

Critical Democratic Dissemination, Learners' Lives and Further Education

Rob Smith, Birmingham City University: rob.smith@bcu.ac.uk

Vicky Duckworth Edgehill University: duckworv@edgehill.ac.uk

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Further Education (FE) is an umbrella term that describes learning taking place mainly outside of school environments and largely shaped by historical, industrial and social factors closely related to the local socio-economic circumstances in different towns and cities across the UK. This chapter presents findings from a collaborative research project into how, against a challenging landscape constrained by the pressures of marketisation and funding, further education continues to offer a 'differential space' (Lefebvre 1991) in which learners, supported by critical pedagogy, are able to experience education as transformative (Mezirow 2000; Duckworth & Ade-Ojo 2016; Duckworth & Smith 2017, 2018).

The churn post compulsory educational policy over the last quarter century provides a vital frame for any discussion about knowledge production practices in this field. As a point of departure, the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) removed colleges from local authority control and introduced marketisation to this heterogeneous and locally defined education provision. At the heart of this episode of marketisation was an approach to funding that, in effect, centralised the curriculum control and allowed for on-going annual policy and curriculum intervention by successive government departments (Hammond 2003, Keep 2006, Crowley and Lucas 2016). This market-orientated structure allowed for an intensification of an instrumentalist view of FE – closely linked to the emergence of neoliberal policy with its emphasis on 'skills' rather than broader conceptualisations of education (Duckworth and Smith 2019). The ideological effect of the Further and Higher Education Act was to conjure into being and consolidate what has become known as 'the Further Education Sector' – a generalised and 'abstract' space (Lefebvre 1991) that has

facilitated policy making at a distance and systematically superimposed a centralised drive to address economic and skills concerns over local 'ecologies' of teaching and learning.

As 'marketisation' requires colleges to generate performance data, these 'metrics' – measurable phenomena – have come to dominate the knowledge production activities of colleges and tend to shape their cultures. At worst, these pressures have the potential to engender a set of practices and an attitude to knowledge production on the part of teachers and managers that combine to represent only a distorted and distant reflection of the lived experiences of teaching and learning.

In this high stakes context then, our research project aimed to work outside and beyond these performative knowledge production practices, to engage in knowledge production as a reflexive and collaborative rather than a competitive activity governed by 'gaming'. Rather than purporting to present a factual and reductive truth (perhaps best represented symbolically by the Ofsted grading system), the research project chose to foreground voices of students, teachers and others to provide a qualitative, textured and more critical picture: a nuanced picture we would argue that creatively represents perspectives that are typically blocked out within marketised settings. As a project that sought methodologically to bring values and practices from critical pedagogy (Freire 1995) to research practice, we viewed the cycle of research as enhancing the agency of the participants by foregrounding their stories and offering an alternative set of narratives that crossed institutional boundaries and challenged reductive discourses that permeate discourse about the 'FE sector'.

The current context

The current circumstances and landscapes of FE are troubled for at least three structural reasons. First, there has been a systematic reduction in FE funding since the 2008 financial crisis, contingent on the imposition of neoliberal 'austerity' measures; secondly, a series of Area Reviews have reconfigured the number of colleges in each region through merger and closure (see Smith 2017); thirdly, the periodic churn of policy intervention identified in a lot of the literature about the sector (for example, Coffield 2008, Wolf 2011, Keep 2006) continues unabated creating instability for colleges and people who work and learn in FE.

In contrast to the highly constrained and performative knowledge production practices that incorporation has brought into being within colleges, this project has collected counter-metric narratives: stories that fall outside of what is deemed to be measurable. The project provided a collaborative and democratic space for the sharing and celebration of participants' stories; their voices were validated. The digital platform was a key facilitating factor in this. We will focus in particular on the project's creative use of digital tools to: i) extend engagement with and dissemination of the project findings and ii) enrich the research through the establishment of discursive *fora* and a virtual space in which ideas and narratives related to transformative teaching and learning could be shared. The paper concludes by theorising the connection between a digital, organic research methodology and critical pedagogy in an attempt to model a democratic and dialogical approach to knowledge production that acts as a counterforce to work against the grain of current neo-liberal hegemonic discourses.

The research project: transforming lives

The research project: *FE in England: transforming lives and communities*¹ utilised a digitally embedded research methodology to gather, explore and share project data. The data comprised a series of rich narratives from learners, teachers, employers and learners' family members. These were collected through video recorded interviews which were then shared via a project website. A Youtube channel² and twitter account (@FEtransforms) were further features of an inter-related and multi-faceted digital platform that were used to build a project audience and an interactive critical space which garnered further contributions in the form of written narratives, photographs and artefacts. This digital platform was used to grow a wider project audience to participate in a collaborative way by contributing to the data. The aim here was to catalyse what we describe as *virtually enhanced engagement* in order to constitute a 'thirdspace' (Soja 1998) i.e. a space in which FE could effectively be reimagined, through a collective dialogical interaction of practitioners and students as *more*

¹ <http://transforminglives.web.ucl.ac.uk/>

² <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkDeirtGCmeBs361BgibXnA>

than the quantitatively–defined abstract space that current FE policy discourse reifies. This interactive dimension extended the influence of the project and constructed new and alternative meanings in the public domain. It also facilitated engagement with policy makers and led to additional opportunities for public dissemination and speaking back and to the development of policy.

Research methodology

The research methodology brought together aspects from a range of different approaches. For us, life history and biography provided important entry points into our research (Goodson & Sikes 2004; Duckworth, 2013). The life stories of the researchers are closely bound up with FE and this provided a crucial frame of authenticity when meeting and speaking with participants. Reciprocity in telling our stories while asking participants to share their own was an important principle in the collaborative practice of gathering the data. This was a crucial aspect of the collaborative approach that underpinned the project. Goodley et al. (2004: 167) comment that:

Researching life stories offers opportunities for drawing on our own and others' narratives in ways that can illuminate key theoretical, policy and practice considerations.

Listening to participants' life stories provided insights into the transformative impact of FE for them and on their lives; it also illuminated the ripple impact on family and community. This often also involved us listening to participants recounting negative experiences of schooling. These research conversations were collaborative in the sense that not only were stories shared, but new understandings were generated for everyone involved. For the research team, participants' stories provided important insights into the factors that facilitated transformative teaching and learning. For participants, these dialogical research conversations involved a re-telling that culminated in an affirmation of the new learner identities and a shedding of spoilt identities (for example through the symbolic violence of being labelled) and the affirmation and reclaiming of the new learner identities based on agency and self-respect. The discussions also, more broadly, fostered a growing awareness of social and historical factors that had shaped their experience of education to date (Duckworth and Smith 2018). Participants' sense that they belonged to a dispersed

community that they could connect with through the project made possible a broadening of individual horizons. There was also a sharing of stories between the participants which developed the process of what Clough (2002: 81) describes as 'focused conversations', the value of which he outlines in the following way:

Through 'talking- for- writing' new ideas can be born, new knowledge can be created, views can be shaped and re-shaped. The richness in the approach lies in the openness of those participants and their ideas to be shaped by those of others, and to examine their own experiences in the light of what they hear others say. (ibid: 81)

The dialogical approach not only fed into a methodological position that sees research as a social practice (Duckworth and Smith 2019) rather than as a separate, technical exercise in extracting information while remaining neutral and distant. As we explain below, we felt the nature of the narratives we were gathering demanded that we step outside of the rush and tumult of 'the present' and into a space of reflection in which we aimed to summon up a greater level of 'presence' (Lefebvre 2004). Lefebvre uses the terms 'presence' counterposed against 'the present' to critique 'le quotidien' or everyday life (Lefebvre 2004) which he sees as ideologically imbued with marketised relations. In contrast with the present which for him is "a fact and an effect of commerce":

(W)ith presence there is dialogue, the use of time, speech and action.... presence situates itself in the poetic: value, creation, situation in the world and not only in the relations of exchange. (Lefebvre 2004: 47)

In this way, the research was reflexive inasmuch as it recognised its own potential impact as social interaction. That consciousness made it important for us to draw on our understanding of critical pedagogy and to attempt to produce an egalitarian space for research conversations to take place in. Hierarchical positions were ruptured; participants were positioned as being on an equal footing with us as researchers. We, ourselves and our narratives were weaved into the research conversations as a way of de-mystifying research as a process and ourselves as researchers.

Life histories were used as what Plummer describes as a 'sensitising tool' (1995), allowing the researchers not just to view the respondents' world picture but to enable them to engage with each other's narratives (and ours) and open them up for discussion and meaning

making. Throughout, we remained highly sensitive to the importance of the language we used as we wanted to explore the issues without labelling and stigmatising the participants. That said, the experiences they have are not neutral, they are lived in experiences which demonstrate the forms of inequalities which impact on their lives.

Participation in the project

The project adhered closely to the BERA ethical guidelines (2011) and paid particular attention to the ethical issues associated with using a digital platform which included video. Anonymisation was offered to all participants. As the focus was on the transformative qualities of their educational experiences, most were happy and indeed strong in their voicing that their real names be used. Where colleges and teachers were explicitly mentioned, we also sought permission to include these. Recruiting participants to the project happened organically: starting with the existing professional networks and contacts of the researchers, it gradually spanned out across the UK and indeed beyond. This momentum grew through an ongoing programme of virtual and actual dissemination. The researchers began presenting data from the project to networks and at local, national and international conferences around the country within six months of it starting. This fed into participation naturally; those listening to presentations about the project were invited to contribute to the project website. We distributed postcards with images of participants and links to the website asking audiences to share their stories of transformative teaching and learning. At the end of our presentations, conversations were sparked with members of the audience who were waiting to share how the participants' narratives had resonated with their own experience as teachers and / or learners. Listening to and engaging with these accounts was often a sharp first step towards audience members contributing directly to the website. Once these new accounts had been written into the website under a tab labelled: *Share your story*, we were able to tweet the link out to the growing digital audience for the project.



Figure 1. Project postcard.

In this way, the collection of project data was punctuated by specific social events that sought to promote a shared understanding of transformative teaching and learning and that generated further data gathering opportunities. At the same time, the research was digitally live and publically accessible as it developed.

The retelling of the participants' narratives was not without difficulties. The de-mystifying aspect of the methodological approach required us to shift from a position of privileged arbiter to being socialised mediators. To offer validity to the narratives, it was important to include our own life histories and to write ourselves into the knowledge (Stanley and Wise 1993). This approach came with emotional challenge. The difficulty for us was feeling at times impotent as details surfaced within participants' narratives that spoke of deprivation, poverty and struggle. As comparatively privileged academics, earning a salary an able to pay bills and put food for ourselves and family, we were sharing experiences with people who had often come from (or were still in) very different circumstances.

Maintaining the dignity of participants who talked about freeing themselves from drug dependency, abusive relationships, spending time in prison, episodes of clinical depression and similar experiences was sacrosanct: it touched us deeply. This required a careful and judicious editing of the data that we thought it appropriate to include.

Using video

The project positioned the use of video centrally as a medium for presenting participants' narrative voices. The immediacy of video and its ability to communicate participants' stories as told by them was one reason for this choice of medium. Also, we were keen to avoid or at least limit the kind of imposition of meanings onto their stories that is rendered largely invisible when snippets of transcript are presented on a page. A key finding of the research related to participants' experience of symbolic violence in their educational histories (Duckworth and Smith 2019). This manifested itself through the labelling and stereotyping that many had been subjected to and that positioned them as 'thick' or tried to attach a deficit label on them as learners.

Symbolic violence, involving the imposition of meanings and definitions does not only occur in educational circles. The critical and reflexive research methodology that we sought to utilise was conscious of the potential for our research project interactions to embody symbolic violence in the same way. That consciousness called on us to ask ourselves what meanings we were reinforcing and imposing? By bringing a collaborative dimension to the research we sought to avoid transforming the project participants into passive research subjects. In the context of using video as part of ethnographic research, Pink (2007) suggests that visual knowledge should be presented in a contextualised way as forming part of a broader picture rather than simply being translated into written, knowledge during analysis.

By directing a critical gaze at the participant / researcher relationship, we repositioned ourselves as co-producers of meaning, rather than being intermediaries and mediators of knowledge and understanding (mainly) for an external (academic) audience. While it is true that we were still responsible for the editing process, each video was shown first to the participant for approval. Additional edits were made at the participants' request. This was not surprising as many of the narratives were of an intensely personal nature and, indeed, the lens provided learners, teachers, family members and their communities with the opportunity to tell their stories through voicing their experiences and trajectories in education and the impact of this in the personal and public domains of their lives; each narrative exposed the distinctiveness and power of FE. The narratives also expose how

transformation and the construction of positive educational identities allow for the reclaiming of spoilt identities based on agency and hope.

We converted video data to a format that could be embedded into visual or multi-media presentations while also uploading videos to YouTube. Digitisation facilitated posting and sharing across the public domain and disciplines. The emphasis throughout was on maintaining the dignity of participants as people who are able to tell their own stories. The research allowed us to understand participants' life-worlds and their situated practices and lived local realities. Some of our participants have gone on to develop their technical skills into digital literacies.

In a digital age, learners need to practise and experiment with different ways of enacting their identities, and adopt subject positions thorough different social technologies and media.

These opportunities can only be supported by academic staff who are themselves engaged in digital practices and questioning their own relationships with knowledge. (Beetham and Oliver, 2010: 167).

However, the digital approach did not mean capturing everything. The digitalisation of data does not necessarily make it more comprehensive or more 'accurate'. An example of this comes from our experience of video recording research conversations with participants. It is important to acknowledge that however hard we tried as researchers to create an informal setting, the switching on of the video camera somehow changed the atmosphere. While many participants were comfortable with the use of videoing on phones and with the notion of a lens capturing images, still the camera sometimes seemed to interpose itself between us and participants. A consequence of this was that often, the moment the interview ended and the camera was switched off, some participants would then seem to relax and the sense of suspended formality would trigger new comments and rich, important insights. A number of participants at this point related an experience or perspective that we wished we had captured as data. On at least one occasion, we switched the camera back on and asked for the story to be repeated. On other occasions, the data was off the record and while relevant, was judged to be too personal to be included. It was vital that the conversations captured were organic and followed the participants' flow of thoughts; they controlled what they

wanted to disclose or not. The aim was to retain sensitivity and remain mindful of not exploiting their conversations in a voyeuristic way.

The Project Website

The use of a digital platform to present and disseminate the research responds to the rapid and seemingly constant development of new and emerging technologies which impact on people's experiences of space and time. Within this context, the project utilised a research methodology with the reach and power to engage, inspire, entertain, enrich and connect. This meant taking account of a non-linear approach to accessing and using information sources and navigating resources; constant and instant online communication and connectivity sharing information culture (see for example, Veem, 2003; Prensky, 2001).

The project participants spanned different generations: the youngest being 16, the oldest in her fifties. It embraced then the so-called 'Net Generation' (Tapscott, 1998, 2008) for whom education and social interaction have always been infused with technology, and digital media a part of their learning and social experience. On the other hand, a number of participants in our study lacked digital literacy skills and the project became a platform for them to develop these. For example, some learners set up accounts in order to watch their videos, or set up twitter accounts and engaged with an online community for the first time as a result of involvement in the project. In this case, digitally mediated research, drawing on technologies such as desktop PCs, laptops, tablet computers and smartphones, provided access to and engagement with research across social media networks and at times and locations that were convenient to the social media users.

If marketisation has a negative impact on education and knowledge production within education, then it is important for educational researchers to respond to this. Much of the knowledge production work carried out in colleges is digital and involves carefully crafting stories and figures in order to best represent the efforts of the individual, the department, faculty or college, through the use of electronic registers, online tracking tools and reports, these are harnessed to corporate aims, specifically to produce data and present it in as favourable a light as possible. In contrast, our use of digital tools was geared towards the facilitating the expression of stories of individual caught up in 'the present' and hidden by

these corporate narratives. Rather than seeing this digital 'thirdspace' (Soja 1998) as an alternative to the crafted performative representations that marketisation inevitably produces, we would argue that these project narratives, free from the distortion of the funding-driven cultures that have come to dominate FE settings, instead present a human picture of lived experience and social reality. In addition, they are orientated towards future development for the individuals concerned but also for FE itself.

The website produces a "thirdspace" (Soja 1996) in the sense that it actively seeks to represent aspects of transformative teaching and learning in particular ways through featuring narratives about different aspects of FE. While it is curated by the researchers, both students and teachers of FE are free to contribute their narratives. The website thus becomes an attempt to assert what is relevant and what is meaningful in the work carried out in FE settings. These are not just 'stories from below' that only present lived experience of practitioners, learners and others; instead they include commentaries about wider policy, funding and artefacts focusing on specific perspectives (e.g. Women and transformative learning or employers' perspectives). In that sense then, the website is an attempt to create a space that makes dialogue possible between sometimes conflicting views on the purposes and meanings and achievements and problems of FE.

We were excited to see how some videos became stimulus materials for teachers that generated further narratives for an online project audience. One example of this was Adam's video. Adam was a student who had been excluded from school for anger management issues that seemed rooted in a frustration at being labelled. At college, he (re)discovered a positive learning identity. Another project participant, a teacher who ran classes similar to those Adam attended, used his video as stimulus material. The students in her class recognised different aspects of Adam's account and were able to relate this to their own educational experiences in a constructive way. One of the students produced a piece of writing that illustrates this empathy and the beginnings of reflection. This was shared on the project website.

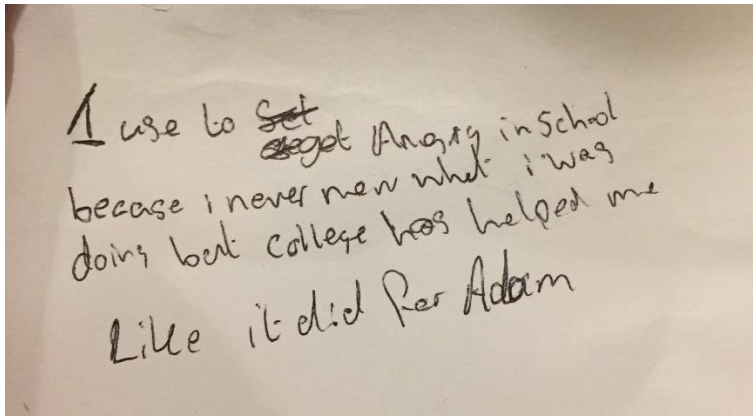


Figure 2. The use of stories of transformative teaching and learning in classroom settings.

Broadly the project-dedicated website was driven by dissemination and public engagement. However, it was more than this; it provided a platform to validate and celebrate the narratives of learners. The research approach itself became a part of the affirmative practice that aided the creation of conditions for the transformative learning that participants had often experienced. In that sense, taking part in the research reinforced the positive learning identities that the participants talk about having achieved.

Twitter

The project made extensive use of Twitter (@FEtransforms). Linked to website content in the form of videos but also text-based participant contributions, tweets helped us develop the sense of a new space of communication in which participants' experiences could be shared and affirmed. The use of twitter helped establish and build an audience for the research and required an investment of time: at least half an hour or an hour every evening and weekend. We were aware that participants and wider community go online at various times and in various spaces; for example: on trains, in shops, in bed, in meeting rooms, at conferences *inter alia*.

The 140 character limit (for the first eighteen months of the project) of the Twitter format led to additional developments in our creative use of media. We established a standard format of providing a headline about a new participant with a link to the video underneath. But we felt more variety was needed so we also produced collages of photos of participants from stills exported from the video data. These were used to link to the reports produced at

different stages of the project. In addition, we used free websites to make GIFs that functioned in the same way as the collages: providing an artefact to attract a larger audience. Finally, we also approached and organised the video data in different ways. While the majority of videos present individual narratives, we developed a number that drew snippets from across the dataset to create themed videos. For example, a video was produced that focused on the transformative educational experience of women; another video focused on adult literacy. These were essentially a re-framing of the data. Sometimes they included new segments from the research discussions, sometimes, they were a montage of extracts from videos that had already been published. The targeting of specific events, like International Women's day made a real difference to the impact of these tweets that magnified the interactive potential of the data.

Conclusion

The project website acted as the digital core of the project. Emanating from it, in addition to the twitter feed and the Youtube channel, themed blogs posts were produced for different organisations and websites; eighteen months into the project a themed conference was convened, bringing together many of the participants as well as higher education academics and FE practitioners, policy-makers and others. The focus of the conference was to reimagine FE through the lens of transformative teaching and learning. In this way, all the different aspects of the project acted together to assert a heterogeneous picture of FE. The intention was to disrupt the 'abstract' and dominated space crafted by neoliberal policy-making, and displace this with a 'differential' space (Lefebvre 1991). In this space, the individual transformative narratives are sovereign. They are not narratives that tell the story of the inner workings of a 'sector', rather they are stories about how people's lives have been changed by a social (and often political) process in which they have shrugged off their spoilt learner identities, grown in confidence and rediscovered an ability to learn and to harness this ability to agency and hope for the future. The research through the website and other digital platforms has been a vehicle for asserting this alternative meaning for FE.

The research has an ethic of respect for the individual and their communities. In this, it is working against the grain of the marketised cultures that have taken root in FE that,

typically, objectify students. It is, perhaps, this that is the key difference between research which can claim to be socially just and research undertaken within other frameworks and paradigms where although there may be concerns about issues related to social justice, the research itself falls into the deficit-reinforcing position of using approaches and processes which are contrary to social justice. We would argue that digital technologies are not neutral tools – they can produce spaces where stories can be reclaimed that unsettle the hegemony of inequality and objectification. It requires considerable time commitment and engagement to develop research networks through the social media platform.

Our research has illustrated how digital technologies can be used in socially just research incorporating the development of a dynamic digital research participating audience which breaches the boundaries that divide scholarly and local communities. The website to date has had 7,199 users and more than 46,917 page views. There is a lack of closure in using this type of approach and indeed, the virtual platform has developed an energy locally, nationally and globally. Traditional research cultures may have resistant attitudes to digital technologies, however, we would argue that digital literacy and practices are a necessary part of research training to meet the needs of participants in the 21st Century. Certainly, failing to use them amounts to missing an important opportunity to share data and involve the research audience in meaning-making and knowledge production. Marketisation and the current funding regime have resulted in an ideological reimagining of a 'sector' that has had a significantly negative impact on the local agency teachers and learners – whose voices within the corporate, competitive institutions have been silenced as well. The *Transforming Lives* project, through harnessing critical digital platforms, has sought to create a new shared understanding of FE that offers an exciting and hope-filled alternative; an alternative that has the potential to rupture the cycle of inequality which makes it vital in this this age of austerity.

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