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'Life-changing things happen': the role of residential education in the transformation of adults' learning and lives

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‘Life-changing things happen’: the role of residential education in the transformation of adults’ learning and lives

Abstract

Purpose

This paper aims to examine the implications for adults of learning in a residential context and whether the residential aspect intensifies the learning process, and can lead to enhanced personal transformation, moving beyond professional skills and training for employability.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper reports on research, conducted in 2017, with 41 current and former staff and students (on both short courses and longer Access courses) in four residential colleges for adults: Ruskin, Northern, Fircroft and Hillcroft Colleges.

Findings

Key findings include the powerful role residential education plays in accelerating and deepening learning experiences, particularly for adults who have faced extraordinary personal and societal challenges and are second chance learners. The colleges, all in historic settings, confer feelings of worth, security and sanctuary and the staff support – pastoral and academic, bespoke facilities and private rooms are vital enabling mechanisms. Seminar-style learning creates opportunity for experiential group learning, helping to foster critical thinking and challenge to mainstream views.

Social implications

The colleges’ ethos, curricula and traditions foster among students an ‘ethic of service’ and a desire to offer ‘emotional labour’ to their own communities, through working for instance in health and social care or the voluntary sector.

Originality/value

Little research has been undertaken in contemporary settings on the impact of learning in a residential environment, particularly for second chance learners and vulnerable adults. Still less research has examined the wider implications of learning in a historic building setting and of learning which extends into critical thinking, intellectual growth, transformation and change.

249 words

Keywords: adult; residential; learning; transformation; acceleration; sanctuary

Current status of adult education

Adult education, at its best, provides not only improved professional skills and training for employability, nor just better cultural habits, but intellectual growth, transformation and change. It often involves ‘putting right what went wrong in schools’ as well as skills acquisition; developing new skills, in turn, creates ‘more fulfilled employees and citizens who are less reliant on state support and leads to the bonus of improved productivity and a more competitive and successful economy’. Such ‘second chance’ education remains necessary for many today. However, many of the barriers to their learning are not associated with their individual effort or agency but are connected with societal and familial issues which disrupt compulsory schooling. These include, for instance, growing up as a looked-after child, early drug use, family break up, and having an undiagnosed mental health issue or learning disability. There is a ruthlessness about the speed and pace of life today which many people feel leaves them behind. Mental health-related issues are a growing concern across further education. An Association of Colleges (AoC) survey (2015) found that in 66% of respondent colleges ‘the number of students with mental health difficulties had ‘significantly increased’ in the previous three years with a further 20% saying they had ‘slightly increased’’. In addition, ‘75% felt that their college had ‘significant numbers’ of students who had undisclosed mental health difficulties’, while all reported having students with depression, anxiety, or who were self-harming. (Association of Colleges, 2015).

Debate about further education generally focusses on young adults, but in reality adult learners – a very diverse group – seek to learn at different points in their lives. In the year 2016/17, according to the AoC, 1.9 million adults were studying or training in colleges; there were 200,000 adult apprentices; and 106,000 college students were aged 60 or above – while 30% of adults in further education colleges came from an ethnic minority background. Yet perhaps the most noticeable trend of recent years has been decline: the total number of learners in Further Education and Skills, which stood at 3.163 m in 2010/11, had fallen to 2.325m by 2015/16 – a fall of 26.5% over five years (Department for Education, 2017). The decline in the numbers of mature part-time and full-time learners in Higher Education has also been sharp: between 2012/13 and 2016/17 the number of mature students (aged 25 and over) fell by over 15% (from 841,480 to 730,145), while part-time student numbers fell over 21% (from 659,310 to 519,825) (HESA, 2018) This seems clear evidence that many widening participation (WP) activities are not working – or are effective mainly in reaching potential students

of school-leaving age. As an Open University report recently pointed out, ‘Most current WP outreach activity focuses on interventions in schools, partly because policy makers can appear infatuated with getting 18 year-olds from under-represented groups into selective universities’ (Open University, 2017, p.4). Les Ebdon, Director of Fair Access to Higher Education, urged colleges and universities to ‘reach out to prospective adult learners’, who are more likely to be part-time learners and from specifically under-represented groups such as students from white working class backgrounds, from certain BME groups and students with disabilities:

While we shouldn’t be tempted to consider adult learners as one homogenous group, we do know that they are disproportionately more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds than those who enter higher education straight from school. We also know that adult learners are far more likely to study part-time. And with the dramatic decline in part-time numbers since 2010 showing no sign of levelling off, numbers of adult learners look set to continue dropping unless drastic action is taken (OFFA, 2017, Foreword).

The OFFA report (2017) notes that the decline in part-time and mature learners (an ‘all-too invisible’ disadvantaged group) ‘shows no sign of levelling off’; the ‘deeply worrying’ decline in part-time student numbers is ‘hindering social mobility targets’ (OFFA, 2017, p.3).

There have been major shifts in how adult education is funded over the past two decades. In the early 2000s, according to the AoC, ‘the government spent around £3 billion a year ... on education and training for those over 19’ (AoC, 2017, p. 1). In 2016/17, however, although it allocated £3 billion to the Skills Funding Agency, this was to be split in ‘very different ways’: £260 million was allocated via FE loans (and ‘not all of it is being used’), and £1 billion to apprenticeships for those aged over 19:

This leaves £1.5 billion for the Adult Education Budget and £0.3 billion for a variety of national programmes (National Careers Service, financial support, data collection, SFA’s own costs). Given inflation over the last 15 years, this adds up to a cut in government spending on adult education of almost two-thirds (AoC, 2017, p.2).

Effectively, therefore, non-apprenticeship funding now comprises a much smaller proportion of a reduced adult education budget. The refocusing of budgets towards apprenticeships also means that adult education in the form of basic skills, school-level qualifications, vocational courses delivered by colleges and personal and social learning (community education and learning for interest) has become much less widespread.

FE Week's #SaveOurAdultEducation campaign, launched in February 2017, argued for a new adult education investment strategy, 'that does not disappear under the political weight of apprenticeships and devolution (FE Week, Feb 2017). £200 million, 13 per cent of the £1.5 billion adult education budget, went unspent within the FE sector in 2016/17. David Hughes, the AoC's chief executive, sees this as a sign that the new Education and Skills Funding Agency rules are 'restricting the types of students, courses and activity' that can be funded: the 'need is out there, but the restrictions are too severe' (FE Week, 2017) A similar problem exists with student loans. Education Maintenance Allowances, introduced by the last Labour government to make continuation of study for young people aged 16-19 from less well-off backgrounds less financially difficult, were abolished (in England) by the Coalition government. However, loans were made available for further education for those aged over 24 the same year; and this was extended to 19-23 year olds (studying at Level 3 and above) in November 2015. However, this has in no way stemmed the decline.

Residential colleges for adults

Our focus here is on the four residential colleges for adults in England with a regional and/or national remit: Fircroft College, in Selly Oak, Birmingham; Hillcroft College, in Surbiton, Surrey; Ruskin College in Old Headington, Oxford; and Northern College, in Stainborough, Barnsley, South Yorkshire. They account for a tiny proportion of public spending: a mere £13 million – rather less than 0.01% of the £1.5 billion Adult Skills Budget. Nevertheless – we argue – they contribute disproportionately to the public good.

All four colleges, independently constituted charities regulated by their own trust deeds, have long and illustrious histories of educational experiment and innovation. Developing in the early and mid-twentieth century, they responded to a demand for emancipatory education for working people. Their ethos has emphasised the whole person and the cultivation of individual well-being, placing considerable emphasis on learning communally, and on understanding others and learning from them how to live a useful and productive life.

This ethos has developed from several sources. In Britain the influence of the labour and trade union movements, and of the Quakers, is clear. The Danish Folk High

School movement also played a part. This sprang from the work of Bishop Nikolai Frederik Grundtvig (1783-1872), who saw productive human beings as best developed in citizenship-based residential settings where the stimulus of conversation and the balm of kindness and community were at least as important as books. The Folk High Schools emphasised creating a microcosm of society, bringing together post-school age people from all walks of life on a residential basis to discuss important issues. Key to the approach was the concept of ‘enlivenment’ (or *animering* in Danish, ‘to animate’). Enlivenment was a pedagogical approach in which teachers spoke directly from the heart on subjects they found inspiring, creating opportunities for students to construct their own curricula, based on subjects which interested and stimulated them, and encouraging debate in small groups. It allowed individuals to take charge of their own learning, building confidence through hands-on and experiential learning in atelier-style workshops. Distinctions between teacher and learner were minimised, based on the view that tutors and students could learn from one other. Its primary objective was to support authenticity – a real love of the subject, an authentic connection between student and teacher and an intellectual freedom. Such experiments in ‘progressive, holistic education’ foster an ‘engaged pedagogy’; this

emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively involved and committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students (hooks, 1994, p. 15).

In other words, the teacher/student relationship is based on mutual well-being and empowerment.

Thomas Hardy (1912) recorded that some of his readers had told him ‘Ruskin College... should have been called the College of Jude the Obscure’ (p. xi). A major government report just after the First World War noted that Fircroft’s students were engaged in manual occupations; almost all had left school at or before 14, and ‘reside[d] at the college for periods varying from a few weeks to a year’. An inspector had noted the ‘stimulus’ the college offered students, ‘the wide variety of interests opened out to them; and the importance of ‘a common life and fellowship’ (Ministry of Reconstruction 1919, p. 74). Commenting on Ruskin, the report continued:

The importance of the pioneer work done ... in proving that adult students can pass direct from their occupations into an academic atmosphere, derive much educational benefit from it, and return to apply their knowledge to practical affairs, can hardly be exaggerated (p. 76).

By the early 1970s, Fircroft, Hillcroft and Ruskin were well-established as ‘long-term residential colleges’ for adults – long term in the sense that they offered courses of one or two years’ duration, and contrasting with the network of ‘short-term residential colleges’, developed largely after 1945, which offered courses typically lasting a week or less, and generally under the *aegis* of local education authorities.

In the century since the Ministry of Reconstruction report, only one substantial government committee of inquiry has examined adult education: the Russell committee in 1973. It took the view that:

It is essential to keep open an alternative route for the adult late developers, especially those from unpropitious environments whose perceptions of the possibility of higher education come only in mature life. The long-term residential colleges have an impressive record in creating such opportunities, not only as an entry to university or college, but as a form of higher education in their own right. ... (p. 83)

The colleges, it found, had

a remarkable record of finding men and women from unpromising backgrounds and developing their intellectual capacities and personalities so that they have gone on to make important contributions to society. The colleges have done this by developing, each in its own way, an ethos which combines the traditions of liberal adult education with academically demanding courses and a strong community spirit. Several factors, all deriving from the fact of residence, have contributed to this ethos ... [including] the stimulus of cultural activities, and the close contract with other students sharing similar aspirations and problems but drawn from all parts of the country and many other parts of the world. Full-time study makes sustained intellectual demands and, when combined with individual tuition and the full life of the college, produces more rapid intellectual growth than is possible under conditions of part-time study. None of this would be within the reach of, for example, students from deprived backgrounds without the change in environment and the temporary release from voluntary activities that a residential course offers (p. 84).

The Russell committee recommended that ‘consideration should be given to the establishment of one further [long-term residential] college in the northern half of England’ (p. 85); Northern College, dubbed ‘the Ruskin of the North’, opened in 1978. Both Ruskin and Northern Colleges in particular had strong links with the trade union and labour movements: until the 1980s at least their focus was on ‘the promotion in a residential setting of liberal education for working class students, recruited mainly from the trade unions’ (Pollins, 1984, p.63).

Since the 1980s, the terrain of residential adult education has changed radically. As public finances became increasingly tight, many ‘short-term’ colleges closed, while the ‘long-term’ colleges have had to reposition themselves: while maintaining a

commitment to second-chance learning for adults, and to residence, their curricula have evolved in subject-matter and length and level of courses. This has still not prevented Coleg Harlech, the only ‘long-term residential college in Wales’, closing as a site of adult education at the end of the 2016/17 academic year.

In a bid to broaden appeal, short courses are often now offered, as well as longer courses. In this respect, one observation the Russell Report made in relation to the significance of residence in the short-term colleges should be noted. It pointed to the colleges’ capacity for a range of innovation. They had, it found, been able to

experiment and to pioneer a wide variety of different courses for a range of adult students who do not usually attend classes The element common to this work is the exploitation of the appeal of and the advantages arising from a short period of residence, chiefly the concentration of effort and the opportunity for informal group discussion (p.45).

The Changing Context of Educational Debate

Shortly after the Russell Report appeared, the political context changed radically. By 1976 the value of ‘liberal education’ was being contested across all areas of education. On October 18th 1976, James Callaghan, the then Labour Prime Minister, spoke at Ruskin College (Callaghan, 1976). He referred to a university sector with high numbers of students studying in Humanities subjects, whilst science subjects were neglected. He advocated ‘higher standards’ in the workplace and the importance of training in response to new ‘legislation on health and safety at work, employment protection and industrial change’. During a period of intense economic crisis, culminating in soaring inflation, which, according to the Retail Price Index, peaked at 24.2% in 1975, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/timeseries/czbh/mm23>) as well as a dramatic reining-in of public expenditure, Callaghan’s government sought to focus education on fitting the individual for working life and playing a role in the economic machine. As Callaghan expressed it:

There is no virtue in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills. Nor at the other extreme must they be technically efficient robots. Both of the basic purposes of education require the same essential tools. These are basic literacy, basic numeracy, the understanding of how to live and work together, respect for others, respect for the individual (Callaghan, 1976, <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/speeches/1976ruskin.htm>).

Callaghan's speech is commonly regarded as an important milestone in a 'Great Debate' about the purpose and nature of public education. With the election of a Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher in 1979, the emphasis on skills and work-readiness grew. It contrasted, of course, with the liberal adult educational approaches which the residential colleges had developed, and which remain a hallmark of their approach and ethos today. Managing the tension between the ideals and traditions that underpin their educational purpose, and the narrow vocationalism of policy debate, has been a major challenge for the colleges over recent decades.

The Student body at the IALs

In 2016/17 the four colleges had a total of 10,150 student enrolments on Further Education courses and 271 student enrolments on Higher Education courses. Fircroft, the smallest, was founded in 1909 to provide educational opportunities for some of the most disadvantaged and excluded members of society. It remains committed to its social justice mission and many of its students are still referred by agencies working with groups furthest from learning. In 2015/16 it offered 193 residential short courses, specifically Personal Development and Functional Skills, primarily aimed at adults with few or no previous qualifications (43.9% of these were disabled). Students were generally residential for 2 or 3 nights, between Monday evening and Sunday afternoon, on courses leading on to Level 2 progression programmes. The College also offered a full-time Access to Higher Education programme for 20 learners, mainly residential. All of Fircroft's courses are accredited and delivered on a residential basis or on-site (consideration is currently being given to strengthening outreach). Whilst the college's ESFA funding previously came entirely from within the Adult Skills Budget, 86% of its funding in 2016/17 came from the Community Learning budget.

Since 1920, Hillcroft College has been the only publicly funded women-only college in the country. Students are generally between 21 and 60 years of age; over 70% are unemployed, and many have low prior attainment. In 2015/16 82% of learners reported Widening Participation indicators such as caring responsibilities, being in recovery from substance misuse, disrupted education, seeking refuge from domestic violence and/or a disability. Over the last four years there has been a significant

increase in the number of learners disclosing a disability (67% in 2015/16). This includes a significant and increasing proportion disclosing mental health and dyslexia issues.

In September 2017, the Governing body of Richmond Adult Community College (RACC) and the Hillcroft College Council agreed to proceed with a merger, creating the Richmond and Hillcroft Adult and Community College (<https://hillcroft.ac.uk/news/97/merger-between-hillcroft-college-and-richmond-adu>). The impact of this development has yet to be understood.

Northern College was founded in 1978 with an explicit objective of providing transformational residential and community education for the empowerment of people without formal qualifications seeking to return to learning, as well as training for those active in community and voluntary groups and in trade unions. The College retains strong links with the WEA. In 2016/17 44% of students declared a disability or learning difficulty and 77% were unemployed; individuals and groups who need support due to mental health issues or drug or alcohol abuse access the College via its links with a variety of voluntary and support groups in the region and families are able to take advantage of intergenerational learning opportunities. The college offers education for trade union activists and teacher education with a focus on social purpose, often for the voluntary sector rather than traditional education providers. The college has established progression routes in the broad curriculum areas of Humanities, Social Sciences and Computing, meaning students can move from entry level or non-accredited provision through to the full time Access to HE Diploma and beyond.

Ruskin, the oldest of the four residential colleges, was founded in 1899, with a view to providing educational opportunities for working class men; as the *Oxford and Working Class Education* Report (1908) reported, ‘to give working men, and especially those likely to take a leading part in the Working-class Movement, an education which will help them in acquiring the knowledge essential to intelligent citizenship’ (University of Oxford, 1908, p.8). Out of the current student body, 80 students live on site and 200 are non-residential full time; there are up to 2,000 part-time students. Access to HE courses lead to vocational qualifications in Health and Social Sciences, particularly in the areas of social work and youth work etc. Ruskin also offers placements with hospitals and in social work settings. Other popular courses include Applied Social Sciences, Creative

Writing/Arts, Maths, English and the Certificate in H.E. Pre-Access courses – for brushing up on skills – are 10 weeks in duration. Ruskin now tends to attract most of its students from within a 50 mile radius. It still places central importance on second chance learning for people who have often faced (and dealt with) extraordinary personal and societal challenges; and it focuses on opening up access to the job market, even for older learners. It retains strong links with the unions and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) – for instance, Unionlearn offers its TUC short courses programme at Ruskin.

All four residential colleges place considerable emphasis on enabling vulnerable adults to reconnect with themselves as learners, to re-gain confidence – or acquire it for the first time. As the staff at Northern College expressed it - and this was a sentiment echoed throughout all the staff interviews in all the colleges – “our specialism is our students”.

Methodology and theory

During May 2017, we undertook a series of interviews with current and former students and staff across all four colleges. All the 41 interviews were recorded digitally at the time and later transcribed. Most of the interviews took place face to face, though a few (at Hillcroft) were undertaken by telephone (and recorded simultaneously). The majority of the interviews were one-to-one in nature, though each College made focus groups of multiple students – and also staff – available. Each interviewee or focus group participant was issued with a description of the project which outlined the key questions to be covered, as well as the context of the research. All were read and each person completed an informed consent form, which outlined the ethical parameters for the research and allowed for total anonymisation. The interviews were of no more than an hour's duration. Each interview examined the following key areas:

- Does residential learning intensify and accelerate the learning process? Do the specific settings of the Colleges have an impact?
- What is the importance of the residential learning community and the group learning experience?
- Does this differ depending on the type of course i.e. non-vocational or skills-based?

- What impact has the College learning had on longer-term personal and professional development?

‘Bathing in Data’

The interviews were analysed according to themes explored in the questions, enabling a recoupling of the social and the personal. This life *history* (in contradistinction to a life *story*) approach is consistent with a theoretical positioning by which the researcher and the ‘story teller’ work collaboratively to achieve an inter-textual and inter-contextual account, placing emphasis on the interviewee’s ‘situated context’ rather than celebrating the ‘idiosyncrasies of the individual’. As Ivor Goodson has argued, ‘In studying learning, like any social practice, we need to build in an understanding of the context, historical and social, in which that learning takes place’ (Goodson, 2008, p. 11).

Goodson also described the process of achieving connection with a large body of data through a narrative analysis methodology, referring to it as ‘bathing in data’ – a state of complete immersion, without judgement, in the material. From this key themes and strands emerge: ‘I adopt a process of immersion, or what I call ‘bathing in the data’. I read and re-read the transcripts noting emergent and then recurrent themes; organising the quotes into clusters’ (Goodson, 2008, p.4). This allows for a system of codification which moves from individual testimony to translated material and facilitates thematic cross comparisons between the interviewees. This approach emphasises what is said and the time and place of narration, and allows for comparison across different types of material. It is respectful of the stories told, by keeping them ‘intact’ and allowing for analysis of long sequences. It also enables a process of ‘imaginative reconstruction’, or ‘narrative imagination.. This is similar to Nussbaum’s emphasis on unpicking and exploring how we best engender the capacity to discriminate and to think critically and empathically across boundaries of distinction and difference: the ‘narrative imagination’ or ‘the ability to be an intelligent reader of another person’s story’ (Nussbaum, 1997, p.3).

Deficit models and individualisation

Mature students are more likely – as indicated above – to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, to have family and/or caring responsibilities, to have a disability and to be from a BME background (OFFA Report, 2015). They may also be

more averse to taking on loans and to incurring debt. They may experience multiple levels of disadvantage. Too often such learners are perceived in deficit terms, with a slew of policies and reports describing ‘at risk groups’, ‘the hard to reach’, problematic behavioural characteristics, the need for ‘Bridging the Gap’ and ‘Learning for All’. Many mature students have experienced real barriers to education – such as having been looked-after children, having engaged in early drug use, gone through family break up, been homeless or had an undiagnosed mental health issue or learning disability.

Deficit models focus on the individual and tend not to acknowledge structural barriers: in contemporary Britain social class, race, gender, physical and mental health, for example. Moving beyond a focus on individuals as defective or inadequate, we have to become aware of our conditions - both those which surround us structurally and socially and those we have internalised. Otherwise we are delimited by what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called our ‘habitus’: this refers to the socialised norms or tendencies, the lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities that guide our behaviour and thinking. Habitus is created through a social, rather than an individual process, leading to enduring patterns, transferrable from one context to another, that also shift in relation to specific contexts and over time. Habitus is a product both of free will and of societal structures, effectively an interplay between the two, and comes to seem as if it has always existed:

we learn how to act, how to behave, what is and is not appropriate, and so on, but we rarely remember that we have learned them. They come to seem ‘natural’ – a ‘second nature....What this suggests is that ‘taste’ is not innate but learned through the deep socialization of the habitus. Furthermore, what gets to count as ‘tasteful’ – in clothes and demeanour as much as in art and music – is what the group with the power to name things as tasteful decide is tasteful (Lawler, 2008, p. 130).

Such learned tendencies and dispositions create forms of ‘cultural capital’, which we carry with us, internalised, and also wear externally in our networks and social connections – our ‘social capital’. Bourdieu argued that cultural capital, like social capital, is convertible ‘into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications’, (Bourdieu, 1986, p.241). It can protect the interests of those in power, ensuring that the educational system replicates ‘the reproduction of the social structure by sanctioning the hereditary transmission of cultural capital’ (ibid, p.241). This theorisation provides a framework for understanding the structural aspects of learning and how they become encoded in human culture and within our internal

mental and emotional frameworks (habitus), through acquired sensibilities, tastes and dispositions.

Once we become socially isolated, decoupled from our collective understanding of ourselves, from our community, our class and from our families, our attitudes, dispositions and tastes can become pathologised and our sense of failure individualised. Lawler described this process, arguing that habitus are profoundly social and hierarchical and ‘carry the traces of the lines of division and distinction along which the social is organised’ (Lawler, 2008, p.131). Lawler suggested that not all habitus are created equal: they are relational – ‘some are normalized, while others are pathological’ (ibid), meaning that, without a collective identity, the individual can be judged as lacking if they do not possess the ‘right kind’ of habitus.

Desjardins and Rubenson (2009) argue that the broader structural and cultural conditions in which individuals are raised - specifically the institutional and labour market settings and the social support available - are as important in shaping their response to education, and their future life chances, as dispositional factors, internalized conceptual frameworks or personal agency. In other words, bounded agency requires a ‘re-conceptualisation of agency as a process in which past habits and routines are contextualised and future possibilities envisaged within the contingencies of the present moment’ (Evans, 2007, p.86). As Róbert (2012) points out, bounded agency is especially useful as a paradigm as it recognises the complex interplay between personal/individual motivation and the social structures in which individuals are located upon their decision to engage in lifelong learning/adult education. The concept suggests that

structural factors are centrally involved in individual motivation, since a person’s sense of their ability to actively construct their life is shaped by the economic, social and cultural resources they are able to mobilize. People living in specially disadvantaged circumstances are less likely to engage in lifelong learning, in part because they lack the financial resources to fund their studies and believe that there will be few economic benefits. In addition, their life experiences may have reinforced a sense of powerlessness and inability to control risk (Róbert 2012, p. 88).

Learning is motivated by ‘an interconnected mix of intrinsic and extrinsic factors’ Riddell (2012) comments, adding ‘economic instrumentalism is very far from the sole, or even the main, driver of the decision to participate in adult education’. Human beings are also motivated by such factors as ‘the love of learning, the desire for personal

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3 growth and the urge to exert some control over future life events' (Riddell 2012, p.152).
4 So whilst even when an individual's initial drive to undertake a course of learning is
5 economic, or at least extrinsic (for skills acquisition, promotion, qualifications), 'the act
6 of engaging in learning of any type generally stirs a desire for further learning
7 experiences' (ibid.). For this reason, she argues, human capital theories are inadequate
8 in explaining the motivation of adult learners as they place 'undue emphasis on rational
9 economic planning' (ibid.)
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15 Sen's human capabilities model builds on the human capital theory idea that
16 'human qualities...can be employed as "capital" in production in the way physical
17 capital is'. Human capability, however, emphasises 'the prospect of leading a
18 worthwhile life as well as ... being more productive' (Sen, 1997, p.1959). Education is
19 a good example of the self-actualising emphasis of the human capability approach. Sen
20 argued that 'a person may benefit from education, in reading, communicating, arguing,
21 in being able to choose in a more informed way, in being taken more seriously by
22 others, and so on. The benefits of education, thus, exceed its role as human capital in
23 commodity production' (Sen, 1997, p.1959). Yet while Sen emphasizes the plasticity
24 and creativity implicit in human capability, he also describes a phenomenon – 'adaptive
25 preferences' – whereby the preferences of individuals in deprived circumstances are
26 formed in response to their restricted options. In other words, people can internalize the
27 harshness of their circumstances so they do not desire what they can never expect to
28 achieve. From this perspective, personal transformation for people from disadvantaged
29 backgrounds is unlikely.
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40 By contrast, Jack Mezirow's (1997) theory of transformative learning describes
41 a kind of learning which causes a sudden recalibration of the individual's 'meaning
42 perspectives', or overall worldview, irrespective of their background. This 'perspective
43 transformation' is often precipitated by what Mezirow described as a disorientating
44 dilemma, which has three dimensions: psychological (changes in understanding of the
45 self), convictional (revision of belief systems), and behavioural (changes in lifestyle).
46 Such a dilemma can be seismic in its impact, creating much more far-reaching change
47 in the learner than other kinds of learning, as it impacts on all the learner's subsequent
48 experiences. Central to Mezirow's theory is critical reflection. Transformative learning
49 develops autonomous thinking – 'in contemporary societies we must learn to make our
50 own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgements, and feelings of
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others' (Mezirow, 1997, p.5). For Mezirow experience is positive rather than preconditioning us to be limited by our circumstances:

A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience. For some, any uncritically assimilated explanation by an authority figure will suffice. But in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgements, and feelings of others. Facilitating such understandings is the cardinal goal of adult education. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking (Mezirow, 1997, p.5).

Therefore, for Mezirow understanding how society operates and manages power is crucial. This may be a longer-term prospect for the adult learner and requires a learning approach which recognises the need for short-term gains in a longer game plan. It is almost a form of learning by stealth, but central to it is the concept of building confidence, skill and mastery:

Often, adult learners' immediate focus is on practical, short-term objectives—to be able to qualify for a driver's license, get a job or promotion, or teach a child to read. It is crucial to recognize that learning needs must be defined so as to recognize both short-term objectives and long-term goals. The learner's immediate objectives may be described in terms of subject matter mastery, attainment of specific competencies, or other job-related objectives, but his or her goal is to become a socially responsible autonomous thinker (Mezirow, 1997, p.8).

Crucially, critical reflection and becoming an autonomous thinker do not happen in isolation. A community of like-minded peers is important in allowing for the realisation that one's discontent, and the process of transformation, are shared and that others have negotiated similar changes. This requires a process of recognition – being recognised by others and affording them the same level of recognition. Through debate and dialogue change and transformation occur, at both individual and social level, and it is through such dialogue that plans are formulated and what Freire (1972) calls praxis or informed action can occur. This assumes a bringing together of theory and action, the process by which a theory is enacted, embodied, or realised. For Freire education is by nature political and should be a process of developing or harnessing political consciousness – or 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1972, p.55) – within the specific context in which it is taught. Fleming (2016) describes the theory of recognition as establishing 'a link between the social causes of experiences of injustice and the motivation for emancipatory movements The political is personal. This is an attempt to reconfigure the age-old sociological debate involving structure and agency' (Fleming, 2016, p.16). Ultimately, therefore, in transformational learning the social and the individual can

come together. Our case is that the residential setting provides ideal circumstances in which this shift can take place.

Findings

The value of place/space/community

The tutors here and their services and support networks are outstanding, no words, there are no words to describe this place really, other than it's a safe haven, a sanctuary for your education, for your health, for your mental health....

In all of the four colleges, the sense of being away from the mundane and the day to day, from the distractions – and sometimes the chaos – of everyday life was crucial in engendering space for reflection and learning. It was also often remarked that this was in stark contrast to the Further Education colleges which some students had experienced and which were perceived as large, busy, making many students feel anonymous.

The main aspect was the atmosphere ... it was very quiet and totally different to an FE college in the sense it's always hustly bustly and very hectic, students go in for one thing and run out....the college is much more student focused, and that's what makes this residential stand out from the rest. A further aspect I loved about it being residential was it took out the distractions that come with real life and FE colleges (Male Student, Northern College).

The feeling of safety and tranquillity the colleges elicited was vital to students who had often had traumatic life experiences, such as domestic violence or homelessness, or were seeking asylum from the hard realities of unemployment and trying to make a living in precarious or unstimulating work. Many students talked about the inclusive nature of their college, welcoming people from all backgrounds; one student in particular, at Hillcroft, described the holistic approach offered by the college as addressing elements missing from her childhood:

I genuinely think this is the only place I've seen life-changing things happen... because it's so ... holistic and all-inclusive, everyone's lives, it gives the safe opportunity to provide everything possible that's missing in people's childhoods in one place, you know that you're safe, and that sounds a very strange thing to say, you're safe...(Female student, Hillcroft).

Everything's now opened up, and before I was stuck in this job doing what a chimpanzee could do (Male student, Ruskin).

Others commented on being in an environment historically associated with the elite and how this broke down perceptions of places of beauty being only for the '1%'

or the cream of academia. They saw access to historic grounds, gardens and buildings as restorative, conferring 'social justice' on people from working class or disadvantaged backgrounds. Strikingly, some of these comments were reminiscent of Soja's work on how physical spaces shape us, and our learning practice – '[w]e must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology' (Soja, 1989, p.6):

I think also this kind of environment, this kind of building and these kind of grounds are probably something that, that is quite alien to a lot of people, it's almost like you know that's kind of seen as like an ivory tower for other people. But it's got that almost Oxbridge feel to it, so you do kind of, you feel part of something that's got a lot of history that welcomes you, values you, so social justice values as well (Male student, Fircroft).

there is such a sense of respectfulness ...and dignity and self-worth because the building is the type of building that, as a working class woman you'd never, ever have access to. These spaces are reserved for heritage sites and the 1%! (Female former student and current staff member, Hillcroft).

Many described the social benefits and sense of community which resulted from living and learning with fellow students in a small and intimate environment. One younger student described how other older and more experienced students both looked after her and ensured she was not isolated. She described them as 'the parent crowd' (Female student, Ruskin). This inter-generational awareness worked both ways, with other older students being grateful for support (on IT matters for instance) from their younger colleagues.

So you've got 20 year olds and 30 year olds through to 50 and 60 year olds...you communicate with all of them...in the big wide world no 20 year old is going to entertain a 58 year old - but in this environment, where you're all learning and you're all put in the same class, you're on the same level. I'll be looking at others to support me – and that's what happens, they do! And they gather round you, like cotton wool! (Male student, Northern).

The sense of inclusivity and the diversity among the student group encouraged greater inter-cultural and inter-generational tolerance and understanding and enhanced the learning experience, as people share aspects of their own backgrounds and life paths:

It plays a vital role in shaping you for university life because you've still got that independence, you're away from your family and ... actually another aspect is you meet a range of students from different backgrounds, and always being in close contact with them, you learn to be open-minded and respect their attitudes to life and it just breaks down barriers that would otherwise have stayed put (Female student, Northern).

For many, being able to stay on-site enabled them to concentrate and focus on learning, instead of being preoccupied with childcare, the daily commute, or having to cook and clean for themselves.

I think for some people, you know, it's probably one of the best meals they have, some people probably don't eat that well at home, so that's another thing (Male student, Northern).

Having a room to retreat to, with a desk, bed and shower, after a day of intensive learning, was perceived as an important aspect of the sense of inhabiting a sanctuary for learning. A significant additional advantage of being in residence was access to the library during both the day and night:

They've got everything you need, there's a desk for you if you want to do some coursework. I mean obviously as well you've got access to the library twenty four hours a day (Female student, Fircroft).

Pastoral/tailored support

Being a mature learner brings its own particular anxieties; people have often been out of an educational environment for many years, or have unhappy memories of it. For many interviewees, this included having undiagnosed learning disabilities or mental health issues while in school. Staff attention to student welfare, both within the learning environment and outside, as well as their care in creating an atmosphere which supports personal resilience and a sense of well-being, is viewed as central to the residential college experience. The level of support from both academic staff and operational staff was a constant theme in the interviews. Staff talked about individualised, person-centred and 'scaffolded' support, and students commented that 'being listened to', and knowing support was on hand if needed, helped them gain in confidence:

I didn't go to school, I was made to feel a bit stupid when I was younger, so you kind of take that on board in the end... Coming here, it was just so relaxing and everyone was dead friendly and you're not made to feel in any way inferior to anybody else (Female student, Northern).

...the support you get here is ... just so amazing. Because they listen to you and they don't have any preconceived ideas. I mean I also have ADHD which is partly why I used to struggle so much (Female student, Fircroft).

And they're watching out for things, if you're here all the time, they know you... you get to know the catering staff, the cleaning staff, and they all work together, so they know, they'll come and talk to you and they all pass information between them (Male student, Northern).

Students described the immense confidence boost of being, or of having been, a student in one of the residential colleges. Going on to Higher Education – achieved by many who completed the Access courses – becomes a realisable ambition. Some, of course, find the experience of higher education very different, and challenging in new ways, but the ‘toolbox’ of interacting and coping strategies gained at the colleges helped foster ongoing emotional and intellectual resilience. Staff argued that the residential aspect allows for the creation of techniques and skills which cannot be built up when contact time is more limited:

So they’re able to you know be of value to the world...and just go for what they want and it makes you more determined... When I left Hillcroft I felt like I could have been the next prime minister! (Female former student, now staff, Hillcroft).

I enjoy the course, but I do find the settings a bit hard! Because when you’ve come from somewhere like Hillcroft to somewhere where you’re just a number again or a percentage ... it’s really hard ... I think it’s taught me to ask for help and stuff, because even in the uni, you know, I don’t get the same kind of attention, people don’t know my name... (Female former student, Hillcroft).

...it’s a step out of life but I wouldn’t say it was a step away from life. And that’s the important thing for me about it and about residency ...It’s a step away so you can sort, re-evaluate and think... trying to establish issues and give people toolboxes of resilience/resource that they can do. You can’t do that just coming in for two hours (Female former staff member/current volunteer, Hillcroft).

Critical Thinking – Transformative learning

Many of the courses offered in the residential college environment take place over two or three days. They are by necessity intensive and demanding, with learning compressed into a limited time frame. This has been referred to as ‘a super-charged educational experience’ (Mel Lenehan, Principal of Fircroft College, 2017). This is particularly the case for students aiming to reach Level 3 in attainment. Many found this intensive learning experience exhilarating. One student at Fircroft described working as a tutor on the Aspire programme, which worked to support people with criminal backgrounds and ex-offenders back into work:

It was two weekends throughout the year, and at the end of it, the peer mentors or recovery coaches we called them...got an OCN grade and they were ready to go and work in the community...and a lot of them now work professionally in prisons (Male student/tutor – Fircroft).

Sometimes the intensity of the ongoing learning moves beyond the classroom and into social time, in gardens or canteen:

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3 You're amongst it all the time, you're talking to people, you're teaching each other,
4 you're speaking in a way that some of us have never spoken before, you're speaking
5 academically. And that becomes more and more frequent, and it becomes normal. And
6 ... it is more intense (Male student, Ruskin).

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8 The importance of critical thinking, debate and challenge was raised many times by the
9 students as the specific hallmark of their learning experience; a number described the
10 change in their perceptions, convictions and behaviour as having a dramatic
11 emancipatory effect on their understanding of political, economic and social structures,
12 as well as their internalised views on identity and capacity for self-reflection. With rich,
13 complex and diverse backgrounds, the students harnessed the course content, the levels
14 of tutor engagement and debate and to make use of their own experiences and
15 understandings of inequality and social injustice:
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22 ...my understanding of politics, economics, has changed massively...how that impacts
23 on myself as a person, impacts on the world around me. Those kind of nuts and bolts
24 things that you learn in class, I've taken a lot of them to heart, looking at race, ethnicity,
25 sex and gender studies...what it means to be a man or masculine or feminine or how I
26 was brought up in a really working class background with loads of problems and in part
27 why that was, and why that was passed on to me, that second generational socialisation
28 process of keeping me chained down, then coming and trying to break free from it
29 (Male student, Ruskin).

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31 I think the important thing is debating stuff that you didn't agree with. Like having to
32 debate for capitalism makes you sort of question your own views, and I think that's
33 important about what this place does - you might have a view but you can't stand by
34 that view unless you've challenged it (Female student, Northern College).

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36 I think what this place does is it encourages new thinking and it makes you question
37 systems and how they work. And most people have grown in terms of thinking, there's
38 still going to be people that aren't prepared to do that, but most people are politically
39 engaged now...but it breeds a thing of openness and ... the confidence to be able to
40 articulate yourself and not feel like an idiot ... it really does allow free thinking (Female
41 student, Northern College).

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43 Finally, students so fired by their experience of learning were keen to 'give back
44 to the community', and specifically their own communities. Numerous students
45 described a strong service ethic - a desire to set up a charity, to work as a volunteer in a
46 community organisation, to help others engage in learning and debate, or to teach others
47 themselves. This has been described as 'emotional labour', the 'emotion work' that the
48 former students as social actors perform in the course of their daily lives when they
49 return to their communities. This emotional labour, as Diane Reay has argued, is often
50 part of affective and associational life - "emotional capital is generally confined within
51 the bounds of affective relationships of family and friends and encompasses the
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emotional resources you hand on to those you care about” (Reay, 2004, p.60) .Most of those going on to university wanted to do so while staying close to their home environment. Far from this being a sign of trepidation or tentativeness or an unease at going into a new environment, it was a sign of local pride and solidarity. The colleges seem to foster civic activists who care for their fellow men and women, demonstrably handing on resources to those with whom they have associated

I don’t want to leave the area... because it’s like the amount of political persuasion that Unions had, and how much Yorkshire had...but even if I came back to teach here, people from [home town] do come here, and I’d love to teach here [at Northern]...because it’s not like normal teaching either, it’s social purpose education (Female student, Northern College).

Education + Training

Conclusions

It is clear that residential education plays a powerful role in, and accelerates and deepens, learning experiences for adults. The experience seems particularly valuable for those who have faced extraordinary personal and societal challenges, such as ADHD, epilepsy, dyslexia, mental health or anxiety issues, often undiagnosed at school. Residential second chance learning opportunities are a unique and invaluable social resource for such people. The financial cost – a minute element of the educational budget – is overwhelming valuable in the lives of individuals and communities across the country, and maintains a unique and innovative educational tradition.

The college settings – their grounds and historic buildings – confer feelings of worth on students who have been subject to social exclusion. The colleges generate a sense of safety, security, retreat and refuge for people often stepping out of difficult home lives. Particularly important are the provision of quiet spaces for learning (such as libraries and computer suites), which are generally open for 24 hours, and individual, private rooms. In the residential setting, experiential learning from the group – ongoing discussion and debate after classes and in informal interactions – leads to an intensity of learning experience and real intimacy. The absence of rigid formality helps learning. Pastoral and academic support at the colleges is substantial, vital and highly valued by the students. It is provided not only by tutorial staff, but also informally by all categories of support and operational staff. The small size of the colleges means students can get to know tutors and approach them as equals.

Access to Higher Education courses, leading to vocational qualifications in areas such as Health and Social Sciences, Social Work, Youth Work, etc., open up access to the job market, even for older learners. The colleges' educational outreach, community engagement and advocacy promote the colleges formally and informally, including through word of mouth, at job centres, community organisations, etc. The colleges have a vital role to play in sharing their strong outreach and community engagement expertise and their effective links with the voluntary sector with others in the field of access and widening participation to higher and further education. We suggest the colleges should develop a wider role, disseminating their pedagogical expertise in access to higher education, in order to help rebuild part-time higher educational and

lifelong learning opportunities for adults, especially among socially excluded groups and those who have experienced psychological and similar challenges.

The college experience seems to foster critical thinking and understandings of politics and society which challenge mainstream and establishment views: it ‘changes the way we think about the world’. Seminar-style classes play an important role in encouraging debate and discussion – turning the college into ‘a poor man’s Eton’. The education on offer provides adult students with ‘the tools to learn anything’, to test and experiment without ‘fear of failure’.

The residential colleges’ ethos, curricula and traditions foster an ‘ethic of service’ and social justice. Students and alumni take their compassion and understanding back to their own communities. As stated previously, they have a keen awareness of the contribution of ‘emotional labour’ to community and solidarity. The dominant aspiration is to work in social care, the care sector or the voluntary sector, helping others to access what they have had. This is perhaps no accident. The colleges sprang from the working-class educational perspective famously articulated over a hundred years ago by the Portsmouth shipwright, John Mactavish, at the conference on Oxford and Working Class Education:

We want Oxford to open wide her doors to the best of our people, and take them in. We want her to send them back to us as doctors whose business will be health-giving, not wealth-getting; we want her to send them back as to us as lawyers, whose business will be justice not fees; we want her to send them back to us as living teachers, not manipulators of child-life. We want her to inspire them, not with the idea of getting on, but with the idea of social service. (Mactavish 1907, p. 197)

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