

## Research Paper

# Does feeling part of a learning community help students to do well in their A-levels?

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## Contextualisation

Each year, around 250,000 sixteen-year-olds in the United Kingdom finish their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations and begin studying for their Advanced (A) level qualification, many of them at a Further Education (FE) college. GCSEs are national exams taken by 16-year-olds at the end of compulsory schooling and are usually applied across nine subjects; A-level exams are taken when students are 18-years-old, enabling them to specialise in two or more subjects. Until recently, the two years were divided into Advanced Subsidiary (AS) and end-of-second-year (A2) examinations although this is gradually reverting to a single terminal examination at the end of two years. Students choose to study A-levels at an FE college for a number of reasons: feeling too 'grown up' for school, a wider range of subjects being available, more freedom and social life than at school, more mature relationships with college teachers, and college life as a stepping stone to university life. However, research shows that when students arrive at their FE college, despite there being a more equal power balance and a more adult learning environment than at school, they often find that the new-found freedoms of FE college - especially having to take responsibility for their own learning and progress - leave them feeling less secure than at school and in need of closer guidance and direction than perhaps staff at FE colleges realise. Hence this study explores these needs in relation to belonging to a learning community and whether this is related to students doing well in their A-levels.

**Abstract:** *Learning communities are believed to improve academic achievement, contribute to higher retention rates, enhance student satisfaction, develop their thinking and communication skills, help them to understand themselves better, and close the gap between their academic and social worlds (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999). It is the link between students doing well and being part of a learning community that forms the basis of this study. Sixteen Advanced (A) level students at a Further Education (FE) college participated in a focus group interview and a learning community questionnaire, both of which were based on the theories of Eckert, Goldman and Wenger (1997). Thematic coding analysis (whereby codes were generated from the raw data of the transcriptions) revealed that students understood the meaning of a learning community, that they felt part of a learning community and that this helped them to do well in their A-levels. The study concluded that, whilst FE colleges as learning communities are largely conducive to students doing well, little has changed from the students' point of view since Bloomer and Hodkinson's 1997 study, *Moving to FE*. Furthermore, bearing in mind also that students' experiences and concerns embraced 'personal' and 'college' issues, three main drivers emerged, which should build a greater sense of learning community and enable students to become more successful in their A-levels: FE policy, teacher professionalism and stronger liaisons with external agencies.*

## Introduction

Learning communities are believed to improve academic achievement, contribute to higher retention rates, enhance student satisfaction, develop thinking and communication skills, help students to understand themselves and others better, and close the gap between their academic and social worlds (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999). Given the weight of the evidence for expanding the culture of learning communities as a means of enhancing learning (MacGregor, 1991; Matthews, 1993; Pike, 2000; Smith, 2001; Tinto, 1997, 1998, 2000), learning communities should be added to the growing list of effective educational practices (Chickering and Gamson, 1989; Kuh, 2001, 2003). It is the link between students doing well and being part of a learning community that formed the basis of this study. Cross (1998:4) acknowledges that learning communities “offer hope of making college a more holistic, integrated learning experience for students”, although she emphasises the problem of defining exactly what we mean by ‘learning community’. For the purpose of this study, we will define it as “groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning” (Cross, 1998:4).

Since 1951, A-levels have been the traditional choice for many British school-leavers. As post-compulsory courses in two or more specialist subjects, they (i) represent a route to university entrance qualification and (ii) indicate suitability for specific employment. The purpose of the learning community is to create an educational environment that is relevant to students’ social world, and in which they are thus motivated to work hard and do well. This is partially reflected in the social, cultural and economic capital of A-levels: what Archer and Yamashita (2003) believe to be the real-life relevance that students need to associate with their studies, if they are to be motivated to succeed. This is directly linked to how students relate to their teachers, how they feel about themselves, and how they view their learning environment. In support of this, Kaufman and Dodge (2008:101) argue that “relatedness to the professor and value of the course” are factors affecting student motivation to succeed. However, the matter is not so clear cut, with Martinez (2001) drawing attention to the observation that the initial motivations of college students do not vary between those who successfully complete courses, and those who drop out. Also, Hardré and Sullivan (2008:471) cite “at-home and family circumstances and resources” as having an influence on student success, and not just institutional characteristics or ethos. This is further compounded by Yorke and Knight’s (2004) discussion on the complex nature of students’ self-perception and ability, especially students who choose courses to match their limited abilities as opposed to those who seek more challenging courses in order to maintain interest and motivation. Nevertheless, Zepke et al (2009) found that these student characteristics are not consistent since they vary across colleges.

Studying for A-levels at a Further Education (FE) college constitutes a “most basic form” (Tinto, 2000:1) of a learning community because it “enables students to take courses together” (ibid.). Whilst this might appear to be the norm for students at all levels, unlike school new FE college students experience a sudden social and cultural shift: all A-level subjects are chosen by the student, they are shared and “typically connected by an organizing theme, which gives meaning to their linkage” (ibid.). According to Zhao and Kuh (2004), a learning community involves “social and intellectual connections between students, which, in turn, help build a sense of community among participants”. In addition, the social and cultural freedoms of the FE college play an important part in students’ sense of sharing common goals. My own experience as a secondary school teacher enabled me to witness the achievements that the lower achieving students could make in lessons, (i) if they had a positive relationship with their teacher, (ii) if lessons were made to appeal to their individual interests and (iii) if students were allowed to manage their own work (with discreet supervision). Ten years on, now teaching FE students, I find that this is still the case. I

therefore anticipate that there is indeed a link between students doing well and their sense of belonging to an educational environment that is conducive to successful learning outcomes and whether they constitute a *learning community*.

As used in the title of this article, the phrase 'doing well' may simply mean students 'getting through' their A-level courses before enjoying the perceived freedoms of life beyond: to pursue their interest in a subject; or simply attain a highly respected academic standard; it could mean qualifying for a chosen university course or desired employment; or developing their individual personalities. In addition, Allen (1999:461) talks of the 'desire to finish college' and the comparable (but different) 'strong desire for achievement'. Notwithstanding the subtle differences between the meanings of 'doing well', 'achievement' and 'success', it can be agreed that they all share a common denominator: that FE students wish to pass their examinations in order to be able to leave college and/or pursue their future goals. It is this explanation that served the purposes of what is meant by 'doing well' for this study.

The learning community ethos pays close attention to the value and perceived use that students associate with their learning (as a relationship to their world beyond the classroom), as well as to the study of the learning environment as a student-centred space in which the advantages of enjoyment, interaction and autonomy can be observed and analysed, with a view to improving their achievement (Dewey, 1902). More precisely, the interest and value that students place on their learning, how they interact with their teachers, and whether or not they feel involved in the learning process or in control of their learning, all appear to be factors that historically determine their success on education courses. In support of this, although they refer to *professional* learning communities, Vescio et al (2008) show that communities which encourage student-centred learning (as opposed to instructional learning) lead to better learner performance, a conclusion similarly reached by Bolam et al (2005) when they discuss institutional effectiveness. Furthermore, Glassman (2001) notes that both Dewey and Vygotsky draw attention to the roles of social interaction and life-related learning that enable students to engage in meaningful activities that bear relevance to their non-educational lives and thus lead to enhanced results.

This study used Eckert, Goldman and Wenger's learning community theory to explore students' ideas on what helps them to do well in their A-levels. Eckert, Goldman and Wenger (1997) believe that students who choose not to succeed feel that academic success conflicts with what they believe to be possibilities for social fulfilment outside the classroom. They argue that transforming learning environments into learning communities requires the same energy for learning subject matter that goes into non-educational interests. This means that schools and FE colleges must develop *communities of practice* in which participation, including subject matter learning, is a valued resource for social identity and social interaction, both in the classroom and outside of it. This study therefore sought to determine if students felt part of a learning community and what it meant to them, as well as what it was about FE college that helped them to succeed in their A-levels. The deliberate application of the idea of a learning community can be dated back to the 1920s, with an experimental college program at the University of Wisconsin started by Alexander Meiklejohn (Smith, 2001). A variation of this occurred in the 1960s, in an attempt to make the learning environment more learner-friendly. In the late 1980s, a contemporary version of the learning community was supported by the growing realisation that student engagement in purposeful learning activities is a precursor to high levels of student learning and personal development, as well as an indicator of educational effectiveness (Kuh, 1996, 2003; MacGregor, 1991).

Lave and Wenger (1991: 29) demonstrate the role of learning communities in student achievement when they discuss the social connectedness or 'legitimate peripheral participation' that students engage in when they are immersed in the sociocultural features of

a learning environment. More precisely, they allude to the transition of school children to FE college when they discuss the observation that “newcomers become part of a community of practice”, in which the student becomes “a full participant in a sociocultural practice” (1991:29). The learning intentions of students (and their meanings) are absorbed by students according to how far they engage with the practices and systems at their place of learning. A practical example of this is demonstrated by Watkins (2004) when he notes that “the way in which the classroom is managed is more influential than any other variable” (2004:1) and that we should be “thinking of the school as a community, rather than the common form of thinking of the school as a bureaucracy” (2004:2). This is related to student motivation and a sense of belonging, as well as a number of convincing arguments for fostering learning communities that support student achievement (Watkins, 2004).

## **Methodology**

### **The participating FE college**

This research was conducted at an FE college in the southwest of England. The college was formed in 1983 following a re-organisation of secondary education in a unitary authority. It is the main provider of A-level courses in the region. Around 80% of the college's Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) learners are aged 16-18 years and around one third of learners joining the college to study Advanced Subsidiary (AS) levels have an average General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grade lower than C. The college offers 55 A-level subjects and is the best performing college in the area for A-levels. In summer 2013, students achieved the following: 98.3% pass rate for A-levels overall, 100% pass rate in 39 subjects. The college has some of the best FE facilities in the country. All facilities are less than ten years old and are for student, business and community use. There are state-of-the-art Information and Communications Technology (ICT) facilities with 1700 on-site personal computers, a learning resource centre, a theatre, television, radio and art & design studios, hair & beauty studios and science laboratories for chemistry, biology, physics and electronics. In 2011 the college was successful in achieving '*Sunday Times Best 100 Places to work in the public sector*' at their first attempt.

### **Research method and sample**

The study followed a four-stage process: *Preliminary* (formulation of documentation, including questions and completion of ethics forms); *Fieldwork* (college approval, A-level liaison and interviews); *Analysis* (transcription of interviews and thematic coding analysis); *Report* (results, discussion of findings and conclusion).

There were four focus groups of four students each (two males and two females per group): AS English Literature and Language students (aged 16-17); AS English Language students (aged 16-17); AS Geography students (aged 16-17); A2 Maths and Further Maths students (aged 17-18). The 16 respondents in the study were not taught by the author.

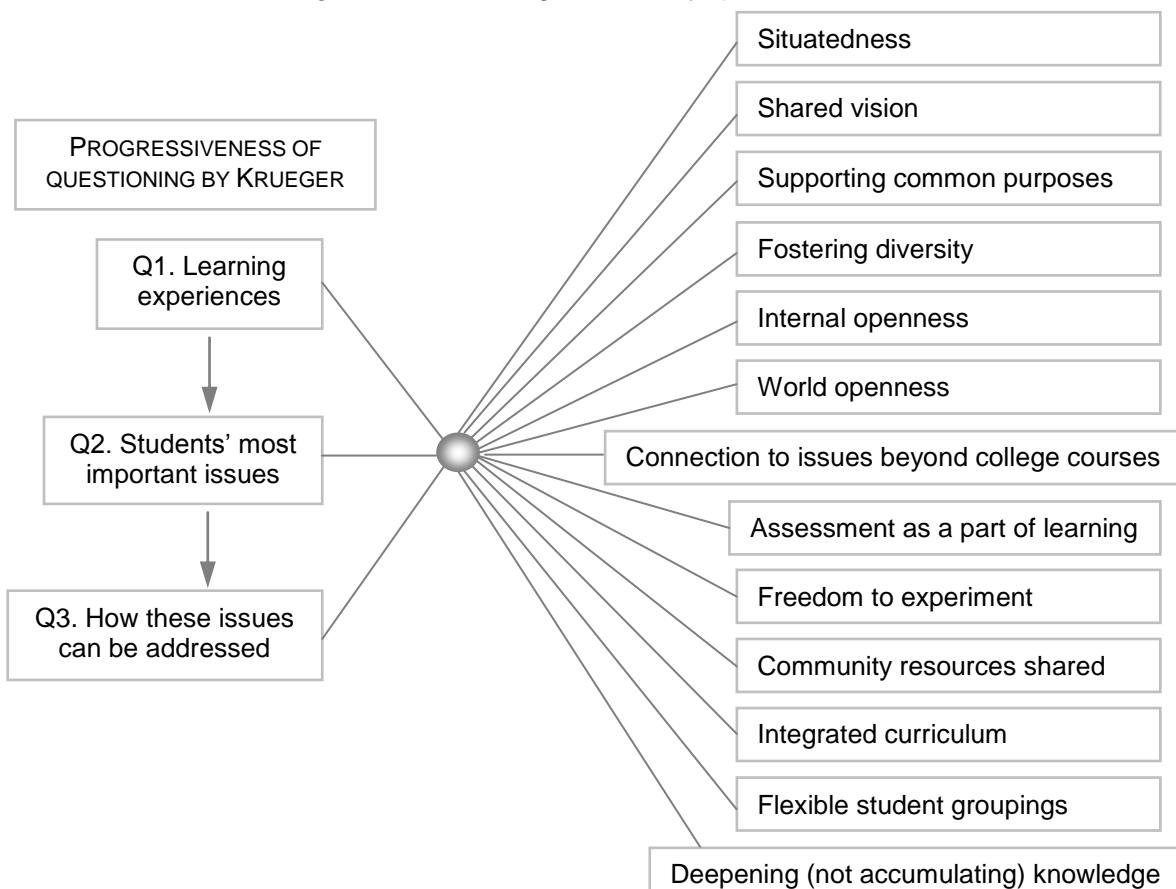
By choosing groups with at least one common subject in each, this ‘imaginative sampling’ (Kitzinger, 2005:63) made it possible to interview students from similar academic disciplines and associated frames of mind. Also, since the focus groups were designed to investigate students’ learning experiences, they needed to “consist of participants who have been exposed to similar experiences” (Breen, 2007:466) as well as embrace a cross-section of subjects and genders, if they were to be truly representative, valid and reliable. FE colleges - and their subject faculties - attract different kinds of student who vary in their criticism of college structures e.g. target population characteristics (Kruger, Witziers and Sleegers, 2007). Therefore, it is reasonable to ask that participants be chosen to reflect more variety

within a study population (Liamputpong, 2011) by including those at different stages of development. Therefore, both AS and A2 students were included in this study.

Because of the risk of misplaced perceptions of students who had taken A-level subjects not available at GCSE, i.e. the advent of 'a greater incidence of realism' (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997:49) and subsequent negativity on their part, I requested that the college organise respondents into mixed ability groups that were representative of the college's A-level cohort.

### Research questions

The classification and order of interview questions was adapted from Krueger (2002), 'progressiveness of focus group questioning' (Breen, 2007:471). That is, a general opening question on previous experience was followed by a key question that asked respondents to highlight issues arising from this experience. An end question then asked respondents to provide solutions for these issues. Thus, all main questions led on from one another and were interconnected. The content of questions was based on Eckert, Goldman and Wenger's (1997) elements of a learning community. The relationship between the two sides of the diagram below (Figure 1) is such that responses from questions on the left can be categorised and discussed in terms of the elements on the right e.g. Question 2 (Q2) on the left hand side could elicit responses related to *assessment as a part of learning* or *integrated curriculum*. Further to this, a post-interview questionnaire asked students questions based on Eckert, Goldman and Wenger's own learning community questionnaire.



**Figure 1.** Relationship of questions asked and elements of a 'learning community' by Eckert, Goldman and Wenger

The aim of Focus Question 1 (Q1) (*Can you tell us about your experience of learning at this college so far?*) was to determine which factors help or persuade students to do well at A-level. Student experience was divided into a number of manageable areas by using pre-determined themes. A pilot study with my Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) Music students revealed extremely varied responses that were difficult to categorise. Therefore, the pre-determined themes helped to break Q1 down into sections and specific experiences that help students to succeed at A-level: *Relationships with teachers, Relevance to career, Learning facilities, Interest/ enjoyment, Coursework/ course content.*

Focus Question 2 (Q2) (*What do you think are the most important issues for students, if they want to do well in their A-levels*) was designed to ascertain those factors that students felt affected their ability and desire to succeed in their A-levels. Issues were matched to *personal* and *college* issues. This division would provide a basis for responses to Q3.

In Focus Question 3 (Q3) (*What do you think could be done to address the issues you mention, if students are to do well in their A-levels?*), students were asked to refer to any concerns they had raised in Q2 and offer solutions.

Follow-up question 'a' (Qa) (*In your opinion, what is the most important/ critical area we have talked about today?*) enabled students to consolidate the main issues, as well as produce a hierarchy of issues they believe need to be addressed by the college or by themselves. Follow-up question 'b' (Qb) (*Is there anything else you think we should have talked about but didn't?*) was student-centred in that it consulted students on any issues that they themselves believed were important, issues that we did not discuss in Focus Questions 1-3 because (i) there was not enough time or (ii) the interviewer believed he had covered the most important matters. Follow-up question 'c' (Qc) (*What do you understand by the phrase 'learning community'?*) sought to determine students' own understanding of the phrase, and was related to their responses in a *Learning Community Questionnaire*, completed by students at the end of the recorded interview. Follow-up question 'd' (Qd) (*In view of all we have discussed today, do you think you are part of a learning community?*) required a response based on (i) what was discussed throughout Focus Questions 1-3 and (ii) how it matched with students' understanding of a *learning community*. This also linked to the *Learning Community Questionnaire*, completed by students after recording ended.

This A post-interview *Learning Community Questionnaire* related closely to the interview responses and emphasised the importance of a learning environment that is conducive to college students doing well in their course, i.e. a curriculum that is 'thematic and integrated', with coursework and content relating to "the learning and thinking that students do outside of school" (Eckert, Goldman and Wenger, 1997:14). For example, Eckert, Goldman and Wenger argue that *Motivation* comes from the curriculum being embedded as a meaningful activity that is relevant to students' life outside the classroom, as well as "collaboration with resources outside of school (such as museums and workplaces)" (1997:17) being an important feature of a learning community. Further, they note that assessment should be 'meaningfully integrated' in learning (1997:9). That is, students should have the chance to benefit from structured efforts that create conditions for connected learning and promote integration of their academic and social experiences, i.e. their social and human capital.

## Procedure

Focus group interviews took place over three separate days. The questions focused on how students relate to their teachers, how they feel about themselves, and how they see their learning environment and were based on the learning community models of Zhao and Kuh (2004), as well as Eckert, Goldman and Wenger (1997).

Following transcription of the interviews, responses were analysed using thematic coding analysis, whereby codes were generated from the raw data of the transcriptions (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The themes within each question facilitated an initial grouping of responses (a predetermined first-level coding), before they were separated into single statements - what Boyatzis (1998:63) describes as "the most basic segments ...of the raw data... that can be assessed in a meaningful way". For example, in Focus Question 1, reducing the narrative to a list of statements (codes) under the theme *Relationships with teachers*. Second-level coding was then applied to these groups of codes in order to refine them further into the *sub themes* that emerged e.g. all statements (codes) from *Relationships with teachers* could be sorted into three data-driven sub themes: *Teacher-student interaction*, *Teacher receptiveness* and *Teacher commitment*. The anticipatory analysis assumed that there was a link between (i) A-level students at an FE college feeling part of a learning community and (ii) their doing well in their A-levels.

## Findings

Overall, the rapport between student-interviewer and student-student was positive. Students understood the three main questions and were able to articulate their answers accordingly. They reflected upon their comparative experiences of school and FE college, emphasising the advantages and disadvantages of the respective structures at each. Findings are presented in order of the frequency and duration of key themes arising out of students' responses: *Coursework content/ workload*; *Relationships with teachers*; *Teacher organisation and communication*; *Student enjoyment, motivation and interest*, *Timetabling*; *Relationship between A-levels and employment*. I include those quotations that are most illustrative of the particular theme. Overall, there were 91 positive responses and 57 negative responses to the emergent themes.

### Coursework content/ workload

This was a dominant theme in the responses. All students acknowledged that, on reaching FE college, they found their workload to be much heavier when compared to secondary school:

*I'm swamped at the moment. So much to catch up with. It's just ...loads! (Brad)*

This meant that it was sometimes difficult for students to keep track of their coursework:

*I've got so many tests, I've ...when they give you a mark or a result, I can't really remember which result that was actually for. (Mike)*

In support of this, Faith believed study packs would help make course structures clearer at the beginning of the year:

*Making ...maybe with each subject, if they just do a pack with the case studies in, I think that will make it a lot more clearer.*

Elliott thought units could be spaced out more, to enable students to digest learning. However, he did acknowledge that this could be difficult, given the number of lessons on timetable.

### **Relationships with teachers**

Relationships with teachers featured prominently in the interviews and could be further divided into teachers' interaction with students, their receptiveness to student needs and their commitment to helping students. Students claimed that their FE teachers were more approachable than teachers in secondary school. Callum's explanation summed up the general consensus:

*... some of the teachers you can even talk to about stuff that is not to do with education, just a normal chat and you wouldn't be able to do that with teachers in, um, secondary school because they'd always be 'sir' and 'ma'am'.*

Students believed that their FE teachers possess more enthusiasm and knowledge than those at secondary school, and that they enjoy teaching:

*I think the teachers are more enthusiastic than in secondary school ...because they're ...they obviously ...they don't teach a range of subjects. (Victoria)*

There was also general agreement that the power balance was different to school:

*I think the relationship with teachers is much better here because there's no 'sir' or 'ma'am'. It's just the names so it's much more casual and calm and it's much more relaxing. So I feel more comfortable talking to them and learning ... (Megan)*

Nevertheless, there were exceptions: comments about teachers not recognising student needs at the beginning of the AS year, and having to be asked for help:

*...at college now where everything's so independent, some people, like ...sort of fade into the background even if they have got a problem because the teacher hasn't pointed it out. (Kayleigh)*

This is but one example of students referring to teacher professionalism (another being disapproval of teachers marking work in lessons), an area for improvement recommended at the end of this article.

### **Teacher organisation and communication**

This was the third most notable theme. Students believed there could be more communication between teachers and students - another aspect of teacher professionalism:

*I sent a email to a teacher about a lesson, er, that was ...I think, two days in front. I didn't get a reply until the night before about the work. (Brad)*

Organisation of both students and teachers was raised by respondents. For example:

*A lot of pressure, to turn up on time, to be punctual and things like that ...but there are certain teachers that don't really follow that themselves ... (Amy)*

Amy also believed that teachers should be stricter and more consistent about coursework deadlines:

*...it got to the day of the deadline and half the class hadn't done it and that, apparently that was acceptable ...*

Further, students highlighted the importance of student-centred responsibility for being organised, especially in subjects with more than one teacher and more than one classroom:

*I completely dropped all my AS's last year. I dunno why I chose them but, erm ... I think it was just being organised ...even teachers in the, in the college being organised because, erm ...'cause ...because the teachers don't chase you up on a lot of stuff, you can find yourself all of a sudden ...behind, like the exams then, it's like 'Oh, I've still all this to do'. (Tom)*

### **Student enjoyment, motivation and interest**

Enjoyment and motivation were two themes that also emerged, with students agreeing that they were in a more mature environment in which they wanted to be, especially since (unlike school) lack of student effort could mean their being removed from courses:

*Now that you're in college, everyone's choosing to be there ...and everyone knows that you'll just get kicked off ...so it's a lot more ...you know, grown up. (Tom)*

Students generally claimed to enjoy college and find their lessons interesting (apart from occasional repetition in lessons), especially the mature discussions when working with like-minded peers:

*...it's nice being round people ...who enjoy the same things ... (Tom)*

However, there was one exception to the enthusiasm for new-found enjoyment at FE college:

*My secondary school was completely different. I loved all my teachers, even if I didn't like the subject and here, it's just ...they're not as ...personal, because my school was so small, you just knew everyone. (Emily)*

In addition, there was an acknowledgement that personal motivation is essential for working outside of lesson time:

*In lessons, I do my work and I'm a fairly ...fairly good student. But outside of college, I find it really hard to motivate myself to do the work. (Tom)*

### **Timetabling**

Students explained the importance of learning to cope with large gaps in their timetables. One highlighted the need for students' time management outside of lessons:

*Yeah, you just think ...you just wanna go home and relax and stuff and you really can't. You need to go over what you've done ... (Steph)*

It was also acknowledged that gaps between lessons can be overly long:

*... like three hours sometimes can be a bit ...silly, but I think if they're like shortened down or, then ...would be fine ... (Kayleigh)*

Students concurred that they should be made aware (by teachers) that gaps in timetables are for study time and revision.

The final view on timetabling was that more lesson time should be allocated for revision in December, before the January exams:

*I think that we should just be revising now [December] for exams but we still haven't finished. (Elliott)*

### **Relationship between A-levels and employment**

Some students made a link between their studies and the world of work. For example, Maths and Physics were seen by Jess and Daniel as being particularly relevant to the immediate world and their future employment whilst Victoria thought Psychology did not relate to any specific employment. Nevertheless, six students were not yet decided on their precise career pathway, for example:

*I don't know what I want to do in the future but ...I know that English Language will be a good thing to have. (Tom)*

Finally, there were lesser themes such as problematic computers, the importance of assessment, and examination questions being too prescriptive.

Responses to *Follow Up Qc*, what students understood by the phrase 'learning community', were remarkably similar to one another and included "working together as a class", "study groups working together as a team in order to get things done", "where teachers and students get along on a more or less equal footing", and "a positive environment, good atmosphere and working together". The questionnaire attempted to explore students' understanding of the phrase 'learning community' in an educational context, by using Eckert, Goldman and Wenger's original questionnaire that was used to determine the degree to which their own respondents felt part of a learning community.

## **Discussion of Findings**

Overall, although students appear to be ready for most aspects of life at FE college, the results show that some features may take them longer to comprehend or cope with. There is therefore a case for better preparing students for life at FE college. Notwithstanding this, students were mostly supportive of their college experiences, despite the change to a less didactic, less formal, learning environment. It is clear from the focus group interviews that, while most students have made a positive transition from school to FE college, it is also apparent that not all students have made the adjustment to a learning environment in which they are expected to take responsibility for (and exercise more self-reliance in) their own learning. The results indicate that these students may become disorientated due to feeling that the close supervision and guidance of the secondary school has been removed.

### **Coursework content/ workload**

The research shows that the amount of coursework required at A-level came as a surprise to the students, with Brad and Mike representing the views of most when they related the sudden weight and pace of A-level coursework. This is an all-too-common occurrence with A-level students at FE college, being something that students had not previously considered: the prospect of studying two or more A-levels over two years, on a reduced timetable (as opposed to nine GCSEs over two years, on a full timetable) may cause students to believe that their new workload will be less demanding and leave time for the college's social pursuits that they had heard so much about whilst at secondary school (Woolhouse and Blaire, 2003). This theme is also tied to student motivation and timetabling.

### **Relationships with teachers**

Students seem to enjoy more grown-up relationships with their FE teachers than with their school teachers. As they mature and approach adulthood, they naturally desire a more balanced power relationship with adults. FE college teachers appear to serve this need by acknowledging students as young adults, respecting their views and beliefs (Umbach and Wawrzynski, 2005). It is also no doubt a refreshing change to be able to have discussions with teachers about non-educational issues, as part of the social process of human interaction. Nevertheless, two further refined themes - *teacher receptiveness* and *teacher commitment* – arose when students raised the issue of student learning needs being overlooked by their A-level teachers. Meijer (2007) found that students' perceptions of teacher guidance had an effect on their confidence although I believe that, in this instance, the deliberately sociable relationships between teachers and students in FE college also reflect the teacher's adult expectations of his or her students, i.e. to ask for help if needed. Thus, the teacher's apparent lack of awareness of student needs quite probably relates to students' prior experience of a 'teacher', who exemplifies immediacy, attentiveness and guidance in the secondary school.

### **Teacher organisation and communication**

Although students believed relationships with FE teachers to be better than at school, they were concerned that teacher organisation and communication were not as good as they should be. From what students said, it seems that they want 'grown-up' relationships with their teachers although, at the same time, they are still accustomed to the notion of the formal teacher immediacy, attentiveness and guidance that they enjoyed at secondary school. Furthermore, Tom does acknowledge the importance of students themselves being organised. Nevertheless, Amy's comments on teacher lateness and their not adhering to deadlines raises the issue of teacher professionalism although Robson (2006:596) points out that teacher lateness to lessons in FE colleges is difficult to control since, unlike schools, FE colleges have "no sense of unity" and that "there is less shared purpose" in FE colleges.

### **Student enjoyment, motivation and interest**

Students mostly enjoy the autonomy and relative freedom of FE college, with shared subject choices being a motivator for study, as well as new and sophisticated subject content maintaining their interest. However, some students – including Emily – clearly find it "a bit too informal" (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997:17), especially if they may be "familiar with the school ethos" (Wigley, 2009:184-5). Also, being motivated to study in the wide gaps between lessons is evidently an issue for some. Once again, there is an acknowledgement that motivation, as well as organisation, is partly the student's responsibility. This also relates to timetabling.

### **Timetabling**

For students, I felt there was an initial sense of emancipation with their new FE college timetable, in which whole mornings and afternoons are ostensibly 'free'. But students acknowledge the danger of not being motivated to complete coursework within these non-teaching periods, and cite both personal and teacher responsibility for reinforcing the importance of keeping up with college work outside of lessons. Students also believe that revision guidance should be built into their lesson time, so that they can adequately prepare for their exams. Thus it seems that students, despite embracing a deceptively light timetable at the beginning, hold teaching staff at least partially responsible for managing their study periods and revision time.

### **Relationship between A-levels and employment**

Some respondents share a common view, that their A-level courses are 'subjects', thus leaving employment options open and pointing to no specific career. For example, Tom's comment, that he did not know what he wanted to do but thought that A-level English literature would be 'useful', reflects the dislocation that students sometimes perceive between study and work, depending on their A-level subjects. That is, whilst some A-levels are employment-related (science, engineering, journalism etc), others are part of a broad pathway to a range of university degrees. Nevertheless, negative responses to the learning community questionnaire were centred on the relationship between A-levels and real-life scenarios.

### **Professional Relevance of the Findings**

In terms of professional relevance, there is every indication that many of the sub themes that have emerged out of the student voice are inextricably linked to one another and that, as a consequence, they should not be addressed in isolation when considering learning communities and student achievement (which have implications for college effectiveness): as with a precision mechanical device, refining only one part is sure to affect others. More precisely, the findings were shared with the college in which the research was conducted in order to show how feeling part of a learning community might help future students to *do well* in their A-levels. The study could be repeated at a number of colleges in order to determine whether or not the findings are part of a national trend.

This study has not sought to make findings generalisable but to provide an insight into what helps students to do well in their A-levels at FE college. The findings may indeed change with further data collection or analysis, especially since the AS is being discontinued when A-levels revert to the original two-year course. From what students have said, being at FE college seems to have helped them a great deal. Some of the students seemed to be lacking in confidence as a result of their negative experiences of school, confidence which appears to be gradually building up during their A-levels. They will no doubt be leaving college with a more positive experience of education than they had at school. Whilst I am not advocating moving to FE as a solution for problems at school, it seems to be providing a highly positive experience for the young people participating in this study.

The findings are largely supported by the research of Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997), that concurs with much of what students think and feel about their experiences, priorities and desires at FE college. From the main themes that emerge from the findings, I see three immediate drivers for enabling A-level students to feel closer to belonging to a learning community based on Eckert, Goldman and Wenger (1997) and enhancing their potential to do well at A-level: *Personal interests of the students* e.g. situatedness, shared vision and supporting common purposes; *Professionalism of FE teachers* e.g. fostering diversity, internal openness; *Greater collaboration with outside agencies* e.g. world openness, connection to issues beyond college courses:

### **Personal interests of the students**

From this study it can be seen that the FE college learning community helps to build students' social and human capital by serving a number of functions: (i) offering an escape from the enforced subjects and rules of secondary school, (ii) allowing young adults to develop intellectually and socially as they approach adulthood and (iii) enabling them to establish their identity and consolidate their personal qualities, in readiness for adult life (Falk and Kilpatrick, 2000; Field and Spence, 2000). There is therefore a need to recognise that

students have aspirations that FE policy does not necessarily support. That is, students' FE experiences and desires go beyond passing qualifications, going to university and finding a job although these were legitimate goals for many participants in the study. Students not only wish to enjoy their learning but they want to balance their A-levels with personal priorities, e.g. an exciting lifestyle and a part-time job.

In light of the findings, extra-curricular sessions in study skills and exam practice would motivate students outside of lessons, especially in a negative equity timetable that is erroneously perceived as having a substantial amount of free time; more parental involvement and more peer support could also continue the learning environment outside of contact time, including more peer assessment. There is also a case for implementing *high-impact practices*, i.e. regular classes in A-level study skills so that students are clear about what is required of them at this level - a scheme supported by Kuh (2007). In addition, teachers might run practical 'self-organisation lessons' for students, as part of the A-level induction process.

### **Professionalism of FE teachers**

It could be seen from the interviews that teachers are perceived to have a significant influence on the quality of students' learning. Teachers need to possess skills that enhance student achievement, in addition to being knowledgeable and expert in their subject. This concern has wider implications, contesting the Lingfield Review's (2012) assertion that teaching skills are peripheral to the teacher's role as a purveyor of information based on their work experience.

In-house training should focus on enabling teachers to provide more effective communication and feedback that students can clearly understand and use to develop their learning. With regard to findings on course structure, study packs distributed at the beginning of the year would show students, with supervision, what they will study as well as how and when it will be assessed. Some lessons should be used for revision and exam practice – even with the new A-level, assessment of the Autumn term should still take place in January. Findings also indicate that teachers should be involved in networked communication (especially as far as workload is concerned), follow a college-wide coursework deadline policy, and get to know their students' academic strengths and weaknesses in order to elicit the best efforts from them. The issue of marking work in lessons may not be a problem for most students although it would be worth investigating whether this is at the expense of students' learning time.

### **Greater collaboration with outside agencies**

It was also clear from the findings that exam boards and FE colleges might benefit from liaising in order to explore (i) how A-level course content (e.g. Economics) can appeal to individual intelligences, (ii) how A-level subjects can be linked to careers and employment, and (iii) how subject content and coursework can fit into the academic year, including planned revision time before January exams e.g. coursework set over the summer, before AS courses begin. In October 2012, Baroness Sharp of Guildford raised the issue of careers guidance for college students in the House of Lords, i.e. college career advisers should link with the National Career Service and Jobcentre Plus. In the meantime, careers advice might be sought from exam boards, as well as from teachers. Colleges might also support internships, liaise with local businesses for work experience in A2 - during the holidays and days when students are off the college timetable. The *learning community questionnaire* raised a small but notable number of issues, including visits to/from external agencies that relate to A-level subject content.

## Conclusion

The research indicates that feeling part of a learning community does help students to do well in their A-levels since students have mostly acquired "enhanced academic performance, integration of academic and social experiences, positive perceptions of the college environment, and self-reported gains since starting college" (Zhao and Kuh, 2004:132-3). This is reinforced by the notable influence of teachers and teaching that could be seen to affect students, an influence that is highlighted by Watkins (2004). The findings in this study - centred on the student voice - echo much of what Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) found in their own research, *Moving to FE*, as well as bearing a close relationship to other research into student experience. For example, the notion of the teacher-student power balance enabling teachers and students to engage in dialogue is consistent with the research of Cornelius and Herrenkohl (2004), whereby the attitude and encouragement of teachers is said to be instrumental in eliciting classroom discussions. Subsequently, students mostly reported feeling increased confidence, independence and their teachers' valuing of their personal views. Another example is Van de Ven and Brauckmann's (2008:19) support for students' assertions about teaching and teachers: they conclude that student success is affected by "the factors that are closest to student learning, such as teacher quality and classroom practices". Similarly, Meijer (2007) relates students' learning to their perceptions of their teachers' work, including perceived workload, perception of teacher guidance and teaching style.

Whilst the success of FE colleges in providing students with opportunities for academic advancement and personal growth is commendable, two main factors may hinder FE colleges being persuaded to fully engage with students' recommended changes. First, there is a danger that (a) the student voice may be used by FE colleges to reinforce the organisation's current views and (b) college managers will only resolve a limited number of concerns. These examples of tokenism could become standard practice at some colleges since the Ofsted (the official body for inspecting schools in the United Kingdom) began taking account of students' views on their education provider. Second, and most important, with regard to the increasing pressures on colleges in a climate of austerity, as long ago as 2004 Scaife was accurately predicting that FE colleges would soon be under pressure to adopt a business model, respond to changes in funding. Funding from the UK Government, Education Funding Agency and Skills Funding Agency will be limited over the next few years with forecast cuts of approximately 5% for each of the next four years. FE colleges will compete with other institutions, meet increasing performance targets (on top of regular Ofsted inspections), and develop the quality of management and leadership, as well as the quality of teaching and learning. These challenges may mean that student aspirations to feel part of a learning community, in order to help them to do well in their A-levels, will be compromised.

A number of limitations in this study require acknowledgement. The difficulties were (i) the matter of *generalisability*, (ii) the limited sample group (16 students in one college) and (iii) the link between learning communities and students doing well in their A-levels. With regard to the first point, there are many types of FE college that serve a wide variety of students. They will thus have a range of needs that may not necessarily be the same as those of the students in this study (despite similarities to those in Bloomer and Hodkinson's 1997 study). Second, despite 'data-rich' responses, the sample group is unlikely to represent the majority of students at one college (although it may be adequate). Finally, firm evidence that learning communities are educational environments in which students can achieve more has yet to be established. Whilst the results of this study may not represent the position at all FE colleges, they do provide an insight into how members of a small community of learners feel about their experiences of learning at an FE college.

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