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Becoming the 'right person for the job': vocational habitus, gender and learning cultures in Further Education

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Introduction

This is a summary of work currently in progress to develop one of several cross-site themes from the first year's data in the project *Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education* (TLC-FE)¹. As the project title indicates, we regard learning as a social and cultural activity, not simply as an individual cognitive process. In part, we draw on Lave and Wenger's (1991) ideas that learning is 'situated', that is to say, intimately bound up with the social context in which it happens; that learning is a process of newcomers entering more experienced groups or 'communities of practice'; that learning and becoming a member of such a group entails taking on a new identity; and that particular forms of learning may therefore attract people with 'characteristic biographies', from similar backgrounds or with similar dispositions.

Our interest in this link between identity and context reflects issues of structure and agency, so we also draw on the sociological ideas of Pierre Bourdieu as tools for thinking. In particular, we are making use of his ideas of 'field' as the setting for an activity such as learning, where there are certain types of 'capital' at stake, and 'habitus' as the combination in each individual of personal dispositions and collective *pre*-dispositions – shaped by structures such as class and gender, but always encompassing 'strategy' – as useful ways of understanding learning cultures:

...the relation between habitus and field operates in two ways. On the one side, it is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus, which is the product of the embodiment of immanent necessity of a field...On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or cognitive construction: habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one's practice (Bourdieu quoted in Wacquant, 1989: 44).

This 'cultural' perspective is not common in FE research, which has tended to focus predominantly on FE's instrumental contribution to the economy and social cohesion, or on cognitive psychological aspects of learning (e.g. motivation theories, learning styles), driven by measures of retention and achievement geared towards audit and inspection. However, such a perspective raises questions about the traditional role of FE as provider of vocational education and training (VET). How do different courses construct what it means to work in different vocations? In what ways is a sense of 'vocation' communicated to students? As we looked at the data from some of our vocational learning sites² - those where mainly young women were studying to enter nursery nursing or healthcare occupations – we found strong resonances with aspects of Inge Bates' study of girls on youth training (YTS) in elderly care (1990, 1991, 1994). Bates' data revealed an acculturation process as central to this training. The YTS scheme effectively selected and then further sifted girls whose backgrounds gave them a suitable disposition for this work. They then developed a further set of 'coping' dispositions in the face of many unpleasant and distressing tasks. This included learning to manage their own emotions.

These three sets of ideas, combined with our data, seemed to suggest that two questions about the social and cultural aspects of learning might be worth more detailed exploration. Firstly, if learning means taking on a new identity, what sort of person does a nursery nurse (or nurse) have to become? And secondly, if occupations tend to draw in individuals from particular backgrounds, what sort of person becomes a nursery nurse (or nurse)? In short, what makes someone the 'right person for the job'? We continue with brief case studies of the trainee nursery nurses and healthcare students in our project. We have also tried to contrast these female gender-stereotyped sites with a male-dominated engineering site. The data was generated primarily through repeated semi-structured individual interviews with a sample of six students in each site and with their tutors, and through observations of the sites.

Becoming a nursery nurse³

The students in this site – mostly school leavers – are all studying for the Level 3 CACHE⁴ Diploma in Child Care and Education, a 2-year course which mainly leads to employment as a nursery nurse. 99% of childcare workers are female, and this work is low-status and low-paid. Their time is divided equally between a taught course in college, and a series of work experience placements. Many students have experience of part-time jobs or work experience in childcare, and an ability to do well in placement is regarded as being more important than strong academic ability by tutors selecting candidates for the course. As the students have progressed through their first year of training, their accounts of their learning have focused around three key issues: recognising the developmental role of the nursery nurse; keeping their own feelings under control in the face of crisis and provocation; and developing a suitable personal disposition for childcare work.

Their perceptions of their role in their placements, and of their own identities, have shifted discernibly in relation to these issues. Early in the course, students said they enjoyed playing alongside small children in nursery classes, but by the following summer, most saw their role quite differently, as in this typical comment:

CACHE student 1: That's what I've kind of learned, now...I teach, although I was playing with them [*the children*]...If you went and just played with the kids and just not said 'owt, like 'How many bricks are there?', they wouldn't really ever learn, would they? So you've just got to really think about it. Make 'em count the bricks, and say how many bricks there are, and also play at the same time.

This meant leaving behind their own identity as a child, and taking on greater maturity. It also entailed a paradox: they had to engage more intensely with children, but remain purposefully detached at the same time.

This paradox was also expressed in relation to less pleasant aspects of the work. Alongside enjoyable stories from their placements were many less happy tales of toileting, tantrums, and physical aggression or cheekiness from the children:

CACHE student 2: Children can wind you up! You'd say something to them, and then they're really, really cheeky. They've learned how to answer you back, so they're gonna do it. And they can wind you up, and suppose you've got a short temper? But saying that, I've got a short temper, but I don't let them try it.

Students had to limit their affection for their charges, learn not to be too 'lovey-dovey' or 'get attached', and be stern when necessary. They also had to learn not to react when provoked, and to keep their own emotions under control while also trying to manage the extreme

emotions young children can display. This proved difficult and exhausting at first. However, by the start of the second year, most students claimed it had become easier, and all agreed that they were 'a different person' when in their work placement than they were at college or at home.

Students have also been expected to develop certain dispositions and demeanour. These range from the emphasis placed on appropriate – i.e. demure – dress, to the tutors' deliberate efforts to get the group to 'gel' and bond with each other emotionally. As the year wore on, a number of students became isolated and then excluded from the site in various ways. Early on, successful students identified themselves as 'nice', and those who were eventually excluded as coming from 'rough' backgrounds. 'Rough' students were those perceived as living in the more deprived areas of the city, with less stable family situations, who used obscene language, bullied others, got into fights outside college, and tended to dress in more exotic fashions. They were therefore deemed to be unsuitable, rather than 'the right sort of person for the job'.

Becoming a healthworker⁵

Another learning site, at a different college, comprises an all-female group of 16-17 year-olds studying for the BTEC National Diploma in Health Studies. Like the CACHE Diploma, it is a 2-year programme at Level 3, with a substantial part of the students' time spent in work placements. Many of these girls also have prior experience and part-time jobs in the care sector, but personal experience of elderly relatives or siblings with learning difficulties also seem to play an important role in creating suitability. Most aspire initially to careers in nursing or midwifery, but tutors try to broaden these ideas to other healthcare occupations such as radiography and occupational therapy. Here too, familiarisation with caring work roles and development of skills has gone hand in hand with learning to keep control of feelings and the development of appropriate dispositions.

The healthcare students undertake placements in three sectors – childcare, care of the elderly, and care of people with learning difficulties. In childcare, just like the CACHE students, they had to learn not to shout or react immediately to children's misbehaviour. Responses to working with the elderly and learning disabled tended to be less favourable. Students had to cope with unpleasant aspects of bodily care: bathing, feeding, treating infected wounds, and toileting. Elderly people could be agitated, aggressive and violent, and needed calming down at times. As in nursery nursing, this also required a certain detachment:

Health student 1: {laughs} I have felt slightly ill sometimes...But when you can deal with things like extremely bad pressure sores and things like that and it doesn't bother you...-it smells horrendous, absolutely horrendous. A lot of people say, 'Well, how can you do that?' but you don't really think of it that way, you just get on and do it.

Working with the learning disabled caused anxieties and stress for some, but others learned to empathise with these clients' feelings. One well-integrated student, who also works part-time as a care assistant with the elderly, summed up the positive outlook and cheerful disposition she feels are essential to such work:

Health student 2: The main thing is always have a smiley face, that's the main thing, it's true. It works wonders. Everyone gets a bit down, but if you're walking round looking miserable, it doesn't make the residents feel any better. But if you're walking around, you're happy, you're chirpy, you like talking, then it helps.

There are some important differences between the Health Studies course and the CACHE Diploma. Work placements, though a course requirement, are not assessed or graded in Health Studies, but are a vital assessed part of the course in nursery nursing. On the other hand, the Health Studies tutor places an important emphasis on the more academic, scientific modules of the taught course, which may account (in part at least) for the higher status it enjoys compared with the CACHE Diploma. However, an ability to walk the emotional tightrope of appropriately combined involvement and detachment in caring for others seems an important boundary of inclusion and exclusion in both these sites.

Becoming an engineer⁶

In the engineering site at a third college, Modern Apprentices in industry attend the college on a day-release basis for 2 years, to study for a National Certificate in Electronics and Telecommunications. All but one are male, as are all the tutors. The focus of the course is not on personal services and caring for others, but on technical skills and knowledge. Our initial expectations and prior personal experiences of the engineering industry, along with other research (e.g. Maull, 1998), suggested we would find a distinctive culture characterised by particular notions of masculinity and instrumental attitudes to study, and these were indeed confirmed by the data. For example, fieldwork observations refer to the ‘maleness’ of the physical space this site occupies within the college – women are rarely seen there, motorcycles are ranged outside, and groups of young men flank the entrances smoking or using mobile phones. (The female Health Studies students referred to the engineering department as a ‘scary part’ of their college.) Instrumental notions of study appear to be related to weak links between employers’ Modern Apprenticeship schemes and the college provision. Dominant student perceptions are that their college curriculum has little relevance to their diverse work situations, which are already quite specialised.

However, we also expected a great deal of potential evidence of ‘becoming the right person for the job’, but these expectations have not generally been fulfilled. These learners *already* saw themselves as engineers, and saw their college course as an adjunct to their work. The qualification is an essential currency to progress in the field of skilled engineering, but college study does not play the same selection, socialisation and filtering role with individual students that we have seen in childcare and healthcare. Vocational identities were already well-established among the engineering apprentices, through processes in the workplace that our research, focused so far on the FE learning site, will move on to study next.

Becoming ‘the right person for the job’

As we indicated in our introduction, we have found Bourdieu’s concepts useful for analysing different aspects of disposition and identity encountered in these three learning sites. For example, Bourdieu talks about habitus as including both individual aspects of our identity as well as our collective pre-dispositions or habits structured by social class and gender, amongst other factors. At the same time, habitus must be understood in the context of the ‘fields’ within which we operate. Here, the immediate field is constituted by a particular occupation and the associated vocational education. Like other fields, this one defines relationships between positions so that the recognised acquisition and possession of particular characteristics is of paramount importance.

One important aspect of such fields is the vocational culture which informs it (cf. Bates, 1994), and which is underpinned by a ‘guiding ideology of practice’ (N.James, 1989). In the caring occupations, this is promoted through ‘ideologies of sacrificial femininity’ (Bates, 1991: 233, see also Colley, 2001, Gilligan, 1995). In childcare, internationally-used measures of quality reinforce a broad consensus that the personal attributes of the nursery nurse herself – gentleness, sensitivity, enthusiasm and effort – are the most important aspect

of care (Scarr, 1998, Tietze et al, 1996). In care of the elderly, training providers emphasise sensitivity and ‘genuine’ caring on the part of care assistants (Bates, 1994).

Similar arguments apply to nursing, where caring *for* patients is also supposed to include caring *about* them, through warmth, empathy and involved personal attention (N.James, 1989). Media images and research reports of patient perceptions of the ‘good nurse’ focus on these personal and interpersonal attributes (Smith, 1992). Accordingly, the prospectus for the Health Studies site flags the course as suitable for those who, amongst other things, ‘possess a caring nature and a sensitivity to people’s needs’. So we see that vocational culture concerns itself importantly with habitus and with changing student’s habitus as they gradually enter these occupations through the mediation of FE. Since habitus can be changed, but is at the same time ‘enduring’, it is not surprising that successful students tend to be those who already have some experiences that predispose them to develop the dispositions required.

Dominant discourses, then, express these vocational cultures in terms of particular dispositions displayed by those who are ‘right for the job’. These dispositions are primarily defined by their affective content and expectations of the display of involved feelings towards the child or patient. However, from the students’ accounts, we can see that this identity is somewhat idealised. In their work placements, they have to negotiate a realised identity which mitigates emotional involvement with a degree of detachment or even toughness. The more abstract aspects of their college courses – Piagetian developmental theories in childcare, and scientific knowledge in health studies – provide a benign rationale for this detachment. To some extent, they are already prepared for ‘what it takes to do the job’ (Bates, 1994), although much has still to be learned. Such predisposition usually includes being female, and therefore having been steeped in girls’ and women’s socially constructed and allocated gender roles of nurturing others and denying their own needs.

Vocational habitus: sense and sensibility

Given the importance of existing habitus and the transformation of habitus in such vocational sites, we have begun to explore the usefulness of expressing these processes through a concept we term ‘vocational habitus’. There is, of course, an existing body of literature which has discussed processes of socialisation within vocational education and training, although much of this relates to schools rather than FE. Bourdieu (1986) explains how certain social groupings will ‘choose’ (amongst other things) to enter certain occupations according to very stereotyped trajectories, and describes this as ‘the choice of the necessary’⁷. Bernstein (1971) uses the concepts of ‘weak framing’ and ‘integrated codes’ in vocational education, to discuss the shaping of pupils’ attitudes according to particular ideologies. Frykholm and Nitzler (1993) draw on the ideas of both Bernstein and Bourdieu in their concept of a ‘vocational notion’ which serves to unify norms, values and meanings in particular learning sites. Hodkinson et al (1996), and Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000, see also Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000) develop these ideas in terms of ‘careership’ and ‘learning careers’, where they relate the development of habitus to the influence of the field in the post-16 contexts of youth training credits and of FE.

These overlapping theoretical frameworks bring us back to the starting point of this paper: the relationship between the construction of identity, membership of social groupings, and participation in communities of practice. So what might our concept of ‘vocational habitus’ contribute to this literature on socialisation – and to our understanding of learning cultures in FE? We would argue that it builds on these previous theories in two main respects.

Firstly, it may help us to understand the ‘pull’ of a vocational culture to include (and therefore also to exclude) people from certain social groupings. It may offer a tool for

thinking about the way in which practices are regulated within that culture, in ways that produce new identities but also reproduce existing ones, such as gender stereotypes. It therefore expresses 'sense', both as a sense of one's 'proper place', and as a sense of practice – the right way to be and behave in the workplace (Bourdieu, 1977).

Secondly, it may help us understand the emotional aspects of learning revealed by our data. Vocation is defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary as employment that 'requires dedication', and Heller (1979) argues that feelings and morals have to be learned along with thoughts and actions. Vocational habitus offers the possibility of expressing the way in which these learning sites shape students' ability to respond to the complex emotional influences and demands within the vocational culture. It can convey not only 'sense' but also 'sensitivity'.

All of these ideas help us to understand how students' habitus is shaped as they learn to fit in with the communities of practice they are entering. This process appears to be most powerful in the nursery nursing course, which displays the closest consonance between the college-based course and the work placements, and is reinforced by the fact that the work placements are integral to the overall assessment process for these students. But it also raises the issue of what happens to those students who have not been able to 'fit in'. Bernstein (1971) suggests that exclusion may be a painful and potentially damaging experience for them.

Some implications

Our discussions in this paper suggest some important issues for FE practitioners, managers and policy-makers, which are central to the TLC-FE project and its commitment to investigate how learning cultures might be transformed to enhance teaching and learning.

First of all, we have identified the powerful influence of vocational cultures on VET, and this implies that any attempts to transform learning cultures will have to take into account the weight of the related vocational culture. Where such cultures exert powerful influences, it is likely that transformations in associated vocational education sites will not be easily effected. In order to do so, the often covert and taken-for-granted assumptions of practice need to be made visible and subjected to critical analysis. Such a process may require time for tutors in particular to engage in critical reflective practice of a collective nature, especially where issues of class and gender oppression may be at issue. It certainly cannot be expressed in terms of adopting particular tips for 'good practice'.

Secondly, habitus is enduring and durable, but not eternal (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The very formation of vocational habitus represents a transformation of students' existing habitus, yet the evidence clearly shows that some students are less equipped to make this transformation. The tighter the coherence between the FE and workplace inputs in the learning site, the more successfully some students develop the requisite vocational habitus, and the more thoroughly others are excluded. Is it possible to transform learning cultures in a way that allows those who are culturally less well prepared to remain in legitimate peripheral participation, without weakening the development of vocational habitus in those who are better prepared?

Finally, in a literature that we have not been able to explore within the limits of this paper, there is evidence that suggests the contradictions of vocational habitus are likely to create an oppressive and painful degree of alienation for workers, especially in vocational cultures which demand a high level of emotional labour (e.g. Colley, forthcoming, Gilligan, 1995, Hochschild, 1983). Tutors, of course, are also subject to this impact within the vocational culture (cf. Frykholm and Nitzler, 1993), and we have explored elsewhere (Colley, 2002b) aspects and implications of such alienation for the childcare tutor participating in the TLC-FE project. These too must be taken into account in considering transformations to the learning culture. As David James notes, pursuing the study of culture within the study of

learning seems worth the effort, but also presents challenges for transforming practice within VET:

[I]n addition to offering a subtle and contextualised account of learning, [it] may also lead us to a view of the prospects for transformation in...FE-based practices... [T]ransformation is likely to involve change that is beyond the more common recipes for tutor behaviour, technological solutions, or local organisational changes...[since] the vocational curriculum is a product of relations of power as well as being the realisation of the meanings brought to (or created within) a particular course or classroom or workplace by individuals (2002: 10-11).

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Project website: <http://www.ex.ac.uk/education/tlc>

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² There are 16 learning sites associated with 4 FE colleges across England participating in the TLC-FE project. The term 'learning site' is used in preference to 'course' for two reasons. Firstly, not all these learning opportunities are structured like a traditional course. Secondly, we use 'learning site' to denote the expansive nature and location of learning, and influences on learning that extend beyond the classroom or college.

³ A detailed case study of this site can be found in Colley, 2002a.

⁴ Council for Awards in Childcare and Education. It used to be known as NNEB – the Nursery Nursing Education Board, and is a universally recognised qualification for registered nursery nurses.

⁵ A detailed case study of this site can be found in Tedder (2002)

⁶ A detailed case study of this site can be found in James and Diment, 2002.

⁷ This is an instance of what Bourdieu calls 'the subjective expectation of objective probability' and 'ontological complicity' (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1982; Grenfell and James, 1998).

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