



University of Brighton

Faculty of Health

School of Applied Social Science

Health and Social Policy Research Centre

Learners' Journeys

Gateway to Learning
Research Project

Naomi Smith

March 2007

LEARNERS' JOURNEYS

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Funded by the Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP)





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FOREWORD

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Acknowledgements and thanks

The researcher would like to acknowledge the work of Jane Ward and Judith Edwards on Learners' Journeys.

The researcher would like to thank the following people;

Colleagues within the Health and Social Policy Research Centre for their support and for input on narrative research techniques.

Helen Thomas and the staff of the Gateway to Learning Team for their support with the project and for helping recruit and support the learners involved.

All the staff at the Whitehawk Inn for their interest and in making the researcher feel so welcome.

Finally the researcher would like to thank the eight learners who took part in the research for sharing their lives and experience. Their interest in their own process and their willingness to reflect on some very difficult issues and experiences has added enormously to the quality of the project and to the researcher's own learning journey.

The research project was made possible with funding from the Community University Partnership Project at the University of Brighton.

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PART ONE – Introduction, aims, methodology and structure

1.1 Introduction

This report covers the process and findings of the Gateway to Learning Research Project on Learners' Journeys undertaken by Naomi Smith, Research Officer at the Health and Social Policy Research Centre at the University of Brighton. The research project was funded through the Community University Partnership Programme and was carried out between October 2006 and February 2007.

1.2 Background to the research

The Gateway to Learning Project provides support for adult learning in marginalised or hard to reach communities of learners. The project is based at the Whitehawk Inn in East Brighton and has developed a relationship of trust with local people and community gatekeepers. The project originally requested funding for a larger piece of research exploring barriers to learning for adult learners in East Brighton looking to develop understanding and disseminate good practice. A reduction in the funds available necessitated a revision of the original proposal. A key part of the original proposal had been to undertake qualitative research into the learning journeys of learners at the Gateway to Learning Project, in particular adults (over 25) facing significant barriers to participating in learning. The Gateway to Learning Project wanted the research to be undertaken in a way that would enable the learners to have an opportunity to reflect on their journeys and in addition wished to be able to have some case studies from the research that could be used as evidence of the barriers learners had and the work of the Gateway to Learning model in helping address them.

1.3 The Whitehawk Inn

The research was undertaken at the Whitehawk Inn, a community based learning centre in the Whitehawk area of East Brighton which provides a wide variety of learning support and opportunities. Set up in 1997 the centre originally offered learning and development opportunities based around IT. In 2001 success in accessing funding from EB4U (New Deal for Communities) and other capital funding from government initiatives enabled the premises to be renovated and developed extending their capacity as a community learning centre. In 2004, in response to funding changes the centre reorganised its way of providing courses and ceasing to be a direct provider developed contracts with key adult education providers in the area. The centre developed its range of courses to include 'Skills for Life', personal development, creative and health focused courses as well as continuing to provide a range of courses around computer and administration skills. At the same time the Gateway to Learning Team was established with funding from EB4U and Equal (European funding). The Gateway to Learning

Team interact with all learners who come to the Whitehawk Inn to help them choose appropriate courses and learning pathways and to support them in applications for ongoing study and development. They also outreach within the community to encourage and support the take up of learning opportunities in and connected with the Whitehawk Inn.

1.4 Aims of the research

The research had three main aims as follows;

- To work with a small group of learners from the Whitehawk Inn to record their journeys with learning and to produce a set of case studies.
- To work with the learners in a way that would enable them to reflect on their own learning.
- To consider the role and impact of the Gateway to Learning Project on their journeys.

1.5 Methodology

In designing the methodology for the research the researcher was informed by the work of Jane Ward and Judith Edwards on Learners' Journeys. The report of their research on "Learning journeys: learners' voices" published by the Learning and Skills Development Agency in 2002 provided the inspiration and the practical method for working with learners. In addition the researcher considered the results of a follow up to that piece of research undertaken by the Learning and Skills Research Network for the North East in conjunction with the Universities of Sunderland and Northumbria.

Both these pieces of research were considering achievement in basic skills and were looking at how learners' voices could be better heard in the evaluation of their progress in learning. What interested this researcher was the use of the metaphor of the "learning journey" as designed by Jane Ward as a research tool. This seemed to enable learners to reflect on issues like progress, barriers, pace and learning gain in a different way and gave them a voice in the assessment of their own learning process. In designing this research project the researcher therefore incorporated the metaphor of the "learning journey" into working with the learner group at the Whitehawk Inn.

The substantive part of the research was the qualitative work on a one to one basis with each learner looking at their individual journey with learning. This work involved a first semi-structured interview which was fully transcribed and then reflected back to each learner in a further one to one session. Out of this second session the key things to go into the case study were agreed and the case study was then written by the researcher. All the case studies were then given to the

learners for their comment and for their agreement for them to be used.

Around that qualitative work were two group sessions. The first session was based on the "learning journey" metaphor. The session opened with a discussion about journeys and travelling and how that could be applied to learning. The group discussed what that brought to their minds about their learning. Each individual was then asked to draw their journey with learning. These drawings were copied by the researcher and in the individual interviews provided a different representation of each learner's journey. This helped broaden the interview discussion as well as giving some linear information on the shape of the learners' lives. These drawings were personal to the learners and therefore are not included with this report.

Once the interviews had been concluded and all the case studies agreed there was a final session with most of the group. The aim of this was to check back on some of the findings from the research about the Gateway to Learning Project and the Whitehawk Inn, and to provide an opportunity to reflect on how they had found being involved in the research project.

1.6 Sample selection

The researcher worked with the Gateway to Learning Team to select potential learners who would be approached to participate in the research. It was clear with limited funding that a maximum of ten learners could be interviewed for the research. The following were taken into account when selecting the group to be approached:

- Reflecting the overall learner demography – gender, age, ethnicity, disability
- Balancing the group between those supported through EB4U funding and those through Equal funding
- Involving learners with a current or very recent connection to the centre who had undertaken at least one course
- Including a learner about to enter, or who had moved on to, further or higher education
- Including learners with children or other caring responsibilities
- Ensuring that learners felt able to commit to the whole process and to see it through

Seventeen learners were identified and given a priority order to try and ensure a balance of the issues above. They were then approached by the Gateway to Learning staff with written information about the project provided by the researcher and asked if they would like to participate. Nine learners agreed to be part of the research although one had to withdraw almost immediately for personal reasons so the final sample was eight learners.

All eight learners were given a full explanation of what the research would involve and were asked to sign a consent form before starting the project. The Gateway to Learning staff assisted in making sure that learners understood what was involved and felt comfortable with the research. All the sessions; both group and interviews, were carried out at the Whitehawk Inn in familiar surroundings for learners and where staff were available to support if necessary.

1.7 Timeline

The funding for the research was agreed in July 2006 but the project was late starting. This was largely to do with the holiday time of the year and the work surrounding enrolment time at the Whitehawk Inn that kept the Gateway to Learning staff occupied until mid September.

The first group sessions took place in October 2006, the first interviews took place in October and November 2006 and the follow up interviews between November 2006 and January 2007. The final session was held at the end of January 2007 and the final case study agreed at the beginning of February 2007.

1.8 Issues arising from the methodology and the learner group

A number of issues arose from the methodology and from the learner group that have meant that the research has been more complex and slower to undertake than had been envisaged by the researcher.

Firstly it was not possible to bring the whole group together for the first session because of their various commitments. The first session was therefore run three times with two groups and finally with one individual. The one to one interviews had to be rescheduled a number of times due to illness and other issues. Not everyone could make the final session so part of that session needed to be repeated for those who couldn't make it.

The "learning journey" session and the research interviews both prompted learners to speak about their life journeys in some detail and the age of the group and the life events involved meant that the interviews in particular were more extensive both in time and content than had originally been envisaged.

The learner group had within it a number of people for whom serious mental health conditions, addictions and traumatic experiences had been or were still very much part of their lives. This was of concern to the researcher who was mindful of the need to ensure that firstly the learners understood the consent process at every stage of the research and secondly that the research process or findings did not in any way increase the vulnerability of any of the learners. Two of the learners suffered periods of poor mental health during the research project but both were able to complete the process and it did not appear that being

involved in the research project had been negative for them.

In discussion with the learners the researcher agreed how best to anonymise their case studies. Limited personal details are therefore included and their own names have not been used.

1.9 Characteristics of the group

The group was very small and because it was selected may not be representative of adult learners as a whole. However it did represent learners at the Whitehawk Inn and as such is a valid group to draw some conclusions from for the purposes of this project.

The group contained six women and two men and the ages ranged from twenty eight to fifty seven. All the women had children but the men did not. Three of the women had children still at school and described themselves as single parents. Three of the women were working part time. Three of the group had current or recent mental health problems and three were ex drug or alcohol users. One of the group was an ex offender. All lived locally to the Whitehawk Inn.

The group were undertaking or had already completed a variety of courses at the Whitehawk Inn including IT courses, office skills and administration, art and other creative courses, personal development courses, health courses including reflexology and massage, belly dancing and creative writing. A number of them had also done or were doing courses in numeracy and literacy.

1.10 Reporting the research findings

The first group sessions were extremely useful both in starting a thinking and reflection process and in introducing and developing a level of trust between the researcher and the learners before the one to one interviews. The issues that came up in these sessions were echoed throughout the interviews and are therefore not reported separately.

The case studies in Part Three provide a summary of each of the learner's journeys. As already mentioned the nature of some of the difficulties experienced by the learners in their lives was significant and the case studies reflect what the learners wished to share of those. The learners did however all come to the research very prepared to share their lives and their experiences and were keen that their experience should help others to see what they could achieve and deal with. They agreed in addition to the case studies that their words could be used as anonymous quotations to illustrate some of the issues and themes that arose from the interviews.

The interview questions used by the researcher (see Appendix 1) were again based on the work done by Jane Ward. The questions looked at a number of

issues around the learning journey including previous experience of learning/studying, what triggered their desire to return to learning, how they came to be connected with the Gateway to Learning Project, what they had found out about how they learn best, what had been difficult and what they had succeeded with, whether there was something about the Gateway to Learning model that had made a difference and their aspirations for their learning in the future.

PART TWO - The Learners' Journeys

2.1 Early experience of learning

All of the group had issues with their experience of school. For some they had enjoyed school and been either high achievers or could easily cope with the learning. For others learning at school had been more difficult. A number of the group had felt isolated at school and experience of being bullied both by other students and by teachers had really impacted for at least two of them on their schooling and their confidence.

The style of teaching in schools had also made it difficult for some of the group as learners and not feeling able to ask or to make mistakes limited how much they learnt.

"I just didn't understand what they were saying and the teachers were nasty they just made you feel stupid".

For some the different styles of teaching in primary and secondary schools made a difference to their engagement and this was particularly noticeable where they had done well at primary school.

"I hated it I just found it boring....you know when they just teach you dates and things you have to memorise, memorise, memorise and everything that was full of life in my junior school just became sort of dead".

All the group left school aged between 14 and 16. For two of them their education was interrupted by personal events. One became pregnant at 15 and one left at 14 to become a carer for a sick parent. Both these learners, who had been doing well, felt they had lost out on their learning at this stage of their lives because of these events.

About half of the group left school with some qualifications although in most cases they did not feel these were very good. Three of the group left school with no qualifications although two of these had been expected to do well at school. Three of the group felt they left school with some level of literacy or numeracy needs.

There was an issue for at least three of the group of school not being the place for them to be as teenagers and they either became rebellious or withdrew. In all these cases they ceased to engage with learning at that stage although some of them had been very capable students.

"I didn't struggle with any of the subjects but I couldn't be bothered to do it. It didn't interest me while there was other things to do so where I could have done

probably quite well I just didn't really bother".

After leaving school two of them apprenticed to trades, one went on to college then to work, one became a parent, one a carer and the others went straight into work.

2.2 Why come back to learning at this stage?

There were three main reasons that drew the group back into learning at this stage of their lives. These were to learn new skills, to help them recover from illness or as a creative outlet. One learner was clear that their only reason had been to find a creative outlet, a couple were clear that their main reason had been about wanting to develop skills with a view to working. However for a number of the group their reasons were a combination of more than one of these.

"I think number one priority was to get myself right but what I am learning might help me to get a job in the future"

At least half of the group had struggled with mental health problems in their lives and for two of them their conditions were ones that would continue to be a factor in any choices they would make around learning and working. Another of the group had suffered severe anxiety and agoraphobia and was challenging that in returning to learning and studying.

It was also significant that for most of the group being at a time of change in their lives or wanting to change was also a driver. They were looking both for mental stimulation and to broaden the choices they had in life.

"I didn't have much of a social life and I could feel my brain turning to mush".

"I just wanted to get my life back, you know get my brain working, be someone else, be me I suppose".

Out of the group six had been coming to the Whitehawk Inn for less than two years and two of them between two and five years. For two learners their return to learning preceded them coming to the Whitehawk Inn although for both coming to the Whitehawk Inn had taken them in a different direction.

2.3 What made you come to the Whitehawk Inn/Gateway to Learning project and did you know what you wanted to learn about when you came here?

Three of the group came as a result of hearing about the centre through the community, two through family knowledge or connection, one through suggestion from a social worker and one through a tutor working at the centre.

Most of the group had a fairly good idea what they wanted to do. Three of the group came specifically to learn computer skills, two came to do specific painting or creative writing courses and one came wanting to do therapy courses. The other two came more open minded, one enrolled for therapy courses and one on self development courses. Both of these learners were actively seeking things to aid them in recovery.

2.4 What have you found out about how you learn best?

The group showed strong understanding of how they learnt best and for a number of them could relate this to why they might not have learnt as easily earlier in their lives. Keen to learn they all enjoyed being taught but most found that there were key things that made a difference to their capacity to learn and their enjoyment of the process:

- The size of the group they were in mattered and between twelve and fifteen seemed to be the ideal size for most. This enabled them to feel comfortable, to know everyone in the group and to be given enough attention by the tutor. The presence and support of volunteers in the classroom was also seen as extremely positive particularly where these volunteers were part of their peer group and had previously done the particular course.
- For some learners classroom teaching was the best way for them to learn and they wished to be actively taught and given direct personal attention from the tutors. This group found on line or self directed learning much more difficult and had even left courses where this was the main method of learning. Others in the group found they could learn both ways and particularly those who had come to computers older had found once they had mastered them that on line learning was a positive experience.
- Some of the group clearly recognised that how they had learnt best when they were younger had now changed. This was particularly the case where illness or distress had changed their capacity to concentrate and they recognised that they were getting more from being taught directly where they might have previously been more likely to read or learn on their own.

"I know that I would never have bothered to learn the computer on my own at home I couldn't pick up the book and read I'd forget it. Coming in here I've learnt nice and easily".

"So it is a problem for me I don't know how much of it is down to age, my short term memory doesn't seem to be as good as it was...I do find when the tutor is talking a lot I can't take it in".

- Having choice in what they were studying was a significant factor in their ability to keep concentration and interest. Choice was cited as one of the

most significant differences between learning now and their experience at school.

"I think cos I'm choosing the subject ...I don't think if someone had suddenly put me on a German course that I'd be sitting here saying yes it's really good".

- Being able to go at their own pace was important. A number of the group spoke about the pace of learning at school not being under their control and they had often felt overwhelmed.

"At school you have to do it, where here you have to do it but it's not that pressure. Here it's up to you, and you motivate yourself".

"(at school) you've got a subject and there's just stuff coming all the time and there's no room to breathe and if no one is helping you you just drown"

- There was also a significant issue about being able to make mistakes and ask as many questions as they needed.

"(here) it didn't matter how many times you asked something no one'd go oh for God's sake I've already told you this why don't you listen"

- For those living with long term health conditions they recognised the need for some flexibility about attendance. Being able to move in and out of the learning process without missing out or being excluded helped them to keep their learning going and provided them with a positive structure to return to after periods of ill health.
- Almost all the group recognised the importance for them of the tutor or teacher. They all learnt best if they were fully engaged by the tutor and this engagement was both subject based and personal. They needed to feel that the tutor knew what they were talking about and made their subject interesting. However it was equally important that they felt the tutor was interested in them personally and in their learning and understood what their learning issues were.
- Lack of confidence in themselves and their ability to learn was a major factor for most of the group and a number of them had found the reflective style of the personal development courses suited them even though it was not initially familiar to them.

"Yes its really interesting listening to other people and then you sort of realise that its actually you're not on your own that everyone's sort of in the same boat but just to varying degrees and you know some people can't get out of the situations they are in and some people can I mean I always thought I was

just trapped in my life really but it did sort of give me a way to sort of believe in myself again I suppose".

2.5 What has been difficult and what have you succeeded with?

There is significant writing about the barriers to learning for adult learners. These include the issues of cost, accessibility both geographic and timing and the problems of child care. All of the learners in this study are local to the Whitehawk Inn and it was a very convenient place for them to come to. The courses are time tabled to account for learners with school age children and there are several blocks of funding that reduce the cost significantly or allow courses to be free.

The things that have been especially difficult for this group in terms of their learning have been more around returning to learning as a process and their confidence in themselves and their ability to learn:

- For two of the group living with the unpredictable nature of their health conditions means that their learning can be interrupted and they do not always know when this is going to be. Living with the possibility of interruption means that they have to condense their learning into the periods when they are well and hope that will carry them through a period of illness.

"I'm going to have another (period of illness) maybe in twelve months and I'm trying to do in between as much as I can to try and prepare me to get over it faster".

- For a couple of the group an inability to concentrate means that they can be easily discouraged and feel that they want to give up.
- For a couple the issue of the amount of dedicated time they have to study around the demands of their family and other commitments is a strain particularly doing very full days at work or college.
- A number of the group have lacked confidence in their own ability to learn. This is either because it has been a long time since they have studied or for a significant group that they have grown up either thinking or being told that they could not learn or were no good.
- Being able to sit physically in a class for a period of time without being anxious has been hard for at least two of the group:

"One of my biggest worries was will I be able to sit here for a whole two hours and not leg it out the door I actually sat really close to the door so that if I got panicky I could just go".

Discussing what they felt they had succeeded with the group had lots of examples:

- For a number of the group the success was specific about a course they had achieved, having recognition for their ability or getting onto a further education course:

"Well this NVQ is my first qualification in the world".

"I'm just bathing in the glow of getting my first GCSE".

"English and the office skills and administration course".

"Essay writing to get 3 A minus marks after not having done anything for like.....you just can't imagine what a tremendous sense of achievement that has given me".

"I thought well if I go along if I get in I'll give it a go and if I don't get in I don't really mind but luckily I did get in and its really good".

- For a number of the group it was about having refound their confidence in themselves and their ability to learn and grow. They described it as follows;

"Well I've got a different attitude altogether about so many things I can socialise I can go out I could get on a bus now and disappear to Western Road if I felt like it no problems".

"Yeah I've succeeded in actually turning my life you know changing as a person ...I just think I've succeeded in actually reinventing myself.... a bit like Madonna really you know once that gets a bit boring just change into something else and yeah I feel that I've sort of become a person in my own right".

"You might not be able to do it now but you will be able to do it and at some point your brain will just go right just go and do it then and you'll do it".

- For those living with health issues their success was measured in how much more stable they were and how this was helping them to move forward. Some of this was about starting to have a more normal life, feeling part of something again, enjoying what they were doing and having a structure to work within.

"I'm not the only one with problems...we all have our individual stories but I do fit in I belong and that gives me a bit more stability"

"Although you are learning you're having a life as well it makes the whole learning thing fun really".

"I said to someone recently it doesn't matter what I'm learning in here as long as I'm in here that's a half of it and it's a joy and a pleasure and it's a bonus to pick up a qualification and to learn things".

2.6 How do you know what progress you have made?

Between them the group had gone on to do a large variety of courses and most could show progression through the courses they have done:

- Three could show significant progression in computer courses including achieving CLAIT and ECDL.
- Three could show progression in literacy and numeracy including for one learner achievement of a GCSE in maths.
- Four of the group had undertaken a variety of personal development courses including stress management, assertiveness, confidence building and life coaching. One of the group progressed to the New Horizons for Women course but has since withdrawn from it.
- Two of the group had taken courses in therapies including Reflexology, Aromatherapy, Indian Head Massage and Shiatsu and one in Women and Health. One of these learners had also completed an NVQ in Reflexology at City College. One had learnt belly dancing.
- Two of the learners have progressed on to further education. One to an Access course and one to an Art Foundation course, both at City College. The first of these two learners has now been offered a place at Brighton University to study Humanities.

The group were asked how they saw their progress and whether they had any process for reflecting on what they had learnt:

- A lot of the group kept their certificates from courses and looked at these as a reminder of what they had done. For some who had moved into and out of difficult times over the last few years these certificates stood as a reminder to them that they could progress and helped them to stay focused.
- For many of the group looking back and reflecting could be a negative experience reminding them of what they couldn't do or what they had lost rather than what progress they were making.
- Those who had done personal development courses had come across techniques for reflecting that had helped them to see their learning and their

progress differently.

- Applying for college and for jobs had been new to a number of the group but going through a detailed process of application forms and having to write personal statements had helped them to look at what they had done and to see how they had made progress.
- One of the learners described their progress very graphically in the following way;

"But this is like...fences and I feel I'm just progressing and getting over these fences one at a time I come away like quite buzzing".

- What many of them valued about the progress they had made was that it was honest. They felt they had been able to be honest about their doubts and their problems and had been accepted for themselves.

"It's all very honest and it's all very legitimate cos I don't feel any...I'm not doing anything that anybody would be ashamed of like with the drugs and everything you know".

- A couple of the learners expressed how they saw the progress they had made very clearly;

"...keep all my certificates and things and I look back and think what I was doing making a complete and utter mess of myself and my life and now look at me who would have thought you know like five years ago that I'd be working and you know quite happy with my life and things".

"I've succeeded in actually turning my life you know changing as a person I think I'm a lot more tolerant I mean there's lots of different parts of me I'm a lot calmer I don't worry so much about things and that sort of projects on to my children and to other people around me".

2.7 Has the Gateway to Learning model made a difference?

The role of the Gateway to Learning staff was understood by all of the learners and interaction with members of that team had had a significant impact on their process of learning and development.

It was clear however that the Gateway to Learning Team were seen very much as part of the strong overall ethos of the Whitehawk Inn and some of the learners spoke about the impact of other staff and of tutors in a similar way. Some of the learners had been at the Whitehawk Inn before the Gateway to Learning team was set up and had ongoing relationships with staff and volunteers from that time which had continued to be very supportive to them personally. It was also clear

that for some they had found a particular tutor who had engaged with them and inspired them and this had had a marked effect on their learning.

What seemed to be different about the Gateway to Learning staff role was their engaging with people as individuals and helping them to work out what they wanted to do and facilitating them doing it. This role took a number of forms which are indicated below with the learners' perceptions of what this had meant to them;

- One of the key things was that learners felt that they were seen as people first not just as learners and this made them feel differently valued.

"I think it's sort of they look after you as a whole person they don't just see you as another course walking through the door they see you as a person walking through the door who wants to do a course because they want to change something in their life".

- The learners felt that a relationship was developed with them and that the team understood and took on board the fact that their lives were not always straightforward.

"They build up a bit of a rapport they get to know you and I think you know the more you get to know someone the easier it is to actually speak to them and say look you know this is going on at the moment that's going on at the moment and so that's going to make it a little bit difficult and they sort of work around those things they actually see you as a whole person with all the other baggage rather than oh well we can't possibly budge on this because we've got spaces to fill its not about its not really about that its about helping the whole person".

- They also felt that the team found out what they were interested in and looked to develop for opportunities for them.

"Yes cos it was the Gateway that introduced me to the office skills and administration course they said they had heard I was interested in that kind of work can we put your name down and I said yes please. They had a thing in the park and I went down and that was when they said they were thinking of doing this course and would I be interested so I put my name down...".

- The learners felt very personally supported and encouraged by the team members they had had contact with and this was ongoing and often motivational. Remembering what was happening in their lives, checking up on them when they weren't around and listening to them all seemed to be key things that made this group of learners feel that they were heard and valued.

"Cos they're always there for your support if you need to talk to them you can

always talk to them and things like that".

"They were always so pleased for me anything I did and the day that I had the interview I came down here immediately after and everyone was sort of like fingers crossed and phone me and let me know as soon as you know anything you know they were actually interested".

"She has been invaluable she really has and even now she's really motivational about how it's going".

"I would never ever ever have even thought about going if it wasn't for the people here they've been really encouraging".

"Mainly the staff here are so friendly it makes you feel good yourself".

- A key element for a number of the learners was the practical support in getting started with their learning. In a couple of cases this was direct practical support either accompanying them to the first session of a course or looking things up for them rather than just leaving them to do it alone.

"He came to my first lesson at....I couldn't get on a bus and he suggested a taxi but I could get on the bus with him. I then took a cab until the end of the course and now I can get on buses"

"When she said to me there's the computer go and have a look go and look and I said I don't know how to she said come on so she sat and did it all and I said to her you're not really supposed to sit and do it and she said of course I'm not you're supposed to be doing it but I'll do it and I think she really understood how much I appreciated her making those first steps for me rather than if she had just sat me down at the screen and said go to the website and look I probably would have just sat there for a couple of minutes and then gone home but the fact that she was willing to sit in the chair and do it for me really did make a big difference. If I hadn't had her to support me I wouldn't have done it"

- Equally for a number of learners the relationships built up by Gateway to Learning staff were influential in helping them move on to work or further education.

One learner had not considered they were good enough to go on to further education:

"Well I mean you don't just come here and do a course you know they talk to you and then they encourage you to you know see if you want to go any further with it..... they're just really really encouraging I would never have thought about going and I would never have had the confidence to apply but they were there every step of the way that you wanted"

In the case of this learner they also felt that the relationships with the team had meant that when they were pushed outside their comfort zone to go for something higher they went and succeeded even though it felt uncomfortable.

"I was thinking well I only wanted to do this for a hobby and it's all got a bit out of hand but on reflection they did the right thing because they could probably tell that I would be able to do it but I was a bit negative so they kind of without saying you've got to do it they pushed me where I didn't want to go but in the end it worked"

Another learner had felt very accepted by one of the team and came to discuss what to include in applications;

"As I say I don't think I could have done it without her I don't think at that point I would have had the confidence....things like when I got the application stuff for City College and had to write a personal statement I came in and spoke to her about that and we ran through the sort of things that they would want to hear...."

- The final point about the difference the Gateway to Learning team had made was in the inclusive nature of the project and how the staff work. This had a particular impact for one learner.

"Yes because the boxes she was ticking would have been the very things that I would have seen as reasons not to do it ex offender gender identity all those things on income support I would have seen myself as being stigmatised by it rather than it being a good reason to do it so it's the opposite"

2.8 The Whitehawk Inn – so not like school!

At the beginning of the previous section the point was made that the Gateway to Learning Team were not seen as separate from the Whitehawk Inn itself although it was understood that they had a particular role. It was certainly clear that there was an ethos that permeates the whole centre and this was something all of the learners commented on and which seemed to have a major impact on how they felt about themselves and their learning. Some quotes on how the learners felt about the atmosphere and ethos of the Whitehawk Inn are included here to illustrate this.

"Basically you haven't got the rules what you had at school and things like that and the people the workers are brilliant"

"All the staff and everybody all the teachers all so friendly and it's a nice environment in here you walk in its so bright and colourful and welcoming when you first walk through the door".

"The whole demeanour of the people who work here basically they're just so nice and respectful you don't ever get a feeling that oh god here she comes again"

"Safety feeling like a safety net if you were to fall this place kind of catches you its like a life jacket I don't know how you can describe it". You don't have to be on a course you can come in for a coffee or come in for someone to natter away to to moan at you can even volunteer for work here if you want to"

"The issue being coming here is nice and neutral the people the class that I'm currently in they don't know me. Its nice to be equal and nice to be neutral".

"I love coming in here its given me a sense of dignity again."

2.9 Are you satisfied with your journey?

The group had a strong sense of satisfaction with the journey they had had with learning in the last few years. It had given them confidence in themselves, opened their minds to the possibilities of learning and their own capacity, brought them opportunities for work and further education and created structure and stability and a sense of purpose in their lives.

- *"I feel amazed that I have survived I really do.....I am satisfied in some ways with some things that I have overcome....I still feel very frustrated when I get stuck with old habits and I think why am I still doing that why can't I get through that....overall yes"*
- *"it's a kind of a...its like the starting pistol isn't it you see so there can't be any boundaries now because I've got over this major hurdle I've established myself here if you like so nothing can stop me now I'm just going on to bigger and better things"*
- *"If the opportunity arose I would take it with both hands"*
- *"Yeah we're getting there...a bit more stability yeah"*

The cost of learning was still a major issue for those of the group thinking of moving on to courses and opportunities outside the Whitehawk Inn and finding the time to study around the responsibilities of being a parent were also an ongoing barrier. The fact that it had been easy to study at the Whitehawk Inn in terms of these barriers was significant in terms of how satisfied some of the learners felt.

- *"Yeah I mean the only things that are in my life that are going to ..are time and money if I had pockets full of money to play with"*

- *"Yes their courses are like 10-12 and 1-3 so they fit into school and they're quite happy to help with child care to make it easier....they were happy to look at ways to make it possible for me to do the course around ...they really do make it easier they like what would stop you from doing the course you wanted and then they would try to find a way around it and you know I've done courses here where they have a crèche available so they are very very accommodating".*

For some of the group satisfaction was tinged with regret that it had taken them so long to get to where they were;

- *"Yes if I was to go back and do it again maybe try and do it a bit sooner".*
- *"44 years too late but it just goes to show that you can do these things when you're older".*

2.10 What would you like to do next?

There were a number of themes in what the group wanted to do next.

- Two of the group were interested in using their own experience of learning to help others.

"I have always wanted to do caring as one sort of subject and by helping someone it takes my mind off my worries".

"Even the sort of person who can escort nervous wrecks to classes likedid for me anything like that is a form of caring to me".

- Two of the group were interested in pursuing therapies that they had learnt about at the Whitehawk Inn and were thinking that they would like to do further courses. For one there was an issue about being able to move to a big classroom environment at college which would have been difficult.

"I would like to go to City College to do something but at the moment its just like getting the guts and the confidence and that to actually I don't know how I would cope with being in a classroomand I don't want to sign up for a class if I can't continue with it sort of thing".

- For these two groups and for another learner there was still a strong element of their own recovery in what they wanted to do and they felt that the Whitehawk Inn provided them with a safe and stable space to explore their learning.

"It's because I'm there in a place that I have felt is right for me and it's just

ongoing there's just no end to learning about yourself and.....".

- Two of the group were very happy in their jobs and were able to access a lot of training and learning through them.
- Three of the group were thinking of taking their learning further and going on to higher education.

"Oh yeah I'd like to carry on I mean you know you can never learn it all can you so I'd like to carry on with this course for the two years see if there's anything I like more than the others and then I'm quite happy to look at where I can move on to from there".

"I'd like to go to University I think I would like to go to University....just wanting to learn more, I'm not quite sure what I would want to do or whether it would be at a Open University degree its not something I've looked in to but I've always thought I'd like to".

"Sussex to do a degree...I'd like to be Dr....by the time I'm 60!"

One of this group found their interest in going to University surprising;

"It is a surprising thing for me to think considering that I absolutely hated school learning or anything to do with it I just didn't want anything to do with it just wasn't interested but then it's a big world out there and there's lots of things to learn".

There were three broader themes that clearly came out in terms of the future:

- The first was about life stages and being at a different time in their lives when learning was what they wanted and what they now had time for.

"I think you know apart from I'm a lot older I think maturity is a definite factor and hindsight and I just feel that...".

"In a strange way not having any parental responsibilities any more even though it means I've lost my family I feel like I've gained myself.....so for the first time since I was 15 years old I can be selfish and nobody's going to criticise me for it I can do the things that I know are good for me".

- The second was that two of the learners clearly felt they had been given a second chance or a chance to start over.

"Yeah it seems a bit pathetic but it seems a bit like fate that I got to the end of school and they're saying right we think you should go to art college I didn't

go and now I'm at art college so it's kind of like they say opportunity doesn't knock twice but in a way what I kind of wanted to do then but didn't want to do college then it's come back".

"Yes very much so yeah its quite exciting these are feelings I should have had when I was at school but its only ifs and buts if my mum hadn't been ill if my dad hadn't died if I had stayed at school what would I be doing now some things you have little or no choice and then you just take it from there and make the best of that given situation".

- Finally some learners were now open to the process of learning and what it could bring them in a different way.

"And it's like that it's open and you think well if it doesn't work it doesn't work try it try it, what's there to lose and I think that's definitely changed in me cos I used to think oh I can't oh I can't what about this what about that but now I just think oh nothing's impossible you can do anything you want to you can be anything you want to be and I think that goes for everybody it just depends on you".

"Maybe but I did come to the conclusion that education was the only thing that was going to elevate me from the position I was in you know"

"How will I approach learning now? With open arms!...I am capable!"

2.11 Additional impact

In concluding this section on the research findings the researcher would like to add a couple of examples where there had been an additional impact of the learning journey on two learners. This additional impact was not directly related to what they had wanted from coming to the Whitehawk Inn but in both cases had broadened their own horizons and impacted on others.

- In the first case one of the learners was involved in their community and the experience of learning had broadened that involvement and their effectiveness.

"I was sort of involved in things on the fringe but not right in the middle and now I'm right in the middle of everything".

In discussing the reasons for this the learner felt that whilst they had always been interested in being active in their community they did not have a lot of confidence. The process of learning at the Whitehawk Inn had increased their confidence in themselves and their abilities and had not only resulted in a job with a community involvement role but had increased their own level of community activism.

"I think I just became more confident because I grew in confidence here that sort of projected onto every other aspect of my life"

- In the second case the learner had a clear idea of where they wanted their learning to take them in terms of work and a career but in doing a course brushing up their English had found more confidence to explore their reading choices. The course tutor had clearly inspired the group by linking very up to date books to films and encouraged the group to compare and contrast. This had inspired the learner to read Jane Eyre having watched the television series.

"English was very important I read a lot more and things that I wouldn't read.....I read Jane Eyre that's something I wouldn't have dreamt of picking up and reading it was actually cos I watched the film and I thought I'm going to read the book...very very hard one of the hardest books I've ever read.... I really enjoyed it made me think I would like to read other books of that time".

- In both of these cases the learners were also more confident in supporting their children's learning as a result of their own development and both were enjoying how this made them feel.

"And I can help them with their Maths and their English and they say come on you know this cos you've done your GCSE, and I can help them".

"And I read Harry Potter to my daughter and I wouldn't have read things like that before it was part of the course".

PART THREE – The Case Studies

3.1 Learners' experience of the research process

The group of learners engaged fully with the process used by the researcher. Having the group sessions and two individual sessions with the researcher meant that a level of knowledge and rapport was built up between the researcher and the learners which meant that the learners felt comfortable with the process. It was of interest to the researcher that in the second individual interview, when the content of the case study was discussed and agreed, a number of the learners talked about some additional things that implied they had been reflecting on their learning process.

About half of the group did feel that the research had enabled them to see their journey differently although this was in some cases challenging. They had found the process interesting and in one or two cases it had helped them remember the love of learning they had had as a child and lost through circumstances over the years. It was of interest to the researcher that the tone of the interviews was lower and more difficult when the learners were talking about their earlier experience with learning and became much more upbeat when they began to talk about the impact of their learning at the Whitehawk Inn. A couple of the learners felt that the process had been therapeutic for them although it was clear that they understood that it was a different process from any form of counselling.

It was also of interest to the researcher that all but one of the group embraced the drawing exercise in the first group session and interpreted it in their own way; not everyone drawing or even representing their journey in a linear form. One learner found it so useful they did another version at home! One of the group did find this difficult to do and for a number of them it did bring up issues of loss and disappointment. The drawings were used in the research interviews to refer to. They created another perspective for the researcher and enabled some of the more difficult issues to be explored.

In the final session the learners saw their own case studies and a number commented how interesting it was to see their stories written down although some expressed amazement at seeing themselves condensed into a couple of pages! Having gone through the process of agreeing with the researcher what was to be included no one had reservations about their case studies being used.

Meeting with the learners a number of times during the course of the research it was of interest to the researcher that some of the learners asked about the research process and were interested in what the researcher actually did and what the rôle involved. The tape recorder and the process of transcribing was of interest to one learner who saw it as a possible way to help themselves with concentration problems.

In the final session the group were asked to do an exercise to give words that best described some of their feelings about their learning in the last few years.

What word best describes how you felt about learning/studying before you came here?	What word best describes your experience at the Whitehawk Inn?	What word best describes how you feel about yourself now?
Insignificant Burnt out Scared (2) Nervous Unworthy Apprehensive	Fun (2) Significant Fulfilling (2) Change (2)	More confident More able to cope Achievement Stronger Excited No different Clearer Not sure Optimistic

The researcher was aware that all of the learners continued to be supported by the staff within the Whitehawk Inn throughout the research process which provided them with an opportunity to express any concern about the process if they wished to. All the feedback that the researcher received from the learners about the process and the experience was positive.

3.2 Introducing the case studies

The following pages contain the eight case studies. The learners' real names are not used and limited personal detail is included. Each case study has a title which indicates what the researcher felt best described the learner's journey. The case studies were written by the researcher and were discussed with and approved by the learners.

1. Paul's Journey – A way to recovery

Paul is 28 and lives with his carer.

Paul's early experience of learning at school was hard as he was bullied a lot and found it difficult to concentrate on lessons. He remembers primary school being alright but at secondary school around the ages of thirteen to fifteen he was seriously bullied. This resulted in him being removed to a different school especially for children who had been bullied. Whilst the school was supportive it was only part time and even though it was a relief not to be bullied Paul felt it didn't really give him much education. The bullying was serious and went on for some time and looking back Paul can see that it completely took his focus away from learning at that stage.

Although Paul left school with very little in the way of qualifications this did not really affect his choice as he had been clear about wanting to become a hairdresser from a young age. He was apprenticed at 15 and qualified within eighteen months. He did not find the transition from school to work difficult as this was what he had always wanted to do. Once qualified he worked very successfully as a hairdresser for six to eight years. Paul does not think that if his experience at school had been different that he would have made any other choice about becoming a hairdresser.

In his mid twenties Paul became seriously ill. He has been hospitalised frequently in the last few years but is now living successfully back in his own home supported by health services and a full time carer (his mum).

Paul first came to the Whitehawk Inn in the early part of 2005. He wanted to return to learning because he needed something to do and was hoping it would help with his recovery. He came with an open mind about what he might do and enrolled first on a reflexology course. He has since gone on and done courses in Shiatsu and Indian Head Massage and has found all these taster courses beneficial for himself as well as practically learning how to do them. In addition he has enrolled to do maths and having completed level one is now doing level two. He also goes to the belly dancing class.

Paul feels he learns best by doing things and he has chosen mainly hands on courses. He finds it more difficult to learn where lots of written stuff is involved and finds figures easier than words. The most important thing to Paul is having the confidence and self belief that he can learn.

His illness can be unpredictable and this can cause disruption to his ability to attend courses regularly. This has happened less recently and Paul feels that the supportive atmosphere and the way staff and tutors work really helps. He does not feel the pressure to learn that he did at school, he enjoys learning in a smaller group knowing that he can always ask questions if he needs to. The staff

are available to talk about any worries and he says that their friendliness makes him feel better. Most importantly for Paul there is flexibility about the learning and he feels he can come in and out of the process if he needs to and does not have to worry if he becomes ill. He sees coming to the Whitehawk Inn as 'having a life' as well as learning and because staff are aware of his particular needs they will be aware if he does not come and check if he is alright.

As part of the care planning process Paul has also been on courses that have enabled him to develop a set of skills and awareness of his own illness, which help him to cope and manage. These have helped him build his confidence and self esteem.

Paul is about to do a course with Terence Higgins Trust to train to be a one to one support worker. He has always wanted to do caring in some way and he also sees this as a way of taking his mind off his own worries. His own experiences of illness and having a carer himself have also led him to want to do this.

Paul would like to think about doing a course at City College but is very concerned that the size of the classes there would be too large for him to feel safe or comfortable as he really prefers to be in a group of about twelve. However he is hopeful that his confidence will grow and that one day he might embark on a longer course in aromatherapy or reflexology. For the moment Paul knows that he can exist in a classroom situation as long as it is with a small group.

Paul describes coming to the Whitehawk Inn for courses as giving him structure to his week, it gets him out and he knows he is coming to a place where people are there for him. The experience is helping him to have more stability in his life.

This summary of Paul's journey is written by the researcher Naomi Smith and is taken from discussions with Paul in October and November 2006.

2. Georgina's Journey – Learning about myself

Georgina is 57, she has two grown up children one of whom she currently lives with.

Georgina had very different experiences at primary and secondary school. She loved her primary school, she was bright and did very well and felt very nourished and supported by her teachers who she felt valued her as a person. She does not remember being very happy at home and primary school was like a sanctuary to her. Being academically bright she went at eleven to a grammar school and found this a very different environment. The school was very formal and academic and Georgina found the style and methods of teaching did not engage or inspire her. As a result she became very bored and began to hate school becoming rebellious and getting into trouble a lot. She moved to another school at fourteen but did not engage with learning at this school any better although she remembers having friends there. She left school just before she was fifteen with no qualifications and looking back does not feel she got any real education at secondary school at all. Georgina didn't really have difficulty understanding the work but she just wasn't interested in the subjects that were being taught or how they were being taught and she wanted to be doing other things.

Georgina was a teenager in the 1960s and on leaving school became very swept up in what was going on and interesting at that time. She describes herself as having gone off the tracks at this stage and she became involved in using drugs and alcohol. Although throughout these years she held down jobs Georgina recognises that she had a period of maybe eighteen years of her life until her early thirties where drug and alcohol abuse and everything that went with it was a very big part of her life.

Her journey back into wanting to learn came in 1980 when she had stopped using drugs and was suffering from depression. At this stage she wasn't working and she did a number of adult education courses to help her find some focus. She remembers these including First Aid, Italian and Dressmaking. During these years Georgina had also become involved in learning about therapies and healing which had helped her survive and change direction in her life. This interest in therapeutic processes was linked with an interest in animal rights and healthy life style options. Georgina embarked on a course in massage and aromatherapy at a college in London but was forced to withdraw after six months. She found the studying too difficult but the teaching was also very poor.

Coming to Brighton about eight years ago she was aware of the Whitehawk Inn but at that stage it mainly provided computer courses. When therapies and other courses began to be offered she came and enrolled. Georgina has been with the Whitehawk Inn for about two years and has done a number of therapy courses including Aromatherapy, Reflexology and Indian Head Massage. She has also

done a computer course and then started the New Horizons For Women Course. She has since withdrawn from this course.

Georgina has learnt a lot about her own process of learning through the courses she has done at Whitehawk Inn and is aware of what causes problems for her. She has learnt about different ways of learning and recognises that she finds the way schools and colleges teach difficult. She is aware of some of the barriers that she has to learning and finds that smaller group size and being able to go at her own pace helps. At times she finds concentration difficult and having to take in lots of information at one time can cause her problems.

The Whitehawk Inn is very accessible to her both geographically and financially. She finds it a 'safe place' to learn and has felt very supported by staff and tutors. Georgina went on and did a course at City College in reflexology and got her first qualification from this course last September. She found studying at college very hard and the connection with the Whitehawk Inn and the personal and practical support she got there definitely helped her to get through. Achieving the qualification boosted her confidence.

Georgina sees herself as a survivor. She is keen to become a therapist but recognises that qualifications are needed for recognition. Being at the Whitehawk Inn has also given her focus and support with other life changes and bereavements and helped her to understand her own learning process more clearly.

This summary of Georgina's journey is written by the researcher Naomi Smith and is taken from discussions with Georgina in October and November 2006.

3. Louisa's Journey – Having another chance

Louisa is 39 a single parent with two children

Louisa does not remember much about her experience at primary school but at secondary school became very bored and uninterested in learning. Even though she could do the work academically and would have done well she found herself uninterested and in her own words couldn't be bothered. At fourteen or so she became quite rebellious and was often in trouble. Louisa feels her lack of interest in school had less to do with the style of teaching or the standard of the school than with the fact that she wanted to be doing other things.

When in trouble she was sent to the deputy head who was an art teacher and she often ended up being put in the art room rather than being left sitting outside her office. This was a good 'punishment' for Louisa as she had always liked art even as a small child and it was the one thing she was interested in. When she left school at sixteen her then art teacher had encouraged her to think about going to Art School but at the time she didn't feel she would fit in to that environment and didn't want to go.

Having left school she spent a short time at Lewes College and then started working. After a period of doing different caring and shop jobs she settled into office work for a number of years before she had her children. Her two children were born in 1995 and 2000 and it was when her youngest child started nursery that she started to do some craft courses locally out of interest. Through one of these courses she met a tutor who encouraged her to join the painting course she was running at the Whitehawk Inn. Louisa had always liked art but joining this course she felt that she now wanted to learn how to do it properly.

Once at the Whitehawk Inn she came into contact with the Gateway to Learning Team who encouraged her to think about other courses and over time to think about taking her art further. With encouragement and practical support she successfully applied for a part time Art and Design Foundation course at City College which she started in September 2006.

Louisa recognises that for her to engage with learning she must be interested in the subject first although a teacher who she engages with personally would also make a real difference. She likes the structure of being taught but being able to choose the subject is key. There have been some barriers for Louisa mostly to do with time, childcare and money. In particular because she is studying a creative subject having periods of uninterrupted time to develop work is difficult with children. She enjoys the mix of people on her course and feels she fits in in a way she wouldn't have done when she was younger.

Louisa is amazed to be where she is and doing her course and feels that without the very practical support and encouragement from the Gateway to Learning

Staff that she would never have had the confidence to try for City College. She is keen to keep the expectations of what she might achieve low but finds she is somewhere where it is ok to learn by trying things and where even making mistakes can be a positive part of the learning.

Although she has felt overwhelmed at times by the move on to further education she believes it has been good for her to be pushed to try for something more. She is looking forward to the next two years and whilst not looking too far ahead might consider going further with her art after that. She reflects that she has been given a second chance to study art and this has been the right time and place for her to take it up.

This summary of Louisa's journey is written by the researcher Naomi Smith and is taken from discussions with Louisa between October 2006 and January 2007.

4. Liz's Journey – Opening up my world

Liz is 54, she has two grown up children and a granddaughter

Liz loved school and still remembers the excitement of her first day. She loved learning and was a rounded student. She liked and was very good at art and was particularly keen on sports. She wanted to go into graphic art and might have gone on to art college from school.

When she was a teenager her mother became very ill and because her father had already died Liz left school at fourteen to care for her. At fifteen and a half her mother died and after a short period of living with her older brother Liz started to live and work independently until she had her first child. She married twice and had a second child then sadly lost her second husband tragically to a car accident. She continued alone with her children for many years working in cafes and shops to support them.

More recently she lost another person close to her very suddenly and as a result began a period suffering from depression and increasing agoraphobia. Her life became restricted and she found she suffered panic attacks just going down the road.

Despite feeling very low Liz knew that she needed to get out more and wanted to start using her brain again. Her daughter encouraged her to try the Whitehawk Inn and despite finding it very scary she finally got herself through the door. She first came to the Whitehawk Inn early in 2006 and once inside she met the Gateway to Learning Team who talked to her about what she might do. She embarked on a stress management and confidence building course at Frederick Street and with some very practical support and encouragement managed to get to the course each week. As a result she began to feel more confident and was able to go into town on her own and out more generally.

Liz knew that she needed more social contact to help her and felt that she could come to the Whitehawk Inn for that. She also knew that she wanted to learn again and wanted something that would stretch her imagination. Having loved learning at school she wanted to be mentally stimulated like that again. She found being part of a smaller group good and found the teaching methods very encouraging and very different from those she had known at school. At times in her life Liz had thought about doing more studying but hadn't always got a positive reaction from those around her as to her ability to do more and this had sapped her confidence in herself. She found the reflective nature of the courses she has done very useful in helping her see that she is not alone and to learn techniques to rebuild her confidence. She started a life coaching course at the Whitehawk Inn but has recently had to withdraw.

Throughout her life Liz has kept diaries and memory books and is a keen recorder of her own and her family's life and memorable events. These have provided her with a way of reflecting on her life and recording things she does not want to forget. She also likes to have a record of her learning and enjoys being able to look at the certificates of courses she has done. Having left school young with no qualifications her first OCN qualification was a huge boost to her self confidence. Her big barrier has been the confidence to join a new group worrying whether she would fit in and be able to do the class. Having become introverted and depressed it has taken her a while to feel more outgoing.

She describes the Whitehawk Inn as being a safety net that would catch you if you fall, a kind of life jacket. She sees this stage of her learning journey as just starting or restarting and is enjoying what might be possible. Dealing with loss has been a huge part of her life and this loss is both personal and the loss of the opportunity to learn because of having to leave school so young. She has found coming to learning again has helped her to frame that experience and look at how she might use it to help others in the future.

This summary of Liz's journey is written by the researcher Naomi Smith and is taken from discussions with Liz between October 2006 and January 2007.

5. Helen's Journey – Getting my life back

Helen is 41, she has five children three of whom are still at school and a grand daughter. She is currently a single parent.

Helen describes her experience of school as being confusing. She felt lost a lot of the time and never really engaged. The teaching style at all her schools was not supportive and she was made to feel stupid by teachers. In response she kept quiet, did not feel able to ask when she did not understand and generally felt that school just happened to her.

She was keen to leave school which she did at sixteen. She had few exams but had a job to go to. After initially working in a supermarket she enrolled in a secretarial course and doing very well in her Pitman's exams she went on to become a legal secretary for three or four years before she had her children.

Helen has had six children one of whom died and was herself seriously ill with her last child. Around this time she also lost both of her parents.

Throughout all the years of having her family Helen knew she wanted to return to work. She recognises that this was about having independence, getting mental stimulation, about feeling valued and equal to others and about meeting and being with a variety of people. She thought for some time that work might be in a caring profession like nursing but her journey has in fact taken her in a different direction.

When her youngest child went to school in 2001 she started thinking about what she wanted to do. She says that she wanted to get her life back, get her brain working and become someone else. Her initial approach to the Whitehawk Inn was to do some computer courses as she recognised that her qualifications were limited and she needed to update her skills. Helen has been connected with the Whitehawk Inn for about five years and in that time she has done a lot of computer courses, volunteered as a helper in the computer classes and brushed up her Maths and English including getting a GCSE in Maths. She describes the Whitehawk Inn at that time as being her reason to get up in the morning. She was pretty self motivated and found she could learn both in a classroom and self directed particularly enjoying the ECDL course. She found the support of tutors, other students and volunteers very positive and valuable. After the Gateway to Learning Project was set up she enrolled in self confidence and assertiveness courses and this helped her see herself and her life differently, to feel less trapped and to believe in herself again.

In 2005 her personal circumstances changed and she needed to get a job. Whilst working initially in a supermarket she knew that she wanted to get an admin job. She applied for a job that would use her admin skills as well as her experience working in the community and with personal and practical support from Working

Links staff and staff at the Whitehawk Inn she was successful. She has been working since then, gets a lot from her job and is continuing her learning and development within her job. She is not currently doing any courses at the Whitehawk Inn as her time is taken up with her job.

Helen's journey has taken her not just into work which she finds stimulating and gives her financial security. It has also enabled her to develop skills and confidence to use in her voluntary community roles and to be more involved in helping and supporting her children with their learning.

She speaks with feeling about the difference between the experience of learning at the Whitehawk Inn and learning at school. She felt that no one really knew she was there at school and she felt lost and stuck. At the Whitehawk Inn she feels she was allowed to find her voice, had more control over what she was doing and was given the real attention both personal and educational that she needed to help her learn and develop.

Adult learning has worked for Helen. Learning in smaller groups, being able to ask as often as you like and being encouraged to try and work things out have all helped her find out how she learns best and to recognise the strong organisational skills that she has. She speaks of being much more confident now of trying things and believing that she will be able to do them. Her main barriers would have been childcare and cost but the timing of courses and the concessions on most courses have made it possible for her to do as much as she wanted.

Helen's journey with learning in the last few years has given her back her life and helped her to put more back both into her family and her community. She feels that she has reinvented herself and the increased confidence she has gained from being successful in learning has projected onto every other aspect of her life. She is satisfied with what she has achieved so far but is thinking there may be a next stage in the future and is interested in University. This she finds surprising considering how much she hated school learning but now feels that anything is possible!

This summary of Helen's journey is written by the researcher Naomi Smith and is taken from discussions with Helen between October 2006 and January 2007.

6. Michael's Journey – Helping me find a structure

Michael is 42

Michael was educated in a Christian Brothers School in Ireland from six to sixteen. His experience of school was not positive feeling that teachers taught through fear not encouragement. He was bright and had a capacity to soak up knowledge and information easily. He was talented at technical drawing and teachers encouraged him to think of being an architect or a draftsman. He wanted to become an electrical engineer and after leaving school at sixteen he trained and qualified as an electrician.

He describes himself as a loner at school and throughout his life has found he communicates best when he is sharing knowledge or talking about serious subjects. He has always had a capacity to learn in meticulous detail about any subject he is interested in and as a result is knowledgeable about a wide range of subjects.

Michael's enduring love of aircraft, which started when he was young, took him to work in the aircraft industry for many years and he thinks of these as his happiest and best jobs.

In 1990 a period of serious illness changed his view on life and after recovering he developed a new career as an electronics technician. This period of illness also led him to develop the spiritual and self development side of his life more. He came to Brighton in 1994 and became ill again in 1996. Addictions had figured as part of his illness previously and at this stage he sought help with those. He was no longer working in the aircraft industry and Michael became very disenchanted with the working environments and companies he worked for. He did not feel that he was respected for his skills and years of experience and this affected his confidence.

Becoming ill again in 2002 he was finally given a diagnosis that explained his recurring periods of ill health. He came to the Whitehawk Inn in 2004 as part of his journey of recovery and even though he was looking to upgrade his skills more importantly he wanted to recover his confidence and sense of himself.

He has successfully completed a number of computer courses including CLAIT and ECDL and has done courses in photography. He is now doing the office skills and administration course. Despite struggling with the effects of medication Michael has found the courses have helped him get a structure back in his life and a routine which helps him deal with his illness.

He feels the Whitehawk Inn is a very 'neutral' space where he is seen as a person first not someone with an illness and where a lot of his life can remain private unless he chooses to share it. Learning in smaller groups and both tutors

and courses being flexible helps him to learn when he is well and for it to be understood when he has periods of illness and cannot attend.

He finds that medication has had an effect on his memory and that he can no longer teach himself from books and assimilate and remember information and statistics in the way that he could. He recognises that what works for him now is to be actively taught and finds the way of teaching using different styles and breaking the class up into segments really helps him.

The routine of coming to the Whitehawk Inn and his involvement both as a learner and as a volunteer has had positive effects on his confidence and his ability to control other aspects of his life. He says he has had more security and stability in his life in these last few years. Whilst he does not want to give up on the possibility of working again he does recognise the limits his illness places on him and the ongoing issues and difficulties that he will have to struggle with.

Michael is pleased with his progress and says it doesn't really matter what he is learning at the Whitehawk Inn it's the fact that he is at the Whitehawk Inn and it's a joy and a pleasure to be there. Picking up a qualification he sees as a bonus. Feeling he belongs somewhere and that others understand what he struggles with has helped him feel less isolated.

Michael is currently writing a book about his life and experiences.

This summary of Michael's journey is written by the researcher Naomi Smith and is taken from discussions with Michael between October 2006 and January 2007.

7. Jane's Journey – Learning for a reason

Jane is 28. She has one child and is currently a single parent.

Moving around a lot as a child Jane does not remember much of her primary school experience but she quite enjoyed her secondary school in Brighton. She got on very well with others at school but found the subjects a struggle. She always liked English but even though she had imagination she found it difficult to find the language to write down her ideas.

She left school with a few GCSEs and enrolled on a GNVQ at City College. Jane completed her course but did not enjoy college. She found work in care homes and although she enjoyed it she felt she was very young to be dealing with that environment.

Jane had her daughter in 1998 and it was when she was at the mother and toddler group with her that she was approached to see if she would be interested in doing the CLAIT course. Having passed CLAIT she went on to ECDL but found the online learning didn't work well for her and she stopped. It was a few years later when her mother had become a volunteer at the Whitehawk Inn that Jane returned to the ECDL course there as it was then being taught in a more class oriented way. At the same time she enrolled on an English course and achieved both her ECDL course and her level two in English. Jane was then encouraged to do the office skills and administration course which she successfully completed and she now has a job as an admin assistant locally.

Jane has done a number of courses at the Whitehawk Inn including some of the more creative courses but has had a sense that she needs a reason to learn. She is clear about the kind of job she wants and has become ambitious for herself. She feels that the Gateway to Learning staff heard and understood her aspirations and helped her find the best courses to do.

Jane found school work difficult but has found learning at the Whitehawk Inn a different experience. The support of her mum who was a classroom volunteer and coming with a friend made her feel more comfortable. She is now much more familiar with learning using computers but still feels that she learns best with a teacher who has the time to give her attention and go through things with her. Barriers of child care and cost did not affect Jane as school time courses suited her and she was entitled to concessions on courses.

She feels that she particularly succeeded with the office skills and administration course which has directly helped her into a job she enjoys. She has also succeeded with her English and now reads much more widely even becoming confident in trying books with the kind of language that she would never have attempted before. The way the English course was taught linking books to

popular films like Harry Potter she thinks was good and she is now able to share more reading with her daughter.

Jane is really satisfied with her progress and surprised by how much she has achieved. She hopes her job will give her further opportunities and she finds she is really suited to and enjoys the kind of work it offers her.

The Whitehawk Inn is 'so unlike school' she says, so bright and welcoming that coming there has been a very different experience of learning for Jane. She feels that the choice to learn has been hers but that she has had all the encouragement and interest that she has needed to get her engaged again. Looking back at school it was all too much at the time but being able to learn at her own pace has actually enabled her to move forward much faster than she ever thought she would.

How does she approach learning now? With open arms because she knows now that she is capable.

This summary of Jane's journey is written by the researcher Naomi Smith and is taken from discussions with Jane between October and December 2006.

8. Nicola/Nicholas's Journey – No point hiding

Nicola is 51. She has had six children.

Nicola was not happy when she first went to school as her brother was born at that time and she felt excluded. Within a few years however she realised that she was clever and channelled all her energies into learning. Learning and studying came naturally to her and she was an A student and top of the class throughout her time at school. Her schooling was cut short at fifteen when she left school pregnant but she knows that she would have gone on to University maybe even Oxford if she had stayed in education.

Over the following few years she married and had four children however difficulties with her marriage and depression ended in her leaving her family and returning to the world of work. For a number of years she had a good job and a high powered career within the advertising industry. Becoming a parent for the final time in her early thirties she made different choices and gave up her career to bring up her daughter. Her life changed dramatically, her relationship broke down, she had some traumatic experiences and drifted into involvement with drugs. Nicola's relationships with her children have been complex and although she has had contact with them at different stages of her life that contact has been problematic. She is currently only in contact with one of her children.

Despite leaving school young and with no qualifications Nicola was always very capable being able to recall and remember easily, being very articulate and having strong creativity around words and design. This all helped her be successful over the years in the working world and to have the ability to learn by trying and experimenting with ideas and creative outlets.

Throughout her life Nicola was aware that she felt different and around 1991 she recognised that she had gender identity issues. Recognising this and coming into contact with a community she felt rightly part of was significant and made her realise that if there had been more awareness when she was young that her life and choices might have been different.

Her interest in more academic learning was sparked by her grand daughter's serious and unusual illness when she was born in 2002. Researching information about this made Nicola aware of her ability to research and learn and to communicate that learning in a number of mediums.

When she moved to Brighton in 2006 Nicola herself was recovering from treatment for a chronic illness and in a period where work was not her first priority she came to the Whitehawk Inn in spring 2006 to do a creative writing course and a painting course. She chose these subjects because she knew she was good at them and she would enjoy them. Whilst good at both things it was her skill in creative writing that captured attention and she was encouraged to think

about writing for publication and taking her writing further. Developing her writing she initially considered going to University to continue with that but has since changed her mind. With the help of the Gateway to Learning staff she successfully applied to do an Access course at City College and has since decided to apply to do a Humanities degree. She recognises that she has always had a talent for story telling and feels she will continue to develop her writing on her own. However she is very drawn to philosophy and finds that her mind is excited by the study of ideas and it is what is drawing her back into formal education.

She is aware of being an all rounder in terms of learning. Being good at self directed learning and at organising her time as well as operating well within class and group situations. She is a visual learner, a user of mind maps and impatient to learn. She feels she has a lot to catch up on. At City College she welcomes the resources that have become available to her and feels the environment is designed to help her learn. She has found some problems transferring her skills particularly in IT and has found that she needed to regain her confidence in her ability to learn. Finding her way around different computer systems and discovering that she is able to write essays at a high level has given her a tremendous sense of achievement.

She feels that the progress she has made has been huge and that it is significantly about being able to be honest about herself and to deal with her past. Positive experience of psychotherapy has helped her find security and be more confident in her boundaries and both of these things have helped her move on with her learning.

Nicola's experience of the Gateway to Learning Project was that they were "cool" with her and embraced the things that she had always thought would exclude her like her gender issues, being an ex offender and a former drug user. Very practical support and encouragement with looking up courses and finding out about her options for study meant that she did not give up. Ongoing contact and support at each stage of applying for a course and continuing motivational input has been crucial and she feels she would not have been able to get where she is now without them.

Nicola is satisfied with her journey so far although she recognises if there had been more awareness and information when she was young that she might have made different choices about her gender identity. She feels as if she is in the wrong body but having made no formal decisions to change that she recognises it is where she is. She is ambitious for her future, wants to be a Doctor of Philosophy by the time she is sixty and is continuing with her creative writing.

Her journey with learning has also been a journey of coming to terms with her gender identity and feeling confident to express herself as she wishes to. Both her creative writing and her desire for more academic fulfilment are fuelled by

this journey and her understanding of gender identity issues gives her a unique experience and position that she wants to convey in both.

This summary of Nicola's journey is written by the researcher Naomi Smith and is taken from discussions with Nicola in October and November 2006.

PART FOUR – Concluding comments

All the learners had experienced some interruption to their education at school. For two of the group this had been very specific to leaving school early either as a result of pregnancy or because of caring responsibilities. For a number of the others it had been a combination of factors but significant in those factors were bullying from other students or teachers and losing interest or ceasing to engage with learning in their teenage years. Where these factors operated there did also appear for some to be an element of literacy, numeracy or other learning or learning needs that was not addressed or supported at the time. From what the researcher could ascertain at least half of the group would have been considered reasonably high achievers at school and could have progressed to higher education at that stage.

Despite interruptions in education when they were young many of the group were able to use the skills that they did have when they left school to go on to train and be successful in work and in having and raising children. Two at least became fully apprenticed into trades and worked successfully in those for a number of years. One at least secured qualification after school in secretarial and office skills and worked in those environments for a number of years. Some of the group spoke about always wanting to do more learning but that having a family took much of their energy. For some their mental health problems and problems over the years with alcohol or drugs had been significant and for two of them had forced them to give up work. In a couple of cases learners also spoke of other family members being discouraging of them and their abilities and this led them to undervalue what they could do and lose confidence.

All of the group experienced barriers to coming back to learning and these included time, cost, childcare, ability to study, literacy, numeracy and IT skills needs and difficulties in being in a formal learning environment. The biggest barriers for most of the group were lack of self esteem and self confidence and for some lack of stability in their health.

Learners had initially come to the Whitehawk Inn with one thing in mind but most had been encouraged to and had taken up other courses. Some of these routes were interesting. There were learners who had come initially to do therapy based health courses for themselves and had gone on to do literacy and numeracy courses as well. There were learners who had come to do IT courses who had gone on to do literacy and numeracy courses and personal development courses as well. There were learners who had come to do courses for interest and had moved on to do IT and office administration courses having recognised that these could take them either back into work or into a different area of work.

All the learners found the experience of learning as adults very different and for most the way that they were taught and the skills and understanding of the tutors was significant in giving them an entirely different experience. They felt that they

were treated as adults (mature), they were given choices, the level was right for them and there was a lack of the pressure they had felt at school. Those who needed additional support with learning needs were getting it and the support of volunteers within the classroom situation was also a very positive factor for many.

It was clear that the way that the Gateway to Learning Team model worked had significant impact on all the learners and directly related to how they saw their success. This model appeared to offer them the right combination of good information and direction, appropriate personal support, motivation and encouragement and enabled them not only to feel in control of their own process but to feel that they had a voice again and a choice. The variety of skills, backgrounds and interests within the Gateway staff team indicated that they were able to engage with a significant number of the issues that mattered to or affected the learners.

The atmosphere at the Whitehawk Inn also had an impact on the learners. When asked what it was about this environment that was important the learners said it was healthy, modern, colourful, less intimidating than school or college, buzzing, welcoming, individual and up! The connection between the Whitehawk Inn and the community and the nature of the outreach on learning was also apparent. Many of the learners had originally come to the centre because they knew someone in the community who had found it useful or they had been encouraged through an outreach session. A number of the learners were involved in work and activities within the community, a couple had recently become involved as Trustees at the Whitehawk Inn and others were also volunteers as well as learners. Many of the learners spoke of feeling part of something and a sense of belonging.

Finally it appeared to the researcher that the significant thing that had changed for all the learners in their last few years was that they had begun not only to feel capable and confident again but now had certificates, qualifications, jobs and further education opportunities that proved this to them, and that the world of learning and studying was open to them. This had given them a combination of hope, inspiration and stability in their lives and they were excited by the possibilities. In the words of one learner already quoted in the report;

"Nothing's impossible you can do anything you want to you can be anything you want to be and I think that goes for everybody it just depends on you".

Appendix1 Gateway to Learning Research Project

Individual interview questions on learning journeys

1. What was your previous experience of learning/studying like?
If bad do they know why? If good why not continued?
2. What made you want to start learning/studying again?
Look at any influences people or other, life circumstances around work, health, parenthood etc and why they have engaged with learning again.
3. What made you come to the Gateway to Learning Project?
How did they hear about it?
4. Did you know what you wanted to learn about when you came?
Was the journey planned?
5. What have you found out about the best way for you to learn?
Look at subject, pace, style of teaching, levels of support?
6. What has been difficult and what have you succeeded with?
Explore barriers and how they judge their success (what it looks like to them).
7. How do you know what progress you have made?
Do they have any process for this either themselves or with the GTL? How do they see their progress, what do they value?
8. Is there something about the Gateway to Learning Project that has made the experience of learning different for you?
Explore whether they understand the GTL model and if it has been explained to them how the project works and what it offers?
9. Are you satisfied with your journey?
How do they judge this?
10. What would you like to do next?
What are their aspirations now, how different are they to how they felt earlier; do they know how they are going to make them happen?

Appendix 2 Gateway to Learning Research Project

INFORMATION SHEET

What we are aiming to do

- To record a number of learners' journeys in some detail
- To provide an opportunity for those learners to reflect on their journeys
- To identify any common factors that have helped (or not helped) learners to succeed
- To provide some information on the effectiveness of the Gateway to Learning Project model of support

How we are going to do it

The researcher will work with the learners both as a group and in individual interviews:

- The group work will involve learners in reflecting on their learning journeys and in looking at common issues and problems
- The interviews will look with learners at their individual journeys with learning: their history, the barriers they have found, what has helped them to succeed and the role that the Gateway Project has played for them. The research will also look at learners' hopes, other influences that have played a part and, for those who have moved on to further or higher education, how easy that has been.

Learners taking part in the research will be asked to agree to attend four sessions of about two hours each (8 hours in total). The sessions will cover the following;

- The first session will be a group session with all those agreeing to be interviewed in which a process for thinking about and recording individual learning journeys will be used. This process is partly visual and gives an opportunity for learners to record their learning journey either in words or drawings.
- The second session will be an individual 'one to one' interview with the researcher, looking in more detail at the learner's experience and trying to answer some key questions which will include:

What was your previous experience of learning/studying like?
What made you want to come back to learning/studying?
What made you come to the Gateway to Learning Project?

What have you found out about how you learn best?
What has been difficult and what have you succeeded with?
What is it about the Gateway model that has made a difference?
What would you like to do next?

- The third session will be an opportunity for the researcher to meet with individuals to check that they are happy with what has been recorded and to see if they have further reflections.
- The fourth session will be an opportunity for the whole group to get together again and look at common experiences and, in particular, the impact of the Gateway to Learning Project on their learning journeys

The interviews will work on a set of questions which the learner will be given beforehand. The interviews will be conducted in a way that enables the learners to reflect on their own journey.

The researcher will work with a tape recorder for individual interviews as this helps to make sure that what is recorded is what the learner has said. This is common practice in research and the tapes and transcripts of interviews will only be seen or heard by the researcher and the person being interviewed. If the learner is unhappy about being recorded they can choose not to be and they can also ask for the recording to be stopped at any point.

All interviews will be carried out at the Gateway Project where support is available for the learners and in an environment which will be familiar to them. Financial support with transport and care costs will be given to enable learners to have the time to take part in the research and a one off payment (in the form of vouchers) will be given to each learner who participates in recognition of the contribution that they will make to the research.

What will be produced at the end of the research project.

There will be a report produced by the researcher about the work which will include the individual stories of the learners who have participated. These stories will be written in a way that anonymises, as far as possible, the individuals who have taken part although their words will be used as quotes. In addition any drawings or maps of the learners' journeys from the first group session may be included. In discussion with the learners the researcher will ensure that any confidential information or information that learners do not wish to share is excluded from the report.

The group of learners will be small and because of this and the way the information will be presented individual learners may be more identifiable than in a larger piece of research. However, all possible steps will be taken to ensure that individual identities are not disclosed in the report.

A consent form has been produced which is attached to ensure that those who take part understand what they are committing to and how they can exercise control over the process if they wish.

Timetable

The research will start towards the end of September 2006 and run for two to three months.

Funding and outcomes

The research is funded by the Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP) and the researcher is based in the Health and Social Policy Research Centre at the University of Brighton. The study will add to our knowledge of adults who face barriers to participation in education and identify some of the factors that enable (and inhibit) success. The learning journeys will also provide valuable qualitative evidence of the effectiveness of the Gateway to Learning model.

Naomi Smith
HSPRC/UOB
October 2006

Appendix 3 Gateway to Learning Research Project

CONSENT FORM

Please tick all boxes that apply

- 1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study.
- 2. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the process at any point if I wish to.
- 3. I understand that the researcher wishes to tape-record my interview but that I can request for the tape recorder to be switched off at any point or not be used at all.
- 4. I understand that my learning journey will be recorded and used as research and that my words may be used as quotes.
- 5. I understand that as far as possible my personal story will be anonymised and anything I request to be confidential will remain so.
- 6. I agree to take part in the study

Signature of learner.....

Signature of researcher.....

Date.....

Naomi Smith
HSPRC/UOB
October 2006



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