

“I couldn’t have done it without my Access tutor”. Inspiring Access to Higher Education students to (re) engage with learning.

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Paper Outline

Introduction and Context

Access to Higher Education is a nine-month diploma course aimed at mature students under-represented in higher education who would like to study in it, but have few or no relevant formal qualifications and who are ‘excluded, delayed or otherwise deterred by a need to qualify for (university) entry in more conventional ways’ (Parry, 1996: 11). They are intended to provide learners with the subject knowledge and generic skills required for progression to and effective study in HE and the self-confidence to contend with its challenges.

Access to HE courses are awarded by access validating authorities (AVAs) which are regulated by the QAA. However, they remain regarded as the ‘Cinderella of the education system’ (Franklin, 2006: 1), being largely taught within the context of the further education (FE) sector in England and often perceived as having a ‘historical Cinderella like image’ (Hodkinson et al, 2008: 12). FE colleges are ‘commonly regarded as at the centre of providing opportunities for lifelong learning, and a means of promoting economic growth and social cohesion’ (Jephcote *et al* 2008: 164). They are also often perceived as a ‘last chance saloon’ for people who have under-achieved previously in education. Access to HE courses fit in well with this perspective.

Theoretical approach

Drawing on a project funded by the British Academy and Aim Awards (Access Validating Authority) investigating the learning transitions of Access to HE students, the paper articulates the commitment of Access to HE tutors in enabling these students to make successful transitions into HE in a climate of ongoing change and performativity in FE. A review of the literature on the work and identities of Access to HE tutors indicates that this aspect has received little attention from researchers in the field. While the project was interested in Access to HE students’ learning transitions, the project also examined the social interactions between learners and tutors, and the influence of the wider social, economic and political contexts. Following Access to HE tutors (and their learners), the project took into account existing theory and research evidence. This included Wenger’s (1998) conceptualisation of learning as changing one’s ability to participate and to negotiate meaning, Vygotsky’s (1978) work on zones of proximal development and the idea that by various means teachers help support students to reengage with learning. Bloomer and Hodkinson’s (2000) exploration of learning careers and their notion of studentship was also relevant. The project conceptualised and theorised the perspectives of Access to HE tutors as ongoing, a product of past and current experiences, responses to

external factors such as FE college management initiatives, wider regulatory and policy frameworks and, importantly, a response to their knowledge of and interactions with learners.

Methodology

The project was conceptualised using a social interactionist framework that recognises people's learning and development being constructed through social interactions in particular milieu (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The study was based in seven urban and rural FE colleges in the East Midlands of England and focused on students who had enrolled for an Access Diploma in Social Science/Humanities. Across the FE colleges there were 60 tutors who took part in a series of focus group interviews or individual interviews over an academic year to provide an institutional perspective on the Access to HE courses, to explore their perceptions of the cultural and social capital that the students brought/established, and the pedagogic strategies used to support Access to HE students. The qualitative data from the interviews was audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using a grounded approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) to construct themes that reflected the Access to HE tutors' constructs of themselves and their contexts.

Results and implications

The findings from the project illustrate how the Access to HE tutors shared with their students the view that Access to HE provided a significant educational 'second chance'. The tutors' views embodied a strong commitment to this notion, by illustrating the emotional labour they undertook as they conceived of their professional role primarily in terms of establishing supportive relationships with their students. Pedagogical expertise was important in terms of imparting subject knowledge but the social interactions between students and tutors as well as the forging of supportive relationships with students, was fundamental to the progression and transition of these students.

Our findings also showed that the Access to HE tutors invested heavily in emotional labour as a form of coping strategy to deal with the pressure and stresses they faced from FE college managers and especially from challenging learners. Commitment to their learners was such that the tutors worked with students well beyond the formal learning setting. As they presented it, successful teaching and learning was based on establishing appropriate relationships, which provided the necessary basis for changing students' understandings of themselves as learners.

Finally, the position of the Access to HE tutors was an important and distinctive feature of the learning culture, where, for them, learning cultures were the social practices through which the students learnt, albeit constrained by prevailing organisational cultures/s and structure/s. The Access to HE tutors asserted particular values that helped to construct collaborative cultures to encourage

student engagement with learning. Privileging what they perceived to be the needs and interests of learners did not always coincide with the demands being placed on them by their respective FE colleges. As such their professional values, were often threatened by the encroachment of institutional regimes within the FE colleges.

However, formal authority also lay with the Access to HE tutors as they also played important boundary or peripheral roles, negotiating with FE college managers and external bodies such as QAA as to how to meet the demands of the curriculum and policy contexts in which the learning communities were located. It left them socially slightly apart from the students, but also allowed them to develop nurturing relationships while projecting power to steer the community in directions to make learning as successful as possible.

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