

## WORKING PAPER 6

# Learning as being

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### Introduction

**Learning Lives** is a collaboration between the Universities of Exeter (lead-applicant), Brighton, Leeds and Stirling and is funded by a major grant from the Economic and Social Research Council as part of their Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP).

See [www.tlrp.org](http://www.tlrp.org)



## **The Learning Lives Research Project**

The Learning Lives research project began in June 2004, and runs until the end of January 2008. The project is a collaboration between the University of Exeter, the University of Brighton, the University of Leeds and the University of Stirling, all in the UK. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). The award number is RES-139-25-0111.

The focus of the research is on the interrelationships between learning, identity and agency in people's lives. There are two strands to the data collection, involving the integration of three different methodologies. The first strand is a qualitative study of around 120 people, drawn from different walks of life, living in different parts of the country, and of different ages, gender and ethnicities. Each of the university partners has its own sub-sample, with different core interests. The Exeter team (Gert Biesta and Mike Tedder) are focused on learning, identity and agency in relation to family and the local community. The Brighton team (Ivor Goodson and Norma Adair) are focused on issues of migration, including within country migration. The Leeds team (Phil Hodgkinson, Heather Hodgkinson, Geoff Ford and Ruth Hawthorn) are focused on people engaged in adult learning and/or guidance, and on older adults. The Stirling team (John Field and originally Irene Malcolm, now Heather Lynch) are focused on work and unemployment. Of course, these issues overlap. On the qualitative strand, we are combining two normally separate methodologies: life history research and longitudinal qualitative research. Though we will have a shorter engagement with some of the sample, we are following most subjects for over 3 years, involving about six sweeps of interviewing.

The second strand of our work is quantitative. A second Exeter team (Flora Macleod and Paul Lambe) is using the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) – a data set of 10,000+ adults from across the UK who have been interviewed annually since 1991 – to develop robust measures of formal and informal learning, identity and agency in their different dimensions and to test the validity of these measures against a range of outcome variables. Once these theoretically informed instruments have been developed using BHPS variables, longitudinal data analysis techniques (multilevel models of individual change and hazard/survival models of event occurrence in both discrete and continuous time) will be applied to explore the significance of learners' identities and agency for their learning, dispositions, practices and achievements and how transformations in a given individual's dispositions, practices and achievements impact upon their sense of identity and agency and their ability to exert control over their lives.

To establish an iterative relationship between the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data we are mapping the case study participants' learning trajectories onto wider trends and processes in the UK as revealed through analysis of the BHPS.

## **Working Papers**

This paper is one of a series of working papers being produced as part of the Learning Lives research. These papers are of very different types, and their prime purpose is to help the team with its on-going analysis and synthesis of findings. Consequently, they represent work in progress. A second purpose is to share some of our preliminary findings and thinking with a wider audience. We hope that you will find this paper, and others in the series, of interest and value. If you have constructive critical comments to offer we would love to hear from you. Please send any comments to the contact author, identified on the front cover.

# Learning as being

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## Introduction

When we examined the stories of the adults in the Leeds sample, one sub-group stood out. These are people for whom learning, of various types and at various times, seems to be very important. For this group, learning is more than a means to an end. Rather, a love of learning seems to form a significant aspect of who they are: for them, learning is a form of being. Of course, within this group no two people are alike. Here we present the stories of five different people in our sample, some in more detail than others. This working paper has been written to achieve two purposes. The first is to share details of the learning lives of these people, written in varying ways. The second is to use those stories to explain and begin to develop a particular way of understanding learning. Both these purposes are interlinked, and we have written the paper to move progressively from one to the other. Each of these interlocking strands can be read independently of the other, and to aid people who wish to do this, we have used different fonts for each. The theory development progressively draws upon the five stories as they are introduced, so we begin the paper with one of the stories: that of with Tony Wilf.

### **Tony Wilf**

*Tony is in his mid fifties. He has been an unskilled manual worker for much of his life, but became a househusband after his wife died six years ago, with two young teenagers still at home. His life now has two principal foci: firstly his family, especially his youngest child Clare who is dyslexic and, at 18, still trying to gain more school level qualifications part-time at college. His second focus is the courses he attends at community learning centres. These help structure his own personal time, and are helping him to overcome literacy problems, which have affected his life from school onwards. Spin offs include greater confidence, a different outlook on life and new interests which add to ongoing activities, like meeting old work colleagues and going to football matches. This community-based adult education is now a central part of his being.*

*The learning he is doing now relates to the life that went before. A basically happy childhood but poor experience of schooling has led to most of the learning in his life being experiential, including listening to those he respected as having appropriate experience to pass on.*

#### Childhood

*Tony enjoyed large parts of his childhood. He started life in a small terraced house with no facilities in Leeds' Irish catholic community. The family was moved to a flagship rehousing project, Quarry Hill Flats, which Tony loved.*

*The accommodation was a huge improvement with a bedroom each, inside bathroom and toilet, waste chutes, laundry etc. He had many friends and got into mischief but families looked out for one another's kids. He learned basic practical household skills, as he was expected to help with simple jobs like laundry and tea making. He also believes he learned good values for life from his early upbringing.*

*they did a programme ... called "Queenie's Castle", and they actually brought old scrap cars into the flats and then started smearing graffiti all over the walls... and so when it was shown on the TV people instantly "well that's just down the road." and*

*you could hear people on buses talking about it... And I went into such a rant that they did this. Alright we were little so-and-sos but we didn't destroy us own area. We knew how far we could go. You know if somebody shouted at us when we were playing out, "move or I'll tell your Dad," you went, you didn't argue with them because you didn't know who did know your Dad and who didn't.*

*The most important kind of learning. That's learning every day skills, ... I'd say. You know, learning to cope with things, and things with life in general.*

And how do you learn that sort of stuff?

*It came from parents and different people that you – like we were saying you were taught values. You wouldn't go out and vandalise something, or you – you wouldn't dare, because you were taught what your limits were – how far you could go. And I'd like to think that I passed that onto my kids.*

*He also thinks he learned at home not just to judge people by appearance. He remembers his parents talking to someone in a wheelchair and looking at the person not the chair. This carried on in later life as his wife had a "port wine" birthmark on her face, which he didn't notice unless she mentioned it. Also she worked with disabled groups. And now he visits a community centre used mainly by Asians, which he says doesn't bother him at all, although the staff asked him whether he was bothered.*

*He remained at home in Quarry Hill flats well into his twenties. Another "value" that he learned was that he had to have a job and pay his way. At one stage after leaving a job he hated he spent days trudging the streets enquiring for another one. He was devastated when the flats were condemned in the 1970s and everybody was moved out.*

*Secondary schooling was a bad experience which has affected the rest of his life. He doesn't remember much about primary school but arrived at secondary school with poor literacy skills.*

*all the good, or the clever ones, were sat right at the front. The ones who weren't as clever ... were in the middle rows and the rest of us were sat on the back and so every time there was a question asked or you needed to know something, you'd put your hand up, you were told to wait a minute but the minute never came and the more you sat there with your hand up, the more you were ignored. You got to a point where you thought "why bother?"*

*I was told "you're not like your brother", "your brother don't do this", and I was trying to say to them, "but I'm not my brother," you know, "I'm the one that needs help and I'm asking you for help but you're not giving it to me." But because I were a kid and I couldn't talk to them on that level it were just hold your hand out and have cane and off you go.*

*I started, with some other lads, that if it came to doing homework, I'd pay somebody a couple of pence to copy theirs and I'd copy their homework and leave a couple of words out. But nobody ever picked up and looked and said well this is John's and this is yours, why are they so [similar]. You know, so you just got into the stage of "well I'm not bothering", and I didn't.*

*The best scam I ever got in the wide world - ... I was given an appointment for an x-ray and I'd had to go into school and produce this x-ray card "oh off you go, you must keep the appointment" and I thought "this works a treat" and I got somebody to fill another date in for a couple of weeks later and I took it back in and it worked every time...Nobody questioned it, you know.*

*I think they let me down, because I don't class myself as thick, but I was told time and time again by teachers "you're thick, you don't understand, you're thick".*

*If somebody had said, you know, "Right, what's the problem?"...and if they'd have said "yeh I'll give you 5 minutes..." Or maybe, "I'll explain it to you after class, just sit there and I'll come back and I'll tell you." Fine if they'd have done that. But to be snubbed and sort of say "no" or "go away, it doesn't matter, you'll never understand that, you're thick". ...But as a kid you couldn't answer back, or if you did answer back you were off marching again to go for the cane...and that's the only thing I remember from school is seeing the man with the cane, you know. There were never no pat on the head "oh you've done well there".*

*Tony has problems to this day with people who don't take the trouble to listen, or don't understand what he needs. He had learned to distrust teachers, to dislike formal education and that he would not succeed. He learned to cheat and skive, to value alternative activities, to gain kudos from the bravado of canings. He left school barely able to read and struggling to write and spell in capital letters.*

#### Working life

*When he left school the family expectation was that he would go straight out to work and bring in a wage to support himself. "If you weren't working you didn't get fed."*

*I was classed as thick at school so it was expected that I would never get a decent job you know so I mean, all my life I've sort of ducked and dived. I've had silly little jobs here and there but if I'd have had the education then probably I could have got a decent job.*

*His first job was as a "telegraph boy" for British Railways, but it wasn't what he'd hoped for, as there was no motorbike! The next job involved heavy lifting which he was too small to manage. He had a series of jobs which were either meaningless to him or inappropriate. He learned by and through changing and doing these jobs, but without any commitment to them. One better job, with a rope making company, involved off the job training sessions and he had to leave because he couldn't write adequate notes. However he didn't "duck and dive" all his life.*

*I worked on the Highways Department for years and that was a great experience... we used to do road repairs, flagging and curbing. The bunch of lads that you worked with were brilliant. I mean you could work all over the city and so you always got different surroundings... You never felt hard done by, because you were always laughing and joking.*

*He learned from and was trained by experienced men that he could respect, learning by example and by listening to what they told him and copying what he was shown.*

*they used to have like a pothole guy that you used to go round and do – fill the holes in and the other little small jobs. And I got put with this pothole guy... I mean the first day I went, I had no idea. You know, I knew basically how to shovel, or I thought I did, you know. But... you got the people showing me how to make the shovel work for you, not you work for the shovel. And from there you sort of progressed. You could go with another gang where they'd do big road construction or they'd do footpaths. Um, one of the best I ever worked with, a – an old man called ...*

*He goes on to describe with great respect an older worker who worked very long hours, and preferred to do everything by old-fashioned methods. Much of the learning was on the job, but there was also training available back at the depot.*

*...somebody came along with a JCB. And I knew the lad who were driving it, and I was thinking, 'God, that – that's should be me sat in there doing that'. And I applied to do it, to drive the JCB, and they said, "Oh, before you can do that you've got to go on a mobile compressor." So they got me in an old tractor with a compressor fitted and I used to drive it all over, digging road up and – and they said after so long being on there, and being classed as a plant operator, I could go into yard on a morning, and he said, "Oh, you're not taking compressor this morning, take that six ton roller out."... But you had to have the training, and you know, they'd give the training, and it were brilliant.*

*And all the training took place in the yard, did it then?*

*Yeah. The yard just behind where they would store tarmac...where you did the roller and he's put the tarmac down then you'd roll the yard.*

*And then I – I wanted to be working with the masons, the street mason pavers and that. And that were brilliant. You know, I've been mostly a masons' labourer. I still had to have this training of how to cut a flag and how to lay flags.*

*So you got the training from this old guy in the yard about how to cut the flags.*

*Yeah. As I say, I cut this perfect square out of the middle of a flag, then he came along – "Do it again." Well you know, he'd never say, "Oh, you've done that great." It were his way – so you – you would know then to take the measurement properly and do it, and – and so it – it became second nature to me. To work by yourself, you were put with a – a qualified mason first, an old – an old hand who'd been there years, who knew it inside out.*

*He was good at his job and his self-confidence grew. One of the supervisors who could set up a job perfectly despite even worse literacy problems than Tony, would occasionally get Tony to write out orders for him. He learned his job well and as part of the group learned also how to get the best out of bonus schemes and overtime.*

*He was very conscious that he might have progressed further "in highways". Firstly*

*...basic reason I didn't get proper street mason pavier's thing, is because you'd to go to college, and you'd to do all the – the measurement and the –*

So you could only be a...

*A mason's labourer. But I could do the job as well the mason could, but I didn't have the qualification.*

Secondly

*They offered me a job to work as sort of estimator, you know, when say the gas board's been, and they dig a hole in the road, and somebody comes round and measures it up so a contractor can go. I could have done the job falling off a log, it were so easy. But because I couldn't do the recording bit, I couldn't take the job. ... I mean if I'd been able to do it, then I think I'd have still been at the highways and I'd have probably been a street inspector or something like that.*

*At the time he never seriously considered being anything other than a labourer. Being at the core of the gang of manual workers was important to him.*

*That part of his career ended with an accident where he broke his hip (as a result of ignoring safety regulations, to make a job easier). His city council employers provided him with a sedentary job where he still enjoyed some of the benefits of being in a team of workmen. He became responsible for arranging night time emergency callout for repairs to city property, and developed an excellent rapport with the tradesmen who were available for the work. Bending the rules was again part of the culture, but always getting the work done. The job set a challenge for Tony, as he had to keep records of the work done, not least so that the workmen could be paid.*

*...we used to get the phone call and I used to write it down in rough... I mean if it was a broken window, you were suppose to put secure broken window, so I'd just S/W – secure window - and it worked a treat, you know, if somebody had lost their keys you'd gain access and change locks so that were GACL...and I used to have like a triplicate sheet and I'd pull the sheets off and attach it to the single sheet of paper that I'd written in rough and at the end of the night when everybody had sort of gone home I'd sit and rewrite them all out and I used to have my favourite little book with me which were dictionary and if I got something that I couldn't spell and I could sit for hours going through dictionary to try and find it.*

*Unfortunately the requirement for form filling increased. At the same time he barely saw his family who were out during the day. He chose to prioritise family, gave up the job and went back to "ducking and diving", changing jobs frequently – mainly local delivery driving.*

### Family

*From the beginning of his first interview, Tony stressed how important his family were to him, and he evidently had a happy marriage. He tells stories showing his pride in his wife in her roles at home and work. He said one of the most important learning experiences of his life was the realisation of the huge responsibility when his first child was born. When Liz brought Sean home from hospital, he stopped being "Jack the lad". Nevertheless for the period of his life up to his wife's death he said more about work than family. When she became ill he asked for leave, unpaid if necessary. This was refused so he went to the doctor hoping for a sicknote, and was diagnosed with serious angina himself. When Liz died he was devastated by the loss. He still talks "to her" at*

*the end of each day. Disgusted by his employers he left work to look after home and the two remaining teenaged children. He had always helped his wife at home, gone to meetings about the children with her and so on, but struggled to take over.*

*I used to think that I did my fair share... Until it's put on your plate and said "right you do it" and then God! I mean I've told a lot of me friends and my brother and that that they want to look round at their situation and think "just what am I doing"... You know because my wife used to work and then she'd come home ...and start making the tea, things like that, and I used to think to myself "I've done my fair bit, I've done a bit of washing up, and I've done this" but when you've got the job lot, you've got to go and buy the food, then cook it and then do the washing up.*

*He learned, with difficulty, to look after home and children through doing it, with advice from neighbours and the children themselves, and all this at the same time as having to come to terms with the loss of his wife.*

*I sort of like to think that I've sort of taken over from Liz with my kids and sort of say "right, you know, this is what we do and..." I mean there's times when things go wrong, you know I wanted to make something when she first died and I couldn't remember how to make it and I got myself into such a strop. It's such a simple thing to do but I can't think how I'm going to do it.*

*Well up until Liz dying, Liz sort of did all the finances. And I never did. And when it came after Liz had died I had to pay the rent and I had to write cheques and that were a work of art for me to write a cheque to spell everything properly. You know instead of just going and getting the money, because they wouldn't accept all cash.*

*... back to the reading and writing thing, you know I mean I wanted to do some home made fish and chips and I couldn't remember how to do batter so I asked one of old ladies next door I thought "oh she'll tell me how" and she gave me this book, "there you go love it's in there".*

*Oops.*

*"Thanks," ...do you say to kids "just read us this out and tell me what to do" I spent ages looking at this book.*

*Well you've to find the right page for starters haven't you.*

*And then to figure out what ounces meant because it was oz or something and then how you work it out. So that turned into a nightmare... and so it were back to fish shop for proper fish and chips... It's hard you know I mean that's where I'd be embarrassed if I had to say to one of kids or to anybody "what does this say?"*

*He had to do a lot to help Clare, in particular. At the end of primary school he and Liz had visited a specialist with her and she was diagnosed as severely dyslexic. She struggled at school both academically and, particularly after her mother's death, socially. Visiting school to deal with her problems was something he came to terms with and he has also helped her a lot with schoolwork.*

*I got to know high school teachers was because when Liz died I had to go in and settle that, tell people, you know, that Clare needs this and that.... And then I were called in for different meetings and ... I mean Clare went through a bad stage, you know bullying [and related fighting]*

*...her handwriting was like mine at school. If I can't read her handwriting then it is really bad ... when she's done homework or work in her school book and she's showed me and I've put a line through it and said, "no, Clare you can do better and will do better" and we've sat and we've worked it out. And I've actually written it out on a piece of paper for her, for her to copy back into her book and she's still made mistakes.*

*The change in his life resulted in a period of drifting through days getting some things done, but aimlessly. He came close to depression and alcoholism but was shocked into realising how it might affect the children.*

*Erm I started down the road of self destruction in a sense because I started drinking and sort of doing it on quiet. Kids'd gone up to bed and I'd have a couple of cans and have half a bottle of whisky. And then Clare came home one day and said "oh I've missed school bus" and I had to take her to school and I were driving and thought "what if I get pulled now, not only have I got the humiliation of being arrested in front of my daughter I lose my licence, what the hell do I do?" and that was sort of pulled up by the shoelace time. ... It were my sort of wake up call. I'd do daft things when they were at school. I'd get my car and vanish and then I found myself in Huddersfield one day, what would I want to be in Huddersfield for, I was supposed to be going to the shop. It were just escape you know, get out of the house.*

*Six years on he is a capable housekeeper, devoted to his daughter, and to his granddaughter (son's child) who spends quite a lot of time at their house. Reading and writing are occasional problems to him, as he tends to skim read and sometimes misunderstand official letters. Having to help Clare has helped him help himself. It has resulted in him returning to formal learning which has been both a practical and a psychological gain. Her youth group has provided him with a new outlet for activity.*

#### *Returning to college aged 50+.*

*Reading and writing have been a problem to Tony throughout his life. He knows he could have gone to classes and improved his reading years ago. His wife and sister-in-law had contacts and would have encouraged him, but it wasn't a priority, and he enjoyed his role as traditional manual worker. In addition his experience of school was a serious deterrent. It was the need to help his daughter, struggling with her own schooling, that finally brought him back to education.*

*with Liz dying and Clare's [course work] coming up, er – Clare's handwriting - if I can't decipher it, nobody can decipher it. So I – the idea was to get a computer so she'd be able to do it and print it out. And so that's when it started. And I thought, 'well, what do you do?' ... So I went to "Computers for the Terrified". And it worked.*

*I got into it, I really enjoyed that, and then something came up - this is how I started back in the English, something came up about "insert so and so after the third paragraph" and I thought, "what's a paragraph" you know it'd been that long since I'd*

*been at school and nothing like that ever stuck at school... so that's why I started coming back to doing the English because I wanted to know...*

*He started at his local community learning centre for computers but the English course there was not a success, reminding him of earlier failures at school.*

*...it was in like a big workshop and so at the back of me there was somebody learning Maths and there was somebody learning something else and I couldn't concentrate on what I was doing and that was going back to being like at high school.*

*He learned to use a spider diagram and got thoroughly involved in writing a story but*

*if I had to write a letter for you now, I'd do it in sort of block capitals, and I've done it for years and years and it is neat and the tutor was saying "no you must use real writing" and I said "well if I did you would never read what I've written" and then it started getting to be the battle again. It was me being a kid again told "you must do this" and I don't know if it's a rebellious side of me... And I know it must have been two pages, two A4 pages full of this "trip to the dentist" after doing this spider thing, and then she threw it back at me because it weren't in real writing... I've come asking for help and all of a sudden you're the person with a big stick again.*

*He couldn't concentrate and the tutor wasn't listening to what he wanted, he was ready to give up again, but his sister-in-law encouraged him to try again at a different centre. This time it was a success. The tutor, Joan, deals with her students as individuals and does listen! Following a conversation where his new tutor was finding out about him, he was diagnosed as dyslexic like his daughter. The relatively simple system of using coloured overlays, paper or computer screen, has led to a big improvement in his reading. He is now able to make proper sense of official letters that arrive on his doormat, where before he would have given up after a couple of sentences and possible misunderstood. He is enthusiastic to reach the stage of being able to read the books he has missed out on up to now, especially novels, autobiographies and recent and local history. Joan has recently sourced some simplified classics and he takes them home turns the TV off and reads. Classroom sessions help Tony to work from the knowledge he already has, for example providing techniques for spelling individual words. He is encouraged to write about things that really interest him. They have free writing sessions on the centre's computers where he "loses himself" for hours writing about his own and his local area's history. The story he wrote about the dentist was a revelation to him.*

*and I got carried away with that and sort of went into pages about it and to me it's as though I've been locked away for years and somebody's said "well here you go, here's keys, you're free now".*

*But Joan has encouraged his interest in the local history of where he grew up.*

*And through doing this history of Quarry Hill, the stuff that's come out of me and the writing - I never knew it were there, you know, and for me to sit and write...I mean I used to do it sort of in a note pad before I went in [to college], and then I'd do from note pad onto computer. I were buying A4 pads, and I was sort of filling them. You know. For me to go to do something on the computer and if I printed it out I think it's*

*like 47 sheets of A4 paper, that's a hell of a lot of stuff that's been stuck inside me that suddenly has come out. And I didn't know it was there.*

*He brings it to her to check the English. But the project has set him learning on his own, researching web sites to find facts, which his memories support. Some of the information on the library web site was wrong and he contacted them and he is now submitting his own work to them.*

*Apart from improving his basic skills of reading and writing and computing, the courses have provided a focus for his life. When first he was at home all the time, as well as missing his wife, he was unable to organise his time. Now he organises life around his courses.*

*It were the best move I ever made. You know I look forward to Thursdays and Fridays. Since my wife died it's my little escapism. Nobody can touch me for them couple of hours. I aren't Dad going to shop, I aren't making tea, I aren't thinking "oh what are we having for tea" when I'm at college.*

*He said that when there were no courses over the summer he "struggles". He worries that if there were to long a gap in attendance it would become too difficult to go back.*

*There have been more knock on effects from the courses. One of the first things he told me was that he is aware of having changed, of thinking in slightly different ways, of looking at things in different ways, perhaps having wider horizons. He is more observant and much more aware of what other people might be interested in.*

*I can explain things more now...now I'll go into detail ...so it's like painting a picture in my mind and if somebody wants to pick up on it or ... if you've never been to the place you can get a rough idea of what it looks like or looked like to me.*

*He is also much more confident both in respect of literacy and in life more generally. He will now take on things which he would once have assumed were not for people like him. For example his daughter is a keen sea-scout and he has now become involved with the committee that helps organise the troop. He has found that he has abilities and contacts that compliment those of other members and are valuable to the group.*

*He regrets he did not make this progress years ago. As we have seen there were ways forward at work which he would have liked to have taken but couldn't because of his illiteracy. On the other hand he is clear that he wouldn't have wanted "to be a different person". He has enjoyed large parts of his life as a working class male. He valued highly belonging to a gang of workmen, with its camaraderie and sense of humour. He would hate to be "posh" and despises his brother's occasional tendencies in that direction. He is clear that most of his learning throughout life has been experiential. His current classroom learning is very important to him but it has reinforced his bitterness about his secondary schooling and how it/the teachers failed him.*

*The hangover from that is a precarious balance between the positive learning experiences he is enjoying, and feeling as if he is back in an unsympathetic school. His computer learning was initially very successful and he was over the moon when he gained his first certificate. ('50 odd year old and start dancing round the room showing*

the kid, you know, "I passed this and I got a distinction.") Later courses have varied according to the tutors.

*we have like two different tutors. And you can ask one, "I don't understand this." And she'll say, "There you are." And she'll walk away. And the other one'll come across and show you what she's doing, then undo it and say, "Right, you do it." And she'll sit with you 'til you can get it right. And that works better for me.*

*There was also a problem with work not getting marked and eventually he failed the CLAIT 2 exam "which felt like a kick in the teeth" and decided he was wasting his time. He was persuaded to try some desk top publishing the next year, which could have been useful for his Quarry Hill work, but he found the tutor patronising and that he was waiting half an hour for help. Again he gave up. But he does recognise the benefits of his computer work overall.*

*...there are a lot of things that I've done with the computer courses ... It's got me interested in things again.*

*Maths was not a success. He had great respect for the tutor, who was once a student in the same position as Tony. But he struggles with maths on paper that he can understand and do in his head. Somebody telling him he must turn up for an exam which he knew he was going to fail was the last straw, and again he left. He believes his practical maths is plenty good enough for everyday living.*

*Now his formal learning is focussed firmly around the literacy courses he loves, twice a week. He likes the attitude of the tutor and other students, and the relaxed and varied curriculum provided (including outings to museums, theatres, historic sites). The clear progress he has made and the personal interest and encouragement of the tutor are important.*

*...what I like about it, you know, everybody works as a group nobody takes the mickey out of anybody. It is like a little family circle. ... I mean all right I only see 'em once or twice a week but that time that we're in the group together everybody works with each other you know... some of people in my group are worse than me at reading you know, I mean, and they'll sit with me and they'll ask me.*

*...how can I describe it? It's so relieving that you get to know something and you can then do it, you know you think to yourself "thank God, it weren't that hard, it weren't that bad." ... Gradually your confidence builds up. You can start to do this and you can understand it. You know, I mean all right I still have problems with commas and full stops and spelling 'where' and 'were' and you know, I mean, but that hopefully is gonna come with time.*

*In his most recent interview for which the transcript is not yet available, Tony is as keen as ever on the literacy group. But he does not seem to be seeing the summer without classes as problematically as last year, and he is not at present thinking of taking on any extra classes. He is closer to getting over the loss of his wife – looking to buy a memorial bench and managing quite well without her. He has two sons doing well, with partners and in good jobs, and a granddaughter who has no problems at school. Clare may be a worry for a while yet, but his life seems to be opening out somewhat. He is experimenting with "healthy" cooking. He has given up smoking. The literacy class*

*remains important at present. It spills over into the rest of his life. And he would just love to get himself a GCSE English certificate and go and wave it at his old school and say, "I'm not thick. This is what I can do with the right help".*

## **Theories of Learning**

For the purposes of the Learning Lives project there are some problems within the existing learning literature. The essence of these problems lies in different ways of understanding learning. The first, which Sfard (1998) argues has been dominant within the psychology literature until very recently, is to view learning as acquisition. That is, learning is centrally concerned with acquiring a known commodity – be that knowledge, skills, understanding or something else. It is superficially possible to understand learning within the three stories presented above in this way. Thus, Tony has recently acquired some literacy skills. However, Tony's story demonstrates the reductionist inadequacy of such an understanding of learning, for much of what is centrally important in his story, such as the significance of belonging first to a work gang and later to a literacy class, is missed out from this perspective. Hodkinson (2005) has argued elsewhere that the reasons for this inadequacy lie in several central problems with this metaphor, and with the ways it is commonly used. Thus, as Hager (2005) points out, the acquisition metaphor turns what is learned into a series of commodities, and sees learning itself as a series of acquisition events. In contrast Hager argues, and Tony's story supports this view, learning is essentially an on-going process.

A related problem with acquisition is that the metaphor separates out the learner, the process of learning and the product which is learned. That is, the product is independent of the way it is learned, or who learns it. The skills of pavement-laying have an independent existence. People like Tony can acquire these skills, but the skills always remain the same. We are left with the currently fashionable technical efficiency view of learning: what matters is (i) knowing which skills matter, and (ii) knowing which is the best (most efficient) way for those skills to be learned. However, in Tony's story, the processes and products of learning are deeply intertwined, and neither can be understood without considering the positions, dispositions, and identities of Tony himself, as a learner. Tony's skills with the road gang were an integral part of belonging to that male working class community, membership of which continued, even after injury forced his move into an office job.

Many writers still wedded to what Sfard (1998) terms an acquisition view of learning, go way beyond this simplistic folk view of learning – 'putting stuff into vessels' (Bereiter, 2002). One way to do this is to see learning as a process of construction by the learner. That is, a learner constructs, say, skills of road mending and pavement laying, that are partly unique for him, as he makes sense of and comes to own what he is learning. There have been many different views of the process of learning as construction. About 10 years ago, what was termed the constructivist movement was debating a range of positions, juxtaposed by Phillips (1995). The nub of the debate was whether or not what was learned, for example Newtonian physics, did have an existence independent of any learner, as opposed to a more radical, relativist view, that knowledge of Newtonian physics could only be what any learner made of it. A common way out of the perceived dangers of relativism is illustrated by Chinn and Brewer (1993). They argued that

previously held schemata (constructs of understanding held by the learner) could impede the effective learning of science. The answer was to work as a teacher to change those problematic schemata, so that correct scientific understanding could then be scaffolded into a learner's ways of thinking.

In this form, there are three serious weaknesses in construction as a metaphor of learning, again shown up in the stories in this working paper. Firstly, this was an almost entirely cognitive view of learning. It was concerned with the mind, and with propositional knowledge. Construction was seen as a mental process only, albeit often a tacit one. Yet our stories show that even when learning has a clear cognitive focus – like Tony's literacy skills, the process of that learning is embodied. In Tony's case this can be seen in his attempts to manage with very limited literacy skills whilst at work in the office, and the centrality of his later learning of literacy skills as part of belonging to his adult education classes. In both cases, practice was and is central to his learning, as are his emotions – what he felt.

Beckett and Hager (2002) argue that the separation of the mind from the body, found in much constructivist literature, is essentially Cartesian, and that it is a false dichotomy. Varela et al. (1993) argue that though mind and body are partly independent from each other, neither can be understood in isolation, and both are intimately involved in all human actions, including thinking and learning. Furthermore, thinking entails much more of the body than just the brain. We need to understand learning as biological, cognitive, emotional and practical. The learning lives research does not allow us to engage directly with human biology, but the stories show clearly the embodied, practical and affective significance of learning.

The second problem with constructivism is that it is primarily concerned with formal learning, such as science or mathematics. This way of thinking about learning was partly developed to answer the questions, why do so many school pupils fail to understand maths and science, and how can we overcome these problems? These are very important questions, but in relation to the Learning Lives stories, they are but a sub-text, at best. Much of the learning in all our stories is 'informal'. As Tony's early story shows, it is quite possible to live a fulfilled life with lots of learning that is almost entirely informal.

However, both these criticisms of construction as a metaphor for learning can be overcome if, like Hager (2005) we understand construction in a Deweyan sense. That is, the process of construction is an embodied process. We can now Tony constructing himself through their learning. At all stages of his life, the negative experiences of secondary school, learning as work, learning in the family and his later adult education courses, for Tony, learning has been a process of becoming.

The third problem with constructivism is more difficult to surmount. Like other largely accounts of learning grouped together by Sfard as 'acquisition', constructivism still sees learning as occurring in a context – that is, context and learning are separate. One of the prime reasons for the decline of constructivist learning theories came from a series of texts written at the turn of the 1980s/90s, which thoroughly undermined this separation. Thus, Brown et al. (1989), Lave and Wenger (1991) and an increasingly large number of post-Vygotskian writers (Engeström, 1999; Wertsch, 1998) argued that learning differed in different situations. That is, learning is always situated and learning

is part of that situation, not separate from it. Thus, for example, Lave and Wenger, 1991, p35) argue that

In our view, learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world.

In Tony's case, his work-based learning in the earlier period of his adult life was centred within the participatory practices of the various jobs he did. In fact, most of this academic work on situated learning was based outside the worlds of formal education and schooling, in third world communities or the workplace. The central concern was therefore with informal learning. Where these theorists did engage with school learning, it was to argue that the situation of school itself produced the very weaknesses in understanding science or mathematics that constructivists were concerned about (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Engeström, 1991). Rather than seeing learning as either acquisition or construction, these writers saw learning primarily as participation (Rogoff, 2003).

To further explore this view of learning as participation we now move to our second story: that of Derek Hutchinson.

## **Derek Hutchinson**

*Derek was born in 1944. Almost the whole of his life has been spent in the building industry, much of it self-employed, some employed by companies. Most of his family were in the building industry and he never expected to do anything else other than to enter a building apprenticeship – although he differed from his family by choosing carpentry rather than continuing the family tradition of bricklaying.*

*Derek has strong opinions on the importance of practical on-site training and declining standards in the building industry. He has lived in the same rural market town for virtually all his life and is very proud of his County, in which he is deeply rooted through family, love and his own sense of belonging. These are factors that have helped to create his strong sense of identity, which appears to remain largely untouched by the eventual need to leave the construction industry for health reasons.*

*Derek was identified for us by the Jobcentre Plus disability team, with whom he has been registered. In recent years he has suffered increasingly from rheumatoid arthritis. At the start of the fieldwork, Derek was working part-time as a handyman in a country public house and restaurant, while further developing two of his main hobbies (stamp and postcard collecting) around which he has already developed a small but successful business.*

### Education (including attitudes towards learning)

*Although Derek was in the grammar school stream, and was thought highly of at school (he was also County standard in athletics), he left school at the first opportunity for financial reasons (his mother was divorced) and never expected to do anything else. He went directly into a carpentry apprenticeship with a local firm, subsequently moving to an*

*alternative company to broaden his practical experience. Neither firm offered day release so all the training was on site. Derek was fortunate in having highly skilled workmen who taught him a wide range of construction methods and techniques. He is a firm believer in the importance of learning on site where one learns through doing. This experience has helped to shape his critical views of what he considers the inadequacies of college training for the construction industry, which he sees as a protected and therefore unrealistic environment.*

*Derek is equally critical of workers who have received 'botch training' or no training at all, and who have low standards of workmanship. He is particularly critical of building companies who employ such workers and are only interested in money, with little if any regard for producing a high quality product. Derek blames cash-book management for what he sees as the deplorably low standard of much modern building. Basically Derek believes in on-site training delivered by experienced and caring craftsmen who are able to pass on their own high standards of craftsmanship, i.e. the kind of training Derek himself received during his six-year apprenticeship. He also realises changing in building methods, including increased off-site mass-production, means that those days may have gone in terms of much new construction, which requires on-site assembly rather than the use of more traditional craft skills.*

*However, there remains a high demand for craft skills to maintain and renovate older buildings, country houses and heritage sites, an area of construction that interests Derek. This is a skill shortage area, and the specialist firms that operate in this area are encountering increasing difficulty in finding and, where necessary, training sufficiently skilled staff.*

*During his career Derek has gained considerable experience in working on older and listed buildings, especially country houses. At no time has he attended college for formal training courses: his experience has always been gained on site. Throughout his career, and especially when he was younger, Derek has taken care to widen his experience of different building methods and has been prepared to move company in order to do this.*

*In 1975 Derek was one of a small number of craftsmen to be trained in dry lining techniques by a large national building company (but again with no paper qualification) and found that he was one of a very small minority to have these skills. This training has served Derek well and means that he has rarely been out of work, unlike so many in the industry. The same company offered him the opportunity to attend college to acquire qualifications on the basis that he was likely to be hampered in terms of further promotion to managerial status within the company without them. However, Derek was unable to go to college because the week after the offer was made the firm was taken over by another company and many of the staff, including Derek, were made redundant.*

*The national company's emphasis on the importance of formal qualifications reflects the sharp divide that could exist in the 60s-70s between the type of training provided by large employers with formal training departments and by small employers who needed all their employees, including apprentices, to be involved in production. The variety of work that some of the small employers undertook (and in which Derek was trained), often with a body of loyal and highly experienced workers who had grown up and worked together for years and who frequently developed caring father-son relationships with the*

*apprentices to whom they passed on their skills and techniques, provided a particular form of craft training which Derek valued and responded to, and which is now dying out.*

*Derek has been a very successful builder and is a highly intelligent man, with a deeply held love of learning. The following examples illustrate this love of learning.*

- 1 For a number of years Derek has run a secondary philately and postcard business. He specialises from a business standpoint in West Indian stamps and postcards although his personal interest is more local. He first became interested in stamp collecting at his primary school and his interest in postcards followed from this. Postcards have stamps and they have postmarks and (unlike envelopes) are less likely to be thrown away. Derek now has a large collection of postcards of his home town and surrounding area, and for some years has lectured on philately and his postcard collection to philatelic societies and local museums. He has averaged some eight lectures a year although currently he has cut this back to about four. Derek said that initially he was "terrified" although he now enjoys lecturing and has lectured to audiences of up to 250 people. Derek has had a slide show put together by a small company (as yet he doesn't have the skills to do this himself although he has recently acquired a scanner and may learn). Derek is a past-president of a local town philatelic society. He has also provided information on philately and postcards on request to a number of specialist authors internationally (including Canada and the States) and, although he has not written himself, his contributions are acknowledged in several books.*
- 2 At school Derek enjoyed studying history and geography, and this interest has continued. Derek's interest in local postcards is accompanied by an equally strong interest in local history. He has read extensively on the subject and has a collection of local history books. He has colleagues who work in the local County Archives where he has undertaken research, including family history – an interest which he hopes he may have more time to develop. Derek has recently used the internet to help him research family history but found that the census site is expensive. He considers that he can obtain most of the information he requires from the County Archives and intends to spend more time there.*
- 3 Recently Derek has bought a computer and is now spending much of his spare time learning how to use it. Last year he took a basic course (no paper qualification) in computing at a local Learndirect centre which has helped, but he is dependent for much of his computer learning on leaflets and handbooks, and on trial and error. Basically he is teaching himself. However, he telephones the small local business that sold him the computer if he has a problem he cannot solve, and is impressed by the quality of the support he is receiving.*
- 4 A main reason for purchasing a new computer is to further develop his philately and postcard business by using the web more extensively. He feels that he could create his own website himself and has the necessary knowledge to do so, but that it would take too much time. It might also be an inferior site because it would be a first attempt and he wants a well-designed and efficient site because it will represent his 'front window'. This is particularly important because his business represents his insurance for the future as he gradually becomes less mobile. Derek has already had offers from friends and contacts with the*

*necessary skills and experience who will be able to help him. The computer will also help him with cataloguing, which currently he undertakes by hand and typewriter.*

- 5 *Derek's love of learning is further illustrated by his pride in the achievements of his two daughters. The elder daughter has a degree in law and is a qualified and experienced solicitor, although currently she works in a senior administrative post in a local university. She enjoys her work very much, and Derek takes great satisfaction in this. Derek's second daughter has a responsible position in the local offices of a national charity. She is married to the great-grandson of a famous furniture maker (also well-known for regarding the on-the-job training they give in their own high-class workshop as superior to any training that apprentices might gain at college) and lives locally in an old house. Derek has spent considerable time in helping them with conversion and fittings, and enjoys applying his expertise and experience to help his own family. He also continues to learn from the new challenges. The couple are currently in the process of buying a sizeable property within a national park. They are asking for Derek's help and advice which he is delighted to give, but because the property lies within a national park any work will require the services of an architect (again a potential learning experience for Derek - and from his descriptions of the property and the work that needs doing, one can feel his eagerness to get started). However, he is concerned that the tight building regulations that apply to national park properties may mean that he won't be allowed to be of as much use as he has been previously.*

*Derek's strong sense of agency is apparent throughout. He has a wide range of interests, especially practical but including his collections and deep interest in local history. Recently he has become interested in IT, initially for business reasons but increasingly because he has become aware of the computer's potential and the challenges it presents and wishes to develop his expertise. The strong sense of agency is also apparent in his determination to prepare for, and continue to lead, a fulfilling life as the rheumatoid arthritis worsens. His consultant and doctors have told him this is inevitable.*

*Derek still has no paper qualifications, but has developed a wide range of skills and expertise through on-the-job training, finding out for himself and 'doing'. However, he sees the benefits of education, as witnessed in his pride in his own daughters' achievements. As for Derek himself, he feels he has achieved a great deal through his own very considerable practical efforts and drive; he is very much part of his own local community with friendships that go back to schooldays.*

*Derek sees much of the learning in his life as positive. He learns in relation to his practical skills and tasks, and in relation to his hobbies and interests. For the last few years, he has also been learning to live with his arthritis, and with the fact that it will continue to get worse. For several years this caused no major change to either his self-image or his interests and activities. His jobs changed, but not his identity as an active and practical man. His existing interests in stamps, postcards and history also helped him cope with the changes in lifestyle that followed from the condition. However, as his health deteriorated, the pressures on his life style and associated identity began to change.*

*In July 2005, Derek's deteriorating condition necessitated his handing in his notice to the public house where he had been employed as handyman. About a year later he found alternative part-time employment, as a driver.*

*Derek's disability is a matter of continuing concern which is now beginning to prevent him from leading the kind of life he would like to lead. He is finding compensation both in the breadth of his other interests and in his family. His daughters are very attentive and are also helping him with any problems he may encounter in mastering the computer.*

*As yet Derek hasn't attended any more IT courses and remains uninterested in gaining any qualifications. His approach to learning is direct and pragmatic. If it can help him to become more proficient in areas where he is unable to teach himself adequately then he is interested. If he can do it for himself then he is not. Derek describes himself as learning "through trial and error". His younger daughter has helped him to register with E-bay and he is selling stamps and postcards through the website. However, he does not see his small business as much more than a hobby – certainly not the equivalent of a paid job.*

*Derek has also bought a scanner and is becoming skilled in photographic copying and restoration work. He says that there are IT classes available but that he can learn successfully by himself supplemented by the occasional help of his daughters. If he did attend formal classes it would be for a specific purpose. For example, he could be tempted by a class in digital photography (one was advertised but it didn't run because of insufficient students) and (possibly) in the use of spreadsheets specifically for cataloguing purposes.*

*Although Derek's commercialisation of his hobby brings only small financial reward it has provided him with an international network of 'e-mail friends' in such places as the USA and the Caribbean, Australia, New Zealand and Malta. Derek is also delighted that he has now (through E-bay) sold to customers in Russia.*

*Derek has further developed his interest in local and family history through the web, but is concerned about the expense. He is happier using the resources of his local library and the County Archives. Since our last meeting he has spent time exploring the 1901 census for local and family history purposes.*

*Derek continues to give lectures on philately and postcard collection and has developed lecture materials on the different postmarks used at various periods by the communities and districts in his local County. He continues to buy "bits and pieces" (including bill-heads and "fancy calligraphy", some of which he then resells) and wherever possible visits local postcard fairs. However he is having to cut down gradually on his outside engagements because of his deteriorating mobility. The arthritis has its "ups and downs" and Derek finds it is affected by the weather. He is on painkillers.*

*Derek's wife is now virtually a fulltime carer looking after her Mother who lives in their home, and she and Derek are also caring for his own Mother's sister (age 83) who has recently had a stroke that threatens her independence. As much as possible, Derek tries to make time to help his daughters and their partners with practical jobs that need doing in their homes. He still gains great enjoyment from this.*

*Derek is now preparing for retirement, brought closer by the progressive arthritis. By nature he is active and he does not feel ready for retirement yet. However this may be forced on him. He is philosophical about this and says that he relishes the greater freedom and the time to think and to do the things he wants to do. He is doing things “at my own pace” and in particular is gaining solace from his family, his hobbies, and from his relatively new interest in the computer and the possibilities – and friendships - it is opening up for him. However, he may not yet have come to terms with the progressively increasing constraints, financial as well as physical, on his preferred lifestyle, and the eventual loss of his deep-rooted practical, craftsman way of life.*

## **Learning as Participation**

Derek learned to be a skilled craftsman in precisely the participatory ways that Lave and Wenger (1991) describe. He learned by participating in a community of craftsmen, learning their values and identities, as well as carpentry skills. His deep knowledge about stamps came through participating in the hobby, including participating in the wider community of other stamp collectors. Tony’s learning as work was also participatory, and involved values and identity as part of a community of male manual workers, as well as the technical skills of cutting paving stones, or driving a JCB. He later learned to be a housekeeper, through doing the role after his wife died – another example of learning as participation.

Learning on formal courses can also be usefully seen as participatory. Tony clearly gets a strong sense of belonging from his beloved adult education classes, and is learning through engagement with and participation in those classes, with the tutor, others students, and the varied activities and practices in the class.

By the turn of the century, learning literature was locked in a struggle between two competing views of learning: situated learning and learning as participation (Greeno, 1997) and learning as a cognitive process of construction/acquisition (Anderson, et al., 1996). However, despite the claims of Cobb and Bowers (1999), the fashionable view of learning as participation also had a central problem, which is of direct concern to learning lives. Namely, the significance of the individual learner was often overlooked, in detailed studies of learning situations, such as workplaces, be they seen as communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) or activity systems (Engestrom, 1999). It would be as if we studied in detail the workplaces where Derek and Tony learned, or the classrooms where Tony learned, but without thinking about Tony or Derek as people. Worryingly for the concerns of the learning lives project, identity and agency disappear.

Thus, there are elements of learning as construction, in a Deweyan sense, and elements of learning as participation, which help make sense of our data. We can see the ways in which all three stories can be understood as the on-going construction of the person, through participation in a wide variety of activities, in a wide variety of settings. The task for Learning Lives is to build upon these insights, in ways that help us understand the interrelationships between learning, identity and agency. We return to this theme at the end of the paper.

## **Learning as becoming, and learning as being**

When we examine our sample, this view of learning as a process of becoming through participation makes sense for all of the people within it. However, we have selected the five stories presented here because they are different from some of the others. A comparison between Derek's and Tony's stories illustrates this difference rather well. Throughout his life, at work and in his hobbies, as a skilled fulltime carpenter, and now, following health problems, working in less demanding ways, learning has always been central to Derek's sense of identity. He has spent his life striving to meet new challenges, to learn new things. His enjoyment in building came largely from tackling new projects – both enhancing his skills, and taking satisfaction in using them well. We can see the same drive for constant learning in his stamp and postcard collecting, and in his love of local history. However, learning was not always of such central importance for Tony. Derek was almost always looking for challenges to overcome, and new things to learn, but in his early adult life, learning for Tony was incidental. In his case, it was simply that through living and working, through belonging to his group of valued peers, learning took place. Throughout their lives, both Tony and Derek learned through becoming – but for much of Tony's life, learning was peripheral to his sense of identity, whereas for Derek, it was always central. For Derek, unlike Tony, learning was always part of being.

We have included Tony in the sample used in this working paper, because of his changed attitude to learning after he first went to adult education classes. In this more recent phase, learning has arguably become as central to his life as it has always been for Derek. What began as learning to meet an instrumental need – to help his daughter at school, has gradually become a central part of his newly found sense of self in life. He now attends classes because going to classes is important to him. His on-going attendance has brought increased self-awareness, greater self-confidence, and a changing sense of who Tony Wilf is. In our terms, Tony is now also someone for whom learning is central to his being. The difference between him and Derek is that for Derek this has arguably always been the case. For Tony, it is a recent transformation.

Another person who has gone through a similar, though arguably even more dramatic learning transformation, is Gladys Dean.

### ***Gladys Dean***

*Gladys is a 66 year old widow who now lives alone in her family home. She grew up in the West Indies and had minimal education, spending her time instead working in the house and on the farm. She never learned to read or write, but to cook and sew and wash and garden and care for animals. She had two children before following her husband to the UK after he had found work. Although she now feels completely British and that the West Indies is a foreign place, initially England with its cold climate and smoky cities was a big shock. They started life in England in a shared house and Gladys was sent out to work straight away. She worked long hours in a series of low skilled jobs until she was 60, taking only short periods out when she had her other four children. Her children have all done well and have good careers ("proud of myself for that"), but she herself has been completely unable to read or write for most of her life. Her husband took responsibility for all such matters while he was alive.*

*Gladys's life has not been easy. She has always had to work hard, in the house and to earn money to support family here and back in the West Indies. Her marriage was initially happy but her husband became unfaithful and abusive to Gladys both mentally and physically, although he provided responsibly for his family. When he died 12 years ago, Gladys missed him, but relief was a stronger emotion.*

*Gladys's illiteracy has long been something she was ashamed of - so ashamed that she was afraid to do anything about it. It became a bigger problem once her husband was no longer there to deal with paperwork. Her children have willingly spent a lot of time helping her. But Gladys's fear of being "shamed" meant they were not able to persuade her to go to literacy classes. Then, in Gladys's words...*

*My daughter in London came up for holiday and this leaflet drop in the letterbox, and she pick it up and she come in and she start write up. I say, 'What you doing now?' She said, 'I find some place where you can go, Mum'. I say, 'What!' She say, 'You're going to college'. And I remember I laugh after her. Said, 'College!' She said, 'Yeah'. And she write it up, and she ring - she ring straightaway. And I said, 'Oh, I'll have to get bus', and then my daughter find out it's not too far from me... And I were dreading it the whole time, for the 6 weeks that come up 'til college open in September. I were dr- really dreading it. And I go, the... day before school open. You go... see the tutor there. And I book up and Joan [tutor] ... Joan and Margery's face, and just the face alone said I were going to be ok... I can't read, and I'm so old. I mean I started... I was 62, somewhere there. And so I said, 'everyone going to say, "oh this big old lady can't read and can't do nothing"'. Put it like that. I can't do nothing. I can cook and I can do that, oh yes, but I can't read. I can't write. And I meet up these two face, and another lad what were a student there, and he come over and said, 'you'll be ok'. You know, 'you'll be ok'... And I were alright from that, you know.*

*Attending literacy classes has resulted in a total change in Gladys's life. Previously she had one great achievement, bringing up her children well, but she seems not to have recognised that fully and remained a withdrawn person who saw herself as of little worth. Her progress in reading and writing has not been fast but she feels it has already made a big difference to her life, and she is totally committed to making more progress. The literacy class twice a week is central, but she was also encouraged to do maths, where she already had some practical ability, and she thoroughly enjoys doing a couple of courses using practical skills which she already had - dressmaking and cookery. All the tutors and students are very protective of her, and hugely supportive. Importantly it is not only Gladys's literacy which is improving, the knock on effect of gaining skills and being in such a supportive environment is that Gladys is becoming a happier and much more confident person. Apart from the big improvement in the practicalities of dealing with written material in everyday life, Gladys believes she now understands much better what is going on around her and is able to talk about things better and explain them better. She no longer feels oppressed.*

*"Literacy. Going back to that, I can't tell you the burden what lift off me. I don't have no more burden. It's so light."*

*She says that she is happy for almost the first time in her life. She lives in her own house with good neighbours around. She has grown up children whom she is proud to have*

*raised. More importantly she feels independent for the first time. She is able to do things she enjoys and is eager to do more, and that is largely down to going to college, where staff and students all support one another, and that has allowed her to flourish. She also has support from her family who ring her up to find out what she has cooked today or what new word she has learned*

*The best life I have is now...I really love going to school... What I'm learning now is for me, you know. What I were doing, it were for the children. I were doing it for the children. Now, it's for me. Everything I do now is for me. So that's why I go to college, you know. And – and try to grab what I can grab...It's not I want education for do a job, it's just because, er, I – I want to be – know something what I didn't know. Read something what I didn't read, you know.”*

## **Learning and Identity Change**

For both Tony and Gladys, we can identify a key period of transformation in their relationships with learning. Both spent most of their lives learning tacitly and incidentally, as they worked and in Gladys's case, ran a family. In both cases, a significant change in their lived circumstances eventually triggered an engagement with adult education. In both cases, this 'triggering' was a complex and multi-faceted process, and in both cases, relations with other family members was of crucial significance. For Tony, it was the need to support his daughter. For Gladys, it was her daughter who finally persuaded her to make the big step of entering a literacy course. In both cases, the engagement with adult education proved to be a catalyst for a further personal change. Gladys and Tony visibly grew as people, gaining confidence, new abilities and a progressively changing sense of who they were. Put more abstractly, as their identities changed in other ways too, learning and continuing to learn became central to who they were. Learning became a central part of their being. Of course, this sense of identity as a learner could change again in the future.

We next turn to Anna Reynard. Like Derek, but unlike Tony and Gladys, learning has always been a central part of her identity.

### **Anna Reynard**

*Anna Reynard is a highly educated and reflective 66 year old, who wanted to become part of the Learning Lives project partly because of her commitment to adult education and concerns about the pressures on it. This in turn reflects one of her first and repeated statements: "I've always felt that education was the leitmotif in my life". She says she has, and has always had a passion for learning - which she perceives more broadly than formal education. This encompasses both a passion for learning for herself and a desire to share that passion with others; in particular with those from disadvantaged backgrounds who have not had the same opportunities to enjoy learning.*

*She is convinced that her parents own history in education have influenced this aspect of her own life. Both parents did well at school, but were not allowed to stay on beyond a basic level. Her father regretted this for the whole of his life, disliking the bank clerk's job he was forced to take. He continued to educate himself through the WEA, reading etc.*

*They are totally influential in my attitude to education - all my learning basically... he was determined that his three children should be educated to as high level as they were capable of going and he encouraged us right from the day we were born basically.....he bought us books right from a very early age so we had things like um, children's encyclopaedias, sets of second hand school books that were no longer being used in school, geography, history, which I loved and I was an avid reader. So basically I inherited ... the value that my parents placed on education and it's never left me basically. And his attitude to education was not that it was a means of getting better jobs and lots of money and promotion and so on. He did see it as a way of getting a more satisfying, enriching life but not in terms of material success, that was never a priority in his life. So I grew up with the idea of education for its own sake basically - that education was a good and was, should be a good for everybody.*

*Her father's determination that his children should achieve in education what he had not, involved a lot of pressure, as well as the encouragement and enthusiasm. They were expected to excel in all fields, to do everything to the highest standard, to compete. Anna's youngest brother eventually rebelled but Anna took on the mantle because:*

*I loved learning, I liked reading. Education fired my imagination in so many different ways, and, um... - I have to admit, and this is all part of the expectations and pressure, I liked the success.*

*She also learned from him to value all people, developing socialist and humanist principles. She recognised later however that her personal social education and learning had been largely by-passed.*

*Anna applied to Oxford, which was her father's dream. To do so she studied foreign languages where there was less competition, rather than her own first preference - English. She wasn't particularly disappointed when she got into London University instead - looking forward to the cultural activities available in the capital. However:*

*Instead of being as everybody expected me to be a good scholar all the way through and end up with a first... I found a lot of other interests including relationships.*

*She had a lot of catching up to do on the social side of her life and went through two initially idyllic but eventually "disastrous" relationships, the second of which led to a serious disagreement with her father as she came to doubt his previously steadfast humanist values. When she eventually came to recognize that he was probably right, it led to a serious identity crisis which she feels has reoccurred at various stages in her life when she has been unable to match her achievements to her ideals. After failing her second year exams she lost her grant but was allowed a year out and returned (from a fairly agreeable translation job) and got her degree. She recognizes that at this stage in her life she had become entirely self motivated and did the better for it. "I really did love studying." She was no longer trying to achieve what others expected of her. This theme of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation is another that reoccurs throughout her life, and which she has never fully learned to deal with.*

*Her own ambition was to go into some kind of creative occupation, but she was persuaded by "sensible adults" to gain a teaching qualification, and found somewhat to*

her surprise that she really enjoyed it. "I found the teaching certificate so stimulating. The combination of academic study with a practical use at the end of it just suited me." She was fascinated by what she learned about child development and the sociology and psychology of education. However at no point in her life did she want to "commit myself to just being a modern language teacher in a grammar school and reproduce my own history". She was always more interested in helping those she saw as disadvantaged.

Nevertheless, her first permanent job was in a girls direct grant school, where she was able to keep some of her options open by working both as a class teacher with younger pupils and (increasingly) as a language specialist in the upper school. She taught there until she got married and had children. Her husband was a working class labourer who nevertheless shared her values and belief in education. They lived in considerable poverty at the start of their married life. Anna's interest in social and especially educational deprivation grew, and she read in depth about the subject. She saw its problems around her whilst being able to provide compensatory stimulation for her own two toddlers.

She does see deliberate learning she has pursued both formally and informally as reflecting the stages of her life, but always underlain by her egalitarian principles and belief and joy in education. Thus she read about educational deprivation and followed it up with a diploma course. She took preschool playgroup training courses. As she moved gradually back into pursuing a varied full time career she took all the courses that were available that seemed appropriate to help her do her work as well as possible, and where no appropriate course was available she read.

...you'll gather than in and amongst all this [various jobs] I was also concerned about my own learning and was forever doing in-service courses and short courses.

When both her boys had started school she went back to teaching in a local council estate primary school, which she found very rewarding, but the job was only temporary. Unable to find another similar job, she applied for a teacher training post at an HE college which seemed made for her, as it required experience of both primary and secondary education. This was again temporary, part of a succession of part time and fixed term jobs. The one that best suited her self view, was as a field officer setting up and evaluating projects in an initiative to improve the educational opportunities of disadvantaged groups. When that was shut down by the government, similar jobs were only available at a distance which she saw as too great a risk to her family life, so she took a post locally as an educational social worker. She liked being able to work directly with families with problems, but after four years the system required her to take a social work qualification. This was one course she didn't want to do as it would have moved her away from her educational focus and duplicated what her husband was by now doing. She tried doing some freelance educational writing, then worked at a technical (FE) college teaching "pre- social work" students. Then the HE college offered her a series of short contracts back in teacher training. She enjoyed the work, but became frustrated as she was not eligible for promotion or training, whilst covering for permanent staff training. The requirement then was that teacher trainers should update their own skills through "recent and relevant" school experience. She believed in this and that it should apply to her.

When Anna talked about learning in her first interview she emphasised formal courses. However, although she is enthusiastic about doing courses she does not believe that

*this is all that learning is about. She believes strongly in learning through experience and practice and in many other less formal ways. In fact it was her perceived need to learn from up to date practical experience in a school classroom that led her to leave teacher training and return to schools. And she deliberately applied to a school in a poorer area.*

*I tried to prepare myself by getting as much information as possible and tapes and things about recent developments in teaching modern languages, which I fully approved of.*

*She had high ideals on teaching methods to inspire all, but these did not help her to deal with the difficult classes, nor did she have any support from her head of department to try to learn to cope. Her temporary contract was not renewed. Through school networks she learned of a job in a similarly deprived area but where there was a strong ethos of support for staff and pupils and belief that the system could work. She took the job even though it involved long journeys every day. Although there was support and the school's ethos fitted her own, she still struggled with many of the classes, and after a few years, coming close to a nervous breakdown and crisis of identity, she decided that the journey, and time away from home, was not justifiable. She took a job in a "nicer" area nearer home. Some classes were still problematic and she thinks now that there may have been a failure to learn on her part – perhaps too determined an adherence to ideals. She was more than happy to leave school teaching, when she saw, applied for and received a research bursary at her old HE college. She was pleased to learn how to conduct her own research and to read more around the sort of problems she and other teachers had.*

*I thought "this is ideal, this is exactly what I want to do" [laugh]. Because I'd been saying to myself "if I could only retire I will write something about this, I will do research, I will find out what teachers need to support them"...I wasn't thinking in terms of a PhD I just wanted to do the research. I wanted the opportunity to look into all these issues that were bubbling up inside me.*

*In doing the research she returned to the schools where she had recently taught and was boosted when she learned that she had been valued more highly than she had realised at the time, by both pupils and staff.*

*At this time her husband became seriously ill and died, and she feels that she survived that difficult period because of her interest in the research. "it was a life-saver I think after my husband died, to be involved in that was absolute life-saver." By the time she had finished her PhD she was of retirement age. She would happily have taken on more research work, but there was nothing available, but...*

*I just never stopped learning basically. And after I finished my thesis I got involved with the University of the Third Age in the town where I now live... first of all I because I was writing the book [of the thesis] I thought I don't want to over-commit myself. So I concentrated on learning activities for myself and did various sort of courses just for a year.*

*Thereafter she also started teaching courses for U3A. Anna's first interview ended thus:*

*...which brings us up to date, still with my passion for learning and passion for ..... being in some way involved in educating others... I can't see myself ever wanting to*

*give either of those two up, either continuing to learn myself or if I can be useful to others in helping others learn.*

*Over the next two years of our project Anna's involvement with U3A has continued. She went to Russian and keep fit classes, organised a walking group and taught two foreign language groups. But the learning she has described for herself has largely not been about the acquisition of knowledge or skills through classes, but about personal and social relationships. A new partner died, and she became concerned yet again with dealing with bereavement, and an increasing sense of impermanence in herself. She enjoys her teaching and with well-motivated groups is able to teach much as she always wanted to, but is aware of the need to adapt to the individuals and groups. Learning to deal with group dynamics has been central to her achievements with U3A. She has also developed two new "hobbies" outside U3A. She collects antique porcelain which has lead her to find out not only directly about what she is collecting and about auctions but also the history and social history surrounding its production. She is also now exploring her family history. She started in the long summer holidays when there were no U3A courses. Her learning for this has been experiential, through consulting others, using libraries, using the internet and parish records. Again there has been spin off learning about the times, places and society where her ancestors lived, much of which she has gained through books. She admitted this had become her current obsession.*

*I never intend to give up learning. Whether it's formal learning, whether it's experiential learning, the day I give up learning will be the day I die, basically. Because learning is...is to do with living, isn't it?*

## **Formal and Informal Learning**

For Derek Hutchinson, learning as being entailed mainly what is often described as informal learning. That is, he had attended very few taught courses since leaving school, and constantly expressed a deeply felt preference for learning in other ways. For him, attending a courser was a type of last resort – when no other way of learning something particular seemed possible. This does not mean that he saw no value in formalised courses. He was proud of what his daughter had achieved through her school and university education. But for him, the joy of learning, of meeting new challenges, of participating in new activities or new ways of extending his expertise, were what is often termed informal. For Anna Reynard, as well as for Gladys and Tony in their later lives, attending various types of course or educational provision were very important. This was not the only way in which any of them learned, but all three greatly valued the processes of participation within education. For Anna, as we have seen, participation might be as a student or as a teacher – she was committed to learning through both roles.

Looking at Anna's learning in this way reinforces the argument put forward by Colley et al. (2003) that formal and informal learning are artificial and rather arbitrary categories, which are applied differently and often inconsistently by different writers. Thus, when Anna attends a course as a student, many people would describe her learning as 'formal' – and that is the rather loose usage of the term we have adopted for this working paper. But even as a student, there were many facets of Anna's learning that might often be termed informal. As we have seen, she herself is aware of the importance of

learning outside courses, stressing learning from her parents, and the ways in which her ideals, her 'formal' education, and her practice as a teacher always interacted, sometimes in discordant ways. When she is learning as a teacher, most people would describe her learning as informal (Eg Beckett and Hager, 2002). Yet Anna herself did not really distinguish between the two. She is committed to education and to learning. Furthermore, her learning as a teacher shows several attributes often attached to formal learning (Colley et al., 2003). She was learning in a place where education was the main focus, and her own learning was often intentional and deliberate.

For our final example of someone for whom learning is and has been a key part of their identity, we turn to Jane Eddington. For her, 'formal' and 'informal' were deeply intertwined throughout her life.

## **Jane Eddington**

*Like everyone, Jane has been learning informally all her life but in her case learning appears to be a kind of bastion against a sequence of troubles, both financial and medical.*

*Jane's parents left school young. Both had middle class antecedents but their families had fallen on hard times and her father spent his career in the Air Force. He did influence Jane in significant ways: he had been in the liberation of Italy in the war, and 'adored Italy' and everything about it. He had been Sicily, and although he didn't talk about it with Jane, he had told wild tales about it to her brothers. The Italian language and Sicily became a lifelong passion for Jane.*

*Jane's family moved to Malta when she was very young. Her Service schooling in Malta was good, and simply being there led to some informal learning of Italian:*

*'when we were living in Malta, ... the only television was in Italian. ... And ... for 6 months of the year, all the films were in Italian. Not that we ever went to them. But we were always brought up with 'andiamo' and 'seditola'. And little instructions in Italian'.*

*When her family moved back to England, schooling didn't go so well and a life-long pattern began. She failed her 11+ at first, but her parents were very keen for her to go to a selective independent school and at 13+ she passed. She describes the atmosphere at that new school as a bullying one, and attributes her own depression in later life, and that of her two brothers, as having started there. However, she was very fortunate in her choice of A levels which laid a foundation from which later 'absorption' (her favouring word for informal learning), and its close interrelationship with formal learning, began to build:*

*you're obviously very interested in Mediterranean history –*

*I absorbed a certain amount of it. ... I've always liked history. And we did this particular A-level syllabus, and I was in Istanbul at one point, then later on I'm back in Sicily. My brother did the same course. .... Basically – you remember it 'cos it's extremely well-taught. And - but I've absorbed a lot of it. – you just go to*

*the place and – and you just absorb the atmosphere. ... I mean the stones are still there. The culture's still there.*

*Informal learning didn't stop during her schooldays:*

*My father learnt a lot of Italian in the war, you see. And he had high hopes for all of us. And he went out and bought a Teach Yourself Italian book. And he used to leave it lying around hoping we'd pick it – so I picked it up. When I was about 13, I'd struggle with it.*

*After school, Jane was accepted on a General BA course at a College of Art and Technology, in which the specialist paper was the History of Art. She got a temporary job that summer and at 18 was thrilled to be in London. However, the course did not work out: she failed two of the subjects and had to leave. She embarked on a couple of years of short-term jobs, and it was during this time that she had another significant and learning episode:*

*'I thought, 'wow, I could learn shorthand'... So I rang up the speed writer people in Oxford Street, and I went rushing down on a Saturday morning, and I bought a course of books. And I got back, and I did practically the whole course. I shut myself in my room, ... and I did an intensive course over the weekend. And I went in and I started taking dictation on the Monday morning [laughs]. That was really – I – you can do it, you see, if you're determined and – you know, and when you've got the motivation.'*

*She tried again at her formal education:*

*But I think I felt very dissatisfied, sometimes, because it becomes very mundane after a while, you know, the basic [pause] office work. ... And I met another girl who was a graduate, she'd just got her classics degree ... . And I thought, 'You've got some A-levels, why don't you use them? And – and, you know, you do enjoy reading books'. So I applied to [named ] University and I got a place in ... 1973. ... So there I was, a student again at 23. ... And I was doing Ancient History, Archaeology and Italian, of all things. And my best result was in Italian.*

*Disaster struck again. In her first long summer vacation she inadvertently took LSD at a party, and had a bad reaction, failing to concentrate throughout the next term and dropping out again the following Easter. After a complicated interlude and a difficult relationship with a young American academic, she set off on her own for Istanbul, thrilled to be experiencing first hand the topics of that influential A level course.*

*The collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, the crusades – no, it was the collapse of the empire, Byzantium, and the crusades was a special paper. ... And I'm there! In Constantinople.*

*Six months later, back in England and just about to be interviewed for a job at the BBC, disaster struck again: she found she was pregnant by the American. She went with him to the USA for six months but then came back to London on her own with her young son and got council accommodation in west London. This was potentially a bleak time but characteristically she threw herself into learning. Childhood ambitions had included acting:*

*I did want to act actually, when I was about 13, I went to Stratford Centenary year in 1964. And I thought it was the most thrilling thing, and we saw Henry IV Part II when I was 13, and I announced to my mother in the kitchen very grandly, I said, "Mum, I want to be an actress "*

*It did not go down well at the time with mum, but once in London with a small child herself Jane did manage to find a company where she could study.*

*I felt fulfilled, I knew I had found the emotional fulfilment that I needed, because when you learn the proper breathing, that calms your nerves as well. And you learn to fit the sound onto the breath. And then you learn that you have to actually think about each word. And you're not just repeating, which is what I see they do now.*

*This continued on and off for a few years, alongside jobs in offices and retail, but her difficulties with exams affected even her acting – she failed again because she forgot the final component and turned up too late to take it. She then began to get worried by her son's schooling.*

*'So I compensated by taking him out a lot to plays, Royal Shakespeare Company of course. He thought it was exciting and we used to go and see a lot of comedies, 'cos I got a bit tired of him just sitting glued in watching the television like that. So I put the television out, and he started reading frantically.*

*She had to abandon her own training as the pressure to earn more money became too great, partly because she wanted her son to go to an independent boarding school in East Anglia (not her own) and although he had a scholarship she still had to house and feed him in the holidays. Jane was able to buy her council house and really loved it. But even though her son came back to London to do A levels, and then went on to university in London, he lived away from home and after another rather confusing period, Jane sold her house and put the money aside with the hope of buying somewhere else eventually. Sadly she then seems to have been the victim of a systematic sting and lost this money. She also suffered from a minor stroke, and a couple of years later, a seizure. However, none of these disasters interrupted her extraordinary intellectual energy.*

*I went abroad a few years ago. ...my brother said to me, 'you – you've got to go back'. I said, "oh, oh, oh", and he said, "no, now". So he bullied me into going back and I sat at the airport, I was sat by myself, waiting for the bus to come, and I thought, 'what am I doing here?' You know? But I did it. And I made myself, and I was speaking, and it was coming very easily, and I've been back a few – I'm hoping to go back. I'm saved now to go back. I love Sicily... You know you have these wonderful cities, all this merge of these cultures and everything, Greek.*

*As she emerged from her depression and illnesses, she went to the library, and was directed from there to the Connexions (careers advisory) service. This seemed like a new beginning, as she started on a helpful back-to-work programme; but again her bad luck with courses intervened and her hopes were dashed by its sudden closure.*

*I met a lady, I explained the situation. I said, "look, I'm in my early 50s now, and I really must learn computers, I'm terrified". So she gave me a couple of addresses, and I went for this ladies' charity in – it's to help women to – with confidence, and skills and that. And I was with them for just under two years. And I was being given work experience. I did some computer exams. I met some great ladies, great ladies there. But the lady who ran it just shut it down suddenly. .... So I thought, "right, back on the scrap heap again" [laughs].*

*Worse still, when she tried later to get hold of her certificates from the course, the organiser told her that she had lost the paperwork and the electronic files and there were no records.*

*This is why I was so disappointed ... I was quite comfortable, coffee break, tea break, dealing with queries on the phone, this sort of thing. It's very mundane, very simple, but it kept my mind occupied and kept me happy. And I was quite good at Excel spreadsheets, I found I quite like them, you know. When you're totalling everything in this little – this –...So cool. ...When this happened [the closure], and I couldn't really grasp it when I went back. ... it did take me some months to really recover from that.*

*This led on to a more formal courses in Advice and Guidance*

*And then ... I thought I might be interested in teaching English – I started getting interested in the literacy skills, you know? Teaching literacy skills. And then I started on a course at the [local] Community College, last autumn. And half way through, it was so theoretical I couldn't grasp it. I had to leave... it was so theoretical, and I'm more of a hands on person. ... And I just wanted to sort of get out there in a classroom, basically. ... And so then I found – the first college in [nearby borough], where I'd done the City and Guilds certificate in the spring, were actually doing a combination of the ESOL course, plus CELTA, which combines the 2. It was literacy within an ESOL context. I thought, 'well, perhaps that's better.'*

*This looked like a promising career development for someone in their fifties, but Sicily, and then her health, and her Hardy-esque bad luck, intervened again and she had to miss two interviews for the course. By that time her ambitions for that plan seemed to have faded. But her energy for informal learning was undimmed and the local Age Concern drop-in centre became an intellectual life-saver for her:*

*I did some drop-in sessions at Age Concern, and I do a little bit of volunteer help there as well. I'm the baby, 'cos I'm not quite 55, and they're all in their 60s [laughs].... I just mostly use internet and I'm learning to use ... this photo shop where you can actually take backgrounds out of pictures and alter them and the artistic stuff. ... Yes, it's a little education centre. .. But I don't go all the time, 'cos I don't strictly want to be around retired people all the time.*

*Jane is sustained by her learning. She is an avid reader, she learns from the internet, from the radio, from public lectures, from looking around her, grudgingly from television, but most importantly from other people. In all her talk about her interests she reveals a richly cultured understanding. Jane is learning 'from life':*

*That's the nice thing. I can handle myself a lot better. I have to say, also, by raising a family, whether you're two people or one people or single parent, man or woman, you develop management skills.*

*And she is learning to manage her health, including depression:*

*I'm a bit better now because I started to pull out last Sunday I started to feel a bit better, started to. The best thing to have started a bit of cleaning, but of tidying...Yes but I find the best way sometimes is to fiddle around with some plants or if you've got a little garden or do a bit of cleaning. Don't go at it frantically, but just tidy up one little bit of your place ... and [it] takes your mind of things you know.*

## **Learning as becoming or unbecoming**

It is through participation in a number of different learning cultures – at home, at work, in the local community, in leisure, in education, etc. that people learn (Hodkinson et al., forthcoming). Their learning can be understood as something akin to a Deweyan notion of embodied construction. Thus, one way of understanding these stories is that all five people become through learning, and learn through becoming. Derek, for example, became a skilled craftsman carpenter through his apprenticeship learning. Whilst becoming a skilled craftsman, he learned the skills, knowledge and values, associated with that identity. In his later life, he learned in becoming an expert in stamp and postcard collecting, and in local history. As these parts of his identities developed, he learned new things, for example how to give presentations to expert audiences, and how to use the computer to manage his small business. As his arthritis developed, his changing health, his becoming unfit, led to further learning. As he changed, he did not lose that deeply held craftsman identity, but he is progressively losing his identity as a practical man, who does all his own repairs etc. The loss of his most recent part-time job brings another shift in who he is, and again, learning is an integral part of that process. Thus, Derek is learning to become and to unbecome, at the same time.

Tony's early schooling can also be seen as a combination of becoming and unbecoming. He became a person who distrusted formal education, and was suspicious of teachers. His working class jack the lad identity was learned. He 'unbecame' a pupil or a student. Becoming and unbecoming are often different words for the same process, but to remember 'unbecoming' is important, to avoid implicit assumptions about learning as an entirely positive or constructive process. As we develop, we often become something and cease to be something else. However, as these stories show, there is never a completely fresh start. We always carry within us something of our past. Thus, even in his new persona as enthusiastic adult student, Tony's resentments of schooling frequently resurface.

The other thing that these stories show is that 'becoming' only ends with death. Learning is a ubiquitous part of life – of being a social, human being. This does not imply that everything is in flux. Much learning for all of our sample subjects was often undramatic, and took the form of what one might term routine living. Sometimes change was very gradual, and often learning was more about confirmation and consolidation than change. However, in all the lives, we can see periods of significant turbulence,

sometimes associated with life changing events, or what Strauss (1962) termed 'turning points'. During and after such life changing events, learning is more noticeable and more marked. It is also when, as in Tony's and Gladys's cases, reengagement with formal learning is most likely to occur.

## Learning as being

The five subjects for this working paper were chosen because for at least part of their respective lives learning became a significant part of their identities. For Tony and Gladys, this is most clear in recent years, where the process of attending adult education classes and participating in them has become a significant part of who they are, and how they organise their lives. The fact that, for much of their lives, illustrated here in Tony's story, learning was mainly incidental and experiential, further emphasises the on-going processual nature of learning and becoming. Furthermore, there are hints in Tony's most recent interview that engaging in classes may be declining in significance, now other aspects of his retired lifestyle are sorting themselves out.

On the other hand, for the other three people, learning has been a significant part of their identity for all of their adult lives. Their stories demonstrate the significance of informal learning to that sense of learner identity. Whilst for Jane and Anna it is the combination of informal learning and formal courses that matters, for Derek, informal learning alone is enough. Jane, Gladys and Tony, are the sorts of adult education class attenders who are often looked down upon in audit-driven policy discourses. They are seen as 'education junkies', who fail to recognise that, according to the acquisition hegemony, learning should only be about attaining outcomes. In fact, all of our subjects value learning outcomes, and would probably not engage with learning if the outcomes did not seem worthwhile. However, *they* decide what the desirable outcomes are, and these may not include dominant policy assumptions about that they should be. Thus, Tony values his qualifications, but they are not the main reason why he wants to learn.

More fundamentally, outcomes and learning are not seen as separate, with one leading to the other. Thus, Jane goes on holiday to Sicily, and learns whilst she is there. Derek works at his stamp collecting, improving his knowledge as he goes along. Tony wants to improve his literacy, but is also gaining what he describes as a new family circle, in his course associates. On occasions, all five subjects do set themselves targets of desired learning outcomes in advance, such as Tony taking a course to learn to use a computer and then improve his literacy, or Derek looking for ways to learn how to use a computer for his business, Jane taking course to help her get a job. But this 'outcomes first' model is only one variation of a much more complex story. There are significant issues here for the ways in which we think about agency in relation to learning, which we do not have space to explore in this paper.

There is a parallel argument that we are more centrally concerned with. For, just as learning may or may not be focussed on predetermined outcomes, so learning as becoming may or may not be associated with striving to become a particular changed person. Tony both wanted to be different – more literate – but also wanted to cope with his already changed situation – and he doesn't want to be 'posh'. After his initial apprenticeship when he became a craftsman, most of Derek's learning and becoming were focussed on developing interests and solving practical problems. He liked tackling

new problems, and learned through so doing. Recently, like Tony, he has been having to learn to cope with his changing situation – a combination of declining health and approaching retirement. Jane went through a stage of wanting to be an actor, but much of her learning of history and ancient civilizations was never planned or deliberately striven for. Rather, it was part of who she was.

Put more abstractly, these stories show that there is no clear separation between learning and identity. At least for some people, each is part of the other. Thus, for all the people whose stories are told here, learning is not just about becoming – it is also about being. Learning is an important part of their sense of who they are. There is no clear distinction between learning as becoming, and learning as being. Tony has been learning all his life, and much of his learning, for example in the family and at work, has always been important. Though we are arguing that there is a difference between his engagement with learning before and after his enrolment for adult education classes, the difference is one of degree. Also, even now, learning is arguably less a central part of Tony's identity than is the case for some of the others.

## Learning, identity and agency

For the purposes of the Learning Lives project, there are some pointers here towards our main research aim – to understand the interrelationships between learning, agency and identity. We present these as a short list of bullet points, to stimulate further discussion, within the project team and beyond.

- Understanding learning as becoming and being facilitates a potentially valuable way of considering these relationships, which contrasts with the assumptions of a crude acquisition model. Namely,
- Learning, identity and agency are not separate and distinct, though of course, it is possible and sometimes valuable to consider any of them independently of the others. Rather, all three are interwoven and interrelated in people's lives.<sup>1</sup>
- It is a mistake to bracket off issues of situation, including macro-considerations of global labour markets, of ethnicity, of gender and of social class. Just as these factors interpenetrate learning, so they also interpenetrate identity and agency.

In sum, this short conclusion is arguing for a holistic and relational, but neither a totalising nor a deterministic, understanding of 'Learning Lives'.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to remember that learning, identity and agency are constructs of human (Western) thinking. They do not have any fundamental existence outside such thinking. That is, each is nothing more or less than a way of understanding something of the human condition. Whilst still wishing to retain all three as valuable, it is for us to decide the extent we chose to see them as separate and distinctive – in the light of our data.

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