

## Community-based learning in FE colleges

Why it is important for adult returners and how it can be improved

Community Learning Centres (CLCs) linked to further education (FE) colleges can play a key role in re-engaging learners who are traditionally very hard to reach. But this area of education has been neglected in both policy and research, reflecting the relatively low status of community based-learning within further education and in the education system as a whole. This project helps us understand why it is important, and how it can be improved.

- The permeable boundaries of CLCs enable them to provide supportive learning environments for adult returners.



The distinctive contribution which CLCs can make to re-engaging adults in learning should be recognised and supported.

- Both teaching and non-teaching staff at CLCs engage with learners' social and emotional lives to create the supportive learning cultures of CLCs.



The work of teaching and non-teaching staff in CLCs is complex. They need appropriate training and support.

- More work needs to be done to encourage learners' transitions from the supportive environment of CLCs to other learning and employment opportunities.



Colleges need provision, including guidance, mentoring, and bridging courses, to help students identify routes from CLCs, and to support them in the transition process.

- The peripheral status of CLCs within colleges can limit their effectiveness.



Colleges need strategies to ensure that CLCs can offer appropriate provision, and to address issues of staff support and student transition.

# The research

## Community based learning in FE

Community-based further education is marginal in many respects. This is true in both a physical sense, because it is often situated at a distance from campus-based provision, and in terms of its status within many colleges. As a result, it has been relatively neglected in both policy discussions and research. However, it is of considerable importance in implementing the widening access strategies which have been important aspects of the policy agenda over a number of years. This briefing reports on some of the outcomes of a research project – *Understanding and Enhancing Learning Cultures in Community-Based Further Education* in which we explored distinctive aspects of the learning cultures which are found in community based FE learning centres, and how these differ from those found in other learning sites in FE colleges. We bring out some of the implications of our findings in developing measures which could support and enhance the work of these centres.

## The project

The overall aim of the project was to achieve enhancement of the teaching and learning experience at Community Learning Centres through a deeper understanding of the learning cultures found in CLCs attached to two of Scotland's colleges. Our approach to learning cultures has been influenced by the Transforming Learning Cultures project within the TLRP. This emphasises that learning cultures should not be understood as the context or environment in which learning takes place, but as the social practices through which people learn. In analysing these practices we have placed particular emphasis on the learning relationships which we suggest are central to learning cultures.

In planning this research the project team was interested in exploring how 'learning relationships' can help influence the development of learner identities and the processes of learning. A learning relationship exists when we learn from or through others, or when a human relationship has an impact on a learner's fundamental disposition to learning. These could include relationships with others in the learning environment, or relationships with people not directly connected to the learning, but who have an influence on whether people view themselves as learners and how they view learning. In this study we have recognised and explored the impact, within community based learning, of relationships which learners have with family members, friends, and non teaching staff, as well as the more obvious learning relationships with tutors and fellow students.

While it was based in the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRL) in Glasgow Caledonian University, an important aspect of the project was that it was developed in partnership with two of Scotland's colleges. A member of staff from each of the colleges was seconded to work on the project as a part-time research fellow. College staff were involved in planning the project, and there were regular feedback workshops, involving both staff and students, at which the research team reported the emerging findings and their implications were discussed.

The study was largely qualitative. Data were gathered through a programme of interviews and focus groups with staff and learners in a CLC attached to each of the two partner colleges. Informal observations were also undertaken, and more quantitative contextual studies of the two CLCs were undertaken to provide wider information about the characteristics of the two centres and the students who use them.

## Learning cultures and learning relationships in CLCs

The role of community based learning in encouraging 'uncertain' learners is well established. This project has provided a better understanding of aspects of the learning cultures found in CLCs which encourage people to return to learning and engage increasingly with the education process. These can be summarised as follows.

- **Permeable boundaries.** In understanding these learning cultures, we found that the boundaries between the CLCs and the communities from which learners come can be more permeable than those found in the main college campuses. As a result, many learners bring significant aspects of their personal and social lives into the CLCs. A very wide set of learning relationships, which can involve family, friends and others, influences the experience of learners in the CLCs. One result is that learners perceive CLCs to be more open than conventional college campuses, and they perceive fewer barriers to returning to learning in these centres than in attending a conventional college, which might be more formal and forbidding.
- **The role of teaching staff in CLCs.** Tutors reported that this informality creates quite different learning relationships from those generally found on the campus. In particular, there is greater emphasis on their role in supporting learners in gaining confidence, and in helping them build an identity as successful learners,

alongside their more traditional teaching role. Learners report that they value highly the informal and supportive nature of the culture within CLCs. They comment on the importance of relatively equal relationships with tutors, and of 'having a laugh', rather than the more formal relationships they had been used to in their earlier education. Teaching staff who came to the CLCs with more formal approaches to teaching and learning - for example a more didactic or hierarchical style - were deemed by learners and other staff 'not to fit'. On the few occasions this did happen, informal pressure was exercised by both students and staff to encourage the staff involved to conform to the expectations associated with the learning cultures found in the CLCs. If staff did not show preparedness to change, they were not likely to remain working in the CLC. However the relationship between teaching staff and students was a complex one which is characterised by informality and equality, but also by a recognition of the important role of staff as educators in enabling students to develop their learning careers.

- **The key role of non-teaching staff.** An important finding to emerge from this study has been the recognition of the key role of non-teaching staff, including administrators, secretaries and janitors, in shaping the learning cultures which are found in CLCs, in particular their contribution to the supportive learning relationships which are an important aspect of these learning cultures. Although these staff are not employed explicitly to undertake work of this kind, they recognise it as an important aspect of their role. This more expansive remit is associated with the fact that these are the people who are in the centre on a permanent basis, whereas the teaching staff come and go, and are often only in the centres for short periods of time while they take their class. The non-teaching staff are often the first point of contact for students, both when they come to the centres in the first place, and when they come in and out for their classes.
- **Emotion work and 'underground working' in CLCs.** Tutors and non-teaching staff in CLCs often take on work which involves difficult and demanding engagement with aspects of learners' personal, social and emotional lives. This type of work has increasingly been recognised as a feature of many occupations, and is sometimes referred to as 'emotion work'. Work of this kind, which goes well beyond what would be thought of as the normal role of college staff, has been recognised within the Transforming Learning Cultures project (the other TLRP project which has examined learning cultures in FE colleges) as 'underground working'. However work of this kind is now in many ways accepted as part of the role of CLC staff, and although it may not be 'underground working', it must

be recognised as a very demanding aspect of the role of staff in these centres.

- **Impact of the wider field of Further Education.** The learning cultures of the CLCs involve negotiation with the rules, norms and expectations of the wider field of FE. For example staff had to recognise the importance of assessment regulations, and integrate them into the informality of the learning cultures found in CLCs. A balance had to be struck between the informality of the CLCs and the formal expectations of the FE college system. Learners welcomed the informal and supportive CLC culture, but also value formal recognition and certification of their learning.
- **Issues of transition.** Our analysis has shown that the learning culture of CLCs does succeed in encouraging students to engage with learning, and has very positive consequences for their self confidence. It also achieves measurable success in learning outcomes. However, evidence from interviews with students and staff in both centres did indicate that the downside of the very informal, relaxed and supportive relationships was that the centres could become comfort zones for some students from which they found it difficult to move on. These problems were recognised by the staff involved, and some learners did move on to courses on the main campus college or to paid employment. But the numbers making these transitions seemed to be limited in relation to the total numbers attending the centres.

## Major implications

In the project we concentrated on deepening our understanding of the learning cultures of CLCs attached to two FE colleges in Scotland. We argue that our work has resulted in an increased understanding of certain aspects of the learning cultures of CLCs. We identify four main implications from the work.

- This study has shown that a wide range of learning relationships contribute to the distinctive and supportive learning cultures found in CLCs. Given the importance of these centres for widening access and social inclusion, and their often peripheral role within the FE system, it is important that the distinctive contribution of these community learning centres, and the learning cultures found within them, be adequately recognised, and that these centres be properly supported. This has implications for national policy for further education and community learning. It also has implications for the funding methodologies needed to ensure that the needs of small-scale community based provision of this kind are recognised, and provided for in appropriate ways.
- Staff in CLCs often undertake work with learners which is complex, demanding and involves engagement with aspects of learners' personal, social and emotional lives. It needs to be recognised and supported. One of the implications of this is that those who work in CLCs must be suitably prepared for the role they are expected to take on. In this respect it is important that colleges have appropriate methods to select staff for these demanding roles, and provide appropriate training and support for staff working in these centres.
- Students who would not have returned to learning in a more formal learning environment, including a main FE college, welcomed the informal, supportive and friendly learning culture of the CLCs. We found, however, that some learners then found it difficult to move on to more formal learning environments. More work needs to be done to understand and encourage learner transitions from CLCs into other learning and employment opportunities. This requires colleges to provide guidance, mentoring and bridging courses to help students identify appropriate exit routes from CLCs and to support individual learners in this transition process.
- The peripheral status of CLCs within colleges can limit their effectiveness. Colleges need to develop strategies to ensure that CLCs are fully integrated into the work of the college, taking into account their important roles in widening access and social inclusion. This should include enabling CLCs to offer appropriate course provision, meeting the needs of the community in which they work, and

addressing issues of staff support and student transition.

- The project team is continuing to work with the Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) in the FE sector to explore the implications of this research for policy and practice in FE. The focus of this work is three fold:
  - to highlight the role that community learning can play in the lifelong learning, social inclusion and widening access agendas;
  - to increase understanding of the complexity of work that staff – both teaching and core centre staff – play in the CLCs and consider how these can most effectively be supported;
  - to highlight the issue of learner transition from CLCs and to explore ways to support such transitions.

## Further information

More information about this project can be obtained from the research team at CRLL, Glasgow Caledonian University. For more information about the project, contact:

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Details of the project and publications are available on the project website:  
<http://crll.gcal.ac.uk/Community-based-FE.htm>

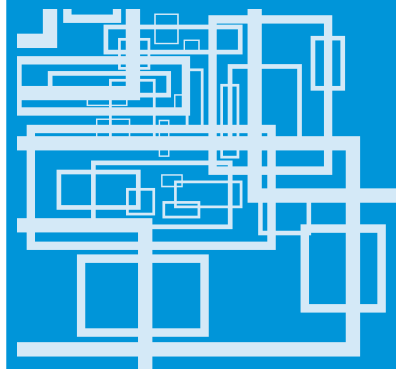
## The warrant

This study was rooted in qualitative approaches to research which combined the expertise of both higher education researchers and further education practitioners. This collaboration strengthened the relationship between research and practice which was central to this study. The college representatives played a full part in all aspects of the research process.

A total of 81 interviews were conducted over three phases of fieldwork, including both staff and learners. These comprised 29 staff interviews and 52 learner interviews. In all, 54 people were interviewed (20 members of staff and 34 learners). Several staff and students were interviewed twice or three times. Of the 20 staff interviewed, 10 were from each CLC. Interviews with staff and students lasted around one hour. All were recorded and transcribed, and made available to all members of the research team. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used as the framework for analysing this data. This approach requires in-depth qualitative analysis of the data from each interview, which is produced by detailed readings (and in our case discussions) of the transcript. It is particularly suited to a context in which rich and detailed information has been obtained from a relatively small number of respondents. The project's innovation in this analytical method has been to introduce a collaborative dimension to the interpretation of the interview data.

After each phase of the fieldwork, workshops were held with staff and students in each centre, followed by meetings with senior management in each college, for emerging findings to be presented and the implications for changes in practice to be discussed.

## Teaching and Learning Research Programme



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