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## **Digital research as a resource for reimagining Further Education**

**This is a draft paper – please do not cite but contact us as it is work in progress.**

This paper draws on the project *Further Education in England: transforming lives and communities*<sup>1</sup>. Data – comprising a series of narratives from learners, teachers, employers and learners' family members – were video recorded and shared via a project website; an inter-related and multi-faceted digital platform. This catalysed what we describe as virtually enhanced engagement and constituted a 'thirdspace' (Soja, 1998) i.e. a space in which further and adult education could be reimagined, through a collective dialogical interaction of practitioners and students as more than the quantitatively-defined abstract space that current policy discourse reifies.

### **Introduction**

Further education in the UK comprises a broad range of courses and educational experiences for 16-18 school leavers but also for adults who are returning to learn. Over the last quarter century, policies that have fostered neoliberalisation with its focus on de- and re-regulation, economic competitiveness (both national and institutional) all framed by (so-called) 'free market' competition have had a significant impact on the colleges that provide further education, disrupting their role and function in local ecologies of communities and employers and local democratic structures and instead positioning them instrumentally as a sorting house through which the population is processed in order to provide human capital (Becker 1993).

This has tended to consolidate a 'classed' two tier (academic versus vocational) system which, following the funding cuts imposed as part of austerity has created a system of structural disadvantage. In this way, colleges educating young people and adults are structurally positioned as providers with a responsibility to supply human capital to fulfil the 'skills needs' of employers.

While neoliberal educational policy often pays lip-service to social justice through the discursive vehicle of 'social inclusion', behind this promise of social mobility through educational attainment is a skills discourse that depends upon the objectification of students and their stratification within an intractable structure that perpetuates divisions between 'academic' and 'vocational' pathways. With reduced funds to adult learning (around 40% since 2010 according to AoC 2016), it also appears that the age-staged tyranny of compulsory education presents the main or only opportunity for individuals to transcend their family's social background (if that is what we take social mobility to mean). If nothing else this reaffirms governmental complacency in the face of ongoing social divisions. What remains of the 'social mobility' dimension of the policy rests on a reliance on supply-side intervention in the labour market (Keep 2006) while largely

ignoring measures to adjust employer demand. Underpinning the whole approach is an ever less convincing fable about economic growth and the classic neoliberal assumption about social benefits accruing from a 'trickle-down' as a result of 'wealth creation' activities on the part of employers (Harvey 2005, 64–65).

This paper 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 adult learners who have often had negative experiences of schooling, supported by critical pedagogy, are able to experience education as transformative (Mezirow 2000; Duckworth 2013; Duckworth & Ade-Ojo 2016; Duckworth & Smith 2017, 2018).

In England, the ideological effect of the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 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. Marketisation requires colleges to generate performance data: 'metrics' – measurable phenomena – which have come to shape and dominate college cultures by imposing on them a regime of (primarily quantitative) knowledge production. These pressures have resulted in a sectoral habitus, a way of doing and seeing things in colleges /providers that values and promotes the production by teachers and managers of favourable performance data detached from and distorting the lived experiences of teaching and learning.

Travelling against the grain of this linear, rigidly systematised and systematising mode of knowledge production – designed and functioning to facilitate arm's-length control by the State – our research project chose to utilise digital media to foreground the narratives of students, teachers about the individual and social benefits of learning. Our use of digital media was designed expressly as a de-centred way of sharing the research. Also unlike the knowledge production regime enforced by marketization, our sharing of data was dialogical – inviting as it did, its audience to comment and contribute.

The project data was published via the internet to provide a qualitative, textured and critical picture: a nuanced picture we would argue that creatively represents perspectives that, in their granular, irreducibly qualitative nature are typically ignored as 'too complex' and contextual 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'.

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 in video form: stories told in the voices of students and teachers and others that fall outside of what is deemed to be measurable. In this way the project provided a collaborative and democratic space for the sharing and

celebration of participants' stories; their voices were validated. The website 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 chapter concludes by theorising the connection between a digital 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.

### **Working through a research methodology**

The methodological approach adopted in this research project sought to be forward-looking: to endorse newly established learning identities and to share in a collective imagining of future plans. We drew on participatory methodologies where the oppressive qualities of the 'researcher' and the 'researched' relationship were challenged, this cohered with our intention to position social justice at the core of the undertaking. As such we strove then to convene research discussions in a safe space, a space moreover that shared some characteristics with critical pedagogical space. Underpinning this was a sense of research as a social practice (Herndl & Nahrwold 2000) i.e. not divorced from everyday relations or having any 'mystique' that might in any way make participants feel like 'subjects'. Instead, just as education can be experienced as a socially embedded process that is to a greater or lesser degree conditioned by the social forces and structures that shape our society, so as researchers we were aware of how research can reduce to a limited and convention-ridden exchange between people who do not enjoy an equal social footing (Duckworth and Smith 2019A). As such, the methodological approach adopted for the study was closely aligned to critical pedagogy (Freire 1995, Breunig 2005) and extended a number of its underpinning principles.

The research project: *FE in England: transforming lives and communities*<sup>1</sup>, sponsored by the University and Colleges' Union, utilised a digitally embedded research methodology to gather, explore and share project data. The data comprised a series of 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 channel<sup>2</sup> 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 Transforming Lives project has gained considerable traction nationally and internationally. To date, the virtual UCU Transforming Lives website has had 23,775 sessions, 14,000+ users and more than 93,000 page views (Wordpress Google analytics). The project twitter account has 1736 followers (as of September 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://transforminglives.web.ucu.org.uk/>

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

The aim of hosting the data on a website 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 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.

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. Goodley et al. (2004, p. 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 a shedding of spoilt identities (for example through the symbolic violence of being labelled) and an affirmation 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 & Smith, 2018A). Participants’ sense that they belonged to a dispersed community that they could connect with through the project made possible a broadening of individual horizons.

This dialogical approach not only fed into a methodological position that sees research as a social practice (Duckworth & 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 (2004) uses the term ‘presence’ – counterposed against ‘the present’ – to critique ‘everyday life 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, p. 47)

In this way, the research was reflexive 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. Creating an atmosphere of informality, sharing our own stories, helped to rupture hierarchical relations; we aimed to position participants on an equal footing with us as researchers. Our narratives were woven into the research conversations as a way of de-mystifying research and ourselves as researchers.

Life history has the sensitizing potential “to enable voices to be heard that are usually silent” (Plummer, 2001, p. 248). This allowed the researchers not just to view the respondents’ world picture but enables a mutual engagement with each other’s narratives to 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 experiences which demonstrate the inequalities which impact on their lives.

### **Involving teachers and students in the project**

The project paid particular attention to the ethical issues associated with using a digital platform which included video. Anonymisation was offered to all participants but, as the focus was on the transformative qualities of their educational experiences, most were happy for their real names to be used. 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 beyond. This momentum grew through an ongoing programme of virtual and actual dissemination. The researchers began presenting data from the project to audiences at local, national and international conferences within six months of it starting. These audiences included HE researchers, further education teachers but also policymakers and members of the public. 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. This often then led to 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.

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. To offer validity to the narratives, it was important to include our own life histories and to write ourselves into the knowledge (Stanley & Wise 1993). This approach came with emotional challenges. 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, 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 paramount. This required a careful and judicious editing of the data that we thought it appropriate to include. Very personal and sensitive information (e.g. details of drug dependency or of family trauma) while often very significant were omitted to preserve participants' dignity and where there was a potential for impact on other family members.

### **Videography**

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 & Smith 2018B, 2019) in which some were positioned in deficit terms as learners and labelled as 'thick'.

The critical and reflexive research methodology that we sought to utilise was conscious of the potential for our research interactions to embody symbolic violence in the same way. We asked 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. 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 through 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 & Oliver, 2010, p. 167).

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 and off 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**



**Figure 1. Project website landing page.**

The use of a digital platform to present and disseminate the research responds to the rapid 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 navigating information sources; constant and instant online communication and connectivity sharing information culture (see for example, Prensky, 2001).

The project participants spanned different generations: the youngest being 16, the oldest in her fifties. 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 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.

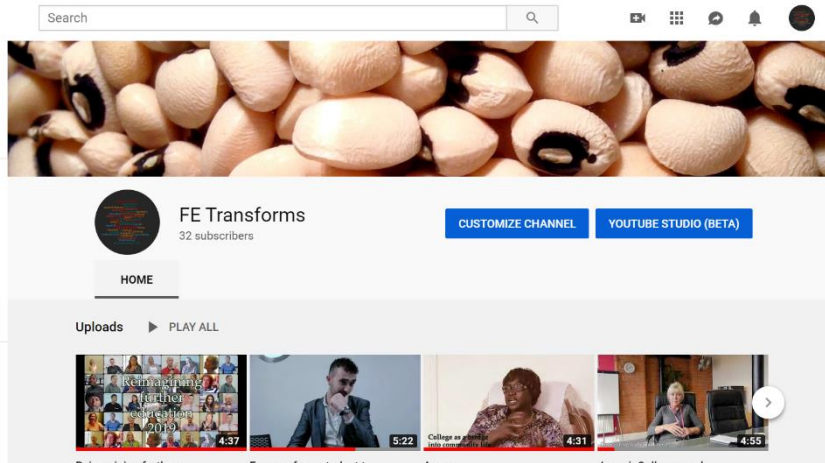
Our use of digital tools was geared towards the facilitating the expression of stories of individual caught up in 'the present' and hidden by the corporate narratives engendered by marketisation. We would argue that these project narratives, free from the distortion of the funding and market-driven cultures 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. The uses of digital media here became a way of addressing:

the realisation that it is space now more than time that hides things from us, that the demystification of spatiality and its veiled instrumentality of power is the key to making practical, political and theoretical sense of the contemporary era. (Soja 1989: 61)

If we accept Soja’s claims about spatiality, then the internet is a crucial development with the potential to reveal ‘the hidden’ and spread locally produced knowledge across networks at previously unimaginable speeds. As such, the project is disruptive of the notion of a ‘FE sector’ that disguises the huge breadth in socio-economic contexts in which adult and further education happens across the country. One effect of this notion, at an ideological level, is that it encourages the imagining of further and adult education as some kind of homogeneous whole. This is certainly how policy makers view it and project policies onto it. In fact, further and adult education exists within local ecologies and the imposition of centrally prescribed policy directives is likely to be inappropriate and to have unforeseen consequences. This ‘sectoral’ discourse has a broader and more insidious effect as it promotes an instrumental and economised skills discourse as part of a national picture in ways that over-ride the social benefits that further and adult education provides. Where these two purposes are in tension, there is a likelihood that the social justice purposing that is articulated (more or less) by most providers will be marginalised and or undermined. When that happens, further and adult education is in danger of becoming a structural force for the replication of inequality and thereby social injustice.

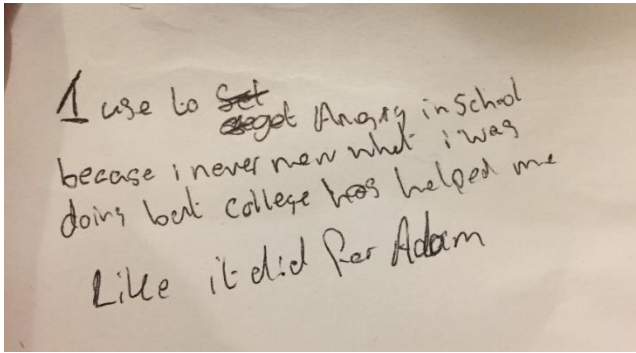


While it is curated by the researchers, both students and teachers of FE are free to contribute their narratives. The website thus becomes an attempt to assert what is relevant and what is meaningful in the work carried out in FE settings. These are not just ‘stories from below’ that only present lived experience of

**Figure 2. The Project Youtube Channel.**

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, meanings, 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.



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 transformative learning that participants had often experienced.

**Figure 3. The use of stories of TTL in classroom settings**

In that sense, taking part in the research reinforced the positive learning identities that the participants talk about having achieved.

### **Social media**



**Figure 4. Twitter project homepage.**

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 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.

In this digitised and accessible form, the project data has the potential to reach across geographic borders reasserting a particular meaning for adult and further education that has been obscured by the nihilist objectification of the neoliberal project.

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. This took account of participants and communities more widely going online at various times and in various spaces, e.g. on trains, 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

## **Concluding thoughts**

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 blog posts were produced for different organisations and websites; eighteen months into the project a conference was convened, bringing together many of the participants as well as HE 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 and rediscovered an ability to learn, harnessing this to agency and hope for the future.

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 (Duckworth & Smith 2018B). This is perhaps 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 a focus on social justice, the research itself falls into the deficit-reinforcing position of using approaches and processes which reify participants' passivity. 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.

Our research has illustrated how digital technologies can offer a way of communicating a reimagination of further education: one that is infused with emancipatory power. The use of the website, youtube channel and social media in conjunction with each other allows for a reaching out to an audience and a breaching of the boundaries that divide scholarly and local communities. 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 of 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 can contribute to the resources of hope that are vital in this age of austerity.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://transforminglives.web.ucu.org.uk/>