity, mood, theme and metaphor. I examine how each student has expressed her or his learning outcomes and also analyse a small section of each portfolio in terms of the discourse practices used. Both learning outcomes and other sections of portfolios are considered in relation to the information given to students during the process and the activities they have undertaken in the taught sessions on the module.

All of the students except one listed the learning outcomes they were claiming credit for separately from the rest of their text. They used different strategies to draw up their learning outcomes. One of them used the learning outcomes of an existing module and attempted to match her experience to these for one of her claims, and drew up her own outcomes for the other. Another drew on the learning outcomes of a module she had studied to create her own learning outcomes to claim for a free module. The other two developed their learning outcomes without reference to those of any existing module.

#### 1. C

C was 32 when she started her degree and had already had a successful career spanning several fields, as an actor, a journalist, a producer for the BBC and a company manager. She continued working after the birth of her two children, but while the second one was still pre-school age decided to give up work to study full-time, with the aim of resuming her career on graduation. Her motivation in applying for APEL was partly to give herself breathing space as a full-time student and mother, but mainly because she felt that she had knowledge learned from experience that deserved recognition as part of her degree, which was in Applied Psychology and Mass Communications. C. expressed her perception of the conflicting demands of her situation in her banner (see Fig. 5.1 p.81) and also said under the 'How I would like to see myself in a year's time' section of the banner:

To be at peace with myself with regards to my internal conflicts. I tend to set unrealistic goals and often feel let down- or let other people down – I should try to lower my expectations of myself.

C took the ‘Making Your Experience Count’ module in her second semester at university and claimed specific credit for two advanced level modules (All modules taken in year 1 of full-time study are classified as ‘Preliminary’ and all those taken in years 2 and 3 of full-time study as ‘Advanced’). One was ‘Principles of Video Production’ for which she produced a video and was eventually awarded credit, but only after she had also written an essay, which was not a requirement for the students who studied the module. She also claimed credit for an advanced level module in Journalism for which the learning outcomes were as follows:

At the end of the module, students should:

- be able to identify the main characteristics of different journalistic forms;
- be able to adapt their writing skills to journalistic formats;
- be able to articulate ethical concerns in relation to journalism

C referred specifically to these outcomes in the introduction to her portfolio, which included a range of samples of her work as a journalist.

The outcomes she listed were:

***Develop journalistic writing skills***

*My journalistic skills were developed and shaped through feedback from my editor during the six months prior to the training course (which the newspaper sent her on after she had volunteered for them for six months), during the five-*

*month training course, and continued through feedback on my return to the newspaper. The style of the reporting changed according to the form of journalism such as interviews, features, reviews, ad-features, court and local government reporting.*

### ***Gain confidence in writing***

*My confidence in writing developed during the first six months of work experience at the newspaper. My reports and features were being published. I had achieved a front-page lead early on and an outside magazine requested the use of an article. (this was followed by examples)*

### ***Write and edit quickly***

*With only two to four reporters at any one time trying to produce copy for a local newspaper, writing and editing quickly was essential. Each day pages had to be filled before being downloaded, therefore each day had its own deadline. If there were spaces to fill on the pages we would be required to find an interesting press release, obtain a quote and write on the spot, editing the information to fit the space available.*

### ***Be able to articulate ethical concerns in relation to journalism***

*'Cynics will say that ethics and journalism are incompatible ... journalists, or indeed members of any professional group do not always meet the expected standard in their conduct, but what this fact demonstrates is the relevance not the irrelevance of ethics to the profession' (Belsey & Chadwick 1998).*

*I was first introduced to ethical considerations during my five-month training course. Every week I had to find stories from the local area in order to make up a mock paper. One person from the group would act as an ombudsman and spend*

*the following evening telephoning all the contacts. The purpose of this was to make sure that each completed story was representative of the information given by the contacts and that no false information had been given.*

C had introduced the learning outcomes with a short history of her work in journalism, and followed them up with some examples of stories she had investigated and how she had dealt with any ethical issues.

C has adapted the first two learning outcomes of the module, using her own formula. The module learning outcome seems to imply that students have already acquired writing skills in the University and will go through a process of adapting them for a new purpose, so the change C makes is perhaps intended to indicate that rather than 'adapt (her existing) writing skills to journalistic formats' she developed her writing skills through journalism. The ideational function of the text is to give an account of C's experience in terms that fit with the module description. The interpersonal function is to convince the reader that she has achieved the learning outcomes of the module. Textually, she has followed the learning outcome model, producing her own 'little texts' and putting these in bold type, with spaces before and after to make them stand out. She appears in so doing to indicate her willingness to conform to the appropriate genre for the situation, at the same time demonstrating, by adapting the first two learning outcomes, that her learning is of a different nature to that of the students who study the module. She situates herself as a practitioner rather than as a student, making clear that she has learned through action, although she includes two quotes (only one included in the extract above) which indicate that she perceives a need to add an academic dimension to the text.

This is borne out in the paragraphs which follow the learning outcomes where a narrative voice is adopted, describing how her experience developed. The vocabulary belongs mainly to a journalistic genre rather than academic discourse, including terminology such as: 'features', 'front-page lead' and 'deadline'. In most paragraphs the recurring theme is C herself, with most sentences starting 'My' or 'I' although under the heading 'Write and edit quickly' the recurring theme is the production of 'copy' or the 'pages' and the



'spaces' on the pages placing an emphasis on the task of journalists rather than C as an individual. The two quotes, correctly referenced and listed in a bibliography at the end, demonstrate an awareness of academic conventions and a perception that her text needs to made 'academic' if it is to meet the requirements for credit. These features combine to make this a hybrid text articulating different orders of discourse, with the focus on learning outcomes, the description of experience clearly outside the academy in a work genre and the inclusion of quotes to lend the text academic authority.

## 2. JM

JM started university as a part-time student at the age of 37. He has cerebral palsy, and, after nine years 'in an institution' when he was of school age, he lived with his parents in Dublin until his mid-twenties, when he participated in what for him was a life-changing event, an 1100 mile sponsored cycle ride. In his portfolio he says:

Before the cycle I was very dependent on people around me. I couldn't feed myself. I didn't have to think for myself or organize my own life in any way.

The experience of the cycle-ride led him to come to live in England on his own, to study at college and eventually at university. He took the 'Making Your Experience Count' module because he was advised to by one of his tutors and because he was keen to save some time on his degree as he has plans for a future career as an advocate for disabled people. He later gained credit for one module at advanced level for a work experience placement in advocacy work in the United States, which he organised independently when the University would not let him go on their Study Abroad scheme because his grades were not high enough.

JM also claimed credit for one free module at advanced level. His portfolio covers several aspects of his life experience, which is unusual and different from that of most students because he is disabled. JM started his portfolio by writing a descriptive account of the experiences he had chosen to present and attaching evidence in the form of an

article he had written and some of the artwork he had produced. He then produced a list of learning outcomes on a separate sheet. Each numbered point was followed by an explanatory paragraph. Here I have included only one paragraph per activity, as an example, but have listed all the learning outcomes:

### *LEARNING OUTCOMES*

#### *Typewriter Art*

*There are two obvious learning outcomes here: Lateral Thinking and Creative Thinking.*

- 1. Lateral Thinking*

*This is an example of lateral thinking as it is taking an instrument that was designed for office use and putting it to creating pictures.*

- 2. Creative Thinking*

*With the keys of the typewriter it is possible to use them in conjunction with the roller to create shapes and illusions.*

*Over the years typing pictures and experimenting with characters overlapping with other characters, it was possible to bring life into the pictures and create 3 dimensional pictures ranging from very light to very dark.*

#### *Chess*

- 1. Intellectual ability*
- 2. Working as a team*
- 3. Working with outsiders and official bodies*

4. *Learning protocols*
5. *Organisational abilities*

*Being able to run a chess club. This involved having a club night and a venue. Budgeting involved getting enough income to get equipment, stationery and paying membership to the Leinster Chess Union and a fee per team into the leagues etc. This was done by everyone paying subscriptions. Also making sure everyone had a fixture list of matches. Making sure the equipment was complete and intact.*

### *Cycling*

1. *Learning to be independent*

*It was only through seeing what other similarly disabled people were doing that I realized I wasn't fulfilling my potential. As a result, I adapted over the five weeks.*

*Up to that point I was unable to feed myself or do a lot of very basic things. The person who inspired me was able to do things himself. Not perfectly, but I realized that it didn't matter.*

*This gave me the incentive to eventually leave home and become totally independent.*

Other learning outcomes from the Cycling he included were:

2. *Working as a team*
3. *Stamina Building*
4. *Communicating with outsiders and official bodies*
5. *Writing abilities*

Although his portfolio is divided into three distinct sections, the learning outcomes, the description and the evidence, there is some overlap between the three. The learning outcomes JM has written include some which are conventional in that they match given examples such as those in the Statement of Learning Outcomes in Appendix 5, for example 'Working as a Team' or 'Organisational Abilities'. Others are much less conventional, such as 'Lateral Thinking' and 'Creative Thinking' or 'Learning to be Independent'.

In the description section JM wrote:

*Typewriter art meant a lot to me. The challenge here was to take an instrument which is used in one way and create a completely different use for it.*

He also elaborated on the outcome of 'Learning to be Independent':

*I had the first notion of independence. To me this was doing everything on your own. I later realized that this didn't have to be the case. So I was forced to redefine the word 'independence' to include knowing when I needed help and how to get it.*

The three learning outcomes: *Lateral thinking*, *Creative thinking* and *Learning to be independent* are inseparably linked with his social situation as a disabled person. He signals this clearly, with both descriptions emphasizing the unique nature of the outcomes to him as an individual: '... meant a lot to me.', 'To me this was...'. On the other hand the description under the heading 'Organisational Abilities' omits personal pronouns altogether using gerunds in theme position: 'Being able to', 'Budgeting' and 'Making sure' and including some 'little texts' to create an impression of activities which are general and common to all those involved. The different genres here suggest a tension between the effort to conform to the conventions taught during the 'Making Your Experience Count' module and the desire to describe important personal experiences which do not fit with the conventional models provided. The evidence of his 'Writing

Abilities' is a lengthy article written about the cycle ride in a journalistic genre very different from that of the description. It starts:

*Imagine going on a trip starting at Marble Arch, London and going through Cardiff, Dublin, Belfast, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Manchester via the Pennine mountains, Milton Keynes and back to London. There is nothing to it you probably think. ... Imagine if that trip was not done by car or any other form of motor transport but every mile was cycled. Furthermore, to add to this cycling achievement imagine, all nine cyclists having a disability called Cerebral Palsy.*

Here he again locates himself outside of the text, in the guise of a reporter. The strong focus on involving the reader, with the repeated use of the imperative 'Imagine', the direct addressing of the reader as 'you', show JM's awareness of stylistic devices and ability to switch genres. The outcomes which are most personal to him do not fit with any learned genre perhaps because they are so specific to him as an individual, so that the combined effect of the text is of a patchwork, as hybrid as C's although in his case without any concessions to academic conventions in the form of references, and where C focuses on the workplace JM chooses experiences which he feels reflect the 'unique' nature of some aspects of his life as a person with cerebral palsy.

#### 1. JH.

JH left school at 16 and spent several years working in an office before becoming a Christian and eventually leaving work to take a course in theology. Her parents were 'horrified that I left a sort of stable job' and she returned to work after the course, got married and had a child, then got involved in playgroup work and youth work and decided she would like to be a teacher. She chose to take a degree in History followed by a PGCE rather than a BEd and was advised by one of the lecturers to take the 'Making Your Experience Count' module because:

*I think I said 'Look, how long is it going to take me to get through?' because actually I need a quick way of getting through'.*

JH was awarded 10 credits for studies in theology at the London Bible College, on the basis of the assignments and exam completed and the number of hours study involved. She then wrote a submission describing how she had used the knowledge gained in this study to set up and run study groups. This was the basis for a claim for 5 more credits bringing the total up to 15, or the equivalent of one undergraduate module. This was not claimed as specific credit but as free module credit. JH did not list learning outcomes in the way that the two students in the examples above did. She chose to write the submission in essay form with learning outcomes clearly described but incorporated into the context in which they had taken place. Her introduction says:

*I will demonstrate that I can reflect and theorise on aspects of theology through listening to lecturers, studying books, evaluating and investigating for myself and then that I have been able to apply these theories in a practical way by organizing, teaching and provoking discussions on the subject ... in essence putting an element of Kolb's cyclical theory into practice in that he believes that learning happens when there is a connection between thinking and doing.*

This paragraph exemplifies what I call the 'APEL genre' through the vocabulary used: 'demonstrate', 'reflect', 'theorise', 'evaluating', 'investigating' 'organizing' as well as the low modality: 'can', 'have been able to' and the reference to Kolb. There is a strong intertextual element here, drawing on the module materials. In the subsequent sections of her submission, however, JH combines the expression of her deeply felt religious beliefs with the approach to describing learning from experience she acquired on the module, for example:

*Many thought Jesus would lead a rebellion against the Romans to conquer by force but this was never his plan. His plan for defeating his enemy was to surrender his life. In a small discussion group situation I was able to teach about*

*'free will', how we have opportunities to choose our own destinies rather than to drift through life making no decisions about our futures, that we have choices, and with this opportunity, that differs from that of the animal kingdom who live only by their instincts, we instead can be resolute about our purpose in life. This inspired the group to reflect upon where their lives were going, each being challenged to change, diversify and draw their own conclusions.*

The degree of certainty expressed in the first two sentences of this paragraph is very different from the tentative approach generally considered appropriate in academic writing. JH here makes clear her personal status as a believer, not just a student of theology. The third sentence switches to APEL genre with 'I was able to' but continues in a voice of religious conviction, although the paragraph ends with another sentence in APEL genre, describing an activity and its consequences rather than expressing a belief. One senses the intermingling of two ideational functions here: that of conveying information to the assessor about her abilities and at the same time that of expressing the religious 'truths' that have motivated the activities she describes. In her final paragraph the APEL genre dominates again with the reference to learning outcomes, the focus on herself with the use of personal themes ('me', 'my being', 'I') and vocabulary similar to the first paragraph quoted above.

*Clear learning outcomes for me have been my being stimulated to investigate without bias (if that is possible), to formulate and construct ideas, to correlate this information, making it understandable to small groups, to teach and provoke them to investigate and discuss and to formulate their own ideas. I have been able to motivate and clearly communicate to those assisting me in the discussions, working as a team.*

JH's essay is another hybrid form in that it takes the shape of an academic essay in terms of structure and is organized in paragraphs without using the 'little texts' format for the learning outcomes. However there are no references and the ideas included are approached from a perspective of conviction rather than discussion: 'His plan was to ...'.

'We have choices...'. This example demonstrates how the lifeline exercise described above (Chapter 5 pp 82-85) serves to flag up issues which are central to candidates' representations of themselves and which they may subsequently feel the wish to convey in their portfolios. JH had indicated her religious conversion as a salient point on her lifeline (see p. 85). Both JM and JH have sought to convey very personal perspectives in their submissions, with different outcomes in terms of how they have chosen to represent these in their texts.

## 2. N

N is a single parent with three children who has worked throughout her adult life, mainly in community related work. She had already been writing, setting up creative writing groups for women and performing her poetry at events such as birthdays, weddings and funerals and as part of Black History Month, before enrolling at university as a part time student at the age of 36. She took a two year break from her studies when her youngest child was small and on her return decided to take the 'Making Your Experience Count' module because a friend had done it and explained to her what it involved. Prior to the break she hadn't considered it because:

*It frightened me because I assumed, incorrectly, that everybody there would have papers and that's what APEL meant, bringing your papers from your previous experiences and trying to fit them into a module.*

N has already been involved in part-time work at the University in addition to her work outside, working on creative writing with groups of young people and with refugees and asylum seekers, as part of Widening Participation initiatives. She plans to build on both aspects of her work when she finishes her degree.

N claimed credit for one free module at advanced level. She had successfully studied for a preliminary level module in Creative Writing and used the learning from it to examine her own experience in the field outside the University and to submit a claim for further



credit. She was the most experienced student of the four when she made her claim. Having studied for a year before taking the break meant she had had the opportunity to apply what she had learnt in her work outside, before coming back and writing the portfolio.

After a brief introduction giving personal details and her reasons for claiming, N. presented her learning outcomes as follows:

### **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

*My experience in facilitating Creative Writing Workshops, my writing experience has meant that I am able to:*

- 1. Enable people to express themselves through creative writing**
- 2. Plan a course of creative writing sessions for different groups e.g. young adults, asylum seekers**
- 3. Introduce the group to different forms of writing**
- 4. Conduct and lead creative writing sessions that meet the needs of a specific group**
- 5. Monitor and evaluate a course and its delivery**

The learning outcomes are clearly laid out on the first page in bold type and unlike any of the other candidates N has introduced them with a sentence which provides the actor ('I') and the finite element of the verbal group ('am able to') in order to enable the reader to make sense of the 'little texts' which follow.

These are expressed in accessible terms whilst avoiding the frequently used terminology of 'communication skills' or 'organizational skills'. Having more experience of university study has perhaps been the factor that has enabled N. to achieve this, or it is perhaps my subjective judgment as a teacher which makes me feel that these outcomes are clear and jargon free, because they relate to an educational context. Only the verb 'evaluate' sounds as if it has been selected from a list of useful terms for describing experience.

The rest of the portfolio takes each of these outcomes in turn and elaborates on them. This is the most conventional of the four portfolios described, in terms of the APEL genre. It is structured in a similar way to C's but does not include as much evidence as C included in the form of excerpts from her own work, although N did attach a small publication including a selection of her own and her students' writing. It resembles C's portfolio in that it includes paragraphs in which the recurring theme is N herself in her role as teacher of creative writing:

*As a facilitator it is my responsibility to encourage participants to write by first explaining that there are no right or wrong ways in this creative writing workshop, unlike academic writing at school or university, but to just let the pen flow and freewrite. I let them know that they will not be judged by anybody. In relation to my work with the young people, I found they needed a little bit more encouragement to put them at their ease.*

Thus we have 'facilitator', 'my responsibility', 'I', 'my work' and 'I' again. In contrast other paragraphs focus on the process and participants other than N, reading more like a brochure or a more formal informative document, although in every case she appears as an individual at some stage:

*In dramatic writing work participants are encouraged to write a dramatic account of their lives as a witness to injustice. They are then asked to look at it in the form of a dramatic script with characters playing the role. After sharing and*

*discussing all our work we will then choose between us one piece of work and start to look at how we can craft it into a script for radio. I have to emphasize that radio is the theatre of the mind, a theatre of sound, so that whatever is read needs descriptions.*

The progression in this paragraph is interesting. It starts with the participants as theme and the passive verb forms: 'are encouraged', 'are asked'. Then it moves on to the collective 'our work' and 'we' where she includes herself with the participants and finally ends with an acknowledgement of her responsibility and central role with 'I' and the high modal 'have to'. The text reflects an image of the activity as she experiences it where she is involved in a formal process of 'conducting' and 'leading' a group but also involved on a very personal level, as she says:

*Being there for them is essential when it comes to my role of a facilitator as like the lady who read in her language, one could sense and then see that it was painful for her but with support and encouragement she managed to break through her barrier and overcome her fears of expressing herself.*

The voice here is much more personal and informal than the start of the paragraph above, contributing to the impression created of a hybrid text drawing on professional and personal voices within paragraphs in a reflection of the role that is being described.

JH and N both describe learning gained in teaching/facilitating roles which fit more easily with the educational environment and academic discourse, however in each of the portfolios the interweaving of the students' personal voices with the features of the APEL genre such as learning outcomes is a striking feature. C's professional role as a journalist, JM's experience as a disabled person, JH's religious convictions and N's personal involvement in the workshops she runs are central to their portfolios, with considerations of the requirements of the APEL claim framing them. Each of them has used their portfolio to express their personal perspective on their experience in a very different way and each has produced their own representation of their learning outcomes, drawing

intertextually in different ways on the material they have been exposed to on the module and applying this to the areas they have chosen to focus on. Elements of the APEL genre as presented in the module materials are identifiable in each case but the difficulties in adapting this while expressing very personal and individual perceptions are apparent in the switching of voices exemplified by differences in transitivity, mood and theme. However all four students seem to have managed this interweaving much more smoothly than was the case in the examples given in the previous chapter of the resumés. In order to gain a further perspective on the process these four students went through I interviewed each of them. Fairclough (1992, p. 227) suggests interviews as a way of finding out how the participants themselves interpret discourse samples and as means of discovering, for example, how conscious participants are of 'the ideological investment of a particular discursive convention'. He also emphasizes that interviews are themselves further discourse samples.

### **The interviews**

The data from the interviews add a dimension to the analysis of the portfolios in giving an insight into how the students construct themselves in relation to the outside world and the university context. I asked them questions (see Appendix 5) about how much of the knowledge they had acquired previously they had thought could be recognised for credit, on what basis and why. I also asked them what they felt about the process of preparing the portfolio.. As part of the analysis of the interview texts I constructed a chart of data consisting of extracts from the texts classified under the headings: Genre of APEL, Academic discourse, Informal discourse, Construction of self, Construction of the assessor and Experience of Power (see Fig. 6.1 below). I used this chart as a basis for the account given of the interviews.

Fig. 6.1 Chart of data from student interviews

Student	Genre of APEL	Academic discourse	Informal discourse	Construction of self	Construction of the assessor	Experience of power
C	Experience Qualifications Criteria Learning outcomes Credit Transferable skills Reflexivity process	Module Critically evaluate Theoretical genres/essay Seek, handle and interpret information Intellectual Assessment	Jobsworth Scary Gradually squeezed out Too much hassle My God Like I said Doing it blind	I had an awful lot of experience I actually had far more experience than the students would come out with	'This is my module and this is what's academically required to pass it' The tutors maybe didn't understand the process They weren't aware of what was needed or what is acceptable	I felt a bit frustrated The experience I had wasn't being recognised It wasn't good enough for them
JM	Knowledge Experiences Learning experience Prior knowledge Achievement Processes Learning process Credit for knowledge	Innate ability to acquire knowledge Processes needed to acquire knowledge Modules advanced/preliminary	Take it for granted A pure fluke Unique A kick in the teeth Fifty-fifty	I'm not a very good student I don't think I'm the ideal student here I've a lot of weaknesses	Thinking of my experience, if that's unique how can you mark it, maybe that's not my problem	If I'm going to be an advocate that means fighting for other people's rights, so in a way I could do it for me
JH	Experience/s Abilities Knowledge Learning Prior learning experiences	Learning curve Psychological aspect Essay Module Structure Academic language Analysing	Forced into a box Cheating Kind of it's hard Stuff like that	I had knowledge that was valuable I didn't actually think it would be able to be used in university	Some people think it's cheating, people say the attitude of some staff is it's cheating	I have moved on It's taken me a step over the fear barrier I can do this sort of thing
N	Experience Knowing in action Process of learning Context Learning Credit Learning outcomes Evidence Reflective knowledge	Core module advanced/preliminary Structure Syllabus Process Core capabilities Criteria Plagiarise Qualifications	Well valuable Gonna Where I'm coming from A do-it-yourself book about N Repackage myself Wow Unsift and funnel Runaway horse Tune yourself in	Mother, sister, worker Within the community whoever I am Working person I didn't have self worth	People are set in their ways, they've got what they want to see They're not going to fully understand me or appreciate where I'm coming from They work within their structure	It brought back all my confidence and my focus on why I want to study It made me feel good about myself

1. C

C was not awarded credit for the module in Journalism. I asked her how she felt about this and she said:

C. I had an awful lot of experience and I felt it should be recognized, especially having worked with people coming from university and where although they had academic qualifications they didn't have the experience to do the job they had come to do. But as I was applying for APEL I found it quite difficult and felt a bit frustrated because I felt it wasn't being recognized, the experience I had, especially the Journalism module that I tried to claim for because as I said, even though it didn't match the whole criteria of their module my experience could match most of their learning outcomes and also maybe not match one or two but have one or two more other learning outcomes. So that was a bit disappointing that they wouldn't give me credit for that particular module

Me. Why do you think that was?

C. For lack of a better word I think it's their jobsworth. They wanted you to have done exactly what they said because of the value of their module, you know it shouldn't be considered as a module that anybody could easily do. You know there's the whole idea that each person's module that their teaching has got to be so hard for anyone to get and for someone to walk in off the street who hasn't gone through that process and then gain credit for it.

Here C constructs herself as someone more knowledgeable in the field than 'people coming from university' and evidently felt that although she found the APEL claim 'difficult' she had prepared an adequate submission. She attributes the fact that her claim was not successful to the assessor's reluctance to award credit because of a perception that this would detract from the value of their own work. The assessor is thus perceived not only as insufficiently knowledgeable to recognise the value of her experience, but

also as insecure in defending the unique value of the knowledge taught on the module. This is not to say that C thought preparation of the portfolio was easy. On the contrary she described it as:

Scary. I couldn't initially put my experiences into words ... in the end it sort of gradually squeezed out, I've learnt this and how can I put this in an intellectual way that somebody would accept because it's written intellectually.

Her perception of the difficulty of describing experience is one shared by all the interviewees and confirms the impression given by the portfolios, that enormous effort has gone into producing a document whose nature is ill-defined in advance:

You're doing it blind really, you're taking it from a very broad basis and trying to specialize it to a particular module.

## 2. JM

JM was not awarded credit for his portfolio either but expressed a very different perception of himself from C's.

Me. So do you feel that the University hasn't really recognized what you were bringing?

JM. Yeah but I don't think I'm the ideal student here, I've lots of weaknesses so it's a bit of fifty-fifty, I will admit. I'm not a very good student full stop, I just get by.

The assessor commented on his portfolio as follows:

I found I could not quite grasp the learning outcomes and feel had they been clearer perhaps the credit outcome would be more favorable. They are not written

in a form that allow them to be measured. I am not sure that lateral and creative thinking can be that easily measured and are quite high order cognitive skills which would require considerable academic ability to articulate them.

This comment seems to contain contradictions. The assessor first says that if the learning outcomes had been clearer credit may have been awarded, but then goes on to say that what she is asking for, that they be 'written in a form that allows them to be measured', may not be possible and that if it were it would require academic ability which by implication JM does not have. This suggests that he has chosen inappropriate learning outcomes in relation to his academic ability. It is quite difficult to work out from this what the assessor thinks he should have done differently to gain credit, although the message seems to be that it is the ability to formulate the experience which is lacking rather than the experience itself. JM is prepared to take half the responsibility for the fact that credit was not awarded ('fifty-fifty') and seems to see this as part and parcel of who he is as a student ('not ideal') rather than a reflection on the value of his previous experience. However he also perceived the outcome as partly at least either a factor of the assessor's inadequacy or of the unique nature of his experience:

Me. I know you were disappointed when they didn't give you the credit. Why do you think that was?

JM. I don't know because just thinking of the typewriter art, I mean if that's unique how can you mark it, maybe that's not my problem

Me. So you think it's more of a problem with the marker?

JM. Yeah, it could be

Just as C suggests that for her it was a case of the assessor:



not understanding the actual value of the experience and the learning from that experience in relation to their module.

These students construct their assessors as ill-equipped for the task of evaluating their portfolios in terms of their knowledge of the particular abilities they were presenting. However C also implies that there may be problems with the system of awarding credit, in suggesting that lecturers may be reluctant to award it because of their feelings towards the subject material they teach. Her responses indicate a perception of professional experience (which she sees herself as having) as more valuable than academic learning and of the assessor as being at fault in not recognizing this. JM on the other hand conveys a perception of himself as different: 'unique', 'not an ideal student' which in his view makes it harder for an assessor to measure his experience. In both cases problems, in the assessor's eyes, were specifically associated with learning outcomes, in C's case with the learning not considered to match the existing learning outcomes sufficiently and in JM's case with the writing of the learning outcomes not considered satisfactory.

JH and N were both successful in their claims, which puts a different gloss on their interviews as they start from the perspective of 'having done something right', and in fact are each preparing a second portfolio. It is to be expected therefore that they would be less likely to find fault with their assessors, and the positive nature of the experience for them is expressed in the quotes on page 1. They both perceived themselves retrospectively as being experienced but not in a way that they had thought relevant to their university studies:

My work had mainly consisted of work within the community, so therefore I didn't think academically it would have been valuable (N)

I did think I had knowledge that was valuable and my experiences I thought were very valuable but I didn't actually think it would be able to be used in university (JH)

They also had in common their approach to the task of preparing the portfolio:

Me . In terms of the writing, how did you decide to do that?

JH. I looked at examples of people's work

Me. Other people's claims for APEL?

JH. Yes that's right I mean you look at successful ones and how they presented them and you kind of then structure it in a way that you know is going to be a winner, if you like

and:

Me. What gives you the idea, where do you get that from?

N. From my learning here, reading through the materials, that's when I got the idea that this isn't just about writing about 'oh look this was my experience'. It has to fit into somewhere and I think when you do your learning outcomes that's where you realize that you are working to criteria

N also said :

It's their structure, they work within their structure and I have to respect that and try and fit my experiences into that structure

There is more of a sense, from what JH and N say, of their positioning themselves as having to conform to the criteria the University sets in order to be successful. They both imply that they are aware of the constraints imposed by academic criteria and are prepared to work within those constraints to get what they want. In the following exchange:

Me. So did you find that the learning outcomes inhibited you or were they helpful?

N. I think they inhibited me and I think before I hand in my work I may have to change them

The impression is given of the learning from experience being tailored to fit the requirements of the genre, the genre effectively shaping the data and the students' and the assessors' understanding of it. This is borne out by the metaphors used by the interviewees to describe the writing process (my bold):

C It sort of gradually **squeezed out**.

N You come with all your experiences and you've got to **unsift and funnel** it through into that form of academia

and:

I'm having to learn a new language. I'm having to come out of my normal natural self [ ... ] and **repackage myself** in order to pass through that process

JH I suppose with academic language you are sort of **forced into a little box** in a way

These metaphors: 'forced into a little box', 'unsift and funnel', 'repackage' and 'squeezed out' all have a very physical resonance, of material being moulded or reshaped by means of force. N also used the expression 'a runaway horse' to describe her account of her learning from experience. These images present a picture of academic discourse as being very restraining, in the perception of the interviewees, when used in the context of APEL,

and reinforce the impression given by the texts of the portfolios of conflicting orders of discourse.

Examination of these four portfolios demonstrates how different individuals, who have been through a similar process of preparation, chose different ways of constructing their representations of their experience in terms of voice, genre and the physical shapes of their texts. They also demonstrate how students may choose different aspects of themselves as a focus for their portfolios: the professional, the lateral thinker, the believer, the community activist. The interviews give some insight into their perceptions of the process of preparing the portfolios and the strategies they saw themselves using, such as using models, or consciously attempting to adopt an intellectual approach. They also highlight the different ways in which successful students and those who were not awarded credit perceived the assessors and rationalised the outcome. JM's valuation of his experience seems to remain untouched by the assessor's. Perhaps he has learnt from his past experience as a disabled person not to accept the judgement of others, as illustrated by his reaction to the University's refusal to allow him to join the Study Abroad programme, which was to organise a placement abroad for himself. C on the other hand had described her high expectations of herself in her banner exercise. She was confident that her claim for what she saw as really congruent knowledge was valid, and therefore felt frustrated and critical of the institution when her claim was rejected. It could be said that the two students awarded credit, and the two not awarded, represent two different approaches within the context of Fig. 3.1 on page 34. C and JM approach from the perspective that the academy needs to open up the space where the knowledges overlap, to allow outside knowledge to penetrate and be accepted. N and JH, on the other hand approach from the perspective that outside knowledge needs to be shaped and adapted within the overlapping space in order to be accepted into the academy. This emerges from the research as a central issue with regard to APEL: the challenge which it makes to the ownership of knowledge and the structures set in place to maintain that. The potential success of such a challenge depends not only on students' willingness to take on the task of presenting their knowledge, but also on the willingness of academics to open the gate to their submissions, both in terms of what knowledge they consider and in terms

of how they require it to be presented. The concept of learning outcomes has been placed at the centre of the practice. The next chapter explores the attitudes of some lecturers/assessors at the University and compares them with the students' perspectives.

## Chapter 7

### Academics and APEL

In seeking to find out what happens in APEL, how it is working in my institution and what is not working in the process I have looked at the various stages the students go through in the process of preparing a submission for APEL. In this chapter I look at some lecturers' reactions to the finished product: what happens when lecturers encounter students' submissions for APEL and how the students' aspirations and abilities and the expectations of the lecturers compare.

By means of interviews with lecturers who have assessed claims for APEL I examine the process from the assessor's perspective and seek to find out what distance separates, in the perception of the interviewees, the two poles of what Challis (1998) describes as the axis between academic values and learner experience. In doing this I am seeking to find out how different lecturers perceive learning from experience, what kinds of representations of learning are likely to have validity in their eyes and what the factors are that lend validity to representations of learning. Freebody and Freiburg (2001, p. 228) suggest that one way to start trying to understand what happens in the assessment process is to consider 'the co-ordinated interactional rights and responsibilities of each of the participants.' (p. 226). This approach has as its basis 'core propositions' including the inherently social nature of the practices of members of a culture, the fact that members of a culture provide each other with accounts of their conduct by means of which they construct a social order, so that these practices need to be explained from within, through the participants rather than from the perspective of any outside rules or generalisations. I consider to what extent decisions about what knowledge is considered creditworthy in the APEL process depend on the individual perception of the assessor and whatever internalised or externalised criteria they may be applying within the academic context, rather than on the knowledge in the form in which it was gained in a different context.

This leads to the question of the relative weighting given to the form and content of the knowledge presented for credit, and the question of discourse. I have described in Chapter 6 above how problems can arise with the matching of learning from experience to pre-determined sets of learning outcomes (C's case), and also with the formulation of learning outcomes (JM's case). As Heap says (1985 p. 249) 'Discourse formats have designs which facilitate the accomplishment of certain tasks, functions and aims.' Heap explains how for knowledge to be valid in the classroom it is necessary for the teacher to believe it. If the teacher is not convinced by the student of the validity of the latter's claim, then that claim is not valid in that particular context. Heap traces the asymmetry of power in this situation back to the Greek classical tradition in which the teacher has both the 'authority of reason' and the 'authority of position', so that even if the teacher is not able to justify a claim they still have the authority to impose their view because of their position in the educational establishment. In this way society is constructed and students are acculturated into it.

### **Interdiscursivity**

Bakhtin (1984) has stressed the central importance of dialogue in bringing new meanings into being and Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p.16) use 'interdiscursivity' to describe how the mixing of different forms and types of discourse results in the development of new discourse types and social practices. As I have discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, in preparing a portfolio for APEL students need to express their thoughts and narratives, recounting events from their own lives, in a new discourse, created within the framework of the assessment process of the institution, that of the categorisation and description of knowledge and learning through the formulation of learning outcomes and the relating of experience to these. They need to acquire experience of this discourse and the way in which it can be used to dis-embed and generalise certain aspects of their life narratives in order to convince assessors of the educational validity of their learning from experience. This relatively new practice of APEL needs to establish its credibility with users on both sides of the student/academic divide, and involves the induction of the students into a new way of perceiving and describing the familiar, and the assessors into the perception

of unfamiliar forms of knowledge through a familiar prism. As Avis (1995) stated, the discourse on APEL programmes influences how students extract meaning from their experience. Some of the students interviewed acknowledged that they are not in a position to challenge this. As N said: 'They work within their structure and I have to respect that'. Because students want to gain credit they have their own vested interest in acquiring the discourse, although they may resist the interpretations suggested by the discourse or develop meanings of their own, as JM did.

The students' attempts to match the discourse of their submissions for credit with the expectations they attributed to the assessors resulted in interdiscursivity. As assessors attempt to reconcile students' accounts with their own notions of academic credibility, they search for clues that will enable them to equate what is in portfolios with familiar formulations and standards. Thus they also have to become familiarised with a new discourse. This may be harder to achieve since students enter university with the intention and desire to acquire new discourses (N - 'I'm having to learn a new language', C - 'How can I put this in an intellectual way?'), whereas in the case of established academics there may be reluctance to accept change for fear of 'loss of standards', for fear of doing a disservice to the student by exempting them from a course of study which the lecturer deems essential for their future success, or as C suggested, because they are not willing to accept that someone could gain learning equivalent to what they teach on a module without attending an academic institution. There will always be an element of the personal in the reaction of an assessor to a piece of work, however the importance of the frame of reference referred to by Heap (1980 p.283) is key in determining the level of match between the outcome desired by the student for her/his work and that accorded by the assessor. So the role of those involved in the APEL process as tutors and/or organisers, for example writing guidelines for staff or helping students prepare claims, involves developing a discourse which is shared with students and among colleagues.



## **The interviews**

The reactions of lecturers as perceived by some students were described in Chapter 6. Here I describe and discuss the reactions of six lecturers to some sample submissions for APEL. The lecturers interviewed have all assessed portfolios for credit, but not those of the students who were interviewed. Lecturers were sent two portfolios matching the experience described as closely as possible to the lecturer's area of expertise. These were portfolios they had not seen before, produced by students who were not known to them. They were sent a few brief questions with the portfolios (see Appendix 6) and again, interviews were semi-structured in the hope that issues that were dominant for the lecturers concerned would emerge. The lecturers interviewed had all attended a staff development session on APEL at which requests for volunteers to be interviewed were given out. This means that those involved were already interested enough firstly to attend the session, and secondly to be prepared to be interviewed. I am aware that there are lecturers within the institution who have much more negative attitudes towards APEL than those interviewed, including some who disagree with the process altogether. The data from interviews therefore represent views from a section of the academy which could be expected to be pre-disposed towards APEL.

## **The data**

Three lecturers from the School of Biological and Applied Sciences were interviewed and all three had looked at the same two portfolios before the interviews. One lecturer from the Business School, one from the School of Informatics and Multimedia Technology and one from the School of Area and Language Studies were also interviewed. These all looked at different portfolios except for the lecturer from Informatics, who had recently worked in the Business School and who looked at one of the Business related portfolios and one IT related portfolio (see chart below).

Fig. 6.1 The lecturers and the portfolios they saw

Lecturer	School	PF1	PF2	PF3	PF4	PF5	PF6	PF7
KA	Bio. and Applied Sciences	√	√					
PM	“	√	√					
CB	“	√	√					
PW	Business School			√	√			
PD	Informatics and Multimedia			√		√		
KS	Area and Language Studies						√	√

Each lecturer had been sent the two portfolios in advance and was asked to comment on whether they deemed them creditworthy and their reasons for their judgement. They were also asked what they would be looking for in a claim for APEL in their subject area. Interviews lasted between half an hour and an hour, some including long digressions. They were tape-recorded and transcribed with what I considered to be digressions omitted. I then went through the transcriptions and after reading them decided to use the following headings to group some of the interviewees' comments: the lecturers' perceptions of the students who had produced the portfolios and sometimes, by implication, of other students who submit work for APEL, the lecturers' perceptions of themselves and their colleagues with regard to the APEL process and the lecturers' expectations of submissions for APEL, including their likes and dislikes. (Their likes were often expressed in sentences starting 'I like ...', what I construed as dislikes tended to start 'It's not ...' or 'It doesn't... suggesting a reluctance to take personal responsibility for critical comments.) These headings were chosen because they emerged

as common themes in all the interviews but I have also included some issues which were only mentioned by one or two lecturers, because they relate to themes which arose in the student interviews such as reflection and cheating (but in a different sense from that used by the student).

I have applied the principles of CDA in analysing the texts produced as an outcome of the interviews (the transcriptions), looking at who the lecturers are, how they are located in the institution and how they relate to me as a colleague and researcher. I also seek to glean from the texts how they position themselves in relation to the students whose work they are assessing and to applicants for APEL in general, and how they perceive the process of APEL in relation to their role as lecturers. As staff in the institution they operate within a context which requires them to follow procedures and creates expectations that they will behave in particular ways with students and with colleagues. Their approach to APEL is informed by a number of factors such as the policies of the institution, for example with regard to widening participation, mature students and other 'non-traditional' students, and the quality control systems established in the University. The influence of both of these is evident in the documentation described in Chapter 4. In addition they have their own personal concepts of academic rigour and educational value, according to which they operate in their teaching and particularly in assessment, which they bring to bear in the context of APEL. In examining the detail of some of the texts I have drawn on Halliday's (1994a) SFL techniques.

### **Field, tenor and mode**

The general field in which the discussion is taking place is within an academic context, with the aim being for one colleague to find out from another their views on the specific portfolios sent them to comment on and the APEL process in general. There is an implicit assumption that the role of the tutor is to pass judgement on students' work, making the field an evaluative one. The premises are that APEL is a good thing, that it is beneficial for students and that lecturers should take it on board. Another premise is that students are not necessarily good at producing portfolios for APEL or that they may be good but

there is always room for improvement. This is perhaps a premise applied by lecturers to all texts produced by students.

The tenor is that of two people with equal status but different areas of expertise, one acknowledged as having expertise in their subject area, the other in the area of APEL. There is a respect from the interviewees of the interviewer's research, and respect from the interviewer of the interviewees' authority to pass judgement on work related to their area.

The mode is that of spontaneous speech for much of the interviews, loosely structured by the use of prepared questions by the interviewer. There is far more speech from the interviewees than from the interviewer and most of it is evaluative of the portfolios, as required by the questions, with some of it being self-evaluative. There is a certain amount of prescription included, when lecturers take on their evaluative role to explain their expectations as in: 'It needs to comply with certain academic requirements' or 'They would have to include a commentary'. Other sections are expressed in the form of anecdotes describing experiences they have had with particular students.

### **The lecturers' expectations**

All the lecturers mentioned 'learning outcomes' as important. The interviewees wanted to see the experience described by the students related to clear learning outcomes and in most cases they wanted to see these related to specific module descriptions, even though the staff guidance booklet (cf Chapter 4) specifies that this is not necessary and that in many cases it '... will be inappropriate to follow the standard assessment set out for the module in the case of the assessment of learning derived from experience'. Frequently recurring terminology from the learning outcomes discourse included 'transferable skills', 'competencies' and 'capabilities'. 'We're very big nowadays on learning outcomes and capabilities' said one lecturer. The two most important issues for lecturers seemed to be the relationship of the experience described to specific modules, and the demonstration of an awareness of the academic dimension through the use of referencing

and through the presentation of the material. They mentioned abstracts, contents pages, synopses, resumés and bibliographies, exemplifying a recurring theme of summarizing or distillation of information within the academic context. They used phrases such as ‘written appropriately’, ‘to comply with certain academic requirements’ and wanted to see ‘examples of good practice in essay writing’. One interviewee expected students to demonstrate that they ‘can write, read, edit, take charge of a text’. The expectation was that students would have acquired a set of skills related to the production of texts in an academic context and that they would be able to apply these in the APEL portfolio. This discourse is primarily general academic discourse with little to mark it out as specific to the genre of APEL apart from ‘transferable skills’ perhaps. I was quite surprised that although the concept of ‘reflection’ is presented as an important part of the process in the literature for students and lecturers, only one of the interviewees mentioned it specifically. This one laid great emphasis on it as an essential criterion for the award of credit: ‘... presenting the experience in itself is valid but the reflection on that experience is part of the crediting process’ because ‘... we expect of our students that they engage in that process of reflection’. The ideational function of the lecturers’ responses here seems to be to convey an impression of academic rigour with a clear explanation of what is expected of a student in terms of academic skills, with the interpersonal function being very much one of colleague to colleague, professional, creating a text which would have validity as an academic document when transcribed.

In expressing likes and dislikes interviewees often adopted a more personal voice and less formal discourse. In terms of their likes, a theme that emerged was their wish to be able to access and check information in a short space of time. Speed and simplicity were required. Thus one lecturer wanted a contents page or a pro forma ‘so that you can very quickly flip through .. and see what they’ve done’ and ‘... say tick, tick, tick’ and another talked about ‘looking at the learning outcomes and sort of mentally ticking them off’ and added ‘you make the assessor’s job very easy if you produce a check list and show you have already been through that and checked it’. Another lecturer said the student should ‘... write a very brief synopsis about [the] syllabus and how she meets the learning outcomes .. and this makes the accreditation process simpler’ and another liked one

portfolio very much because 'it was very nicely set out. It made reading it easy, it made picking out the important information ... very easy' (PF2). 'I particularly liked the way she has mapped her experience against the learning outcomes', said her colleague about the same portfolio. What they did not like was 'too much detail', 'repetition' and writing that was too 'verbose'. 'You have to plough all the way through it to extract [the] information ... it's slightly irritating to fight for it' (PF1) said one. Another, talking about a different portfolio, said 'I've got to sort out for myself here what the evidence is, shouldn't they be highlighting: that's the evidence against that particular issue' (PF3) and a different lecturer said of the same portfolio 'It does go on'.

The emphasis here on the requirement to make assessment easy for the lecturer, with the use of the words 'easy' (three times), 'simpler', 'flip through', 'tick off' or 'tick' (twice) and 'check-list' (twice) does not fit with the academic discourse described in the previous paragraph and generally associated with essay writing, where more importance tends to be attributed to analytical skills and reference to literature in the field. Only one lecturer mentioned this, the same one who emphasised reflection, saying of PF7 '... there's absolutely no literature, there's no reference to the critical literature or what the academic context of this would be.' This suggests that lecturers assessing for APEL generally expect a different kind of text from those they expect students to produce as part of their taught modules, one which at the same time embodies the characteristics of the academic form and incorporates the features of a check list, in effect a hybrid form. Students studying modules and writing coursework for them are demonstrating learning outcomes, yet are not expected to make these explicit, so the text which APEL candidates are required to produce differs from other forms of academic writing. The importance of getting this right was emphasised by the interviewees not just because the characteristics of a portfolio make the work of the assessor easier or more arduous but also because, as one said of PF 2, 'I think one has to accept the effort which has gone into producing this portfolio as an example of some form of skill base', implying that this in itself contributes to the award of credit. Where a lecturer felt in PF 3 a student had 'mismatched his application' and showed a 'lack of attention to detail in choosing modules' she felt this would count against him despite the fact that he had 'considerable previous knowledge

applicable to the course' because 'It should be taken into account to some extent their ability to document.' The portfolio thus characterises the student in the assessor's eyes in terms of both their knowledge and their skill as a writer.

All but one of the interviewees mentioned use of English as a factor, although they were not asked to comment specifically on this. One portfolio (PF1) was written by a student whose mother tongue is not English and the three lecturers who had seen this portfolio all expressed some anxiety about this. 'There're glitches in the English and you slightly worry about that.' said one, 'She would need to have a certain level of English', said another and 'I think we would have to look at the language side. Could the student cope?' said the third. PF3, which was written by a mother-tongue speaker of English also raised concerns with the two lecturers who read it. There was a contrast in how they reacted though with one saying:

I was surprised that there were so many errors in the grammar/spelling: errors all the way through it on every single page, grammar, spelling, misunderstanding of tense ... contradictions throughout from singular to plural which given the level at which the person was working I found quite surprising.

while the other lecturer who read this portfolio only mentioned the English retrospectively in comparison with the second portfolio she read, of which she said 'English is no problem at all whereas the previous one ...', although she had not commented on the English when discussing PF3. They also commented approvingly on English where appropriate, for example: 'she had a high level of skills in written English and in collating and putting together information.' None of the interviewees viewed the language deficiencies they perceived to be an obstacle to the award of credit in themselves, but the first one quoted above felt that she would want to interview the student and they all felt good English was important.

Two main themes emerge strongly here: the desire of lecturers that portfolios be presented in a format that makes their task of assessment quick and easy, and the

importance of skills of presentation, language and the ability to handle information in an academic way, which they saw as indicative of the students' general ability and deservedness of credit. As will be seen below, in the eyes of the assessors the texts presented by the students became very much representative of who they were and how they were perceived as fitting in on the programmes for which they were applying for credit.

### **Lecturers' constructions of the students**

In commenting on the portfolios interviewees talked about the students who had produced them and often extended their remarks to include other students by implication or directly. They made very positive remarks about the students who had written the portfolios such as 'a very experienced person', 'a good communicator', 'they obviously are experienced' and 'This is a very talented person'. Some of them felt that the students had not done themselves justice: 'I think she has undersold herself', and one said of PF 3 and PF5 'In both cases there's a lack on the students' part of making as much as they can of their prior learning.' In some cases it was acknowledged that the style of writing affected the reader's attitude: 'very nicely written, eliciting sympathy' said one lecturer, and when asked if she would want to interview this student she said:

Probably not, for all it would be very nice and I would enjoy it. That would be taking up her time and my time and I think she has made her case.

The same lecturer said of PF2 'It was very very worthy. I had great empathy ... She was particularly interested in genetics, which happens to be my subject so I obviously felt very very warm towards her.' Another said 'As a whole I liked the feel of it, there was a sense of understanding of human motivation'. Lecturers wanted enough personal detail to be able to form an image of the student as a person. One said of PF6 'I was missing out the personal component because if this is experience then the person who experiences it must be visible'. Two mentioned the importance of knowing the student's age '... so that I knew what sort of life experiences to expect. We would be looking for rather different



things were it someone who was 21 rather than someone who is 55'. The other said that in an ideal application for credit she ' .. would want to see very quickly the details of the person, their age, their background ..'.

An issue which was raised by only one of the interviewees was that of authenticity, and she raised it in relation to PF2, which was the only portfolio produced by a non-native speaker of English. Although she was not suggesting that this particular student had been dishonest in any way it was in a discussion on this portfolio that she dwelt at some length on the fact that '... sometimes any application, not just in this area, is heavily influenced by others (laughs), and [ ...] in the past we have had even forged qualifications [...] we have had people who have lied, not just APEL applicants but any applicants who have lied or even forged documents' she then goes on to say about the writer of PF2 specifically 'I would want to test her verbally, discuss the subject to make sure it really was her that knew this material'. Another interviewee, her colleague and in fact her Head of Department said of the same portfolio 'I would want to be assured that the student can do something in the lab on her own in this case'. There was a degree of tentativeness expressed about these views. The first interviewee cited above had said in talking about PF2 'I'm in slight doubt ... ' and 'You slightly worry ... because sometimes we get these er any applications which somebody else has definitely moderated.' Her use of the euphemisms 'heavily influenced by others' and 'definitely moderated' together with the use of the adverb 'slightly' twice and the laugh after 'heavily influenced by others' combine to create the impression of unease at having to mention this mistrust of some students, as does the use of the modal 'would' in 'I would want to test ... ' and 'I would want to be assured ...'. This suggests a conflict between the wish to be and to be seen to be rigorous in assessing and fear of being perceived as prejudiced.

All the lecturers except one mentioned feelings of sympathy towards the students as individuals and their expectation that they would include a personal dimension to their portfolios. It is interesting that several of them felt the students had not done themselves justice, suggesting that lecturers felt they could guess or intimate more information about some of the students than had been presented in their portfolios. This worked in reverse

with the student who was not English in the case of two of the interviewees in that they did not feel convinced that she was capable of everything she had described and wanted to meet her to 'make sure'.

### **Lecturers' constructions of themselves and their colleagues**

Generally lecturers presented themselves as sympathetic towards the candidates. One has been cited above describing the empathy and warmth she felt towards the writers of the portfolios she looked at. Another one said 'I think I'm quite a reasonable person' and a third said 'I believe in total and utter flexibility' however she specified that this was in relation to how evidence could be presented in accompaniment to a 'proforma ... as a guide so that you can see very quickly where everything is and why it's relevant.'. The interviewee who is a Head of Department said

I encourage, as a manager, my staff whenever possible to look at this kind of expertise and I think in the past we have been rather harsh on students and I think we have got to and I use the term loosen up.

He then goes on to say, with regard to PF2:

I suppose I am being a little harsher on this student [ ... ] I suppose I'm breaking equal opportunities [ .. ] for students coming in from outside the UK we tend to be hard so we want to be sure.

He and other lecturers worried about the danger of awarding credit inappropriately, and this was described as being disadvantageous for the student:

The worst thing you can do is accredit something on the basis of a hunch [ ... ] and you fall on the side of the student and the student suffers.

He felt that ‘... one should be as flexible as possible in accepting prior experience’ but at the same time ‘It is important that we do ensure that university standards are maintained.’ The lecturer in Informatics and Multimedia felt that ‘... there is definitely a prejudice against experiential learning in this department.’ This she puts down to the fact that they think experience must have covered every aspect of a module and that if it hasn’t:

They feel it is a dangerous road to start walking down as you may well end up disadvantaging the student when they do further modules because their experience hasn’t prepared them for some aspects of it.

However she also felt that tutors’ backgrounds might influence their attitudes depending on whether they had come ‘through academia’ or from a ‘commercial background.’ These two were not the only ones to be concerned about assessors’ responsibility for the future consequences of awarding credit. Another ended the interview by explaining ‘I once took on someone who didn’t make it. That was my mistake and it is in the back of my mind.’ The Head of Department stipulated that ‘every member of staff should have the ability to make some form of assessment, judgment and evaluation about students’ worth and potential’ and felt that his staff did have the expertise, however he thought academic staff were ‘possibly weaker in customer care.’

The lecturers interviewed see themselves as caring and sympathetic people, with a duty to be open and understanding of students’ experience, but at the same time with a responsibility to uphold standards in the university and a concern for the students’ future studies. An element of caution emerges where a student’s first language is not English, but this goes beyond language in some of the interviews where it is implied that students from overseas may not be trustworthy and may have had too much help with their portfolios. This is never implied with regard to the portfolios by native speakers and the difference in attitude is recognized by the Head of Department when he describes a ‘harsher’ attitude to students from overseas. Some interviewees also ascribed cautious attitudes towards APEL in their colleagues, whilst emphasizing their own openness towards the process.

### **Discourse and voice in the texts**

In the majority of the interviews a very personal voice emerged. Interviewees frequently used first person pronouns or adjectives 'I' as in 'I had great empathy', 'I suppose I am being a little harsher' or 'That was my mistake ...', demonstrating a recognition of the effect of the personal dimension on the assessment process and their own individual bias. They also used 'we' and 'you' as less personal forms, generalizing their reaction to include colleagues, the department or the University as in 'You have to plough all the way through it to extract information' or 'We would have to look at the language side'. One person used the impersonal form 'one' several times as in 'One should be as flexible as possible in accepting prior experience'. In this way they spoke sometimes as individuals but also as members of a collective, assuming a voice for other like-minded individuals as well as themselves. The Head of Department made explicit his perception of his responsibilities for the approach of the department and also his role in the institution as a whole, referring to 'my staff', 'academic staff' and 'every member of staff'. The texts include a combination of academic and informal discourse with a number of expressions such as 'What the heck does that mean?', 'He has the wrong end of the stick.' and idioms such as 'out of the blue' and 'pot luck'. There is also some evidence of interdiscursivity with the language of business with expressions such as 'customer care' used to refer to staff approaches to students and 'They're marketing themselves really' about the students and their portfolios. These are perhaps symptomatic of a changing attitude to education and students which may account for the willingness of lecturers to consider the APEL approach, with its focus on the student as a person with a past history and existence outside of the institution. There is use of modality to express the hypothetical nature of the discussion with frequent occurrence of 'would' and 'should', for example 'You would probably meet this student so you would soon discover.' denoting an unwillingness to commit to a definite opinion in the context of the interview. The texts reveal the sympathies and openness of the lecturers' attitudes towards APEL but also the complexities of accommodating a new form of assessment into an existing

system with the uncertainties and doubts that arise and the varied expectations of form and content of the portfolio.

### **Contrasts between assessors' and students' perspectives**

Returning once again to Fig. 3.1 (p. 34), assessors approach APEL from the starting point of the academy, the candidates approach it from the perspective of the outside world. Using data from the interviews with assessors and candidates I examine the degree of potential convergence in the APEL area where the two domains overlap. The assessors position themselves firmly within the academy section of the diagram, defining themselves as part of the institution and responsible for the maintenance of standards and the welfare of the students. They see themselves as doing what is best for students, within the context of a domain in which they have an expertise which students do not have, as knowledgeable yet benign authorities. However, their position is interpreted by the students as one of defending their territory (cf 'This is my module', Fig. 6.1, p. 118, Construction of the assessor) or 'working within their structure' in a way which creates constraints on the potential for valuing the knowledge and abilities that students bring with them, and validating their identities as individuals ('People are set in their ways', Fig. 6.1, p. 118). None of the students interviewed said anything to indicate that they felt the assessors had their best interests at heart, seeing them at best as people whose requirements they would have to adapt to and at worst as people who would probably not understand them (They're not going to fully understand me', Fig. 6.1, p. 118).

Learning outcomes constitute part of the academic discourse which constrains this space of overlap, perceived by assessors as an important and useful means of identifying knowledge and enabling it to be accredited, but by students as part of the 'funnel' or 'box' within which they have to 'squeeze' their account of their learning (cf Fig. 6.1, p. 118, Informal discourse). For the assessors, the learning outcomes form part of a system for checking and ticking off information in a way which simplifies their task and facilitates quality assurance, reassuring them in an area where they seem to feel some uncertainty, or at least attribute this to some of their colleagues. For the students learning

outcomes are a model they have to conform to and which some find 'inhibiting'. In C's case she perceived the learning outcomes as working against her since the fact that her learning from experience was not an exact match was given as the reason for not awarding credit. The assessor of JM's portfolio also says 'if the learning outcomes had been clearer credit may have been awarded' so that the discourse of learning outcomes becomes the means of maintaining control over what knowledge is accepted by the academy, making it difficult for those not familiar with it to construct claims for APEL which will satisfy the expectations of assessors.

The assessors interviewed perceived themselves as flexible and sympathetic to claimants. They stressed the importance of the personal dimension of the portfolio and their desire to get a whole picture of the person in order to make a judgement. However the student perception of the lecturers they dealt with was that they were set in their ways, committed to their curricula and structures and unlikely to appreciate where the students 'were coming from'. Students had picked up on the wariness of assessors worried that the process could lend itself to cheating. 'People say the attitude of some staff is it's cheating' (Fig. 6.1, p. 118, Construction of the assessor), said JH, however I interpreted her comment as meaning that staff felt the actual gaining of credit for learning from experience is somehow not valid, whereas the assessor who mentioned cheating clearly meant that a student might submit information which was not bona fide. Assessors expressed general uncertainty about APEL within the institution, particularly with regard to overseas students but also in their comments on colleagues' reluctance to implement it. The fear of awarding credit inappropriately, described as 'the worst thing you can do' and the description of APEL as 'a dangerous road to start walking down' because of the possibility of 'disadvantaging the student' at a later stage show a perception of a long term perspective in which students might end up struggling with their studies because of APEL. Students, on the other hand, perceived APEL as facilitating their progress, 'It's been a springboard to help me do my history', 'It brought back all my confidence and my focus' (Fig. 6.1, p. 118, Experience of power). So there are fundamental differences in evidence here between how assessors and students perceive the role of APEL in the context of their studies as a whole.

The assessors are caught between wanting to take a personal approach and treat students as individuals, in line with the ethos of the University and its commitment to 'the widest possible clientele', and their accountability to the maintenance of standards through the use of 'objective criteria'. The students' motivation is to gain credit, but they also want recognition of their value as professionals and as individuals with lived experience. Where they succeeded they recognised the gains they had made from going through the APEL process in terms of self-confidence and understanding of themselves and their goals and potential. The two successful students reinforce the view that deep learning is more likely to take place when learners consciously build on what they already know. However the assessors interviewed seemed to perceive APEL more as a granting of a concession than as a means of building on a student's existing knowledge. One of the advantages of APEL is that it takes students through a process of recognising the value of the learning they bring with them, however this seems to be hampered by the context of an institution which is working within embedded power relations which encourage people to conform to a common norm. This is particularly the case where those such as JM who have traditionally been marginalized in education are concerned, since it may be difficult for assessors to recognise how the learning and understanding these students' have derived from their self-identification as different from the norm can constitute valid knowledge.

The interviews with assessors, whilst providing evidence of an awareness of equal opportunities and the need to be fair to all students, show little understanding of APEL as 'a socially inclusive process' with 'a commitment to valuing a diversity of learning' (Staff Guidance for the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning, Chapter 4). Nor do the assessors appear to have taken on board some of the caveats in the Staff Guidance such as: 'Adult learning may not fall into neat modular categories' or 'the language of formal theory and the language of practice may be quite different', since most of them specifically refer to the importance of module matching and of formal and theoretical language in claims. This suggests that APEL specialists, those who produce the documentation and act as tutors and advisors during the process, have a different

understanding of it from the assessors, who may have attended staff development sessions and assessed portfolios, but have not had the ongoing involvement with the students that the tutors and advisors have. If the latter were involved in assessment they would have more confidence in the authenticity of the students' accounts, because they would have spent time with them on developing these, and would contribute a different understanding of the nature and relevance of the process to the student's studies.

There is an openness of attitude towards APEL, expressed by the assessors interviewed, which suggests that the concept has impinged on the consciousness of the academy in that at least the principle of recognition of learning from experience is established, which is in itself an acknowledgement that knowledge can be acquired in different but equally valid ways. However the need perceived by academics to integrate the assessment and award of credit for this learning into the rigidly defined practices devised for the assessment of taught modules, specifically the use of learning outcomes, makes the process very arduous for students and conflicts with their desire to capture the nature of their own multiple identities in a meaningful way in their submissions. Assessors are seeking representations of learning that fit with the criteria applied to all academic work, but with the addition of a personal dimension which reveals the student as an individual with an existence outside the academic domain. The students are seeking to fit their constructions of themselves as multi-faceted individuals into an academic format without losing aspects of their identity. This is part of what Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p. 59) call 'the irreducible hybridity of modern communicative interaction' which I have attempted to examine here in the context of the practice of APEL.



## Chapter 8

### Conclusion

In this project I have used qualitative methods to carry out research in my own workplace, as a participant observer. My aim was to study the practice of APEL in the institution as a 'telling case', as a means of evaluating the practice and considering how it could be made more accessible to students. In order to do this I looked at three dimensions of the practice: the documentation which established the practice in the University and regulates its implementation, the activities and reactions of some students participating in the practice, and the reactions of some lecturers involved in the practice. I present myself in the research as a lecturer working with the students and a colleague working with the other lecturers. I deliberately chose to research an area in which I was deeply involved, both because of my personal interest and commitment to the practice and because I felt it would give me a perspective which an outsider would not have access to. I chose to use CDA as a tool to examine the discourses which interweave in the process of APEL, because of its location on the border between life and work outside and the world within the academic community. This was supplemented by drawing on SFL in order to concretise the analysis of the discourses used through study of their realisation in the linguistic features.

In this concluding chapter I evaluate the methodology used to carry out the research to establish how successful it has been in clarifying what happens in the APEL process and what is not working. I then examine the findings that have emerged and what answers they provide to the questions. Finally I discuss the implications of the findings for the future practice of APEL, both in the institution where the research was carried out and more widely.

## **Evaluation of the methodology**

Collecting documentation on the APEL process at the University was unproblematic. As an insider and someone who works within the system I was aware of most of the documentation and was able to gain access to it easily either through colleagues or on the University website. The use of CDA proved valuable in examining the aims of the various documents, the ideal readers for whom they are intended and how the readers are positioned. SFL also proved useful in helping me pinpoint the characteristics of the documents which together created the respective images of the readers and writers and in providing clues as to how these documents might include individuals in, or exclude them from the process. I was able to establish the existence of a genre related to APEL and recognise its features and the purpose these were designed to achieve, in particular the concept of learning outcomes as a means of describing knowledge and the place of this concept in the APEL process.

Collecting data from the students was a much more arduous and complex process. I had planned a coherent strategy of collecting data systematically from four groups of students over the duration of their involvement in the APEL process. This was to involve recording specific sessions in the seminars, collecting the texts students produced throughout and interviewing those who completed the process. The biggest issue here, which is in itself an interesting finding, was the small number of students completing a portfolio for APEL within the time-span of the research. One of the advantages of APEL is that students can put in claims for credit at any stage during their studies and can therefore choose to prepare their portfolios at any time which is convenient for them, taking their time over the work. It was disappointing that none of the part-time evening Business Studies students completed a portfolio in time for it to be included, yet understandable when one considers that these students are working full-time while studying and many of them also have family responsibilities. The collection of data in seminars was also problematic in that some students missed certain sessions through illness or other commitments, some did not hand in work and some dropped out in the

course of the module. Nevertheless the data I was able to collect provide a rich picture of what happened to individual students in the process, which has enabled me to gain insights into specific events and stages and how the students experienced them. Again, CDA has been useful in analysing students' perceptions of themselves and of lecturers/assessors as they are represented in the texts they produced, and in looking at how these developed over the period of the research. SFL has also proved a valuable tool in breaking down the language and analysing the changes and differences in the texts between the various stages and tasks of the process as well as between individuals.

The collection of data from lecturers was unproblematic in itself, in that all the lecturers I interviewed were keen to help. Nevertheless I was aware that those who assisted in the research represented staff who are advocates of APEL and who would like to see it succeed, so that the picture given is only a partial one. It was not possible for me to gain access to lecturers who have serious doubts about APEL or who totally disapprove of it. However bearing this in mind sets the findings from the lecturer data in a context where any problematic points have to be considered as particularly significant, when one considers that the wider environment may be hostile to the existing process. Lecturers demonstrated that they have established concepts of the ideal APEL candidate and perceptions of their colleagues' and their own roles and approaches as teachers and assessors. This is manifested in the detail of their discourse as well as in the content of their observations.

I have found CDA useful in prompting me to ask questions about students' and colleagues' perceptions of the APEL process and their role within it. Tying this in to specific linguistic features through SFL clarified my understanding of how these are instantiated in specific social situations. I have not had the space and time to go into as much detail as I would have liked, although I could have chosen to look at fewer data in more depth. The CDA/SFL approach has helped illuminate for me some of the ways in which the power relationship between academics and students is manifested and maintained within the APEL process. Whether or not it can provide the means of working

towards change, by challenging existing assumptions and practices is not yet clear to me. In this instance it has fulfilled the task of critiquing;

the discursive dimensions of a practice (APEL) in terms of whether they meet the communicative aspects of the needs of the participants. (Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p. 33)

However it remains to be seen whether such a critique can contribute to overcoming the obstacles which confront the process of APEL, which ultimately aims to subvert the existing practices of academic institutions and break down rigid distinctions between knowledge gained in different contexts and the ways in which such knowledge can be represented. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999 p.154) present CDA as:

contributing to critical social research systematic accounts of the discourse moment of contemporary social practices

They criticise SFL for being too focused on language and not enough on social change, yet it is difficult to see how the analysis of social practice as represented in discourse can actually lead to the kinds of changes in practices which Chouliaraki and Fairclough advocate and which I would like to see being achieved through the APEL process. Academic accreditation operates through a particularly rigid set of discourse practices. Pointing out the 'irreducible hybridity of modern communicative interaction' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, p.59) does not of itself contribute to any change in these practices and such an awareness could on the contrary be used to reinforce existing academic requirements rather than to work towards implementing change. Yet the aim of the process of CDA is 'to discern possible resources for changing things in the way they currently are' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, p.65). Having acknowledged that an important issue is the relationship between theoretical practice and practical action, they acknowledge that the theoretical nature of their analysis is a limitation.

Later in this chapter I will attempt to look at some ways in which this limitation might be overcome in the particular instance of APEL and the relationship between the practices of the academy and the outside world, and how common ground could be established between them through new understandings of communication practices.

I will first discuss my findings by listing some of the assumptions I found to be evident in the data and the conclusions I have drawn from my analysis.

## **Findings**

The first assumption that is evident in the documentation related to APEL is that:

*the power to recognise knowledge and its value rests uniquely and incontestably with the University.*

What also becomes apparent very quickly in all the documentation is that:

*in order for knowledge or learning to be recognised by the University it must be presented according to norms and regulations laid down by the institution, specifically through use of the concept of learning outcomes.*

Thus tight control is maintained over definitions of knowledge and students wishing to claim credit are made aware that they need to acquire a particular discourse for describing this in order to be successful. The extracts from the course materials which form part of the data demonstrate the process of initiating students into the discourse. Although there is some reference to employment and the workplace in some of the documents there is little discussion of the value of learning in the world outside, or of the professional status of many students. Emphasis is on the proving of academic ability through the use of the forms developed by the academy for the purpose, namely the learning outcomes. This makes it clear that students need to be assimilated into the culture of higher education, to a certain extent, prior to preparing a claim for APEL, if they are to be successful.

Although the guidelines for staff make reference to flexibility, social inclusion and diversity it is made clear that APEL procedures conform to those for assessing students' work on modules they have studied. This means that APEL is unlikely to constitute a means of opening up the academy or widening participation, since most students are gradually initiated into academic discourse and practices over their three years at university rather than entering with a full grasp of the culture and the ability to express their prior knowledge within it.

Examination of the student data makes it clear that:

*students may find it hard to describe their learning from the outside world in the discourse of the academy.*

Even if they are familiar with this it is difficult to describe learning from experience in work or other fields unrelated to university life in academic discourse. This seems to be especially hard if the context of the learning being described is very far removed from the academic environment. This gives rise to hybrid texts which are sometimes awkwardly put together or fail to express clearly what the student is attempting to explain, as well as texts which straddle the borders between spoken and written modes. The use of learning outcomes as a means of measuring learning involves the acquisition and practice of a very specific genre, and an approach to the structuring of knowledge in a particular way which make the task of claiming credit more complex and restrictive for applicants. Learning outcomes may in fact be used as a means of rejecting or excluding knowledge which does not fit with them. In addition:

*students may perceive assessors as likely to have very specific expectations with regard to claims for APEL, which students need to attempt to cater for if they are to succeed.*

Thus there is a perception that it is the role of the student to fit in with whatever the assessor may require, rather than there being a perceived willingness on the part of

assessors to consider whatever may be presented in a portfolio with an open mind.

Nevertheless:

*students may find the process of reflection on experience for a claim for APEL rewarding and useful in itself.*

Students enjoy talking about their learning from experience outside the University and making connections between it and their studies and may find that this enriches their studies overall, even though they acknowledge the difficulty of the task.

The texts consisting of interviews with lecturers provide evidence that in the perception of academics:

*students who can write clearly demonstrating academic skills are generally worthy of being awarded credit.*

Whilst:

*students whose first language is obviously not English need careful investigation, both because their language may not be up to standard and because they may not be trustworthy.*

These last two findings testify to the high value placed on the format, discourse and presentation of claims for APEL by assessors and, certainly in the evidence from these texts, lower emphasis on the context and implications of the learning from experience being represented.

It was also clear, however that in the eyes of assessors:

*claims for APEL must include a personal dimension, an evident presence of the writer as an individual*

Together with the previous two findings this illustrates the contradictory situation in which APEL claimants find themselves, having to produce a document which includes a personal presence but is formally structured, matches learning to learning outcomes and observes academic conventions. Lecturers/assessors themselves also seem to be torn by this dilemma, wishing to be fair to individuals and acknowledge their particular circumstances but at the same time to conform to institutional criteria and uphold standards. A final assumption is therefore that:

*students and lecturers have different perceptions of the nature of the process and of their respective positions within it*

The assumptions drawn from the analysis of the data indicate that in its present form APEL is probably not challenging existing perceptions of outside knowledge in the institution to any great extent, or its authority to arbitrate on this, either in the eyes of the applicants for APEL or in those of the assessors. It has been taken on board through a commitment to social inclusion and widening participation, but only in a form mediated through the normal procedures and conventions of the institution, which, applied in these circumstances, have the effect of defusing any power to change which might be associated with APEL. In addition to this, students going through the process are exposing themselves to the risk of inviting assessors to sit in judgement over what they, the candidates, value from their previous experience, which the assessors may not be in a position to judge fairly. Faced with an unsatisfactory outcome the candidate either has to accept that their experience is not valued by the institution or create a mental image in which the judgement of the assessor is discredited.

## **Conclusions**

For APEL to function in a truly revolutionary way, changing perceptions of knowledge and ways of valuing it, would involve academics in rethinking their approaches to their subject specialisms and how they transmit their knowledge in these to their students, but



it would also primarily involve changes to their perceptions of their students as individuals who have lived and worked in a range of contexts before embarking on study in higher education, and the interrelationship between their past experience and their studies. There are examples of this happening. While I was working on this research I was invited by a group of tutors on the Diploma in Social Work (DIPSWA) at the University to assist at a staff development session they were holding with regard to their APEL practice. APEL is a recognised part of the DIPSWA and students are invited to claim credit for work placements where they have appropriate experience, however most of those applying for credit were unsuccessful on their first attempt. The aim of the staff development session was for the team to discuss the reasons for this and examine their procedures for helping students put their claims together. The outcomes were changes in the requirements and the development of more interactive procedures involving, for example, an interview and feedback before final submission. This example shows how practices can be changed in response to student needs in circumstances where they are not serving their intended purpose. However many lecturers may not perceive APEL as useful, may see it as a threat to academic integrity or may have a perception of it as the responsibility of students rather than an area for discussion and negotiation. One lecturer (with a designated responsibility for APEL in his department) said in a meeting:

Lecturers are not against APEL, it's just that students don't know how to present claims. They need to be taught.

APEL thus becomes something students need to learn to do rather than something which acknowledges who they already are and what they already know. These examples illustrate Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (1999) point that people's relationship to discourse depends on where they stand in social structures, with people in some positions having an investment in limiting the openness of discourse.

What has happened here is that a set of procedures has been set in place, constituted by means of academic discourse, which enables APEL to become an integral part of the assessment process across the University. This serves to reassure academics and

administrative staff that the proper controls are in place and procedures are not being subverted. However it also ensures that knowledge gained outside the institution continues to be devalued, whether it is professional expertise or other forms of life knowledge, and reinforces the perception by academics of the student as someone who should be 'prepared to suspend their adulthood at the door of the institution' (Hanson, 1996, p. 103). For APEL to work, knowledge gained outside of education has to be accepted as being potentially of equal status to that gained inside. This entails accepting knowledge as equivalent even when it is expressed in a form that is different from the form academic knowledge normally takes, created by a discourse that is different from academic discourse. APEL comes much closer to this when it is used in Nursing or Social Work, where academic studies are preceded and/or interwoven with work in the field, which is regarded as a necessary, indeed essential part of the qualification. The example of the Social Work team in the University demonstrates the potential of the practice of APEL to bring about changes in attitudes to learning from experience and ways of bringing it into the University. With the current teacher shortage, this is also starting to happen in Education, with classroom experience being recognised as creditworthy on degrees, although as Stierer (2000, p.193) has pointed out in describing research into schoolteacher students on an MA in Education:

The discourse and knowledge that schoolteachers bring to their studies, and indeed the discourse and knowledge that schoolteachers manage to construct for themselves as professionals as a result of their studies, are only sanctioned by the institution when they can be overtly realized in the language of the novice academic.

An emancipatory APEL would recognise learning described in a range of discourses, formats and representations. Imposing rigid formats and discourses is a powerful means of control and exclusion which is becoming more and more prevalent in all areas of our lives, for example in situations such as job applications, bids for research funding or funding for other kinds of projects and developments, and validation of new programmes of study. In all situations of uneven power balance, knowledge of the discourse is the key

to access to the desired resource. Emancipatory APEL, rather than being set up as another hurdle to overcome in the education stakes, could function as a mediatory procedure which facilitates the transition from one sphere to another and promotes understanding between academics and professionals, between mature students and the lecturers who teach and tutor them within a lifelong learning environment. However in order for this to happen the power of academics to arbitrate needs to be challenged. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) would argue that CDA has an important role to play within such a challenge, not least in that through appropriation of a discourse one can gain the power to overthrow the control of those who created that discourse. Whether this is a useful means to further the development of APEL is an issue which would be worth investigating. In the final part of this conclusion I will look at what may be the necessary conditions for this kind of change to take place.

### **A different kind of APEL**

The first prerequisite for an APEL which challenges the monopoly on knowledge of the academy is that control of it should not rest solely in the hands of academics. There are many in the area of professional education who have experience of both a profession and the academy and will therefore be in a position to judge the value of experience gained in practical circumstances. Where there are no insiders with this experience outsiders can be invited in. In France applications for credit based on professional experience are examined by an Accreditation Jury which includes representatives from companies or organisations who have experience relevant to the claim (Feutrie, 2000). There are many people outside universities who would be useful members of such juries and would be able to contribute a perspective on how what happens in higher education fits with what happens in other domains. This would counterbalance the perspective of academics who have little or no experience outside and therefore think primarily in academic terms. This was demonstrated explicitly in the case of student C and the judgement passed on her experience in journalism (Chapter 6). This is not to say that academics should be excluded from decision making on the award of credit in their field, but rather that they should not be sole arbiters. This is particularly important because of the personal

dimension to the process mentioned by some of the academics who were interviewed. The danger of credit being awarded because someone likes the candidate or because she or he meets the assessor's idea of a good candidate can be avoided by involving more people in the decision. Institutions offering APEL usually do so because among their staff are certain individuals who have taken it upon themselves to become familiar with the theory and practice and have built up experience in advising students and helping them to reflect on and sift through their experience. Harris (2000, p.127) suggests that APEL advisors or mentors should be people who have a 'grounding in adult education theory and practice'. These people often play the role of advocates in guiding candidates through the process, but are sometimes excluded from the assessment itself because of their closeness to the candidate. In a French style jury they could be included. If the assessment process is not to be mechanistic and rigid, thereby excluding a range of forms of knowledge and ways of expressing it, an element of negotiation needs to be brought into the equation, with candidates themselves being given the opportunity to argue their case. As Holmes (2002, p. 7) has suggested in a paper on assessment:

Once the candidates are brought into the analysis and theorisation of assessment as co-producers of what are taken as facts about them, the assessors themselves are transformed from 'judges', separated from the world in which students engage in the performance which is to be judged and with mysterious powers to 'infer' some metaphysical property (competence) of the student. They become ordinary human beings engaged in fact production ...

Holmes is not alone in advocating a negotiated form of assessment. Harris (2000) cites Dale who also argues for the involvement of the candidates in the evaluation of submissions for APEL. In addition Starr-Glass (2002, p.228) considers that in the practice of APEL:

We should learn the candidate's language. ... They must not be forced to use a way of communicating that is alien and restrictive to them.

because:

The evaluation of prior experience is an exploration of the candidate's territory, and an exploration that must engage both the candidate and the invited evaluator.

Starr-Glass advocates a focus on metaphor and on totemic systems. The problem with conventional assessment is that generally we are looking for signs of something familiar, since we are matching the representation of learning against pre-set criteria. In assessing submissions for APEL we need to be trained to value the unfamiliar, learning that has come from sources we never imagined, represented in unfamiliar ways. Opening up the assessment process could help us to do this, moving it:

from a one way evaluation to a reciprocal, almost contractual, process of identification. (Feutrie, 2000, p.208)

My research has shown that the practice of APEL is failing in some ways '... to meet the communicative aspects of the needs of people engaged in the practice' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, p.33). The students I worked with showed a great enthusiasm for and commitment to the practice of reflection on their past and present learning and felt that going through the process enhanced their university experience. The lecturers also expressed some enthusiasm although emphasising the need for efficient and strictly regulated procedures. These procedures are clearly in evidence in the documentation I have examined here and their effects are illustrated in the work of the students at different stages. The research has demonstrated that discourse is at the heart of the process, the key to the gate in the border crossing. The requirement to present experience in the prescribed format of the academy makes preparing a submission an arduous and long-term task for a student unfamiliar with higher education. It can also mean that what is accredited is the candidate's ability to present information in an acceptable form rather than their learning or knowledge per se. On the other hand the task of awarding credit for knowledge presented in forms which do not conform to the academic norm requires a

shift in perspective that many academics may be reluctant to take. As Stierer (2000, p.193) says, citing Bourdieu et al, (1994):

Institutions of higher education use language to sustain and legitimate an epistemological hegemony - that is an ideology which positions students of any type as relatively powerless

The practice of APEL was conceived as a means of empowering students and challenging this hegemony, but at present this has proved to a large extent resistant to the challenge. However as Iedema and Wodak (1999, p.7) say:

organisations are continuously created and re-created in the acts of communication between organisational members

Changes in the roles of participants in the process and in who those participants are will result in new ways of communicating and the creation of new values in the process. As more mature students with life experience enter universities and as the relationships between universities and workplaces change, new orders of discourse come into being. As students metamorphose into 'clients' or 'customers' they may also enter into different kinds of relationships with academics in which the balance of power is altered. The concept of a negotiated APEL process involving students and academics relates back to McNair's (1999, p. 37) vision of an academic community in which knowledge is 'the product of groups of people talking to each other'. Future research using CDA/SFL could examine the potential of group discussions involving candidates and assessors in establishing the nature of their knowledge and abilities for the purpose of APEL. With the development of work based and problem based education, an examination of the interacting roles of educators, worker/students and employers and the orders of discourse these create could also be a means of establishing new practices in the assessment and recognition of learning by academics. Greater dialogue between the academy and the world is starting to open up. CDA could be a useful tool in developing new approaches to higher education which acknowledge the range of ways in which knowledge can be

gained and represented. If it can be taken beyond theory to have a practical impact on the roles played by the participants in the process, this would be a step in the direction of emancipatory APEL.

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## Appendix 5 Questions to students

### Interviews with students re. APEL

#### Questions to be posed to interviewees

From your experience of APEL what did you think were the chances of the knowledge you acquired experientially before coming to university being recognised ?

How much of that knowledge did you feel could be included?

On what basis did you feel some might be included and some excluded?

What were the factors that made you feel this?

How did the task of preparing a representation of your knowledge from experience appear to you?

What were the factors that made you feel this?

17 April 2002

Dear Colleague

Research into approaches to the assessment and accreditation of learning from experience

Thank you for agreeing to help us with our research. Please find attached two examples of portfolios submitted by students for the purpose of APEL. These may not relate specifically to your subject area, however we would like to obtain feedback on the approach to making a claim that you find most acceptable, whether for general or specific credit, and the reasons for your views.

Please could you consider the following questions in looking at the portfolios.

1. Would you consider the sample portfolios attached to be worthy of credit, either specific or general?
2. What are your reasons for saying this?
3. What are you looking for in a claim in your subject area?

Helen Peters,

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