Leadership in Adult Community Education: Political Decisions and the Development of Social Capital in Nottingham

Peter Gates

With Eleanor Brown, Christopher Clegg and Samina Din
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Executive Summary

This project examined current leadership and political priorities in adult community education and focussed on what people gain from engaging in adult community learning, including, but was not specifically restricted to vocational type outcomes. Whatever definition we adopt for “social capital” there is a sense that it refers to characteristics of individuals which allow them to come together more effectively and provide conditions and skills for subsequent development. Clearly this involves elements of social engagement, social inclusion and social confidence. The root question is, how does engagement in (adult community) education influence people? One aspect of engagement in community education for the people on whom we focussed in this project was also to re-engage with learning and to possibly re-engineer their identities as learners. We explored three main areas – people’s personal lives, their social relationships and finally the institutional factors which structure the experience.

The project used structured interviews to collect data to identify the nature and the factors underpinning and influencing the impact that adult community learning had on the social, cultural and professional lives of the learners and members of their extended family and community. The project focussed on three wards in the City of Nottingham that suffer from relatively high levels of multiple deprivation - Aspley, Clifton and Arboretum (also called Forest Fields) - where Neighbourhood Renewal Funds have been invested to a greater or lesser extent.

We found considerable benefits through the influences on self-perception and self image. Whilst some felt able to undertake certain things they had learned directly from their courses, perhaps more significant were the people who felt better about themselves just through engaging with learning and interacting with others. This provided a springboard for enhanced self-image, leading to greater engagement and employability.
Introduction

This project explored the current direction of adult education and how it might affect adults in Nottingham. In particular it examined the impact of current political decisions over the funding of adult education as an example of strategic leadership in adult community learning. It focussed on some areas of the City of Nottingham by looking at issues of personal development. There has been much discussion recently of the need to understand how clients progress through learning to employment and there is a desire locally to make that journey easier. The local strategies of the City of Nottingham all recognise the low skills base of the local population and a lack of self confidence and self esteem as barriers to the labour market. However strategies have been based on an assumption that by developing vocational pathways and helping people to improve their skills and confidence, this will improve access to employment. This project focused on community learning, delivered by New College Nottingham, in order to assess the impact of these programmes, particularly focusing on the impact for those individuals taking part, but also on their family and wider community. In particular we looked at the direct and indirect benefits of engaging on adult community programmes.

The main section of this report covers the background to the project in Section 1 – Theoretical Background and the research methods adopted in Section 2 – Research Methods. The main analysis is covered in Section 3 – Discussion, which leads onto conclusions and recommendations in Section 4 – Conclusions and Recommendations. Since we feel this project has so many important potential spin-offs we have included some thoughts on future research opportunities in Section 5 – Future Research with references in Section 6 - References. Throughout the report we have suppressed the names of individuals but we have retained the name of one local school involved as it is only largely used as a location for provision.

The research team provided key local knowledge of the area and consisted of:

- **Dr Peter Gates**, project manager and deputy director of the Centre for Research into Equity and Diversity in Education (CREDE) who has been undertaking research focussing on education and social justice in Nottingham for some years;

- **Eleanor Brown**, a research associate in the UNESCO Centre for Comparative Education Research (UCCER) and the Teacher and Leadership Research Centre (TLRC), who has worked on international education and cultural relations, peace education in Jordan and Britain, and the impact of school leadership on pupil outcomes and classroom practice;
- **Christopher Clegg**, a research student in the Centre for Research into Equity and Diversity in Education (CREDE), who has also worked as a teacher in Clifton for some years and who is undertaking an ethnography of the culture of education in Clifton;

- **Samina Din**, a research associate in the Centre for Research into Equity and Diversity in Education (CREDE) and who, in addition to English, is fluent in Urdu, Mirpuri and speaks Punjabi. Samina has previously worked as a Family Support Worker for Nottingham City Council supporting families who have children with health and disability needs in the Nottingham City area. She is currently researching the experiences of Pakistani ‘second chance’ learners in Nottingham.
1. Theoretical Background

1.1 The Political Context

This project was principally focussed on what people gain from engaging in adult community learning. It seeks to provide empirical evidence to inform the national debate around the future funding of community learning. Equally, it explores how community programmes build social capital that supports a ‘culture of learning’ as envisioned by the Leitch report, how progression from community programmes can be best understood, how the new capital development plans for Basford Hall College can best support progression from the local community, and how participation in HE from Nottingham North can be increased. It does this within a context of national consultations and debate over the direction of funding and how such decisions are being made.

The learning often currently referred to as most important for funding includes those with vocational type outcomes and this is the crux of the debate. However in our study we looked at all forms of learning but were not specifically restricted to vocational programmes. Hence, the national leadership of community education is a key issue behind this research – whether the current cuts in non-qualification bearing leisure provision is justified given claims that it benefits many people in complex ways. In this project we sought to examine this claim by exploring the development of social capital amongst many disadvantaged communities.

The UCU claimed on its website:

‘The government’s funding priorities for further and adult education are wreaking havoc in branches in colleges and adult education services across the country. Thousands of adult education courses and hundreds of UCU members’ jobs are at risk. By the government’s own admission, up to 500,000 adult learners risk losing their courses as a result of its new priorities for post-16 education. At the same time, thousands of learners face the prospect of paying large fee increases for their courses.’ (UCU, 2007)

The underlying issue here then is political leadership and direction of the Adult Education sector. The Government has a desire to improve the skills and employability of the UK. To achieve this it has focused national priorities for the Further Education sector and is targeting funding at very specific groups of learners:

- 16-19 year-olds;
- Skills for Life courses (literacy, numeracy and IT) for adults;
- Full Level 2 qualifications (equivalent to five GCSEs) for adults without Level 2 qualifications;
- Level 2 vocational qualifications for working adults (through the Train to Gain programme);

- Level 3 qualifications (equivalent to A-levels) for 19-25 year olds (UCU, 2008).

As a result of the Government’s prioritization, many further education colleges and local authority-run adult education services have to look carefully at their provision and “many lower level, short and leisure courses which do not lead to recognised national qualifications and are not seen as direct pathways to work, are under threat” (UCU, 2008). Overall adult learner numbers on LSC funded further education provision (including “train to gain”) have fallen 36% by 1.24m between 2004/05 and 2006/07 (LSC, 2006 & 2007), with percentage falls in some colleges even greater than this (e.g. David, 2007).

The question here then that lies behind this research is – to where is adult community education being led and what are the implications? It has been argued quite vociferously that many community education courses (the type of which we explore in the research) provide important stepping stones for people returning to learning later, and possibly after very negative experiences the first time round. Such people:

> ‘Often want to learn for their own personal and social development. It is widely accepted that such learning has associated mental and physical health benefits, particularly for the elderly.’ (UCU, 2008)

Hence, we are here trying to open up the debate over the political leadership of the sector and seek to provide evidence which can invite a reconsideration of the wider benefits of learning. We discuss this issue further in Section 4.4.1.

### 1.2 The Theoretical Context

The definition of “social capital” is somewhat diverse, some referring to:

> ‘The networks, relations of trust, and patterns of reciprocity that facilitate collective action and bond members of particular communities.’
> (Green, Preston and Sabates, 2003, p. iii)

While others refer to:

> ‘Collective ties, norms, values, interactions, networks and relationships reflecting the involvement of human individuals in a common life based on family and community.’ (McClenaghan, 2000, p. 566)
For Putnam, a key figure in the development of social capital theory:

> ‘Human and social capital are clearly related, for education has a very powerful effect on trust and associational membership, as well as many other forms of social and political participation.’ (Putnam, 1995).

Bourdieu defines social capital as:

> ‘The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248)

Which is a rather long-winded way of saying ‘the resources individuals can mobilise through membership in organisations and social networks’ (McClenaghan, 2000, p. 568).

It is clear that whatever definition we adopt for “social capital” overall there is a sense that it refers to characteristics of individuals which allow them to come together more effectively and provide conditions and skills for subsequent development. Clearly this involves elements of social engagement, social inclusion and social confidence.

Yet, increased engagement in social and community institutions might not of its own accord result in greater empowerment of individuals; empowerment requires the opportunity to shift one’s position in the various social fields in which one acts out one’s life. Whilst social capital may be a resource and indicates potential - that resource needs to be effectively engaged so the potential itself can be enacted (Coleman, 1988).

However, the literature indicates that whilst this concern might be important for individuals at a local level, we need to be wary of over-generalising to the broader social level. For as Green et al. say in their study of social capital and social cohesion:

> ‘Social capital does not always translate into societal cohesion, since intra-community bonding does not necessarily lead to inter-community harmony. Some types of association may be beneficial for wider societal trust and harmony; others may not be.’ (Green et al. 2002, p iii)

With this caveat taken into account, this project reveals how engagement in community education brought individuals closer together.
Underpinning this project is the well-grounded assumption that education – in various forms - is a powerful generator of social capital. Recent research has indicated (Green, Preston and Sabates, 2003) that more educated individuals:

- tend to join more voluntary associations;
- tend to show greater interest in politics;
- tend to take part in more political activities;
- are more likely to express trust in others;
- are more likely to express trust in institutions;
- are more inclined to ‘civic co-operation’ – or at least to profess that they do not condone ‘uncivil’ behaviour.

The root question then is, how does engagement in (adult community) education influence people – along with an implied assumption that in some way it does. However this is not a straightforward question because,

‘Precisely how education contributes towards civic engagement and social capital, and under what conditions, is not yet well understood. Rather little is known about the mechanisms through which learning influences different kinds of individual social behaviour, the contexts within which such effects occur, and how and why they change over time in different countries.’

(Green, Preston, and Sabates, 2003, p. 3)

Furthermore, one aspect of engagement in community education for the people on who we focussed on in this project was also to re-engage with learning and to possibly re-engineer their identities as learners. There seem to be three main areas here to explore – people’s personal lives, their social relationships and finally the institutional factors which structure the experience (Gallacher, Crossan, Field and Merrill, 2002, p. 501).
2. Research Methods

2.1 Sampling

The project used a structured interview approach (See Appendix 1). However interviewers were able to allow participants to move off the main themes if this was felt appropriate. The purpose of the interviews was to collect data to identify the nature and the factors influencing the impact that adult community learning had on the social, cultural and professional lives of the learners and members of their extended family and community. The project focussed on three wards in the City of Nottingham, where Neighbourhood Renewal Funds have been invested to a greater or lesser extent. All suffer from relatively high levels of multiple deprivation. The wards selected were Aspley, Clifton and Arboretum (also called Forest Fields).

We were provided by New College MIS manager with detailed data on all students in targeted wards who had taken NCN Community courses since 2004. This data was obtained from students’ registration information and included:

- full address and postcode;
- telephone number;
- age;
- ethnicity;
- any disability;
- courses followed.

Naturally, all data was treated as confidential by members of the research team and was stored securely on a university computer. We were also provided with a random sample of 100 students per academic year stratified according to ethnicity, disability and age. This was to ensure we had a cross section of the population within each ward from which to select the final sample. We aimed to select around 15 students in each year cohort, five from each of the wards. The final selection took some time in order to ensure we had a spread of age, ethnicity and disability. We over-sampled to cover attrition and finally were able to interview 39 participants.

All those in the final sample were personally written to (See Appendix 2) in advance of a telephone call. At this stage some declined to be involved. We offered each participant a £10 gift voucher from a large shopping centre in Nottingham and provided people with the telephone number of a dedicated mobile phone – although this was not used by participants – and the mobile phone number of the member of the research team who was allocated to their ward.
2.2 Ethics

All research undertaken in the School of Education needs to follow the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA). Principally this is to safeguard the rights of participants. At all stages the team recognised the potential vulnerability of participants and gave them the right to refuse to participate. The participant information sheet is in Appendix 3 and each participant was given one of these and talked through it at the start of the interview. Participants were also given the right not to be recorded. We also asked if participants would be happy to be contacted again in the future. The Participant Continuation Agreement is in Appendix 4.

2.3 Key Research Questions

The project was based around three key research questions:

- What are the patterns of progression from community programmes?
- How does a culture of learning spread, building ‘social capital’, through the extended family and social networks, or what barriers might exist to hinder this?
- What are the influences and impact on the adult learner engaging in community programmes, including cross-social class influences?

We looked at direct and indirect effects of engaging in community education, and at the development of expertise, relationships, and engagement in society more generally.

Interviews included a range of topics, including whether interviewees had subsequently done other courses, had progressed at work, had moved into work (paid or voluntary), had helped them change job; whether the course had helped them influence others (e.g. family, friend) to become interested in and value learning; and whether the course had allowed them to meet others interested in learning and/or broaden their social network and meet people who had influenced their views on learning and career development.

2.4 Key Areas to Explore

The key areas explored in the interviews were:

- Family and personal history;
- Views of locality and place;
- Views of the local community;
- Quality of personal relationships;
- Understanding of trajectory;
- Exploring the context of leaning;
- Exploring the learning itself;
- Exploring the impact of learning.

This project looked at the impact of community learning on the development of social capital. Social capital covers the networks of relationships, both social and economic that individuals can become engaged with. These networks provide support and opportunities but also can provide space for the development of self confidence amongst previously socially excluded groups.

There will be some contextual factors that need to be explored within this project – albeit on a small scale – e.g. location within the city, gender, age, and ethnicity. These will be explored through the following question areas (See Appendix 1 for the full interview schedule):

2.4.1 Family and personal history

Develop a story of educational and family history of the learner.

2.4.2 Views of locality and place

How does the learner see their locality as a place to live? How is it described and how do they feel within it?

2.4.3 Views of community

How does the learner view the notion of community as a space and a set of relations? Is community important? How is it used?

2.4.4 Understanding of trajectory

How does the learner describe and understand their own educational trajectory?

2.4.5 Exploring the context of learning

How did the learner come to consider and take up the course? What decision led to the specific course and location? What barriers existed to be overcome?

2.4.6 Exploring the learning itself

How did the course unfold for the learner? What emotions were created? How is success viewed? What relations were encountered and fostered? What changes occurred to self image? How were course tutors viewed?

2.4.7 Exploring the impact of learning

What has happened since the course finished? Have there been any employment changes? Does the learner feel different? Have they made new friends, or engaged in new activities? Has their financial situation changed? Has there been any change in the relation to their children’s school?
2.5 Data Collection

The intention was to interview each participant singly either in their own homes or if they preferred in some other location; one woman preferred to be interviewed at the University of Nottingham and one other at Nottingham Trent University. The majority of interviews therefore were on an individual basis. However, in the course of arranging one set of interviews it transpired that some of the (female) participants knew each other well and suggested they might be interviewed in groups at the local Primary School – Ambleside School - where the courses took place. This seemed an ideal opportunity as it would provide support for participants as well as, through snowballing, produce more participants for us. This is discussed in Section 2.5.2. It is significant that this was a site for the AMBER Project (See Appendix 5) which is set up specifically to support parents in disadvantaged communities.

2.5.1 Individual interviews

Each individual who agreed to be involved was interviewed for between 40 and 74 minutes depending on how much they had to say. Most interviews took place in participants’ houses, but one took pace at the participants request at the University of Nottingham and one at Nottingham Trent University where she was taking another course.

Most interviews were digitally recorded and stored on a secure computer for analysis apart from some interviewees from the Asian community who preferred not to be recorded. In addition, interviewers had a data table in which the transcript was turned into a form to be used during and immediately after the interviews. In some cases these were typed on a laptop computer during the interview. Some interviews were undertaken in Mirpuri and later translated into English.

Our brief in this project was to collect data on participants’ social capital and therefore we do not specifically report here on other issues which did or could have arisen in the course of interviews.

2.5.2 The Ambleside School focus groups

The focus groups we ran were formed through the participants’ engagement in The AMBER Project (see Appendix 5 for a more detailed summary of this project). This is particularly significant because the project was established to provide support for local parents. The participants were selected by one group member who, as the AMBER worker at the school was responsible for organising the adult community courses at the school and knew all the parents and participants through this. Eight of the interviews were conducted in this way as focus group interviews – the first with five and the second with three participants. This strategy was helpful in a number of ways, as people seemed more confident to speak and issues were raised that prompted further discussion from others. The neutral ground of the school made people appear more at ease and generally they appeared to be very forthcoming with information.
There may of course have been limitations to this method, as there is a danger that some participants’ responses might have been influenced by social desirability, either with respect to what they felt the interviewer wanted to hear, or with respect to the reactions of their peers. However, we feel confident that this did not occur strongly enough to invalidate the data and the groups were open and responsive. Most participants knew each other, either through the courses they had been on or through having children at the school itself.

The people who were asked to take part tended to be those who the Amber worker felt were reliable and willing to talk, but they may also have been selected as they were people who had particularly benefited from the courses, meaning that it may not be easy to generalise many of the findings. However, the scope of this project was not such that we were looking particularly at generalisability of findings; rather we were looking at cases and at exemplary and narrative outcomes.

It is also probably relevant, though possibly little surprise, that all the participants in the focus groups were female.
3. Discussion

3.1 Making Contact

One of the first difficulties we had was in actually making contact with potential participants. A significant number had provided only a mobile phone number and these were often unreliable – as were some of the land-line numbers. Interestingly our strategy of writing to all participants, pre-empting a cold-call by telephone, backfired in a very small number of cases as it apparently scared some people – particularly some younger women and those in Asian communities. Our evidence suggests that only in a very small number of cases did this trepidation result in non-participation.

However, we can’t but see the communication difficulties we had as indicative of deeper problems of stability and community. If we are looking at social capital and community cohesion we are also interested in networks and relationships. It seems there are sufficient issues for people here given the variety of reasons they have for social stability.

3.2 Diversity

Whilst we report below on several commonalities, we were struck by the incredible diversity in the people we encountered. At one extreme, we interviewed one young woman of 30, who was not working and had not worked for some time. She had done quite well at school getting 4 GCSEs but was now a single mother in a benefits trap, frightened of looking for work as this would make her already precarious financial situation even worse. Many other participants had left school with no qualifications. On the other hand, one woman of 40 was in a professional job and had a degree from an African University, yet had taken several courses including an adult literacy course because she wanted to get to know people in her local community. On other courses she had developed a rapport with some of the local mothers and wanted to help encourage some of those around her who had not had her opportunities.

This diversity makes it impossible to simplify any conclusions and recommendations yet it does illustrate the way in which some of the educational opportunities do engage a wide range of people. It does, of course, make one more impressed with the course tutors who can seemingly take diverse groups of people and, as we shall see, provide effective learning environments.

3.3 Educational Backgrounds

‘That was the way things were then. Most people around us worked in Boots or Players after school. It was rare for anyone to go to university you just finished school at 16.’
As indicated in the previous section, the educational background of the participants varied enormously. Although a small number had been academically very successful – even gaining degrees – most had not done particularly well at school, although many reported they had enjoyed the experience.

Many participants reported they felt they were “average”, “did just ok really”. Most finished school with a small number GCSEs or equivalent, but we did not meet people who had stayed on at school to do A levels or equivalent courses.

One woman had originally been to a school in a surrounding village which had closed causing a change of school – something she never got over leaving school early with no qualifications.

Amongst those who left school at 16, experiences of school were very influential in their sense of who they were and how their life unfolded. One woman said that personal problems made school harder, one had been bullied and one said she “hated school and had been written off”, interestingly her sister really enjoyed school and did quite well.

Most of the participants who were early school leavers went on to do something at a college, either a local FE college, a secretarial course or some other college course. Another group went straight to work at sixteen, although several had subsequently gone back into full time education later on in life to do GCSEs, a BTEC National Diploma etc.

3.4 Perceptions of the Locality

Apart from the Ambleside focus groups, most of the interviews were conducted in the participant’s house, this potentially allowed another layer of data gathering in terms of the perceptions of the location of the house, the local community and the arrangement in the household. However, this is a very subjective measure and difficult to include in this report – so we have omitted such references.

What was particularly significant and very widespread in our sample was a positive and upbeat view of the locality – and this was true of all three areas we looked into.

3.4.1 Aspley

Although the way that Aspley was seen by the participants varied, there were no very negative feelings about the area. Most Aspley residents we interviewed were born in Nottingham or close by, and many had lived elsewhere in Nottingham before moving to the area, often when a council house became available, although there was a group who had lived in Aspley all their lives.

One participant, who was born in Jamaica and had lived in Forest Fields before moving to Aspley when she started her own family, said what many reported. She recognised that outsiders thought Aspley was a “bad area” with high unemployment, but she felt quite safe there and felt happy that although it is not her dream home it is a good start in life.
One participant even said moving to Aspley “was like the best thing I ever did”. The Aspley groups all had positive comments about Aspley, no one really felt unsafe there, although two women did say that they would not walk alone at night. All had many friends in the area and said that the people were “nice, helpful and brilliant”. One woman commented that the people are “friendly, quiet and family orientated”.

The Ambleside focus groups were generally very positive about the area. Six acknowledged that it did not have a good reputation or that there is a lot of unemployment and it was classed as a deprived area, but all felt that this was quite unjustified and that it was a shame that people “stereotype the area”. They commented that “outsiders should not run it down” and that it was a “great place to live”. One said that she would not want to bring up her children anywhere else. Two participants did not feel that Aspley had a bad reputation, saying that “they had never heard people saying bad things about Aspley”. All Aspley residents said they had many friends in the area and that having good friends and neighbours were two of the things which made it a good place to live.

3.4.2 Forest Fields

People thought Forest Fields was “very nice” and they “had no trouble here”. The facilities were seen as suitable “everything is nearby so I don’t need a car”. Residents in Forest Fields also liked the sense of community and the diversity that they had “good neighbours – never had any trouble here”, “nice neighbours, very caring and loving” and that “around here are mostly Pakistanis but even the people from other cultures are nice”.

3.4.3 Clifton

Thoughts about the area of Clifton were also generally very positive. There is a consensus of the high level of crime in the area, although this crime appears to be, in the main, petty. One woman had her garage broken into no less than nine times and her husband’s fishing tackle had been stolen every time. Interestingly, she would probably have moved out of Clifton had it not been for the fact that it had much cheaper housing meaning she and her husband could afford for her two children to attend university.

3.4.4 Overview

We think this set of views is important because it suggests the potential for greater and stronger community engagement. Some areas of Nottingham do have a bad press and an equally bad reputation (though of course the two may be connected).

3.5 Engagement Locally

Few people we interviewed were significantly engaged in local activities apart, interestingly, from the Ambleside focus groups. Indeed it was interesting that of the people we met, a common characteristic was not to consider oneself particularly sociable or do a great deal locally. It may be of course that it was precisely because of this they were able to find the time and energy to undertake courses.
In one of the Ambleside focus groups, many of the women were already involved in other groups in the area such as the church, Chairing and minuting meetings of the Aspley Partnership, volunteering extensively and taking part in a number of local steering groups and committees. Two of these women also ran the after school club ‘Mega Nite’. Three of the Ambleside Group were also involved with Sure Start, one worked as a volunteer and another had taught a short course in arts and crafts. One had won the Volunteer of the Year Award the previous year for all her hard work and involvement. It is interesting to conjecture (for we do not have hard evidence) on the connection between the community engagement of these participants and their being part of a school based community education provision. Our instinct is to assume there may well be something of interest here which might benefit from further examination.

Of the others in the sample, three had become school governors since doing the NCN courses at the school, they all agreed with one comment that they "could not believe at first that people were interested in my opinions", and one woman who was also part of a woman’s group commented that she “felt really important”. Two of the participants also subsequently volunteered at the local football club Beacon FC.

3.6 Courses and Sessions

People interviewed commented on a wide range of courses. In addition to the NCN courses many had also accessed courses from Castle College, the Aspley Partnership and the local authority, and occasionally the conversation moved freely between these making it difficult to distinguish which was which.

In terms of the courses run at Ambleside School, all the group members had many positive comments and all had attended a number of courses, including: Keeping up with the kids, IT, literacy and numeracy, New Clait (ICT), National Literacy and Numeracy tests, Salsa, beauty therapy, nail art, health and happiness, food hygiene, minute taking and first aid. One woman was retired and enjoyed the opportunity to get out of the house and really enjoyed learning about computers, and, having never switched one on before, was now thinking of buying a PC. A couple of women commented on the fact that whilst it was “scary to go back to learning after so long” the support and encouragement from the local Amber worker was important in helping them through, especially studying the course on numeracy.

Just about all participants seemed to get on very well with the tutors and also the groups. Tutors were generally seen in highly positive terms: “very supportive”, “excellent” “brilliant”, “made you feel at ease” and importantly, “we were treated like adults.” Where we do have negative comments these were very rare and not representative of any common grievance. There was almost universal agreement that the groups were “nice”, “great”, “fun” and everyone was willing to “muck in and get involved”. Few of the participants felt uncomfortable about anything during the sessions – other than not having confidence to participate fully in some of the activities. Indeed, the only common complaint was that the courses did not last long enough and they would like more. People were generally quite happy with their progress and even if the course had started out as just a way to get out the house, it had become much more and motivated them to do more (see later for more comment on this).
3.7 Learning in the Asian Community

We tried to collect data from the Asian community – which pragmatically meant mainly within the Forest Fields area. We would have liked to have explored this group more. We encountered some scepticism and suspicion on first contact but because we had a member of the Asian community undertaking the interviews, this appears to have soon dissolved. In one case however, the interview only proceeded because the participant knew, and lived close to, a relative of the interviewer. However the attrition rate was very high for this community and we do not feel we were able to collect as much data as we would have liked. In particular, the sample consisted entirely of women and so we were unable to say much about the backgrounds and outcomes for the males within this community. This is a clear area for future research.

Nevertheless the data we did collect presented positive outcomes. Characterised initially by a lack of confidence – caused in the main by language difficulties - many of the woman seem to have experienced a gradual drawing into the community.

‘I am more independent now. I feel confident talking to people and can make my own doctors and dentist appointment’.

‘I can understand my children now when they use new English words and I can read with my 5 year old daughter.’

We would not want to underestimate the significance of these skills – because the data suggested that this was not really just about making appointment with health professionals. Participants talked of feeling able to talk to teachers – although maybe not fluently but enough to feel valuable and engaged in school.

As with other communities, members of this group also talked positively of their area. The local facilities were fine and the neighbours good, supportive and helpful. Taking part in the courses has enlarged the circle of active friends and this has often resulted in a more active social life. We cannot underestimate the importance of this to the particular group we were talking to here – some of whom had talked of previous isolation which appeared to result in a low sense of self-actualisation.

3.8 Barriers

Several people commented on the difficulties they had pursuing the courses. More than one said it was difficult juggling everything with a family as well. Others had to overcome family illnesses. In a number of cases the support of the local Amber worker had been invaluable. At least two women had overcome severe difficulties, one had back problems and marital difficulties that had left her homeless for a time, another commented on the difficulties of being a single parent and having no outside support, particularly as she had also suffered serious health problems. She had also done one course in the City centre and not having transport made that difficult.

1 Here we use “self actualisation” in the sense of the highest of Maslow’s needs hierarchy and represents the need people have to make the most of their capabilities to fulfil their potential.
Of course the problem of identifying barriers is that we are only interviewing people who, to some degree, overcame these barriers. However we can identify from what they said what other barriers might be. One participant said:

‘The location played a big part of my choice as it was within walking distance of my daughter’s school. The start and end was within the school day.’

‘I did find it difficult finding the time with three children. I had to do my work in an evening when they had gone to bed.’

Of all the people interviewed, the consensus was that Clifton does not have enough happening in terms of adult education whereas it did in the past. Courses were previously attended at Fairham School and all respondents suggested that if this was still the case, and the courses were well publicised, they would attend more. Transport was the issue for many of the interviewees. It reportedly takes a two-three hour round trip on a bus to get in and out of the city centre, whereas if courses were in Clifton they would be within walking distance.

3.9 Benefits and Outcomes

We explored in some depth what participants felt were the benefits they had gained by engaging in the courses. This is a difficult issue because, first, people may not be particularly aware of accrued benefits that engaging in community learning might bring. Second, it is difficult to attribute an outcome from a particular input. However, we were surprised at, in some cases the degree of self knowledge – and the degree of honesty people had. Particular benefits were:

- greater knowledge;
- increased self-confidence;
- better quality relationships with family and the community;
- benefits to children and grandchildren and to schools;
- greater employability and increased financial benefits.

These are of course not easy to unwind since increased self-confidence and greater knowledge are often at the root of increased employability. Participants often said doing the particular course didn’t really help with their work, but then went on to talk about getting a stronger feeling of self-confidence and other indirect benefits. Here we look at the last four benefits in some detail which are less direct than the first, somewhat obvious benefit.

3.9.1 Increased self-confidence

The benefits the participants felt they had derived from the courses were immeasurable and participants talked of a long list of benefits they felt they had acquired. Most predominantly they all felt it had given them more confidence, and
this had helped their general well being. One woman said, “the more courses I do the more confident I get”. She felt she had come a really long way and this confidence had allowed her to get out and meet people and also become a school governor, which she loves. One said that she is “no longer afraid to speak to groups of children in the street” and another felt the confidence she now had was what had encouraged her to volunteer for Sure Start where she now had a permanent position as a volunteer worker.

In the Ambleside focus groups three others said that doing these courses and being involved in the local community had given them the confidence to “get out there and get a job”. Clearly, there is evidence of some financial benefit here, and yet all the groups agreed that the greatest benefit was not, in fact, financial. Far more important than that was that they had met people in their local area and they had then strengthened these networks through the Aspley Partnership or other volunteering activities, either at the school, after school clubs or other community volunteering. Since the people they met were all local they had a lot in common with them, even if it was only that their children went to the same school and they lived nearby, this helped foster deeper relationships and most said that they regularly saw people from the course. Many participants commented on the benefit of making new friends and being more included in the community, as well as learning new skills and information. One woman liked the fact that children at school knew who she was and she also knew more parents.

Many participants recognised the importance of doing something for themselves and having some “me time”. Another participant felt that she had more patience and it had changed her as a person because she felt she could achieve things and had realised that “age makes no difference to learning or what you want to achieve”. Two of the women participants agreed that doing the courses and getting out more had been “a life changing experience”, which had “really raised my self esteem”. Three women, echoing views expressed by others, recognised the importance of their own personal development saying:

‘It was lovely to say I did it for myself, I feel like a person again, not just a mum.’

‘Now everyone at the school knows me, it has helped me as a person and made me feel better about myself.’

‘I started off just to get out of the house, but really pleased with what I got out of it. In the end it helped me to get a job. I have lots of confidence. It has made me feel better about myself. I’m here for a purpose not just being a mum.’

One participant felt the course had helped her in other ways as well:

‘Doing the beauty course for instance, has helped me to accept myself and others in terms of body shape and I have learned to be more positive with people.’
One young male had graduated from Nottingham University about 8 years ago and had stayed in the area to undertake a professional job. He followed a cookery course at Aspley Bluecoat School, and had a different perspective from many of the others we interviewed. He attended the course with two male work friends. There are a number of interesting differences here – he is young, academically successful, and professional - characteristics which we might expect would introduce a range of different experiences and purposes. He felt less integrated than others we spoke with because:

‘There was less reason to mix because I went with friends - but the group was friendly enough. There was not a lot of interaction – but it was really good - but was a bit for fun rather than technique. It was not academic and was just for interest and enjoyment. I suppose I wanted to broaden my horizons.’

Yet even here there were some possibly surprising benefits for someone who had been so successful at education and employment:

‘I feel more confident about taking part in things. I wasn’t that confident with large groups. It also helped me in meeting other people locally.’

It is very difficult to measure such benefits, yet there is a clear and widespread view that many people are simply feeling better about themselves – which then goes on to helping build better relationships and communities as we see in the next section.

3.9.2 Enhancing social and personal relationships

Most participants had done some sort of course when they were younger, but had been out of education for some time and most now had young families. This fact had a significant effect on the data, as many of the benefits they derived from the courses were particular to this type of community learning. For those recruited through the local school, many became more involved in the community, and activities through the school. Many became volunteers and governors and this was achieved not only through the confidence gained from the courses themselves (discussed above), but also through the support of the Amber worker who had encouraged them and helped them with things that they may have been afraid to do without her support, including accessing the courses in the first place. A strong social network seemed to have developed as a result of this person and the courses consequently offered at the local primary school. People who would probably not have accessed these services without her have enrolled on many courses and grown so much out of it.

This is particularly the case in terms of the local community, many of the people met through the courses are also parents at the school and live on the same estate, therefore, it seems that a higher than average number remained friends, or at least in contact with people off the course than would probably be the case if the course were accessed through a college in the city centre. This suspicion was confirmed by comments from the one participant who had enrolled and engaged in the courses as
an individual and had not made many new friends through her course at Clarendon –
maybe as a consequence her attitude to the course and the people on it was quite
different, and more negative.

One retired woman said that she felt that the courses, and the benefits she had
derived, ‘had changed her life’. She had made new friends and done lots of
volunteering, she felt that she had learned to be more tolerant and listen to others
more. For her the benefits were not straight forward, initially she just wanted to get
out the house more. As a retired woman who had worked all her life she felt very
bored at home, but having lost her income she did not know how to spend all her
new free time. She got involved in the Aspley Partnership and going to a Police
Meeting in the community, and started to get involved in doing courses, which led to
more volunteering and involvement in the school and community. She loved the fact
that she was able to get out of the house and then one thing led to another and she
could make new friends without it costing any money.

The Ambleside focus groups were a particularly interesting group in this way because
the location and the role the local primary played in people’s lives was highly
influential. The participants reported on how easy it was to mix with others from the
local community and that they are more likely to make friends since they have things
in common and a common shared meeting place, which seemed important in
building relationships. The issue of childcare is also alleviated, as the courses take
place in school time. It appeared to us that participants were reporting benefits which
grew like a tree with many branches, when one is affected by one thing it grows out
and affects other parts of your life and gets you more involved in the community. It
also seems to make people want to contribute to the community and “give
something back”, for example with the volunteering.

The courses people followed seemed to play a role of building up the community
resources and were able to encourage parents to become more involved in school
and able to help their children with homework, and enable people to overcome labels
of being just someone who is “going nowhere” or “just a baby machine”.

Many of the participants did not pay for the courses, being on income support or
retired, and they want to find ways of contributing to society and even if they are not
entering the job market, they can still be an important part of something, through the
school or voluntary organisations – as one parent put it:

‘I think the community has really helped me much more than I help them,
but I do as much as I can.’

What is clear here, is the potential for developing tighter and more positive social
cohesion, particularly by using the school as a setting for adult learning, the benefits
come through on a number of levels and social networks have the opportunity to
grow stronger, as people’s lives intersect in a number of ways.
3.9.3 Benefits to children and schools

Many participants felt that doing these courses had been beneficial to their children (or even grandchildren), as they were able to help with homework, particularly those four women we interviewed who had followed the courses on ‘Keeping up with the kids’. Many also felt that doing first aid courses had benefited their children because they felt able to act with confidence when their children hurt themselves.

It seems that having courses, run at the local school, has many layers of benefits. Parents were more willing to get involved in their child’s education when they understood more about learning and about what their children were doing at school; they were no longer afraid of the school and the process of learning. Even those participants in the Ambleside AMBER focus group who had a bad experience at school themselves were able to see it in a different light after doing courses in the primary school environment. It is also very convenient for parents with families to undertake the courses, as they are done in school time.

The indirect benefit to the participants’ children’s school in general was also significant. Even if participants do not want to get back into education in a longer term sense, after doing a course they are more likely to come to parents evening as they do not see school as threatening and they are more prepared to get involved. Therefore, more parents subsequently volunteer to help at school, listening to readers for example, and after school clubs. This helps to create a tighter knit community.

3.9.4 Employability and financial benefits

‘I feel more positive now and get more job satisfaction because I can do the job better. Oh, I also got a pay rise.’

Some of the women talked about using what they had learned in the future. One participant said that she may add a Business Course to her hairdressing and beauty courses and another two participants said that they would like to use their confidence and experience from volunteering to work as a play worker in the future.

‘I don’t shy away from helping others now.’

‘I did a hairdressing course. It helped me to make more money but also helped other people to change their image and hairstyle. My 15 year old daughter sees me working from home and finds it inspirational. She is going to learn to do toes and nails.’

‘I am quite a shy person with being on my own I did at times feel a little self-conscious and didn’t join in the discussions but as I got to know the other students I became more confident. I was the only person who came on their own, all others came in pairs. But after a few weeks we all became very friendly and helped each other. We did go for a few meals at the end of the course.’
‘I am a more confident person both at work and at home. I now confidently meet new people without any worry. I will try new things. I now have self-worth before doing the course I had nothing to do as I didn’t work.’

‘I originally did the course out of boredom but it progressed to finding work so I am financially better off.’

There were many positives taken from attendance at the variety of courses offered. Phrases such as ‘community spirit’; ‘group cohesion’; ‘meeting new people’; ‘an eclectic mix of different people’; ‘something different – out of the ordinary’ were all used by the interviewees. Courses varied from wine-tasting (bought as a birthday present by a loving son – who also attended) to anatomy and physiology with ICT somewhere in the middle.

One woman who had done an ICT course felt:

‘It was good not to have to rely on the kids. I have more confidence now – and new toys. Internet, email, eBay. I’d be lost without it now.’

‘Yes my kids can’t get away with not doing their homework now as I’ve learned what they should be doing!’

The course had been directly useful for work for one of the Ambleside group, as she was able to use the things she had learned to write letters and design posters within her work.

One participant had benefited in perhaps the most conventional way, using it to advance her career, she now worked in the summer doing hair for weddings as well as working from home doing the hair of friends and relatives, although it was still not her main job this was something she aspired to. She said that she had wanted her own career and to make herself a better person. She enjoyed doing the key skills as part of her course and liked the variety on offer. Studying key skills had also helped her to be more involved with her children’s homework, and she said that seeing her working from home had also been a source of inspiration to her 15 year old daughter.

One particular interviewee stood out from the rest as, at the time of attending the courses, was dealing with her husband dying from a muscle-wasting disease. She also subsequently discovered that her children had the same disease and their lives will therefore be shortened. She decided to attend the courses in order to make her husband’s, her own and her children’s lives as good as they could possibly be in the time they have left. She attended the following courses: Anatomy and Physiology Diploma B.S.Y.; Beauty Therapy NVQ Level 1-2; Holistic Therapy NVQ level 3 Diploma
She attended these courses as she wanted to start her own business and earn lots of money, as mentioned, to make her family’s lives better. She now:

‘Earns more in an hour waxing and massaging than in a day working at school as a Teaching Assistant. These courses literally changed my life for the better and helped me to come to terms with the trauma in my life.’

This demonstrates one key issue - the complexity in many people's lives and the intricate way in which benefits work. Many of the people we encountered were living particularly difficult lives in disadvantaged communities and needed a leg up onto the ladder that might eventually lead to employment and improved prosperity. The experience of the courses they attended although, or maybe expressly because, they were not directly vocational had significant benefit which would lead onto bigger and better things.

3.9.5 Overview

There is certainly a range of very positive feeling about these courses, for a variety of reasons, for a variety of people. Furthermore in terms of location, many of the participants would not have been able to access the courses if they had had to travel into the City. This locality then had additional community benefits being in the local community and making social bonds and creating networks:

‘I’d recommend doing one of these courses to anybody, you always get something out of it and it’s such as boost to your confidence, and you can do anything because you’ll always benefit eventually somehow.’

A participant who did a course in Forensic Science articulated the gains in the following, quite philosophical way.

‘They were simple things really – in life always look at the bigger picture. I feel I can achieve things now. Want to go on to do a biology course.’

This statement suggests the course not only taught about forensics but had broader applicability.

Overall we received a very positive response from participants about their experiences, and, whilst we would not want to over-generalise from the results we obtained from our data, it is clear there are some very encouraging themes.
4. Conclusions and Recommendations

This project sought to provide a window into the principles behind the current political priorities being engineered by the government with a view to raising questions and providing evidence for a more considered leadership strategy. Initially the project was based around three key research questions:

- What are the patterns of progression from community programmes?
- How does a culture of learning spread, building ‘social capital’, through the extended family and social networks, or what barriers might exist to hinder this?
- What are the influences and impacts on the adult learner engaging in community programmes, including cross-social class influences?

In this section we look at these and draw conclusions from our data.

4.1 Patterns of Progression

It was rather difficult to identify clear and planned progression for many students, or any overall implications, but there did seem to be two main routes for progression.

First, some learners had clear and planned instrumental goals where they could see and expected direct benefits - usually improved job prospects. These were individuals who had followed courses which lead to job promotion of increased remuneration. Yet some had achieved a greater sense of worth through greater job satisfaction from doing their existing job in a way that made them feel more valued and effective. ICT seemed to be a key subject in point here. Yet given the preponderance of female learners, there was also evidence of people moving into working and helping out at school – both in a formal capacity (as a teaching assistant for example) or in an informal capacity helping out.

A second route was more informal – through the development of confidence which allowed individuals to seek employment in areas not at all related to the courses followed. Such individuals might have not had clear goals associated with their learning but might have had a desire to do something for themselves or a wish to feel able to support their children’s or grandchildren’s school work.
4.2 Culture of Learning

It was encouraging to see how many people talked of personal development over time in the interviews. In many cases – usually woman it seemed - also reflected on and identified positive changes in themselves and in other around them. This resulted in feelings of “I can do” and greater awareness of enhanced self-confidence. This mirrors Gallacher et al.’s findings:

‘A key idea in the development of learning careers is that people’s self-perception and commitment to the role of a learner can and does change over time. This process often involves changes in social identities. Also associated with these changes in many cases is the development of growing self-confidence, and a belief in their capacity, not just to successfully complete a course of study that they had previously never considered, but also to engage in a wider range of activities. In all of these cases, we can see evidence of reconstruction of social identities in which formal engagement in learning has a central role that most of these people would not have considered an option in the past.’ (2002, p. 505)

People we interviewed in some areas had had negative experiences with education and therefore had ‘fragile learner identities’ (Gallacher et al., 2002, p 506). These seemed to fit in with the idea of ‘spiky profile’ of adult learning (Hamilton et al., 2000). This is a perspective that sees adult learning as non-uniform and uneven with strengths in some conceptual areas and weaknesses in others. Hamilton et al. argue against the belief that this unevenness is some ‘incoherent aberration’, rather:

‘The uneven literacies of adult learners are the norm and need to be built into the heart of any adult curriculum.’ (Hamilton, 2000)

‘Personal factors and social relationships—including status passages through which people pass—play a significant role. In individual biographies, critical incidents such as divorce or bereavement can be time for reflection and an engagement with learning.’ (Gallacher et al., 2002, p. 507)

This culture of learning was very closely entwined with personal self-image which we discuss in the next section.

4.3 Influences and Impacts

We did find considerable benefits through the influences on self-perception and self image. Whilst some recognised they felt able to undertaken some things they had learned directly from the course, perhaps more significant were the people who just felt better about themselves just through engaging with learning and interacting with others – as Gallacher et al. found:

‘The complex ways in which people become engaged with certain activities, and their perception of themselves can change as a consequence of interaction with others.’ (2006, p. 8)
Our evidence in Nottingham again mirrors work undertaken by Gallacher et al. – that individuals change their self-perception through active engagement in community learning, which in turn has indirect benefits:

‘However once learners become involved […] there was evidence for the majority of increasing engagement with learning, and of growing confidence in their ability as learners. Their perception of themselves changed, and many began to develop an identity as a successful learner.’

(Gallacher et al., 2002, p. 8)

Our data bought us into contact with a range of people who had had very different educational trajectories yet we were able to identify widespread benefits within these diverse groups.

4.4 Looking Ahead

In this section we look at some possible implications of this study and in particular at how the findings might be helpfully exploited. We do not feel however that making the most of the opportunities is only the responsibility of New College Nottingham. The local authority and other service providers, local agencies and voluntary bodies can also significantly contribute to taking advantage of the benefits we have identified locally. Yet New College Nottingham does have a role to play as a catalyst here – and as an educational institution with a strong sense of community mission.

4.4.1 Exploiting the benefits

It is clear there are widespread personal and community benefits from engaging in the type of community education programmes we investigated, yet in some cases these happened almost incidentally in the sense that they produced unexpected and unplanned personal benefits. We cannot help but feel there would be much to gain by more directly intervening and capturing these benefits locally. Some of this might be through the College itself, but more might be through the community services – through the Local Authority and the voluntary sector. There is a need to more actively communicate the many positive images that are everywhere within this sector and some agency might need to take this on. There are stories that need to be told and shared; there are role models that need to influence others.

However, more importantly there is an underlying policy issue here which begs exploration. As reported in the Times Education Supplement (TES, 2008) the numbers of adults undertaking courses has reduced – possibly by as much as 12.7% - representing “a shift to longer courses designed to improve the skills of workers” (TES, 2008). In the TES (2008) Alan Tucket, Director of the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) said “Adult education of all sorts has a benefit for people’s lives” something which our research has highlighted. Yet, the present government’s priorities appear to focus on relatively immediate economic benefits for the workforce, viewing this as the route to economic development. What this position fails to value is the need to establish the necessary first steps for those particularly disadvantaged individuals and communities who are so far away from engagement in
stable employment that they need more deep seated support. It would be unfortunate if a government committed to social inclusion, failed to prioritize those measures which would particularly benefit the most socially disadvantaged. We are talking here about the benefits we discussed of increased self-confidence, enhanced social and personal relationships and benefits to children and schools, all of which are precursors to the gradual step up a ladder to eventful employment and are also all foundations of greater social cohesion.

4.4.2 Exploiting the school as a focus for community development

We were lucky to have been invited to work with Ambleside Primary School AMBER Project as a site for the provision of adult education. This provided us with a viewpoint we might otherwise have overlooked – and that is the very strong role of a local community site in the development of a local community as well as enhancing personal skills. A local primary school in particular is a very central part of adults’ lives – especially if they have children and grandchildren who attend. Not only can it provide a geographical focus but it can also provide a place for participation; a place to give something back and to feel valued. Having the opportunity for learning close to home was invaluable in some cases, where the participants clearly stated that they would not have been able to access courses had they not been provided in the local school. The additional benefit is that, since they are then more engaged in school, they have a more positive attitude to learning, which is in turn passed onto their children. We feel this aspect of community adult education might be exploited more fully.

We were then surprised to find that the AMBER Project is struggling for survival at the moment particularly over funding the posts to sustain the project. Whilst the project almost ended at 31st March 2008 it appears to have a temporary extension to the end of July 2008. Our findings suggested there were considerable benefits to such a project – at the very least in this one site and it would be a great shame and a considerable loss to the community if all of the opportunities, the many layers of learning and the expertise associated with the project were to be lost to the City of Nottingham.
5. Future Research

There are several projects which we feel would be worthy of consideration and which have arisen as important questions which we were unable to explore because of the scope of this project. We would welcome the opportunity to develop ways of working on these projects were the resources and facilities available. It may be of course that these are good opportunities for the University and the college to work more closely together in the future.

5.1 Adult Community Learning and the Local Asian Community

The difficulties we faced in exploring issues within the local Asian and minority communities means we were not able to fully understand some of the issues, the barriers or the possibilities. Yet we are clear – there is much to find out – and much to do with local minority communities.

5.2 A Longitudinal Study of Adult Learners

Whilst this was an exciting project to undertake, it was also frustrating because we felt there was much more to find out, but in addition we wanted to know how the stories developed. We uncovered some very encouraging stories demonstrating strong determination to do something different. Yet the limitations of this project meant we were not around to see these stories unfold.

We feel there is much to learn here be looking in detail and the development of life changes and the development of community resources, through adult community education.

5.3 The Effects of Adult Engagement in Learning on Children

We found several examples where engaging in adult community learning was claimed to benefit young people. Naturally children are a major focus for parents, and grandparents and we have seen they stand to benefit from educational opportunities offered to their family members. Again, this is an under-researched area and we need to understand how the links might be made more effective.

5.4 Finally...

This was a time and opportunity limited project which indicated considerable potential for much further work. We hope this report can contribute to a greater understanding of local communities and to how these might be developed and strengthened. As we said in the introduction, we welcomed the opportunity to work with new College Nottingham and with the local communities in Aspley, Clifton and Forest Fields. We hope this is the beginning, not the end of such involvement.
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- Emma Derbyshire, AMBER worker Ambleside School
7. References


Learning and Skills Council (LSC) (2007) Further Education, Work-Based Learning, Train to Gain and Adult and Community Learning - Learner Numbers in England: 2006/07, London, Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS)


Appendices

Appendix 1 – Interview Schedule

Instructions to interviewer
This is a fairly structured interview and we are interested in how the interviewee positions themselves and what benefits they see in engaging in adult courses both in direct and indirect ways. We are also looking for any barriers. Interviews should be recorded where interviewees give permission, but here notes should be taken to allow us to ascertain the key issues. Feel free to add contextual notes, field notes etc. in the left hand columns but information form interviewees in the right hand columns.

Thanks for agreeing to take part in this project which is looking at community learning in Nottingham. These are local courses offered both by local colleges and by others. We want to look at the impact of these courses on those people taking part, but also on their family and the wider community. We have been told by New College that you have undertaken a course locally either in 2004, 2005, 2006 or 2007. We are interested in why you went on the course, what you got out of it, what happened as a result.

The purpose is to find ways of helping more people benefit from local opportunities. We will ask you a few questions – but feel free to add other things you think are important. All information will be confidential and you will in no way be identified. You can withdraw your permission to take part at any time. Are you happy to be recorded? No one else will hear this and it is used only to help us remember what you said.

1. Family and personal history

Develop a story of the educational and family history of the learner.

I want to start by asking you a few questions about yourself and your history.

1.1 Have you always lived here? Where did you live before?
   Why did you come here?

1.2 Do you have close family that lives here?

2. Views of locality and place

How does the learner see their locality as a place to live? How is it described and how do they feel within it.

I want now to ask you now some questions about Aspley / Forest Fields / Clifton

2.1 What is it like here?

2.2 Do you feel happy here? Do you feel safe here?
2.3 Would you move if you had the chance?

2.4 What do you think outsiders think of it here?

3. Views of community

How does the learner view the notion of community as a space and a set of relations? Is community important? How is it used?

Can we talk now about the people and the community around here?

3.1 What are the people like round here?

3.2 Do you have many friends here? Do you have family here?

3.3 Do you belong to any groups, clubs? Are there local activities around here?

3.4 Do you take part in local activities? Do you get involved in things further out?

4. Understanding of trajectory

How does the learner describe and understand their own educational trajectory

Can we talk about your own education and how you now see it?

4.1 Where did you go to school? How did you do?

4.2 Can you tell me how you did at school, and what you did after?
   Do you feel successful?

4.3 Why do you think school/college went the way it did for you?

5. Exploring the context of leaning

How did the learner come to consider and take up the course? What decision led to the specific course and location? What barriers existed to be overcome?

Can we talk now about the course you took?

5.1 What was it you did? Where and when?

5.2 Why did you do that particular course?

5.3 Did you do it on your own or with a friend or relative?

5.4 Was it easy to get on the course?

5.5 How did you fund it?

5.6 Was it easy following and finishing?

5.7 What was the group like? Did you get on, enjoy their company, mix outside sessions?
6. Exploring the learning itself


Can we talk now about what it was like for you?

6.1 How did you feel about the sessions?

6.2 What sorts of things did you do?

6.3 How did you feel about your input, progress?

6.4 How did you get on with the tutors?

6.5 How did you get on with other students?

6.6 Was there anything you felt uncomfortable about?

7. Exploring the impact of learning

What has happened since the course finished? Employment changes? Does the learner feel different? New friends, new activities? Financial situation? Children – relationship to school

Can we talk now about the impact of the course – what happened as a result of you doing it?

7.1 Since it finished – have you used what you learned?

7.2 Has there been any way it has helped with your work?

7.3 How has it helped you as a person?

7.4 Has it helped financially in any way?

7.5 Have there been any ways your children have benefitted?
   What about their school – any impact?

7.6 Did you meet any new people? Were they different to you?
   Do you still see them?

7.7 How has it changed you and what you do?

7.8 Would you do any more courses? What? Why?
8. Barriers to learning

What barriers were there and how were these overcome? Social? Health? Financial? Family?

I am interested in any problems or barriers you had to face.

8.1 Did your family support you? Was it difficult finding the time?

8.2 Was it easy paying for the course or getting support?

8.2 Did you have any health problems to overcome? Were these supported by the course organisation?

8.3 Are these health problems likely to be responsible for difficulties getting a job?

8.4 Did anything else stand in your way?

9. Anything else

9.1 Is there anything else you want to tell us?

9.2 Would you be happy for us to contact you again about this project in the future?

Thanks a lot for your time – it will be really interesting. Here are my contact details – feel free to get in touch if you need to. If you think someone else might want to talk to us, ask them to contact me.
Appendix 2 – Letter to Prospective Participants

<<Name and address>>

Dear <<firstname>>,

We are undertaking some research into the benefits of adult education courses on behalf of New College Nottingham.

I am writing to you because New College has told us that sometime recently (between 2005 and 2007) you have undertaken one or more of their courses.

We are hoping to talk to around 50 people in Nottingham about their experiences on these courses and what benefits people felt that had gained.

You are one of the people who have been selected to be approached for permission to hold an interview and we would really appreciate it if you could spare us some of your time. We have used a wide range of criteria to select people and want to get as good a cross section as we can.

It is people such as you who hold the key to helping us understand how these courses help local communities.

The interview will last around 40-60 minutes and will be at a time and place of your choosing. One of the research team – <<Samina Din>> - will ring you shortly to set this up.

We will ask you about the courses you took and how you felt about them. Then we would be interested to find out how these courses might have benefitted you personally.

You are of course free not to take part – but of course we hope you will! Also you are free to withdraw at any time. However, you are only being asked to take part in the one interview.

I hope this gives you enough information, but if you need more please do not hesitate to contact me by phone or email (see above for details)

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Peter Gates
Centre for Research into Equity and Diversity.
Appendix 3 – Ethics: Participant Information Sheet

Adult Community Learning in Nottingham

This research project has been established by New College Nottingham to look into the benefits of adult community learning in some areas of the City of Nottingham. This project will focus on community learning courses, provided by local colleges, to assess the impact of these programmes, focusing on the impact for those individuals taking part, but also on their family and wider community. In particular we will be looking at the direct and indirect benefits of engaging on adult community programmes.

Interviews will include a range of topics, including whether interviewees had subsequently done other courses, had progressed at work, had moved into work (paid or voluntary), had helped them change job; whether the course had helped them influence others (e.g. family, friend) to become interested in and value learning; and whether the course had allowed them to meet others interested in learning and/or broaden their social network and meet people who had influenced their views on learning and career development.

- I have read the above information on the research project. I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it and agree to take part.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the project at any stage.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal information will remain confidential.
- I understand that I will be recorded during the interview. [Delete if the interview will not be taped]
- I understand that data will be securely stored but at the University on one computer and will only be accessible by members of the project team for the purposes of this project.

I understand that I may contact the researchers if I require further information about the project, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Coordinator of the School of Education, University of Nottingham, if I wish to make a complaint relating to my involvement in the research. (Tel: 0115 951 4417, or email to andy.hobson@nottingham.ac.uk, or write to the above address)

Signed ................................................................. (Research participant)

Print name .......................................................... Date ......................................

One copy should be given to the participant and one copy should be retained by the research team.
Appendix 4 – Ethics: Participant Continuation Agreement

Participant Continued Involvement Agreement

This research project has been established by New College Nottingham to look into the benefits of adult community learning in some areas of the City of Nottingham. This project will focus on community learning courses, provided by local colleges, to assess the impact of these programmes, focusing on the impact for those individuals taking part, but also on their family and wider community. In particular we will be looking at the direct and indirect benefits of engaging on adult community programmes.

Initial interviews will include a range of topics, including whether interviewees had subsequently done other courses, had progressed at work, had moved into work (paid or voluntary), had helped them change job; whether the course had helped them influence others (e.g. family, friend) to become interested in and value learning; and whether the course had allowed them to meet others interested in learning and/or broaden their social network and meet people who had influenced their views on learning and career development.

Follow up interviews or phone calls will continue to look at some of the topics covered in the first interview to explore subsequent progress and any changes that may have taken place.

I have been interviewed for the above project and I am happy to be contacted again in the future regarding this project. Again I understand that I may withdraw at any time.

Signed ................................................................. (Research participant)

Print name ................................................ Date ...........................................

Address ..............................................................................................................

Home Phone ........................................ Mobile phone ...................................

Email: ..............................................................................................................

One copy should be given to the participant and one copy should be retained by the research team.
Appendix 5 – The AMBER Project

Specifically, the AMBER Project (Adult Minorities Breaking Educational Restrictions) attempts to:

- support parents as partners in learning – helping parents to engage with their child’s school and to understand homework and the curriculum;
- influence the culture of the school – supporting schools to be more welcoming to parents and to help broker good relations between the school and parents;
- support parents, carers and families – providing parents with the opportunities for social networking, access to training courses and signposting to relevant public and voluntary and community services. (see Page, Whitting and Mclean, 2007, p. 18)

Funding for the Amber Project was initially provided by the local Learning and Skills Council, the European Social Fund, New College Nottingham and the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU). Currently, the project is administered from New College Nottingham and receives direct financial support solely from the NRU. (Page, et al., p. 18)

The AMBER project, which for 12 years been strengthening and developing links between homes, schools and communities in the Greater Nottingham area, has a local reputation for excellence as is recognised by its nomination for a European award for parent involvement at the European Parents’ Association in 2004. The project has also hosted visitors from other local authorities across England and even from international visitors interested in learning more about the project.

New College Nottingham has supported its growth and development during that time and has been its host institution. The activities of the AMBER Project connect it currently with several interlocking policy areas:

- **Social inclusion and Integrated children’s services**: improving attendance; improving the transition from pre-school to primary/primary to secondary; brokerage between parents and schools
- **Adult learning, skills and employment**: learning promotion and learning champions
- **Extended schools**: developing family learning in literacy and numeracy
- ** Provision for BME communities**: improving service management improving inter-agency working.
Since 1996, the AMBER Project has sought to engage parents in Nottingham’s most disadvantaged areas in their children’s education. In particular, it has worked to develop close working relationships between Black and Minority Ethnic communities and their schools, with a focus on raising achievement.

The success of AMBER locally, regionally, nationally and internationally is due to the structure of the staff team, who represent and support the culturally and socially diverse communities in the City. It is the policy of the Project to recruit local people to Parental Involvement Coordinator posts, which ensures that it is rooted in the communities it seeks to serve. These Parental Involvement Coordinators act as community Learning and Employment Champions. In the last year alone – over 1,000 parents attended training programmes and over 10,000 participated in an event based at their child’s school. The Parental Involvement Coordinators have also worked with colleagues to offer innovative family learning programmes around the themes of arts, maths and sports, where children and parents learned together. Through their work they have not only contributed to a number of regeneration strategies and promoted social inclusion, but also to the raising of attainment of both adults and children. AMBER has engaged with and supported local learning partnerships and has a strong local role in brokering links between local services, parents and the community.

AMBER addresses the needs and concerns of parents on a number of levels and works through personal contact with parents on a daily basis, involving parents in the life of the school, changing the culture of schools to make them more welcoming and by creating learning communities across the City. The AMBER Project works to break down barriers to participation and enables parents to become active partners in the education process.
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Many of the documents in this series are prepublication/preprint articles, which may subsequently appear (part or whole) in peer reviewed journals and books. In most cases they are draft documents, the purpose of which is to foster discussion and debate, prior to publication elsewhere, whilst ideas are still fresh. Further information about the research programme and other papers in this series can also be found at the following websites:
http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk or
http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/cel/

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Further Information and Contact Details
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If you would like to receive further information on the Research Programme, please contact:
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Further information is also available at:
http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk
http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/cel/
Leadership in Adult Community Education: Political Decisions and the Development of Social Capital in Nottingham

Peter Gates
With Eleanor Brown, Christopher Clegg and Samina Din