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Original Citation

Scaife, Tony, Colley, Helen and Davies, Jennie (2001) Setting Up Collaborative Partnership Research in FE: When the “Big One” meets “a world of rabbit warrens”. In: LSDA Annual Conference 2001, 5th - 7th December 2001, Cambridge, UK. (Unpublished)

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Setting Up Collaborative Partnership Research in FE: When the “Big One” meets “a world of rabbit warrens”

Tony Scaife, Helen Colley and Jennie Davies

This paper explores the early experiences of researchers building a unique partnership to study the transformation of learning cultures in Further Education (FE), described below. The project brings together researchers based in Higher Education settings with those seconded from FE colleges. Although the induction period for those working on the project has only recently finished, and the data generation process just begun, we have found it useful to reflect on the early stages of constructing such a partnership, which itself transcends two different learning cultures. This demands that we ourselves engage in the process of transforming our own learning and of creating common ground between these two cultures. The research is longitudinal, over 4 years. Not only do we have to find ways collaborate constructively and collegially together for this period – we are all in this for the long haul – but we also feel that reflexive research upon our own experiences in the project team and the partnership challenges that arise may represent an important contribution to knowledge.

We find ourselves undertaking this task in something of a spotlight. The Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education (TLCFE) project was described as ‘The Big One’ in a full-page article in the Guardian Education supplement. It is the largest ever research project in FE, funded through the Economic and Social Research Council’s (ESRC) massive Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). Hence, it is likely to have a high profile and be subject accordingly to intense scrutiny by both the FE and the HE communities. At the same time, the focus of its research, the FE sector, is highly complex and fragmented. As Robson noted in his research in FE colleges, once beyond the glossy corporate reception area, there lies ‘a world of rabbit warrens’¹. What happens when the TLCFE project engages with the rabbit warrens? When Alice (as an HE researcher) can go down the rabbit into FE’s Wonderland accompanied by the White Rabbit (an FE-based researcher)?

The process of reflecting upon these experiences for a public audience has not been an easy one, especially for researchers who have not previously written for academic publication before. Those of us who are tyro authors felt at times that we may have been better advised to:

“Tell it not in Gath: publish it not in the streets of Askelon”²

but that would be to negate the whole transforming principle of the Transforming Learning Culture in Further Education (TLCFE) project and our

¹ In Jocelyn Robson “Outsider on the inside: a first person account of the research process in a further education college.” *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 4(1) 1999 p 78

² 2Samuel 1 20

role as partners in the enterprise. Instead we aim to reflect honestly on work in progress. This paper is not in any sense a considered summation of an extensive process of analysis. Rather it is the product of reflection on the process in hand and draws simply upon the evidence readily available to us (an FE based researcher and two HE based researchers) as we seek, with the rest of the team and others, to establish research capacity within parts of what is itself being transformed into the learning and skills system.

A more detailed explanation of the TLCFE project can be found elsewhere³. In brief, it aims to develop systematic research on learning in FE and to engage FE practitioners in research

“... of special interest to the project is the study of teaching and learning in authentic settings”⁴

In this study a key element is the partnership between the four universities (represented by 5 project directors and 5 researchers employed on 0.5 contracts); the four FE colleges (represented by a researcher seconded from the college for 0.4 of their full-time contract in each) 4 participating tutors from each college; and successive cohorts of their students. This is a challenging agenda

“In theoretical terms there is no precedent for a contextual study of this nature and the time-span in the FE sector.”⁵

We might also add that the breadth of this partnership is itself unprecedented in the learning and skills sector. We believe that this project is both well founded in its aims and well directed in its actions. What this paper aims to do is to explore the challenges and demands of operating a within such a complex, collaborative partnership. It is, of course, a partnership spanning not just two but several fields. As well as the FE-HE axis at sectoral and institutional levels, partnerships also exist between the project and its funding body, the ESRC; between the TLCFE and other projects within the TLRP; and between the national TLCFE team leaders and individual members at the local level; and between those employed on the project and the participating tutors in each of the partnership colleges.

One of the main theoretical frameworks we are using initially in the project is that of the French sociologist Bourdieu⁶.and some of his concepts may be useful tools in exploring the partnership-building process in which we are ourselves engaged. Bourdieu uses the notion of ‘field’ as a way of understanding context. He often represents it as a game, where the layout of the field and the rules of play are metaphors for structural factors inherent in a

³ Dennis Gleeson. “Transforming learning cultures in further education” College Research 4(3) Summer 2001 p 3- -32

⁴ Dennis Gleeson op.cit. p30

⁵ Dennis Gleeson op.cit p 31

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant. “ An invitation to reflexive sociology” Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992

particular context, and agency is represented by individuals' moves and interpretations of the game. All players bring resources to the game – cultural, social and economic resources – but in different amounts. This is related to their differential possession of power, and the power relationships between players, in that field. Moreover, the rules of the game decide which of those resources count as *capital*, since only capital can circulate or be exchanged and accumulated.

The HE and FE sectors brought together in the TLCFE project can be seen as different fields in this way. Each of these fields constructs and deploys differing cultural capital. What resources count as capital in one do not necessarily count in the other, and presently there is no guarantee that the sum of the specie is negotiable across the two fields. Indeed, to extend the metaphor, the TLCFE project could be said to be an attempt to strike a “euro” of practitioner based cultural capital negotiable across both fields. Transformation of such complexity is not without challenge and tension at every level but, as Engstrom⁷ has argued, it is precisely that tension between potentially conflicting fields which can create the essential pre-requisites for transformative learning by the participants when the commitment to do so is strong.

On the one hand then the auguries are good. There is growing support for the development of a research culture and the initial involvement of FE staff in the TLCFE project has been very favourable. But on the other hand, what are the challenges and potential pitfalls that confront us? Tensions and contradictions within the concepts of partnership and collaboration may create “noise” in the system such as to preclude an unambiguous adoption of strategies to conduct the research. Is the cultural capital of higher education negotiable within further education? Are there organisational and cultural barriers in FE to research *in* (rather than 'on') practice that may make the route towards the TLCFE objective 5 “... to set in place an enhanced and lasting practitioner- based research capability in FE”⁸ especially arduous? Let us look first at what is in the positive hand.

There is much support for the development of research capacity within the learning and skills community⁹, and some argument for the efficacy of “*relevant and timely*” research in policy formulation.¹⁰ Similarly bodies like the Learning and Skills Development Agency¹¹ often focus upon the need to improve the efficient productivity of teachers and learners through a process whereby research is conducted *on* education and the results offered for emulation. As we shall see below, however, this approach may well

⁷ Yrjo Engstrom “Expansive learning at work” Journal of Education and Work 14(1) 2001 133-156

⁸ ESRC TLCFE project proposal para. 17

⁹ See for example College Research 4(3) p22-29

¹⁰ Malcolm Wicks “Reforming the way research interacts with policy – improving the rates of return”. College Research

¹¹ see for example Paul Martinez “Great expectations :setting targets for students” LSDA 2001; Muriel Green “Successful tutoring: good practice for managers and tutors” LSDA 2001

fundamentally misunderstand the way that colleges presently process information. It may also fail to address the nature of contemporary professionalism. In contrast John Quicke¹² argues for the need for new professionalism in education based upon collaboration between professionals to establish "... situated certainties of collected professional wisdom among particular communities of teachers." He argues that such an approach is essential in the light of the changing demands modernity imposes upon the practitioner. This is the position adopted by the TLCFE project in respect of bringing together communities of practice in teaching and research.

Communities of practice between HE and FE researchers on the TLCFE Project have now been set in collaborative motion, at the macro-level with the complete Project team as well as at the micro-level within our college-based teams. Even the writing of this paper may be considered an exemplar of this approach. We should like to share the similar but not identical ways in which two FE colleges (Park Lane College in Leeds and St. Austell in Cornwall) have begun to forge collaborative research partnerships.

Park Lane College is one of eight FE colleges in Leeds. It has 32,000 students; delivers over 1 million units and has a budget in excess of £25 million per year. There are a total 1545 staff of all grades employed at the college and of whom around 600 are full-time tutors. It is from this group that the project's participating tutors were nominated by the teaching departments and ultimately selected by the Directors of the TLCFE project working in concert – with a view to the overall balance of the 16 participating tutors. At the start of the process some 10 Park Lane staff were nominated and ultimately 4 were selected.

The college-based TLCFE research fellow (Tony Scaife) was nominated by the college and approved by the Project Directors. There was, however, only one member of staff nominated for that role and there are no available records of how the nomination was determined. His role is a partial secondment from a permanent full-time post. The HE research fellow (Helen Colley) based at Leeds University was appointed following advertisement and interview, on a part-time temporary contract typical for researchers in HE. She is a new member of the staff at the University, and is also aware that although research itself carries high status within HE, that of contract researchers themselves is relatively low. While this might be taken to imply that the FE-based researcher enjoys a superior level of status and security, other factors come into play. Participation in the project is an important career advance for the HE researcher, who has just completed her doctorate elsewhere. The nature of the research approach adopted by the TLCFE, combining a qualitative, interpretive approach with quantitative survey data, is one which lies within her professional 'comfort zone', notwithstanding the very real challenges this combination presents. However, for Tony Scaife the

¹² John Quicke "A new professionalism for a collaborative culture of organizational learning in contemporary society". *Educational Management and Administration* 28(3) p299 –315
quote page 304

reduction in his teaching hours, has meant abandoning his comfort zone of professional expertise and confirmed competence, and stepping into the less familiar field of HE research. Complexity is a characteristic of our own professional identities and relationships, not just of the field we are researching.

The Director, Helen Colley and Tony Scaife have met regularly to plan and deliver induction sessions for the participating tutors. At the time of writing the whole Leeds based team has met for one full –day and two half days. They do not face the exceptionally difficult practical and logistical barriers the St.Austell team has to overcome (see below). The early meetings concerned themselves with briefings on the project, addressing some of members' hopes, fears and expectations and looking at some of the research theories and stances, which underlay the methodology. In addition the sessions discussed the keeping of research journals and collecting outline information on the 'learning sites' (the team will be focusing on one particular group of students with each participating tutor, and the project summarises the *process* of teaching and learning with that group as a 'learning site'). All members have been asked to evaluate these introductory sessions. The responses to the nature and demands of the task in hand have been overwhelmingly favourable. Thus:

"I developed quite an in-depth perspective on colleagues' work and interests in TLC"

"Very helpful and supportive colleagues. Project is going to go well"

"I learned a lot about the particular contexts of the tutors and their sites..."

There were also requests for further work on the "research mode" of thinking and approaching experiences from a project perspective.

"However it was clear ... that we were not looking from a research viewpoint ...[!] that this was a new area for me and would be a challenge. [!] hope to become more familiar and comfortable with looking at things from this perspective."

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"The meeting helped me to re-engage my interest in research and learning with my long-term interest in approaches to education and training"

What participating tutors were requesting were more and greater opportunities to reflect on practice than is encouraged by the present emphasis on assessment and course delivery. There is reason then to be optimistic that tutors will collaborate with a key feature of the project research focus, as defined in the project poster:

“The progressive development and refinement of conceptual and theoretical understanding is central to all stages of the research. Theory development is the method of our investigations”

Team members also enjoyed the opportunity to discuss their work in a more personally appealing fashion. Thus for example:

“I find discussing my teaching work from a personal rather than simply a functional perspective very refreshing”

Sessions also allowed discussion of some of the existing studies on teaching and learners in Further Education which participating tutors found particularly resonant with their own experience. It is not too fanciful to suggest that there was a thirst for discussion and reflection amongst the participating tutors. By and large tutors had little knowledge that such studies existed. At the simplest level then one could argue that any effective process of augmenting research capacity or developing communities of reflexive practice within the sector must ensure that the existing literature receives a wider distribution.

At the time of writing the HE research fellow has conducted preliminary, biographical interviews with the participating tutors and shadowed them through a working day. Both researchers are about to make the first observations of the sites of learning – chosen in conjunction with the participating tutors. For Helen Colley, who has worked very little in FE previously, the collaboration with Tony Scaife has transformed her own experience of gaining access to do the fieldwork. The ability to learn about the culture of FE from someone with experience in the sector has enhanced her own sensitivity to key issues very early on, making it easier to build collaborative relationships with the participating tutors. Moreover, the combination of perspectives – metaphorically the novice perceptions of Alice in this Wonderland combined with the insider knowledge of the White Rabbit – is likely to bring richer understandings and explanations of the data than either might achieve on their own.

For Tony Scaife, working with Helen Colley and the project director at Leeds has been an opportunity to learn about the particular research methods the TLCFE project is adopting, which do not fall within the traditions of positivist research that currently dominate the broader field of educational research¹³

Collaboration of this nature though is not without perceived peril and potential pain. For example, however hard we researchers try to make the

¹³ Phil Hodkinson “The contested field of education research: hegemony, policing and dissent” Paper presented at the BERA Annual Conference Leeds 14/9/01

distinction between 'research mode' and 'assessment mode', it is not so easy for the participating tutors, in the heart of the FE field and in the heat of practice, to spot the difference. As one of the St. Austell tutors noted in their research diary:

" Within the [project] I am becoming slightly uneasy that the participating tutors and their chosen sites are under surveillance and am consequently uneasy about 'letting rip' [in the Journal]. Perhaps you can reassure me/us on this one".

As participants tutors' are committed to keeping research diaries as an important source of data for the project, one of the ways in which we have addressed such concerns has been to ensure that the tutors have complete control over divulgence of the content of those journals. We have encouraged them to use their journal for private reflection, and asked them to share only what they choose to place in the public domain – whether by providing only selected extracts, or otherwise editing the content before making it available to the team.

It is also clear that not all of the fears and anxieties we felt could be expressed or even anticipated in those first induction meetings. As the project has already faced the possibility of things 'going wrong' in fairly predictable ways – tutors being reallocated or getting new jobs, for example – there is a world of difference between the immediate reactions of the HE and FE-based researchers. It is relatively easy for a researcher based in HE to see any such developments as an interesting part of the data for the project, despite the frustrations and concerns they may feel at these events themselves. However, the prospect of having to search for a new participant, and the delays to data generation and dissemination of findings are far more sharply felt by an FE-based researcher. Acknowledging these differences, and raising awareness of both researchers' perspectives in response to inevitable hitches in such a project, have been an important aspect of the team building to which we are committed.

Compared with Park Lane the social, economic and cultural context of St. Austell College is very different. The town of St. Austell, now the focus of public attention through its proximity to the Eden Project, was formerly known mainly for its links with the china clay industry. This is the face of industrial Cornwall, but so different from the industrial faces of the other partner colleges in this Project (at Bristol and Coventry as well as Leeds) that St. Austell can legitimately claim to be the rural (and co-incidentally, but perhaps unsurprisingly non-multicultural) strand in the research. St. Austell College is the major provider of post-sixteen education and training in East and Mid Cornwall, with a budget of around £15 million. It became a tertiary college in 1993, and on 1st August 2001 merged with Cornwall College, while still maintaining its distinct ethos within that large federal corporation. There are currently approximately 2300 full-time and a further 6000 part-time (including adult education) students.

The original selection of St. Austell College was based on established research traditions between Exeter University and the College, in which the Head of the HE Centre within the College had played an active part. The College Research Fellow was the first appointment made to the St Austell team, with this senior staff member being approved by the Project Directors. He and the Exeter Director were involved jointly in choosing the 4 participating tutors. From 11 applications, 4 tutors were ultimately selected, together with a particular learning site, on the basis of the overall balance of the 16 different learning sites, as well as tutors' commitment to personal and professional development. The HE Research Fellow (Jennie Davies) was the final appointment to the team, following advertisement and interview in which both the FE Research Fellow and the Exeter Director were involved.

Like Park Lane, at the time of writing, the St. Austell/Exeter team has met for 2 half-days and 1 full day (in this case, an 'Away day'), but the emphasis here has been more on exploring different participants' roles within the Project and less on research literature. One key paper, written by two of the project directors, provided the basis for fruitful discussion, emphasising the importance of research *in* rather than research *on* education; more papers will be explored on a regular basis from now on. The participating tutors now have two dedicated hours timetabled into their week. The intention is for tutors to develop their own meetings in this slot, as well as having a regular time for full team meetings. So far all members of the team have appeared to collaborate enthusiastically as is evident from these journal extracts:

" ... perhaps I'll have my own perceptions changed by what comes out of this project. Maybe I will have to change in some way the way I think and act!"

"[I] really enjoyed hearing other people's experiences, which really encouraged me to think about teaching, and clarified some of my own thoughts".

" I think this is what every teacher should have the opportunity to do.[Its] so difficult to do this when your days and evenings are immersed in preparation, actual teaching and marking."

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But what sorts of partnerships are developing at this stage and what are the constraints on them? Practicalities cannot be ignored here. The Jennie Davies is based in Exeter, 145 miles from St. Austell. Happily, she lives half way between the two, but a 50-mile drive does mean that collaboration cannot be spontaneous. It is possible that there may be times in the future when decisions have to be made unilaterally rather than jointly by the two research fellows if distance and individual schedules within part-time contracts make urgent collaboration impossible.

Because of the geographical constraints on visiting the College as often as she would have liked, Jennie Davies was initially concerned that she should not be seen as too much of an 'outsider' and so planned a gradual familiarisation schedule starting in the summer including 'shadowing' days

with Participating Tutors, preliminary biographical interviews with tutors, and attendance at some college meetings. The HE and FE researchers are now in the process of together visiting all the learning sites, exploring what the Project will mean to students in joint, informal sessions.

The project is much influenced by what is seen as a fundamental dichotomy in styles, methods, form and function of research on educational practice – between the technical ideal type and the practical ideal type¹⁴? Thus in a *technical* ideal type of education practice:

*“theory is considered to be irrelevant to practice, or to be the foundation of unchallengeable prescriptions for action... this enables assessment and monitoring to be tightly structured around highly explicit criteria. It allows teaching to be reduced to delivery and learning to consumption...”*¹⁵

The language of FE tends to be rooted in the technical - thus tutors ‘deliver’ courses to students. By contrast the approach of the TLCFE project is located in the *practical* type of education practice where :

*“Theory lies at the heart of the practical, but it is not the handed down theory of others. Theory is applied to practice but it is also constructed out of practice. The practitioner is the interpreter, creator, user evaluator and re-creator of theory in both tacit-intuitive and formal-explicit forms... Practice is not something that the practitioner does it is what the practitioner is, for practice is constituent of the identity of the practitioner.”*¹⁶

The TLCFE project “...represents a commitment to forms of enquiry in which educational research and the professional development of teachers are integrated”¹⁷ A significant exemplar of this is to be achieved through the development of partnerships between university based researchers and teachers in FE:

*“... participating tutors and students... will be engaged as partners in the research. Working with experienced researchers they will explore the nature of the learning sites in which they work along with their own perspectives, assumptions and feelings”*¹⁸

In one sense of course we all should have been reflective practitioners for twenty years or more. There had been an earlier call to “counteract the inherent technicism in [the] Further Education Funding Council and the

¹⁴ Martin Bloomer and David James “Educational research in educational practice: paper presented at the regional; conference of the South West of England Learning and Skills Research Network” Dartington Hall, Totness, July 3rd. 2001

¹⁵ Bloomer and James op.cit. p3

¹⁶ Bloomer and James op.cit. p 4

¹⁷ Bloomer and James op.cit p 8

¹⁸ ESRC Research proposal p4

Teacher Training Agency.¹⁹ Recently, for example, David Jolly²⁰ has argued that the FENTO standards can be used to encourage reflective practice along the road to excellence in teaching. Similarly this reflective practice can draw upon collaboration and consultation with students.²¹ Thus perhaps there is now more complexity in thinking on FE practice. Surely then if some current writing on FE practice and the theoretical stance of the TLCFE are moving together building a partnership based on research in education practice has a solid footing – the auguries are indeed good.

However whilst the TLCFE project is based upon collaboration and partnership neither concept is neutral in its application. Collaboration can become so constrained by the collectively acceptable and the practicable as to actually limit what can be achieved or enforce a dominant conformity²². Based upon experience of previous partnerships in education they can become an “*an ideological sleight of hand*”²³ Legitimizing a balance of influence in favour of one institution over another.

The participating institutions may have a commitment to joint activities but possibly for different reasons. It is at this point that the ultimate success of the TLCFE project becomes somewhat more questionable. If the partnership is to be effective it is important that there is an exploration and negotiation of those expectations; a recognition of the efficacy of meeting the needs of the other. Finally there is a need to address the affective concerns of the participants.

Firstly there is of course the notion of what would constitute success? On the one hand there are the formal objectives for the project, to which the whole team are committed. Thus

“ (i) to determine the nature of learning cultures and their impact upon students’ and teachers’ learning in FE

(ii) to establish a theoretical base for understanding the inter-relationship between learning culture, learning and situational and motivational factors in FE

(iii) to identify the principles of procedure for the enhancement of learning culture in order to improve student and teacher learning and achievement

¹⁹ Inge Bates et al “Towards a new research agenda for post-compulsory education ...”
Research in Post-Compulsory Education 2(3) 1997, p314

²⁰ David Jolly Continuing professional development related to FENTO standards. Paper at the Mentoring Towards Excellence conference Hamilton House, London, Tuesday March 27 2001

²¹ Joe Harkin Student descriptors of effective teachers. College Research 4(3) Summer 2001 p42

²² John Quicke op.cit. p 305

²³ Sally Brown et. al “Getting it together: some questions and answers about partnership and mentoring” Dept. of Education, University of Stirling May 1993

(iv) to determine the effectiveness, within prescribed limits, of different intervention strategies for the enhancement of learning cultures and the improvement of learning

(v) to set in place an enhanced capacity for practitioner-based research capability in FE"

Underlying these are the exciting and stimulating challenges involved in working within a large, complex project with the inherent capacity to transform the way we think about teaching and learning in further education. There is also explicit commitment to working with the wider learning and skills community; summarised as:

" Project activities and outcomes will be reported regularly to practitioners, managers and policy-makers within and beyond the four selected FE colleges. This will take place on a local, regional and national basis...

*Opportunities for participation will be extended to a network of practitioners, managers and policy-makers in both the wider FE sector and research communities...."*²⁴

Ambiguity, complexity and potential conflict have been raised and anticipated by the project team leaders from the outset²⁵. There was recognition of the possibility of different expectations, different priorities and doubts about the projects benefits by some, given the diversity of personal and professional backgrounds, individual interests and perspectives, current roles and status within the team. Not to mention the views of those affected by the project operation but not directly involved, such as college managers. As we have already argued, these contradictions and tensions have, however, the capacity for , indeed they may well be a precondition of, generating new and expansive knowledge.²⁶ One of the challenges we face is to ensure that this positive outcome of such tensions is achieved, and that will be a learning process in itself.

The team needs to devote sufficient time to addressing the complexity, the tensions and the affective dimensions in its work. So, for example, an evaluation of a recent national project team meeting found that in addition to a general sense of celebration that the project was exiting the induction phase, and entering the initial stage of fieldwork, at the same time, the research fellows expressed:

²⁴ Dennis Gleeson op.cit. p31

²⁵ Martin Bloomer "The operational challenge" TLC – Bristol Workshop 24-25 April 2001

²⁶ Yro Engstrom "Expansive learning at work :towards and activity theoretical reconceptualisation" Journal of Education and Work 14(1) 2001 p137

“...concerns to protect our own and participating tutors’ research time, a fear factor for the FE research fellows as the new year opens with their two days remission for the project, and for the HE research fellows ... as well as feeling isolated, encountering defensive situations with participating tutors, needing to work towards achieving university requirements/ expectations for publishing , and coping with a high workload for little pay”.

There are obviously opportunities for role conflict for all of the project team members, none of whom have the opportunity to make an exclusive, full-time commitment to the project. This conflict may well be a valuable part of the project data but that, of itself, does not make the experience more bearable or easier to handle. Be that as it may, the project is functioning and already generating data with the participating tutors and their sites.

Within its own terms the project is already rewarding the actual capital invested in it by the symbolic, cultural capital of its products – data generated is being utilised for this conference and for others. Given the scale of the TLCFE project its cultural capital is likely to be so extensive as to attract even more cultural and economic capital²⁷. There is for example an ESRC studentship associated with the project, and some of the partner FE colleges are investing additional staff resources in the project at their own expense

The project team has recognised the field transforming potential of the TLC project in both their operational discussion and their three discussions on an extensive publication policy. As the project poster explains;

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“ Our research is the rigorous searching out of better ways top conceptualise:

- *the nature of learning*
- *the relationship between teaching and learning*
- *the social, political, institutional and cultural dimensions of teaching and learning*
- *the transformation of teaching ,learning and learning cultures”²⁸*

Inevitably there will be ample data then to support the cliché that in HE it is a case of “publish or perish” but we would argue that one of the potentially creative tensions within the collaborative project stems from a predominant FE stance of “publish at your peril”.

Now what we are suggesting is not a crude dichotomy between the ivory towers and the horny handed sons of toil. It is more complex than that. Participating colleges^{29 30} have been quick to draw interest on the cultural

²⁷ Michael Grenfell and David James “Bourdieu and education: acts of practical theory” Flamer Press, p20

²⁸ Phil Hodgkinson

²⁹ see for example “Drive to improve colleges” Yorkshire Post 4/9/00

³⁰ see for example “The West Briton” 16/6/2001

capital of their involvement. Arguably this is a survival necessity in an institutional world dominated by marketing and brand names³¹ Raising the brand fits fell with those in the recent editions of *College Research* who have argued a positive case for FE based research

There is, however, a powerfully argued contrary case that FE is almost institutionally moribund in terms of its ability to explicitly process knowledge generation. Thus "research activity remains alien within the FE culture": "What the [Further Education Funding] Council does not do is fund colleges to carry out research..."³²

The TLCFE project takes the view that much collective, organisational knowledge is a process: that the project's proper focus is upon the "interactive and iterative nature of knowledge creation"³³ highly appropriate given that FE colleges are "knowledge intensive organisations":

"where the majority of employees are highly educated, where production consist[s] of... complex, non-standardised problem-solving... the customers are treated individually. The main distinguishing features are:

- *Non-standardisation*
- *Creativity*
- *High dependence on individuals*
- *Complex problem-solving*"³⁴

Yet in dealing with this the FE system tends to adopt:

"a factory strategy where the dominant strategy will seek to:

- *package knowledge into standardised distinguishable pieces...*
- *seek economies of scale*
- *build strong brand names*
- *franchise concepts"*

*Such a strategy is likely to be successful in creating short-term operating efficiencies and output volume, but equally is one likely to reduce the extension of professional knowledge and hence the value added per employee over the longer term."*³⁵

³¹ see Charles Leadbetter "living on thin air: the new economy" Penguin 2000 or Diane Coyle "The weightless world: thriving in the digital age" Capstone 2000

³² see M.G. Page "Forbidden knowledge: the research process in a further education setting" Research in Post-Compulsory education 2(1) 1997 p 85

³³ Bob Brotherton "Developing a culture and infrastructure to support research related activity in Further Education institutions...." Research in Post-Compulsory Education 3(3) 1998 p313

³⁴ Bob Brotherton op.cit. p316

³⁵ Bob Brotherton op.cit. p317

Rather than tolerating failure current education policy ensures that “college performance is very much under the spotlight, overshadowed by performance tables and public accountability”³⁶. Some claim that there are over 200 days per year devoted to some form of academic, financial or organisational audit within colleges. Bearing most heavily upon the teaching and learning process itself are the 91 pages of the “*Handbook for inspecting colleges*”³⁷ and the 19 pages of “*The “Common Inspection Framework*”³⁸. In this environment it is to be expected that colleges seek to minimise risk of failure.

“One key issue ... is a capacity for, and real tolerance of failure... however, in general ... strategies are designed to cope with and/or reduce uncertainty by seeking to make operations and environments more predictable... a drive to make the formal more formal, and the implicit more explicit via conformance driven structures, processes and routines... The downside to this is that the organisation potentially diminishes its flexibility, creativity and ability to promote the type of internal, culture conducive to the development and exploitation of its knowledge- base”³⁹

We see this being an issue for the participating colleges in particular and the wider FE and learning skills sector in general. Have these issues been explored in sufficient depth by the parties before or during the partnership? It is probably more realistic to ask if they could they have been so discussed since to do so already implies the commitment of significant time. Has there been an open exploration of intended outcomes for the participant groups? Our hope, of course, is that we can work towards this exploration. For example to facilitate our participating tutors’ ability to reflect on their own practice, and through this experience enhance understanding of how to conduct research *in* education.

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A concrete manifestation of the “publish at your peril” syndrome in FE is the role conflict and pressure experienced by FE staff engaged in research. The realities and problems of research in FE have been summarised as:

- *“lack of time and funding*
- *no ‘active’ research culture in FE*
- *no value of research within colleges*
- *few opportunities for dissemination”⁴⁰.*

Some participating tutors on the project are already concerned that time allocated to research will be viewed negatively within their college. Helen Paterson gives a full and convincing account on the pressures faced by FE

³⁶ M.G. Page op.cit. p85

³⁷ Office for Standards in Education “Handbook for inspecting colleges” October 2001

³⁸ Adult Learning Inspectorate and Office for Standards in Education “The common Inspection framework for inspecting post-16 education” February 2001

³⁹ Bob Brotherton op.cit. p320

⁴⁰ Andrew Culham Practitioner based research in FE: realities and problems” College Research Summer 2001 p 27

staff dealing with the delivery of teaching programmes in an environment of “*thick, unresponsive bureaucracy*” and she finds that

“... rightly or wrongly the job calls for less ‘vision’... and more for completion of course related administrative tasks...”⁴¹

Since incorporation FE has had to cope with the speed, complexity and size of changes which have been introduced into FE⁴². Many FE colleges are also physically large. In the project partnership, for example, Park Lane College has 32,000 students spread across over 60 sites in the city, and has recently appointed a new principal, whilst two other partner colleges are undergoing mergers and restructuring.

In addition the TLCFE team is faced with the practical challenge of negotiating access to and communicating with somewhat amorphous, isolated and disparate groups of staff.

“...staff congregated (ate, drank coffee, prepared lessons) in their staff workrooms... the layout was fragmented and staff workrooms were small, separate communities with distinct cultures, varying enormously.”⁴³

Inevitably much of the burden for facilitating the work of the project falls upon the project team staff based in the colleges. They have to meet the expectations of the project team whilst raising general expectations about one project amongst many. One may not be able to “large” the “Big One” when burrows in the rabbit warren are focussed on unit targets, general inspections or getting enough photocopies from a recalcitrant machine to survive tonight’s class.

With over 3 million students and given the size and complexity of FE institutions it would be a mistake to construct them as victims, or dupes of an academic culture which is secretly bent on researching on educational practice not in education practice despite what is claimed. The TLCFE project is not like that: it was not set up like that and does not operate like that. But as we have seen FE culture is not well disposed to research and finds it difficult to come to terms with the products of research.

Changing that culture is very challenging, very exciting and daunting. Michael Fullan has reviewed the voluminous evidence on change in educational institutions and concludes:

“ In summary the broad implications of the implementation process have several interrelated components. The first is that

⁴¹ Helen Paterson “The changing role of the course leader...” Research in Post-compulsory education” 4(1) 1999 p 97 – 116 especially p104 and p 110

⁴² Barrie Withers “ The experience of incorporation...” Research in Post-Compulsory Education 3(2) 1998 p 223 - 239

⁴³ Robson op.cit p 75

the crux of the change involves the development of meaning in relation to a new idea, a new programme, reform or set of activities. But it is individuals who have to develop new meanings and these individuals are insignificant parts of a gigantic, loosely organised and complex messy social system that contains myriad different subjective worlds.”⁴⁴

Adding spice to the challenge is that one of the traps of collaboration is that of sticking with the safe, the comfortable, the understood subjective world.⁴⁵ Part of the danger then for the TLCFE project is to collude with a safe and comfortable process whereby the HE element would produce its research papers and books on educational practice in FE. At the same time FE could largely ignore the work and the challenge it poses by claiming a pressing prior engagement with one of any number of inspectors and auditors.

Knowledge is not neutral, it challenges power structures and the status quo. Transforming the learning culture in FE will be controversial and may be denied or resisted.⁴⁶ Isolating and ignoring the project may be FE's systemic response. To use an organic metaphor, when cells and structures in the central nervous system are damaged connective tissue overgrows the site; leading to scarring and impairment of function; in a process referred to as gliosis.

The challenge facing the whole team is to prevent gliosis as the outcome of the TLCFE project by producing material and disseminating it throughout the FE system from the start. The “*motivation to learn stems from participation in culturally valued collaborative processes in which something useful is produced*”⁴⁷ We need to work in ways which have resonance throughout the system. As we see it the challenge for FE is to recognise that:

“...opposing values crucify the psyche and threaten to disintegrate both leader and organisation. Yet to resolve the same tensions enables the organisation to create wealth and outperform competitors. If you duck the dilemma you also miss the resolution. There is no cheap grace,”⁴⁸

There is also a challenge to the HE element because they will be required to invest time, effort and resources in products that have less cultural capital. The Research Assessment Exercise⁴⁹ accords little cultural or

⁴⁴ Michael G. Fullan “The new meaning of educational change.” Continuum, 1991 p92

⁴⁵ Qucike op.cit p304

⁴⁶ See Michael Young “Contextualising a new approach to learning” Journal of Education and Work 14(1) 2001 p160

⁴⁷ Yrjo Engstrom “Expansive learning at work: toward an activity theoretical reconceptualisation” Journal of Education and Work. 14(1) 2001 p141

⁴⁸ Bob Brotherton op.cit p322

⁴⁹ The RAE is the 5-yearly system for inspecting the research output of each HE institution, and thereby determining its research funding and ‘league table’ status for the following 5-year period.

economic capital in return for publication in conference proceedings or practitioner journals, as opposed to peer-reviewed academic journals. Paradoxically, by disseminating the research to a practitioner audience in ways that are less valued in the field of HE, they will generate cultural capital that may transform the field of FE. An iterative process of evaluated dissemination activities generate cultural capital that has value in both the HE and FE fields. Indeed may we also hope that it is negotiable across the trichotomy of institutional FE, HE and educational research generally. Thus achieving the outcomes envisaged by the project:

“ A sound conceptual and theoretical basis upon which to build an understanding of the complexity of learning and learning cultures

An improved understanding of the methods for the detection and assessment of high quality learning from the perspective of different participants in FE

An improved research capacity with regard to learning and teaching in FE

An understanding of the limitations and potentialities of partnership and collaborative research in to pedagogy...

An improved understanding of ways of communicating research about pedagogy to a wider audience.⁵⁰

As Bratman⁵¹ has argued, successful partnership relies, inter alia, upon mutual responsiveness and a commitment to mutual support. From its inception the TLCFE project has recognised this. The anticipated outcomes address concerns across the education community and in this article we have reported some of the successes and challenges raised in this regard during its early days. However, as we noted at the start, the Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education is a project in which we are all committed to the long haul. Beyond these initial reflections, the project will doubtless generate further useful data that can help to transform research learning in both HE and FE as we strive towards our ambition of creating research *in*, not ‘on’, the rabbit warrens of further education.

Contact details:

⁵⁰ TLCFE Project schedule p 11-12

⁵¹ Bratman, M.E. (1992) Shared Co-operative Activity, *The Philosophical Review* 101 (2) 327-341.

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6,731 words