Learning and Working in Further Education in Wales: an overview and initial findings

MARTIN JEPHCOTE, JANE SALISBURY AND GARETH REES
Cardiff University

ABSTRACT

Much is expected of the further education sector and the teachers and students who work and learn in it. Little is known, however, about the work of teachers or students' experiences as learners. Drawing on a two-year in-depth qualitative study attention is drawn to how teachers cope in the face of what for them seems like endless change, and to students' accounts of their transitions into and experiences of further education and how, in turn, learning is embedded in their interactions and the wider social environment.

Background and overview

This paper reports the initial findings from the *Learning and Working in Further Education in Wales* project (2005–7). This was a Welsh Extension Project of the ESRC/Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), its initial conception was in reference to the Transforming Learning Cultures (TLC) in Further Education Project (2001–5). Our project differed significantly from that of the TLC in that it was smaller in scale and did not set out to develop the research capacity of those in FE involved in the project, but did and continues to involve them in finding locally useful ways of disseminating and acting on findings.

The *Learning and Working in Further Education in Wales* Project had a distinctive focus on the ways in which learning of all kinds is a product of the social interaction between learners and teachers, and the ways in which

03 Jephcote:Welsh Journal of Education 29/7/09 10:06 Page 19

learning is influenced by wider economic and social contexts as well as the influence of the policy frameworks through which FE in Wales is regulated.

The aims of the project were to provide a contemporary account of what it was like to be a teacher or a student in a college of further education (FE) and to track their 'learning journeys'. Its purpose was to improve our understanding of learning processes, and add to knowledge of the relationships between learners and teachers and to the sorts of learning outcomes these relationships gave rise to. It was particularly interested in the ways that learner identities were shaped by their wider social circumstances and, in turn, the professional practices displayed by teachers.

In this paper we draw attention to a number of themes that emerged from initial analysis of our data, pointing to the sorts of pressures that students and teachers were under and the ways they were resolved. Against the ongoing reform of FE, teachers were expected to play a key role in recruiting and retaining students and felt accountable for their performance. Students attended FE for a variety of motives, not always but often career related, and had high expectations in terms of achieving better economic futures as result of their participation. Often, these were contrasted with experiences of schooling. At the same time, many students experienced difficulties in their wider social lives that impacted on their abilities to participate. In turn, teachers adopted an ethic of care as means to resolve these tensions by privileging the needs and interests of the students. Classroom interactions and learning outcomes were, therefore, not rehearsed and routine, but negotiated: contingent on what the teachers and the students brought into the classroom and negotiated in the different sites where these interactions took place (Jephcote et al., 2008a; 2008b).

Methods

As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) pointed out, the 'situational constraints' of the research process shape the nature of the inquiry. The outcomes of initial and ongoing negotiations, and the willingness of managers, teachers and students all had an influence on the work done, the kind of data collected and the final results of the study. Our multi-method qualitative approach was based upon methods 'sensitive to the social context in which data are produced' (Mason, 2002). Working in three colleges across South Wales we identified subject areas so that we could sample both teachers and learners, ensuring that we kept within three research frames: full-time academic courses (mainly 16–19 year old A level students); full-time vocational courses

03 Jephcote:Welsh Journal of Education 29/7/09 10:06 Page 20

(mainly16–19 year olds and older returners to learning); and part-time vocational courses (mainly older learners). At each college we began with a sample of at least nine teachers and fifteen students and in the early months of the project 'filled gaps', especially in the cases of students who left. For each of the circa forty five students and for each of the circa twenty seven teachers this involved them in:

- an in-depth semi-structured interview at the start and end of the project;
- regular completion of structured learning journals;
- extensive first-hand observation of learning in a variety of settings including classrooms, open learning centres and workshops.

Additional groups of students reflecting the three research frames and the three colleges were drawn into nine separate focus groups at the mid-point and end of the project, that is, eighteen groups, comprising 131 students in total.

In the first interview the focus for students was on their social backgrounds, their previous educational experience and their aspirations with respect to their participation in FE. For staff, the interviews were concerned primarily with their entry to teaching and their previous professional experience, and with their views on the pedagogical strategies which they adopted. In the second, the student interviews emphasised their experiences of learning and what they felt to be the significant learning outcomes that had been achieved through the two years of their courses. Some were also able to provide information on what they expected to be the next stage in their lives. Interviews with staff focused on what they viewed as the successes and failures of their work with the students.

Both teachers and students were asked to complete learning journals at regular intervals over the two years of the study. These were designed to elicit data on the experiences of learning and teaching as these were being developed by participants. Each journal was based upon structured 'prompts', inviting individuals to reflect on particular aspects of their experiences. They were completed in a variety of forms, mainly written and posted text, many by e-mail, and a few in the form of pictures and photographs. Inevitably, there was substantial attrition as the study progressed. However, the overall completion rate is some 60 per cent, higher than we expected at the outset. In addition, a self-selected set of ten teachers provided extended autobiographical accounts of their professional and wider social lives.

Focus groups were undertaken towards the end of the first year of the

03 Jephcote:Welsh Journal of Education 29/7/09 10:06 Page 21

study; and again towards its end. They were designed to explore with a much larger group of students some of the issues arising from the semi-structured interviews and the learning journals, both as a means of 'testing' the validity of the data being generated and of producing new information.

Ethnographic-type observation amounting to some sixty five days was undertaken in classrooms, workshops and open learning centres, as well as the public spaces in the colleges such as refectories and vestibules. The focus here has been on the nature of social interaction in these settings; and, in particular, how teachers attempted to manage teaching and learning and the students' negotiation of their encounters with curriculum knowledge, the development of learning skills and assessment.

Results

It is recognized that the small scale of the study raises some questions about the generalizability of the findings. This is, of course, characteristic of most qualitative studies. We suggest, however, that the in-depth nature of the data produced provides significant insights into the social processes underpinning interaction in learning settings and the learning outcomes thereby generated, which have implications beyond the specific settings in which they were developed.

Information obtained was, of course, always conditioned by the social and physical contexts from which it arose with texts compiled through collaboration, and co-authorship with informants who responded to questions and the progressive focusing of researchers. Indeed, as stated in our original proposal, given the design of the research methods and the levels of interaction between the Project team, college managers and especially those teachers who took part, there was a real sense in which participants interacted and collaborated, not as passive objects of study, but as co-producers and consumers of evidence-based research.

Core teacher participants included full and part-time staff from vocational and academic curriculum areas whose ages ranged from mid-twenties to late fifties. Without exception, all of them have fascinating career histories, having joined the further education sector following other forms of employment. The core students were aged between seventeen and forty five years, attending full-time academic and vocational programmes or on part-time vocational courses and all but two were engaged in 'part-time' employment.

We have organized our initial key findings around the following themes.

03 Jephcote:Welsh Journal of Education 29/7/09 10:06 Page 22

Regulation and accountability

From the outset and throughout our contact with teachers, their accounts and our encounters with them were testimony to what seemed like having to cope with endless change (see Jephcote et al., 2008c). For example, at the level of the college, we found many teachers critical of local initiatives such as attempts to impose learning styles inventories and a requirement to take consequent action in classrooms. They were also critical of outside regulation and most perceived inspection, data gathering for audit and so as distracting them from what they saw as their core roles in teaching and supporting students.

We were told by teachers of the pressures they felt under to recruit and retain students and to ensure that they obtained good examination results. Consequently, college work was perceived to be 'driven by the numeric data' with middle managers having to regularly undertake 'curriculum area audits by subject'. Teachers felt strongly that 'grappling with the data prevents you from preparing for teaching'. Some teachers explained how they were compelled to 'break down the raw figures to show the truth' and better illustrate the 'if and when' of participation, completions and qualification patterns. Welsh funding regimes were viewed as punitive and the Estyn inspection framework as not best serving the diverse client groups within FE. Changes in the qualification framework and the embedding of the Welsh baccalaureate were but a few of the challenges listed by our teachers who expressed mixed feelings:

> The job is exciting – it doesn't stay still! On a five-year basis NVQ is overturned! The first Dips. [diplomas] are now back and we have turned full circle again. Never a dull moment in FE.
>
> (Engineering teacher)

> I love my work in the classroom. I love teaching my students, but I get very stressed out with paperwork – having to revamp, rewrite stuff. It seems like change for change's sake.
>
> (Social Care teacher)

Schooling and transitions into further education

Older learners presented diverse motivational accounts yet there was a strong sense at interviews of both full time and part time students seeing

03 Jephcote:Welsh Journal of Education 29/7/09 10:06 Page 23

their time in FE in a focused and purposeful way. Older and younger students claimed to be compensating for earlier, missed opportunities as a means to 'credentialize' but many saw other benefits such as increasing their confidence. Throughout the study and repeated in their final interviews, younger learners often pointed to the social dimension of being a student and it was common to claim that a main benefit was 'making new friends'. Without exception, all student accounts revealed a positive perception that studying at college could change and improve their lives. Across all campuses the belief in the transformative capacity of FE and the power of qualifications to enhance an individual's labour market position, increase earnings, raise standards of living and quality of life was widely held.

Prior experiences of schooling were often negative. Many students carried these with them into further education and used them to explain and justify their current dispositions to learning. Many teachers had themselves experienced chequered educational histories at school, were late developers and suggested that their own employment careers and late entry into the teaching profession made them powerful role models for their students.

Many teachers perceived further education to be the 'last chance saloon' much of its role being ameliorative, compensatory and vitally important (see Salisbury et al., 2008). Virtually all interviewees claimed that further education gave learners more time, and more individualized help, and that schools had failed large numbers of pupils because of their inability to tailor appropriately. Though there was some commendation of school by students, these voices were far fewer than the critical ones and were far less strongly expressed. Summarized simply: 'If they're friendly they give you more confidence' (F, College B, 1st Focus Group), and it was perceived that the 'adult' relationship extended to learning and teaching situations. As Helen, a 17-year-old AS level student at College C stated in her first interview: 'at college you are allowed to have like have your own opinion and as long as like you don't offend anyone else but, I much prefer college'.

Complex lives

We were struck by the complex lives that young and older students led, and their accounts and our observations continued to remind us that for them, being at college and following courses of study was only a part of their wider lives. This presented challenges to teachers and the need for them to display a wide range of support strategies. Even in our relatively small sample

03 Jephcote:Welsh Journal of Education 29/7/09 10:06 Page 24

of students we came across those who had experienced being in and out of prison, the birth and loss of a child, being thrown out of home, and living independently. In describing their school histories, current situations and aspirations some students disclosed rather private rationales for coming to college and revealed difficulties in their off-campus lives:

> Why am I here? I'm here to show my mother's boyfriend that he has got me wrong!
> (Howard R, 17)

> I want to show my family that I can turn out okay. My Mum especially … They have all been so behind me and getting pregnant in school caused them such a lot of stress – especially my Mum. I want to prove myself and show her …
> (Emma J. 17)

Our principal field researcher came across numerous incidents that directly impacted on day-to-day college life and the learning that went on, including cases of student fatality, and an instance of physical assault in the classroom. On a more routine basis there were numerous interruptions from mobile telephones and texts relaying for example, the heart attack of a student's mother, the news of an absent classmate's positive pregnancy test. Details of students' wider lives thus came into the classroom with them. In turn, teachers were acutely aware of both the need to strive for improving students' results and to cater for and scaffold the wider realities of their learners' lives. Students routinely confided in their teachers who, in turn, accepted this as part of their job, by providing help, giving advice, sometimes contacting the counselling service.

As revealed in focus group interviews, numerous young 'full-time' students worked up to 44 hours a week in 'part-time' jobs. For some this was to fund their independent living enabling them to be a student. For others, who lived at home, this gave them an enviable disposable income. In turn, we detected on the part of some of our students a contradiction between their accounts of being a student and their aspirations. Coming to college was seen by most learners as important but only a part of their lives, and as life became more complex and demanding, it was often 'learning' that was pushed aside. Students adopted a range of coping strategies, many looking to contain their studies within the timeframe of the college day so that at other times they could attend to other matters in their lives. Many younger students openly told us in their learning journals that they did little or no study out of college time and teachers maintained that younger students struggled to balance study against wider social lives. This all pointed to something of a gap between their ongoing rhetoric, evident in initial and

03 Jephcote:Welsh Journal of Education 29/7/09 10:06 Page 25

final interviews, justifying their being at college and the reality of what they themselves did to fulfil their own expectations. Older full and part-time students seemed to be much more driven, especially when on courses related to gaining job related qualifications. Those on day release from employers, however, were much more of a mixed bunch and described their approach to college course work as 'doing just enough, just in time!'

An ethic of care

From all our data, and especially from observation, we have been drawn to the ways in which being in post-compulsory education and training contributed to much more than the acquisition of qualifications. As expressed in Charlotte's biographical account:

> FE, to me, is about a second chance … I tend to teach school leavers who have failed or been failed by the school system or adults returning to education … both are rewarding to teach because you know that you are changing their lives. There should be recognition of the work that FE does and how professional the staff are … I think a lot of my friends outside of work would be surprised by the level of emotional baggage we all deal with on a day to day basis.
>
> (Charlotte Anning, Key Skills teacher, College C)

When we asked teachers to describe and justify their classroom strategies it was common instead to talk about the pressures of work, impending inspections and the changing nature of the job. Quite strikingly, in an interview with a mid career teacher she told us that she had in fact never discussed learning in a sustained way with anyone before. It was not a topic of staffroom conversation. Here, was the chance to talk with colleagues about impending student issues, coursework deadlines, internal and external verification and the occasional stolen moment to exchange something about their own personal lives.

Whereas the need for students to obtain accredited qualifications drove much of the learning and teaching, the majority of teachers and many students attached importance to other benefits. Moreover, even though teachers felt under enormous pressure from managers and outside agencies, they privileged the needs and interests of learners, thus adopting an ethic of care. Commending her art teacher, one student stated:

> Elaine is always able to see me, even if she can't see me then, she'll always give me a time slot to pop back later.
>
> (Focus group, AS graphics student)

03 Jephcote:Welsh Journal of Education 29/7/09 10:06 Page 26

From what they did tell us and from observation, it was evident that the majority of our teachers recognized that formal learning outcomes like qualifications and securing a job were important, but equally important were things like promoting the enjoyment of a subject. Born out of their own studies or vocational experience many teachers were passionate about the subject they taught and they wanted their students to share it. Some subject teachers, such as media and business, thought that their subject offered a good preparation for life by developing students' critical thinking skills. Many teachers directly or indirectly alluded to the benefits gained from group work, class discussions and problem solving. In this vein, some described the teaching and learning strategies in which they strived for active learner engagement and judged the success of a lesson in terms of how much students joined in discussion or in activities. A number of our teachers reported that a main aim was to promote enjoyment in their classrooms and they wanted the learning experience to be fun.

Privileging the needs of students was not without cost. The majority of teachers worked well beyond timetabled hours, employed one-to-one teaching strategies and accepted numerous drafts of coursework. They invested heavily in 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) as a form of coping strategy to deal with the pressures they faced from college managers and especially from challenging learners (see Salisbury, forthcoming). Often they had to adopt strategies to defuse difficult classroom situations where they displayed tolerance or feigned amusement providing further evidence of the complex relationship between teaching and caring.

Concluding remarks

Our data confirm that the learning journeys that students embarked on had their own antecedents rooted in disparate experiences of schooling and, that at relatively young ages, learners led and managed complex private lives. Whereas some students explained their lack of academic progress at college in terms of the pressures in their wider lives, others with more 'successful' trajectories used this to explain their determination to succeed. We witnessed 'elements of unpredictability, susceptibility to external pressures and resulting tension' (Jephcote et al., 2008c) underpinning a sense of the fragility of learners' and teachers' (professional) identities. Thus, it is argued that the conditions under which individuals participate in FE are central to the determination of learning processes and, to some extent, learning outcomes.

03 Jephcote:Welsh Journal of Education 29/7/09 10:06 Page 27

Learning is embedded in the interactions between students, teachers and the wider social environment and in the ways in which individuals form meanings as an outcome of these interactions and how subsequent thought and actions are rehearsed and modified in light of these interactions. Thus, in our research design, which lent towards symbolic interactionism, it was necessary to go beyond the interview and witness the everyday lives of the participants, in everyday learning settings. Learning was, in part, therefore, a product of the social interactions of learners and teachers, shaped, facilitated and constrained by what learners and teachers bring to this interaction and by the nature of the interaction. Thus, prior knowledge and prior experiences of learning and teaching, together with wider life-experiences 'collide' in ways which, at the time, are unique and individual. Our research strongly points to the ways in which learners and teachers resolved the challenges caused by this collision and, in turn, to a wider definition of learning outcomes. What we witnessed, especially from our first hand observation, was the ways in which learning was, in effect, negotiated. For teachers, the competing pressures they faced were reconciled by a renewed emphasis on an ethic of care and an essentially moral commitment to their role in attempting to ameliorate the social disadvantages experienced by many students. In relation to this, we were reminded of the work of Pollard (1982; 1985) and his depiction of the coping strategies teachers deployed. But for us, classroom interactions are fundamentally much more than coping, and point more directly to the proactive role of students in constructing what refer to as 'negotiated regimes of learning'.

Of course, ultimately, the potential of the further education sector and further education teachers to make a difference to an individual's learner identity and life chances is limited by broader factors. Without the collectivized power of either the school or higher education sectors, further education is constantly pushed and pulled, operating in a deficit model, having to compensate for the failings of the economy and meet perceived skills gaps. Operating as 'generic modes', whose origin is often the result of government policy and programmes (such as the Technical Vocational Education Initiative of the 1980s or the General National Vocational Qualification of the 1990s) they are directed towards wider life, work and the economy. Based on a model of performance, they offer 'trainability', where 'flexible labour' is seen to have 'the ability to respond effectively to concurrent, subsequent, intermittent pedagogies' capable of being 'formed and reformed according to technological, organizational and market contingencies' (Bernstein, 1996: 73). This identity is the interface between

03 Jephcote:Welsh Journal of Education 29/7/09 10:06 Page 28

individual careers and the social or collective base, arising 'out of a particular social order, through relations which the identity enters into with other identities of reciprocal recognition, support, mutual legitimization and finally through a negotiated collective purpose' (p. 73).

Acknowledgments

1. We are grateful to the college principals who allowed us to undertake this research and to the students and staff who shared their lives with us.
2. This research was funded by the Economic Social Research Council as part of its wider Teaching and Learning Research Programme (see *www.tlrp.org*)
3. John Roberts, University of Wales, Newport, was a member of the research team.

References

Bernstein, B. (1996). *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique*, London, Taylor and Francis.

Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (2000) (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.

Hochschild, A. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling,* Berkley, CA, University of California Press.

Jephcote, M., Salisbury, J. and Rees, G. (2008a). 'Inside Further Education: the social context of learning', *Teaching and Learning Research Briefing no. 52,* at: *http://www.tlrp.org/pub/documents/JephcoteRB52final.pdf.*

Jephcote, M. Salisbury, J. (2008b). 'The Wider Social Context of Learning: beyond the classroom door', *International Journal of Learning*, 15, 6, 281–8.

Jephcote, M., Salisbury, J. and Rees, G. (2008c). 'Being a teacher in Further Education in changing times', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 13, 2, 163–71.

Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative Researching* (second edition), London, Sage.

Pollard, A. (1982). 'A Model of classroom coping strategies', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 13, 1, 19–37.

Pollard, A. (1985). *The Social World of the Primary School*, Eastbourne, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Salisbury, J. and Jephcote, M. (2008). 'Initial encounters of an FE kind', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 13, 2, 149–62.

Salisbury, J., Jephcote, M. and Roberts, J. (forthcoming). 'FE Teachers Talking About Learning', *Research Papers in Education*.