

Adult Literacy: Further Education as a space for resistance

By Vicky Duckworth and Rob Smith

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Introduction

This paper draws on the [*Further Education in England: Transforming Lives & Communities*](#) project commissioned by UCU. This research project aims to understand and provide evidence of how the further education (FE) sector is vital in transforming lives and communities in 21st century Britain. The study provides learners, teachers, family members and their communities with the opportunity to tell and share their stories, linking the distinctness of FE to the impact it has on individuals, society and the economy.

TRANSFORMING LIVES

further education: learning hope



Literacy is a vital thread that links the research and will be explored in this paper.

Adult literacy has elaborated two models of literacy: the autonomous and the ideological (Street, 1984). The former treats illiteracy as an independent variable, a deficit position that needs to be cured by a medicine of skills; the latter views literacy in terms of social and cultural practices and thus, in recognition of the range and variety of such practices, speaks of *literacies* rather than of a unitary skill. The ideological view is supported by an increasing awareness of the importance of context, and how the circumstances in which learners find themselves influence both their perceptions, understandings, and their uses of literacy (Ade-Ojo and Duckworth 2016).

In the context of the dominance of a 'skills' discourse in further education in England and the flux of continual policy interventions, adult literacy programmes in the UK have a long history, but have grown particularly in prominence during the last three decades. Together with post-compulsory education and training (PCET), adult literacy has been reshaped by national policy initiatives since the 1970s, when the government took an increasing interest in the education and training of adults, as the concept of lifelong learning fed into international policy documents (Field 2000). The late 1990s saw '*A Fresh Start – Improving Literacy and Numeracy*' produced by a working group chaired by Sir Claus Moser. The Moser Report drew on some of the evidence from a previously administered OECD survey to estimate that approximately 20 per cent of the UK population (as many as seven million people) apparently had difficulty with functional literacy and/or numeracy (DFEE, 1999).

Functional literacy and numeracy in this context was considered to be synonymous with the ability to read, write and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general. The resulting strategy, *Skills for Life (SfL)*, identified a number of priority groups which included people who live in disadvantaged communities (DfEE 2001). In its local implementation, the Skills for Life agenda took a more instrumental approach to adult literacy than for example, a critical pedagogy model (see Giroux 1997; Lankshear and McClaren 1993; Lankshear 1993; Shor 1992, 93, Duckworth 2013, Ade-Ojo and Duckworth 2016, Duckworth and Smith 2018), which challenges autonomous prescriptive approaches to curriculum designs that do not take into account the history or background and needs of learners. This was typified by the way the 'Core Curriculum' became a matrix for assessment and progression and thereby, a vehicle for standardisation that structured learning so it more closely aligned to the autonomous model of literacy. Arguably, because of the pre-eminence of this agenda, a dominant focus in the discourse on adult literacy in the last decade or so has been the issue of perceptions of literacy.

The emergent question for us in the context of the study is: how does further education influence and inform an engagement with adult literacy for often marginalised learners? In

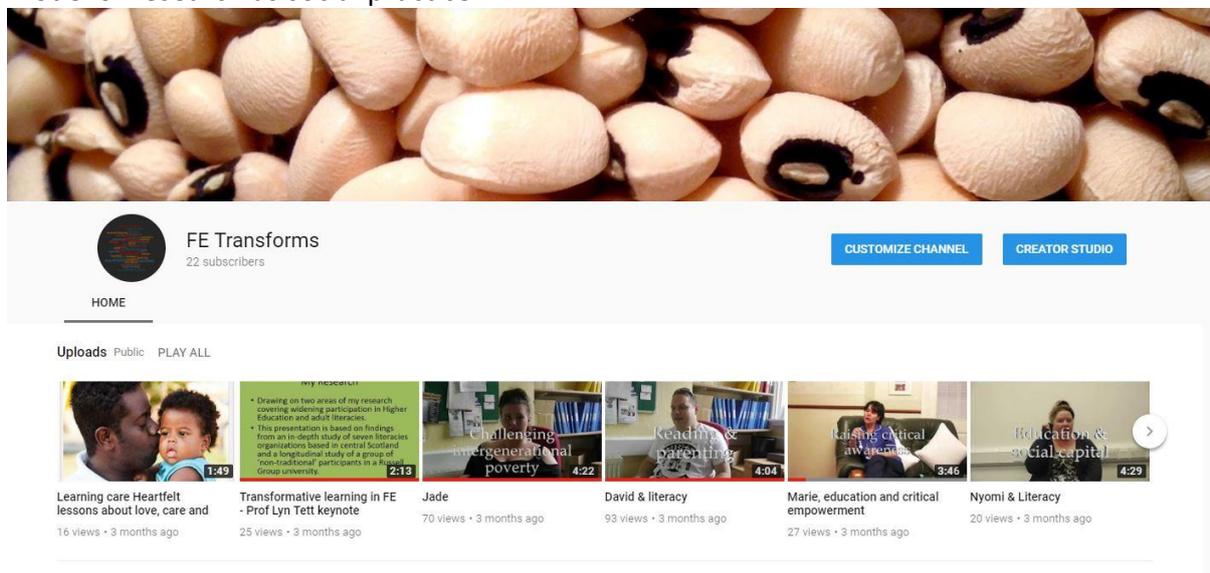
effect, the aim of this research is to track the effectiveness of a curriculum and engagement process informed by an alternative perception of literacy, critical literacy, in engaging and facilitating learners whose experiences have been impacted upon by barriers which, for example, include negative experiences of compulsory education and cultural issues where attendance in compulsory education settings was not viewed as important in the family and community context.

Finding a critical space

The research provides evidence of how further education offers a 'differential space' (Lefebvre 1991) that can subvert the prescriptive, linear spaces of compulsory education and lead to critical spaces for transformative learning (Duckworth and Smith, 2018). The study proceeds from an understanding that educational practices are positioned as ideologically imbued, driven and shaped by policy. Indeed, the model of curriculum can determine whether education is an emancipatory or oppressive process. It seeks engagement with learners through a purposeful acknowledgement of their cultural background and biography and provides critical insights into education as a socially-situated process. Transformative learning is orientated to affirming agency and as such, has a ripple effect that impacts on learners' families and their communities.

Methodology

The project draws on digital data gathering tools (video, audio, project website) and social media (twitter & Youtube) but places a strong emphasis on applying these tools as part of a model of research as social practice.



[The video was used as a way of placing participants' voices and views centrally.](#) Rather than black typography on a white background with their views and the manner and tenor of their voice being (silently) reconstituted and interpreted by a reader from a page, their words and thoughts emanate from situated images of them, usually in spaces / institutions / buildings in which they have begun (re)constructing a positive identity as a learner. What they say, how they say it, the affective dimension of their accounts are all visible to viewers. While the videos are edited, participants are involved in editing decisions. Through this we have

attempted to democratise the research process and reach towards a model in which the co-production of knowledge can take place without researchers necessarily interposing themselves between the data and the viewer. This connects to our concerns about accessibility and dissemination of project data. One of the key purposes of the project has been to communicate the vital work that further education colleges and institutes engage in across and within diverse communities.

Research Conversation

We have re-termed our interviews ‘research conversations’ as this tag reflects the egalitarian and reciprocal atmosphere that drives the interviewing practice. The research conversations which draw on stories, poetry, songs and images are also used as foils to represent the generative themes in the lives of the learners. For us, it is vital to be authentic and in sharing our stories engage in a dialectical relationship of trust with participants so that they are active in the co-construction of knowledge and meaning that sits at the heart of the project.

This also strongly underpins our use of video: early edits are shared with all participants and then re-edited if necessary in the light of their comments. The premise with these videos is to present individuals’ stories in a powerful way which places often silenced voices on a public platform, validates the participants’ experiences and subverts often negative stereotypes perpetuated by the media which, for example, demonise marginalised communities and the people they are home to.

[Twitter](#) has become a powerful way of connecting the project to the Further Education Community, Higher Education Community, activists, policy makers and beyond. It has also been drawn upon to act as a tool to develop impact in sharing findings through Phase One of the project. This has included dissemination of material – leading to further research.

Findings: Empowerment

Learners’ accounts revealed further education courses as pathways to overcoming problematic and painful domestic issues; for example, abusive relationships, alcohol dependency and mental health issues. Empowerment was also linked to agency. The participants described how the telling of the narrative was empowering; their narrative was a capital for resistance against the barriers they have faced.

They described having their eyes opened to ‘a whole new world’ by returning to education and improving their confidence and skills in literacy.



Claire spoke of the power she experienced in simply being listened to and how she longed to return to the classroom in order to experience that empowerment once more.

[Claire's account](#) illustrates some important attributes of transformative learning environments. Central in these was the sense that participants had of not being 'judged' and of being accepted for 'who you are'. This is explained in a number of cases by prior educational experiences that featured labelling and being designated 'thick' or as coming from a particular family or estate. In contrast, learning environments which enable transformative learning to take place are founded on an ethos of egalitarianism – usually explicitly. People's background, thoughts and views are accepted and even foregrounded as important features in the curriculum and as a basis from which to move forward.

David's story



David, a participant from a traveller background, spoke about his motivations for learning as being able to read to his four year old daughter. Claiming literacy was also a catalyst for David to take part in our democratic processes.

Now I can actually read and write and sign my own name. When I go to the doctor, I can sign a note... You need education to know what's going on outside: the politics and all that. I'd never voted in my life, ever. I read the thing that came through the letterbox and I voted for the first time.

<http://transforminglives.web.ucu.org.uk/2017/09/22/david/>



Jade's story

Jade is a mother who attends adult literacy classes. Being a mum motivated her and she has seen her confidence increase while studying and has learnt new literacies. Now, she has aspirations for her future and is determined to be the best possible role model for her son. Jade's story can be accessed on the project Youtube channel¹ where she tells her story of literacy and empowerment.

Jade's story and other learners' narratives expose the complexities they experience in their daily lives and how they try to make sense of them from their structural positioning as literacy learners in a society based on inequality of opportunity and choice.

<http://transforminglives.web.ucl.ac.uk/2017/09/22/jade/>

Discussion

Literacy teaching and learning can be related to the lives of the diverse learners. However, this was not the case in a number of the participants' experiences of the secondary school curriculum. There, they often experienced marginalisation and a sense of self (identities) and capital (often informal, brought from home) being incongruent with the dominant capital attached to formal schooling (cultural, social and symbolic).

Clearly, the symbolic power embedded within the field of compulsory education, and the legitimate cultural capital embedded in and reinforced by it, led to differential access to potential opportunities and advantages. It led to education being misrecognised in terms of individual natural abilities and effort, rather than in terms of an unequal distribution of cultural, linguistic, social and economic capital among the social classes. The learners felt that they did not 'gel' with school, that their social and cultural practices were fixed and devalued. It is important to understand how this was experienced in terms of a 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1994) of school-life: in other words it was felt in a bodily sense through repeated and institutionalised interactions, interventions and assessments. As a result, the learners carried with them and in them an emotional landscape of pain and disillusionment as they recalled their experience of navigating through the educational system where the capital they had to exchange was rendered valueless and how the shame of struggling with linguistic capital compounded this.

Illustrating the stories of resistance

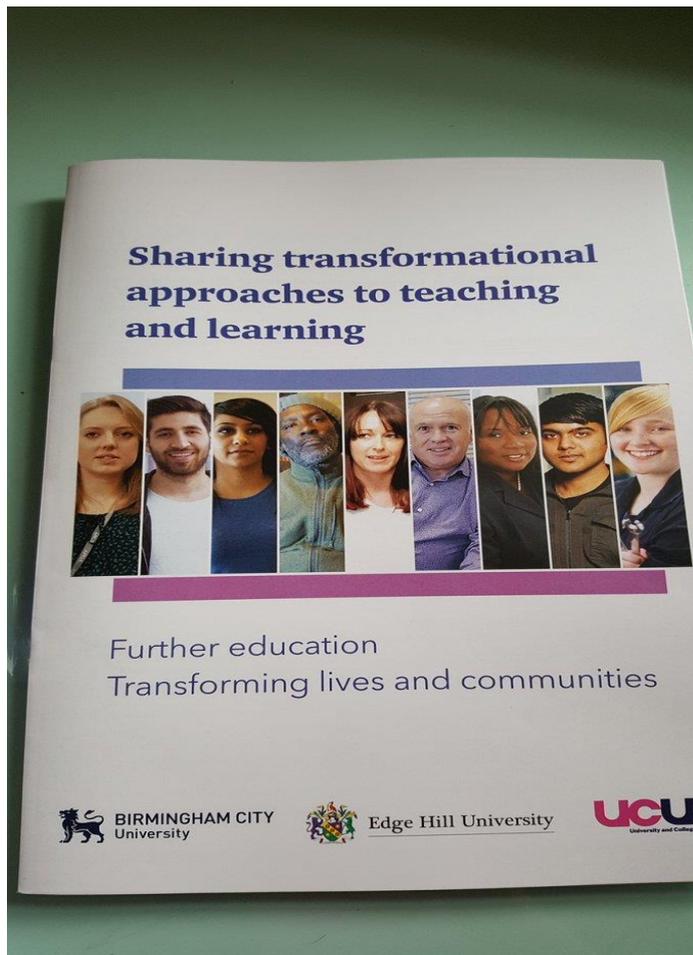
Whilst school was a site for reproducing social inequalities, further education was a site for resistance. The critical spaces offered in further education settings allowed them to develop a strong awareness of where they were positioned in terms of legitimate capital and that they were being labelled and stigmatised, for example because of struggling to read and write at school. The differential space offered by further education also enabled them to defamiliarise themselves from educational practices and spaces that tended to pathologise them and sought to render them passive. Transformative teaching and learning practices allowed the learners to question their positioning in unbalanced power relationships that had marginalised them and their practices of literacy, and to act to change them.

By revisiting their own stories of learning and not learning, rather than keeping them hidden in shame, these project participants took ownership of them. They reclaimed them as stories of success, recognising the structural inequalities they have challenged and resisted to become empowered to take agency in their lives. Jade, a single mother in her early twenties, who left school to work in unskilled jobs that paid a 'pittance to live on', moved from North Manchester after the birth of her son to her own flat in Rochdale, where she 'loved being a mother' and 'wanted so much more' for her son. David, from a gypsy community, a married man in his thirties with children, had not attended compulsory education regularly from eight and instead spent the days working with his father on manual labour. Both were labelled by school teachers as being 'thick' and 'stupid'. In their view, the deficit labelling was due to their struggle with literacy and for David it was a double deficit lens, being part of the gypsy community.

Conclusion

The relationship between struggling to read and / or write, and the ability to articulate one's rights can result in adult literacy learners being marginalised and silenced and a loss of agency. A literacy approach which derives from Freirean notions of 'conscientisation' (Freire 1972), encourages critical reflection on the relationship between literacy practices and the (mis)use of power, thereby providing the scope to challenge hegemony. Evidence from the project showed this critical pedagogical approach generating a curriculum which is culturally relevant, learner-driven and socially empowering (Freire 1985; Barton et al. 2000 and 2006; Duckworth and Ade-Ojo 2016; Duckworth and Smith 2018). It facilitated the learners to generate a personal connection with the historical, social, economic and political structures privileged by the dominant ideologies. It empowered the learners, their families and communities. Empowerment here meant having the strength and will to challenge oppression and inequality, to have control over one's own life, and the motivation and self-belief to contribute to the needs of oneself and the community. A vital ingredient in this is an awareness of the structural inequalities oppressing people and, where possible, challenging and changing these conditions.

Our study brought into sharp focus how literacy and empowerment are reflected in the emotions, knowledge, and skills of the participants and act as a catalyst to their agency in political engagement, including voting for the first time and taking part in voluntary work and community activism.



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i https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5SRHMB84_8&feature=youtu.be