Teaching and Learning RESEARCH BRIEFING
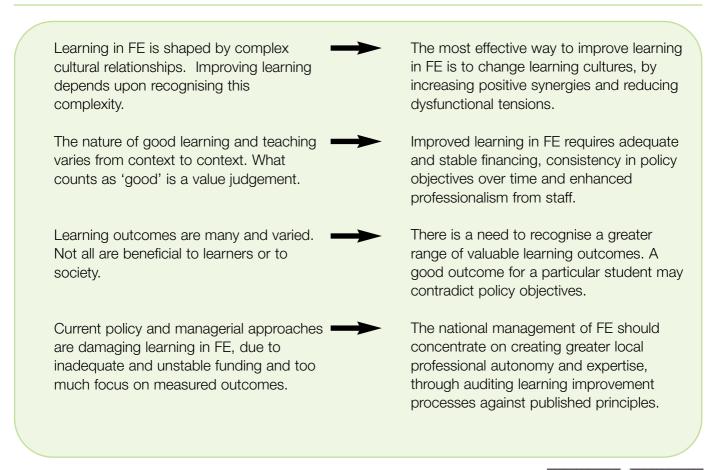
Improving Learning in Further Education: a new, cultural approach

Further Education colleges provide diverse and badly needed services, especially for the educationally and socially disadvantaged. However, the quality of learning in FE is under pressure and even threat. The Transforming Learning Cultures in FE (TLC) project identified these pressures, developed a better way to understand learning in FE, and produced a new, multi-level approach to improving that learning.

Learning in FE is shaped by complex cultural relationships. Improving learning depends upon recognising this complexity.	The most effective way to improve learning in FE is to change learning cultures, by increasing positive synergies and reducing dysfunctional tensions.
The nature of good learning and teaching varies from context to context. What counts as 'good' is a value judgement.	Improved learning in FE requires adequate and stable financing, consistency in policy objectives over time and enhanced professionalism from staff.
Learning outcomes are many and varied. Not all are beneficial to learners or to society.	There is a need to recognise a greater range of valuable learning outcomes. A good outcome for a particular student may contradict policy objectives.
Current policy and managerial approaches are damaging learning in FE, due to inadequate and unstable funding and too much focus on measured outcomes.	The national management of FE should concentrate on creating greater local professional autonomy and expertise, through auditing learning improvement processes against published principles.

T·L·R·P TEACHING & LEARNING RESEARCH PROGRAMME

E·S·R·C ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

The research

Learning in FE is strongly influenced by several factors including the positions, dispositions and actions of students and of tutors. Other significant factors include the location and resources of the site, which enable some approaches and attitudes and constrain others, the course, assessment and qualification specifications, the time tutors and students spend together, their interrelationships, and the other learning sites students engage with.

Higher-level factors of importance include college management and procedures, funding and inspection body procedures and regulations, and government policy, as well as wider vocational and academic cultures and broader social values and practices. Among these are social class, gender and ethnicity, the nature of employment opportunities, social and family life, and the status of FE itself as a sector. These factors interact with each other over time.

This means that no single factor can be isolated from the others, or is always of more importance, when we consider how learning occurs in FE. A learning culture emerges from the combination of these interrelationships.

Our research identified wide variations in learning cultures within FE, as well as some common characteristics. By 'culture' we mean the practices which influence learning in any site. Any site where learning takes place can be said to possess a learning culture.

A learning culture both enables and constrains learning, and changing the characteristics of a learning culture will change the learning. But learning cultures are complex, and individuals participating within them differ, so there are variations of learning within any learning culture. Within the same class, what works well for some students may not work for others.

Many of the factors that contribute to learning cultures in FE are beyond the control or influence of tutors. Nevertheless, tutor expertise and actions were important in enhancing and sustaining the learning in the sites where the tutors worked. A rarely recognised but central role of teaching is to mediate the aspects of a learning culture that tutors can influence.

We identified four key features within learning cultures in FE on different scales.

- The central significance of the tutor in learning. Here there were significant variations. Some tutors were more independent than others, and had more social and cultural capital and room to manoeuvre. Some were teaching on courses that they had started themselves – and some on courses they disapproved of.

- FE has always dealt with students, young and old, looking for a second chance in education. Often these are people for whom schooling has been a partial success at best. FE has developed a welcoming ethos, and has practices for working with such students. This reinforces its relatively low status compared with school or university, and this low status permits forms of funding and managerialism that are more extreme than in other education sectors. Status impacts on different courses in different ways, often risking detriment for those on lower-status routes.

- Learning in FE is pressured by a combination of inadequate and unstable funding and a rigid audit regime, focused on retention, achievement and inspection standards. Tutors spent much of their time striving to protect the existing learning culture from external damage such as dramatic reductions in class contact time, imposed register systems that do not fit with patterns of attendance and learning, and tensions between inclusion and high achievement rates. This frequently entails large amounts of 'underground' working whereby tutors routinely engaged in working well beyond their job descriptions. These pressures increased during the period of the research. Such nationwide managerial approaches pose a significant threat to learning quality, and tutors are running out of the energy and morale needed to mediate them.

- Pressures to improve teaching and learning in FE are driven by concerns other than the nature of teaching and learning. Over the last 50 years, there have been repeated calls for the improvement of teaching and learning in FE in attempts to tackle broader issues including perceived social and moral problems among youth, the inadequacy of vocational education and training from the point of view of employers, insufficient skill levels to ensure the nation's global competitiveness, and the need for a cost-effective FE service. Beneath these calls for improvement lies a basic problem that bedevils FE – the demand that the sector provide effective responses to some of the country's major social, employment and economic needs, and with ever-decreasing resources.

Students as learners

Students are key participants within any learning culture in FE. They contribute to the construction of those cultures, and their participation in them contributes to their learning and personal development. Students' opportunities are enabled and constrained by their 'horizons for learning'. These horizons are related to a student's position, for example in relation to the class, to a desired employment field, to their family and to their community. From that (possibly changing) position, the horizon for learning is constructed through the interaction between the characteristics of the site and of the learning culture, and the dispositions and perceptions of the student.

Student groupings in some classes are more homogeneous than in others, and homogeneity or diversity influences the learning culture of a class. Even when a group is largely homogeneous, minor variations in the positions and dispositions of students can have a significant effect on their learning. The significance of dispositions in influencing horizons for learning and learning goes beyond 'learning styles'. Aspects of a student's dispositions are deep-seated and often tacit, and are influenced by experiences outside FE. Dispositions can and do change, and one of the main purposes of education is to contribute to personal growth through extending and challenging existing dispositions. Much learning entails deep-seated personal change, not merely acquiring sets of skills or chunks of knowledge.

Learning outcomes for students are complex. Current policy approaches concentrate on the achievement of qualifications, but for many students this was not the only significant outcome from their experience of FE. Some students who failed to complete or pass still learned much of value, although issues of personal growth and personal change were unacknowledged in the written assessments they had to take. These more informal learning outcomes were significant, and not always beneficial. Thus we found that nursery nurses on a course we researched learned to become effective practitioners in the field, but also had their identity as low status, gendered and low-paid workers confirmed. Entry-level drama students learned to enjoy and perform drama, and to express themselves within the setting of the class. However,

their dependent identities were reinforced. In an AS psychology class, some students learned to succeed and to enjoy their new academic knowledge. Others learned that psychology was too difficult, and that they could not succeed at it, resulting in lowered self-confidence.

Interventions to improve learning

Our work with FE tutors included a series of deliberate attempts to bring about change in the learning culture, each of which was discussed, monitored and documented. We distinguished three types of intervention:

Interventions for improvement. These were initiated to foster better learning and maximise student success. Their success depended in part upon whether they brought about a shift towards greater synergy between various elements of the learning culture.

Interventions to mitigate negative change. These were much more common. Typically, strongly held professional values and practices came into conflict with new expectations or requirements from college managers, funding arrangements, qualification bodies or other stakeholders. These interventions were aimed at maintaining practices, sometimes at considerable cost to the tutor.

Interventions for 'exit'. Some tutors left the FE sector, feeling that work circumstances were intolerable.

Tutor interventions of the first type often brought about improvement, but there were also unintended consequences. In some examples, pervasive aspects of learning cultures prevailed and tutor interventions had little effect.

Not all interventions were made by tutors. Some of the most significant interventions that impacted upon learning originated from sector-wide policy and management changes, for example to the funding mechanism, from major college level changes or challenges, such as mergers, staffing reorganisations, external inspections or crises in funding, and from particular managerial approaches within a college. Such changes are often driven by a combination of the need for financial survival, the need to excel at changing performance indicators such as inspection criteria, and a desire by college managements for new systems and procedures. The impact of such interventions on learning was at best neutral, and often harmful.

Major implications

Improving Learning in FE

In this project we have concentrated on the potential for change inside the FE system. We are also conscious that many of the improvements necessary in FE require issues of social inequality and restrictions of the labour market and employment practices to be addressed. We identified four possible drivers for the improvement of learning.

1. Student interests. What students in FE want and need is varied, between and within particular courses. Their FE experience is not simply about passing qualifications and getting a good job – though these were goals for many. Students want to enjoy their learning, and to be able to balance their studies with other personal priorities such as economic survival, supporting a family, doing an existing job, or sustaining a vibrant lifestyle. To operationalise this force for positive change, we need to acknowledge that sometimes students legitimately want things that policy does not currently support.

2. Tutors' professionalism. In all sites the tutor was a major influence on the quality of learning. If the huge reservoir of tutor experience, altruism and professionalism were recognised and supported, improvements in learning would follow. This would entail creating more space for tutor autonomy and collaboration, encouraging, rewarding, sustaining and supporting creativity, imagination and innovation, and providing better tutor learning opportunities, including challenging their expectations and assumptions.

3. Pedagogy. Our data supports the view of teaching as an art rather than a technical craft. Though there are some common features of good pedagogy that can be applied almost anywhere, the application differs significantly between different sites and their learning cultures. Often the good pedagogy we observed did not fit the criteria set out for national standards and inspection, and what worked well for one tutor in one site would not have worked for a different tutor, or on a different site. More understanding and support for a tutor's individual approach that is sensitive to the surrounding learning culture could be combined with staff development strategies that encouraged the sharing of expertise.

4. A Cultural View of Learning. Pedagogy, tutor professionalism and student dispositions need to be considered together with the factors

underlying learning cultures as a whole. Such an approach would open up the biggest improvements in learning of all. Improving learning cultures requires actions by a range of players including, at the minimum, government and other national bodies, college managers (both senior and middle), tutors (including the various types of paraprofessional), and students themselves.

It is necessary to develop ways to manage and monitor improvements that do not require either universal approaches or over-reliance on measured outputs. This can be done through nationally established principles of procedure, setting out approaches to improving learning at all levels in the system. The project has produced a draft of such Principles which appears on the project web site. The principles are underpinned by six broader principles about learning and improving learning, based upon the findings of the TLC research. These broader principles are:

- Improving learning entails more than increasing its effectiveness. It is important to supplement judgements about learning effectiveness with judgments about the value of learning, and to make issues of effectiveness subordinate to issues of value.

- There are many different positive learning processes and outcomes, beyond the achievement of a qualification. Different groups and different individuals may value different things. There is a need to celebrate and support a diversity of such positive learning, as well as recognising that learning can be harmful.

- Improving the effectiveness of learning entails modifying learning cultures. One way of doing that is to increase functional synergies and reduce dysfunctional tensions.

- In enhancing learning cultures, 'what works' is often localised and context-specific. Attempts to impose rigid standard procedures often have negative effects.

- Improving learning in FE entails creating space for localised initiative, creativity and professional judgement, and creating more synergistic cultures to support and reward such initiatives.

- The improvement of learning requires a reflectively critical understanding at all levels of intervention: government, college, tutor and, where possible, student.

Further information

The best source of further information about the project, including access to many project publications, is the website. The specific project website is www.ex.ac.uk/sell/tlc. It can also be accessed via the TLRP website: www.tlrp.org.

The main published output is a book to be published by Routledge Falmer in 2006, *Improving Learning Cultures in Further Education*, by authors.

For academic readers, TLC findings are being published in two journal special issues. They are:
Journal of Vocational Education and Training, Vol 55, No. 4, 2003
Educational Review, due in 2007.

For readers interested in the workings of the project and the partnership between HE and FE, the best source is a book published by the LSRC:
JAMES, D. (Ed) (2004) *Research in Practice: experiences, insights and interventions from the project Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education*. Building Effective Research: 5 (London: Learning and Skills Research Centre).

The warrant

The TLC investigated learning in 17 sites across four partner FE colleges, in different parts of England. There were originally four sites per college. One was changed partway through, giving the final total of 17. Within each site we conducted repeated interviews with a sample of at least six students per year, as well as with the tutor. In all, over 600 interviews are transcribed and analysed. Sites were regularly observed by several people, and over 150 observations were recorded. A repeated questionnaire was administered to all students in those sites where this was practicable. A total of 1043 questionnaires were returned and analysed. Fieldwork was conducted over a three-year period, from September 2001 to July 2004.

The research was conducted as a partnership between HE and FE. Four FE practitioners were seconded for two days a week to join the core research team. The main tutor in each site was given two hours per week of teaching remission to work on the local data collection and analysis.

At all stages, interpretation of the findings was shared across a team of 14 core researchers, including the FE-based researchers. In addition, our developing thinking was shared with and tested out on groups of academics and practitioners in workshops and seminars throughout the project.

In sum, the TLC was the largest, most rigorous and most in-depth investigation of learning in the UK FE sector that has yet been completed.
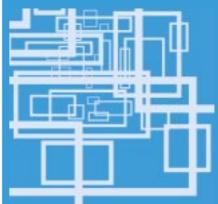
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