The Learner's Voice: a Focus on the e-learner Experience

Linda Creanor[1], Doug Gowan[2], Carol Howells[2] and Kathy Trinder[1]
[1]Glasgow Caledonian University, [2]The Open Learning Partnership
l.creanor@gcal.ac.uk; doug.gowan@olp.co.uk; carol.howells@olp.co.uk;
k.trinder@gcal.ac.uk;

ABSTRACT
This paper outlines work in progress on a national JISC research project on the learner experience of e-learning. The project is named LEX, a contraction of the long name but also a reference to the importance of using the learner's own words in the analysis. The project covers a wide range of post-16 learners including adult, community and work-based learners as well as FE and HE learners, distributed widely across the UK. We describe the development, evolution and implementation of the research methodology, and how we tackled practical problems of reaching such a diverse learner group. We go on to outline three case studies which illustrate how learners describe their approaches to fitting learning into their lives, to accomplishing e-learning tasks, their strategies to overcome problems, and their expectations and experiences of e-learning across a range of educational contexts and technology use. The paper does not present findings or research outcomes, however tentative, since we are only at the start of the analytical phase. The case studies do however indicate some of the issues that learners have raised in the research.

Keywords
e-learning; learner experience; learner voice; interpretative phenomenological analysis

INTRODUCTION
Investigation shows that the majority of e-learning research studies have originated in higher education, whilst adult and community learning and work-based learning are poorly represented in the literature. Many are contextualised and teacher-focused with an emphasis on specific aspects such as virtual learning environments (e.g. Browne & Jenkins, 2003), e-assessment (e.g. Conole & Warburton, 2005), student discussion boards (e.g. Sorensen & Takle, 2002; Webb, Jones, Barker & van Shaik, 2004) and e-portfolios (e.g Clegg, Hudson & Mitchell, 2005). A few embrace a wider perspective, including reviews of individual learning approaches (e.g. Mayes, 2004) and student perceptions of online learning (e.g. Song, Singleton, Hill & Koh, 2003). However, only a small minority put the learner's voice centre stage. This is tacitly acknowledged by the DfES in its recently published e-strategy Harnessing Technology (2005) in which it is stated that,

> *"We need to listen to people's views and ensure that technology meets their needs."*

The disparate nature of these studies points clearly to the need for a more integrated, cross-sector approach which will inform e-learning developments and help to ensure a real benefit for the learner.

BACKGROUND
In order to address this need for a more integrated approach, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) in the UK has funded The Learner's Experience of E-Learning (LEX) research study under the Pedagogy strand of the JISC e-Learning Development Programme. The research study runs for one year from May 2005 and forms part of the 'Understanding my Learning' theme which is exploring learner perspectives on e-learning. It sets out to capture learner voices across the broad range of post–16 learning and to give equal weight to those voices, including:

- community based learners in a neighbourhood ICT centre
- work based learners in an employer's premises

- undergraduates involved in blended courses, online PDP and e-assessment activities
- postgraduate learners undertaking fully online, masters level modules
- basic skills learners doing online diagnostics and tests in a Learndirect centre

The LEX study is closely linked to a recently completed Learner Scoping Study (Sharpe et al, 2005), also funded by JISC, and is designed to result in improved insight into learner motivation, perception, and interaction with other learners and tutors, which will lead in turn to practical results including guidance for e-learning designers and tutors. This paper will describe the development, evolution and implementation of the research methodology. It will also outline through case studies a number of issues that are being raised by learners in the research, including how learners describe their approaches to e-learning tasks, their strategies to overcome problems, together with their expectations and experiences of e-learning. Motivational factors and their influences on learner engagement, or lack of it, in e-learning across a range of educational contexts and technology use are also a feature of the case studies. We do not however present emergent findings since the methodology used in the project emphasises a rigorous approach to data analysis and the project is only at an early stage in the procedure.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Along with a predominately HE focus, the majority of e-learning studies to date have provided a perspective which emphasises course design, tutor intervention or technology rather than foregrounding the learner voice (e.g Fox & MacKeogh, 2003; Salmon, 2002; Attewell, 2005). This study is adopting a more holistic view of the learner experience which tries to capture the overall role and broader impact of the application of technology to learning. Given the diverse nature of learner profiles and lifestyles we recognise that this is a challenging and somewhat daunting undertaking. We acknowledge also that the impact of e-learning cannot easily be separated out from the complex nature of the learning experience as a whole. As Entwistle et al (2002) comment:

"Besides all the complexity created by marked differences across subject areas and myriad individual differences among both staff and students which prevent simple patterns emerging, there are additional crucial differences between the idealized world described by research and the actual world experienced by the participants."

The research methodology starts from the premise therefore that learners are experts on their own experiences and that these experiences will be influenced in turn by a wide range of factors. We are interested in exploring the strategies e-learners adopt in order to cope with the demands of technology and learning in relation to other aspects of their lives, and in particular to examine what aspects of their approach and attitudes towards technology might allow them to be categorised as 'effective' e-learners.

Development

Our approach has been strongly influenced by the findings and recommendations of the JISC Scoping Study Final Report (Sharpe et al, 2005) and the views of the Pedagogy Strand consultant[1], both of which advocate the 'Interview Plus' approach as a technique to capture effectively the beliefs, intentions, motivations and feelings of learners. It is based on the conduct and analysis of individual interviews supported by appropriate artefacts such as learning diaries, blogs, transcripts of asynchronous discussions and e-portfolios, which would normally be created by the learner during a learning episode. These artefacts can then be used as prompts to instigate discussion and encourage deeper reflection during an interview (Aspden & Helm, 2004). As the main aim of the research study is to elicit reflective individual narratives, the research team resolved to adopt this fundamentally phenomenological approach rather than engage in large-scale surveys.

[1] The term Interview Plus was coined by Helen Beetham, consultant to the JISC Pedagogy strand, during project meetings and described in detail in an email to joint project teams on 29th November 2005.

As well as interviews, a few focus groups are also being conducted, initially to refine the research focus and question types, and subsequently to ratify and probe issues which have come to the fore during individual interviews. They are also being used as another means of identifying individuals for interview.

As the study is tasked with covering a representative sample of learners from Adult and Community Learning (ACL) as well as Higher and Further Education (HE and FE) from across the UK, a first step was to identify an appropriate range of learning contexts, both formal and informal, in which e-learning was playing a part. We view e-learning as a broad concept which encompasses the application of a range of technologies to support and enhance learning, of which we are committed to include a representative sample. We were also guided by the influential research by Jones, Asensio, Goodyear, Hodgson and Steeples C. (2001) into Networked Learning in HE which proposes the definition,

"Learning in which information and communications technology (ICT) is used to promote connections between: one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources." (Final Report vol 1: p5)

The acknowledgement that rich interaction necessarily involves resources, people and technology resonates closely with the all-encompassing approach of the LEX study.

Evolution

The approach is bottom up therefore, starting from the words and experiences of learners rather than a theoretical base. Our research questions stem from an evaluation matrix included in the Learner Scoping Study Final Report and developed further by the LEX research team.

A distillation of the questions highlights three key areas:

- What might characterise effective learners in an e-learning context?

  (e.g. IT skills, confidence, technology-rich background)

- What beliefs and intentions do effective learners display?

  (e.g. understanding of the teaching and learning process and their role within that, personal motivation, emotional aspects of technology use.)

- What strategies do effective learners display?

  (e.g. managing their learning, fitting life around learning, coping with problems, willingness to engage in networked learning)

  (Adapted from Sharpe et al, 2005: p12)

The generic nature of these questions once again highlights the need to consider e-learning within the broader learning experience.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

In recognition of the subjective nature of the learner experience, the research team decided to adopt an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) as described by Reid, Flowers and Larkin (2005). To date, this methodology has been used primarily in the health sector (e.g. Flowers et al, 2001; Michie et al, 2003), and rests on the premise, as does the LEX study, that the interviewee is expert on their own experience. This inductive approach deliberately avoids testing hypotheses and making prior assumptions, but rather encourages participants to provide their own detailed narrative, interpreting their understanding of their experiences firstly for themselves and subsequently for the researcher. Its aim is to capture and explore the meanings that participants assign to their own experiences, reduce the complexity of the resultant data through rigorous analysis and provide an interpretative, transparent and reflective account of the outcome. As well as providing a plausible interpretation of an individual experience, the analysis should maintain a balance by drawing out shared aspects of experiences across a group of participants. By marrying this with the Interview Plus approach

described above, we aim to elicit highly personal and subjective data from individual interviewees alongside the identification of shared characteristics across the sample.

The adoption of the IPA methodology however has not been without its challenges. Our initial approach to the interview schedule was to identify the key issues we wished to address and to draw up a standard semi-structured interview schedule based around the main questions. We included sufficient flexibility at the start of the interview for the introduction of the specific learning artefact around which discussion would be instigated, with the aim of gradually shifting from the specific and concrete aspects of the interviewee's learning experience towards the more general and abstract. Indeed our first few interviews were implemented using this structure. As our understanding of the IPA approach grew however, we came to realise that we should actually reverse this process by starting off the interview at a more general level and only later encourage a focus on specifics through introducing the learning artefact. This would allow further exploration of the inevitably condensed meanings and narratives which emerge at the start of the interview, deflect the tendency to focus on course-specific aspects from the outset and allow the interviewer to follow the interviewee's story rather than employ leading questions (Reid et al, 2005). The main challenges for the interviewer therefore are to follow rather than lead, pursue hints to deeper meanings signalled by the participant and to create an atmosphere which is conducive to a reflective narrative. Our interview schedule was adjusted accordingly.

Data Analysis

Another major challenge arises in the analysis of such varied and complex data. A successful analysis should demonstrate three key features: interpretation (by the researcher), transparency (supported by examples from the data) and plausibility (should makes sense to all stakeholders) The researcher's subjective interpretation of the meanings, attitudes and understandings which underpin an individual's lived experience cannot be construed as facts, but through implementing a detailed exploratory coding approach to the analysis which highlights emergent and recurrent themes , along with rigorous cross-validation among the research team, a robust analytic interpretation can be achieved (Elliot et al, 1999; Reid et al, 2005).

One result of the development of the project is therefore expected to be a working example of the application of IPA methodology outside the health sector, and the development of a hybrid approach through, for example, combination with the Interview Plus approach.

Implementation

Along with the methodological challenges, the practical aspects of implementing the study required to be addressed. We were aware from the outset, for example, that it would be crucial to ensure 'buy-in' from tutors as they would be our main conduit to the learners. Much to our relief, requests for help were met with great interest from all sectors along with an overwhelming willingness to be involved. Letters of confirmation were sent to senior people in each organisation to ensure participation was visible and acknowledged. Despite the fact that our initial contacts with learners were by necessity via their course tutors, we made clear that our interest lay beyond the confines of any particular course. Due to the reliance on individual interviews as core to the study and also to the distributed geographical locations of learners taking part, the administrative aspects of the study have been time-consuming. Nevertheless we felt strongly that the nature of our approach necessitated face-to-face meetings rather than telephone interviews.

From our initial flurry of contacts, we identified a short list with whom we engaged in correspondence, working closely with tutors to identify individual learners and groups of learners for interview. As with all studies which involve learners directly, timing is crucial: too early in the academic year and learners have not had any real exposure to e-learning, too late and they are busy with final assignments and exams. This is only one area in which the assistance of course tutors has been vitally important. They have also spent time explaining the background to courses, helped the research team to identify appropriate artefacts for use during interviews, allowed us access to online discussions and other course resources, and provided valuable student evaluation data. With the tutors' agreement, learners were contacted directly, consent forms signed, and dates, times and interview venues agreed. National book tokens were offered as an incentive to all learners who took part.

Case study A

The Trade Union Congress (TUC) has a long history of involvement in education and training, primarily as day release courses. In recent years it has embraced e-learning as a means to reach members in the workplace and at home and has developed an e-learning strategy to inform its progress in this area. To help participants prepare for its online learning programmes, a new short course entitled 'Getting Ready for E-Learning' has been

developed. The first run of this course took place during summer 2005 with a group of more than 30 adult learners who were planning to enroll on a Work Life Balance course in the autumn of that year. We approached the course tutor who kindly agreed to help us contact these learners by giving us access to the online course and introducing us to the participants. With the agreement of the tutor, we set up a new discussion forum in which we outlined the aims of the project to the learners and invited them to reflect on their experiences of using technology for learning. It was clear from their contributions that they represented a wide range of profiles, from novice to the highly computer literate. After a review of the forum and discussions with the tutor, three follow-up interviews were conducted, using contributions to the online discussion as the main Interview Plus artefact.. The interviewees comprised two experienced, highly confident e-learners and one novice. All three were mature females and one was hearing impaired. All were employed, either full or part-time, and were fitting the course around work and family commitments. The experienced learners were generally positive about their e-learning experience for a variety of reasons:

"I can do them anytime, anywhere. At home, at work. When I've got 10 minutes in between meetings, half an hour between other things, its just you can slot it in any day of the week, you don't have to take a whole chunk out of your day to attend a course." (experienced e-learner)

"Nobody online had to know that I had a disability, whereas in a classroom environment it stands out like a sore thumb". (hearing impaired learner)

For the novice however, the emotional aspects of first encounters with e-learning were clearly expressed:

"Yeah well basically when I first went on and started to look at it I thought 'Oh my God! I don't know whether this is for me?' but then I thought calm down a bit and sit down and go through it step by step." (inexperienced e-learner)

The fact that others on the course were more experienced was daunting:

"Well what I realised was the people who were confident in IT could do that without any problems at all because what I learnt was that there were 37 of us on this course and you range from total beginner, like myself, to really, like, IT specialist, so they had absolutely no problem and had a lot of confidence in talking to each other on discussion boards because they'd obviously done it before, so they had more of a rapport and what I noticed was that although there were 37 of us on the course, it seemed to be the same people all the time who were posting on the discussion board and replying to each other." (Inexperienced e-learner)

Although innovative from the TUC perspective, the IT-literate learners did not view e-learning as particularly new:

"To me its just learning, the fact that its online as opposed to in a classroom is irrelevant. It's just another way of accessing it. It's all just learning. My personal view is, I've been involved in the internet and online stuff for a long time, in some ways it strikes me as quite old-fashioned and quite quaint, but talking to other people they're like 'Oh wow,! It's online! It's e-learning!' and I think it depends on where you're coming from what it means to you, but for me I just think of it as learning and I don't use the term [e-learning]." (Experienced e-learner)

Despite the clear differences in prior experience and attitudes towards learning online, all three learners successfully completed this particular online course and expressed readiness to sign up for the next one.

Case study B

This group were first year business students at a UK HE university. The cohort was a large class consisting of students from a range of business school courses taking a campus-based, core module in Economies, Markets and Enterprise. The class ranged from school leavers to mature students. The classes took place in a large (500 seat) lecture theatre, equipped with state of the art audio visuals such as whiteboards, internet access, video and media. The module also made use of the institutions VLE to offer extra support by way of student & tutor discussion boards and email, resources and resource sharing, timetabling, and course information.

"I think using ...certain kinds of technology is really good like the internet is a god-send like in my opinion...because you can look at Blackboard and that's like a good way of communicating with all the students at the same time ..." (18 year old school leaver)

Our contact with the learners was initially through one of their tutors who uses a rich media mix in his lectures and who is an early adopter of e-learning technologies. With his endorsement we asked for volunteers to email the tutor to state their interest. We required the students to keep a blog/reflective diary for two weeks, to be followed by a 1 hour individual interview in the third week.

Of the 12 initial respondents, only 6 made a start on their blogs, and of these 4 attended for interview. Trying to co-ordinate students and available quiet rooms was challenging and took a little organising, especially as we did not have direct access to the students and had to rely on email and on the students checking this regularly. However, with the IPA methodology the smaller number of students was not seen as problematic. They may be somewhat self-selecting, but the use of the blog appears to have been a successful way of choosing potentially 'effective' e-learners.

We asked the students to keep a reflective diary, via the blog, on their use of technologies for learning, personal or other use. We initially asked them to tell us what kind of technologies they used in their everyday lives (personal and work) and their feelings about the technologies. We then asked them to think about what technologies they used in their learning and studies, and talk about this.

Since employing the IPA methodology, we felt it was important to re-think our interview techniques from the initial semi-structured approach, and these students were the first batch through with the refined, more open question set. We started the interviews with an initial open question encouraging the student do as much of the talking as possible. As can be imagined, this was easier with some students than with others. During the interview we also used a printout of the student's blog as an artefact in keeping with the Interview Plus approach.

The group appeared to be of mixed ability and confidence though all displayed proficiency, some being much more explicitly confident in use of new technologies than others, and some being much more aware of their use of technologies for learning. One student noted that:

"I read like the paper on-line ... and I never realised that ... I was actually learning something when you're reading the paper…I was like oh I'm learning and I'm not aware of it…" (18 year old school leaver)

Another commented on where they preferred to study:

"At university I find it an easier atmosphere to learn in than I do at home …when I'm at home you get more distracted…because you have television there…erm, I mean I do have a computer at home and I use it a lot but sometimes you get distracted…and I'll just put messenger on for a wee while…Yeah I find it easier to learn in a sort of learning institute than it is at home." (Inexperienced e-learner)

Whereas a mature student made an age comparison on use of technology:

"Erm I like to try and use it [technology]. I'm competent but I wouldn't say overwhelmingly so. I think a lot of the stuff that younger people would find a lot easier I find harder." (Mature student)

Case study C

This case study is based on a busy community learning centre in a large acute hospital in North London. The learning centre attracts staff from the hospital and learners from the local community. A focus group was arranged, in part as a way of identifying potential candidates for individual interviews.

The learning centre mainly offers personalised Learndirect learning with an emphasis on level 1 and 2 ICT and skills for life qualifications. Group workshops are offered to learners who wish to take part in class based sessions, although none of the focus group had taken part in these sessions or was even aware of them.

The centre had never been approached to set up a focus group before and the staff were enthusiastic in helping set it up. The staff identified two slots for focus group session that would be suitable for their busy learners – one a lunchtime session and one in the early evening when some hospital staff would be at the end of their shift. An open invitation letter was sent to all learners registered with the centre and a broad mix of learners were recruited to the two focus groups, with 13 participants overall. The mix included hospital staff, unemployed people from the local community, a retired person, and a construction apprentice catching up on IT skills. Three learners did not have English as a first language.

The focus groups were held in the learning centre, in the area used for online tests for literacy, numeracy and IT qualifications. Being in the centre may have acted as a prompt for their thoughts about their learning experiences, in line with the 'Interview Plus' approach.

Learners commented about the positive value they got from the Learndirect learning approach, in addition to their specific learning aims:

"I think it's really good because as you're learning, I'm doing literacy and numeracy but as I'm learning about literacy and numeracy I'm picking things up that I maybe didn't know before on the computer." (level 2 literacy learner)

Comparisons with other modes of learning was a common occurrence:

"I do think it is a good way to learn and I do think that I learn a lot easier than what I did in college, pick it up a lot quicker and working at my own pace again." (19 year old ex-FE learner)

Working individually, at their own pace, was important for some, to the point of wanting to be cut off from distractions:

"I don't think I've ever met any other learners, to tell you the truth [laughs]. But I think that, I think that's quite good…you can come and there are quite a few people here but you can actually just sit down and get on with your own work and just focus just like everybody else is, whereas in a classroom environment you might find that if this was our class that I'm talking to this gentleman here and I'm therefore distracting you and things like that. I think it's pretty good actually and the fact that we have headphones so you can block out the rest of the noise around you, even if you're not listening to anything." *(Learner studying to become a teaching assistant)*

And getting away from traditional exams and having the opportunity for computer based assessments was a clear advantage for some:

"I preferred it because when you've got an exam and it's on paper it tends to be all black and white, just in a list form, I suppose and it's not interesting or eye catching. I know that's not what exams are for but it always helps like on the computer you've got like visual aids like little pictures or something just to like break up the writing so it makes it a little bit easier." (Learner preparing for online numeracy test)

Points for discussion

The case studies have been presented to provide a flavour of our methodology and to illustrate the diversity of learner profiles and contexts. At time of writing (January 06) interviews are still underway and in-depth data analysis is only just beginning, therefore we have avoided the temptation to draw definitive conclusions or to draw up a tentative list of emerging themes. We would however encourage consideration of these issues arising from the LEX project:

- How can bottom up research methodologies such as that developed for the LEX project be put to best use?
- How can we better support learners with their use and understanding of e-learning opportunities?
- How can we promote the development of models and systems that improve learners' access to and choice of e-learning opportunities?
- How can learning environments be developed to ensure that we can meet learner expectations and provide for differentiation between learners?

REFERENCES

Aspden L. and Helm, P. (2004). Researching Networked Learning: Critically Reviewing an Adaptive Evaluation, *Proceedings of Networked Learning Conference*, (Lancaster, UK, 2004) , pp356-362. Available online at http://www.shef.ac.uk/nlc2004/Proceedings/Individual_Papers/Aspden_Helm.htm . [Accessed 9.1.06].

Attewell, J. (2005). *Mobile technologies and learning: a technology update and m-learning project summary,* LSDA, Available online at http://www.m-learning.org/docs/The%20m-learning%20project%20-%20technology%20update%20and%20project%20summary.pdf, [Accessed 9.1.06].

Clegg S., Hudson A., Mitchell A. (2005). The personal created through dialogue: enhancing possibilities through the use of new media, *ALT-J*, 13, 1, 3-15

Browne T. & Jenkins M. (2003). VLE Surveys: a longitudinal perspective between March 2001 and March 2003 for HE in the UK, *UCISA report*, available online at http://www.ucisa.ac.uk/groups/tlig/vle/index_html. [Accessed 9.1.06]

Conole G. & Warburton B. (2005). A review of computer-assisted assessment*, ALT-J*, 13, 1, 17-31

DfES E-Strategy (2005). *Harnessing Technology: transforming Learning and Children's Services*, available online at http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/e-strategy/ . [Accessed 9.1.06]

Elliot, R., Fischer, C.T., & Rennie, D.L. (1999). Evolving guidelines for publication of qualitative research studies in psychology and related fields, *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 38, 215-299.

Entwistle, N., McCune, V. and Hounsell, J. (2002). Approaches to Studying and Perceptions of University Teaching-Learning Environments: Concepts, Measures and Preliminary Findings. ETLProject, Universities of Edinburgh, Coventry and Durham. *Enhancing Teaching and Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses Occasional Report 1*, September 2002, available online at http://www.ed.ac.uk/etl/docs/ETLreport1.pdf. [Accessed 9.1.06]

Fox, S. and MacKeogh, K. (2003). Can eLearning promote higher-order learning without tutor overload? *Open Learning,* 18, (2) 121-134.

Jones C., Asensio M., Goodyear P., Hodgson V., Steeples C. (2001). *Networked Learning in Higher Education Project: Final Report on the Field Studies*, University of Lancaster. Available online at: http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/edres/research/csalt/networklearn/. [Accessed 9.1.06].

Mayes J.T. (2004). Learner-centred pedagogy: individual differences between learners, report *for JISC E-learning Models Desk Study,* available online at http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/Stage%202%20Learning%20Styles%20(Version%201).pdf . [Accessed 9.1.06].

Reid, K. Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. (2005). Exploring Lived Experience, *The Psychologist*, 18, 1, 20-23.

Salmon, G. (2004). *E-moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online* (2nd Ed). London, Kogan Page.

Sharpe R., Benfield G., Lessner E. & DeCicco E. (2005). *Scoping Study for the Pedagogy strand of the JISC e-Learning Programme,* Available online at http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/scoping%20study%20final%20report%20v4.1.doc. [Accessed 9.1.06]

Song L., Singleton E., Hill J. & Koh M. (2004). Improving online learning: student perceptions of useful and challenging characteristics*, Internet & Higher Education*, 7, 59-70.

Sorensen E. & Takle E. (2002). Collaborative knowledge building in web-based learning: assessing the quality of dialogue*, International Journal on E-learning*, January-March 2002, 28-32.

Webb E., Jones A., Barker P. & van Shaik P. (2004). Using e-learning dialogues in higher education*, Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 41, 1, 93-103.