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Hearts and Minds:
Learning the Culture of a Caring Vocation

An initial case study from the project
Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education

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by
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Hearts and Minds: Learning the Culture of a Caring Vocation

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Introduction

Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education (TLC-FE) is the largest ever research project in FE. It was described in detail in *College Researcher* last year (Gleeson, 2001), and in the project's first national briefing, which is also available at this conference. In brief, the 4-year longitudinal research comprises a partnership between 4 universities with 4 twinned FE colleges in Bristol, Exeter, Leeds and Warwick. 4 tutors from each college are active partners in the research, which is linked to one of their 'learning sites' (these may be constituted by a course, but in some cases represent less traditional forms of delivery), making a total of 16 sites echoing at least some of the diversity of FE provision. The project is studying teaching and learning in authentic settings, rather than as abstract technical processes. It engages with the complexity of relationships between teachers, learners and learning in a range of contexts within and outside the college environment. The aims are to identify the nature of learning cultures, aspects of those cultures that might be amenable to change, and to implement and evaluate how such changes may improve teaching and learning.

The project is still in its early stages, in which we are trying to develop rich descriptions of the learning sites. As yet, although change is a constant fact of life in FE, our participating tutors have not begun to instigate their own planned transformations. Our job so far has been to develop deep and shared understandings of the culture of each site, in order to provide a sound basis for future changes. This paper presents a case study of just one of the 16 sites, the CACHE Diploma, a two-year, full-time, advanced level vocational course in nursery nursing. The location and names of individuals have been anonymised to protect confidentiality.

The learning site

Joanne Lowe, the site tutor participating in the TLC-FE project, has been a full-time early years lecturer for 5 years, the last two on a permanent contract at Holly Trees College. She is the personal tutor for one of two groups in the first-year cohort of the CACHE Diploma in Child Care and Education. It is this tutor group which forms the learning site. Joanne is responsible for teaching modules on Anti-Discriminatory Practice and Service Provision/Child Protection to the group, as well as for their study support and pastoral care within tutorial sessions. This case study is based on data generated in the weeks after the students had started the course. A questionnaire was administered to the whole group. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students selected to represent a range of social and educational backgrounds, and two interviews were also conducted with the tutor. Observations were conducted of a day's recruitment and induction to the course, college-based tutorial sessions and lectures, and one of the

students' work placements. Joanne also provided extracts from her reflective research diary.

The location of the site
Holly Trees College is a large FE college with several campuses and outreach centres across a multicultural city. The CACHE Diploma is based not at the college's main campus, but at a smaller building elsewhere in the city centre. However, location is not simply a question of geography, but is also taken to mean the place of the college and the site within other networks, hierarchies and public perceptions. Holly Trees is a generalist college, offering a broad provision of academic and vocational programmes, but not any workshop-based education or training (such as hairdressing, engineering, or building trades). It enjoys an excellent reputation, having achieved Beacon status, the Chartermark award, and first-rate results in inspections.

The CACHE Diploma sits within the Early Years Programme Area, and alongside other healthcare courses within the Vocational Education department. Because of current government policies to expand childcare provision, the labour market for nursery nurses is buoyant, though most vacancies are in the private sector. The field of early years education is currently quite politicised, with much academic debate about the high level of privatisation of nursery provision and the quality of provision and training (see e.g. Ball and Vincent, 2000, Penn, 1997). In this framework, Joanne and the whole CACHE teaching team are keen to emphasise the professional nature of nursery nurses' work and the advanced level of the course. However, nursery nurses are positioned in lower status in the whole field in relation to qualified teaching staff, and this is reflected in the attitudes of some school teachers' and parents' perceptions of this occupation. As one student explained:

> *Student 6*: I've always wanted to work with children, but my mother had put me off by saying she didn't want me to do any sort of childcare course, because she thought it would be rubbish.
>
> *HC: What did she mean when said it'd be rubbish?*
>
> *Student 6:* When you're a nursery nurse you can't progress very far.

The stated entry requirement for the CACHE Diploma is a minimum of three grade C passes at GCSE, although some students do not come direct from school at 16, but have followed an intermediate-level childcare or healthcare course for a year first. In practice the entry requirement was relaxed at recruitment in favour of students who seem likely to achieve well in their work placements. In part this is because tutors do not wish to disadvantage students who hold promise of becoming competent nursery nurses, but may not have succeeded in the academic environment of school. This year it was also influenced by the new college principal's decision that class sizes should be maximised to at least 20 students (typically the CACHE Diploma had had 16 per class). In order to achieve these targets for both the Diploma and the Level 2 Certificate course, some applicants who would have qualified only for the Certificate course were 'promoted' to the Diploma group.

The overwhelming majority of students are female, reflecting the fact that almost all nursery nurses are women. Unusually, 3 young men are among the 40 students on the CACHE Diploma this year, one of whom is in Joanne's learning site. Most of the students have considerable part-time work experience in childcare already. There have been very few non-white students on the course, although some nurseries in the city have a majority of children from ethnic minority communities. This is also in marked contrast with the relatively high level of ethnic students recruited by the college as a whole, which is higher than the level in the general population.

Within their part of the Vocational Education department, the CACHE Diploma occupies a median position. It is a Level 3 course, and clearly represents progression from Level 2 courses such as the GNVQ Intermediate Health and Social Care or the CACHE Certificate. Joanne also notes that she and her colleagues 'wouldn't touch the NVQ [*Level 3 Modern Apprenticeship*] with a barge pole'. However, although they are also at Level 3, the BTEC National Diploma in Early Years and the AVCE Health and Social Care are marketed as more academic courses, with higher entry requirements, more academic assessment régimes, and A Level additionality. Some students have been offered places on the CACHE Diploma though they have been rejected for these other two courses. Not surprisingly, the CACHE teaching team display some rivalries in defence of their status, particularly towards the BTEC team, and towards the CACHE provision on offer at another college in the city. The academic portion of the course is fairly substantial. To achieve the Diploma, students must pass 9 written assignments, produce a portfolio of 20 case studies of child observations and work with young children, complete 4 successful work placements over 450 hours a year, and pass a terminal exam.

The other notable thing about the location of the CACHE Diploma is its current physical location at Priestley House. It is some distance from the main college site, in a relatively small building with a 'cosy' feel. The staff are also protected from some of the worst pressures of administrative work and bureaucracy by their Department Director and their Programme Area Manager. They are allowed considerable autonomy and space as teachers. This means that they are removed to some extent from the 'gaze' of management, and although there is always an atmosphere of hard work in the staffroom, the team do not appear to feel the severe pressures that exist in some other sites. They were concerned about a proposed move to the main campus next year, which would have brought them under the gaze of the college management much more closely, but they opposed the move, and it has now been deferred for at least three years. The staffroom, and the Priestley House campus as a whole, is highly feminised, with a large majority of women tutors and students.

The CACHE team is very close knit. They enjoy close social as well as working relationships, which is of great importance to Joanne herself, and this gives the staffroom a distinctive character. It is a site of constant exchange about students, teaching methods and content, assessment practices etc. – as well as much good humoured banter and gossip about 'women's things', which Joanne says can be embarrassing at times for the sole male tutor.

A site of practice

Joanne and her students see the course as a site primarily of *practice*. 'Theory' is seen as *necessary but difficult*, especially for the modules Joanne herself teaches. This character of the site combines with the weak learner identities of the students. Several students talked about their decision to choose the CACHE course rather than the BTEC option:

> *Student 1*: … it [*the CACHE Diploma*] just seemed a bit better than the BTEC one, because the BTEC one seemed a bit more harder, if you know what I mean.

> *HC: In what ways?*

> *Student 1*:… in the prospectus it [*BTEC*] seemed like there were loads like of-, like theory, and I'm not that good on that, and then this one [*CACHE*], it had it all listed and like what we had to do, so I just-, that seemed better, because the other one was all about like Psychology as well … I didn't know whether I'd be able to do it as well as I thought I would be able to do on this one.

Similarly:

> *Student 2*: I know why I chose the CACHE over the BTEC, `cos it was less academic … I think this one is less course work, more placement-orientated sort of thing…

> *Student 3*: I did it because it was more practical for me, more hands on, which would suit me better than a lot of written work ...

Prior experience of looking after children, including in formal provision in several cases, was a major deciding factor for most of them in deciding to studying this vocationally-oriented course.

This preference for the more 'practical' CACHE course mirrors the students' learner identities. Several talk about how hard they have found it, at school and in their first year at college/sixth form, to motivate themselves to study, especially given the distractions of paid employment, and of the leisure/social activities which this funds. The amount of academic study in the course is a surprise to some:

> *Student 1*: …there's a lot more [*written work*] into it than I thought there was going to be, there's a lot more like classroom work … I knew there was going to be a lot, but not as much as I thought, because like, you know, there's a lot! [*Laughs, pulling a face*]

Even coming onto the course was a frightening thing for others given their previous experiences of education:

> *Student 4*: I've always feared education. … I was a bit like my dad, I'm more practical than academic, and I did well in them sort of subjects. But I found exams just totally, you know, mind block.

Even those who express strong levels of commitment at this early stage in the course themselves raise doubts about how long they can maintain this commitment:

> *Student 1*: Sometime when eventually-, not the novelty'll wear off, but like, you know, like- I go home and do my work, but eventually it'll stop, you know what I mean?

Joanne and the other tutors put an enormous amount of effort into helping students develop study skills and cope with the level of academic work required. The *sine qua non* is that students should perform well in their placements. The questionnaire responses revealed that students in the group rated the tutor support they get very highly, and in interviews this was seen as a key distinguishing characteristic of their experience at Holly Trees College compared with school.

Most students seem to be enjoying their early work placements a great deal, and any problems that arise are swiftly and effectively dealt with by Joanne. They are encouraged to talk about their placement experiences in taught sessions in a way that makes explicit the learning that has taken place. Although students tend to assert initially that they have not learned much in their placements (and we must acknowledge here how difficult it is for anyone to recognise their own workplace learning), they talk easily about the way in which the taught sessions have already improved their ability to work with and respond to children, including multicultural understanding and practice. One student in particular found the theoretical work stimulating and challenging to her own practice as a parent at home, which raised interesting issues about the development of professional identity and knowledge, as distinct from personal identity and 'common sense' knowledge, through participating in this learning site.

Joanne manages to create very positive learning experiences within the site despite its fundamental paradox: it is marketed to, and attractive to, students who have not achieved academic success as commonly defined, and who do not have strong student identities. To do so, it privileges the practical over the academic aspects of the course. Yet to become a nursery nurse means achieving at Level 3, and the academic work has to be successfully completed. Many of these students could be seen as bordering on 'disaffection'. Motivating them to engage with the learning site is a major challenge. Two key aspects of the site stand out in this regard: the leadership Joanne displays as its tutor, and her deliberate attention to the cohesion of the group.

Joanne: a charismatic leader
Joanne provides charismatic and authoritative leadership to the learning site. Ensuring the group's cohesiveness is fundamental to her pedagogical approach.

Authoritative expertise
Related to the practical character of the site, she derives her authority from her extensive experience as a practitioner in early years' childcare. Her identity is very much projected as a 'practitioner who now teaches', and this is

true for the team as a whole, who pride themselves on their insider knowledge of the 'industry'. Joanne's practice was/is informed by very high professional standards and principles, which are central to her personal disposition. This is clearly perceived and often remarked on by her students.

> *Joanne*:…childcare is a subject that I'm passionate about anyway. I loved working with kids, I think it's a fantastic job. It's poorly paid, which is a downside of it, as a nursery nurse, but you know, I know what [the students] are going to be doing inside out, because I've done it, and I've done it in lots of different capacities, erm, so I can be enthusiastic with them…and they respect you because they know that you're not talking out of a book.

Practice is used to legitimate academic knowledge that would otherwise be difficult for this student group to relate to.

This is not only confined to drawing on this experience in class discussions, and it remains a source of innovatory teaching practice for her. This year Joanne has, very successfully, used demonstration and coaching by herself to introduce the students to the very important process of carrying out and reporting observations on children (a major part of students' assessed work throughout the course). Not only was the quality of the students' work higher than in previous years, but at least as importantly, they were motivated to meet their deadlines with 100% success. Joanne expresses a sense of pride that the other tutor group has not done so well.

Enthusiasm and commitment
Joanne's enthusiasm and commitment extends equally to her current teaching role, and in particular in her commitment to support her students – including through the additional workload involved in introducing innovations in her teaching, and an 'open door' policy towards students needing tutorial help. As she talks in the interviews, it is clear that this is related to her own experience of the transformatory possibilities of education.

Personal/social support for students
She also provides vital personal and social support for a number of students experiencing difficulties outside the course. Diana (aged 18) is one example, estranged from her family, and just transferring from hostel accommodation to independent living:

> Came in this morning and my Diana is on the phone in the office, having a really hard time of it. Now Benefits are messing her about! She was in tears on the phone. Gave her hugs, and then took the phone for her. The woman [*at the Benefits office*] was really shirty…gave lots of pompous excuses and no help. Tried to reassure Diana and said I'd ring Welfare. They are ringing me back to see if they can access the 'emergency fund'. (Joanne, journal entry)

Diana was delighted and relieved that Joanne's advocacy ensured her receipt of some benefits. Such support is much valued by the students. One typical comment by a student experiencing particular difficulties:

> *Diana:* Joanne is brilliant, she's just really nice, she's just-, you can have a laugh with her, and she's understanding. [*Goes on to describe support* Joanne *has provided*]

Another student described Joanne's efforts to help her secure an EMA. The one male student in the site received support from Joanne in challenging an overly formal dress code imposed by his placement, which he felt discriminated against him as a man.

Another student who did the CACHE course last year, and experienced very great difficulties in completing the written work, told us that she would not have decided to return to college and progress onto the CACHE Diploma this year unless she was in Joanne's tutor group. Joanne has also provided support for the male student in her tutor group.

<u>Commitment to professional values</u>
Joanne also draws on her own very strong value base. Joanne in fact became an FE teacher because, when she moved to London some years ago, she was not prepared to work in the dominant private provision which she perceives as lower quality than public service provision in her home city. Joanne has managed to get allocated to teach the modules in which she really wants to specialise: Anti-Discriminatory Practice and Service Provision/Child Protection. She chose her degree subject (Humanities and Social Studies) through her personal interest in such issues, and partly to assist her teaching in this area:

> *Joanne*: I've had loads of different units fired at me, but I mean, they are my-, I am passionate about those areas, they are subjects that I feel I could-, I've got a bit more insight or a bit more passion about, that maybe somebody that had to teach them that hadn't worked in them might be a bit dry.

Teaching these subjects is particularly challenging with a group of young people who are all white and who live in a city that has been suffered racial divisions and some high profile incidents of racial violence in recent years.

The student interviews took place when they had only recently begun their work placements. Most of them described their placements as great fun, and talked about their enjoyment in playing with the children. However, when the interviews probed about what they felt they had learned from their course and their placement at that early stage, their comments often centred on the need to control one's own emotional instincts and reactions towards the children:

> *Student 4*: …I'm quite for smacking…you know, as and when it's needed, but of course, other childcare workers say it's not really done, that sort of thing…

> *Student 5*: I've learned quite a lot, because I've learned how to be a bit more patient. I was patient before, but I'd say more…I wouldn't raise my voice any more, I used to not shout, but I'll be more calm about stuff.

> *Student 6*: Well, you're taught [*in the placement*] like you can't be all lovey dovey with the children, you've got to be quite stern if they've done something.

Group cohesion

The student group coheres initially around their common desire to work with children. However, the group incorporates much diversity among students, not least in relation to their immediate prior educational experience.

Joanne places great emphasis and considerable resources as a teacher into building the group's cohesion. The allocation of students to the different tutor groups involves careful consideration e.g. how to balance former CACHE Certificate students and those who have studied GNVQ Health and Social Care with those who have come straight from school, balancing individual personalities, taking into account personal and social problems – Joanne takes every opportunity from first contact with prospective students at college Open Nights to the recruitment and enrolment procedures to build up relationships with her students and get to know them and their backgrounds.

Joanne's dynamic personality, enthusiasm and commitment cement the group. She works constantly on conveying a sense of what it means to be a high-quality professional childcarer, and the construction of this new professional identity for the students, with a strong focus on vocational goals, allows them to 'gel' as a group in college, as well as to 'fit in' successfully in their placements. Dress and appearance, tone of voice and body language, and appropriate responses to the many incidents which are initially either provoking or embarrassing among large groups of small children, have all formed topics of discussion in the group and in interviews with the students. This question of how professional identity is constructed, and the process of socialising students into new roles as nursery nurses, is one of great interest to the TLC-FE research team, and we would like to pursue this further.

A group that 'gels'

The creation of a relaxed and sharing atmosphere within the group parallels Joanne's perception of the way the teaching team functions. Students frequently declare that the group gets on well together, noting in particular the willingness of students to help each other with their work in college. As one student commented: 'We get on really well. If you're ever stuck, all you have to do is turn to whoever you're sat next to, and they'll help you out.' Other research demonstrates that the ability to create such cohesion among learners can be a key factor in raising achievement and aspirations (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000). In Joanne's groups, it appears to contribute to high retention and achievement rates.

Constructive conflict

Although, especially in Joanne's Anti-Discriminatory Practice sessions which have focused on race this term, students sometimes engage in fierce debate, Joanne constantly reassures them that the college classroom is a place where they are all entitled to express their opinions freely, and several students have commented upon this. They are in no doubt, however, about the values of equal opportunity that Joanne herself espouses and promotes. Those interviewed strongly affirm the importance of such principles in the workplace.

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The students enjoy Joanne's interactive style of teaching, although this is not always easy for her, given the necessary-but-difficult nature of the content:

> *Joanne*: I like to make sure … that I'm involving them, which is where my conflict comes, because I get where it is so theoretical it's very difficult to get them to draw on their experiences, because the stuff I'm teaching them might be new.

The students appreciate the opportunity to learn through discussion and through sharing their own experiences, rather than the approaches that they often found difficult at school:

> *Student 1:*…like at school, … they just like said, 'Oooh, we've got this, that and the other done, if you don't do it now, you do it for your homework'. But like here they do a lot more where-, where like we talk about it more, and you know like, they [*the tutors*] do, like, writing … and we all say something, they all write it down and we all copy it, do you know what I mean? It's like we've got more… of an input in a way…

This creates a burden of work for Joanne, as she is feels that the students respond well in class, but do not yet have the study skills to back up a more independent style of learning:

> *Joanne:* What I like to do is make sure … I've got the information that I know they're going to need already prepared, and then I use different techniques, like brain-storming or small group work, to get them to come up with it, and then make sure they've got a handout… that'll back that up at the end of the lesson.

A reflective practitioner

Joanne has been exceptionally open and insightful in her reflective 'action research' journal, which she regularly records and sends to the research team. This term, Joanne has grappled with two key dilemmas. The first relates to the difficulty of creating and maintaining group cohesion through her distinctive personal style:

> My only downfall with that is because I am so casual and quite jokey when I'm teaching, like my second-year group now, people find them difficult because they are so bubbly, and I know that isn't always a good thing with the group, but I find it very difficult to work in any other way… even though I have to sort of like sit on them, because they do get rowdy, I know that I have added to that. I am not a calming influence on a group.

At times, this has resulted in heightened tension in the learning site:

> Things that frustrate me are where I've got students that constantly talk in class, or that don't, you know, give you eye contact or seem to be paying attention. … It's a relaxed atmosphere, but we've got two hours and we've got to bash out stuff …

There are tensions between the need to create group cohesion and positive tutor-student relationships to assist student retention, and the need to get them to concentrate on theory in order to assist their achievement:

> …it's trying to get that serious side of it over, whilst still being really friendly and welcoming, and you know, 'Let's get used to this', because you don't want to put them off. You don't want to come down heavy on them, but they need to … quickly get into that kind of pattern of learning, really.

The second relates to the difficulty of finding a balance between offering support to a group of students with weak identities as learners, and ensuring this develops into autonomy as learners over time. The second-year group she teaches has been a focus for this problem:

> I have tried so hard to support the 'weak' group, and it doesn't seem to <u>bother them</u> that they are so behind with their assessed work. It is just a third of the group, but they are such a drain on my resources. Sally, in particular, seems to take no responsibility for her own learning. She is happy to blame everyone else. I had a disciplinary meeting with her, which she requested, so I could give her exact deadlines! As I thought about it, I realised I was making a rod for my own back! I support her more, spell everything out to her, so she has to take even less responsibility?! (Joanne, journal entry).

Both these problems have also resulted in Joanne feeling tensions within the teaching team. Nevertheless, Joanne has drawn on the support and advice of her colleagues in trying to deal with this 'rod for her own back', and has begun to encourage students to take more responsibility for their own learning. Not only does this carry less risk of 'burn-out' and frustration for herself, but it appears to have had a salutary effect on at least some of the students.

Some tentative conclusions and some concluding questions
One very interesting theme emerging from this site relates to some established theory about gender, caring work and the construction of particular dispositions that suit students to enter particular occupations. Some very similar features can be identified in another TLC-FE partnership, a Level 3 Health Studies course where most students aim to become nurses. There seem (not surprisingly) to be parallels between the way in which Joanne – who of course trained, worked and supervised as a nursery nurse – is committed to the needs of her students, and the expectations of how student nursery nurses will develop and behave towards small children. Both involve the sometimes painful management of one's own emotions and reactions towards others, and this is a phenomenon know as 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983). It has been argued that emotional labour is a key part of caring work that is almost always carried out by women, and that women's deeply established gender roles make them vulnerable eventually to burn-out, frustration, guilt, and sometimes cynicism in the end. In this respect, we may be able to identify pre-dispositions and vocationally developed dispositions in the field of nursery nursing which have at least as much to do with deep-seated social and political structures as they do with individual's life history

and personal choices (cf. Bates, 1994, on vocational training in care of the elederly).

This raises a number of questions for the research to pursue further. To what extent does such work demand not only skills and knowledge, but also the commitment of 'hearts and minds'? What counts as valid learning when it includes the development of personal dispositions? What count as valid ways of learning? How are the boundaries of who is and who is not the 'right kind of person' maintained? What happens to learners who find themselves beyond these bounds? Some of these are issues that were addressed long ago by the work of Basil Bernstein in relation to the 'classification and framing of knowledge' (Bernstein, 1971). Some parallels have already been drawn between the CACHE Diploma group and another of the TLC-FE learning sites, an all-female group of healthcare students. We note here that similar issues of needing to 'fit in' as the 'right kind of person' have also arisen in the very male-dominated culture of a engineers' day-release course at a third partnership in the research.

The TLC-FE project plans to address these issues in more depth by developing a paper on the theme of 'vocational habitus'. Habitus is a term used by the sociologist Bourdieu to describe the individual dispositions and socially constructed predispositions which inform the way we act in the world. We will explore the possibility that some occupations themselves both require and tend to evoke the development of an habitus – attitudes, values and beliefs – which enables workers to perform that job at least as much as skills or knowledge do. Through the theme paper, we will attempt to understand the links between learning to develop or refine a particular disposition in order to successfully enter a professional community, and the way in which gender and other structural factors predispose students to take on that vocational habitus.

These questions relate directly to the issue of learning cultures. For example, what is, can or should be the source of a tutor's authority within the group? In Joanne's case, it is clearly her experience as a practitioner. This goes beyond the purely personal. Almost without exception, the students appear to see a close congruence between what they are taught in the college course they follow, and what they learn in their work placements. This is not always the case in courses which combine academic and workbased elements, and a degree of incongruity can create space for some students to develop their critical thinking (e.g. Smith, 2001). The way in which the workplace serves as the 'centre of gravity' in this learning site, combined with the emphasis on the importance of the group 'gelling', suggests that its culture is based primarily on participation in practice rather than acquisition of abstract knowledge. Yet the acquisition of academic knowledge, and its impact on practice, particularly in the units for which Joanne has a special remit, is also crucial to the students' success in moving beyond legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) to the possibility of fuller membership of the community of professional childcare workers.

Joanne has raised a further and not unrelated question for the research in her diary – is it possible to reflect 'too much' on one's own practice? This is a valuable question, for reflection on ourselves and our own practice can

sometimes be the harshest criticism we receive. I suppose there is another question that could stand alongside or replace this question: is there another way of reflecting on one's own practice that might be preferable? Jennifer Gore (1993) has discussed the way in which practitioners' reflective journals can become self-critical to the point of undermining one's confidence. She has pointed to the need to see the journal's potential for 'reconstructing' professional identity and practice in a positive way. This is an issue for which we, as researchers, must also take responsibility and support the tutors who are participating in the project.

Postscript

The observant or curious reader will have noted that this paper presents more data based on the views of the tutor in this learning site, and on observations, than it does on the interviews with the students. Although we have attempted to distil from the data generated with the students some of the key issues we perceive to be important in this site, much of the detail of the students' views, and especially of their individual narratives is not included. This is a necessary limitation at this stage of the research, where the confidentiality of the students has to be protected. Given the design of the project, we face many difficult ethical decisions in working with our participating tutors. Deciding what we can share of the students' accounts is particularly delicate, as it is often impossible to anonymise them from their own tutor. At the same time, we cannot draw this data into the public arena with the assumption that our tutors will not – or should not – see what is open to the rest of the FE community. As the research progresses, and as the current cohorts complete their courses, we will be able to share more of this data, and the detail of the learning sites will become richer still.

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