

Keeping students! Motivational drivers
of trainee educational professionals in
a further education college

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
University's requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

March 2013

University of Worcester

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Acknowledgements and dedication

I would like to thank all the respondents who took part in this research, who shared their stories and learning experiences with me. Without all of them this study would never have happened.

My sincerest thanks also go to Karima Kadi-Hanifi, Geoffrey Elliott and Erica Smith, my supervisory team, for their patience and their words of wit, wisdom and encouragement.

Finally, I wish to give my heartfelt thanks to my husband Andrew who has given me the confidence to complete this endeavour.

This thesis is dedicated to:

Ian Edward Burbery, Clerk in Holy Orders; B.A. (University of Wales, Lampeter); MPhil (Swansea Metropolitan University).

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Abstract

This thesis has the aim of defining the features of an effective learning environment. Success in higher education leads to advantages beyond the qualification; strategies that address the challenge of attrition may result in personal and community benefit. This thesis examines the extent to which belonging to a community of practice influences motivation and learning.

Social constructivist philosophy requires a qualitative interpretive approach to data gathering to capture the lived and living learning experience. Respondents studied the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector and the Foundation Degree in Learning Support. Data arose from episodic semi-structured interviews, a blog, group interviews and an on-line survey.

Results demonstrated that: i) students experienced fluctuation in their day-to-day motivation; ii) most students developed a sense of belonging based on a shared understanding of experience; iii) some students drew on existing features of their previous successful selves to enable their success.

This research contributes two key findings: i) *e-motivation* describes the use of e-communication tools to motivate; ii) a new model of *proximal ethnography* acknowledges the significance of shared identity, of being 'inside-out-inside' the research. The reflexive nature of proximal ethnography sees commonalities in research rather than any dissociation between the research question and the researcher.

These results could be applied to teaching practice by improving students' preparedness for study through normalising feelings of instability in motivation. In addition, students could be supported to reflect on past accomplishments in order to help them succeed. Finally, this research offers the opportunity to evaluate the model of proximal ethnography, to allow the concept to be offered as a new research method with conviction.

Keeping students! Motivational drivers of trainee educational professionals in a further education college

Chapter 1: Introduction and research questions

The longest journey is the journey inwards. Of him who has chosen his destiny, who has started upon his quest for the source of his being.
(Hammarskjold 1964 p58)

1.1 Introduction

This is a study about motivation and the learning experiences of trainee educational professionals. It examines the motivating drivers and strategies used by adult students who have studied for a higher education (HE) qualification in a further education (FE) college (expressed as 'HE in FE'). It has its origins in my own reflections upon what I have seen while teaching foundation degree courses, namely the straightforward observation that some students stay the course and succeed and that others do not.

This work examines social constructivist learning theory in practice, arising from discoveries made when I interviewed cohorts of HE learners to address the question of how motivation influences attrition rates. Students who took part in this research were studying the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector (DTLLS) and the Foundation Degree in Learning Support (FDLS). Throughout this work these courses are referred to as the Diploma and the Foundation Degree.

The thesis presents a combination of several stories linked together following an exploration of individual motivation, self-discovery and transformation. One element of this story is what Tierney and Slack describe as the 'learning journey' (Tierney and Slack 2005 p375) as experienced by one group of student respondents; their two years of undergraduate study culminating in the successful conclusion of their HE programmes and subsequent

graduation. This group of students participated in the research for the duration of their two-year course starting in September 2008. They took part in a series of individual interviews, allowing me to investigate their motivation for study over time.

Additional stories arise from other students on HE courses who have shared with me their tales of learning, transformation and growth. These are students with whom I have had a brief encounter, dropping into their lives and asking them to take part in group interviews, or to complete questionnaires. My requests to them to be part of this research had no obvious immediate benefit to them as a person. However, their participation was, as I shall indicate later, an activity that allowed constructive reflection on the individual's development and learning experience.

A further narrative is woven into this work. It tells of my own progression, inextricably bound with those who have taken part in this research, which has seen me develop from novice scholar to practising researcher. Our learning experiences and histories have co-existed over a period of four years. I have played a part in the students' learning lives and my research has had some impact on their experience, evidenced by comments in interview and after participation in the study. Learning about their endeavours has developed my own knowledge, so throughout this work I have reflected upon my own development as an individual, a teacher and a research student. Reflection is integral to this work, and has been fundamental to my practice throughout the various professional roles I have had. During this study, I have challenged some of my own assumptions about research, learning and motivation through an inclusive practice of interviewing and co-creating knowledge. I have undertaken an emancipatory reflection (Taylor 2010) on my own transformation and learning. This continually reflexive process is important to this work; I am embedded in this study.

As a student within the discipline of education I am in a similar position to the respondents in this study as they too are students, so in some ways we have shared a learning experience, albeit on different courses. This led me to consider my dual role, as student and researcher and how I might be seen to 'move' between the two during interviews and self-reflection. In an attempt to capture the sense of 'inside-out-inside' research (Kadi-Hanifi 2011), of being what one has studied, and as a contribution to knowledge expanding the bounds of traditional ethnography, I have conceived a model of 'proximal ethnography' (Price 2012). This term describes very specifically that situation in which the researcher shares the same experiences as the observed but does so outside the domain of the observed. The model and its formation are explored in greater detail later in this work in Chapter 4.

In examining the way students were motivated to study, an analysis of their experiences gives rise to the term '*e-motivation*' (Price with Kadi-Hanifi 2011). This term describes the novel ways students used communication technologies to form a cooperative network extending beyond the classroom in order to motivate each other to stay on course. Use of contemporary communication methods, including text messaging via mobile phones, e-mail and social networking using the website Facebook, extended the boundaries of social constructivist learning and enhanced the motivating sense of belonging to a social group. This e-motivation had a positive impact on retention in that students were prevented from leaving the course by the motivating support they received from each other, and in one case from family and close friends. Not all the respondents in this study were motivated using these tools, and so the term is offered with caution. This offers the opportunity for further study to establish if these findings may be replicated elsewhere.

This work also explores the distinctive complexities of HE study and how these intricacies were conceptualised and understood by students through their use of metaphors to describe the learning experience. This aspect of the research was influenced by the pioneering work of Lakoff and Johnson who

describe the pervasive character of metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). They argue that our daily perceptions of reality are steeped in metaphor. In the case of this study, students used metaphors to aid their understanding of their learning, and to make concrete their experiences and share their feelings. In addition, their metaphors enriched my understanding of the student learning experience. These findings form part of a paper that has been accepted for publication which demonstrates how experience is characterised through metaphor. Chapter 4 explores the metaphors used by respondents to see how they echo my own desire to tell our collective story.

Finally, the thesis tells the unique learning history of one individual; Francis (not her real name). She did not 'fit' into the norms of social constructivist learning theory but was what could be called an 'individual constructivist'. Her learning experience, and what strategies she used to stay motivated, are detailed later in this work. Having clarified the broad themes of the research, the next section identifies the specific aim and objectives of the study.

1.2 Research aim

The overall research aim was to define the key features of an effective learning environment for HE students studying in a FE college. In order to meet this aim, three objectives were established at the start of this research:

1. To investigate the personal motivational drivers of successful adult students who are training to be educational professionals.
2. To examine the coping and motivating strategies used by adult students to gain benefit from learning and complete their studies.
3. To evaluate the role of social media in the extension of social collaborative learning and motivation.

The study aimed to take into account the effects of personal motivational drivers and the motivating strategies used to ensure a rewarding and successful learning experience. The intention was to explore the influence of

motivation on student retention, signified by the first part of the title of this work 'Keeping students!'. In addition, I wished to discover how communication technologies could help shape the learning experience, and how their use could support theories of social and collaborative learning through interaction and dialogue. These overall objectives influenced my method of enquiry, as did my underlying constructivist, humanist philosophy. In my role as a lecturer teaching HE courses in a FE college, I was moved to inspire my students to learn by getting to know them, finding out how best they studied and how to encourage their development. As a researcher I am no different; I am interested in the personal story, the individual transformative learning experience and the richly diverse ways in which people are motivated to succeed. As a consequence, the decision was made to use qualitative information gathering methods, specifically semi-structured individual and group interviews and a student blog, to investigate the subjects of motivation, attrition and learning. As the research developed, it became apparent that there was an advantage in acquiring supporting data, so an additional quantitative method was used in the form of an on-line questionnaire to supplement the narratives provided through interview. All these methods are explained and justified in detail in Chapter 4.

The next section identifies the rationale for this study, with the aim of situating the research within the context of lifelong learning. Institutional and personal aspects of learning are examined to provide justification for the study.

1.2.1 Rationale for the study

There is a three-fold rationale for this study. Firstly, institutions providing HE exist within a measured, audited system that is funded by positioning in league tables. The ethos is one where student retention and academic achievement are quantifiable measurements of an institution's success (Hodkinson 2008). Therefore it is expedient for the benefit of the institution to investigate a variety of ways to help students succeed. There are those who are critical of this audit culture, for example Hodkinson above, but I do not

place a value judgement on this viewpoint. I do share his unease about the value of educational league tables, but where any institution is funded, be it privately or publicly, be it in education or for example the National Health Service, institutions must demonstrate that something is given in return for that investment. To that end, 'something' must be measured in order that an institution can be held accountable. Within the HE setting success and retention are measured, the student experience is measured through the National Student Survey and so is the institution's research output in the Research Assessment Exercise. Whatever can be done to maximise the potential learning experience for individuals will help institutions keep their students.

HE students studying for their qualification in FE colleges are a group attracting increasing research interest as this relatively recent provision aimed to widen access to HE expands in numbers (Parry 2009, Scott 2009, Stanton 2009, Parry *et al.* 2012). With increasing numbers of diverse HE students studying in non-traditional settings there is a need to identify effective strategies to motivate students to succeed and improve retention rates without losing sight of the individual. The aim of this research into what keeps these students studying, despite all that life can present to them, is to provide insights that could have an impact on teaching and learning strategies in all education institutions.

There is also political concern about the impact of initiatives to improve student retention rates in UK universities, highlighted in a report published in February 2008 (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts report 2008). This report confirms that UK universities and FE colleges providing HE courses consistently lose 22% of their students and continue to do so despite increasing numbers of students attending both these types of institutions. This rate of attrition potentially jeopardises the institution's position in the league tables and has a financial impact in the form of funding that is removed from the organisation. This research problem, of high attrition rates, also justifies

the initial title phrase, "Keeping students!". Further statistical evidence is presented in Chapter 6 where the context of this study is examined, and an analysis is made of comparative retention and withdrawal data from the FE college where the study took place.

Secondly, there is the rationale of considering the human component of the learning experience; taking account of the personal transformation of the student who is motivated to study. In order to establish how best to support students to complete courses much research has focussed on an adult's preparation for and transition into HE (for examples see Lowe and Cook 2003, Knox 2005, Salisbury and Jephcote 2008). Research also examines how students attribute success to internal factors like hard work and persistence, and blame external factors including lack of support and work pressure for failure (Kember 1999). This study aimed to establish if the learning experience of HE students in a FE setting supported these findings, adding to the sum of knowledge about HE study.

This study shows that personal learning provides a great deal more than new facts or skills, it results in increased self-confidence and self-awareness and an ability to work more effectively and share knowledge with others, upholding findings from Jenkins *et al.* (2001), Hammond (2004) and Weir (2008). In leaving the course an individual learner may miss out on these additional benefits and undermine their potential employment or promotion prospects; they may also risk missing future development opportunities including further financial support with fees. However, some students leave courses because they have no choice, and indeed for some leaving is a positive option. Chapter 3 includes work examining attrition from a number of perspectives.

Thirdly, evolving from the individual learning experience, there arises the potential societal benefit from learning, the ability of the individual's wider social network also to grow and develop from the learning. Thus, an individual's family may be inspired and motivated to further learning, an

organisation may develop its skill base, and society as a whole gains the skills to challenge and progress. Extensive work on social capital and lifelong learning examines the potential community and economic benefits from individual learning (for examples see Balatti and Falk 2002, McMahon 2009), tensions between individual and social learning (Zhao and Biesta 2008) and the role of schools in providing the foundations of lifelong learning (Claxton and Lucas 2009). These sociological elements are explored in Chapter 2, analysing the concepts of lifelong learning and how this has an impact on encouraging diversity in the student recruitment, identified in UK government policy as the 'widening participation agenda'. This study has a socio-political background, so the contribution of this study to overall knowledge about the HE in FE experience is offered next.

1.3 Socio-political context

The study took place against the political policy context of an agenda of widening participation and increasing numbers of applicants to HE programmes, specifically the overall number of HE students for entry in 2009/10 being 2,493,415, an increase of around 4% on the previous year (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2011). In addition the 'small p' political context includes a focus on the part played by regulatory bodies (including the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education) and education establishments on the retention of students as a key measurement of the success of an institution. The widening participation agenda seeks to promote access to FE and HE by providing:

A local, high-quality campus [which] can open up the chance of higher education to young people and adults who might otherwise never think of getting a degree (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills 2008).

A number of UK Government reports have been produced over the duration of this study focusing on the role of HE in the provision of a skilled workforce. The report 'A New 'University Challenge' Unlocking Britain's Talent' (2009) written by John Denham, at the time Secretary of State for Innovation,

Universities and Skills, outlined how universities drive economic regeneration and how Government planned to develop university provision of HE. Furthermore he argued that in the climate of recession at the time:

a well funded, successful, independent higher education sector is a vital part of our economic infrastructure, both locally and nationally (Denham 2009).

This political policy debate, stimulated by ambitions to make England a 'world-class leader in skills' (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2007) includes deliberation on the role of FE colleges to extend provision of HE:

The FE system must be the *powerhouse* for delivering the skills at all levels that are needed to sustain an advanced, competitive economy (Department for Education and Skills 2006, my emphasis).

Details of the ongoing thinking about HE provision prevalent at the time this study was carried out can be found in the next chapter.

FE colleges make a distinctive contribution to HE provision, particularly for mature students and for those typically described as 'non-traditional' learners. I have argued that the term 'non-traditional' could be considered to be an out-dated phrase, since:

increased opportunities for entry into HE, for example via access courses, and part time and modular modes of study providing flexibility for mature learners ensure that HE is available to a diverse range of people from a variety of backgrounds (Price with Kadi-Hanifi 2011 p176).

Increasing numbers of adult students find it expedient to undertake degree level study by attending a local FE college, not, I would argue, out of intimidation of the 'mystique of the university' (Marks 2002 p75) but because of the necessity of remaining in their existing employment or combining family and other life commitments with their studies (Price with Kadi-Hanifi 2011). In addition, tuition fees for franchised HE courses taught at FE colleges are less than course costs at universities, so financial savings can be made both on fees and travel. Findings from this study suggest a further reason for choice of institution, that of small class sizes. Mature students, who could have been

out of education for some time, may be intimidated by large numbers of HE students in the university setting, preferring the perceived increased support that a small cohort in a local site can offer.

It is also my own experience that mature students who would not consider applying for a full three-year bachelor degree do feel able to take that first step into HE by attempting a foundation degree. During college open days when my role was to provide information to prospective students, some individuals have described to me feelings of anxiety about the thought of three years of study with an honours thesis at the end, enough to prevent them even submitting an application. However, many expressed the feeling that a two-year programme might be attainable. This is not to say that the foundation degree has any less academic rigour than the bachelor degree route, something my students have discovered very quickly.

The foundation degrees are classed as level four in year one, and level five in year two according to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, the equivalent of the first two years of a bachelor degree (see Appendix 6 for the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation 'Qualifications and Credit Framework' illustration). The Framework identifies equivalence for different qualifications by categorising them as levels. In relation to HE in FE, small class sizes in a local institution do appear to have a specific appeal to those who do not feel academically strong enough for an honours degree, or have no family history of taking part in HE. My teaching experience also shows that over 50% of these students at the end of the two years are inspired to go on to university to 'top-up' their foundation degrees to a full honours degree, having found an unexpected appetite and ability for learning at this level.

This study also took place during a period of significant political and economic change including an economic recession, continued debate about the importance of a 'knowledge economy' and the 2010 UK general election with

the subsequent formation of the first coalition government in the UK since the 1930s, between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. Details about the economic and political context of this research and definitions of some of the key terminology are provided in Chapter 2.

In summary, the study has taken place in a FE technical college setting, examining the experiences of HE students who were enabled to study by the availability of local provision. This widening of the potential to study at HE level locally follows the political desire to drive economic regeneration and enable social benefit through education. As the overall aim of the study was to examine the personal story of learning, the next section identifies and substantiates the choice of interviewing as the principal method used to focus on the individual learning biography.

1.4 Research methods

In order to explore the life-stories of living learning experiences and to understand what motivated students I chose as my main approach the qualitative research method of semi-structured interviewing (Cohen *et al.* 2008) to examine the subjective narrative of the learning experience. I was inspired in this study to examine the learning undertaken by adult students, to investigate their motivation to learn and to discover the best way to support and enhance their learning experience. Seen through the lens of a social constructivist viewpoint, 'truth' is a construction of what is real based on prior experience, the lived experience of the 'now' and internal interpretation of those experiences. I intended that the stories of the lived and living learning experience captured in interview would provide new knowledge constructed by the exchange of ideas and meanings between the researcher and the student.

I should state at this point that I did not have any teaching responsibility with any of the cohorts of students who became respondents in this study as I wished to avoid blurring the boundaries of my role and identity; a further

consideration of the collaborative and reflexive relationship between researcher and respondent is made later in this work.

In order to gain a rich holistic picture of learning and as my interest lay in examining motivation and whether or not this changed over time, I decided to interview at intervals over the duration of one full programme of learning. Respondents were chosen from within the discipline of Education in order to examine the HE in FE learning experience. These courses are gaining research prominence. Respondents were interviewed once in the first few months of their course, (between October 2008 and March 2009), again towards the end of the first academic year, once more at the start of their second year of study and final interviews were held at the end of their second year. Timing of interviews was respondent-focused and led by the requests of the students, particularly in relation to their coursework submission deadlines and my imposition on their life and workload, so I was careful to abide by their wishes. For example, the original intention was to hold a further round of interviews part way through each academic year. However, requests to attend an additional interview were not met with universal enthusiasm from respondents as assessment workload was felt to be too demanding, so I stepped back and did not require their participation at that time. I was determined to be student-focused, even to the possible detriment to gaining valuable data, thus one strand of my data comes from two cohorts of students interviewed episodically over two years.

To appreciate what motivates students this research examined the subjective narrative of the learning experience. My philosophical standpoint is grounded in the humanist tradition (Rogers 1979) and incorporates this perspective with the social constructivist paradigm. I believe that individuals construct their own knowledge and make sense of their interactions based on prior experience and current interpretations of meaningful experiences, and that 'behaviour and...data are socially situated, context-related, context-dependent and context-rich' (Cohen, *et al.* 2008 p167). From a constructivist theoretical

position, a person's understanding is predicated on their individual history and interpretation of action or insight. Moreover, they will judge certain knowledge to be more valuable than other information based on their own ideals. I also consider that in a context of learning, which does not have to be within a formal setting, individuals largely build upon their knowledge in collaboration to co-construct new learning, hence 'social' constructivism.

Bound into this is an appreciation of the tradition within the humanist paradigm that people strive towards goals or self-actualisation (Maslow 1943) and that this drive is a predisposed characteristic (Rogers 1979). However, I moderate the argument that individuals are intrinsically driven towards self-actualising goals with the observation that individuals *sometimes* find that it is pragmatic 'just to pass'. In other words that on occasion it is realistic simply to be 'good enough'. Findings from this study showed that time and social pressures determined a pragmatic approach to learning, and these results challenge an established idea summarised by Richardson's comment that:

the prior life experience of mature students promotes a *deep approach* towards studying in higher education (Richardson 1994 p309, my emphasis).

Richardson argues that there are differences between deep and surface approaches to learning. He suggests that mature students prefer detailed exploration of a topic, where a subject absorbs them, over a superficial surface approach where the minimum is done to achieve a grade. Findings from respondents in this study also suggest that a deep approach is sometimes hindered by fluctuating motivation, and the impact of this on motivational drive is examined.

This student-focussed approach cautions against suggestions that mature learners can be grouped as some sort of homogeneous whole, and in particular against the notion that there is any one kind of 'desirable' way to learn (Richardson 1994). Respondents in this study used a variety of methods of learning, sometimes changing their preferred style as circumstances

dictated, and each was useful to themselves but not necessarily shared by fellow students. Nonetheless, I recognise that 'transformative learning' (Mezirow 1991) has the potential to change not only the individual but also that individual's immediate culture and environment. In other words, I acknowledge the social nature of learning and largely agree with the social constructivist theorists who argue that learning cannot take place outside a social context. However, I include the *caveat* that it is important not to lose sight of the individual, and of the powerful potential for transformation of that person.

Constructivist philosophy requires a qualitative approach to data collection in order to examine the rich and varied experience of studying, the lived and living learning experiences of students. By conducting a narrative inquiry I met with students' 'stories lived and told' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000 p20) to see how their learning biographies unfolded. I was, and remain, motivated by a desire to think and reflect on the narrative of others, to construct a shared understanding of their lived experiences and be enriched by their stories and their successes. These philosophical approaches will be examined in later chapters to provide an holistic view of the basis of this research.

My wish was to delve into the rich and diverse lived experiences of a group of adult students and, in doing so, explore the context and route of my own learning. I am aware that I have changed as my research progressed and this concurrent self-development is a theme explored throughout this work. It tells the story of how educational research is not devoid of the personality of the researcher, rather we are 'inside-out-inside' (Kadi-Hanifi 2011) and cannot be separated from what we find. From the perspective of research ethics, dialogue with respondents also demonstrates the impact of research on both respondents and the researcher within their respective transformational experiences. In other words, it is important to recognise the impact of the research relationship on both parties. Comments from two students following

their individual interviews demonstrate the impact of being part of this study, and are detailed in the findings in Chapter 5.

I also have an interest in the use of communication technologies to advance learning and cooperation, so in September 2008 I devised a blog for my interview respondents to use to communicate with each other while they were not in college. Blogs are typically personal web pages or web-based records with entries updated in reverse chronological order. Students were encouraged to use the blog to provide on-going long-term evidence of their learning experience. This blog was intended to provide real-time evidence of motivation, collaboration and coping, which would be compared with episodic interview data. There is much research on the role of technology to foster learning but none on the use of e-communication tools specifically to motivate. I call this innovative application of technology 'e-motivation', (Price with Kadi-Hanifi, 2011) a term which will be examined in depth later in this work.

Social interaction is argued to be motivational (Waite and Davis 2006), though arguably this is only true of *some* people, so the blog provided an opportunity for collaboration while students were not physically together in college. I expected that students would use the blog to express current views about their learning experiences and share these opinions with fellow students, thus fostering a sense of belonging. I also surmised that students would have translated those judgements before interview, as they would have had the chance to reflect on and restructure their views (Hookway 2008). In fact, blog use was intermittent and by May 2009 blog entries had ceased. During interviews it was revealed that the extent of the independent study required on both courses allowed no time to spend on something that was not required for the programme.

I initially felt frustration at this setback, particularly as I saw analysis of motivational blog use by undergraduates in an FE setting as offering a unique

contribution to knowledge. I had speculated that a blog would be a practical way to encourage social unity, a sense of group belonging and cooperation, particularly for students present in college once a week. However, this feeling was short-lived, as it was revealed when interviewing respondents, that they *had* fashioned a supportive and motivating network extending beyond the classroom by using text messaging, e-mail and the social network website Facebook, for collaboration and mutual support. This finding is detailed in a parallel in-print paper (Price with Kadi-Hanifi, 2011), and is explored in greater detail in Chapter 5 that presents the research findings.

It was originally thought that individual episodic interview and blog data would be sufficient to construct a picture of the learning experiences of a group of students, and these interviews have indeed provided a rich narrative account of learning, growth, transformation and increased self-awareness. On reflection I considered supporting this data with information from additional sources. In 2012 I approached two second year groups of HE students who were studying the Diploma and the Foundation Degree in my own college, and asked them if they would consent to take part in group interviews. The group interview has been seen as an effective method of gathering information about the experiences of a cohort and ascertaining what shared practices there are within the group (Kvale 1996) as well as in this case offering the opportunity for comparison with data from the individual interviews.

Finally, I invited first and second year Diploma and Foundation Degree students from local FE colleges within the region to complete an on-line questionnaire. This was designed to provide quantitative and some qualitative data on their learning experience. Though I am keenly interested in the experiences of individuals, I am aware of the limitations and dangers of attempting to make generalisations based on a small case study, albeit one arising from data gathered in 27 individual interviews and two group

interviews. Survey data was to supplement interview data, resulting in the potential to triangulate results from three viewpoints.

A blank copy of the questionnaire is provided at Appendix 4. This instrument allowed me to ask mature students a series of quantifiable questions about reasons for studying, feelings about their course and methods of motivating themselves and others. Space was also made available within certain questions for an expansion upon the answer, to provide qualitative support for the quantitative response. I received 59 completed responses, with some outliers discarded. Rationale for choice of the 59 is made in Chapter 6.

Thus, all my data came from students who were studying at level four or five, in other words at HE level within the FE college system. The method of gathering data, analysing, then drawing together further information has resulted in a mixed-method study, full justification of which is provided in Chapter 4. This cyclical, collaborative and reflexive process has the researcher grounded within the method and led to the development of the model of proximal ethnography (Price 2012) to capture the sense of being close to the data. This section of the chapter has discussed the methods used. The following section examines details about the respondents who took part in individual interviews for the duration of their course.

1.4.1 Research respondents

This work reports on the results of a study of the learning experiences of a number of cohorts of HE students learning in a rural FE college. Most of the respondents were classified as mature students, being over 21 years old at the start of their programme, but one student from the individual interview cohort was 18 when she started her degree. One group of eight students took part in this research by being interviewed periodically across the two years of their course, though one Foundation Degree respondent left the study at the end of her first year. Four of these respondents were studying the Diploma and the other four undertook the Foundation Degree. These students,

themselves learning in order to work within the education sector, are prospective motivators of others – they will enter professions where their role is to inspire learning. I suggest that teachers and support workers can provide better learning environments for future students by gaining an improved insight into their own motivations and what helped them succeed and grow.

I acknowledge that those involved in learning how to teach, or support learning in others, one way or another may be more aware of their motivations than other HE students. I surmise that a focus on how to teach and motivate students within the *curricula* of both the Diploma and the Foundation Degree programmes may make these respondents more attuned to their own motivations. This possible bias was approached by piloting the group interview with students from a distinctly different discipline, the level five Diploma in Human Resource Management. This could be described as a control group. In fact I discovered that these individuals were clearly aware of what had motivated them and the impact their motivation had on their learning over the duration of their course. In light of this discovery I decided not to include data from this interview, and to maintain the focus of the research solely on trainee educational professionals, a judgment reflected in the title of this thesis.

All respondents in this study were undertaking the Diploma or the Foundation Degree courses. Foundation degrees incorporate ‘academic and work-based learning through close collaboration between employers and programme providers’ (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2002); and they are ‘vocationally focused and equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to their employment and the needs of employers’ (*ibid.*). Specifically, the Foundation Degree in Learning Support is intended to provide a career pathway for practitioners whose role involves supporting adults and children in their learning, for example Teaching Assistants, and it has the potential to allow career progression into advanced Teaching Assistant status or teaching.

The level five Diploma programme was introduced in 2007 in 'The Further Education Teachers' Qualifications (England) Regulations' for all intending or practising teachers or trainers of students over the age of 14 in a variety of educational organisations. Students undertaking the Diploma training may take the preparatory 30 hour 'Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector' (PTLLS) course before taking the Diploma, though PTLLS is incorporated early into the level five course. At the end of the Diploma programme students are required to attain professional status, that is Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) to work in the lifelong learning sector. This sector includes FE colleges and sixth form colleges (Lifelong Learning UK 2010). Further details about the specifics of the Diploma and Foundation Degree regarding course structure and fees are presented in the next section.

1.4.2 Course details

The Foundation Degree is delivered in partnership with a local university, meaning that the programme is validated and monitored by the HE institution and taught by FE college teaching staff who are associate lecturers at the university. All lectures take place in the college over one day per week for two academic years, with the additional recommendation of a minimum six hours a week home study. Students are classed as studying full time, despite the weekly attendance, because of the requirement for a large number of practice hours in addition to the self-directed study.

The course contains a variety of continual assessment methods, including a research project in the second year, with no formal examinations. Students on the course either work or gain voluntary placement experience as a Teaching Assistant in local schools. The university tuition fees policy applies to this course, so course costs during the period this research took place were around £3000 per year of study, with students having the opportunity to apply for a student loan to cover tuition costs. Those students who were individually interviewed worked within the education or care sector during their course.

Francis worked part-time as a Teaching Assistant in a primary school, Tina was a school administrator and Beth worked with children in a residential setting. Zoe was not in paid employment while she studied.

The Diploma course is also a HE course run in partnership, in this case with a different local university. It is a part time course delivered one day per week over two academic years but with the additional requirement of 150 hours of teaching practice, eight of which are observed and assessed by a tutor. Assessment is continual and based on teaching practice, a series of summative assignments, journal writing and reflection. Course fees in this instance were £900 per academic year.

Peter lectured in the FE college where he studied, while taking the Diploma course. Helen worked as a site manager and self-employed cake decorator, and briefly taught in the college where she studied. Sarah was a Clinical Nurse Specialist and taught one day a week as a volunteer in a hospice, and Ruth was a Teaching Assistant in a college of arts.

In common with all HE courses the amount of self-directed study over and above the taught element of the programme, including reading, assignment work and project work for both courses, is extensive. There is the added requirement for Diploma students to write extended lesson plans and schemes of work for their precisely planned teaching practice hours. Thus, both these courses required a significant personal commitment from students if they were to succeed.

Within these brief descriptions of the courses I have not examined the possible impact of being obliged to study rather than doing so voluntarily. The Foundation Degree is not a requirement for working as a Teaching Assistant, but the Diploma programme is compulsory for those wishing to teach. For example one of my respondents Peter took the Diploma as a condition of his new teaching contract, so when he was asked in interview about his reasons

for undertaking the course he replied simply that he had to. The influence of the mandatory nature of study for some respondents is examined later in this thesis and comparisons between the experiences of individuals are made. The Diploma and Foundation Degree were run in the FE college where I was a lecturer while this study took place. This enabled me to sample groups locally, a choice of sampling that is explained next.

1.5 Sampling technique

An opportunistic sampling technique was used to recruit all the students who took part in the various research approaches, further information about which is detailed in Chapter 4. The Foundation Degree and the Diploma are both taught in the FE college where I used to work as a full-time lecturer, so I was afforded the opportunity to contact local students studying HE in FE. Eight students completed interviews with me, though two declined to undertake the final interview, both citing pressure of work. One other student left the study at the end of the first year for the same reason. Details of the respondents are given in Table 1 (below), including their age at the start of the programme, gender, background and course of study. Names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of respondents.

Table 1: Details of respondent's course, pseudonym, age, gender, education and general employment history

| Course | Student | Age at start of course | Gender | Education | General employment history |
|---|---------|------------------------|--------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector | Helen | 34 | Female | NVQ levels 2 & 3 in catering college | Head chef |
| | Peter | 43 | Male | 'O' levels | Engineering and management |
| | Ruth | 34 | Female | 'O' levels | Professional career in musical theatre |
| | Sarah | 41 | Female | 'A' levels | Nursing |
| Foundation Degree Learning Support | Beth | 36 | Female | NVQ levels 2 & 3 | Worked in a food production factory |
| | Francis | 18 | Female | Level 3 Childcare Diploma | Catering |
| | Tina | 29 | Female | 'A' levels | Administration and marketing |
| | Zoe | 39 | Female | 'O' levels | Police officer |

My interest in adult motivation arose from my own previous observations of adult students, both as their teacher and their personal tutor, and my admiration for the variety of ways they balance the competing demands of work, life and study, staying motivated to complete their course and succeed. It is generally my experience that mature students construct a 'shared understanding' (Allen 2005 p249) by developing a sense of belonging to a group and an institution.

A number of theories about motivation, resilience and persistence have arisen from a large existing body of research in the field of education and other disciplines and these are examined within this thesis in relation to intrinsic and extrinsic drivers, the way motivation fluctuates over the course of the learning experience and how these factors impact on students. Arguments are made in this study regarding the extent to which social constructivist learning theory links to each of these features.

As undertaking this research has involved significant self-discovery, as well as allowing an investigation of the narrative stories of its respondents, this chapter goes on to provide a reflection upon what I have learned from my experiences of studying over the past six years of this research.

1.6 Becoming a research student

My exploration of existing research work on philosophy, social learning theory, motivation and collaboration has led to an interesting conclusion regarding both method and content. I have learned about the process or method of literature searching and the ways of researching as well as gaining an appreciation of social constructivist educational theory, motivation theory and the sociological and philosophical context of HE. I started looking for books and journal databases for research articles as soon as I was accepted to undertake this study. I gathered everything I could find on research methods, motivation, adult learners, social learning theory, e-learning, lifelong learning

and so on, seemingly 'flailing my arms around in darkness' and seizing, then filing, everything I touched.

As my research experience progressed, an examination of my own evolving data shed light on my searches so I was able to filter and discard articles and focus my reading, following Andrews' assertion that an essential feature of scientific study is the organisation of material to form an argument (Andrews 2007). Consequently, my appraisal of the research process and the literature became more directed towards the key aims of my study. This reading also became an iterative process, an interaction between reading, gathering data, writing and editing then re-reading, reflecting on the way my latest interpretation had illuminated my writing. The emergent findings from the interview conversations also elucidated my reading and exploration of existing research.

I was motivated to continue to read and reflect on what I had learnt during the time I was undertaking the interviews. Additional research literature also helped to direct the focus of the questions in our dialogue as I recognised topics of interest or opposing concepts I was able to dispute. Themes started to emerge from the interview data, and these too suggested ways forward in my reading, reflecting Glaser and Straus' premise that notions are developed in a cyclical way which, when analysed, further propose new ideas, in their seminal work on grounded theory (Glaser and Straus 1967). In an interesting book centred around what Yehl describes as the essential 'doability' of research (Yehl 2010 p746), O'Leary makes the statement that the 'production of new knowledge is fundamentally dependent on past knowledge' (O'Leary 2010 p71). In other words she forms the argument that the process of reading, and moreover of writing, is key to the development both of new ideas and, I would additionally argue, of the stance of the researcher themselves. Learning, growth and development are dependent upon what is known and the interpretation and challenge of that knowledge.

In relation to the process of writing a PhD thesis, Bolker (1998) and O'Leary (2010) both focus on the importance of purposive writing for a specific audience, and on the benefit to the researcher of this reflective, re-formulating cycle. If the overall thesis is to make sense to the reader, and the research argument is to be defended at a *viva voce*, and furthermore if it is required to be disseminated to a wider audience in part or in whole by publication or at conferences, then the 'conversation' of the piece needs to be structured and considered (O'Leary 2010). Reading, writing, reflecting and editing are all key elements in the process of research, indicative of the writer finding a voice and being situated within the research itself. Bolker talks of the use of free-writing, simply writing for a short stretch of time, then revisiting the resulting messy inclusive notes and writing again. This is an iterative process aimed at clearing and honing thought processes, and a technique that I have found invaluable in my own work.

This research process was not a simple linear progression and not the orderly sequence that the previous paragraphs might suggest or the straightforward course of action Andrews intimates (Andrews 2007). Nor was it a neat cyclical pattern; rather there was a heuristic learning course, a metaphorical journey full of dead-ends, obscure roads, twists, turns and moments of loss. On a number of occasions I did not know which direction to head and for a long time I seemed to have no clear focus for my writing. This alarmed me and I started to doubt my ability and question whether I was capable of the task, until I continued my reading and realised other researchers experienced similar dilemmas. Edwards asserts that educational research is not an easy ride (Edwards 2002). A number of other authors (for example Chenail 2000, Richmond 2002 and Ortlipp 2008) indicated that finding their place in their work was not a simple undertaking but they, and by example I, became mindful that the struggle was a natural and required part of the research process. Furthermore, the benefits of reflexive practice to the researcher, of reflecting on the embodiment of research in the person of the researcher

(Edwards *et al.* 2002), are well described in literature (see Watt 2007, du Preez 2008 and Ortlipp 2008 for contemporary illustrations).

Examples of the ontological debates include Richmond's striving for connectedness (Richmond 2002), Chenail's experience of trying to establish and maintain a 'research posture' (Chenail 2000 p1) and Ortlipp's unease with what she saw as the traditional hegemony within methodology text books 'that presented the [qualitative] research process as linear and unproblematic' (Ortlipp 2008 p697). In addition, I examined work on kaleidoscopic comparison (Dye *et al.* 2000), on reflexivity (Watt 2007) and on collaboration between researchers (Paulus *et al.* 2008). To them all, for unknowingly helping me to continue on my own path, I am grateful!

My original inspiration was how HE students were motivated to study, so I concentrated on looking for studies of motivation, discovering a complex, multi-faceted array of definitions from a resolve to learn (Harlen and Crick 2003), through motivation as purpose (Wlodkowski 2008) to Geraniou and Simpson's (2006) description of a 'force, influence, enthusiasm, drive or incentive' (p5). These definitions are examined in greater detail in Chapter 3. Whenever people asked what I was studying, I would respond, "I am examining mature students' motivation to learn", but this did not feel fully reasoned and often resulted in a sensation of aimlessness, until I realised that motivation was only part of the picture. This research is also about social constructivism, how social collaboration and cohesion can motivate and may enable some students to learn. The study examines how one individual, Tina, found her learning experience to be a personal transformation towards greater social interaction. The study also demonstrates how one particular student, Francis, was equally motivated to succeed but her learning experience was an isolated one that did not fit within the tenets of social constructivist learning theory at all.

A number of themes are brought together to structure this work in order to

form a coherent picture of the experiences of the respondents, and this combination reflects my fundamental philosophical belief in the importance of the individual. My focus in this research is on the human story, the vibrant narrative accounts of the individuals, and this principle is perceived in its bearing on my study (Bracken 2010). In my previous working life as a FE lecturer, I grappled with some tensions when trying to harmonise my humanist ideals with the measurable requirements of an audit culture; as a researcher I similarly found it difficult to categorise my epistemological convictions. In the main, my beliefs coincide with Vygotsky's theoretical concept of social constructivism (Vygotsky 1978) and the positive impact upon learning of belonging to a social group. However, my research provides examples where this theory is not seen in practice, in particular the experiences of my interview participant Francis, whose story of what I call individual constructivism is explored later in this work. As Francis herself said, "The thing with social learning is you have to be in the group to do it, or you're on your own". In other words, my personal growth and development has involved trying to identify how my own values of individuality and identity have informed my attempts to ascertain my particular philosophical perspective.

I have used pseudonyms throughout this work, so Francis is not her real name, and I was intrigued during my reading to find that not all researchers advocate the use of pseudonym to keep confidential the identity of their respondents, for example Clandinin and Connelly (2000). I recognise that I am strongly influenced here by my previous professional life as a Registered General Nurse where every effort is made daily to inculcate the importance of maintaining confidentiality in relation to issues of safeguarding vulnerable people. However, I can understand the reasoning of the researcher who wishes to hold the reality of the histories shared. Ethical arguments surrounding confidentiality are examined in Chapter 4, particularly in relation to the apparent incongruence inherent in disseminating research ideas whilst protecting individuality, and the potential influence of place in inferring identity.

I am interested in creating a narrative, holistic account of the experiences of these learning stories so this work is informed by literature on a variety of standpoints around the fundamental theory of social constructivism. It includes research on belonging and its impact on learning, communication and motivation theory as well as theories of learning. The literature review, Chapter 3, explores aspects of the students' learning experiences, including coping strategies used to balance work, life and study and the diverse methods used by the students to motivate themselves and each other, and reflects these back to the essential theme of social learning.

Schostak, in an examination of symbolic illustration in qualitative research argues that life is not methodically arranged in a linear fashion and that the researcher in documenting lived experiences must avoid creating a beginning and end 'like the obituary writer' (Schostak 2006 p141). This study has involved me approaching busy students at certain points during their study and asking them to give of themselves to me, with no clear benefit to themselves. Certainly, I was asking to fit my 'beginning and end', this research, into their educational experience.

I initially intended to draw on and use Tierney and Slack's journey metaphor (Tierney and Slack 2005) to describe the learning experiences both of my respondents and myself. However, conversations with different supporters of my own learning encouraged me to start to wish to develop the idea of a linear course from 'A to B'. This question of how to capture the lived and living experience of learning without portraying a 'start and finish' led me to analyse the learning journey metaphor. I evaluated the extent to which 'journey' appeared to suggest a straightforward, linear progression from 'A to B'. My learning experiences, and those of my respondents, included meandering, iterative experiences, occasions of feeling lost, of returning to earlier places, meeting and overcoming obstacles, times of self-actualisation followed by moments of despair, and eventually a personal transformation and growth. These were experiences shared by respondents and researcher, further

reflecting the proximal nature of the research. These reflective, experiences are elegantly portrayed in Hammarskjold's quotation about the power of the exploratory inward quest (Hammarskjold 1964) found at the start of this chapter. An analysis of the metaphors used by respondents to reveal their stories of learning is made within the findings presented in Chapter 5.

I developed an interest in the function of metaphors for organising and clarifying thought both for my respondents and me, and in the notion of learning as situated in time and place. It became clear to me that 'A to B' contained inferences of 'ending', but that the conclusion of a course did not signify the close of learning for many of my respondents, or indeed for myself. The learning stories for my respondents included a variety of different metaphors and encompass change, development and personal growth, epitomised by a quote from Helen, another interviewee, "I understand myself now, I never understood myself before". I took account of this intensity of personal change and transformation and considered that the journey metaphor is not rich enough to describe what has happened both to the students and to myself. However, imagery is still useful and my respondents frequently applied a variety of metaphors to their learning, so I have explored those used by them in this research account. My observations on the use of metaphor by the respondents opened my eyes to further examples in literature, so my reflections on these also became incorporated into my research experience.

In order to develop the notion of the linear journey allegory, and in contrast with Lander's description of research as taking place 'in the middle', (Lander 2000 p148) I prefer to say that narrative story-telling research takes place 'in the moment'. Those respondents who took part in individual and group interviews, and to an extent those who reflected on their learning in the questionnaire, shared their experiences of 'now' and 'then'. They told me about the *current* influence of *past* learning experiences, a reflexive process of learning. Their learning histories and own biographies were influential on

how they approached their new student identity. In other words, what is happening 'now' is shaped by what happened 'then'.

Furthermore, they took from the research encounters an idea of 'now' and 'when', a forward-looking focus by which I mean that they considered how taking part in the research had allowed them to focus on their increased knowledge and contemplate how this would help them further progress. I would suggest, therefore, that narrative story-telling research allows the respondent metaphorically to move around the time and space of their learning experience, to see a reflexive, flowing shape in their learning analogous to the dynamic Möbius Strip in its implication of continuity and space. An image of the Möbius Strip is presented in Figure 3 (Chapter 4). The reflexive, flowing and personal nature of research is examined in the following section of this chapter.

1.6.1 The nature of research

From my reading and my exploration of my own learning experience, I draw the conclusion that research is far from a straightforward course of action. Like the respondents in this study, my own encounters with initial self-doubt and increasing self-awareness are seen in the experiences of other researchers. Besides this, I also conclude that the nature of my own research, and that of other investigators, is deeply personal and that for many of us the resulting epistemology is embedded in the person of the researcher. I am not detached from what I found. Rather, I am positioned in what Kadi-Hanifi described to me in an e-mail tutorial as 'inside-out-inside' (Kadi-Hanifi 2011), again comparable to the vibrant Möbius Strip and the essence of the proximal ethnography model. I am situated within the research; I am one of those in whom I have such an interest, namely an adult HE student fitting study into full time work and other life commitments. I have entered the lives of my adult respondents and they have reflected on their increased capability across the duration of their studies; my life has been changed by them sharing experiences with me. I have learned about research techniques, about the

learning endeavours of my respondents and about my own development, and my findings have re-directed my thinking, my writing and my research.

This has necessitated an evolution in my thinking about the nature of research. My first experience of 'doing' a formal piece of research was in 1997 for my undergraduate honours project, a control study on the neuropsychology of movement disorders presenting quantitative data on the minutiae of fine and gross physical neuromotor skills. My supervising professor hypothesised a certain outcome and I ran experiments with volunteers to test that hypothesis. My project was then written in the third person to provide an objective account of the results. Therefore, this was all I knew of research – detached, objective, de-personalised. There was no place for the human story of the control subject or of the individuals with the neurological condition under scrutiny. On reflection even the expression 'control subject' seems aloof and impersonal, though at the time this phrase was the norm in our conversations and writings. 'Subject' implies 'subjected', lacking in power, where the researcher is the dominant agent or the expert.

When I started the research for my doctorate ten years later, this was my experience and my assumptions about the nature of 'true' research remained. I did not start my PhD learning with any hypothesis I intended to prove or disprove, and therefore I felt I was wrong in my approach – how can a study have no hypothesis? A whole new opportunity for exploration opened up to me, with the encouragement of my supervisors, on the realisation that my own experience of a positivistic kind of research was not the only way to search for a truth. Looked at through the lens of neuropsychology, in an ironic way my own micro-neurology had to be re-built. My prior experience of learning a formula for research had resulted in the creation of a set of neural networks (Wlodkowski 2008); these had to be modified as I formulated a new understanding of ways to learn and investigate.

One of the joys and complexities of studying human behaviour and activity from my own perspective is the almost countless variety of ways in which people behave or interact and the individual motivations for their actions. Hence I find a dilemma inherent in searching for absolutes, and a disquiet at my experience of the reductionist interpretation of human behaviour apparent in neuropsychology. To quote the existentialist philosopher de Beauvoir:

To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won (de Beauvoir 1957 p413).

The self-discovery and meaning I have gained from this research, the amalgamation of theories, ideas and experiences, remains iterative, ambiguous and meditative. I consider the ambiguity to be positive; I define it not as vagueness but as an affirmative acceptance of the individual reflective, cyclical and critical nature of both people and of research. This is why Bassey's term 'fuzzy generalisation' (Bassey 1998 p6) resonates so strongly with my outlook on the nature of research. Bassey argues that the phrase fuzzy generalisation can be used for the type of assertion that says 'in cases similar to the cases studied it may be found that x leads to y' (*ibid.* p6). Bassey is acknowledging our innate individuality by suggesting that generalisations may be made in some cases. The fact that I identify with my respondents and that I am concomitantly inside and outside this research lead me to consider questions of ethnography.

Much of the teaching about ethnography coming from student text books seems to focus on the process of participation. For example Cohen and colleagues provide much detail about fieldwork, overt and covert observation and the ethics of revelation (Cohen *et al.* 2008). The interpretation of ethnography arising from my own research has its origin in the importance of shared identity. I share the identity of those who have taken part in this study, albeit on a different course. In other words, I am a mature student managing to fit HE study into my life, in the same way that my respondents have done in this study. The data emerges from shared identities exploring commonalities

of experience rather than the traditional hegemonic focus on external process in ethnography that does not necessarily emphasise the importance of identity.

I questioned if I am engaged in the same 'world' as my respondents. As I said at the start of this dissertation, my research experience is inextricably linked with the learning lives of my respondents and our combined learning stories have co-existed over a period of four years. They have shared with me accounts of their struggles and determined successes. They have reflected with me on their own development and learning and I have seen them enjoy the culmination of their efforts at their graduation ceremonies. As this research has developed, the thesis has been written and my growth continues, I am enjoying the expansion that this process allows me, and will also celebrate my success at my own graduation. In answer to my personal question, 'Am I an ethnographer?' I conclude that I am. The question of what kind of ethnographer I became is answered in Chapter 4 where I expand upon the proposed new model of proximal ethnography to describe the particulars of my findings (Price 2012). A contemporary piece of research in progress is also examined in the same chapter to identify another example of proximal ethnography applied in practice (Kadi-Hanifi 2013).

In order to demonstrate the intrinsic reflexivity that is a fundamental part of this research, each chapter will offer a summary of content followed by a structured reflection upon what has been covered. Reflections will be based around an adaptation of Johns' Model of Structured Reflection (Johns 2000), a copy of which is presented in Appendix 5. Reflective practice is held within many professions to be an empowering learning tool (Johns 1999); structured models of reflection help guide the practitioner in their learning and development. Johns' model was originally designed to be used by health professionals, but I believe the model can be adapted to enable reflection within any discipline. The model is divided into two major sections, exhorting its users to 'Look in' and 'Look out' of their experiences. 'Looking in' enables

the individual to focus on his or her own thoughts and emotions about a particular experience. 'Looking out' offers the chance to reflect on the extrinsic factors that may have influenced the situation, for example other people, the aesthetics of the setting and the ethical mapping of best practice to ones' actions. My adaptation of it involves a focus just on its two major headings, rather than using the whole model, to create a holistic reflection on my learning experience.

1.7 Chapter summary

This introductory chapter has presented an overview of the interpretivist epistemological position underlying the study, and provided a rationale for this research. Using Johns' heading of 'looking out', this chapter has begun to show the reflective, collaborative and iterative nature of this study. It has emphasised the determination to share the lived and living learning experiences both of respondents and researcher. The chapter has identified key areas for investigation with the aim of determining some of the features of an effective, supportive HE learning environment. The work, life and study balance is of interest in this research, as successfully fitting study and self-directed learning into already busy lives is difficult. Students need to be able to formulate strategies in order to enable them to achieve their qualification. Closely allied to this balance of commitments is the importance of a sense of belonging, of feeling part of a group of learners. It is fair to say that the only people who *really* understand what a student is undertaking are i) the student themselves and ii) their fellow students. This first chapter has introduced the notion of belonging, and this key aspect of the learning experience is explored in detail in subsequent chapters.

The inspiration behind this research comes from my observation that adult students remain motivated to learn in spite of numerous struggles experienced during their studies. This study aims to establish what motivational drivers HE students use. It looks at how they keep going through the tough times and whether their motivation stays constant or wavers as their

enthusiasm or energy dwindles. This chapter has introduced the cohort of students who took part in individual interviews. It also charts my own progress as I started to recognise the need to extend the data by using alternative methods and expanding my sample, and this reflexive process is identified and recognised as an important part of learning to be a researcher.

On 'looking in', this research has enabled me to find a space to focus on my own learning experience. My story of learning is inextricably bound with all those students who took part in this research. Each of us has learned and developed over the course of this study. Undertaking this study has allowed me to reflect on the nature of research, on the personal and subjective method of enabling people to tell of their lived and living learning experiences. Their stories have provided rich and interesting accounts of the ways in which learning impacts upon individuals and their families, and they have inspired topics for further research that are detailed later. The use of metaphor to capture the essence of the learning experience is introduced here and is later explored in greater detail with the use of examples of the ways students used metaphor to share their feelings about learning. The collaboration involved in co-creating new knowledge is evident from the transformative learning histories that have been shared, and results in the model of proximal ethnography that arises from this study.

This chapter has also started to situate the research within the context of the lifelong learning sector, providing a rationale for why it is important to examine the HE in FE initiative. The next chapter goes on to examine the social, political and geographical context of this study. It provides detail about the development of the provision of HE in FE and the structure of post-compulsory education in the United Kingdom.

Chapter 2: Geographical and political context

Knowledge, in a global economy, has become an important marketable good (Harris 2007 p107)

2.1 Introduction

Thus far an overview of this study has been given, providing an introduction to the rationale for the investigation and the theoretical foundation of the research. This chapter presents a perspective on the local and national socio-political contexts in which the study took place. This background is significant in that it rationalises why research examining HE in FE is of paramount importance at the moment, and identifies why social constructivism becomes essential as a framework for understanding how adults learn and progress. Each distinct element of the context - the geography, political ideology, socio-economic background and educational philosophy - plays a part in describing the context of the research and learning experiences as a whole.

The chapter identifies a number of topics that are related back to the overarching theme of social constructivist learning, and it explores the discipline of educational sociology to complement the work on individual learning analysed in the literature review chapter that follows. Specifically this chapter includes a description of the geographical location of the study and the role of local FE colleges in relation to increasing professionalisation of the education sector, including the profile of the FE college where the greater part of this study has taken place. The chapter starts by exploring the structure of post-compulsory education in the United Kingdom, and it includes an attempt to define the concepts of lifelong or lifetime learning and the agenda of widening participation. The literature review chapter outlines contemporary definitions of learning and applications of social collaborative learning theory. This section now explores how theories of learning are translated into education practice by examining the concept of lifelong learning and the role of universities and colleges in supporting this strategy.

2.2 An overview of Further and Higher Education in the UK

2.2.1 Further Education (FE)

FE colleges developed from adult technical education and training institutions provided by local councils, amalgamating together into technical colleges in the 1940s (Grubb 2005, Simmons 2010). The sector rapidly grew after the Second World War and the 1960s saw the further conversion of the institutions into FE colleges offering academic and vocational education (Grubb 2005). Education provision at FE colleges was influenced by local demand and competition from neighbouring institutions (Simmons 2010), an influence that remains today.

The FE system is one of great flexibility and complexity as a result of its regional origins, varied provision and significant expansion in the last 40 years. FE colleges offer a wide range of tertiary education in vocational subjects, GCSE and A levels, offering some people a 'second chance' opportunity to return to education to gain basic qualifications. In addition, there is the provision of National Apprenticeships to 14-16 year olds, short courses in subjects including millinery and information technology, functional skills courses, tailored training for local employers, and HE in the form of Higher National Diplomas and foundation degrees. FE colleges continue to respond to local demand providing education to meet the needs of the economy within the policy of lifelong learning.

2.2.2 Higher Education (HE)

The oldest universities in the UK were founded in the 13th century and the sector has expanded through other education institutions being granted university status by Royal Charter or Act of Parliament via the Privy Council. Early university education aimed to be *universal*, in other words teaching students how to learn fundamental doctrines that could be applied to different disciplines and how to become an 'independent enquirer' (Grist 2012 p11).

The number of universities has grown as institutions have developed, for example following the 1963 Robbins Report certain colleges of advanced technology became 'new' universities (Robbins Report 1963). The report recommended a democratisation of institutions, bringing equality and parity of education and standards across different establishments. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 made changes to the funding structure of FE and HE, allowing greater expansion of the sector and creating what are now commonly termed 'post-1992' universities.

There are currently 115 universities and 165 HE institutions in the UK, including specialist university colleges and HE institutions (Universities UK 2012). Many of these are grouped according to their common missions and ideals. The Russell Group of 20 major research-focussed universities is committed to research excellence and knowledge transfer (Russell Group 2012); the Million+ group is a think-tank focusing on links between HE and the economy (Million+ 2012), and the University Alliance presents a balance between research, teaching and innovation and represents universities with a close link to business (University Alliance 2012).

All universities in the UK undertake research and teaching, though the balance between those two activities varies between institutions. In addition, universities make close links to local businesses and encourage innovation and sharing of expertise through collaboration with local enterprise. Many institutions also offer professional accreditation through courses associated with professional bodies, for example nursing and the Nursing and Midwifery Council. Grist makes the case for two further roles for universities, one as preserving the arts and humanities described as 'acting as guardians of learning and culture' (Grist 2012 p14) and finally the role of social renewal through partnerships with local authorities.

2.2.3 Higher Education in a Further Education setting (HE in FE)

In line with the government policy of promoting lifelong learning through a policy of widening participation, HE institutions have developed collaborative relationships with a variety of education providers, an innovative expansion described as having a 'Darwinian energy' (Eastwood 2008 p91) in its growth and development. One part of this strategy known as 'HE in FE' sees universities creating partnerships with local FE colleges in order to offer degree courses in the college. The aim is to extend the scope of programmes universities can provide, to widen participation and enhance the accessibility of HE. FE colleges play a significant role in providing the opportunity to study at HE level to those who cannot access university, encouraging a diverse student population. They have arguably:

made access to a degree much more feasible for "new students" who traditionally would not have gone on to higher education (Grubb 2005 p25).

This collaboration is also a response to changing economic and employment situations, for example inflationary pressures resulting in individuals not wishing to move far from home to study, or the requirement to fit study into an existing job and family life. HE in FE tends to offer a reduced fiscal burden on students as a result of lower living costs and tuition fees (Lloyd and Griffiths 2008). Indeed, student respondents from the current study found it desirable and expedient to study at their local institution because of the necessity of living with family or remaining in their existing employment. In addition, it is argued that education is required to help people adapt to changing work practices including the nature of employment contracts, advances in technology and increased global competition (Packer and Sharrar 2003).

Universities have also responded to changing market forces by forging close links with businesses. By engaging with employers to best meet local demand for education and training they aim to develop skills, working in partnership with organisations to promote social enterprise. The needs of local employers are given priority when institutions choose what qualifications to offer (Stanton

2009), creating a locally responsive education system. Again, market forces determine provision where universities and colleges offer courses based on demand.

One of the ways to create opportunities for lifelong learning for people at a local level is through the development of foundation degrees. Foundation degrees are HE qualifications designed in collaboration between academic institutions and employers, which blend study with work-based learning. They are stand-alone degree level qualifications, equivalent to the first two years of a bachelor degree, and are typically taught over two years. They stand at levels four and five in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (see Appendix 6 for the 'Qualifications and Credit Framework' illustration).

The establishment of foundation degrees has resulted in increased professionalisation of roles within education that previously had no high level qualifications connected to them (Edmonds *et al.* 2009), for example Teaching Assistants whose role is to support classroom learning. As job roles are re-defined, the requirement for a highly trained and skilled workforce emerges. Additional educational opportunities are then offered to individuals who may aspire to enhance their professional standing within a particular discipline. For example, Teaching Assistants can use their foundation degree to go on to gain Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTA) status, a role introduced to raise standards and improve the balance of the classroom workload. Greater vocational links with business leads to the professionalisation of roles not traditionally requiring graduate level skills.

Re-definition of job roles and the development of graduate-only routes to professions can result in compulsion to engage in learning, for example existing teachers having to undertake the Diploma programme in order to remain in their job as was the case with Peter, one respondent in this study. Results from this research indicate that compulsion has some impact on motivation to study.

HE in FE courses, such as the Foundation Degree and Diploma courses examined in this study, are often delivered part-time. This ensures that colleges meet the needs of HE students who are frequently already in work and wish to enhance their career prospects, requiring study which can be incorporated into existing commitments. Both the teaching qualifications examined here require work practice as mandatory elements of the programme, so flexibility is a crucial feature to meet student need. The college where I worked, and where much data have been gained through individual interviews with students, provides access to HE programmes locally. The college literature highlights the small teaching groups and 'friendly college environment' (College website) as positive reasons why adults choose to study there.

Colleges whose students returned the on-line survey, used as a secondary data gathering method in this study, also highlight the advantage of small class sizes and intimate campus environments on their websites. This study has shown that the provision of small class sizes promotes the opportunity for some students to gain a sense of belonging to a group, the importance of which is examined in the literature review in Chapter 3. It is also evident from other research that students who struggle academically get 'lost' in large class sizes and fail to take advantage of the support they are offered and need (Prescott and Simpson 2004).

A recent report into the provision of HE in FE provides evidence of clear differences between teaching and learning in FE colleges and universities (Parry *et al.* 2012). The report identified that students in FE colleges were taught in smaller classes and had more regular access to teaching staff than their university counterparts. Though National Student Survey results suggested FE students were less satisfied than university students with course management, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) review of 232 FE colleges between 2002 and 2007 indicated confidence in 94% of the colleges offering HE courses (Parry *et al.* 2012). The

evidence Parry and colleagues provide about the impact of small class sizes and increased tutor access within FE settings is upheld by the findings of this study.

The provision of HE in FE continues to gain research prominence (for recent examples see Grubb 2005, Lloyd and Griffiths 2008, Stanton 2009, Parry *et al.* 2012) so this research advances further insights into the HE in FE learning experiences of students and situates the research in a socio-political context. This next section explores the relationship between lifelong learning and HE before providing the specifics of where the research occurred.

2.3 Lifelong learning

Professor Peter Jarvis, an influential writer in the discipline of education, defines learning as an holistic process involving both body and mind. He argues that an individual is transformed through their perceptions of new social situations resulting in experience, cognitive change and learning. Learning is socially situated and incorporated into an individual's biography. Lifelong learning combines these transformative processes across the lifespan resulting in a continually developing and more experienced individual (Jarvis 2007). 'Learning is a process of transforming the experiences that we have' (*ibid.* p2).

Learning is both an individual and an institutional pursuit, so Jarvis argues that lifelong learning is:

socially institutionalised learning that occurs in the educational system, that which occurs beyond it, and that individual learning throughout the lifespan, which is publicly recognised and accredited (Jarvis 2004 p65)

Lifelong learning is also referred to as 'all educational provision and all forms of learning including adult learning in formal and informal contexts' (Parker 2003 p3). The concept of lifelong learning has a history spanning more than 30 years of educational discourse and policy-making and is a dominant theme in contemporary education policy debate (Rogers 2006).

Jarvis argues that the expression 'lifelong learning' is more commonly used than the phrases 'adult education' and 'continuing education' (Jarvis 2004), though he confirms that these terms continue to have currency in describing post-compulsory education and learning throughout the lifespan (*ibid.*). Indeed, any internet search for 'adult' or 'continuing' education produces many thousands of results for local educational establishments or government education sites, and the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education remains a leading organisation whose aim is to encourage adults to engage in learning. Regardless of terms, Jarvis argues that it is at least taken for granted that adults should continue to be educated throughout their lives (Jarvis 2007).

Jarvis' focus on 'institutionalised learning' (Jarvis 2004 p62) is merely one element of the idea of lifelong learning and does not imply that he only regards learning as taking place in an institutional context. Jarvis has a humanist philosophy and states that holistic learning can occur at any stage during the lifespan, indeed stating that 'there can be no conscious living at all without learning' (Jarvis 2009). Learning in the context of education can provide measureable results in the form of qualifications and measureable skills; learning throughout the lifespan can produce innumerable individual and societal benefits.

Lifelong learning encompasses formal and informal learning opportunities provided by educational institutions and non-educational sectors and the term incorporates learning achieved in the workplace (Jarvis 2004). The focus of lifelong learning is on learning, rather than on education. Lifelong learning takes place in a variety of settings, a factor that makes Rogers question the requirement for distinctive educational sectors (Rogers 2006). He argues that the relocation of learning into a diverse range of locations unifies learning as a common process, describing learning as 'life wide' as well as lifelong.

Lifelong learning identifies and develops programmes of learning in a variety of contexts and encourages participants to engage with the learning. In other words, the responsibility for learning is said to be placed on the learner (Rogers 2006, Simmons 2010). Rogers goes on to suggest that individual involvement, access and enthusiasm are important elements within debates on lifelong learning, though these could be argued to be external influences which are also not focussed solely on learning. I would further argue that Rogers' list overlooks the important crucial factor of motivation, though one could infer that initial motivation to access learning must exist. In formal learning contexts engagement and responsibility are reflected in the modular and credit-based systems of learning where individuals 'bank' learning credits and accumulate evidence of learning from different sources. Informal lifelong learning is of course much harder to measure in terms of quantifiable outcomes, though it is argued to be of no less benefit to health and well being than formal learning (Bennetts 2003, Hammond 2004).

2.3.1 Role of lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is one key strategy in government policy to improve the skills of the UK workforce in an increasingly professionalised society and a globalised market. Lifelong learning is promoted as a method of bringing about both economic and social benefits, though policy is argued to be focused on the former (Thomas and Slack 2003). Clearly there exist interesting twin concepts of the purpose of lifelong learning; its role in personal transformation and individual growth and development on one hand and the requirement for national economic regeneration and sustainable growth on the other. Martin made the observation that:

Any conception of lifelong learning that is rooted in narrow agendas of economic expediency will make little contribution to...understanding what *moves* people (Martin 2005 p20, my emphasis).

He echoes the cautionary comment made by Jarvis some eight years previously in relation to economic pressures to gain qualifications quickly, that 'to have the product is more important than to be enriched by the process'

(Jarvis 1997 p141). Herein lies the natural tension within education policy; balancing on one side the need to provide individual intellectual challenge and the opportunity for transformative enriching self-discovery, and on the other providing innovation and growth for a competitive society in the globalised world-wide economy. In my mind these differing approaches, of economic imperative on one side and of individual transformation and fulfilment on the other, must be balanced within an education system that can break down social and individual inequality using social collaboration as its philosophy.

Policy recommendations highlight the need to increase skills, for example the strategy document 'Skills for Sustainable Growth' points to the UK lagging behind stronger Eurozone and worldwide countries such as France, Germany and the USA (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010). The document highlights the government focus on the need to drive up skills, to create a world-class skills base to support competitive economic growth and meet the needs of the economy, rather than placing any emphasis on personal growth.

HE policy is argued by some to be framed in terms of supplying the economy with the highly skilled workforce it requires (Cho and Lewis 2005) and valuing education for its employment returns (Winn 2002). Further research identifies the role of HE in addressing social inclusion (Williams 2008), individual moral change and self-actualisation (Zhao and Biesta 2008) and the influence of the student learning experience, or student voice (Ertl and Wright 2008). Evidently, academic interest addresses both sides of the debate about the role of education.

Proponents of lifelong learning highlight the opportunities from learning for personal development, fulfilment and transformation and the means to encourage social mobility and societal growth. The language of much work on lifelong learning and HE resonates with economic imperative (Eastwood 2008). Education provides economic returns, so government policy leads

education towards meeting economic need (Simmons 2010). Learning becomes an investment both for individual development and in terms of human capital, education is a method of preventing social exclusion; lifelong learning can result in individual prosperity and 'national economic competitiveness' (Williams 2008 p158). Some make the case that lifelong learning becomes the foundation of economic regeneration and social cohesion, with workforce development and equality of opportunity as fundamental to a knowledge economy (Cho and Lewis 2005, Aldridge and Tuckett 2007, Edmonds *et al.* 2009). Morgan-Klein and Osborne (2007) argue that HE has a responsibility to promote social justice by giving a second chance to learners by means of widening opportunities for participation. Seen through the lens of social constructivist learning theory, lifelong learning enables individuals to build cohesive social groups, communities of practice that result in increased social capital.

Lifelong learning is one element of education policy to improve economic competitiveness, but some critics contest the extent of any causal link between education and economic success. Williams describes as unconvincing the perceived relationship between education and economic growth (Williams 2008), expanding on the potential tensions mentioned earlier between individual and organisational ambition and questioning the incongruity between increased wages and economic competitiveness. Simmons (2010) suggests it is too simplistic to see a straightforward relationship between education and growth, arguing that there is a lack of compelling evidence that education offers the 'route to salvation' (Simmons 2010 p372). Whatever the arguments, from the standpoint of social constructivism this research and many other studies demonstrate the individual and societal benefits gained from HE study.

Another aspect of policy aimed at increasing social mobility and expanding participation in non-compulsory education is the strategy known as the

agenda of widening participation. This strategy is examined next in relation to HE in FE provision.

2.4 Widening participation

The term 'widening participation' refers to actions for increasing the participation rates of people from under-represented groups by encouraging them to apply to HE. The Labour government's commitment to providing equality of opportunity to non-compulsory education provision lay behind its objective to increase participation. The widening participation agenda in the UK context was developed to address the fact that socially disadvantaged individuals were under-represented in the university student population (David 2010). Disadvantaged in this context referred to individuals from a lower socio-economic background (*ibid.*). A Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) report chaired by Helena Kennedy QC (Kennedy 1997) focused on the challenges and opportunities presented by widening HE participation. It highlighted the 'quantum leap' (*ibid.* p52) required in investment in education to enable underachieving sectors of society to access HE and create a learning society.

The widening participation agenda seeks to promote access to HE by focusing on local provision and encouraging individuals who might otherwise not have considered studying at degree level (Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills 2008). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are meeting changing political and market demand for a graduate, professionalised workforce by providing franchised degree courses in FE colleges. In addition, education policy makers attach importance to the significant role of FE colleges in providing Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNCs and HNDs) and foundation degree courses in relation to meeting need at a local level (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011). This policy results in a wide range of HE level courses being offered, mainly from levels four and five (HND, FD) and in some colleges at level six full bachelor degrees, for example Neath Port Talbot College in South Wales. The result of

this agenda to widen participation is an expansion in the range of courses offered by HEIs.

There exists debate around perceived differences in the educational objectives of traditional university degrees and vocational qualifications which tend to be offered in FE colleges. There is a perceived disparity between academic excellence and professional application of knowledge (Teichler 2008). Teichler goes on to argue that there is the potential for further tension caused by the desire for wider participation on one hand with a continued need to accept students for entry to HE based on merit (*ibid.* 2008). However, the regulatory role of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) through its Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) process is designed to ensure parity of academic quality. The IQER is an evidence-based peer evaluation of the student learning experience and management of academic standards within the FE college, based around the Academic Infrastructure and national benchmarks of academic quality. In examining academic standards, course management, research output and the student experience, the audit measures the standards set at the partner FE colleges and relates these directly to those in the franchising university. The aim is straightforward: is a foundation degree gained from a FE college as academically rigorous as a bachelor degree from a university? Results from Parry *et al.* referenced above (Parry *et al.* 2012) suggest that there is overall confidence in the provision of HE in FE. However, the IQER evaluation process is a recent innovation so it will be of interest to re-evaluate those findings over time. The answer to the question about comparative academic standards between HE and FE is nuanced, and evidence from my own research about class sizes and the importance of a sense of belonging adds further detail to the growing body of knowledge about the HE in FE experience (Grubb 2005, Lloyd and Griffiths 2008, Stanton 2009).

Peter Scott posed the question whether the strategy of offering HE in FE was a marginal and temporary anomaly or if it should be seen as the first steps

towards a wider lifelong learning education system (Scott 2009). In answer to this question, the education policy of widening participation, or of encouraging diversity in the student population by extending opportunities of access to HE, sees a key role for FE colleges in supplying increased demand for HE. FE colleges are more frequently competing with universities as well as working in partnership with them, in a progressively more intricate and multifaceted education environment (Griffiths and Lloyd 2009, Parry 2009).

FE colleges provide HE courses in more vocationally based subjects than traditional universities, courses that often have a specific appeal to adult learners who may need to study part-time to balance existing work and life commitments (Stanton 2009). FE colleges are also argued to provide a key role in revitalising local economies (Stoten 2011). The development of foundation degrees results in a joint academic and occupational content valued by employers, providing learners with the expertise applicable to their job role. Universities also provide the opportunity to proceed from foundation degree level to full level six bachelor degree with the development of 'top-up' degrees, generally delivered over one year in the university itself.

2.5 Political and economic context

This study has taken place during a period of significant political and economic change, including a financial crisis in the banking sector, a worldwide economic recession and an increasing vulnerability within the Eurozone surrounding high levels of sovereign debt and the introduction of austerity measures to prevent economic collapse. A general election in 2010 saw the formation of the coalition Conservative and Liberal Democrat government in the UK followed by subsequent comprehensive spending reviews and substantial cuts in public expenditure.

In addition, the changing nature of work has an impact upon education policy. It is claimed that traditional work patterns included stable jobs and careers, long-term contracts of employment leading to a belief that educational

opportunities were only needed in the early stages of life (Candy 2000). Though this brief synopsis of employment might be seen to have a 'white-collar-centric' view, it is fair to say that the changing character of employment has resulted in few people holding the same job throughout their life. Furthermore, routine tasks are often being mechanised or computerised and there exists a shift towards a technological and global competition (Packer and Sharrar 2003). These changes have led people to suggest that within an education context *knowing how to learn* is a vital skill (Packer and Sharrar 2003, Harris 2007).

A high priority that is driving government policy in the face of such economic challenges is to return the UK's economy to one of sustainable growth, and a key factor in the strategy for re-balancing the economy is the role of FE and HE. The focus of macro educational policy is on explicit ways to produce a skilled workforce, and to look at overall economic and societal benefits rather than the advantages gained by the individual learner. As Harris puts it 'knowledge, in a global economy, has become an important marketable good' (Harris 2007 p107). She goes on to argue that education should maintain as its core value the wish for better understanding and continuous enquiry in a globalised world.

In light of this economic and social backdrop, the next section examines the introduction of tuition fees for HE students in the context of their lifelong learning experience.

2.5.1 The introduction of tuition fees

Prior to 1997, university students were entitled to maintenance grants to cover living costs and they paid no tuition fees. The 1997 National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education lead by Sir Ron Dearing was commissioned to provide proposals into the long-term funding for HE. The Committee recognised the need to widen participation and increase student numbers in HE, but recommended that students in England and Wales contribute

financially to the cost of their education (Dearing Report 1997). In 1997 the government introduced tuition fees and replaced maintenance grants with income-dependent student loans.

Initially, fees were set at £1,050 per year, but in 2003 the White Paper 'The Future of Higher Education' was published which proposed that universities were entitled to set their own variable charges of up to a maximum of £3,000 a year (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills 2003). The aim of the white paper was to increase research funding, support more people to go to university and provide universities with a strengthened financial foundation for the future.

Students taking part in this study paid £900 *per annum* for the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector course and £3,000 a year for the Foundation Degree Learning Support. Within the current economic climate there is competition for public funds, a need for austerity and the government reluctance to raise taxes or further increase the budget deficit. From September 2012 tuition fees have risen to £6,000 *per annum* for a foundation degree, and many universities have set fees for a bachelor degree at the maximum annual charge of £9,000. It seems reasonable to speculate that more students may opt to take their first degree at a local FE college where the reduced fees will create less of a financial burden on the individual or their employer.

Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for the academic year 2011/2012 show that UK enrolments at HEIs had not changed from the previous year. However, separation of the overall figure shows that undergraduate numbers had increased by 1% and postgraduate entries had dropped by 3% (HESA 2013). The applications statistics from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) for the 2013/2014 academic year show an overall growth of 3.5%. This increase consists of a 2% rise in applications from 18 year olds and a high level of submissions from

disadvantaged groups and international students (UCAS 2013). Disadvantaged refers to those applicants from a lower socio-economic background and who would not traditionally have thought to apply to university.

Having provided the national context and background the to post-compulsory education sector in the UK, this chapter now goes on to provide details of the specific context of the college where this study took place. In order to maintain the confidentiality of respondents, the college and region are not named.

2.6 Geographical context of the study

Data for this research arises from individual and group interviews with learners from the Diploma and Foundation Degree, supported by questionnaire data from other local colleges. The Method Chapter 4, provides detail on the courses and cohort. This next section contextualises the study by providing an overview of the institution where these learners studied.

The technology college is one of 222 general FE colleges in the UK (Association of Colleges 2012), situated in a chiefly rural county in the Midlands region. The main centres of population account for just over half of the 179,300 inhabitants with the remainder widely dispersed in villages, hamlets and isolated homes. The majority of the population, 97.5%, are 'white British', the only significant other group being migrant workers from Eastern Europe. The county has a range of employment sectors including many small and medium independent businesses, health care and social work, retail, manufacturing and land-based or agricultural industries. There is also a high rate of self-employed people. Unemployment rates are well below the national average, but so too are income levels.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) published a report (Office for National Statistics 2009) on the impact of the recession on the labour market at the time this study was taking place. The report identifies that this region has

been hardest hit nationally with significant falls in the number of job vacancies, concurrent increases in unemployment with high resulting claimant counts for unemployment benefits, and higher than average redundancy rates. Clearly, local opportunities to access HE courses for career and personal development are important in an area characterised by this economic and employment scenario.

The college is the largest education and training establishment in the county. Locally, five of the 15 secondary schools in the county offer post-compulsory education courses; local provision also includes a sixth form college and an art college, both of which offer tertiary education. The art college offers a franchised bachelor degree from a Welsh university. The closest universities are outside the county around 30 miles from the main county town. In recognition of both financial constraints and the impact of distance, the college where this study took place highlights the importance of this local provision in its literature stating that:

it is important that people are able to access good quality higher education programmes of study locally, without having to lose time and money traveling to out of county institutions (college website).

It also emphasises student feedback about their experience of working in small groups in a friendly expert environment.

The college provides 90 full time programmes of which 21 are HE courses comprising foundation degrees, HNDs, bachelor degrees and Level 7 diplomas in a range of topics including accounting, care, computing, education and training, engineering, ICT, management and outdoor education. The college has 1,900 full-time and 5,000 part-time learners. The majority of the full-time learners (1,350) are aged 16-18. There are 400 students on HE courses (2011/2012 academic year figures).

The HE courses are validated by local universities working in partnership with the college, in line with government strategies to improve individual skills and

widen participation in HE. The aim of this local provision is to meet the needs of local employers and students alike.

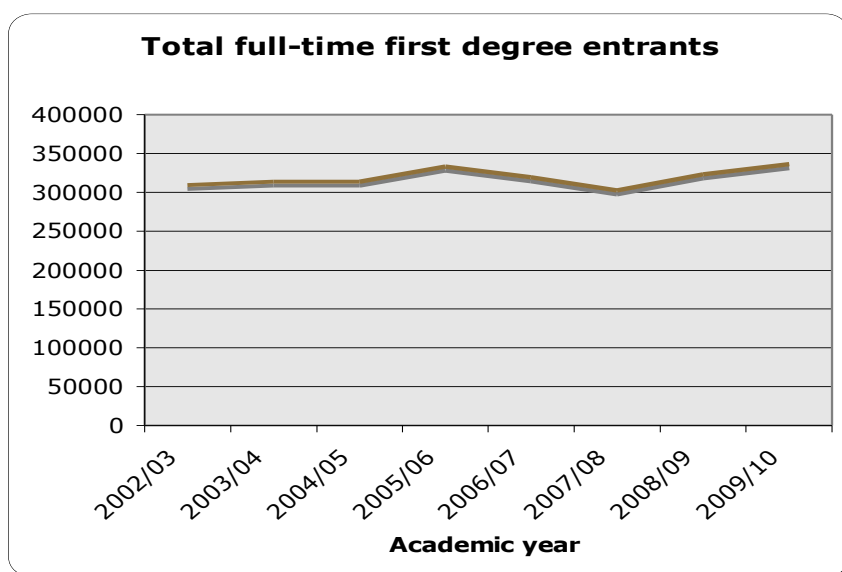
The on-line survey used to gather supporting evidence for the interviewed cohorts was sent to other FE colleges within the same region. The colleges that took part are in rural locations, therefore availability of places to study is limited for mainly logistical reasons. For example, the closest university to this college is an hour's drive away, but it is too far for those who are working full-time, particularly as some courses are offered in the university on a modular basis over more than one day a week.

2.7 Comparative statistics

This section provides an analysis of numbers of HE students in the UK examining first degree entrants, the percentage of those who are mature students across the country and national withdrawal rates. A comparison is then made with the cohort data from the college where this study has taken place. All statistical information, unless stated otherwise, has been drawn from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

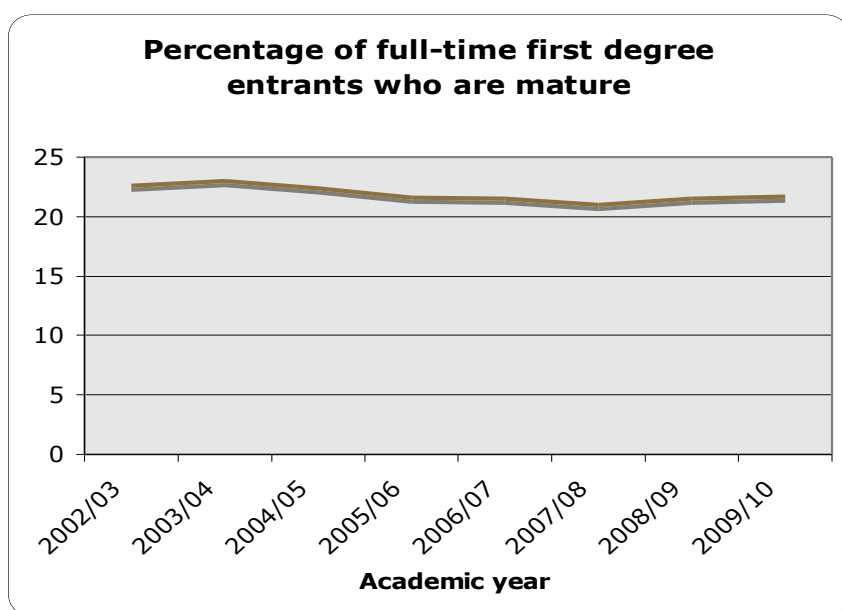
Figure 1 (overleaf) shows that the overall numbers of *first* degree entrants has been generally rising over the last ten years, with these figures being about one-third of the total numbers enrolled on part-time or postgraduate HE courses.

Figure 1: Total full-time first degree entrants in the UK. (The last three academic years exclude figures from Scotland)



The economic recession of 2008, which led to an increase in redundancies and a concomitant decline in employment levels (Office of National Statistics 2009), may have encouraged people to invest in a university education to improve their employment prospects. The graph does show an increase in student numbers after the 2008/09 academic year. Figure 2 shows that the percentage of students taking their first degree who are classed as 'mature' shows a general downward trend.

Figure 2: Percentage of full-time first degree entrants who are mature



Classification of mature means student entrants over the age of 19. Whereas mature student entry rates appear to be declining only slightly, attrition rates are decreasing. This suggests that strategies in place to support learners, many of which are examined in this thesis, would appear to be taking effect. In addition, it may be the case that students who are paying for courses out of their own funds may have a greater commitment to stay the course to gain return on their investment. HESA figures show that the percentage of mature full-time first degree entrants who leave their course early has dropped slightly from 14.9% in 2001/2002 to 12.9% in 2008/2009. Although the numbers of students that leave their courses early are falling, there is a continued need for research to establish the reasons for attrition and formulate strategies to allow students to stay and succeed in their learning. This study forms one part of the overall research community's interest in this topic. In order to contextualise this study, this next section examines figures for the college in which individual and group interviews took place.

2.8 Local statistics

College retention statistics were obtained for the two years 2009/2010 and 2010/2011, that is the two years *after* the cohort that took part in individual interviews. The two HE courses of interest to this study were not run prior to 2008. Retention rates for both courses were higher than the national trends presented above, and are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Retention rates for Diploma (DTLLS) and Foundation Degree (FDLS)

| Course | Academic year 2009/2010 | | | Academic year 2010/2011 | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|------------|------------|-------------------------|------------|------------|
| | Cohort | Withdrawal | % Retained | Cohort | Withdrawal | % Retained |
| DTLLS 1 st Year | 22 | 0 | 100 | 30 | 7 | 90 |
| DTLLS 2 nd Year | 28 | 1 | 96 | 18 | 2 | 88.5 |
| FDLS 1 st Year | 11 | 1 | 91.5 | 16 | 0 | 100 |
| FDLS 2 nd Year | 18 | 0 | 100 | 11 | 0 | 100 |

Diploma courses have larger cohort sizes than the Foundation Degree, which has its maximum class size capped by their university at 18. There is no limit on numbers required by the other university that franchises the Diploma programme. Chapter 6 provides student's rationale for leaving.

There are differences in the way these two courses are structured, differences that are significant to the figures presented above. The Foundation Degree is designed as a two-year stand-alone course leading to a single qualification. Thus, students who embark on this course do so on the understanding that they are enrolling for two years. The Diploma is described as a nested course, in other words the first year contains a discrete programme called the Certificate of Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector. Students enrolling on the Diploma can opt to leave with the Certificate at the end of year one if that qualification is sufficient for their career development. If one looks at just the figures presented in Table 2, the withdrawal of seven individuals seems high, but not so alarming when seen in the context of the nature of the combined courses.

The apparent complexity of qualification levels offered to aspiring or existing teachers, combined with a lack of confidence in the Institute for Learning, a body set up to regulate teachers, led to a government review of qualifications for teachers. The evaluation of provision led to the publication of the Lingfield Report 'Professionalism in Further Education' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2012). Recommendations in this report include removal of the three combined levels of qualification and the introduction of one preparatory award, one level five qualification and a level seven Diploma for those who wish to advance in their profession (*ibid.* p6). Once implemented, these stand-alone qualifications should mean that students would embark on one qualification, resulting in retention data that is more meaningful in context.

2.9 Chapter summary

Using Johns' model to 'look out', this chapter has examined the national and local context of HE in FE. It has offered an exploration of the link between education, social constructivist theory and individual and societal development. Further examination is made of the formation of 'social capital' (Coleman 1988) in the next chapter. This study is important because it relates to government objectives to up-skill the workforce and to increase the professionalisation of roles that previously were undervalued. These political objectives have both national and international significance when examining the potential to drive the UK out of recession and improve the competitiveness of its labour market. This study also addresses the issue of student retention, a priority at college micro-level, and national macro-level when examining individual potential, financial investment and the role of professionalisation to national economic success.

Finally, this chapter addresses the overall philosophy that sees education as a method of creating social capital, removing social inequality and strengthening or supporting individual achievement & fulfilment. On 'looking in', writing this chapter has enabled me to situate this research within a national framework. While undertaking this study, I was interested in the stories from my respondents; their individual tales of determination and success inspired me in my own learning. I have consciously to remember that these students form part of a national picture of HE, that there is a sociological context to their learning, as well as an individual one. Although it is interesting to think about these personal stories, if this study is to have any widespread benefit I must acknowledge the wider context of the study.

Having examined the context of this study, the literature review that follows considers further the theoretical basis of the concepts investigated in this research. The literature review evaluates the theory of social constructivist learning, appraising the relationship between learning and motivation.

Chapter 3: Literature review

There can be no conscious life without learning; there can be no conscious living at all without learning (Jarvis 2009)

This chapter constructs a critical analysis of literature starting with an overview of social constructivist learning theory. It begins by providing a brief outline of the original writings of Lev S. Vygotsky and continues to look at contemporary theories of collaborative learning, including the concepts developed by Engeström (Engeström 1987) and Edwards (Edwards 2000). Current research that examines lifelong learning is situated within Chapter 2 on political context. Chapter 3 evaluates literature with reference to the educational philosophy that formed the backdrop to my respondents' learning experiences.

In order to examine the three key research aims specified in Chapter 1, attention is also directed throughout this review to forming an argument on the relationship between social collaborative learning theory, motivation theory, the significance of belonging and communication technologies. Learning and motivation and the importance of group cohesion are also examined in relation to concepts of social and cultural capital (Coleman 1988; Bourdieu 1986). This chapter, therefore, starts with a brief synopsis of how learning itself is defined; it goes on to provide a summary of the work of Vygotsky followed by an exploration of contemporary application of his theory.

3.1 Learning theory

Philosophical enquiry into the nature of learning has developed from early reductionist 'stimulus – response' models epitomised in Pavlov's work on 'classical conditioning' (Pavlov 1928). In recognising that learning also equates to acquiring new information and skills there developed a distinct field of inquiry into the practices of pedagogy and andragogy examining the notion that adults and children engage in learning in different ways. Later research has led to a greater understanding of the collective or social influence upon

learning. The influential writer Dewey talks of learning as an active enriching process of change in a social context, characterised in his model of 'transactional constructivism' (Vanderstraeten 2002). Illeris makes the argument that all learning includes an interaction between the individual, their environment, the content of what is to be learned and the individual's incentive or motivation to learn (Illeris 2009).

Learning is also seen as a process that includes an emotional dimension. Mezirow's leading theory of 'transformative learning' (Mezirow 1991) suggests that individuals interpret their experiences based on their unique history to transform their meaning making. He argues that an individual's history produces frames of reference, or beliefs through which we make sense of our experiences. Frames of reference have cognitive and emotional elements that may be based on external factors, for example culture, religious conviction or prior education (Mezirow 1997). As Ashworth interprets transformative learning there is already an understanding or experience that precedes learning, and new learning is based on existing interpretations (Ashworth 2004). These existing preconceptions may be strong enough to prevent new knowledge from being accepted (Toynton 2005). Mezirow argues that it is possible for a person to change their frame of reference in order to be receptive to new ideas (Mezirow 1997).

In a study examining learning from the perspective of HE lecturers, Meyer and Land offer the idea of 'threshold concepts' in learning (Meyer and Land 2005). They argue that a threshold concept is an opening to new transformative knowledge; it is a perception that allows an alternative way of approaching a subject, particularly a difficult or complex notion. The resultant insight then promotes further multifaceted exploration of that subject. This is a development from early linear considerations of learning taking in to account the 'eureka' moments when a concept is grasped, then applied, then earlier beliefs are re-visited and re-evaluated. Meyer and Land's work suggests that

learning is an iterative, active process that takes place in a cyclical and expansive way.

I reflect at this point on the experiences of many of the mature HE students I have taught. They have to learn to write in an academic style, find out how to use the Harvard referencing system, study critical thinking and examine how to analyse and synthesise information. Many of them do this by sharing their knowledge and experiences, collaborating in a social learning context. However, I have also witnessed students who struggle to achieve those threshold concepts and become frustrated with specific problems.

By way of example I consider the experiences of two students from this study, Peter and Helen from the Diploma course, and their difficulty understanding Harvard referencing conventions. Peter described an occasion where he could find no information about how to reference a particular source so he made an educated attempt but was disappointed to be penalised for getting it wrong. Helen related her frustration at simply 'not getting it' with referencing at all, even at the end of her course. Their experiences resulted in what could be called rote practice. Both students created a reference with no understanding, which resulted in an unsatisfied feeling about a lack of achievement. Judging by the theories outlined above, a piece of work deemed for assessment purposes to be evidence of learning had been created but no *learning* had taken place, no threshold had been broken through. In other respects Peter and Helen related many cases of having grasped concepts and developed their knowledge. These examples provide evidence of the multi-faceted and complex notion of 'learning'.

This chapter will now go on to consider the development of social constructivist learning theory from its origins to contemporary applications and expansion of the work.

3.1.1 Social constructivist learning theory

Vygotsky began theorising on developmental psychology in post-revolutionary Russia, arguing against the newly founded model of behavioural psychology (Cole and Scribner 1978) and the alternative contemporary schools of Gestalt psychology, functional psychology, genetic psychology and Freudianism (Zinchenko and Davydov 1985). In his opposition to reductionist theories of human behaviour, Vygotsky reasoned that an individual's socio-cultural context was a key factor in understanding their psychology (Van der Veer 2007). In other words, he argued that individuals cannot be subtracted from their intricate social and historical context (Gibson 2004). Vygotsky's idea was revolutionary in that it challenged the prevailing Cartesian philosophy of the dualism of mind and matter. This was the established thinking originating from Descartes that mind and matter are separate from each other and cannot be considered with reference to each other (Russell 2004, Engeström 2009).

Vygotsky developed his theory by observing higher forms of human behaviour including the complex behaviour of learning. In doing so he deviated from the generally accepted contemporary method of psychological enquiry, which consisted of studying discrete elements of what has already been learned (Rieber 1983). He examined the function of education, and argued that the definitive purpose of education was to advance the cultural, historically grounded, intellectual and moral individual *in a social context* (Bakhurst 2007). In other words, the fundamental premise of Vygotsky's theory is the notion of the *Bildungsprozess*, or the educational and social development of the person throughout their life. Vygotsky argued against a reductionist behavioural model of psychology, stating that behaviour cannot be seen outside of its social context. It is argued that he was strongly influenced by the social milieu of Marxist ideology (Edwards 2005), but this is debated in relation to translation of some terms from the original Russian (Veresov 2005). Vygotsky stated that it was not the role of psychological enquiry to impose theory on nature, but to discover it there (*ibid.*). His research suggested that a collective culture was incorporated into the individual through the means of widely

recognised mediational tools including language, music and gestures (Edwards 2005). In other words, learning involves the interaction between the external culture and environment with internal psychological processes of change and development.

Vygotsky's principal theory of the 'zone of proximal development' states that learning *is* development. He highlights the difference between current developmental ability and potential capability. By way of explanation, he argued that what an individual can first do with assistance, they will later be able to accomplish alone, and therefore development is established upon social co-operation (Jarvis 2004). This co-operation leads to a collaborative method of knowledge construction in which both teacher and learner jointly form new perceptions through social practices. From a social learning viewpoint and in relation to the way in which mature students learn, this collective problem solving involves individuals with various insights coming together to create a collective understanding (Allen 2005, Clark 2008). From the perspective of this researcher in this study, shared understandings and experiences lead to a collaborative research, with knowledge arising jointly from participant and researcher. The idea of co-construction of knowledge is explored in detail in Chapter 5.

Neo-Vygotskian theorists have developed Vygotsky's ideas, following his exhortation that he did not wish his theories to lay idle and become 'a sort of monument on which the dust of subsequent years would settle' (Daniels *et al.* 2007 p9). Vygotsky and his contemporaries based their theories on observations of children playing and learning; subsequent researchers challenged the cultural specificity of this work, and expanded their research to include cross-cultural perspectives and learning as applied to other age groups (Engeström 2001). This review goes on to consider contemporary theories of adult social learning.

3.1.2 Contemporary social constructivist learning theory

Edwards explores the relationship between learning and the social circumstances in which that learning occurs (Edwards 2005). She defines intellectual personal development and learning as 'within-person changes' (*ibid.* p50), in other words, she argues that learning is a transformation that shapes the way in which a person interacts with and interprets their world. Transformative changes to the self can be intense and far-reaching (Illeris 2009), supporting earlier influential work by Richardson who suggests that mature students favour a deep and what he terms 'desirable' approach to learning (Richardson 1994 p313). Consideration of the sociological impact of learning is made later in this chapter, and is also included in Chapter 2 on the context of education.

Edwards examines how Vygotsky's work has been developed from his focus on actions that have a social consequence to a conceptualisation of 'Activity Theory' as framed by Vygotsky's own student Leont'ev and later extended by Engeström (Engeström 2001). She focuses attention on the way the mind is:

both embodied and culturally, and historically embedded, involved in a continuous process of interpretation and response (Edwards 2000 p197).

This duality allows for concurrent inquiry into both the features of individual learning and the attributes of the culture in which that learning takes place (Oxford Centre for Sociocultural and Activity Theory Research 2011). This is an important distinction as an initial interpretation of some of Edward's work directed me to question the apparent lack of focus on the individual, but further exploration clarified that her work on learning embraces the idea that it changes both the individual and their social world.

Engeström argues that Activity Theory is an evolving concept which projects learning as not only a linear process whereby individuals move upwards towards greater levels of ability, but also to include horizontal dimensions of learning (Engeström 2001). In other words, networks of individuals meet the

challenges associated with working together and use those challenges to learn and change. This has echoes of the idea of 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991), where cooperative learning is argued to take place by people taking part in a shared experience. Engeström's early research was socially situated in the context of the workplace and focused on institutional improvement, but Engeström also uses the findings to show how his vision of individual 'learning by expanding' is developing (Engeström 1987). It is interesting to note how Vygotsky's original idea of *Bildungsprozess* has developed into Activity Theory and that Engeström continues to advocate the study of meditational tools and their relationship with the constituents of activity systems or communities (Engeström 1999).

Chapters 2 and 3 have presented a range of contemporary views on what learning is and how it can be observed and advanced, exploring current applications of social learning theory and evidence of on-going academic and practical research into the development of that theory. Research into the function of learning and education as agencies for social change was examined in Chapter 2 on the political context of HE.

With these theories of learning as the foundation, this chapter now makes connections between the key particulars of social learning theory and those factors in which I have an interest and which play a part in learning, namely motivation, coping and belonging and communication technologies. Put another way, I am endeavouring to create a holistic picture of the learning experience and demonstrate the degree to which this experience is social in origin. I begin by examining theories of motivation.

3.2 Definition of motivation

Research into motivation has a rich and lengthy history. Motivation is a difficult concept to define, arguably because it is a familiar part of every-day language. Indeed, the difficulty in describing the term leads some researchers

to omit a definition from their work, perhaps assuming that readers will understand what they mean (Richardson 1994, Yoshida *et al.* 2008).

This section examines a variety of definitions of motivation to try to define a key element of this research. It is argued that motivation is a 'force, influence, enthusiasm, drive or incentive' (Geraniou & Simpson 2006 p5). Wlodkowski asserts that motivation involves being resolved and determined and is concerned with the justification of why individuals act in the way that they do (Wlodkowski 2008). Motivation may come from internal sources, a learner's inner resources, termed 'intrinsic' motivation, or external factors, 'extrinsic' motivation, or a combination of both. Intrinsic motivation is said to arise from an *internal* drive for improvement or increased knowledge; extrinsic motivators are related to *external* drivers (Waite and Davis 2006). By way of example, an intrinsic motivational driver may be the aim of greater self-confidence; an extrinsic motivating driver might be a specific grade for an assignment. Results from this research add a further level of subtlety to this apparent dichotomy between intrinsic and extrinsic factors, suggesting the existence of what I term *primary* and *secondary* motivating drivers, and these findings are examined later.

Much work on adult learning and motivation contends that mature students are motivated by intrinsic factors and moreover favour deep learning approaches to their studies (see Knowles 1989, Richardson 1994 and Bye, *et al.* 2007 for examples). Murphy and Roopchand added further evidence to this argument when they noticed age *and* gender differences in their study examining intrinsic motivation and self-esteem (Murphy and Roopchand 2003). They found that mature students, defined by them as over 21 years of age, reported higher levels of self-confidence than young students, and that women recounted having a greater degree of intrinsic motivation than men. It is unclear from the study what courses were being studied by the fairly small sample of students questioned, but the paper adds another layer of intricacy to the complex task of defining motivation.

Further definitions are influenced by the philosophy of the theorist. The

humanist Maslow argues that an individual's behaviour is influenced by a variety of motivations or drivers to satiate certain needs with the aim of becoming an integrated whole person (Maslow 1943). Similarly, the psychotherapist Carl Rogers, founder of the 'person-centred approach' to counselling therapy, argued that educational relationships facilitate learning and change and that motivation is the organismic predisposition to the realisation of learning goals (Rogers 1979). Motivation here is innate and focused on individual drive and fulfillment.

Research about motivation in the context of education considers a variety of sources of motivation. For example, Troia and colleagues argue that motivation to learn is influenced by the interest in the activity to be performed and the merit judged to exist in the activity (Troia *et al.* 2012). Learning that is focused on accomplishment is characteristic of motivation orientated towards goals; learning that examines individual capability has a source of motivation in personal effectiveness and self-worth (Schunk and Zimmerman 2008). In other words, motivation can arise from achieving goals or from recognising individual transformation. These findings support earlier work mentioned in Chapter 1, which suggests that students attribute failure to extrinsic factors over which they have limited control, but take personal credit and provide internal attributions for their successes (Kember 1999).

In contrast, Vygotsky's social cultural-historical theory examines motivation from the social perspective of identity. Identities are socially recognised cultural constructs that are 'actively internalised as self-meanings [and] serve as motivation for action' (Holland and Lachicotte 2007 p134). Baxter and Britton specifically examine the risk to identity posed by undertaking a HE qualification, and their work is examined later in this chapter (Baxter and Britton 2001). Motivation is culturally specific and arguably has a social context; this argument is explored later in this chapter when examining the influences of motivation on learning (Wlodkowski 2008).

Gom characterises motivation as any type of incentive which drives people on the way to the accomplishment of some aspect of their life (Gom 2009). This echoes Maslow's focus on the drive to become an integrated whole person, a definition appealing to me in its use of the word 'drive' and reflected in the title of this thesis. Moreover, the majority of the literature in this field classifies these influences as intrinsic, inherent within the individual, and extrinsic, originating outside the individual; for example see Geraniou and Simpson 2006, Bye *et al.* 2007, Ahl 2006, though again a commonly agreed definition of motivation is not apparent from the literature.

Results from this study have altered my own understanding of motivation. I had assumed that motivation was a stable, intrinsic drive, an internal resolve to achieve. Findings from this study show a more subtle division of motivation into *primary* and *secondary* motivators, and these results are explored in detail in Chapter 5. As this research has a socio-cultural, social constructivist basis, the focus now turns to a theory of motivation founded within this theoretical framework.

3.3 Theory of motivation

There is no one definition of motivation, as there is no definitive motivational driver, but the influence of motivation on learning is clear. This influence is characterised by Wlodkowski with the assertion that motivation not only enhances learning, it is also the end result of the learning process (Wlodkowski 2008). Wlodkowski is a constructivist educational psychologist, who has researched motivation extensively. His aim is to answer the question of how best to provide support for mature students to learn. He provides a holistic view of motivation. His theory encompasses neuroscience, including learning that results in the modification of neural networks and the influence of social, experiential and emotional experiences. He argues that the interaction of all these factors is connected to the value placed on learning. He talks of adult's motivation that 'surfaces like a cork rising through water' (*ibid.* p20)

when they recognise, from their learning, their ability to do better those things that they value.

This analogy reflects the work on threshold concepts discussed earlier in this chapter, where an increasing awareness of an idea facilitates further learning. Meyer and Land state that threshold concepts can develop gradually over time or that these gateways of comprehension can open quickly (Meyer and Land 2005), as Wlodkowski suggests, like the sudden emergence of a cork from under the water.

In his research on adult motivation, Wlodkowski identifies four key conditions that shape motivation, namely inclusion, attitude, meaning and competence (Wlodkowski 2008). To put this another way, Wlodkowski states that mature students' motivation is affected by their social connectedness to the group they study with. Moreover, their expectations and prior learning experiences modify the learning, and self-confidence grows with increased ability or competence at a task. These four motivational conditions work together and influence learning both at specific instances and over a period of time. Fostering feelings of inclusion in a social group creates a sense of belonging and connectedness, a shared experience of learning and growth. I would argue this inclusive element of motivation is fundamentally social and enhances social learning theory, an argument which is expanded upon later in this chapter.

Evaluation of Wlodkowski's work reveals that he seems to base this theory of motivation on the premise that adults have chosen to learn. He suggests that significant life changes may have an influence on the decision to learn, but he focuses on deliberate participation and does not examine any potential effect of compulsion to study. I would argue that obligation influences motivation, and I consider this in my findings when examining the learning experiences of Peter who took the Diploma course. Nonetheless, Wlodkowski's theory does acknowledge the complex identities, personal history and context that mature

students bring to their learning experience, reflecting leading work on lifelong learning by Jarvis (Jarvis 2004).

The next section examines the ways in which adult learners balance the apparently competing demands of study, work, family and other life commitments to ensure a rewarding and fulfilling learning experience. In relation to this topic, again through the lens of social collaborative learning, this section evaluates literature that examines the extent to which adults are prepared for HE study.

3.4 Balancing work, life and study

This section expands upon the social learning concept central to this research by recognising the impact of the complex social world in which mature students live, work and study. Learning takes place within an intricate and sometimes chaotic combination of existing life circumstances. I do not mean to imply that it is only mature students who face concurrent demands upon their time. Many students of all ages manage to balance work and study, but it is fair to suggest that adult learners may have a greater number of aspects of life which require attention at any one time. I would argue that social learning in its widest sense incorporates the cultural and social situations in which that learning occurs, and includes learning the strategies that might help to balance those competing demands.

The successful completion of a specific episode of learning, for example a course or module, has been demonstrated to provide learners with significantly more than just the reward of the qualification itself. Psychological and health benefits include improved self-esteem and an increased sense of self-worth (Hammond 2004), self-efficacy (Hammond and Feinstein 2005, Sabates and Hammond 2008), self-affirmation and empowerment (Weir 2008), though these findings must be considered in relation to the question of compulsion (Weedon 2008). Interestingly, Dench and Regan investigated the impact of studying for older adults and discovered that learning not only

increased self-confidence and encouraged people to participate in community activities, it also had a positive impact on their ability to cope with every day life (Dench and Regan 2000).

The results of these studies suggest that education and learning provide individuals with the opportunity to use the social aspect of learning, or the creation of new networks and relationships, to produce benefits outside the sphere of curriculum content. These benefits are not limited to the individual but also spread to the wider social environment that individual inhabits. An influential study identifying these broader collective advantages led American social scientist James Coleman to advance the term 'social capital' (Coleman 1988) to refer to the means of building beneficial relationships. The term was also developed by Robert Putman to correspond to the mores existing in societal groups that make possible the realisation of shared objectives (Putman 1995).

Adult learners studying HE in FE are a group receiving growing research interest. There is an increasing body of research that attempts to examine the expectations and experiences of learners new to HE. Increased participation by adults in HE has resulted in a growing concern among researchers as to the ability of mature students to adapt to new pressures (Byrne and Flood 2005). Research by Salisbury and Jephcote examined the feelings of 45 students entering a FE college, their rationale for study and their own beliefs on their capacity to learn (Salisbury and Jephcote 2008). Though it is unclear from the paper what level of course the students were taking, nevertheless their experiences demonstrate anxiety on returning to learn. These findings further reflect Lowe and Cook's earlier suggestion that mature students are not all prepared or adequately equipped for the transition to HE (Lowe and Cook 2003).

My own experience of teaching mature undergraduates, and of studying myself with a group of postgraduate students, tells me that many individuals

do not feel prepared for study. They doubt their ability and, moreover, imagine that numerous other students in their cohort are better prepared and more competent. I used to test this premise annually by asking HE students a few weeks into their course to put up their hand if they felt they were the most unintelligent or ill-equipped person in the group. Immediately, all hands rose in the air followed by looks of surprise that each was not alone. This experience and consequent class discussion created a shared understanding of the feelings of individuals within the group and frequently resulted in greater group cohesion. Their community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) included their shared discovery that they were not alone in their struggles.

There is literature that sees learning as a separate entity, regarding 'student' as compartmentalised from other identities (Lowe and Gayle 2007, Baxter and Britton 2001). Many adult learners as is the case for the respondents in this research study part-time, managing their learning 'alongside an existing web of ties, obligations and duties' (Kember 1999 p110). A study by Lowe and Gayle differs from Kember's research in identifying different coping strategies used by students in order to balance study with work, family and general life commitments (Lowe and Gayle 2007). Lowe and Gayle's students coped by creating a boundary between work and study. In their case study of HE students in a Scottish FE college they state that students who felt they had achieved the best balance described situations of 'separation and compartmentalisation' (Lowe and Gayle 2007 p230), in other words their studies were discrete, and did not overlap with any other aspect of their lives. Those who struggled to cope were those who had no clear boundaries; their balance was unstable and resulted in a stressful and negative influence on their learning.

Baxter and Britton undertook a three-year longitudinal study of mature students, defining these as over 21 years old (Baxter and Britton 2001). Their focus was on the risks associated with entering HE, threats to their identity, to friendships and to interactions with family. They report that students

experienced a process of individual change, fundamental challenges to their domestic roles and anxiety over being seen as superior by old friends. Students managed by separating their identity as 'student' from other aspects of their social life. Their findings echo Lowe and Gayle's argument that compartmentalisation of study is a coping mechanism against the stresses of balancing work, life and study (Lowe and Gayle 2007).

My own research demonstrates that individual students are motivated to continue learning in their own way and employ their own coping mechanisms accordingly. These findings may help to explain an apparent paradox that I have observed during my teaching career, that individuals with apparently few demands can sometimes give up studying, while those with seemingly much busier lives often carry on.

Kember argues that coping with conflicting demands is *the* key concern for many adult students (Kember 1999). He asserts that all students face a variety of competing demands on their time but, unlike Lowe and Gayle's students, he found that those who succeeded in balancing these demands best were most likely to have integrated study into all the other elements of life. The ability to build study into other elements of life led to better strategies to manage the various stresses that occurred during the period of study. So, in marked contrast to Lowe and Gayle's findings, Kember's students achieved the best balance, and success, by *assimilating* study into their lives.

It could be argued that comparison between these two studies is unreasonable. Kember's students were undertaking distance-learning courses with some one-to-one contact in group tutorials and a summer school, whereas Lowe and Gayle's respondents were studying both full and part time in a FE college. Student contact, group cohesion and learning experiences would be very different between the two studies. However, Winn upholds Kember's findings in an interesting qualitative study exploring the motivation of full-time undergraduates from a socio-economic perspective (Winn 2002).

Winn interviewed 23 students and found that students had high intrinsic motivations; in addition, they valued their studies so much that they went to great lengths to fit learning into already busy lives (*ibid.*). Winn's group, who were together for their learning experience, used the same technique of assimilation as Kember's group of distance learners.

While it is appealing to consider the shared experiences of students learning in different contexts, it is not appropriate to consider adult learners as some sort of uniform whole. In contrast to Winn and Kember's studies above, Jenkins and colleagues demonstrated that both integration *and* compartmentalisation were shown to be effective strategies for managing learning (Jenkins *et al.* 2001). What emerges from the literature is no single convincing argument, rather that a variety of ways to integrate life and study are effective depending upon the style and structure of the course and the characteristics of individual learners. This section goes on to describe some coping strategies used by students to manage the balance of work, life and study before examining the influence of a sense of belonging on learning.

Teachers and staff at institutions that provide HE are frequently called upon to 'support' their students, and this term is used within module and programme feedback forms and in the National Student Survey. Yet there is a huge variation of the meaning and interpretation of the word support within the literature. Definitions of support range from financial backing (Lowe and Gayle 2007) to relationships formed with other students (Bingham and O'Hara 2007), from tutorial input (Hughes 2007) to having a spouse do the housework (Tierney and Slack 2005). I interpret each of these definitions as describing the *coping strategies* employed by students juggling study and life. These are mechanisms that are loosely considered under the title support which illustrate the individual nature of the experience of learning. Results from this study demonstrate that students do make use of a variety of coping mechanisms to support them in their learning, including delegating housework! These findings are discussed in later chapters.

Having considered some of the ways in which adult learners cope with balancing work, life and study, the next section reflects on literature that investigates how a sense of belonging has an impact on motivation and the social learning experience.

3.5 Balancing work, life and study: a sense of belonging

Belonging and a sense of place clearly have a sociological basis as well as a personal one, and I would argue these are closely linked to social identity. Most of the respondents in this study to a greater or lesser extent developed a sense of belonging to the cohort of learners they were grouped with. Some developed what they described as life long friendships with members of the class. More than that they took on new sociological identities of 'mature student' and with that accepted the concomitant ideas of space and place. They attended college and used the university facilities, for example classrooms and the library. In doing so they adopted the accepted mores of their community of practice. My own awareness of the potential significance of place and belonging influenced my decision of where to hold interviews, a consideration described further in the method Chapter 4.

Social constructivists argue that adult students are complex individuals who bring a unique set of experiences and culture to their learning, and interpret and construct meaning from their learning. In a study examining the socio-cultural aspects of learning, Edwards argues that learners collaborate within a cultural context and construct knowledge through dialogue or interaction. This results in an:

increasingly informed participation in the communities in which specific skills and understandings are employed (Edwards 2000 p198).

A study on decision-making in reference to choosing whether or not to apply to participate in HE examines the role of 'networks of intimacy' (Foskett and Johnston 2010 p223) and their involvement in giving advice and guidance for choosing educational opportunities. These networks are formed of an

individual's close social group. Foskett and Johnston argue that interpersonal relationships and networks have a significant bearing on the decision-making process and that the social influence outweighs the individual choice. It could be argued that this creates in contrast to Edwards comment above, *informed non-participation*. Further social influences include the characteristics of the individual who is dominant in manipulating that choice, for example the teacher's authority over students thinking of applying to elite universities (Oliver and Kettley 2010). Potential students have to make the choice to apply to undertake a course before they can foster any sense of belonging to a shared endeavour. These studies indicate that the initial decision to apply can arise from a complex background.

It is my experience that *some* adults construct a 'shared understanding' (Allen 2005 p249) by developing a sense of belonging to a group and an institution. Some adults are additionally motivated to undertake study by their wish to meet people and engage in a new social arena (Beinart and Smith 1998). Whereas Lowe and Gayle, cited earlier in this chapter, investigated ways in which students managed to fit learning into their lives (Lowe and Gayle 2007), Trotter and Cove explored belonging from a different angle (Trotter and Cove 2005). They talked to focus groups of students to establish their perception of a healthcare degree course in order to determine the reasons for a high dropout rate. Findings indicated that a lack of integration into the common culture of the institution was a key factor (*ibid.*). This directly reflects the findings of an influential study in the US which states that poor social and academic assimilation leads to a negative experience of the institution and influences the final decision to withdraw from studying (Tinto 1987). In these cases it is the collective culture that is the causative feature of withdrawal, though it is debatable whether there exists a culture common to both HE and FE institutions. Discussions around the similarities and differences of institutional ethos form part of the findings from this research.

Kember and Leung in an extension of Kember's previous work on coping mechanisms (Kember 1999), also argue that a feeling of belonging to a cohort strengthened the learning experience and, conversely, that determination waned where that sense was lacking (Kember and Leung 2004). Belonging can include strong friendships with other students (Hammond 2004, Bigger and Bigger 2002). Hammond talks of the way learning 'develops psychosocial qualities through extending boundaries' (Hammond 2004 p551), thus increasing social integration.

Sheridan and Byrne's reflective comparison of cèilidh culture and HE provides evidence of the impact of friendship on learning (Sheridan and Byrne 2008). Their study highlighted the:

benefits of social interaction and enjoyment...[and] the importance of friendship and fun as key elements that contribute to a powerful learning environment (*ibid.* p155).

Further evidence suggests that cohesive student groups develop a student's generic skills including 'critical thinking, communication skills, entrepreneurship and self-reliance' (Leung and Kember 2005 p92). These two studies employed significantly different data gathering techniques (inductive analysis of existing interviews with musicians for the first and quantitative measurements from part-time students in the latter) and yet their results are similar. They reflect Wlodkowski's statement about the positive influence of belonging on motivation (Wlodkowski 2008) and demonstrate a clearly social context to the support of learning.

Belonging is argued to be a fundamental psychological need that influences students' behaviour and experience of approval (Osterman 2000). It is also argued that it is the responsibility of educators to foster this sense of belonging to enhance the individual's well-being and social integration as discussed earlier (March and Gaffney 2010). However, there is evidence to suggest that this sense of belonging is not always cultivated, and in particular part time HE students are said to feel 'ignored or at worst marginalised in

contemporary higher education' (Williams and Kane 2010 p183). This finding presents a challenge to staff and institutions, particularly in relation to increasing student numbers and modular degree designs. In some HEIs this modular structure can result in individuals attending lectures on core subjects in large groups sometimes consisting of students from different disciplines, and then having to find their place within other groups for specialist subject lessons.

My own experience of taking a six-week part-time masters module in research methods included being situated in a new room every week surrounded by a different group of students. The cohort consisted of undergraduates, postgraduate learners and one postdoctoral student, a varied group of people I confess I was glad not to have to teach. I did not feel marginalised by this experience, but at the same time I could foster no sense of belonging as I felt there was no single group to whom I belonged. The membership of the overall group changed each week. My experience became an individualised one as I felt no common or social collaboration could take place.

That such diverse methods of research have produced the comparable results seen thus far, this indicates that 'belonging' is in itself a complex construct, intricately linked to the sense of actual or perceived identity or identities. A number of recent studies have examined the experiences of learners returning to education in relation to their identity, perceived ability and expectations (for example Bingham and O'Hara 2007, O'Donnell and Tobbell 2007, Dunne *et al.* 2008) and the effect on the individual's motivation.

A sense of belonging to a group of learners can relate to a cohort sharing, studying and learning together. Bingham and O'Hara's study of a number of groups of students, mostly in their early to mid twenties, progressing to HE from FE, noted the positive impact of developing relationships on their motivation and determination (Bingham and O'Hara 2007). Read *et al.* focussed on belonging as the extent to which students chose to identify

themselves with significant numbers of other students 'like them', for example in age or cultural background (Read *et al.* 2003). Students in Read's study felt isolated from the institution but integrated into a group of similar learners. Indeed, students in this latter study chose their HEI based on their chances of belonging:

the potential for 'feeling comfortable' at an institution has an important role in working-class mature students' choice of university (Read *et al.* 2003 p263).

Read and her colleagues undertook this study in London where the choice of institutions offering HE courses is more extensive than that which is available to learners in smaller towns or rural areas of the UK. This availability gave learners greater flexibility to choose a place according to where they felt they would best fit in. It is therefore questionable whether these results are generalisable to a wider population of learners.

A sense of belonging is clearly dependent upon more than linking up with learners of a similar age. The attitude and level of preparedness of the individual learner will also have an impact on engagement and belonging, as evidenced by the findings of Schweinle and colleagues examining learner's interactions with their learning environment (Schweinle *et al.* 2009). Their detailed interview research identified that highly engaged students were outgoing, had clearly defined future goals, a well-developed sense of identity and were highly involved in social and academic activities. In contrast, less engaged students lacked vision and were described as shy. The age of these students is not given and the authors themselves recognise that results from a small sample from a public university in South Dakota may transfer to similar institutions but may not generalise across all institutions, particularly the privately funded 'Ivy League' universities in the US. Furthermore, it is not clear at which point during the first year of study the interviews for this research took place, though it is inferred to be near the end of the year. There is a marked contrast between these findings and those of Byrne and Flood (2005) and Salisbury and Jephcote (2008), described earlier in this chapter.

Recent research on the experiences of cohorts of learners within education focuses on the dialogue that connects the learners with themselves, their teachers and their social milieu (Ortlieb 2011). Ortlieb talks of mutual learning arising from a shared discourse between each of these actors and refers to the concepts of social belonging and collaborative learning. Moreover, Ortlieb argues the sense of belonging fosters recognition of acceptable behaviours within a group context, what Bourdieu describes as the *cultural capital* of a group (Bourdieu 1986). Students collaborate in their learning and engage in the accepted behaviours associated with being a student. This notion of the collective acceptance of behaviour associated with identity can be applied to one Foundation Degree respondent from this study, Francis. She did not form any bond with her cohort, or feel any sense of belonging, yet she recognised an instinctive unease in herself, her tutor and her fellow students that she did not fit the expected norm of group learning behaviour. However, her experience is not in harmony with Bourdieu's analysis that the level of acceptance of the culture governs success within education. Francis was always isolated, but successfully passed her course.

Having examined individual advantages to developing a sense of belonging to a cohort, this chapter now goes on to examine the wider social benefits of the learning experience by providing a critique of the notions of social and cultural capital.

3.6 Social and cultural capital

In introducing the concept of 'social capital' (Coleman 1988), Coleman evaluated the links between two particular theoretical ideas. Specifically he examined the difference between sociology's view of the individual as social actor, governed in behaviour by the rules and norms of society, and economic views of the individual as self-governing, driven by self-interest. Coleman argued that these two theories were not upheld by reality. Where a sociologist perspective did not take account of internal, personal drivers for action,

equally an economic standpoint did not acknowledge the norms of the social networks in which activity takes place.

Coleman proposed the term social capital to describe the function of facilitation of actors within certain structures:

If we begin with a theory of rational action, in which each actor has control over certain resources and interests in certain resources and events, then social capital constitutes a particular kind of resource available to an actor (Coleman 1988 p98).

Where 'human capital' is demonstrated by changes embodied in the person, for example through education or learning, social capital facilitates activity through the social *interactions* between people. Coleman attempted to combine these sociological and economic perspectives by stating that rational action is apparent within a social context. In relation to social constructivist learning theory, social capital could be argued to be the basis of the transformative relationships that form between students, or the foundation of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978). In the context of the wider societal benefits of education, social capital as embodied within relationships is also argued to underpin innovation and community development (Keeley 2007).

Coleman developed the concept of capital by suggesting that trusting relationships allowed for the proliferation of obligation and expectation. In other words, a relationship based on trust contains types of reciprocated actions that create a balance of 'favours' or commitments. In a society where there are lots of obligations, there is a large amount of social capital to draw upon. Social capital can be based on group norms, for example the reward of success and the promotion of behaviour that leads to social rather than individual good. By way of an example related to education in the UK, it could be argued that society obliges individuals to attend compulsory education in order to gain qualifications. Taking part in additional post-compulsory lifelong learning can result in increased individual success and the reward of a

promotion, financial benefit, improved self-esteem or better career prospects. The concurrent resulting 'social good' is the creation of a competitive knowledge based economy and improved national prosperity.

Critics of social capital theory point to difficulties in coalescing each part of the concept into a concrete definition and differentiating it from other forms of capital (Morgan 2008, Haynes 2009). However, Coleman acknowledges in the original paper that social capital is less tangible than other forms of capital:

for it exists in the *relations* between persons (Coleman 1988 p100, original emphasis).

Findings from my own study do provide evidence to support the theory that social relationships are one important factor that leads to a successful learning experience for *most* students.

The fact that 'capital' is a term associated with economics referring to something specifically measurable leads critics to question how 'relations' can be measured (Haynes 2009). Coleman's language of debt and owing, devotion of resources, obligation, credit and reward give the concept of social capital a strongly economic flavour, hinting at the commodification of relationships. In addition, the notion that the phrase adds nothing new to existing elements of human relationships like 'trust' and 'belonging' also leads Haynes to suggest that it is hard to be exact concerning the 'causes and consequences' (Haynes 2009 p11) of social capital. By way of example, does a sense of belonging build a successful and developing community, or does a fundamentally successful community foster cohesion?

In regard to the place of this theory in education, four further criticisms suggest themselves. Firstly, it is difficult to ascertain from Coleman's work what is the genesis of social capital. Coleman offers four distinct and reasoned examples of social capital and social norms in his paper: i) the wholesale diamond trade in New York, ii) the organising behaviour of South Korean student activists, iii) the difference between social structures in

Jerusalem and Detroit, and iv) family relationships in the markets of Cairo. Each of these examples is an existing structure, into which new actors may enter, but the structure is already there. This is the first difficulty in applying the concept to an educational context.

At the start of an academic year or at the beginning of a course or module of learning a disparate group of people join a class with the ultimate aim of successfully gaining a qualification. Each person brings their own expectations, previous identity and experience to that group, their personal history and context. If social capital is a function that facilitates the actor, where does that function originate? It could be argued that it is the role of the course tutor to foster relationships and create a group from its different parts in order to promote learning. From another perspective, and within the reality of large class sizes in many HEIs, it is also possible to argue that it is the role of teachers to support learners to gain their qualification, relationship-building being a secondary issue. Students do learn the rules and norms of the identity that is 'student' and (mostly) conform to the expectations of the role and the institution (the possible exception here being the experience of Francis). As the learning experience develops and students share experiences and develop together, social capital also develops, but what is not clear from Coleman's theory is how the function of social capital in education is supported to begin in the first place. The imprecise nature of the concept adds to the difficulty of defining its origins in practice.

Secondly, social capital is presumably social in nature. Coleman states that:

social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible (Coleman 1988 p98),

but what of those students who are not social? Two independent-minded respondents from this study, Tina and Francis, were unconvinced about the social aspect of learning. However, they both achieved their qualification, Francis with no obvious social support or sense of belonging to her group and certainly no social capital as an end product. Coleman's conception of social

capital would suggest that those individuals who are not social would be excluded from the group, and furthermore would be unsuccessful in their endeavours. This model has not been upheld by findings from this study.

A third criticism is based on the rather nebulous nature of the concept. None of the respondents in this study indicated that they took their course because they wanted to develop their community. Each student was driven by a variety of motivational factors and each was prompted to study for different reasons, to gain a qualification, increase their chance of job security or higher earning potential or to prove something to themselves. Albeit that these students undertook their learning in a social context, social capital was a derivative of the learning experience not a causative motive for studying. It is true to say that all these learners conformed to one kind of social expectation, namely that they should attempt to enhance their future by developing intellectually, but academic advancement is only one form of 'capital' in a complex society.

Finally, regardless of how hazy the definition of social capital may be, supportive relationships were formed in most cases but, using the words of John Donne (1839), I would suggest that the notion of the social nature of humankind is by no means a new concept:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind (Donne 1839).

To summarise the literature thus far, research suggests that students make use of a variety of methods to manage the balance of work, life and study in order to achieve a rewarding and successful learning experience. While these in some cases involve deliberate division between study and life outside of the formal learning experience, for others these methods also include assimilation and social support. Successfully managing the multi-faceted elements of life does not just involve personal change, these individual transformations occur within an evolving education system which was examined in Chapter 2.

Moreover, I do not mean to imply that there is a social torpor, that these individual changes are not taking place in a vibrant society outside the confines of the education system. Chapter 2, examining the socio-political context of education, provided details on widening participation, increased demand, changes to fee structures and the increasing professionalisation of the workforce. In order to provide further evidence of how the individual changes the social order in which they live, that chapter also focuses on the sociology of education.

One of the most rapidly changing social activities is the inescapable development of communication technologies and their increased application to learning. This review now goes on to examine how the use of communication technologies and social networks in learning may provide an additional component to social collaborative learning.

3.7 Communication technologies

One of the original aims of the study arose from a sense that a blog might be a useful tool to foster a sense of cohesion and belonging for cohorts of part-time students who only physically met in college once a week. The idea was to help social learning by providing a means for dialogue and collaboration. This aim was partly inspired by my re-evaluation of Jarvis' suggestion that technology is isolating (Jarvis 2004). He asserts that the more technological a society becomes the more alienated people become, unless they continue to learn to keep up with the advances:

Paradoxically, the more that they learn the more likelihood that they become individualised and perhaps alienated. (Given the fact that all people are born with their unique genetic inheritance, individualisation is exacerbated by lifelong learning) (Jarvis 2004 p26, parentheses in the original).

The intention was to build on research that looked at the potential benefits of blogs to postgraduate student supervision (Bigger 2009) to ascertain if blogs were a useful tool for social collaboration for undergraduate learners.

The blog was not successful, but students did voluntarily employ alternative methods of electronic communication to support them in their studies, a practice I have termed *e-motivation*. This innovative method of motivation is explored later in this work and in a parallel in-print paper (Price with Kadi-Hanifi 2011) published from this research. The next section of this chapter reviews literature on the role of a range of communication technologies in learning and educational research.

The array of communication technologies available to education is sizeable, extending way beyond simple e-mail, text messaging and telephone. Methods of learning and accessing information range from the world-wide-web to virtual learning environments (VLEs) including WebCT, Blackboard and Moodle, intranets, blogs, wikis, social network sites, for example Twitter and Facebook, and virtual worlds such as Active Worlds and Second Life. Access to these Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 tools, via PCs, laptops and increasingly through mobile devices, including tablet computers and smart-phones, offers what Barlow calls a 'real opportunity to create a classroom without walls' (Barlow 2008 p46). Indeed, the extent of this opportunity is potentially vast as, according to a recent *Economist* article:

smart-phones accounted for over 13% of the 309 million handsets shipped in the third quarter of 2009 (Economist 2010 p56).

In spite of an Ofsted report in 2009 that describes virtual learning as a slow starter – 'the exploitation of VLEs at curriculum level resembled more of a cottage industry than a national technological revolution' (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills 2009 p4) – there is an increasing emphasis on the role that media-rich learning environments can play in enhancing collaborative learning (Clark 2008, Heaton-Shrestha *et al.* 2009).

Legislative changes proposed by the white paper 'Students at the Heart of the System' acknowledged that students who are asked to pay substantially increased tuition fees should rightly expect their HEIs to offer an increasingly flexible education experience (Department of Business Innovation and Skills

2011). I would argue that the increased liberty offered to students by the judicious use of mobile devices, for example the potential for the use of Skype and a sustainable concerted approach to blended learning, could actually increase the flexibility afforded by the credit-based systems of learning. These factors may alleviate the restrictions to teaching provision that occur when small numbers of students wish to take specific modules. At present, colleges and universities struggle to justify employing a lecturer to teach a small group. If a number of small groups from different institutions could be taught together remotely using technologies to create Barlow's classroom without walls (Barlow 2008), a more flexible, student-centred learning experience might be created.

Academic uses of the internet for teaching and collaborative learning include access to information required for studies, the use of repositories and VLEs for delivery of on-line course content, and the provision of blended learning combining face-to-face with on-line teaching and e-learning. Many HE providers now embed communication technologies within their courses (Selwyn 2008). In addition, blogs are increasingly used as a real-time adjunct to academic conferences, a phenomenon known as event-blogging, allowing immediate dissemination of intellectual information and on-line debate (Ojala 2005).

Blogs, originally titled Web Logs, are usually personal web pages which are regularly updated, (Mortensen and Walker 2002), or web-based journals with entries posted in reverse date order. They allow the writer to upload ideas, web links and thoughts simply and quickly using a straightforward and informal style of language, sharing these with as many people as read the blog (Flatley 2005). Their innovative use in education depends on the fact that entries can be commented upon by others, making them an interactive tool:

an extension of a classroom, where discussions are continued, and where every student gets an equal voice...it can be a place where new ideas are formulated through collaboration (*ibid.* p77).

Thus, they can be seen as an extension of the application of social collaboration learning theory.

Recent innovative educational approaches to the use of communication technologies include using blogs to support undergraduate students, for example the blog publishing web tool *Wordpress*. One study has examined support of postgraduate research students (Bigger 2009) and other studies examine the use of social networks for sharing knowledge and encouraging reflective learning (Mazman and Usluel 2009). Flatley writes about her own experience in devising a blog to support student group work but does not elaborate on what level of study her learners are taking (Flatley 2005). Her comment that 'every student has an equal voice' (*ibid.* p77) does rather make the assumption that all learners both want to use new technologies and have the ability to access these easily. It is interesting to compare her findings with Selwyn's suggestion that HE providers are motivated to provide technologies in response to 'internal political pressures' (Selwyn 2007 p12) rather than a clear student-led rationale. Selwyn suggests that there is insufficient existing research into the use of communication technologies, making the argument that research:

needs to provide a more holistic view of students' *actual* use of the internet in their studies, as opposed to what they could or should be doing (*ibid.* p14, author's own emphasis).

I would argue that this call has been answered in this thesis and in the published paper arising from this work (Price with Kadi-Hanifi 2011). Indeed I would make the case that my student respondents did not use a blog that had been provided for them, in other words dictated by what I assumed would be a useful way to keep in touch outside college. Rather they employed their *own* way of doing what I had supposed they might, specifically, using communication technology to motivate, encourage and support each other beyond the classroom, with the same successful outcome.

Increasingly researchers are also using blogs as an academic research tool, (Hookway 2008), and this was the intention in my own research. However, as my respondents did not engage with the blog I shall go on to focus on literature examining educational use of social networking websites and e-mail, tools they did find of practical use.

Social networking websites, for example ASmallWorld, MySpace, LinkedIn and Facebook, are an example of Web 2.0 software tools which enable users to create and share information in an interactive way, rather than be inactive recipients of material (Minocha 2009). Each network has a particular 'voice' or what Papacharissi describes as architecture (Papacharissi 2009), ranging from the professional focus of LinkedIn, to sites with members-only access for example ASmallWorld and Facebook's 'architectural equivalent of a glasshouse, with a publicly open structure' (*ibid.* p199). Each website allows people to join communities of common interest, create a personal profile and make connections with others within the on-line community (boyd and Ellison 2007).

Though the terms 'network' and 'networking' might suggest that users employ these sites to meet new people, boyd and Ellison argue that users chiefly communicate with others who are known to them and already form part of their extensive social group (boyd and Ellison 2007). These networks are further argued to reflect the existing identities of people's everyday lives (Hargittai 2007). The website Facebook, which was used by many of my respondents, originated as a Harvard University only network but in September 2005 was opened up to general use (Hargittai 2007) and, according to its own statistics, now has 500 million active users (Facebook Statistics 2011).

A quantitative study of the benefits of Facebook indicates that it has a positive impact upon the preservation and formation of social capital, (Ellison *et al.* 2007). The concept of social capital, as examined earlier, is concerned with

participation in aspects of social life, requiring resources that are engaged with to form constructive group relationships (Daly and Silver 2008). Ellison and her colleagues argue that using Facebook can create supportive relationships, but they focus more on use after graduating from college to stay in contact with former students, rather than seeing the same benefits that could arise from use while studying (Ellison *et al.* 2007). These advantages for social learning *in situ* were recognised by Tu and colleagues (Tu *et al.* 2008). Tu's study showed that students used technologies as part of their experience of finding their identity as a student. E-communication technologies have added a further dimension to the ways in which social constructivism works, creating what Salmons terms *e-social constructivist learning theory* (Salmons 2009).

An alternative and equally accessible form of electronic communication favoured within education is e-mail, though there exists little research on how it may provide positive benefits to learning and social collaboration. Boris-Schacter and Vonasek describe the invaluable role e-mail played in their mentoring relationship where Vonasek mentored Boris-Schacter in her new role as school principal (Boris-Schacter and Vonasek 2009). They found that use of e-mail supplemented their face-to-face communication by allowing them not only to share factual information, but also to express mutual consideration for each other and provide both academic and affective encouragement. These results are mirrored in what my own study has found, where students used e-mail to motivate each other to keep studying.

Research in this area seems to focus on the needs of distance learners, though again there is a paucity of study within the field of e-communication and motivation. One report into the use of e-mail by Huett and colleagues suggests that it is a useful tool to address issues around enthusiasm and commitment faced by distance learners (Huett *et al.* 2008). Their research differs significantly from this work in that they used mass-mailed motivational e-mails. They were not responding to individual need, rather they sent e-mails

regularly seemingly without consideration of whether the motivation was required. However, they did conclude that e-mail addressed some perceived needs for some students.

Another examination of e-mail use in education reflects a different angle, a consideration of *what* e-mail is accessed. In the delightfully titled 'E-Mail is for Old People' Carnevale offers a commentary on the student use of e-mail accounts provided by their college, and reports that they do not check their school e-mails regularly (Carnevale 2006). Carnevale found that students were reluctant to control multiple e-mail accounts, preferring to use existing accounts or texts and instant messaging, and found too many e-mails from college meant that important messages were lost in the mass communication. Interestingly, and in reference to his title, students did feel that e-mail was an appropriate way to contact professors because it would be improper to speak to them via Facebook. This study highlights a remarkable perceived inter-generational difference in the application of e-communication tools.

Finally, research from a variety of disciplines into the communities of help that can be provided through the medium of text messaging, for example support in smoking cessation (Free *et al.* 2011) and expansion of language (Cavus and Ibrahim 2009), indicates an increase in academic interest in the use of text messaging. From the perspective of education, there is some work on the use of text messaging in relation to administration of courses, for example Richardson and Lenarcic's research on the use of text messaging to remind students that work is due or to provide assessment feedback (Richardson and Lenarcic 2008), which indicates the need for further study. Research by Young and colleagues (Young *et al.* 2010) suggests that text messaging provides an effective additional method to support health care students when they are working away from their university in their clinical placements. Their results are neatly summed up in part of the title of their work 'Help is just a text away'.

These two later studies both highlight the extent to which modern mobile communication devices are a normal part of everyday life for students. This compares significantly to the situation 25 years ago when early generation mobile telephones were unwieldy and expensive and were not in common usage. This availability of mobile technology extends the opportunities they afford institutions to reach out to students both for information and support. There is a suggestion arising from a recent Ofcom survey that text messages are superseding telephone and face-to-face communication as primary methods of adults having informal daily contact with family and friends (Ofcom Communications Market Report 2012). If text messaging is becoming such a common method of communication, further research will inevitably explore the potential this can offer to support learning.

3.8 Chapter summary

Using Johns' model to 'look out', the intention of this chapter was to evaluate the existing theory behind the fundamental concepts explored in this study. Examining existing literature helps locate this study within an epistemological framework. This chapter has examined studies that create the relationship between social collaborative learning theory and motivation theory. It has also explored the significance of belonging and group cohesion and the role of communication technologies in engaging with students. Vygotsky was formulating his ideas of the collaborative and fundamentally social nature of learning during a time of significant and powerful collective and cultural change (*i.e.* in post-revolutionary Russia). He argued that a child's development was essentially rooted in their social, cultural and historical background. Consideration of his theory of learning and development in the early 21st century must account for the current social landscape of fast-paced technological change, the immediacy of e-communication and the rapid and widespread ability to share information through social networking and instant messaging. This chapter has therefore attempted to include educational and social practices within this changing landscape.

Using Johns' model of structured reflection as a reference for my own thoughts about what has been discussed in this chapter highlights the complexity of the concepts covered here. When one is immersed in a learning environment as a lecturer, learning and motivation are part of every-day life. Reflecting on the learning histories of the respondents in this study, and examining the extensive literature that theorises learning, adds richness to my understanding of what students undergo in order to succeed.

The next section describes how this study has been carried out, with an analysis and critical justification of the mixed methods used to gather information on the learning experiences of the trainee educational professionals who took part in this research.

Chapter 4: Method and methodology

Researchers should never lose sight of the obligations they owe to those who are helping (Cohen et al. 2008 p59)

This chapter describes the methodology and methods used in this investigation. Firstly, the aim of the study is reiterated to give context to this section. The chapter goes on to explore the philosophical focus of the study, considering my stance as an educational practitioner and the way this has informed my choice of method as a practising researcher. Details of the respondents and their courses are provided, with brief descriptions of what students were studying while they were taking part in this research. The qualitative and quantitative research methods are then examined, and a justification is provided for the mixed methods used in this study to investigate the respondent's motivation during their transformative learning experiences. Ethical considerations are also examined in this chapter in relation to confidentiality, identity, and power relationships between researcher and respondent.

This study has resulted in my conceptualisation of the model of proximal ethnography (Price 2012). The model outlines the specific circumstances of working and learning alongside a group of respondents to gain a shared understanding, then stepping outside of that group to theorise, reflect and evaluate, finally stepping back in to co-create theory and new knowledge. The significant original aspect of this new model is its focus on the importance of the shared identity of researcher and respondent. In a proximal ethnographic study the researcher has the same identity as those who are being studied. The shared experiences resulting from our collaboration create a cyclical method of research and this new term, expanding upon traditional forms of ethnography, is explored in greater detail later in the chapter. First the overall aim and objectives are re-stated to highlight the rationale for the study.

4.1 Research aim

The overall research aim was to identify the key aspects of an effective learning environment for HE students studying in a FE college with a view to finding ways to help students stay motivated and remain on their course. From this were developed three further objectives,

1. To evaluate the personal motivational drivers of successful mature students who are training to be educational professionals.
2. To investigate the coping and motivating strategies used by adult students to gain benefit from learning and complete their studies.
3. To evaluate the role of social media in the extension of social collaborative learning and motivation.

Studying at HE level is hard work and each individual will find their own method of managing the demands and learning the new skills required at this level. It is evident from this study that the other important experiences which occur alongside learning, including forming friendships, facing intellectual challenges and making notable self-discoveries, are in themselves motivating and may be to some students almost as worthwhile as the qualification itself.

My predisposition towards the lived and living experience of learning, and against numerical measurements of retention and success, is acknowledged because it influences this assertion and choice of research method, but it is also apparent that other researchers are sympathetic to this belief (Martin 2005, Jarvis 2009). The next section identifies the person-centred philosophy that underpins this research.

4.2 Philosophical position

Chapter 1 outlined my interest in the human story, the narrative biography of students and the lived and living experience of learning, growing and transforming. Chapter 3, the literature review, contains an analysis of the theory behind this constructivist, humanist stance. Chapter 1 also includes an

outline of the ontological position in this study, which is the idea that individuals interpret and construct their knowledge based on their prior experiences. Social constructivist theory also holds that much of this meaning making frequently takes place in a social and collaborative context. It is my observation that many individuals are driven towards a personal goal, motivated to push themselves forward in some way to realise their potential, though this is offset by further observations that on occasion some students find that it is sensible 'just to pass', or simply to be 'good enough'.

As a former lecturer and personal tutor to mature HE students in a FE college, part of my role was to encourage them to learn and one of the ways to support that learning was through engaging with them as individuals. I was interested in them, their lives, their experiences, how they connected with their studies, how they coped with the pressures of study and ultimately how they grew and were transformed by their learning. Above all, I was interested in each one of them as a person.

Their learning narrative stories and histories reflect what Richmond argues is a 'process of self-discovery' (Richmond 2002 p7), which also echoes my own development. Indeed Mehra uses the same phrase 'self-discovery' to describe qualitative research itself (Mehra 2002 p1). My own experience, supported by on-going dialogue with my supervisory team, has involved significant transformation and the development of my self-awareness. Edwards asserts that those engaged in educational research find that i) 'it isn't an easy ride' (Edwards 2002 p158) and ii) that researchers are driven by their own identities and beliefs to investigate in the way that they do. Finding out where my own values fit into a bigger philosophical picture was just one of the elements of this exploration of self-discovery that was not 'an easy ride' (*ibid.*), but holding true to those beliefs did as Bracken suggests help me to maintain connection and focus with this study (Bracken 2010).

My identity as a practicing teacher with this student-centred ethos extended to my style as a researcher because, as Lawson argues, it is important to position the researcher within the work (Lawson 2008). The primary focus of this research has been on the human story, on the vivid narrative accounts of the respondents. This research constructs their learning histories from dialogic aspects of narrative (Riessman 2008), 'stories' of personal living experiences, self-exploration and transformation. As a lecturer, I was motivated to enthuse my students in their learning; as a researcher I am immersed in an examination of the practice of teaching and learning. This student-centred approach has also informed my choice to use semi-structured, in-depth interviews as one research method in order to allow this heuristic undertaking as a novice researcher to be congruent with my own values. I was interested in capturing a sense of the experiences of these mature students so the data are contextually full of meaning, multi-layered and rich.

It has been made clear from the start of this thesis that my own learning experience has been shared with my respondents' personal histories and this process has enhanced my role as a teacher and researcher. We each of us are experiencing Hammarskjold's 'journey inwards' (Hammarskjold 1964). This led me to question whether I am an ethnographer. I *am* one of those people in whom I have such interest, namely an adult learner fitting part-time study into full-time work, and I am also immersed in the culture of the respondents' learning environment. This was not a topic that was explicitly explored with the respondents, but I let them see me as a research student and a learner. On occasions, during interviews, we contemplated the particular intricacies of being a mature student, which is why this study is described as inside-out-inside research (Kadi-Hanifi 2011) since both respondent and researcher step in and out of each other's worlds. Questions of ethnography are examined later in this chapter, expanding on the principles of traditional ethnography and offering a new contemporary concept termed *proximal ethnography* to describe the method developed in this study. Before

exploring how the research aims were investigated, the next section explains the choice of case study as a research method.

4.3 Case study design

This research aimed to explore the holistic complex events and interrelationships forming the learning stories of the mature student respondents, in line with the underpinning person-centred philosophy of the study. Baxter and Jack argue that a case study is more than a way to study individuals or specific occurrences, rather it is a complex method that provides the prospect of contextualising events (Baxter and Jack 2008). Andrade argues that two types of case study exist, *interpretive* case study and case study for *theory building* (Andrade 2009). The first involves an illuminating interpretive explanation of the relationship between actors and events, and the second type is characterised by a positivistic search for units of meaning. This thesis presents an interpretive account, a vivid descriptive contextualised narrative of the learning lives experienced by the respondents.

There are potential disadvantages inherent within the case study interpretive design; the possibility of observer bias and individual subjectivity. Case studies also face the challenging risk that what has been found is unique to that case, and cannot be generalised to a wider population. However, the opportunity to capture the dynamic nature of learning and discover the deep, vivid accounts of learners was deemed to outweigh the shortcomings. Responses to each of these criticisms are made throughout this chapter and later in this work.

In order to examine the research aims outlined above, four types of data gathering tools were used:

- Semi-structured individual interview,
- Blog,
- On-line questionnaire, and
- Semi-structured group interview.

Group interviews with learners at the end of the second year were later added to the study in order to broaden the study sample and to gain further data. Those who took part in the group interviews were studying in the same college as the individual interview cohort. The two group interviews were crucial in terms of providing a more holistic picture of the overall learning experience and they added significant additional data in support of what was already found.

Constructivist philosophy, upon which this research is based, requires a qualitative interpretive approach to data collection to examine the rich experience of learning, so the main focus of data gathering in this study was the personal interview. Individual interviews took place episodically over the two-year duration of the Diploma and Foundation Degree courses. Group interviews with other cohorts of students were held near to the end of their two-year study period in order to determine their interpretations of the learning experience and how these may have developed over time. Reflection on the narrative of the student respondents enables the construction of an understanding of their lived experiences. This reflection enables the reader to be enriched by their stories and their successes. However, there are limitations in forming an ontological study based solely on the analysis of one source of qualitative information, (in this case the interview). In order to increase the potential to gain detailed further information about the learning experience, a blog was introduced as an alternative qualitative data-gathering instrument. The blog was offered to those students who took part in individual interviews; a full rationale for its use in this study is presented later in this chapter.

Additionally, in order to extend the boundaries of this study to include students from other FE colleges, an on-line questionnaire was devised to augment qualitative interview data with quantitative information. There is a growing interest in using a 'mixed method' paradigm in educational and social research; *i.e.* combining qualitative and quantitative data to tell a story

(Gorard and Taylor 2004). The addition of a survey was intended to see if the quantitative data supported the narrative stories of others. It was also intended to broaden the scope of the research to mitigate the potential criticism that all data had been gathered from one college source.

The decision to introduce the additional method of group interview was based on earlier assumptions about the sufficiency of data that had been gathered. Group interviews were held with Diploma and Foundation Degree students towards the mid point of their second year in January and March 2012 respectively. The students and their tutor influenced the timing of interviews in order that participation would have minimal impact on their studies. It could be argued that students of education are more attuned to the topic of motivation than other learners as the subject forms an integral part of their curriculum. This bias could result in data that could not be generalised to students outside the discipline of education. In order to test this hypothesis a pilot group interview was held with students from the one-year Level 5 Diploma in Human Resource Management. The interview was held in July 2011 at the end of the course.

Before these methods are evaluated in detail, this work will now describe the respondents who took part in this study and explain the sampling processes involved in their selection.

4.4 Student respondents

This case study took place over four academic years and gathered evidence from a number of HE student respondents using one or more of the methods identified above. In other words, some Diploma and Foundation Degree students were individually interviewed and used a blog, another cohort took part in group interviews and students from other institutions completed the on-line questionnaire. Findings from interviews are presented in Chapter 5 and survey data is found in Chapter 6.

Students on the Diploma and the Foundation Degree who took part in individual interviews started their courses in September 2008 and completed their studies in June 2010. Students were enrolled at both the local university and at the partner FE college, and all of their lessons took place in the college. In order to gain knowledge of their patterns of motivation over time, it was necessary to follow these students for the full two years of their course. Details of the respondents were given in Table 1 in Chapter 1 identifying their age, gender, background and which course they were studying. A short profile of each of these learners is also provided in Appendix 7 to provide some background information on them as individuals.

The Foundation Degree cohort consisted of 17 female first year students, 14 of whom agreed to take part in the study when initially approached. Of those 14, two withdrew from the study prior to the first interview stating they had taken on too much on top of their own studies. Ten students withdrew after the first interview, leaving four who stayed with the research until the end of their studies.

The Diploma cohort was a larger class of 22 first years with six male students in the cohort. 11 of the original group agreed to be part of the study. Six opted to pull out before taking part in any interview, and one did not return after the first interview, leaving again a total of four who were happy to continue to take part. The high attrition rate was disconcerting to me as a novice researcher, and I speculated whether Diploma students were more aware of the extent of work associated with their course than were the Foundation Degree students. Evidence emerged to uphold this hypothesis in the form of written statements from Diploma students who declined to take part based on insufficient time. In addition, Foundation Degree students who withdrew after the initial interview stated that their course contained more work than they had originally expected so they were unable to continue. Both courses require a significant amount of self-directed study and assessment as well as attendance at college once a week and are very demanding on a student's time. Further

examination of issues surrounding interviewee retention is made in Chapter 8 and the paragraph below.

Students had been asked to take part in this study during the very early stages of the course, perhaps before they had begun to study in earnest. A conversation with a HE student whom I taught in her first semester, and who was completely independent of this study, revealed an interesting perspective on student preparedness. She stated that despite early guidance from tutors regarding the extent of the academic work required at this level, it is not until the student is immersed in this work that its true magnitude is appreciated. Reflecting on her comment, it could be argued that the request for students to join this study was agreed to before the extent of their own workload became apparent. This may be evidenced by the high dropout rate from the study. These reflections influenced my decision about the optimum time to hold group interviews.

I initially considered holding group interviews at two stages during the academic year, but having successfully piloted an interview with a group at the end of the course, I opted for single group interviews. The intention was to discover information about the way students had been motivated over the duration of the course. Asking students near the mid point of their second year enabled them to provide a retrospective account of virtually their *whole* learning experience. I decided not to undertake a group interview with first year students simply because their learning was ongoing. I felt that data from part way through a course would be de-contextualised; it would feel somehow unfinished and I questioned what it might add to the overall research. Eight from a cohort of 12 second year Diploma students took part in a group interview on 27th January 2012; 10 from a group of 16 second year Foundation Degree students participated in their interview on 6th March 2012.

A further strand of data gathering came from respondents on the same courses in other FE colleges within the Midlands region of the UK. 66

students responded to an e-mail request to complete an on-line questionnaire examining motivation and coping strategies. A copy of this survey can be seen in Appendix 4. Five of those who responded to the survey were not taking the Diploma or Foundation Degree, or other similar teacher training qualifications so their answers were considered as outliers and were not included for the purposes of analysis. Two questionnaires were returned with no responses, so they could not be analysed. The total number of respondents in this part of the research is therefore 59. The eight respondents who participated in interviews were not asked to complete this questionnaire, neither were those who were involved in the group interviews.

4.4.1 Sampling technique

An opportunistic purposive sampling technique was used to recruit students into both the individual and group interview cohorts. The Diploma and Foundation degree courses are both taught in the FE college where I was a full-time lecturer, so I was afforded the opportunity to contact local students studying HE in FE. Onwuegbuzie and Collins argue that research involving both qualitative and quantitative factors requires separate sampling designs, thereby increasing the complexity of the selection process (Onwuegbuzie and Collins 2007). In contrast to their view, the sampling technique used in this study did not seem to be complex. There was no apparent difficulty with this strategy to choose participants; I simply approached individuals within the discipline of education in the college where I worked because that was my field of experience and interest and they were local. Similarly, this approach simplified my choice of FE colleges to offer the on-line questionnaire, in other words using a regional network of contacts and asking them to take part.

Having discussed the overall aim of the research, explored its methodology and examined those who took part, the next section of this chapter will examine and defend the research methods used in the study, starting with the question raised earlier, "Am I an ethnographer?".

4.5 Questions of ethnography

Chapter 1 raised the issue of ethnography, questioning if this study fits within the traditional ethnographic paradigm. This section now expands upon this and proposes the concept of the model of proximal ethnography for the way the ethnographical paradigm has been interpreted. Hammersley and Atkinson have written extensively on the complex and fluid nature of the word ethnography, and argue that it has developed into a term referring to:

an integration of both first-hand empirical investigation and the theoretical and comparative interpretation of social organisation and culture (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007 p1).

In order to forge this study as a piece of ethnographic research it is necessary to revert to the original Greek translation of '*ethnos*' meaning folk or people and '*grapho*' translated as writing. In this study I was immersed in the students' culture and setting and I have written about them as people. Hammersley and Atkinson also declare that ethnography has 'fuzzy semantic boundaries' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007 p1) with other methods of qualitative research, an assertion that allows for some contemporary interpretation.

Traditional ethnography creates an insight into the context of behaviour by observing distinctive situations from the point of view of the participants. The researcher produces a vivid, living representation of the situation being researched by being simultaneously both participant and observer of a particular group (Cohen *et al.* 2008). Observation of the group could be *overt*, in other words open or known to the participants, or *covert* where the identity of the researcher is hidden from the group being studied. Either method raises complex ethical questions surrounding identity disclosure, consent regarding participation and the ability to withdraw, and also issues of trust (*ibid.*). With regard to this characterisation of ethnography I am not a conventional ethnographer. I was not a trainee educational professional undertaking teacher training, nor has this study resulted from my being a participant observer in a cohort of students. However, I was immersed in the same

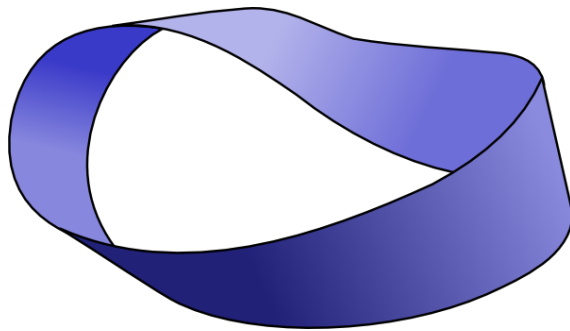
learning environment as the individuals who took part in the individual and group interviews since I worked in the same FE college where they studied. So, I was outside of their cohort but inside their college.

My position as a research student meant that I was also an adult learner, I was discovering how to become an independent researcher, and also learning how to fit HE level study into a busy life of full-time work, family and social commitments. I shared many of the learning experiences of my respondents, and some of their struggles to stay motivated although my learning was at a different level and over a longer time scale. My interest in this study concerns the human story, the individual biographies of the lived and living learning experience. This philosophical outlook is important because it recognises and acknowledges my own bias towards 'story' and 'history' rather than counting achievement through numerical rates of retention and success, a system perceived as having certain limitations. When we took part in conversations during both individual and group interviews I was a research student first, and still a learner; our identities were compatible, we were adult learners talking collectively about learning. Sometimes we reflected on the demanding particulars of life as a mature student, expressing mutual thoughts about studying. As interviews progressed it became clear we shared common ground both in our identities as mature students and in some features of our learning experience.

The origins of the model of proximal ethnography were founded in an early recognition that I shared a number of characteristics with the respondents in the study. We reflected on how to cope with studying and on occasions shared understandings about how that balance was a struggle. I reflected how, like the respondents', my own motivation sometimes waned but that an overall disinclination to fail kept me going, as did the support and encouragement of my supervisory team and my family. I referred in Chapter 1 to being described by my supervisor as 'inside-out-inside' (Kadi-Hanifi 2011) and this is an intriguing portrayal of my position in the research, comparable

to the vibrant Möbius Strip in its symbolisation of movement and space - see Figure 3:

Figure 3: The Möbius Strip



The Möbius Strip is most simply formed by joining a strip of paper by its ends following one half twist in the paper to form a loop; it results in a figure with one side and one edge (Pickover 2005). This elegant form represents fluid movement and is suggestive of the active reflexive processes involved in this research. Its influence on my development of the symbolisation of proximal ethnography presented below in Figure 4 is clear.

I am an observer of adult students, watching them face the challenges of managing the balance of work, life and study while staying motivated to succeed. At the same time I too am an adult learner creating my own strategies to amalgamate doctoral level research into full-time work and other life commitments, and was doing this in the same learning environment as many of the respondents. I *am* what I have studied but I am *outside* of the groups who have taken part in this research, so my ethnography has been parallel to the experiences of the students.

I shared the position of being an adult student with the respondents and we revealed mutual themes about our learning experiences. In undertaking my own iterative and emancipatory reflective learning experience through this

study, I discovered that the nature of research and the resulting epistemology are not detached from the researcher. I shared an *identity* with the respondents, and their lived and living learning experiences shaped the way I thought about learning and motivation. Their stories redirected my thinking and reading and allowed me to examine closely the social collaborative theoretical framework and the methodological foundation upon which this study is built. The emphasis here is on sharing *an* identity with the respondents; in theorising notions of identity, much is written on the fluid context-dependent nature of 'identity' and acknowledgement of multiple identities that exist in a social context (for example Bourdieu 1992).

The deeply personal nature of learning and of research is what I wish to emphasise in this study. My interest in the human story has allowed me to focus on evocative individual learning biographies. Whilst I do acknowledge that the personal experiences of the participants in this study may not be generalisable to all students studying HE in FE, I do consider that the study has developed the ethnographic paradigm, (*i.e.* to recognise and incorporate shared identities), resulting in a new model of ethnography that can be replicated in other disciplines.

I have spent some time considering the subtleties surrounding this belief and wish to suggest a new model for the precise nature of this methodology. I considered a number of terms for this method of research, evaluating and then abandoning the terms 'homological', 'associative' and 'correlational', equally rejecting 'parallel' above because it denoted no meeting of experience between us. Finally, and with perhaps more than a nod towards Vygotsky's work, I have proposed the concept of 'proximal ethnography'. This is defined specifically as that situation in which the researcher shares the same identity and experiences as the observed but does so outside the domain of the observed. This model symbolises the shared identities that are argued to be a key element of collaborative meaning making in educational research (Edwards *et al.* 2002).

During interviews respondents and I shared certain characteristics, in other words we were both students and they shared their own examples of the difficulties associated with managing work, life and study. For example, Zoe joked with me in her first and third interviews about how much I would have to transcribe, and how difficult I would find it to make time to write up her 'waffle'. Peter and Helen voiced their thoughts about similarities in our experiences as we three of us taught in the same college. During the conversation of interview I was 'inside' the research, close to the experiences of the individual respondents and immersed in their learning stories. When I stepped 'outside' of the interview I reflected on the content and what their revelations told me about the intricacies and complexities of the learning experience. I was then able to utilise that knowledge in subsequent interviews. This new knowledge also directed my reading to allow interpretation and further exploration of the literature. Both researcher and respondent constructed an understanding and knowledge about these living learning experiences.

One particular example of mutual understanding and co-creation of knowledge came from Sarah, a qualified nurse who equated *pain* and the perception of pain with her consciousness of workload. This story is detailed later in a section of Chapter 5 titled 'Group Cohesion and Transferable Attributes - Metaphors of learning'. It is cited here because it is a clear example of a subjective co-conception of understanding; this being the very essence of proximal ethnography.

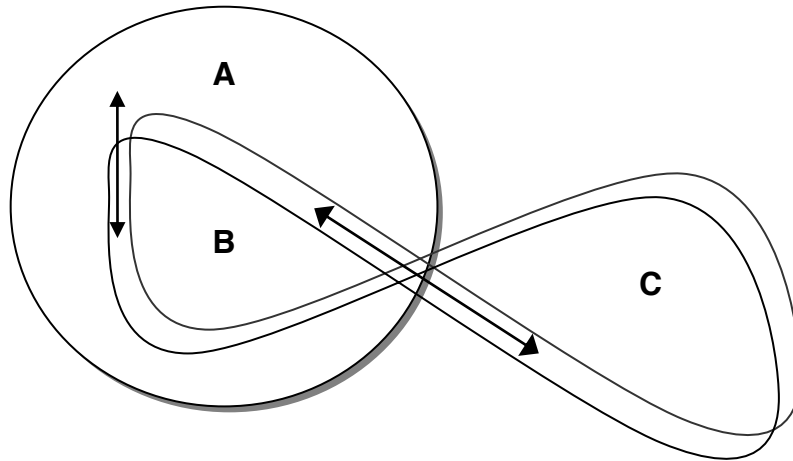
Sarah used the metaphor of pain perception to describe her consciousness of the workload associated with the Diploma course. When she was alert, focused and motivated the course was an integral part of her life and she enjoyed her learning. To follow her pain metaphor, the pain existed but it was manageable and did not interfere with her quality of life. However, when tired or running out of energy she became much more conscious of the weight of assessment and level of commitment required, just like becoming overwhelmed with pain. Her insight was framed in a way that made sense to

both of us as trained nurses, and that resonated with her existing professional role. She shared her experiences of learning using language she knew I would understand, allowing us to consciously collaborate on the creation of a shared knowledge. Sarah used a metaphor to develop a foundation for common understanding using her own professional identity and linking it to mine.

In acknowledging shared identity, proximal ethnography describes very specifically that situation in which the researcher shares the same experiences and identity as the observed but does so outside the domain of the observed. In other words, the researcher *is* what has been studied and shares many of those experiences they have observed in others. This is why the term proximal ethnography best describes this method of ethnographic research. 'Proximal' symbolises the close association and connectedness of our relationship and identities, exemplified in the personal stories and self-reflections respondents shared in this research. Our mutual characteristics were those of adult learner, studying at HE level, specialising in education and learning how to manage the balance of work, life and study while remaining motivated. My individual identity also included the role of researcher. The method of undertaking this study has developed Hammersley and Atkinson's interpretation of the ethnographic paradigm as a direct examination and interpretation of an experience and its customs and mores (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) by highlighting the significance of the shared identity of the researcher.

In an attempt to schematise this situation into a model that might be replicated in other disciplines, I wanted to grasp the dynamic and flowing feel of the dialogue between respondents and researcher. There was a sense of an iterative process involved in developing this epistemology, symbolised by the flowing, active lines in the model moving in and out of the circle. Figure 4 (overleaf) is the resultant diagram of the model of proximal ethnography.

Figure 4: The model of proximal ethnography



Key:

| | |
|----------|---|
| A | The primary research group |
| B | The researcher sharing characteristics of the research group – <i>being</i> what is studied |
| C | The researcher as researcher |

The model represents the dual identity of the researcher and the fluid, cyclical and reflexive nature of inside-out-inside research (Kadi-Hanifi 2011) resulting in a co-construction of new knowledge by researcher and respondent. Co-construction of knowledge is the result of collaborative discourse between the researcher and the respondent; each creates an understanding of, and an insight into, their experience. Research respondents are experts of their own experiences; the role of the researcher in collaborative research is to make sense of this expertise and co-construct new knowledge by sharing understanding.

In the model above, 'A' represents the group taking part in the research, in this case the Diploma and Foundation Degree students. 'B' symbolises the position of the researcher in the midst of the respondents sharing characteristics of the research group, specifically here the identity 'student'. At

this point the researcher is 'inside' the research. 'C' corresponds to the position of the researcher as researcher whilst stepping outside the realm of the primary research group in order to reflect and theorise.

The double-ended arrows symbolise the dialogue between parties in the form of interviews and the exchange of ideas through reflection. In other words, interview respondents shared in reflective discourse with the researcher during interviews after which the researcher undertook active self-reflection outside the interview setting. The model embodies the explicit situation of interviewing, learning and sharing an exchange with respondents to gain a common insight into a shared experience, stepping outside of that group to theorise, reflect and evaluate, then stepping back in for further exchange of experiences and views to co-create theory and expand the boundaries of knowledge.

Hammersley and Atkinson's suggestion that the definition of traditional ethnography has unclear borders between it and other methods of enquiry (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) encouraged me to contribute to a post-modern interpretation of the paradigm. The model of proximal ethnography is therefore offered as a contemporary development of the conventional method of ethnography.

New knowledge and understanding co-created by both parties taking part in the research conversation can spring from any part of this model. Respondents talked of what they learned on their course and also the value of having taken part in the research; of gaining greater self-awareness and a broader perspective from which to reflect on their learning. They explored how they had achieved a sense of self-actualisation and realised that they gained new insights about themselves as well as knowledge about the subject. For example, Helen's final comment 'I understand myself now, I never understood myself before'. When asked about the benefits of taking part on the research, Tina and Zoe said that they had taken the opportunity to step back from their

studies while taking part in the interviews, to focus and reflect on what they had learned. Thus the iterative process of knowledge creation had clearly taken place outside of the interview setting for them also. Equally, the researcher made specific observations during the interviews and formed further ideas while reflecting outside that setting.

The model of proximal ethnography acknowledges the personal nature of research (Edwards 2002, Andrade 2009, Bracken 2010) and the connectedness of the researcher to the research group. A contemporary example of this type of ethnographic study is a piece of research in progress entitled 'Black@HE' (Kadi-Hanifi 2013) and I obtained her permission to quote the ongoing work in this thesis.

Kadi-Hanifi's research portfolio has included work on race and equality. She teaches in the areas of TESOL and ELT ('Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages' and 'English Language Teaching') and co-ordinates teacher training programmes for FE lecturers. Her interest in the learning experiences of HE students and staff includes issues around employability and inclusion. Her Black@HE study examines the meaning of academic success for three black HE lecturers at different points in their careers, exploring their lived experiences and shared accounts of racism through interview. Kadi-Hanifi describes herself as a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)¹ academic, though she states that this term does not fully capture the voice of the narratives in her research, including her own.

In relation to the model of proximal ethnography, her primary research group (position A) consists of the three black academics taking part in the research. During the interviews Kadi-Hanifi is positioned at B in the model – she shares the characteristics of the research group by also being a Black and Minority Ethnic academic; she *is* what she is studying and is embodied in her

¹ The acronym BME has since been updated to BAME: Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

research. On stepping out of the interview to reflect upon her data and what she has found, she is positioned at C in the model. Her identity returns to 'researcher' while she analyses her findings, develops her theories and considers the impact of the research on practice. The knowledge created from her study emanates from all areas of the model, from personal reflection both inside and outside the research context. Kadi-Hanifi, in her own words, is 'inside-out-inside' this work. There are potential criticisms of this model based on the extent to which the researcher is close to the participant group and also the potential for researcher bias inherent in the reflections resulting from that relationship. These factors are analysed in Chapter 7.

Having examined the philosophy of this study and the development of its ethnography, the next sections describe the methods used to gather data for this research. This section starts with an examination of the individual interviews, providing dates and information on content.

4.6 Data gathering: individual interviews

Firstly, individual, semi-structured interviews with respondents were digitally recorded at intervals over their two-year course. Table 3 below presents the interview dates for these eight respondents. Interviews lasted between twelve minutes (the first interview with a very nervous Francis) and an hour and a half. As we got to know one another, interviews lasted longer, illustrating how respondents warmed to the process and perhaps how I developed my interviewing skills.

Table 3: Individual Diploma and Foundation Degree interview timetable

| Student | First year | | Second year | |
|---------|---------------|-------------|----------------|----------------|
| Helen | December 2008 | May 2009 | December 2009 | July 2010 |
| Peter | December 2008 | August 2009 | Did not attend | June 2010 |
| Ruth | March 2009 | May 2009 | April 2010 | Did not attend |
| Sarah | January 2009 | June 2009 | January 2010 | Did not attend |
| Beth | October 2008 | April 2009 | Left the study | |
| Francis | October 2008 | June 2009 | February 2010 | July 2010 |
| Tina | October 2008 | March 2009 | January 2010 | July 2010 |
| Zoe | October 2008 | May 2009 | March 2010 | June 2010 |

Peter was not interviewed at the beginning of his second year, at his request, because he had started a new job and needed time to settle into the role. Both Sarah and Ruth wished to take part in a final interview to conclude their involvement in the research but completion of course work, new job responsibilities and a variety of other obligations made this impossible so some final information was gained via e-mail correspondence. Beth asked to end her participation after the first year, citing excessive work commitments.

The first interviews examined the 'rich, meaningful realities' of the life stories of the respondents (Schweinle *et al.* 2009 p778) with questions concerning:

- Respondent's educational background and family circumstances
- Reasons for doing the course and choosing the college
- What motivations were used to keep studying
- Methods of balancing competing commitments of work, life and study.

The initial interview questions were designed to contextualise the learner's experience, inspired by a style adopted by Watt (2007) in her exploration of home schooling. Watt employed a three-stage process to interviewing starting by establishing the context and background, going on to explore current experiences and finishing by reflecting on the meaning of the experiences. Data from the first part of this three-stage approach in my own study provided a framework for the learning experience for respondents in this study, and a holistic picture of the history of the learners. It was also possible to interpret something of each respondents' character through exploring their early experiences. The subsequent interviews used questions devised from previous interview conversations to gain a nuanced understanding of the student learning experience under the main themes of:

- Have motivations remained the same since the start of the course?
- What methods have been used to keep motivated?

- Do some motivations take precedence over others?
- Progress on the course.
- The role of e-communication and group support.

These themes made it possible for me to concentrate on specific details and current feelings. Later interview questions continued to focus on the individual story, containing references to comments made in previous interviews. The organically emerging stories allowed me to examine motivation over time. Questions also enabled me to establish if respondents had ever struggled and felt like giving up and whether fellow students had been instrumental in their not leaving the course. Interviews in the second year permitted respondents to reflect on their development and the ways in which they had managed their lives during the course. The final interviews included questions that asked whether respondents had changed as a result of their learning experience. Each interview created a basis of knowledge and set the context of the next session, for example reflecting back to earlier feelings or experiences. Some interview questions were formed *in situ* maintaining the naturalistic, conversational and emergent approach to the study. Copies of the interview guideline questions can be found in Appendix 3.

The timing of interviews was respondent-focused, particularly in relation to their submission deadlines and minimising any imposition on their life and workload. Therefore I decided against the addition of further mid-year meetings with each respondent. Individual interviews were frequently held on the same day the students were attending lectures, thereby reducing the impact of participation on their time particularly for those who travelled some distance to get to college and those with childcare commitments. I agree with Pring's reflection on the ethical and moral judgements included in research, where he argues that principled research should focus on the respondent as central and respect their individuality (Pring 2001). I would also argue that this helps build trust and rapport with individuals.

In order to encourage participation, interviews were arranged flexibly to fit the requirements of the individuals. Interviews were semi-structured to allow a conversational and relaxed discourse (Watt 2007), to permit the unfolding of 'stories lived and told' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000 p20) and also to reflect the responses from previous interviews to maintain an individual feel to each interview. Weir talks about the opportunity within a semi-structured interview to let respondents decide the amount of detail they wish to give, thereby defining:

their own reality in respect of their life experiences, and not [framing] those within the expectations of the researcher (Weir 2008 p4).

The planned conversation of an interview, whether completely structured or totally spontaneous, will be filled with illuminating *intersubjective* details full of meaning (Kvale 1996) and it is these meanings that structure our knowledge:

The personal contact and the continually new insights into the subjects' lived world make interviewing an exciting and enriching experience (Kvale 1996 p124).

Here again the inclusive nature of research is fundamental to the idea of proximal ethnography and collaborative meaning making within educational research, and there are many examples of interpretive inclusive research in education (see Richmond 2002, Baxter and Jack 2008 and Andrade 2009 as illustrations). Studies examine the involvement of both researcher and respondent in the co-creation of the lived story, of each actor being both novice and expert and the impact of the method used by each to create a 'tentative and reflexive form of knowledge' (Edwards 2002 p131).

The semi-structured interview with guide questions had topics outlined in advance of the interview to allow subjects to be covered in a way that maintained the conversational feel. The flexibility afforded by a semi-structured style also allowed other avenues of thought or experience to be explored. The interview itself is a complex interaction. It requires that trust be established very quickly if honest and meaningful responses are to be given.

In order to encourage this relationship, I as researcher needed to be especially conscious of my verbal and non-verbal communication skills and the influence of active listening. Active listening is more than paying attention without preconception; it involves interpretation of meaning from all available cues. I have extensive experience of interviewing in a variety of education and health care contexts and believe I have good listening skills alongside an ability to make people feel at ease, skills that I used to encourage respondents to talk openly with me.

The interview is a tool for what Gorard and Taylor term the 'direct approach' (Gorard and Taylor 2004 p2) to investigation. In other words, questions are asked directly in order to gain information, in contrast to their description of an 'indirect' approach which involves modelling and inference based on hypothesis (*ibid.*). This characteristic of interviews compares with the suggestion from Cohen and colleagues that an interview is a:

principal means of gathering information having direct bearing on the research objectives (Cohen *et al.* 2008 p351).

There are different types of interview ranging from entirely unstructured conversations to closed, quantitative interviews, each style having respective strengths and weaknesses and each being an appropriate method of gathering data depending on the individual research objectives. This research has included what Mehra calls 'a process of *self*-discovery' (Mehra 2002 p1, my emphasis) alongside an exploration of the learning experiences of the respondents; therefore a semi-structured style of interview was justified since it provides an opportunity to examine personal stories.

The opportunity to recount experiences during the context of an interview does not just provide the interviewer with answers to questions posed. It might also allow the respondents to reflect on their experiences and learn from the process of being a respondent in the study. It is argued that a carefully designed research interview may provide mutual benefits; the researcher gaining evidence and the respondent achieving personal understanding

through reflection on their experiences (Oliver 2004). It is further argued that knowledge can be constructed and reconstructed by both interviewer and respondent in the conversation of interview (Pring 2001) and so learning is not only experienced in the classroom, it also occurs in the context of the interview. By way of example, at one point in her second interview Sarah made a comment that suggested that she learned about her experience by reflecting on it during the interview itself. This example is explored in detail in Chapter 5. However, by way of qualifying the claims made above by Oliver and Pring, I would argue their suggestions about the mutual benefits of taking part in interview are influenced by three specific factors: i) the design of the interview questions, ii) the approach of the interviewer and iii) the levels of honesty and self-awareness of the interviewee.

Sarah's analogy about consciousness of workload makes me mindful of the question of subjectivity in research, as addressed by Drapeau (Drapeau 2002). This association between awareness of pain and consciousness of workload makes sense to both Sarah and myself because we are both nurses. I had revealed this part of my personal background to her in our first interview, when I acknowledged that I understood her professional role as Clinical Nurse Specialist as she was explaining it to me. We had made a connection in our interviews together and she provided a subjective example which she knew would resonate with my own knowledge and one that she knew I would understand. Our common experiences created a conscious collaboration in the telling of her story and the co-creation of research. Drapeau argued that subjectivity:

may be richly informative about the subject's functioning...the essence of meaningful understanding is in a subjective representation of the subject (Drapeau 2002 p8).

Sarah's metaphor demonstrated to me how her learning and experience were applied outside the limitations of the curriculum.

Having explored how interview data were gained, the next section describes how audio information was transcribed and shared with respondents to verify

its accuracy.

4.6.1 Interview transcription

Digital interview recordings were transcribed into written word-processed documents. It needs to be considered that the resulting text could be argued to be naturally decontextualised and the process of transcription can be open to interpretation. Kvale describes transcripts as artificial, a flat representation of a living communication (Kvale 1996). The written record is not considered here as data but as a tool to render raw data accessible in this final thesis. The whole interview includes the social characteristics of the interaction, where it took place, facial expressions and use of gestures, so interview notes were made soon after each encounter to record the paralinguistic context of the conversation. Issues of reliability and validity within narrative research involve examination of technique, honesty in the approach to data collection and a sound theoretical base. The following section explores these questions in detail.

4.6.2 Validity of interview data

For these research findings to be considered valid or legitimate representations of the interview conversations, it was of paramount importance to evaluate the content of each transcription for trustworthiness and meaning. The semi-structured style of interview allowed the use of probing questions *in situ* to check meaning and ascertain that what the respondent was saying had been correctly heard and interpreted. People entering into any communication, for example a research interview, bring with them their own values, expectations and experiences and this interaction between them creates an intersubjective knowledge (Kvale 1996). The conversational nature of the semi-structured interview is seen as enabling access to that knowledge (*ibid.*). In other words, knowledge that arises from an interview will be co-created by the interviewer and interviewee; effectively a collaboration in the research.

Subjectivity in qualitative research is inevitable since total impartiality in research is argued to be unattainable (Hodkinson 2008), especially in an interview situation (Bell 1993):

Highly reflexive researchers will be acutely aware of the ways in which their selectivity, perception, background and inductive processes and paradigms shape the research (Cohen *et al.* 2008 p172).

I asked questions that provided the information I was looking for, I probed responses that were of interest and this naturally took the conversation in certain directions (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). This does not mean data were ignored if they did not fit the research aim, rather it demonstrates that interview data are inevitably interpretive and contextualised (*ibid.*). For example, my nods of encouragement in response to what an interviewee was saying may have been interpreted as evidence that I wished to hear more; in so doing, I arguably may have 'led' or subjectively directed the content of the communication. I do not argue that this is a positive or a negative feature, simply that I am aware of the limitations of this method of gathering information. Bell makes the case that:

it is easier to acknowledge the fact that bias can creep in than to eliminate it all together (Bell 1993 p95).

Cohen and colleagues argue that the researcher's own agenda influences their analysis of qualitative evidence (Cohen *et al.* 2008) and in a paper on subjectivity in research, Drapeau relates how his personal beliefs led to a confusing interpretation of interview data (Drapeau 2002). It is clear that I must recognise and take ownership of my subjective viewpoints, accept that they may differ from my respondents and be open and honest in my writing to prevent my bias from hiding genuine findings. For example my spending many evenings reading research papers, and even taking Kvale's book about interviewing on holiday, may seem extreme to purely strategic learners (*i.e.* those who study the minimum required to pass a module). I must consider that their motivations are as valid, and perhaps subjectively as *valuable* to their strategy for success, as mine are to me. I have had to remain open to different perspectives on learning in order to find this shared research to be

constructive in advancing my understanding of the lived experience of students. My examination of the lived and living experiences of learning demonstrates that there is no single 'best' way to learn; the choice between adopting a strategic versus a deep learning approach may simply be a pragmatic way of balancing concurrent life commitments.

From a constructivist standpoint 'validity', or truth, is a shared construction of reality, a collaboration and interpretation by the two co-respondents in an interview. Philosophical arguments around the nature of truth and the notion of objective reality are outside even the compass of this work, but within the interviews I used questions to clarify my understanding and to sum up what had been said. I have gone on later in this work to provide explicit descriptions of how conclusions have been formed. Early interview transcriptions were sent to respondents for them to check for accuracy, allowing an ongoing collaborative process of scrutiny of the data. Kvale provides an example of a passage from an interview transcribed by two individuals who produce subtly different texts (Kvale 1996) to indicate the issues of reliability associated with alternative perspectives of one truth. However, this 'proof reading' by the respondents led me to be as confident as I could be in my comprehension of the intended meanings expressed in the interviews.

It was interesting to read four respondents' e-mailed responses after they received their transcripts. Beth's statement "I didn't realise I sounded so moronic!" typified many reactions to the 'ums' and pauses that were part of the transcription. Their feedback made me mindful of Kvale's warning that written verbatim transcriptions:

may appear as incoherent and confused speech, even as indicating a lower level of intellectual functioning (Kvale 1996 p172).

I reassured respondents that pauses indicated where they had taken time to think about and interpret what they had been asked before responding to the question. I believe that my reassurances must have been effective for those

respondents who returned for a second interview; they were arguably less so for those who did not come again.

4.7 Data gathering: group interview

A group interview was initially piloted with second year students on the level five Diploma in Human Resource Management and the rationale for choosing a group outside the discipline of education was provided in Chapter 1. The pilot was used in order to practice an interview technique I was unfamiliar with and to ascertain if the recruitment method was successful. The same procedure was then used to interview second year Diploma and Foundation Degree students.

I met the students in a group tutorial session, with the permission of their tutor, to ask if they would consider taking part in a group interview. I discussed how this would be run and answered any questions from individuals as they arose. In order not to place any pressure on anyone to participate, I gave each of the students present all of the paperwork (information sheet, consent form, question sheet and outline of topics). I advised that if they wished to take part they should complete the forms and bring them to the interview; if they did not wish to participate they were free to leave “with some fire lighters and a free paperclip”. I hoped that this element of humour would help to build rapport and break down any preconceptions of excessive formality and it did indeed seem to help the groups relax. We arranged a mutually convenient date and time to meet for the interview.

The interview itself was held in the same room where the students were taught, after it was ascertained that the group felt most comfortable there. It took place on a day when they were already attending college to minimise disruption to their lives and study time. After ground rules were set out requesting that individuals took turns to speak and not talk over each other and reassurances given that if names were mentioned they would not be used in the thesis, the interview commenced. A digital Dictaphone was used to

record the interview and transcripts were later offered to the group members to check for accuracy.

Group interviews provide the possibility of gaining collective data from discussions between people who have shared experiences (Cohen *et al.* 2008). By meeting with groups towards the end of their course I considered that they would have formed a learning relationship that would enable them to share stories in front of each other. The interview conversations did indeed provide evidence of common factors, in-jokes and details about the collaborative learning experience. There is always the possibility that group interviews will produce 'group think' (*ibid.* p373) where individuals are reluctant to offer differing opinions in front of the group, but I judged that the self-selecting nature of participation and the focus on telling individual stories should mitigate that risk.

4.7.1 Data gathering: blog

An additional method of data gathering running parallel to the individual interviews was to provide respondents with access to a blog to provide on-going concurrent evidence of their learning experience. This section provides a justification for using a blog and a brief description of their role in research, further detail of which is provided in the literature review in Chapter 3.

The blog was devised to serve two purposes. Firstly, use of the blog was offered to the students as a mechanism for support, motivation and continued contact – in this respect it was for the students *as* students, *not* as respondents in the study. This was predicated on a sense that a blog might be a useful means to foster a sense of cohesion and belonging for cohorts of mature students who only physically met in college once a week. The intention was also to develop Bigger's examination of blog use with postgraduate students (Bigger 2009) to see if it could also help undergraduate learners. The rationale was that students might find that a blog provided an

opportunity for extra-mural collaboration which might enhance their ability to cope with study/life balance and therefore stay on the course.

This idea of perceiving a potential question reflects what Malinowski describes as a 'foreshadowed problem' (Malinowski 1922), not a fixed, pre-conceived notion of something specific to research, but rather a topic of interest prompted by certain suppositions. Social interaction is argued to be motivational for some students (Waite and Davis 2006) and I speculated that a blog, as an electronic form of social interaction supporting social collaborative learning theory, might be useful to students, nothing more concrete than that.

Secondly, the blog was developed for use as a data collection instrument. Blogs are increasingly employed as qualitative research tools (Mortensen and Walker 2002, Gurak and Antonijevic 2008) that provide immediate data, in contrast with information recalled during interview (Hookway 2008). There is academic interest in questions about identity and reliability of data, however it is argued that on-line anonymity encourages honesty and candour (*ibid.*) and blogs certainly provide the opportunity to examine real-time data. In order to maintain confidentiality access to the blog was limited to the respondents, one senior college I.T. technician in order that the research complied with the college safeguarding policy, and also to the researcher. In order that students were not potentially inhibited in their writing, course tutors were not given access to the blog.

The intention was to examine respondents' interpretation of their motivation over time. This blog was intended to provide real-time evidence of motivation, collaboration and coping, which could be compared with episodic interview data. My interest lies in how students manage to incorporate study into their busy lives and I aimed to observe what strategies enabled their success, evaluating how students employed a blog to express their coping strategies and motivation to study.

Entries in a blog also allow evaluation of what Ewins calls:

A stream of individual posts, each of them representing a particular moment in time and moment of consciousness (Ewins 2005 p373).

In other words, respondents could use the blog to reflect on their own learning experiences and personal development. I originally hypothesised that students would use the blog to express their immediate feelings about their situation and to share these views with fellow students. I further supposed that students would have reinterpreted their judgements by the time I interviewed them as they would have had the opportunity for 'retrospective reconstruction' (Hookway 2008 p95). In fact, blog use was sporadic and limited to posts from a few individuals and entries ceased in May 2009. However, comments made in the blog were not reconstructed at interview; respondents described their struggles to manage their work just as vividly in interview as they had on-line. These findings are explored in detail in Chapter 5. The fact of the blog's demise is interesting in itself, reflecting the comments about high workload identified by respondents and those who declined to continue with interviews. Where blog entries were of interest, data from it are analysed later in this work.

4.7.2 Data gathering: on-line survey

In order to gain quantitative evidence to compare with or corroborate qualitative interview data, an on-line questionnaire was devised. A web-based survey designer was used to create a questionnaire consisting of 13 multiple-choice questions, some with additional space for supplementary qualitative answers to allow respondents to expand upon their answers if they wished.

The questionnaire was scrutinised and critiqued by a number of colleagues prior to being sent to four local FE colleges providing the Diploma and Foundation Degree programmes. This prior scrutiny allowed me to gain invaluable feedback and understand how other people made sense of my questions. It was not possible to pilot the questionnaire with students similar to my intended recipients because those who were easiest to approach were

already taking part in this study, *i.e.* the Diploma and Foundation Degree students in my own college. Coombes argues that ideally a pilot group should be comparable to those who receive the finalised version, but also recognises that this is not always feasible (Coombes 2001). I felt confident that my colleagues on seeing the questionnaire for the first time would notice any inconsistencies, especially as they are teachers on a variety of courses and adept at 'marking' work.

An html link to the survey with an accompanying set of instructions was e-mailed to the course tutors responsible for teacher training programmes, with the request that this link and explanatory paragraph be further sent on to their students. There are a number of advantages to using on-line questionnaires over paper-based surveys, for example the ability to distribute quickly to a wide audience otherwise difficult to contact (Coombes 2001). In addition, if they are written well they can provide a clear layout with straightforward instructions, a factor which is important since the researcher is not present while the survey is completed (Cohen *et al.* 2008). Furthermore:

web-based surveys show fewer missing entries than paper-based surveys [and] because of volunteer participation...greater authenticity of responses may be obtained (*ibid.* p230).

In addition, there is evidence to suggest that on-line surveys have a higher response rate than traditional paper-based questionnaires (Coombes 2001). This was an advantage I felt to be particularly pertinent as the interview cohort is small and I wished to gain sufficient supplementary data.

There are also shortcomings inherent in the choice to make use of an on-line questionnaire. Trust in the researcher sending the survey is argued to be a major influence on an individual's decision to participate in an on-line study (Fang *et al.* 2009), since there are perceived to be reservations caused by the impersonal and remote nature of the survey. I hoped that the tone and content of the introductory paragraph would encourage individuals to take part. Clearly, issues surrounding computer literacy may also have a significant

effect (Moos and Azevedo 2009) given that a request to participate presupposes both an ability and confidence to do so. As a result, my questionnaire respondents are arguably just as self-selecting as my interview cohorts and I have been mindful of this when analysing the findings.

The rationale for the study and instructions for completion were provided at the beginning, along with the clear guidance that participation was entirely voluntary. However, in an attempt to encourage students to take part they were offered the chance to enter into a draw for a £20 book token and asked to provide their e-mail address if they wished to take part in the draw. There is debate about giving incentives to take part in research. Coombes' view is that incentives are rarely offered in small-scale projects (Coombes 2001), but she does not clarify how to define small-scale. If this research were classified by absolute number of respondents then it may be small, but I would argue that the duration of the study and depth of data broadens its scope significantly. Additional arguments suggest that payment can improve response rates (Thompson 1996) and that a token incentive can compensate participants for their time (Denscombe 2002). I opted to offer an incentive because I was already aware from interview conversations that both courses being studied involved high levels of self-directed study and assignment work. I was therefore asking busy students who had never heard of me to give me some of their time. The incentive was nominal and relevant to students in the form of a book token. In order that respondents could be offered choice, entry into the draw was not compulsory; respondents were asked to provide an e-mail contact if they wished to take part. In fact, all respondents opted to be included in the draw.

The initial survey questions ascertained age, gender and the title of the course. Respondents were asked to identify whether they were studying full or part-time and which year of the course they were in. In order to contextualise their overall responses the next question asked the reasons for the choice of course and institution, followed by what motivations were used to keep

studying and a question asking if respondents had ever thought of giving up. After a question about the impact studying had on life, respondents were asked if they had used any types of electronic communication to motivate themselves and others to keep studying. Many of these questions were presented with multiple-choice answers and the opportunity to expand on the answers or provide a different response, as applicable. Multiple-choice questions offered the opportunity to choose as many of the options as were applicable. A blank copy of the on-line questionnaire can be found at Appendix 4.

The research process has been an iterative one that has included a number of changes in direction and re-visiting previously explored elements as the data have emerged. Above all the attention throughout is on the student, the human story and the rich lived experience of studying. The next section examines how I have tried to maintain psychological safety for respondents within the research and uphold the fundamental research tenet to do no harm.

4.8 Ethical considerations

The research proposal gained approval from the University ethics board prior to the initial interviews and a copy of the ethics checklist can be found in Appendix 12. My own ethical considerations in relation to this study have focused on more than simple questions about physical discomfort or deception outlined in that form, and include issues of confidentiality, beneficence, identity and power.

Students who agreed to participate in individual and group interviews were given an information sheet at the first meeting and, once any questions had been satisfactorily answered, were asked if they were happy to give their written consent to take part. Part of the consent process involved letting individuals know what raw data I would hold and for how long, who had access to that data, how it would be anonymised and how, later, it would be disposed of. This helped to assuage fears of being recognised from the

writing, but also ensured students understood that any possible negative comments arising during interviews would remain confidential and would not be relayed back to their tutor. It was important to create a positive mood with the safety of the individual as paramount (Oliver 2004) and quickly allow a sense of trustworthiness in me to be formed. Researcher e-mail and telephone contact details were also provided to each respondent, with the reminder that I could be contacted at any time to make or amend interview arrangements. Copies of the individual interview information and consent forms can be found in Appendices 1 and 2, and group copies in Appendices 8 and 10. The importance of providing clear details of what is being asked of a respondent (Oliver 2004) again reflects my attention to the welfare and well being of the individual. I was keen to keep intrusion to a minimum and did not wish participation to be burdensome to the students.

It is important to re-iterate that I did not teach any of the respondents, though I had previously taught one Foundation Degree student on her level three course. Furthermore, I declined a request by one Diploma respondent for her to observe me teaching others as part of her assessment of practice. Roles, boundaries, relationships and perceived authority can influence the interaction that forms an interview. In other words, combining my role as researcher interviewer with the position of teacher (and marker of assignments!) could result in a lack of distinction between roles. I am acutely aware of the potential power relationship inherent within an interview of this kind, as Kvale states:

The professional is *in charge* of the questioning of a more or less voluntary and naïve subject (Kvale 1996 p20, Kvale's own emphasis).

It is possible that my known status as a lecturer was already enough to influence the respondents' perception of the interview, so the paralinguistic communication methods used to form a rapport between researcher and respondent were vital.

When I was with them in an interview I was a novice research student, a learner just like them. I enabled them to see me as a student in our

conversations; for example, we talked about the challenges of life as a mature student and voiced shared experiences or feelings about studying. In contrast to Kvale's comment about naïve subjects, I would argue that these respondents were far from naïve. By way of example, in later interviews they talked about motivation and educational theories, they articulated how these theories applied to their own experiences and they evaluated their own knowledge and development. Their increased knowledge informed and influenced their responses in the interviews and allowed them to reflect on their own progression. In this way our identities as mature students talking together about learning were equal and connected, a fundamental aspect of proximal ethnography.

In order that this rapport building could further be supported, and being aware of the potential influence of space on identity, individual interviews were held in 'neutral' areas away from the office and classroom spaces associated with our own roles. The interviews were held in tutorial rooms in the college on the days when students were attending lectures already in order to minimise the impact on travel, childcare or work commitments. In contrast, the group interviews were held in the students' own classroom, since they confirmed at our original meeting that they would feel psychologically safest in their own environment.

Active listening skills were used to make certain that the interview was focussed on the individual and what they were saying. By concentrating on the lived moment of the conversation, the 'here and now' of the dialogue, the interaction echoed the immediacy described by Bond and Culley as being intrinsic to the active listening process (Bond and Culley 2004).

I inferred from respondents' comments during individual and group interviews that I had created a psychologically safe environment unhindered by my job role and identity. For example, Helen light-heartedly compared interviews to counselling when she revealed some deeply felt traumas from her life and

Francis told me about a health issue that she had not even shared with her family. Some respondents from the group interviews also shared personal experiences with me, though it could be argued that being in the room together for the interview enhanced their psychological safety.

The matter of confidentiality is of key ethical interest when gathering the personal narratives of lived experience. As part of the written consent process respondents were informed that their names would not be used, neither would the college be referred to by name, so their identity could not be inferred. The consent form also specified that direct quotations from interview and a blog would be used in the final paper and required agreement from each respondent that this was acceptable. The intention was that interviews and the respondents' own blogs would produce rich narrative evidence of their learning experiences, and this is when the potential practical difficulties of maintaining confidentiality became apparent.

It could be argued that individuals who know me know where I worked, therefore, when my name appears on this thesis the college identity could be inferred. Furthermore, the college managers may want to know the results of my research to see if it might influence policy; they will know when the research took place and could deduce knowledge about respondents that way. It may also be that students could be identified from their unique life narrative. I am aware of the potential for any or none of these factors to have some bearing on confidentiality and merely make the argument that upholding what appear to be *prima facie* proper moral standards is not always a straightforward matter.

Clandinin and Connelly talk at length about the ethical dilemmas associated with maintaining confidentiality and make the argument that researchers need to be aware of their conscience in making decisions about revelation (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). On the other hand, they acknowledge that:

as researchers, we also owe our care and responsibility to a larger audience, to the conversation of a scholarly discourse (*ibid.* p174).

In other words, the responsible researcher must be worthy of trust, both from respondents and the wider research community with whom the work is shared, and must therefore accept that the sharing of findings is part of the process. In order to maintain an ethical research position the researcher must inform respondents that data will be used and possibly published, and must ascertain that respondents understand this consequence of taking part. I propose that I have done all that I reasonably could have to be that responsible researcher.

Having identified methods used to gather the data for this study, the next section examines the way that the information was handled. It details the way Microsoft *Word* was used to undertake a discourse analysis of interview data.

4.9 Data analysis method

Interview transcriptions were written in *Word* and kept as individual documents, one per interview. Forms of narrative analysis, in which learning histories are constructed from dialogic aspects of narrative (Riessman 2008), can examine data from a *literal* or a *reflexive* approach (Mason 1996). Both methods are employed in this study. Literal analysis examines particular language, for example exploring metaphors used to describe the learning experience; reflexive analysis includes the researcher's contribution to the co-creation of knowledge (Welsh 2002), exemplified here in the creation of the model of proximal ethnography.

The specific type of narrative analysis used in this study emphasised the construction of meaning between interviewee and interviewer and took the form of discourse analysis (Coyle 1995). Discourse analysis allows the construction of meaning through dialogue to gain a natural history of events. The context of the dialogue is important, so discourse analysis reveals an intersubjective content through its context. Analytic engagement with the data in this research involved identifying examples that represented or epitomised

themes in the data and examining the frequency of those examples. Data analysis packages exist, for example *Nvivo*, and it is argued that these programs make interrogation of data easier than manual reading alone (Welsh 2002). However, I would suggest that transcriptions are not data, they are merely the flat representation of actual lived and living words from the interview. The voice, the tone and all the nuances of the interview conversation, *they* are the actual data. I find it intriguing that researchers should debate about the best way to examine the written words, and that they should go on to suggest that examination of this artificial form of data is best performed by a computer programme.

Having no desire to interrogate flat representations, but needing to make sense of the content, I decided against using *Nvivo*. I chose to use the facilities available in *Word* to search for key words and gather examples of common themes and shared metaphors. Microsoft *Word* is readily available and includes many of the functions that proponents of specific data analysis packages argue to be useful attributes. For example, it has a function that will 'find' repetitions of key words and highlight them; it can be used to create tables and add line numbers, simplifying the process of linking sections. 'Search' and 'find' functions in either package are limited to finding specific words, so an iterative process of reading and re-reading enabled manual recognition of subtle similarities of language, examples of which could then be simply 'cut and paste' into a working document for analysis. By working with the whole document, rather than chunks of data, I felt closer to the holistic picture of the learning experience. I was able to tell the individual learning stories while being able to provide a transparent account of the way the transcriptions were handled.

Having identified the methods used in this study, it is also important to consider their potential limitations, some of which have been alluded to previously. It is anticipated that criticisms of this research could be based on researcher bias and subjectivity, sample size, the nature of the sample and

the specificity of the geographical context of the study. These limitations are addressed in the following section.

4.9.1 Study limitations

This section starts by addressing the idea that researcher bias could result in research that favours findings about the subjective experience of learning over quantitative conclusions about success and retention. I am not enthused by numbers, and quantitative data about the successful gaining of a qualification tells me nothing of the human endeavour involved in that achievement. This chapter has already acknowledged the shortcomings of interviewing, *i.e.* the potential predisposition towards a particular direction encouraged by nods and paralinguistic features of the conversation. However, my own desire to tell the *story* of learning directs me towards a method that will allow that story to be told, namely the personal interview. By using a semi-structured style, respondents could tell me as much or as little as they wanted and enable their learning history to be related in their own way.

Secondly, as has previously been intimated, it could be argued that the sample employed in this study is relatively small. Individual interview data are drawn from a total of seven students who stayed with the research for the full two years (Beth left the study at the end of her first year). Additional data arise from one-off group interviews with two groups of second year students, one Diploma and one Foundation Degree cohort. Finally, responses are gained from 59 on-line survey responses from first and second years on a variety of teaching qualifications.

Seen in isolation, a group of seven respondents is not a large sample. However, these seven individuals provided a total of 27 interviews consisting of close to 26 hours of conversation. This was supplemented by two further hours of dialogue from the group interviews. Consequently, the sample number may be small but the resulting data is broad, long and deep, and I

would argue it provides a vivid and compelling account of the learning experience.

Another limiting factor is that the majority of respondents were female. Both Foundation Degree cohorts were all female; the Diploma group interview included three males, and Peter was the only male who took part in individual interviews. This fact could lead to the suggestion that findings are applicable to female HE students, but they may not generalise to males. The research interest wished to focus on those undertaking qualifications within the discipline of education because these students are future motivators of their own students. Enabling them to understand their own motivational drive may make it possible for them to motivate others. National statistics provided by the Department for Education show that of the new entrants to teacher training in the 2012/2013 academic year, 62% were female (Department of Education 2012). The sample in this study has a higher percentage than the national average, but it does reflect the current situation within the teaching profession. I do not make any claim that findings can be applied to all HE students; rather the results may be generalisable to other trainee educational professionals.

The fact that all respondents were studying within the discipline of education could limit the potential for the findings of this study to be applied universally to other students. This study concerns the motivating drivers of students on HE courses that will take them into teaching roles. It is likely that their curriculum will have some focus on motivation as a topic, since they are prospective motivators of their own students. It could therefore be argued that these students are not typical of all undergraduates as they may be more familiar with motivation as a subject and therefore more attuned to their own motivating drivers.

In order to test this premise, as detailed previously, the pilot group interview was held with students on the Level 5 Diploma in Human Resource

Management. They were chosen because they were local, were coming to the end of their programme and were from outside of the field of education. Results from this interview affirmed that these students were just as aware of what motivation was, and how they were motivated themselves, as the students who took part in this study. This finding suggests that HE students are already highly motivated individuals, almost regardless of their subject; they have had to motivate themselves to apply for their course, to pass their selection interview and to continue to attend.

Finally, this study has taken place in a college in a county town in a predominantly rural county. It could be argued that results do not generalise to students studying in an urban location, particularly those results that show students chose the college because it was local to them. In a city environment where the availability of HE in FE may be much greater, students might well have a different rationale for choice of college. Prestige or reputation may play a greater part than it seems to have done in this study and the option to repeat this research in another setting may generate different findings. In response to this potential limitation I would argue the results may not be generalisable to all HE students, but may reflect the experiences of other students in similar HE in FE contexts to these.

4.9.2 Chapter summary

In summary, the major influence on my decisions surrounding choice of method has been my student-centred philosophy; my inspiration is the history of their 'complex and nuanced world' (Rubin and Rubin 2005 p19) and a naturalistic, interpretive approach allows me to delve into the lived account of that experience. Using Johns' model to reflect on how this study was carried out I consider on 'looking out' that I have achieved what I wished for by working with a number of groups of students to explore their learning experiences and in doing so allow them to reflect on their own development. In 'looking in' I have remained congruent with my own beliefs and recognised the influence of our shared experiences.

The next two chapters present these stories of learning. Chapter 5 provides the findings from the individual and group interviews, offering insights into the rich and complex learning lives experienced by these students. Chapter 6 submits findings from the on-line survey. These are offered separately from results arising from the interviews because the data come from a number of teacher training courses. The final two chapters offer discussion and overall recommendations based on the data as a whole.

Chapter 5 : Interview findings

A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience (Mezirow 1997 p1)

The data for this study come from two specific professional HE courses, the Diploma and Foundation Degree, and findings from both courses are presented together. Data arise from four main sources:

- 27 individual episodic interviews held over two years of the Diploma and Foundation Degree courses;
- A blog used by six Diploma and Foundation Degree students from the individually interviewed cohorts;
- An on-line questionnaire from four other FE colleges in the region;
- Two group interviews with final year Diploma and Foundation Degree students from different cohorts. These students started their courses two years *after* those who were individually interviewed.

In order to distinguish between individual interview data and information arising from group interview, all data that are ascribed to a *name* came from individual interviews. All other data came from group interviews where names were not sought and accounts cannot be individually attributed.

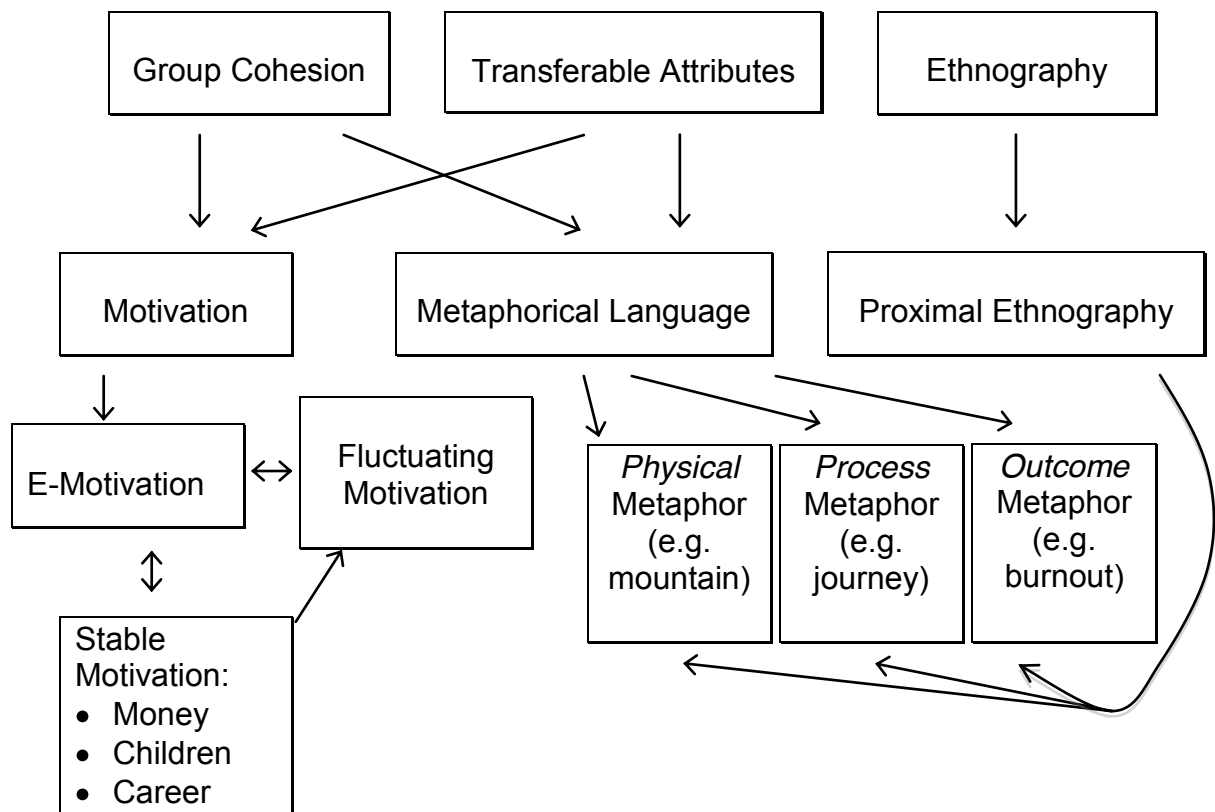
Data emerge from a total of 27 individual interviews held between December 2008 and July 2010. Two group interviews provided additional information. From a cohort of 12, eight Diploma students took part in a group interview in January 2012. 10 out of a group of 16 Foundation Degree students participated in their group interview in March 2012. The descriptions given by respondents of their experiences of learning are analysed individually, using their own words to create a sense of ownership of the data. Findings are then generalised appropriately from these specific learning histories.

Three significant findings emerge from this research. These are:

1. The importance of group cohesion.
2. Students are able to draw on personal characteristics from previous successful roles to help them manage the pressures of HE study. These are described as *transferable attributes*.
3. The impact of the shared identity of researcher and respondent on the practice of ethnography, highlighting the personal nature of research.

In relation to the overall thesis title, evidence demonstrates that students used a variety of stable and constant motivating drivers to reinforce wavering day-to-day motivation. To some, a sense of belonging to their cohort was motivating. Some students were able to identify characteristics of their previous successful identities and transfer those to their new identity as 'student'. The first two findings relate to the lived and living learning experiences of the student respondents, and the third represents a new development in research methodology. Each of these overarching findings is divided into interconnected themes and sub-themes that are descriptive of the HE learning experience. The findings are summarised in schematic form in Figure 5 (overleaf) before being discussed in detail.

Figure 5: Group Cohesion, Transferable Attributes and their relationship to the development of Ethnography



The top tier of Figure 5 symbolises the three key findings, the importance of Group Cohesion, the identification of Transferable Attributes, and the development of the method of Ethnography. The arrows represent the inter-relationships between those findings and the additional themes that emerge from the study. These three key factors are broken down into themes represented in the second tier of the figure. Group cohesion had an impact upon motivation. Friendships and a sense of belonging had a positive impact on motivation. In addition, group cohesion was characterised by shared metaphorical language describing the learning experience. Metaphors related to i) physical barriers, ii) the learning process and iii) outcome and these are explored in detail later in this chapter. Transferable attributes are described as the ability of students to draw on the characteristics from their previous successful contexts and transfer those traits into their current situation as

students. Using these characteristics enabled them to stay motivated and succeed. Some of these characteristics were expressed through metaphor and are examined in this chapter.

Our understanding of ethnographic practice is extended in this research to acknowledge the crucial importance of the shared identity of the researcher, resulting in the creation of the model of proximal ethnography identified in the second row. Evaluation of this model is included within this chapter because its development arose directly from the data. Analysis of the interview conversations led to the conclusion that shared identity was a focal component of traditional ethnography that warranted further exploration.

The final level in the figure represents sub-themes and specific examples found in this research. Motivation is sub-divided into motivations that remained stable and those that fluctuated. The stable motivations are placed at the base of the figure to demonstrate how they provided a fundamental constancy that supported the students when day-to-day motivation waned. E-motivation is the term devised to describe the contemporary ways students used text messaging, e-mail and the social media website Facebook to maintain their motivation.

Respondents used metaphorical language to indicate the difficulties they had to overcome to succeed in their learning. Proximal ethnography links back into these metaphorical themes because of the shared experiences of the students and the researcher in her doctoral studies. In other words, the researcher also identified with the complex practicalities of managing study, getting around the barriers to learning and struggling to fit work and study together with family life. The researcher held the same identity as the respondent, specifically a mature HE student, but did so outside the particular domain of the respondents, in this case studying at a different level.

The findings from this study are divided into themes and sub-themes as illustrated in Figure 5 (above). These themes are detailed in this chapter under topic headings indentified in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Findings, divided into themes and sub-themes

| Group Cohesion | Transferable Attributes |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Education and employment background | Work, life, study balance |
| Reason for studying | Metaphors of learning |
| Motivating drivers | Individual transformation |
| Group dynamics | |

These categories arise from the interview questions (see Appendix 3) and directly from the data itself. Each theme is presented with examples from respondents used to capture the individual learning histories. In this section, data arise from individual interviews from students who took part in this study for the full two years of their programme, and from two one-off group interviews held with a different cohort of Diploma and Foundation Degree students at the end of their second year. Individual responses are named using a pseudonym, to give context and life to each response. Group interview data cannot be attributed to any named individual. Each of the findings identified is now examined. Where practicable, findings are presented in chronological order from the whole two years with the purpose of identifying the themes that arose over the duration of all the interviews. To that end, these findings begin by giving responses to an initial question about education and employment background and rationale for choosing the institution. These questions aimed to contextualise the learning experience.

5.1 Education and employment background

Table 5 summarises the educational and employment history of the individual respondents. Information was gathered during the first round of interviews to provide context to their learning experience.

Table 5: Level of education, employment history and employment during the course for the individually interviewed Diploma and Foundation Degree students

| Student | Education | Employment history | Employment during this research |
|---------|--|--|--|
| Helen | NVQ levels 2 and 3 in catering college | Head chef | Part time teaching |
| Peter | 'O' levels | Engineering and management | Full time teaching |
| Ruth | 'O' levels | Professional career in musical theatre | Teaching Assistant |
| Sarah | 'A' levels | Nursing | Clinical Nurse Specialist |
| Beth | NVQ levels 2 and 3 | Worked in a food production factory | Full time carer in residential home for children |
| Francis | Level 3 Childcare Diploma | Waitressing | Part time Teaching Assistant in primary school |
| Tina | 'A' levels | Administration and marketing | Part time administrator |
| Zoe | 'O' levels | Police officer | Volunteering in primary school |

The table shows that students all had a working and education background that was diverse and varied. In response to a question asking about choice of institution answers revealed that seven of these eight students chose the college because it was close to home. Sarah was not asked that question. In addition, Beth said that she chose the college because there was only one tutor delivering the modules and Tina stated that the reputation of the course and discussions with previous students influenced her choice. Tina went on to add that the enthusiasm of the course tutor attracted her to the course, helping her overcome an initial reticence about her ability to learn at this level.

Sarah commented on how interesting it was to have students from a range of professions on the course and how each person brought diverse experiences to lessons. Through a social constructivist lens she found this variety to be beneficial to her learning as she was able to absorb different viewpoints into her own expanding knowledge. Ruth's theatrical career ended when she married and this seemed to be something she regretted. Her ambition was eventually to return to the stage and she joked that the theatre always needs old performers.

Helen described herself as a natural organiser, a very determined individual who managed a young family and was always busy. She taught for a short time in the college while studying. Peter's background was very varied, but followed a generally upward path into management before he decided to change career and enter teaching. Results show that all of these students had a working background prior to undertaking teacher training and each had a suitable level of qualification or experience to satisfy the entry requirements of the course.

Students on the Foundation Degree course were required to undertake practice as a Teaching Assistant during their studies, so the tutor expected them all to have work or a voluntary placement for the duration of the course. This precludes the opportunity to work full-time in other fields. Francis went to college straight after school and then stayed at the same college to take the Foundation Degree. Her employment background consisted of part-time waitressing roles undertaken during her school and college holidays, and she worked part-time as a paid Teaching Assistant during the course. Tina worked in administration. She saw this course as a second chance to prove herself academically, having done poorly in school when she was younger. Beth worked in a care home; Zoe was not in paid work while studying as she had had a baby at the end of her first year.

Students who consented to take part in the group interview completed a very short questionnaire as part of their agreement to take part (see Appendix 11). This consisted of three questions designed to ascertain the same background information elicited from the first round of individual interviews. These questions were:

1. Why did you choose to study at [*college name*]?
2. Why did you select this particular course?
3. Could you briefly describe your educational background?

Answers indicated that all of the students chose the college because it was close to home, because of the convenience of its location and because they needed to fit their study into family life. Three Diploma students chose it because they worked there as part-time teachers and it was convenient to stay on after work to study.

The educational histories of those who took part in the group interviews largely mirrored those of the individually interviewed students. Their backgrounds included a range of qualifications from vocational and academic pathways. Diploma students listed CSEs, 'O' Levels and GCSEs, level three diplomas and NVQs at levels two and three. One student had 'A' levels and one held a general nursing qualification. Foundation Degree students had 'A' levels, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at levels three and four, and two of the group were already graduates. Students from both courses had a varied employment history. In order to ascertain the background to their learning experience, students were asked about their rationale for taking their course and their motives included compulsion and career trajectory. These reasons are discussed in the next section.

5.1.1 Reason for studying

Of those in the individual interview cohort who lasted the duration of the study Peter was the only respondent who was taking the course as a mandatory

requirement for his new full-time teaching role. All staff offered teaching jobs in the college where we taught must agree to undertake teacher training alongside their work if they do not already hold a teaching qualification. Helen required a teaching qualification that she could use in different countries because her husband could be posted abroad at short notice and she wanted her own professional status. She hoped that the course would also enable her to set up her own training organisation in the future. Sarah and Ruth both sought opportunities to teach in a university setting and saw this course as a first step towards that goal, although Ruth realised that this was only an initial step. She was amused at the idea that she would need to study at masters or even doctoral level to reach that goal, preferring to brush that aside as something to 'worry about later'.

Francis chose the Foundation Degree because of a life-long ambition to work with children, though in later interviews she had started to question this career choice. Tina was initially interested in teacher training but wanted a 'hands-on' approach to learning so was attracted by the practice requirement of the Foundation Degree. This quote is from her first interview:

I thought that the foundation degree seemed like probably one of the most active ways into teaching because you don't just sit and study...I want to be hands on with the children, I think that that's a *more* [own emphasis] valuable experience than just sitting for a straightforward degree.

Zoe recognised that her learning support role was not teaching *per se*, but she knew that there was an opportunity to top-up the Foundation Degree to a teaching qualification later, so her rationale was that this course was a stepping stone towards the overall goal of teaching. It enabled her to be part of a classroom setting, assisting children and observing the role of the teacher. Beth wanted to gain knowledge to help her in her role supporting children with learning difficulties, particularly those on the autistic spectrum:

I'm hoping that it'll help me understand and maybe give me more ideas of *how* [own emphasis] to help them.

From the Diploma group interview, two individuals had to take the programme in order to stay in their current employment, because like Peter they were employed as teachers. One described it as a 'barrier' to be overcome in addition to his full-time teaching role. Other reasons mirrored the findings from Helen, Sarah and Ruth, namely that individuals had an ambition to teach and wished to gain a professional qualification with potential job security.

Reasons given for study by those from the Foundation Degree group interview echoed what the individual interviews had identified. Motivations can be summarised into four main categories, i) gaining the qualification, ii) improving career prospects, iii) broadening knowledge and iv) self-challenge. This last is an interesting rationale as it could equally be applied to any Foundation Degree course; it could be argued that the challenge also relates to the role of the Teaching Assistant where there is the opportunity to help and support the students to achieve *their* own potential.

In addition to the extrinsic factors listed above, one Foundation Degree respondent from the group interview seemed to hold a particularly strong intrinsic rationale for studying. Rather than stating that she was looking at career-orientated goals, she declared that her previous educational experiences had left her being characterised by her teachers as "thick". She stated that she saw the Foundation Degree as a way to prove her worth and ability to herself and others. This raises the important issue of how powerful and long-lasting educational labels can be, though it must be remembered that this interview took place near the end of the two-year course. By this stage her learning, reflection and transformation had clearly resulted in an increased self-confidence enabling her better to understand and challenge that original label.

A key theme explored throughout the interviews was what motivated each student to keep studying, and these findings are examined in the next section. The findings can be broadly summarised as *Group Cohesion* and

Transferable Attributes. In relation to the first, results show that a sense of belonging to the group was motivating to some students. With regard to the second, some students remained motivated by tapping into skills or attributes from their successful lives prior to becoming a student and transferring those skills to their new identity. These features are discussed in more detail in the next section.

5.2 Group cohesion and transferable attributes: motivating drivers and fluctuating motivation

Students reported being motivated by a variety of factors, for example financial security, providing for their children and for a better career. Some of these originated internally, others from external sources. Five respondents described unstable motivation. Four of those respondents indicated that their primary motivating drivers remained fixed and acted as a stable bedrock, whilst secondary drivers fluctuated and changed as priorities altered. The fifth, Francis, stated that even her primary motivation was unstable. This nuanced notion of a dual layer of motivating drivers is presented in Table 6 (overleaf). Results show a combination of unwavering motivators that acted as a foundation to underpin and support the fluctuating state of day-to-day motivation.

Table 6: Shifting primary and secondary motivating drivers of individual interviewees²

| Student | Motivator | 1 st Interview (Yr. 1) | 2 nd Interview (Yr. 1) | 3 rd Interview (Yr. 2) | 4 th Interview (Yr. 2) | Stability |
|---------|-----------|-------------------------------------|---|--|---|-------------------------|
| Helen | Primary | Financial (lifestyle) | Financial (lifestyle) | Financial (lifestyle) | Financial (lifestyle) | Very stable |
| | Secondary | None stated | Pride (personal: doing her best) | Pride (personal: do her best. Others: father, social status) | <i>Just finishing the course</i> | Unstable |
| Peter | Primary | Career (mandatory qualification) | Career (mandatory qualification) | Declined to attend | Career (mandatory qualification) | Very stable |
| | Secondary | None stated | None stated | | <i>Just finishing the course</i> | Unstable |
| Ruth | Primary | Children (provide for, set example) | Children (provide for, set example) | Children (provide for, set example) | Declined to attend | Very stable |
| | Secondary | Career (transfer existing skills) | <i>Career (better prospects)</i> | <i>Social (group fellowship)</i> | | Unstable |
| Sarah | Primary | Career (better prospects) | Career (better prospects) | <i>Just finishing the course</i> | Declined to attend | Unstable |
| | Secondary | Enjoyment (of learning) | Enjoyment (of learning) | <i>Social (group fellowship)</i> | | Unstable |
| Beth | Primary | Career (better prospects) | Career (better prospects) | Left the study | Left the study | Stable |
| | Secondary | None stated | Pride (others: family) | | | N/a |
| Francis | Primary | Pride (personal: achievement) | <i>Just finishing the course</i> | <i>Fear of failure</i> | <i>Fear of failure</i> | Very unstable |
| | Secondary | Pride (others: grandmother) | <i>Tutor (supportive)</i> | <i>None</i> | <i>None</i> | Unstable |
| Tina | Primary | Pride (personal: prove own ability) | Pride (personal: achieve qualification) | Pride (personal: achieve qualification) | Pride (personal: achieve qualification) | Stable (but developing) |
| | Secondary | None stated | Pride (personal: prove own ability) | Pride (personal: prove own ability) | None stated | Somewhat unstable |
| Zoe | Primary | Pride (personal: independence) | Tutor (supportive) | Pride (personal: independence) | Pride (personal: independence) | Stable (relatively) |
| | Secondary | None stated | Pride (personal: prove own ability) | Pride (personal: prove own ability) | None stated | Stable |

² Motivational drivers shown in italics indicate the point that it became apparent during interviews that motivation had shifted to become unstable

Peter was a very focused individual who always looked for the positive in any situation. His motivation came from the opportunities that the Diploma course were likely to offer him:

There are lots of opportunities. So that's where my motivation comes from. It's like where does this sort of end up.

Peter was confident in his abilities and described himself as not being particularly social; he did not feel much group spirit within his cohort, and was not concerned with the social aspect of the learning experience. He was the only male in the study cohort, but was one of four males in his Diploma group. He was able to focus on his motivating driver when he otherwise had difficulties with the course structure or content that presented potential obstacles to his learning. By the final interview, Peter's motivation was still focused on finding value in what he had done; the course had become something to get through rather than to be enjoyed, but he maintained his will to complete.

Helen's financial motivation was also shared by other group members, a motivation based a belief that the qualification would lead to stable career prospects and a better salary. Ruth shared some of this motivation, but was primarily focused on financial security for her children, stating in her second interview that:

[The course will help] me and my children's life and lifestyle I suppose a bit more financial security because of the added single responsibility that I have just as a single parent.

Later in the same interview she indicated a high level of awareness of how her own improving situation would reflect on her children:

You know it's quite empowering that thing that I'm doing, and not just within my work, but it benefits my life and hopefully then reflects down into my children and onto their outlook on life and knowledge and gaining knowledge and you know being constructive and useful.

Ruth was steadfast throughout the two years in her determination to do well for her children. Her identity as a divorcee seemed to make her more motivated to give them the best upbringing. She confirmed that she was motivated to:

demonstrate hard work and what you get out of life is what you put into it, as well as enjoyment, you know and yes, just the whole fact that I don't want ever anyone to look at them and go, oh well, it's because they come from a broken home.

Sarah saw both intrinsic and extrinsic motivating drivers in her experiences. In her first interview, when she was asked which she thought was most important to her she replied:

it's internal... the external motivator is what I see myself doing in the future, promotion and whatever at work, but the internal motivators are I enjoy learning. Yeah, and I'm motivating myself. Nobody, nobody has said you've got to go and do it to me, and you've got to go and do well.

As her Diploma course progressed she clearly gained motivation from strong friendships she built within the group. However, by the end of the course she struggled with the fact that her initial love of learning had been eroded by the demands of the course:

There's been some good points but a lot of it, I had to really pull from inside me, the motivation, because I haven't got it in other ways, do you know what I mean, I've had to really think, right, why am I doing this?

Sarah found her motivation had waned by the third interview in January 2010 near the mid point of her second year. It had taken her a long time to re-engage with the course after the long summer break. The nested style of her course and resulting changes were discussed earlier. She found it hard to work with a different group membership, a new tutor and a change of course structure to greater self-directed study with fewer taught elements; these all had an impact on Sarah's motivation. Her mindset had changed and the course had become something to be completed, rather than being undertaken out of a love of learning.

Students on the Foundation Degree course related their experiences, and these reflected directly the primary and secondary motivating drivers described by the Diploma students. This dual layer is encapsulated in a response from Tina:

I suppose it's a bit of a head and heart situation. Proving something to myself is kind of in my heart, and trying to be logical and looking at the big picture and heading in the right direction is more of a head thing...I think the day-to-day in your head thing dips up and down. I've got to re-motivate myself sometimes or think right you *must* [own emphasis] sit down and write that assignment...Whereas the ultimate 'where I want to be and how I feel about myself', that hasn't changed.

Her intention to *prove something to herself*, a key motivation she expressed in other interviews, was one that frequently felt unstable but her core focus on the overall goal of completing the course and gaining a good qualification remained stable. She regularly referred to the 'big picture', stating that her overall goal of qualifying counteracted the times when day-to-day motivations waned.

Zoe's motivation was related to need for independence and autonomy, the notion that she was taking this course for herself:

...personal motivation and wanting to do it. When you're at school by law you had to be at school, although I know you can learn from home, but it's the choice. It's my self-motivation knowing that this is what I want to do for me

This quote from her first interview reflected feelings she maintained throughout the two years. This motivation helped her to stay focused and determined after the unexpected death of her husband in her first year, allowing her to concentrate on her own ability and commitment in order to remain on the course.

Francis was the only respondent who admitted to having completely lost all motivation during her studies. She was originally partly motivated to study to be the first in her family to graduate. This quote from her first interview demonstrates her inspiration:

The only thing keeping me going is thinking of myself holding that piece of paper in the cathedral. That's what will make it worth studying the course for...I want to be the first grandchild to go to uni and not quit.

When her grandmother died, Francis was unable to find anything to motivate her. In addition, she subsequently experienced two incidents that undermined her understanding of the importance of qualifications. These are examined in more detail later in this chapter. The only reason she did not leave the course was a strong and persistent fear of failure. Francis also experienced a number of other significant family issues during her studies, which she alluded to in interview but did not specify. In later interviews she stated that she wanted to gain her qualification and leave education all together.

The next part of this chapter explores further the dual layer of primary and secondary motivating drivers with specific examples that students expressed through metaphor to describe their day-to-day struggles.

5.2.1 Primary and secondary motivation

Textual analysis identifying examples of metaphor showed that one theme arising from the interviews was that motivations are inherently unstable. Metaphorical references concerning motivation included 'peaks and troughs', as experienced by Peter in his first year, and Ruth who described her motivation 'dipping up and down' in her second interview. Helen made the following comments in her second interview in May 2009, near the end of her first year. The first is an especially vivid account of the emotions she experienced while learning. In response to being asked whether motivation stayed the same or fluctuated she stated that:

I've got the constant motivation of what's going to happen at the end, of my being able to support the family and enjoy the family at the same time and do something that I love doing that I'm good at. So there's that motivation, that's been constant all the way through...

But no, motivation generally has been like a bloody great roller coaster, up down, up down, can do it, can't do it...the roller coaster is still going up down, up down, [laughing], ooh, there's a loop-the-loop.

She also pointed to the effect that altered motivation had on her ability to study:

And I'll actually sit down in front of the computer with my books and I'll go [sighing sound] can't do it, I don't know what I'm looking at, I don't, I don't understand I don't know and blah, bloody Maslow's hierarchy of needs he can shove it up his bum [laughing], it's like honestly. And then other times you're like 'no I'm really getting this, this is great, I understand, fab, lovely, well done Maslow, great'. So yeah it's all over the shop.

Helen had posted a blog entry earlier in March of the same year that described the struggle she was experiencing in motivating herself to 'sit in a different room and study'. She had been ill with influenza for three days and her mindset and routine for study had been disrupted. Her description of her attempts to 'sit down in front of the computer' and 'sit in a different room' indicate the importance of space and place to her learning experience. She experienced a physical and psychological transformation associated with finding the right space in which to study.

Helen titled her blog post in March 'Finding it a struggle to get motivated'; she used the blog to express her immediate feelings about her situation and to share these views with her fellow students. The two interview comments above also describe her struggles to stay motivated, the roller coaster analogy being an especially colourful description. Hookway suggests that immediate reflections written in a blog would be retrospectively reconstructed by the time interviews took place (Hookway 2008). However, Helen's experience does not support that suggestion. Her experience of multiple, fluctuating motivations

was described just as strongly in the intimate and immediate environment of the interview as it had been in the blog.

Ruth observed in her second interview that her motivations relating to grades and success had changed:

Even within the course I found my motivation changed as well. When I first started the course, the first thing I did was 'right OK what's the pass mark?' So, once I did my first assignment and I got above the pass mark it I was like 'oh, OK'. So I've now self-motivated that I want to improve each time...now I'm motivating myself to try and push the benchmark higher.

She recognised a transformation in the way she wanted to learn, and a change in the way she then approached the next stages of her learning, though her overall fundamental motivation remained her children. Having never seen herself as particularly academic, Ruth began to realise that her natural abilities were higher than she originally thought. She had not challenged herself in school because her aim was for a career on the stage, so her early educational focus was on performance skills. By the end of her first year she had formed a new ambition to improve her grades and she talked of going on to take a masters level course having found an appetite and ability for further study.

Tina used the word 'fluid' in her third interview to express changes of priority based on the difference between short and long-term motivations:

I'd say it's quite fluid, so different times, different things become more important...If I'm struggling on a day to day basis, thinking why am I doing it then I need to look a lot further ahead. Once I start getting my teeth into an assignment, you know, it's the passion of it and I've got to do it to the best of my ability and I don't want to hand it in if I know I could have done it better, so that's more of a short term motivation.

Her fundamental motivation was the long-term 'big picture' goal of overall ambition, and her ability to raise her sights and look ahead when she was struggling enabled her to regain her focus. Again, examples of motivating drivers from the Diploma group interview were largely similar to those

expressed in individual interview. Some students were motivated by the chance of a stable career and the opportunity to earn a better wage, and for two students the opportunity to learn something new was motivating in itself. Seeing other members of the group each week was cited by a number of group respondents as being a significant motivation, further evidence supporting the importance of Group Cohesion. The Diploma cohorts were characterised by a changing membership at the start of each academic year, but in each cohort small groups of friends formed and these relationships were a fundamental motivational driver.

Group respondents said that their motivations fluctuated and that different levels of motivation existed, supporting the findings from individual interviews. Respondents talked of their individual primary motivating drivers taking precedence at times when they struggled. For example, one talked of the way she focused on her goals of getting a good job and better providing for her family specifically to motivate her when struggling to understand a new learning theory. Two respondents commented on the financial and professional consequences of failing the course and of the concern over letting their managers down by not passing.

A wide range of motivational drivers were expressed by students from the Foundation Degree group interview at the end of their second year, and they are presented in the following summary table:

Table 7: Motivational drivers of Foundation Degree students who took part in the group interview

| Intrinsic | Extrinsic |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Sense of achievement | The qualification |
| Fear of failure | Career and financial prospects |
| Increased knowledge | Children |
| | Fellow students and the tutor |

These students were looking back over the two years of their course, so these motivating drivers were being examined in retrospect. All the students confirmed that their motivations had wavered, and that there had been times when they felt low and wished to leave the course. They again reflected the experiences of the Diploma students when they talked about the level of assessment required and the complexity of fitting all of the study demands into their lives. In the group case, the primary, unwavering motivators are the ones listed above; these are what students held onto when their day-to-day motivation was diminished. One example captures the feeling of camaraderie and the motivating support of fellow students particularly well:

If it wasn't for you guys I know I wouldn't be here now. Coming in every week, seeing you, having a laugh and knowing we're all in it together, that's what's kept me going.

This particular motivation came from the support of the group and perhaps also the pleasure of their company, and these group dynamics are examined in the next section. The Foundation Degree courses were made up of fewer students than the Diploma (15 compared with 26) and they kept the same students throughout the course. This fact led to a different focus on the importance of group membership and the factors around group dynamics and cohesion are explored in a later section. Having examined individual motivating drivers, the next section provides information on factors that tempted respondents to leave their course. Findings are presented as a response to the question...

5.2.2 “Have you ever felt like leaving?”

In order to ascertain if any de-motivating factors existed, individual interviewees were asked in the second interview whether they had ever considered leaving the course. Each said they had contemplated it at some point, for example Helen, Sarah and Tina when they were physically tired. Peter was de-motivated on two occasions when he was given negative feedback after assessment of his teaching practice, but was not subsequently

praised when he used his skills well. He described criticism that only focussed on the negative as being demoralising. Helen added that it was an effort to stay motivated when she was not academically challenged. That is not to say that she thought the course was not challenging, but on occasions she felt that she was not being pushed to think hard. Beth was demoralised by a low grade given for one of her first semester assignments. Francis was demotivated as a result of isolation from her family, a factor explored in detail later in this chapter.

Some respondents from the Diploma group interview found the long summer holiday to be de-motivating. One comment on the struggle felt on returning to college elicited general agreement from the group:

R1 Anyone think that worked really badly for our motivation though at the beginning of the second year? [General agreement]. Cos we had the summer and the massive gap in between, I forgot everything. Not that I learned much but, it was too long.

R2 That first few weeks back I nearly did, I thought I can't do this, I nearly had a nervous breakdown. It was a big, big dip for me.

Results from the individual interviews showed that respondents each stated that they would not actually leave the course, referring back to their original primary motivating drivers as deciding anchoring factors. Their descriptions indicate a retrospective reflection on the learning experience and how their fundamental motivating drivers remained as a kind of bedrock to mitigate periodic uncertainty or instability. Focusing on the original motivator was the most successful way to alleviate the lowering of morale caused by negative experiences.

To summarise thus far, individual motivational drivers support the learning experience. Interpretation of these findings leads to the conclusion that motivation is a complex concept composed of a stable, primary foundation that underpins fluctuating day-to-day struggles to stay motivated. Motivational drivers are not fixed, so each can be tapped into at different times to support

learning, some taking priority over others. It is also evident that students need to be able to focus on these stable motivators in order to succeed.

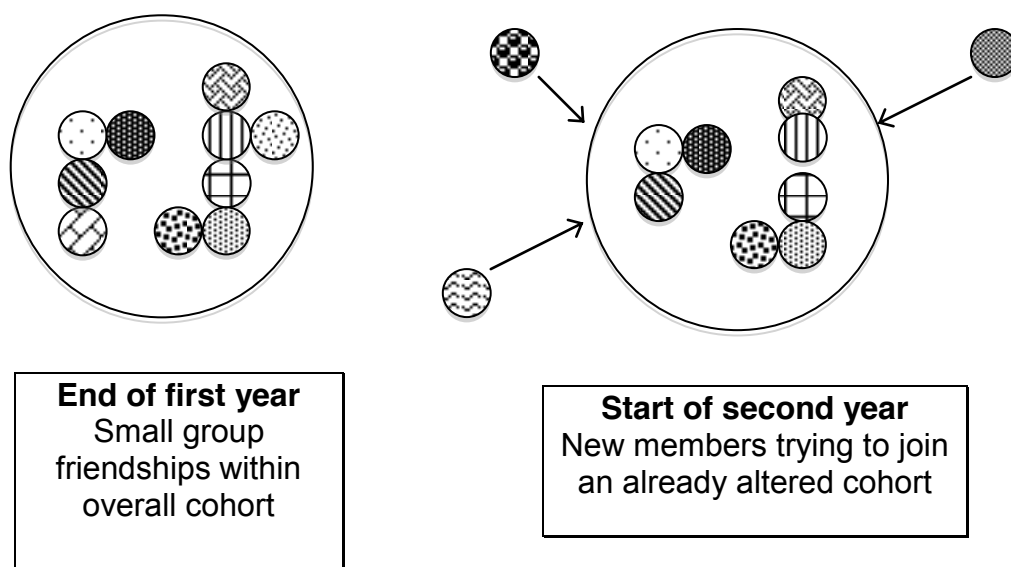
Students identified a number of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and many of them acknowledged that the cohorts they were in also had a motivating influence. These group influences are examined next.

5.3 Group dynamics and cohesion

Respondents clearly had individual motivating drivers that helped them persevere, but for many there were additional motivational factors associated with the dynamics of their group that also had an impact on the learning experience. Many of these findings support the work on *belonging* highlighted in Chapter 3 (for example see studies by Hammond 2004, Allen 2005, March and Gaffney 2010).

These findings directly inform the overall conclusion from this study outlined above; namely that this study is about *change* and *difference*. Group membership in the Diploma programme was changed in the second year, since some students left the group and others joined. This had the effect of altering the support network of the group. An attempt to illustrate these changes is made in Figure 6 below. By the end of the first year, students had formed an overall supportive cohort in which individual friendships had also formed, represented in Figure 6 by smaller groups within the larger circle. At the start of the second year, some original members had left and new students were trying to fit into the group after taking a year out of their studies.

Figure 6: Diploma cohort characteristics



Key:

Small circles illustrate groups of friends that formed within the overall cohort, represented by the larger circle. In the second year some individuals have left the course; the small circles on the outside represent students new to the group trying to become part of the overall cohort. (Note: the numbers of circles are illustrative of the point; there were not *literally* two friendship groups and three new students).

Helen neatly summed this up using a metaphor about hair. She suggested that the group members during the first year had formed a close-knit group analogous to a plait, all entwined together. The new members of the group, the 'outsiders' who had not shared the same experiences as those they were joining, were like the end of the plait outside the bobble that held it all together. Helen was shocked at her own description of them as outsiders but was clearly aware of the change to group dynamics that resulted from them joining.

Sarah confirmed at the end of her first year that she had been motivated to continue to attend college by her peer group: 'my motivation actually comes from the group'. She hinted that she was not alone in this:

Because it's not just me who's been feeling oh you know, can I keep going, you know? There's been that general feel across. But the reason that has kept me coming in and not thinking 'oh I'll do some work on my own' is to see everybody and to get that motivation. So it, the group has given a huge amount of motivation, which you asked at the beginning, they have been a motivator and it has been supportive.

In addition to her focus on the group, Sarah's comment provides further evidence of the influence of place and space. 'Coming in' to college is not just about seeing the group, but it includes the importance of the space in which the group is found. In this respect motivation could be seen to be closely aligned to the idea of belonging to a place as well as a group.

Peter described the group camaraderie at the end of the first year as being quite good; however, he did not particularly value the social aspect of learning. He stated that he did not feel much group spirit, citing the relatively short amount of time they spent together and the fact that the tutor joined them for tea breaks. His interesting suggestion that the presence of the tutor inhibited cohesion is explored in detail later.

Helen and Sarah were affected by the change but stated that the friendships between some original members were still strong. They had both made life-long friendships with some students in their group, friendships that had been invaluable in supporting their learning experience.

Group Cohesion was also highlighted in the first two blog entries from the Diploma students. The first post asked if anyone else was finding the course hard going. There seemed to be a concern with some of the course content 'the lecturing is based on don't do as I do, do as I say'; in addition there was the suggestion that sufficient learning could be achieved through reading at home. The blog post suggested that the course had been anticipated to

provide valuable teaching, maybe especially since fees were being paid, but that the expectation of this was not being met. The second post agreed, but both referred positively to the level of support provided by fellow students in the group:

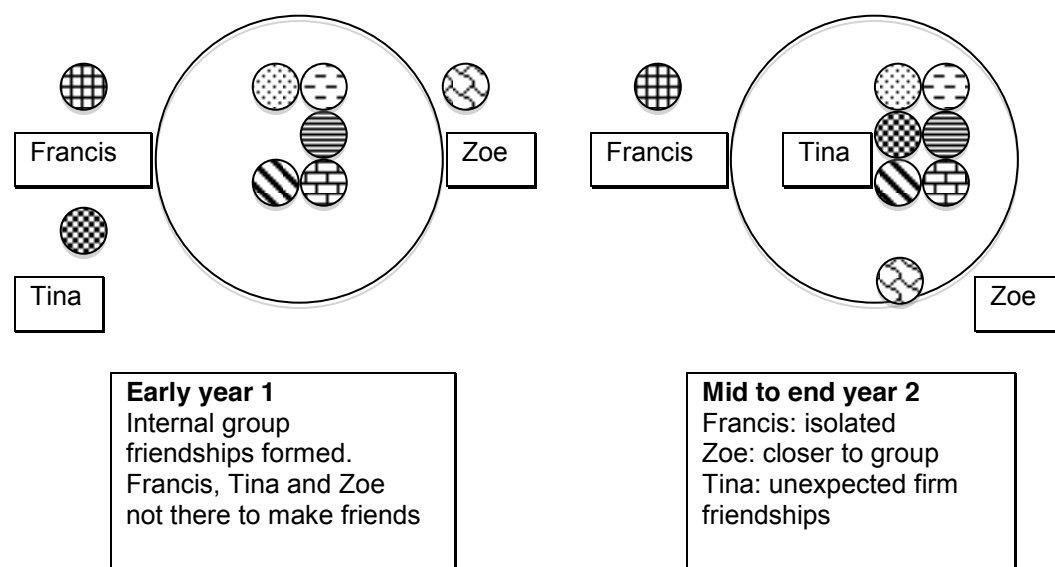
Post 1: On the plus side my peer group is fantastic. What a top bunch of people. They bring a wealth of different experiences to the class and are a really supportive group.

Post 2: Also agree my peer group are amazing. The support from each other is great and the wealth of experience sees me in awe on many occasions

These two posts were made in the first year of study, before any of the change in cohort membership that seems to have caused difficulty during the second year. Again, the language here resonates with strength of feeling – ‘fantastic’, ‘top bunch’, ‘amazing’, ‘awe’. These are words indicating the extent to which group dynamics feed into the learning experience. This suggests that the ability to foster this sense of group cohesion has a direct and positive impact upon motivation to attend college, learn and succeed.

The overall research theme of *change* is evidenced in the findings concerning group dynamics in the Foundation Degree course. Change in this case is not caused by students leaving the course, as with the Diploma programme, but in individual transformation. Figure 7 (overleaf) represents the individual changes seen across the two years of the Foundation Degree.

Figure 7: Foundation Degree cohort characteristics



Key:

Figure 7 illustrates the changes experienced by Tina and Zoe, and the continued isolation of Francis. The left-hand part of the figure represents year one where the small circles (symbolising students) show how friendships formed within the overall cohort. Those on the outside of the larger circle did not form social collaborative relationships with the others. Again, numbers of circles do not represent *absolute* numbers of students, rather the circles are illustrative. The right-hand figure shows the changes. Zoe moved closer to the group following her bereavement, but stayed on the outskirts of the group. Tina formed life-long firm friendships and is seen in the middle of the group of students. Francis' position did not change across the two years of the course, and her circle remains in a remote position away from the group.

The first interviews highlight cohesion and the level of supportive associations within the group, with exceptions from Francis, Tina and Zoe, shown here outside of the main group. Tina, a very independent learner, stated that their tutor stressed from the outset that students would become 'like a little family' in the level of support they could provide for each other, something that Tina only recognised by the end of the course. Initially she remained detached

from the group, preferring to share any worries about the course with her boyfriend rather than fellow students. During the course Tina transformed her sceptical attitude about the potential for strong friendships to be formed. In the right-hand section of the above figure, (representing year two), Tina can be seen as part of a tight-knit group having developed strong friendships that she had not expected to form. She realised that she gained moral support from some of her fellow students who were going through the same experiences she was, a shared experience her boyfriend could not fully appreciate. These findings support the notion of a *community of practice* (Lave and Wenger 1991), where collective values and practices are an intrinsic part of the overall learning experience. Findings on individual transformations are examined later in this chapter.

Zoe was an independent learner at the start of the course. She stated she was not there to make best friends, but thought the group may be supportive. For example, she received some kind comments early in the first year after her dog died, and felt this represented some responsiveness within the group. After her husband died unexpectedly part way through the first year, Zoe said she still did not feel like she was part of the group, but felt a new sensation of being valued *in* the group. Her attendance at the start of the second year was only partial. In her final interview, following her experiences of both having a daughter and the death of her husband, she confirmed her distance from the group:

I've not been dependent on them, I haven't formed close friendships, I don't speak to any of them about any great worries or concerns that I might have.

She did state that some members of the group had been supportive after her husband's death, so she moved closer to the group as indicated in Figure 7 above, but no particular friendships had been formed.

Francis was isolated from the group from the very start and her learning experience was a lonely one. She was the joint youngest in her class and did

not fit in with the group. Figure 7 shows that she stayed outside the group throughout the course. Across the two years she described being apart from the group, feeling unable to contribute to class discussions and never being part of the relationships that she saw other people forming. Francis' learning experience was so unique within this study that a later section of this chapter is devoted specifically to her experience. It examines the premise that she might be described as an 'individual constructivist' but with the *caveat* that further study is required to determine whether this term can be applied with any certainty.

This next section examines the findings about group dynamics from the perspective of those who took part in the Foundation Degree group interview.

Group cohesion was evident from the group interview, with aspects of social collaboration and social learning clearly demonstrated. In addition, the fact that all individuals felt the course was tough led to their own shared community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991), a collective appreciation of what each was going through in order to succeed. These shared interactions led to:

participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means for their lives and for their communities (*ibid.* p98).

From a social constructivist viewpoint, the existence of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) can be inferred from the group in-jokes that were shared during the interview. In talking about how hard it was to fit study into existing busy lives, students shared a joke about how they had found ways to avoid studying. Examples of procrastination were listed as surfing the web, telephoning a friend, having a cup of tea and washing the dog and these elicited much laughter. There is nothing unique about these examples of putting aside studying in favour of more mundane activities. What makes them of interest to this study was the suggestion that they signified close camaraderie and common understanding. Another source of shared

amusement related to the comment that successful completion of the course would result in a better standard of living; this in turn would enable them to “buy better wine, and more of it!”. This phrase was said in unison by everyone in the interview, followed by laughter, suggesting that this was a common refrain that had been used by them during their studies to describe the group focus. Lave and Wenger’s *shared understandings* of the learning experience led to a close community of learning (Lave and Wenger 1991), bound together by their experiences and demonstrated in their ability to laugh together about what they experienced together. These shared in-jokes signify closeness and bonding which gives much greater significance to the content than is necessarily apparent from the words themselves.

Group cohesion was also demonstrated by members of both the Foundation Degree cohorts, and extended into virtual cohesion with the use of electronic forms of communication by *some* members of the groups. The proposed concept of e-motivation is examined next, concerning the ways contemporary communication tools were used by students to motivate both themselves and their fellow students.

5.3.1 Group cohesion: e-motivation (Price with Kadi-Hanifi 2011)

As this research started with the aim of determining the features of an effective learning environment by examining motivating strategies, this chapter discusses the proposed concept of *e-motivation*. This term describes the innovative ways in which students used e-communication tools to motivate themselves and others. Specifically, students made use of text messaging, e-mail and the social networking website Facebook to motivate themselves and each other to keep studying. The data suggest that students used these communication technologies to extend their motivating network outside the college setting. This pushes the boundaries of social constructivist learning, further developing the theory of *e-social constructivist learning* (Salmons 2009) by including e-motivational methods. This section identifies the ways in which students described their use of communication technologies.

Text messaging, e-mails and Facebook were all used, though not by all students, to support individuals to stay on the course; (Peter preferred face-to-face communication over any of these methods). They were used by individuals both to motivate other students and to motivate themselves personally. For example, Helen, married with two children under five years old, talked about the ease of use of texts and e-mail:

I think it's a time thing, it's quicker because you check your e-mails every day so you just fling an e-mail to someone or you've got your phone with you all the time so you just text because it's quicker and it's easier.

The comment about the speed of 'flinging an e-mail' was made in response to my query about whether she used the college VLE *Moodle* to contact fellow students. She said that she only used the intranet site to look for course materials because it was slow and cumbersome to access from college and especially so from home. Helen stated that she and other students were further put off using *Moodle* by the college requirement for multiple log-ins with a password that had to change every 30 days, preferring the convenience of those other methods. Helen summed up her experiences of the usefulness of e-motivating technologies in her final interview. She had talked throughout the two years about how communication technologies had helped in support and motivation, and responded about how useful these had been right to the end of the course:

Right up until the end, right up until the end. There's been emails going backwards and forwards, certainly the last week was just like, go on, yeah, you can do it...there was more actually in that last sort of week and a half, two weeks, there was a lot more texts and emails going backwards and forwards and the odd phone call as well actually, this time, whereas normally, the phone didn't happen.

Two examples from individual interviews also summarised the findings. Sarah was married, worked full time and had three young children and she found that receiving text messages had helped her to stay motivated:

You know I remember this week we've had a few texts...about keeping going, 'not long now', that kind of thing. Texts [have been] supportive, usually it happens when you actually kind of need it.

Likewise, Ruth, a mother with two young children, found that texts enhanced the strong and motivating friendship she made with three other students on the Diploma course:

Whenever we've sort of said "Oh I don't think we're gonna make it!" she's always said [via text] "Well you can't stop because you're gonna get me through this".

Peter was not helped or motivated by any form of electronic communication. He always looked for the positive in any encounter, so found the negativity permeating some blog comments to be unhelpful. He also did not make contact with students outside college, seeing no community spirit in the group. He was the only male in the group and this factor may have contributed to his seeming isolation. Moreover, Peter described himself as a private individual whose professional background in management may also have led him to have a more detached personality. He was happy to speak face-to-face with fellow students at break times, but did not extend this contact outside college.

Findings from the Foundation Degree individual interviews start with the use of e-mail by Francis and Zoe. This section then examines how the social networking website Facebook was used by other students in an innovative way to provide motivating support.

The supportive role of the Foundation Degree tutor was very apparent and communication with her was particularly motivating to Francis early in the course. At the end of her first year, Francis talked about the e-motivating support she had gained from the tutor via e-mail. Her isolation from the group prevented her from seeking support from fellow students, but she valued what the tutor could provide in both practical and emotional motivating encouragement. As she fell behind in her coursework, Francis began to "dread Tuesdays" and she stopped checking her e-mails just in case the tutor had tried to contact her. Her use of the words "dread" and "hate" indicated the depth of feeling she had towards the course and by the early stages of her

second year she perceived that she no longer had the original e-mail lifeline to rely on. All of her original e-motivation through e-mail was gone, and she felt guilty that she was behind in her work; her only support network was no longer available to her.

Zoe relied on e-mail for contact and support from her tutor after her husband died and whilst unable to attend college. For her, the practical and emotional support provided by the tutor was what enabled her to continue to study. For both Francis and Zoe, e-mail support was motivating to some extent.

Beth, a mother with three children in secondary school, gained motivating support through the use of Facebook. She was de-motivated by a low grade for her first assignment but found that inspiring comments left by friends, family and fellow students prevented her from leaving the course. Beth's social support network extended beyond the classroom and fellow students to include family and friends. Her identity as 'student' was recognised by those outside the learning environment, who provided a series of supportive posts on Facebook to motivate her when she was struggling. This example is the essence of e-motivation. Beth used Facebook to extend her network of social collaboration, which in turn motivated her to stay on course. She did not use the blog, and was unable to use the college messaging system because of access difficulties, but created her own way to stay motivated by sharing information and feelings using the medium of Facebook, and developed its usefulness as a motivating tool.

Tina used Facebook for practical support, stating that she liked the fact that Facebook could be used selectively to share limited information:

I am a social body but I have my barriers and boundaries. I really like things like Facebook and stuff like that, because you show and tell what you want to show and tell...And that's it and you know, you can be very friendly with people, you can have a great laugh, but there's that boundary and you don't have to give away what you don't want to give away.

The emotional support received through Facebook was motivating, and again reflects the finding of Group Cohesion, developing the notion of communities of practice through additional means.

Students from the Diploma course group interview did not keep in touch outside the classroom setting via Facebook or the messaging service available through the college intranet; e-mail was the preferred method of e-motivation. One student talked of occasions when she struggled on the course and sent e-mails to the tutor saying she wanted to leave. When asked what motivated her to come back the following week she stated that it was plain-speaking but supportive e-mail replies from her tutor. Four students from the group interview highlighted the effectiveness of e-mail in enhancing a sense of cohesion, 'we're all in it together', particularly as they had formed friendships within a somewhat disjointed group.

E-motivation was demonstrated by all but one of the Foundation Degree students who took part in the group interview. Students in their group discussion talked of the way Facebook made them feel less isolated when they were faced with deadlines or struggled to stay motivated to study. By way of example, by updating their Facebook page with their most recent word-count for an assignment, students understood that they were experiencing the same struggles:

You don't feel isolated, you don't feel like you're on your own in it, you know that other people are doing *exactly* [own emphasis] the same.

Sharing word counts created some element of competition as well as an understanding of the shared experiences of sitting down and writing assignments. This sharing was motivational as it allowed students to gain a sense of togetherness outside of the classroom setting; further evidence of Group Cohesion extending beyond the classroom setting. In relation to writing assignments, e-motivation is more than simply supporting peers via

Facebook. It is the expansion of the cohesion felt in the classroom setting into a virtual unity of people in different physical places doing the same activity, *i.e.* sitting down to compose an essay. This extension of the social network is what is apparent in e-motivation, the fact that students can tap into their supportive social network at any time to receive that encouragement needed to boost their motivation and stay on course.

It has been acknowledged earlier in this work that the Diploma and Foundation Degree courses are both characterised by a high level of assessment. Students indicated that the use of e-motivation tools increased around assignment deadlines. In addition to the level of assessment required on these courses, there is also considerable emphasis placed on continual self-directed study. To illustrate the ways that students managed to fit their HE studies into their already busy lives, the next section discusses the findings about their work, life and study balance.

5.4 Transferable attributes: work, life, study balance

Analysis of the data in relation to the coping and motivating strategies used by adult students to gain benefit from learning and complete their studies now follows. Overwhelmingly, results showed that students did not find it easy to adjust to studying. Textual analysis of the interview data demonstrated repeated use of the words 'struggle', 'juggle', 'pressure' and 'tired'. Analysis identifies the techniques used by students to identify skills and strengths developed during their previous educational and professional experiences. This finding is characterised by the heading Transferable Attributes.

Peter was required by his employer to undertake the Diploma course, so he had to consider his priorities when he took on his new teaching role. Initially there were no problems around balancing work and study. Later he recognised that there was only a limited penalty for late submission of assignments, so his main concern became his own students and he restricted the time he spent studying. This alteration in attitude is a reminder of the

overall theme of *change* throughout this study. Peter was the lecturer responsible for a group of students who were undertaking a project to build a go-kart in order to take part in a competitive race, and he prioritised working with them over additional reading for his assignments. He recognised the implication of doing enough just to pass while still seeing value in gaining the qualification overall. An amusing quote from his second interview highlighted his situation:

From a priority point of view it was what I had to do. Because if it'd said to my new boss "I passed my DTLLS course but, by the way, a little bit of bad news - 45 students didn't pass theirs [laughing] and we made a go-kart that was so unsafe three people have been injured". So you prioritise from that point of view.

All of the Diploma students found the work, life, study balance to be hard from the beginning, and all confessed to struggling throughout. In addition, Ruth and Sarah experienced employment pressures that took precedence over studying. In her first interview, Ruth was philosophical in her acceptance that she was going to have to learn to live with the struggle:

So, you know, I've realised that this is going to be a tough two years with the balance of everything, my house is going to be a mess, I'm just going to have a really bad eating regime with no exercise and I'll deal with that in two years time.

In fact, the physical strain that Ruth experienced was considerable, as described in her final interview:

I don't feel very healthy at the moment...ulcers in the mouth... physically it's taking its toll. I mean, I've put on so much weight over these last two years, I've never been so big. I'm so unfit, I've done no exercise. I feel tired, back pain...not sleeping well, I've actually had palpitations over the last two months.

Sarah also talked of domestic responsibilities that had dropped down her list of priorities and in the first interview set herself the challenge to think of new ways of working:

Fitting the studying in has been hard, it's not that it's really academically challenging, it's that it's time-consuming...So what gives

way because I'm studying? Sleep, tidiness, the house is chaos, the kids have clean clothes but I mean, I'm looking for a cleaner, I'm looking at different ways of working at home. I'm trying to consider about reducing my hours if I can afford it...I actually can't sustain staying up late every night so I'm looking at different ways of working.

It is interesting to note the extent to which study had an impact on Sarah's life. To consider changing ones working hours and practices are significant sacrifices to make in order to continue to study. In her final interview Sarah confessed to the negative effect of studying on her marriage and the pressures on her family and work colleagues, having not changed her working hours:

I started to feel, because the assignment became quite intense, just on hand-in time and just before hand-in, December and January, I felt that it was having an effect on other people. I felt like it was putting some pressure on them, as well as me, so that didn't sit very easy with me at all.

Sarah valued friendships very highly and was self-critical regarding the negative impact that her own actions had on those around her. An examination of the impact of HE level study on the partners and significant others of students themselves is indicated as a subject fitting for further study. This is a topic explored in more detail in Chapter 8 in a section entitled 'Recommendations for further research'.

Blog entries also indicated these pressures. Two words that were used in *all* posts were 'hard' and 'struggle'. They indicated the common difficulties of finding time to study with regards to concurrent job and family commitments.

As Foundation Degree students had to be working or volunteering as Teaching Assistants, they, like the Diploma students, had to try to find ways of fitting study into existing busy lives. The overall experiences of each of the four individually interviewed students were quite different, so, unlike the Diploma students, there were no obvious shared words or themes arising from the textual analysis. Rather, individual cases are presented here demonstrating their experiences. The group interview did produce some

common themes including 'juggling' and 'guilt', and these feelings are explored in this section.

Francis had a difficult learning experience and a troubled personal life. She was isolated from her cohort, an experience detailed earlier in this chapter, and received no interest or support from her family regarding her studies. This latter issue became more significant as the course progressed and in interview three she confessed to a hatred of the course. She fell behind with her assignments, missing numerous deadlines and dreaded checking her e-mail in case her tutor was chasing her to submit work. When we met for her third interview she was trying to work simultaneously on six assignments that had all missed the deadline. She suggested that the summer break had given her a chance to change her negative mindset and use some practical strategies to help balance her work, life and study:

[I thought] right, over the summer I'm going to completely switch off, come back with an absolute fresh mind. And in September I came back and I was so organised, and I had folders for each like module and I had a note book that I wrote in every week, and I was like right, tasks I've got to do these tasks and I was doing the tasks.

Time management was a particular problem for her and Francis ended up not starting assignments until only three days before a deadline. She would pass them successfully, but be disappointed in herself that she had not managed to fit studying into her life in a way that made it enjoyable.

Zoe was not employed whilst undertaking the course, so she had flexibility in when she undertook her voluntary placement. However, she was pregnant and already looking after two children, so she balanced her study by turning down additional commitments. For example, she agreed during the summer before the course started to chair the local school Parent Teacher Association, but withdrew her offer once she was accepted onto the Foundation Degree course:

So that's how I balance it by not taking on too much and saying no to things which in the past I found very difficult to do.

Acceptance onto the course, and the recognition of the commitment required to pass it led to an increased confidence in saying 'no' to taking on extra work.

Zoe's later experience was uniquely difficult following the death of her husband and she relied on practical family support to cope with studying. Her main concern was that she felt she was doing too little academic work, but she had to allow herself time and recognise her own capabilities.

In common with Ruth from the Diploma course, Tina confessed that she coped by abandoning housework! She humorously suggested that:

I feel as though all the little jobs, housework, eye tests, dentist appointments, getting flea drops for the cat etc. etc. etc. are just building up and building up – I know they've got to be sorted but they're so far down the list, there's just never a day to get to them! I may have to sit down, write them all out and set myself a two-per-week target. How sad!

Beth seemed to be managing well in the first year. She had three school-age children, and said early on in the first year that the good relationship she had with her children meant that they recognised when she needed time and space to study without distracting her. However, the increased workload over the year resulted in Beth leaving the study, stating that pressure of course work made it impossible to continue.

Tina used the word 'juggling' in her second interview, to indicate the challenges inherent in managing all her commitments. This metaphor was used by a number of respondents; others too were used to describe the learning experience and these findings are detailed later.

Overall from the Diploma group interview, there was a general feeling that the course was tough and it was difficult to manage the balance between work, life and study. Three interviewees were working as full-time teachers in the college while taking the Diploma course, two others held teaching or training

jobs elsewhere and the remaining respondents had teaching placements to fit around existing employment. A competitive attitude was evidenced by unresolved disagreement over which was the harder route, to take the course whilst teaching full-time, or to fit the teaching requirements into an existing non-teaching job role.

The language used to describe this difficult learning experience signified pressure, struggle and a tough time, notably Sarah's description of the course's 'invasion' of her life. These are highly charged words linking to the metaphors used and examined later. They all indicate the level of commitment required to undertake the highly assessed Diploma course, and imply that students may not have been fully prepared for the extent of the workload before they embarked on the course.

In common with individual respondents, those who took part in the group interview all commented on how tough it was to balance work and study commitments. Students were studying multiple modules in the second year and also had to undertake a piece of action research within their placement setting, all adding to a heavy workload. The metaphor of 'juggling' was again used in this interview to depict the complexities of HE study. All but one of the students in the group interview had children, so a number of them talked of juggling their time and energy between their study requirements and the needs of their family. One described how she failed in this attempt to juggle everything, and how her personal life 'encroached' on the course, making it very difficult to separate study from family life. One student also talked about how hard it was to juggle multiple modules, having to divide concentration and time between numerous topics at any one time.

'Guilt' was another theme shared by many. As a result of the workload increasing in the second year, one student described feelings of guilt arising from spending less time with her children than she wished, a feeling echoed with general agreement by the group. She went on, laughing, to describe how

she had been determined to spend quality time with them at Christmas and immediately felt guilty for taking time out of her studies.

Blog entries showed that Foundation Degree respondents were using constructive metaphors of 'building' to portray feelings of being inundated with a multitude of tasks. Zoe talked of work 'building up', Tina of household jobs 'building up and up'. Both these students in interview indicated how they used existing skills, or transferable attributes, to manage these tasks. Zoe used her organisational skills to prioritise those tasks that were 'stacking up', enabling her to concentrate on her studies by delegating certain responsibilities to her family. These were characteristics developed during her days as a police officer. Tina tried to keep detached from the group, a tactic she knew had helped her to stay motivated and succeed in the past. This ability to draw on existing parts of their personality became a coping strategy for successful learning.

Blog use was just as sporadic as that of the Diploma cohort, and the final entry was made even earlier (in February 2009). Students similarly admitted in their interviews that the level of mandatory assessment, planning and assignment work required on the course left no time to spend on an additional research component that provided no immediate value to themselves as students. Taking part in interviews twice a year was not perceived as too great a burden to add to their work, but finding time to write an unnecessary blog risked wasting too much of their study time. Tina's penultimate post in October 2008 ends:

So, it's two (assignments) down, and only a million to go! LOL. Which leads me to signing off, as I should really be doing that rather than this.

The clear implication from these findings is that the Foundation Degree course requires a level of practice and assignment work that is tough to manage on top of all other life commitments. Evidence from these findings about the extent to which students are prepared for this level of work before the course begins are discussed in Chapter 7.

The next section explores some of the metaphors students used in individual and group interviews to appraise their learning experience. It looks at language as playing a key part in the communities of practice conceptualised by Lave and Wenger to describe the ways people take part in a collective process of learning (Lave and Wenger 1991). These results explore how students used metaphors to portray the spirit of their learning experiences. These results provide further evidence of the importance of Group Cohesion and the use of Transferable Attributes.

5.5 Group cohesion and transferable attributes: metaphors of learning

Students described their learning experiences using a variety of shared and unique metaphors. Metaphors are powerful tools for analysis. The specific examples arising from the data and explored here are listed in Table 8.

Table 8: Shared and unique metaphors of learning

| Shared metaphors (pertain to the shared metaphors identified in Figure 5) | Unique metaphors (examples of the 'Burnout' metaphor) |
|--|--|
| Journey | Pain |
| Obstacle | Boiling pot |
| Running | |
| Juggling | |

Many of the metaphors used were not unique and may even be so commonplace as to be thought of as cliché. What was most interesting was not their lack of originality but the fact that students used metaphor to make tangible their experiences and to share their experiences of learning in a way that made those experiences 'real' and clearly understood by the researcher.

The use of metaphorical language to describe the learning experience led to a shared understanding of the experience between respondent and researcher and the creation of the collaborative knowledge that developed from the

interview conversation. Metaphors were not actively encouraged or sought during the interviews but arose naturally in conversation. Some metaphorical images and descriptions were used by students on both courses, reflecting the overall nature of HE learning rather than specific elements of each curriculum.

In much of the language used to describe the learning experience there was a persistent focus on i) physicality and ii) on-going progress. In other words, many of the metaphors made reference to physical concepts including 'obstacle' and others suggested dynamic, active elements of learning like 'journey', 'juggling' or 'running a mile'.

In addition to accepting the fluctuating nature of some of their secondary motivations, many respondents used the metaphor of juggling to describe how they managed the complex task of coping with work, home, life and study. One survey respondent wrote that 'time management helped in juggling commitments', hinting at practical ways used to cope, but Ruth in her last interview reflected on her failure to manage the balance when handing in a piece of assessed work:

[this is] probably the second [assignment] I've handed in late over two years with juggling everything else.

She was disappointed not to have met the deadline and her own rigorous self-expectations, but was resigned to accepting the grade penalty. She recognised the impact of having to manage her life and her priorities.

All interview respondents who used the metaphor of *juggling* to describe their current experiences did so during their third interview, during the second year of their course. This suggests that they may have acquired a greater awareness of the balancing act required to manage HE study and had developed better strategies to manage all the elements of work, life and study over the duration of the first year. Ruth's example does show however that the strategies are not always successful.

Alongside the metaphor of *journey* there arose others pertaining to obstacles that resonate with parts of Taylor's work on the 'geography' of education research, with particular reference to scale (Taylor 2009). Specifically, both Sarah and Ruth experienced occasions where the amount of work they faced was overwhelming, both using the metaphor of a mountain in their third interview to describe their perspective:

Sarah - And the second year, you think, oh my God, that's massive, there's a bit of a mountain to climb here.

Ruth - I had this mountain of work I needed to do and I was stood at the bottom looking at this mountain going, where do I start?

These physical, tangible metaphors improve our understanding of a student's appreciation of study at HE level. There is a physical *enormity* expressed in a description of facing a mountain, acknowledging the scale of the undertaking and the level of dedication required to stay on course. There is a perceived physical barrier in the extent of work required to complete the course, and a psychological awareness of the intellectual and emotional challenges to be faced and overcome in order to succeed. These metaphors of scale indicate an awareness of the magnitude and range of the effort required and the prospective hindrance to their motivation.

Other metaphors were unique to the individual. Two Diploma students described their learning experience using metaphors that were congruent with their own backgrounds and made links to their previous professional identities. These results are demonstrations of Transferable Attributes. Sarah, a nurse, used the metaphor of pain awareness, and Helen, a chef, referred to a boiling pot to illustrate her experience of temporary burnout. These were particularly interesting from the perspective of the way these individuals drew on experiences that formed their previous professional identities to help them cope in their new learning environment.

Sarah and Helen used individual metaphors to relate their learning stories, examples which were clearly congruent with their professional backgrounds

prior to joining their course. Sarah, a qualified nurse undertaking the Diploma programme, told the following story when considering her consciousness of the workload associated with her course:

You know when someone's got pain and there's pain perception and there's pain tolerance. And your perception of pain and your tolerance of pain drops if you're tired, so you haven't had the same amount of sleep, you're emotionally upset about something or you're feeling stressed or under pressure, that's how the course feels in a way. If I get very, very tired, something else is emotionally draining elsewhere, or work is really intense, then sustaining this level becomes harder work and I think that's when it feels a lot heavier. And then when things are feeling like they're going quite swimmingly right, then it feels lighter.

This metaphor did not appear to have been rehearsed in preparation for the interview but it emerged naturally from her awareness of the physical and emotional effect of realising that her motivation had diminished. She had learned from and then interpreted her experiences as part of our conversation. Her job involved working with people with cancer who experienced pain, and who she supported to develop their own coping strategies to enable them to preserve quality of life. Therefore, Sarah's metaphor came from comparison of herself with others in a different situation she was very familiar with. She could see how external experiences reflected her internal state - the 'someone' in the first line of her quote reverting to herself by line five: 'If I get very, very tired'.

Another Diploma student, Helen, a very determined individual, experienced quite an intense learning experience, always pushing to get to the top 'as fast and as hard as possible'. She talked about her fluctuating emotional journey, and recognised her need for crying and emotional release:

I've done it to pressure release it, does that make sense? I mean my pressure release is to burst into tears. And it's like lifting the lid on a boiling pot it just lets that steam out, and you put the lid back on and let it build up a bit more.

Her 'boiling pot' metaphor described her learning experience in a way that was harmonious with her personal identity as a professional chef. Helen

related her experience of a New Year's party as head chef, describing the pressure of having to serve 200 desserts five minutes after midnight, when everybody had cheered in the new year, saying that she found that easier than coping with the stresses on the Diploma course.

Both examples demonstrate that these students used metaphor to make sense of their experiences and relate them back to situations with which they were familiar. They drew on their existing skills or attributes and brought them forward to their new identity. Sarah was successful in acknowledging her consciousness of workload; Helen understood her own values. Both transferred those previous successes and drew on those attributes to stay motivated.

The transformative influence of learning became evident in the final interviews. Based on a variety of studies defining the psychological and health benefits of learning (for examples see Hammond 2004, Hammond and Feinstein 2005, Sabates and Hammond 2008, and Weir 2008), students were asked if they felt they had changed during their learning experience. Findings on the transformative influence of learning identified in the final interviews are presented next.

5.6 Transformation from learning

Peter's view when asked about whether he had changed over the duration of the course was somewhat pragmatic. He laughed when I asked if he had noticed any change in his well-being, stating only that he had done what was needed to gain the qualification. He had developed an interest in psychology and had recognised the impact on his teaching, but did not admit to having changed in himself. The fact that he was taking the course as a mandatory part of his new teaching role may have been influential.

The others however did describe examples of changes in their self-awareness, Helen of becoming more assertive and Zoe in recognising self-

worth. Their learning experiences changed the way in which they saw themselves. Helen reflected in her last interview:

I've just got so much going on in my life at the moment, it's crazy, but I've got these two cans. One is that I've opened a can of understanding, which is great, brilliant and I've opened a massive can of worms in my head - [laughing] - of things I now need to learn to handle. I need to learn how to sort things through and how to react to different situations, because I know more, I know differently now.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. You know yourself more?

H: Yes, I understand myself, so therefore, I now know that when something happens or somebody says something, I have to think about it, but I know I will, I know I react differently, I'm a lot more assertive...I think that's doing the personal journey, you look at Maslow and you work your way up and you can see yourself working your way through all the different levels.

Interviewer: You're at that self-actualisation point?

H: Yes!

Ruth's interest in new knowledge had expanded outside of the classroom into unexpected areas:

I went to a comedy night a week ago and someone made some joke about Pavlov and his dogs you know within Behaviourism and it was like ho, ho, ho I could get that joke, I could *get* that joke [laughing].

Her learning had enriched her social life in unexpected ways. Ruth reflected that studying at HE level had given her the opportunity to see herself for the first time in an academic role, and indeed she hinted at wishing to study further.

These final findings can be interpreted as demonstrating the wide individual and social benefits of learning. Individual transformation comes not only from learning specific theories or facts, but also from application of learning to one's own whole life and self. This notion of the richness of learning and the effect upon self and identity reflects straight back to Hammaraskjold's quote at the beginning of Chapter 1. Students may not have intended to start upon a

quest for the source of their being, but individual transformation and development seems to lead to a deeper understanding of self.

Francis' response to the question regarding personal change was met with a negative response. She experienced a number of setbacks during the course, related to employment opportunities, and saw only what she thought of as the worthlessness of the qualification. She seemed to have a natural tendency to see the worst aspects of each experience, though her fear of failure prevented her from leaving. She saw no positive change by the end of her studies.

Beth did not stay in the study until the end of her course, but her change was already apparent in her second interview. She had learned practical skills and new information useful to her role, so her own transformation was formulated around how she perceived herself to be a more useful and rounded person in work.

Tina expressed surprise at what great friendships she had formed over the two years. She was doubtful in the first interview about the tutor's suggestion that significant relationships would be made during the study, but she recognised by the end that she had learned from the group and had made some long-term friends. She had not expected to form these supportive relationships, but transformed her attitude towards this aspect of learning.

Zoe's reflections were also interesting. She talked throughout the interviews about identity and how this changed after her husband died. She was no longer 'wife' but now 'single mum' and had noticed a change in attitude towards her from other mothers at the school gate:

And you make friendships in the playground as a parent, with other parents, but then because my circumstance changed in that I was a couple and now I'm not, I noticed people distance themselves.

Gaining her qualification however had given her a professional identity, and that had enhanced her sense of self-worth:

Perhaps it's given me an identity, perhaps it's giving, rather than just being a mum, which is a lovely occupation to have, but then I'm not fickle in that way that a qualification, calling myself a graduate or a teacher or whatever should make people think any differently of me, but I think it does. It is a reflection, I think. People make judgments about you on a job title.

Zoe stated on more than on occasion during her interviews that she did not have a great deal of self-esteem, but she was transformed by her studies and achievement into someone who recognised her own value.

Those final year students who took part in the Foundation Degree group interview talked about individual transformation *and* highlighted the wider benefits of studying. One described how her greater knowledge about learning disabilities had helped her to recognise dyslexia in her own child and to seek support for her. She recognised the application of knowledge to her own circumstances, demonstrating the wider social value of learning as applied to an individual's family. Another respondent also demonstrated how individual learning could inspire others to learn when she said that her experiences on the course had led her own daughter to apply to go to university. Her application was successful and they had supported each other, shared their learning experiences and developed together. She had given her daughter the confidence to apply, who stated that she would never have done so without the motivating effect of seeing her mother learn. These two examples show that learning does not necessarily take place separately from other elements of life; the influence of social collaboration and resulting transformation can extend to those within a wider social circle.

Individual changes were also apparent from the experience of learning. A number of respondents discussed how they had learned how to be independent learners and also how that skill could be extended outside the classroom into their professional roles. Practical skills included learning how

to manage time effectively and how to incorporate study into their working and family lives. The group also indicated a general consensus that learning and achieving their qualification had led to greater self-confidence, a finding that supports much literature on the emotional benefits of study (Hammond 2004, Hammond and Feinstein 2005, Sabates and Hammond 2008). These findings however contradict Simmons proposition that the lower status of Foundation Degrees and vocational based HE learning results in students feeling second best (Simmons 2010). In fact, no evidence in support of this was apparent during the study. These students were transformed by their learning and took that transformation into their wider social groups of family and friends. Their learning experience was clearly enhanced by the expertise of the FE lecturer and the small class sizes, but their transformation was arguably just as profound as that which could be felt by other undergraduate learners.

Having examined the overall learning experiences of students, this chapter now goes on to present the case study of Francis who was an individual who remained isolated from her group for the whole two years. I call her an 'individual constructivist' and describe her story here.

5.7 The 'individual constructivist'

I have long reflected on the learning experience of Francis and consider her to be an *individual constructivist*. By way of explanation, Francis 'constructed' her knowledge based on her previous experiences, and she did this in a classroom of other people to whom she listened. However, she took no active part in any lesson, gained no support from fellow students or her family and received encouragement only from her tutor. She constructed new knowledge and used this in her work, but did so without the 'social' or collaborative aspects of social constructivist theory.

Her story is a lonely one. At 18, Francis was the youngest of the interviewees and was joint youngest in her Foundation Degree group. She chose the college because it was local, the course fitted in with her placement and

because she knew the campus. The importance and relevance of 'place' was a fundamental factor for Francis:

I feel if I go somewhere where I don't where I am, it worries me and I prefer being in a place that I sort of know and it helps me relax a lot more. It might sound silly but I don't like being in places that I don't know very well and big places, like if I went to the actual uni it would have been huge and I'd just be too scared I think.

From the very first interview she stated that she was not fitting in, partly because most of the other members of her group were older than her. Francis wished that she could fit in, but confessed that she was more familiar with the role of an outsider. Being bullied at school had made her determined but isolated:

I don't fit in with them which makes it hard for me to do the course. Everyone else sort of gets along really and it's nice to watch them but then you wish that you were kind of involved in it, *but that's life* (whispered). But I'm there to do the course...so as long as I get my work done that's all that matters really.

In her second interview in June 2009 Francis described a tough year. She had not really connected with anyone and talked to nobody outside class. She would come in to college, listen, then go home. She would watch other students share ideas but could not disclose her own, finding it especially hard in group work because she did not speak to people. Francis learned a great deal by listening to others but her lack of self-confidence prevented her from taking an active part in discussions:

there's nobody I speak to outside of any classes or anything. I don't take part in the lessons, I don't really interact with anybody else.

By the start of the second year, Francis tried to change her mindset and attempted to make contact with her group by e-mail and Facebook. However, her attempts were unsuccessful. E-mails were unanswered and her Facebook comments elicited no responses, though she observed other students sharing

information and motivating messages that way. Her belated attempts to become part of the group came too late to overcome the initial barrier created by her isolation.

Her third and fourth interviews were characterised by further struggle and loneliness. Francis was hurt when she was turned down for a job for which she felt she was more qualified than the successful candidate. She interpreted the other person's success as arising from "it's not what you know it's who you know". When later she met someone whose job she felt would be her ideal occupation, she was devastated to discover that the role required no formal qualifications:

So it's just taught me that qualifications don't get you anywhere, so I'm just thinking what's the point, you know... So I just feel like I'm doing it now for no reason at all, I feel like there is no benefit from doing this course, it's not going to get me anywhere.

Francis also identified that she needed demonstrations of support from her family, but they offered no encouragement and she suggested that they did not even remember that she was doing the course. These factors were demotivating:

I think if someone was proud of me and was noticing what I was doing I think it would make a huge difference but I have nobody. Like I'll go home on a Tuesday night and mum and dad are like "Well why are you home late, where have you been?"

It's as if [the course is] banned from talking about. I've never been asked a single grade, I've never been asked how I'm getting on, nothing. And I think that's true where you want the support to come from isn't it, the ones that love you...I want to hear it from my mum and my dad you know, my family.

In spite of this negativity and isolation, Francis achieved her ambition 'to be the first in the family to get the cap and gown' and she successfully achieved her Foundation Degree.

I considered earlier in this chapter if there is enough evidence from this study to propose the term individual constructivist. At the start of the Foundation

Degree course three learners could be described as remote and apart from the group, Francis, Tina and Zoe, and their experiences were represented above in Figure 7. All three isolated students learned by listening to group interactions and constructing their new knowledge based also on their own previous experiences. They all demonstrated significant learning and development and successfully passed the course. Their experiences aligned to some degree with the model of constructivist learning. However, Tina, and to a lesser extent Zoe, changed their initial experience of working outside the group, Zoe moving closer to some people and Tina forming firm friendships. Their learning developed to include the *social* element of social constructivism. I considered whether I could offer the term individual constructivist to describe these learners since they clearly benefited from some of the social aspects of studying but without any particularly active engagement with the group. Since Tina and Zoe transformed their original attitudes during their studies, I am reluctant to make an ontological assumption based on the sole case of Francis. Further study is needed to establish if others share Francis' experience. When I asked her if she had seen any evidence of social collaborative learning theory in her own learning experience, Francis herself said:

The thing is with social learning, you have to be in the group to do it. If you're in the group you're fine, if not you're on your own.

The opportunity also arose to establish how students felt about being part of this study, and the reflections of two of the Foundation Degree students are examined in the next section.

5.8 After the interviews: students' personal reflections

In addition to considering the individual changes experienced as a result of the learning experience, I considered what the participants felt about being part of the study. This was prompted by comments from two Diploma students. In her first interview Sarah said:

I feel like I've just sat here and talked about myself, it's like having a counselling session [laughing].

She had been talking about the support she had received from her group and the tiring effect of the pressure she put herself under always to achieve high grades. Helen also reflected on her learning experience and her own transformation and in her third interview likened the opportunity to do this to being in counselling.

After the individual interviews were completed, I e-mailed each respondent to ask if they had found any benefits from taking part in the research. Of the group of seven who had stayed with the study, only two Foundation Degree students responded to my e-mail, Tina and Zoe. This section presents the e-mailed comments received from them both.

They had recognised the personal benefits of participation in this study and the opportunity it gave them to reflect on their learning. Each comment is interesting so they are both reproduced in full here. Firstly Tina:

I would say that the main impact of being part of your study was to allow me a bit of time to stop and really look at what I was doing, to think about things from a step back. Also I felt really pleased with what I had done and was doing, partly because of thinking about some of the difficulties I'd had and some of my achievements in overcoming these. I expect it was probably a bit motivating too, to have someone interested in what you're doing though I'm not sure I was aware of this at the time.

Tina had been given the chance of retrospective evaluation of her experience of being part of the study. Her comment on the motivating factor of attention from someone is reminiscent of the remarks from the Foundation Degree group interview that the personal interest of their tutor was motivating, though in Tina's case this seemed to be unconscious. Zoe's comment held a similar theme:

The Foundation Degree was a journey for me and it was good to touch base with you at different places during that journey. It gave me a chance to reflect on my experiences at that time and focus my thoughts. Sometimes we don't quite know why we're doing something until we step back and see it from another viewpoint. Your questioning allowed me to do that.

Examining these comments through the lens of social constructivist learning theory, and combining this with the notion of co-construction of knowledge, it is clear that these respondents were transformed by their learning. They constructed new *selves* and used the opportunity offered by being part of a study to step back and observe that change while they learned.

These comments evoke the experiences of counsellors and midwives during supervision, professionals who both use formal conversation with a supervisor to reflect on their practice. They indicate that the ability to step back from learning was a powerful learning tool in itself, enabling consolidation of learning and recognition of their achievements. Evidently not all students can take part in research interviews, but if this kind of self-examination could be incorporated into the tutorial programme in an HE setting then this might encourage self-reflection and ultimately improve retention rates.

5.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has presented data that show the complex combination of both individual and group features that make up the totality of the learning experience. Applying Johns' model to 'look out' on the content of the learning histories, it is evident that there are many parallels and commonalities in the learning experiences of students on these two courses. The learning histories shared by all of the respondents in this study present complex, rich and diverse stories that result in the co-creation of new knowledge about the learning experience at HE in FE. This collaborative, constructive approach to exploring experiences led to the development of the traditional ethnographic paradigm to include the inside-out-inside nature of mutual identities and shared research. The resulting model of proximal ethnography is presented in Chapter 4 (Method), because its creation is based on the findings from the group interviews from both courses.

On 'looking in', these learning histories resonate with a sense of the extent to which students have to dig deep inside themselves to stay motivated, learn

and succeed. Their ability to amalgamate life, work and study are redolent of my own experiences in undertaking this research. My learning experience has been one that has included fluctuating motivation, occasions when the thought of giving up was briefly tempting but was counteracted by a single-minded determination to succeed. I have developed as a researcher, a teacher and a person as a result of spending time with a group of people who were equally determined to achieve their qualification. They shared with me their stories of anxiety, uncertainty and ultimately their elation at graduation, a ceremony I was delighted to be able to attend.

The next chapter offers the findings that arose from analysis of the survey responses. The survey was included as an additional data gathering method to increase the geographical area from which information about the HE in FE learning experience could be gained. It was intended that quantitative survey data could be used to supplement interview data and give greater authority to the resulting epistemology. Results are offered separately from the interview data because information is included from other courses in addition to the Diploma and Foundation Degree. All courses do fit under the umbrella term of 'teacher training', and justification of this separation was made in Chapter 4.

Chapter 6: Survey findings

Questionnaire respondents are not passive data providers for researchers; they are subjects not objects of research (Cohen et al. 2008 p317)

This chapter outlines the findings from the survey, and gives information on withdrawal rates and reasons for withdrawal for Diploma and Foundation Degree students in the college where the interviews took place. Withdrawal data comes from the two academic years *after* the individually interviewed cohorts. Survey data has been analysed as a whole, but individual responses are used to give a personal impression of the data. Specific written comments from the survey are used where they summarise a point well, or are typical of many of the responses made.

An on-line survey was used to gather quantitative data from students on courses under the umbrella term of 'teacher training'. The original request for student participation was aimed at those on the Diploma and Foundation Degree, the same courses as those interviewed in this study. However, the e-mailed link to the survey was sent to other students too, to cohorts interpreted by other college lecturers as eligible to take part. Responses from students on courses completely outside the remit of this study were removed, specifically apprenticeships and masters courses.

A total of 59 survey responses provided data from first and second year students in four FE colleges in the region. Of the 66 original responses, two contained no answers and were deemed outliers or spoiled surveys; five surveys were completed by individuals studying apprenticeships or masters level seven courses, so these were also discounted from the final total. Surveys were sent to FE colleges offering HE courses within the Midlands region. Survey responses were accepted from both first and second year students on the Diploma course, the Foundation Degree, a Certificate of Education (Cert. Ed.) and the Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE). The on-line questionnaire was designed to provide additional data from other

FE colleges, which could be compared with information from individual and group interviews.

79% of survey respondents were female. The age distribution is given in Table 9

Table 9: Age distribution of survey respondents

| Age group | Number of respondents | Percentage of total |
|------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 18-29 | 5 | 8.5% |
| 30-39 | 14 | 23.7% |
| 40-49 | 31 | 52.6% |
| 50-59 | 8 | 13.5% |
| 60+ | 1 | 1.7% |

In common with findings from the individual interviews, the majority of survey respondents chose their college because it was local (58%). One quarter responded that they had studied there previously, and the remainder chose an institution based on its facilities or on a recommendation. On examining other rationales for choice of course, 53% stated it would help in their career and 22% that it was compulsory for their job. Some chose the course because it was interesting to them (13%), 7% took the course because it had been recommended to them, and 5% ticked 'simply for the fun of studying'.

Within the 'comments' section regarding choice of course, two respondents made observations on wider aspects of learning. Specifically, one first year female Diploma student (50-59) gave the reason as '*personal ambition, self-esteem*' and the other, a female first year Foundation Degree student, (40-49) '*to prove to myself that I am capable of doing it, and at my age have some brain cells left!!*'

Sense of achievement and *personal goals* were also given as answers to question eight concerning the motivation to keep studying, indicating that internal measures of success were intrinsically motivating to some. In response to the question “What motivates you to keep studying on your course?” students could choose multiples of the options available, in other words as many as they felt were applicable. Two thirds were motivated by the potential to gain a new career and 22 respondents stated it gave them the opportunity to earn more money, supporting findings from the interviewed cohorts.

10 students (17%) shared Francis’ motivation of picturing themselves at graduation. 26 (three quarters of the sample) stated that they were motivated by the enjoyment of learning something new (perhaps a pleasingly positive outlook on learning), and the majority of those added that they liked doing something stimulating. It must be remembered, however, that survey respondents have self-selected to take part in this research so it is impossible to ascertain just how many HE learners do not share these optimistic views.

Again in line with the individual interviewees, one survey question asked about feelings about wanting to leave. 52% of respondents stated that they had felt like giving up ‘occasionally’. Of the 10 respondents who were taking their course compulsorily, half admitted to occasionally feeling like giving up, two considered it frequently and the remaining three said they had never felt like giving up. Reasons for not quitting from those who were obliged to study included:

Stress when completing assignments led to me feeling like giving up the course. This was overcome by asking for additional support. Once the support was received I felt happier. (Female, 18-29, Diploma first year).

I’ve never truly thought about quitting, but I have been fed up at times. But if I want to continue to be a Lecturer I know I need to get through it. So it suppose it’s practicalities more than anything else. (Female, 40-49, PGCE second year).

One Foundation Degree respondent (Female, 40-49, first year) summed up her feelings in a way that echoed so many stories from all the other interviews:

The thought crossed my mind possibly 6 weeks in, (but not seriously enough). I think it was just an organising issue & possibly a guilty feeling of not being 'mum' 100% of the time. Now though, would I give up? Never in a million years, it's changed me for the better and I don't want to feel I have simply 'given up' when the going has got tough, I'm proud of my achievements so far.

Two responses to the question of 'how respondents had overcome feelings of wanting to give up' suggested the important role played by fellow students in offering support, related back to the interview data about group cohesion and friendship. Support came from:

Speaking to my peers on the course about my feelings and frustrations. Talking to my mentor and also my colleagues at work who've also completed the course. (Female, 30-39, Cert. Ed. second year).

Support and encouragement from others to continue (Female, 30-39, Diploma first year).

Again, those students who had shared the same learning experience were part of a shared community of practice, a close collaborative and supportive cohort learning together.

In relation to the topic of 'balancing the competing demands of work, life and study' respondents were asked to rate how easy it had been to fit college study into their existing life commitments (Question 10, Appendix 4). Only one ticked 'Very easy'! The oldest (60+) respondent, a female first year Diploma student stated:

I am semi-retired only because I have little work, so I have enough time for study too. Nevertheless, I find that the work for the course often conflicts with preparation for my classes and I struggle with both deadlines.

Four respondents (7%) found the courses 'easy' to manage. The seven (12%) who gave a 'neutral' response highlighted that they used strategies to manage the balance:

It's been tough but my time management has allowed me to juggle all my commitments (Female, 18-29, PGCE first year).

I have to make time and do less of other leisure activities (Male, 40-49, Cert. Ed. first year).

Sometimes the time spent has meant I have to scale back my other activities, as I have made it a priority (Male, 50-59, Cert. Ed. second year).

These comments also reflect the experiences of those interviewed respondents who talked of changing priorities, giving up housework or turning down social events in order to study.

45 respondents (76% of the total) found their course difficult or very difficult to manage. One female second year PGCE student (40-49) described her life, a story that typified many of the experiences of those who found studying very difficult to manage:

I work and try to be home for my children as well as doing the course, and it has been very difficult to balance all of this. I am stressed out most of the time, feeling like I am giving neither my home life, work life or college life enough commitment. I am often working late into the night, either finishing college work or catching up on teaching work that I don't have time to do during the day. I nearly completely miss out on any leisure time for myself; I'm always having to finish work, sort something for the children, cook dinner, do the laundry, etc. There is always SOMETHING that needs doing, and I seldom get the chance to just chill out. I constantly feel as though I am not performing well enough in any aspect of my life.

Here, leisure time and 'chill out' time had been given up, but there is an admission in the last line that the pressure of study was having an impact on all other aspects of life. Literature is inconclusive regarding ways to manage the balance of work and study, suggesting variously that separation of study from other parts of life is best (Baxter and Britton 2001, Lowe and Gayle 2008) or that integration is the most successful strategy (Kember 1999, Winn

2002). Here, neither approach seems apparent; the student struggled and perceived the balance as 'very difficult' as a result.

In line with the overall research aim of evaluating the role of social media and communication technology in extending social collaborative learning and motivation, respondents were requested to identify any of a list of electronic forms of communication they used to keep in touch outside college (Question 11 in Appendix 4 lists the options given in the survey). Again they could tick as many options as were applicable to them. Of the list presented, all used e-mail, eight kept in contact using an on-line forum, 13 used text messaging, three used a blog, 11 telephoned each other and seven used social network sites such as Facebook.

Survey entries indicated that Facebook was used around assignment deadlines:

When we are writing an assignment there is normally quite a few of us 'live' on Facebook giving each other encouragement. I have found this support invaluable (Female, 40-49, Diploma second year).

And further:

Communicating and receiving support off peers helps because I gain more knowledge and am able to complete assignments and also feel motivated (Female, 18-29, Diploma first year).

These comments epitomised many responses regarding the shared experiences and difficulties associated with learning:

It is nice to know that other people are suffering the same hardships as you, and that we can empathise with each other...Since I'm going through the same problems, I can motivate by telling how I overcame them, using e-mail and Facebook. (Male, 50-59, Cert. Ed. first year).

Realising that we all, at some points, have been feeling the same demotivation has helped to spur me on. I am not alone! (Female, 40-49 second year, course identified as 'Teacher Training').

14 respondents who used any form of electronic communication to motivate themselves, also used them to motivate others (Questions 12 and 13, Appendix 4). Two of those only used e-mail, the remainder also made use of texts, blogs, a messaging service and seven included use of Facebook. Of helping others, one respondent stated:

One lady loves Facebook and I have given her lots of encouraging messages which she has said helped (Female, 40-49, PGCE second year).

The remainder of respondents said they did not use any form of electronic communication to help *themselves* to be motivated, but nine stated they did support *others* in this way. Motivating support of this type was practical, giving advice on assignments or giving information after an absence:

Having experienced a similar situation with my degree course, I have sought to reassure a fellow student (who was contemplating leaving the course) that it is possible to balance a busy work life with studying. I emphasised that whilst you sometimes cannot see the woods for the trees you need to set yourself short-term goals and then gradually achieve them in order to achieve your long-term goal. However, I must say that after completing my degree course I did say that I would never put myself through that again! (Male, 40-49, PGCE first year).

To those who responded positively to question 12, whether 'forms of e-communication had been useful in motivating oneself', text analysis showed that a theme common to the expanded answers was the importance of the shared experience. The knowledge that others were experiencing the same difficulties seemed to have a positive impact on motivation. For example:

We have a blog specifically for our course and I have often read other people's entries and been calmed by the fact that they are going through the same things. (Female, 30-39, Cert. Ed. second year).

It has helped to reassure me that others feel the same way as I do and that I am not alone (Female, 30-39, Foundation Degree first year).

Staying in touch with some students who are also struggling has kept me going (Male, 40-49, Diploma first year).

And one somewhat disconsolate response:

It is good to know we are all feeling as bad as each other! (Female, 40-49, Diploma first year).

Lave and Wenger's notion of shared communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991), where individuals participate in and understand the meanings of a shared activity system, is demonstrated in evidence showing that shared understanding is actually motivating. To realise that one is not alone normalises the struggle and helps build a sense of belonging to the cohort, as well as encouraging individuals to stay on their course.

6.1 Withdrawal data for both courses from the college where the interviews took place

In order to capture a sense of why HE students leave courses at the college where the interviewed cohorts studied, withdrawal forms (completed when a student leaves a course) were examined. Findings for both the Diploma and Foundation Degree are presented here for the academic years 2009/2010 and 2010/2011. This data partially includes the cohorts who took part in the individual interviews (both courses second year, academic year 2009/2010). Figures are provided to compare with the experiences of those students who did stay on their courses. Retention and withdrawal rates are presented in Table 10 (overleaf), shown as the total numbers of students in the cohort, individual withdrawals and the overall percentage of retention.

Table 10: Retention rates for Diploma and Foundation Degree 2009-2011

| Course | Academic year 2009/2010 | | | Academic year 2010/2011 | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|------------|------------|-------------------------|------------|------------|
| | Cohort | Withdrawal | Retained % | Cohort | Withdrawal | Retained % |
| DTLLS 1 st Year | 22 | 0 | 100 | 30 | 7 | 90 |
| DTLLS 2 nd Year | 28 | 1 | 96 | 18 | 2 | 89 |
| FDLS 1 st Year | 11 | 1 | 92 | 16 | 0 | 100 |
| FDLS 2 nd Year | 18 | 0 | 100 | 11 | 0 | 100 |

The student who left in the second year of the Diploma in 2009/2010 stated that it had been difficult to attend college regularly. This student had failed to submit all of the assessed work during the first year, so was also trying to catch up on outstanding work and this had a negative impact on their year two assignments. In addition, this student had trouble in completing their teaching practice requirements on top of other life commitments.

Of the seven who left during their first year in 2010/2011, four stated that they had taken on too much and that they were not coping with the academic workload. One lost her teaching job and another had her paid teaching hours reduced to the extent that she could not afford to take voluntary teaching to enable her to gain the required practice hours for the course. Her comments on the withdrawal form indicated that as a single mother she was disappointed that she could not make further sacrifices in her life to allow her own development. The seventh student found that the academic requirements were above their intellectual ability and were offered a lower level course, which they declined.

The two second year students who withdrew offered similar reasons. One struggled to meet the academic demands, and the other expressed dissatisfaction with the extent of the workload. They stated that the programme had considerable demands outside the college setting and that these were unreasonable and unmanageable.

Attrition rates for the Foundation Degree were significantly lower in the college than for the Diploma, with only one first year withdrawal in the two years examined; the reason for withdrawal was that the student lost her job so could not afford to continue with her studies (at £3,000 *per annum*). Overall, these findings do seem to support Kember's suggestion that external factors are largely blamed for student withdrawal (Kember 1999).

In summarising this chapter, attention is drawn to the limitations of the survey data. The omissions are recognised, specifically the unknown cohort size from which data were gathered and the lack of specific information related to retention and success rates in the other colleges. Nonetheless, textual analysis of the comments written in the survey does provide substantiating evidence of commonalities shared between the programmes and the students from different colleges.

6.2 Chapter summary

On 'looking out' at the data, certain factors indicate that, in retrospect, this survey could perhaps have been designed differently in order to provide greater confidence in the results. Findings from the survey largely support the data gained in interviews and it has been acknowledged that the differences in structure and administration between the Diploma and Foundation Degree can have an impact on retention because of the nested nature of the Diploma. However, certain commonalities are evidenced in the survey. Findings from the survey also bear witness to the relatively high workload required by these courses. The survey only provides a snapshot of the learning experiences of a self-selected group of students who decided to take part. The study may have

additionally benefited from obtaining the retention and success data from these colleges, to provide some context for these figures. It would also have helped to gain a clear idea of the percentage of each cohort that answered the survey. The Diploma and Foundation Degree students who were individually interviewed studied in relatively small groups, and the impact of this on a sense of belonging has already been examined. Had I focused on this emerging finding before issuing the survey the questionnaire could have included questions about the degree to which respondents felt part of their groups.

Using Johns' model to 'look in' allows me to recognise that I have effectively undertaken an apprenticeship during this research. The questionnaire is not perfect but it has added weight to what I have found despite its limitations. In recognising this I have developed a greater appreciation of the complexity of research design and I have learned about those aspects of survey administration that are significant when carrying out good research practice. Overall, whilst acknowledging how this part of the research could have been handled differently, the results do at least elucidate substantial elements of the learning histories presented by the interviewed respondents.

The following discussion chapter examines the implications of these learning histories as a whole, in order to provide an evaluation of the data with regard to the overall study aims stated in the title of this thesis: 'Keeping students! Motivational drivers of trainee educational professionals in a further education college'.

Chapter 7: Discussion

Much of educational research is, and should be, a site of continual meaning making (Edwards 2002 p158)

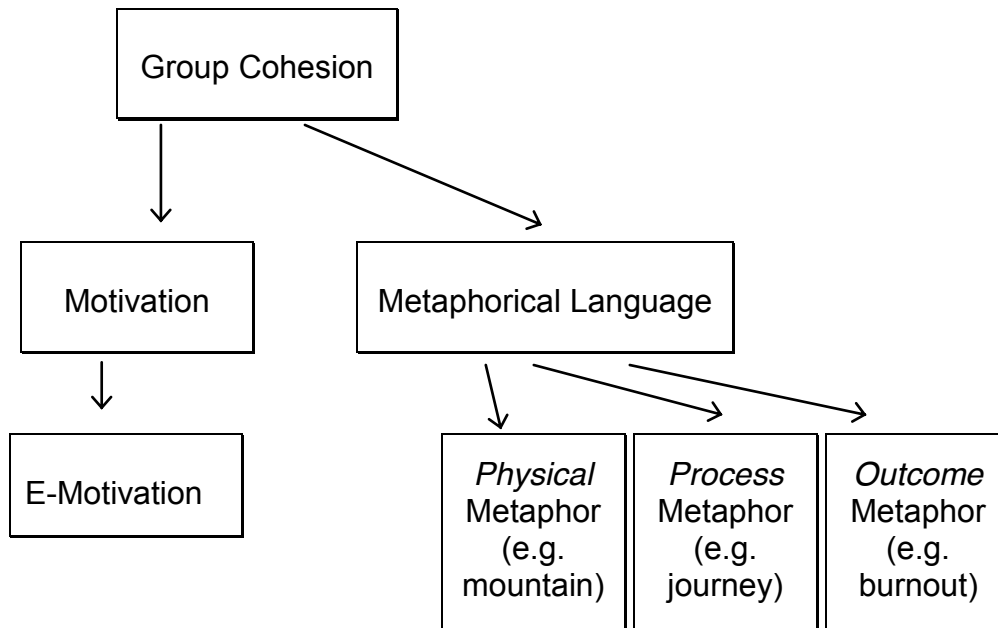
The previous chapters provided a rich account of the learning histories of all the respondents from this study, using their own words where possible to recount the living experience of learning. Interview data was supported by results from the on-line survey. The overall themes arising from the data were also examined under the overarching categories of Group Cohesion, Transferable Attributes and Ethnography. This chapter will bring together these topics, examining parallels and commonalities from both interview cohorts in order to respond to the title of the thesis that seeks to identify the motivational drivers of trainee educational professionals in a FE college. Some comparison is made between the two courses, but a key finding from this research is around 'change', for the individual, their study group and for their wider social circle, so course differences are not particularly emphasised overall.

This chapter is presented in three main sections as per the categories identified above. The first of these, on Group Cohesion, examines the degree to which bonding, friendship and a sense of belonging influenced the motivation of those involved. The second section exploring Transferable Attributes looks at the learning experiences of those students who were able to draw on aspects of their own previous successful professional identities to help them succeed in their new role as HE students, characteristics which enhanced their motivation and enabled their transformation. The final section discusses the development of Ethnography and the formation of the proposed model of *proximal ethnography* to capture the interconnectedness of the learning experiences of respondents and researcher.

7.1 Group cohesion

The findings pertaining to group cohesion can be outlined in pictorial form using the following diagram:

Figure 8: The links between group cohesion and motivation described through metaphor



Group cohesion and a sense of belonging enhanced motivation for most students. Shared metaphorical language and in-jokes about coping with study at HE level demonstrated a community of practice. There was evidence of a common appreciation of the learning experience, supporting Allen's notion of an adult's ability to construct a 'shared understanding' (Allen 2005 p249) to enable learning.

A sense of 'belonging' to their student peer group was directly motivating to some individuals. Friendships developed and students were motivated to attend college because of the network or community they felt a part of. Evidence for this came from comments directly stating how important the group was. Sarah commented in her second interview in June 2009 that the

one thing that kept her going, when she thought she would spend a college day studying at home instead, was:

I've come in because I've wanted to see everybody, and my motivation actually comes from the group...But the reason that has kept me coming in and not thinking oh I'll do some work on my own is to see everybody and to get that motivation.

Ruth stated in her second interview that the sense of group cohesion was evidenced by the fact that they all understood what they were going through, and that she would miss the motivating element of the group once the course was finished. Clearly, relationships had developed over the first year of learning together, relationships that for most were motivating.

Three of the students from the Diploma course, Sarah, Helena and Ruth, mentioned the small class size. The small number of students seemed to enhance the feeling of cohesion and belonging, a feeling summed up in this comment from Sarah:

Um well, we're quite a small group and we're quite a diverse group which is, well I love that actually. And we support one another and I think that's been incredibly helpful.

Sarah stated that she enjoyed learning from other students who were not from her discipline of nursing. The professional diversity of the group enabled her to draw on the experiences of others, seeing her own learning in a new light. This reflects Hammond's idea that learning helps to extend social boundaries, bringing new insights to the learning experience (Hammond 2004). Sarah's sense of pleasure from learning within the group directly enhanced her learning experience, again upholding findings from Leung and Kember (2005) and Sheridan and Byrne (2008) that highlight the benefits of social collaboration and enjoyment in learning.

There was a distinct divergence in the experiences of the Foundation Degree and Diploma students, based largely on the change of cohort members in the

second year of the Diploma course. Both courses were two years long, but the Diploma was designed to allow students to join from other colleges or take a year out and join an existing group for their final year. The key variation between the groups was apparent by the third interviews, where text analysis of transcripts revealed that the word 'different' was used by a number of respondents. Collaboration and motivation had changed as a result of new members entering the group; the new students had not shared the same first year experiences. The sense of 'we're all in it together' had now changed. This observation supports the findings of Kember and Leung that integration of a cohort strengthened the learning experience and, conversely, motivation faded where belonging was lacking (Kember and Leung 2004). Sarah described her struggle to re-motivate at the start of the second year when the whole learning experience felt different. New students, a change in staff and a greater focus on self-directed study than she was used to had changed the *fabric* of her learning experience and she took some time to adjust.

Nevertheless, students on the Diploma *were* able to manage the changes, help integrate new student members into the group, and go on to succeed in gaining their qualification. A feeling of 'belonging', in the sense of being part of a group, seemed to be apparent from the presence of small groups within the overall, if changing cohort. This sense of belonging to sub-groups within the whole class was evidenced from both individual and group interviews. Friendships formed and learning took place, directly reflecting Bingham and O'Hara's study showing the positive impact of developing relationships on an individual's motivation and determination (Bingham and O'Hara 2007). This study indicates that developing friendships within a group can be motivating to some students, and that a fluid and changing group membership does not necessarily have a negative impact on the overall sense of belonging.

7.1.1 Group cohesion and motivation

Motivating drivers stemmed from both intrinsic and extrinsic factors; some primary factors were solid and could be relied upon when enthusiasm or

energy levels were low. Different motivations took precedence at different times and each could be focused on to enhance the will to carry on and achieve the qualification. This dual layer of motivations suggests a development of Galbraith's proposition that motivation is inherently unstable (Galbraith 1998). In this case, some secondary motivational drivers were less potent than others and students did find that their motivation waned, although they were able to access additional and more deep-seated primary motivators to enable their success.

Overall, five of the respondents talked of an element of motivational insecurity on a day-to-day basis but with a fundamental stabilising factor to hold onto when enthusiasm started to dwindle. The key factors for the Diploma individuals were financial or career benefits, group friendships and their own children. Galbraith's work examining adult learning methods suggests that coping with competing demands on time, energy and resources results in unstable motivation (Galbraith 1998). However, results from this study propose that successful adult learners do indeed have to manage challenging pressures on their time but they are also able to hold onto a fundamental, *stable* motivational driver in order to motivate themselves throughout their learning experience.

Their stories suggested a dual layer of primary and secondary motivating factors, of motivation that fluctuated but of other primary motivating drivers that remained as a sort of foundation that could be focused on and drawn on. For example, Helen's focus on financial advantage was a fundamental source of motivation that she could focus on to help offset the more chaotic feelings exemplified by her roller coaster metaphor. This builds on Galbraith's earlier findings, (Galbraith 1998), and suggests a more subtle layered experience than a straightforward instability. In other words, some motivating drivers remained fixed and this secure core helped to compensate for occasions when other motivating factors were unstable.

Interview conversations demonstrated that *acceptance* of this state of fluctuating motivation was fundamental to a student succeeding in their learning. For example, Helen stated in her second interview that she was motivated by seeing what her qualification would enable her to do for her family in terms of financial security. She recognised that this helped her to get over the difficulties she faced on a day-to-day basis when trying to stay motivated with practical tasks like background reading or writing assignments.

In addition to individual motivation some students found that motivation also arose from social collaboration. The relationship between group cohesion and motivation is that a sense of belonging to a group was specifically motivating for some students. These findings are not generalised to all respondents, since Zoe, Tina and Francis did not demonstrate a sense of belonging, but for some, social connectedness had a positive impact on motivation to learn. These individuals took on a new identity, that of 'student', and then adopted the particulars of that role. They attended college, wrote assignments, took part in group discussions and class activities and further enabled their development and transformation through self-directed study. They learned to manage their time commitments and created coping strategies to balance work, life and study, often to the detriment of housework and social life. For most, these activities were undertaken in a social, collaborative and supportive network of common practice – “we’re all in it together” – and that community of practice also represented a motivating structure to enable their learning.

The students who took part in the individual and group interviews all studied as discrete cohorts. In other words, aside from the changes of group membership on the Diploma courses, the students from each programme remained together for all their lectures throughout the two years. The courses were structured in a modular fashion, so students took a number of individual modules concurrently, but stayed together for all of their modules. I do not know if this was the case for those who answered the on-line survey, since

this question was not asked. I also cannot say if this pattern of course delivery is true of all HE in FE courses in this college or others. I do know from my own experience that it is not a model of delivery replicated in some university settings. In university cohorts where there are greater numbers of undergraduates, lead lectures on shared topics may be given to large groups from different disciplines. Students then form smaller cohorts for taught sessions within their own subject area. They are frequently taught in groups consisting of different members, particularly during the early part of their programme. Findings from this study indicate that the significance of group cohesion is not necessarily generalisable to students in other HE institutions.

For some students, the cohesion of the group also included their tutor. The next section examines the role of the tutor and identifies two distinct findings. For most students, the tutor was motivating and also helped to enable group cohesion. One student however held a contrary view and found that the presence of the tutor at break times inhibited cohesion. These findings are discussed next.

7.1.2 Group cohesion: the role of the tutor

The Diploma group was taught by one course tutor, who also acted as course administrator, and one other lecturer. The Foundation Degree was administered and taught by one tutor. Some of the students in this study commented on the supportive role of their tutor, particularly Francis early on in her learning. Sarah made the following statement in her second interview when asked to describe the support offered to her by her peer group:

Plus, you know, you don't want to let your tutor down either. There is a relationship that you build over a year with the tutor, as well as your peers.

The change of staff part way through the Diploma course had a negative impact on Sarah, who stated in her third interview that she found it hard to get engaged at the start of the second year. Part of her struggle was based around the new tutor; support was there but the rapport was not:

And although we were getting that from another tutor, it wasn't the same, because you hadn't made that relationship with them.

These comments indicate an extension of the concept of group cohesion to include the staff. The relationships students made with each other were motivating and the relationship with the tutor also had an important role. This finding indicates that interviews with the course tutors might also have been beneficial in order to ascertain if they felt there was a concurrent growth and development in *them* of being part of a learning community. This indicates a subject for future study.

In contrast, Peter's perception of the role of the tutor was influenced by the fact he found their presence at break times to be distracting. His sense of group cohesion was based around his peers providing practical information or help. He described occasions when valuable learning occurred through informal sharing of knowledge during meal breaks when students went to the canteen and often discussed what had been taught in the lesson. Sometimes individuals found that the formal taught session had been unclear so break-time conversations were an opportunity for informal peer learning, each person sharing their observations on lesson content:

In a way a lot of the stuff that we've learned was by having free and open conversations in the canteen...they were gold dust, they really were, because sometimes [in the lesson] you didn't listen, you didn't get the link, and it was just little bits and pieces of jigsaw that didn't fit together.

Peter went on to recognise the evolutionary spontaneity of this situation:

So if you were trying to manufacture what's happening in the canteen it wouldn't necessarily work, it's a funny dynamic that needs to gel for interaction to be really beneficial.

Peter's comment above about the free and open conversations in the canteen was preceded by this reflection about the negative consequences of the tutor's presence:

I think the camaraderie of the students on the course is quite good. It's funny one of the things they promote is that the lecturer goes down for their break with the students. I think that's a bad thing [laughs]. In a way a lot of the stuff that we've learned was by having a free and open conversation in the canteen but if the lecturer's there you can't do that 'cos there's not that relationship there. So you lose the camaraderie.

Group cohesion for Peter did exist, in a practical sense, but was hindered rather than enhanced by the presence of the tutor. None of the other members of the Diploma group mentioned this aspect of their learning experience, but it was noteworthy to Peter. There are a number of ways to make sense of this difference. It might be because he was the only male in the group, or his own management background may have had an influence. He was a solution-focused individual who looked for the value in every situation and it appeared to him that the value was lost when the tutor's presence inhibited their cohesion. His own teaching practice may also be significant in that he recognised when his own students needed time away from him as tutor. Whatever the reason, Peter sensed the importance of space and time away from staff to enhance camaraderie and group cohesion.

This finding demonstrates that students view the learning experience differently and that mature students are not homogeneous, and cannot be treated in any one particular way with regard to group dynamics. It also raises the question about the identity of the tutor in relation to adult students. It is argued that, at HE level, the role of the lecturer is to enable learning rather than to be the source of subject-specific knowledge (Avis *et al.* 2003) and there is active research interest in how that role is played out in the relationships formed with students (Bathmaker and Avis 2005, Robinson and McMillan 2006 and Boyd *et al.* 2007). Findings from this study suggest that for the tutor there exists a balance to be made concerning role, identity and space.

This chapter now goes on to evaluate that aspect of group cohesion that took place outside the classroom, the development of e-motivation. The next section starts with a critique of the blog that was created before examining the potential role of other communication technologies in learning. Underpinning these findings is the enduring *caveat* that not all students found e-communication tools to be helpful in their learning experience. Findings are not generalised to all students, but these e-motivating tools might form one part of the multifaceted motivating support networks that students can create for themselves.

7.1.3 Group cohesion: e-motivation

The broad research aim was to establish some of the features of an effective learning environment for HE students. To that end, the study sought to evaluate the role of contemporary communication technologies in extending social collaborative learning and motivation. For some students, motivation was enhanced by the extension of the social collaborative network formed outside the classroom through the use of e-communication, resulting in e-motivation.

In an effort to determine if it would prove a valuable device for collaborative social learning, a blog was created expressly for the students who were taking part in the individual interviews. Respondents were advised that they could use the blog for any purpose. The intention was the creation of an on-line support network, a virtual extension of the coffee bar where learners might share their experiences and motivate each other to keep studying. Nonetheless, it quickly became apparent from observing the content that what had been created was not specifically being used as a place for individuals to post their observations and receive interactive comments shared by fellow students. It had become more of a forum, (a place for discussion) rather than a blog *per se*. This distinction is made because evaluation of blog use was part of the third objective of the study, so a potential criticism of the research could be that a blog was not what had been created. Arguably in this case the

distinction is not important, as whether it was a blog or a forum its actual use was relatively short-lived. However, as Bigger's research into the use of blogs to support postgraduate research students shows (Bigger 2009), blogs may have a valuable role in supporting educational development and transformation. The research opportunity still exists to ascertain if Bigger's findings are likewise applicable to undergraduate learners.

With the group respondents what was striking was that in addition to using these tools for sharing their assignment or course worries, they also indicated that they used their Facebook updates or a group text messages or e-mails to share with others when their motivation was at its lowest and they felt like giving up their studies. Respondents used these popular well-established communication technologies to form a common bond with fellow students. They developed the boundaries of social constructivist learning theory through electronically enhanced social co-operation.

Notwithstanding the limitations of this element of the research, this study provides evidence that students enhanced their learning experience by using contemporary types of communication technology. They used the tools of e-mail, text messaging and Facebook to do more than provide practical support for each other. These tools were used in an innovative way to motivate, for example sharing progressive assignment word counts as part of their Facebook updates. Facebook status was engaged as a resource to help maintain constructive group relationships (Daly and Silver 2008). Again, this fed into the community of practice and sense of belonging. The physical representation of progress and achievement in the form of word counts created some element of friendly competition and enabled people to feel that they were 'in this together'.

It is not suggested that students were only motivated in this way. Nor is it stated that all students used this technology for any purpose, but for some students, e-motivation reinforced much of their supportive social network.

Although a variety of primary and secondary motivating drivers helped students focus on their work at difficult times, ultimately student retention was sustained by the use of these technologies.

Those respondents who found these tools useful indicated that Facebook, e-mail and text messaging all enabled direct access to a supportive network of fellow students, family and friends outside the classroom. Access to this network enabled the transformation of the learner, moving from wanting to give up to being motivated to stay on the course. E-motivation had a positive impact on student retention in this study. Facebook, e-mail and text messaging have added a further dimension to social constructivist learning theory, supporting Salmons' theory of e-social constructivist learning (Salmons 2009). Social constructivist learning theory is present and unmistakable in the living learning experiences of most of these learners and has advanced in line with the developments in communication technologies of the past decade. The technological means of socialising are innovative, immediate and e-motivating and are to be encouraged.

It has been suggested that groups of individuals find challenges associated with working together and then use those challenges to learn and change (Engeström 2001). I would argue that students in this study have used electronic forms of communication to help them to meet the challenges of working together and developing the skills required at HE level study. This innovative use of technology further supports Engeström's fifth principle of activity theory, that of expansion and transformation resulting in development (Engeström 1999). This principle also states that the use and value of commodities, for example communication technologies, shapes the collective activity system, or group practice. Transformation frequently happens when the 'object', in this case the technology, is 'reconceptualised to embrace a radically wider horizon of possibilities' (Engeström 2001 p137). This expansion of practice then results in a collaborative community or network that sees greater potential from that commodity that was originally intended.

In the example of this study, the blog held little value as a commodity; equally, the college intranet messaging service was not used or valued because of practical difficulties in accessing it from home. Facebook and other e-communication tools were valued by most and were used successfully in the transformation of attitude and for the provision of mutual support. Their use represents Engeström's radical widening of possibilities (Engeström 2001), specifically in the motivating use of e-mail, text messaging and Facebook. Students were able to draw on their social support network at any time while they were not physically together at college. Ruth talked about receiving motivating text messages on a Sunday morning, when she felt low and had nobody around to talk to. Her social network was there, instantly, enabling her to share her feelings and transform her present attitude. These tools became the remote equivalent of receiving help from peers in person over a coffee after saying, "Help! I've had enough. I'm going to leave". Students made use of e-mail, text messaging and Facebook to change their outlook and to transform from wanting to leave to being motivated to stay on the course.

Findings from this study showed that students used a variety of metaphors to describe their learning experience, metaphors that were shared across the two courses. These provided interesting and illuminating ways to capture the experience of learning and understand how students stayed motivated. The findings also suggest that shared metaphors (along with the sharing of in-jokes) are reflections of the shared community of practice, expressions of how students viewed their common experiences. Another outcome from this research considers the nuanced understanding of the learning experience, the way metaphors provide rich insights into how students conceptualise their learning. The use of metaphor demonstrates a dynamic and active dimension to language, a discourse on the *activity* of learning. It is not known if students shared these metaphors together outside our interview relationship, or whether they used symbols together when they were part of their group. However, it is the case that, within the research context, common experiences shared by researcher and respondents lead to mutual understanding, hence

the proposition that proximal ethnography provides a method of collaboration in meaning-making. The interaction and structured conversation of an interview between two people (Kvale 1996) will be full of emerging intersubjective meanings and it is these shared meanings that construct our knowledge. I conclude that these collective metaphors allow us to gain an insight into successful learning experiences and the transformation of the individual.

This next section examines some of the literature on metaphor and makes a link between group cohesion and shared language.

7.1.4 Group cohesion and metaphor

A metaphor is a figurative use of language, a linguistic shorthand way to conceptualise and share understanding. Metaphors are considered to be persistent in daily discourse and essential to the way we think about our experiences (Owen 1984, Gibbs 1999). Their purpose is to create a specific mental picture in others, to encapsulate the spirit of a situation or experience without having to provide a lengthy or explicit explanation. Metaphors can also identify common ground if they resonate with other individuals, adding to the notion of the community of practice by including shared language with shared identity.

Original work by Lakoff and Johnson suggests an even more fundamental role for metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). They suggest that metaphors shape our everyday lives, in our thoughts, discourse and activities. Their work 'Metaphors We Live By' describes the enduring character of metaphor in which our daily insights and experiences are steeped. They argue that we make particular sense of our world through the use of metaphorical concepts in everyday language and speech and make the case that the expressions we use then follow on from the character of the concept.

We make individual sense of our world (partially) through metaphorical

thoughts. The language we use is a consequence of the nature of what Lakoff and Johnson term the *network concept* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). For example, findings from this study show that if 'education' is seen within the network concept of 'journey' then the language of education follows suit: 'keeping on track', 'walking a mile in others' shoes', and 'not falling at the last hurdle' are all examples from this study. In contrast, if learning is perceived through a social constructivist lens then the language of building, transformation, or growth becomes more resonant. The schemas and essential values behind metaphors present themes that describe the learning experience.

Reading interview transcriptions and highlighting any repeated words, phrases associated with feelings and uses of metaphor, presented an interesting and useful way to understand some of the unconscious motivations of respondents. The ways in which they used language resonated with their own prior experiences and gave clues about how they interpreted their learning experience. My own desire to tell the authentic stories of all the respondents encouraged me to use direct quotations from them so I have included examples wherever possible to capture the living and vibrant descriptions of learning.

Within the overall theme of group cohesion, students used metaphorical language to explain their learning experiences. These metaphors demonstrated how students tried to make sense of their experience, and share that sense with others. From the perspective of collaborative learning, each student brings their own life story to the developing interactions that surround their learning. Relationships form and grow with tutors, other students and families (Jarvis 1997), and their personal life history influences their education (Foskett and Johnston 2010).

Data from interviews, the blog and to a limited extent the survey showed that many students used metaphors to describe the experience of studying and to

reflect on their development; it also emerged that different individuals across both courses shared many of these metaphors. Some of the metaphors could be thought of as hackneyed, or certainly too common a part of every-day discourse to offer anything new to our understanding. However, their very fluency ensures that they make descriptions of learning instantly recognisable to others. There is a well-defined distinction between these unoriginal yet evocative expressions and the specific, unique metaphors used by Helen and Sarah who were drawing on their previous experiences in order to find ways to describe their learning.

Additional evidence of the community of practice that developed in these cohesive groups can be inferred from the shared metaphors used by students. Metaphorical language referred to specific parts of learning, the barriers experienced, the coping strategies and the experiences that relate to burnout. Metaphors shaped the ways in which students conceptualised their learning experience and made their feelings tangible. For example Helen's description of her motivation being akin to a roller-coaster ride, Sarah and Ruth's depiction of the learning journey as having mountainous obstacles *en route*, and one survey respondents statement that:

I have to do a lot of 'plate spinning'. I have learned not to spin too many plates, or they all may get broken, if you get my drift! (Female 40-49, First Year, Certificate of Education).

Students frequently referred to 'juggling' their various commitments, a word I have also heard used more recently by student colleagues on a Return to Nursing Practice course when describing how hard it was to manage study on top of everything else in their lives. This more recent example demonstrates the universality of the word 'juggle'. The juggling metaphor, and many others used and illustrated here have a social linguistic framework; the imagery used to portray the experience of learning has meaning to both the respondent and the interviewer, and creates understanding between them. With reference to Austin's Speech Acts Theory (Austin 1962) and its taxonomy of language in

terms of *literal meaning* and *meaning in context*, these metaphors illustrate the impact of language and its power to express complex emotions in a figurative way. Furthermore, they demonstrate the vibrant and vivid character of language and its ability to express activity in learning. Many of the metaphors used by these respondents resonate with movement and action, for example 'juggling', 'journeying', and 'walking a mile in others shoes'. Austin's perspective on language is of speech as action, so these metaphorical expressions are *active* statements of the lived and living learning experience.

These findings also further support the key premise of Lakoff and Johnson that we make individual sense of our world through metaphorical concepts and that the language we use then follows on from the nature of the concept (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Within the metaphorical concept of 'maintaining equilibrium' the language of coping follows suit, in this case 'juggling' and 'balance'. The metaphorical conception of learning as journey naturally evokes the language of walking, heading towards goals and overcoming mountainous barriers.

Four of the interviewed respondents used the metaphor of learning as a 'journey' to describe elements of their experience, deepening this with references to scale and the cyclical nature of their experience. 'Journey' here was not a linear sequence from A to B but rather an evolving, fluid experience, reflexive and animated, giving an almost tortuous feel of exploration leading to individual transformation and growth. A focus on the emotional and energetic nature of the journey, 'running a race', 'walking a mile in others' shoes', and 'not falling at the last hurdle' suggested the vivid, dynamic and active nature of the learning experience. With further reference to Austin, the use of phrases involving movement to describe learning implies an active transformative pursuit. The vital and living nature of the concept of 'journey' replicates the key concept in this paper, the notion of proximal ethnography.

Taking the journey metaphor further, two interconnected journeys have taken place during this study, my own and my respondents. My own journey, inextricably linked to theirs, has involved a shared experience alongside the group, stepping outside of that group to contemplate and learn, then periodically stepping back in to co-create theory and knowledge. The development of the resulting model of proximal ethnography is discussed later in this chapter.

The metaphor of the mountain as used by Sarah and Ruth independently to depict their perception of the workload ahead of them was described earlier:

Sarah - And the second year, you think, oh my God, that's massive, there's a bit of a mountain to climb here.

Ruth - I had this mountain of work I needed to do and I was stood at the bottom looking at this mountain going, where do I start?

The power behind the apparent simplicity of this metaphor lies in the depth of feeling it portrays. Similarly the word 'journey', shared by students, is indicative of an active transformative pursuit inherent in the learning experience. My own experiences as a researcher are 'storied' and my language tells of the exploration of concepts, of 'stepping in and out' of situations, physical descriptions resonating with a quest for activity and action.

These physical metaphors are evocative of the dynamic practices involved in learning. Language used in this highly structured way to recognise common experiences and make tangible the feelings associated with managing life, work and study is a shared discourse. Respondents understood that I too was juggling home, work and research and sometimes struggled with that undertaking; they told me of their efforts and we each understood the other's learning experience. Again, this reflects the 'proximal' nature of this ethnographic study. We shared these common experiences expressed through metaphor, but each was part of a discrete group. Mine is a journey complete with mountains to be conquered, both practically and psychologically. By coming together at interview, each individual made sense

of their situation, reflected on their learning experience, and gained greater self-awareness and knowledge.

The next section examines the Transferable Attributes that students alluded to, the skills that they drew on from previous selves to enhance their motivation and ability to cope as students. Much of this finding also arises from the use of metaphor, so the section starts with the distinctive metaphors Sarah and Helen used to depict their learning.

7.2 Transferable attributes

Transferable attributes refers to the ability shown by some students to draw on previous positive characteristics of themselves and transfer them to enable them to cope with the pressures of HE study. Figure 9 shows how these attributes were articulated.

Figure 9: The relationship between transferable attributes, motivation and the use of metaphorical language

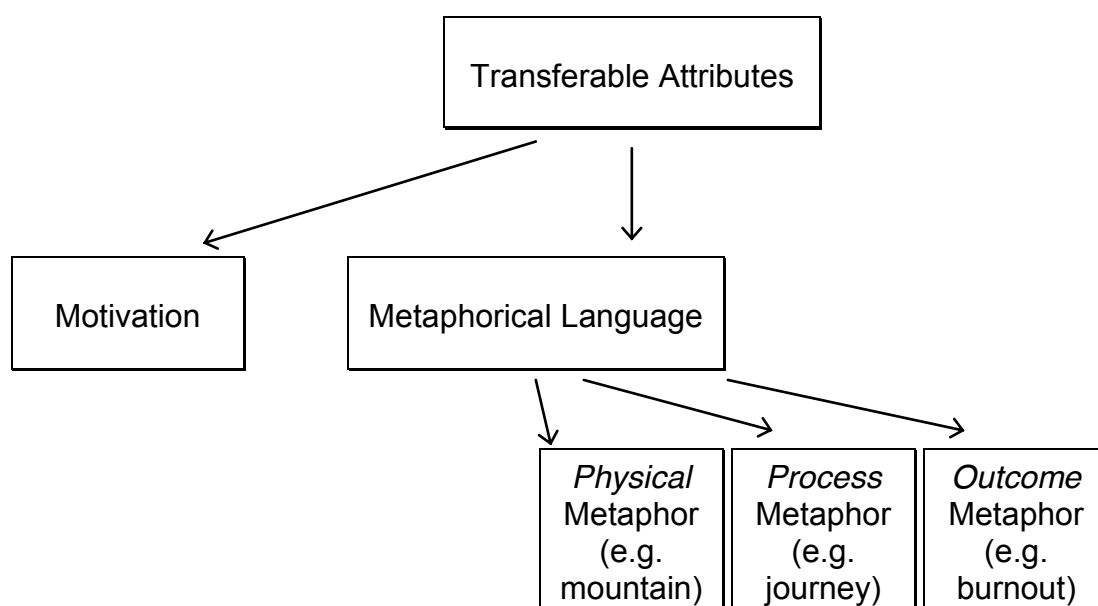


Figure 9 represents the relationship between these findings, the ways in which some students were able to draw on their own attributes in order to help them succeed in their studies. Their ability to tap into these characteristics had an impact on their motivation, and was demonstrated through their use of

metaphorical language to describe their experiences. This section starts with the unique metaphors used by Sarah and Helen, and provides analysis of their experience.

The distinctive metaphors used by Sarah and Helen were noticeably different but no less powerful than the common shared metaphors describing learning. Sarah's 'consciousness of pain' metaphor, detailed in Chapter 5, describes her coping strategies and the impact of her physical and emotional states on her ability to learn. Kember (1999) suggests that students blame external factors for failure and demonstrate internal attributions of success; Sarah's experience was more nuanced. Success in incorporating study into her life was all about her consciousness of the course. When she felt on top of the course she was aware of it but it did not take over her life, whereas at low physical or emotional points she was very conscious of it and was somewhat weighed down by its presence.

Sarah drew on her characteristics as a successful specialist nurse to apply her knowledge of perception to her new identity as a student. In other words, she tapped into her previous successful identity, saw what attributes she used in that scenario to be effective, and applied them to help her cope with her new situation. For Sarah, this was a powerful tool for supporting her to stay motivated and achieve her goal.

Her participation in the interview and her reflection on the process of learning support Oliver's argument that reflection encourages amplification and illumination of thoughts and experiences (Oliver 2004). Later, in the same interview, in using this metaphor Sarah was conceptualising her method of balancing life, work and study by recognising that the course was only one part of her holistic self:

it's like becoming conscious of the factors that affect how you feel about it [the course]. Hmm, there's an interesting thesis [laughing].

That last statement – “there’s an interesting thesis” – came just after the metaphor about pain perception. It suggests that, even in the seconds between using the metaphor and making that statement, Sarah had reflected on the potential of what she had just voiced. Her unconscious ability to draw on past success became a conscious recognition of her own experience.

Sarah’s personal identity included the category ‘nurse’ and this led her to make a symbolic link between pain and consciousness, further allowing me an insight into her thought processes as she analysed how she coped as a mature student. Furthermore, this association between awareness of pain and consciousness of workload made sense to us both since I include ‘nurse’ as part of my own personal identity. Sarah knew I was a nurse before I was a lecturer, a fact I shared with her in the first interview when I explained how I understood what her job title meant. We made a connection in our interviews together and she provided a subjective example which she knew would resonate with my own knowledge and one that she knew I would understand. Our common experiences created a conscious collaboration in the telling of her story.

This is the essence of proximal ethnography, the model proposed in Chapter 4. Sarah was a mature student within the discipline of education and a practising nurse fitting the demands of HE study into her already busy life. I was a mature student within the field of education, a qualified nurse and I too was integrating HE level study into my life. In our discourse, she shared her metaphorical description of the impact of the consciousness of her workload in an attempt to help me understand the way in which she coped. In analysing our conversations, I have stepped back from that shared relationship to theorise and consider the implications of her story. We have co-created knowledge about the lived and living learning experience.

Helen too used a unique metaphor. Her ‘boiling pot’ imagery described in Chapter 4 indicated the extent of her struggle at times of near burnout. Her

biographical accounts of managing her learning on the Diploma course combined actual prior experience with metaphorical descriptions of previous experience. Furthermore, she recognised how she had managed previously in difficult situations and transferred those skills to her new role as a student. These findings further echo Lakoff and Johnson's notion of living by metaphor and of metaphor underpinning individual meaning making (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Helen constructed a vivid and personal account of her learning and the active language of 'boiling' and 'release' makes sense to those who hear it; her personal construct of learning is congruent therefore with her identity.

These personal tales helped these students to make sense of their learning experiences. Their metaphorical discourse enabled them to make tangible their transformation and share their developing understanding, resilience and self-awareness. As Helen summed up her overall experience of the Diploma programme in her final interview, 'I understand myself now, I never understood myself before'. Here, the successful learning experience results in increased self-awareness and self-actualisation, providing evidence of the enriching and transformative effects of education and further supporting Edwards definition of intellectual development and learning as 'within-person changes' (Edwards 2005 p50). In addition, they demonstrate that it is possible to draw on known personal strengths in order to deal with new situations.

By creating their own metaphors based on their previous personal successes these students demonstrated how they coped with the new situation of being mature students, which helped them to stay motivated to remain on the course. In terms of learning theory they reflect what Meyer and Land have identified as *threshold concepts* (Meyer and Land 2005). These are insights that allow an alternative way of thinking about or approaching a subject, particularly a difficult question or complex notion, and also allowing further multifaceted exploration of that subject. Sarah explored her new identity as a mature student using her knowledge of the holistic perception of pain, and

Helen was transformed by her learning experience by employing familiar mechanisms for survival. These are illustrations of the effective use of transferable attributes identified as an overarching finding in this study. These storied perceptions allow us to share insights into the students' successful learning experiences. In other words, these learning metaphors create a link between previous successful selves and current new or developing selves trying to cope with troublesome knowledge (*ibid.*), connecting past and present identities and forging a new self. Peter, Ruth, Tina and Zoe also talked about occasions when they drew on previous successes, recognising the benefit of applying their existing skills to their new position. Francis and Beth were the only two individually interviewed respondents who did not articulate that they had used these transferable attributes.

Having discussed the evidence presented thus far, this chapter finally examines the development of the model of proximal ethnography. The next section develops the links between shared metaphorical language and shared identity to explore the distinct characteristics of this ethnographic study.

7.3 Proximal ethnography

The model of proximal ethnography is an innovative development of the qualitative research method of ethnography. Proximal ethnography encompasses the shared identities and reflections recognised as important parts of the collaborative meaning making in educational research. The model specifically depicts that situation in which the researcher shares the same experiences as the observed but does so outside the particular domain of the observed. In other words, the researcher *is* what has been studied and shares many experiences seen in others who are part of the study. I was a part of my respondent's learning environment as I worked in the college where they studied. So, I was outside their group but inside their college. I was also a mature student fitting HE level study into a busy life of full-time work and family life, so I shared their learning and coping experiences albeit on a different course.

My motivation originates in the human story, the vibrant accounts of the lived and living experience of learning. When I was interviewing the students I was a research student and a learner. I took care to let them see me as a student in our conversations and *not* as an authority on education or research; our characteristics were therefore compatible, that is of mature students discussing the experience of learning. On occasions we reflected on the challenging intricacies of life as a mature student, voicing shared understandings or feelings about studying. By way of example, Sarah's metaphor of the consciousness of pain made sense to both of us, both as nurses and as HE students. Her struggles to cope with the course reflected my own efforts to stay motivated to complete this work – we both experienced difficulties, yet both kept going.

This is why the phrase 'proximal ethnography' best describes this type of ethnographic study. Respondents shared personal stories with me, allowing self-reflection, theirs and mine, and creating a combined understanding - our relationship and identities were closely associated. In this way I was proximal, or close to them. Our common identities were that of mature student, studying at HE level, specialising in education and needing to balance work, life and study; my individual identity also included 'researcher'.

Relating back to the original model of proximal ethnography presented in Chapter 4, Sarah was positioned at A in the model while she was relating her pain metaphor. I was located at point B at the time at which I shared the characteristics of her learning experience as expressed in metaphor. I understood her story of her perception of the impact of her course, and recognised her experiences in some of my own. Our identities corresponded; those of students reflecting on the extent to which HE study had influenced their lives. When I stepped away from the interview to evaluate what I had gained from our collaborative conversation I was situated at position C; I became the researcher analysing text and exploring meaning arising from the interview.

The proximal nature of this study, where the researcher is embodied in the research, was not only evident from the unique metaphors used. The commonplace metaphors including learning as journey, and the in-jokes shared in the Foundation Degree group interview about methods of prevarication when trying to study all made sense to me. They reflected my own experience of trying to fit independent research into managing full-time work, a change of job and family and social commitments. I was inside-out-inside (Kadi-Hanifi 2011) the learning experiences of my respondents. The knowledge that results from this study has been co-created through our shared experiences and identities.

The next chapter presents the conclusions arising from this study and makes recommendations for application to education practice. It also includes a final reflection on the learning experience of the researcher.

Chapter 8: Conclusion and recommendations

There is a crushing question that can be put to researchers about their work. It is remarkably simple, but it can be equally devastating. It is the question 'So what?' (Denscombe 2010 p23)

8.1 Introduction

The provision of HE in FE is growing and gaining increased research attention (Parry 2009, Scott 2009, Stanton 2009, Parry *et al.* 2012). It is recognised that students leave their HE courses prematurely for a variety of reasons, so research interest focuses on causes of attrition and what institutions can do to support students to stay on course. The intention of this study was to examine what part motivation played in relation to student retention.

This final chapter is divided into the following six sections:

1. Summary of findings
2. Key contributions to knowledge
3. Limitations of the study
4. Application of findings to practice
5. Recommendations for further research
6. A structured reflection on the process of research

The first section presents a summary of the overall findings of this study. It outlines the conclusions that can be drawn about the complexity of the learning experience and the ways in which multiple personal and institutional factors enabled success. Section two proposes the key contributions to knowledge and evaluates the concept of e-motivation and the model of proximal ethnography. This section also critiques the model of proximal ethnography, recognising its potential limitations.

The third section discusses the limitations of this study by anticipating criticism about sample size and geographical specificity, and offers ways in

which the study could have been approached differently. This section acknowledges that some of the elements of learning identified, for example e-motivation and transferable attributes, were not used by all students. Nevertheless, what is presented is an holistic picture of the learning experience of these groups at this time. Justification of the conclusions is made in this section. The fourth section proposes suggestions for the application of findings to education practice. The fifth section makes recommendations for further research, developing the main features of the learning experience and identifying observations that arose as the study took place. The last section presents a structured reflection of the process of research. My learning is inextricably bound with the experiences of my respondents and my development is embedded in this work. I use a final adaptation of Johns' model of reflection (Johns 2000) to evaluate my own transformation over the six years of this study.

8.2 Summary of research findings

This is a study about personal transformation and change. The respondents in this study changed as a result of their learning experience, for example Helen's comment:

I understand myself now. I never understood myself before.

The following statement made by Ruth in her second interview in May 2009 indicated that even part way through her course she was able to reflect on how she was changing:

I suppose to a certain extent I'm bettering myself, and all those kind of positive things that you can get from study. You know, not many people do it.

Having never previously seen herself as an academic, she compared herself here to those who did not study; part of her self-change was being accepted onto the course in the first place and recognising that she was good enough to be there. In some cases the change resulted in wider social benefits. One student in the Foundation Degree group interview had inspired her daughter

to go to university; here the change is also extended to include influencing family members. Another observation from Ruth identifies the benefits of learning to her family:

You know it's quite empowering that thing that I'm doing. And not just within my work, but it benefits my life and hopefully then reflect down into my children and onto their outlook on life and knowledge and gaining knowledge and, you know, being constructive and useful.

Transformation through learning resulted in self-actualisation, improved self-esteem, greater resilience and increased confidence, echoing much previous work on the impact of learning on emotional well-being (Hammond 2004, Hammond and Feinstein 2005, Sabates and Hammond 2008, and Weir 2008). The findings concerning intellectual and personal growth directly support Edwards' assertion that learning shapes an individual, and that development results in 'within-person changes' (Edwards 2005 p50). These findings also support Vygotsky's original declaration that learning *is* development.

Respondents in this study used a variety of metaphors to describe their learning, providing rich insights into the conceptualisation of their experiences. The overall findings from this study can be summarised using a further metaphor; this is a study about *digging deep!* All of the respondents who took part in the interviewed element of this research successfully passed their course. Each of them, in different ways, dug deep inside themselves to enable their success. They experienced a dual layer of motivating drivers, of some that were fixed and stable and secondary factors that fluctuated. In relation to the key question in this research, about the way motivational drivers were used to help their learning, findings show that students typically held onto a primary fundamental, stable motivating driver to compel them onward when their everyday motivation fluctuated. They 'dug down' into this deep-seated factor, bringing it to the surface of their consciousness when they needed to overcome feelings of quitting. Students also delved into their past successful

selves and transferred attributes of that successful character into their current identity as students, further enabling their success.

This summary presents an overview of the findings. The next section highlights two original findings that arose from this study; the development of *e-motivation* and the evolution of the method of ethnography, resulting in the presentation of the model of *proximal ethnography*.

8.3 Original contributions to knowledge

Many of the research findings add credence to what is already known about the complexities of the learning experience and the individual and societal benefits of studying. However, analysis of the individual learning biographies explored throughout this research led to two distinct contributions to knowledge. Firstly, the findings advance the evolving theory of social constructivist learning. The term e-motivation (Price with Kadi-Hanifi 2011) describes the innovative use of electronic forms of communication specifically to motivate one's self and others. It contributes to attention within the research community on the potential for mobile devices and technology to augment the holistic experience of learning. Much research examining the role of electronic media in education examines the ways in which they can be used to enhance learning (Selwyn 2007, Mazman and Usluel 2009) and there is increasing interest in the supportive role of these tools (Flatley 2005, Bigger 2009). The results from this study indicate an extension of their potential to include peer group support and motivation. It supports and enhances the theory of e-social constructivist learning proposed by Salmons (Salmons 2009).

The term e-motivation is proffered with some caution. Two respondents in this study disliked the impersonal nature of e-communication tools, preferring face-to-face dialogue for support and motivation. E-motivation is not offered as a universal solution to the continuing challenge of preventing student withdrawal. There is potential for misuse of text messaging and posting on Facebook, for example cyber-bullying. In addition, e-motivation by its very

nature may only be appealing to people who are able and willing to access and use these tools. Perhaps in ten years time Facebook will be outmoded and students will have progressed to incorporate a newer technology into their learning experience. Rather than a single solution, e-motivation is one means of social collaboration and connection that students adopted and developed for themselves.

The second contribution to knowledge arises from my interpretation of the influence of identity on the practice of ethnography. The model of proximal ethnography and its development were presented in Chapter 4 with an example of a piece of research in progress that has features of the model. The key feature of this model is the shared identity between researcher and respondent. In relation to the practice of traditional ethnography, it probably does not matter if a proximal ethnographic study is carried out using overt or covert observational methods. What does make this model distinctly different is that the researcher shares aspects of the same identity as the respondents and shares similar experiences. In the case of this research the mutual identity is of 'HE student'. In Kadi-Hanifi's example the common characteristic is Black and Minority Ethnic academic (Kadi-Hanifi 2013). The significance of this shared identity is in the deeply personal reflections that it enables. The researcher is embodied in and embedded in their study. Respondents can reflect on their experiences during and after the research interview. The researcher can also consider their own experiences in order that knowledge can be co-created.

When I presented this model at the Postgraduate Student Conference in Manchester in 2012, I asked delegates to consider if they felt that their own research followed the model of proximal ethnography. Of the 25 research students in the room, 12 indicated that they shared characteristics of their respondent groups. I was later only able to ask one of these individuals to describe whether he felt that his study followed this model. He stated that he was in a managerial position within education and was interviewing other

educational managers. In other words he shared an aspect of the identity of the respondents in his study. This illustration is not a scientifically robust case, but anecdotally it does demonstrate that there is scope to further this element of the research to see if the model of proximal ethnography can be proposed with confidence as a development of the traditional ethnographic paradigm.

This model has limitations based on the 'closeness' of the researcher to the participant group. An ethnographic study can only be considered to fit the proximal model if the researcher shares a certain key identity with the respondents. It could be argued, therefore, to be very difficult for a researcher to remain truly objective about their findings. Reflexive research does acknowledge the *person* of the researcher, the embodied nature of research. It may therefore present difficulties to the proximal researcher to occupy position C in the model and be able to step away to reflect objectively on their findings. Proximal ethnographic research may be more subjective than traditional ethnographic inquiry, so care would be needed to ensure that findings were robust.

In the case of this research, individual and group interview transcriptions were sent to their respective students to be checked for accuracy. If I had allowed my interpretation of data to be predisposed towards my own philosophy about learning, the validity of these findings could be open to question. For example, I enjoy learning and gained both pleasure and knowledge when I took Kvale's book about interviewing on holiday. Sarah, a Diploma student, also enjoyed learning and when she shared this fact with me during her first interview I was at point B in the model; we were two adult learners who shared the characteristic of taking pleasure in scholarship. At this point it was easy for me to step into point C and reflect on our mutual experiences. Sarah, and others, later told me that their learning experience had changed to become more negative. These respondents now just wanted to do the minimum required in order to pass the course. Though I could not fully identify with that desire in relation to what I intended to achieve in *this* study, I was able to take a

subjective stance and examine those differences. Clearly, every researcher must use the data they have gathered; ignoring certain aspects that do not fit their hypotheses is the route to invalid research. I simply make the point that it is possible to be so immersed in the shared identity and likely shared experience inherent in a proximal ethnographic study that the researcher must remain vigilant with regard to personal differences, acknowledge those and reflect accordingly when interpreting results.

When I described proximal ethnography to the postgraduate students in Manchester, the fact that I was only able to verify the account of one of the 12 who thought they were proximal ethnographers leads naturally to the next section which examines the limitations of this study. These are summed up in relation to researcher bias, sample size, geography and limitations caused by what I was unable to ascertain. These were examined in detail in Chapter 4, but are re-iterated in the following section to give context to the conclusions made.

8.4 Limitations of the study

Chapter 4 evaluated the limitations of this study. It recognised that the sample is specific to education, is predominantly female, relatively small in number and comes from students studying in a predominantly rural county. It also acknowledged that an element of researcher subjectivity is inevitable. In recognising my own bias towards the personal *story* aspect of learning I must accept that this research tells of one part of the learning experience that could otherwise be revealed via analysis of retention data, albeit in a purely quantitative format. Analysis of data from a large sample across all HE students may therefore provide a different story of learning. Justification of the relatively small sample size was made in Chapter 4 in relation to the *depth* of data gathered. In conclusion, I refer again to the concept of 'fuzzy generalisation' (Bassey 1998 p6) and re-iterate that all these findings are not generalisable to all students studying HE in FE. Not all of the respondents in this study used all of the methods discussed to support their learning. Zoe and

Peter did not engage with any e-motivation method, Francis was not a social learner and Beth did not describe her learning experience using any metaphorical language. Findings are indicative of the holistic nature of the learning experience. They may not be applicable to all HE in FE students, but they might apply to HE in FE students in similar situations to the respondents here.

8.4.1 Ways in which the study could have been approached differently

One additional benefit to this study could have come from interviewing the staff who taught the groups that were interviewed. This opportunity to gain a perspective on motivation from somebody involved with the group as a whole may have added further depth. For example, it would have been intriguing to ascertain how the Foundation Degree tutor perceived the learning experience of Francis. It was described earlier how Francis felt some personal unease that she did not conform to the norms of student behaviour; data from the tutor's outlook may have provided insights into the impact of that behaviour on the learning environment for the other students and the tutor themselves.

In addition, I did not take the opportunity to invite the new students who joined the Diploma in the second year to take part in the study. Their experiences as individuals needing to join an existing cohort may have provided valuable insights into the complexities of group cohesion in an altered group. It is a limitation of this study that it does not contain the learning stories of the whole group.

The study may have yielded further insight if courses from separate disciplines had been interviewed, so the research could have included interviews with students on diverse courses, or from different institutions. It has been acknowledged that the human resource managers who took part in the pilot were similarly as aware of their motivations to learn as those from the cohorts within education. This may be because their employment role involved them recognising characteristics in potential and existing staff; so

they may not have been so dissimilar to the other cohorts as was first surmised. Interviewing groups from several different HE in FE courses might produce results more generalisable to HE students as a whole.

Finally, the limitations of the survey have been addressed. Survey data could have been further contextualised by gaining additional details from the respective cohorts. Given the chance to repeat this study, greater weight could perhaps be added to the survey data via a follow-up of the subsequent achievements and destination of respondents.

The next section identifies how these findings may be applied to research and teaching practice within the HE in FE setting, mindful of the qualifying factors described above.

8.5 Application of the findings to practice

Findings from this research apply both to the practice of research *and* to the learning experience of HE students. Therefore, they are discussed according to each field as per table 11.

Table 11: Application of findings to research practice and to teaching and learning practice

| Research Practice | Teaching and learning practice |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| Timing of initial recruitment of respondents | Preparedness for study |
| | Fluctuating motivation |
| | Transferable attributes |
| | Group cohesion |

8.5.1 Timing of initial recruitment of respondents

The first finding based on the timing of recruitment arose quite early in the study. It indicated that timing may have had an impact on the number of respondents who consented to take part, based on the extent to which individual students were prepared for the amount of academic work related to

their course. The cohort studying for the Foundation Degree was approached as a group and offered the chance to participate in the research in September 2008. This discussion took place during the first fortnight of their course. 14 out of 18 students initially agreed, and three withdrew before the interviews began. Diploma students were recruited in the same way but the preliminary meeting did not take place until two months later. 11 of 22 agreed to take part, proportionally fewer than the Foundation Degree group. By the time the first interviews were scheduled, seven further students had withdrawn, citing workload pressures.

This difference in the numbers of participants initially recruited and retained for the study led to the hypothesis that Diploma students were more aware of the workload associated with their course than were the Foundation Degree students. The Diploma group had experienced six weeks of study before they met me. In addition, Diploma students may have been considering whether or not they would continue for the full two-years and gain the Diploma, or leave at the end of year one with a Certificate. Their reluctance to join a two-year study may have been caused by uncertainty that they would remain enrolled for the duration.

Evidence supporting this hypothesis arose from two sources. Firstly, when students were asked at the original meeting to write on a slip of paper whether or not they wished to participate, some Diploma students declined based on their perception of having insufficient time to add interviews and use of a blog to their existing schedules. Few Foundation Degree students had however expressed the same sentiment. Secondly, those Foundation Degree students who attended the interview stated that there was much more work on the course than they had expected. By the time we met for the first interviews in October 2008 they had experienced around five weeks of teaching. Their classroom learning and accompanying assignment schedule was well underway and accordingly they had gained a greater awareness of the *actual* experience of learning than they had when they initially agreed to join the

study. This experience reflects the conversation I had with one of my own students (described in Chapter 4) who believed that the only way *truly* to understand how much work was involved at HE level was to be ‘immersed in the middle of it’.

Early evidence therefore indicated that students who had a clear perspective on the task ahead of them were less keen to join the study, (including the added commitments of interviews and blog use), than those who later confirmed that they did not realise how much work they had to undertake. Many Diploma students also wanted to focus purely on their own studies with no distractions, but proportionally more Foundation Degree students withdrew their consent after their initial agreement.

In respect of applying these findings to practice, two points become apparent, one regarding research practice and the other in relation to the learning environment. Firstly, researchers interested in the learning experience of HE students for the entire duration of their course should be especially aware of the potential impact of timing on the success of the initial recruitment. Early enthusiasm and motivation may lead to students agreeing to additional commitments they later regret or find themselves unable to meet.

8.5.2 Preparedness for study

Secondly, the implication is that students need to be better prepared for (and given more realistic expectations of) the extent of academic work required at HE level, perhaps especially those making the transition from secondary education. Research has demonstrated the degree to which students are not prepared either for the increase in academic demand or the degree of self-directed study required in HE (Lowe and Cook 2003, Lowe and Gayle 2007). The early findings from this study seem to echo what has already been found. Having examined the evidence from early in the study, the next section considers the conclusions that can be drawn around the findings concerning fluctuating motivations.

8.5.3 Fluctuating motivation

One practical conclusion to this study is connected with what students expressed through metaphor; that is to say, the idea that students can expect their motivation to rise and fall over the course of their studies. All of the students who took part in the interviews successfully gained their qualification. Most of them experienced some aspects of their primary or secondary motivation in a state of fluctuation; there were occasions when they felt low and wanted to give up. The practical outcome from this research could inform HE induction programmes and their ongoing aspects of peer and tutorial support; namely advising students that changes in motivation are to be expected, *i.e.* 'don't leave simply because you are de-motivated'. From an institutional perspective, being able to act upon these findings may have a positive influence on student retention. Enabling new students to realise that they can typically expect to feel unstable in their motivation over the duration of a course could help in the formation of a functional community of practice by acknowledging and sharing these common feelings.

8.5.4 Transferable attributes

In addition, students could be supported to reflect on their past accomplishments or previous successful identities in order to help them succeed. Results indicated that, at least with five of the respondents, adapting previous characteristics into their new identity helped them to cope with the demands of HE. These five students demonstrated that they had prior and transferable attributes that they tapped into to enable their current successes. It is accepted that these five individuals *had* previous successful traits that they could transfer to their current situation, and not all students may be in this situation. However, if *all* students could be encouraged to reflect more deeply on their own previous successes, or perhaps the positive experiences of a role model (for example a mentor or 'study buddy') then this could provide a highly effective coping strategy for future academic success.

8.5.5 Group cohesion

The final comment relates to the finding about the importance of group cohesion. For most students, creating a sense of belonging to a group or being part of a cohesive cohort was intrinsically motivating. The community of practice that developed over the courses, and the sense of shared experiences helped to normalise feelings of frustration or de-motivation, as is crystallised in these two comments:

You don't feel isolated, you don't feel like you're on your own in it, you know that other people are doing *exactly* [own emphasis] the same.

Since I'm going through the same problems, I can motivate by telling how I overcame them, using email and Facebook.

Students should be strongly encouraged to engage with their peer group, with the understanding that their fellow students could provide knowledgeable support because they are part of that collective experience. This sense of belonging could be promoted within a large group or in smaller sub-groups, but should nevertheless be actively fostered as early as possible during a course so that effective support networks may be established in order to maximise their motivating potential.

At the start of this thesis I mentioned my unease at the limited focus of the audit culture that exists within the discipline of education, in its measurement of retention and success rates as determinants of the quality of an institution. Based on the findings from this study I wish to make one further recommendation for an additional measurement that acknowledges the 'value-added' aspects of learning. The students in this study were transformed by their learning in rich and diverse ways not captured in the two measurements of their success, *i.e.* they stayed on the course (retention) and passed the qualification (success). HEI's do examine individual transformation during tutorial work. If those self-assessments of growth and development could be given real weight and be used by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in its Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review

(IQER) to demonstrate depth and breadth in learning, then institutions could also be measured on the ways in which they develop their students by enabling holistic lifelong learning and growth. Formal measurement of the value added to a student's learning would also acknowledge the personal change that occurs in students who do not stay on their course, or do not gain the final qualification, but for whom leaving a course early is the right course of action.

This chapter goes on to make recommendations for further research with regard to the impacts of HE study on significant others and the effect of group size on the sense of belonging.

8.6 Recommendations for further research

A number of respondents discussed the effects of study on their families, partners and significant others. Some of these were negative, but others were positive. Sarah noticed the amount of pressure she was putting on her family and work colleagues, and hinted at the strain on her and her marriage caused by trying to manage the high additional study workload.

One PGCE first year student commented in the survey that:

fitting in the work I need to do alongside my paid employment impacts on the time I spend with my family.

Another student in the second year of study for her Cert. Ed. noted:

I spend most evenings and weekends reading and researching so don't get enough time with my partner, which makes me feel guilty and sometimes causes arguments.

These comments are indicative of the various struggles that students identified and the impact they had on those around them. On a more positive note, one student from the Foundation Degree group interview said that her daughter, who would never otherwise have considered applying for university, did so (and was accepted) because she was inspired by her mother's example. These stories provide very strong evidence that learning does not

take place in isolation and further research perhaps could examine the impacts of HE study on the immediate family. There were those in this study who stated that they had abandoned housework, epitomised in Sarah's comment 'the house looks like a hurricane's been through it'. Presumably either the household chores were left undone, or otherwise somebody else had to take them over! That is only one limited example, but raises the question of to what extent significant others may be making sacrifices in order to enable the learning experience of the student.

In addition, if studying can result in self-actualisation, increased self-confidence and assertiveness, then what impact might the individual transformation also have on existing relationships? Findings suggest that individuals change as a result of undertaking HE study. It would be of interest to ascertain if significant others are i) aware of the potential or actual changes in personal characteristics that occur in the student over the duration of their study and ii) prepared for the influence of any change on the dynamic of their relationship. Research into the impacts of studying on close family members could provide some fascinating insights that might enable the wider effects of the learning experience to be better understood.

The findings concerning the importance of group cohesion are predicated on results from relatively small groups, albeit that in the case of the Diploma membership of the groups changed. In light of the larger class sizes typical of HEI settings, further research could extricate more subtle information about the ways in which a sense of belonging is created in large and mobile groups. National success rates indicate that students also clearly succeed in their learning when they are part of larger groups. One university local to this study for example has an undergraduate cohort in the first year of one course numbering nearly 200 students. Further research examining the importance of belonging in large-sized cohorts could focus on the formation of sub-groups *i.e.* what helps them to coalesce? Does the sense of belonging fostered by a small sub-group based on personal friendship have the same impact on

motivation as per the findings of this study? It would also be of interest to ascertain if e-motivation tools were more important within a large cohort than a small one. This study could also provide the basis for an examination of the potential de-motivating aspects of e-motivation. In relation to the existing literature that examines the positive use of communication technologies to enhance learning, further research could perhaps examine its potentially alienating effects on those who feel either socially or technically excluded.

Finally, this research indicates an opportunity for further study to examine the potential for proximal ethnography to be validated as a new model. This research has emphasised the importance of mutual identity within the ethnographic paradigm. Two further examples of proximal ethnography in practice were presented, albeit that one came from an unscientific source, *i.e.* an unrepresentative group of conference delegates who I was not able to question in any depth in order to clarify their personal interpretation of this model. Kadi-Hanifi's example arises from a reliable and robust source. Her work concerns shared identities between the researcher and respondents. What emerges indicates an emphasis on commonality in research rather than dissociation between the research question and the researcher. Examination of additional examples of this model in practice could allow the concept to be proposed as a new research method with greater certainty. Throughout this thesis, it has been made clear that I as the researcher am integral to the research; I am embedded in the study. The closing section uses Johns' model of reflection to consider the whole experience of this study. It examines my own transformation and what I believe I have achieved.

8.7 Reflections on the transformation of this researcher

Earlier in this thesis I characterised my research experience as being as an apprenticeship. I have learned about the roles of participants in research by being immersed in the part of the researcher. Johns' model of structured reflection allows me to observe the transformation of my own frames of reference (Mezirow 1991) as this research has developed. I have re-evaluated my understanding of the relationship between the researcher and

the participant to acknowledge the critical importance of collaboration. I came to realise that my role was to enable the individual story of learning to be articulated by the person who had lived that experience. Their experiences enriched not only my understanding of what it means to be an HE student but also the intrinsically personal nature of this type of educational research.

I have also transformed my understanding of the process of research. When I started this study six years ago I was inspired to examine student motivation and understood that I was expected to contribute to the sum of knowledge relating to the subject of motivation. What I had not anticipated was the extent to which my own learning experience would involve meandering and iterative twists and turns as part of its overall trajectory. To paraphrase my favourite author of idiosyncratic fiction *I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I ended up where I intended to be* (Adams 1988 p124). Using Johns' model for a final 'look in' I have come to understand that an acceptance of this state of flux is fundamental to progressing original research of this, since:

meaning is never fixed...it must be constantly won (de Beauvoir 1957 p413).

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Information Form

My name is Fiona Price and I am researching for my MPhil/PhD at the University of Worcester. My research interest focuses on what motivates adult learners studying higher education qualifications in a further education college.

The aim of my research is to establish how to provide the most effective learning environment for adult learners.

Your participation involves taking part in interviews at the start of each year of your study, midway through each year and at the end of your course. The interviews are likely to last around an hour.

The interviews will be recorded using a digital voice recorder and then transcribed and kept as Microsoft 'Word' documents. You will be given a copy of each transcript to check for accuracy.

You are also invited to use a confidential blog to keep in touch with fellow students and share your experiences.

Please be aware of the following points:

- Participation is entirely voluntary and you are not obliged to participate.
- You are free to say that you do not wish to take part at this stage.
- You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason and without prejudice.
- No interview questions will be intimate or embarrassing, and you are free to decline to answer any questions in the interview if you wish.
- Your name will not be used in any publication – pseudonyms will be used for each participant.
- The college will not be named, so your identity will remain entirely confidential.
- Evidence, in the form of transcribed interviews, will be kept password secured and will only be accessible by myself.
- As the researcher, I will need to reserve the right to use direct quotations from the interviews and the blog.

Contact details:

Fiona Price Tel: [work telephone number provided] e-mail: [work e-mail provided]

Consent Form

Researcher: Fiona Price

Theme of project: How adult students are motivated while studying higher education in a further education college

Please tick to confirm

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for this research.

I have been given the opportunity to consider the information and ask any questions.

Any of my own questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I am aware that I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the research.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason and without prejudice.

I understand what my role will be in this research.

I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded.

I agree to the researcher transcribing, analysing and publishing any personal data which I have supplied (with due regard to confidentiality).

I agree to the researcher using direct quotations from interviews and the blog as evidence.

I agree to take part in the research.

Name

Signature

Date

One copy for the researcher and one copy for the participant.

Interview Questions

Interview 1

Why did you choose this course?

Why did you choose to study at [*College name here*]?

What are your expectations of study at this level?

Do you have any thoughts about whether this course will have an impact on your day-to-day life?

What do you expect the main benefits of your course to be?

Tell me about your past educational experiences

What has helped you succeed in the past?

Interview 2

Could you tell me how you would define motivation?

Would you explain what motivates you? – I refer to 1st interview if applicable

Would you say your motivation has remained constant or has it wavered?

Give me a general idea about how the course is going so far.

Can you give me a specific example of having learned something new on the course?

How did it make you feel? Elaborate

Can you give me a specific example of a time when you have struggled on the course?

How did that make you feel?

How have you managed to overcome the struggle? Elaborate

Have you ever felt like giving up the course?

Elaborate

What has stopped you?

How does this link with the way you define motivation?

Have there been occasions when you have got support from other students in the group?

How would you describe that support?

Interview 3

General feelings on how the course is going

Motivation – hierarchy

Do some motivations take precedence over others?

How do you tap into motivational drivers when 'wobbly'?

Is e-communication still useful?

Group support

Interview 4

How do you feel now that you're at the end?

Gauge feelings in relation to well-being

Has e-communication remained useful?

Group support

Has motivation altered?

Other than learning, how else have you developed?

Is there a feeling that social collaboration has been a part of the learning journey? Get a feeling for social constructivism in action

What motivates students in higher education?

My name is Fiona and I am undertaking research into what motivates adults studying higher education courses in a further education college setting.

Thank you for getting this far!

You are under no obligation to take part; you can stop answering the questions and simply close down the survey at any point.

If you do take part, you do so on the understanding that information will be analysed and published anonymously.

By submitting the survey you demonstrate your consent for this to happen.

Don't worry, there are no embarrassing questions!

The survey should take no more than 5 minutes to complete.

If you would like the opportunity to be entered into a draw for one of 5 £20 book tokens please type your e-mail address into the last page.

Thank you in anticipation of your participation.

* 1. How old are you?

- 18-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60+

* 2. Are you

- Male
- Female

* 3. What course are you studying?

* 4. What year are you in?

* 5. Are you studying full time or part time?

6. Why did you choose this course? (Tick as many as applicable)

- It's compulsory for my job
- It's an interesting course
- It's been recommended to me
- It will help me progress in my career
- Simply for the fun of studying!
- Other - please specify

* 7. Why did you choose your college to study? (Tick as many as applicable)

- It's local
- It's highly recommended
- I like the facilities
- I've studied here before
- Other - please specify

* 8. What motivates you to keep studying on your course? (Tick as many as applicable)

- Getting a new career at the end of it
- Picturing myself at graduation
- The opportunity to earn more money
- The prestige of a higher qualification
- Compulsion - I have no choice!
- The enjoyment of learning something new
- Doing something stimulating
- Other - please specify

9. Have you ever felt like giving up the course?

- I'm thinking of it right now!
- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Never

If you have thought of giving up please explain how you have overcome the feeling

* 10. How easy has it been to fit college study in with your other life commitments?

- Very Easy
- Easy
- Neutral
- Difficult
- Very Difficult

Please describe the impact studying has had on other aspects of your life
11. Do you use any of the following types of electronic communication to keep in touch with fellow students outside of college hours? (Tick as many as applicable)

- E-mail
- On-line forum
- Text
- Blog
- Telephone
- Message service on college intranet
- Social network (e.g. Facebook)
- None
- Other - please specify

* 12. Do you feel that using any of these methods has motivated you to keep studying when you might otherwise have left the course?

- Yes
- No

If 'Yes' please tell me briefly how it has helped

* 13. Have you used any of these methods to motivate *other* students to stay on the course?

- Yes
- No

If 'Yes' please indicate which type & how it helped

14. Many thanks for taking part in my survey.

If you would like the chance to be entered into a draw for one of 5 £20 book tokens please enter your e-mail address in the box below. Please be assured all responses will be treated in confidence & I will not bombard you with junk e-mails!

Johns (2000) model of structured reflection:

Looking in

- *Find a space to focus on self*
- *Pay attention to your thoughts and emotions*
- *Write down those thoughts and emotions that seem significant in realising desirable work.*

Looking out

- *Write a description of the situation surrounding your thoughts and feelings.*
- *What issues seem significant?*
- *Aesthetics*

What was I trying to achieve?

Why did I respond as I did?

What were the consequences of that for the patient/others/myself?

How were others feeling?

How did I know this?

- *Personal*

Why did I feel the way I did within this situation?

- *Ethics*

Did I act for the best? (ethical mapping)

- *What factors (either embodied within me or embedded within the environment) were influencing me?*

- *Empirics*

What knowledge did or could have informed me?

- *Reflexivity*

Does this situation connect with previous experiences?

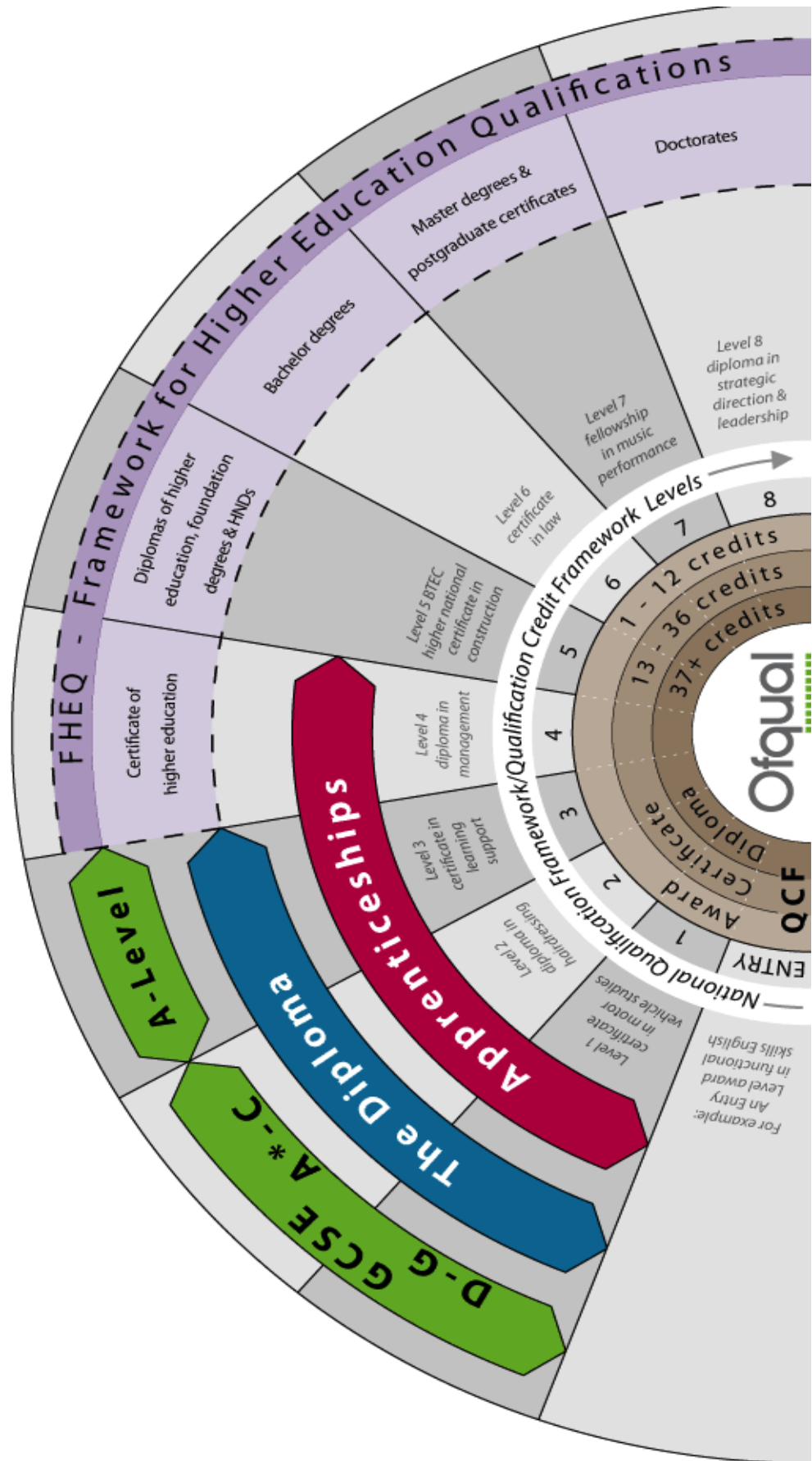
How could I handle this situation better?

What would be the consequences of alternative actions for the patient/others/myself?

How do I now feel about this experience?

Can I support myself and others better as a consequence?

How available am I to work with patients/families and staff to help them meet their needs?



Short profile of each student who took part in individual interviews

Students on the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector

Peter

At 43 Peter was the oldest respondent in the interview cohort. He described himself as a determined, optimistic and focused individual. He had a strategic business background. Peter was a very positive person who was always seeking constructive feedback and ways to learn and he found studying interesting. He avoided negative influences and always looked for what could be gained from any situation. He looked at the big picture and was able to prioritise his work, study and life effectively. Peter gained motivation by inspiring others to develop and learn, but also learned well when others inspired him. Peter worked as a full-time lecturer in the same college where he studied.

Helen

Helen was 34 years old at the start of the course and had two young children. Helen was tenacious, she wanted to do the best she could in any situation, but she lacked self-confidence having been put down throughout her life. She was most focused when she was busy and seemed to thrive on the buzz, structure and fast pace of work. She valued doing things the right way, not cutting corners, and instilled in others the intrinsic value of learning things properly. She admitted to being motivated by money and justified that by saying that she wanted the best for her children. She was ambitious, but felt that no matter how hard she pushed herself she would never be good enough. However, over the duration of the interviews Helen noticed a transformation in her motivation and an increase in her self-esteem. Helen taught for a short time in the college where she studied.

Sarah

Sarah was married, worked full time and had three young children. She was 41 at the start of the study. Sarah was a very disciplined and determined individual who found family and friendship to be core foundations to her life. She undertook the course in order to gain knowledge and to be credible in her work. Sarah loved learning and took pride in doing assignments well; she described being motivated to succeed by a teacher who wished to put her in for CSE not O level, proving her point by doing well in her O level. She described how she referred back to that original teacher when she gained a first class degree later in her life. Sarah was very focused on her course, sometimes to the detriment of her relationship with her family. She was motivated to attend lessons because of the supportive friendships made in her group. Sarah worked part-time as a Clinical Nurse Specialist.

Ruth

Ruth had two young children and worked part-time. She was 34 at the start of the course. The importance of family was a strong theme in Ruth's life, and her children were a key focus and motivation. She did not consider herself an academic but she knew her family were very proud of her achievements. Ruth experienced a significant tragedy in her life, and this gave her a balanced view of life; her perspective was 'why worry', though she recognised that she put herself under pressure by leaving work until the last minute. Her early ambition 'just to pass' was transformed by the end of the course as she found greater self-worth in being motivated to improve her grade for each assignment. A very positive, optimistic individual, Ruth described herself as a survivor. Ruth gained a lecturing position in a local college while on the course.

Students on the Foundation Degree Learning Support

Francis

At 18 Francis was the youngest of the cohort. She was a bright individual who was bullied at school. Francis acknowledged the psychological safety of learning in a familiar place, avoiding the university as its size was overwhelming. She found it hard to talk to new people and did not fit in with her Foundation Degree group from the start, preferring to sit on her own. She also received no support from work colleagues or her family during the course, describing her learning experience as isolating, like she did not exist. Family support was of tremendous importance and she was frustrated that there was none. Francis had a combination of motivating drivers but lacked self-confidence and had a great fear of failing. Initially motivated to improve her grades, she had her self-confidence shaken on two specific occasions during the course and this resulted in her just wanting to pass, feeling the course was worthless. Francis managed four jobs including work as a Teaching Assistant during the course.

Tina

Tina was 29, with two young children. She started the course as a volunteer in a school and later gained a part-time job there. At the start of the course she did not integrate well with her group and felt doubtful about the tutor's assertion that lifelong friendships would be formed during the programme. She described herself as a social but private person with specific boundaries; she gained support for her study from her boyfriend. Tina loved learning and applying her knowledge to practice, and she used both short and long term motivating drivers to help her focus on study. The hardest part of studying was fitting all her commitments together. Tina was strong, motivated and determined and was drawn to people with the same traits. By the end of the course Tina had made some good friendships, and noticed her own transformation in the way she learned from other people, reflecting on her initial scepticism about the value of belonging.

Zoe

Zoe was 39 and had three children at the start of the course. She had a baby during the summer break and her husband died unexpectedly, early in her first year. Zoe took the course partly for personal achievement, and in order to maintain a good standard of life for her family. She was very focused, motivated and determined and she worked well under pressure. Zoe found it difficult to allow herself just to do the minimum required to pass after her husband died, as she preferred to give full commitment and work to the best of her ability. Zoe lacked self-confidence and did not like to form too close a relationship with fellow students, preferring some isolation. She regarded gaining a degree as a positive affirmation of self-worth. Zoe worked part-time as a Teaching Assistant during the course.

Beth

Beth was a mother of three children working in a local primary school as a Teaching Assistant. She was 36 at the start of the course. Beth was taking the course in order to develop her knowledge so that she could better help the children she worked with, many of whom had behavioural and emotional difficulties. Beth had practical help from her own children to manage the balance of work and family life, as they were old enough to have some independence. She made early friendships in her group. Beth came from a large family and their support was invaluable, particularly after getting a low grade when she was motivated to stay by her family. Beth found the increasing workload to be stressful and asked to step away from the study at the end of the first year.

Consent Form

Researcher: Fiona Price

Theme of project: How adult students are motivated while studying higher education in a further education college

Please tick to confirm

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for this research.

I have been given the opportunity to consider the information and e-mail any questions to the researcher prior to taking part.

Any of my own questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary.

I understand what my role will be in this research.

I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded.

I agree to the researcher transcribing, analysing and publishing any data which I have supplied (with due regard to confidentiality).

I agree to the researcher using direct quotations from the discussion as evidence.

I agree to take part in the research.

Name

Signature

Date

Group Interview Topics

These are the subjects I would like you to discuss when we meet for the group interview. As you can see, there are no trick questions. I am interested in your account of how you have remained motivated during this course, so this is all about your experience.

You are very welcome to make notes to bring to the discussion if you would like.

Topics for discussion:

- Could you tell me how you would define motivation?
- Would you explain what motivates you?
- Would you say your motivation has remained constant or has it wavered?
- Do some motivations take precedence over others?
- How do you draw on your motivational sources when 'wobbly'?
- Have there been occasions when you have received support from other students in the group?
- How would you describe that support?

Information Form

My name is Fiona Price and I am researching for my PhD at the University of Worcester. My research interest focuses on what motivates adult learners studying higher education qualifications in a further education college.

The aim of my research is to establish how to provide the most effective learning environment for adult learners.

Your participation involves taking part in a group discussion that will last around an hour. The discussion will be recorded using a digital voice recorder and then transcribed and kept as a Microsoft 'Word' document. You will be given a copy of the transcript of the discussion to check for accuracy.

Please be aware of the following points:

- Participation is entirely voluntary and you are not obliged to take part.
- You are free to say that you do not wish to be included at this stage.
- No discussion questions will be intimate or embarrassing, and you are free to decline to join in at any point if you wish.
- Your name will not be used in any publication – pseudonyms will be used for each participant.
- The college will not be named, so your identity will remain entirely confidential.
- Evidence, in the form of a transcript of the discussion, will be kept password secured and will only be accessible by myself.
- As the researcher I will need to reserve the right to use direct quotations from the discussion.

Contact details:

Fiona Price Tel: [*work telephone number provided*] e-mail: [*work e-mail provided*]

Written questions

In order to provide context to your discussion would you please answer the following questions and bring the completed sheet to the group interview.

As with your participation in the group interview, all information will be kept confidential, you will not be named in the final dissertation and all evidence will be destroyed at the end of the research.

Name:

Age at start of course:

Title of course:

Why did you choose to study at [*College name here*]?

Why did you select this particular course?

Could you briefly describe your educational background?



ETHICS CHECKLIST FOR STAFF/POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS WRITING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

This form is intended as an initial checklist for students/members of staff undertaking a research project. Ethical approval must be obtained prior to starting research with human subjects, animals, human tissue and literary or artistic works with human or animal subjects.

| | |
|------------------------------------|------------------|
| Researcher: | |
| Email: | |
| Institute: | Education |
| Status: | Research Student |
| Supervisor (if PG student): | |
| Project Title: | |

Checklist

| | Yes | No |
|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Does the study involve research with human participants who may not be able to give fully informed consent (e.g. children, vulnerable adults, employees, those with a pre-existing relationship to the researcher)? ³ | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Will invasive procedures be part of the research (e.g. blood sampling, temperature probes)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Is there any foreseeable risk to the participant (physical, social, psychological, emotional or financial)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Does the research involve access to, or the collection of, sensitive/confidential data from other organisations? | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Will the study require information about unlawful activity? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Will the study involve prolonged, high intensity or repetitive testing? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Does the study involve deception? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Does the study involve NHS patients, staff or premises? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Does the study involve testing of animals? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Will financial inducements be offered? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

³ Please note that this does not include projects using general data about people in which individuals cannot be identified.

Signatures

| | | | |
|--|-------|--------------|-------|
| Researcher: | _____ | Date: | _____ |
| Supervisor (if applicable)⁴: | _____ | Date: | _____ |
| Hol (if applicable)⁵: | _____ | Date: | _____ |

The researcher has answered **NO** to all the above categories and does not consider that this research project needs to undergo further Ethical Approval.

Institute Ethics Representative: _____

The researcher has answered **YES** to at least one of questions 1-10 and has forwarded a completed Ethical Approval Form to the Institute.

Institute Ethics Representative: _____

**A COPY OF THIS FORM SHOULD
BE FORWARDED TO THE GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL**

⁴ Please note that a PG student's checklist must be agreed and signed off by the principal Supervisor.

⁵ Please note that a member of staff's checklist must be agreed and signed off by their Head of Institute (Hol).