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Borderless or Bound?

Exploring students' perceptions of HE in FE learning spaces

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The FE & HE Divide: Blurring the Boundaries

■ *FE is particularly effective for HE learners from disadvantaged groups, backgrounds and communities. Many FE colleges offer flexible, local opportunities which make HE accessible to people who might otherwise face significant barriers to participation. This sector is well placed to promote wider participation in HE.*
(Department of Education and Skills 2006: 30)

■ **Some issues explored:**

- Relationships between HE and FE institutions (Connolly et al. 2007)
- Funding and resource implications of HE in FE provision (Chadwick 1997)
- Academic rigor and robustness of QA mechanisms (Hilborne 1996)
- Cultural differences (Harwood and Harwood 2004; Jones 2006)
- Vocational relevance of HE in FE qualifications (Tierney and Slack 2005)
- Transitions from intermediate to undergraduate qualifications (Greenbank 2007)



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HE in FE: the student perspective

- **Research Focus** – exploring issues relating to learning & teaching, academic support & social integration.
- **Case study** – focusing on the views and experiences of TU's HE in FE students.
- **33 courses targeted** – approx. 600 potential participants from a range of disciplines.
- **One-to-one and group-based semi-structured interviews** – encouraging students to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of their HE experiences (66 participants).
- **Thematic analysis** – informed by Bourdieu's interdependent concepts of *field*, *habitus* and *capital*.

(Habitus X Capital) + Field = Practice





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Connected Learning

■ Putting Learning into Practice

“I wanted the course to help me to become a better manager and I certainly feel it has...I’ve been able to pull what I’ve learnt from the course and put it into practice”.

■ Linking Learning to Personal Experiences

“I’ve got two children with disabilities, and they’re excluded as young people. I’ve been learning more about it and how I can use the skills that I’ve developed over the years with them with other young people who don’t have those problems, but have others”.

■ Informing Attitudes & Beliefs

“I also think that it changes the way you look at life, the perspective that you have on life. It totally changed mine anyway”.

■ Disconnected Learning

“I work for the local council so the marketing side – they’re always going to want council services – I found it bit hard to assimilate between the two. I got a lot out of the Organisation and Finance module because of the job that I do”.





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Making Connections

■ With tutors and peers.....

“The lecturers are easy to approach when you’ve got problems because they’re like friends as well”.

“There has always been that support....it’s the fact that they recognise most of us are mature students coming here on day release. You feel as though you can ask them anything and they’ll be there every step of the way”.

“We’ve stayed well together as a group....We’ve supported each other....That’s the one thing that’s helped me want to come back all the time instead of dropping out”.

■ and their experiences

“One of the good things about the tutors that we’ve had; they know exactly what they’re talking about because they’ve had that work experience”.

“We all come from different management backgrounds or different walks of life so we bring different experiences to the course.....And hearing what other people do helps you put it in your own perspective and see how it works for you”.





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Difference & Distance

■ From Prior Learning Experiences

"...it's a hundred years since I was at school and there you are spoon fed whereas this type of learning environment is independent. They give you little snippets and you are supposed to go away and find everything out for yourself and I found that quite alien...and then it has all sort of slotted into place".

■ From University-based HE Students

"The tutor does draw a lot from the students which is good, but because we've got a wide range of experiences and knowledge then that's where we get the good interaction. I wouldn't imagine there are that many eighteen-year-olds in management type positions to be able to do the interaction in the class or have that little bit of knowledge and experience about what things are about".

■ From FE Students

".....the college banned all the kids from printing....The university students get the same treatment. From that perspective it's crackers. I'm 42 and I'm being told that I'm not responsible with a bit of ink....But we're not kids, we're university students".





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HE in FE & Identity Issues

■ The Learning Environment - A Liminal Space

“The only thing I find studying at the college is I don’t feel like a university student; I feel like a college student”.

“I came to university with the idea that I wanted to come out with a degree but I also wanted the chance to be a university student and have that stereotypical lifestyle.....[The college] has got that college atmosphere.....There is no university life in the immediate area....it’s not like a real university. You feel like you’ve just come back to college for another couple of years to do A-levels”.

“I feel a bit out of it because we’re not really college or uni students”.





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Creating Distance & Boundaries

■ Maintaining Physical Boundaries

“We’ve kind of just stuck in our little clique and hung around together....we normally get our lunch and come back to the classroom because nobody will bother us then. The lessons based in that room are for us. They [the FE students] never really venture near us”.

■ Reinforcing Distance

“I think you have to stick that degree bit in....Because then people know how serious [the course] is”.

■ Invisible Boundaries

“....people at work say, “oh do you go to Teesside University?” I say no, the course is delivered in [college name] and then they say, “is it a college course?” And I say no it’s a university course. If you’re taking a degree then you’re at university.....people don’t associate a degree with college”.



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The Value of HE in FE

Beyond the Boundaries of Education

■ Learning for Knowledge.....

“The tutor is at the top of his art. Whether he’s teaching at university or here at the College you know you’re going to get that same experience from him; that same knowledge.... you’re still going to get brilliant tutors....they’re still going to share that same knowledge”.

■ vs Learning for Status

“Even though I’m doing a degree, my colleagues don’t give it the same regard as a degree because it’s delivered through just a college...It’s just general conception of which is best. It’s a misconception but if you’re going up in the world then you want to be going up the hierarchical system of education settings”.





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Thank you
Any questions?

