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Adult learners, access and higher education: learning as meaning-making and negotiation in context

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the learning experiences of adult learners entering higher education for the first time. Based in the Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Cape Town, it analyses the experiences of successful adult learners on the first year (1995) of a formal Certificate Programme in Adult Education, Training and Development.

In order to better understand what makes for success in learning, the study argues that a key issue to problematise is the relationship between access and success in learning - so as to create learning and teaching contexts that can provide for successful learning experiences. To explore this, the research draws on ethnographic case study methodology and focuses on four case studies of successful learners. As a theoretical frame, the research is built on grounded theory drawn largely from sociocultural theories of learning. Key concepts that emerge are discourse, learning as meaning making and negotiation, and the process of learner role construction. From the data, it is argued that while learning is an individual process, we need to contextualise such experiences. We need to realise that (adult) learners, given their lifeworld contexts and experience both inside and outside the classroom, are active agents in their own learning.

The study concludes that the ways in which contexts and learning relate is complex. We need to understand that it is at the intersection of the individual and the social that meaning is made and negotiated in learning. This understanding, it is argued, is crucial to better understand the relationship between access, learning and success - within but also across contexts. The implications of this are raised tentatively by looking at alternative approaches to curriculum development and teaching-learning processes.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

SETTING THE SCENE

Introduction

> we need to develop more responsible social cognitive accounts of how individual students - as thinking personal agents operating within and shaped by a social and cultural fabric - learn. And why they do not learn (Flower 1994:33).

Over the past ten years, there has been a growing interest in understanding student learning from the point of view of how students experience it; in particular, how students previously denied access due to policies or previous schooling experience higher education. We are urged to confront the issue of how and why students learn and do not learn by Flower and others. Many of these studies (Weil 1986; James 1995; Thesen 1994) have tried to explore what factors inhibit learning or provide students with an often alienating experience at higher educational institutions. This is no exception in the field of adult education, as Weil's findings from her study confirm:

> ... there is the disjuncture between non-traditional learners' expectations and their actual experiences of higher education ... between the different values and beliefs adult learners and lecturers bring to their interpretations of what it means to generate and validate knowledge and to inhibit and facilitate learning ... between what are traditionally identified as the 'purposes' of higher education - eg. to stimulate critical analysis, encourage creative and independent thinking, to promote personal development, to underpin professional practice with relevant preparation - and the ways in which these purposes are contradicted by actual practices, processes and structures of higher education as they are experienced by non-traditional learners (ibid:232).

As a educator on a newly-formalised Certificate-level programme for educators of adults at the University of Cape Town (UCT), I have had much contact with students who have expressed similar feelings. Given that the Certificate course is a two-year initial professionalising qualification for adult educators, trainers and development workers, Weil's comments have had a strong influence on my thinking about this study. It could be argued that students enter our course as 'practitioner-students', with previous work experience an important part of their identities. They could therefore be expected to experience much of the 'alienation' the students in Weil's study encountered.

While these are important concerns, I wish however to take another angle on the issue. This dissertation aims to 'turn the argument around' so to speak, and investigate the experiences of **successful** non-traditional adult learners. It was through my experience of teaching on the Certificate programme, through my observation of students and their experiences of learning, that this interest developed. Making this choice is not to deny the struggles of many students who 'do not succeed'; however, I feel that we as teachers and educators, can also learn from those who have successful learning experiences in higher education. In other words, by focusing on successful learning experiences we may be able to assist future students more effectively by examining how others have already done so.

In order to outline the rationale for my choice of study, this chapter will provide the background and context from which my interest is derived. This provides the 'macro' frame within which this 'micro' study of student learning is located. While this frame is not the primary focus of this dissertation, I do believe that in order to understand the relevance of this research as a case study of student learning, is important to provide a contextual framework within which to understand its significance. I therefore include a brief discussion on the broader policy context which influenced much of the thinking behind the Certificate programme. As part of the macro frame, I will also outline the approach to curriculum that has impacted on the teaching and learning processes. The resulting question that guides this study will then be highlighted. This chapter will conclude with an outline of the rest of the dissertation.

Background and context

At UCT, Certificate-level adult education provision has traditionally been non-formal. From the mid-1980's until the end of 1994, the department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies offered two year-long non-formal programmes: the Community Adult Education Programme (CAEP) and the Adult Learning in the Workplace Programme (WLP). While there was substantial overlap between the two programmes, there were important distinctions in terms of student groupings. Whereas students on CAEP were predominantly community-based adult educators, Xhosa- or Afrikaans-speaking and predominantly 'black' (used to denote both 'coloured' and 'african' apartheid racial classifications), the students on the WLP were a mixture of 'CAEP-type' students together with corporate- or industry-based trainers. There was thus a strong representation of white, English or Afrikaans-speaking students on the WLP courses over the years.

Provisioning on both these programmes was non-formal, access to the institution being

granted on the basis of previous experience. In other words, formal qualifications were considered neither sufficient nor a requirement for access: the experience students accumulated both through their lives and through their work, granted them formal access and was drawn on as the dominant discourse. Given that the courses lacked formal accreditation, assessment took on the same non-formal status; however certificates 'of attendance' were awarded to successful students, namely those who had a high attendance record. The courses thus fell outside of the mainstream university provisioning, drawing relatively small numbers of practitioner-students in the classroom.

The aim of such courses was to provide access for the further development of practitioner competence; students entered with the role of practitioner in place and this was built on during the programme. Students were provided with an opportunity to reflect on and further develop the skills and experience they already possessed. The notion of the 'critical reflective practitioner' (Schon 1983; 1987) guided the thinking behind curriculum design and development and the teaching approaches adopted. The small size of the classes meant that we could build group identity and affirm learners' experience - in this way we felt we had a sense of each student's learning. This allowed us to integrate learning and experience, facilitate critical thinking and problem-solving, thereby increasing possibilities for practitioner development and, I would argue, 'successful' learning. As Gamble (1994) puts it, there was congruency between the role of practitioner and that of student in that we were preparing students *in* the nonformal system *for* work in nonformal settings. The notions of 'role' and 'role construction' are important for this study and will be explored in greater depth in Chapters Two and Four.

However, with the move to formal provisioning, this discussion on roles and learning becomes more complex.

From non-formal to formal: shifting discourses

In South Africa, inequities in access to higher education as well as problems in the relationship between higher education, national reconstruction and human resource development are currently high on the agenda. The African National Congress's (ANC) Education and Training document (1994) on which the Government White Paper (1995) is based, continually links issues of access to the need for redress and equity. Access is seen as an entitlement; it is viewed as providing equal opportunities to those who have found education inaccessible in the past. It has also been interwoven with such elements as:

* the right of access to lifelong Education and Training
* curriculum changes ... changing the curriculum to make it more relevant and accessible
* opening up accreditation systems, progression routes, qualifications structures ...
* recognition of prior learning and experience (RPL) (Thaver 1994).

The White Paper (1995) goes further and makes a link between the new policies and the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). Education and training is an important mechanism for addressing human resource development, a key component of any plan for reconstruction and development - an underlying goal of which is that everyone should have access to lifelong learning. As part of its human resource development strategy, the White Paper identifies teacher training (including the professional education of trainers and educators) and Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) as important forces for social participation and economic development and as an essential part of all RDP programmes.

In order to achieve these goals of access, the White Paper identifies an important mechanism, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which will, amongst other things, encourage new and flexible curricula and upgrade learning standards. Such a system can therefore be seen to be taking into account historical patterns of inequality and developing a range of mechanisms to promote and facilitate education and training to meet the human resource development needs of the country.

Some universities have taken this challenge seriously:

> one implication of these commitments if they are to be achieved is that thousands of adult educators and trainers will need to be equipped with professional skills to carry out demanding and historically new educational tasks (DEAL 1994:5).

In other words, universities will need to provide this educator grouping with professional training and status to facilitate paths for further career development. The pressure facing universities to offer similar opportunities has been echoed by others:

> most, if not all, of the growth in higher education provision in South Africa will take place outside of the traditional notion of full-time study by recent school leavers at residential universities (File 1995:2).

The response from many providers has taken the form of formalised provision. Adult

education at UCT responded to such calls in 1995 by introducing a new formal Certificate in Adult Education, Training and Development. The drive to formalise the Certificate programme must thus be viewed against this backdrop and as a response to issues of equity, flexible access and the creation of opportunities for new learning pathways in higher education.

Many of our students - mature adult educators/trainers - entered the new Certificate programme without the normal formal requirements for entry to university study. We initiated a policy of 'alternative access' and encouraged any of our students who had completed one of the two previous one-year non-formal programmes in our department to apply for the new programme. Their one year on either of the two previous non-formal courses was accredited, providing them with formal access to complete the second year on the new Certificate programme. This qualification, therefore, together with their experience as practitioners, provided them with formal access to the university. However, while we retained a policy of institutional access on the basis of prior experience, the course now offered formal accreditation and formal written assessment was introduced.

Thus, whereas in the past non-formal programmes were aimed at assisting (a small number of) practitioners to improve on their practice via critical reflection, the Certificate course at UCT now has a twofold aim. It is aimed at the further development of practitioner competence together with the development of academic skills and competencies. This is an indication of the commitment of such a programme to provide access paths for 'non-traditional' students into higher education.

In 1995, the period of this research, student numbers more than doubled, from the usual thirty or thirty five students per course to over seventy. This move also brought a very diverse group of practitioner-students onto our course including both community-based educators and trainers and those located within a corporate or industry setting. The latter grouping included some students who already possessed undergraduate and even postgraduate university qualifications.

It could be argued, however, that for many of the students we were 'piloting' a new access path at UCT into higher education for adult educators and trainers. While other universities, for example the University of the Western Cape (UWC), already had a formal Certificate programme for adult educators, students at UWC at the time of this study were required to possess a matriculation or school leaving certificate for formal entry into the programme.

Learning, curriculum and 'epistemological access'

However important it is to look at access in policy terms, I believe that in order to understand students' experiences of higher education, the discussion on access needs to be taken further. It needs to be extended to look at how new forms of access translate into curriculum design and the subsequent issues this raises for both students and teachers in higher education.

In order to understand access and its relationship to learning more fully, we need therefore to differentiate between 'access' and 'accessibility' or 'success'. It is clear that access can achieve a sense of greater (physical) accessibility within and even across the higher education system; this does not however, necessarily imply that students will be able to achieve more access to the knowledge-content of the curriculum itself. As Hanson (1996) argues, institutions may develop access courses and find innovative ways to increase numbers of adult learners on their courses but there is usually no clear distinction between pragmatic aims and ideological assumptions:

> [i]t is possible to widen access, to increase mature student intake and ignore the social, cultural and political distribution of knowledge and skills (ibid:101).

The points above bring us to the issue of 'epistemological access'. According to Morrow (1993:10), to become a participant in an academic practice 'is to learn the intrinsic disciplines and constitutive standards of practice'. Epistemological access, or the process that facilitates students' access to the processes of learning and mode(s) of knowledge embedded in the curriculum, cannot be supplied or delivered to the learner. While Morrow takes note of the many factors that can serve to block or inhibit this process, he argues that it is ultimately the students who 'have to be trying to learn' (ibid:10).

curriculum

However, this is a complex issue. There is great diversity in the student body and thus multiple ways in which the 'official or dominant discourse embedded in the curriculum can serve to block such access. Curriculum is not just about the 'content' of education. It is also about selecting and ascribing value to particular kinds of knowledge, attitudes and ways of thinking. As Lawton (1975) puts it:

> the ... curriculum ... is essentially a selection from the culture of society. Certain aspects of our way of life, certain kinds of knowledge, certain attitudes and values are regarded as so important that their transmission ... is not left to chance ... but is entrusted to specially trained professionals ... in elaborate and expensive institutions. Not everything is regarded as important, so selection has to be made (cited in Griffin 1983:22).

As a practitioner with a key interest in teaching and learning, I began to question much of our practice and our approach to curriculum and teaching and learning. What is the nature of the curriculum that our students have to be trying to access? What are the 'kinds of knowledge, attitudes and values' that we as educators of adults espouse? In addition, how do these play themselves out through our curriculum?

Understanding 'successful' learning experiences

It is clear that there are many ways in which a curriculum makes visible the knowledge and attitudes implied in a particular approach to teaching and learning. A particular focus and interest became to explore this through the experiences of students who were seemingly successful on our course. I felt I could do this through exploring experiences of two critical aspects of our practice - group work and assessment. These form two of the key issues explored in the case studies in Chapter Four.

The reasons for this choice are complex but important. In the past as I have indicated, our small classes allowed us to work creatively with our students; to provide opportunity for critical reflection and problem-solving. We did not have to concern ourselves with assessment. With the moves to formalising, our course now had a two-fold aim: the further development of practitioner competence *together with* the development of 'academic skills'. We were therefore faced with a set of new challenges. To take Gamble's argument about roles further: she believes that the formalising of previous non-formal programmes, such as this Certificate course, has implications for how we think about teaching and learning - it implies an understanding of changing learner roles. She makes a persuasive point:

> as we move towards formal accreditation and therefore formal assessment, we will be preparing this group in the *formal* system for *practice* in *work-based* settings ... where we did not notice or attend to role discrepancy before, it will become glaringly obvious ... and the transition to the formal learning role will have to be preceded by that complex activity known as 'unlearning' if they are to be successful in achieving the learning task (1994:3).

Given these issues and the fact that the course was in its first formal year, I wasn't sure what this meant for both us as teachers and our learners as students. In addition, I began to feel that there was not yet a clearly defined social practice in which discourse conventions would be followed in a relatively normative way (Fairclough 1992). Therefore, when these practices are in flux, just taking shape 'and when the social action is perhaps oppositional or in some way problematic ... one might expect innovative combinations of conventions' (ibid:11).

While Fairclough might be referring to the shape of form of curriculum or classroom discourse, his comments are useful for thinking about student experiences as well.

What interested me therefore was to investigate and explore what possible 'innovative combination of conventions' students might be adopting in the process of learning in order to be successful. While it is important to bear in mind how I might or might not have conceived of our goals and the need to understand students' experiences in light of these, I wished to understand these through the experiences of the students. In this way, I believe, we can go a long way in understanding the complexities inherent in any teaching and learning situation.

Bearing in mind my interests and experiences outlined above, the central question framing this research project is thus:

* what does the process of constructing a successful learner role entail, and how is this process perceived by different students?

In order to indicate how I have explored it, I outline the rest of the dissertation below. But first, a brief comment on the style and language I have used in writing up the study. At times during the study, I refer to 'we' and at times to 'I'. This is an indication of the fact that while the interpretation and analysis of the study is derived from my own process of research, much of my thinking has been informed by the approach to teaching on the Certificate course, which is collaborative in nature. The other lecturers involved in various ways through teaching or consultative roles were Linda Cooper (the overall course Co-ordinator), Nina Benjamin (Assistant lecturer and academic support staff) and Jeanne Gamble (colleague and co-ordinator of the WLP from its inception until 1994). My particular role on the course was in most ways, identical to Nina's. Thus, where I refer to 'we' or 'us', it has more to do with the curriculum approach or thinking behind it. My own reflections, understandings and interpretations from this research are captured in the first person accounts.

This dissertation will be structured as follows:

Chapter Two sets out the theoretical issues informing my understanding of learning built from grounded theory. Drawing on a wide range of perspectives, I argue for an understanding of learning that takes account of both the micro processes in the classroom and the macro lifeworld contexts of the students as adults within which they are located. Key concepts for this study are discourse, learner roles, negotiation and meaning making.

Chapter Three outlines the research methodology and methods employed to undertake this study. I divide this chapter into two sections - the first discusses the methodological choices I made and methods used to collect my data while the second reflects on the process of conducting the research. I also highlight what I see as some of the limitations of this study.

Chapter Four describes and analyses the four case studies of learning investigated. I argue for a descriptive/analytical approach and link the data with the theoretical issues highlighted in Chapter Two. In writing up the cases largely case-by-case but with some linking near the end, I provide insight into the lives and experiences of the students - both as adults and as practitioner-students in higher education.

Given the exploratory nature of this study of student learning, the final chapter, Chapter Five, outlines some tentative teaching and learning implications for future practice. Finally I raise the issue of assessment and its relationship to teaching, learning and curriculum development.

This study is not intended to produce any conclusive answers or even possible ones. While it might indicate implications for future thinking on teaching-learning and curriculum design, I see it as preliminary, tentative and thus exploratory. By taking an approach that asks questions and investigates 'what is happening' in the cultural practice of our class, I hope to better understand the relationship between learning, teaching and epistemological access. It is my aim, through an exploration of the experiences of students reflected against specific aspects of the curriculum, to highlight the complex process of becoming part of 'the university community' - in this case, for mature adult learners.

We move now to Chapter Two and the theoretical frame of 'learning as meaning making and negotiation'.

CHAPTER 2

EXPERIENCE, NEGOTIATION AND ROLES: TOWARDS A BROADER FRAME FOR UNDERSTANDING LEARNING

Introduction

In this chapter, I will outline the development of the theoretical frame informed by my exploration of students' experiences of learning for 'success'. As I indicated in Chapter One, my interest in these issues can be summed up in the following question:

* what does the process of constructing a successful learner role entail, and how is this process perceived by different students?

In trying to make sense of my data and come to an understanding of how these students succeeded on the programme, I spent many hours working and reworking my data. I had some ideas of how I might understand learning experiences of adult learners, given my experience of working with them for some years across a range of contexts. Yet I struggled to find a theoretical framework that illuminated what was emerging: stories of conflict and tension yet also of agency, decision-making and awareness. In this way, I realised the importance of developing 'grounded theory' in my study (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Such an approach, according to Strauss and Corbin, implies interpreting data, from which a theory about the phenomenon under scrutiny is inductively derived. As such, data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other:

> One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge (ibid:23).

I began by looking at the role that experience plays in learning in higher education. I found, however, that while this approach highlights important factors to consider in understanding learning particularly in adult education, it does not do justice on its own to what has emerged in my study. In many ways, I feel by privileging the individual as isolated learner, such approaches neglected the reality of the broader context(s) of learning, be they political, institutional or social/cultural. Via Bourdieu's sociological insight, I then moved to a more sociocultural/historical approach which I believe to be more useful to understanding learning. It began to capture many of the complexities I feel emerge in my data.

Gee's (1990) sociolinguistic/cultural study of literacy and discourse was an important starting point for my approach, arguing that relationships between 'Discourses' within which learning takes place, need to be understood. Gee however, while useful, leaves his analysis at too macro a level, which doesn't allow us to meaningfully understand the important relationship between personal and broader social context(s). I feel therefore, following Flower (1994) and Thesen (1994), that we need to investigate the specific processes of 'meaning construction' involved in learning. This is supported by Hanson (1996) who argues that in developing approaches to understanding the process of (adult) learning, richer forms of analysis may be found in more specific investigations of specific individuals and their contexts

> with regard to what they are learning, the setting in which they learn and the relationships with those peers and tutors with whom they learn (ibid:99).

Such approaches therefore involve attending to the individual and specific, but mindful of the broader contexts as well. In this way, they attempt to locate and understand learning within a broader landscape, both shaping and shaped by multiple contexts.

A key learning theorist who has argued for learning to be understood as located within the broader sociocultural milieu or context is Vygotsky (1978). In developing his approach, he argues for the importance of understanding the role that culture, cultural symbols and 'expert-novice' relationships play in learning. A study drawing on these notions in useful ways to look at adult learning is Kasworm's (1990) study investigating the 'patterns of interaction' that emerge in a study of learning in higher education. It is out of this frame that I find the notions of the adult learner as both novice *and* expert and the way learning is incorporated into a 'learner role' particularly illuminating. However useful, I find Kasworm's arguments limiting. In my own analysis, I extend her argument, putting forward a position that argues for a more complex understanding of learner roles and patterns of interaction than emerged in her study. In concluding this chapter, I return to the notion of 'successful learning', arguing that the construction of learner roles and the intricate processes of 'meaning-making' and 'negotiation' are central to this process.

Adults as 'experienced' learners

To begin my exploration of adult learning and given that I am arguing that experience is an important part of adult education, I read a number of studies (such as Weil 1986) which 'celebrated learners' experiences and which argued for them to be central to our understanding of learning. This for me was an approach that attended to the individual, the

personal and in some senses, the 'micro' processes of learning.

Given that within many adult education practices experience and experiential learning are key elements, such approaches have been extensively used. Adults are viewed as both 'experiencing' and 'experienced' practitioners where experience is both the foundation and the most important resource for learning (Usher 1992). The use of experience is not just a pedagogical device; rather it is the means whereby adults have been defined - adult education thus justifies itself as a learner-centred practice based on what adults supposedly are and can be. It is therefore critical of abstract, disciplinary knowledge, of the purely 'theoretical' and of dominant significations and discourse. Instead, adult education emphasises the intrinsic value of experience:

> experience is the centre of knowledge-production and knowledge acquisition, the foundation of a learner-centred educational practice congruent with the unique characteristics of adults (ibid:201).

This has been an explicit part of our approach to learning in our curriculum and the students often reflect on their experiences during learning. However, the relationship between experience and learning is not unproblematic (see Usher 1982; 1986; 1992). Experience does not always necessarily lead to learning and success - the 'disjuncture' experienced by learners in the 1986 study by Weil attests to this. Weil argues that the gap between non-traditional learners' expectations and actual experience of higher education, between 'the different values and beliefs (adult) learners and lecturers bring to their interpretations of what it means to generate and validate knowledge and to inhibit and facilitate learning' (1986:126), often causes tension, confusion and conflict, leading ultimately to failure. In such an approach, the problem lies with the institution, in that it doesn't provide space for experience to be drawn on for learning.

Avis (1995) provides a useful overview of the various approaches that incorporate experience into learning activities and argue for it to be central to a 'learner-centred' pedagogy. He categorises them in terms of the relationship between knowledge and experience and he argues that this relationship is made visible through one of four ways. These are as pedagogic practice; as positivism and empiricism; as identity politics; and as dialogue (see his article for further elaboration). Each of these approaches understands the relationship between experience and knowledge in different ways and as Avis argues, each approach on its own is problematic. He argues that experience is 'never innocent' - a pedagogy that fails to look critically at experience and the role that it plays in learning can lead to a conservative practice. Avis thus believes we need to accept the discursive production of meaning.

Furthermore, it is problematic to assume that because adults have experience of the real world, this can unproblematically provide the yardstick against which academic knowledge can be assessed (ibid:1995).

Elshtain (1978) supports this view and believes that if life experience is given 'privileged epistemological status' and the attendant feelings are accepted without challenge or criticism, the 'analysis of conclusions ... will be riddled with a false, because uncritical consciousness' (in Norton & Ollman: 302-303). Elshtain believes that students' experiences must be taken seriously as a dimension of creating a radical and critical consciousness. However, such experience needs to be mediated through what he terms 'conceptual categories' if it is to play the role of supporting, sustaining and providing the prelude for critical theory - something I believe is an important dimension of learning within and across a range of contexts. Therefore, following Brah, if we understand learning located in context(s), we need to understand experience

> not as an unmediated guide to 'truth' but as a practice of making sense, both symbolically and narratively; as struggle over material conditions and over meanings (Brah cited in Avis 1995:183).

Learning, context and orientation

Drawing on sociological theory and Bourdieu's work in particular, James (1995) argues that most of the major studies of mature student experience (eg. Weil 1986) are limited by the epistemological underpinnings of their approach. Following on from Avis, James believes such studies do not capture the 'mutually dependent *relationship* between these two levels namely personal experience and institutional and social context' (ibid:456). In support of this view, Hanson (1996) argues that many of these theories obscure the development of an understanding of the differing strategies necessary to enable diverse adults to learn different things in different settings in different ways.

In order to develop a more dynamic approach to understanding mature students' experiences of learning in higher education, James argues that Bourdieu's 'theory-as-method' is useful. It provides us with a theory of practice which views social life as a mutually constituting interaction of structures, dispositions and actions whereby,

> social structures and embodied (therefore situated) knowledge of those structures produce enduring orientations to action which, in turn, are constitutive of social structures (ibid:457).

Important for James' analysis are the concepts of 'habitus' and 'field'. James, citing Bourdieu, argues that habitus refers to the

> active presence of past experiences ... (which) makes possible the free production of all the thoughts, perceptions and actions inherent in the particular conditions of its production (Bourdieu in James:457),

whereas 'field' refers to

> the structuring of social space. Fields are fields of forces and positions which are made up of holdings of different kinds of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) (ibid:458).

What is significant in James' interpretation is his notion of 'habitus' as playing a role in the production of practices which is neither deterministic nor mechanistic. Rather, 'habitus' sets the boundaries within which agents are 'free' to adopt strategic practices. These practices in turn, James believes, 'based on the intuitions of the practical sense, *orient* rather than strictly determine action' (ibid:457-458; emphasis my own). The consequences of such practices, can include the modification of the habitus and field. The relationship between field and habitus must therefore be seen as dynamic and mutually dependent:

> fields are often games with stakes or prizes to which some form of habitus give readier access than others (ibid:458).

In other words, if we understand learning and context as mutually constitutive, we need to develop an approach that locates learning within a range of contexts and understands the relationship between context and learning as one which keeps as part of the picture, both the constituting as well as the constituted nature of social practices. This is echoed by Avis (1995:183) who stresses the importance of recognising the material context 'in which identities are formed and played out as well as the practices that constitute the material'. In the case studies that follow in Chapter Four, we will see that this mutually constituting relationship had significance for the students - both as learners in a learning context and as practitioners and adults.

Discourse, acquisition and learning

The above critiques are useful in supporting some of my own concerns but do not go far enough. I extend the debate by locating my analysis within a frame that links learning, culture and context in a more interrelated and complex way. It is to the development of a

sociocultural frame that we now move.

The usefulness of approaching learning from a sociocultural perspective is that understanding learning is not to discover universals or make predictions that will hold good over time; instead, it is to 'explicate contexts and thereby to achieve new insights and new understandings' (Merriam & Caffarella 1991:110). This is particularly so given the context of our course, framed as it is by changing contexts - policy, institutional and learner groupings. An important concept to understand within this approach is that of 'discourse' and its relationship to learning.

The notion of discourse is used in many different texts and contexts, including many texts of student learning (Taylor 1989; Chiserie-Strater 1991). Coming from a sociolinguistic background and exploring issues of discourse, learning and literacy, Gee (1990) provides a useful starting point. Gee argues that there is a distinction between '**d**iscourse' and '**D**iscourse'. While the former refers to patterns of speech, stretches of language, **D**iscourse refers to socially accepted ways of using language,

> of thinking, feeling, believing ... and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal ... a socially meaningful 'role' (ibid:143).

Gee argues that all humans become members of various Discourses in their lives. One Discourse is acquired 'free' namely the 'home-based' primary Discourse. Others, acquired through work, education or any other activities we partake of, are referred to as 'secondary Discourses'. They can thus be local, community-based Discourses or more 'globally oriented public sphere Discourses', the latter including the Discourses used in schooling.

Accessing a Discourse is therefore a process. To begin to explore this, I find Gee's distinction between two processes, namely acquisition and learning useful. According to Gee (ibid:146):

> *acquisition* is a process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, without formal teaching;
>
> *learning* is a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching or through certain life-experiences that trigger conscious reflection.

Gee argues that most of our life experiences involve a mixture of acquisition and learning.

While we are better at performing what we acquire, we consciously know more about what we have learnt. Learning thus facilitates 'meta-learning', which can lead to power because it enables students to manipulate and analyse. However, it is through the former process, namely acquisition that Gee argues we master discourses - they are not mastered by overt instruction but by 'enculteration' into social practices.

Acquisition therefore needs to precede learning. Teaching should incorporate both processes and a student can only learn, and therefore succeed once they have acquired the Discourse. Thus the argument goes, 'if you have no access to the social practice, you can't get into the Discourse - you don't have it'. In other words, there is 'no workable "affirmative action' for Discourses ... you are an *insider, colonised* or an *outsider*' (ibid:155, emphasis my own; see also Hemson 1996 for an application of these concepts in a case study on apprenticeship in adult education).

For many non-traditional students this process is complex. There is a vast amount of literature (Taylor 1988; Bruffee 1993) that points to the culturally specific 'ways of knowing' that are required for membership of the academic community:

> There can be no meaning to the term academic literacy outside the quite particular culture and cultures of the university (Taylor 1988:5).

Street (1996) has also questioned the simplistic notion of 'academic literacy' in higher education and argues instead for the notion of 'academic literacies' across disciplines, content areas and specialisms in higher education contexts. Following from this, I wish to emphasise the contextualised nature of a term such as 'academic literacy' - across but also within higher education institutions.

Discourse as 'meaning exchange': agency, negotiation and identity

From Gee's arguments above, it seems that while he alludes to the possibility for learning to occur through 'certain life-experiences that trigger conscious reflection' (I shall explore this later), his arguments do not seem to explore the possible processes individual students go through in their learning. Thus while he highlights important structural and contextual constraints that need to be taken into account in understanding many non-traditional students' struggles with university studies (eg. conflict and contradiction between primary and secondary discourses), he seems to argue that meaning and agency are embedded in the centre of discourses 'so that they (Discourses) are conceived of as tight, binding entities' (Thesen

1994:28).

During my research, I found that the students I spoke to often reflected more sense of 'agency' than implied by Gee's frame. In some senses, I find his arguments somewhat deterministic. While the students struggled with many of the demands of the course and felt that they were uncertain of their ability to succeed, they also expressed clear views about their experiences and their ability to 'negotiate' meaning for themselves. It seems that learning for them was not a clear cut case of 'in' or 'out' of the Discourse; rather, it seemed that some students moved between the two, at times 'in' and at others 'out' - even feeling they were both at the same time. For example, Nomzi, one of the students I interviewed, when asked whether she felt she was coping with the demands of the course, said

> ya, I think I am into that ... although I might not ... I would put myself in writing, group discussion and reading ... ya, I don't fall much in class discussion. I contribute only in writing (interview 12/9/95).

Thesen (1994), working from a sociocultural/sociolinguistic frame, has undertaken a fascinating study looking at second language students' experiences of writing at university. Drawing on Gee and others, she raises some criticisms she herself found with Gee and extends his arguments. She argues persuasively for an approach to learning which attempts to look at 'voice or subjectivity, ... (locating) meaning in the individual' (ibid:56), yet without losing the tensions and contradictions this poses. In terms of her understanding, she provides a further interpretation of discourse, a concept central to her study. When investigating this concept, Thesen believes we need to ask ourselves where we think meaning can be found - and believes a discourse approach should be concerned with the interactions between people in a given context rather than relationships to text. This then allows for meaning to be located in the user or individual rather than the system. She argues for discourse to be understood as

> a process of meaning exchange, via language, in a given context. Individuals have differing access to these patterns of exchange in different contexts (ibid:25).

By coming to such an interpretation, she sees this as an attempt to bring together the view of discourse as negotiated meaning 'with the fundamental recognition that individuals do not have equal access to this process of negotiation' (ibid:25). Thesen argues that learning within this perspective, assigns a stronger role to the individual as agent, acting sometimes from the centre, and at other times from the margins, border crossing, and making decisions. In particular, she argues that

> [t]his perspective makes it easier to track and understand the way discourses rub against one another, and what individuals do about this. Locating meaning in the individual does not mean that I am down-playing the social, but trying to find a starting point that is more profoundly social, in that it deals with human action, which must surely be at the heart of the social (ibid:56).

This argument links to the issues around the mutually constitutive relationship between 'habitus' and 'field' highlighted by James and which is echoed in my own research. In other words, habitus (or orientations to human action) is as much influenced by the capital implied by certain social spaces as social spaces or contexts are impacted on by the orientations of the participants in such spaces or practices.

Flower (1994) in her study on student writing, extends the idea of discourse and argues for learning as 'negotiating meaning'. In developing her social constructivist approach, she argues that we need to understand social cognitive processes as being a source of tension and conflict among the many forces that act to shape meaning: the social and cultural context, the demands of the discourse and the learner's own goals and knowledge. As such, she sees 'negotiation' as an important concept: it is through the process of negotiation that social expectations, discourse conventions and learners' personal goals and knowledge become inner voices. As a response to this tension and conflict, she argues that learners rise to the active negotiation of meaning, thereby creating meaning in the intersection of alternatives, opportunities and constraints. This links well with Thesen's point about the way in which discourses 'rub against each other' - a process that is filled with both opportunities and constraints.

In her analysis of what makes for 'success' or, following Gee, what constitutes 'literacy' or mastery of a Discourse, Flower sees it as a socially situated problem-solving process shaped by both practices and texts as well as by the different ways in which people interpret the situations they find themselves in. For Flower, a literate act is thus

> an individual constructive act ... (which) can call for the orchestration of diverse, seemingly incompatible practices ... (they) also reflect the complex, even contradictory, goals and purposes that often drive meaning making (ibid:18).

For me, implied in this definition is a sense of **identity** and the ways in which this shapes acts of constructing meaning. A number of authors (Walkerdine 1990; Grundy 1994) have argued for its importance in understanding experiences of learning. However, the relationship between identity formation and learning is complex. On the one hand, Davies (1992:64)

argues that we 'talk ourselves and we are talked into existence' through the discourses in which we participate. Discourses therefore 'subject each person to the limitations, the ideologies, the subject positions made available within them' (ibid:64) so that we become not our true essential selves but rather that which the various discourses we participate in make thinkable as a self or a true self. Our identity and that of the students' would, in this interpretation, seem to be shaped by the discourse of the classroom of which they are members.

On the other hand, however, given the mutually constitutive relationship between context and orientation discussed earlier, students will not necessarily passively accept the identity being constructed via the classroom discourse. They bring an agency into learning which I have argued is central to understanding learning experiences. In other words, the identities that are made available to students through practices in the classroom should not be assumed to be uncritically adopted by them. Often students resist or distance themselves from constructions and act according to the orientations they bring with them from outside the classroom. Furthermore, if we understand that discourses are multiple and often intertwined (Walkerdine 1990), contradictory and complementary discourses might be operating at any one time. As such 'multiple forms of subjectivity are theoretically available to each person' (Grundy 1994:18).

Identity formation is therefore a social process, neither deterministic nor totally a matter of individual choice. It is formed at the intersection of the social and the individual and what is important is to understand how this occurs for each student. Extending this argument, Henriques (1984) argue that these interpretations can thus result in both struggle and resistance as well as in role modelling. Students do take on an identity while being students, but it needs to be understood that such identity might be multiple and at times contradictory.

This understanding emerged strongly in all the interviews and probably most starkly in Yasmine's. It therefore needs to be borne in mind when trying to understand the different ways in which learner roles are constructed, to which we shall now turn.

Adults and learner roles: experts and novices

I argued in Chapter One that I have come to understand the usefulness of the concept of role and role construction in understanding learning. It is through this process that students attempt to make sense of what is required of them - to negotiate the demands of the discourse. In an informal discussion with other colleagues in our department, this concept

was expanded on in interesting ways. Jeanne Gamble argued that the issue is not actually to construct a learner role; rather, we should

> aim to teach in a particular way as it is between these two - the way we teach and the way learners learn - that the learner role is constructed (discussion notes 21/9/95).

This means therefore that learner roles are constructed as much by the social purpose of teaching as well as by what we - as educators *and* learners - bring to the learning environment. Roles bring the issues of identity, orientations and learning together in complex ways - ways that shape students' processes of negotiation and meaning making for success.

The process of role construction also brings us to the relationship between learners and context. There are many arguments in studies on learning that learners come into a learning context as novices. However, we need to see this differently if we are serious about the possibility for meaning negotiation in learning. As Thesen (1994) points out in her study, the students she interviewed were very lucid and confident in talking about their own life experiences outside of the formal classroom - they were able to make complex connections between seemingly diverse events in their lives. She argues that there must be ways to translate this into learning inside the classroom. In other words, Thesen is arguing that we need to find ways in our teaching and learning to bring the 'expertise' of the students acquired through life experiences eg. analytical skills, developing an argument into the classroom and translate this into learning.

Kasworm (1990) following Scribner (1986) and others, would support this viewpoint. Kasworm argues that we need to recognise the adult learner as *both* novice and expert in his/her interaction with the learning task and the social context. By locating her investigation within a sociocultural/historical framework, she extends some of the above arguments and provides a valuable perspective in defining the nature of both cognitive and social interaction between adult students and higher education. Drawing on, and extending the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky and others, Kasworm explores adult learners patterns of interaction with the higher education context.

According to her, post-Piagetian theories have identified the crucial dialectical relationship between adult experiences, cognitive development and formal higher education. Such approaches argue for the importance of understanding the 'sociocultural milieu' and its impact on learning. In this way, they seek to specify how human mental functioning (learning) reflects its historical, institutional, and cultural setting.

Using Activity Theory, Kasworm broadens this perspective by also incorporating the social context as a key element in cognitive development. In particular, by understanding that 'adult learning within higher education should be defined by a broader landscape of the adult's life-world of social contexts of higher education, family, work, home and community' (ibid:5-6), she has echoed many of my interests and understandings. She argues that the significance of this approach is twofold:

i) sociocultural history provides the tools for cognitive activity and practices which facilitate reaching 'appropriate' solutions to problems or frames for interpreting events; and

ii) it helps us to understand the ways in which the immediate social interactional context structures individual cognitive activity.

Sociocultural history and practices therefore, are transmitted by teachers, fellow class members, privileging texts (Bernstein 1990) and, perhaps most importantly, 'by current knowledge of the participating adult learner and his/her related life-world experiences' (Kasworm 1990:4). Therefore, while the adult learner may be a 'novice' learner in a particular content or skill area, his/her cognitive structures reflect a highly complex and unique socio-cultural knowledge or skill base. As such, while they engage in academic class settings for new knowledge, they also engage in academic class work enhancement and reflection upon their 'mastery expertise' as well as upon their understandings of knowledge as adults and as workers. Kasworm captures this well:

> Unlike a child novice, adults can identify a number of social contexts to structure their cognitive activity and can generate potentially new and diverse understandings and applications in different contexts ... the adult learner's sphere of learning should not be restricted to the notion of an expert-novice relationship ... within higher education (it) should be defined by a broader landscape of the adult's life-world of social contexts of higher education, family, work, home, and community (ibid:6).

This aspect of the argument has particular relevance to my understanding of the factors that need to be taken into consideration in understanding adults' learning - particularly the notion of the multiple roles that adults play. The argument here is that adults, unlike children, interact through many roles and concurrent social contexts in their lives. This gives adults the ability to frame and thus understand, the current cognitive classroom experiences *beyond* the formal context and information given.

The discussion above links with Gee's argument highlighted earlier, particularly his notion

of the possibly for learning to occur 'through certain life-experiences that trigger conscious reflection' (1990:146). It could thus be possible to argue that the students I interviewed had, to varying degrees, 'acquired' the discourse of our course and were able to engage in learning - to develop metacognitive skills. They have come to understand some of the requirements and are in the process of engaging in learning - in facilitating their own 'epistemological access' into the cultural practice of the classroom setting of which they are members. It also, I would argue, helps us to begin to understand that while institutional and other contexts impact on learning, we can move beyond the assumption that these contexts always create barriers to learning. Given the 'broad landscape' of adults' lives, this impact needs to be carefully understood and analysed in relationship to the specific learner and the life-world, roles and community(ies) he/she is an inherent part of and which is drawn into the learning context.

Learning as 'meaning making and negotiation in context'

In her study, Kasworm identifies four key patterns of learner interaction with higher education contexts - all of which look at the kind of learner-teacher relationship, the kind of learner role students identified for themselves, as well as their own perceptions of what higher education learning is all about. They are conflict, withdrawal, accommodation and transformation and I feel they are significant in that they begin to suggest highly differing dynamics between adult as learner, as student and the adult's life environment. I discuss them in more detail when analysing my own data in the next chapter.

While useful as a frame, I am also critical of her analysis and move beyond it. Given what emerged through the case studies I investigated it is too simplistic. While she argues that in analysing her cases the key categories could not be differentiated by differences in age, educational background experiences, academic discipline or socio-economic background, it is, because of this, a little difficult at times to get a 'sense' of the people behind the categories. As such, it would be interesting to know whether each student exhibited only one pattern consistently, or whether there might have been co-existing patterns within one student's interaction with higher education and thus path of learning. In analysing my case studies, I found overlapping and sometimes contradictory patterns emerging within one case. Given my understanding of issues such as discourse, identity and learning, this is to be expected. However, the way in which they are reflected in the different accounts substantiate this argument in interesting ways.

The framework I have developed in this chapter thus provides us with a picture of the adult

learner as an actor and thinker in higher education teaching-learning situations. This, it can be argued, helps us to understand that learning does not necessarily have to be seen as a performance of 'isolated menial tasks undertaken as ends in themselves' (Kasworm 1990); rather, learners view the meaning of learning from their place as student embedded in the classroom context or from their place as expert and novice in a societally defined classroom with its relevance linked to their broader lives, tasks and roles.

Learning therefore, can be understood as the process whereby learners engage with the curriculum/access the discourse; we need, however, to be able to understand the different ways this happens if we are to deal with a wide range of learners with different backgrounds, expectations, experiences and orientations to learning. This echoes Hanson's (1996) point earlier about the need to understand experiences of specific students in order to develop richer forms of analysis. Furthermore, how we define 'success' also needs to take into account the relationship between a learners life-world(s) and their interaction with learning. In other words, it needs to take account of the mutually constitutive relationship between factors within the classroom - the other students, the teacher, the curriculum and the 'privileging text' embedded in it - and factors in the broader context(s) of the lives of adult learners.

What will be shown in Chapter Four is that by exploring successful learning experiences in relation to specific aspects of the course, there were co-existing patterns of interaction with higher education for each student. This echoes Thesen's comment about seeing learning as assigning a role to the individual as agent, yet understanding that this means that students might at times be acting from the centre yet at other from the margins. It also seems to echo James' comment about the *orienting* relationship between habitus and field which he argues for in his study. Whatever the outcome of this relationship, students are I believe, constantly in the process of border crossing, negotiating meaning and making decisions, in relation to their learning and unique lifeworlds.

We move now to Chapter Three which discusses the research methodology and process of conducting the research. It provides the link between the theoretical issues raised in this chapter and the accounts of students' experiences of learning, the focus of Chapter Four.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

For those being researched, research in always an intervention in their lives whether the process is face to face and personal or more distant as in a postal questionnaire (Middleton 1993). Particularly in the first instance, which has relevance for my study, the process engaged in before and during the research therefore, as well the methods employed, involves researcher and subjects in a complex, multi-facetted process of meaning-making. Choosing an approach to research is thus a complex and often confusing process.

While it is widely thought that the approach considered most appropriate for a particular study is given direction by the kinds of questions chosen, there is a further dimension to such a choice. This is because I believe that the kinds of questions chosen are both a reflection of the interests one has as a researcher as well as of the nature of the relationship between researcher and researched as it develops during data collection. Important components of any such relationship are boundaries and power between the researcher and those who are the subjects in a research process. This emerges in the quote below from my first interview with Pat, one of the case studies in this research:

> actually, you know, my education has been a battle. I came from a poor background and had to go to work at some stage. I wouldn't like to discuss my sons because they are my sons and they have private lives ... with myself it's fine ... (interview data 14/9/95).

This quote begins to point to some of the complexities of conducting research, for both the researcher and the participants in the process. In order to discuss and analyse these issues, this chapter will be divided into two sections. In the first, I shall discuss my rationale for choosing a qualitative (ethnographic) case study approach for this study of student learning as well as what I consider some of the limitations of such an approach to be, more generally as well as in this study. I shall also discuss the specific methods I used to collect my data, the methods I used to analyse it and how I have dealt with the issues of validity and ethics - two important aspects of any research process.

In the second section, I shall discuss and reflect on the process of doing the research. This will include the decisions I made on selecting the students I chose to work with, how I

negotiated access with them and the process of sharing information and feedback. In addition, I will include some of my own personal reflections where appropriate to provide an account of my own experience of conducting the research. By doing this, I attempt to capture and reflect the issues that this research project did and did not address. This is because I believe retrospectively that some of the issues it did not cover ought to have been given more careful consideration, in both the planning and conducting stages of the research.

I realise that a separation of this kind between method and process can be problematic, particularly in a qualitative study of this nature. However I feel that by dealing with each of these aspects in separate sections allows me to provide a more coherent and systematic account of research - a process that feels at times messy, incoherent and uncertain. We move now to section one in which I discuss my methodology, methods of data analysis and issues of validity and ethics.

Methodology, analysis and validity

By the very nature of the questions and issues that have guided my thinking and which I seek to address through this study, I have been drawn to undertaking a qualitative study. Such an 'interpretive' study is designed to

> investigate human experience and to do so in ways that both reveal its complexity and reflect its historical and situational contexts (Maclean 1987:132).

Following this, my goal is to take the wisdom and insight of people and give it expression and grounding in order to reveal and better understand the complexity and dynamics of human behaviour. Such understanding emerges through a process of interpretation, the goal of which is to elucidate meanings embedded in human behaviour. Qualitative research therefore is concerned with how people make sense of their experiences (eg. of learning) within the ongoing framework of their lives. Furthermore, we need to bear in mind that individual perspectives cannot be interpreted without an understanding of the context in which they are developed - this thus requires a qualitative researcher to observe and document the characteristics of the broader socio-cultural milieu, something I argued for in the previous chapter.

However, such a process is never neutral. Something that I have become much more explicitly conscious of as a researcher and educator is the fact that a person's experience is a mosaic made up of a wide range of incidents over a period of time. As such, it could be

argued that one's identity and allegiances are described quite differently when one talks to different people in different contexts 'with (different) conversational axes to grind' (MacLure 1993:382). As a result of this, I became enormously aware, very early on in the research process, of my dual role (researcher and educator) when interviewing students and the power relationships implicit in such positions.

I have also become aware of the 'construction' role played by researchers, even in qualitative research. This is supported by van Manen (1990) who argues that when conducting research that explores experiential accounts or lived experience descriptions, these accounts are never identical to lived experience itself. All recollections of experiences or reflections on those experiences are already experiences transformed. In dealing with such accounts, it is important therefore to realise that

> experiential accounts or lived-experience descriptions ... are never identical to lived experience itself. All recollections of experiences, reflections on experiences, descriptions of experiences ... are already transformations of those experiences ... we [thus] need to find access to life's living dimensions while realising that the meanings we bring to the surface from the depths of life's oceans have already lost the natural quiver of their undisturbed existence (van Manen 1990:54).

I am thus aware that my role as an interviewer, a white woman and course facilitator, shaped the nature of the accounts the students chose to present. In addition, I realise that my accounts do not capture the students as adults and learners in all their complexity; rather, they provide an understanding of them as I came to know them through my interviews and time I spent with them as learners. As researcher, as a woman, as the educator of the students and as a person who has had a very different collection of experiences, I play no small part in 'disturbing the existence' of surface meanings in incidents and experiences. I am mindful, therefore, of the notion that by recalling experiences people have lived through, I am doing so in a way that offers the description as a possible experience or as a possible interpretation of that experience.

An ethnographic case study

I said earlier that I have been drawn to doing qualitative research. More particularly, I have felt that my interests in students' learning as 'meaning making and negotiation' is best explored via an ethnographic case study methodological framework. I use the term 'methodological framework' specifically by understanding it as the orientation to approaching research and as distinct from methods, which are discussed later. As Scott (1996) argues, a

methodological framework is thus a particular way of approaching research with 'particular understandings of purpose, foci, data, analysis and more fundamentally, the relationship between data and what they refer to' (ibid:61). As such, different and often contrasting frameworks can embrace the same data collection method(s) but because the particular method is used to collect data in different ways and thus different data, it is possible to distinguish between them.

In respect of an ethnographic case study approach, I do not see it as a full anthropological inquiry as is often implied by ethnography. In such an ethnographic study, ethnographers attempt to behave like participants in the research. Consequently, interviews are often not formalised, data collection and recording is often snatched and incomplete and the favoured means to collect data is by means of a fieldwork diary (Scott 1996). In contrast to this, my approach has been more formalised. Therefore while I have drawn on my own diary and field notes, I see my approach, following Thesen (1994), as more of an 'ethnographic orientation', or that I have chosen an 'ethnographic lens' through which I have attempted to capture what I have found out during the research. I say this given that I have attempted to capture experiences of participants in a setting (the formal classroom) which, while in many ways unfamiliar to them, is also part of their experiences - it is in other words, in parts familiar to them.

My choice for using an ethnographic case study approach is as follows. On the one hand, ethnography offers opportunity for the study of lived experiences (Brodky 1987). While this does not preclude boundaries between 'me' as researchers and 'them' as subjects - a key dilemma for many qualitative researchers - Brodky argues that ethnography does offer the preconditions for research that has an element of 'social responsibility' to it. She believes this is because while these boundaries do exist, an ethnographer understands these not as natural boundaries but as boundaries we construct to maintain 'space' and thus show respect for subjects. As she puts it, they are '*social* borders that we help maintain when we refuse to travel in unchartered territory' (ibid:42; emphasis my own).

The case study on the other hand, offers the chance to study in depth 'a particular instance rather than attempting to survey specific, clearly identified variables across a large sample' (Hemson 1996:14-15). In my case, I have chosen to do intrinsic case study work (Stake 1985), as I wish to learn something about the experiences of specific students on a specific programme in a specific moment of its life. Such an approach is not sampling research - a case is studied not primarily to understand other cases, but rather 'our first obligation is to understand this one case' (ibid:4). A case study therefore draws attention to what specifically

can be learnt from this one case; it is a specific, a 'bounded system', being both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning (Stake in Denzin & Lincoln 1994). In addition, a case study can serve to expose the limitations of a particular assumption (eg. about learning) and generate important questions for practice, alerting practitioners to issues that might need to be addressed in other cases or by other methods of research.

In terms of adopting a case study approach in studying the Certificate course, I believe this approach has been able to provide rich insight into both the experiences of students on the course and the issue of the relationship between learning, role construction and success. I do not therefore, see this research as 'categorising' or pursuing generalisable findings. As Hammersley (1992:186) has suggested,

> the choice of case study involves buying greater detail and likely accuracy of information about particular cases at the cost of being less able to make effective generalisations to a larger population of cases.

It needs to be stated that I am aware that accuracy of the information is relative to the particular orientations, approaches and relationships built up during the research process. In addition, while I made concerted efforts to clarify information with the students before writing about it, I realise that in studies of this nature, the notion of objective reality is questionable. Scott (1996) has coined the term 'representational realism' to describe this position where representations of reality are assumed as the primary data source. This is both a condition of such research and a reflection of it as well as a reflection of all involved in it - researcher, subjects, other stakeholders and contexts.

This leads me to the issue of stakeholder involvement in the process. According to Wilcox (1982), the overall aim of the ethnographer is to combine the views of both insiders and outsiders in order to describe a social setting (cited in Chiserie-Strater 1991). In my research, while I focus on the perspectives of my students, I have from time to time, both implicitly and explicitly, drawn on the views of colleagues and co-lecturers. While it could be argued that they are insiders given their location in the university and department, I feel they are also outsiders to this particular research project - 'outsiders' in the sense that while they share my interests and concerns in teaching and learning, they do not necessarily share my views and interpretations about learning. In this way, they have usefully and fruitfully provided critical feedback and comment on some of my conclusions which has greatly encouraged me to refine and look more critically at my own assumptions.

A qualitative case study as a consequence, has the following characteristics:

* it is about understanding the *meaning* of an experience;
* it sets out to investigate or explore different dimensions of a phenomenon, not just one particular variable;
* it puts an emphasis on description and explanation, rather than the testing of hypotheses (Merriam 1988).

Methodological limitations

Having indicated that case studies illuminate the specific, the local and the particular, one of the temptations in doing research is to move towards generalisation, which seems to be contrary to the reason for choosing to use a case study approach in the first place. While the case study can possibly be seen as a small step towards generalisation, damage occurs when 'the commitment to generalise or create theory runs so strong that the researcher's attention is drawn away from features important for understanding the case itself' (Stake cited in Denzin & Lincoln 1994:238). However, arguing that no generalisation occurs is not either entirely true. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) argue that researchers using this approach do not (and cannot) avoid generalisation. The methods used in this approach need primarily to provide insight into the complexities of the particular case; at the same time however, they need to provide enough 'descriptive narrative so that readers can vicariously experience these happenings, and draw their own conclusions' (ibid:243).

It was important for me as researcher therefore, while using an ethnographic approach, to engage with the students and my colleagues, to keep the study focused on the Certificate course and the issues that played themselves out within it; to keep it at the level of exploration and meaning-seeking in terms of students' experiences of learning. This is particularly true given the small number of cases I have used and the specific moment when this study was done - a period of transition in the programme that will not occur again.

A study of this nature is thus constrained due to a range of factors and my findings must be read in this light. Three other concerns warrant mention here which in some ways could be seen to be limitations of this research.

First, I have not theorised the gendered nature of these accounts. Given that all the students I interviewed were women this could be seen to be an omission. However, as I did not set out to explore 'women's ways of knowing' (Belenky 1986), the focus of this study was not intended to explore this directly. I was more interested in exploring learning experiences of adult learners than differences in learning between men and women. Having said this

however, I realise that women's experiences of learning are often marginalised and that they experience powerless and voicelessness working and living often at the edges of society. As such, I believe that it is an important area for future research.

The second concern is that the small number of cases studied might be seen as not providing enough depth for comparison. I feel however, given that comparison was not intended in undertaking this study, this choice could be justified. While in the analysis in Chapter Four I reflect on some of the differences that emerged across the four accounts, I intended for each case to be valued and understood in its own right. Comparison is only used where I feel it highlights particular issues in new ways. Third is the issue of the timing of the study. I began to think about my questions quite early on in 1995 and started my journal and observations in May. I only managed to do the interviews and more indepth recording of discussions towards the end of the year. I feel that while it was useful to enable the students to reflect on their experiences during that year, I could have started earlier with selecting my participants so as to have been able to record their experiences over a longer period of time. This might have allowed the students to explore their changing perceptions over time and thereby gain more insight into their own processes of learning. I feel that this last point impacts quite directly on the nature of the accounts that emerged and therefore some of my conclusions. This is discussed again when I look at the issue of validity.

The next section will deal with the methods used in the study to gather data.

Methods of data collection

Given the above discussion, I understand that qualitative research encompasses a wide variety of possible methods of data collection. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994:2) put it, such research is

> multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter ... qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

In her study of academic literacies, Chiserie-Strater (1991) cites the major techniques for acquiring ethnographic data as including participant observation, collecting 'thick descriptions' (Geertz cited in Chiserie-Strater) through field notes, and conducting interviews with relevant informants. Other techniques include the use of photographs, writing and personal artifacts. In order to collect my data, I relied on the following methods:

* I conducted two semi-structured interviews with each of the four students. The first interview focused on their experiences on the course and on particular aspects of the curriculum; the second emphasised their experiences outside of the course;

* I used an assignment from the course which the students reflected on during the interviews;

* I recorded two class discussions with a wider group of the students. One of these was during a tutorial while the other was as part of the evaluation of the course;

* I recorded two discussions with three colleagues who were involved in the course in various ways;

* I kept a journal of the process, including observations during classes and discussions that were not recorded; the comments from this are included in this study as 'reflections'.

The method I used primarily to collect data was the interviews with the students. Burgess (1984) offers three reasons for choosing interviews. First, they allow a researcher access to past events. Second, they allow a researcher access to situations where she/he was not present. And third, they can allow researchers access to situations where permission to be present might otherwise have been refused. What all these three point to is a gap between the events referred to by the interviewee and the account given to the researcher. In other words, those being interviewed are giving accounts of how they experienced a particular event but removed from it in terms of time and space. Scott (1996) argues that Ricoeur's (1991) notion of 'narrativity' is implied here where 'social actors, embedded in time, give new meaning to their past, but always in terms of the present' (ibid:66).

Following Brodky (1987) I feel that the single, most important lesson to be learnt from interviews in ethnographic fieldwork is that experience is not - in fact cannot be - precisely reproduced in formal speech or writing. Instead she argues that it must instead be narrated; as such, it is open to much personal selection, interpretation and indeed even bias.

I thus believe that when interviews are used to generate data, they should serve the purpose of what Mishler (1986) calls 'the joint construction of meaning'. Rather than interviewing with a predetermined format, Mishler argues that the interview proceeds 'through mutual reformulation and specification and questions, by which they take on particular and context-

bound shades of meaning' (ibid:53). My approach to the interviews was thus 'open-ended' and grounded in a sense of initiating a dialogic conversation with the four students I focused my research on. I believed that this was an important approach as a way into understanding the experiences of the students in the context of the class as well as in the context of life outside of class - both their work and their personal experience.

I believe this is important for two reasons: to develop a better understanding of their experiences on the course; and to try and see what links exist between their dual roles of student and practitioner. Where possible, I let the students speak. At the same time, however, I realised that the 'voice' they are being given via this project was in no small way shaped by the interaction between us, between themselves, their texts and experiences, and between them and the broader context of the course and their lived experiences.

In thinking about the kinds of questions I would be asking, I planned to conduct the first interview with a focus on their experience of being on the course and their role of student. I had then thought that I would bring in their experience as a practitioner in the second interview. This was largely followed, but I find it interesting that I found this division in a sense 'artificial'. Many references were made by the students during the interviews to their practice to explain or elaborate on some of the answers. I discuss the interview process further in Section Two of this chapter.

The recordings of the class discussions were used to balance the views generated by the interviews. In some cases, the students I interviewed were present at these; at other times not. The discussions with colleagues were informal and used both as a way of making me look critically at my own interpretations as well as to evaluate the course. While useful as a record of our thoughts and ideas as facilitators on the course, they have not been drawn on extensively as a source of data. This is because I wished to explore the experiences of students in this study.

The assignment I focused on is attached (see appendix A). Given I was not focusing specifically on writing experiences, the assignment was used more as a prompt than as an analytical tool in itself. However, it generated interesting discussion as I indicate later in this chapter.

We turn now to a discussion on the analysis of the data.

Data analysis

Data analysis, according to Altricher (1993), helps to find explanations which 'fit' our understanding and therefore seem plausible. However, such explanations need to be carefully scrutinized as they cannot necessarily be trusted. What I believe is important in studying experience therefore, is that these explanations should help in deepening our understanding, not that they need to fit with what we already understand. While they might do this, I believe it is important in an exploratory study of this nature, that data should help both students and teachers to understand the situation better and more clearly. I thus found it interesting, in analysing what emerged, to look for ways that allows the 'voice' of the participants emerge. It is in this way that I believe data generated from interviews, discussions and observations with both students and us as educators are important.

In balancing the views of the different stakeholders on our course, I have used triangulation, crosschecking the views of students and educators on the course against my own observations and research notes. This is seen by some as the keystone of ethnographic enquiry (Brodky 1987) as it involves researchers both crosschecking data collected from the scene from a range of sources *and* crosschecking their own inferences against the data. In this way, I have hoped to highlight the silences, gaps and contradictions that make a qualitative research approach an often complex, yet, I believe, essentially alive and dynamic process of relationships, journeys and exploration.

In developing categories and coding data, I have attempted to use a combination of deductive and inductive methods. As Altricher (1993) argue, it is probably useful to use a combination of both methods 'capitalising on what you already know but remaining open to the surprises the data can contain' (ibid:124). I have found that a reflection on the interview or discussion immediately it after has taken place, while often time consuming, is critical to get a 'fresh' feel of the data collected.

Metaphors are also useful in making sense of the data. Metaphors can act to provide alternative approaches to reality, reflecting different facets of the same event. They can stimulate new directions for analysis and thus enrich a research process. As metaphors can be seen to be 'generative' they can help researchers 'distance themselves from the apparent obviousness of daily routines' (ibid:130). The metaphor of learning as the 'construction' of meaning is particularly useful in this case given I am arguing that 'learners themselves frame their process of learning and 'construct' new knowledge, using the experience and knowledge they already have' (ibid:129).

However, this is not to deny learning as the 'imprinting of meaning' (ibid:129), for to do so would be to disregard the cultural and social conditions of learning. This opens up the possibility of seeing 'dilemma analysis' as a useful way to explore data. As Winter (1982) has argued, dilemma analysis can make for a more 'enabling discussion' between teachers and students: one is more easily able to 'ascribe equal value to students' perspectives and the perspectives of those who ... (have)... higher status in the social context' (cited in Altricher :152). I am aware though, that readers of this study might ascribe their own values to the different perspectives that emerge.

Validity, reliability, and ethics

Hemson (1996) argues that when thinking about these methodological issues, one needs to take into account both what a particular study is trying *and* not trying to do. If, as in this study, one sets out to describe, to illuminate and to investigate in order to better understand a phenomenon or process, then the study would have validity if I am able to do this. However, the validity that this study has is in no small part due to my understanding of what is valid for the students as I try and make sense of their accounts. I feel, as Thesen (1994:12) so eloquently puts it, that if one understands reality, knowledge and experience as largely social constructs, 'then as researcher I have to construct the reality of this research by making it persuasive'. If it can be seen as persuasive, perhaps it will indeed have a fair measure of validity.

Assessing the validity of research consists of both internal and external validity checks. According to Scott (1996), internal validity refers to the research's truth value and the accuracy with which it is related to reality. In this case, given that I am arguing not for realism but for 'representational realism', my account needs to be seen as a good representation of the 'reality' of the students' experiences of learning. Scott believes that a piece of research is credible if its methods are relevant to the questions being addressed and if the participants in the research recognise their contributions and affirm that they are valid. In order to establish internal validity, researchers need to engage in prolonged fieldwork, persistent observation and triangulation. Following from my discussion on methods of data collection and analysis, I feel that I have largely met these criteria. As I mentioned under the limitations of this project though, I do feel that I could have begun to collect data earlier in the process. This would have allowed for more data 'moments' (ibid:80) and judgements made by participants at different times in the research process could have been compared. This would have strengthened my claims to internal validity: '[i]f the later judgements confirm the validity of early ones, the researcher can be more sure about [her] conclusions'

(ibid:80).

External validity on the other hand refers to how a piece of research relates to other contexts and environments. In a case study as I have argued, the purpose is not to move to generalisations but to better understand this specific context. Therefore, as Guba and Lincoln (1985) argue, the role of the researcher is to collect the 'thick description' 'necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether the transfer can be contemplated as a possibility' (cited in Scott 1996:80). Given the detail in my cases studies, I believe that I have some way in providing this.

Finally, it could be argued, following Hammersley (1992), that qualitative studies should be judged in terms of their intentions. He argues that a descriptive study (such as this one) should not be judged to have failed because it did not test in any meaningful way a developing theory. Assessing validity therefore involves an identification of the main claims made by a study, 'noting the type of claims these represent, and comparing the evidence provided for each claim with what is judged to be necessary, given the claim's plausibility and credibility' (ibid:72).

Following from the discussion on validity above is the issue of reliability. In terms of reliability, I believe that there is no such thing as absolute reliability of results in a qualitative study of this nature. If one believed this could be achieved, one would need to ask 'reliable in terms of what criteria?' If the criteria are that I will try and reflect what I discover, describe what I think has been the experiences of the four students, then the study will have reliability in as far as I share my interpretations with them and other stakeholders and ask them for their views on this. Guba and Lincoln (in Scott 1996) argue that reliability is about dependability. Implicit in the issue of reliability is credibility and thus if a piece of research is credible, it will also be reliable. Given that in research of an explorative nature like this project the role of the researcher is integral to the data collected, I am aware of my role in shaping the account. The shape of the research was responsive to the initial data collected through observations and this subsequently influenced the methods I used. In the final analysis, the burden of proof is therefore placed on the reader, but this in itself provides no guidance as to how they should judge the research.

In the context of the 'exploratory' nature of the study, I needed to make critical decisions about analysing data and when to stop collecting data and work with what I had. I felt tempted time and again to gather further stories, 'to prolong the conversation' (Thesen 1994). I felt that at times I was unsure of how much further I could push a particular point raised

if the student seemed unwilling to talk about it.

Given that research, and in particular ethnographic inquiry, is seen as a social activity, Scott (1996) argues that researchers in the field collecting data are confronted by a series of methodological dilemmas. These involve researchers in making decisions about how they should conduct themselves and with the rights and responsibilities of the researcher and the researched. He suggests three models of research which inform such decisions. The first, covert research, emphasises the need for the researcher to conceal from the participants the aims and purposes of the research. The second, open democratic research, lays stress on the rights of participants to control the data which is collected and which is included in the research report. The third model, the open autocratic model, argues against allowing these rights to veto and this then obligates the researcher to protect the interests of the participants.

I would argue that my approach is a combination of the second and third position in that while I allowed students to edit the transcripts of their interviews with me, the decisions about what was included in the final report rested more with me. It does not therefore represent a picture of complete collaboration between myself and the students. Scott argues that there are five issues important to consider in terms of ethical procedures in open democratic research: for the researcher, as far as possible, to withhold his/her judgements or suspend their values; to allow participants to control what aspects of the data is released; such control procedures should be a series of negotiations between researcher and researched; research activities should not compel participation; and lastly, the researcher is not just accountable to the participants in the project but to other bodies who might have a stake or interest in the information that has been collected.

However, these concerns are balanced by issues emanating from open autocratic approaches, the second position I argue is evident in my account. These are: that I as researcher made the initial decisions about methods (which structured the type of data collected); given that I am operating in the public domain, I will be inclined to present these accounts as neater and more coherent than they actually were; and finally, negotiation between researcher and participants can never be an a relationship between equals. This is due to the fact that I, and the students to a large degree, am shaped and determined by aspects of the institutional setting of which we are all part. The manner of negotiation is therefore shaped by this. As Burgess (1984:32) reminds us, 'people respond to the structured situations in which they are located'. This is not to deny attempts at opening up the research process and allowing for agency within it, but to acknowledge that the impact of institutional spaces and structures cannot, and therefore should not, be ignored.

This brought me up against the issue of ethics. It was in my interview with Pat that I was given one of the few indications that she was unwilling to talk about particular issues. This emerged at the end of the first interview and links with Brodky's (1987) point about the importance of boundaries as marking social space in research of this nature.

J: What I would like to do is a follow-up interview - to get to understand you outside the class and other parts of your life

P: OK, I hope I am not telling you any family secrets

J: You may erase anything you are not happy about ... in this interview as well.

What is central to this discussion for me is the need to take into consideration the views of the social actors central to our investigation. However, while this is clearly important in a study as this one, we must not do this to the exclusion of context(s) within which they lead their lives or the conditions under which they gave their accounts. While perhaps we ought to realise that our claim to knowledge about educational matters must always be approximate, we must try and give as complete a picture as is possible. Not doing so would render such research limiting and not do justice to the time and effort given by all involved in the process.

It is to a discussion of some elements of this process that we now turn.

The research process

This section of the chapter will discuss the process of conducting the research. This includes negotiating access to the students and a reflection and discussion on the process - particularly the interviews, which were the main source of data.

Negotiating access

As far as selecting students to interview, I was initially overwhelmed by the range of issues I could focus on and thus the ways in which different students could provide varied insights. In negotiating access with the students, while I did not make it explicit, I wished to work with students who had not entered with previous university qualifications; those not entering with the 'rules of formal learning or role of formal student at university' (Morphet 1992; Gamble 1994) firmly in place. Rather, I chose to work with students for whom the experience of formal university study was something they had been denied access to in the past. Moreover, as I was interested in exploring what success looks like, I chose to work with students who

were seemingly, in Bock's (1988) term, 'cracking the cultural code'. In other words, I selected students whom I felt, through their assignments and discussions, were accessing the curriculum and would probably do well at the end of the year.

As part of the overall Certificate course, I was also co-coordinating a research module, which was an optional choice for the students. In addition, I was co-responsible for an optional tutorial programme which focused on reading and writing skills. Many of the students who chose to do the research module were also regular participants in the tutorials. As I had been working more closely with these students, I decided to ask them whether they would be willing to be involved in my research. I explained to the students that while it was part of my research, I also saw it as an opportunity for them to reflect on their own learning experiences and to help us with our course evaluation. The research group seemed interested. I then approached four students who were on this module and had been doing well on the course. They agreed to be interviewed.

Before proceeding to the discussion on interviewing, I would like to introduce the students, who so far in this study have remained largely invisible. The four students I finally worked with are all women. I did not choose them specifically for this reason; I realised though that I had built up closer relationships with the female students than the males. Thus, while this possibly gives a particular slant to the kind of data gathered, I felt it would allow for richer data to emerge. I am mindful that this is a possible limitation of my research. However, being a case study, I feel that the specific interest I had in their experiences and the relationships I had built up with them, can serve as a possible justification for selecting to work with them.

Although they were all women, they ranged in age, background, language and site of practice. Yasmine (36) is a single parent of two children whose home languages are English and Afrikaans. While she grew up in Diep River, she now lives in Mitchell's Plain (an historically coloured township) with her sister, her sister's husband and their child. Currently, Yasmine works as a co-ordinator at the Volunteer Centre in Mitchell's Plain. Tembi (45) is a single parent of a teenage daughter. She lives alone with her daughter in Guguletu (an historically African township in Cape Town) and works for a health project in Khayelitsha. While her mother tongue is Xhosa, she speaks predominantly English at home. Nomzi (47) is a single Xhosa-speaking mother of three grown up children. She currently works as a sewing training co-ordinator for a large NGO. While she loves her current job, she often wishes she could do more for her community. Pat (67), the fourth student I interviewed, is a mother and grandmother. Recently retired as a library assistant, she currently does

voluntary literacy work in Brown's Farm, a squatter settlement on the fringes of Cape Town. Her home language is English.

I realise that negotiating access and making one's research aims as explicit and clear as possible is a delicate process. In addition, I realise that the choices I made will shape the account that has emerged and the understanding that I come to have about the issues that concern me. However, I also believe that no research process is ever neutral no matter what steps are taken to minimise bias in results. Rather, what needs to be borne in mind is research as a constructed political process. As such, it allows space for certain voices and thus issues to emerge, while it silences others. What is important therefore is to realise this and to work towards developing research processes that minimise feelings of disempowerment.

The interviews

While I found the interview process exciting and illuminating, I found aspects of it more difficult than I imagined. I shall reflect further on this in what follows in this section.

As I mentioned earlier, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with each student. On the whole, the first interviews were easier than the second. I felt that I was more familiar with the terrain - it was in a sense mine after all. In other words, it could possibly be argued that from a particular angle given I was one of course facilitators, I had more of an 'insider' perspective' on the teaching and learning framework on the course. In addition, I was the researcher and they the 'subjects'. I thus had, to some extent, preconceived ideas of the boundaries within which the interviews would be conducted (reflections from my research journal 21/11/95).

The second interviews were more difficult. I felt I was getting a 'privileged' view into the lives of the students. While it happened in the first interview, in the second it was far more personal. I felt that it was the students who guided me gently with what they chose to tell me and what they chose not to disclose. While I had particular questions related to issues I wanted to probe, I had to take some of my guidance from them. This fits in with Mishler's (1986) notion of the interview as the 'joint construction of meaning' in which much time was spent on clarifying meanings and coming to mutual understandings of events and descriptions. From the interview process I also realised that to separate the two accounts was harder than I expected and wouldn't do justice to the fragmented and difficult lives that many of these students lead (reflections from my research journal 21/11/95). Given that the participants

were all women, Belenky's (1986) comments about the voicelessness and powerless of women on the margins resonated with me.

When I set up the first round of interviews, I had a sense of the kinds of questions I would ask. I had arranged that we do the interviews fairly soon after they had completed an assignment as I wanted to probe some of the 'process' issues in the doing of a writing tasks. I had the sense that assessment had become an important issue for them. For myself, I had begun to see it in a way as the 'playing out' or 'making explicit' of the underlying discourse (Luckett 1995). The focus we gave writing in 1995, the first formal year, compared to previous years on the non-formal programmes, is also significant (reflections from research journal 13/3/96). It was partially due to these feelings of mine that I decided to allow the second, more biographical interview to flow more freely - for the students to tell the specific story they wished to tell. This had two implications. First, I feel it gave the space to students to talk as much or as little about things they chose to talk about and therefore allowed their 'own story' to emerge. Second, however, it made the process of identifying themes and choosing issues to focus on first more difficult.

This was particularly the case in my interviews with Yasmine. The complexity of her experience made not only the interview itself, but also writing up the account difficult, something I discuss in more detail in Chapter Four when I deal with the case studies. I wish to briefly reflect on the process with her as I think it highlights some more general points about the complexities of conducting biographical interviews. The first interview with her had ended with her in quite an emotional state and had in fact turned the tape recorder off at her request. What was interesting was that she initiated the second meeting even though we had agreed to have a follow-up interview.

During the first one she discussed the fact that she used to write poetry but due to the difficult and depressing times she had been through during the past year or so, she had been unable to write and had not written anything for ages. I suggested she try to write something about her experiences on the Certificate course. To my surprise, she did and phoned me to say that she would like to show it to me, thereby pre-empting our meeting. We began the interview in quite a relaxed way, chatting about things in general and then she gave me a poem entitled 'Discourse'. I started reading it and then she suggested that she read it to me. It seemed to have a lot of significance for her and I was quite overcome by the intensity of the feelings expressed in it and the way she read it. She seemed to re-living the experience on the course as she read. She then explained that it was written at night when she couldn't sleep and she took out all her files and went through them to recapture significant moments

in the course for her. It was very expressive and reflective of her experiences in really interesting ways (fieldwork journal notes 4/12/95). I quote it in full in Chapter Four when I analyse her experiences of learning. From this experience with Yasmine, I thus became much more aware of the risks involved for the students in deciding to share their experiences with me.

Assignment writing

From their writing I wanted, together with the students, to be able to unpack their conceptions of learning and locate these within the wider social context of their personal and work experience. I felt that doing it with them would help to prevent me from making assumptions about their writing based on their other experiences on the course. Examining student writing was useful for another purpose as well. Given the fact that the course is in its first formal cycle, it could be argued that it is a discourse in flux, without well-defined social relations and practices. As such, instead of expecting discourse or text production conventions being followed in a relatively normative way, one might expect 'innovative combinations of conventions' (Fairclough 1992).

This is particularly the case when one considers that many of the assignments require students to give account of or critically reflect on everyday work and life experiences but mediated through conceptual categories, in order to acquire the skills of academic reading and writing, an integral part of the discourse. While I realise that writing is not the only way to assess acquisition and learning, it can be argued that this is perhaps the most visible way that one can observe the discourse playing itself out - or at least students' attempts to make sense of it. As James (1995) points out, assessment is also a key factor impacting on students' levels of confidence about themselves as students.

My gut feeling was also that immediately after completing a writing task might be an appropriate time to try and understand how different students had taken on a learner role or what they perceived as important elements of such a role. On reflection, I feel I was partially right. I say 'partially' because while I feel this did allow some concrete 'task-related' issues to emerge and helped to give the interview a 'focus issue', it did make the interview process a little more difficult to structure. As I had set it up as a conversation around their learning, but indicated that we would look particularly at their experience of writing that particular assignment, I found it somewhat hard to shift the discussion to their learning more generally (reflections from my research journal 13/3/96).

Feedback on the interviews

Once I had completed the interviews and fully transcribed them, I gave a copy of both interview transcripts to each student for feedback, comment and possible editing. I felt that this was important, following Scott's criteria for open democratic research processes, something I argued earlier in this chapter is evident in my approach. None of them wished to delete anything they had said - in fact, they were all quite surprised by the level of detail that had emerged during the interviews and were quite happy for me use them as they were. I also said that I would use pseudonyms in my report. While all participants agreed to this ultimately (and I have consequently used them throughout), Yasmine initially felt that she wanted me to use her own name as she felt she wanted people to know 'my story and what happened to me'. When I discussed the fact that this data might be used in contexts where other students might thus be able to identify her, she preferred to use a pseudonym. This interaction made me realise the tension between me as researcher giving her a voice through my account, and her as a learner and individual, wishing to make her own story visible.

This chapter has provided an account of my research process, both in methodological and process terms. It is never easy to recount an experience such as this after the fact. Many small yet often significant incidents are forgotten or at least re-interpreted the longer the gap between the event and the recording of it. Having said that however, I feel that this chapter allows the reader to gain insight into my particular experiences of research - something I have argued for to be seen and understood as a complex, yet essentially alive and dynamic process of relationships, journeys and exploration.

We turn now to Chapter Four and the case studies of learning.

CHAPTER FOUR

CASE STUDIES OF LEARNING

Introduction

This chapter will deal with the case studies or experiences of learning that I have investigated within the context of the newly-formalised Certificate programme at UCT in 1995. I shall do this in a descriptive and analytical way, linking description with the theoretical framework developed in Chapter Two. Given that I have argued strongly for an understanding of learning that locates it within the broader landscape of an adult's life, I wish to explore this notion in my accounts. Drawing on the theoretical frame developed in Chapter Three, I will demonstrate an understanding of learning that locates meaning making within the individual, yet does not lose sight of the impact various contexts have on this and how this acts to shape different experiences.

In analysing my case studies, I have chosen to present each case separately as I believe, following Hanson (1996), that this better captures the specificity of each student's process of learning. Firstly, in order to introduce them, I provide a brief lifeworld synopsis for each. Drawing on Kasworm's (1990) 'patterns of interaction' with higher education, I then frame the accounts of the students' processes of meaning making and negotiation for success by highlighting the patterns that emerged in each account. In order to conclude the chapter, I pull the accounts together through a discussion of the main themes that emerged across the different accounts. These are again related to the theoretical issues raised in Chapter Two. The themes which emerge are motivation, perceptions of the curriculum, group processes and relations, and experiences of writing. Discussing the themes serves two purposes: they provide the link between the different accounts; and they also serve the purpose of being signifiers of negotiation and meaning making for 'success'.

Clearly, the notion of 'success' is not unproblematic: from the point of view of both *who* and *what* determines success, within and across contexts. However, through the complex processes of meaning making, negotiation, and making explicit the process of learner role construction entailed in this, the students discussed in these cases achieve success in their learning - in this context at least. Whether they are able in the future to transfer this across other learning contexts both inside and outside of the university, remains to be seen. These concerns are raised tentatively in Chapter Five, my concluding chapter.

In order to begin our exploration of these processes alluded to above, it is to the case studies of learning on the Certificate course that we make our first turn.

The case studies

In this section, I provide two 'sketches' for each student. The first will provide some detail on their lives outside the course while the second provides insight into their experiences as students. In the second sketch, their accounts are linked to the theoretical issues in Chapter Two and the themes mentioned above.

Yasmine

Sketch One

> the wind is always blowing on the wrong side of the track ...

Yasmine (36) is a single (widowed) parent of two children who lives in Mitchell's Plain with her sister and her sister's husband and their child. She says that Mitchell's Plain is divided by a railway track and that she lives on the 'wrong side' where

> gangsterism is rife and the unemployed sitting around on the corners

Having grown up in Diep River, her family was moved to Manenberg during the height of the Group Areas forced removals. Yasmine speaks with fondness of her years in Diep River where there 'were flowers everywhere'. Manenberg was 'just one big bush ... there was no streets or lights - just a shell. And I wanted to know where the flowers were'.

When I asked her about the effect of political events in her life, she said that while she was not directly involved in political activities, she was made aware of them through her experiences and her family. While her mother always looked up to white people during the time she worked for them as a domestic worker, her father

> he had this ... he hated white people and had a soft spot for black people. And that I couldn't understand. I just knew that somehow white people had hurt him ... also the fact that we were chucked out of Diep River

Some of these feelings have remained with Yasmine and have shaped her experiences of learning, as I shall indicate later on in the chapter.

After leaving school at the end of standard nine, getting married and having a child, Yasmine started working in a clothing factory as a machine operator. Nine years later, she had her second child and decided she was not going back. I asked her if this was because she wanted to get involved with helping people:

> no, not helping people. Helping myself ... I was fed up with being a number [on the factory floor]

She started doing voluntary work as an Employment Facilitator at the Volunteer Centre in Mitchell's Plain and is currently employed as the organiser for the satellite office in this area where she works with youth doing community training. The Volunteer Centre gives her a lot of space to try out new learnings gained from the course and she is left very much to do her own thing. While Yasmine enjoys her work, she indicated that she often feels in conflict with the other staff employed by Nicro, particularly the 'professionals' like social workers and psychologists:

> Somehow I feel that I am not on their level ... that I am just a 'speck in the dust' ... I've got a small office and it's killing me

She now feels that she would like to start her office where she can be on her own.

Sketch Two

> maybe I'll quit ... tomorrow

I found this account quite difficult to write up given the linkages between her personal life and experience on the course. It was almost as if Yasmine found it difficult to reflect on her learning experiences - her personal and learning experiences were often discussed simultaneously and therefore her personal life and learner identity were very intertwined. However, even though at times she struggled to maintain a belief in herself, she was clearly a fighter - her personal will to succeed and to 'prove and develop herself' were the main driving forces behind her success. This is indicated in a number of places in her account and demonstrated in her writing, which I shall discuss in more detail below.

Yasmine told of how she came upon the CAEP course in 1993 by accident - she picked up a piece of paper that was blowing in the dust on the side of the road:

> I read every bit of paper that I come across

She knew of no-one else who had done the course and it was not linked directly to improving her practice; rather, it was linked to her own needs and to see whether she could develop something for herself:

> I was thinking at that time I have got to do something, I mean to develop myself ... *to see if I was student material* ... so I think it was just meant to be ... if I could do this, then I have most certainly developed (emphasis my own)

Proving herself is important to Yasmine. It is a means of moving beyond just being a 'speck in the dust', the way she said she often felt in relation to others at work. It is also a way of moving beyond her own home situation which she described as 'full of conflict'. These extremely personal reasons with which Yasmine came to the course are important in understanding her experience. They also highlight for me the complexity of the relationship between experience and identity (Walkerdine 1990), both inside and outside the course.

Yasmine was fairly critical of the groups in the class and felt she was an 'outsider'

> because of groups sticking together

Particular mention was made of an 'elitist' group this year who looked down on others and made the most comments. It is interesting to note that only Yasmine mentioned the group as having a specific racial identity:

> those consultants, whites, don't really mix

While this is understandable given her personal background and the effects - both directly and indirectly - of politics on her family life, this was in strong contrast to her experience on CAEP (the nonformal one-year programme she completed in the department in 1993) where the group work was 'fantastic' and where there was a bond, a closeness between some of the students. In Gee's terms, her primary discourse and that of CAEP seemed more compatible than on the Certificate course. On this course however, the 'consultants' were seemingly in a better position in this respect and she felt that the course often times benefitted these students and did not take into account the range and breadth of experiences she had gone through in her life. The discourse of the Certificate programme thus privileged particular ways of being and her own rubbed up uncomfortably against this.

In the poem below - which she brought to the second interview - much of this conflict and tension she experienced during her learning on the Certificate course is reflected. It is an

important account of her learning and I wish to quote it in full.

DISCOURSE

We are being told about
The roles we play
The discourse that we follow
As if we didn't know

We thrash out theories
Of how we learn and how play
As if it will end tomorrow

It's adult education, training and development
I wonder does everybody follow?

Psychology, sociology, anthropology
Do not forget the different methodology
Class, are we clear on that today?
I am a bit dismayed!!

People do we understand?
'Cause these are what the theorists say

There's groups that feel they've been there
Others feel they'll never get anywhere
It's clear to them, but what about the rest of 'em
I'm lost!!

They say it's about
Reflecting, understanding, expecting,
Acting, Behaving, thinking, feeling,
Involving, choosing and creating

Of course there is agreeing or rejecting
To whatever else was said
Every step a calculated map

Be pro-active, be creative,
Be constructive, be suggestive

Formulise, prioritise, analyse,
Visualise, contextualise,
What a frantic state I'm in!!

Teaching now for learning later
Or is it

Learning now for teaching later
Solving problems in a practical
Cost and time efficient way

Transfer of learning
Is what we all yearning
Strife, strife, strife*
Towards the ultimate learning

Through all of this, assignments follow,
Handouts to read and books to borrow
I think I'll quit,...
Tomorrow.

* Although Yasmine wrote 'strife' in her poem, when she actually read it out to me - which she insisted she wanted to do - she pronounced in 'strive'.

In reading the poem, I was struck by its intensity. It is full of contradictions, something I have argued was indicative of her learning and engagement with the course. On the one hand, she is able to articulate some of the important issues and topics covered in the lectures. These are both content areas as well as capacities that we hoped to develop in the students during their time on the course: from 'psychology, sociology' [to] 'reflecting, understanding, expecting'. After reading the poem to me, she added that 'especially the part of formalising, prioritising, analysing, visualising - I am sure these weren't words that were part of my vocabulary at the time ...'. She is particularly aware of the importance of 'transfer[ring] ... learning', and hopes to be able to accomplish this. For me, these comments are highly indicative of her having acquired important aspects of the discourse (Gee 1990), even though she believed that the course was more beneficial to the 'consultants' - students whom she felt had an acquisition advantage on entering the course and to whom we seemed to direct the course.

On the other hand however, I feel that the poem reflects Thesen's (1994) notion of the ways in which discourses 'rub uneasily' against each other. As I argued in Chapter Two, learning in such process is about meaning exchange and negotiation and thus following Flower (1994), we need to understand that the social cognitive processes drawn on in this respect, can be a source of tension and conflict. In addition, Yasmine's account supports the idea that there are many forces which act to shape meaning, amongst them the social and cultural context, the discourse demands and her own goals and knowledge (ibid:1994).

James' (1995) comment on the mutually constitutive relationship between learning and

context and the *orienting* nature of habitus is also relevant here. This is in the sense that while Yasmine feels somewhat isolated and even restricted at times in her learning - 'every step a calculated map' - she also indicates that 'there is agreeing or rejecting' to what has been said and that one can be 'pro-active ... creative ... [and] suggestive'.

Her writing on the course more broadly further highlights some of these tensions and as such, this process is not an easy one. When asked about the process of writing, Yasmine indicated that there was no 'breakthrough' in her writing. Given that she sees herself as a perfectionist - 'practice makes perfect, but I'm not perfect yet' - she often feels disappointed. This is both with herself and with the lecturers. At the end of the year, the students had to work on a research project and Yasmine chose to do an evaluation of some of activities at the Volunteer Centre. While the project was 'actually a highlight of the year', she felt she could have done better in the project report:

> I felt it was sort of your fault that I rewrote the whole thing because you didn't make it clear to me exactly what you wanted. If I had known, I could have ... sort of got 80% for it

Again, a really interesting contradiction emerges in this quote between her feeling she was able to 'be creative' in the project yet not getting the credit for this. While she found doing the project interesting and felt she learnt from it (she even spoke of the fact that other staff at the Volunteer Centre were impressed), this was not enough reward for her. She felt that when it came to being assessed, we (she used 'you' but it was unclear whether she was meaning me personally or the lecturers more broadly) had not really valued her creativity and thus while it 'might be clear to [some of] them ... I'm lost!!'

What is interesting however, is that when Yasmine wrote other assignments, she managed in some ways to 'suspend' much of the inner turmoil and anxiety she often felt even though she might have felt initial resistance to writing assignments. This is revealed in her comments on Assignment Four. Each student is required to hand in a coversheet with each assignment on which they reflect their processes of completing the task (see appendix B). On the coversheet of her Assignment Four, she indicated that

> I nearly didn't write this assignment because it dealt with politics' (dealing with the RDP) ...

Her piece however, was lucid, well argued and a coherent piece of writing for which she received a high mark. The resistance to writing this particular ('political') piece can possibly

be linked back to her ambivalence to her own political experiences while growing up. However, she did indicate that she found writing could help her work through these tensions and possible barriers to success:

> my feelings, things that happen to me, not for public view ... I would like to write a book. Not just any book - my life story because lots of interesting things happened in my life so I would like to put it down on paper

Yasmine's ability to use writing in this way is one of the key features contributing to her success on the course, which I shall now analyse in terms of the patterns of engagement and learner role(s) (Kasworm 1990) I saw evidence of in her account. What emerges strongly is evidence of a primary pattern of conflict in her account. However, there is also evidence of withdrawal and accommodation in her account.

Given the linkages between her personal and learner identities, Yasmine's experience demonstrated a fairly high sense of anxiety and conflict. Students who find learning a site of conflict, often experienced life difficulties and 'they are unique in the intensity and breadth of their personal life difficulties' (Kasworm 1990:11). In terms of the kind of learner role she saw for herself, Yasmine felt that she was

> more on the outside, I think, sort of looking in. I have always seen myself as an outsider, not a person to chat up strangers, talk about things in general

This is clearly a case of the 'solo learner', a role Kasworm argues is indicative of the withdrawal pattern, the second I identified in Yasmine's account. This was clearly evident in her relations with other students, with the lecturers and with her processes of writing. She feels that while the role of lecturers was important in her learning, she felt that 'there'll always be this power thing'. This was demonstrated in her feelings about the grading of her project work which I discussed earlier. As Kasworm puts it, learners interacting with higher education from this angle, speak of 'self-imposed isolation' from other students and they struggle to maintain a belief in themselves. Their end goal is to meet external expectations in their lives and to have same status as fellow workers. This tension was clearly revealed in the interview in her description of her relationship with others in the organisation. She spoke in detail about the fact that there was conflict between herself and the 'professionals', for example the social workers, whom she perceived as thinking they were superior to her because of their formal job status.

For me, there is a third pattern that emerges in this account, namely accommodation

('validated expertise'). Her need to see herself as 'student material' is in relation to the course and in this way, it does have some 'authority' for her in shaping her experience. She doesn't actually talk of really questioning this authority beyond the elements where she blames the course for poor marks. This we saw in her comments on her project where she felt that we had let her down in some way when she didn't get the marks she had hoped for - that it was 'sort of your [lecturers] fault'.

While I have argued that withdrawal was also demonstrated by Yasmine in her account of her learning experience, particularly in her experience of assessment, this did not totally obscure her success due to the fact that it was balanced by the other two patterns discussed above. In other words, while Yasmine's experience was difficult and often tinged with turmoil and conflict, she found ways to negotiate meaning - she also saw herself as being able to rise up above this conflict. This is highly indicative of the conflict pattern of engagement as Kasworm has indicated.

The poem 'Discourse' quoted above is a good example of this. While I have discussed how it shows her turmoil and conflict on the course, particularly in relation to what she perceived as the dominant discourse (Gee 1990) or 'privileging text' (Bernstein 1990), it also indicates a clear sense of the important ways in which she was able to write about the process she was grappling with - how she was able to 'rise above' the tumult in her life and learning experience.

Success for Yasmine was thus found in her ability to write in ways which allowed her to get a sense of herself as 'student material'. This allowed her - even if momentarily - to suspend some of her inner turmoil and conflict and to give her a sense of worth. It shows a determination and an ability to deal with a range of pressures - personal and learning related - in a complex yet beneficial way. Her statement 'I think I'll quit ... tomorrow' sums this up for me.

Tembi

Sketch One

jazz music and picnics ...

Tembi (45) is a single parent of a teenage daughter. One of three children, she grew up in Cape Town, first in District Six (an historically mixed but predominantly coloured area in

Cape Town) and later in Langa (an historically African township). Living in District Six was unusual for the family, classified as they were African but Tembi explained that her mother was 'very, very fair' and was often mistaken for a 'coloured lady'.

Both Tembi's parents were formally employed and Tembi spent her high school years at a private boarding school in Umtata. The decision to go to school out of Cape Town was one that she herself took. While she says that

> I wanted to be out of Cape Town - for no particular reason

she adds that she 'hated the whole system' of state schools where the teachers were 'forceful and bossy'. She recalls her high school days with fondness. She even indicated that what she liked about Bethal (College)

> is that we didn't come (home) in June ... so we used to be entertained - picnics, going to the beach, campfires ... it was very nice

Her teachers, white and English-speaking, introduced her to films, jazz and classical music and she was part of a singing group while at school. After finishing school, she came back to Cape Town to find a job and instead

> I happened to find a husband

After being married for five years and working with her husband in the Transkei, she came home. She said that she had a difficult relationship with her mother-in-law and that she made her feel like 'an intruder - sort of I didn't belong in that family'.

Currently, Tembi lives alone with her daughter and works for a health project in Khayelitsha. Although she is an administrator and loves her job, she would prefer to be working more directly with people in a training capacity. She speaks with incredible fondness of previous research jobs which involved a lot of talking and interaction with people. Often in the conversation about her jobs, she mentioned various people who were instrumental in securing her the jobs - people who were in fairly important positions in the university.

Sketch Two

to be a role student ...

Tembi's motivation for the doing the course was linked to personal ambition and, most strongly of all of the accounts, to the status that went with studying. The importance and status of university education was supported by a comment where she indicated that for her, academics were important people. She gave an example of an aunt of hers who was a teacher, had a degree and therefore, much status in the community.

Yet there are interesting contradictions that emerge in her account. She said that she saw this course as being for 'people who were disadvantaged' and didn't have the chance to complete schooling.

> So if you want to be something, this course can take you far. I want to say maybe it's because I wanted to study, but I never had the chance

While it is clear that Tembi might not have had the means to study when she left school, in relation to the other students I interviewed, she had a fairly protected and stable family and home background. She was also the only student of the four I interviewed who had completed her schooling undisrupted. I thus find her comment about the course being 'for people who are disadvantaged' interesting. It is clear that she puts herself in this category. However, in Gee's (1990) terms, her primary discourse acquired through the family and her high school experiences, probably meant that there was more congruency for her in her transition to the secondary discourse of the university than for the other students. It could also be argued that the jobs she has had over the years, being as they were linked to projects at universities, provided the motivation for her to study.

In terms of her perceptions of the course, Tembi felt that

> this year is very, very, advanced ... when you say it prepares students ... you know to be prepared for academic work, it's the truth because you must write, to do research, to explore

Although the Certificate programme did not lay an overt emphasis on research, I found it interesting that the area of research work was closely associated with university study. This probably links back to her experience of working in research projects linked to the universities, both as an administrator and as a community worker/researcher. This relates to

James' (1995) observation about the relationship between habitus and field as mutually constitutive. In other words, while in Yasmine's case I argued for a fairly high degree of autonomy that this gave her in her learning, I feel that in Tembi's case, the context of the formal classroom impacted on her learning in ways not dissimilar from her experiences of schooling. Her process of learning appears highly constituted by this context and her previous experiences of formal learning, and to a lesser extent by her broader work and life experience. This also seems to echo Davies' (1992) point about the ways in which discourses *can* 'talk [students] into existence' thereby becoming the 'selves' that discourses, in which students participate, make participants think are possible.

This argument sounds in some ways quite deterministic, leaving little room for agency, something I have been arguing strongly for in order to understand learning experiences. However, I believe that for students like Tembi, whom I have seen as an acquirer on entry to the course, this relationship to, and perception of, higher education is important for her success. This is supported by her own comments. In order to be successful, Tembi said that one had to take learning 'seriously' and 'be alert'; furthermore,

> now it's a *real* class, it's not playing

Tembi's notion of this being a 'real class' is important. She felt that her experience on the previous non-formal course was preparation for this year and that she felt that she was now in a 'sort of in a classroom, you know - a school situation'.

Tembi, like Yasmine, found the groups and group work difficult. While she enjoyed the smaller groups - in particular the voluntary tutorials which were 'nice and small and we are close to each other' - she found the larger groups less effective. She found it interesting to watch people and to analyse them, but found in the large groups, with so many different people in the class that

> I think ... for us ... it's not working

The reference to 'us' are those students from NGO's 'whose jobs are not recognised'. Also in the class, there were students who for Tembi gave the impression that 'they think they know everything'. These were mainly students from corporate companies and she said that she often found herself wondering 'why they are here'. In order to overcome this, she attended the voluntary tutorials where she was able to engage with both students and lecturers in a more intimate way. I discuss this aspect of her engagement with the course in more

detail later.

Tembi, as indicated, saw the kind of student we required as one who 'did their work' and showed dedication. In terms of attention given to her studies, Tembi was able to devote a lot of her spare time to this, particularly on weekends when her daughter went to stay with her (Tembi's) mother. Her relationship with her daughter was also an important component of her success as she spoke openly of the way in which her daughter encouraged her to 'go to school' and asked her mother whether she had packed her 'school books' on Tuesdays, the evenings of her Certificate class.

Tembi found that she enjoyed writing and drew her inspiration from the many novels and popular magazines that she enjoyed reading. In speaking of her writing, she likens her approach to 'writing a good story - it must flow'. In a story,

> you don't jump from A to D; [you] make your points to follow each other

therefore, the time given to do assignments and the tutorials helped her substantially and gave her time to structure her assignment. A significant beginning to her writing was a workshop she attended where the co-ordinator told her that 'anyone can write'. It was after this workshop that 'I became addicted to writing'. She said that she thinks of an audience when she writes, and indicated that our opinion of her work was important, showing her validation of us as 'experts' whose views of her are important:

> you [the lecturer] wanted to read something that makes sense. I think ... 'Janice is going to read this ... maybe she will think I am a terrible person' ...

So in some ways, Tembi writes to make a good impression - to 'be the role student' and to 'go far in the course'. In my analysis, she therefore took on a fairly 'traditional' student role, something I have argued for is important in understanding her success on the course. While she spoke of her broader experiences, very few of her remarks centred on her work and the links between this and the course. When she did make connections, it was almost an afterthought, not something she had consciously thought about while doing the course. It is as if to be a successful university student, means suspending this part of her identity.

In identifying patterns of interaction following Kasworm (1990), I identified two patterns: a primary or dominant pattern of accommodation and a secondary pattern of transformation. As we saw in her account, she attaches a lot of importance to the value of learning and to the

university as being able to provide it. According to Kasworm, students exhibiting an accommodation pattern seem to 'accommodate' themselves to the learning environment in higher education and speak of acceptance and congruence with it. They also speak of the value of curriculum, course-defined content and traditional format of teaching-learning. In addition, these students see the importance of teacher as 'expert' providing guidance - in other words, they frame their learning experience in terms of 'expert-novice interaction'.

This I have shown emerges fairly strongly in Tembi's account. In terms of the kind of learner role she constructed for herself therefore, she saw herself in many ways as the 'novice':

> dedication ... you expect them to do their work ... you know if you do your work, you'll be the role student

In her relationship to the lecturers, she brings up the notion of 'dependency' on us, although later indicates that this is not meant in the 'pure' sense of the word, but more that she sees lecturers as 'guiders' - Vygotsky's notion of 'mediators'. There are a lot of the reference points in her discussion of her learning centred around 'doing things right' so that she would not 'appear stupid' to me as assessor. The fact that she regularly attended the tutorials, an optional extra-curricular activity, is testimony to this. It is also evident in her comments on her writing where she wrote in a way so that 'you could read something that made sense'.

The university was thus a place of 'status' and her qualification would therefore provide her with recognition and status. The notion of a 'real' class and that we are not 'playing' is an indication of Tembi's acceptance of the learning context as having validity.

However, while Tembi values the university and attaches a lot of importance to being a student there, I feel her particular style of accommodation is the 'exploration beyond expertise' pattern as Tembi 'thoroughly enjoys her learner role'. While I argued above for the importance attached to the lecturers in her learning and the fact that she valued the expert-novice relationship, she did see herself as gaining new meanings for herself as an individual. What is evident as existing in the background but is nonetheless present, is a secondary pattern of transformation. Towards the end of the second interview in particular, she makes some linkages between learning in the classroom and learning outside across other contexts - on how she came to understand more about 'society, different views and how different people think'. She also reflected on how she drew on both work experience and other texts in the library to expand and refine her learning. This is evident in the following quote:

> You know it was my first time to pay attention that societies are made of working classes and middle classes ... why are they the way they do, the influence of their society, their culture, the way they grew up ... I can differentiate between such things ...

I found these comments particularly interesting given how I have argued for the primacy of her identity as the 'role student' on the course - an identity which played a crucial role in her success.

Nomzi

Sketch One

> I was always a fighter, in and out of life ...

Nomzi (47) is a single mother of three children. She grew up in Cape Town, one of 11 children and describes her life as very 'in and out', something she feels is related to her difficult family relations.

As a young child, she was very sickly and her mother could not look after her because of her responsibilities with the other children. This early separation from her mother set up a very difficult relationship with her mother and her siblings and she spent much of her young years with relatives, particularly her grandmother in Herschel (an area in the Eastern Cape), of whom she grew very fond

> I was very much close to my grandmother

She was married for a while, but this caused a lot of tension with her first child, who was from a previous relationship. Given her difficult relationship with her family over many years, she is very close to her children. When I asked her what she wishes for her children, she said

> I would like my children to stand tall, do things right

Her 'in and out' identity also relates to periods spent in both the urban and rural areas. She sees this as an important part of her identity and experience; she sees herself as both urban and rural - these identities are balanced for her and help her work with people from different communities. She seems very aware of these differences and discusses them in relation to

working with both urban and rural communities. She feels that 'knowing' the people you are working with is almost more important than 'knowing your job'. This is particularly the case with rural communities:

> You must be careful how you work with rural women otherwise they won't come to you. You must be flexible

This issue of 'flexibility' is important for Nomzi and something which she brings into her learning on the course. It is for me, a key component of her success in that it allows her to define her engagement in learning in interesting ways as we shall explore later.

Nomzi currently works as a sewing training for a large NGO. She had always thought she wanted to be a teacher when she was growing up, but then realised more and more that she didn't want to go to a college, but instead wanted to do something for people in the community so that they could 'uplift' themselves, particularly given the high rate of poverty and unemployment. While she loves her job and working close to people:

> in fact I don't want an office where I would isolate myself from people, I want to be around the people

she is also very clear that by doing things for her community should not create dependency:

> you should teach her how to make food, not give her food

Sketch Two

> the multiple roles we play

Like Yasmine, Nomzi did not either directly seek out the course; rather, someone gave her a pamphlet for the course which she read and found interesting. When asked what she felt her reason for doing the course was, she indicated that she realised she wanted to do a course which would allow her to transfer what she is learning 'into their [her own learners'] world'. This seems a clear indication of the shifts she has made from wanting to be a teacher, where her direct contact with the community would be far more restricted.

What I found quite interesting, however, is that while her 'community identity' is important and comes out a lot in her account, she said that if she had to 'really honest',

> I decided to come ... in a nutshell, I can say it's my personal ambition because I wanted to do this long ago

Why I found this interesting is that although she spoke in her interview about the fact that she has always enjoyed reading and often taken books out of the library, she did not strike me as an ambitious person. She was not someone for whom the course would signify status or personal achievement in the sense of giving her something that others might lack; rather it is her experience and sense of self through experience that constitutes her identity most strongly.

In deciding to do the course, while Nomzi saw the course as meant for 'elderly people who have experience',

> It is also challenging on its own because if you think how we were taught at school - it totally leaves us out

Here Nomzi related the fact that given she had moved around a lot between family members when she was growing up, she never had a chance to develop a 'get to know' herself as a learner at school.

For Nomzi, the important issue on the Certificate course was to be able to reflect critically on what she was learning. This is important for her as she feels that she can transfer what she has learnt back to her work and experiences in life. She felt that independence was important - the course presented a place where it was expected of her to

> think, do your own things

In terms of the group, Nomzi felt positive about the group as a whole. However, while she enjoyed the diversity in the class, often felt that group discussions were intimidating. This emphasis on group work, an important part of the course and strong feature of the discourse of much adult and experiential learning, was something that was contrary to her preferred learning process and echoes Thesen's comments about the unease of the relationships between discourses. Nomzi's processes of meaning making and negotiation had thus to take place largely outside the social context of group learning. However it was not all negative for her. She felt that her lack of participation in groups isn't because she is shy - rather,

> I get frustrated when I have to contribute ... because I like to talk when I want to

I found this interesting given her own life and growing up experience which, while involving difficult relationships, also had strong elements of 'rebellion' and resistance. However, in telling me of her relationships with her siblings and other children, Nomzi said that while she 'had to fend for [herself] - I used to be a fighter', she also indicated that

> you know, how we grew up, we never used to speak in front of elderly people. You look as if you are naughty

It is almost as if in the class, she found that this same attitude was not conducive to learning. However, while she found talking in groups difficult, she absorbed their ideas and often found an answer to her own question - she learnt to use the group processes to her advantage and overcome a potential barrier to learning. This is evidence of the flexibility I spoke of earlier which enables Nomzi to make meaning for herself in her learning in interesting ways.

The notion of 'self reflection' mentioned earlier is also reflected when Nomzi spoke of her writing. Writing for Nomzi is about argument and 'you don't write something like a story'. She said that while in a story you can just say 'da, da, da', an essay is quite different for her;

> You must argue ... you say what you want to say and then you reflect it on the outside and look at it on the other side ... and correct what you have said, or put it in another way as if you are talking to someone else

It is thus important for Nomzi in her writing to reflect on past experience and for being asked to express her opinions:

> you must reflect on your everyday life, your own experience ... and the books. You agree with what has been said. At the same time, you write being disagreeing with that on another point

It is at these moments of recalling her past experiences - work and life more broadly - that learning really had meaning for her and, I would argue, she used this to negotiate success. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, Nomzi has also commented that she felt she was both 'in and out' of the discourse of the Certificate - it is in her own reflective space and through her writing that she feels she is most comfortable and at ease as a learner. These feelings about the importance of reflecting on her own experience were brought into her writing of Assignment Four. Unlike the other three students, she chose the first of the two choices (4A), mainly because

> I wanted to say what I think of RDP, not what other people think It's where

> I could express myself about what's happened and what must be changed - to redress the past

In analysing Nomzi's account in relation to Kasworm's frame, the primary pattern of interaction is that of transformation. According to Kasworm, this is the most integrated and yet complex pattern of engagement - such students are 'uniquely oriented' to broad world-views concerning the nature of higher education and the undergraduate learning process; they speak to a prominent, definitive perspective of their own internal value of learning, their involvement across their life work in learning, and their commitment to learning as a broadening of values, perspectives, and beliefs. They also speak of their learning and knowledge development as happening across a range of settings - classroom, work, family and community; in addition, they spoke with awareness of their application of learning across contexts, even beyond the classroom. Kasworm sees them as 'transformative learners' as they transformed their learning from the classroom to other parts of their lives in an ongoing cycle of action and reflection.

Elements of this pattern were strongly visible in Nomzi's account. For her, the importance of the relationship between her identity as adult and community worker on the one hand and that of learner on the other, meant that she constantly made reference to the role the course played in her own practice, as well as the role that her world of practice made on her learning. Nomzi also showed a high degree of critical reflection on herself as a learner and also how learning related to work and life.

In her account, she illustrated this with examples and how she drew on her lifeworld for learning and how she learnt a lot through her own life experience. Here she made frequent references to the 'multiple roles' that she plays, only one of which is her role or identity as student:

> the beginning of the year, identifying the roles people play. I didn't know my roles - some are hidden, then you find out where you fall in. It gives you strength

As a student, she had clear expectations of herself. Thus, while she valued lecturers as mediators, she also saw herself and life experience as important in guiding her learning. While she expressed elements of 'in and out' in terms of her learning, this didn't cause her undue conflict - rather, she seemed to comment on it as an awareness of her own learning patterns and what was expected of her:

> you expect ... students like us - mothers ... and responsible students, people who have responsibilities to come up with their experiences, they must come up with ideas

As we saw earlier, Nomzi indicated that she didn't often speak in groups. However, she indicated that she felt comfortable with this decision as she 'conducted personal interior silent dialogues' with herself about what was going on or what she was learning. Kasworm (1990) in her discussion of the transformation pattern of interaction, indicates that while most of these students were highly verbal in class discussions, a few more introverted students spoke to their dislike of speaking out in the class: 'rather they conducted personal interior silent dialogues with themselves as the class discussed a topic' (ibid:20). She argues that this is because they don't see their learning as 'solely anchored' in the class; rather, they are able to understand their learning as transcending the class and specific assignments or tasks.

A secondary pattern that emerges in her account is that of accommodation. While she felt that 'life experience taught you a lot', she did see the university as having value and the usefulness of the curriculum and transmission process eg. her indication of the importance of assessment as telling you 'right from wrong'. In terms of her style of accommodation, it is closest to 'exploration beyond expertise' variation where she thoroughly enjoyed her learner role and learning was both an 'exploration of new worlds and new ideas' as well as a chance to refine and focus more in relation to her life decisions.

In many ways, Nomzi exhibited the kind of 'critical reflective' capacity captured in Schon's (1983; 1987) notion of the 'critical reflective practitioner' where practice is reflected on and thereby one's role as a practitioner is continually under personal scrutiny. The way she engaged with her learning - linking her experiences outside the class with what she was learning - are highly indicative of this:

> I learnt to think deep and also to add to my experience about how this happened the previous time ... more especially I have worked out how to do the right things

For Nomzi therefore, success on the Certificate was made possible by a complex process of self-reflection, negotiation and meaning making. The context of the course allowed for her to build on her previous experiences but she felt that she had to actively linking her learning on the course with her outside world(s). She also showed flexibility in her learning so that where at times she might have felt on the margins of the course (for example in groups), she was actively engaged in the process of border-crossing and making meaning for herself as a learner (Thesen 1994). This emerges particularly in her strong feelings about the need for

critical reflection, as well as in her belief of the importance of argument in the process of writing assignments.

Pat

Sketch One

> I came from a poor background and had to go and work

Pat (67), a mother of three grown up children is a pensioner. Her family grew up in District Six and she was one of three children. Her father worked as a waiter at the Mount Nelson, a high class hotel in Cape Town, and her mother worked as a domestic worker in the city. The family left Cape Town when WWII broke out and her father joined the army. Her mother took her three children with her to Kimberley where she went to work in the munitions factory. Pat commented that both her parents were unusual for their time: involved in community activities and not afraid to do things a bit differently from other people their age.

Her parents had separated before her father went to war and when they came back, although the family moved back together again, there was 'very little love in the home'. Things were difficult and Pat, then about 14 and having finished junior school, went out to work. There was never much encouragement to continue with school at home

> You went to school because that is what had to be done ... so there was no guidance or encouragement to learning

Going to work was however, against her own wishes and to the disappointment of her teachers in Kimberley ('the nuns') who encouraged her to pursue a career in teaching, something she herself always wanted to do. They felt that

> I had potential ... I don't know if I did. I felt I was just average but she felt I could go places you know

Teachers were important people for Pat; they were 'learned people' who

> had something that other people didn't have. They ... understood things better. They had knowledge you know

Pat went to work in a clothing factory and it was while working here that she went back to

school to continue her education. It was also during this time that she met her future husband who was to have a big influence on her life. Considerably older than herself, he was a teacher and someone whom

> from the word [go], I learnt from [him]. I was always learning from my husband ... he was such a model of everything

She went on to complete her matric through night school and while married, completed a number of administrative and typing courses, which she used during her married life to work part-time as a school secretary. After working at the school for about ten years, Pat applied for a position at UCT as a library assistant, a post she held until she retired a few years ago.

Since then, she has been involved in various voluntary adult literacy activities which she feels builds on what she gained from the course.

Sketch Two

> sorting out the weeds from the daisies

An issue that emerged strongly in only one of the accounts was that of age. For Pat, her motivation to do the course was to 'keep my mind active'. She felt that it was important to study and she did not do the course to 'use it afterwards'. Even though she was older than most in the class, this did not deter her; she said that while coming to university is usually thought of for younger people and that

> ... people discriminate in different ways, I am more aware at this stage of my life. So education isn't just for younger people as a lot of older people think

She added later however that she found the course has a usefulness in itself. This seemed almost unexpected:

> But once I had it ... once I was in it you know, acquired that knowledge, I found I used it

I find Pat's comments interesting in terms of Gee's (1990) notion of acquisition as a process of 'enculteration' into a social practice. In a sense, Pat was acquiring aspects of the discourse throughout her learning which allowed her, (at the end of the course when this interview took place) to talk about her experiences. This is indicative for me of the fact that she had moved through a process of acquisition and was now engaging in learning, which Gee argues, allows

for 'meta-learning' or know consciously more about what you have learnt. Part of this I attribute to her having worked at the university previously (albeit in the library) but also to her maturity which I feel allowed her see her learning in perspective and in relation to a wide range of previous experiences - both learning and otherwise.

Pat said that she found the Certificate fairly academic, particularly compared to her experience on a previous CAEP course in our department. She felt that

> this year's course has been a very formal sort of education. You're actually have to think about what you have gained from these readings

In terms of the academic nature of university study, she raised an interesting comment in relation to Assignment Four on the RDP. When she first saw the topic, she saw it [the RDP] as something for 'academic members of society' to think about and she wondered how she could have anything to say about it. The government was from the 'learned part' of society and had 'all the learning'. When she came to do the assignment, she felt differently however - her reservations did not deter her and she felt that she gained enormously through this assignment.

For Pat the class group as a whole was regarded positively. She found the students very communicative and easy to get on with - a sort of community. She felt they had all come to learn something and 'were very serious about what they are doing'. In terms of process and working on specific tasks, Pat had slight reservations however. She felt that while she hadn't met any conflict situations, learning in groups is not always effective:

> it depends on who your group comprises of ... you come in with a lot of people and discussion is not really on what we are supposed to do ... come away and feel you haven't gained much from it

Pat, in discussing her writing, spoke at length too of how she came to understand what was required in terms of structuring an argument and putting all her information down. Given that she saw the course as a 'very formal sort of education', she felt that she has to write in an academic way. We spoke at length about the way one organises information in an assignment and how she has now,

> almost at the end of the year, realise[d] that there's a structure you know ...

This comment is highly indicative of Gee's notion of acquisition whereby she came to

'realise' almost 'unconsciously', what the requirements of an assignment were. Through this process, she came to enjoy writing and putting her arguments forward and was quite reflective on her own process of writing, keeping back assignments and going over the comments. This she found very useful and it helped her to develop an awareness and understanding of the importance of structure in writing.

My second interview with Pat was conducted at her house. Out at the back, she has a beautiful garden which she told me she enjoys tending. It is clear that this has importance for her and she linked her love of gardening to her process of writing. When asking her if she felt she could try and explain how she comes to a structure for her assignment, she likened it to her gardening. Her reflections are important in that they capture both her identity as student and as mature adult learner and indicate how her life experience and maturity contributed to her success on the course in significant ways. I would like to quote in full her comments on this:

> It's like, it's ... I've got a little garden at home ... and when it gets to this time of the year, it's a mess ... everything's been sleeping but now everything's waking up and so now you find things have multiplied, everything has to be sorted out ... and I think the writing is something like that. You've now got - you've got your ideas down but it's in a mess. You've got that there and that there and you've got to put it straight ... and you've got a whole lot of daisies there and they've multiplied and you've got to thin them out, throw away what you don't want and put them all in order. Eventually you're going to have the pattern you want for your garden ... and I think the writing is something similar to that ...

In relating Pat's account to Kasworm's analysis, I believe there are two parallel patterns of interaction, namely accommodation (measured expertise and exploration beyond expertise) and transformation. I found these two patterns difficult to separate and would argue that they were equally evident in her account. She valued the class and the diversity within it as we have seen from her comments, but also learnt to be critical of some of the processes within the groups. She also interpreted some of the more potentially conflictual moments as not necessarily problematic - she indicated that she has learnt that conflict is important and that 'there can be no learning without it'.

The kind of learner role she constructed for herself is of someone who is 'critical' of things around them, who is prepared to accept different views. She used the example of a role play on the RDP we did in class as helping her to understand that diverse views are important. She said that this then led her to interview people for her assignment who would have very

different views of it. Thus, while Pat speaks of the value of education and the value of the specific curriculum on the course and the role that the lecturers played, she drew with her learning on the course and life more broadly. She is not solely dependent on the course for learning, but draws learning from her involvement in other things in her life.

One of the big learnings for her was her awareness, like Nomzi, of the different roles one plays in life. While she says she came into the course as a literacy facilitator

> there are various other roles that you play. You're not just a facilitator, you're [also] not just coming to here to be an academic

Thus for Pat, her learning was adding value to her full and busy life as a mature woman involved in voluntary work. She seems to have gained extensively from the course through her ability to realise that while she was 'not young any more'

> education has value for anyone at any stage of their life

For Pat therefore, success in learning came at a relatively late stage in her life but at a stage which allowed her to approach her learning with maturity and critical awareness. While she often seemed to doubt her own ability to engage 'academically' with certain aspects of the course, she found much pleasure in using her mind and being in a space which enabled her to be part of a social practice together with other adult learners.

Themes

Analysis of the data shows that all the students in this study commented on their motivations, their perceptions of the curriculum and their actual experiences in the classroom. I shall discuss these below and in this way, highlight similar and contrasting experiences across the four accounts. I feel that in different but highly significant ways, these issues shaped their process of meaning making and learning on the course.

Motivation

What was interesting to note were the different reasons that the students gave for doing the course. While I didn't specifically set out to explore these, students spoke at some length about their motives. Looking at motivation begins to indicate the complex relationship between identity, context(s) and learning. This relationship has been theorised by West

(1995) and others. In an article discussing adult learners and access courses, West focuses on the role that culture plays in shaping learners and their motives on the one hand, but also how learners might find ways to challenge such prescriptions on the other, taking

> 'risks with themselves and their identities, to become active agents in reconstituting selves, lives and stories in ... proactive ways' (ibid:134).

I found his article interesting particularly in the sense that his understanding of motivation is one that moves beyond more traditional individualised psychological approaches. What West argues for is a view which is more inter-disciplinary, 'focusing on the subjective as well as the cultural and social preconditions for learning and effective human agency' (ibid:134). This compliments Thesen's (1994) notion of the importance of understanding agency in learning and strengthens Flower's (1994) understanding of a literate act as an 'individual constructive act' which reflects complex and at times even contradictory goals and purposes - goals and purposes which she believes 'often drive meaning making' (ibid:18).

It also supports what emerged in my interview data. In looking at the comments of the students I interviewed, I was surprised at the lack of motivation for how this course would build their skills as practitioners. Nomzi was the exception here in that she alluded to her practitioner identity a number of times in her interview and the way this course had helped her to develop in this way. I assumed, given that they were granted access on the basis of their role as adult education practitioners, that this might have been the primary reason for doing the course - particularly with the recent emphasis on the field of adult education and the moves to professionalise it (see DEAL 1994 for an elaboration of these arguments). Having said this however, one needs to bear in mind the importance attached to formal education and the fact that many of these learners would have been denied access in the past due to a range of socio-economic and political reasons eg. poor or interrupted schooling, lack of resources. In other words, the reality the history of formal education for the majority of learners in South Africa support West's comments in interesting ways.

In addition, the timing of the interviews may have had an impact on their responses. The interviews were conducted at the end of the year and thus their motivations might well have been shaped by their experiences during the course of the year on the Certificate and their experiences of the curriculum and discourse. Yasmine and Tembi, in particular, were motivated by the drive to 'be students' and to succeed on the course for the perceived benefits they would receive from having a UCT qualification. Their student identity could therefore be argued to be the main driving force behind their motivations to succeed. Nomzi and Pat,

while both having quite different practitioner roles, seemed to speak to the role of both student and practitioner as motivating them to succeed. While Nomzi quite clearly seemed driven to reflect on her own work through the learning she gained on the course, Pat felt that the course made her more aware, through the many roles that she played, that studying at the university was not only for 'academic purposes'.

When discussing motivation, it is also interesting to look at moments of 'demotivation' - when students feel that they are not motivated to continue or to be part of the class. This emerged strongly in Yasmine's experience where she often spoke of feeling 'alienated' or 'on the outside' and it impacted quite directly on her learning. However, as I have argued, it did not completely obscure her success. Tembi too, in particular situations in the class, felt demotivated and less inclined to participate. As West argues therefore, we need to be able to see not just subjective but cultural and social conditions that impact on learning and effective human agency in various ways.

Perceptions of curriculum

In Chapter Two I argued, following James (1995), for the importance of understanding the role that 'habitus' or the active presence of past experience, plays in learning. It is a role that 'orientates' rather than strictly determines action and highlights the mutually dependent or constitutive relationship between these orientations and 'fields' or contexts. Students, in other words, have orientations to learning which impact on their expectations and perceptions of what learning on a formal course at the university is about. How these play out are interesting.

As I indicated in Chapter One, the course had a fairly clear twofold aim - at least to us as curriculum developers and teachers. First, it aimed to assist learner-practitioners to improve on their practice via critical reflection and second, it aimed to help students develop academic skills or competencies required for university study. While these were not overtly discussed with the students, they were emphasised quite directly through aspects of the curriculum such as assignments, group work and text-based activities. In these activities, we often grouped the students according to their sites of practice, their organisational location or their field of specialisation.

However, given that the course was in its first formal year, there was no pre-existing curriculum. As such it could be argued that the course discourse was in a state of flux. It is foreseeable then that learners will rely on a 'combination of conventions' to make sense

of the demands of such a course and with a range of motivations for coming to the university. These are complex issues however, and as can be seen from the cases above, it often became almost impossible to separate them as learners from their broader lifeworld contexts and as well as previous experiences of learning. For example, Nomzi's two identities of adult and learner were crucial to her success in that they allowed her to find ways to apply her learning while in Yasmine's case, her identity as learner brought both conflict and resolution for her in terms of her previous experiences - learning and otherwise.

Groups and group work: the social context of learning

In our course, we emphasised group work and some of the assessment tasks were built around and developed out of such approaches. This was for a number of reasons. The class was extremely diverse as alluded to earlier and at times we wished to mix the students; at other times, we grouped the class according to their sites of practice for specific exercises.

Many people speak of the value of learning in groups. Bayer (1990) speaks of the importance of Collaborative Apprenticeship Learning (CAL) in mediating learning in the Vygotskian sense while Hartman (1989) argues strongly for 'syndicate based peer group learning' as an alternative approach for developing 'deep level processing' in learning. We also, following Bayer and Hartman, saw collaborative learning as an important alternative to individual, competitive learning. Whether this is always true however, is not so clear as we saw from students' comments on their experiences of groups and group work.

While some of them valued the role the group can play in learning (Nomzi and Pat), groups also cause conflict that can make meaning negotiation difficult (Yasmine and Tembi). Group work, therefore while it is highly valued within the discourse of adult education, needs to be carefully thought through as a tool for learning (Tudge 1987). This is because often the 'espoused' value of such an approach is in conflict with its value in learning: simply facilitating peer interactions or pairing students of varying abilities may be insufficient in promoting learning. Tudge argues that we need to pay more attention to the process of collaboration and the specific conditions that may help some but hinder others. This is particularly so if learners engage with learning in different ways and are both 'novices' and 'experts' (Kasworm 1990). In other words, it appears that working in a group can also cause tension and competition amongst its members - the very antithesis of the espoused value of group work in learning.

Assessment: writing and critical reflection

For the students, one of the big differences between previous non-formal courses and the Certificate course has been formal assessment. For them, this was an important signifier of their success on the course.

In thinking about assessment on the Certificate programme, we saw the need for it to serve two parallel purposes. Firstly, given the fact that the course targeted adult education practitioners, there was a need to allow them to draw on that work experience through assessment tasks - to enable them to become 'critical, reflective practitioners' (Schon 1983; 1987). While writing is by no means the only way in which this can be done, written assessment is an important component of formal learning and we attempted to incorporate assignment tasks which would require a reflection on their own work.

This links to the second purpose we saw for assessment on the course. We understood, given many of our learners had no experience of formal higher education, that we needed to allow for them to develop 'academic literacy' skills - skills which would hopefully help them to 'acquire the discourse' (Gee 1990), or at least an important component of it. However, the ability to write critical arguments, particularly when linked to assessment, is not easy. Many studies exploring learning in higher education allude to this (Chiserie-Strater 1991; Flower 1994; James 1995).

Meyers (1986) argues that while the notion of critical reflection is not new, there is often an implicit assumption in traditional teaching that learning to think or reflect critically develops naturally as students move through tasks of increasing complexity. He argues however, that critical thinking intentionally involves introducing an element of disequilibrium in order for students to rework or reconstruct their thinking patterns. Many students often resist this process as reconstructing thinking processes can be painful - such (thinking) processes are highly personal thereby involving well-established values or implicit theories about the world formed on the basis of accumulated experience. Therefore, because critical thinking involves challenging such implicit theories and teaching new perspectives for interpretation, Meyers believes we need to be aware that it can be a very emotional process.

Emotions about the experience of learning emerged strongly in the accounts in this study, often causing students to doubt their own ability to succeed. This we saw clearly in Yasmine's case where it even caused anger and frustration for her towards the course lecturers. For Tembi, assessment was important - it validated her. In tutorials in particular

when she was discussing her assignments, she felt confident in her ability as a student. Nomzi, when asked how she felt about formal assessment, said she was pleased that the Certificate (unlike WLP) had introduced it because 'this is when we get the learnings'. Pat, who saw the course and assignments as 'academic' felt that her ability to tackle and succeed on these tasks gave her a new sense of herself and 'I realise I have something to say you know'.

Learning as 'meaning-making and negotiation': constructing roles for success

As I set out in Chapters One and Two, the key question underpinning this study of student learning was as follows:

* what does the process of constructing a successful learner role entail, and how is this process perceived by different students?

I have explored this through case study research with four adult learners on a recently-formalised programme in adult education, drawing on ethnographic interviews and observations of learning. I have linked what emerged through the data with theoretical perspectives on learning, drawing largely on sociocultural theories. I have presented the case studies of the students individually as well as looked at some of the patterns that emerged across the accounts. Analysing specific experiences of group work and writing on the course, as well as exploring learners perceptions of the course, the accounts presented provide an understanding of learning as the process of meaning making, negotiation and learner role construction.

Understanding these processes helped me to gain more insight into the challenges of succeeding on the Certificate for each of the students. For Yasmine, she found ways through her writing to accomplish this and to suspend many of the conflicts that could otherwise potentially have blocked her learning. Tembi, by taking on a fairly traditional role was able to foreground her student identity in her learning. Nomzi, through her ability to link her classroom learning with her practitioner experience, was able to gain deeper insight into both her practice and her formal learning; while Pat, through her valuing of the formal learning environment and her maturity, was able to negotiate a space for herself within a class that could have caused her to feel alienated.

From this I believe we can see, as Thesen (1994) has argued, it is not so much that students are 'in' or 'out' of the discourse. It is rather to begin with the individual, to understand the

relationship between discourses and see them as a process of 'meaning exchange' that meaning making and negotiation have real and significant meaning in understanding learning. Individuals can learn from various points - the centre or the margins. However what is significant is to understand that they are in the process of border crossing and making decisions.In addition, the ways in which students dealt with the demands of the course - assessment and working in groups - can be seen to reflect both previous experiences of learning as well as their broader lifeworld contexts. However, while this is a unique process for each student, if we wish to understand processes of learning, we need to understand that understanding the contextualised nature of learning - both inside and outside of the classroom - is crucial. In other words, it is at the intersection of the individual and the social and through the construction of learner roles that meaning is made and success attained.

This study has focused specifically on adult learners and their engagement with learning. Given the use of experience in many approaches to adult eduction, this approach is particularly relevant to this study. However, following Thesen, I believe that this approach is equally relevant to studies with other student groupings. This brings me back to Flower's comment with which I began this dissertation. We need to begin to take more seriously the role that experience plays in learning so as to develop approaches that capture the complexity of learning processes. This will allow us to see students as 'thinking personal agents' both shaped and being shaped by social and cultural contexts in which they attempt to make meaning and negotiate success for themselves in learning.

If we understand learning as discussed above, this has serious implications for how we conceptualise teaching-learning situations and particularly for learning across contexts. In the next chapter, I shall raise some points as a beginning to thinking creatively about these issues. Given that this study has argued for a better understanding of the relationship between formal, institutional and epistemological access, I believe it would be amiss to conclude the study without any discussion in this regard. The importance of developing a deeper understanding of 'cross-context learning' has been brought home to me both by studies on transfer of learning and by the experiences of the students I have worked with.

Three of the four students in my case studies - Nomzi, Tembi and Yasmine - were successful in applying for the Advanced Diploma in our department based on their successful completion of the Certificate course. The fourth student Pat, decided against going further with her studies. She chose instead to spend time with her grandchild.

The students are now in the second year of the Diploma (1997) and I have found it interesting

to watch their progress. While I am not involved in teaching directly on the Diploma, I have been asked to be available for support work with any of the students. Through this I have had ongoing contact with these three students and have found it useful, given my interest in learning across contexts. It has also helped to reinforce my understanding of meaning making as happening at the intersection of the individual and the social. The context of the Diploma is in many ways a more 'traditionally' formal learning context where practice, while valued, is not drawn on explicitly in curriculum and pedagogical terms. This has had implications for the students and their ability to make meaning and negotiate learning. It has also forced them to redefine their learner roles, not without problems.

All three students passed the first year (1996) and are about to graduate (December 1997). Their experiences however have been mixed. Nomzi was one of only three students of a class of over forty students who had to write a supplementary examination at the end of year I; Tembi came to me for assignment support throughout the two years and found the Diploma

> shoo, it is difficult Janice ... yes;

while Yasmine, after failing her first assignment on the course, was heard to comment in the corridor

> perhaps I am not student material after all ...

In the final chapter which follows, I will to look at the relationship between these two contexts of learning in order to raise implications for curriculum development which aims to facilitate access and success across learning contexts.

CHAPTER FIVE

TEACHING AND LEARNING: CURRICULUM DESIGNING FOR SUCCESS

Introduction

It was argued in Chapter Four that the students in my study found ways both individual and social to engage successfully in learning. The purpose of this chapter is not to continue this exploration. It is to use it as a means of moving beyond the study of individual students' experiences towards some considerations of the consequences of this understanding for teaching, learning and curriculum initiatives that might assist students to find meaning in their learning. While in the context of the Certificate course these students dealt successfully with their learning, I wish to highlight some of the potential barriers and boundaries they need to negotiate to make meaning for themselves in their process of learning across other contexts.

I have argued in this study that it is important to unpack and better understand the contextualised nature of learning; to understand that learning experiences are embedded in very specific discourse communities and social practices. Having said that however, it is not sufficient to leave the discussion here. We need to be able to better understand how these issues of learning play themselves out across contexts - in this case, particularly where there has been a formal access path set up in institutional terms.

This chapter will perform two functions: first, it will conclude the study of case studies of learning; second, it will highlight the complexities of teaching and learning within and across a range of contexts. This is crucial to understand if we are serious about developing a better understanding of the relationship between access and success.

Re-thinking approaches to curriculum development

In thinking about the relationship between access and success, we need to look at the implicit assumptions about learning behind curriculum development initiatives in specific learning contexts. However, developing curriculum and teaching and learning processes to aid this process are often difficult and complex processes. I alluded briefly to this in Chapter One, when it was argued that 'curriculum is a selection process' where certain values, ideas and views are valued and others not (Lawton 1975). Luckett (1995) argues furthermore that if we are serious about engaging in such a process, one which needs to take what she terms 'a holistic approach to curriculum development'. Following her argument, we need to

understand that this involves not only what should be taught (content), but also

> what values, theories, assumptions and beliefs about knowledge underlie the curriculum (epistemology), how knowledge and learners are organised (structure), how teachers teach and learners learn (pedagogy), how learning is tested (assessment) and also how the whole is evaluated (evaluation) (ibid:1).

Understanding learning within the broader contexts of students' lives is important and the ways in which the individual and social intersect, has been seen to be an crucial factor in determining 'success'. In other words, the role that previous experience(s) plays in learning, and the ways in which this can be incorporated into curriculum and teaching-and-learning needs to be better understood across learning contexts.

Other authors have provided support for this view (Chiserie-Strater 1991; Thesen 1994). In her study investigating academic literacy issues with second language students, Thesen argues that the students she interviewed were 'remarkably aware and fluent' when they came to describing significant events or transitions in their lives. Linking this to Gee's (1990) notion of meta-awareness and learning 'as a point of power' and thus of his challenge to teachers to know whether students have a learning or acquisition advantage on arrival at university, she believes that the students in her study do have resources generated by the experiences and transitions they have had to make in their lives. She feels strongly that it must be possible to find ways in which to translate this into the formal learning experience in universities.

This also links to Kasworm's notion of adult learners as both 'novices *and* experts', coming to the learning situation with much expertise gained from learning experiences within the broader context of their lives. As institutionalised provision, formal adult education is part of the structure of cultural reproduction and needs to take cognisance of the requirements of academic Discourse. It developed however out of a movement critical of this form of provision, critical of abstract, purely theoretical Discourses. Thus critical questions to be asked are: is everyday experience validated in curriculum terms and how does this relate to the acquisition of the academic discourse and skills required by learners to succeed - particularly in the case of the Diploma course? How do we enable the histories, experiences, cultures and ways of knowing of adult practitioner/learners to be given a voice in the formal classroom while at the same time constructing learner roles that allow adult learners to acquire the cultural capital represented by the discourse of the academy more broadly?

In order to explore this issue in curriculum terms, Muller and Taylor (1994) argue for the importance of the concept of 'boundary'. They believe that in progressive curriculum theory,

the aim of all pedagogy is, or should be, learning to cross-over the boundaries between different kinds of knowledge, namely the 'everyday/profane' and the 'formal/sacred'. They argue that it is not helpful to collapse boundaries or render them invisible - we need rather to distinguish between these two kinds of knowledge. In other words, it is not enough to use examples from the everyday in the classroom. We need to show students how to get from the 'profane' to the 'sacred' in very practical, concrete ways.

Robins (1995) in a response to Muller and Taylor's argument above, argues that it is problematic to set up an 'everyday/formal' divide in the way in which the authors have. Rather, he believes that one needs to investigate the specificities of each of these kinds of knowledge and to appreciate the 'contextualised' nature of both. Furthermore, unless one gives attention to the social location of students and the complicated nature of acquisition and reception, students can be seen as 'standardised subjects' that respond in standard and predictable ways.

This emerged strongly in my study and I thus believe boundaries are important - but not as a means of preventing access. Rather, they need to made visible as indicators to both students and teachers of the places for 'meaning making and negotiation' and of the opportunities for acquisition. I would argue therefore that classrooms need to facilitate both acquisition and learning so as to allow for students to 'negotiate and make meaning'. Simply focusing on learning will both not assist this process and not take cognisance of the complexities of the social process of learning and the links between classroom learning and the broader context(s) of students lives. While the context of the Certificate class allowed for this to some extent through the explicit use of experience for learning and through teaching and assessment practices which allowed for 'acquisition' to occur, this might not be the case in other contexts of learning - academic literacy has very context-embedded meanings. This we saw in the comments reflecting the students' experiences on the Diploma course, in particular in the case of Tembi and Yasmine.

What does all this mean for curriculum design, particularly if we are serious about facilitating epistemological access and thus success across and not only within contexts of learning? As a means to conclude this chapter, I shall therefore take a brief turn from the specificity of the UCT context to broader questions which could guide curriculum development initiatives both here and elsewhere.

Curriculum: towards a hermeneutic paradigm

In order to address this issue, I would like to locate the discussion within an understanding of curriculum as 'contextualised social practice' (Cornbleth 1990). According to her, this interpretation allows for a definition of curriculum as 'an on-going social process comprised of the interactions of students, teachers, knowledge and milieu' (ibid:6). Within this interpretation, it becomes clear that curriculum development cannot be separated from both its systemic and extra-systemic contexts. However, whilst the demands for curriculum change within this frame usually arise in the extra-systemic context (we have seen signs of this in Chapter One), these pressures for change will be

> mediated by the internal structure and culture of the university [which] ... will usually mediate those demands in ways which are system maintaining (Cornbleth in Luckett 1995:7).

In order to make changes in our thinking about curriculum therefore involves a paradigm shift, which Luckett (1995) argues involves a shift from a 'traditionalist' to more 'hermeneutically-oriented' one. In other words, we need to shift from a paradigm where the learning process is largely invisible, where knowledge is treated as an object and where the 'lecturer-as-expert' determines beforehand what the students need to learn, to a paradigm where curriculum is viewed as

> an ongoing activity that is shaped by various contextual influences within and beyond the classroom and is accomplished interactively, primarily by teachers and students (Cornbleth 1990:24).

Given that hermeneutic (interpretive) inquiry involves continuous and reflective interpretation of social interactions and their underlying meanings and assumptions (Luckett 1995), such a basis for curriculum development allows space for teachers to (re)interpret the broad institutional curriculum goals within their own classrooms. It also puts the learner's understanding, thinking and reflective processes as the focus of the curriculum and while it does not disregard learning outcomes, it emphasises the learning processes involved in achieving these.

On the one hand, the notion of 'curriculum as shaped by various contextual influences', parallels the understanding developed in Chapters Two and Four where 'meaning making and negotiation' were seen as central to the process of success. On the other, the emphasis on 'process' and not just outcomes allows us to develop better understandings regarding the construction of 'learner roles', something I argued was key to understanding learning. As

Elsey (1986) puts it, if role is the 'mediating acting part or social construction' that relates the individual to context(s), the 'learner role' constructed by individual learners in their process of learning makes explicit the processes through which 'the individual negotiates a particular relationship between the self and learning' (ibid:139).

Given the meanings, significance and complex processes by which adults engage in learning activities and the fact that constructing new roles and identities is complex, this shift in thinking about curriculum opens up news ways to conceptualise teaching and learning for 'success'. Drawing on a range of models including neo-Vygotskian and constructivist models, Luckett (1995) argues that a number of strategies to assist learners to achieve success must be built into curriculum planning. These include modelling (to offer behaviour for imitation), feed-back, instructing (as instructional conversation), questioning (to assist the learner in the process of achieving an understanding performance) and cognitive structuring (where the teacher 'lends' her own cognitive structure to facilitate the learner's thinking and acting).

The last strategy, namely cognitive structuring, is an important strategy and can be done in three ways, all of which have important implications for teaching. According to Luckett, these are

* teaching as facilitating access to academic discourse communities;
* teaching as facilitating the building of cognitive structure; and
* teaching as facilitating meta-cognition.

Following on from a neo-Vygotskian frame, such 'means of assistance' need to be carried out in social contexts or 'activity settings' (Tharp & Gallimore 1988) where 'settings' are collaborative activities in which expert and novice work towards shared goals. What is stressed is that these activities should be meaningful to all participants; should result in a real product and that it must be understood that they might have different meanings across cultures. This collaboration in turn requires a degree of 'intimacy' and 'intersubjectivity' between teacher and learner. Luckett argues that while this is often difficult in many higher education contexts given the large student numbers and demands made on them during the teaching-learning process:

> if teaching is to be effective, the importance of getting in touch with learners' individual learning processes and of structuring appropriate social contexts for teaching-learning interactions cannot be overlooked (ibid:30).

These are important insights. They begin to indicate for me that it can help facilitate

students' movement from one cultural context to another and it can allow students to redesign meaning-making strategies so that they can be transferred from one learning situation to another. While this process of negotiation and redesigning might be difficult and often painful, we all need these skills if we are going to take an active role in designing social futures, futures which can lead to critical engagement and thus improved chances for access and success in higher education and other contexts.

Negotiation across contexts: access, learning and success

This chapter has moved the direction and emphasis of this study from the local, the specific of individual cases of learning outwards to the broader context and issues of curriculum development and pedagogy. It has in a sense, brought us back to where we began - looking at the impact of broader contexts and lifeworlds on the process of learning, of acquiring the discourse and of negotiation and meaning making. To do this, it has introduced the importance of creating space for both students and teachers to engage in processes of 'redesigning' and of collaboration in learning. It has also re-emphasised the importance of drawing on the experiences of students within the pursuit of critical engagement in learning.

In my brief concluding comment, I wish to touch on a last, yet important component of learning - that of assessment. While assessment was alluded to and discussed in to some extent through the case studies, investigating the issue itself was beyond the scope of this study. Many authors have argued for it to be an important component of any curriculum and pedagogical process (Street 1996; Luckett 1995). We saw how the students in my case studies came in some ways to define their engagement with learning and subsequent learner role construction in relation to the kinds of assessment tasks that are set, both on the Certificate course and the Diploma and how they defined much of their learning experience, successful role construction and subsequent success or failure in terms of this. For lecturers as well, assessment is a crucial component of their teaching practice. Luckett captures this in her comment when she argues that

> [f]orms of assessment are perhaps the strongest indicators to students of the epistemological paradigm underlying a course or curriculum (ibid:17).

Assessment is clearly an important and complex issue in any learning context - particularly if we wish to improve learners' chances of epistemological access and therefore success across learning contexts. Returning to Gee (1990) for the last time, I think his arguments about the relationship between acquisition and learning are important and his point about

incorporating opportunities for both in our classrooms is crucial. While it means that we, as teachers and educators in higher education, face enormous challenges in confronting and unpacking our espoused ways of teaching and thus assumptions about learning, we need to take up the challenge if we are serious about the relationship between access and success. We have to focus on creative ways of mediating between non traditional students and academic discourses (Thesen 1994) particularly I believe, through the ways in which we think about assessment and its relationship to learning. At the same time, however, given my arguments about the relationship between learning, learners and lifeworld contexts, we have to be open to the creativity of our students and to their processes of making meaning in the context(s) of higher education learning.

I therefore see this study of learning as laying the foundation, or providing the framework, for investigating teaching, learning and - particularly - assessment issues in the future. I believe it is crucial to explore possible ways to think about assessment practices that incorporate these concerns; that aim to contribute teaching and learning situations which maximise opportunities for learners to make meaning so to engage in 'literate acts' (Flower 1994) for success in higher education. Following from this, I believe, we need to work with the tension between the formal requirements of the curriculum and students' ways of engaging with learning. This was made clear to me often during my relationship with the students on the Certificate course and observations of their learning. It is thus fitting, I believe, that my final comment belongs to one of them.

Tembi, Yasmine and Nomzi have just completed the Advanced Diploma course (November 1997) and are about to graduate with a post graduate qualification in adult education. Their four years in the department as I have indicated in this study, have been filled with moments of both challenge and opportunity. At their recent farewell function, I spoke to Yasmine. When I asked her what she felt had kept her going during difficult times, she said that it was 'my will not to give up and to learn the rules' [of university study]. She expresses clearly here the experience of acquiring the discourse; of even possibly having 'cracked the code' (Bock 1988). Furthermore, she said that she couldn't believe that she had finally completed the Diploma and would miss the challenges this had provided for her over the four years:

> while it was difficult - and I can be very critical you know ... - I feel that I have learned what it means to study in the university. I never thought I would get so far when I started ...

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APPENDICES

CERTIFICATE IN ADULT EDUCATION, TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

CONTEXTUAL STUDIES (EMS105W)

ASSIGNMENT 4

PLEASE NOTE:

* This assignment should be between 3 and 5 written A4 pages.
* *YOU MUST CHOOSE EITHER 4A OR 4B*
* *DUE DATE: 4.00pm, TUESDAY, AUGUST 15.*

ASSIGNMENT 4A

What do you think the RDP would look like if it was successfully implemented in your community or workplace?

EXPECTED OUTCOMES:
In order to complete this assignment successfully, we expect you to:
* show that you have a good understanding of the development needs of your community/workplace
* demonstrate that you have some understanding of the underlying principles of the RDP
* show the ability to interpret these principles in relation to the situation in your own community/workplace
* put forward a clear argument of your own view on the meaning of the RDP.

ASSIGNMENT 4B:

"The RDP means all things to all people"

Do you agree with the above statement?
Make a clear argument, backed up by evidence, as to whether this statement is true or not

In order to answer this assignment, you will need to research the different views, understandings and meanings that people bring to the RDP. You should interview a minimum of 3 people, and they should be as different as possible (in terms of culture, language, class background, occupation, gender etc.)

EXPECTED OUTCOMES:
In order to complete this assignment successfully, we expect you to:
* show that you understand the significance of the issue or question raised by above quote
* show that you are able to do some simple research, present your findings clearly, and to interpret your findings
* argue your own viewpoint on whether the above statement is correct or not
* make a clear argument as whether your research findings support your own views on the above statement, and if not, why not.

CERTIFICATE IN ADULT EDUCATION, TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

COURSE EMS203W: ADULT LEARNING & TEACHING II

ASSIGNMENT COVER SHEET

Name: Student Number:

ASSIGNMENT NO. & TITLE:

Date:

Please answer the following 2 questions in as much detail as possible:

1. **To help you establish your own patterns of learning, reflect and describe the process you followed to complete this assignment** (this could include an estimate of the time it took, who you talked to, what you read, how many drafts you did and the order that you followed).