Exploring Transformative Journeys through a Higher Education Programme in a Further Education College

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Abstract

Since the 1960s, there has been a sustained policy commitment to widen participation to social groups previously under-represented in further and higher education (Thompson, 2000; Burke, 2012). Widening participation has encouraged students to return who are poorly prepared for the intellectual challenges of post-compulsory education (Leatherwood, 2005; Burton and Golding Lloyd et al, 2011). Some research has concluded that post-compulsory education has been dumbed down to accommodate ill-prepared students (Haggis, 2006; Coffield, 2010). This research interrogates these analyses in the context of Higher Education in Further Education (HE in FE). The research investigates if HE in FE can be a catalyst for significant social, emotional, and intellectual growth in students – if students can be transformed by the experience of education (Mezirow, 1978a, 1991; Cranton, 2006).

Within both a critical and a phenomenological research paradigm, twelve non-traditional graduates from a full-time BA programme at an HE and FE College in Scotland were interviewed; as were the BA programme leader and a module teacher. The graduates also produced reflections of their experiences of HE in FE. The research sought to determine if graduates from HE in FE can experience significant social, emotional, and intellectual growth as a result of participation; what teaching and learning settings make this possible, and can graduates be transformed by the experience of HE in FE?
The findings of the research indicate that the participants, to varying degrees, all experienced some significant shift in attributes such as confidence, independence and willingness to try new things. How they experience, conceptualise and participate in their social worlds has become more discriminating. I conclude by proposing that higher education programmes, facilitated in further and higher education colleges, can have the potential to provide transformative experiences for students who participate. It has been a transformative experience for the participants in this research.

**Key Terms**

non-traditional students; widening participation; higher education in further education (HE in FE); meaningful teaching and learning; student motivation; teacher-student relationships; transformative teaching and learning; collaborative group learning; transforming participants
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Dedications

My candidacy for this doctoral degree would have made one particular gentleman extremely proud. I would like to dedicate this achievement to my Father. You continue to touch our lives Dad. I would also like to add a dedication to my late colleague, Eric Cochrane, recently passed. When I first returned to FE, it was Eric’s inspiration and encouragement that set me on what would become my own transformative journey.
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Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

This research thesis presents the findings of a study undertaken with graduates of a full-time academic Bachelor of Arts (BA) programme, facilitated in a Scottish Further and Higher Education College (hereafter HE in FE). My research proposes that a) studying HE in FE can be the genesis of a process of significant social, emotional, and intellectual growth, and b) that participation has the potential to transform the lives of all HE in FE students (Mezirow, 2000; Cranton, 2006). This chapter first describes my thinking behind the study, why I determined that the study was needed, and why the study should make a contribution to teaching and learning in HE in FE. Second, I consider some of my own experiences and observations, which have inspired the study. Third, I explain my research approach and how I manage potential issues stemming from my role as an insider in the research context. Fourth, I will describe the research sample before defining the research focus, expressed in the research questions. The research questions emerged from my own practice, in juxtaposition with a review of the extant empirical and theoretical literature.

Higher Education in Further Education

I define HE in FE as higher education that is facilitated in Further, or Further and Higher Education Colleges. When higher education is facilitated at FE or FE and HE colleges, it is assessed at a level nominally consistent with the university equivalent. For example Higher National Certificates, Higher National Diplomas and Bachelor of Arts programmes, facilitated in college should represent the first, second, and third levels of an undergraduate degree facilitated in a university. The respective levels should be equivalent in quality and rigour whether facilitated in college or university (Barr and Tagg, 1995; Dearing, 1996; Stanton, 2009). However, observations through my own professional lens convince me that HE in FE lacks depth and quality. I have been persuaded for
many years that participation in HE in FE could, and should, be a much deeper and more meaningful experience.

Nonetheless, I sincerely believe that if facilitated in a way that is both challenging and inspiring, HE in FE can be a transformative experience for students. Transformative or transformational teaching and learning has been defined in myriad ways. I will explore definitions of transformative teaching and learning further in the literature review and indeed throughout this thesis. Most definitions agree however that transformative teaching is any teaching that encourages students to participate in rich critical dialogue, with self, teachers and other students, in a way that challenges their ways of understanding the world and their place in it – their worldview (Cranton, 2006). Most definitions also agree that the student transformed by participation in education will experience; a) a shift in basic premises of thought; b) a shift in feelings; c) a shift in actions; d) a shift in consciousness, and e) an altered way of being in the world (Hoggan, 2015, p. 64; Cranton, 2006).

Participation in HE in FE can alert the student to the prospect of previous beliefs, attitudes and assumptions being faulty, inauthentic and invalid (Cranton, 2006). Faulty beliefs, attitudes and assumptions can however be identified and replaced with others that are more discriminating, more accurate and more trustworthy (Mezirow, 2000). As a consequence, students can then experience real social, emotional and intellectual growth (Mezirow, 1991). Their worldview can change profoundly (Hoggan, 2015, p. 65). It is unlikely this will happen in the absence of a spirit of discovery approach to teaching and learning. An assessment-driven, utilitarian approach, it is argued, is what is characteristic of HE in FE (Hultberg and Plos, 2008; Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009; Feather, 2010). This approach will unlikely be transformative argues Freire (1970, 2010). To position myself in the research context, and to share my own experiences of these contentions, I now consider some of my own experiences and observations.
About the Author

I returned to HE in FE following redundancy from a 15-year career in heavy industry. Typical of many students I now teach, I aspired only to a qualification to support a return to the workplace. Because of encouragement from enthusiastic HE in FE teachers however, I quickly became a very passionate and committed student. When as a post-graduate student I was introduced to the work of Jack Mezirow and associates, I came to realise that in Mezirow’s conceptual taxonomy, I had experienced a transformation. I had become more critically reflective; more discriminating - my whole self-concept and worldview had changed (Cranton, 2006).

I returned to my local college in 2001, this time as a teacher. Notwithstanding the extremely rewarding aspects of my teaching career, it has been characterised by frustration and tension, rooted in my experiences of a learning milieu where too few students appear to genuinely want to learn. Some classrooms can become sites of conflict where what is now euphemistically termed ‘challenging behaviour’, significantly impacts on my ability to facilitate quality teaching and learning (Coffield, 2008, p. 38). Behavioural issues including, for example, turning up late for classes, the use of mobile phones in class inter alia, dominate my interactions with students and can have a negative impact on time spent supporting other students, who genuinely do want to learn. Enthusiastic students, inspired to participate in a meaningful way can leave HE in FE prematurely, citing as the reason for their departure, the behaviours of other students, who appear to have little interest in learning. A study of further education colleges in the north and south of England concluded that the disruption of learning by unresponsive students was a recurring theme, therefore not unique to my own experiences (Coffield, 2010; cf. David, 2004).
Non Traditional Students

I refer to the participants in this study as non-traditional students (Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011). Non-traditional students tend to be over the average age of more traditional students (Wainwright and Marandet, 2010). They return to HE in FE following an often lengthy hiatus (Reay, 2003). They tend to come from, and identify with, working-class backgrounds (Reay and Crozier et al, 2010). They tend to choose colleges rather than universities as a site of learning (Munro, 2011). Non-traditional students also tend to have competing responsibilities such as jobs, children and often sick or elderly parents to care for. Juggling these responsibilities can have an adverse impact on the learning experience of non-traditional students (Cappleman-Morgan, 2005; Burke, 2012).

Despite a negative connotation and some disagreeable inferences, non-traditional student is a useful construct (Merrill, 1996). It contrasts the different learning experiences of non-traditional students, when compared to traditional students, for whom the intellectual and social experience of learning tends to occur immediately following compulsory education (Burke, 2012), and is more extensively centred on a university campus (Munro, 2011). Traditional students may have the benefit of a number of Highers. In Scotland, Highers are achieved, usually but not exclusively as part of compulsory schooling, by doing well in relatively demanding examinations or other forms of assessment. Highers have real academic currency; they are often regarded as the gold standard for new university entrants (Hawkins and Mill, 2010). As well as, or possibly because of, having a number of Highers, traditional students tend to be better prepared, younger and have little of the competing responsibilities of work and family, characteristic of mature non-traditional students (Reay, 2003; Munro, 2011).
Non-traditional students are the type of learner we attract to the college and the BA degree programme. The BA degree is an academic social science-based programme, which contrasts with the mostly vocational provision offered elsewhere in the college. The BA programme is a part of a wider degree provision offered by the college; the impetus for which was recognition that there were insufficient people holding degrees within the county where the research is located (Elliot and Brna, 2009). The BA programme was designed to attract non-traditional students for whom a university-based education was considered unrealistic, due to lack of confidence regarding their perceived academic ability, or because of competing commitments (Reay, 2003; Reay and Crozier et al, 2010).

A History of the BA Degree

First facilitated in 1998, our BA degree programme is validated by a post-92 university and facilitated exclusively on-campus at the FE and HE College. The BA degree is unique in the context of the other degrees the college delivers, which are written and taught in collaboration with teaching staff from the validating university. The BA degree is written and taught exclusively by the HE in FE college teaching staff. The articulation route into the BA degree is mostly HND vocational, care-related programmes. We do have students (less than five per cent) articulating from HND Social Science, if they have the relevant experience working with vulnerable groups in a care context.

Graduates from the BA degree programme are now typically working in care or education-related employment, often following post-graduate professional study at one of a number of universities.
throughout Scotland. A small minority (less than 10 per cent) use the BA degree as a route into the honours year at the validating university. Over 95 per cent of participants on the BA degree programme are female. Typical class sizes range somewhere between 30-40 students. A significant majority (more than 95 per cent of all students who participate in the BA degree) study full-time. Around half are mature (25 years+) with caring or work responsibilities, often both. I turn now to my research approach.

My Research Approach and Research Questions

The primary role of research is to extend the knowledge base of a particular academic or vocational discipline. I propose that research can also be transformative; the researcher, research participants, and other teachers and scholars can, as a consequence of participating in the research, or reading the research report, in some way experience a significant change in terms of, for example, how research is taught, understood and applied to research situations. Also, teachers may experience a profound change in how they think about themselves, their relationships with students, their professional praxis and their teleological aspirations for teaching and learning (Anderson and Braud, 2011).

My research inclines to a confluence of research approaches. I first apply a critical approach to interrogate what I observe as the limited horizons of HE in FE; which, it has been suggested, emphasises narrow skill-setting at the expense of meaningful learning (Raffe, 2003, 2007; Creasy, 2013). I define meaningful learning as learning that adds new and superior understanding of concepts, ideas and attitudes students are already familiar with. Critical research approaches are often condemned for being ‘value-led [or] partisan’ (Gomm, 2004, p. 16). Typical of much critical research, I am also an insider to the research site. I found it difficult to avoid a bit of auto-ethnography creeping into the research. Being so close to the research context, in terms of it being
a significant part of my lived experiences, I tried to accept this subjectivity, and use it beneficently and in a way that would not compromise the integrity of the study.

For example, being deeply entrenched in the context of the inquiry; my working life experiences inevitably shape my thinking about all aspects of the research design. My beliefs and values can unwittingly corrupt how I understand the milieu in which I teach, and how I interpret the research data (Denscombe, 2010). Nonetheless, I felt it could be a good thing to allow my teaching and learning experiences to inspire my research; to help me identify what may emerge as important themes, particularly in the early stages of research planning. Calling on my subjective experience had to be juxtaposed with an awareness of my own biases, which I needed to hold in abeyance. This is of particular import as I had anticipated relatively intense data-collection encounters with the participants. Subsequently, I had to ensure that my own frames of reference were not imposed on the research findings and analysis (Finlay, 2012); that my research data was not simply poured into a pre-determined conceptual ‘mould’ (Smyth and Shacklock, 1998, p. 8).

I therefore committed my research practice to sustained critical self-examination by researching reflexively and continually remaining conscious of complications that may arise because of my dual role as both researcher and teacher (Finlay, 2012; Carolan, 2003). I shared my research progress with a colleague who has a similar interest in the BA degree programme. She challenged me if she suspected I might be compromising my researcher integrity. I reflected on her feedback and made changes where appropriate. When initially planning my methodology, I first considered positivist approaches but ultimately rejected positivism as too sterile and unsuitable for yielding a deep meaning. I doubted I could effectively interrogate participants’ experiences in any significant way by applying a positivist approach (Moustakas, 1994). As I designed my research to yield rich data, to develop a deep understanding, a real verstehen (Creswell, 1998) of the ways in which the processes
and the outcomes of transformation may be experienced, I have combined my critical approach with phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994).

The research sample consists of twelve non-traditional graduates from the BA degree programme. They articulated to the BA programme following sub-degree (HNC then HND) level study. I interviewed the graduates, the programme leader and one teacher on the programme. All but one participant is female. I purposively chose the graduate sample because they were all mature students and they had all juggled being a student with competing commitments. They also had all chosen to continue studying beyond the qualifications they needed for employment. An important caveat: it would be optimistic to take this sample’s experiences as an indication that all BA students are committed, enthusiastic or participate in learning in a deep way.

Some BA students, deliberately not represented in the sample group, can be perceived to show little interest in participating in learning in any meaningful way. This is indicative of a broad concern about students’ understanding of what real participation in education, including HE in FE, involves (cf. Field, 1999; Stevenson and Clegg, 2010; Burton and Golding Lloyd, 2011). In a stimulating and challenging learning environment, however, most BA participants quickly become committed and enthusiastic students. To examine the accuracy of the above statement; to yield some understanding of the extent to which HE in FE may transform students, I now describe the research focus and research questions. The literature suggests that most of the research and theory about transformative teaching and learning is located in informal education (Brookfield, 1986; Cranton, 2006), or part-time and distance formal education (Galbraith, 1991; Daloz, 1999). There is a paucity of research investigating the transformative potential of learning in full-time HE in FE. This research is needed to address this incongruence. I now expand on my definition of non-traditional students, and consider what is it exactly that is to be transformed?
Non-traditional students return to HE in FE following a *disorienting dilemma*, which could include *inter alia* divorce, redundancy, declining care responsibilities or aspirations for a career change (Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b). Non-traditional students return with pre-existing *frames of reference* and *habits of mind* which determines how they see the world and their place in it – their worldview (Mezirow, 2000). Transformation occurs when a student adopts a new worldview following ‘a fundamental questioning and reordering’ of their pre-existing assumptions about how they ‘think and act’ (Brookfield, 2000, p. 139). To investigate if the participants have been transformed by learning, if their worldview has changed in a significant way, and if they have become more independent in thought and action, my research will investigate the extent to which participants have experienced - ‘a process of self-empowerment, acquiring greater control’ of their lives (Mezirow, 2000, p. 27). I will also need to determine that they attribute experiences of self-empowerment to their HE in FE experiences. The following research questions were investigated to develop an understanding of both, the process of transformation, what I will call a *transformative journey*, and how participants in the context of HE in FE experienced transformation. The overarching research question is,

*To what extent may HE in FE be a transformative experience for non-traditional participants?*

It emerged from my early reading of the data, for my year one report, that past experiences impact significantly on non-traditional students’ perceptions and aspirations. I felt that applying a biographical dimension in the shape of the metaphor of a *transformative journey* would help me understand the wider life experiences of the participants and give some shape to my research findings. I have subsequently added the sub-questions below to trace more holistically participants’ life and learning trajectories,
1. What lived experiences, including compulsory educational experiences, shape participants’ perception of returning to HE in FE,

2. To what extent does the teaching and learning milieu influence the social, emotional, and intellectual growth of participants, and,

3. Were the participants transformed by their experience of HE in FE?

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have first explained the rationale for the study. To explain what inspired the research design, I have included some of my own occupational biography, as it pertains to my own experiences of teaching HE in FE. As my experiences are firmly entrenched in the research context, I felt it fair to metaphorically come clean so the reader understands an unavoidable tension - my criticism of HE in FE, juxtaposed uneasily with my high aspirations for the HE in FE students I teach. Secondly, I explain my research approach, including how I have researched reflexively. Thirdly, I describe the main characteristics of the research sample and why they were included in the research. I finished with the research questions and the sub-questions that have allowed me to develop the data in the form of a Transformative Journey metaphor to position the participant’s experiences of being HE in FE students in the context of their wider life histories.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter first explains the conceptual framework which inspired my research approach. Most importantly, I draw on theories of transformative teaching and learning, first posited by Jack Mezirow in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although dated, Mezirow’s theories still have intellectual currency today through the work of inter alia Patricia Cranton (2000, 2006) and Ed Taylor (2000a, 2000b). Second, I consider the guiding metaphors and the language that shape my research. Third I consider briefly, a policy stream determining successive governments’ desire to widen participation in further and higher education and the implications for teaching and learning. Fourth, I turn my attention to how non-traditional students may experience the competing commitments of work and family, and how these commitments may concomitantly impact on the learning experience. Fifth, I review the empirical literature to interrogate the motivational requisites for successful encounters with learning. What motivations support, and what motivations are a barrier to positive learning experiences? Sixth, I consider what is meant by transformative teaching and learning, before considering some teaching approaches that may contribute to transformation. I interpose with short summaries as I progress. I begin with an outline of my conceptual framework.

A Conceptual Framework

The conceptual lexicon of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly the following concepts - habitus, field and cultural capital, offer useful insights into how further and higher educational contexts may not be a natural milieu for non-traditional students (Bourdieu, 1973, 1988; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Habitus describes the structures of meaning passed from one generation to the next. Habitus
experiences determine the ‘mutually penetrating realities’ of our socialised, subjective selves in interaction with the objective social structures of society (Swartz, 1997, p. 96; for detailed discussion see Wright Mills, 1959, particularly chapter 1). Consequently, habitus experiences determine ideas about an individual’s chances of succeeding in different life experiences, including experiences of HE in FE (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

For example, as a consequence of working class habitus, mature non-traditional students, who are predominantly working class, may view more traditional university-based higher education as something participated in by brighter, more financially affluent candidates - not for the ‘likes of us’ (Reay and Crozier, 2010, p. 117). Non-traditional students can be disadvantaged by a belief that they lack what it takes to succeed in the elite social space (field in Bourdieu’s lexicon) of a university. Field, for Bourdieu (1994), represents a ‘multi-dimensional space’ where your social position in the coordinates of that space are determined by access to and possession of social and cultural capital (p. 95). For example, as a consequence of not possessing social and cultural capital, when non-traditional students do attend university, they can often feel like ‘fish out of water’, particularly in the more prestigious institutions (Reay and Crozier, 2010, p. 119; see also Bourdieu, 1990). University-based higher education may end up dominated by one social class, who are likely to succeed, at the expense of another social class and, who are more likely to fail (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

For working class, non-traditional students a further and higher education college may represent a significantly ‘safer’ field (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009, p. 122; cf. Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Entrenched in a belief that a further and higher education college is the only realistic choice, and that university education is not for them, habitus experiences may therefore be a barrier to learning
for non-traditional, working class students. Habitus experiences may severely narrow working class students’ learning choices (Brookfield, 1986; Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). High aspirations may be compromised because non-traditional students lack cultural capital, often as a consequence of not having well-educated parents (Holt, 1997). It has correspondingly been concluded, from quantitative and qualitative studies on parental transmission of cultural capital in Holland (De Graff and De Graff et al, 2000) and the USA (DiMaggio, 1982), that parental educational success is still a strong indicator of the educational success of their children.

Although Bourdieu’s theories of cultural capital are empirically based, his work can be critiqued on the basis that it is culturally deterministic (Lawson and Garrod, 2000). Habitus is too often presented as an absolute construct aggregated to too many fields (Holt, 1997). However, staying with field-specific cultural capital (education), it has to be recognised that children from working class backgrounds can have a tendency to valorise the rejection of educational values (Willis, 1981; Holt, 1997). It is reported that rejecting education early in life can profoundly influence parents’ views on their own, and their children’s education later in life (Breen and Goldthorpe, 2001; Thomas, 2011).

Bourdieu’s work is therefore still useful in developing a conceptual framework which demonstrates how cultural entrenchment may become pervasive; how particular socialised cultural disposition may become congealed and difficult to transcend (Swartz, 1997). In terms of learning for employment, economic activity has changed significantly since much of what Bourdieu wrote was first published. It has been argued that employers will seek graduates with different skills for different types of industries; for example, caring professions are emphasised now as opposed to craft professions previously (Thomas, 2001; Burke, 2012). Bourdieu’s early publications may
require updating; a neo-Bourdiesian approach may be able to re-operationalise his key constructs to have the same conceptual value they had when first posited.

Habitus corresponds to the idea of *facticity* (Wartenberg, 2006), and refers to the facts of our existence - if we are working-class or middle-class, short or tall, the circumstances in which we have been thrown into the world (Sartre, 1977, 1984). Facticity positions us in a set of social circumstances that can place limitations on our ability, or desire, to transcend these conditions. Like habitus, facticity plays a significant role in shaping how one makes sense of one’s life; how we understand essentially who we are (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Sartre, 1977). For example, limited cultural capital may act as a barrier to appreciating the potential benefits of education, and our capacity to participate (Sartre, 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Nonetheless, human beings are malleable. Dissatisfied with who we are presently, we may turn our gaze to who we ‘are not’, but who we ‘might be’ (Weberman, 2011, p. 880 [my emphasis]). Individuals can, and often will, decide to act to change their facticity. For Sartre (1977), this means engaging in *projects*, defined as creative activity (de Beauvoir, 1989). To be worthwhile, a project must have the potential to lead to an individual transcending their given circumstances; to experience a significant transformation of one’s life (Sartre, 1977).

To transcend is to live an authentic life, to assume full responsibility for one’s life; to take responsibility for taking the actions that makes life fuller and more meaningful (Blattner, 2013; de Beauvoir, 1989). It is taking responsibility, *being* in Heideggerian terms, the agent of change that gives opportunities for transcendence (Sartre, 1984). The authentic life is contrasted to an alienated life, defined as ‘a lack of wholeness’ (Lawson and Garrod, 2000, p. 8). To live an authentic life, one must choose instead to find a ‘fulfilling purpose’ to life (Blattner, 2013, p. 321; Sartre,
As my research emphasises women’s experiences, I finish this part by continuing with a few ideas about experiences of women’s perceived limitations; ideas that may impact on education.

Simone de Beauvoir uses the term immanence to define women’s limitations (de Beauvoir, 1989). Women’s immanence manifests as the largely ‘uncreative chores’ undertaken within the private enclosure of the home; viewed as neither ‘constructive work’ nor an ‘active mode’ of existence (Veltman, 2006, p. 121). In The Second Sex, de Beauvoir (1989) urges women to challenge their objectification; to transcend the oppressive social roles allocated to them by men. Participating in creative projects, such as HE in FE, can mean breaking free from ‘biological fate’ (Wartenberg, 2006, p. 119). Participation in HE in FE can also lead to the participant being transformed by the experience.

Transformative teaching and learning can be concisely defined as comprising all teaching and learning that results in a profound ‘change in the learner’ (Illeris, 2014, p. 40). A definition of transformation is offered by Novak who suggests that,

Transformation represents not only a total change in life perspective [worldview], but also an actualisation of that perspective. In other words, life is not seen from that perspective, it is lived from that perspective (in Mezirow, 2000, p. 22 [original emphasis])

The genesis of transformative learning is the early empirical work of Jack Mezirow (1978a, 1978b, 1981). Mezirow identified factors that influenced women’s experiences of programmes at community colleges in the USA. Similar to the female participants in this study, the women in Mezirow’s early research studies had returned to college with frames of reference and habits of mind, shaped in large part by negative experiences of compulsory education (Mezirow, 1978a,
Changing frames of reference and habits of mind is an experience that can be experienced as fraught with inner conflict and tensions; frames of reference represent the foundation from which the individual gets a sense of stability and from which the whole identity is formed (Mezirow, 2000). Individuals may feel uneasy having their cultural assumptions challenged. Consequently, a teacher aspiring to facilitate transformative teaching and learning may meet with students’ ‘negative resistance’ (Featherstone and Kelly, 2007, p. 270).

In Mezirow’s transformative schema, a return to college begins with a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2000). A disorienting dilemma could include for example, the family growing up, divorce, death of a spouse or loss of career; as a result of which the individual questions the direction their life is taking. By participating in education individuals begin to challenge faulty frames of reference and habits of mind, replacing them with new ones that are more discriminating, more trustworthy and more dependable (Mezirow, 2000). However, merely contemplating a return to college could be a disorienting dilemma. A feeling that one is returning to school can be ‘anxiety-provoking’ for returning adults (Cranton, 2006, p. 5). Anxiety can be further exacerbated by concerns about other responsibilities.

For example, the female participants in a study by Pascall and Cox (1993) experienced a double-dilemma; they felt uneasy at what they experienced as putting their own needs ahead of the needs of their family. The ways these meaning structures are constructed and validated are more often than not faulty (Cranton, 2000). Nonetheless, they are the filters through which lived experience is understood (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). A key goal of transformative teaching and learning is to encourage students to critically reflect on these ‘limited and distorted’ views of the world (Cranton, 2002, p. 64); to subject them to continuous re-examination (Galbraith, 1991). This requires participating in critical reflection, which in a formal learning environment can take the
shape of rational discourse; exploring new ideas with others, ‘trying on’ new points of view 
(Mezirow, 2000, p. 12). Research shows that frames of reference and habits of mind may be so 
deeply entrenched, however, that confronting previously held assumptions is difficult (Cranton and 
Carusetta, 2004, p. 7). Individuals may recoil from challenging deep-rooted assumptions in the 
belief that avoidance may simply cause less pain than confrontation (Galbraith, 1991).

Nonetheless, transformation cannot fully occur until an individual starts to consider new points of 
view and to ‘act on their learning’ (Cranton, 2006, p. 4). Acting on learning implies that participants 
in education begin to reorganise the way they think and act (Mezirow, 1978a). A test of 
transformative learning is the extent to which new and unfamiliar ideas penetrate cultural 
entrenchment; the extent to which individuals become prepared to try on new ideas and refuse to 
be situated in ways that impede transformation (Mezirow, 2000). The stages of transformation are 
aggregated to a 10-stage schema by Mezirow (2000). Returning students will experience some, if 
not necessarily all of the stages,

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
Thus far I have suggested that mature non-traditional students return to education when they reach a crossroads in their life, referred to by Mezirow as a disorienting dilemma. Returning to education can be difficult as students may feel they are returning to school. Challenging cultural assumptions, which are encrusted in students’ frames of reference and habits of mind, can be difficult. Nonetheless, it is necessary that cultural assumptions are tested for authenticity. I will now offer a critique of the theory.

Transformation has been criticised as being little more than a metaphor (Newman, 2012). Too much is made of the established rhetoric of transformation and the *eureka* experiences of respondents, which deny the ordinary and everyday experiences from which transformation may equally emerge (Dirkx, 2000). All learning involves change, and merely getting students into a classroom after a lengthy hiatus, signifies change (Newman, 2012). Indeed, transformative learning theory is now bolted on to almost any kind of learning outcome, seldom now serving as a ‘coherent theory’ (Hoggan, 2015, p. 58). I agree with Patricia Cranton, who suggests that merely engaging in a college education is not transformative. Neither is learning new skills or meeting new people with different points of view. Achieving a degree is not necessarily a transformative experience (Cranton, 1996).

Also, as there exists little critical research to validate theories of transformation, the theories that do exist may be conceptually uncertain (Illeris, 2014). What research there is on transformative teaching and learning is too ‘obtuse’, is difficult to access and has little direct implication for
teaching and learning (Taylor, 2000a, p. 321). Snyder (2008) highlights research design issues when investigating transformative learning. To make claims that any learning has been transformative requires the use of longitudinal studies or at least the use of follow-up mechanisms to check if transformation has been sustained. Transformation can be an exciting concept that research respondents might want to be seen to have experienced. More rigorous methods of triangulation would also control against issues of respondents’ ‘faking it’ (Snyder, 2008, p. 176).

Why then such a powerful emphasis on the transformative possibilities of education? While I concede that Newman (2012), Illeris (2014) and Cranton (1996) make very important points worthy of further empirical and theoretical interrogation, they also, to a significant degree, devalue the empirical and conceptual efficacy of transformation. For example, although a very imprecise construct, difficult to operationalise, King (2004) does so to some extent by staying very close to Mezirow’s original criteria. In this way she offers some measure of transformation that is congruent with the theoretical literature (see Mezirow and Associates, 2000, Cranton, 2006). I suggest that King takes the correct approach when she operationalises transformation as for example, being significantly more open-minded, allowing for multiple perspectives of social phenomena and reconsidering the way the world appears to (now transformed) research participants. Thirty-six of fifty-eight participants in her study of students in graduate education reported these changes, which I would argue should be considered transformational.

I would argue further that the changes experienced by King’s participants are unlikely to be minor changes; they may be ‘deeply felt’ and, it is argued, indicate significant shifts in the way these participants read the text of their own experiences (King, 2004, p. 162). Nonetheless, most published work on transformation is, as Newman (2012) suggests, theoretical in nature. Most empirical work has been undertaken by doctoral students and remains unpublished (Walton, 2014).
Researchers, seeking to document instances of transformation are now nonetheless, finding effective research designs to evaluate and report processes of transformation by applying multiple data pathways (Snyder, 2008). As these researches find their way into the academic journals, a more rigorous empirical and theoretical base for transformative teaching and learning may emerge. I accept that until a more precise measure of transformation can be found transformation will always be critiqued for its lack of scientific rigour. Until an inventory of the experiences of transformation is developed, there may always be issues with internal and external validity in terms of what is being measured, and what is the practical utility of such an inexact construct?

Nonetheless, although I would like to see transformation more precisely operationalised, I personally see the main issue with transformation as a crisis of definition. The authors in the previous paragraphs, with the notable exception of King (2004), posit a very narrow definition of transformation. They ignore important caveats. I sincerely believe that the power and cogency of transformative teaching and learning is shaped by the quality and depth of the learning experience. The evidence is the change in the student that manifests as a consequence. Transformative teaching and learning is less about how much is learned or understood. It is more about ‘how learning changes the learner’ that determines transformation (Cross, 1999, p. x).

The previous few paragraphs have evaluated the conceptual framework within which I position my research. I have explored the construct of habitus to try and understand the perceptions mature non-traditional student may return to education with and how it might impact on their student experiences. My research focus is to investigate if HE in FE can be transformative. Although I have to concede the imprecision of transformation, I still believe it has significant utility in understanding emotional, social and intellectual growth in students in HE in FE. I shift the emphasis now to propose that the perceived downward shifts in the quality of teaching and learning can be
conceptualised as guiding metaphors. To ground them, I will weave the metaphors into the context of HE in FE.

The first guiding metaphor is the suggestion that HE in FE has been ‘dumbed down’ (Haggis, 2006, p. 502; Feather, 2010). I take dumbed down to imply a perceived atrophying of academic standards, the aim of which is to increase instances of educational attainment. As participation is widened to include myriad student abilities and aspirations, dumbing down, it has been argued, is a deliberate strategy to meet the needs of students who lack the academic biography or commitment for the intellectual challenges of HE in FE (Haggis, 2006; Miller, 2010).

The second guiding metaphor emerges from the idea of HE in FE being organised on a business basis. A need to increase the number of students recruited, to make facilitating programmes economically sustainable, has entered the teaching and learning lexicon as a ‘bums on seats’ approach (Leese, 2010, p. 241; cf. Thomas, 2000; Naidoo, 2003). A definition of bums on seats, as I understand it in the workplace, is that while it might be a first principle of student recruitment to fill programmes with motivated, able and suitably qualified candidates; when candidates fall short of this ideal, significant elasticity may be encouraged. Cohorts of students can be recruited from candidates who may not be particularly motivated, able or suitably qualified. HE in FE teachers’ jobs are contingent on recruiting students and this may become an incentive to fill classrooms; the suitability, in terms of the motivation and learning experience of the candidate may become a secondary consideration (Burke, 2012; Feather, 2012). Not allocating students to the courses most congruent with their abilities, needs or aspirations can lead to students having bad experiences of further and higher education (Reay, 1996; Creasy, 2013). The main casualty of dumbing down is meaningful teaching and learning, which I define and discuss below.
Meaningful teaching and learning occurs when the student integrates new learning into ideas she already has. Meaningful teaching and learning I define as learning that challenges and inspires students; learning that changes in some fundamental way the person who participates. It has been argued that in the context of dumbing down, further and higher education should take more instrumental approaches geared almost exclusively to preparation for the workplace (Hultberg and Plos, 2008; Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). Gill (2014) alternatively argues that HE in FE provision should do more than only prepare students for the workplace. HE in FE should aspire to facilitate meaningful teaching and learning that touches every aspect of students’ lives including their attitudes, beliefs systems and their relationships with themselves, others and the wider world. If we are to make the most of teaching and learning opportunities, teachers must find ways to instil a deeper intellectual curiosity in students (Cooper, 2013).

It could be argued that meaningful teaching and learning, as it has been defined, has less significance in vocational education. Research disputes this assumption however. It was shown in research by Tobias (1978) and Tobias (1990) that vocational students sought more than skills training for the workplace. They also wanted to be educated at a more meaningful level (in Bruffee, 1999). These students recognised there was a difference between training and education; these students decided that training was not enough for them - they wanted to be educated. From that I conclude that if one aspires to less than promoting substantial social, emotional, and intellectual growth, in juxtaposition with skills for the workplace, HE in FE may become, in the experience of both teacher and student, merely superficial, puerile – an ‘empty ideal’ (Brookfield, 1986, p. 172).

An alternative discourse proposes that to assume that all students seek to ‘develop and realise their potential’ is simply unrealistic (McArthur, 2011, p. 742; cf. Parker, 2003; Miller, 2010). It is argued that some students might participate as a consequence of coercive forces, which might include for
example, a threat to welfare benefits (Watts, 2013) or parental expectations (Coffield, 2008). As employers increasingly demand qualifications, many students may now participate reluctantly as an economic necessity (Ball, 2008; Hultberg and Plos et al, 2008). Subsequently, HE in FE may be oriented to ‘what is measured’ and what leads to vocational accreditation argue Coffield and Williamson (2012, p. 41). Many students, it is argued, may be caught in a ‘short-sighted search’ for a passport to the world of work (Daloz, 1990, p. 75).

Here, I must introduce an important caveat. What is ignored is the significant population of participants in HE in FE, who are deeply interested in learning. A number of research studies conclude that for some students, more than merely a route into employment, HE in FE offers a way to improve students’ self-confidence and their self-esteem (Wainwright and Marandet, 2006; Smith and Wayman, 2009). Participants in HE in FE can be overwhelmingly excited by the challenges of learning (Cantwell and Archer et al, 2001). Research shows that following meaningful participation, students’ lives can be changed forever; they can become different people after participation in education (Wainwright and Marandet, 2006; Smith and Wayman, 2009). For example, participants can experience a ‘personal transformation’ (O’Shea and Stone, 2011, p. 285). Participants can become open to scrutinising existing values and beliefs (Galbraith, 1991), with the outcome that their views of the world and their place in it, can change irreversibly (Mezirow, 2000; for real life examples, see also Daloz, 1986, 1999; Galbraith, 1991).

I have considered the guiding metaphors that inform the shape of my research. I have situated the metaphors in the context of HE in FE. Most importantly, I have defined the perceived contradistinction between training for the workplace and meaningful teaching and learning. I have tried to indicate both are of equal import; that the student is receiving a ‘quality’ learning experience only when the emphasis on training for work is juxtaposed with education for personal
growth. The alignment of this distinction is imperative in the context of the widening participation of educational opportunities. Widening participation has been a persistent policy priority for successive governments since Robbins (1963). It would be appropriate then to interrogate further its impact on post-compulsory education generally, but with an emphasis on HE in FE particularly.

**Widening Participation**

Widening participation has been defined as a way of stretching a system to accommodate a ‘much wider mix’ of students (Thompson, 2000, p. 2). Traditionally, social or intellectual elites who had achieved Highers, the imagined gold standard of education, represented the individuals who participated in higher education (Hawkins and Mills, 2010, p. 16). Other social groups were hitherto poorly represented in any form of higher education including full-time HE in FE (Burke, 2012). These social groups included *non-traditional students*, who are contrasted to *traditional students*. Traditional students are reported to be much better prepared for higher education due to their prior socialisation, schooling and ‘better attainment’ (Smit, 2012, p. 370). A perceived decline in academic standards has however been attributed to successive governments’ desire to widen participation to non-traditional students, who according to Burke (2012), are widely deemed ‘unsuitable’ for HE study (p. 129; *cf*. Field, 1991; Haggis, 2006).

Widening participation has become a buzzword for successive UK governments keen to sever the link, between ‘social inequality and educational privilege’ (Hawkins and Mills, 2010, p. 8). In terms of numerical expansion, we might consider that widening participation has been successful. Just over 200,000 students studied higher education in the UK in 1963, compared to almost 2.4 million students in 2009 (Newman, 2010). Increasing the number of participants in post-compulsory education has led to accusations of dumbing down (Haggis, 2006; Walker, 2010; Miller, 2010). Meaningful teaching and learning in HE in FE is compromised by the quantity of certificates being
awarded argues Feather (2010). HE in FE teaching staff also find the guiding philosophy or purpose of widening participation poorly articulated; not fully understanding what widening participation is intended to achieve (Feather, 2010, 2012). Despite a number of policy initiatives to support widening participation (for Scotland, see Scottish Government, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2011), one study concluded that teaching staff take it to mean that academic standards must depreciate to include underprepared students (Stevenson and Clegg et al, 2010). I doubt any government would seek to advocate a deterioration of academic standards. It may be worthwhile now to drill into the purpose of post-compulsory education as it is seen by both the UK and Scottish governments.

The genesis of widening participation can be found in the Robbins Report (1963) which concluded with a recommendation for significant investment in the mass expansion of post-compulsory education. The Robbins report made explicit the aim that the number of students in post-compulsory education in Britain should be comparable to numbers of students on the continent, which was then much higher. The desire to widen participation of students in further and higher education finds more recent expression in the Dearing Committee (1996) and the Kennedy Report (1997). The Dearing Committee (1996) found unequal access to post-compulsory education located in social class. The lowest social classes were ‘under-represented’ (Stevenson and Clegg et al, 2010, p. 106). The Kennedy Report (1997) emphasised education as the key to both national and individual prosperity. Kennedy also recognised an inability to recruit educationally disadvantaged adults; concluding that all citizens of the UK from 16 years of age should have equal access to further and higher education.

These reports resonated with policy-makers who wanted to eliminate barriers to post-compulsory learning opportunities (Burke, 2012). Widening participation became a key policy objective of the
Labour administration that came to power in 1997. Prime Minister Tony Blair believed that education was good ‘economic policy’; that the economic success of the country was contingent on education (in Ball, 2013, p. 7). More recently; Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron said of education in 2011, ‘We’ve got to be ambitious ... complacency would be fatal for the UK economy’ (in Ball, 2013, p. 4). Successive governments, then, have emphasised that education had an economic purpose and that there was a need to make the UK more competitive in a global economy, a theme I turn to next.

An educated workforce is important to meet the demands of a global shift from manufacturing to service-based economies (Ramsden, 2003). The UK’s economic prosperity is increasingly contingent on better skilled, more flexible workers (Hultberg and Plos et al, 2008). Consequently, Individuals are now increasingly compelled to take responsibility for their own employability, despite increasingly unstable and ‘highly competitive’ employment markets (Burke, 2012, p. 30). It has therefore become ‘an obligation’ (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009, p. 121), of the individual, to train and retrain for whatever employment opportunities become available (Coffield, 2007). Drawing on the work of C Wright Mills (1959), the public issue of limited opportunities for employment becomes a private trouble of continuous retraining for whatever employment opportunities do exist. This may be problematic for meaningful teaching and learning. As widening participation is seen to contribute to a better-educated and flexible workforce, student experiences and graduate outcomes are evaluated against these ends (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). This research is located in Scotland. It is to a short historiography of Scottish education I now turn to trace the significance of changes in aspirations for education in Scotland.
First, it can be argued that an economic discourse around a narrow widening participation agenda is rejected in Scotland by recent Scottish government policy directives. In *Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Learning Strategy*, the Scottish Government states that Scotland has a history of valuing learning for the ‘wider benefits’ it can bring to the individual, to society and to the economy (2007a, p. 6). More recently however, in *Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education*, the Scottish Government shifts the emphasis beyond hitherto narrower economic imperatives – ‘Yet it is not just about the economy; higher education is [also] a civilising force’ (2011, p. 9). Emphasising education as a civilising force, the Scottish government (2011) imply that widening participation can have a significantly wider impact on the wellbeing of individual members of society.

Higher education, including HE in FE can therefore be considered to comprise one of two distinct processes. Firstly, it is a technical process where new skills are learned to meet the needs of the economy. Secondly it is a process that emphasises the benefits of living a more ‘authentic and creative life’ (Brookfield and Holst, 2011, p. 42). This apparent dichotomy is seen as a battle of ideas between ‘notions of meritocracy’ and a commitment to ‘social justice and egalitarianism’ (Burke, 2012, p. 31). An educated citizenry can play a major role in shaping a more ‘democratic, civilised and inclusive society’ (Coffield, 2008, p. 60). I have established an aspiration in Scotland that education, including HE in FE, can serve the purpose of both a well-trained and flexible workforce, and, of equal significance, a well-balanced, civically responsible citizenry. In Scotland, this is not new.

Historically an article of faith in Scotland, meaningful teaching and learning is part of a long tradition, deeply rooted in the Presbyterianism of the Scottish reformation, further developed
during the important epoch of the Scottish enlightenment (circa mid-late 18c.). The belief was that the educated individual is better adjusted to civic society - she is ‘happier and more virtuous’ (Broadie, 2007, p. 110). Adam Smith (1723-1790), in his famous treatise - An Inquiry in to the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1776), had argued that ‘an instructed and intelligent people ... are more decent and orderly than an ignorant and stupid one’ (Campbell and Skinner, 1976, p. 788). The ‘intrinsic value of education’ was a public good from which all of Scotland could benefit (Thomas, 2001, p. 4). The Scottish enlightenment had a momentous impact on Scottish civic society. It is one reason why Scotland emerged as one of the most literate countries in the world (MacWhirter, 2013). Returning to a Scotland present; within a system of education (HE in FE), that may have less grand aspirations for students, the intrinsic value of education expressed in the ideals of the Scottish enlightenment become otiose. Some commentators have gone so far as to suggest that it may be time to cease the pretence that students are still receiving a ‘meaningful education’ (Coffield and Williamson, 2012, p. 48; cf. Feather, 2010, 2012).

I have briefly reviewed the policy stream as it pertains to widening participation. I evaluate the Scottish context to interrogate if Scotland has indeed experienced some level of abandonment of meaningful teaching and learning. I used the educational characteristics of a Scotland past to make comparisons to a Scotland present to suggest that there may be evidence of a disturbing trajectory of declining standards, albeit over a lengthy period. I interrogate this further. In the following paragraphs, I will turn my attention to contemporary students. My emphasis will be firstly, the relationship many contemporary students have with education and secondly, how students are viewed by education providers.
First, Clegg and McNulty (2005) warn against a normative assumption that all students regard HE in FE as an incontestably good thing. Not all students are necessarily motivated to participate in learning (Field, 1999). Individuals spending significant time together in a classroom is not an indication that learning is automatically occurring argues Brookfield (1991); resistance to the efforts of teachers to encourage learning in the classroom should be considered ‘highly predictable’ (Brookfield, 2015, p. 10). These comments represent points of view increasingly finding their way into the research literature. For example, a study of non-traditional students’ experiences concluded that they lacked the ‘skills, education and advantages’ associated with traditional students (Leach, 2011, p. 248). Their shared existential conditions determine that non-traditional students are fundamentally ‘resource poor’, in comparison to traditional students who are reported to be ‘resource rich’ (Ng and Forbes, 2009, p. 48). Further, non-traditional students are more likely to have developed negative habitus dispositions (Bourdieu, 1988), culturally assimilated from parents and other family members (Mezirow, 1997). This may be experienced as a general ‘lack of preparedness’ for learning (Burton and Golding Lloyd et al, 2011, p. 26). Poor preparedness manifests as a barrier into what is, in a Bourdieusian schema, an alien culture (Bourdieu, 1973, 1988; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Where a deficit of cultural capital exists, non-traditional students tend to confront significant educational barriers, including ‘low aspirations’ (Stevenson and Clegg et al, 2010, p. 107). Reading, writing and other tasks associated with learning, can be considered anathema by many students argues Robbins (1993, p. 159). This may explain the reason for the perception that HE in FE has been dumbed down for students who it is argued cannot, or in many instances lack the aspiration to, meet the ‘critical challenges’ of further and higher education (Haggis, 2006, p. 502; Morley, 2003). Students are rarely, suggest Coffield and Williamson (2012), challenged to develop academic
or intellectual skills in any meaningful way; studying a discipline because of a genuine passion may be rarely encouraged. Dumbing down has often been evaluated in parallel with the commodification of HE in FE (Parker, 2003; Walker, 2010), associated with the idea of the business model of education.

It has been argued that colleges have for many years been operated as businesses (Coffield, 2010). Wolf (2016) contests this proposition arguing that neither universities, nor I presume colleges, are businesses. Nor are they merely training schools; they are ‘a glory of our civilisation’ (n-pn). While auxiliary businesses such as student loan companies may seek profit from education, education itself is not a business (Wolf, 2016). Cost-cutting and competition exists but this does not make education a business. Even if the explanation of Wolf is accepted, at the very least universities and colleges are now more ‘business-like in a number of ways than previously’ argues Briggs (2004, p. 588). It is suggested that by implication, students may be analogised to customers who ‘consume learning’ in a way no different from other consumers ‘buying a car or a packet of cornflakes’ (Taylor, 2000b, p. 76).

Re-conceptualising students as consumers, an institution’s success is measured by income generated and the number of students attracted, retained and, of most import, certificated. Faced with competition from other institutions, colleges are increasingly under pressure to be flexible with entry qualifications and experience (Walker, 2010; MacArthur, 2011). To satisfy the demands of college managers, it is argued that teachers strive to keep more students longer and make achievement easier (Naidoo and Shankar et al, 2011, p. 1145). Using the ‘bums on seats’ metaphor (Leese, 2010, p. 241; Stevenson and Clegg, 2010, p. 111), students are now not so much ‘selected’ to participate on the basis of their ‘potential’, but ‘seduced’ (Walker, 2010, p. 201) or ‘coerced’ to
participate (Gallacher and Crossan et al., 2002, p. 494). Little consideration, it has been reasoned, is
given to their ‘ability to participate’ (Archer and Hutchings, 2000, p. 569). Consequently, HE in FE it
is argued merely serves the political and economic interests of society, and at a cost; the ‘growth of
human beings’ (Henriksson, 2012, p. 120). Subsequently, education becomes a purely ‘technical
endeavour’, lacking the aspiration to develop students’ minds into a new way of ‘feeling and acting’
(Henriksson, 2012, p. 120). Colleges have been analogised to a ‘skilling factory’ for British industry
(Parker, 2003 p. 529). Feather (2010) cites the example of a teacher in HE in FE, ‘We are now
nothing more than the manufacturers of tins of beans ... we are pushing out bits of paper, you know
people with qualifications’ (p. 197).

I have now touched briefly on the policy stream that introduced and has sustained widening
participation. It has been suggested that part of the perceived dumbing down of standards may be
attributed to successive governments’ desire to lessen standards to accommodate students who
otherwise might be underprepared. I agree that colleges have, at the very least, become business-
like (Briggs, 2004), inasmuch as both the Scottish Government and college managers appear to be
mis-prioritising by persistently trying to squeeze more from fewer resources - the impact of which
may require further research (Burke, 2012). At this point, I introduce a further metaphor Juggling
Competing Commitments (Cappleman-Morgan, 2005) to capture the lived experience of mature
non-traditional students.

**Juggling Competing Commitments**

Many non-traditional students are ‘often distracted’ from their studies (Munro, 2011, p. 116; cf.
Reay, 2003; Cappleman-Morgan, 2005). Stress attached to studying and working simultaneously,
has been shown to have a negative impact on non-traditional students’ experiences of well-being
and plays a more significant role than ‘academic stressors’ (Forbus and Newbold, 2011, p. 111).

Competing commitments can impact negatively on achievement and retention. Competing commitments may inhibit the opportunities for non-traditional students to integrate into campus life, and constrain opportunities to build reciprocally supportive relationships with fellow students (Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011).

For female returners, studying may impact on ‘maternal responsibilities’ (Reay, 2003, p. 309). Husbands can view a return to education as both ‘irresponsible’ and ‘selfish’ argue Archer and Leatherwood (2002, p. 287). The competing commitments of family and being a student can result in persistent feelings of ‘tension, conflict and guilt’ (Kevern and Webb, 2004, p. 330). One participant, in Kevern and Webbs’ study suggested that study, work and caring is a ‘constant juggling act’ (p. 331). ‘Juggling’ and ‘plate spinning’, used in a context of inordinate levels of stress (Kevern and Webb, 2004, p. 303), are popular metaphors used to explain the pressures of trying to fulfil contradictory roles simultaneously (McGivney, 1996).

A small qualitative study however, showed that only a small number of female participants (3 from 18) encountered ‘active resistance’ to the extent that they had to compromise their desire for education for the needs of their families (O’Shea and Stone, 2011, p. 282). As a consequence of their participation in education, these students felt empowered, their perceptions of themselves transformed, ‘I feel like all of a sudden, I’ve got a brain … I’m more confident and say what I think’ (participant in O’Shea and Stone, 2011, p. 282). The experiences of these students correspond to the experiences of students that Mezirow (1978a, 1978b, 1990, 1991) observed in his early studies, from which theories of transformation first emerged.
Following participation in learning, Mezirow’s participants had experienced ‘an altered state of being ... re-engaging life with a greater degree of self-determination’ (Mezirow, 2000, p. xii). Mezirow (2000) would go on to argue that they had experienced a transformation. By questioning previously held beliefs and assumptions, they had developed new, and more discriminating, ‘ways of thinking’ about the world (Cranton, 2006, p. 37). I have discussed the competing commitments, characteristic of many non-traditional students. Juggling competing commitments can clearly be a barrier to transformation. Opportunities for transformation may be largely contingent on where non-traditional students choose to study. To interrogate how well non-traditional students achieve, and to investigate if HE in FE is a better option than university, I now turn to explore the empirical research on non-traditional students’ experiences of universities.

That non-traditional students are generally under-prepared for the rigours of university-based higher education (Burton and Golding Lloyd et al, 2011), is argued in a study that found that 73 per cent of traditional students, who enter university with A-levels from school, complete their studies compared to 48 per cent of non-traditional students (Hatt and Baxter, 2003). For students, articulating from an HND vocational programme to a BA academic programme, making the right choice may be of particular import. Long and Ferrier (2006) found that 24.4 per cent of students, articulating from vocational to university-based academic programmes, drop out compared to 13.7 per cent of the general student population. Further research based on a large volume of comparative statistics concluded that vocational entrants to university whose articulating qualifications are HNDs, have higher withdrawal rates than students with academic qualifications (Hatt and Baxter, 2003; Gallacher, 2009).
Other empirical evidence shows that, if they complete their programmes, vocational entrants achieve worse degree classifications than academic entrants (Round and Brownlee et al, 2012). Hatt and Baxter (2003) concluded that students articulating from vocational to academic study struggled to adapt. It was found that vocational, ‘competency-based learning’ was incongruent with the more ‘theoretical orientation’, and more critical assessment methods typical of universities (O’Shea and Lysaght et al, 2012, p. 263). Students studying academic, highly theoretical disciplines, such as psychology or philosophy, were likely to adopt deep approaches to learning as opposed to the surface approaches of students studying vocational disciplines (Lonka and Lindblom –Ylanne, 1996). Interestingly, even students of more prestigious vocational disciplines, such as medicine and pharmacy, were less disposed to critical thinking and intellectual growth than students of, for example, social and human science disciplines (Parpala and Lindblom-Ylanne et al, 2010). John Dewey offers an analogy: some machines are just better than others for developing arm power. Similarly, some subjects are just better than others for developing intellectual power. He therefore considers academic ergo intellectually stimulating subjects, intellectual training par excellence (Dewey, 1997, p. 45 [original emphasis]). Dewey’s theory may have been confirmed empirically. One study found that students studying academic disciplines adopt better critical and intellectual skills and habits, and consistently score lower on a Student Anti-Intellectual Scale (SAIS) than vocational students (Laverghetta and Nash, 2010; see also Rigney, 1991 for more about the SAIS scale).

While I accept that it may be difficult for vocationally qualified students to make the transition from vocational to academic styles of teaching and learning, nonetheless, we must be cautious. Evidence from other research suggest that students with vocational qualifications, can ‘perform as well as, or better than, other student cohorts’ (Bandias and Fuller et al, 2011, p. 591; Forbus and
Newbold et al, 2011). Considerations such as socio-economic backgrounds (Round and Brownlee et al, 2012), part-time work commitments (Munro, 2011), and caring commitments (Wainwright and Marandet, 2010) may be more important indicators of barriers to academic achievement than articulating routes or differences between vocational and academic learning.

For example, research concluded that vocational entrants are almost twice as likely to come from the most ‘deprived communities’ when compared to academic entrants, and study under more stressful conditions (Round and Brownlee et al, 2012, p. 9). A study by Forbus and Newbold et al (2011) concluded that non-traditional students tend to spend more time off-campus and experience more ‘stressful situations’. They are ‘squeezed for time’ in a way not experienced by traditional students (p. 111). Non-traditional students are more likely to cut class. They skip homework tasks because of demand overload, resulting in ‘negative experiences of well-being’ (p. 111). The same research found that non-traditional students are ‘more mature and motivated’ however, and take their studies extremely seriously (Forbus and Newbold et al, 2011, p. 112). They tend to be more resilient and self-sufficient. The study concluded that non-traditional students have to learn task-orientated coping strategies, but are quite capable of adjusting to factors in their environment and make those adjustments extremely well (Forbus and Newbold et al, 2011).

Round and Brownlee et al (2012) concluded that ‘the relationship between entry profile and retention’, and ultimately achievement, is just too complex and may require more extensive investigation (p. 18). Nonetheless, types of education (vocational or academic) and location (Further Education Colleges or Higher Education Institutions) determine how universities perceive the abilities of students and the status of qualifications. Despite HE programmes facilitated in FECs (HNC and HND in Scotland) being considered equal in academic standard to the first and second
year of university undergraduate study, Scottish university admissions staff are often reluctant to accept HNC/Ds as comparable (Gallacher, 2009; Stanton, 2009). I will explore this reluctance to recognise FEC-based qualifications further.

Most universities, the more prestigious universities particularly, are disinclined to credit HNC/Ds as being comparable to the first two years of undergraduate study. It is argued that they are suspicious of the perceived boundaries between HE and FE and the ‘social and cultural prejudices’ associated with HNC/Ds (Gale and Turner, 2011, p. 159). A dominant issue appears to be the type of teaching and learning characteristic of HE in FE which, according to a study by Griffith and Golding Lloyd et al (2009), emphasises ‘breadth but not depth … memorising rather than understanding … the collection of facts rather than a thorough grasp of concepts’ (pp. 484, 486). It has been argued that typical college-based teaching is based on a ‘technical conception of learning’; what constitutes knowledge is disaggregated into ‘bite-size chunks’, learning assessed against very narrow but ‘highly specified criteria’ (Burkill and Dyer et al, 2013, p. 322). Higher education alternatively, it is argued, emphasises ‘the mastery of theories, technical and abstract concepts’ (Creasy, 2013, p. 42). The outcome of university-based higher education is ‘autonomous, critical and analytical thinkers’ (Ainsley, 2008, p. 618). By contrast, in HE in FE the focus is more on awarding students qualifications; awarding the qualification is the ‘key outcome’ in HE in FE (Creasy, 2013, p. 41).

Under these circumstances, it has been concluded that, to ensure students achieve the key outcome, the surface of learning is ‘skimmed’ and the students are never allowed to ‘go deep enough’ (Feather, 2010, p. 195). Consequently, rigid and inflexible assessment criteria, outlined by course descriptors, may be largely unchallenging and may ‘stunt’ intellectual growth (Naidoo, 2003,
As a method of achieving standardisation, course descriptors, produced by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), may be too prescriptive and inflexible; the rigidity of what they demand from students can potentially ‘stifle’ any real intellectual creativity argues Raffe (2007, p. 500). Both teacher and student may become ‘bored’ by a boring, ‘narrow and centralised curricula’ (Simmons and Thompson, 2008, p. 602). Uninspiring curricula can have the effect of accelerating a process of ‘academic drift’ and trivialisation of the learning process (Raffe, 2003, p. 252).

Although FE colleges have become significant providers of HE, it has been argued that the HE in FE professional staff identity is invariably embedded within the ‘norms and values’ of the FE culture (Gale and Turner et al, 2011, p. 163). For example, as with colleagues who teach only FE, HE in FE teachers are also considered generalists who should be able to pick up an unfamiliar course, staying just ahead of the class to whom it is being taught (Feather, 2010). Gale and Turner et al (2011) report an HE in FE teachers’ experience – ‘I have taught 14 or more course, making it difficult to become a specialist, whereas in a university, I suspect you focus on one particular subject and teach that very very well’ (p. 161). A question often asked of qualifications achieved in the FE context is do they really have any value?’ (Young, 2007, p. 450). My response would be that qualifications achieved in the FE context definitely do have value. However, I also agree that if we are to achieve meaningful teaching and learning in the FE context, we must raise our game beyond what I perceive as the existing limited horizons; we must move beyond the very fixed criteria typical of HE in FE as it is currently packaged, particularly in SQA descriptors (Lea and Simmons, 2012).

To briefly summarise; the literature above suggests that non-traditional students, particularly those who articulate through vocational routes, do not cope, compete or achieve as well as traditional students. It has been concluded that the conditions under which they study, including competing
commitments, can be the root cause of disproportionate stressors and anxieties. Other research (cf. Forbus and Newbold et al, 2011; Round and Brownlee et al, 2012) concludes that non-traditional students can be extremely resilient; careful planning of their studies is often done very well. In many instances students are just extremely motivated (Adcroft, 2011). What it means to be, or not to be, motivated I now explore.

**Student Motivation**

I define motivation, in the context of education, as to be inspired, to be excited about, or to be ‘moved to do something’ in terms of participating in learning (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 54). The individual who is energised towards such an end, I would consider highly motivated. An individual who feels no inspiration, excitement or has no impetus to meaningfully participate in education, I would consider unmotivated. In education, motivation is often discussed within two dichotomous constructs - *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation. Meaningful learning is contingent on the student being intrinsically motivated by ‘academic activities’ (Adcroft, 2011, p. 523; Deci and Koestner et al, 1999). Extrinsically motivated students view education as merely a means to an end; it is not valued ‘for its own sake’ (Valleran and Pelletier et al, 1992, p. 1006). This is an oversimplification, requiring a deeper analysis. From empirical research, Pintrich and De Groot (1990; *cf.* Pintrich, 2003; Thoonen and Sleegers et al, 2010), deconstruct this thing we call motivation, positing three distinct components; an *affective* component: an *expectancy* component and a *value* component.

The affective component is linked to self–efficacy, the students’ perceived abilities to achieve designated goals. Low self-efficacy will have a negative impact on achievement and how much of themselves students invest in learning (Peetsma and Hascher et al, 2005; Thoonen and Sleegers et al, 2010). Students with low self-efficacy can often experience high levels of anxiety, and low levels
of confidence (Walker, 2010). The expectancy component determines an individual’s beliefs about their ability to perform well at learning tasks such as essay writing and exams.

Also linked to self-efficacy, expectancy influences levels of engagement; students with high self-efficacy are motivated to apply themselves better and more consistently (Pintrich and Garcia, 1996). They will push themselves that bit harder and achieve more; students with low self-efficacy avoid the ‘shame of failure’ by ‘not dedicating themselves,’ thereby achieving poorly (Vrugt and Oort et al, 2002, p. 386). The value component is determined by the extent to which the student is intrinsically motivated to value the learning experience. In which event they would be goal-orientated students – they are intrinsically motivated to develop as students and tend to be high performers (Elliot and Harackiewicz, 1996; Thoonen and Sleegers et al, 2010). Alternatively, performance avoidance-orientated students are extrinsically motivated and less resilient (Ryan and Deci, 2010). They avoid tasks where they are lacking in confidence and tend to be low performers (Seegers and Van Putten et al, 2002; Thoonen and Sleegers et al, 2010). How well students achieve will be significantly influenced by what psychologist Carol Dweck refers to as their mind-set (Dweck, 2007, 2012; Elliot and Dweck, 1988).

Extensive empirical researches indicate that some individuals approach education with a fixed mind-set, which tells them simply that ‘they are either intelligent ... or they aren’t’ (Dweck, 2007, p. 34; Dweck, 2012). If they determine that they lack intelligence, they subsequently have low levels of expectancy (Thoonen and Sleegers et al 2010). It can be difficult to support growth in students with a fixed mind-set. They unconsciously position themselves as performance avoidance-orientated students and respond negatively to criticism (Thoonen and Sleegers et al, 2010). They can experience criticism as an indication of failure (Dweck, 2007, 2012).
Other students have a *growth* mind-set; they recognise that intelligence is not fixed. These students are ‘essentially malleable ... they have the potential for growth and development’ (Dweck, 2007, p. 34). They will have high levels of expectancy (Thoonen and Sleegers et al 2010), be goal-orientated (Elliot and Harackiewicz, 1996) and intrinsically motivated (Ryan and Deci, 2010). Growth mind-set students are motivated by challenges, strive to achieve and subsequently, tend to be higher performers (Thoonen and Sleegers et al, 2010). Dweck and her associates posit mind-set as being very narrow or discrete. It seems to suggest you have a growth mind-set or you do not, which denies the possibility of shifting from a fixed to a growth mind-set. If this is what is meant, I disagree. Many students return to education with a fixed mind-set, only to leave with a growth mind-set (Bruffee, 1999). Consequently, transformative teaching and learning approaches assumes the capacity for learning is not fixed and ‘definitely can be increased’ (Askew and Carnell. 1998, p. 8).

From the findings explored in the discussion on motivation above, it can be argued that motivation is not a fixed disposition. It may be more instructive for teachers to consider motivation to be a complex phenomenon that can shift and change. For example, a student returning to HE in FE can be initially poorly motivated. As they achieve however, confidence and self-efficacy may grow and their mind-set may change. Understanding the complexity of different students’ motivations and feelings of self-efficacy is important, particularly if teachers hope to facilitate learning experiences that are cognisant of the individual differences within any given cohort. Teachers ought to be aware that although they stand in front of a class, that class is essentially made up of individuals with different biographies *ergo* different motivations. In the remainder of the chapter, I will explore how HE in FE teachers may support the development of motivated students and, of particular import, how to nurture growth mind-sets in students. Ultimately, I will try to determine how students can be supported in a way that their learning experiences can significantly transform their
lives. I will first need to further analyse what I mean by transformative teaching and learning as an approach to supporting students to develop their full potential.

**Approaching Teaching and Learning**

First, teaching may be thought about as a process of reacculturation argues Bruffee (1999); what Freire (1970) identifies as a pedagogy of cultural change. In transformative teaching and learning, the goal is a *deep* rather than *surface* approach to change. Transformative teaching and learning may lead to a self-actualisation of the student; a ‘lasting change’ that becomes a salient ‘part of the [students’] way of life’ (Askew and Carnell, 1998, pp. 2, 7). It has been argued that to be considered transformative, change will be; a) *Persistent* – it is neither temporary nor reversible; b) *Pervasive* - it will impact all aspects of ones being and functioning, and; c) *Profound* – significant change will be experienced in ‘ones perspective, understanding, ways of knowing and doing and ways of being in the world’ (Anderson and Braud, 2011, p. xvii). Freire (1970) argues that to promote transformation, teachers ought to move beyond the ‘banking’ concept of education, where students are analogised as ‘receptacles’, who are rarely ‘called upon to know’, but to merely ‘memorise’ (pp. 53, 61). In the banking model of education, the overarching principle is that learning is a gift bestowed by a knowledgeable teacher on a group of students who know nothing (Freire, 2010).

I agree with Freire that the banking model serves only to dehumanise (Freire, 1970). Instead, I am inspired by Hellenic philosopher Plutarch, who recognised that less ‘… a vessel to be filled’, the students’ mind should be considered by teachers ‘… a fire to be ignited’ (Lipton-Bowers, 2012, p. 33). It is argued that it is much more important to strive to develop ‘the whole person’ (Daloz, 1999, p. xvii). I concur with Askew and Carnell (1998) who suggest that learning is not a cognitive, but a social event that should be interrelated with students’ wider life experiences. Positive change
may only occur when learning is used to make connections between students and the learning, and wider social contexts. Teachers ought to also be aware that the important resources for learning are already within students’ wider experiences, they may not be exclusively ‘acquired through teaching …’ (Whitaker, 1995, p. 2). Teachers may approach students as hitherto largely unexplored, radically unpredictable identity with unlimited potential. The role of the teacher is to ‘unfold that identity’ and release the potential (Ruzak, 1981, in Askew and Carnell, 1998, p. 25). Consequently, teachers should resist viewing education as a ‘thing to get’ and ‘merely useful’, but approach learning as a ‘way to be’ and ‘intrinsically valuable’ (Daloz, 1986, p. 133). I am particularly inspired by Palmer (1997), who succinctly compresses what is exciting about teaching and learning in a few lines,

Learning at its best – these profound human transactions called knowing, teaching, and learning – is not just about information, and they’re not just about getting jobs. They are about wholeness. They are about empowerment, liberation, transcendence. They are about re-claiming the vitality of life

(p. 10)

I have revisited transformation to operationalise the construct further. With that, I move on. In the context of relatively large class sizes, how teaching and learning may be approached with a large group is of particular import. Here, I will discuss how HE in FE teachers may work with students, supporting them on their journey to potential transformation.

Daloz (1986, 1999), proposing a mentoring approach to teaching and learning, suggests that although we are teaching a whole class, it is in all cases individuals who participate in learning, and each will learn and develop in their own unique way. To promote a pedagogy that is inclusive,
caring and above all transformative, Daloz (1999) proposes that teachers should listen to students. How does their HE in FE experience fit into the rhythms of their lives? We should act as guides on their ‘learning journey’, challenging them to be the best they can be, always ready to support them when they falter; get a sense of the whole lives of our students; move beyond the teacher-student relationship; appreciate how students’ aspirations and values are caught in a ‘web of forces’, which can enhance or inhibit their development; appreciate the place students have in our lives and how we can best ‘care’ for them’ (p. xix).

Daloz recognises that fostering transformation is contingent on ‘establishing meaningful, genuine relationships’ with students (Cranton, 2006, p. 5). The significance of building positive relationships becomes clear when empirical evidence suggests that students often need support which can often be more psychological than academic (Griffith and Golding Lloyd, 2009). Having an empathic understanding of the needs and aspirations of students, of truly ‘viewing the world’ from the students’ points of view, is very rare in teaching and learning (Rogers, 1990, p. 31). Where it is applied successfully however, it can have a significant impact on the learning experience of students (Thorpe and Edwards et al, 1993). Further, truly trying to understand students’ experiences can be a catalyst for the development of ‘fully-functioning and self-actualised human being[s]’ (Daley, 2003, p. 24). It is argued that it is also highly likely that there will be a significant increase in learning (Rogers, 1990). Participation in HE in FE can be extremely difficult for non-traditional students. This may be particularly true of students who are juggling the competing commitments of care or work responsibilities. If HE in FE teachers are to be supportive, they ought to understand early the types and range of potential constraints on their non-traditional students’ ability to learn. They may need to explore ways, and often times, for learning that suits students both as a group and as individuals (Rogers, 1990; Daly, 2003; Griffith and Golding Lloyd, 2009).
Once these arrangements are established, the teacher’s role is to develop autonomous students, while appreciating that to do so involves, paradoxically, significant levels of support. In a transformative approach to teaching and learning, authoritarian styles may not be appropriate but neither may unquestionably responding to a student’s sense of helplessness. Therefore, part of the teacher’s role is to help students help themselves; to really ‘learn about learning’ (Askew and Carnell, 1998, p. 23); to support students to find ways to manage the challenges of studying in often demanding circumstances. This often requires an element of change in the students. Teachers can help students see themselves as ‘capable of change’ (Askew and Carnell, 1998, p. 50).

To meet this end, it is argued that the ideal teacher-student relationship is one that is predicated on a ‘dialogue between equals’ and the teacher being ‘warm, caring [and] open and sincere’ (Galbraith, 1991, pp. 8, 9; Rogers; 1990). Teachers may try to be supportive of students in the belief that transformation will only occur in a context of ‘mutual respect, negotiation and collaborativeness’ (Brookfield, 1991, p. 9). In this way, teachers strive to make learning more meaningful and rewarding (Galbraith, 1991; Brookfield, 2015). These ideas have already been reported by a number of learning theorists, including Laurent Daloz (1999), Michael Galbraith (1991), Stephen Brookfield (1987, 2015) and Jack Mezirow and Associate (2000). There are more recent researches however, that have further developed the work of these earlier theorists.

For example, researches by David (2004), Freeman and Anderman et al (2007) and Chiu (2009) also found that the relationships that develop between teaching staff and students affect levels of participation, retention and achievement. David (2004) found that positive teacher-student relationships affect the extent to which students willingly participate in learning. His conclusions suggest that a learning milieu that is more open and democratic is significantly enriched. Freeman and Anderman et al (2007) concluded that good teacher-student relationships increased both a
sense of belonging and motivation to study. It was further found that students were more likely to be active participants in class. Chiu (2009) found that something as simple as referring to students by their first names had a positive impact on student motivation and their relationship with education.

By way of contrast, being taught by an authority figure that students never really get to know on a personal level is detrimental to learning (Cranton, 2006). Formal authority ought to be conceded and replaced by personal power in the shape of authenticity, genuineness and loyalty (Cranton, 1996; cf. Rogers, 1990; Galbraith, 1991; Daloz, 1999). As student and teacher get to know each other better, deference by the student to the teacher may diminishes and the teacher-student relationship has the potential to be transformed into something more profound and powerful (Daloz, 1986). Letting students know that, whatever doubts or anxieties they may be experiencing, that teacher’s genuinely care about them can have a real impact on their learning (Rogers, 1990; Daloz, 1999). Working in this way it has been argued, the classroom can develop into a culture which encourages growth in both teacher and student (Daloz, 1999). The teachers’ main role, which we ought to always be aware of, is to teach students relatively difficult academic ideas and tasks. Notwithstanding the important pastoral role, the main role of the teacher is to support students’ intellectual development. Teachers getting to know students well, trying to understand how they experience learning may be ‘pivotal to increasing ‘intellectual attentiveness’ (Hansen, 2007, p. 353).

Subsequently, it is the teacher’s responsibility to intellectually stretch students in a context of support; not to shelter them from the rigours of ‘debate, criticism and controversy’ (Earwaker, 1992, p. 124). Supporting students to fully participate and to engage with new ideas, but being
there to support them and alleviate some of their anxieties, will only encourage students’ experimentation with the construction of knowledge. Research by Lund Dean and Jolly (2012) shows that real engagement in teaching and learning can only happen when students are encouraged to take risks and are prepared for the positive and negative outcomes associated with learning. It has been found consistently in studies on teachers’ effectiveness that teaching is most effective ‘when teachers set high expectations for their students’ (Daloz, 1986, p. 228).

I have now reviewed some key ideas of teaching and learning theory. I have argued that teachers have an important pastoral role, but more importantly a role that also demands that they set their students real intellectual challenges. This may be best achieved away from the lecture theatre, where students have more freedom to interact with each other in a milieu of collaborative support and encouragement. This is why collaborative group learning is a particularly useful teaching and learning approach. I now evaluate the benefits of collaborative group learning from the empirical research.

It has been said that ‘collaboration is the stuff of growth’ (Sherratt and Planche, 2016, p. 21). Collaborative group learning is defined as a teaching and learning strategy, within which a small group of students assume responsibility for not only their own learning, but also the learning of members of their cohort group (Ruys and Van Keer et al, 2011). I see it as a way of working where students are encouraged to work together to discuss and make a joint sense of what they learn, to share readings and ideas, to discuss one another’s coursework tasks as they are being crafted; to bring their joint construction of knowledge back into the classroom to share with their peers. I see collaborative group learning as an opportunity for intense and productive dialogue between a small group of students with shared aspirations and interests. It is an opportunity to deconstruct then
reconstruct what is learned; to shape knowledge and understanding into something that will enhance both the learning experience and learning outcomes. An early study of collaborative group learning, with medical students, concluded that students learned better clinical judgement studying collaboratively than students studying independently (Abercrombie, 1960). Askew and Carnell (1998) argue that collaborative group learning is more effective than didactic methods, such as lectures. Research has shown that collaborative learning groups help students learn more effectively (Sultan and Kanwal et al, 2011).

Further research concludes that collaborative group learning is better than learning alone; students can achieve with the help of others what they could not achieve when on their own (Sharan, 1990; Shahar and Sharan, 1994). Learning was found to be much more ‘enjoyable’, stimulating and ‘challenging’ in small collaborative groups than it was when learning in isolation (Costa and O’Leary, 1992, p. 65). Other research by Presselen (1992) suggests that collaborative group learning facilitates meta-cognition. Costa and O’Leary (1992) concluded that increased meta-cognition improved performance. Costa and O’Leary (1992) also found that working in small collaborative groups, where there is inevitably a rich mixture of views, can be inspiring and deepen learning; it can ‘generate creative thought … ideas flowed more freely’ (p. 62). Sultan and Kanwal et al (2011) found that collaborative learning fosters academic confidence, creativity and emotional intelligence, through an exchange of views, elucidation of thought and analysis of the views of others. They concluded that collaborative group learning is one of the ‘most efficient’ methods of teaching and learning as it increases ‘competency and mastery’ (p. 33). Students need to explain to each other how they arrive at ideas, which makes it incumbent on them to ‘… examine their own thought processes’ (p. 34). Students need to self-examine the significance their ideas have, ‘… one of the first acts of constructive thinking’ (Costa and O’Leary, 1992, p. 2). Collaborative learning acts
as both a ‘catalyst for learning’ and a ‘source of learning’; it is a valuable part of a learning process that ‘enriches learning’ (Askew and Carnell, 1998, p. 44).

The teacher has a part to play in collaborative learning. Collaborative group learning requires the teacher to adopt a co-learner role with students. The facilitation of a ‘safe [and] comfortable’ atmosphere for the collaborative learning group to work in is important (Cranton, 2006, p. 4). To summarise the benefits of collaborative group learning, Askew and Carnell (1998) offer the following conclusions: groups are more effective than individuals in bringing about change; individual change is facilitated by the support of the group; feedback works more effectively in collaborative groups; learning is deeper when the group share perspectives and experiences; the teacher must establish a positive group culture; learning in a group leads to feelings of social identity and belonging (pp. 39, 40).

I have confidence in the merits of collaborative group learning; I recognise limitations in the literature nonetheless. Most theorising on collaborative learning groups has relied on subjective comments from students or teachers; there is a paucity of sophisticated, empirically tested research (Delucchi, 2006). Nonetheless, subjective feedback has been positive (Costa and O’Leary, 1992; Sultan and Kanwal, 2011). For collaborative group learning to work to best effect, all involved have to be disciplined and committed to their individual groups. If collaborative group learning is approached half-heartedly, if group members are not making a full contribution, it will not work (Askew and Carnell, 1998). Research shows that social engagement on a level demanded by collaborative group learning can be difficult for some students (Bruffee, 1999). This may prove problematic as other research has concluded that group members must hold each other accountable or the conflict that will inevitably arise could make collaborative group learning less
effective than traditional methods of teaching and learning (Johnson and Johnson, 1989 Johnson and Johnson et al, 1998). There is evidence that some students resist collaborative group work on the basis of badly designed group work experiences in school (Bruffee, 1999). Research found that deep talk, or searching questions does not necessarily emerge in collaborative learning groups and that collaborative group learning can be equally characterised by a ‘superficial sharing of ideas’ (Bruffee, 1999, p. 176). Further, it has been found that many academics who write about the benefits of collaborative group work use it only minimally in their own teaching practice (Cooper and Macgregor et al, 2000).

Nonetheless, Light (1990) concluded that collaborative group learning increased enthusiasm and high-order discussion and thinking. If HE in FE teachers would like students to participate in high-order discussion and thinking, they may need to create the conditions where high-order discussion and thinking is possible. Teachers may cut down the opportunities for students to potentially lose themselves in the back of lecture theatres, where it is argued, they can become detached from the learning process; particularly when research shows that students can retain only something between 20 and 42 per cent of lecture-facilitated information (Gardiner, 1994). HE in FE teachers ought to find even better ways of getting our students fully involved with learning, to keep them busy with learning; to get students interacting with stimulating materials and each other in a way that they can make the best use of their time learning. Only then might we anticipate improvements in the learning experience and learning outcomes.

Conclusions

The literature review has critically examined important discourses of the current quality and rigour of post-compulsory education. Remaining true to the main themes of the research, I have focused
particularly on higher education facilitated in further education colleges (HE in FE). Drawing on the
literature, I have argued that widening participation in HE in FE may have been, in some ways,
responsible for what has been analogised as a dumbing down of standards. Studies show that
dumbing down teaching and learning may be necessary if students, who are widely reported to be
now less able and motivated than previously, are to be included in further and higher education.

As an HE in FE teacher who values education, this is a disturbing phenomenon, particularly as it
goes largely unchallenged. I concur with Brookfield (1995) who suggests that our teaching careers
are hardly saturated with ‘Glorious and revelatory moments’, however they do happen and when
they happen, we treasure them as ‘highpoints ... as a justification for why we began teaching in the
first place’ (1995, pp. 47, 48). I still believe that HE in FE can be a stimulating and challenging
experience for students; that HE in FE has the potential to significantly transform students’ lives.

Here, I would like to reiterate the research questions that have emerged from my reading of the
literature. They may help the reader understand better my choice of methodology chapter. The
over-arching question is, Can HE in FE be a transformative experience for non-traditional
participants? I have disaggregated the main question to three sub-questions: 1. What lived
experiences, including compulsory educational experiences, shape participants’ perception of
returning to HE in FE; 2. To what extent does the teaching and learning milieu influence the social,
emotional, and intellectual growth of participants; 3. Were participants transformed by the
experience of HE in FE? How I investigated these phenomena, I outline in the following chapter.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Research Methods

Introduction

The first part of this chapter describes the two main paradigmatic assumptions guiding my research approach. I indicate why one was considered preferable to the other. Secondly, I explain my rationale for applying a critical phenomenology to the study of the transformative potential of HE in FE. Third, I describe and justify my data collection methods. I end the chapter by discussing some of the methodological issues I encountered, including how I undertook my research ethically.

Choosing a Research Paradigm

My first task was to decide on a research paradigm within which to undertake my research. I first considered a positivist paradigm, the ontology of which is that an objective social world exists somewhere *out there*. Methodologically analogous to the natural sciences, observing the same phenomena across an array of contexts should yield the same results, allowing generalisations to be made (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). I was alerted to some complications. My research focus was a small slice-of-life study, which sought to throw light on the transformative potential of HE in FE through the meaningful insights of participants. A positivist approach would have allowed me to increase my sample size, and to posit some tentative generalisations. However, depth of data would have been an inevitable casualty. I decided to examine phenomenological approaches.

Phenomenology is rooted in the ontological assumption that the existent nature of the social world is socially constructed. Social sciences have yet no way of penetrating social reality other than the different social constructions created by the perceptions of individual human agents. Phenomenologists deny the positivist ontology of one universal reality, arguing instead that the same phenomena can be seen in different ways by different people at different times (Denscombe, 2010). Phenomenology has been denounced as atheoretical (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). It is
criticised for lacking ‘scientific rigour’ (Denscombe, 2010, p. 103). Phenomenology does not follow the scientific procedures of ‘verification [and] generalisation’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008, p. 11). Nonetheless, it was never an aspiration to develop truth statements or posit generalisations. I decided that participation in education is saturated with different experiences and emotions, which would be best captured by a phenomenological approach (McGivney, 1996; Wainwright and Marandet, 2010).

Quantitative research would have revealed little of the rich texture of experience. I preferred an approach that allowed participants to express themselves with flexibility and depth, within their own frames of reference (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008). As the research was located in a work context, which has been my place of employment for a number of years, I found an auto-ethnographic approach kept creeping into my research thinking. I tried very hard to steer myself away from auto-ethnography, however I found this difficult as my experiences were so entrenched in the study (Gomm, 2009). I needed to be on constant alert for biases emerging. As I also sought to subject HE in FE to critical scrutiny, I have combined my phenomenology with a critical approach.

Critical educational research incurs a process of penetrating educational praxis to expose them to examination (Naidu, 2012, p. 21). I have therefore implemented my critical approach, not to cavil needlessly at the context in which I practice, but to commit it to ‘critical scrutiny’ (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 44). I felt that a critical approach was necessary to really penetrate the front of the HE in FE context, which I have argued previously lacks a meaningful philosophy of praxis. My critical approach first raises awareness of the limited horizons of HE in FE. Secondly, by highlighting a dichotomy between education and training generally, and Scottish educational traditions and current provision specifically, I have highlighted what may be perceived as the intellectual inadequacy of Scottish HE in FE. Thirdly, I have proposed through the work of Jack Mezirow and
associates that students’ lives can be transformed through participation in HE in FE. My critical approach also emphasises that educational research itself can be both transformative and transformed by practitioners giving meaningful insights in to the cultures and contexts in which we practice (Severs, 2012a; Anderson and Braud, 2011). I now explain my choice of phenomenology.

Phenomenology has a multiplicity of different, often contentious philosophical underpinnings (Moran, 2000; Wartenberg, 2008). Phenomenologists have many different emphases and interests (Smith and Flowers et al, 2009). It would be wrong to overstate the extent to which there is a monolithic coherence or an ‘agreed method’ (Moran, 2000, p.3). I take phenomenology to mean the study of the uniqueness, and wholeness, of human experience as it is structured through the consciousness of the experiencing person (Moustakas, 1994; Friesen and Henriksson et al, 2012). To investigate and uncover understandings of the world as the conscious mind perceives it our point of departure must be ‘the subjective mind’ (Sartre 1977, p. 44). I agree with phenomenology’s primary assumption; the experiences of human agents are not passive phenomena but phenomena in which individuals actively and consciously engage. I felt that the analysis of first-person accounts was of import to yield an understanding of how participants make meaning of the complex web of emotions associated with learning (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 1998). I will in turn, better understand how I can improve my ability to facilitate transformative teaching and learning (Daloz, 1999; Cranton, 2006).

My phenomenology is hermeneutically inspired. Defined as ‘the art and science of interpretation’ (Friesen and Henriksson et al, 2012, p. 2), I have integrated the key ideas of hermeneutics into my phenomenology, as it implies drilling into the description, to add a deeper interpretation of experience. Phenomenology becomes hermeneutic when description then interpretation is contextualised within the wider contexts of participants biographies to yield more holistic insights
(Finlay, 2012; cf. Wright Mills, 1959). How students make meaning of their learning experiences are ‘inextricably tied’ to, and influenced by these ‘socio-historical contexts’ (Cresswell, 1998, p. 19; Kincheloe, 2003). Guided by a model posited by Wright Mills (1959), we must understand how experiences are located in the participants wider biography and history, for example compulsory education, work and family. Phenomenology represents a genuine attempt to make meaning at a more holistic and much deeper level; an interpretive rather than descriptive level (Moustakas, 1994). There are however potential concerns with my approach, which require some consideration.

The literature review emphasised that as a consequence of widening participation (Haggis, 2006; Walker, 2010; Miller, 2010), HE in FE is widely critiqued for a perceived atrophying of standards, further exacerbated by students’ under-preparedness for HE in FE (Hawkins and Mills, 2010; Naidoo and Shankar, 2011). Nonetheless, my critical approach offers a significant rejoinder to what concerns me as excessively negative discourses, which in large part marginalise or deny the transformative potential of HE in FE.

I therefore disagree with opponents, who malign critical educational research as the language of ‘romantic possibilitarianism’ (Severs, 2012a, p. 610; Apple, 2000). This is a misrepresentation of the goal of critical educational research, which is to first and foremost, champion educational competence (van Manen, 1990). Championing educational competence can, in turn, be a driver of ‘strategic pedagogic action’, by teachers who seek continually to improve educational praxis (Tripp, 1990, p. 161). Critical approaches can throw light on where change to educational praxis is required. Understanding the context in which I practice in a deeper way I am better positioned to integrate transformative aspirations into my teaching. I now turn to my data-collection techniques.
In phenomenology, the best evidence for the truth of a shared existence, and the ‘most powerful tool’ for exploring and understanding existential experience, is language (Frieson, 2012, p. 45). Language is grounded in subjective social experience. Descriptions of experience emerge from the simultaneous collection of interviews, and interview analysis, using a grounded theory approach (Chamaz, 2006). In grounded theory, emphasis is on the generating of theories from the patterns of themes grounded in the research data. The generating of further theories must include a hermeneutic listening to the voices of the people we research as they talk about experiences (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). Therefore, taking as a point of departure, the premise that experience is grounded in and ‘soaked through with language’; that phenomenological research is only possible ‘thanks to language’ (van Manen, 1990, p. 38), I chose semi-structured interviews as my primary data collection technique.

Data Collection Techniques

I felt that interviews were a convenient method of data collection as conversations represent the ‘most basic mode of interaction’ (Kvale, 1996, p. 6). Language allows participants’ experiences to surface and gives these experiences some symbolic form which I was confident that, as I designed the research, I could subject to an effective level of analysis. My interviews were deep and qualitative interactions (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). The interview method allowed me to explore the research themes in depth and to probe for further elaboration (Robson, 1993). I had the time and space, and the flexibility, to exhaustively drill into the experiences of participants. I was able to pursue lines of inquiry as they emerged organically from the interview process. In phenomenology, the interview is the most popular research technique and serves two specific functions,

1. To explore and collect ‘experiential narrative material’, which constitutes the resource for developing a deeper, richer understanding of the phenomena of interest.
2. It gives the interviewer a vehicle to explore, through conversation relations, the meaning of experience.

(van Manen, 1990, p. 66)

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with graduates who successfully completed a BA degree in a Further and Higher Education College. I started collecting data early, initially as pilot interviews for my first year report. The first year report was a particularly profitable exercise. My research process, in my original thinking, was relatively rigid. I would have undertaken the literature review based on the predetermined themes I felt were of most import. I would then have developed an interview guide. I was intending to collect and analyse the data to interrogate convergence and divergence as the data related to my pre-determined themes. Originally, my thinking was extremely linear; I was denying, to some extent, the emergent nature of the inductive approach to research.

I had originally focused my research on how well we could, in the context of HE in FE, prepare students for post-graduate study, a desired choice for a significant number of BA graduates. As I participated in early data analysis cycles, in parallel with further reading of the empirical literature, my thinking and ergo my emphasis shifted. I was struck by how participants enthused about the extent to which the experience of education had changed them. It was also impressed on me that non-traditional students can participate in education in very difficult circumstances. I was already aware that there was a body of literature that could be called on to deepen my understanding of the competing commitments of caring, working and study. I had consulted some of the literature earlier (cf. Pascall and Cox, 1993; McGivney, 1996; Cappleman-Morgan, 2005), while undertaking research for an M.Sc degree. I had also been introduced to the work of Jack Mezirow while doing a post graduate diploma in Community Education. I was convinced that I could use the ideas of

Revisiting ideas of transformative teaching and learning provided a start to the process of reorienting my literature review to support my new focus (see pp. 18-28 for a discussion of my conceptual framework). Traditionally applied to informal adult education or distance formal adult education, transformative teaching and learning had yet to be applied to the context of full-time college-based higher education. It was, I felt, the right decision to shift my research emphasis. I had only completed a few interviews, so changing emphasis did not incur a radical shift in direction

I had fortunately sought consent from participants to maintain contact for the purpose of exploring further themes as they emerged from the original data. I was able to revisit some of my early interviews to metaphorically fill in the blanks. Once the shift was established, fourteen participants; twelve BA graduates, the BA programme leader and a programme teacher, took part in semi-structured interviews which lasted around fifty-five to eighty-five minutes. All interviews took place on the college campus and were digitally recorded and transcribed in full. I used an interview guide (see appendix 1) as I anticipated that, although I sought some flexibility, I needed to maintain some control over the interview (Robson, 1993; Creswell, 1998). The interview guides; I eventually used, were informed by a confluence of a) my analyses of the extant empirical literature; b) my understanding of the experiences of non-traditional students and c) some early research conversations, both formal and informal, with my participants. The interview schedules were adapted following some reflection on feedback from the year 1 report. I decided that a lifetime trajectory of educational experiences was necessary to yield a more meaningful verstehen of the non-traditional student experience. My interviews were undertaken within a framework adapted from McNamara (2009),
1. **Choose a setting with little distractions:** - in order for participants to feel comfortable and undisturbed, I carried out my interviews in the evening when the college was quieter. I posted a notice on the door of the interview room asking not to be disturbed and indicating why.

2. **Explain the purpose of the interview:** - the participants were fully informed of what was expected of them and how the research was to be used. I gave a full explanation when participants were initially contacted, before interview and when returning transcripts for inspection.

3. **Address terms of confidentiality and anonymity:** - although guaranteeing confidentiality is very difficult, interviewers should explain what steps are being taken to protect confidentiality and anonymity. I assured participants that every technique possible (i.e. pseudonyms and password protected pc storage) would be employed to protect their identity.

4. **Explain the format of the interview:** - I gave participants a full explanation of the reasons for the study, and what their participation involved, on initial contact and during the early briefings at the pre-interview stage.

5. **Indicate how long the interview should be:** - I would not want to rush an interview and risk obtaining inferior data. I determined that the participants did not need to rush off early. If they were time constrained I would have rescheduled or undertaken the interview in stages.
6. **Tell them how to get in touch with you later, if they want to:** I wanted to maintain contact for follow up questions. I also wanted to email transcripts to allow participants to validate that their contribution was not misrepresented. Email addresses were exchanged for this purpose.

7. **Ask them if they have any questions:** I would consider it good ethical practice to encourage participants to ask questions of the interviewer. A short debriefing was facilitated, at which point, participants were asked how they felt the interview had went and did they have any further questions?

8. **Do not count on your memory to recall their answers:** Particularly as I anticipated relatively long interviews, I sought permission to digitally record, which was granted on all occasions.

**Research Validity**

Defined as a ‘validity procedure’, different sources of data increase the dependability of the study (Golafshani, 2003, p. 604). Data triangulation reduces the ‘likelihood of misinterpretation’, and improves both the quality and the accuracy of my findings (Robson, 1993, p. 382). My approach to triangulation involved designing and asking participants to develop what I called structured reflections (see appendix 2) of their wider experiences; their compulsory education, family and work biographies, their learning journeys generally and their possible experiences of transformation. Reflection questions were distributed and returned as email attachments.
I felt that it would be expedient to encourage participants to develop the structured reflections prior to participating in the interviews. It would refresh their memories in a less demanding context. It worked in this way on all but two occasions where participants returned reflections following being interviewed. This created no perceivable problems whatsoever when it came to analysing the data. I was thereby able to cross-validate across the two datasets. I sought further data validation by returning transcripts to participants for confirmation that their views were accurately represented. It also gave participants the opportunity to suggest amendments before I started analysing the data.

I had earlier considered facilitating two focus groups of six participants each. I recognised that this might be problematic when I experienced difficulties identifying times suitable to both myself and participants. I thought it would be particularly stressful and difficult to organise six participants to commit to be in the same place at the same time. Further, when I did suggest the idea to participants, I sensed reluctance. Also, ethically I felt that participants had given a reasonable time commitment to be interviewed and to complete the reflections. As the interview transcripts and reflections were rich in data, I decided not to pursue the focus groups. As I reviewed the methodological literature, I was also impressed with the way relatively new technologies such as emails, and Skype, were being used to collect research data. I thought that this would be a logistically easy to manage data-collection technique. I rejected these potential data-collection methods as I felt that I may lose something by not having face-to-face interactions. I decided only to use email for follow-up questions. I now turn to my sampling strategy.
Recruiting Participants

Recruiting participants was done by purposively sampling participants whose experiences were congruent with the study aims (Cohen and Manion et al, 2000). Experience can never really be made sense of in the pre-reflective stage (Moustakas, 1994; Moran, 2000), but only reflectively as ‘past presence’ (van Manen, 1990, p. 36). Therefore, I also purposively recruited participants for whom there had been a hiatus of no less than six months and no more than four years between completing their BA degree and participating in the research (see appendix 7 for pen portraits of participants), experience would then have had time to have taken shape. At that point, in terms of the research question, *Can HE in FE be a transformative experience for non-traditional participants?*, they were then ‘fit for purpose’ for the research (May, 2001, p. 95).

Data Analysis

Once the interviewing stage was complete I then analysed the transcribed text to make sense of how participants ‘frame and mould their communication’ (Gibbs, 2008, p. 2). As a novice researcher, I found daunting the realisation that I must make coherent a relatively large volume of fairly heterogeneous data. To remain alert to the fact that participants’ accounts of their experiences could be very different, I adopted the baseline belief that I would uncover ‘multiple realities’ (Robson, 1993, p. 27), and ‘multiple interpretations’ (Creswell, 1998, p. 9). I applied a thematic analysis approach, which is described as less of a *method* – a set of predefined rules, than a *process* - a systematic approach to making sense of the transcripts (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4). Using a form of pattern coding (see Saldana, 2009), I looked for inferential words or phrases (see appendix 5) that told me something about how participants made meaning of particular experiences. When I identified a pattern developing, I then located these words or phrases into a bigger code, a meta-code, which then became a theme or construct. Each theme was a categorisation that identified
something important about the data; consistent phrases, expressions, or ideas, common among research participants (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008).

I also spent time cutting small fragments of text with particular phrases and ideas out of the transcripts, placing them in envelopes with different categories. I found this a more relaxed and practical approach to dealing with a lot of data. It helped me separate the fragments of data representative of themes from the verbosity of the transcribed text. My first task however, was to become intimate with the data through intensive reading and re-reading of the transcripts, seeking out words, sentences and statements; asking what they reveal about the experience of the participants (Creswell, 1998). I felt I captured a ‘complex, holistic picture’ (Creswell, 1998, p. 15) of participants’ wider ‘biographies’ and ‘life histories’ (Gibbs, 2007, p. x).

By way of example, a theme that was grounded through the data was, **Juggling Competing Commitments**; the identification that most of the participants had to juggle their learning with caring and/or work responsibilities. I recognised **Juggling Competing Commitments** was emerging as an important theme when I repeatedly heard participants lament the lack of opportunities to get on with reading, writing coursework and meeting others for collaborative group activities. To make this theme meaningful as part of a wider narrative, I then looked for meaningful insights throwing light on how competing commitments impacted, not only on participants’ learning, but also their wider social experiences, including for example, resistance from, and relationships with, other family members. I then selected fragments of transcripts that offered an accurate representation. At the data analysis stage the depth the researcher seeks can theoretically be positioned on a continuum between description of data and interpretation of data (van Manen, 1990). Boyatzis (1998) refers to the descriptive stage, the first stage of data analysis, as understanding my main
themes at the ‘manifest level’ (p. vii). Analysis at the manifest level focuses on the concrete phenomenological descriptions as they are expressed in the frames of reference of participants.

Analysis at what Boyatzis (1998) refers to as, the latent stage demands that I add a hermeneutic (interpretive) dimension. Interpreting the transcripts was important as it revealed a ‘fuller, more meaningful understanding’ (Moustakas, 1994, p. 10). Following my initial analysis at the descriptive (manifest) stage, I applied a hermeneutically intense analysis to develop a deeper level of ‘interpretive complexity’ (Vaismoradi and Turunen et al, 2013, p. 399). By interpreting the description of experience, I was able to determine the ‘underlying structures’ of experience and how they correspond to wider life experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).

Once the data had been analysed as richly (hermeneutically) as possible, I then returned to the literature to interrogate where the findings of my research converges with and diverges from the wider theoretical and empirical understanding, and particularly my conceptual framework. I followed a qualitative data analysis guide adapted from Creswell (1998),

1. All transcriptions should be first read in their entirety. I would suggest multiple readings to become really intimate with the data.

2. Significant statements should be highlighted from each transcript. I began to do this tentatively initially as I needed to be aware that new ideas would emerge with each re-reading.

3. Statements are formulated into meanings and then clustered into themes. Again, this is a process that required re-reading, re-thinking and much revision.
4. The themes form the basis of a narrative account. I have woven the themes into a ‘story’ of their life experiences, prior to and culminating in an analysis of participants’ potential experiences of transformation.

(p. 32)

The challenges I faced involved making sense of a relatively large volume of data. I found it particularly difficult discriminating between what parts of the data should be deemed important, and what offered little to the overall narrative. By taking a grounded approach to simultaneously collecting data and analysing data early, I was able to avoid ‘amassing volumes of general, unfocused data’ (Chamaz, 1996, p. 31). Nonetheless, I found data analysis daunting and time consuming; the research transcripts and reflections required significant reading and re-reading to ensure a deep exploration of key word, themes and possible metaphors. I also had to avoid seeking out data that supported my own pre-existing beliefs and biases (Finlay, 2009). I am aware that qualitative researchers applying a thematic analysis method can often tell us as much about the thinking of the analyst as about the thinking of the interviewee (Gomm, 2004). I had to hold in abeyance my own ideas about what themes should emerge and analyse instead what themes actually did emerge.

The focus of the remainder of this chapter is to consider some of the theoretical and practical issues I encountered in the methods I used. I first consider the limitations, but also the possibilities of phenomenology. I then discuss how I researched reflexively to eliminate, as far as possible, any potential bias which might creep into the research. Finally, I explore how I approach issues of generalisability, validity and reliability before describing how I ensured my research was undertaken ethically.
Research Limitations

I have investigated, in one particular context, the transformative potential of HE in FE. The first limitation I had to be aware of was that my research offers merely a small slice of social reality. It is important I recognise that small-scale phenomenological researches produce but one interpretation, and does not ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary, or even richer interpretation (Creswell, 1998). A second limitation lies with my choice of main data-collection technique.

Semi-structured interviewing represents an elastic and adaptable data-collection technique (Robson, 1993). Nonetheless, interviewees will only reveal what they are comfortable revealing. Subsequently, interviewing is open to criticism on the basis of an alleged lack of scientific rigour (Denscombe, 2010). It is almost impossible to posit generalisations beyond the research context. However, scientific rigour, including generalisations, abstracting or classifying are definitely not goals of phenomenology. Phenomenological research seeks the generation of plausible insights that can bring us into more immediate contact with our social worlds (Robson, 1993). Semi-structured interviewing was the most appropriate technique for collecting the type of data I needed. I also sought to use my research to inform and improve my own practice.

Phenomenological research conversations can be a platform for ‘deeper learning’ leading to a ‘heightened consciousness [and] perceptiveness’ of my own role in facilitating transformational learning experiences (van Manen, 1990, p. 168). I look forward to using my findings as an opportunity to open up conversations with colleagues, and other researchers, who also aspire to facilitate transformative learning experiences. I now consider how I managed research issues.
Research Reflexivity

My intimacy with the research context presents a paradox; often it is not that ‘we know too little’ about the contexts we research, but that ‘we know too much’ (van Manen, 1984, p. 46). I have reviewed some critical discourses about HE in FE. This can influence the way I think about, both my role as a practitioner in HE in FE, and my responsibilities as a researcher. I recognise that my views of FE in HE are influenced not only by analysis of these critical discourses, but also by my experiences of teaching in the college over a number of years. Reflection on my own experience provided stimulus for further exploration of the changing nature of the FE experience. In particular, a negative experience of change contributed to the intention to explore more fully what the FE in HE experience might mean for learners in the current time.

Experiencing education in such a negative way is where van Manen’s idea of knowing ‘too much’ (van Manen, 1984, p. 46), becomes problematic in terms of making it difficult to suspend my beliefs relating to the research context. Nonetheless, I have made a genuine attempt to ‘place in the foreground’ my researcher subjectivity by being honest regarding my subjective feelings about HE in FE. In this way I separate the interpretations that belong to me as researcher, and the interpretations that belong to participants (Finlay, 2012, p. 45). The only way I could deflect accusations of bias was to approach my research in a way that can be deemed truly reflexive by recognising that the outcome of the research will inevitably reflect some of the background milieu of my work context and some of my own values and assumptions (Gibbs, 2007).

Undertaking her own doctoral thesis, Carolan (2003) found herself facing a similar dilemma to my own. As a novice researcher she also brought significant values and feelings - a philosophical stance - into her research. Reflecting on how she could keep her philosophical stance in abeyance, she
decided that the researcher should subject themselves to a similar critical analysis and scrutiny as the research itself. Like Carolan, I had to find a way to separate myself from the attitudes, beliefs and values I have developed as an HE in FE teacher. I had to avoid attaching ‘common sense, pre-understandings’ to the significance of what interviewees were telling me (van Manen, 1990, p. 46). How I approached interviews with participants I had previously had a professional relationship with as teacher could have been problematic on another front. As an insider to the research site, I have an advantage insofar as I have easy access to participants and insider knowledge about what is worthy of investigation. I am disadvantaged however by the level of scrutiny that insider research, quite rightly attracts (Sykes and Potts, 2008). I was also aware that insider knowledge can influence my research in ways that can create distrust in research integrity (Smith and Holyan, 2008, p. 28). It was therefore incumbent on me, as an insider to the research site, to find a way to be truly reflexive as indicated earlier. I spent some time musing how I can address this troublesome issue. I decided that there was no solution that would satisfy all; that the researcher as insider could only do his or her best to suspend all knowledge and experience and investigate the phenomenon of interest with integrity and honesty. I explored the extent to which phenomenology might provide a way of addressing this issue.

In the terminology of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), it was important that I *bracket* or ‘place outside’ (van Manen, 1990, p. 47) my own pre-existing ideas, and values, so that I might gather data from a phenomenological perspective without ‘predefining participants’ experiences’ (Cassell and Symson, 2004, p. 195). I bracketed my *natural attitude* - what is revealed to me in my every day common sense experiences - to develop a ‘temporary indifference’ to the realities of my research focus (Holstein and Gubrium, 2005, p. 190). Husserl also refers to this as the *epoche*. In the epoche, everyday understandings of the ways of the world are temporarily suspended (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33).
Only by ‘bracketing out’ the epoche, how I understand and classify the constructs I may inevitably impose on the research, was I alert to the possibility of new ways of reframing ‘definitions and assumptions’ (Heron and Reason, 2006, p. 150). To subject my work, including my research approach, to critical scrutiny, I asked a trusted colleague to read and comment on my work as it progressed. I have researched reflexively. At the data analysis stage I subjected my transcripts to a number of analysis cycles to ensure that the points I made were supported by the data; that I was not just seeking out data that was congruent with my own experiences. Nevertheless, my colleague forced me to rethink my role as an objective observer on a number of occasions. It was at this point that the value of having a critical friend, someone trusted to consult during the research process, really became apparent. Taking note from her comments, I used regular opportunities to discuss my research with my colleague. I explained what I was planning to do prior to doing it. I sought her views on my research activity as I progressed. I wanted to carry out my research responsibly, ethically and sensitively, thus ensuring in some way that bias did not creep in (Gilgun, 2006).

Reviewing the literature on phenomenology, I had real ideological difficulties with bracketing in the rigorous sense I have suggested. I regard it as too rigid and possibly only appropriate for positivist approaches. Bracketing may simplify the research context for a novice researcher; I have chosen to apply it. Had I more research experience I might have followed phenomenologists who deny the possibility, or desirability, that researchers’ experiences should be fully ‘bracketed out’ of the research (Finlay, 2009, p. 7; Moustakas, 1994). My interpretation of phenomenology is that it is the rich and insightful inter-subjectivity that makes phenomenology such an exciting approach to research, and from where real phenomenological understanding emerges. Correspondingly, attempts to eliminate the effects of the researcher are futile; our time might be better spent ‘understanding them’ (May, 2001, p. 75). My experiences as a teacher inevitably influence my role...
as a researcher and, if I wish to undertake further phenomenological studies, I must learn to use these experiences in ‘my intellectual work’ (Wright Mills, 1959, p. 196).

**Other Research Issues**

There was also the concern about the extent to which participants could be influenced by my being there, as both researcher and their former teacher. How could I ensure they respond to questions honestly? By way of better illustrating the significance of this point, a study highlighted by Tim May succinctly warns of lurking dangers. The study involved white interviewers interviewing black interviewees about the extent to which they were satisfied with their social, political and economic lives. The study disclosed that when black interviewees were interviewed by white interviewers, they reported a ‘high level of satisfaction’ (May, 2001, p. 128). A more ‘radical opinion’ was expressed when the same interviewees were interviewed by black interviewers (May, 2001, p. 128). I addressed the concerns this example alerted me to, by spending time briefing participants, making it clear that the quality of the research data was contingent on their honesty (Cohen and Manion et al, 2000). I informed the participants that one of the aims of the research was to identify ways to develop an understanding of how the facilitation of the BA programme supports transformation and how instances of transformation might be increased. Participants checked the transcripts for authenticity, suggesting amendments where they felt the meaning of what was disclosed by them may have been misrepresented. I now turn to the issues of generalisability, validity and reliability.

Qualitative research is often evaluated within criteria frameworks more appropriate for quantitative research designs (Russell and Gregory, 2003; Denscombe, 2010). Concepts such as Generalisability, Validity and Reliability have real meaning in quantitative studies, but are largely irrelevant in qualitative research (Krefting, 1990, p. 214). I suggest we may need to use a different language to critique the credibility of qualitative studies. For example, generalisability is defined as the extent
to which research findings can be generalised ‘from the study sample to the entire population’ (Myers, 2000, p. 2). Validity is the claim that a research method measures what it claims to measure (May, 2001). Reliability is the suggestion that repetition of a research design will have a parallel repetition in further research findings (Robson, 1993). I would argue that in qualitative studies, positing generalisations in particular is problematic insofar as qualitative research is based on the premise of multiple realities and multiple interpretations (Creswell, 1998; Denscombe, 2010), and the impossibility of a ‘context free’ research site (Guba and Lincoln, 1982, p. 238).

The significance of qualitative research is that it connects to the real world and describes and critiques social phenomena within ‘social and historical contexts’ (Myers, 2000, p. 2). Validity claims, even applied to the quantitative studies they were designed for, can be ambitious. For example, socially generated constructs such as poverty or inequality can be challenged on the basis of what are they actually measuring? Equally, reliability may be achievable, to some extent, in the context of large-scale quantitative studies, but reliability is decidedly meaningless within context-specific, relatively small purposively sampled studies.

Working from a baseline belief that ‘... the mission of [phenomenological] research ... is to discover meaning and understanding rather than verify truth and predict outcomes’ (Myers, 2000, p. 3), I would prefer that the language of qualitative research be revised. Concepts like generalisability, validity and reliability might be replaced by any number of useful concepts, including credibility, trustworthiness and transferability (Creswell, 1998). For this research, believability, developing useful insights and ‘instrumental utility’ may be better concepts (Creswell, 1994, p. 163). I would also like to claim, what Clark Moustakas identifies as inter-subjective validity. Within the bounded context of my research, both myself and the participants have a ‘personal interest’, and concrete experience of the phenomena I have investigated (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59). There was ‘reciprocal
understanding’ as a consequence of our ‘co-presence’ in the research site (Moustakas, 1994, p. 57). A further relevant concept, for my research, is ‘typicality’ (Schofield, 2007, p. 189), the degree to which I can claim ‘extrapolation to similar situations’ (Golafshani, 2003, p. 604). Despite no two sites ever being exactly the same, I firmly believe that my research will resonate with the experiences of colleagues at other HE in FE colleges facilitating degree level study (Schofield, 2007).

**Researching Ethically**

I could not assume an inalienable right to carry out research with the participants (Israel and Hay, 2006). I needed first to create a climate of trust as my research could only progress contingent on the ‘good will’ of participants (Israel and Hay, 2006, p. 5). I was mindful that I respected the participants as ‘persons of worth’ who agreed to participate as a matter of ‘autonomous choice’ (Brewster-Smith, 2000, p. 6). I extended to participants due respect by being open and honest about what was required of their participation and how the data would be stored and used. I sought neither to coerce, nor influence in any way, participants’ decision to take part, or not, in the research. Second, I needed to obtain participants’ informed consent to participation in the research. Informed consent, defined as the knowing consent of a participant, free from any inducements, deceit, duress or coercion, was central to my research. Informed consent can only be assumed once participants have had the opportunity to ‘… agree or refuse to participate in the light of comprehensive information concerning the nature and purpose of the research’ (Homan, 1991, p. 69). Participants were briefed regarding the aims of the research, how the data will be collected, what is expected of them, how the data will be stored and, how the findings will potentially be disseminated.

I needed participants to have significant understanding of exactly what they were consenting to as I wanted them to be comfortable with their agreement to participate (Israel and Hay, 2006).
designed and asked participants to sign an informed consent form (see appendix 3) which attested to their understanding of what they were committing to. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw without need of explanation (Bower and de Gasparis, 1978). It was ethically necessary that participants had somewhere to turn if they became unhappy at part or all of the research process. The name of the college’s Research Manager was given; to be used in the event of participants’ being unhappy or distressed by any part of the research process.

The permission of participants was sought for the interviews to be digitally recorded. Completed transcripts were returned to participants for approval to satisfy them that they were not misrepresented. Assurances of anonymity and confidentiality were given. Anonymity and confidentiality are difficult to guarantee absolutely, but every precaution was taken including, the use of pseudonyms; all data was stored on a password-protected PC. Before participating in any interviews, I consulted the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011) and the Data Protection Act (1998) for guidance. Ethical approval for collecting data was sought from, and given by both the FE and HE college and the Open University Research Ethics Committees (see appendix 6a and 6b).

My own perspective of an ethical and democratic approach to interviewing parallels an approach suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2011). They suggest that when interviewing for research purposes the emphasis should be on ‘… working with interviewees as … conversational partners’ as opposed to treating them as ‘objects’ of research (p. 13 [original emphasis]). I therefore approached my research interviews as a shared experience, resulting in a shared construction of meaning; an activity done with as opposed to something done on my research interviewees. To be effective as a phenomenological interviewer I tried to develop a ‘phenomenological empathy’ (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 224). By building a relationship of trust and dialogue, it was anticipated I could close the gap
between the interviewer and interviewee. Consequently, I gave a lot of thought to planning the interviews. A potentially stress-producing encounter, for both interviewer and interviewee, was, to a significant extent, moderated by sensitive preparation. I also explained at length, the reason for the research and, how the success of the research was contingent on their participation. I wanted participants to feel that their contribution to the interview was genuinely valued and that they should view their role not as ‘passive subjects’, but as ‘active agents’ in the interview process (Heron and Reason, 2006, p. 144).

**Conclusions**

In this chapter I have described the philosophical assumptions which have guided my research approach. After reviewing the different assumptions and research paradigms, I have explained the rationale for my choice of research design and data collection and analysis techniques. I have argued that the criteria used to allow social and behavioural sciences to emulate the natural sciences is too sterile and not suitable for the multiple realities likely to be unearthed in phenomenological research. Phenomenology needs to be much more flexible and creative with the criteria upon which it is judged; I have tried to reflect this flexibility in this chapter. In the last part of the chapter, I have explained how I managed the main methodological issues I encountered, including how I undertook my research within a strict ethical framework. In the following chapter I will present the findings of my research.
Chapter 4: Findings and What They Mean

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of my analysis of the interview transcripts and participants’ reflections. I have presented the findings thematically to give the narrative a coherent shape (van Manen, 1990). The themes that have emerged from analysis of the research data are not accidental. They emerge naturally, to a significant extent; from the structure of my data-collection instruments (see appendices 1, 2 and 3). The interview schedule in turn, was designed to reflect the over-arching research question and the sub-questions, which I reiterate immediately below.

First, the main question,

Can HE in FE be a transformative experience for non-traditional participants?

And the sub-questions,

1. What lived experiences, including compulsory educational experiences, shape participants’ perception of returning to HE in FE

2. To what extent does the teaching and learning milieu influence the social, emotional, and intellectual growth of participants, and,

3. Were the participants transformed by their experience of HE in FE?

I have argued in the methodology chapter that what is important in phenomenological research is to allow participants to give meaningful expression to the understandings they attach to experience, using their own frames of reference. Consequently, I have placed a significant emphasis on the voice of the participants. I have also anonymised participants by substituting their real identities for pseudonyms.
Where required, I interpose with small extracts from the literature previously presented and for interpretive analysis, my conceptual framework. I use the metaphor of a *transformative journey*, leading to a perspective transformation, to show how past experiences can shape the individual, only for the same individual to be re-shaped by subsequent experiences of, in this instance, learning in HE in FE. As my research is phenomenological, I really wanted to emphasise experiences. Therefore, the findings are arranged under the following headings,

1. *Experiences of Compulsory Education*
2. *Experiences of Returning to Education*
3. *Experiences of juggling competing commitments*
4. *Experiences of Structures of Support*
5. *Experiences of Transformation*

It is anticipated that the first research sub-question - *What lived experiences, including compulsory educational experiences, shape participants’ perception of returning to HE in FE?* will be answered in the first three themes indicated above. The second sub-question - *To what extent does the teaching and learning milieu influence the social, emotional, and intellectual growth of participants?*, will be answered in the fourth theme, when I present participants’ experiences of structures of support. The final sub-question - *Were participants transformed by the experience of HE in FE?*, will for the most part be answered in theme 5, but the processes of transformation will begin to emerge in theme 4.
Theme 1. *Experiences of Compulsory Education*

Research has shown that negative experiences of compulsory education can have a consequent negative impact on students who return to HE in FE later in life (Gallacher and Crossan et al, 2002; Reay and Crozier et al, 2010). In the context of a *transformative journey* metaphor this becomes an important theme; particularly when my data unearthed that compulsory education was, for the most part, reported as a negative experience. This theme is where I start exploring the sub-question, ‘what lived experiences, including compulsory educational experiences, shape participants’ perception of returning to HE in FE?’ Participants reported that they were ‘not interested’ in learning at school or experienced compulsory education as being, ‘not good at all’ or ‘unenjoyable’. The language of, ‘hate’ or ‘hated’ was used by some participants. Satisfaction was expressed when compulsory schooling came to an end,

*I was never very interested at school ... I could not wait to get away from school and was really happy when it finally happened* (Irene)

*My experience at school wasn’t good at all ... it was just unenjoyable in every sense ... the last two years of school I would very, very rarely turn up ... I just wanted away* (Janice)

It would be misleading to suggest that participants, who disliked school, did so *all* of the time.

Following further analysis, it became evident that disillusionment could be experienced as a *process* whereby early enthusiasm and interest declined, later to be displaced by feelings of alienation,

*I liked [school] at first ... by the end of primary school I was doing all right. First year at high school was all right, and then by second year ... I just got fed up with it all and started to really hate it* (Shelley)
I really quite enjoyed school for a long time, but things happen and you just, well, sort of get bored with it … I think I just lost interest … other things just become more important (Mary)

Elaine had a, ‘great experience’ at primary school and enjoyed secondary school, ‘up to about second year’. However, as she progressed through high school she started to, ‘lose my way’ and, … went completely off the rails. I went to a school in quite an impoverished area, and it was easy to go off the rails, and … that’s what I did (Elaine)

I found that for some participants, it may have been less about how they felt about school, more about how they felt about themselves. Angela and Lynne, for example report feelings of being, ‘inadequate’ with regards to studying; a perceived deficit experienced as a sense of discomfort or shame,

I felt I was always behind and that the others in my class were always that bit ahead of me … I don’t think I ever felt [compulsory schooling] was that important and then I got a bit embarrassed to put it mildly (Angela)

I never felt very confident at all. I always had the idea that it [studying] was beyond me and that the others were much brighter … it upset me sometimes (Lynne)

Drilling deeper into what this all means for learning, I found feelings of inadequacy had a manifest impact on general self-efficacy and a latent but associated impact on commitment to studying.

I hated school … I lacked in confidence as a teenager and I felt that exams and things were forced upon me … I kind of took the route to just think, ‘ah well, I’ll no bother studying, I’ll just sit the exams and see what happens’ (June)
The overwhelming majority of participants completed compulsory schooling in the 1970s or 1980s. The teaching and learning context may have been significantly different. As a consequence of less statutory obligations, there would possibly be less emphasis on supporting struggling students. This naturally has consequences,

... I wasn’t able to do the lessons very well and I was unsupported in what I was doing so I didn’t want to be there ... (Janice)

I wasn’t encouraged to study really by anybody that worked in the school, so I never did very well at school ... (June)

I offer one further example to illustrate the consequences of how a poor attitude on the part of an education professional, might have a negative impact on the morale of the learner. Despite breaking a leg while studying for her higher exams, the passing of which determines whether university is an option or not, a visit to her guidance teacher to seek support ended with Angela being told, ‘do not bother coming back [as] you are wasting your time’ (Angela). She did in fact pass her higher exams. However, because of not feeling supported, she determined to give up on school in the fifth year. Angela subsequently left school to participate in a Youth Training Scheme (YTS) programme. She reports that she drifted for a period, found it difficult to settle on a career and, ‘... flitted between painting and decorating, and hairdressing’ (Angela).

Further, instances of overt discrimination by educational professionals were reported. For example, Linda recalls a teacher who would separate the class into the, ‘thick’ group and the ‘clever’ group (Linda). This choice of language may have consequences for pupils contingent on what category, ‘thick’ or ‘clever’ a pupil was labelled. Participants’ perceptions of why some pupils were favoured at the expense of others, was located decisively in social class relations. Therefore, an
unanticipated theme to emerge was class bias. Framing some pupils’ relations with education professionals very strictly in class terms, Shelley suggested that,

... teachers didn’t spend much time with us. They just helped the clever pupils ... the ones from the posher areas ... they knew that their parents would complain if their kids weren’t being taught properly. Whereas, nobody would ever complain about me not getting any education ... it was definitely class biased (Shelley)

In an educational context where it was perceived by participants that teaching staff placed little value on the learning experience of some pupils, where encouragement and support is at a premium, it is hardly surprising that alienation occurred at some stage of participants’ compulsory education. Alienation from learning may be explained by Bourdieu’s (1973) concept of habitus, or Sartre’s claim that our facticity, how we are ‘thrown into the world’, determines our perceptions of who we are (Wartenberg, 2008, p. 28). A working-class habitus, or being thrown into the world as working-class, and all that involves including the cultural expectations of the school, can hinder our motivation to learn (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Brookfield, 1986).

The participants’ perceptions were that some teachers cared little about some of the participants’ education. Shelley laments the improbability that anybody would ‘complain about her not getting any education’. Negative interaction with teachers, including reported put-downs, will quite naturally have a deleterious impact on the school experience. I offer a conclusion that this is exactly what has happened with some of the participants; teachers just did not take their educational needs seriously enough. They were seen as not having, and therefore not worth being given, the opportunity to accumulate cultural capital. Consequently, notwithstanding some positive early experiences, some participants had been turned off compulsory education quite late in their school careers.
One might be tempted to suggest that this was all a long time ago; is it not time to get over it and just do better with your second chance education? On the contrary, research has uncovered some potentially serious consequences associated with negative experiences of compulsory schooling. For example, non-traditional students can return to education with low self-efficacy (Reay and Ball et al, 2002; Reay and Crozier et al, 2010). They can often experience high levels of anxiety, and low levels of confidence (Walker, 2010). Getting back into a classroom, after a lengthy hiatus, can be a difficult experience for non-traditional returners. Memories of experiences of compulsory schooling can re-surface to intrude on the learning experiences of adult returners (Reay and Ball et al, 2002; Reay and Crozier et al, 2010). This is why it was important that, as part of this journey, I explored participants’ experiences of compulsory education. More optimistically, a few participants reported their compulsory schooling experiences more favourably,

... I was, I suppose what you’d call a grade ‘A’ student or something, so I enjoyed going to school ... school was a really good experience for me (Sandra)

Debbie also reports that her experience of compulsory education, ‘was positive’ and she stayed in school until fifth year. She left school at 17, only, ‘because that’s when my nursing training began’ (Debbie). Despite David, Mary and Elaine also reporting, ‘liking school’, or having positive experiences, all three indicate important caveats; enjoying compulsory schooling was juxtaposed with some disruption or significant loss of interest. For example, David suggests that compulsory schooling, ‘started off enjoyable. I went to the same school [in Scotland] right through primary and into high school’ (David). His mother remarried when David was still at high school. He reports that he ended up enrolling at three different schools as a consequence of his stepfather relocating the family to England to take up work opportunities. At which point,
Mary, whose Scottish parents emigrated, went to a high school for girls in New Zealand. The experience, though not perfect, was much less traumatic than David’s, however,

... because I had such [high] grades going in to high school, they put me in the top stream class which was French and Latin, neither of which ... I really [had] a passion for ... needless to say I didn’t do very well (Mary)

The participants who reported compulsory schooling more favourably came from more aspirational familial experiences. David’s parents, for example, sent him to boarding school to help prepare him for university despite him prematurely, ‘leaving [because] it is not what I wanted’ (David). Sandra’s parents, as will be seen later, were very keen for her to go to university. According to Sandra, her father felt education was the best way, ‘to make something of yourself’. These participants were ‘thrown’ into the world (Wartenberg, 2008, p. 28), into circumstances more sympathetic to education; certainly more so than the participants who feature in the first few paragraphs of the chapter. There was an ambition, on the part of aspirational parents, that their progeny should do well in education. Viewing the situation through a Bourdieusian lens, habitus determines your feelings about, and your relations to, particular cultural goods, such as education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

It would be anticipated that participants from families with high aspirations would do reasonably well; they may possess a relatively high degree of cultural capital. This may not be so evident when our gaze is turned to participants who do not come from high aspiration families. Families, who for
whatever reasons, have lower aspiration are likely to aim lower and achieve less, as a consequence of less cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). To explore this further, what emerged was a distinct attitudinal dichotomy characterised by real aspiration for their child’s education on the part of some parents; real apathy for education on the part of others. Linda, for example, cannot remember her mother ever attending parents’ nights. When she once asked why, her mother responded, ‘I just [didn’t] go; there was nothing they [could] tell me about you that I don’t already know’ (Linda). If she had chosen to go, laments Linda, her mother might have ‘realised just how badly I was doing’. Angela intimated that her parents never showed any, ‘real interest’ in her doing ‘anything worthwhile at school ... there was just no support there’ (Angela). Angela recalls, ‘often’ being told by her parents that they thought she was not able; statements such as, for example, ‘you cannot do it, you are not going to make anything of yourself’ (Angela). June’s parents, ‘didn’t encourage me at all’; they thought she should, ‘leave school and get a job’. June attributed her parents’ attitude to education to their own work experiences,

... my dad worked in a dock yard and my mum worked in an old folk’s home ... [they] expected me to find a job, any job ... No encouragement was given to succeed in education (June)

One unanticipated theme I uncovered was that negative parental attitudes to education can be a gendered phenomenon. It emerged that parents could be enthusiastic about further and higher education, but only to the extent that it was male participation that inspired them,

My mum felt education was for boys and encouraged and supported my brother through many years of college ... education for me was never an option ... I always felt that being responsible for looking after your family and your man was my mum’s idea of being a woman (Irene)
... I had three brothers and it was more like the brothers had to get [education] ... But me! ... They decided a hairdresser – [I] could be a hairdresser ... (Lynne)

Research has found that gendered attitudes can appear ‘uncritically assimilated’ (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8) and ‘relatively permanent’ (Swartz, 1997, p. 197). Gendered attitudes and assumptions can be projected by parents on to their progeny (the participants) in a way that appears largely unchallenged,

... it was always mum being at home’, which made [Linda] feel, therefore, when I have kids I should stay at home ... I always felt you learn by example (Linda)

Despite Linda’s father teaching in FE, and her brothers going on to achieve degrees, she revealed that she was the seventh child of seven; by the time it came for her parents to be interested in her education, she felt they were, ‘... a wee bit more relaxed about things ... there was nothing expected of me’ (Linda). Linda realising somewhat late, that she had not made the best of her schooling, suggested to her parents that she should, ‘stay on a couple more years’ so she could at least achieve a few qualifications. She was ‘firmly told’,

... go out and get a job! ... they had no other real aspiration for me ... I think there was a difference in how the boys and girls were treated in my family ... (Linda)

Linda’s experiences are unfortunate as research has indicated that having parents who have a positive perspective of education, impacts positively on their children’s’ perspective of education and educational achievement (cf. Wainwright and Marandet, 2006; Smith and Wayman, 2009). What was even more surprising was that equally, husbands of adult returners can have gendered attitudes to learning; this was reported by three participants. For example, Shelley, whose husband
is from abroad, said that in his culture of origin the woman’s place is, ‘at the kitchen sink’ and that anything in the public sphere, ‘is a man’s world’. Shelley said that it, ‘was challenging at times’, that her husband never really,

... appreciated what I was trying to achieve. He is kind of old fashioned and sort of his thinking is like ‘the wee woman stands at the sink doing the dishes or standing at the cooker or doing something like that’. I can remember getting really fed up with it ... it was a really trying time for us (Shelley)

I felt I needed to include a brief illustration of the gendering of attitudes. I will explore the theme in more detail in a later section. I would now like to explore some positive attitudes to the benefits of education that emerged from the data. For example, Debbie was brought up in an environment where education was valued. Her parents,

... believed that education was the route into making a success of yourself ... [Subsequently] I think we [siblings] really enjoyed school and tried to do well. I left school at seventeen to train to be a nurse (Debbie)

A further example of a positive perspective on education is Sandra’s parents, who had an, ‘expectation that I was to go off to University’. Her dad was particularly disappointed that Sandra did not progress to university as he saw this as ‘doing something really worthwhile’. What irritated Sandra’s dad was,

... at that particular time my best friend went to university and did what my dad thought I should have been doing. He was really disappointed that I didn’t do some more education when I left school ... (Sandra)
I have thus far offered a descriptive analysis of the participants’ experiences of their compulsory education experiences. I would now like to deepen my analysis by viewing their experiences through a more interpretive lens, and within the conceptual framework set out in the literature review. Prior experiences help shape how non-traditional students think about further and higher education (Dweck, 2007, 2012) and their perceived ability to fit into what can be viewed as an alien environment (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Reay and Crozier et al, 2010). The participants, with a few exceptions, might be rightly referred to as working class – their structures of feelings are analogous to the structures of feeling of their parents, who have spent their lives as homemakers or wage earners in, for the most part, manual or relatively unskilled jobs. Subsequently, the participants also aspire to the stability of quite modest terms and conditions, in extremely useful, if unremarkable, types of employment. In Bourdieusian terms, the participants are living breathing artefacts of cultural reproduction in that their aspirations may rarely exceed those of their parents (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Cultural reproduction has a plasticity however that may change with new experiences such as participating in further or higher education.

The research participants have, in most instances, presented an anti-education position as children in compulsory education. This is almost certain to be a consequence of negative habitus dispositions concerning education, assimilated from parents (Bourdieu, 1973, 1988; Swartz, 1997). Their sense of alienation from the values and possibilities of a good compulsory education was often surpassed by their parents’ lack of interest or, more particularly, lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). The cultural capital they lack is important as a ‘resource’ emerging from a cultural appreciation tied to, for example, ‘cultural awareness, aesthetic preference’, which allows those who have it to make the most of ‘the school system’ (Swartz, 1997,
p. 75; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Working class families traditionally, ‘lack the cultural capital’, necessary to fully appreciate the benefit of post-compulsory education (Swartz, 1997, p. 192).

A lack of parental support was, in a number of instances, mediated by a traditional gendered division of domestic labour. For example, in the thought of de Beauvoir, a female life, denied the opportunity to participate in ‘creative projects’ (Fabijancic, 2008, p.447), is characterised by immanence. Immanence is understood as woman’s limitations expressed as her primary role in the domestic sphere; meaning the unappreciated labour of housework and childrearing (de Beauvoir, 1989). Domestic labour does not require participation in education. Subsequently, there was evidence of gendered attitudes, expressing itself as real resistance to the participants’ return to HE in FE. Not just that participants were thrown into the world as working class, which had a consequence for the support they might anticipate in compulsory education, but that they were thrown into the world as women, was a determinant on the support they might anticipate at home. Five participants’ parents and three of their spouses never, ‘appreciated what [they] were trying to achieve’ (Shelley). Finding one’s place within the private sphere of the home, ‘woman’s enclosure in being’ (Direk, 2011, p. 61), was often viewed by some family members as ‘biological fate’ (Wartenberg, 2006, p. 119).

As a consequence, Peggy, a module teacher, observed that the type of students we attract, almost exclusively female and working class, do not normally emerge from backgrounds where education is, ‘highly prized’. A natural outcome, according to Programme Leader, Dawn’s observations is that they are rarely ‘high achievers’ in their time at school. What I can offer as a rejoinder, however, is that once back in HE in FE, the participants who experienced resistance from other family members, very quickly developed resilience; giving up on learning was not an option.
Summary

In sum then; some of the participants reported negative experiences of compulsory education. Low levels of confidence or feelings of inadequacy were cited as the main contributory factors. The perceived social class attitudes and biases of compulsory education professionals were also deemed important. Of the participants who reported enjoying school, three reported disruptions to their schooling, which impacted negatively on their overall experiences. Just over half of the participants suggested a lack of parental interest. This was attributed, in some instances, to parents’ working-class backgrounds and gendered perspectives of education; a few participants also reported that the education of male members of the family was deemed important, but much less so for them. Some of the participants’ parents, including the only male participant, David, had some or high expectations that on leaving school, they should progress to post-compulsory education.

Collectively, the participants’ experience indicates that returning to education is an extremely complex phenomenon. Despite a lengthy hiatus away from learning, experiences of compulsory education continue to influence their perspectives on their suitability to return. This will be emphasised further as we continue the transformative journey.
Theme 2. Experiences of Returning to Education

The second set of themes to emerge from the data emphasised, first, the experiences and structures of feeling informing participants’ return to education. Second, the anxieties, and aspirations that mature non-traditional students experience as they consider returning. Third, how do participants make meaning of the choices of where to study? The narrative will show that participants return with an array of dichotomous feelings of preparedness or being unready, and feelings of confidence or doubt, which can influence both their decision to return to education, and choice of education provision. The sub-question, ‘what lived experiences, including compulsory educational experiences, shape participants’ perception of returning to HE in FE?’ continues to be relevant. I first evaluate why participants consider a return to education.

Reasons for returning to education included for some a career change, an opportunity to work towards a career they may find fulfilling. Others felt that, after many years assuming the main responsibility for parenting; it was now their time to do something for themselves. A return to education, therefore, precipitated what Mezirow terms a ‘disorienting dilemma’ (2000, p. 22), which might include one or more of the following: family growing up; divorce; career change or loss of career *inter alia*. Disorienting dilemmas occur when the individual questions the direction their life is taking. For example, Janice’s youngest son had started attending nursery and her oldest son was getting ready for his exams at high school. She no longer saw,

> where I was going to fit in ... how I was going to be needed ... everybody, I think, needs a purpose; they need to feel needed ... I couldn’t see where I was going to be needed anymore (Janice)

Sandra had a very different disorienting dilemma. She had worked self-employed for many years; she now felt it, ‘*was time to slow down a bit*’ and wanted to do something different. Although she
has had very different experience to that of Janice; where the experiences converge is in the
encounter with a disorienting dilemma and the subsequent desire for a lifestyle change,

*I came back because my life was consumed by my work ... I sort of just decided that I needed
to slow down, to do something different ... I was never going to go to Weightwatchers or
Keep Fit so education was next* (Sandra)

Disorienting dilemmas, therefore, can have very different antecedents. Although coming from very
different experiences and backgrounds, Sandra and June both sought the same effect – new
experiences and new meanings to their lives. In the language of transformation, they sought new
ways to take more control of their lives; to reshape the direction they felt their lives were taking
(Mezirow, 1978b, 1981; Daloz, 1999). Most participants cited qualifications for work opportunities
as a motivating factor for a return to education. For example, Debbie intimated that following a
divorce, and a lengthy hiatus away from a previous career in nursing, she,

*... needed to get something behind me. I didn’t want to go back and do training to get back
on the register to be a nurse because I wanted a BA and the reason I came back [to college]
... there was the possibility of a BA at the end of it* (Debbie)

Mary had been made redundant and, having already determined that she, ‘hated working’ at the
type of work she had previously been doing, decided she needed a, ‘new challenge’. Mary elected
to take a year out to go to college and get, ‘re-skilled for a new career’. At the outset, she believed
that, ‘I will do an HNC and get back to work ... something that was more people-orientated’ (Mary).
Unanticipated, but serendipitous, experiences informed Irene’s desire for change. In one of her
former jobs as a taxi driver, Irene had enjoyed transporting children with learning difficulties - ‘I had
a good rapport with them’. Irene thought, ‘I could work with these kids’ and spotted the
opportunity for a career change, which involved achieving,
... the necessary qualifications required to work directly with young people ... I wanted to get the skills and knowledge to try and make a difference in peoples’ lives (Irene)

Some of the participants were already working in what I will generalise as ‘helping relationships’. Naturally, desiring to progress further into more senior positions, they regarded an advanced qualification as a route to promotion. For example,

*I had been working in a school and I couldn’t get any further ... I didn’t have an academic qualification to get a promotion so that’s what encouraged me to go [back to college] (June)*

As employers are increasingly demanding more, or higher, qualifications, Angela needed a work-based qualification, ‘so that I could keep up my registration [to practice]’ (Angela). An unexpected theme to emerge, despite having been previously documented, is some participant’s desire to be good role models for their children. This was a recurring theme in two particular large-scale research studies, undertaken with undergraduates (Wainwright and Marandet, 2006, 2010; Smith and Wayman, 2009). Correspondingly, I found this to be a compelling stimulus in the motivation of the participants. For example,

[I] wanted to retrain for work and get out of the benefits system. I wanted to be an example to my girls and also prove that I was worth something (Irene)

... I wanted to set a good example to my children ... I did not want to be seen as another single parent living off the state. I was capable of taking care of my own children ... I want my children to get a good education too ... [previously] it wouldn’t have crossed my mind to encourage my children to the level that I encourage them to now (Linda)

Looking beyond education to the broader panorama of whole-life experiences, Elaine reported that she felt she was, ‘setting a good example to my daughters’, within the context of a wider social sphere,
... they don’t just have to get married and have children, there is a bigger world out there ... there’s more they can be doing with their lives ... so yeah, I feel a bit proud, I am a good example to my children (Elaine)

Lynne equally, felt that if her children observed her, ‘making something of myself’ they might perceive it as, ‘just the normal thing to do’. She felt she was a good influence when, ‘it came to continuing with their [own] learning’ (Lynne). Bourdieu (1973) has argued that being a good influence can be the catalyst for accumulating cultural capital and a subsequent elevation in social status. Cultural enrichment manifests as cultural reproduction and will be experienced by subsequent generations (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Notwithstanding the documented benefits that one should set a good example to ones’ children, research by Archer and Leatherwood (2002), Reay (2003), Kevern and Webb (2004) and Cappleman-Morgan (2005) all concluded that women returners can be reproached by other family members for neglecting the family unit. This happened to a small minority of the participants initially, but, confronted with the tenacity of the female participants in this study, their husbands eventually became more appreciative of their wives’ learning aspirations. For example, Lynne and Angela share their experiences,

_He humphed a bit at first ‘cause he didn’t like it. I think he was just used to getting his own way ... he saw me achieving though ... I think in the end he was really proud of me (Lynne)_

_He wasn’t happy at all about me coming back but I felt I had to do it ... I just wanted to do it so bad ... I needed it for my job, but most of all I wanted to do it for me (Angela)_

Participants could subject themselves to intense pressures. For example, Linda was determined to earn a degree. She wanted, simultaneously, ‘to be more active’ in her children’s lives than her mother had been in hers – ‘I wanted to do things differently’. Linda confronted an important caveat - she felt, ‘selfish ... guilty leaving them ... I felt I was neglecting [my children] in some way’ (Linda).
These are feelings consistent with the findings of a study by Pascall and Cox (1993), where participants reported a ‘sense of unease’ as they consider themselves prioritising their own needs over the needs of their families (p. 26; cf. Wainwright and Marandet, 2006, 2010; Smith and Wayman, 2009).

Through the lens of my conceptual framework, if participants in HE in FE genuinely seek experiences that could become transformative (Mezirow, 2000) they must participate wholeheartedly in the kind of ‘creative project’, such as studying to earn a degree, that gives life ‘meaning, direction and structure’ (Fabijancic, 2011, p. 447). Female participants in HE in FE must get over the hurdle of guilt precipitated by caring responsibilities. Returning to HE in FE and, subsequently earning a degree, may be the most significant of creative projects; a real catalyst for a transformed life (Mezirow 1978b, 1981). HE in FE has the power to help us transform or ‘transcend [our] particular situation’ (Fabijancic, 2011, p. 449). Transcending current modes of being-in-the-world is existentially a more human lived experience (Weberman, 2011). Nonetheless, it was found that after a lengthy hiatus away from education, returning can be a traumatic experience. Three participants experienced particular difficulties,

The first day I nearly walked out of the class ... I thought, ‘how am I going to do this?’ ... I was petrified. I wasn’t sure if I was going to be capable of sitting in the classroom and sitting still for a whole lesson. I wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to manage that (Janice)

Janice’s difficulties, particularly at third year degree level, may have been a response to another aspect of education that was troubling her; her poor perception of her own academic ability, possibly exacerbated by an early encounter with an FE teacher who had suggested that she, ‘would struggle as [her] writing was not academic enough’. Feeling that she was,

... way out of my depth ... I very nearly pulled out until my husband and I had a talk and I decided to try it until Christmas. If it wasn’t going well I could admit defeat but be proud of myself for trying. I decided that to not try was failure (Janice)
Angela experienced similar emotions. She felt ‘terrified’ at the prospect of returning,

_... I think that [returning] was one of the hardest things ... I basically thought I was thick. Sounds quite harsh but because I hadn’t had any encouragement I didn’t believe in myself ... I really wasn’t sure that I could do this (Angela)_

Angela disclosed that she feared not, ‘fitting in’ to the dynamic of the class. Fear of not, ‘fitting in’ was also a metaphor used by Irene. Irene found, however, that despite being the oldest in her class, she was quickly accepted by younger students and fitted in quite well. Not before a shaky start however, as she explains remembering her first day returning to college,

_... I just stood at the door and looked and thought I cannot go in. I went in to a sweat and everything. I felt like just turning and just going. It was easier to turn and just go home because I didn’t know what I was doing or where I was going (Irene)_

Work and family concerns were the predominant issue for most of the participants, when making choices about where to study. For example,

_... to be travelling [to university] would have been almost impossible. I actually had to still get my daughter out her bed; so there wasn’t a choice there. It was essential that I stayed local and the college was ideal for what I needed at home (Angela)_

June had relatively intense caring responsibilities as her youngest child had, ‘quite complex disabilities ... she needs 24-hour care ... I just need to be near in case of emergencies’ (June). Irene discloses that parenting responsibilities, juxtaposed with a need to work and earn money, made HE in FE difficult, often a real chore - ‘if I did not have to work, I would have enjoyed studying more, and been able to put more into it’ (Irene). Subsequently,
It was more practical and realistic for me to go to a local college and go to work. The main issue was money. I was a single parent at the time and I could not afford to travel and I could not afford to pay for a lot of books (Irene)

The local college suited Irene as she felt universities were ‘for posh people with money’. She conceded further, ‘I could have found a way to go to university’, however she added,

I felt very intimidated by universities … I felt I did not fit in … my accent would not let me fit in academically at university … I just felt the whole class thing. I had this idea that universities [are] where people with nice accents and from families with money go … working class students go to the local college (Irene)

Two other participants, particularly, emphasise a class-based idea of what a university was. It was, ‘a class thing … nobody in my neighbourhood [went] to university … it was alien to us’ (Shelley).

June and Janice were concerned about the formality and stuffiness of university,

… in comparison to university, [college] was more intimate … it’s much more formal in a university … more people from good schools and professional families. I don’t really know how I would cope with that … it might have stopped me from achieving anything (June)

it’s scary, it’s this big building that only really, really clever people go to … that was my perception; only really clever rich people go to Universities … it [would be] very authoritarian … very intimidating (Janice)

The narrative above is saturated with negativity and expressions of otherness – the others are, ‘hooray Henry’s’ in Irene’s terms. It is perfectly fine for [specified] others to go to university but it is ‘not for people like us’ (Reay, 1998, p. 526; Reay and Crozier, 2010); we are not worthy of it. In Bourdieusian terms these participants are the quintessential products of cultural reproduction
inasmuch as they find it difficult to aspire to more than replicating, in many ways, the life experiences of their parents and peers (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Despite her parents’ aspirations for her to be the, ‘first one of the family to go to university’, Elaine suggested that, in the area she lived in, it was not the norm for people to go to university - ‘the majority of people didn’t go to uni[versity] in my class’ (Elaine). Dawn, the Programme Leader, emphasised the motivational aspects of returning to HE in FE. She described our students as generally having, ‘a very distinct career path’ in the short term – ‘they come to us to get a qualification for a job, for many almost any job’ (Dawn, Programme Leader). As they progress and achieve however, ‘they want a wee bit more …’, in terms of ‘aspiring to earn their degree, and then, as their confidence grows further, use it as a platform to prepare themselves for participation in post-graduate professional study’ (Dawn, Programme Leader). For most students, Dawn believes that HE in FE is, at the time of participants’ return to education, ‘a more appropriate way of learning for them’. She suggests that,

... we get young students who didn’t particularly like the school learning and were not that academically gifted, or struggle with a perceived idea of themselves [as students]. And we get a lot of mature students who return for second chance learning who ... left school for a whole variety of reasons ... we get a real variety of students ... but most change after they have been with us for a while ... they want more and more from their education (Dawn, Programme Leader)

Other participants chose a local college because at the point of returning to education their ambitions were as yet still quite modest. For example, Angela reported that she,

... wanted a work-based qualification ... I knew at that time, being in childcare, you need to have a formal qualification so that you can register ... I know you can do degrees in childcare [at university] ... I didn’t really believe I could go that far ... I still did not have that level of self-esteem (Angela)
Research which has uncovered similar self-concepts has suggested that non-traditional students, in comparison to traditional students, are seldom prepared for higher education (Ng and Forbes, 2009; Hawkins and Mill, 2010). They are just not up to the critical challenges of higher education (Leatherwood, 2005; Burton and Golding Lloyd et al, 2011). Speaking about first coming into her first year (HNC), and being, ‘definitely enthusiastic’, Shelley confessed that,

*I never really knew what it [HE] was. I had been through school and never ever sat an ‘O’ grade, so I never knew if I could write an assessment or actually pass it ... I had never had a test to see* (Shelley)

Shelley never doubted her, ‘sheer motivation’, although she experienced returning to learning as a, ‘bit daunting’. She questioned if she could ‘cope academically’, but she still felt that she had, ‘to go through the door and do this’ (Shelley). Debbie, who had studied to be a nurse 25 years before, thought she might be in a position of strength because of previous experiences of learning. As time to return to HE in FE approached however, she became, ‘apprehensive and I didn’t know if I could still do it’ (Debbie).

Carol Dweck (2007, 2012) has suggested that a growth ‘mind-set’ is an important factor in determining success. To varying extents, all the participants had growth mind-sets. June, for example, ‘was really determined to work hard ... I really believed I could do it and I was prepared to work hard to get it’ (June). As she progressed, she began to make links between theory and her potential future professional career. June very quickly moved beyond the instrumental reasons for qualifications, hinting rather at an altogether deeper mode of engagement with education,
I wanted to learn more. I don’t believe that just because you’ve got a certificate that that is it – there’s all sorts of other things in life that go with education ... Like your attitude, your outlook on life, your experience, your values and your skills. What you can bring to a job, it’s not just about a certificate, definitely not ... (June)

Janice had a, ‘particularly difficult’ start to her BA year, but stuck at it and, to her surprise – she achieved an ‘A’ for an important piece of work. This was a particularly positive achievement, which had a significant impact on her mind-set,

You could have scraped me off the ceiling ... I initially thought I had failed ... I was then given an ‘A’ ... I cried a lot when I got that ‘A’ ... I began to believe in myself and I began to think that I might just be able to do this (Janice)

From my own observations, students who are motivated soon get into the rhythm of studying at university level fairly quickly. One participant reflects, ‘confidence was building as we were progressing ... passing [coursework] helps confidence, and it just gets higher as you go’ (David).

Mary said that,

As I progressed, I started to get more feedback for my work. One of the tutors actually asked me if she could use one of my essays as an exemplar for future students ... that really helped my confidence (Mary)

Transition from sub-degree to degree level can be something of a problem for students. It is a different style of engagement. Rigid deadlines, critical and analytical essay writing, for example can be initially extremely difficult for many students (Burke, 2012). Supporting students to make the transition from a college to a university mode of participation is one of our biggest challenges. Teaching staff describe some of the difficulties students encounter,
They have to be more critical … the academic standards require a much more evaluative, critical thinking mode which is very new to the students accustomed to the college system … [where students] are used to churning out wee bits of information to satisfy a tick box marking scheme (Dawn, Programme Leader)

The leap from prescriptive (SQA) learning to assessment of their critical thinking is quite a jump … autonomous learning has to come to the fore quite quickly. Lots of independent reading is required from the off which can be quite overwhelming for some [students] (Peggy, Module Teacher)

Overwhelming it may be, however the task of the HE in FE teacher is to deliver a university-like experience on the college campus. Unfortunately, our professional experiences concur with the empirical literature. It has been argued that vocational learning at HND level leaves students underprepared for ‘methods of assessment in academic HE programmes’ (Hatt and Baxter, 2003, p. 18). Further, it has been found that ‘competency-based learning’ is incongruent with the more ‘theoretical orientation’ typical of university or academic type learning (O’Shea and Lysaght et al, 2012, p. 263). Consequently, Mary felt that it was a, ‘… small step from the HNC to the HND … a much bigger step up into the BA’. June said of the transition,

*It was a lot different …It’s a different type of writing. That took a wee while to get my head round - writing critically … it became easier and I enjoyed doing the essays towards the second semester. Once I got over the first semester and kind of understood exactly what was expected I quite enjoyed doing my essays* (June)

The following two very different testimonies attest to the diversity of experience. Angela, despite finding studying at sub-degree level, relatively easy was, ‘surprised’ to find,

*The BA was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I would actually say I was very naive when I started it. I had passed everything up to that point with no difficulties so thought*
how hard could this be? ... I could not have been any more wrong ... learning to get to grips with what the [teachers] were looking for at BA level, what was expected of me, was harder than HNC and HND (Angela)

Irene’s experiences were the converse of Angela’s. She confesses that in the early days of her return,

I was terrified and I doubted myself, but what I found was I was looking too far, I was analysing too much ... once I got over that hurdle ... I was more capable than I thought I would be ... I think I got into the different style of teaching and producing course work fairly quickly (Irene)

Linda suggested that her,

... confidence grew as I progressed through the programme. Passing early pieces of coursework was important ... I seemed to get more confidence as I passed a few pieces of coursework ... it was harder than doing the HND ... [but] I started to realise I could do this (Linda)

Another good example of a student growing in confidence comes from Janice, who suggested,

Positive feedback and encouragement regarding my ability was exceptionally motivating ... I had never had this in my life before and I would pinch myself often that [teachers] believed I could do this (Janice)

If they are encouraged to participate actively in their learning, participation becomes, at some point, ‘a deep and meaningful learning situation’ (Dawn, Programme Leader). Students’ whole attitudes to, and motivations for learning may start to shift,

... some of them come back to education only for the certificate to get a job. For most of them, it is their only chance of getting a job .... [meaningful learning] does come for some of them later on. I am not sure that’s the initial reason they come on the course but many
students start to get a real passion for the academic side of coming to college (Dawn, Programme Leader)

Research indicates that, particularly mature non-traditional students, choosing a local college rather than a university are largely informed by practical issues around work and family (cf. Forbus and Newbold et al, 2011; Creasy, 2013). For some, it can be informed by uncertainty. Mary, for example, despite being, ‘very enthusiastic’, and her, ‘confidence not being too bad’, was worried about, what she termed, ‘the uncertainty of it ... could I fit into an academic environment?’ Therefore, not feeling they would fit in or having what it takes to learn in a university was the experience of most participants. Subsequently, I have shown that college is the venue of choice for the participants as a consequence of a multiplicity of experiences, including but not exhaustive of compulsory educational experiences, habitus experiences, lack of cultural capital and competing commitments, including paid work, caring responsibilities, or both.

Summary

All of the participants identified factors informing their return to HE in FE that can be defined as disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b, 2000). Only Sandra really wanted to participate in HE in FE purely for the experience. The financial benefits, in terms of getting a job, promotion or job security was identified as a motivating factor by the remaining participants; five of whom recognised that there could be a positive impact on their children’s perspective on education. Meaningful learning is something that develops later in the programme. There was a difference in the difficulties, or ease, with which participants experienced the transition, from sub-degree to degree level work. This was evident when participants made reference to confidence getting better as they received the results of early coursework. Growing confidence was also attributed to positive interactions with teachers.
Participants’ choice of where to study was largely based on the need to fulfil other practical responsibilities, almost always linked to family or paid employment. Modest ambition was also a factor that played a part in the decision making. Three participants particularly, though it was possibly evident in other interviews, made explicit class-based distinctions when explaining why they chose higher education in further education rather than a university. Although both had commitments that justified their choice of returning to college, it may have been the only option under any circumstances.
Theme 3. *Experiences of Juggling Competing Commitments*

**Introduction**

In this section the key theme is *juggling competing commitments*. I will first explore how participants managed the competing commitments of study, work and caring responsibilities. Second, I will turn to how juggling competing commitments impacted on husbands and other members of the family, particularly children. Third, I will explore their experiences of support, both practical and moral, as it was received from husbands and other family members. Again, the sub-question, ‘What lived experiences, including compulsory educational experiences, shape participants’ perception of returning to HE in FE?’ will be responded to here. The emphasis, as the theme title suggests, will be on work and domestic commitments.

A number of empirical studies present a landscape whereby the learning experiences of many, particularly mature female, non-traditional, students are juxtaposed with the responsibility of caring or work; in some instances both (*cf.* Reay and Ball et al, 2002; Reay, 2003; Cappleman-Morgan, 2005). These studies emphasise how pressure on time is managed, and the impact this has on familial relationships and learning. I found that the participants in this research had some, often significant, commitments to attend to in juxtaposition with learning. All were working either in a paid capacity, or looking after children or elderly and infirm parents. Describing these commitments, the ‘*juggling*’ metaphor was used on a number of occasions. For example, Elaine found that, ‘*it was a bit of an ordeal trying to juggle everything to make sure you were up to date with college work and that the bairns had everything they needed*’ (Elaine). Angela experienced competing commitments as,
... learning to juggle, like learning to find a balance in your responsibilities ... I had the responsibility of completing [college] work and then you are going home and then you have that responsibility there. It was finding a balance with everything. I did not find that easy, trying to juggle all the different responsibilities (Angela)

June, a single parent who has a daughter with a ‘life-limiting condition’, said that, as her daughter needs 24 hour care, she had to ensure her ex-partner and her other daughter were prepared to share some of the responsibilities. June was determined to get an education, planned how she was going to achieve it very carefully, and, ‘stuck to the plan’,

... I had to juggle my time and plan well in advance ... I got a year planner, I worked out what days I was going to study ... Who was going to look after [daughter] when I was going to study, whether it be family members, whether it be her dad, whether it be [the] after school club (June)

Irene was in a similar position, despite her care responsibilities being for her mother, who was terminally ill, and her father who could not bathe or dress independently. Irene describes her experiences of competing commitments,

Every day I had to go round and had to help her dress and that is when she could get up and bathe. I had to sort out her oxygen machine and nebulisers, and her medication ... then I had to sort out all the finances because my mum did all the finances. My dad did not have a clue and I had to look after him as well ... shopping, housework, the whole lot (Irene)

Irene, whose mother did not live to see her achieve her BA, only managed to stay abreast of her college workload by getting up at, ‘four or five in the morning to work on essays’. She suggests that this was her, ‘only quiet time’, however,

... I still met the deadlines but I was really tired. I was doing the nightshift. I had another job as well so I would have to get up about two or three in the morning. I then had go to my other job on the days that I was not in college doing the degree and in between I done my essays or on nightshift ... (Irene)
Sandra recalls studying alongside other commitments as being, ‘tough, but I really wanted to do what I was doing ... having a daughter in primary school wasn’t going to stop me carrying on’ (Sandra). Competing commitments has been shown to have an impact on learning in terms of students feeling guilty about neglecting their families (Kevern and Webb, 2004). Angela, who had a partner who believed her place was, ‘at the kitchen sink’, recalls an incident where something happened to her daughter at school. A responsible family member was required. Angela felt she needed to, ‘... phone the school then drop everything and run’. Thinking it was her responsibility exclusively,

I didn’t see that I might have been able to lean on other people. I was still trying to maintain the role of being wife and mother and being the student. A lot of the time the different roles did clash. That was just how it went (Angela)

On another occasion, Angela, feeling that her husband was denying her the proper support, felt her only course of action was, ‘going on strike’. This is an example of culturally reproduced roles within the family context, the cultural expectations of women in a patriarchal society (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Nonetheless, Angela informed her husband that she would no longer be prepared to do anything. If he wanted anything he could, ‘... whistle for it ... he can make his lunch himself’. Angela felt that she needed to demonstrate to her husband just how important studying was to her and that, ‘I had to do the homework to maintain the level I was at’,

... I think men think we are more super human than we actually are you know and it took a long time for him to get out that mind-set. He thought that I could cope with anything. I know they say that women can multi-task and that but there is only so much we can multi-task with (Angela)

Angela sustained her strike, for a few weeks, until her point was made. Simone de Beauvoir would argue that Angela’s rather desperate response to her husband’s attitude by going on strike is but one manifestation of men asserting women’s ‘biological fate’. The state of immanence that defines
a woman’s ‘limitations’ is very much determined by men (Wartenberg, 2008, pp. 119, 136). The ‘uncreative chore’ of the private sphere, including ‘cooking, cleaning’ (Veltman, 2019, p. 119) and looking after the family were, for some of the participants, dispositions informed by habitus experiences; the socialisation they received in the home (Bourdieu, 1973; Swartz, 1997). We accept our lived situations because we normalise them by way of years of experiences, often never really questioning the need to change them (Reay, 2003).

For example, having a supportive family is not necessarily an indicator of an unproblematic learning experience. Janice, ‘felt lucky’ her husband was extremely supportive, as were her children. However, that did not obviate problems making time for study. As she suggests, her husband appreciated she needed time alone to study, and was very understanding of what she was trying to achieve. However, as she recalls, her husband worked at sea and was rarely home. When he was, he wanted her to, ‘be there to talk to’. Janice said that he would always, ‘interrupt me, asking me questions or needing to tell me something’. Following these interruptions Janice, ‘would seriously struggle to focus again’. It was also difficult for her youngest son,

... he missed me not spending time with him at the weekends ... it was impossible, at times it felt like my head was going to explode (Janice)

This had a significant impact on Janice in terms of feelings of guilt. Other participants, ‘...found it difficult ... I felt sometimes I was neglecting [daughter] at times’ (June). Janice experienced guilt as a difficult emotion to contend with. Guilt emerged from a feeling that she was, in her view neglecting the family and that achieving her degree was more important than caring for her family. Janice felt that she was putting her degree before her family if she, ‘... wasn’t continually supporting them’. She reports that feelings of guilt were particularly strong when,
... [my youngest son] would want me to spend more time with him and I would be getting child minders to take care of him, to try and catch up on work and try and get some reading in ... a part of me thought that, ‘I’m neglecting him, I’m not doing it right.’ ... there was no getting away from guilt (Janice)

The way the programme was time-tabled made competing commitments quite difficult to negotiate for Shelley and Debbie. Shelley emphasised her way of coping as, ‘good time-management and getting support from other members of my family ... my husband mostly’. Shelley expanded, ‘I really needed to be focused and manage my time well ... or no coursework would be going in that [submission] box’ (Shelley). Shelley also said, however, that because she was unaccustomed to leaving her children, even though they were being looked after, ‘... while I was in college, it wasn’t really happening ...I was too busy worrying’. Debbie, when she started the BA programme,

... started my work at 5pm. But after a few months I reduced my hours to start at 6pm. These things are financially difficult, particularly now that I am on my own. It was still difficult because I didn’t get home till 11pm ... I had to study all weekend and during any holidays (Debbie)

Linda, whose parents were resistant to her aspiration to stay on at school when she was 16, were significantly more sympathetic to her later educational aspirations. Linda’s dad, who I suggested earlier had a career as an FE teacher, ‘was great ... I always had my dad as a back-up to look after them’. She put her ability to juggle competing commitments down to strict, ‘time management - that was what was important’. Everything else, for example her social life, just went, ‘out the window’. Describing her routine, Linda said,

I saw to the children, put them off to the school ... they went down to bed by seven. I could study from between seven to half past ten. I think because I was a wee bit younger as well, I could stay up slightly later and still get up the next morning and that was a routine, and it was a case of just getting in to a routine, sticking to the routine and getting through the work (Linda)
Four participants experienced gendered attitudes from husbands. Debbie had wanted to come back to HE in FE for a while, but her husband was not keen on the idea at all. Debbie claimed that whenever she brought up returning to college, her husband would argue, ‘You don’t need to go back, you’ll never need to go back to education …’ (Debbie). Despite her protestations that returning to HE in FE was what she wanted because, ‘I felt I could ... I wanted the chance to see if I could do it’, his response was always, ‘you are fine the way you are’ (Debbie). Debbie said that, ‘he really did not want me to go back to college’. Elaine experienced a significant level of resistance from her husband to her studying, from whom she received little support. Although there was the, ‘financial thing’, he was also guilty of not taking responsibility for the children and belittling her efforts to improve herself.

*When people would be asking me about it, people would say, ‘good for you [Elaine] is that you back? Good for you, how is it going?’ And him going, sitting about talking about bairn’s psychology – she thinks she’s a psychologist now’, that sort of thing – you know what I mean ... just belittling it* (Elaine)

I found familial support, or lack of it, to be a strong indicator of the extent to which participants enjoyed the programme and remained fairly free from excessive stress. Interpreting orientations to support through my conceptual lens, my conclusions are that some family members simply lacked the cultural capital to see the real point of what their husbands/mothers/daughters were trying to achieve (Bourdieu, 1973). They were trying to transcend their circumstances – the facticity of their current existence (Wartenberg, 2008). They were on a journey to live a more authentic life and to challenge their entrenched habitus dispositions (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Sandra had no such issues; her husband may have assimilated cultural capital from his own university experiences. Sandra therefore felt, ‘very fortunate’ that she had a husband who, because he was a learner himself, had a high degree of understanding and sympathy with what Sandra was
trying to achieve. He was, therefore, ‘really supportive’, prepared to make sure that Sandra had the
time and space to get on with her studies. Sandra admits, that it would have been a, ‘lot harder’ if
her husband, ‘didn’t really believe in what I was doing’. However, because he was sympathetic to
Sandra’s needs,

... if he had to take our daughter away for a couple of days or take her out, so I could
concentrate on my college work, it was never an issue ... He would do the ironing for me and
stuff like that (Sandra)

Reflectively, however, Sandra laments the time she ‘missed’ with her daughter while she was still
very young,

I think it’s only afterwards you realise how much you have missed, how much you have
sacrificed; your time with the family, weekends, doing something together ... you can never
get that time back (Sandra)

Support from other family members was of particular import to some of the participants. For
example, June’s daughter spends time in hospital, but also spends a lot of time at home. She is a
particular worry for June,

... if she goes to hospital then she’ll pick up all sorts of stuff, so – she needs a lot, she needs
twenty-four hour care so when I made a commitment I had to make sure the caring was
shared and I got the support that I needed (June)

Support was equally important for Janice. Janice disclosed that her mother and mother-in-law,
‘would babysit for me as much as possible’. Notwithstanding other responsibilities they, ‘would help
out when they could’. Her husband also took some responsibility, taking her boys out on day trips
to allow her time to keep up with her studies. For Janice, moral support was every bit as important
as practical support,
Their support helped me to be motivated. They wanted me to be better and that encouraged me to want to be better. I had no self-belief and all of a sudden they were showing more belief in me than I was showing in myself (Janice).

Summary

This section has demonstrated the practical and emotional difficulties adult returners experience trying to improve their lives through participation in HE in FE. The metaphor of ‘juggling’ was used. All participants experienced some difficulties managing their time to juxtapose with study, caring and/or working. Participants experienced feelings of guilt. Neglecting, or not giving their children the attention they felt they deserved was problematic. One participant only really appreciated the time with her daughter she had sacrificed, after she completed the programme. Other participants managed their time very strictly using diaries or planners. However significant disruption was experienced. Some participants experienced hostility from male spouses, two who were particularly negative, and chauvinist; the other just wanted more attention.
**Theme 4. Experiences of Structures of Support**

**Introduction**

How we teach and support students will have a significant impact on the extent to which they benefit from learning (Brookfield, 2015). In the physical environment of an FE college, we can offer students little of the trappings or aura of a university. We do not have the considerable libraries and large lecture theatres we associate with universities. What we do have, however, is the intimacy of a milieu, where relationships between teacher and student might be expected to be more familiar than would be anticipated in a university. The themes that will be addressed in the following paragraphs support my observations. It is in this theme that the sub-question, ‘Were participants transformed by the experience of HE in FE?’ will begin to be interrogated. I will explore how relationships of trust, between teacher and students, can manifest into something pedagogically substantial in the teaching and learning context; how participants experienced structures of support and how support might have enhanced the learning experience.

I had earlier described my method of supporting students as a mentoring approach, inspired by the ideas of Laurent Daloz (1986, 1999). All the teaching team try to develop positive teacher-student relationships that, to different degrees, are congruent with a mentoring approach, in the belief that this can be a catalyst for real personal growth and development. Positive relationships can be defined as any action that makes the students feel valued. Feeling valued can include, for example, a student recognising that they are really being listened to by, or experiencing empathic understanding from teachers when they confront personal or academic issues. Being student-centred could also mean truly encouraging students’ intellectual and social development and generally breaking down any teacher student barriers which might emerge. That developing positive teacher-student relationships is beneficial to growth and development, is verified by the conclusions of earlier researches. For example, David (2004), Freeman and Anderman et al (2007)
and Chiu (2009) all conclude that developing positive relationships with students has a concomitant impact on participation, retention and achievement; surely an outcome desired by all involved in teaching and learning. Dawn, the Programme Leader, frames how we work with students as, ‘student-centred’,

... we take [student-centeredness] very seriously ... we let [students] know that we are really interested in them and I think this helps motivate them ... We spend a lot of time with them out-with the classroom ... I think they like the idea that we are always there for them ... they like the fact of our visibility [as] they see us going around the campus (Dawn, Programme Leader)

Through the prism of both the empirical literature and our own professional lenses, we find it beneficial to interact with students as individuals. They sit in front of us as a group; but they are a group of individuals nonetheless. We can best support their learning by trying to understand their personal circumstances, by having an empathic attitude towards them (Rogers, 1990, Galbraith, 1991, Daloz, 1999). All of the participants, notwithstanding minor caveats that will be explored later, reported satisfaction with the support, and were positive about how teacher-student relationships were encouraged to develop. For example, Mary described it as knowing, ‘If we gave our best ... it was reciprocal. Tutors would give their best back’ (Mary). A further example was Angela, who reported that,

The staff were amazing and really added to the experience ... staff went above and beyond in their commitments to us ... it meant a lot, believe me (Angela)

Returning briefly to Bourdieu (1973, 1988) the teachers on the programme explicitly claim working class backgrounds; we were, much like our students ‘thrown into the world’ as working class (Wartenberg, 2008, p. 28). We are the exceptions among our peers, rather than the norm, in that we are all university graduates. Nonetheless, we also lacked cultural capital on returning to
education; our experiences would have been entrenched in the nomenclature that included the phenomenon of Non-traditional Students.

We ask students to give the best of themselves to their studies; it is only right that we are prepared to give the best of ourselves for them in return. An example of where a member of the teaching team might be described as giving, ‘the best of themselves’; may have gone beyond what should normally be required, is reported by Irene, who recalls being absent from college with a flu bug. Preparing for an essay and, ‘unsure of what I was supposed to be doing’, Irene contacted the teacher responsible for the module and was pleasantly surprised by the teacher’s response,

\[I \text{ felt proud that the tutors would take time just to help me ... I was shocked that a tutor would travel so far out her way, and in her own time ... they were like that though, they were very sociable the tutors, very grounded, approachable and helpful ... (Irene)}\]

On that particular occasion, the teacher had travelled to another campus, and in the evening to meet Irene. Empathy and regard for our students has been argued to be the foundation of affirmative pedagogical action, the catalytic agent from where all other good things emerge (Rogers, 1983, 1990). Some of the teachers take on the role of student for periods of time, doing for example further or higher degrees, FE and HE teaching qualifications. In this way, we stay in touch with the challenges, the highs and lows, of learning. For David, having teachers who were also students, was experienced as a, ‘levelling out’ in the teacher-student relationship,

\[... \text{there’s almost a feeling of tutors and students being on equal terms, if you know what I mean? ... I think the lecturers were very good in treating us that way ... going above the call of duty ... treating us as equals. Being treated as an equal is, to me, very important (David)}\]

Barriers between teacher and student can be broken down by teachers using their own histories and experiences to show that we are like them, just further along an educational pathway. We are not academics, and we arrived in education from similar background to our students. Students
recognise this fact. For example, in Elaine’s experiences, teachers were never, ‘aloof’. They had been, ‘through it all’ before us and they used their experiences of education, and working with vulnerable people, to support our, ‘learning – to ‘bring it to life’ for us. At the end of the day they were,

... just people, they were good at sharing their own experiences with the students so we realised that they went through a similar thing to us. They know exactly how we are feeling and said if they can do it, I can do it. There’s always that part of it, you know – giving people real life examples of their own experiences [of work and learning] ... I think is one of the most encouraging things you could do (Elaine)

Some studies have concluded that caring and work responsibilities make it difficult for some mature students to participate in HE in FE (Reay, 2003; Cappleman-Morgan, 2005). Because we are in a more intimate environment, we are in a position to make the relatively small practical adjustments that can make a difference to some students’ ability to fully participate in the programme. For example, we often adjust the timetables so that students who are travelling long distances can get away a bit earlier or we can make, ‘allowances for students who have caring responsibilities’ (Dawn, Programme Leader). Being flexible is appreciated by students,

I might never have been able to get through my degree, if it was not for the willingness of the tutors to be flexible and supportive. I had some real problems with support for [my daughter] ... the tutors were always supportive and understanding (June)

If you had an issue with childcare or your child was unwell ... the lecturers were always understanding ... they never made you feel bad about things that are well, things that are just things that happen in life (Lynne)
Students’ issues are real and they should feel comfortable coming to teachers if the teachers can help. Mary uses the metaphor a, ‘safe place [where] tutors have a genuine interest in students’.

Similarly, June reported that, the message from teachers was that,

\textit{If you need any help ... come to us and let’s have a discussion and see what we can do ... But they also made it clear that they wouldn’t take any [nonsense] either} (June)

Some limited examples were provided by respondents where teaching staff were perceived to be unsupportive. This might be confounded by enforced teaching personnel changes, or, some teachers not fully getting in step with the culture of the programme before moving on. One example was expressed by Shelley, who reported that,

\textit{Some [teachers] had the attitude that you are a degree-level student now; you have to go and find it all out for yourself. They shrugged you off if you approached them because you were struggling to understand something} (Shelley)

She did not find this response particularly helpful as she was not confident using library or electronic resources. I think the above two quotes highlight the fact that students are all different. Different students have different needs. Students have different abilities and can be overwhelmed by different aspects of learning. Consequently, participants were appreciative that individual differences in students was recognised,

... \textit{[teachers] saw our individuality ... the support was for us as individuals and not just groups ... How they would support somebody with a lot of confidence would be completely different to how they would support somebody that had a lack of confidence ... I would say that they had to know the individual and what that individual needs ... It was made clear from the first week that lecturers wanted us to do the best we could do, and they were always available if we needed any help} (Janice)
Sandra, who has since studied at post-graduate level made the following observation,

... the writing that was accepted on the BA might not have been accepted at a university ... I cannot knock the BA but is the standard the same as Aberdeen or Glasgow [universities]? (Sandra)

Later in the interview, as Sandra reflected on her learning journey beyond the BA, she appears to moderate some of her earlier statements. First she suggests that, ‘the BA was a good degree ... it was what I needed, and it gave me the confidence, to go on and do my M.Sc.’. BA teachers had taught her, ‘how to do good essays ... it was excellent in that sense ... I learned a lot from the BA’ (Sandra). As I made explicit earlier, we never claim to remotely have the aura or resources of a university. We have neither the significant libraries nor the large lecture theatres. Nonetheless, module teacher Peggy is confident that at the college students get, ‘a very high quality learning experience ... a very positive learning experience ... well up to standard’. Particularly, in their final (BA) year, ‘the leap from prescribed (SQA) learning to assessment of their critical thinking is quite a jump’ and very challenging for students.

Nonetheless, the validating university is, ‘impressed by the quality of our results’ (Peggy, Module Teacher). Vocational students can perform well in academic programmes at university argued (O’Shea and Stone, 2011; see also O’Shea and Lysaght, 2012). Peggy attributes the students’ successes to, ‘hard work’ by both the students and the teachers who offer students significant support. Notwithstanding the significant support offered to students, they do have to learn to become autonomous and, ‘take responsibility for their own learning and development’ (Dawn, Programme Leader). Although we try to develop productive relationships with students, and try to be supportive of their learning, it can never, advises Dawn, be about, ‘spoon-feeding students’. The responsibility for the quality of their own learning must always rest with them,
... it is still very much their responsibility to engage in ideas ... in reading, and engage in academic skills ... I think it prepares them for future life and future careers (Dawn, Programme Leader)

Teachers made it clear to students that they believed that they were ‘advanced students’; that to prepare for post-graduate study, ‘there is an expectation that we learn to work autonomously’ (David). However,

... at the same time, it wasn’t that the tutors weren’t approachable ... the tutors would wander in to the library and you would end up in a group discussion ... it was just that it was much more informal ... I think in different ways it worked very effectively for all of us (Mary)

It may be that students feel more comfortable asking questions, contributing and are more open to learning when participating in these ostensibly impromptu discussions. I also believe that, in the relatively intimate context where I find myself discussing ideas with a small group, individual members of the group feel valued; mentoring begins to work,

It was a great way of learning ... we just got a conversation going about something tricky that had been said to us in class. A couple of tutors were really good at that. You thought they had just come in to say hello, then they leave about an hour later and you realise you have had a really intense seminar... I think that we all benefited from these type[s] of discussions (Lynne)

These ‘casual’ interactions with our students is always premised on a desire that they have a real encounter with the existential experience of being a university student, but in the more informal milieu of a local college. Participating in deep and meaningful conversation, in a loosely structured way, helps build confidence and provides a context where students find it easier to give opinions and generally debate ideas. A number of students intimated that this was only possible because of the relative informality of a small college, and the relationships that could develop between teacher and student. For example, June felt that it was better, ‘in the college as opposed to [being] part of a huge campus; it was more intimate’. Linda and Lynne doubted that,
I would never have achieved a degree if it had not been for the teaching staff ... [the support] was very personalised and it certainly helped me achieve (Linda)

I would only have been able to do [a degree] in an environment like the college. I would have been lost in a university ... probably frightened and really out of my depths. The college felt right. It was comfortable (Lynne)

Angela feels that she is speaking for her whole cohort of students, when she confirms that she felt the students in her class acknowledged that,

... the support from teachers was important to their learning ... I think a lot of students were getting overwhelmed with the workload and would have left if they were not confident that they were seen as important and worth the effort by the lecturers (Angela)

Breaking down the barriers between teaching staff and students is important to Elaine, who suggests that teachers were always available if needed; not always immediately but ‘they always made time for you’. Elaine describes it as an, ‘open door policy’ (Elaine). As teachers, our primary objective is to support the development of students’ intellectual skills. While it might be positive that we are able to develop effective teacher-student relationships, our principal objective remains, to prepare students for the workplace or post-graduate study. David felt teachers were so passionate about their subjects that students could, ‘listen to them all day ... because they are so enthusiastic’ (David). He felt that, ‘even though they’ve been doing this for years ... to have that level of enthusiasm rubs off. It certainly rubbed off on me’. David suggested that teachers put significant effort into supporting students to improve their intellectual skills, ‘they were never condescending’, and always had an, ‘open ear’ for students,

... they would look at your positive aspects and then maybe encourage you to stretch yourself a little bit further ... they would say, this is why I think this is really good ... if you want to go that little bit further maybe you could add this the next time or maybe expand on something else. It was always positive ... they were never condescending (David)
I would now like to focus less on relationships and more on participants’ perception of teaching and learning methods. We encourage students to study collaboratively, to discuss and share ideas. We use the term Collaborative Group Learning, however Programme Leader, Dawn, framing it as Communities of Practice, describes how collaborative learning works,

*We encourage them to work in small groups. We encourage them to share readings and ideas, to check one another’s work and critique one another’s ideas. We want them to develop a sense of independence and the ability to problem solve on their own* (Dawn, Programme Leader)

We have observed it to be effective over the four or five years we have actively promoted collaborative group learning. Researches and conferences confirm that this is a very effective way to enhance learning (Delucchi, 2006; Sultan and Kanwal, 2011). For example, Linda saw it as, ‘learning from each other ... [it] opens up different pathways of thought’. Mary felt collaborative learning is particularly useful when one, ‘is struggling ... not feeling that confident’. Mary suggested that it is likely you will find others in the group are struggling too, and sharing with others can ‘lift your morale just when you need it most’. June thought that collaborative learning was the most important activity supporting her learning,

*I think the biggest thing that helped was having our wee study groups ... at the start I think everybody is competitive and wants to work on their own, however, we were encouraged to work in groups and it does help and you can feedback from each other. We developed great wee study groups over the time and then got a lot of different feedback* (June)

Debbie really liked collaborative learning saying that there, ‘wasn’t enough’. She would have liked more collaborative, ‘group work ... instead of sitting through too many power-point presentations’. The benefits for Debbie included the opportunity to, ‘support each other’. Students could work collaboratively to source important ‘journal articles and book chapters’. A really important feature of collaboration, for Debbie, David and June, was the opportunity to,
... discuss ideas ... bits we struggled to understand. We seemed to learn better because one of us might understand something that another couple didn’t, so we would speak about it and eventually we would all get it. Compared to one ... two or three heads is better (Debbie)

You have a support network around you. You are not going to have tutors available all the time so you needed to be able to trust and rely on each other ... I liked the bouncing ideas off each other ... when you are working in a group, you have to be responsible. You don’t want to be of disservice to others ... I thought it worked tremendously for me (David)

We were encouraged to have debates about things as well, which helped. Not everybody agreed on everything but it was great because not everybody agrees and it gets you thinking and, well you know, that helped as well (June)

Shelley believes without working collaboratively, she might never have achieved. She said that, ‘we bounced ideas off each other; we checked we were all understanding things the same way’. Had it not been for the opportunities to get out of the classroom and get working together, she suspects ‘I would never have been able to do it’ (Shelley). As has been shown, collaborative group learning worked for the significant majority of participants. Only Elaine felt, because of caring commitments, she was unable to make full use of collaborative learning as a way of learning,

... because you weren’t able to sit in the library, you weren’t able to share ideas ... sitting in the library with them sometimes would have been nice ... I did feel like I was out of the loop, eh, but your kids have got to come first, you know what I mean? (Elaine)

A different, but equally important problem was experienced by Janice, who burdened herself with what she described as the possibility that she, ‘could be letting the other members of the group down’, that she would ‘fail other people’. Students, like Janice, possibly need a bit more mentoring support, but only in the early stages; all students have knowledge, ability and life experiences to bring to the learning context. Janice soon found that she had something valuable to offer her peers
and had an extremely successful BA year. Overall, we have found that our approaches to teaching and learning seem to work to the benefit of students’ self-efficacy. Programme Leader Dawn observed that students become ‘more autonomous’ and ‘less needy’. As the programme progresses, they begin to require the attention of teachers less and use each other for support and guidance more. For example, there comes a point in the learning journey when you are with a group of students but your presence seems no longer required. This I take as a sign of real group and individual independence. Ultimately, suggests Dawn, students,

... come to us less, use each other more. They gain the confidence to think critically, and ask searching questions in class ... which is, of course, what we want (Dawn, Programme Leader)

The following two quotations really sums up what students were looking for and why they believed they would get it at their local college. First, June reports how she experienced college,

I think in comparison to university it was more intimate, where you knew probably quite a lot about each one of your students ... relationships formed ...a bit of banter went on, and people were encouraged to say what they thought and how they felt ... We had a suite, where the degree students used to study, and the tutors would come in and they would discuss work we were doing ... I think that really helped ... if someone was way off track they would point you in other directions ... they were really good at that (June)

And from Angela, who lays more emphasis on support,

You helped us believe in ourselves so it got us through to the end ... It was a nice feeling a really good feeling and to know that you were there and you wanted to be there for us. It is just what is needed to give us that belief in ourselves so that even when you are pressing the panic button I think it changed our work ethic ... just the fact that we knew you were around ... (Angela)
We might argue that previous negative experiences of compulsory education, juxtaposed with habitus experiences that placed little value on education, can result in non-traditional students with limited self-efficacy. I would dispute Bourdieu’s position that these socialised dispositions are relatively permanent however (Bourdieu, 1973, 1988; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). By participating in education in the project of studying for a degree, our students demonstrate a willingness to ‘transcend [their] particular situation’ (Fabijancic, 2011, p. 449), to lead a more authentic life, which as the following, and last theme will show, can manifest in a transformation of students’ hitherto ‘limited and distorted’ views of the world and their place in it (Cranton, 2002, p. 64). Students become infinitely more confident and self-reliant as the programme progresses. Self-reliance is paralleled with more optimistic self-assessments of capability and preparedness for what the future may offer in terms of employment, further study or life experiences generally.

**Summary**

The emphasis of this theme has been participants’ experiences of support from teachers and teacher-student relationships. Participants, overwhelmingly, seemed satisfied, or very satisfied with the support that was given, and the way the teacher-student relationship developed. Nearly all participants felt their learning had benefited in some significant way; three voiced the opinion that they may not have completed had the structures of support been different. One participant hinted that we might be under-supportive, despite the relatively advanced level of the programme. Another reported that the BA was the right preparation for post-graduate study.

As practitioner-researchers, we will continue to evaluate and adapt support as students’ needs indicate. Overall, when compared to some experiences of compulsory education, the very different structures of support, in juxtaposition with a nurturing context, appears to have the effect of empowering students to progress further in their studies and work harder to achieve more (Daloz,
1990, 1999; Daley, 2003). What has emerged from the data is that the success of the programme is deeply entrenched in a context of Non-traditional Teachers, who were formerly Non-traditional Students, now teaching other Non-traditional Students. I think the fact of our having been thrown into the world to similar habitus, and our experiences up until our encounter with education, positions us to really understand and have an empathy with the students we teach.
Theme 5: *Experiences of Transformation*

Introduction

We are now approaching the end of the transformative journey. It is time now to determine the extent to which it might be argued that transformation has actually been experienced by participants. My research question explores the extent to which participation in HE in FE can be transformative. Before proceeding, it should be reiterated that transformation is an extremely imprecise, ambiguous construct. Therefore, I determined that indications of transformation may need to emerge from more than one source. Consequently, I felt indications of transformation could best be unearthed firstly, by the terms of reference of participants. Secondly, to buttress evidence to claims that participants have been transformed, I explore how it is understood, through the observational lenses of ‘others’; reported by participants. Here, I will explore the final sub-question, ‘can it be proposed that participants are transformed by the experience of HE in FE?’ I ask the reader to reach beyond the words being spoken, to be aware of the evocative possibilities participants communicate as they reflect on their experiences of how their lives have new meanings; of how they have been transformed by the experience of HE in FE.

I should first revisit transformation briefly to re-establish what is being investigated. Mezirow’s (1978a, 1978b, 1981) early research on transformative learning concluded that learning opens up the world to those who participate; effecting an alienation of old perspectives and the framing of new ones. Later, Mezirow (2000) defined transformative learning as ‘a process of exploring, assessing and working to change limiting frames of reference and habits of mind’ (p. 233). Mezirow, in all his work on transformative learning begins from the premise that students return to HE in FE with frames of reference which, very quickly become otiose in the light of new understandings. Existing frames of reference are revised as the learner experiences social, emotional, and intellectual growth as a consequence of participation in education.
The student, following a process of transformation, re-engages with life in ‘an altered state of being ... with a greater degree of self-determination’ (Mezirow, 2000, p. xii). Students become self-actualised; they experience a profound and enduring change that becomes a significant part of their future life experiences (Askew and Carnell, 1998). Transformation might only occur however if education is facilitated in a way that excites, challenges and inspires students (Sherratt and Planche, 2016). The rest of this chapter will seek to illustrate the extent to which the participants have been challenged, excited and ultimately transformed by participation in HE in FE.

For Janice, the discarding of a social phobia was a significant change that was a real shift for her. From being, ‘extremely uncomfortable in company’ as a consequence of having had ‘no self-confidence whatsoever’, Janice reports that, ‘For the first time in many years I have went out for a meal, sat in a pub, went to shows and held interesting conversations’. This represents a significant step forward for Janice, attributed to a change of her structure of feeling, whereby she, ... rarely [now] feel[s] stupid talking to others... I have started to believe I have a lot to contribute. I think I can do anything that I set my mind to, and I feel strong for the first time in a very long time. Learning about the rights of others taught me about my own personal rights as a human being ... (Janice)

Whatever has happened to Janice in her transformation, the quotes above point to a real sense of Janice becoming empowered, regaining something really important - real control of her life. Janice rarely now feels stupid, which represents a shift in self-concept; she is now aware she has rights as a human being. Mary, with similar brio, makes explicit her own feelings of enablement, reporting that she now, ‘feel[s] empowered ... for the first time in my life, I really feel I can make a difference’. Mary continues,
I’ve got a lot to offer, I believe that I have the skills, even if it’s just a tiny little bit, to help somebody’s life and make things a little bit nicer for somebody, somewhere (Mary)

A number of the participants almost grudgingly concede that some significant change has taken place. The emotions that emerged from reading the narratives suggest that they know that their frames of reference have altered, but they are almost apologising for it. A good example is Debbie, who believes that she really, ‘hasn’t changed that much’, but follows up with a contradiction, by musing that,

I now feel confident applying for jobs I would never have considered before … I think it has something to do with having letters after your name, it gives you confidence … more motivation to achieve. That’s to do with self-esteem and how people out there see you. They see a middle-age woman … I might look the same, but they don’t realise what’s happened to me (Debbie)

David could never settle into any particular career path. He was never able to find that career that would bring him satisfaction. He now feels he has turned an important corner and is now,

... a lot more confident ... I think I am ready to go out there and get the career I want ... the fact that ... I am now career-minded, that’s a big change (David)

Irene has turned Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) theory of cultural reproduction on its head. She believed that her working-class upbringing disqualified her from ever thinking about going so far in education – ‘[education] was just never on my horizon’ (Irene). Irene felt like,

... with my working class background and being a single parent ... [I thought] I would never come to anything. I sometimes look back on that and have a little smile to myself thinking look at me now it absolutely changed me for the better and I am more responsible now ... (Irene)
Similarly Sandra reported how participation in the BA has,

... certainly made me more confident in my day-to-day living ... I don’t know if you can fully make sense of the world, but ... I saw there was more to the world than I had ever knew as an uneducated person ... I have had an insight into that. There was a world out there I knew nothing about (Sandra)

Sandra has used her BA as a platform to go on and do bigger and better things,

I have done more than I ever thought would have been possible ... my experiences as an undergraduate at [...] college made all that possible. I have had fantastic promotions over the last few years and it is all because I decided to change my life and come back to college ... it all mushroomed from there ... it has been an amazing journey (Sandra)

Other participants appeared equally animated when describing their transformations. A good example is Elaine. Prior to returning to HE in FE and achieving her degree, Elaine felt she was a, ‘nobody ... just somebody’s mum, just somebody’s wife’. Much has now changed for Elaine. She now believes she has a,

... much wider perspective, certainly my perspective was quite narrow before because my experiences were quite narrow ... I now see things in a much wider way ... the world has opened up a lot for me ... it’s made me feel more like, I don’t know (pause) ... that I have got something to give to society, if you like... I feel like I really have something to contribute now (Elaine)

Elaine is now of the opinion that coming back to HE in FE was the ‘right thing’ and that it has changed her life for the better,

I used to think so little of myself ... that I was a nobody. I’ve got my own identity now ... I feel equal to anybody, that’s what it’s done for me, yeah ... I feel that I’m equal to anybody now (Elaine)
Lynne also reports that successfully achieving the BA degree has transformed the way she thinks about herself. She said that getting a degree was never something she ever felt that she would ever be able to do. She came back to college on a ‘Lift off’ programme and worked herself up the qualification levels. Taking it ‘one year at a time’ she eventually found herself in the final year of a degree programme. She felt, ‘I was never meant to be here’, however she ‘got my head down’ and participated meaningfully with the programme. She was awarded her degree and,

“It was probably the best feeling in my life, going up on stage to collect my certificate ... it was something I never thought I would do in my lifetime. I was a housewife, somebody's mum ... I thought of all the times I had at college ... starting with my wee lift-off programme ... what a great journey I have been on” (Lynne)

David also attests to his thinking changing, an important aspect of transformation. David reports how his thinking has changed to become more analytical, less accepting or taking things for granted,

“I take nothing at face value anymore ... I think that this is a positive change in me ... I like having the ability to be analytical ... I was always someone who used to waffle, I just made a noise for the sake of it ... now I think what I say has some validity because I check it out first” (David)

June has had a similar experience. Caring for her daughter was, ‘about as much as I could cope with’ at one point in her life. Her friend was a teacher and June hints at being a bit in awe of her friend’s education. However she now reports that her own education has ‘politicised me’ in many ways - ‘I want to speak about this kind of stuff now and share my opinions with others and hear what they think’ (June). June now enjoys, ‘political conversations’ with her teacher friend and thinks she has a lot more to offer. She now sees the world differently, reporting that,
I think differently now … I think more politically than I did before, much more. I had so much to be getting on with in my own life I didn’t really consider much else … I’m a lot more confident as a person because I’ve done it. You know, I’ve got a degree and my best pal is a teacher – I always admired her, eh? That she was clever. But I’ve got a degree the same as her, so I must be clever as well … (June)

A few participants have experienced significant changes to lifestyles. An example is Shelley. Since achieving her BA, Shelley has been doing community work. From seeing herself as a, ‘... downtrodden mother of three bairns’, she now perceives herself as, ‘very able ... I have grown into a very confident woman’ (Shelley). Prior to her journey in HE in FE she said that she, ‘... never really knew she was living in poverty ... [I] just thought this is how life is’ (Shelley). Never having previously taken an interest in politics, she has now taken a significant leadership and support role in her local community. After joining her local Tenants Association, she was soon voted as Chairperson. She has since travelled the country speaking at political meetings, highlighting issues facing disadvantaged communities. A highlight was being asked to speak at the Scottish Parliament, ‘something I thought that I would just never do’. Reflecting on how far she has come,

... if somebody had said to me ‘would you do that like ten years ago?’ I would have said ‘don’t be silly’, speaking in front of 250 people ... politicians, academics? ... ‘you are living on a different planet’ ... now, I think it’s in my blood, I enjoy it (Shelley)

Shelley has come to realise that, ‘unless the community make a noise ... people are just ignored’.

Shelley is now busy making a noise on their behalf. Asked how this makes her feel, she responded, ‘Well it feels – I’m very powerful ... people respect me more’ (Shelley). Research studies have demonstrated that the whole family can experience a transformation in the way education is perceived (Wainwright and Marandet, 2006, 2010; Smith and Wayman, 2009). For example, June
had previously not, ‘given a lot of thought’ to how her own HE in FE experiences might have been useful to the possible future experiences of her children. Nonetheless, she now reports,

*it’s made me encourage my kids more as well to go to a higher level, if they are capable, and encourage them to work harder and achieve more. Don’t let people stand in their way, kind of thing, if they are wanting to do something I would give them all the encouragement* (June)

I had decided that, being a nebulous construct, transformation would need to be demonstrated on more than one front. I therefore asked participants to speak about instances where family or friends had voiced change in them that could be interpreted as transformation. Elaine reports that friends and family now saw her as an achiever, she was now different,

*I think [family] see me as somebody that’s achieved something ... So I think they see me differently in that sense. And I know that friends of mine see me a bit differently ... I got a lot of nice comments when I graduated ... people were coming up to me and speaking to me and I get a lot of, ‘Good for you – there’s not many single mums that can go out there and do that’. I don’t really have the words to describe it* (Elaine)

June reports how time spent with her friend has changed,

*... we discuss different things now. We discuss education and political stuff ... I can’t believe we’re sitting watching Question Time together. Twenty year ago that would never have happened, eh? Even ten year ago it would never have happened ... Things to talk about has changed* (June)

The participant accounts I have presented in this section gives testimony to the growth and development they had experienced. I felt a stronger indicator of transformation would however be how it was recognised by others. For example, Dawn describes a discussion with one graduate, but this is typical of many other graduates, we encounter from time to time,

*She talked about the transformation for her and her family – her children ... she felt that the transformation for her was reflected in her children ... if nobody in your family has ever*
achieved a university degree it is phenomenal and her children now believe that they can do the same ... (Dawn, Programme Leader)

Sandra has a grown up son who has qualified in his own right and is now a professional worker with responsibility. Sandra reports that her son would previously not seek her support or advice on a professional level, but does so now,

my son now thinks I am a real professional and someone with expertise ... he never ever saw me like that before. To him, I was always just his mum ... I think he sees me as a very different person now (Sandra)

Due to the intimacy of the familial home it would be anticipated that husbands would recognise significant change in their wives. Significant change may manifest in different ways however, as the following two quotes attest,

[My husband] now says that he is around because I want him there; I do not necessarily need him now ... I do love him but I do not have that dependency anymore ... I think that is me just saying that I am not frightened of anything now [pause] not the way I was before anyway. I am a lot more able and capable than I think I might have thought I was a few years ago (Angela)

... he hardly recognises me anymore. [He thinks] that it is like having a different wife altogether ... but he does say he really loves the ‘new me’ though ... ‘I find myself worrying about you far less than I ever have before ... You are the most confident I have ever known you to be. I love your enthusiasm’ (Janice)

Sometimes aspects of transformative change might be less grand, but enough to show that change has taken place to the extent that others recognise it. David disclosed that his flatmate said to him - ‘You seem more like you have focus ... your life has more meaning’ (David). June was ‘pleased’ when her daughter told her,
... that she’s proud of me and I think it’s made her push more to go to University as well (June)

And equally, Elaine reports that,

... my children see a difference in me ... I think they see me as more a happy, confident person ... my son (12 years) recently asked me ... you seem much happier mum, is it because you are doing something you like doing now? (Elaine)

The whole dynamic of the home can be changed as Janice’s son experienced. Janice discloses that her son told her,

... when I was growing up ... there was this feeling of edginess around you ... nowadays it’s like you’re happy and excited but no tension, it’s easy and relaxed ... everything feels good now (Janice)

Angela recognises herself that, ‘My confidence levels have gone through the roof’, but also her colleagues have ‘pointed out to me that I used to walk with my head bowed and now I hold it high’. Her husband and daughter had pointed out to her that,

It is amazing to be told that I have changed in that way ... I really like when they tell me about the changes. They have said I am a happier person who is living her life to the fullest ... I don’t let things drag me down any more like I did before I came to college (Angela)

Dawn believes that a significant part of students’ transformation is ‘becoming a professional worker’ and the ‘credibility’ that raises their self-esteem and their concept of themselves. Both Dawn and I have observed many students coming to us with ambitions to achieve a degree but with a real deficit in confidence, self-efficacy and esteem. Dawn emphasises in particular, students who have
had significant negative experiences of compulsory schooling; students who, for example, were unrelentingly told by education professionals, ‘… that they will never learn’. We encountered this issue in chapter 2 when discussing experiences of compulsory education. Dawn reports nonetheless that, with the right support and teachers who now care about them, education becomes,

... transforming for them; in terms of how they see themselves ... they have the confidence to try for good jobs or post-graduate opportunities ... it transforms their lives. We have had many students who never dreamed they would be able for a degree ... many are now teachers themselves. They come into see us and anecdotally, they’ll say ‘you changed my life – I never thought I’d be able to do it but I did’ ... It makes me feel immensely proud ... we give them the opportunity, that’s all we give them ... they do the work, they change, not us (Dawn, Programme Leader)

I had indicated earlier that Janice represents the most profound experience of transformation I have observed thus far in my career. I therefore, feel it is to her I should give (almost) the last words. First, Mezirow (2000) defined the transformed individual as an individual who, following participation in HE in FE, ‘... now engage with life with a significant degree of ‘self-determination’ (p. xii). Has this happened for Janice? Janice felt it difficult to put into words,

... how much achieving, what felt like the unachievable, meant to me. Achieving a BA has given me the confidence to keep looking forward with the knowledge that I can do anything if I want it badly enough ... I have never been happier ... The world is less scary when you are more confident ... I couldn’t even leave the front door for nearly ten years. So to be ‘lighter’, to walk with a bounce in your step is amazing ... I’ve achieved something that I never in a million years thought I was capable of ... I want to see what’s next ... I’m petrified of going backwards, that really scares me ... I’ve had a lot of conversations with my family about that and how to keep going forward (Janice)

You may remember Janice really struggled at the beginning of the programme and needed some persuading by her husband to stick with it. She reflected on her decision to stay with the programme and where she is now regarding learning,
I am still studying night classes in Counselling and DSLR photography ... I am always looking online at night classes I can attempt in the future as I love learning in a way I previously would have never have had the confidence to attempt ... when I think about how much I would have lost out on if I had walked away from the opportunity ... I feel extremely emotional (Janice)

Summary and Conclusion

In this final part of the analysis of the findings I have presented evidence that participants in a full-time higher education course, facilitated in a further education college, can have a transformative experience that can have an enduring and lasting impact on their lives. I have traced participants’ transformative journeys, from compulsory education, through their adult lives, culminating in their experiences of HE in FE. I have been able to throw light on the real impact that meaningful participation has had on these graduates. In many ways transformation has been significantly more profound for some participants than for others. Nonetheless, I would argue that each and every one of the participants has been deeply touched in some way by their experiences of HE in FE. As David suggested, following his participation in full-time higher education in further education,

I take nothing at face value anymore ... I think that this is a positive change in me ... I like having the ability to be analytical ... I was always someone who used to waffle, I just made a noise for the sake of it ... now I think what I say has some validity because I check it out first (David)
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Reflections

Introduction

In this final chapter I will first, return to the research questions by offering some conclusions regarding a) what lived experiences, including compulsory educational experiences, shape participants’ perceptions of returning to HE in FE, b) to what extent does the teaching and learning milieu influence the social, emotional, and intellectual growth of participants, and c) to what extent have participants been transformed by the experience of HE in FE? Secondly, I consider my research to have made an original and worthwhile contribution to the widening corpus of empirical research emphasising transformative teaching and learning. I will set out the basis on which I claim originality. Thirdly, it is incumbent on me to use the skills developed as a doctoral candidate to benefit students. I will discuss the implications for further research to better inform my professional practice and to make further contributions to academic understanding. Before concluding, I will reflect on the research experience. Also, how I might share the research findings with other teachers and scholars that, in some small way, their praxis may also be transformed. As suggested, I first return to the first sub-question; What lived experiences, including compulsory educational experiences, shape participants’ perception of returning to HE in FE?

Returning to the Research Questions

I would first argue that Non-traditional Student is presented too often as a master-status where homogeneity is too easily assumed. To impose a generic label such as non-traditional student seems to me fairly meaningless; particularly when applied to a constituency of students who are, in reality, characterised by their heterogeneity and other protean qualities. For example, mature adults return to education for various reasons and from myriad lived experiences. Subsequently, I found that a return to education can be prompted by one or more of a plethora of disorienting
dilemmas (Mezirow, 2000). For example, Sandra was previously a successful businesswoman who, no longer satisfied with her career, sought new experiences. By way of contrast, Janice was a stay-at-home housewife, struggling with mental health issues, which included extremely low self-esteem and episodes of agoraphobia. Like Sandra however, Janice also sought new meaning to her life, but the impetus for Janice returning was fear of the day that her children’s need of her might diminish. Some participants just wanted a job following a sometimes lengthy hiatus away from the workplace to - ‘prove that I was worth something’ (Irene); promotions in their current jobs - ‘you need to have a formal qualification’ (Angela); or to be good role models for their children - ‘I did not want to be seen as another single parent living off the state’ (Linda). Some were lone parents, following divorces; others were married and one was now a grandparent.

As a monolithic construct then, non-traditional student may create negative, unvarying images of these students. Nonetheless, it is a construct that offers insights into the learning experiences of many students in HE in FE. Congruent with the research literature (McGivney, 1996; Reay and Crozier et al, 2010), a number of the participants had real issues with compulsory education. For example school - ‘… wasn’t good at all’ (Janice); I ‘… hated school’ (June); ‘I always had the idea that [studying] was beyond me’ (Lynne). One participant recalls a teacher who separated pupils into a ‘thick’ group and a ‘clever’ group (Linda) – little wonder non-traditional students rarely return to education effervescent with confidence. Other participants, for example Sandra who, ‘really liked school’, or Mary for whom school, ‘was positive’, compulsory education was a good experience. A few participants enjoyed their early experiences but their interest then went through a process of decline for a number of reasons; for example a move to New Zealand in one instance. Compulsory education spans many years. Its fragility and uncertainty, in terms of shifting and disruptive experiences, is demonstrated by these students; a phenomenon itself worthy of further research.
These experiences are characteristic of the students who return to HE in FE; they are experiences that often continue to impact students’ education. For example, we find most participants are particularly anxious, juxtaposed with excitement, as they approach beginning the BA programme; a good thing normally, but for a number of students anxiety can be debilitating. Particularly anxious students can require significant reassurance before starting to find a rhythm to meaningful participation. For example Janice felt that she was, ‘way out of my depth’. She needed a lot of reassuring that she had the ability to succeed. Similarly, Angela believed she ‘was thick’. Both seriously considered withdrawing early in the programme.

These examples are not atypical. The frames of reference they use, for example – ‘I was thick’ – are not unfamiliar. I observe students’ similar self-denunciations every academic year. Many students aspire to just do well enough to pass in anticipation of poor academic performance. Fortunately, many others raise their aspirations as a result of positive feedback and early successes. Others work their way through feelings of inadequacy during their HNC/D experiences. The BA degree programme is however perceived as a significant elevation in standards when compared to HNDs and, despite how well they did at HND level, the old fears and anxieties can return to haunt students. Unconscious identification as non-traditional student may be a master-status that can rekindle earlier anxieties.

My data indicates that negative experiences of compulsory education can be a response to external circumstances, such as familial relocation, teachers and other staff not being supportive, or experiences of rejecting educational values. Pierre Bourdieu proposes that educational contexts are not a natural milieu for working-class ergo non-traditional students (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). For example, a student declaring her perception of herself as ‘thick’ may be
an indicator of poor self-efficacy, linked to limited cultural capital. We can, with support and nurturing, penetrate the cultural entrenchment that characterises some of these students (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), by creating a teaching and learning milieu, experienced as supportive, compassionate and encouraging. How students make meaning of this, I turn to next, when I explore; *To what extent does the teaching and learning milieu influence the social, emotional, and intellectual growth of participants?*

Our students come to us, not as a class with a homogenous cluster of issues, fears and anxieties; but as individuals with very different life experiences and abilities. By getting close, we can support students individually; we can meet their needs in a nurturing and enabling milieu. In the context of a very short final academic year, we must set about this task with urgency. That is why the discussion of collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1999), is prefaced with the work of *inter alia* Laurent Daloz, Carl Rogers; names synonymous with caring and support in education (Daloz, 1999) and other professional contexts, including education (Rogers, 1990). To let our students know they are valued – ‘… we take [student-centeredness] very seriously … we let [students] know that we are really interested in them’ (Dawn, Programme Leader). Being student-centred works for students – ‘I would never have achieved a degree if it had not been for the teaching staff’ (Linda). Another said that, ‘… I would say that [teachers] got to know the individual and what that individual needs’ (Janice).

Students can often be surprised by the level of support given by teachers - ‘I felt proud that the tutors would take time just to help me … they were very … grounded, approachable and helpful’ (Irene). From another participant – ‘The staff were amazing and really added to the experience … staff went above and beyond in their commitment to us’ (Angela). In cognisance of these
comments, I conclude that a local college may be the right choice for returning non-traditional students. We get to know the needs and aspirations of our students very quickly as a consequence of the intimate context of a local college. My findings attest to this – ‘You helped us believe in ourselves ... It was a really good feeling to know that you were there and you wanted to be there for us’ (Angela).

I have little doubt that university teachers will have similar aspirations for their students as our teaching team espouse. Nonetheless, it was recognised by participants that universities may lack the intimacy of the local college. The quotes above demonstrate the significance of making the right choice. Participants made it clear how uncomfortable and intimidated they felt by university. For example, ‘... I felt I did not fit in ... my accent would not let me fit in academically at university ... I just felt the whole class thing’ (Irene). Their perceptions of universities as intimidating, juxtaposed with their experiences of intimacy and teacher-student relationships experienced in college, suggests that, at least from the findings of this research, participants may have been right to follow their instincts and choose college in preference to university. I do not believe that the experiences of our students will be necessarily unique. I would suggest however, that the research should be repeated on other similar research sites to determine if the same results can be anticipated elsewhere. Nonetheless, the intimacy of the college, and smaller class sizes, allow teaching staff the opportunities to experiment with different teaching methodologies. We are currently using a Collaborative Group Learning approach to encourage critical dialogue and mutual support.

Collaborative group learning is a very interactive and reciprocal method of learning (Askew and Carnell, 1998). After experimenting with collaborative group learning for four years there is compelling evidence it is beneficial and enjoyable for students. The participants appear to agree –
‘It was a great way of learning ... we just got a conversation going about something tricky ... I think that we all benefited from these type[s] of discussions’ (Lynne). Another said that – ‘we seemed to learn better because one of us might understand something that another didn’t, so we would speak about it and eventually we would all get it. Compared to one ... two or three heads is better’ (Debbie). A final contribution – ‘You have a support network around you. You are not going to have tutors available all the time ... I thought it worked tremendously’ (David).

It is an important part of my role as a teacher to try and find innovative ways to support teaching and learning. I am confident that collaborative group learning is a method that works for students, particularly for students who lack confidence. I suspect I could be using collaborative group learning more effectively. I think as an outcome of this research, I should review of more of the literature to understand collaborative learning better. I should also design more research to empirically evaluate how we might use collaborative learning better to improve teaching and learning. I do however believe the evidence is compelling enough to suggest that the participants flourished as a consequence of the levels of support given by the teaching team and the use of collaborative learning. There is evidence of significant social, emotional and intellectual growth which can be attributed to the student-teacher relationships that organically emerged from a positive learning milieu. I now turn to the final sub-question; Were the participants transformed by their experience of HE in FE?

Transformation is very difficult to operationalise with any real precision, lacking the measurability of other social science constructs; poverty or social mobility for example. This might explain why almost all empirical research on transformation is phenomenological in nature. It lacks a universal instrument against which transformation can be tested. I found an example in King (2004; see p.
but still believe that the time is right for academics, interested in transformative teaching and learning, to get together and develop a transformation inventory that can be used by different students over different learning contexts.

For this particular research, I suggest that we can compare the participants in a before and after format. Firstly, did the participants in this research experience growth in any tangible way? Secondly, did this all occur in a way that would have been highly unlikely had they not returned to college? I would argue that they have. We need only consider the participants’ evocative use of language. The excitement and joy, that saturates their accounts of their meaning-making is compelling enough to conclude that they have experienced what Aristotle identified as human flourishing (Irwin, 1999); what Sartre (1984) calls transcendence, and what from Mezirow (2000) we know as transformation. To experience transformation the learner must be prepared to adjust their frames of reference; to embrace new ways of thinking about themselves and the world. For me, this represents the very essence, the absolute experience of transformation. I will give a few examples.

I begin with Angela, who at the start of her learning journey – ‘basically thought I was thick I didn’t believe in myself’, but by the end was a – ‘lot more able and capable than I think I might have thought I was’ (Angela). Then there was Janice who on her first day at college – ‘nearly walked out of the class. I was petrified. I wasn’t sure if I was going to be capable of sitting in the classroom’. This is the same Janice who now believes that she – ‘can do anything that I set my mind to, and I feel strong for the first time in a very long time’ (Janice). The very same Janice, whose husband – ‘hardly recognise me anymore ... it is like having a different wife altogether’. Then there is Elaine who previously thought – ‘so little of myself … that I was a nobody’. The same Elaine that now feels
— ‘equal to anybody, that’s what [education has] done for me’. Shelley made some particularly remarkable progress. She reported that she was, ‘the wee woman [who] stands at the sink doing the dishes’. However Shelley determined that she wanted more.

Since achieving her BA degree, Shelley’s everyday experience has shifted significantly. From her previous perception of herself as a, ‘… downtrodden mother of three bairns’, she now sees herself as, ‘very able … I have grown into a very confident woman’ (Shelley). From never having had a real interest in politics, Shelley has now taken on a significant leadership role in her local community. Shelley has become chairperson of her local tenants association. To highlight issues facing disadvantaged communities, she travels the country speaking at political meetings. A daunting task indeed, for the, ‘wee housewife’ who lacked confidence. But for a transformed Shelley – ‘... now, I think it’s in my blood, I enjoy it’ (Shelley). I think these examples represent strong evidence that HE in FE can be a transformative experience for participants.

I make the proposition that my thesis has unearthed some very compelling evidence that HE in FE can indeed be a transformative experience. I have demonstrated, through my analysis of the educational journeys of the participants that despite their often negative experiences of education, and the cultural entrenchment of working class habitus, non-traditional students who have the motivation for a second chance in education, can experience significant social and emotional, and intellectual growth as a consequence. I would concede that some participants have experienced transformation to a more significant degree than others. I would also argue however, that the majority of participants have grown and developed to the extent that it would be fair to propose they have experienced a transformation.
Original Contribution

There has been a plethora of researches designed to investigate the phenomena of transformation as a consequence of participation in education (Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b, 1991; Cranton, 2006). Thus far, transformation has interested researchers working in informal education (Brookfield, 1986; Cranton, 2006), or part-time and distance formal education (Galbraith, 1991; Daloz, 1999). Subsequently, there is a significant research corpus highlighting the transformative potential in particular educational sites, but at the expense of others, including HE in FE. This research was needed to address this gap. The originality of this study therefore is rooted in the paucity of research investigating the transformative potential of learning in full-time HE in FE. My research was important firstly, because widening access policies are placing more emphasis on the role of FE in providing routes into HE and whole programmes of degree study. Secondly accusations of dumbing down have raised questions about the nature and value of the HE in FE learning experience. My investigation into the transformative potential of learning HE in FE provides a contribution to a) understanding the pedagogical, social, and intellectual contribution of higher education in further education and b) how participation in HE in FE can be a transformative experience in ways similar to the transformative experiences of learners in more informal types of education.

I determined that it was of some significant import, that in a context of widening participation, and accusations of subsequent dumbing down, that research should be undertaken to investigate my hunch that instrumentally oriented teaching and learning was but one possible approach in HE in FE; that transformative experiences were also a possible outcome for HE in FE students. I would like to claim originality on the basis that investigating transformation in HE in FE represents a new
frontier for transformative teaching and learning theory. More needs to be done however and I will
discuss this further when I consider the implications for future research next.

**Implications for Future Research**

The teaching team on the BA has always considered ourselves to be reflective practitioners. We
undertake regular focus group evaluations on various aspects of the programme. I would be keen
to make some of these evaluations more formal. I ought to use the skills learned, as part of my
doctoral studies, to yield a deeper understanding of my classroom, and to develop better teaching
and learning. For example, in the belief that research should be cumulative, that educational praxis
should be evidence-based; undertaking practitioner-researches on specific aspects of teaching and
learning may contribute to a much deeper understanding of how we can improve practice and
enhance the student learning experience. For example, I think a study on how students respond to
collaborative learning would make a fascinating research study to support our practice. This work
would also be useful for other researchers interested in transformative teaching and learning. A
further action research project to investigate how students experience teacher-student
relationships, and how teacher-students can impact teaching and learning, would be worthwhile.
The challenge now is to use my new skillset to make my praxis truly evidence-based, and to share
any emerging research yield with other teachers with similar aspirations.

My previous practitioner researches have been undertaken on various aspects of the BA
programme. It might now be time to extend research activities to undertaking practitioner
research at HNC or HND level. This might result in the teaching team being better prepared for
students progressing to BA. These researches would require little concession from the college, but
could make a significant contribution to teaching and learning. Some practitioner researches would
give the BA teaching team much to think and talk about. Practitioner researches would help us
determine what needs to be adapted to improve delivery of the programme and the student
experience.

**Implications for Practice**

The research journey I have just taken has been a significant learning experience. Therefore, as
both practitioner and researcher it is ethically incumbent on me to use what I have learned from my
doctoral experience to enhance my contribution to the social and intellectual development of
students. For example, how I think about writing for academic assessment, how I think about the
role and practice of research has shifted significantly. My writing and research skills have become
more polished. I feel more confident in my scholarly attributes and skills. I feel I have reached a
new plateau in my intellectual development. Of more significant import, I now feel better able to
support students to advance their own intellectual development. Students will benefit significantly.
I am the person on the teaching team who assumes responsibility for teaching effective writing for
academic assessment, including for example structuring essays and referencing. I also teach
research methodology and have significant research supervision commitments. I look forward to
applying my new understanding to supporting the intellectual development of students; particularly
as a further part of my role is preparing students for post-graduate study. Finally, my students will
gain in a number of ways from the participation in the research. They will be taught by someone
who is significantly more learned and, as a consequence, more confident in his skills as a teacher
and supervisor of research.
Reflecting on the Research Experience

I must be prepared to reflect on and critique my own performance as a researcher, and now do so.

My critical approach to HE in FE was largely pejorative. My assessment of management aspirations for the quality, rigour and learning experience of students in HE in FE, based on many years working in HE in FE, is unapologetically unflattering. A number of critical assumptions were implied. Although I recognise that in a doctoral thesis there is an anticipated high level of criticality and researcher impartiality, I also wanted my own experiences to count for something. Equally important I felt, were the experiences of colleagues, as I understand them from the many conversations I have with them in the workplace, and the, albeit, occasional conversations with colleagues from other institutions. I tried to juxtapose, what I see as an accurate collective HE in FE teacher experience, contrasted with a fair and critical review of the literature. I suspect I may not have always achieved the correct balance; I will continue to position this concern at the forefront when planning future research. My initial research hunch was that transformative teaching and learning was still possible in a milieu I have experienced as not ideally structured to support transformative aspirations. I decided to interrogate this idea by using BA graduates as my ideal sample group. The BA degree is, relative to other programmes, well represented by mature adult non-traditional students. Typically, BA graduates have comparative to most other students, the longest learning journeys. I also proposed that I should experience some level of transformation as a consequence of undertaking the study.

My professional responsibility on the BA programme is to teach Qualitative Research Methodology and Research Ethics. I also have significant research supervision responsibilities. Much of my teaching commitment is therefore spent thinking about issues apropos to the designing and undertaking, of social research. I have a strong ethical commitment to this work. I particularly enjoy
my time spent with small groups, or one-on-one, supervising the development of students’ ideas, coursework and theses. I undertook my doctoral learning journey for three reasons. Firstly, I wanted the experience of participating in a programme of study at a high academic level. Secondly, I wanted to deepen my understanding of research to a) use it more rewardingly in my own practitioner researches; to make future researches more polished for wider dissemination and b) to help me become more proficient when teaching and supervising research. Third, after working in collaboration with a colleague for many years, trying continuously to improve all aspects of the BA programme, I felt it was time to explore my hunch that HE in FE can be a transformative experience for students. As I have already concluded that I am confident that I have demonstrated that students are transformed by the experience, I now turn to my own transformation.

I feel I have developed significantly in terms of my general appreciation of the role of research in developing professional praxis; and the designing and undertaking of research. I am more confident with the range of philosophical and methodological approaches. Most importantly however, a more comprehensive appreciation of appropriate academic writing and using empirical materials has been the gift I have received from both, significant engagement with scholarly materials and extremely constructive discussions with my research supervisors. I feel I have developed a research imagination. I now feel confident I could confidently undertake insightful practitioner researches, and intend to do so. I feel I would now use these same insights, to inform practice beyond my own classroom, by participating in conferences and publishing practitioner researches. I now consider my experiences of the process of undertaking the research.

At various time during the development of my research, I was anguished at the thought of losing objectivity. I am passionate about my role developing students. I can indulge myself in the
occasional histrionics, when I feel meaningful teaching and learning is being compromised by the lack of a really explicit guiding philosophy, or what I called earlier, the limited horizons of HE in FE and the instrumentality of college management. This is experienced as an unnecessary anxiety and discontent for many HE in FE teachers. Although objectivity was an important research aim, as I became more involved in my work, I became convinced that critical research is better when there is a subjective interest and the opportunity to posit what may be regarded as subjective statements, such as the statements just made. Nonetheless, I tried to make creeping subjectivity acceptable by suggesting that my research approach incorporated a bit of auto-ethnography. I would advise other researchers considering a similar research design to give meaningful consideration to auto-ethnography. I suspect I may have missed a real opportunity to position my own experiences more in the research by considering auto-ethnography late. For similar research in the future, I would spend significant time exploring auto-ethnography as I suspect it would have both widened and enriched the parameters of my research.

Ultimately, I have thrown light on a requisite to deliver HE in FE, with higher aspirations than those that currently appear to satisfy the Scottish Government and their representatives in colleges. I suspect that college managers will be aggrieved by some of my propositions. Nonetheless, the focus of my research is teachers and students. I perceive college management to be too disconnected from the everyday experiences of teachers and students for their views to be considered pertinent in this instance. It is important that a real desire for meaningful and inspiring learning be re-established in the context of HE in FE. As I hope I have shown, students’ experiences of participation in education can impact in too many positive ways to be compromised by a lack of vision or aspiration. I would argue that it is incumbent on those who work most intimately with
non-traditional students, the teaching staff, to be at the vanguard of returning meaningful learning to HE in FE.

**Final Conclusions**

I have been very critical of HE in FE throughout this thesis. I have tried extremely hard to balance my criticism with visions for a better way of facilitating education. I returned to education as a mature student in my late twenties. Teaching and learning has since become an enduring passion; but only because I was taught early by inspiring teachers in inspiring milieux. I would be cheating my students if I aspired to less for them. I do not claim to have all the answers to reinstating meaningful learning to HE in FE. I was just lucky to be in a position to explore some questions. I hope the findings of this research might continue to motivate, not only myself, but may help inform others who seek to facilitate learning contexts that truly excite and inspire students. To return one last time to transformation; I am satisfied that participants have been transformed by the experience of participation in HE in FE. I would like to register the claim that transformation has been positively demonstrated. The evocative language of my research participants attests to how far they have travelled on their transformative journeys.

The participants have experienced a significant shift in their ways of being-in-the-world, in a Heideggerian sense. They could be said to have flourished in their emotional, social and intellectual lives in an Aristotelian framework; and in the ideas of Jack Mezirow and associates, the participants in this research have been transformed by the experience of participation in HE in FE. *Very good but what of it?* is an anticipated response I end this conclusion by answering. Ultimately, I now have a deeper understanding of the transformative potential of HE in FE. I now know that...
participation in HE on FE can be much more meaningful experience for students than an opportunity to participate in a mode of education; which is predominantly instrumental and designed merely as a passport to the workplace. I would be doing education, and future cohorts of students, a real disservice if I sought merely to prepare students for the workplace; if I aspired to less than significantly increasing the instances of students transformed by participation in HE in FE. I will continue to seek out teaching methodologies, and ways of being with students that maximise the impact that learning has on students’ lives. I anticipate that dumbing down has yet to reach its apotheosis, that there is still some quality and rigour to be expunged from teaching and learning in HE in FE. It is my hope for any colleague, whether teacher or management that takes the time to read my thesis that it resonates with their own experiences of HE in FE. In the true spirit of a critical pedagogy we must all be prepared to recognise where we are coming up short. Until we can confront this uncomfortable truth an old adage applies – *nothing changes if nothing changes*. My final wish is that in some small way, the reading of my thesis will act as a referent to be reflected on, and that it may influence how the reader feels about, and functions, in their role as manager, teacher or student in HE in FE.
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**Interview Schedule**

Interviewee:       Date:

1. I would like to begin by asking you something about your experiences of compulsory education:
   (ask for examples)
   
   • Was it an enjoyable experience?
   • Can you explain your answer?
   • Did you do well at school?
   • Can you explain your answer?
   • Did you value education?
   • Anything else?

2. Can you tell me about any aspiration you might personally have had to participate in Further and Higher education immediately after leaving school? (ask for examples)
   
   • Can you explain why you felt the way you did?
   • How would you describe any aspirations your parents had for you participating in Further or Higher Education?
   • Can you explain why they might have felt the way they did?
   • Anything else?

3. Can you explain your reasons for returning to education when you did?
   (ask for examples)
   
   • Better job Prospects?
   • Change in life circumstances?
   • To do something worthwhile?
   • Any other reason?
4. Once you had made the decision to return; can you tell me how you felt about the following:
(ask for examples)

- Levels of confidence?
- Academic ability?
- Enthusiasm for learning?
- Anything else?

5. How do you feel your levels of confidence changed during your time at the college in terms of:
(ask for examples)

- How would you describe the change?
- Were there any particular milestones or important experiences?
- Anything else?

6. How would you describe how you feel your academic ability changed during your time at the college in terms of:
(ask for examples)

- Were there any particular milestones or important experiences?
- Anything else?

7. How do you feel your enthusiasm for learning changed during your time at the college in terms of:
(ask for examples)

- How would you describe the change?
- Were there any particular milestones or important experiences?
- Anything else?

8. How would you describe the transition from HND/Diploma level study in terms of
• How easy/difficult?
• In what ways was it easy/difficult (e.g. strict submission dates, types and levels of coursework, other examples)?
• How well did teaching staff support you to make the transition? (ask for examples)

9. Can you tell me something about your caring responsibilities when studying for your BA degree in terms of: (ask for examples)

• Who were you caring for?
• What did this involve?
• How difficult did you find juggling caring and study?
• Any time management strategies?
• How well did they work?
• Anything else?

10. Can you tell me about any support you received from partners/other family members/friends to help you juggle the commitments of caring with study? (ask for examples)

• What did support consist of?
• How did it help you?
• What do you think might have happened had the support not been there?
• If little or no support – how did this impact on your studies?
• Anything else?

11. Can you explain the extent to which you felt supported by programme tutors? (ask for examples)
• What would you expectations have been as a student in the third year of a degree programme?
• In what way did the support exceed/fall short of your expectations?
• How would you describe the support?
• How do you think support from tutors helped you achieve?
• How well did tutors develop productive relationships with students?
• Can you explain with examples?
• Anything else?

12. Can you explain what doing the BA has done for you in terms of:

• How you might have ‘grown’ as an individual? (examples)
• How you feel about yourself as an individual? (examples)
• How you think about the world you live in? (examples)
• How you think generally? (examples)
• Anything else?

• Can you give me some examples of where others may have recognised change in you as a consequence of achieving educationally?

• Family – explain with examples?
• Friends – explain with examples?
• Employers – explain with examples?
• Colleagues – explain with examples?
• Anyone else?
Reflections of BA Graduates

I am currently undertaking a study for a doctoral degree with the Open University. The focus of the study is how engaging in Higher Education in Further Education (HE in FE) has the potential to transform the lives of those who participate. I anticipate that the findings of the study will help yield a better understanding of the BA experience and, through dissemination of the findings, help the teaching team to identify ways to make the degree a better experience for future cohorts. Can I ask that you consider the following themes/questions and respond to them as fully as you feel appropriate: the richer the data the better. Type in your responses in the box immediately below the questions

I have attached a consent form. If you agree to participate, could you please enter your name and date and return to (email address removed) with your reflection. If you agree to participate, please accept my sincere thanks.

Name: Date:

For the purpose of anonymity; choose a pseudonym:

Age at graduation:

Email address:

Family/Caring commitments when studying:

Last programme of study before participating in the BA:

What have you been doing since graduation in terms of work/advanced study?

(1) Can you explain your parents aspirations for you in terms of further and/or higher education at the point of leaving school?
(2) Can you explain your own personal aspirations at that time?

(3) Can you tell me something about why you came back to education when you did (job/academic challenge etc)?

(4) If appropriate: When you started your learning journey at the entry level (NC/HNC etc.) can you explain your feelings in terms of the following:

- Your levels of motivation
- The extent to which you feel you ‘fitted in’ at college and why?
• How you perceived your level of ability?

• How far you thought you would take your education and why (eg. HNC/D)

(5) How would you describe the positive and/or negative aspects of your experience of the BA (what made it positive/negative?)
(6) Can you describe how you ‘fitted in’ family and/or work commitments with your studies?

(7) Can you describe the support you might have received from ‘others’ (partner/friends/other family members etc.) to successfully engage with your studies?

(8) Can you explain how support from teaching staff helped you successfully engage with your studies?

(9) What do you feel are the personal advantages of studying for a degree in a local college?
(10) What do you feel are the disadvantages?

(11) Can you explain how easy/difficult you found the transition from diploma to degree level work? (if possible use examples)

(12) How well do you feel teaching staff helped you make the transition? (if possible use examples)

Please read before progressing (probably the most important 2 questions in the survey)

(13) How would you explain how achieving the BA has changed/transformed you as an individual?
How might others (colleagues/friends/family) have indicated that they recognise a change/transformation in you?

Some (not all) current literature on Higher Education facilitated in Further Education Colleges have been critical, claiming that FE colleges are not the appropriate place to be doing a degree - How would you respond to these critiques in light of your own experiences of doing the BA?
Finally; there may be aspects of your BA experience, which I have not addressed. Is there anything you feel you would like to add about your experience of the BA?

Thank you very much for your participation. It is very much appreciated.
Interview Schedule – Teachers

• What do you feel are the salient differences between the HND (SQA) and BA (HEI) in terms of: (examples?)
  • Academic standards
  • Stricter submissions
  • Teaching and learning approaches
  • Assessment criteria
  • Promoting autonomous learning
  • Any other comments?

• How would you describe any difficulties students encounter making the transition from HND to BA level study in terms of academic in terms of: (examples?)
  • Academic standards
  • Strict submissions schedules
  • Teaching and Learning approaches
  • Assessment criteria
  • Autonomy of learning
  • Any other comments?

• How would you describe [in general terms] the type of students who participate in the BA in terms of: (examples?)
  • Ability
  • Motivation
  • Willingness to participate in meaningful learning
  • Any other comments?

• How well do you think teaching staff prepare students for transition from HND/other diploma to BA: (examples?)
  • Prior to starting the programme
  • As an ongoing process
  • Academic support
  • Pastoral support
  • Any other comments?

• What particular issues do you feel students with significant ‘caring’ commitments experience in terms of: (examples of particular student biographies?)
• Time and space to study
• Juggling competing responsibilities
• Staying focused/motivated
• Any other comments?

• How well do you feel students are supported to have positive learning experiences in terms of: (examples?)
  • Academic support
  • Pastoral support
  • How students use the support offered
  • Compared to what they might expect of a university-based academic programme
  • Any other comments?

• How would you describe the quality of the BA programme generally in terms of: (examples?)
  • Academic rigour
  • Quality of learning experience
  • Preparing students for progression to further study or employment
  • Any other comments?

• To what extent would you say that participation in the BA has the potential to ‘Transform’ students’ lives in terms of:
  • Academic maturity
  • Emotional maturity
  • Self-identity
  • Confidence
  • Any concrete example

  Any other comments?
Appendix 4

Informed Consent Form

Facilitating Transformative Learning Experiences for Non-Traditional Students Studying Higher Education in a Further Education College: Exploring the Potential

I am conducting this research as part of a Doctor of Education (Ed.D) programme with the Open University. Thank you for considering being a participant in this research. Before consenting to participate you should consider the following.

- The interviews should take 60-90 minutes to conduct
- I might need to contact you again for clarification or with a few follow-up questions
- There will be no emotional or physical cost to participating in the research
- A benefit of participation is that the findings of the research will give me a deeper understanding of the student experience on the BA programme.

Please read the following statements and tick the box to indicate your agreement.

- I have been fully briefed and understand the nature of the research.
- I stand what is expected of me as a participant.
- I stand that every care will be taken to ensure my confidentiality.
- I stand that my contribution will be treated confidentially.
- I stand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without having to give any reasons.
- I understand that the interview being recorded, but I can ask to have this switched off at any point.
- I stand that parts of the research may be published and that this does not affect my right to participating in the research.

PTO
Once your interview is transcribed it will be returned to you by email attachment for approval. If you agree that it accurately represents what you disclosed during the interview, please return by email your permission to proceed to use the data.

If you have any concerns regarding how any part of this process has been conducted, please contact *** ******* (Research Manager) (email address removed)

Name (printed)________________________________________

Name (signed)_________________________________________

Date _______________________

Please indicate if you would like to see a copy of the final report

Yes, I would like to see the final report
No, I would not like to see the final report
Interview: XXXXXXX

Introducer - bold
Interviewee - normal
Transcribed by: Facal
Duration of interview: 01:15:27

Symbols used in interview transcript

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<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td>A self-initiated pause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[laughs]</td>
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<td>Bold text indicates stressed/emphasised speech</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incredibly</td>
<td>Emphasis within speech already in bold text</td>
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<tr>
<td>(00:01:03)</td>
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</table>

I: I'd like to ask you about your experience of compulsory education. Could you tell me something about it?

F: My experience at school wasn’t good at all; I didn’t enjoy school, to the point that for the last two years of school I would very, very rarely turn up. Er, my parents would catch me playing truant, take me back to the school and the minute nobody was looking I was back out of the school. It was very frustrating because I didn’t feel that I was fitting in. I didn’t feel I was part of the system. I felt inadequate. I felt that I wasn’t able to do the lessons very well and I was unsupported in what I was doing so I didn’t want to be there. And I don’t think they missed me being there.

I: The school didn’t miss you being there?

F: No.

I: How did that make you feel?

F: If anything… I was quite rebellious so, for me, it was quite good that they didn’t care because I didn’t then get forced to go and they left me alone to my own devices after that.

I: So how well did you do at school then, Ffynn?

F: I surprisingly came out with ok standard grade marks but they had put me into a stage where… when I was at school, I had been put in the middle group and once you
were in the middle group it was very hard to work your way up. And when I was doing maths my maths teacher had wanted me to move up because I was always coming between ninety and a hundred percent in all my exams so she said, 'You are more than capable of doing a credit exam.' So I got quite excited then, at that point, because somebody told me I was good at something and says you can go and do it. But before I was allowed to do it you had to sit a certain exam so me and another lad, in the class got picked out to sit this exam. And we both came out - I came out with twenty-six and I think he got twenty-seven percent and she said they can't move us up. But she was really frustrated - she was quite a young teacher - and she said they had set it to all the people on credit and nobody got over thirty-five percent but they still, due to the system, weren't allowed to move us up even though we hadn't been taught what we were doing. So that kind of made you think, 'what's the point?'. They are going to box you, they are going to put you where they want to put you and you can't go where you want to go.

I: So, taking your whole school experience, how would you say you'd done - how well did you think you'd done?

F: I could have done better but...em, I think, under the circumstances, I was lucky to get the qualifications that I got.

I: Anything else you'd like to add to that?

F: (No).

I: When you left school, what were your aspirations to participate in further or higher education?

F: None, none at all. Em, the only time I thought about it was because there was youth training schemes on the go and I wanted to be a hairdresser. I decided because I didn't feel I was very academically intelligent that I'd be better off using creativity, throughout my whole school life it had been commented that I was quite creative so...em, I decided hairdressing was the way to go. Through hairdressing and the YTS scheme, we got put on one day a week within the college and you got paid there but for me I think that was just a day out - it wasn't really education, it was: going in showing up, getting your tick box and get your money at the end of the week and get your YTS money. Nobody nobody considered me going on to further education, it wasn't an option.

I: What about your parents; how did they feel about further and higher education?
Below is a section pertaining to the author of this thesis. It is presented as evidence that ethical approval was sought and given by the Research Ethics Committee at the college where the research was undertaken. The title of the thesis has changed since approval was received.

B. STAFF APPLICATIONS

<table>
<thead>
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<td>023/02/13</td>
<td>Non-traditional graduates’ experiences of transformation. A case study of higher education in a further education college</td>
<td>Eddie Rocks</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>The Committee looks forward to the sharing of findings.</td>
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Appendix 6b

To Eddie Rocks,

Subject Exploring Transformative Journeys through a Higher Programme in a Further Education

MEMORANDUM

Ref HREC 2016 2365
AMS (Red) 29/08/2015

This memorandum is to confirm that the research protocol for the above-named research project, as submitted for ethics review, has been given a favourable opinion by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee by Chair’s action as it is thought to be low risk. This is on the understanding that you will obtain permissions and protective measures are in place.

Please make sure that any question(s) relating to your application and approval are sent to Research-REC-Review@open.ac.uk quoting the HREC reference number above. We will endeavour to respond as quickly as possible so that your research is not delayed in any way.

At the conclusion of your project, by the date that you stated in your application, the Committee

Kind

Dr Louise

Chair OU
Introducing the Participants

**Angela:** Angela returned to education at National Certificate level (NC). Following an anxious start, she indicated that she very quickly developed a passion for learning. Angela indicated that she felt that she flourished as she progressed through the different levels. After successfully completing the Higher National Diploma programme, *Supporting Learning Needs,* she progressed to, and graduated with, the BA in 2011, age 37 years. Angela worked as an Early Years Officer, and cared for a husband and daughter when undertaking the BA. From a starting point characterised by a personal lack of confidence, Angela enthused about her personal development and elevated sense of self-efficacy. She now teaches childcare at the college from where she graduated.

**David:** David initially enrolled on the HNC/HND *Supporting Learning Needs.* David had previously been to university but withdrew without graduating. Following much personal deliberation, centred on whether he believed he had what it takes to achieve at BA level, he decided to participate. David flourished on the BA programme. David disclosed that he had always suffered from a distinct lack of confidence and feelings of self-efficacy. Following a very successful experience, David graduated with the BA in 2011, age 34 years. David had no familial caring responsibilities while undertaking the BA, however worked as a Support Worker in a school. David returned to his job as a Support Worker following graduation.

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1 Information correct at the time of the interviews taking place.
Debbie: Graduated with the BA in 2012, age 48. Is a single parent (recently separated at the time of the interview). Debbie had held long term aspirations to return to education before eventually doing so. One of the most significant barriers to her return was a distinct lack of support from her husband. On the contrary, the husband was quite aggressively antagonistic to the idea. Debbie found it difficult to study while also trying to be responsible for a young family. She was also employed in a call centre when participating in the BA. Debbie was not always able to make the most of opportunities such as collaborative learning groups but did so whenever possible. Debbie has set her work aspirations higher than previously. She was very excited about her achievements during interview. Since graduating Debbie has been looking for a graduate job.

Elaine: Elaine initially enrolled on the HNC/HND Supporting Learning Needs. She graduated with the BA in 2011, age 39 years. A single parent with two young children, she worked as a Carer when undertaking the BA. Elaine also found it extremely difficult to participate in collaborative learning as a consequence of her care commitments. During her interview, she lamented what she regarded as lost opportunities. Elaine felt that she could have made more of her BA opportunity if she had been able to make best use of the opportunity to work intensely with others. Nonetheless, Debbie did very well on the BA programme. She also indicated significant changes in how she perceived herself and her place in the world. Shortly after graduating, Elaine secured a graduate position with a national charity, which she continues to hold.

Irene: Irene articulated to the BA programme form an HND Social Science programme at a neighbouring college. She had initially returned to education at NC level. Irene, largely
informed by her working-class habitus, and gendered familial attitudes, was never
convinced that she had a right to participate in education. The catalyst for her return to
education was when, as a taxi driver, she had a regular contract transporting children with
disabilities to school. Having built up a rapport, and something of a relationship, with the
children, Irene felt that she would like a career working with disabled people. Irene
suggested during her interview that she had achieved, what she once considered, the
unachievable. She indicated that she now took real pride in her achievement; she no
longer feels inferior. She graduated in 2012 age 47.

Janice: Janice had significant anxiety issues to cope with on her return to education. Her
anxiety almost derailed her educational aspirations right at the start. She found it difficult
to be at peace in classes and often felt a strong urge to leave. She did moderately well in
her HNC/D Supporting Learning Needs programmes. She wanted to participate in the BA
but her confidence again almost stopped her. Even after enrolling she considered
withdrawing for fear of failure. Ironically, Janice absolutely flourished on the BA
programme. The catalyst followed a graded presentation which Janice characteristically
felt she had failed. Her presentation was in fact excellent; she was graded ‘A’. Janice then
went from strength to strength. She graduated in 2012, age 40. As indicated in her
descriptions of how she is now perceived by family members; she is a different woman.
She now works as a Support Assistant, with children with disabilities, in a local school.

June: Returned to the HNC/D Supporting Learning Needs programme. She graduated with
the BA in 2011, age 46. She is a single parent of three children. June did not work when
studying, but her caring responsibilities were significant. Two of her children are still
June was really concerned about how she was going to manage juggling competing commitments. Her strategy was to make a plan for her study; she determined to stick rigidly to the plan. Her daughter’s health status was a persistent concern for June during her time participating in the degree. She countered this by being very well organised and working to her plan. She also enjoyed considerable support from other family members. Despite some small disruptions due to the health status of her daughter, June flourished on the programme. She now works in a secondary school with children with special needs.

**Linda:** Linda also started her learning journey by enrolling on the HNC/HND *Supporting Learning Needs.* She graduated with the BA in 2012, aged 36. She wanted to return to education for a long time but was never really encouraged. She is a single parent with four children, age range 4-15 years. She worked as a Pupil Support Assistant with children with support needs. She was eventually encouraged by her father. He realised how determined she was and decided he should support her return. He took some pressure off Linda by doing some childcare. Following graduation, Linda continued in the role as a PSA. She intimates that she now feels very different about herself and is glad she returned. She also volunteers for a local charity. Linda is currently being trained to take up a paid role with the charity.

**Lynne:** Lynne returned to college to participate in a *Lift Off* programme. Lynne returned to education to prove to herself that she could do it. She felt that all her family thought she could not do education; she wanted to prove them wrong. Lynne was a particularly anxious student who, despite her anxieties, took it ‘one year at a time’ and eventually
worked her way up the different levels. She suggested that it was difficult and that she often questioned herself and her abilities; particularly when significant others also expressed doubts. Lynne had significant caring responsibilities while also participating in the BA. Caring responsibilities were not allowed to be a barrier to participation. Lynne graduated in 2012 age 40. She was not working or seeking work at the time of interview. She was too busy, she indicates, as she had recently become a grandmother.

**Mary:** Graduated in 2011, age 45. Mary experienced significant disruption to her compulsory education when her family migrated to New Zealand. She always had a desire for second chance education and returned at HNC level. Mary participated in part-time caring work while studying. Mary was ambitious and determined fairly early to use her undergraduate degree to do post-graduate professional study. After graduating with the BA, she went on to do a Post-Graduate programme in Social Work at one of Scotland’s ancient universities. Mary flourished on the BA programme; it was quite spectacular the rate of improvement in for example essay writing skills over the duration of the programme. She is planning to return to New Zealand soon.

**Sandra:** Graduated in 2010, age 48. Sandra is married with dependent children. Untypical of most of the other interviewees, in Sandra’s early years, and in her married life, she was encouraged to learn; learning was seen by both her father and husband as a thing to be valued. Subsequently, Sandra enjoyed significant support when participating in her degree. Since graduating with her BA, Sandra has achieved a master’s degree in Residential Childcare form Strathclyde University. Following graduation Sandra secured a job with the local council as a Residential Care Manager in a residential home for vulnerable children.
Sandra appeared less enthusiastic about the BA experience than other participants. Possibly, she was more instrumentally motivated. At the time of being interviewed, Sandra was undertaking an undergraduate degree in Social Work.

**Shelley:** Graduated in 2010, age 37. Shelley is married with four children, all school age. She did not work while studying for the BA as she felt she ‘had enough to do at home’. Shelley returned to education at NC level. She had spent a number of years living abroad; in the Mediterranean, from where her husband originated. Shelley was given little familial support during her time on the programme. Her husband was not convinced of the merits of his wife doing a degree. Shelley was determined however and eventually won his support. Shelley perceived herself as being ‘only a housewife … the wee woman at the sink’. She had no significant career aspirations. Nonetheless, despite never previously having been interested in politics she is now a Community Worker and extremely active supporting the community she lives in which she considers a disadvantaged community.