



Transforming the Learning Experiences of Non-traditional Students: a perspective from higher education

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ABSTRACT *This paper presents a contextualised model of internal and external factors affecting student learning. It suggests that a two-way process of change and development is required if non-traditional entrants are to enjoy a successful experience of higher education. This process involves students, for whom HE is an alien environment, in negotiating a series of stages, or “transformations” regarding: their entitlement to participate in HE; their disposition towards the course; their approach to theory–practice; and their attitude to becoming a “professional”. For its part the university must accept that the implications of offering access to non-traditional students does not end, but rather begins, at the point of entry. This means providing sustained support to students throughout the course in relation to the external and internal factors that affect the learning process. It is suggested that our findings will provide some useful insights for an international audience in HE, and other formal learning situations, wishing to adopt more inclusive policies and will alert them to the problems and possibilities that this raises.*

Introduction

Concern about widening access in the United Kingdom has quickened considerably in the late 1990s, as the issue has progressed steadily up New Labour’s list of priorities for development in higher education. As we write, for the first time funding councils have released figures measuring the success of HE institutions in attracting students from low-participation neighbourhoods. This year they have also provided £18m to universities to provide extra support for students living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. With this clearer focus on dropout rates universities and colleges have been warned (*Guardian*, December 7, 1999) by government to improve their performance. Government policy appears to be ambiguous, however, since there is a clear correlation between increasing access to poorer students and higher dropout rates.

In this context our study is timely since it presents a contextualised model of internal and external factors affecting the student learning experience. Based on a case study, it suggests that a two-way process of change and development is required if non-traditional entrants are to enjoy a successful experience of higher education.

This process involves students in negotiating a series of attitudinal stages, or “transformations”. For providers it means:

... creating inclusive admissions policies and practices while making provision available ... at convenient times and places, with the support [for students] to be engaged successfully in completing the qualifications which they need ... to move ahead with ... careers ... and with their lives. (Peinovich, 1996, p. 63)

The main emphasis in the paper will be on the student learning experience. It is hoped that this will provide some useful insights for those in HE, and other formal learning situations, wishing to adopt more inclusive policies and alert them to the problems and possibilities raised.

The LAST Project

The paper derives from research into the Lothian Apprenticeship Scheme Trust (LAST), a special program set up in 1995 to enable academically unqualified activists from working-class communities, disabled people and minority ethnic groups, to gain the BA in Community Education. By enabling participants to work in their own communities and study part-time, the Scheme sought “to achieve equality of outcomes for people whose circumstances, geographic, physical or cultural, would not permit them to consider becoming professionally qualified” (LAST, 1995, p. 2). Because the participants were all working part-time in the community this reinforced their links with employment as well as education. They undertook much of their course in conjunction with the BA students who followed a more traditional full-time route, but they were also taught separately and were supported by two full-time tutors and an administrator appointed to the Scheme. These students studied on a 40-week-year basis, rather than the usual 30, so they had to deal with all the problems associated with accelerated degrees and intensive courses such as less time for reading and reflection, and stressful work-loads (see Grounds, 1996; Sims & Woodrow, 1996). Of the 18 working-class participants who started the program, including three disabled and three black students, none had the standard entry qualifications for the full-time course. By the end of the project all but three students had completed their degree. The apparent success of the project, however, should not be allowed to mask the fact that considerable difficulties were encountered along the way. These can usefully be discussed in terms of the difference between integrative and disjunctive learning experiences.

Integrative and Disjunctive Learning Experiences

The characteristics of non-participant adults in higher education in the UK are well rehearsed in the literature (McGivney, 1996; Dearing, 1997; Paterson, 1997). Whereas adult participants are often younger and with positive experiences of the formal system, non-participation correlates strongly with lower social class, disability and some forms of ethnicity. The fact that such students have tended not to

participate in HE has led to their being labelled as “alternative” or “non-traditional” entrants. Widening access should result in a noticeable increase in representatives from these groups, yet may not:

Unless such students represent a sizeable participating group, they tend to become invisible in the larger mass of undergraduates and there is little pressure on academics to change their teaching styles or on institutions to reorganize their provision. (Bown, 1988, p. 26)

The LAST experience shows that pedagogical and institutional change is necessary if such students are to become “visible”.

The basis for the argument is Caffarella and Merriam’s (1999, p. 63) statement that, “learning cannot be separated from the context in which it takes place”. Supporting students, therefore, means taking into account the context in which their learning occurs. For conventional students, passing through HE can be a relatively smooth, integrative process involving confirmation of what they already know and hold to be true. This is not to deny that such students have to work hard to gain their degrees! Jennings (1995, pp. 17–18) puts the point in the following way:

... Adults who have moved in and out of formal learning contexts throughout their lives, and who experience little discontinuity in the assumptions and expectations about learning operating across these various situations, can feel a sense of integration upon entry and in their overall experience of subsequent comparable learning environments. What they achieve in that situation is tied in with other kinds of influence within that context and within themselves ...

For non-traditional students, however, the passage is more likely to be characterised by uncertainty and the need to critically examine and change some of the underlying assumptions on which their lives have been built (see Mezirow, 1991). The case study suggests that for these students the difference between an integrative and a disjunctive experience of HE depends upon successfully negotiating a series of key attitudinal stages, which have their roots in aspects of the social context. It is argued that the student and the provider must work together to achieve the necessary change and development. As Tennant and Pogson (1995, p. 197) point out, “the nature, timing and processes of [adult learning] development will vary according to the experiences and opportunities of individuals and the circumstances in their lives”. This means that educators have an important role in supporting learners to integrate their learning experiences.

A particular issue for learners who bring life and work experience to their studies is how that experience can be used in an academic context. Whaley’s (1999, p. 5) comments about learning in HE provide a useful starting point for the analysis:

Most students need tutor guidance in understanding that experience itself is not sufficient in an academic course; it has to be embedded in “theory” and used in assignments with scholarly detachment and rigor. Course tutors face a delicate, dual challenge—to develop students’ self confidence

by accepting and valuing their experience and to develop students' understanding by encouraging them to venture beyond the "safety" of their own experience.

A central implication of this statement is the need for a shared understanding between educators and students which ensures that the difficulties encountered by the latter are acknowledged and addressed. Extensive mechanisms may be needed to support achievement. Yet this must be done without undermining the criteria for assessment set by the university. This type of approach may present a challenge to an academic mindset more accustomed to entry protocols based on high school leaving qualifications, full-time students and conventional methods of assessment. On the one hand, all students entering HE programs have to learn to understand, cope with, and also challenge such protocols and perceptions. On the other hand, however, universities must also accept that access to non-traditional students does not end at the point of entry; account needs to be taken of necessary changes in assessment, curriculum and student support. There is a need, in other words, to acknowledge with Caffarella and Merriam (1999, p. 65) that individual learning needs to be understood within an appreciation of how the context shapes learners, educators and the learning transaction itself.

Those "schooled" in informal learning situations, such as adult education classes, take direct proof and experience as the main sources of knowledge and may be opposed to the received opinions of authorities and tradition. The achievement of integration into the new situation of HE presents quite a different challenge for members of these groups. For the LAST students, integration came about to the extent that the new learning situation compensated for prior experiences of disjunction elsewhere. In part this necessitated the invalidation of previously held beliefs, ideas or meanings. In this way previous disjunctive experiences were reconsidered and used as a constructive starting point for learning. A critical factor here was the extent and nature of the support available to guide the learner through the sense of confusion and fragmentation generated by the HE experience. The message is that appropriate and sufficient support can enable non-traditional students to steer a path through the difficulties towards significant learning and change (see Fryer, 1997; Preece, Weatherhead & Woodrow, 1998). To tease this point out it is instructive to elaborate on the experience of the LAST students. Before turning to this, however, we provide an overview of our methodology.

Methodology

Documentation on the planning of the course, and on recruitment and selection procedures, was gathered, analysed and supplemented by informal interviews with community education workers, the project planning team, LAST staff, Trust members and applicants. The analysis of application forms and brief written accounts of their work in the community, provided information on socio-economic and personal characteristics, participants' roles in the community and their reasons for wishing to take part in the course. The data provided background information for this paper,

which also makes use of semi-structured, informal, individual and group interviews with the student group concerning prior educational and learning experiences and their on-course experience.

The 18 participants (6 males and 12 females, all from the Registrar General's classes 4 and 5) were interviewed, individually and in small groups, at the start of the course, and again after three months. The purpose was to ascertain their experience of, and attitudes to, education and their initial impressions of the course. The interviews were transcribed and analysed and this information was used to identify common themes. The salient themes that emerged from this analysis were: negative school experience and the repercussions of this; positive later learning experiences, which had resulted in change; and attitudes to higher education of the students, their families and the communities in which they were living. The whole group (except for one female who had withdrawn from the course on medical grounds) was interviewed after they had been on the course for 18 months, and again after two years, and the data analysed in the same way. The themes that emerged this time included: what motivated them to stay on the course; the role of their practical experience in a course that provided professional training as well as an academic qualification; and their changing attitudes to higher education and the resulting impact on their families and communities. Interviewees were provided with copies of the transcripts and encouraged to reflect on the issues that they had raised. Finally, individual interviews were held with ten of the students during their third year on the course that asked them to reflect back on their learning experiences during their course of study. These interviews were also transcribed and analysed. In the text hereafter interviewees are identified by their first name and some demographic data are provided. Their statements are used to illustrate our arguments after we discuss the centrality of experience for learning.

The Transformation of Experience in Learning and Teaching

Learning and teaching are often spoken about as if they were simply a function of subject expertise, skill and method. Salmon points to a more fundamental factor, however, in illustrating the extent to which learning is mediated by "personal stance":

How we *place ourselves*, within any learning context, whether formal or informal, is fundamental. This is not just a matter of "attitude", in so far as it defines our own engagement with the material; it represents the very stuff of learning itself ... how we position ourselves towards [each other] in any educational setting ... is what governs the limits and possibilities of our engagement together, what shapes and defines the material we construct out of that engagement. (1989, p. 231)

Weil (1993, p. 175) has also suggested that adults do not just bring their experience with them into education; they *are* their experience. But the answers to the real complexities and challenges of this idea do not lie simply in the provision in HE of tailored modular programs, access courses, and so on. They lie in much finer

nuances of expressing respect, concern and care for individuals, and in giving priority to the need for adults to build upon and make sense of their own and other's life worlds. Sense making has been seen by some educational theorists as the transformation of experience. Kolb (1993, p. 155), for example, defines learning as:

... a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. This definition emphasises several critical aspects of the learning process as viewed from the experiential perspective. First is the emphasis on the process of adaptation and learning as opposed to content or outcomes. Second is that knowledge is a transformation process, being continuously created and recreated, not as an independent entity to be acquired or transmitted. Third, learning transforms experience in both its objective and subjective forms. Finally, to understand learning, we must understand the nature of knowledge and vice versa.

While there is no simple relationship between experience and learning, making sense is always a learning process. Seen in this way, learning is an act of becoming critical, building upon and extending experience and in the process creating the new experiences that become part of what we know. This way of thinking about learning and experience can be usefully elaborated through a number of propositions that we have adapted and developed from Boud and Miller (1996, pp. 9–10). Each proposition has implications for the role of the educator.

All Experience is Shaped by Concrete Social Conditions

Each of us, though unique as individuals, are positioned within society according to hierarchies of power constructed around such factors as class, caste, race, gender, age and sexuality. In other words, social encounters in the lecture room are mediated within the parameters set by this broader social context. So the colour of a person's skin, for example, is not a neutral category (see Williams, P.J., 1997). It is imbued with different meanings in different contexts. A complete analysis of the learning experience of the LAST students would consider all of the factors mentioned but space precludes attempting such a complex task here. This proposition figures below in our analysis of the impact of poverty and cultural milieu on the learning experience of the LAST students. Educators need to be aware of, and responsive to, such realities.

Experience is the Foundation of, and Stimulus for, Learning

The effects of experience influence all learning—what learners are attracted towards, avoid and how they approach a task are all related to what has gone before. The previous experience of the LAST students, it is argued, left them with a clear sense that HE was “not for them”. The issue here can be described as one of *entitlement*. In such situations, educators have to be able to assist learners to make links between different kinds of experience and learning in different contexts.

Learning is Socially and Culturally Constructed

Learners construct their experience in the context of particular social settings, cultural values, and economic and political circumstances. As well as being the foundation for learning, experience also distorts, constrains and limits. One example of the limiting power of experience was manifested through the LAST students' negative attitude to aspects of the course in terms of content and process. The former was said to be too abstract and the latter too formal and didactic. The issue here, therefore, was one of *disposition* towards the course. It is not possible to step beyond the influence of context and culture although, as Brookfield (1987) argues, critical reflection on experience can expose some taken-for-granted assumptions. Educators can provide learners with options to extend and challenge dominant assumptions.

Learners Actively Construct Their Experience

Though each experience is influenced by the unique past of the learner as well as the current context, the meaning of experience is not given; it is subject to interpretation. The LAST students came from a social milieu where "theory" was equivalent to a set of instructions. Yet they had to come to terms with a course culture in which theory raised more questions than answers and where reflection was valued over a merely instrumental, "technical-rational" understanding of the role of theory in developing professional practice. The issue generated here was one of needing to appreciate a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between *theory* and *practice*. Where this occurs there is an important role for educators in challenging interpretations and offering alternative ways of viewing knowledge in order to help learners examine and re-construct their own meanings.

Learning is Influenced by the Socio-emotional Context in which It Occurs

Emotions and feelings are key pointers to possibilities for, and barriers to, learning. Denial of feelings is denial of learning since, through emotions, some of the tensions and contradictions between our own interests and those of the "other" manifest themselves. Some of the LAST students felt a powerful tension around becoming "academic" and "professional" since these attributes were considered undesirable in their own communities. The result was a narrow focus on obtaining the qualification as a proverbial "meal ticket". This, it was felt, would enable them to obtain decent salaries for work in their own communities that they, in their own eyes, were doing anyway. The issue here concerns what it means to be *professional*. The course invited students to consider that being professional is literally "a way of being" (Smith, 1994) involving commitment to certain principles, values and practices. In order to challenge deeply held, and emotionally charged, views, educators have a responsibility for establishing a micro-context (within any broader context) within which learners can investigate, disclose and construct meanings. The creation of such a space can provide a place where the expression and exploration of feelings and

emotions is legitimate, distorting influences on experience can be acknowledged and channels of communication with others are opened.

The Need for a Contextualised Model of Learning

Accepting the validity of the propositions entails a model of learning which contextualises the teaching and learning experience. Such a model is useful in describing the relationship between the range of enabling or disabling factors, from psychological to contextual, that affects student performance in a HE environment. This type of model avoids as Heany (1995, p. 149, quoted in Caffarella & Merriam, 1999) suggests, “a narrow focus on individual-in-the-head images of learning [that] separates learning from its social contents, both the social relations which are reproduced in us and the transformative consequences of our learning on society”. Setting the LAST students within a wider social context means that a broader range of factors, such as the influence of poverty, home, work, community, and the nature of their apprenticeship scheme, come into focus. Together with the impact of the course itself, these external factors have to a greater or lesser extent been formative in relation to the student’s self-determined progress. But it is important to appreciate that the relationship with social context is iterative rather than deterministic, since the students have been shaped by it but they have also wrought significant changes in their own environment. Where this has been deemed to be positive, as in the effects on immediate families of seeing the students studying for a degree (see below), this has fuelled the motivation of the students and added to their determination to succeed.

In reacting to and dealing with this context, the students have been confronted with four challenges which we have expressed in terms of entitlement, disposition, theory–practice, and becoming professional. In describing their negotiation of these challenges, we do not mean to infer that all had to proceed through the process in a linear, pre-ordained order, at the same rate or with the same level of engagement. Rather, each student engaged with them in an individually defined way, depending on the particular qualities of their previous and current experience, knowledge and understanding. It is useful to generalise to some extent, however, and it is justifiable to state that the challenges were triggered at certain points in the course:

1. Entitlement to participate in HE: at pre-entry and at the point of acceptance.
2. Disposition towards the course: around the end of the first year when they have had sufficient time in an academic setting to know what it is like.
3. Approach to theory–practice: during the third year when the curriculum focuses on re-theorising practice.
4. Attitude to gaining the professional qualification: towards the end of the course when the question of employment begins to press.

Successfully negotiating the stages means that the student moves beyond qualified status to a level where they actively pursue their own continuing professional development on the basis of a fundamental confidence. Achieving this level of development may involve a profound change in the conception of self and way of

being. When completed it provides the basis for a commitment to continuing professional development, which in turn is underpinned by a fundamental sense of self-confidence. The opposite also holds true, however, in that failure to pass through the stages means, even if they still obtain the degree, that the full potential of the learning process would not have been fulfilled. Students in this position would function at a barely adequate level and continue to have profound doubts about their capacity. This relationship between concrete social conditions and the internal, attitudinal struggles of the LAST students can now be discussed.

The Impact of Social Context

Although the majority of those who started the scheme have obtained their degrees, it has been a very close-run thing at times. In some ways the focus on progress through the stages underplays the extent of the burden placed upon staff and students alike. For these non-traditional students, surviving the requirements of an accelerated degree has demanded huge effort and sustained commitment over a long period of time. The financial difficulties alone have been an immense burden for those whose regular income was well below the poverty line. In addition, students reported that they had to confront negative attitudes towards their study from friends, parents and partners. Where these were supportive, however, for example when partners took increased responsibility for childcare, this was seen as a major boost. Those without this level of support carried an additional significant burden throughout their period of study. Finding time and space to study at home was also a major problem. The reaction of children and dependants was also crucial, especially when they felt that their parent had abandoned them in order to study. Some reported an increase in behaviour problems at school, which then put additional emotional strain on the student. The following quotes are illustrative of these issues:

In order to make ends meet I have to work outside of the apprenticeship scheme as well. I do residential care on a night shift-basis. This has a big impact on my family commitments. I can't always be there for them. Something has to give though, and it's often them. You don't even get a break in the holidays. That's when I work most of my hours. So there's no space to expand into to get the college work done. In other words, there's no time off! (Issy, female, 30s)

Combining being a single parent and the workplace element of being an apprentice is extremely difficult. I've got a sixteen-hour a week work commitment and my employer's demand every hour of it. It's a constant struggle between looking after the kids, work and studying. I sometimes have to do my college work from eleven at night till four thirty in the morning. Then I have a quick sleep, then breakfast, get the kid's to school and then off to work. That's what a day's like for me. It's hard but you've got to do it. (Jackie, female, late 20s)

The equal opportunities issues for providers are clear in such situations. In the words of one of the students themselves:

If you want people to succeed you have to make sure that the structures are in place for that to happen. That's across the board, whether you're men, women, parents, single, whatever, it has to be equal. It's not equal for adults that come in with responsibilities for families and children. There needs to be a little more flexibility within that, more resources, more support. (Stella, female, 30s)

Without such commitments to support, there is a serious moral question to be answered by those who would unthinkingly put students through such difficult situations.

As these students were also working, the number and pattern of hours worked was a crucial factor in their experience of learning. Some had shift work at inconvenient times. Working half time reduced the amount of time available for study and the pressures of work could also detract from commitment to the course. Where work was supportive, for example in granting extra time off or study leave, this was highly valued.

All the students welcomed the benefits of participating in the course through the LAST Scheme. This provided a central meeting place and well-resourced base within which to work. It was an important locus of emotional support where the students could gain reassurance from peers and LAST tutors, acceptance for their struggles and develop a collective sense of shared endeavour. In practical terms they received guidance and advice from the tutors, and had access to resources such as books, journals, computers, phones, photocopiers and kitchen facilities. The ethos of the scheme was supportive and this was translated into practical measures when, for example, money was made available to assist with childcare. Even with such levels of support, it was still a hard road to follow:

I think we became more protective about what we were going to achieve and we had to prove harder all the time that we were achieving it and that in a lot of cases it was harder for us because we were balancing so much. (Stella, female, 30s)

Nevertheless, all reported a significant positive impact on the educational aspirations of their children, from seeing the student engaging in, and completing, a degree program. The following quotes are typical:

It affected [my children's] attitude to school and their attitude to education as well. We had always tried to encourage them to see education as important but this made them think that it was much more important for them to have a good education. And to let them see that that if they didn't stick in well at school, then they would have to go back into education the way I did. (Patsy, female, 30s)

I've watched a change in the kids as my life has changed, from being a lone parent on benefits with pretty low self-esteem and that reflecting on my

children. All the way through this I've talked to my kids about what I'm aiming to achieve. Since doing this we've bought our own flat and that's the first time we've been stable since we left my marriage which was horrendous. Now the kids could see that this is my Mum's education that's achieving this. They were able to connect and to physically see the changes in their living standards. The two younger ones in particular talk about their education all the time. (Stella, female, 30s)

For the LAST students this is not only about personal achievement but also about carrying the banner for their community:

This was the biggest thing I've ever taken on and I wasn't going to allow myself to fail. Traditionally it didn't matter if I failed, but it really mattered here. It mattered in terms of LAST set out to achieve this and I had part responsibility for achieving it as well ... (Sandra, female, 40s)

The significance of this responsibility should not be underestimated, since it fuelled a powerful sense of motivation and commitment amongst the students. It must be set alongside the levels of support that they received from LAST, and the efforts of the tutors on the BA program, in enabling them to negotiate the four stages. It is to a discussion of the stages that we now turn.

Stage One—Entitlement

The *first stage* involved a crisis of “entitlement” that derived from the interplay between external experience and internalised feelings. The LAST students came from backgrounds where there had been negative experiences of formal schooling and little, if any, previous experience of HE. This was clearly evidenced in one student's experience:

I was expelled from secondary school when I was fourteen years old. I never really went back into the system after that. That was me finished with it. (Allan, male, 40s)

As documented extensively in the literature in relation to non-traditional students (McGivney, 1990, 1996; Woodrow, 1996; Williams, J., 1997), such experience can result in the feeling that, “no, HE is not for us”:

People from my area don't go to university, it's seen as just for the “wee swots”. But we're breaking the mold and that's scary. (Michelle, female, 30s)

The situation can be compounded by negative attitudes on the part of friends and partners to which reference has been made above. Deep-rooted feelings can therefore set up a significant psychological barrier to a student engaging fully and openly with a course in HE. In learning terms, the student's motivation to succeed needs to be turned into a “yes, this is for me” attitude. In part this was possible because

many of the LAST students had a deep-seated commitment to doing well, to showing that it could be done:

... I wanted to achieve it for people like myself. If the whole lot of us had gone through and failed then we wouldn't have achieved what LAST had set out to. But our success should open gates for people instead of slamming them shut. It proves it can be done. (Stella, female, 30s)

The evidence also shows that the positive effect also spread beyond the immediate family to friends and acquaintances in the community.

Stage Two—Disposition

Proving that it can be done was important for the *second stage* concerning the interplay between feeling and thinking. Here the issue was one of “disposition” whereby the “no, not for me” attitude can cast theory as academic “jargon” irrelevant to the “real” world as construed by the students themselves. Of course, the rejection of HE culture as elitist can be a principled position. The concern here is where the “against” position is born out of a prior and unquestioned assumption, and one, moreover, based ultimately on a negative perception of their own status in the social order. In learning terms, the students needed to turn “towards” the academic culture if they were to progress and to begin to use newly acquired information and concepts to better understand and redress social injustice.

The type and nature of the support that they received from the LAST Scheme was crucial in enabling the students to negotiate this stage. The students' appreciation of LAST is clear from the following:

I think one of the strengths was that most of the apprentices had quite a broad range of experience. Most of us were mature and so we had a support mechanism around the apprentices themselves and the LAST staff were really supportive and that includes the administrative staff as well as the tutors. We all came from similar backgrounds and we all supported one another. (Jan, female, 40s)

I think that the apprenticeship scheme is a wonderful thing and could be opened up to other courses for adult students to be supported in that way. For working class people who don't have the qualifications but who have the experience and knowledge of what they are doing, not just in community education, but in the sciences and arts too. (Sandra, female, 40s)

Stage Three—Theory and Practice

The *third stage* followed on from the previous two and concerned the relationship between theory and practice. Theory that is perceived as alien in its expression is unlikely to inform practice behaviour in any positive sense. This attitude is often compounded by a misconception common to working-class cultures, which casts theory as “technical” in nature. In other words (see Schön, 1983), theory is seen as

a set of instructions for the resolution of practice problems. Students often express disappointment with theory when it does not fulfil this latter expectation. The critical conceptual development required here is twofold. Firstly, it is to see theory's place in filling out the wider picture within which the specifics of practice occur. Secondly, it is to understand that whilst theoretical analysis initially renders practice situations more complex, it may also lead to an increase in the options available in any given situation. In this latter case, theory is not so much received as developed through the process of theorising. The thinking and reflecting process of the student in the practice situation comes to the fore, an understanding which is clearly apparent in the following statement:

The work I've done within the college, it has made a difference to the work that I do and the way I think about my work. It is about the way that you use theory. Before I was doing the practice but I didn't have the theory behind it so a lot of it was guesswork basically. Once you've ... looked at the theory it helps you to understand more. It has actually helped me to plan courses better, to have more structure to them and to understand my role a wee bit better within that. I think I see myself as more of an educator now ... (Allan, male, 40s)

All reported the educational advantages of being able to ground studies in working experience. As one student expressed it:

I think the biggest thing is that while you were at college and learning theoretical things, you were also going to work and doing practical work, getting experience and trying things out. There was a lot of contradiction, so sometimes that was kind of difficult to work with and to deal with but it was also really useful, rather than spending three years at college, learning all the theory and maybe doing a bit of placement. So although it was difficult to balance the two at times, I thought that it was good. (Joanne, female, late 20s)

Factors such as the quality of supervision at work, the nature of the student's role, the level of responsibility held, and the balance between voluntary and paid activity all had an important bearing on the learning experience. Some reported that their course-based learning was bringing them into conflict with colleagues, especially when they wanted to try out new ideas or offer a more theoretical analysis of situations. The LAST tutors were central in enabling the students to think their way through such issues as well as helping them to develop their ideas in response to the course assessments and its curriculum. One specific aspect of the course that the students valued was the assessment arrangements whereby failure in an assignment could be overtaken by two subsequent attempts to pass. Such practices were important given that many reported that coming to terms with the academic requirements was an immense struggle:

It's a real hard transition to go from leaving school at 15, a commercial college at 16 and then working and never having done anything else at all

to suddenly to be in a university degree course. Scary. (Sandra, female, 40s)

Some retained a distrust of the academic language and struggled to master it throughout the length of the course:

Instead of sitting for an hour and a half in lectures with someone babbling on at you, especially when they aren't relating it to any realistic circumstances, I think that smaller group discussions were better. They were more interesting to do, you got more information out of it, you had the opportunity to discuss something if you didn't quite understand. It's very academic and I'm sure that with most subjects at some point the tutors could bring in some real practical examples. The jargon is another language. (Jan, female, 40s)

Against this, however, evidence of assimilating the language and concepts can be seen in the numerous references that the students made to "seeing the big picture" and the high value that they placed on the capacity to do this:

I have an insight into being on both sides of the fence. I think that I can stand back and be analytical about things going on around me. I watch how local people respond to the approach workers make and I'm able to stand back and I think that's something that LAST has been really powerful in I can see it from both sides. I can honestly say that now I understand the structures and I understand why people are in the situations that they're in. It's given me a holistic approach to the way I work, and I think that's powerful. (Stella, female, 30s)

Coming to terms with a more sophisticated appreciation of the relationship between theory and practice was a prerequisite for moving through the next stage, when the question of future employment began to press.

Stage Four—Becoming Professional

Stage four presented itself as a disjunction between the requirements of the course and the starting expectation of the student. The student typically expressed the instrumental desire at the start of the course to "get the qualification". In this construction being a professional is more or less about having a qualification which permits entry to certain jobs:

I would always look at community workers and say, I could do that. But knowing fine that I can't because I've not got an educational background and go to university, and I didn't have the time to go through the process of gaining all these qualifications to allow me to access the course. I didn't have someone to look after the kids or money to employ someone to look after them well enough to chase this education anyway. So the fact that I've got all that from LAST, I'm confident now that I can at least go and apply

for these jobs. I know I can do the job, I've been doing it for three years, and I've got a lot of knowledge and experience. (Stella, female, 30s)

What the student needs to learn, and what follows from a successful resolution of the previous crisis, is that there is a distinction between having a qualification and being professional. *Being* professional means appreciating the big picture, gaining some "distance" from those being served, acting on the basis of principles, using theory, theorising, and arguing a case and exercising the authority inherent in a given role. This latter, as Smith (1994) notes, is more about a fundamental approach to work which needs to be incorporated and internalised into the way that someone is. But this was difficult for students coming from backgrounds with little or no tradition of professionalism. Some reported a lack of understanding of their situation from activists in the community with whom they had previously been associated. Some felt under pressure to keep up their former activities but could not do so because of their new commitments and also because of their changing role as educators. One student expressed this tension in the following way:

I was getting into trouble for being active in groups I believed in while being employed by others that were in the same boat fighting for funding. I was getting my hats all mixed up and I was getting into a lot of trouble. ... Local activists, people who had known me for years in other projects, were finding it difficult to accept me in the role of a worker. (Stella, female, 30s)

Whilst the ethos of the course was seen to be broadly supportive, some of them felt that insufficient account was taken of their personal and work experience:

I think that it's about having a respect for someone that does it in practice rather than just sits there telling you what it should be. If somebody sits there and tells you "this is what you should do" or "this is a radical perspective" you think "well you don't go out there and do it every day" and you kind of lose respect for someone. If it was more a case of "when I do it, these are the problems that I find and this is how I overcome them", it's getting the balance between being too theoretical but also about not telling people how to do the practice. So I think that someone that has a grasp, not just an understanding from reading about it from 20 years ago, must have relevant and recent experience of what they're teaching. (Allan, male, 40s)

Successful negotiation of the four stages, as the following quote shows, does more than provide the basis for an integrative learning experience in HE. It also lays the foundation for the reflective practitioner who then functions in a certain set of ways in the practice environment:

There's this thing about professionalism I suppose, but for me being a professional community education worker is about understanding why I'm there and the purpose of my job, being focused, understanding wider issues and also being aware of boundaries as well which I probably was less aware

of when I started, with me living in the area, being involved in the organization as a local person. So through the course I developed my own set of boundaries and professionalism in that way. (Joanne, female, late 20s)

The understanding that learning is an active and restless process is then shown in a commitment to continuing professional development:

I would like more experience. I'm actually thinking about doing more study, an OU course or something like that. I'd like to do social policy or politics. I've always fancied the idea of going into politics and I've been thinking about that for a couple of years, so there's a possibility that in 5 years time. (Patsy, female, 30s)

I think I'd like to do some more study, short courses on something specific, I'd like to specialize in something. (Joanne, female, late 20s)

Finally, the need to continue learning is not seen as a result of inadequacy but is borne out of a fundamental confidence in one's ability to face new situations successfully and out of the desire to continuously improve upon one's previous best. As was noted, for some students, the achievement of this position represented a fundamental change in self-conception:

I feel better about myself and that is really key for me. Coming from background where education was a non-starter for me, I've achieved something, I've succeeded. ... I basically know more about what I'm talking about and I know more about how to make things happen. In terms of being a worker I'm confident and capable. Before I knew that I'd skills and abilities and stuff but now I know that I can achieve things. It's made a difference. I'm not really worried about my future now. I can now compete with the rest of the professionals in this field for employment. (Stella, female, 30s)

Being a qualified person now has certainly changed some of the ways I work and let me see the other side of the argument. (Patsy, female, 30s)

I was also able to recognize some of the theory at work and it has aided my work, it has made me think further than the end of my nose. To think through thoroughly why I'm actually doing a piece of work and I can actually put a proposal in at work now and argue my case. (Jan, female, 40s)

Aspiration alone, however, cannot deliver such a final, integrative outcome, since sufficient resources and appropriate teaching methods have to underpin the "transformative" learning process.

Methods Supporting Integrative Learning Experiences

In this study, where integration was achieved, it was characterised by those concerned as feeling valued for who they were as people, and for their prior experience. Conditions associated with a sense of integration in connection with academic learning programs included: the active use and appreciation of different forms of knowledge (for example, experiential, tacit, practical); the making of connections across disciplinary boundaries; and a positive valuing and use of personal and social differences within a group. For those in this study, to experience learning situations characterised by such conditions went some way to repairing severely damaged confidence and self-esteem, and to compensate for previously negative experiences of education, formal or otherwise.

To counter the previous effects of such negative factors, LAST adopted proactive recruitment procedures to encourage applications from members of traditionally under-represented groups. The course structure allowed for part-time provision and their route was not tied to conventional term times, which meant that they were able to combine their studies with working in their communities. Finance has been made available through the Urban Program, a special government fund aimed at socio-economically disadvantaged communities, for travel, dependants' care, and disability support. The scheme had its own premises where the apprentices had access to a range of facilities including a substantial collection of course books and relevant journals. More generally, course policy and content reflects awareness of the needs of excluded groups, with much emphasis being placed, by LAST staff, on individual tuition and guidance. Assessment procedures were flexible and every encouragement was made for the "community" of students to provide mutual support and reinforce the positive aspects of a diverse student body. They were encouraged to identify positive learning experiences of all kinds. Even where their experience had been negative, the learning gained from reflecting upon this during the course was taken as a way of turning once-negative experiences into positive ones. In addition, the privileging of experience over qualifications enabled apprentices to recognise their own strengths. The involvement of participants' own communities in recruitment and continuing support also served to reduce the "otherness" of higher education.

More specifically in terms of teaching, we have found that non-traditional students need introductory level courses in order to learn to think sociologically, politically or critically, for example. They benefit from intensive practice and tutoring in writing, comprehension and basic study skills and from extensive verbal and written feedback on draft work by tutors, and from coaching as to how to improve work prior to submission. They favour interactive, rather than didactic, teaching styles, especially when coupled with opportunities to work collectively in small groups. Course materials that have not, in the initial stages, been set at an appropriate intellectual level, can seriously undermine their confidence, which badly affects future performance. In particular, texts that are inaccessible to all but the most able academically could set back, rather than enhance, intellectual development. At the same time, however, there needs to be an emphasis on critical thinking (see Brookfield, 1987) to open up and re-examine experience. In itself this can be

an emotionally challenging and threatening process; hence the need for a supportive course environment, especially in terms of the relationship with tutors.

As we have shown previously (Bamber & Tett, 1999), working supportively with non-traditional students is a teacher-intensive business. The requirement is significantly greater in terms of face-to-face contact with individual students, marking, personal tutoring and coaching. Their needs are greater and they need more personal attention to reflect upon the emotional baggage that we have referred to above. Given their lack of free time, course materials need to be plentiful and to hand. They have less time for research in the usual sense, which means that photocopied articles provided free and in timely fashion are of great benefit. In this respect, the fact that a number of apprentices needed, and were able to gain, paid educational leave indicates the levels of situational support required out-with the course. Access to a "home" base is extremely important for continuous contact with tutors and other apprentices. In addition, working alongside fieldwork staff and having work-based supervisors throughout the year, means that there is also another avenue of support open to the apprentices. Group support in the form of learning clusters, tutorial groups and encouragement to co-operate over the composition of assignments, is also beneficial.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has demonstrated the importance of not separating out learning from the context in which it takes place. We have shown that using experience for learning is not straightforward, but requires a two-way process of change and development on the part of both students and institutions. Students for whom HE is an alien environment need to negotiate a series of attitudinal transformations in order to build on and integrate their learning. For institutions this means providing sustained support to students throughout the course in relation to the external and internal factors that affect the learning process. For its part the university must accept that the implications of offering access to non-traditional students does not end, but rather begins, at the point of entry.

Our case study of the LAST project has demonstrated the difference between lofty aspirations and the harsh realities of the struggle to realise them. Students from non-traditional backgrounds are also struggling with adverse material circumstances and we have shown the impact of this on their ability to study. The LAST project, which was very well funded, sought to address this issue as well as providing support with learning and teaching. It can be argued that providing support at this level is justifiable but, given funding limitations, it is difficult to see this model being replicated on a wider scale. It should be obvious that if non-traditional students are to engage productively with HE then fundamental pedagogical and institutional change is necessary. But, given the current economic climate, we believe that this is unlikely except in small-scale projects like the one we have described. Nevertheless we feel that our findings will provide some useful insights for those in HE, and other formal learning situations, wishing to adopt more inclusive policies and will alert them to the problems and possibilities that this raises.

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