

# 'A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions': learning to be a university student

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## **Abstract**

Accounts of emotion and affect have recently gained popularity in studies of learning. This paper draws on qualitative research with a group of non-traditional students entering an elite university in the UK to illustrate how being and becoming a university student is an intrinsically emotional process. It argues that feelings of loss and dis-location are inherent to the students' experiences of entering university, and that 'coming to know' a new community of practice is an emotional process that can incorporate feelings of alienation and exclusion, as well as of excitement and exhilaration. A broader understanding of how students learn then depends not just upon the individual's emotional commitment to developing a new learning identity but on the emotional interaction between the student and the learning environment of the university.

## Introduction

In recent years studies of how students develop learning identities have become central to theories of learning in higher education. Individuals entering higher education, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds, often have to adapt to changed ways of learning in order to get the greatest benefit from their course. But universities too must adapt to the changing needs of the 'new' learners, and searching questions are being asked about the role of university culture in supporting or impeding learning. It is becoming clear that learning is a profoundly reflexive and emotional construct. There are two reasons for this. First, it entails the undoing of earlier learning because students enter a new environment where there may be differences in learning approaches and teaching styles, and where they may be studying radically different subjects. And secondly, it is now recognised that learning does not take place within the realm of individual cognition. The entire person, group or even organisation can become involved in the learning process and universities have the opportunity to influence a student's approach towards learning by offering an environment that encourages an active learner approach (Zepke et al 2006). These accounts open up for scrutiny the emotional dimensions of individual (and organisational) learning, and draw attention to the multi-layered and complex nature of the learning process. Some learning can involve upsetting or alarming experiences, leading to feelings of psychological vulnerability and insecurity. Other learning experiences are incredibly positive and can engender feelings of hopeful anticipation, exhilaration and discovery (Griffiths et al 2005: 275).

In this article we examine some of the theoretical and empirical issues surrounding the powerful emotional component of learning amongst higher education students. We use the experiences of a sample of non-traditional students who entered an 'elite' Scottish university directly from further education colleges and where the learning experiences in the two settings were profoundly different. In the opening section of the paper we show how a focus on the emotional aspects of the learning experience is a valuable addition to literature on student learning. The next section describes the nature of the study and the methods of investigation. There follows a detailed analysis of the empirical findings, including discussion of the emotional turbulence

the students (and their families) experienced as they went from studying at college to studying at university.

## **Emotional transitions to university: learning the new rules of the game**

The recent interest in student learning in education studies is part of a wider renaissance in studies of post-compulsory education and lifelong learning (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; Hughes 2004). Along with a policy concern to widen access to students who had previously been marginalised within or excluded from HE, there has been an intellectual concern to rethink theories of how students learn. In particular, there has been recognition of the many facets of learning: the cognitive, rational and objective and the intuitive, imaginative and subjective (Grabov 1997, Illeris 2003). Attention has also focused on the transformative power of learning in adult education (Mezirow 1991) using insights from psychoanalytical theory (Boyd and Myers 1988) and critical social theory (Scott 1997). Both the rational and the affective play a role in learning and yet in policy discourse there continues to be a 'commonsense' emphasis on learning as a cognitive process where students internalise knowledge that is largely cerebral. Too often it is assumed that students who experience difficulties with learning, and who struggle to complete, come from more diverse backgrounds and have non-standard qualifications and lower entry grades. In this scenario failure to succeed is 'blamed' on the attributes of the individual students who are regarded as being poorly prepared for learning and/or lacking in motivation and academic ability. And despite the burgeoning academic interest in learning experiences and experiential learning (Gibbs 1992, Kolb 1984, Rogers 1975), the literature has remarkably little to say about the emotional dimensions of learning (see also Brown 2000, Boler 1999). There is little investigation of the emotional impulse to learning – of the difference that confidence, motivation, perseverance and creativity make to the individual's wider disposition to learning, or of the potential changes in learning identities as students move from one setting to another or one life stage to another. This latter point is especially pertinent to non-traditional students many of whom are returning to education later in life and grappling with new or unfamiliar learning environments. Perhaps more than any other identifiable group of students they are embedded in situations which bring into sharp relief the emotional dynamics of learning.

This emphasis on the rational component of learning, at the expense of its emotional and social dimensions, has been critiqued for privileging outcome measures and individual aptitudes to learning over more searching questions about university cultures and the social nature of learning (Taylor 1998). Not surprisingly commentators have called for a broadening of how learning is conceptualised, and have looked to explanations of the 'social situatedness' of learning. Much of this concentrates on the social nature of learning, with inferences drawn from studies of how people learn outside of formal educational settings, and is concerned to move beyond theories of learning which stress an individual's cognitive abilities. There are two main approaches which merit attention. First, the 'theory of situated learning', closely associated with the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), seeks to explain changes in learning practices when individuals become exposed to new influences and new situations. Their theory of social practice emphasises 'the inherently socially negotiated character of meaning and the interested, concerned character of the thought and action of persons-in-activity'. This view also claims that 'learning, thinking and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from, the socially and culturally structured world' (Lave and Wenger 1991 pp.50-51). Learning is viewed as participation in social practice – subjective as well as objective – whereby newcomers to a particular community of practice are both absorbing, and being absorbed in, the 'culture of practice'. Apprentice learners typically come in to the margins or the periphery of a new learning environment and from there 'gradually assemble a general idea of what constitutes the practice of the community' (ibid: 95). Rather than learning by replicating the performance of others or by acquiring knowledge transmitted in instruction, learning occurs through 'centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community. Because the place of knowledge is within a community of practice, questions of learning must be addressed within the development cycles of that community' (ibid: 100).

From this perspective significant learning is what changes our ability to engage in practice and to understand why we do it. Such learning has to do with the development of our practices and our ability to negotiate meaning. It is not just the acquisition of memories, habits, and skills, but the formation of an identity. As Wenger (1998:96) points out 'our experience and our membership [of a community of practice] inform each other, pull each other, transform each other. We create ways of participating in a practice in the very process of contributing to making that practice

what it is'. Participating in a new practice or community involves us in forming an identity in relation to our competence such that 'we know who we are by what is familiar, understandable, usable, negotiable; we know who we are not by what is foreign, opaque, unwieldy, unproductive' (ibid: 153).

Issues about learner identities and learning careers are at the heart of a second set of approaches to the social process of learning. Here, the emphasis is on the need to understand dispositions to learning as part and parcel of a social process of identity formation that is sensitive to biographical narratives and cultural influences in a variety of settings and across a range of scales (Hodkinson and Bloomer 2000, Osborn et al 2003). In this scenario, being and becoming a learner is explained as the product of complex interplay amongst the social and economic structures which shape people's lives, the educational institutions which determine the processes of engagement with learning, and the learners themselves (Crossan et al 2003: 58). The emphasis is on the factors which motivate and empower individuals to take advantage of the learning opportunities open to them, and not on their innate ability to learn. Learners are not passive recipients of teacher knowledge but co-producers of meaning. And the identity of the learner at the heart of this new model is similarly reconfigured. Learners are not single, unitary figures who absorb knowledge in relative isolation from their peers, but complex, late modern figures whose learning biographies are fluid and subject to change as social mores and discourses change or as they move to new learning environments or enter a new phase of the life course.

Although the central concern of these new approaches is not with the emotional component of learning they do contain important insights about its affective dimensions. In particular, biographical studies suggest that learners have inherently 'fragile' identities: they follow 'fractured' and 'disrupted' pathways through formal education; their engagement with new learning environments is often tentative and uncertain, at least in the first instance; and their disposition to learning, and eventual success (or failure), is affected by a range of psychological factors including confidence, ambivalence and hostility. In this model, learning is a process of identity formation which is inherently risky and uncertain (Gallacher et al 2002, Jackson 2003). And studies which draw on Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning show that the difficulties of becoming embedded in a community of practice come into play precisely because of their emotional dimensions. It is the 'culture shock' on

entering higher education – the anxiety about not knowing what is expected or not understanding the new rules of the game – which underpins and becomes entangled with the learning process (Griffith et al 2005). This shock is not entirely located within the community of practice but is crucially influenced by structural factors related to the class and gender location of the learners. These emotional dynamics are most pronounced – and most open to scrutiny – amongst students with no previous experience of HE where there is no reservoir of knowledge or expertise to draw upon. In such cases the acquisition of a learning identity is complex and contradictory: it can evoke powerful feelings of displacement, anxiety, fear, and guilt, alongside the more accepted emotional responses of hopeful anticipation, pleasure and self-esteem (Reay 2005, Christie et al 2006). This is not to say that conventional undergraduates are untouched by these emotional processes, far from it; indeed the rising incidence of stress and mental health disorders amongst young students, and the particular pressures experienced by middle class women in high expectation educational settings, suggest otherwise (HUCS 2003, Lucey and Reay 2002).

In this paper we consider the ways in which emotional processes underpin and become entangled with the social processes of learning. Little attention has been paid to the emotional processes through which students develop new (and often initially insecure) learning identities, or to the emotional costs and consequences of learning the new rules of the game, or to the possibility that the emotional labour involved in becoming a student is part of a matrix of new inequalities being created within the mass HE system. This latter point touches on the recognition given to the links between emotional labour and changing identities which has received some attention in studies of the pathways which non-traditional students take to university (Christie et al 2005).

## **About the study**

In order to cast more light on the emotional component of learning we draw on data gathered from interviews conducted as part of a longitudinal project on the teaching and learning experiences of non-traditional students. The university-funded research was driven by a concern amongst managers to enhance the learning experiences of the

cohort of students who had entered direct from further education colleges. Transitions from further to higher education are not straightforward, and the great majority of students with higher national (HN) qualifications move to study at post-92 institutions (Gallacher 2006). This study is unusual for two reasons. First, it is based in an 'elite' university where the proportion of students from non-traditional pathways is low. And secondly, it is longitudinal in nature and designed to follow the students over the three or four years of their university education and the year following graduation. The tracking of students through time is an unusual approach because the established body of research on non-traditional students more often provides retrospective accounts of students' experiences.

This paper reports on the initial stages of the research and draws on interviews undertaken with the students during their first year at university. In September 2004 a sample of students was drawn from within the humanities and social sciences college; all students entering the college with Higher National qualifications were invited to take part in the study. Of the possible total group of 79 students, 28 agreed to be interviewed twice over their first year, and this paper is based on their narratives. Students were questioned broadly about their transitions to university, about learning to be university students, and about perceptions of their success once there. Although they were not questioned directly about the emotional aspects of their learning experiences, this emerged as an important theme in the interview data. This adds a new and exciting dimension to the study – namely an investigation of the links between emotions and learning amongst non-traditional students. All of the interviews were taped, transcribed, and subsequently coded using the N\*Vivo qualitative analysis package. This involved drawing out the major themes of the interviews and then assessing their applicability across the interviews as a whole. In the account which follows each student has been allocated an identifying number and this is used to attribute quotes to individuals.

### **A new learning environment: the loss of learning identities**

The first round interviews, undertaken at the beginning of the students' first semester, gave a strong sense of exhilaration and excitement about going to university to study

(Christie et al 2006). Faced with the reality of being there, however, few of the students gave that same sense of exhilaration in the second round interviews. Rather, they described the process of transition in emotional terms, often emphasising its highs and its lows. Some students found the changes 'horrendous' and 'stressful', others thought 'it was a rollercoaster of confidence and emotions' and many described themselves as, at best, 'coping'. For the majority of respondents the difficulties lay in making the transition to a new teaching and learning environment and, in common with other studies of student learning, they documented a process of 'learning shock' as they entered the university (Griffiths et al 2005). It was fairly typical for candidates to describe coming to university as a 'huge culture change and a huge shock' to the extent that many regarded the first semester 'as a total write off' (01).

Common amongst the respondents was a sense that coming to university involved loss – the loss of a secure learning identity built up during their time on an HN course. In the first round of interviews students were enormously appreciative of their time in further education – they were known and supported by both staff and students and were familiar with the volume and standard of work they were expected to do (Christie et al 2006). In contrast, the material gathered in the second interviews shows that entering university was often a bewildering and dislocating experience because those old certainties were lost: they were not mapped directly on to the new teaching and learning environment of the university. Differences had to be identified and the respondents had to learn how to become university students: in Lave and Wenger's terms, they had to learn the new rules of the university so that they could engage in a new community of practice. Our analysis of emotions and learning indicates the importance of two aspects of loss as the students moved from their further education colleges to the university. First, a loss of knowledge about how the learning system worked, and secondly a loss of understanding about the academic standard of work expected of them. We consider these in turn.

#### *Lack of knowledge about university*

First, students' learning identities were threatened by their lack of knowledge about the university and how it worked. They no longer felt competent to be students (Wenger 1998) and this resulted in the loss of a secure learning identity built up during their time in further education colleges. The security of learning within a

small, known and familiar world disappeared, and initial reactions were based around feelings of worry and anxiety. This loss stemmed from a range of factors, including physical issues about the sheer size and scale of the university. The effort new students put in to learning to find their way about the campus, and the potentially dislocating effects of this, should not be under-estimated. Intense emotions underpin even the simplest of cognitive learning exercises as 42 discusses:

‘the whole set up of the thing, the buildings, [...] trying to find out who people were, where you should be. I know everybody’s an adult when they come to university but I just felt ‘oh God!’. When you walk in you haven’t a clue what building to even start looking for someone.

Although the scale of the university and the difficulties of negotiating it took some people by surprise, everyone anticipated that learning and teaching styles would be different with more emphasis on formal lectures and independent study time. The overwhelming sense, at least to begin with, was of an environment that privileged a rational-cognitive model of learning based on attendance at large, formal lectures. This was in contrast to their college experiences where all teaching had been based in small groups and where interaction and discussion were valued and accepted modes of engagement. For many of the students this change in emphasis – although anticipated – was experienced as one of acute loss. The loss of a previous learning identity is palpable in accounts which emphasise the impersonal and individualised nature of the new learning experience:

It’s (being in a lecture) very impersonal and you can’t really ask questions. [...] I feel there’s [...] not just the openness that you had at College where you could say, ‘I want to ask a question, I don’t understand, can you repeat that?’. (01)

I felt it was quite boring. We just sat. The guy spoke to us quite a lot whereas like, from college, I’d been used to always interacting, always discussing, always ‘what do you think?’, ‘right, you do this, I’ll do this’, whereas this guy just spoke at us and you just had to write notes (13)

The loss of a previous learning identity also centred on the loss of supportive relationships with staff. At university these relationships were perceived to be much more distant, with students having to be proactive in seeking out support. This was in contrast to further education where participation and interaction with staff was

embedded in everyday learning practices. Again, this loss was often experienced as bewildering and dislocating, at least in the first instance:

But the actual starting to study, you just [...] felt out on a limb. Although you've got tutorials, and tutors because you didn't actually know any of them, it was just like a number on a door, it wasn't like there was a person there to say 'Look if you need anything, come in,' (laughs) you know, 'knock on the door.' (22)

Here I find you have a lecture, you go away and you never see the person 'til the next one again. They are there to flip a slide rather than have that human contact one to one' (42)

The evidence also suggests that the students' security was threatened by a lack of tacit knowledge about the rules of the university, particularly in circumstances where they unwittingly deviated from these or observed others doing so. Being outside of the university's community of practice can be a painful process, and one that exposes the hierarchical power relations between staff and students, as well as differential knowledge positions within the student population. The following quote makes clear the real pain involved in not knowing the rules of the game:

There was another mature student in [subject]. We had, [name] and he was talking about kinship. Great lectures, very professional lecturer and she was in the front row and she put her hand up to ask a question. Now, it's just a big no no, isn't it, that you ask a question in lecture theatres. [...] She must have been dying to say something. She put her hand up and [...] he says [...] 'I can see you with your hand up but I am not going to answer you'. (Laughing), it was like this attitude and she was a mature student and she looked round and she was like, 'oh'.... I suppose the younger 17 or 18 year olds come here, it's still like at school. They haven't been to college. [...] Even college, it's a different level. It treats you like [...] more of an adult. It doesn't treat you like, 'you'll sit down and be quiet and if you don't behave you're getting put to the back' .... And, you know ... they do they conform. They're socialized into this way of sitting and behaving (21)

This unfamiliarity with protocol and procedure, and the emotional insecurity it engendered, was a recurrent feature of the students' accounts of the transition from further education colleges to university.

### *Insecurity about academic standards*

It was clear throughout the interviews that the students had limited understanding of the new system or of the standards expected of them, and that this insecurity was deeply unsettling. Again the loss of a previously secure learning identity was tangible in accounts of 'not knowing what was expected' particularly in relation to assessed work. This uncertainty related both to the problems of deciphering lengthy reading lists – where to start, how many of the books and articles to read and so on – and to the problem of anticipating the standard of work required. The following quotes are indicative of the uncertainty engendered when students had to take control of their own learning portfolio in a new environment:

I didn't really know what was expected. Academic writing in comparison to college is completely different and I can't stress that enough (10).

'I realised before I came that everything would be unfamiliar' and that I would need 'to get used to how things worked. Coming up to the essays I just felt that I wasted a whole lot of time, getting the wrong kinds of information, getting readings that I didn't really need, just... because I didn't know exactly what I was doing' (14)

'It was clear to us what we had to do (for an essay) [...] but it was just never ever knowing if it was right. Is this what they were expecting of someone who is supposed to be of university standard?' (32)

'Not knowing' what standards were expected, or how to undertake everyday learning activities, were bewildering experiences for many of the students because they no longer knew how to participate successfully in a community of practice. And high levels of emotional isolation and loneliness affected their academic confidence (Turner 2006).

The evidence presented here suggests that the lack of clear expectations in semester one, and the lack of knowledge about university practices and procedures, can hinder students' learning experiences. It supports Wenger's (1998) claim that we form identities in relation to our competence. For these students, the move into higher education disrupted their sense of being competent learners because their learning environment was no longer familiar, usable or negotiable. Instead they experienced a crisis of confidence in a new context which was, as yet, unfathomable, foreign and alien to them. In the next section we consider the varying degrees of success with which they learnt about, and adapted to, the new demands of the university during their first year.

## **Significant learning: learning the rules of the game**

Accounts which privilege the rational dimensions of learning stress that expertise and learning competence are located in the individual and are independent of context. This approach suggests that learning skills are transferable from one institution to another, for example when students move from school or college to university. What our evidence shows, however, is that learning competence is socially distributed amongst students and the expertise learnt in one environment does not necessarily enable a student to succeed in a new learning environment. This has enormous ramifications for understandings of transferable skills which are a cornerstone of current education policy (see also Trowler and Knight 2000). Relying on a rational approach to learning misses the existence of 'embedded' or 'tacit' knowledge which resides in systematic routines and forms of technology, as well as in the way they inter-relate. Embedded knowledge includes the rules and formal procedures of the university but as they are located in the emergent, often tacit routines which enable things to get done (Wenger 1998). Following Lave and Wenger (1991), our analysis suggests that to undertake 'significant learning' the students had to change their ability to participate in the social practices of learning. In furthering their work, however, we suggest that we can only understand why students make these changes, and negotiate new meanings and new learning identities, by looking to the emotional values which they extract from the learning process.

Understandably, respondents found it frustrating and irritating to lack embedded knowledge and, at the most extreme, the loss of any feeling of learning competence undermined their confidence:

‘I need a bit of a push to get rid of the self-doubt’ (22)

‘I really dipped in the first term’ (25)

But, of course, emotions are complex and multi-faceted (Ahmed 2004) and the students who struggled, and who questioned their decision to go to university, simultaneously spoke of the real thrill of learning new things, even in a very formal arena:

... I've loved the lectures and I mean you just feel like 'oh, I didn't know that', so it's like you're getting information all the time (14)

And there were other emotional gains of being at university, beyond the well-documented career benefits and financial rewards (Manning 2001, Reay et al 2002, Smetherham 2006). While instrumental gains were important, the students more often commented on the intrinsic pleasures of studying, on the importance of doing something 'for themselves', and on their pride in belonging to a prestigious university:

...The year between doing my HNC and coming here, I missed the studying and I missed having that, you know, you've got a spare night to read a book and then you've got nothing to do. I do need it in my life (21)

[I'm] not in awe, but sometimes ... when I was in the [oldest building] sitting in the lecture theatre you're kind of thinking 'I wonder who sat here before me', you know there's a wonderful sense of history about the place. So I enjoy that (12)

All of the students were strongly motivated to be at university and were making every effort to succeed. And it was the emotional gains which gave them something positive to work with in the midst of the worries and anxieties about losing a secure learning identity; something to motivate them through the new and unfamiliar landscape of higher education, and something around which to build a new learning identity. Candidate 10, for example had an acute awareness of the psychological costs of the transition to university and described semester one as:

'a real roller coaster with confidence and emotions where one day you feel that you can take on the whole world, and the next day you feel so under confident and you think 'I am out of my depth here and I am not very sure what I am doing'.

Yet for all the highs and lows she persisted because it was:

an experience; wonderful, absolutely enriching. [...] It was very intense I thought but when I look back at the whole experience to think about the amount of time and what I actually got from that (it) was amazing, absolutely amazing.

Again, the evidence presented here suggests that it is the emotional gains, which are produced in and through the encounter with learning, which help students to form a

(learning) relationship to the university. These emotional gains motivate and empower the students to engage in the identity work required to help them become members of a new learning community. Establishing their position in, and actively engaging with, particular cultural fields enabled them to move towards new learning identities. In and through this process they achieved a balance between the cognitive, social and emotional dimensions of learning which enabled them to become competent learners (Illeris 2003). Our evidence suggests two ways in which the emotional processes of learning were entangled in the creation of new communities of practice. First, students developed new ways of learning; and secondly, these changes in practices and the identity work they undertook helped them to develop a sense of belonging to and membership of the wider learning community. We consider these in turn.

### *Developing new ways of learning*

The task facing the students on entering the university was to become engaged with the common set of understandings and assumptions held collectively in the wider community of practice: that is they had to 'come to know' the reality of their new learning environment. As Wenger (1998) argues, this knowledge is seldom built up through formal induction processes, being more commonly the product of participation in the community of practice. Often the first step was to recognise that participation required the students to develop new ways of learning; seemingly basic conventions, like taking active responsibility for finding learning materials and moving closer to the model of the 'independent learner', were unfamiliar to them and had to be learnt.

On your HNC, you're handed everything. Here's a photocopy, read this, read that. Whereas here you've got to go and do all your own learning... get your own resources and materials and get this book and that book. [...] It takes forever. But you need the material (21)

You do a lot more yourself and there's nobody to spoon-feed you as such. You know, it's a bit of a shock to the system but you just have to adapt quickly. But again that's the big difference from anything else before. ... At university you're expected to do it yourself and the help you get is minimum' (27)

Only by recognising this difference could they begin to engage with the new learning environment and begin to make it familiar, understandable and usable. But, of course,

the transfer of this necessary knowledge is not an easy process because those who possess it may not be aware of it (Bourdieu 1997).

When the students felt they had got something 'right' they began to develop a sense of being a competent learner. This process itself brought emotional gains:

the reading for that's a lot (one course) [...] but when you've done it at the end it's sort of a sense of satisfaction with being able to cope with it and you've picked out the right bits (01)

And the process of identifying themselves as competent learners took place in and through the formal assessment procedure. Receiving (good) marks and feedback on course work helped the students to authorise and validate their new learning identity. Again, the emotional underpinning to this validation was significant to their developing sense of self-confidence:

we all did really well on our first assignment so that kind of gave us a boost that we all know where we are going now and that we are on the right lines. And, that what we have been doing has been good (37)

I feel more like a University student than I felt in the past. I have got my first essay marks back and I have passed so I feel that I am in the right place (38)

Another factor in moving towards significant learning was for the students to recognise what help and support was available from academic staff, and to learn how to access it proactively. It was only by participating in the new support structures that they could begin to understand how the university worked. This was especially important in seeking help from the teaching staff:

I was a bit scared about coming here because it was so big. I was like, oh 'what do I do if I'm stuck?'. There's nobody going to be there to speak to me or whatever, but it's brilliant. You can always find somebody to come and help you or they'll find out an answer for you (13)

If there was something you did not understand you could just go and talk to them and they were not standoffish as I thought that they would be. That surprised me (07)

The quotes above indicate the need to be sensitive to the discursive level in accounts of how students engage in significant learning: cultural narratives about the limited help available in the 'big' university collide with individual narratives about their (lack

of) ability to learn in a new environment. The surprise registered by many of the students on finding that help was available, and that the university was not just a faceless bureaucracy, was created in and through the tension between their experiences and these discourses. Again, this analysis demonstrates the social nature of learning – the act of seeking help and advice from teaching staff is a joint enterprise to create a situation in which the new student will become more fully involved in the social constitution of learning practices, values and attitudes (Clegg et al 2006). And, of course, the ambiguities, uncertainties and contradictions that can be invoked in the process of entering a new environment can provide key opportunities for individual and collective development. In these cases the context effectively becomes 'new' for everyone and some form of learning is a likely outcome, even if this centres on resistance (Illeris 2003).

As the students gained in confidence they began to incorporate some of the more participatory learning styles they had been familiar with in college. This shows the ways in which students actively contribute to recurrent practices and assumptions. A more secure learning identity was created when students recognised that learning was intrinsically related to the quality of communication and relationships in daily practice, and that they could actively challenge and resist the perceived emphasis placed on rational learning in formal lectures. Some, often in conjunction with tutors, formed study groups or became more active about talking to peers because of the benefits it brought:

[...] having study partners like [name], it's taken us the whole of the first semester to realise that it is important to talk to each other and share, because we have just done it one week before the exam and it has really made a difference. So we talk a lot more. Rather than keeping answers to ourselves, we discuss them so that has helped (04)

we've got [...] study groups going now, that we've set up ourselves [...] we just go away and look through stuff, and go away and write stuff up, then come back. We did this mock exam (laughs) we did it in the library, we did it sort of like you did at school 'you turn the paper over, and what does that mean?' And then she went 'right, that's it, it's an hour'. And then we read each other's, just to get an idea (22)

For some of the students these study groups bolstered their confidence enormously in part because they realised they were not alone in struggling with the transition to higher education, as described in the previous section. Candidate 22, in the quote

above, spoke of the cognitive benefits of learning in a study group but went on to discuss the emotional underpinning of this knowledge acquisition process. Participation in the study group helped to overcome her feelings of alienation and anonymity within the university system and bolstered her confidence to persist:

I felt I was (the only person who was struggling with studying). [...] I thought 'Oh my goodness, I'm gonna run', you know. And then I was standing speaking to other people (in the study group) and I was saying 'I'm runnin, I've had enough'. So there was quite a few people that said the same (22)

This confidence boost enabled the students to become active learners by engaging more fully with learning practices which were becoming more familiar and less alien to them:

'I've come in this year determined not to be in that position again (overwhelmed/silent in tutorials) because even if I don't feel that I can [...] say in front of the rest of the tutorial group that 'I don't have a clue what you're talking about' I will definitely go to my tutor; I mean I've learnt that this year' (14)

One implication of this analysis of the social situatedness of learning is that new students benefit from coming to know the rules and procedures of the university, and that this awareness is also an invitation to identity creation and to actively change the community of practice. What is also clear is that our analysis confirms Illeris' (2003) thesis that the value and durability of the learning process, and the creation of a more secure learning identity, is underpinned and entangled with the emotional dimension of the learning process.

### *Belonging and membership*

Biographical approaches to learning suggest that the formation of new learning identities is an inherently risky and uncertain business. There are ongoing tensions and contradictions between normative (and age- and class-specific) ideas about what it means to be a student, and to belong to a student community, and the reality of the lives of (non-traditional) students (Christie *et al* 2005). Thus the identity work undertaken by the students was not entirely located within their central community of practice (the university) but was crucially influenced by structural factors related to gender and class socialisation, including their own and their peers. Undertaking this

work took a heavy emotional toll on the students because it brought with it conflicting and paradoxical feelings of ambivalence and contradiction about their membership of the university and their aged, classed and gendered identities (see also Thomas and Quinn 2006). To a large extent there was a sense amongst the respondents that they were not, and would not ever become, full members of the university community:

I don't know, I want to belong, ... but I don't, I don't know if I (do). I feel I deserve to be here (14)

I went to a couple of the lectures, but I feel like *kids* are the students, do you know what I mean? (laughs) I just sort of swan in and out, and they let me sit in on their lectures. [...] It's [...] like they're letting me come to *their* university. (21)

I find it really hard to integrate with [...] middle class people [...] I feel quite intimidated by this university and I feel as if I'm working class and I shouldn't be here [...] I feel as if, if Ravenscraig hadn't shut down I'd still be working there, I'd be working there the now but eh, I just feel I'm no' good enough (27)

Despite this ambivalence about belonging (or not) the students, like 14 above, articulated a strong sense of their entitlement to read for a degree at an elite university. The analysis here suggests that there is a close connection between this sense of entitlement and ideas about membership of the learning community. Membership generally was perceived as involving two aspects: first, participating in the social practices to do with learning; and secondly, participating in the social practices to do with student life. For the students in this study the emphasis was firmly on the former: belonging was provisional and could only ever be justified in relation to successful learning practices and learning outcomes, congruent with a sense of their entitlement to be at university. In contrast, being and becoming a 'student' with a social life was perceived as likely to be unachievable, as secondary in importance and as contributing to their more general sense of dis-location (Green and Webb 1997, Hughes 2002). Within an elite university they were not 'proper' full-time students and should not expect to 'fit in': students are people who participate in a full social life that takes place in and through the social microcosm of the university (Waller 2006). While attention often centres on the emotional difficulties of these discourses for non-traditional students, we deepen the analysis by looking at how the students prioritised, often in deeply emotive terms, these different aspects of membership.

To a large extent our respondents had to draw very tight imagined boundaries between their home life and their university life if they were to succeed in either. Again, the emotional commitment to studying was a central factor in motivating and enabling them to create new ways of participating in a community of practice, and in the process transform understandings of the community itself. At this point differential power relations come into play because individuals use the resources at their disposal to advance their preferences. The positions adopted may derive from their particular status within the university (mature student, course member and so on) or may be the expression of structural factors emanating from the wider socio-economic environment. Significant learning does not take place in isolation, and as the students seek to develop a new learning identity so they bring new 'currents' in to the university (and in to home life). Simply being at university, and developing identities as students, as well as carers and workers, involved the respondents in making significant changes to their domestic arrangements. The emotional work this entailed often put an enormous strain on their home lives – and was a price that they felt they could only justify in terms of learning outcomes. They noted the complex and contested emotional demands of changing home life to better support their emerging identities as students:

A big, important thing for me is my husband changing shifts, accommodating me going out (to university) on a Tuesday night' (24)

It's been difficult having two assessments at almost the same time and having to balance it with work and family, and trying to get in and out of [university]. But from a personal point of view it is gratifying to be doing something like this (35)

'If I had to pick out one thing (that helped him to succeed), I'd probably say my partner. [...] she's just finished her degree in nursing and she's learnt me a lot of good habits [...] which I feel I couldn't have done without so she's been really beneficial for me in my private learning at home' (27)

The emotional toll of developing an identity as a student was greatest when family members were not supportive and, in common with other studies, these pressures were felt most acutely by women with dependent children (Edwards 1993). Again cultural discourses, this time about what it means to be a good mother, can conflict with the individual's desire to become a student:

he (husband) is trying to help me a bit you know but [his attitude] is 'I don't like you going to uni 'cos you don't care about us any more' [...] and the kids are sort of 'oh, if you *have to*', you know (22)

I also wonder sometime why I am doing this course, making my life [difficult] ... he (husband) also asks sometimes 'what is the point? You are a mother and you are doing the stuff and you didn't have enough time' (31)

This respondent was from an ethnic minority family and went on to detail the enormous emotional pressure put on her by her extended family and friends:

Sometimes in our culture it's your relatives and friends, they are making you feel bad: 'why you are leaving your children at home and then doing this course?' (31)

Trying to achieve membership, and becoming absorbed in the culture of practice, was primarily about the learning aspects of the student identity. To go beyond this was to stray too far into ideas of membership that centred on belonging to the social world of the student. For the majority of the students, like 21, personal and family sacrifices could not be made to engage in such activities:

'if you can do enough to pass, you know, to get through plus keep your home life good, I think you've accomplished quite a lot actually (laughs) (21)

Indeed, they articulated a sense of 'proper' student life as something to look at but not touch because they could not free up the time to become absorbed into this aspect of the community of practice. Thus their membership of the student community could only ever be partial and incomplete:

Maybe because I don't stay here, maybe I don't feel as [part of the student community], people are going out and meeting and maybe the social life of it, maybe I am missing that in [university], but it doesn't bother me (30)

...we had sort of our own group (within course) and we all live out, we all have other lives. The people in my group were people with families and houses and an actual other life. So [...] I felt (I belonged to) my group who I suppose were part of [the] University's group but as it was I never [...] felt like I had an identity as a student (42)

Although the students were pragmatic in their approach to (a lack of) student social life it was clear this was this loss was experienced as an emotional injury of their class location. More broadly Sayer (2005) and Reay (2005) have written about the lexicon

of emotions which characterise (students from) different class locations, from guilt, shame and resentment, to envy, deference and pride, and their findings have direct relevance to the respondents in this study. In discussing their partial and contested membership of the student community, the students drew upon affective discourses to map out a powerful emotional and psychic landscape of class membership of the university:

Ye-es, I do (feel like I belong to the university). For the most part. I think it's quite divided though in some ways. I think there's [...] a whole section of wealthy English people who [...] are just in a world of their own but aside from them, yes, I do (23).

I enjoy it and I feel proud to be here but I don't feel part of uni (27)

Indeed the affective dimensions of class were implicit in the students' everyday social processes and interactions, both inside and outside of the university. Candidate 10, who was 'definitely working class', described how this cut across all of her interactions with other students:

I know that the way that I speak is working class and I have got an accent, and being in an environment where there is lots of middle and upper class students and when they are presenting, and they are able to project themselves, it just seems to be a completely different thing for me because I suppose I am class conscious [...] and I didn't feel very confident giving presentations in front of middle and upper class people because I know that I carry an accent.

And these class dynamics held outside of the university to the extent that the students felt a sense of doing something unusual or even deviant by attending university (Edwards 1993, Hughes 2002).

[...] what I can't believe, and it possibly comes down to this class thing as well, is that when people have said to me 'oh what are you doing, you are not working?', and I say 'I'm doing my voluntary work at the school and I am going to university', 'oh what are you doing, which university are you going to?' and I say ... 'the university of [name]', and it's just they look at you in a different way (39)

Typically the students outlined the emotional injuries of their class location by contrasting the (stereotypical imagery) of the ideal student life with their experience of gaining a degree through dedication and persistence. The students often drew on

discourses of morality to make judgements about the behaviour of their (more advantaged) peers:

'there's upper class people who don't commit to studies, they are here and they just party on, turn up drunk and I just feel 'you are upper class, you may have money and support, financial support and whatever to be here, but I am committing 100% hard work' (10)

These defensive comments were often accompanied by a statement about the individual student's entitlement to be at university despite (or perhaps because of) their sense of class dis-location:

I have just as much right to be here as anybody else (04)

As Reay (2005: 923) suggests, this defensive reliance on a discourse of rights reflects the students' underlying feelings of shame – shame about not being the 'right' person for an elite university even when their level of achievement entitles them to a place.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have drawn on ideas about the emotional character of learning to broaden accounts of the learning experiences of non-traditional students entering elite universities. We have shown that engagement with learning is a subjective experience bound up with other life events and experiences and have drawn attention to its 'social situatedness'. We have also shown the importance of competence to learner identities and to how a person's activities and choices are both constrained and enabled by their horizons for action. As Hodkinson (2004: 7) argues 'horizons ...are influenced both by opportunities which a person has access to, and also to a person's perception of self, of what they want to be, and of what seems possible'.

The analysis presented here allows for some reflection on the connections between emotions and learning and thus on the likely consequences for theoretical and empirical research on the learning experiences of students from across a range of socio-economic backgrounds.

First, our findings suggest that many non-traditional students work with distinctive – and class-based – understandings of what it means to fully belong to a community of

practice in an elite university. The identity work they undertook as part of the process of becoming a competent learner was underpinned by a strong emotional desire to engage in the social practices of learning. But they were only ever partial and fragile members of the wider community of practice and their engagement with 'proper' student life engendered strong emotional feelings of ambivalence and dis-location. In line with Reay's (2005) work these class practices reveal the very real ways in which the emotional labour involved in becoming a student is actively shaping the creation of new inequalities within universities.

Secondly, as we have demonstrated here, educational debates are beginning to tackle directly the role of emotions in shaping the learning experiences of non-traditional students. While learning how to be a university student was an emotionally demanding process for all of the students in this study, it was also bound up with the very particular nature of the pathways they had taken through higher education. Rather than beginning the analysis from the point of entry to university, which is the case in many other studies of non-traditional students, our analysis focuses on how students negotiate multiple and competing learning identities and subject positions as they move from further education colleges to university. The extent to which they had built up secure learning identities within the personalised and supportive environments of their further education colleges was a significant factor in explaining their experiences of loss and displacement within a large and (at least initially) impersonal university environment. Further comparative and longitudinal studies are required to explore the emotional journeys that different groups of students make as they encounter different learning environments within the education system. For example, comparative studies would uncover the extent to which the experiences of loss and dislocation documented here are widespread amongst the student population – for example amongst privileged students moving from small classes in well-resourced (private) schools and/or moving to less prestigious institutions. And an important and as yet under researched dimension of this debate concerns the learning experiences of students who enter and come to know different kinds of communities of practice within an institution. This highlights a pressing need to investigate the nature of the relationship between the organisational context, particularly cultural characteristics, and individual and group practices. Only longitudinal interviews can portray the range of experiences of these students, and the emotional work they undertake as they 'come to know' the rules of their new learning environment. Again,

these are important dimensions of the new inequalities created in and through the psychic and emotional processes of learning and ones which merit further attention.

Finally, our work suggests that it is important to avoid simplistic assumptions about the transferability of learning skills from one setting to another. Rather, as we have indicated here, moving to a different learning environment brings new sets of risks and uncertainties because the students must negotiate the meaning and significance of the everyday practices embodied in the new learning setting. Being and becoming a successful learner is as much about the social and emotional, as well as the cognitive, dimensions of learning. Whilst it is important for universities to be concerned with the quality of their teaching programmes, the interactive, social and collaborative aspects of students' learning experiences, captured in the accounts of the social situatedness of learning, are also important determinants of graduate outcomes, and should be included in efforts to enhance the quality of student learning (Smith and Bath 2006). Within policy discourses there is often little explicit acknowledgement of the social and emotional components of learning, despite the well publicised problems of student drop-out and the student mental health problems. The theory of situated learning outlined here is an important addition to policy debates about learning which often make too easy an assumption between acquisition of skills and learning competence.

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