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Adult change and development: learning and people's lives

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that adult learners are seeking some form of *change* in their lives or that *change* has provoked them to engage in learning. The lives of adults affect how, what, why and when they learn, and at the same time their lives are affected by the learning process. There is a great diversity in the nature of these changes and interactions. Some students are seeking to enhance their chances of promotion or of gaining employment or a change of career; some are seeking to broaden their minds; others feel that they have been unfairly judged by the educational system in the past, and want to prove to themselves that they are capable of academic study. They want to overcome the feeling of 'rejection' by the employment-educational system. Some students are taking up learning again after redundancy or some other personal crisis. Being an adult learner is thus inextricably linked with human *change*. Studying involves more than the understanding of bodies of knowledge and the development of skills; however, change and development from the learner's perspectives are poorly understood, and relatively little research has attempted to explore these issues of human *change*.

This paper describes current research which sets out to explore the outcomes of learning and the way students change and develop, when the experience of learning is viewed from the learner's perspective. The outcomes of learning can be conceptualised under three closely related levels of change: changes in conceptual understandings, changes in study patterns and skill in learning, and adult change and development - change in a social context. The present research focuses on the broader issues of adult change and development and the interactions of learning with people's lives.

The aim of this research is to contribute to the development of a holistic understanding of student learning in a social context. The work builds on other studies of student learning in the Open University (Gibbs, *et al.*, 1984, Beaty and Morgan, 1992) and follows in the Tradition of qualitative-illuminative research in students of learning, as elaborated by Parlett and Hamilton, (1977). There is a range of researchers stressing how the human and cultural dimensions are crucial if we are to gain a complete understanding of learning, (e.g. Saljo, 1991).

In a similar way Bruner (1990) is critical of the boundaries which define much of psychology, and sets out a cultural psychology which emphasises the nature and cultural shaping of meaning-making. He stresses the power of humans to reflect on experience in a social and cultural

context; although they are constrained by a structure and history which is not of their own making, they are reciprocally human agents within this structure.

In terms of improving student learning, and the relationship between research and practice, the need is to generate rich descriptions of the experience of learning, which provide a 'recognisable reality' as a basis for critical reflection as the starting point for *change* in practice.

The present research sets out to look at the wider issues of *human change* and the interactions of learning with people's lives. The diversity in 'how students come to be engaged in study' has been termed 'orientation to education' (Taylor, 1983) - a sort of holistic motivation which acknowledges learners' conscious control over their study - a personal context of study, (Gibbs, *et al.*, 1984).

For many students there are other changes which come about from the interactions of studying with their lives as adults. Some of these changes may be unanticipated, such as the realisation of the limitation of a current job, the shortcomings of a peer group of friends or the constraints of a relationship. Similarly, as the student population of conventional universities is changing with efforts to widen access and to increase the participation of mature students as well as part-time students, we need to take a fuller account of the interactions of studying and learning with people's lives. With this premise that *change* is a fundamental aspect of learning, it is important that research and evaluation studies of student learning are designed to explore the nature of these changes.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As soon as we look at the realities of adults learning in context, a wide range of theoretical perspectives can be drawn upon to contribute to data analysis.

The current research develops from a longitudinal study of student learning (Beatty and Morgan, 1992), which identified the key issues of confidence, competence and control, as the crucial dimensions for how students developed as learners. Besides the changes described by the longitudinal studies of Perry (1970), other aspects of learning and change were identified. A further analysis of some of the data identified a sixth conception of learning, 'changing as a person', which extends the framework of five conceptions of learning, described by Saljo (1982).

The notion of 'changing as a person' can be seen as the point of departure for the present research. The aim is to extend this earlier work by looking at the contextual nature of 'changing as a person' and what this means to the way students tackle their work and the interactions with their lives as adults. The research can relate the concept of 'orientation to education', a sort of 'a holistic motivation' (Taylor, 1983), to the more detailed processes of approach to study, and with broader issues of the interactions of studying with adult's' lives. The work of Mezirow (1981) on adult learning and perspective transformation also contributes to the theoretical background. Finally, ideas from social theory and the relationship of structure and agency (Giddens, 1984) provide theoretical insights for understanding students' experiences of learning in the broader social and economic context.

METHODOLOGY

Twenty-eight students studying a Foundation Course (Social Sciences or Technology), in their first year of OU study in 1990, were asked, in individual interviews, how they came to be studying, what they hoped to gain from study, how it interacted with their lives and how they tackled their studies and coped with the demands of the course. (The sample was drawn from one Region; the students would not have gained entry to a conventional university based on their formal qualifications.) Students are also being interviewed again during 1993-94 about their experiences with the OU, so as to generate a series of case studies.

EMERGING THEMES AND ISSUES

A preliminary analysis of the first phase of interviews has identified key themes of confidence and self-esteem; an awareness of self in society, a move towards 'empowerment'; and change in relation to social and domestic context. Although these changes are described separately, they are closely interrelated. Many of these changes appear to be particularly important for the experience of women students.

Confidence and self-esteem

From an analysis of the interviews, gains in confidence and self-esteem stand out as a substantial dimension of experience of being a student. The following case will serve to illustrate this issue.

Pat had left school at eighteen with two pass grade A-levels, then worked in various clerical jobs. She had married and had a family, although as she explained 'always had at the back of her mind to get a degree sometime', and now ten years later, she was studying the Technology Foundation course. She described how she came to be engaged in OU study, as improving her chances of getting work at some time in the future, building on her interest to use computers and on her best school subject, mathematics.

The broader gains of confidence stand out as significant for this student beyond the subject matter understanding which is formally covered through the assessment system, as she explained:

'I've done quite well really on this course - it has boosted my confidence ... Most of the things you do as a housewife and doing a bit of part-time work at home, you don't get any feedback - and people don't really notice you ... Summer school was good in the respect that having done something on my own, which I haven't done before ... I haven't been anywhere on my own before for a week. I was very homesick for my husband for the first few days, but once I got over that, I really enjoyed it. I had the chance to be me and not mother or wife. And managing to hold your own for a week and get on quite well does boost your confidence a bit - and having conversations about other things than children.'

This sort of experience of 'seeing themselves differently' is similar to the findings in other studies with OU students, (Taylor, *et al.*, 1982).

Change of awareness

Another dimension of the interaction of study with people's lives is the way a course structured around contemporary issues in technology can relate to an individual student's life and work experience and thus contribute to change. One of the technology students, John, made reference in the interview to the 'issue focused' curriculum and how it initiated further reflections for him.

"I found the issues approach in the course very relevant to life - it did make me consider all aspects of life really. In the block on 'health', it made me consider how you relate to doctors and nurses, but also other ways of tackling problems ... I look at things completely differently now.'

John had worked for News International at Wapping and the events in 1986 began his politicisation. He described how he had changed, as follows:

'Until 1986 I virtually believed what was in the papers and on TV, until I saw the mismatch at Wapping and what was reported. I can relate that now to every other news item and the half-truths... think OU study has reinforced and developed this ...

I have become more political - an awareness of how individuals and groups are used and I suppose manipulated... everybody should have the opportunity to see the issues from a more critical "OU angle."

John had left school at the first opportunity. At his school, there was no expectation that people would continue to study and as explained 'he just wanted to get out'. So he ended up in the printing industry in the 1970s as an apprentice. He did some further education study and gained a City and Guilds qualification in printing, but did not pursue his education any further.

'I found technical college difficult and could not see the point in studying. Now I can see it as beneficial, whereas previously I could not ... I can see it now as .my big regret... The schools were not very good in the area, and I didn't see the importance of further education.'

In fact it was a period of unemployment that had convinced him of the need to have further qualifications and this had led him to enrol with the OU.

The broader gains and interactions from study are often more significant than the material actually studied to meet the formal requirement of the course. It is also interesting how this student made specific reference to the 'issues focused' curriculum design, as important for him to engage in and consolidate this *change of* awareness. These changes can be understood as 'empowerment' in the sense of a 'perspective transformation' as described by Mezirow (1981) and the ideas of empowerment by Freire of how adults come to see the structural inequalities in society and how individuals (and groups) as human agents can work to challenge such domination in society.

Studying and the social context

One of the major themes which comes out from the interviews is the way OU study interacts with people's social and domestic lives. Many students do not perceive themselves as 'students'; rather

they are adults with busy lives and fitting in part-time study is just one relatively small part of that life.

The impact and response from partners, wives and husbands, and the support, or lack of it, is crucial for many students. As teachers and course designers, we sometimes ignore the realities of students' wider social contexts and assume that they have ideal settings in which to pursue their studies. This is far from reality for many students. For some students, to be engaged in studying was almost like a clandestine relationship; their studying had to be concealed from their partners and almost carried out in secret, (Holly and Morgan, 1993).

For some of the women students, the way they described their experiences of study and their relationships with husbands can be seen as influenced by historical factors which shape the social structures of how they are subordinated. The cases of three women stand out clearly within this perspective. Their studying can be described as 'education without consent'.

These students were from working-class backgrounds, with little expectation or encouragement to go into higher education. Although they studied A-levels none of them gained sufficient grades for university entrance. There was also a peer group pressure on them to leave school (and education) when their friends were out working, with an income.

In terms of orientation to education, these students can be seen as having mainly 'personal intrinsic orientations' - a general desire to return to study to broaden and enhance their lives. One student saw the changes in her own son, who was at university, and she wanted to do the same thing. Another had started an A-level evening class, abandoned that, then applied to the OU.

The way these women students described their study patterns provides powerful insights into their social contexts. They worked on their OU course during the daytime when their husbands were out at work and in the evenings only if they were out.

'If he is here, we sit and watch TV or whatever together. I'd rather not leave him on his own and go and study... but if he is out, then I'll work in the evenings. He said he would be supportive, but he hasn't taken over anything on the domestic side ... and I don't feel inclined to ask him if I can fit it all in.'

It seems that some women students experience a 'double day', as they return to study with the OU combined with their domestic roles. Besides all the traditional expectations of gender roles, study has to be fitted in around these domestic labours. With the lack of support from husbands, these students chose to study in the daytime, or in various ways which conceals their study from their partners. This is vividly portrayed by the student who concealed her books inside women's magazines, when she was notionally watching television.

It would appear that for some women students, to be engaged in OU study is perceived as a threat by their husbands. Studying is seen as changing the identity of the partner from being subservient and domesticated. There is apparently a choice between a relationship with the husband and the intellectual development available through study. Some women students have to contend with study under constraints of this nature.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has identified some of the realities of the experiences of studying in the OU. The aim is to generate rich descriptions of people's lives and the way these interact with study, and to theorise the various forms of human change. So how can this sort of research contribute to improving practice and improving learning? In looking at the relationship between research and practice, it is important to recognise the limits to what Schon (1983) calls a 'technical rationality' for understanding how professionals operate in practice. In contrast, he identifies 'reflection in action', as the basis for understanding professional practice. Research which serves to describe students' realities of studying can provide the basis to theorise practice and subsequently change our practice, (Morgan, 1993). Case study research generates a 'recognisable reality' of students learning as a foundation for theorising practice. In terms of improving student learning, i.e. to foster a 'deep approach' to learning (Marton and Saljo, 1976), we need models of learners which mirror their realities and experiences of studying and change.

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