

**An Exploration into Perspectives on
Literacy and Literacy Education for
Students between the Age of 16 and
18 who are Taking Vocational
Qualifications in a Further
Education College**

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Abstract

This study investigates the issue of literacy education for 16-18 year olds who attend literacy lessons as part of a larger vocational programme of study in further education colleges in England. The issue is investigated through focus groups with students, one-to-one interviews with literacy teachers and through lesson observations, and draws on the perspectives of the students for whom the literacy lessons are intended, and their literacy teachers. The study considers three different perspectives of literacy: literacy as a skill, literacy as social practice and literacy in action, as ways of conceptualising literacy, and as a theoretical framework for the analysis and interpretation of the data.

The study concludes that there is no one, single or fixed perspective on literacy or literacy education held by the students who took part in the study that defines what those students think literacy *is* in the context of their literacy lessons, or how those students viewed the literacy education offered to them. The students who took part in the study drew implicitly on different perspectives of literacy pragmatically according to their literacy needs at any one time. The study shows that students' perspectives on literacy often differed from perspectives held by other stakeholders in the field, such as government, business leaders, awarding bodies, and college management teams. The study also shows that in the context of 16-18 year old vocational education, what the students thought of as good literacy learning activities and what they thought of as good teaching and learning were related. This has implications for pedagogy in post-16 vocational education in general, as well as for teachers of literacy to 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in further education colleges.

Declaration and Word Count

The candidate hereby declares that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely his own.

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Glossary of Terms

CBI	Confederation for British Industry
CIF	Common Inspection Framework
CEG	Careers Education and Guidance
CPVE	Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education
DfE	Department for Education
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
EFA	Education Funding Agency
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FEC	Further Education College
FEU	Further Education Unit
FSSP	Functional Skills Support Programme
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
LLUK	Lifelong Learning United Kingdom
LO	Lesson Observation
MSC	Manpower Services Commission
NCVQ	National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NRDC	National Research and Development Centre
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
Ofqual	Office for Qualifications and Standards
Ofsted	Office of Standards in Education
QCF	Qualifications and Credit Framework
SFG	Student Focus Group
TLRP	Teaching and Learning Research Programme
TP	Teacher Participant
TVEI	Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative
YTS	Youth Training Scheme

Preface: Reflections on Professional Learning

I undertook the Doctorate in Education (EdD) degree out of a desire to understand better the professional context I had been working in for the previous eight years. I had observed at work problems that existed in the sector that seemed largely intractable, and I wanted to find out why the problems existed, and if anything could be done to improve things. My professional context is literacy in post-16 education. My academic interests are linked to my professional interests in literacy and literacy education in the post-16 sector.

In the early part of my work on the EdD, I focused on the background to my professional context, in particular the development of vocational education from the mid-1970s, and the place literacy had had in that development. I was struck by the way the period could be characterised as a single policy period in spite of the length of time the period covered and the changes in government that had taken place during that time, characterised singularly by the way different governments drew again and again on the notion of qualifications reform as a strategy to improve standards in vocational education and in literacy education as an aspect of vocational learning, whether or not there was any evidence that the strategy was working. An understanding of the development of vocational qualifications, with their focus on skills development and competency-informed assessments, and the development of literacy qualifications as one aspect of vocational education, gave me an insight into how the notion of 'literacy as a skill' had developed and why the literacy qualifications that had been developed as part of a larger vocational programme of study were similarly assessed through competency-informed assessment frameworks that drew on the notion of literacy as a skill; one that could be taught, learned, and when learned, transferred to other contexts. My investigation into the background of vocational education also gave me an insight into the motivation behind the formation of government policy on vocational education, and the connection between policy and the funding and regulation of colleges. I became increasingly aware of the extent to which the practice of literacy teaching in post-16 education could not be separated from its political and economic context.

I also investigated different perspectives on literacy, in particular the notion of literacy as social practice, drawing on the work of Street (1984) and Barton and Hamilton (1998) in the UK, and Heath (1983) and Gee (1996) in the USA. The notion of a connection between a person's use of language and literacy, and that person's sense of themselves, their identity, resonated strongly with me, as did the notion of multiple literacies, one of which is the academic literacy of formal educational setting. I was particularly struck by the social practice perspective that characterised people who were perceived to have low levels of literacy as people who were in fact simply not able to live up to governmental notions of what literacy is in a formal setting, even though they may have been competent in other varieties of literacy in contexts that were familiar to them. I drew on this perspective of literacy as a framework for the analysis of data in my Institution-Focused Study (IFS).

A third strand of work I undertook in the early part of the EdD was on research methodology and research methods appropriate to the kind of study I was planning to carry out. I decided early on that the focus of my research was not simply literacy, but literacy education, specifically literacy education in the post-16 sector, and that the outcomes of the research should where possible inform my professional practice. I decided that the setting for my research would be an educational setting, and that the research participants would be the students and teachers of the literacy courses I taught or managed. I wanted to know why things were the way they were, and what could be done to improve things. I decided that the best way to find out what the students and teachers thought about literacy and literacy education at college was to ask them, and to observe them in their literacy classrooms. I therefore decided to take a qualitative approach to the generation and analysis of data, using interviews and classroom observations as my two main methods of generating data.

The setting of my Institution-Focused Study (IFS) was an Adult Literacy class in the college where I work. The title of the study was Adult Literacy and Identity. I drew on a social practice perspective of literacy to investigate the extent to which the literacies the students in the class were familiar with in their everyday lives were

drawn on in the students' Adult Literacy lessons. I took a qualitative approach to the study, carrying out lesson observations of the Adult Literacy class and one-to-one interviews with a sample of the students. I found out that the academic variety of literacy associated with formal educational settings was the only variety of literacy that was used in the Adult Literacy lessons, and that none of the varieties of literacy familiar to the students in their everyday lives were drawn on in any of the lessons. I also found out through interviews with students that the students did not value the literacies they were familiar with in their everyday lives, and that none of the students in fact wanted any variety of literacy other than the academic literacy associated with formal educational setting to be used in their Adult Literacy lessons. The students wanted to be taught, and to learn academic literacy as used in formal educational settings, and as privileged by schools and colleges.

I must admit that I was surprised by the outcome of the study. I had expected that the students would have been glad to know that someone acknowledged the literacy skills they had in the contexts that they were familiar with in their everyday lives. As far as the students who took part in this study were concerned, this was not the case. While I believe my study of the social practice perspective of literacy and the use of the social practice perspective as a framework for the analysis of the IFS data better enabled me to take into account the problems my students faced when I planned and taught literacy lessons, the aspirations I had for the students in acknowledging the literacy skills the students had in the contexts of their everyday lives, were not the aspirations the students had for themselves. I also realised that my focus on a social practice perspective was not necessarily the focus the students wanted me to take when planning and teaching their literacy lessons, if it was to the exclusion of other perspectives of literacy. The outcomes of the IFS paved the way for my thesis.

As with the IFS, I located the subject of my thesis in my professional context, in this case literacy education for 16-18 year old students who were taking a larger vocational programme of study. I wanted to find out what 16-18 year old students who were taking vocational qualifications thought about literacy, and the literacy education offered to them as part of their vocational programme of study, and if their

thoughts on literacy and literacy education resonated in any way with the adult students who took part in the IFS. I also wanted to develop the thesis academically by bringing into the framework for analysis perspectives on literacy other than the social practice perspective that had informed my analysis in the IFS. I wanted to do this in order to take a more comprehensive approach to the interpretation and analysis of the data. I therefore decided to draw on two additional perspectives of literacy to act as theoretical constructs to inform my analysis and interpretation of the data. These were literacy as a skill, and literacy-in-action (Brandt & Clinton, 2002).

The literacy as a skill perspective was intended to act as an alternative perspective to the social practice perspective, in that it sees literacy as an individual, cognitive activity that people do by themselves, rather than literacy as existing within a community of practice. The literacy as a skill perspective was also relevant to the study in that it was the perspective explicitly adopted by the government's Office for Qualifications and Standards (Ofqual) in its guidance to awarding bodies on the production and development of Functional Skills English qualifications (Ofqual, 2011). The literacy-in-action perspective drew on and extended the social practice perspective by including two additional constructs: a consideration of the reciprocal relationship between people and literacy, as in the effect literacy has on people, not only what people do with literacy, and the effect on what people do with literacy brought about by influences beyond the immediate context, what Brandt and Clinton referred to as 'globalising connects' (Brandt & Clinton, 2002), such as the effect the Internet has on the way people use literacy.

The three perspectives together provided a broader framework for the analysis and interpretation of data than I had had in the IFS, and this proved useful in revealing the extent to which stakeholders in the field of literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications share a common understanding of what they think literacy is, and what the students are or should be trying to achieve when they attend their literacy lessons, and the extent to which students and teachers do or do not aligned themselves to any one particular perspective of literacy.

The 16-18 year old students who took part in the study responded differently to the adult students who took part in the IFS, and while I acknowledge that the outcomes of the IFS were not intended to be generalizable beyond the context of the study, the outcomes of the two studies taken together nevertheless highlight emerging differences between the pedagogies of adult literacy and literacy for 16-18 year olds who take vocational programmes of study, and this has had implications for my professional practice as a teacher and manager of literacy courses in post-16 education in terms of course design, the production of teaching and learning materials, and the professional development of teachers of literacy in college. One such difference was the perspective students had on the notion of discussion as a literacy learning activity. While the adult students who took part in the IFS did not associate discussion with their notion of academic literacy as used in formal educational setting, the majority of 16-18 year old students talked about discussion as a necessary means not only to hear other people's opinions, but as a means to form their own opinions on things, and saw this as an essential aspect of literacy learning and development. My engagement with the EdD has as such had a significant impact on my academic and professional development, and with this in mind I would like to invite you to read my thesis.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Why research 16-18 year old further education college students' perspectives on literacy and literacy education

This study is an exploration into perspectives on literacy and literacy education of students between the age of 16 and 18 who are taking vocational qualifications in a further education college (FEC). The students who took part in the study came from a range of ethnic and social backgrounds. Many of them opted to take a vocational course in a FEC because they did not achieve well enough at school to continue on an academic programme of study. The students were studying vocational subjects such as Travel & Tourism, Hair & Beauty, Sport, Health & Social Care, and Information & Communication Technology (ICT). The vocational part of their course was the students' main reason for attending college. The literacy part of the course was one part of a larger programme of study which included vocational learning, literacy, numeracy and tutorials. This study is about what these students think literacy is in the context of the literacy lessons they attended as part of their vocational course, and their perspectives on the literacy education offered to them in the FEC where they were studying.

I am a teacher and manager of literacy courses for 16-18 year olds in a FEC, and I have noticed in my own practice conflicts and tensions that exist at a political, an economic and an institutional level in the field of literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational programmes of study in FECs, and it is a recognition of these conflicts and tensions, and the effect they have on the students for whom those programmes of study are intended, that led me to decide to do this project.

Stakeholders in the field of literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs are numerous. They include government¹, business leaders, the media, further education colleges and their support networks, teachers, researchers, parents and carers, as well as the students themselves. At a political and economic level, the interest of government, business leaders and the media is borne

¹ At the time of writing, the government was the Conservative Liberal Democrat coalition which came to power in 2011.

out of the need for a workforce suitably skilled to enable the UK to compete economically in a global market (Dearing, 1996; Leitch, 2006). Literacy is seen as one of the critical skills needed for the workforce to be suitably skilled. The target is for all students to leave full-time education with a Level 2 qualification in English (Wolf, 2011).

Business leaders and the media routinely voice criticism of the area, characterising literacy among 16-18 year olds leaving vocational education and entering the workforce as problematic, and call on the government to do more to drive improvements in literacy among 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs (CBI, 2006; THES, 2007; The Guardian, 2011). The government's own reviews also periodically remind the government that there is little evidence to suggest that its strategy to drive improvements in literacy among 16-18 year olds in FECs is working (Dearing, 1996; Leitch, 2006; Wolf, 2011). For government, business leaders and the media, the issue of literacy among 16-18 year olds leaving further education and entering the workforce, and the effect this has on business and the economy has been an intractable problem that has remained unresolved after more than 30 years of government intervention (Coffield et.al., 2008).

Government intervention is enacted through funding, through the government's approach to qualifications reform, and through the various governments' inspection and regulation of FECs; and it is these interventions and the constraints they impose on FECs that have led to conflicts and tensions in literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs at an institutional level.

Funding for 16-18 year olds in FECs is separated out from funding for students who are 19 years old and over. The government mandates through its funding regulations that all 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs take part in some form of literacy education while in full-time education, but does not fund students who are 19 years old and over to take part in the same literacy education (EFA, 2014). The mandatory nature of funding for 16-18 year olds and the constraint on funding for students who are 19 years old and over inevitably creates tensions at an institutional level as seemingly arbitrary notions of how funding operates according to age, results in 16-18 year olds being required to attend literacy classes whether or

not they want to or are considered to be below the required level of literacy, and others who are 19 years old being disenfranchised from those classes, even though they may be ready and willing to take part.

The government's approach to qualifications reform as a strategy to raise standards of literacy among 16-18 year olds has also led to conflicts and tensions at an institutional level. Since the late 1980s, the reform of literacy qualifications for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs has seen the introduction of Core Skills Communication in 1988, followed by Key Skills Communication in 1999 and Functional Skills English in 2007 (Green, 1998; Lumby & Foskett, 2005; Coffield et.al., 2008). In September 2012 when I started this study, all 16-18 year old students taking vocational qualifications in FECs were required to take a Functional Skills English qualification as one element of their full-time programme of study. Since September 2013, following the 2011 publication of the influential Wolf review of vocational education, all 16-18 year old students leaving school and entering a FEC without A*-C GCSE English are now required to continue working towards GCSE English while at college (Wolf, 2011). The Level 2 literacy qualification offered to 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs has therefore changed since the start of the study from Level 2 Functional Skills English to GCSE English, an issue I address later on in the chapter. The notion that literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs should be mandatory, and the approach to qualifications reform as a strategy to raise standards of literacy among 16-18 year olds in FECs remains the same.

Issues with qualifications reform are not restricted to the effect that continual qualifications reform has on the credibility of those qualifications in the eyes of the students who take the qualifications and people in the wider community. The issue of whether a qualifications-driven agenda in fact leads to improvements in literacy among 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs remains unresolved. There is as yet little evidence to show that achievement of accredited literacy qualifications equates to competency in literacy, as viewed by business leaders and the media (CBI, 2011; Independent 2014).

Government intervention is also enacted by the Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted) through its inspection of colleges. The Common Inspection Framework (CIF), Ofsted's guidance to FECs on the inspection of colleges, requires FECs to take a dual approach to the provision of literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications: firstly through the provision of discrete literacy classes, FECs are funded to provide all 16-18 year old students with one 90-minute literacy lesson each week for the duration of their full-time course; and secondly through teachers of vocational courses helping their students improve their use of literacy whilst taking their vocational course. Both aspects are monitored and reported on by Ofsted during the inspection of FECs.

Taken together, the two aspects may seem to offer 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs a comprehensive literacy education, with teachers of vocational subjects working with their students on their use of literacy on a day-to-day basis whilst taking their vocational course, and specialist teachers of literacy giving students the specialist input they require once a week. I am aware through my professional practice however, that specialist literacy teachers often see the allocation of one 90-minute lesson a week as insufficient time for the students and the teachers to achieve the sort of results expected of them, and teachers of vocational subjects often comment that they are not qualified or experienced enough in literacy teaching to offer their students the kind of professional support in literacy that is being required of them. The approach gives rise to conflicts and tensions, as neither the specialist literacy teachers nor the teachers of vocational subjects see their role in improving their students' use of literacy as achievable.

Given the structural constraints that exist in the field of literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, and the conflicts and tensions these structural constraints create, it is questionable whether in fact it is possible for FECs to offer a comprehensive literacy education to their 16-18 year old students. The field is further problematized by differences that exist in perspectives on what literacy *is* among the different stakeholders in the field. The Office for Qualifications and Standards (Ofqual), in its guidance on Level 2 Functional Skills English, characterises literacy as a skill (Ofqual, 2011), something that can be taught, practised and learned, in a similar way to other skills such as playing football,

playing the piano, or learning to cook. It sees literacy as an individual, cognitive activity that people do alone (Ofqual, 2011).

Researchers working in the tradition of New Literacy Studies however, (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Gee, 1996; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Rampton, 2006), have argued that a focus on literacy should be a focus on the social practices of a community rather than on just the language used by individuals in that community. They argue against the idea that literacy is fundamentally about an individual's ability to read and write, and suggest that people who are thought to have low levels of literacy may in fact be simply unable to perform up to a standard represented by governmental notions of what literacy is in a formal setting. Others have argued that the connection between standards in literacy and problems in the economy are overstated, and that the resolution of problems with business and the economy is more to do with changes that are needed to management practices and to workers' terms and conditions of employment than to raising standards of literacy in the workforce (Gowen, 1994).

The government nevertheless adopts the CBI perspective that literacy among 16-18 year olds leaving vocational education and entering the workforce is problematic, and as such hinders the country's economic development (CBI, 2011). It continues to see the problem in terms of the way literacy is taught and learned in schools and colleges, and seeks to address the problem through the education and training system and the qualifications it funds.

Through this study I want to investigate literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs from the perspective of the students, because I believe that to see improvements in literacy among 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, teachers and managers of those literacy courses need to know more about what their students think literacy is, how their students view the literacy classes offered to them as part of their vocational programmes of study, and how the conflicts and tensions brought about by policy and funding affect the way 16-18 year old students experience literacy education while at college from their own perspectives.

I do not seek to offer a resolution to the way literacy education for 16-18 year olds in FECs is funded or regulated; nor do I seek answers to the effectiveness of a qualifications-driven approach to driving improvements in literacy among 16-18 year olds in FECs. I also do not address the issue of a perceived connection between literacy among 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs and the economy, but I do want to contribute to an understanding of the conflicts and tensions within literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs as they are experienced by students. The study therefore draws on students' perspectives for insights into how FECs might better address the issue of literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational programmes of study in FECs, given the structural constraints, and the conflicts and tensions that already exist.

In parallel to this, I intend to carry out a similar investigation into literacy teachers' perspectives on the challenges FECs face with regard to literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications. I want to find out if literacy teachers' perspectives offer further insights into how FECs might better address the issue of literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, and whether or to what extent the teachers' perspectives resonate with those of the students.

I am aware of the relatively large amount of research commissioned and undertaken in the field of literacy education in schools (Murphy, 1974; Watson, 1998; Logan, 2008; Snape, 2011), and an increasing amount in the field of adult literacy (Heath, 1983; Gee, 1996; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Rampton, 2006; Houghton, 2010; Hamilton, 2012). Much less attention has been paid to the field of literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs. The field is nevertheless an area of considerable concern for government, business leaders and the media, not to mention FECs, and their teachers and students. I aim therefore to contribute to and develop the body of research in the field of literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs.

In doing so, I plan to draw on my knowledge of the historical development of literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, and how the current situation came into being. I also plan to draw on my knowledge of

different perspectives on literacy that have emerged over the last thirty years that have influenced my work as a literacy teacher and manager, and policy makers in their decisions on why and how to fund and regulate literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs. My aim is to find out if a knowledge of the background to literacy education for 16-18 year olds in FECs, and a knowledge of different perspectives on literacy can be used to gain insights into the problems experienced by 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, and whether such insights can be used reciprocally to enable me to develop my understanding of those perspectives on literacy, and to inform my future practice as a teacher and manager of literacy courses for 16-18 year olds in the FEC where I work.

1.2 Terminology

The students who participated in this study were taking Level 2 Functional Skills English as the literacy qualification offered to them as part of their vocational programme of study. I refer throughout the study to Level 2 Functional Skills English as a literacy qualification, and I use the terms ‘literacy’ and ‘English’ interchangeably. I do so because I see Functional Skills English, with its focus on the correct use of spelling, punctuation and grammar, as a literacy qualification, in spite of the fact that it has the term ‘English’ in its name.

I am however aware that the terms are used differently in different sectors, and may be interpreted differently by teachers and students. In the school sector, through its focus on GCSE English, the term ‘English’ is more commonly used. In the adult education sector, the term ‘literacy’ as in the Certificate in Adult Literacy that formed part of the Skills for Life initiative from 2000 to 2010 is more commonly used. For 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, the named qualifications from 1989 to 2007, Core Skills Communication and Key Skills Communication, avoided the use of the terms ‘literacy’ and ‘English’, although the content and modes of assessment of the qualifications resembled the Certificate in Adult Literacy more than GCSE English. The Labour government of 2007 re-introduced the term ‘English’ into the name of the literacy qualification offered to 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs with the introduction of Functional Skills English, although the learning outcomes and assessment criteria

remained closer to the former Key Skills Communication than GCSE English. The current Conservative Liberal Democrat coalition consolidated the use of the term 'English' through the current requirement that all 16-18 year olds entering FECs without A*-C GCSE English continue to work towards that qualification.

1.3 The research setting

The research setting is the FEC where I work. The College is located in a county town in Central England. The town and surrounding area has a diverse population. The students come from a range of social, economic and ethnic backgrounds. In any one year the College has approximately 4,000 students, just under half of which are 16-18 year olds and just over half of which are adults. The college has a wide remit. It offers vocational education and training to 16-18 year olds and adults in a range of vocational subject such as Construction, Engineering, Hospitality & Catering, Hairdressing & Beauty Therapy and Childcare. Like schools, the College offers GCSEs to 16-18 year olds, and like universities, it offers foundation degrees to adults. It runs courses such as English as a Second Language in community locations, and apprenticeships in work-based settings. It welcomes and delivers discrete programmes of study for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

The College offers vocational programmes of study at Entry level and Levels² 1, 2 and 3, and at the time of data generation, Functional Skills qualifications in English, Maths and ICT at Entry level and Levels 1 and 2. While data for the study was generated in just one FEC, the issue is nevertheless bigger than just the individuals in this study. An exploration into students' perspectives on literacy and literacy education for 16-18 year olds who are taking vocational qualifications in FECs, given the structural constraints and tensions that exist in the sector, may be of interest to all teachers and managers of literacy courses for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, as well as policy makers, business leaders and the media.

² Level 1 of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) is equivalent to Grade D-G GCSE; Level 2 of the QCF is equivalent to A*-C GCSE; Level 3 of the QCF is equivalent to A-level.

I restricted the student participant sample to students taking Level 2 Functional Skills English to create a level of homogeneity when selecting the student participant sample and in the analysis of the data. Level 2 literacy is also the government's target for all 16-18 year olds. In 2012/13, when the data was generated, 1,480 16-18 year old students took a Functional Skills English qualification in the college; of these, 215 took Functional Skills English at Level 2. Level 2 Functional Skills English has three components: a teacher-assessed Speaking & Listening assessment, an externally marked Reading exam, and an externally marked Writing exam. Students completed the Speaking & Listening assessment during class time when the teacher considered the students were ready. Students took the externally-marked Reading and Writing exams towards the end of the academic year in May 2013. The data for the project was generated in November and December 2012.

The college uses government funding regulations to inform college policy on literacy education for its 16-18 year old students taking vocational programmes of study. When funding regulations change, the college amends its policy accordingly. In 2012/13, college policy required all 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications to be timetabled one 90-minute literacy lesson a week for the duration of the academic year, and to be entered for a Functional Skills English qualification at the level they were considered to be working at. At the time of writing, January 2015, college policy continues to require all 16-18 year old students taking vocational qualifications to be timetabled one 90-minute literacy lesson a week for the duration of the academic year. Students who are considered to be working below Level 2 continue to take Functional Skills English qualifications. Students who are considered to be working at Level 2, and who do not have Grade A*-C GCSE English are required to re-take GCSE English. Students who enter college with Grade A*-C GCSE English take an 'Advanced English' lesson designed by the college, but do not work towards a literacy qualification.

The data in this project was generated from groups of students taking Level 2 Functional Skills English. These groups of students would now take GCSE English or an Advanced English course designed by the college. The change in qualification is one of a series of changes implemented by government through its focus on qualifications reform as a vehicle for driving improvements in literacy among 16-18

year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs that resulted in changes to college policy. The findings from this study however, with their emphasis on students' perspectives on literacy and on literacy education as one aspect of a vocational programme of study, apply as much to today as when the data was generated in 2012.

In the next chapter, Chapter 2, I outline the background to literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, and the historical developments that led up to the current situation, then in Chapter 3, I discuss different perspectives on literacy and on literacy teaching that have emerged over the last thirty years that have influenced my work as a literacy teacher and manager, and have influenced policy makers in their decisions on why and how to fund and regulate literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs.

Chapter 2: The Background to Literacy Education for 16-18 Year Olds Taking Vocational Qualifications in Further Education Colleges in England

2.1 Organisation of the chapter

This chapter deals with the historical development of literacy education for 16-18 year olds in further education. The chapter begins with an outline of the development of literacy qualifications for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, and the part these qualifications played in the emergence of a skills agenda in English education. It continues with an outline of the origins of Functional Skills English, the qualification around which literacy education for 16-18 year olds in FECs was based at the time the data for the study was generated.

2.2 A political and economic perspective

Current government policy and discourse on literacy education in the further education sector was borne out of the economic difficulties of the 1970s and early 1980s. I date current government policy on literacy education in FECs back to the 1976 speech by Prime Minister James Callaghan at Ruskin College Oxford, in which he asserted that British education was not good enough to deliver the skilled workforce the country needed to compete in a global economy (Callaghan, 1976). In terms of vocational education, and literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications, I see the period since then as a single policy period that has stretched over thirty years and several governments; singular in that government policy and discourse has focused in an uninterrupted way on qualifications reform and a connection between education, skills, and the economy (Lumby, 2001; Coffield et.al., 2008).

The Callaghan government's position on the perceived inadequacy of the education and training system gave rise in 1978, not to an initiative from the then Department of Education and Science, but from the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), sponsored by the Department for Employment, and with a remit to co-ordinate employment and training services through a commission drawn from industry, trade

unions, local authorities and education. The MSC's focus was a reform of vocational qualifications with an emphasis on learning objectives and outcomes (Kelly, 2001).

In 1979 the Further Education Unit (FEU), the unit of the Department of Education and Science responsible for vocational education and training, in response to the work of the MSC, produced a core curriculum of skills needed by vocational students to enter the workforce (FEU, 1979), one of which, and mentioned for the first time, was Core Skills Communication, a literacy element in the core curriculum of skills that made reference to the development of students' ability to read and understand written texts, to transfer information from one context to another, and to produce accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar (FEU, 1979). Influenced by the MSC's drive to reform vocational qualifications, the FEU applied a competency-based methodology to Core Skills Communication assessments, as it had done with other qualifications targeted at students in vocational study (Green, 1998). The qualification was targeted initially at lower-achieving young people on programmes such as the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) and the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE), also sponsored by the MSC. Literacy was positioned as one of the skills required by students to be ready to enter the workforce, and acquired by working towards a series of learning outcomes associated with communication, and evidenced through competency-based assessment (Green, 1998). The National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), set up in 1986 to rationalise the system of vocational qualifications, further endorsed the notion of competency-informed vocational qualifications, and by extension the literacy qualifications offered to students taking vocational programmes of study.

Another reform of vocational qualifications took place in 1988 with the introduction of the Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative (TVEI) (Lumby, 2001). TVEI was intended to raise the standard of vocational qualifications, and attract more able students from the age of 14 into vocational education (Lumby, 2001). TVEI introduced a vocational curriculum for 14-18 year olds that included Careers Education and Guidance (CEG), work experience, and Core Skills in English and Maths, as well as the student's main vocational qualification. The curriculum was to become a model for vocational education for the next 25 years (Yeomans, 1998), during which time Core Skills Communication, Key Skills Communication, and then

Functional Skills English became ubiquitous elements of almost all vocational programmes of study for 16-18 year olds in FECs.

Although TVEI was itself superseded by other reforms, and the literacy strand of the framework changed from Core Skills Communication to Key Skills Communication in 1999, bringing with it changes to the qualification specifications and modes of assessment, the underpinning policy of developing skills to compete in a global economy and the connection between literacy, skills, employment and the economy remained (Foster, 2005; Leitch, 2006). The education and training system was assumed to be the place to address the issue of literacy among 16-18 year olds, and influenced by the NCVQ, literacy was viewed as a skill to be assessed through a competency-informed methodology. The approach was endorsed by the Confederation for British Industry (CBI) in its 1989 report *Towards a Skills Revolution: Report of the Vocational and Education Training Task Force*, which included Effective Communication in a suite of common learning outcomes and core elements the CBI recommended government include in all post-16 vocational education (CBI, 1989).

In 1999, as part of the preparation for the introduction of Curriculum 2000, the then Department for Education and Skills carried out a further reform of the literacy strand of vocational education with the introduction of Key Skills Communication. While the qualification was intended to represent a development of its predecessor, it nevertheless bore a lot of similarities to Core Skills Communication. It came with a statement of learning objectives and outcomes, and a competency-based assessment methodology that sought to assess students' ability to read and understand written texts, to transfer information from one context to another, and to produce accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar through the development of a portfolio of written evidence produced by the student, and a 40-question multiple-choice reading exam. In common with Core Skills Communication, neither the FEU nor the CBI gave guidance on what a literacy curriculum for 16-18 year olds should look like, how it should be taught, or how the learning objectives should be achieved. It was up to individual teachers to determine the curriculum and the achievement of the goals (Green, 1998).

In the adult education sector, the government adopted a different approach. In 1999, it commissioned a review into standards of literacy in the adult population. The motivation remained an economic one, intensified by international comparisons that saw Britain lagging behind its international competitors in standards of literacy (Moser, 1999). The government believed the resolution of problems with business and the economy lay in part in an improvement in standards of literacy in the adult workforce. The Moser Report (1999) concluded that one in five adults were not functionally literate, and this was one of the reasons for relatively low productivity in the economy (Moser, 1999). This set in motion the government-funded Skills for Life initiative that ran in parallel to Key Skills Communication from 2000 to 2010. The target was for 1.5 million adults to improve their level of literacy by 2007. The measure of success was the number of adults taking and passing the Entry 3, Level 1 or Level 2 Certificate in Adult Literacy. The target was exceeded. More than 2.25 million adults took the Certificate in Adult Literacy at one of the three levels, with a national average pass rate of 81% (Coffield et.al., 2008). The Skills for Life initiative had gone along with the perspective that problems with literacy were best addressed through education and training, and while it was successful in achieving its stated aims, it was nevertheless unsuccessful in silencing business leaders and the media in their criticisms of the education and training system and its ability to produce literate young people (CBI, 2006).

The Skills for Life initiative led to increased attention on the pedagogy of teaching literacy to adults through the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum, and specialised teaching qualifications for Adult Literacy teachers that recognised the specialism of their work, and from which a professionalised workforce of Adult Literacy teachers emerged (LLUK, 2007). This was not the case with Key Skills Communication. No such pedagogy was developed for the teaching of literacy to 16-18 year olds. In terms of teaching qualifications, Key Skills Communication was subsumed, along with other qualifications intended for 16-18 year olds taking vocational programmes of study, into the general teacher education arena. There emerged two parallel approaches to literacy education in FECs, one for 16-18 year olds, and another for adults.

2.3 The origins of Functional Skills

Functional Skills had its origins in the 2004 Tomlinson Report on 14-19 reform (DfES, 2004a), and in the government's response in the White Paper 14-19 Education and Skills (DfES, 2005b). The Tomlinson proposals, sponsored by government and business leaders, were the most wide-ranging proposals for qualifications reform since the emergence of the MSC in the late 1970s (Coffield et.al., 2008). The Report proposed to discontinue A-levels and the existing system of academic and vocational qualifications, and create a unified education and training system, subsuming academic and vocational qualifications into a single Diploma (DfES, 2004a). Functional Skills English was to supersede Key Skills Communication as the literacy part of the new Diploma.

The reform proposed a link between Level 2 Functional Skills English and GCSE English. The proposal, which was subsequently accepted, was for the achievement of Level 2 Functional Skills English to be a mandatory element of achieving Grade A*-C GCSE English. Tomlinson had argued that it was possible for 16 year olds to achieve Grade C GCSE English without having a satisfactory standard in literacy (DfES, 2004a), and that a requirement to achieve Level 2 Functional Skills English as a mandatory element of achieving A*-C GCSE English, with its competency-informed assessment methodology and assessment criteria focused on the accurate use of spelling, punctuation and grammar (Ofqual, 2011), would contribute to driving improvements in literacy among 16-18 year olds, whether following an academic or vocational pathway.

In 2007 the government adopted the Diplomas, but not as the unified system proposed by Tomlinson. The Diplomas were offered as the middle track of a three-track system that included existing academic and vocational qualifications. The option for students to opt out of the Diplomas precluded take up of the qualification, and the Diplomas subsequently failed in their attempt to attract young people and their parents to the qualification (Isaacs, 2013). The link between GCSE English and Level 2 Functional Skills English was removed, and the Diplomas eventually removed from the list of accredited qualifications. The educational landscape resumed its default position with an academic route on the one hand, and a

vocational route on the other. Functional Skills English emerged as a stand-alone qualification, and the successor to Key Skills Communication, as the government's new qualification aimed at driving improvements in literacy among students taking vocational qualifications in post-16 education (Coffield et.al., 2008; DfE 2012).

The discourse of government and business leaders continued to focus on literacy as a skill essential to the economy, with inadequate standards of literacy in the workforce a persistent problem (DfES, 2005c; CBI, 2006). The DfES report, *High Standards, Better School for All* referred to, '... the need to give every child a good command of English ... the only way to overcome economic and social disadvantage and make equality of opportunity a reality' (DfES, 2005c). The CBI report, *Work on the Three Rs*, continued to state that, '... basic skills levels of those leaving school and seeking employment are inadequate' (CBI, 2006). Leitch, in his government-sponsored report on world class skills, identified the four skills of literacy, numeracy, team work and communication as applicable to most jobs (Leitch, 2006). Leitch writes, '... our natural reserve is our people – and their potential is both untapped and vast. Skills will unlock that potential' (Leitch, 2006). The same factors that had driven the development of Core Skills Communication in 1989 were driving the reform of literacy education for 16-18 year olds in FECs more than twenty years later through a focus on qualifications reform and the introduction of Functional Skills English.

The latest government-commissioned review of vocational education, the 2011 Wolf Review, commissioned by the Labour government prior to the change of government in 2011, and adopted by the current Conservative Liberal Democrat coalition, focusing on improvements in vocational education to promote successful progression into employment and into higher level education and training, maintains the same focus on qualifications reform and the development of skills. The review recommends the government ensures that those who have not secured a good pass in GCSE English and mathematics continue to study those subjects (Wolf, 2011). In its response, the coalition government acknowledges that the current post-16 education and training system for vocational education has 'failed too many young people', citing six reasons for the failure, one of them being, 'Students without a solid grounding in the basics being allowed to drop the study of English and maths – the most vital foundations for employment' (DfE, 2011: p.2). The response pledges

action on three fronts, one being to, ‘ensure that all young people study and achieve in English and mathematics, ideally to GCSE A*-C, by the age of 19’ (DfE, 2011: p.3).

It is notable that in the 30 years that have elapsed since the introduction of Core Skills Communication, none of the initiatives adopted by successive governments have sought to involve young people in considering what they think literacy is or how it could be offered as part of a vocational programme of study. The turbulence that has taken place with qualifications reform in the further education sector over the last 30 years has brought about little change in the perception of government and business leaders that the education and training system is unable to produce appropriately literate young people to meet the needs of business and the economy. The government perspective remains squarely on the development of literacy as a skill, and schools and colleges as the place to address the problem.

In the next chapter, Chapter 3, I discuss different perspectives on literacy and on the teaching of literacy that I believe have been influential in shaping the work of teachers and managers of literacy to 16-18 year olds in FECs over the last thirty years, and have influenced policy makers in making decisions on why and how literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs should be funded and regulated. The chapter acts as a review of literature in the field of literacy and literacy education for 16-18 year olds in the further education sector.

Chapter 3: Perspectives on Literacy

3.1 Organisation of the chapter

In this chapter I discuss different perspectives on literacy and literacy teaching that have influenced policy makers in making decisions on why and how literacy education for 16-18 year olds in FECs in England should be funded and regulated, and that I believe have been influential in shaping the work of literacy teachers in FECs over the last thirty years. I draw on these perspectives on literacy and learning later in the thesis as theoretical constructs on literacy and literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs that inform my analysis of the data, and that I return to in Chapters 6 and 7, where I discuss the findings of the study.

I begin the chapter with a discussion of the notion of literacy as a skill, as prevalent in current government discourse on literacy. I then discuss two dichotomous models of literacy proposed by Street, Street's 'autonomous' and 'ideological' models of literacy (Street, 1984), the autonomous model relating to literacy as a skill, and the ideological model to literacy as a form of social practice (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Gee, 1996; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Rampton, 2006). I then discuss Brandt and Clinton's literacy-in-action perspective on literacy, which seeks to develop the social practice perspective of literacy through a focus on the objects and artefacts of literacy and the effect those artefacts have on users of literacy (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). I follow this with a discussion on theories of learning that have informed pedagogy in post-16 and adult education and training over the last 30 years, with reference to my own practice as a literacy teacher, and to the field of adult literacy.

I end the chapter with a review of two research projects in the field of literacy in post-16 education from the perspectives of literacy as a skill and literacy as social practice.

3.2 Literacy as a skill

Official discourse on literacy in post-16 vocational education refers to literacy as a skill (Ofqual, 2011). The idea is encapsulated in the name of the qualification ‘Functional Skills English’. The Office of Qualifications and Examination Regulation (Ofqual) claims that, ‘Individuals of whatever age who possess these skills will be able to participate and progress in education, training and employment’ (Ofqual, 2011).

The notion of literacy as a skill does not see literacy as contingent on context, but as a set of skills that can be applied to different contexts. It sees literacy as a neutral, value-free skill that can be taught, practised and learned, and then possessed by the student (Barton, 2007), and as such, fits in well with a competency-based approach to assessment as prevalent in post-16 vocational education. In terms of writing, it is associated with the use of correct spelling, punctuation and grammar, as alluded to by Ofqual in their guidance on the marking of Functional Skills English Writing exams, which states that 40% to 45% of marks in Functional Skills English Writing exams are allocated to correct punctuation, and accurate spelling and grammar (Ofqual, 2011: p.3), putting the emphasis on competence and the notion of literacy as a skill.

The government-sponsored Functional Skills Support Programme (FSSP) claims Functional Skills to be ‘essentially concerned with developing and recognising the ability of learners to apply and transfer skills in ways that are appropriate to their situation’ (FSSP, 2007: p.22). From this perspective, a person who is functional in English is someone who is able to consider a task, identify the type of language needed to complete the task, select from a range of linguistic options the ones that are most appropriate and necessary to complete the task, and apply these choices to the task successfully. It is the combination of the four factors that confirms a person is functional in English (FSSP, 2007). The perspective fits in well with the Ofqual position that literacy education is essentially concerned with developing the ability of students to apply and transfer literacy skills in ways that are appropriate to their situation (Ofqual, 2011).

Critics argue that the notion of transferring literacy skills from one context to another is problematic, because literacy is so strongly associated with the contexts in which it is developed (De Corte, 1999), and that the notion of transfer is intuitive and without a basis in empirical research (Tuomi-Grohn & Engestrom, 2003b). From this perspective, the notion of literacy as a skill is inadequate as a way of conceptualising all of what literacy is. In my own practice, while I acknowledge the literacy as a skill metaphor as having a place in understanding some aspects of literacy such as learning the alphabet, I am nevertheless aware of the tensions that exist between my own belief in social practice theories and the approach to teaching that teachers of literacy to 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs are required to adopt given the structural constraints discussed in Chapter 1 and the competency-informed approach to assessing standards in literacy discussed in Chapter 2.

3.3 Autonomous and ideological models of literacy

Since the mid-1970s, metaphors have emerged that articulate different perspectives on literacy. Literacy as a skill can be seen as one such metaphor. Others are the banking metaphor and the notion of depositing knowledge into another person (Freire, 1987), or the disease metaphor, and the notion of illiteracy as a disease to be eradicated (UNESCO, 1976). Barton suggests an ‘ecology’ metaphor that views literacy as embedded in other human activity (Barton, 2007). Street (1984) suggests a metaphor, or model of literacy, that conceptualises literacy in terms of a dichotomy; a dichotomy that Street refers to as ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’ models of literacy (Street, 1984).

The autonomous model sees literacy as a neutral, value-free, individual, cognitive activity, in which individuals can be taught and learn to read and write, and when learned, can transfer the practice to other texts or situations (Street, 1984). Street argues that the autonomous view of literacy is often implicit in formal literacy programmes (Street & Street, 1991), and as such fits in well with the notion of literacy as a skill, and the official discourse on literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs. Street’s ideological model sees meaning as residing in the social events that draw on written language (Street, 1984). In this model, literacy is embedded and used in a wide range of social activities, not only in

education, and these social activities and the institutions where the activities take place, maintain their own versions of literacy practice (Street & Street, 1991).

Street suggests that formal educational settings privilege the autonomous model of literacy over the ideological model, thereby making the literacy as a skill perspective widely recognised as the dominant model, and the ideological model as a vernacular variety of literacy (Street, 1984). Other researchers have concurred with this perspective, referring to Street's distinction of 'dominant' and 'vernacular' alternatively as 'domesticating' and 'empowering' (Freire, 1987), 'imported' and 'indigenous' (Irvine & Elsasser, 1988) and 'imposed' and 'self-generated' (Barton, 1991).

Street's ideological model of literacy sees literacy as the study of texts and the literacy events in which they are used (Barton & Hamilton et.al., 2000). It gave rise to the notion of the existence of multiple literacies that are used in different contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), some of which are observable and take on labels; such as academic literacy, workplace literacy, and computer literacy (Barton, 2007). The model is synonymous with a social practice perspective of literacy.

3.4 Literacy as social practice

Shirley Brice-Heath (1983), one of the main proponents of literacy as social practice, through her ethnographic study of three different Appalachian communities in America, exemplified how the literacy practices of the home community shaped children's educational development at school (Heath, 1983). Collins and Blot (2003) point out that rather than starting from texts, Heath starts by describing the physical and social environment where the literacy events take place, and that by tracking the groups of children from their communities and homes to school, Heath was able to exemplify the different literacy practices of the three different communities, and the different effects these literacy practices learned at home and in the communities had on the children's educational development in school (Collins & Blot, 2003). As a consequence, Heath was successful in broadening the dominant, school-based definition of literacy in America, to one that considers the reading and writing that

takes place in classrooms in relation to children's acquired notions of literacy as a community resource (Heath, 1983).

Contemporaries of Heath, carrying out ethnographic research of different communities of practice, also referred to literacy as a community resource. Scribner and Cole (1981) in their study of the Vai people of Liberia, found literacy among the Vai to be 'a set of socially organised practices' (Scribner & Cole, 1981: 26). Reder and Davila (2005) describe the work of Scribner and Cole as a move away from the idea of 'literacy as a set of portable, de-contextualised information processing skills which individuals apply... [to] literacy as a set of socially organized practices with which people engage' (Reder & Davila, 2005: 172). Street, in his ethnographic study of villagers in Iran, found that the literacy practices of the villagers could not be understood separately from their social context, and that an understanding of literacy may change from one situation to another (Street, 1984). And in their Local Literacies project Barton and Hamilton (1998) identify six key areas of everyday life where reading and writing are of particular importance (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Barton concludes that all six categories relate to Street's 'vernacular' literacies and none to Street's 'dominant' literacies, as mediated by teachers in classrooms and other formal situations (Barton 2007).

The perspective of literacy as a social practice is one that has resonated with me in my work as a literacy teacher, particularly in the way that I have often made as my starting point the literacies the students are familiar with in their own everyday lives.

3.5 Literacy-in-action

Brandt and Clinton (2002) offer a critique of the social practice perspective of literacy through the notion of 'local' and 'global' contexts, and through the use of the objects and artefacts that are the technology of literacy, such as newspapers, magazine, books, advertisements, and the Internet. While they acknowledge the insights the social practice perspective has brought to the field of literacy research, they make the point that the social practice emphasis on literacy as rooted in and inseparable from context, has resulted in a lack of consideration of aspects of literacy that impact on the local context from afar; what Brandt and Clinton refer to as 'local'

and ‘global’ contexts (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). In Brandt and Clinton’s terms, literacies external to the local context ‘infiltrate’ local literacies (ibid.). They argue that a social practice perspective of literacy maintains an artificial divide between local and global contexts.

Brandt and Clinton also argue that a social practice perspective of literacy does not take into account the objects and artefacts that are an everyday part of literacy, and as such is unable to articulate the effect literacy has on people. They claim that what literacy does to people in context is just as important as what people do with literacy (ibid.). Brandt and Clinton offer a ‘broadening’ of the concept of literacy as social practice, and present the notion of literacy-in-action. The literacy-in-action view of literacy seeks to include both the people involved in a literacy event and the objects and artefacts used in that event (ibid.).

Brandt and Clinton offer the analytical tools they refer to as ‘localising moves’ and ‘global connects’ for conceptualising the notion of literacy-in-action (ibid.). The tools are intended to act as an expansion of the analytical tools provided by the social practice perspective, in an attempt to move away from over-emphasising the ‘local’. In Brandt and Clinton’s terms, ‘localizing moves’ refers to literacy events where people use literacy to meet their own or their group’s needs. The concept resonates with the social practice perspective of literacy, although Brandt and Clinton include in this explicitly the contribution of the artefacts involved in a literacy event and the effect they have on the people involved. ‘Globalising connects’ including people and objects, refers to how local literacy practices are influenced or affected by factors that are remote to the local context. According to Brandt and Clinton individuals move in and out of local contexts in a variety of ways, and that technologies such as the Internet are prime examples of ‘globalising connects’ because of the way they demonstrably move reading and writing in and out of local contexts (ibid.).

3.6 Pedagogy in post-16 and adult education and training

In this section I discuss theories of learning that have informed pedagogy in post-16 and adult education and training over the last 30 years. I refer to the behaviourist, cognitivist, constructivist and humanist theories of learning, and consider the theories

in relation to my own practice as a literacy teacher. I also consider how different theories of learning and perspectives of literacy have informed adult literacy pedagogy over the same period of time.

Behaviourism is associated with competency-based assessments as commonplace in vocational education and training (Gray et.al., 2000). A fundamental premise of behaviourism is that students' responses to stimuli are always observable and measureable and provide clues to what the next stimuli should be (Skinner, 1971). Learning is achieved through changes in behaviour as students move from non-complex to more complex tasks (Rogers, 2002). Critics argue that a focus on processes that are readily observable and measureable do not accommodate more abstract processes such as thought (Armitage et.al., 2003), and in that a person's thinking cannot be reported on as behavioural change, the theory offers only a partial theory of how people learn. While my own personal bias in literacy teaching does not lean towards a behaviourist paradigm, I acknowledge that during my career as a literacy teacher, I have drawn on behaviourist principles implicitly in some of my work, such as teaching students to learn the alphabet, and I acknowledge that behaviourist learning theory has a place, albeit it limited, in the pedagogy of literacy teaching for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs.

Proponents of cognitivism reject the focus on observable behaviour in favour of a focus on how students learn to 'know' (Rogers, 2002), drawing on complex tasks which are broken down into smaller learning objectives, and arranged hierarchically in order of difficulty. Learning is seen to take place in a linear way as students achieve one learning objective before moving onto the next (Rogers, 2002); an aspect of the theory that lends itself well to a skills perspective of literacy and structured programmes of learning common in formal educational settings. Critics argue that the theory does not address the social context in which a person's thought processes take place (Armitage et.al., 2003). I would argue however that I and many other literacy teachers in government-funded post-16 vocational education and training, when articulating students' cognitive targets on lesson plans and students' individual learning plans (ILPs), whether explicitly or implicitly, by the nature of the task have been drawn into a cognitivist paradigm when planning and teaching literacy lessons.

One of the main proponents of constructivism, the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), gave as his most enduring contribution to psychology and to education the characterisation of learning as a profoundly social process (Vygotsky, 1978). He writes, ‘... learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them’ (Vygotsky, 1978; p.88). Vygotsky asserts the need to consider learning separately from development; that learning and development do not happen concurrently. When a student shows mastery of an operation, such as the use of punctuation, it indicates that the learning process is achieved. In Vygotsky’s terms however, the developmental process has only just begun. For a student to move towards the developmental level, the student must engage in a level of abstract thought, which in formal educational terms means a pedagogy that emphasises the social processes involved in discovering the how and why of things, as well as the doing of things (Vygotsky, 1978). The view of learning as a predominantly social process is one that has resonated with me throughout my career as a literacy teacher, and one that I have drawn on in my teaching practice by linking literacy learning activities to students’ lives beyond the classroom.

The humanist view of learning tends to be at odds with notions of education that stress the need for measureable and externally-imposed learning objectives, such as occur in government-funded formal educational settings. Humanism rejects the notion that externally set standards and assessment practices can be imposed on all students in the same way (Rogers, 1969). Central to the humanist view of learning are the needs and wants of the students. Learning happens when students are given the opportunity to learn something they believe they need and want. It involves combining a person’s thinking with their emotions, and as such addressing the ‘whole person’ (Rogers, 1969). Critics argue that humanism is based on intuitive notions of education, and that terms such as the ‘whole person’ are vague (Curzon, 2004). In my own practice, I have drawn on a humanist view of learning to some extent by negotiating learning aims and the content of lessons with students.

Adult literacy pedagogy over the last thirty years has similarly been influenced by different theories of learning. Paulo Freire (1987), in his work to empower disadvantaged people through literacy, took a learner-centred or humanist view of adult literacy teaching, drawing on the idea that for an adult literacy curriculum to be

meaningful to the students for whom it was intended, the curriculum must by necessity come from those students (ibid.). It was a view of literacy teaching that was particularly influential in England in the 1970s and 80s (Hamilton & Hillier, 2006) In contrast, the government-sponsored Skills for Life Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (2001), which dominated adult literacy pedagogy in government-funded settings from 2001 to 2010, through the assertion that the curriculum provided, ‘... a map of the range of skills and capabilities that adults are expected to need in order to function and progress at work and in society’ (BSA: 2001, p.3) alluded to a cognitivist view of adult literacy teaching.

Hughes and Schwab (2010) on the other hand, in their book on the principles and practice of teaching adult literacy, whilst acknowledging the place a skills perspective has in some aspects of adult literacy teaching, propose a pedagogy that recognises the value of different types of literacy, one that draws on adult students’ backgrounds and lives outside of the classroom, and one that recognises the value of social aspects of learning, such as physical and emotional safety (Hughes & Schwab, 2010). Hughes and Schwab as such describe a pedagogy for adult literacy teaching synonymous with a social practice perspective of literacy and a constructivist perspective of learning. It is a view of adult literacy teaching that has particularly resonated with me during my career as a literacy teacher.

3.7 Research in the field of literacy in post-16 education

Two significant projects have been carried out in the field of literacy in post-16 education with findings relevant to this study. One of these, the *Literacies for Learning in Further Education* project, sponsored by the government-funded Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), was conducted over a three-year period from January 2004 and undertaken by researchers from the Universities of Lancaster and Stirling, and four FECs, two of which were local to each of the universities. The project drew explicitly on the view of literacy as social practice in its analysis of data, acknowledging that, ‘The project does not view literacy as a set of individual skills and competencies alone, but as emergent and situated in particular social contexts’ (Mannion & Ivanic, 2007). Another was the *Progress for Adult Literacy Learners*

project, commissioned by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC), and undertaken in 2007 by a group of researchers from Sheffield University. The project had a focus on measuring progress in the development of students' literacy skills, in particular the skills of spelling, oral reading and sentence combining (Burton & Davey et.al., 2010).

The Literacies for Learning in Further Education project focused on the interface between the literacy requirements of the vocational curriculum and the resources students take with them to their studies (Miller & Smith et.al., 2007). It started with the premise that FECs and the vocational curriculum are not always fashioned around the literacy resources the students take with them to college (Mannion & Miller et.al., 2009). It drew on the notion of 'border literacies' in articulating its aims, defining 'border literacies' as literacy practices that occur, 'in fluid, in-between spaces when someone is using certain text types, practices and capabilities in ways that overlap with ... another practice or practices' (Ivanic et.al., 2007), such as if a Childcare student has a part-time job as a babysitter, the notion that there exists a reciprocal relationship between the literacy associated with the student's job as a babysitter and the literacy associated with studying Childcare. The aim was, 'to identify the 'border literacies' that enable people to negotiate between informal vernacular literacies and formal literacies within the further education context, that positively affect learning outcomes' (Ivanic et.al., 2007). An additional aim was to develop pedagogic interventions, based on the findings of the investigation, to support students' learning more effectively (Miller & Smith et.al., 2007).

The project used a multi-method approach to data collection, drawing on semi-structured interviews, observations, photo-elicitation, photographing literacy practices, the collection of texts and other artefacts, and a questionnaire to triangulate and increase the generalisability of the findings. 60 interviews or focus groups took place between staff and/or students at the four participating FECs, involving approximately 100 participants.

The findings identified four different literacies for learning in further education:

- Literacies for learning to be a student; such as enrolling on a course

- Literacies for learning to be a student of a particular subject
- Literacies for assessment
- Literacies related to an imagined future; such as a work placement (Ivanic et.al., 2007)

The report claims that literacies for learning were not fostered by focusing on the development of individual skills, but through the meaningfulness to students of the tasks they were asked to complete, and as such supports the social practice perspective of literacy that the project bid adopted at the start of the project (Ivanic et.al., 2007).

The report also notes that students were most preoccupied with literacies for assessment, and that a significant issue for students in post-16 vocational education is the multiplicity of literacy practices the students bring with them to college compared to the very specific sets of practices valued within the institution. Such literacy practices are the non-linear, multi-modal practices that combine the use of symbols, pictures, colour, and music, non-linear multi-media practices, and interactive and participatory practices that involve sense-making and creativity, such as those literacy practices enacted by 16-18 year olds through social media and the Internet (Ivanic et.al., 2007). The report also notes that the literacies valued by students were literacies that were clearly purposeful to them, had a clear audience, generated new ideas or knowledge, and involved a degree of self-determination in terms of the time and place the students chose to take part in a literacy activity (Ivanic et.al., 2007).

The project generated a significant amount of literature that drew on the data and findings of the project, in particular the notion of 'boundary crossing' (Ivanic & Satchwell, 2007), and 'border literacies' (Mannion & Miller et.al., 2009). Mannion and Miller (2009) acknowledge that while the Literacies for Learning in FE project uncovered notable findings associated with literacies for assessment, and differences between the literacies the students brought with them to college and the literacy of formal education as valued by the colleges, it did not find entirely distinct literacy practices that students brought with them to college that could be drawn on as

resources for learning (Mannion & Miller et.al., 2009). The findings of the Literacies for Learning in Further Education project concludes that ‘border literacies’ as static entities, do not exist; a position consistent with the theoretical position that literacy practices and the contexts they emerge in affect each other in a reciprocal way, such that they are inseparably linked to each other (Tuomi-Grohn & Engestrom, 2003b; Barton, 2007).

Mannion and Miller claim that the project’s findings lead them to conclude that competency-informed ideas of transfer and neatly bounded views of literacy as transferable skills, are not viable or accurate, and that core/key literacy-related ‘skills’ are not transferrable from one context to another (Mannion & Miller et.al., 2009). Instead, such communicative practices involve re-contextualisation and enactment in emergent contexts through drawing on traces of previously enacted contexts (Mannion & Miller et.al., 2009). The outcomes of the project and the literature it generated saw a firm distinction between the perspective of literacy as a skill and literacy as social practice, and as such endorsed Street’s autonomous and ideological models of literacy, and the privileging of the autonomous model in formal educational settings.

The *Progress for Adult Literacy Learners project* (2007) was carried out in the field of adult literacy. It nevertheless generated outcomes applicable to the 16-18 age group. The project sought to draw correlations between the teaching strategies used by adult literacy teachers, and the progress of their adult literacy students. Its aim was to measure the progress of adult literacy students through research in three skills areas: phonics, oral reading fluency and sentence combining, with the intention of helping to improve the quality of teaching and learning in adult literacy.

The project followed on from the findings of the NRDC projects *Effective Practice in Reading* (Brooks & Burton et.al., 2007), and *Effective Practice in Writing* (Grief & Meyer et.al., 2007). These projects found that some generic strategies in adult literacy teaching were effective, such as the use of group work and pair work, the importance of regular attendance, and the use of self-study (Brooks & Burton et.al., 2007), and the use of meaningful contexts for writing tasks rather than de-contextualised writing activities (Grief & Meyer et.al., 2007), but found very little

correlation between the specific teaching strategies used in adult literacy classrooms and the progress of adult literacy students.

A total of 140 students completed the three strands of phonics, oral reading fluency and sentence combining. Specialist learning materials were devised for the three strands of the project, and Adult Literacy teachers in the colleges where the research took place were trained in their use. The research tools consisted of pre and post-questionnaires for teachers and students, and pre and post-assessments in reading, writing and spelling for students.

The project found that students made gains in all three strands: in reading comprehension (phonics and reading fluency), spelling (phonics), and writing (sentence combining) of between one third and one half of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level (Burton & Davey et.al., 2010). Progress was achieved in a relatively short time period, on average between five and a half and six sessions. The report also claims that the confidence of students in all three strands improved, as measured by the attitudes questionnaire and the students' and teachers' comments. The report notes that a narrow focus in teaching does not necessarily produce narrow results; as there were positive outcomes in confidence in oral skills that went beyond the specific remit of the study (Burton & Davey et. al., 2010).

The report recommends a skills-based approach to adult literacy teaching within a rich literacy curriculum, in order that students make fast and measureable progress in their level of literacy. The report claims that a skills-based approach does not have to be at the expense of a social practice approach, and that the two approaches need not be mutually exclusive (Burton & Davey et. al., 2010).

While I have tended to adopt a social practice perspective of literacy and a constructivist approach to teaching and learning in my work as a literacy teacher, I nevertheless acknowledge that I have also drawn, whether explicitly or implicitly, on a skills perspective of literacy and a behaviourist and cognitivist approach to teaching literacy to some extent in my own practice. I return to the perspectives on literacy and learning I have discussed in this chapter in the final two chapters of the thesis, Chapter 6 Findings and Chapter 7 Discussion, where I use the perspectives of

literacy and learning I have discussed in the chapter as analytical tools with which I examine the data and discuss the finding of the study.

In the next chapter, Chapters 4, I articulate the research questions I sought to answer through the study. I then discuss the epistemological and ontological assumptions I make in carrying out the research, and describe my methodological approach to the study, and the methods I used to generate and analyse the data. I make clear my own position within the research, and the subjectivity I bring to bear in the generation and analysis of the data. I also discuss ethical issues relating to the generation, storing and analysis of data, ethical issues relating to the writing up of the report, and the steps I took to protect the rights, the dignity and the well-being of the participants.

Chapter 4: The Research Questions, Research Method and Methodology

4.1 Organisation of the chapter

I begin the chapter by re-stating my purpose for carrying out the research, the research questions, and how I arrived at the questions. I go on to describe the epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin the study, and how these assumptions informed my choice of research tools. The research tools I used were focus groups, which I carried out with student participants, one-to-one interviews with literacy teachers, and lesson observations.

The three sections that follow take their headings from these three methods of generating data. In each section I describe the approach I took to the design of the questioning routes and the observation schedule (Kreuger & Casey, 2009), and the process I followed in arranging and conducting focus groups with students, one-to-one interviews with literacy teachers and lesson observations. In the section on focus groups with students, I describe the steps I took to generate a sample of student participants. The following two sections deal with the issues of trustworthy data (Kreuger & Casey, 2009), and the ethics involved in generating the data.

I then describe the process I planned to follow in analysing the data. My aim is to make explicit to the reader how I developed the sample of student participants, how I recruited the participants, how I conducted the focus groups, one-to-one interviews with teachers, and lesson observations, and how I planned to carry out the analysis of the data, in order to give the reader an insight into how and why I reached the findings that I discuss in the final two chapters of the thesis. The chapter ends with a section on my position as an insider in the research setting.

4.2 Research Questions

My intention in carrying out this investigation is that the main beneficiaries should be 16-18 year old students who take a literacy course as part of a larger vocational programme of study in a FEC in England, and the teachers of those literacy courses. The contribution I intend the thesis to make is in gaining insights into the problems

16-18 year old students and their teachers experience with literacy and literacy education in FECs from their own perspectives, to draw on these insights to gain a better understanding of the reasons for perceived problems with literacy among 16-18 year olds in FECs, and to consider how FECs can better drive improvements in literacy among 16-18 year olds given the structural constraints that exist within the sector.

I do not seek to address the issue of literacy education for 16-18 year olds in FECs from the perspectives of all the stakeholders I referred to in the first part of the thesis. The study does not consider the perspective of the government, the media, the CBI, college management teams, employers, parents or carers on literacy education as offered to 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs in England. I do not seek to offer a resolution to the structural constraints and the conflicts and tensions they create that I discussed in Chapter 1; nor do I address the issue of qualifications reform and the effectiveness of a qualifications-driven approach to improving standards in literacy among 16-18 year olds in FECs. I also do not address the issue of a perceived connection between standards of literacy among 16-18 year olds and the economy, although I acknowledge that each of these issues is worthy of investigation.

The research questions I sought to answer through the study are the source of reflection on why it is necessary to see the issue of literacy for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs from the perspective of the students; that before we can work out what we should do as literacy teachers, we need to understand what the students think literacy *is* in the context of their Functional Skills English or literacy lessons, for example whether the students consider discussion to be a form of literacy as well as reading and writing, and if their perspectives on literacy and literacy education resonate with any of the perspectives I discussed in the previous chapters. I also wanted to find out what the students wanted to get out of their literacy classes at college and to what extent their experience of literacy education at college met their expectations. My aim was therefore to contextualise the research questions in terms of what the students think literacy *is* in the context of a Functional Skills English or literacy lesson.

Through a parallel investigation into literacy teachers' perspectives on literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, I wanted to find out what the teachers think are the greatest challenges to literacy education for 16-18 year olds in FECs, and what they believe the reasons are for the perception in government, the media and the CBI of problems with literacy among 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs (Wolf, 2011; CBI, 2011). I also wanted to find out if the teachers see the issue in terms of the way literacy is taught and learned in schools and colleges, or whether they believe the answers to such problems lie elsewhere. While I acknowledge that the teachers of the vocational qualifications the students were taking may also have a perspective on the literacy education offered to their students, my aim was to generate data within the context of the literacy classes the students and their literacy teachers took part in. As such, I did not include the teachers of the vocational qualifications the students were taking in the data.

I therefore framed the research questions within the context of the students' Level 2 Functional Skills English classes as follows:

- What do 16-18 year old students taking vocational qualifications in a FEC in England think literacy *is*?
- How do those students view the literacy education offered to them?
- What do the literacy teachers who teach those students think are the greatest challenges to literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs?

I return to the questions in the final chapter of the thesis, Discussion, where I discuss the insights I have gained from the findings of the study.

4.3 Epistemological and ontological assumptions

I do not claim through the study to generate neutral or value-free knowledge. I also do not claim that my interpretation of the data is the only possible interpretation. I

acknowledge that my understanding and interpretation of the data is relative to my own specific cultural and social references (King & Horrocks, 2010). I see myself as a co-producer of the data with the participants, and as such, having an integral part in the construction of meaning. I make explicit the perspective from which I approach the research, and my own position relative to the topic and the participants, so that my understanding and interpretation of the data can be understood as such (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

I take the position that there is no one overarching truth about social reality, but that there are multiple realities (King & Horrocks, 2010), or different interpretations of reality. I do not take the position that meaning in social situations exists independently from any subjective understanding of those situations, but that knowledge and meaning are brought into being through the process of social interaction (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003b), and are as such dependent on context. I take the position that our understanding of social situations, such as those experienced by teachers and students in classrooms, is relative to our own specific cultural and social references, which are themselves open to interpretation (King & Horrocks, 2010).

This is a qualitative study that draws on participants' subjective views and experiences of their literacy classes. I wanted to find out not only what the participants thought about their literacy classes, but why they thought the way they did (Morgan, 1997). I take the view that meaning and knowledge are constructed through social interaction, and that talking to participants to seek their perceptions and subjective experiences of literacy classes in a FEC is the most meaningful way of generating data (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). I decided therefore to use interviews as my main method of generating data.

4.4 Research tools

I used focus group interviews with students to generate data on students' perspectives on literacy and literacy education, and one-to-one interviews with teachers to generate data on the teachers' perspectives on literacy and the literacy education offered to their students. Focus groups and one-to-one interviews are both

consistent with my methodological position, that meaning and knowledge are constructed through social interaction. My rationale for using only focus group interviews with students and only one-to-one interviews with teachers was based on my aim of generating data on the range of perspectives from the two groups of participants.

215 16-18 year old students took Level 2 Functional Skills English in 2012/13 when the data was generated. My aim was to generate data on the range of 16-18 year old students' experiences and perspectives on literacy, and literacy education. I decided therefore to use focus groups to generate the data, because data generated from a number of focus groups allowed for a larger sample of students than one-to-one interviews, and as such a wider range of student experiences and perspectives (Morgan, 1997). I decided not to use one-to-one interviews with students because data generated from one-to-one interviews would focus the analysis of the data on the perspectives of a small number of individual students, rather than the range of views I sought to investigate. I also wanted to develop my ability to use focus groups as a method of generating data, because I realise that focus groups are a useful way to find out other things about my professional practice at the college where I work after the project has finished.

While focus groups have the advantage of generating a range of perspectives across a large sample of participants, I was aware of the ways in which using focus groups could inhibit the study. It is possible that the lack of anonymity in a group can result in some participants withholding information, or simply conforming with the majority of the group. This may cause some participants to intellectualise their responses and talk about the way things should be, or the way they wished things were, rather than the way things actually are (Kreuger & Casey, 2009). The dynamics of the group could cause a tendency towards polarisation, resulting in participants exaggerating their responses (Kreuger & Casey, 2009). With this in mind, I planned to follow a systematic procedure for conducting focus groups that sought to reduce the effects of conformity and polarisation, and I describe the procedure later in the chapter.

I used one-to-one interviews with teachers to generate data on what the literacy teachers thought were the greatest challenges to literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs. In 2012/13 when the data was generated, the college employed five teachers who taught Level 2 Functional Skills English classes to 16-18 year old students. A group interview with the teachers did not seem a meaningful way to generate data, as five teachers allowed for only one group, and one group would be unlikely to generate data on the range of experiences and perspectives I sought to investigate. I therefore decided to conduct one-to-one interviews with the teachers. One-to-one interviews allowed the teachers to talk about their experiences and perceptions in detail, and enabled me to generate data on the range of perspectives held by the teachers. As I stated in Section 4.2, while I acknowledge that the teachers of the vocational qualifications the students were taking may also have had a perspective on the literacy education offered to their students, my aim was to generate data within the context of the literacy classes the students and their literacy teachers took part in, and as such did not include the teachers of the vocational qualifications the students were taking in the data.

I was aware that if I used only interviews, whether focus groups or one-to-one interviews, as the method of generating data, there existed the possibility that participants may intellectualise their responses (Kreuger & Casey, 2009), and talk about the way things should be, or the way they wished things were, rather than the way things actually are. I therefore decided to use lesson observation as a third method of generating data. I did not intend to answer any part of the research questions from the lesson observation data alone. My aim was to allow a more comprehensive approach to data generation, and to provide a way to generate additional insights into literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs. As with the generation of student focus group data and teacher interview data, I planned to follow a deliberate and articulated process to show how the data was generated.

I now describe the preparations I made in the formation and conduct of the focus groups with students.

4.5 Focus groups with students

I begin this section with a description of the students who took part in the study, and the steps I took to preclude personal bias in the selection of the students sample, and include a range of students' views, by generating a randomly selected student participant sample stratified by gender, ethnicity and by students who had an additional language other than English (EAL). I then describe the steps I took to design the questioning route I followed, and the questions I asked the students during the focus groups. I end the section with a description of the steps I took to arrange and conduct the focus groups.

4.5.1 The student participants

In 2012/13 when the data was generated, the College had 3,688 students, 1,578 of whom were 16-18 year olds and 2,110 adults. The majority of the 16-18 year old students were taking full-time programmes of study, and college policy stated that all full-time 16-18 year olds should take Functional Skills English as an additional qualification at the level they were working at, up to Level 2. 1,480 16-18 year olds took Functional Skills English qualifications in 2012/13, and 215 of these students took Functional Skills English at Level 2. There were 15 different Level 2 Functional Skills English classes.

The students who took part in the study were from eight of these 15 Level 2 Functional Skills English classes. Table 1 shows the number of students from the eight different classes who took part in the lesson observations and student focus groups. Altogether 117 students were present during the lesson observations, the largest class had 20 students and the smallest had seven students. 86 of the students who were present in the lesson observations attended the student focus groups. The largest focus group had 14 students and the smallest focus group had six students.

Table 1: Lesson Observation and Focus Group Numbers and Duration

Name of vocational subjects	No. of students in class	No. of students present at lesson observations	No. of students attending focus groups	Duration of focus groups in minutes
Travel & Tourism and Catering	7	7	6	32
Computing	15	13	10	28
Health & Social Care	23	19	14	35
Creative Arts	19	17	12	27
Childcare	16	15	11	25
Hair & Beauty	11	10	8	34
Sports & Football	16	16	11	30
Digital Media & Performance	23	20	14	28
Total	130	117	86	Av: 30 mins

I arrived at the eight classes by randomly selecting a sample of 70 students from the 215 Level 2 Functional Skills English student population. These 70 students were spread across the eight Level 2 Functional Skills English classes in Table 1. The number of students in the sample in each of the eight Level 2 Functional Skills English classes is given in Table 2.

Table 2: Student Participant Sample by Vocational Course Groups

Group nos.	Name of vocational subjects the students were taking	No. of students in sample
1	Travel & Tourism and Catering	2
2	Computing	7
3	Health & Social Care	14
4	Creative Arts	10
5	Childcare	9
6	Hair & Beauty	6
7	Sports & Football	8
8	Digital Media & Performance	14
	Total	70

I randomly selected the student participant sample from the whole Level 2 Functional Skills English student population, in order to eliminate selection bias, as I was aware that any such bias may be inherent in any personally selected sample of participants (Robson, 2002). I stratified the sample by gender, ethnicity and by EAL, because I wanted to ensure as much as possible that the views of students in those categories were represented in the data. The stratification categories were based on

the demographic profile of the college, which is located in a county town in Central England and home to people and families from a range of ethnic backgrounds speaking a diverse range of languages.

4.5.2 Selecting the student participant sample

In quantitative research, where there is a need to establish the generalisability of conclusions, recruiting a sample that is statistically representative of the population is of central importance. I did not seek to generalise my interpretation of the data in this way, and as such did not seek to draw on a sampling strategy that was statistically representative of the whole population (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). My intention was for my conclusions to be transferable to other contexts, so that the reader of the report rather than myself could decide whether or not my interpretation of the data could be applied to another situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1989).

The aim of the sample size was to achieve theoretical saturation; that is when the range of ideas has been reached and no new information is emerging from subsequent focus groups. As a rule of thumb, Morgan (1997) and Kreuger (2009) both suggest three to five focus groups of between 8 to 12 participants as typically achieving theoretical saturation, although this is contingent on topic and participants. I therefore generated a randomly selected sample of 70 students, stratified by gender, ethnicity, and EAL from the whole Level 2 Functional Skills English student population. With an average class size of 14, this was equivalent to approximately five groups, or Level 2 Functional Skills English classes.

While theoretical saturation may have been achieved before all the focus groups had been conducted, the procedure nevertheless achieved the combined aims of reducing selection bias, reaching theoretical saturation, and allowing for as wide a range of students' experiences and perspectives on their literacy classes as possible.

The sampling procedure was developed following feedback from the Institute of Education's ethics review committee. I generated the student participant sample through the college's Management Information System (MIS). MIS is a secure database used to record student information. It holds information on students' age,

gender, ethnicity, and EAL taken from the college enrolment form. To keep student information secure, I drew up the student participant sample within the college's MIS. No student information was taken outside of the college's MIS in drawing up the student participant sample.

I first drew up a report in MS Excel of the Level 2 Functional Skills English student population, and ran a report of the percentage split in the Level 2 Functional Skills English student population by gender, students with EAL, and by ethnicity, as given in Table 3.

Table 3: Student Population by Gender, EAL, and Ethnicity

Gender	Number	Percentage
Males	116	54%
Females	99	46%
EAL		
Non-EAL	176	82%
EAL	39	18%
Ethnicity		
English/Welsh/Scottish/NI/British	168	78%
Any other Mixed	13	6%
Indian	2	1%
Pakistani	11	5%
Bangladeshi	1	0.5%
Any other Asian background	1	0.5%
African	8	4%
Caribbean	5	2%
Any other Black background	2	1%
Any other Ethnic group	2	1%
Not Provided	2	1%

To record the ethnic categories of the students in the population, I used the ethnic categories given in the MIS database fields. These were the ethnic categories used by funding bodies in 2012/13 to generate information on the take up of further education courses by ethnicity. As the number of students in each category apart from the English/Welsh/Scottish/NI/British category was small, from 1 student in the Bangladeshi and Any other Asian background categories to 13 in the Any other Mixed category, I decided to include all the students in these categories in the sample, in order to ensure as much as possible that the students in these categories were represented in the data.

I then generated four versions of the student participant sample, stratifying the sample first by gender, then by ethnicity and finally by EAL. The fourth version was as such a randomly selected sample of student participants taken from the whole Level 2 Functional Skills English student population, stratified to incorporate a diversity of experience and perspective, and large enough to achieve theoretical saturation. Table 4 shows a summary of the student participant sample.

Table 4: Student Participant Sample by Gender, EAL, and Ethnicity

Gender	Number	Percentage
Males	38	54%
Females	32	46%
EAL		
Non-EAL	57	82%
EAL	13	18%
Ethnicity		
English/Welsh/Scottish/NI/British	23	34%
Any other Mixed	13	17%
Indian	2	3%
Pakistani	11	16%
Bangladeshi	1	1%
Any other Asian background	1	1%
African	8	12%
Caribbean	5	7%
Any other Black background	2	3%
Any other Ethnic group	2	3%
Not Provided	2	3%

4.5.3 The focus group questioning route

In planning the focus group questioning route, I was mindful that all participants attending the focus groups should express a view on the topics being discussed, and that discussions should not be dominated by any particular students. To encourage full participation in the focus groups, I planned an opening question that was unrelated to the focus group topic, but required all participants to answer. The purpose was to set a tone for the focus groups that encouraged all participants to contribute.

Another important aspect of the focus groups was that student participants should feel able to express their experiences and perspectives on literacy and the literacy classes they attended in the way they wished to (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). I was aware that the questions I planned to ask may frame my concerns about literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs from my perspective as a manager and teacher of literacy, but might not necessarily reflect the concerns of the students themselves. I therefore decided to use a semi-structured questioning route that encouraged participants to discuss their answers to the questions together, and also enabled me to follow the participants if in expressing their concerns they took a different route. I planned to control the route through the focus groups via a planned questioning route, but to loosen control of the planned questioning route if necessary to reflect the concerns of the participants (Stewart et.al., 2007).

I intended each question to be clear by ensuring each question was one-dimensional, without synonyms or paraphrasing, and free from jargon. I also intended that the questions were open-ended requiring explanations, descriptions or illustrations to reveal what the participants' wanted to say, and were focused on specific experiences rather than current intentions or future possibilities (Kreuger & Casey, 2009). There were seven questions in all. The questioning route and the questions I asked were as follows:

Question 1 - an opening question: *Let's begin by going round and saying who we are and what we most enjoy doing when we're not studying at College?* The purpose of the question was to get participants talking and help them feel comfortable. It was not intended to generate discussion or to get information on the research questions. I asked all the participants to answer the question, in order to set a tone in the interview in which all participants were encouraged to contribute.

Question 2 - an introductory question: *When you think of your Functional Skills English lessons, what's the first thing that comes to mind?* This was an open-ended question intended to encourage participants to start thinking about their connection to the topic of literacy and literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs.

Question 3 - a transition question: *Think back to a Functional Skills English lesson, or any other English lesson that you felt you really learned something in, and tell us what was good about the lesson.* This was a ‘think back’ question, aimed at rooting participants’ responses in specific experiences (Stewart et.al., 2007). The purpose of the question was to move the conversation towards the key questions by focusing on the topic of literacy and literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs in more depth.

This was followed by questions 4 and 5 – the two key questions:

Question 4 - *Think back to a task that you completed that worked well in a Functional Skills English lesson, or any other English lesson, and tell us why it worked.*

Question 5 - *Think about how Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons could be different. Tell us how things could be different with Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons.*

These questions were intended to generate data directly relevant to answering the research questions. I was aware that responses to these questions may be given greater attention in the analysis, and planned to allow sufficient time for a full discussion of the questions. In this section of the interview I planned to use more pauses and probes in moderating the discussion, to encourage participants to discuss their responses in detail. The questions were an imagination question (Kreuger & Casey, 2009) aimed at focusing participants’ attention on what they think literacy is in the context of their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, and a ‘think back’ question aimed at focusing participants’ attention on literacy classes they had attended in college or before they started college.

Question 6 - an ending question: *If you had one minute to talk to the Principal about your Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, what would you say?* This question was critical to analysis. The aim was to allow participants to reflect on previous comments and determine their final position on what they wanted to say on critical areas of concern to them (Kreuger & Casey, 2009).

Question 7 - a final question - *Did I describe correctly what was said? Did I miss anything out?* This question was also critical to analysis in that it allowed the data generated through the focus groups to be verified by the participants (Auerbech & Silverstein, 2003). Following Question 6, I gave the participants a two to three minute summary of what was said in the focus group taken from my notes, and then ask the final question.

4.5.4 Arranging and conducting focus groups with students

I took the position that participants are more likely to say what they really think and feel if the interview takes place in a permissive and non-judgemental environment. I therefore arranged to meet with a small group of students taking Level 2 Functional Skills English classes to ask them what they thought would be a suitable location for the focus groups to take place, and to try out the questions on the students before conducting the focus groups. I also wanted to talk to students about the implications of me moderating the focus groups myself, as I am a member of staff in the college and known to some of the students. I therefore arranged with one of the teachers of the Level 2 Functional Skills English classes to meet a small group of students after one of their classes.

In the meeting, I explained why I was doing the study, and asked the students if they were happy to take part in a conversation with me about my plans to conduct the focus groups. The students agreed, and suggested I use a location for the focus groups other than the students' classrooms, and gave some suggestions of other locations in the college where I could hold the focus groups. I asked the students about the possible effects of moderating the focus groups myself. The students told me that if the participants were properly informed that the study was for a research degree and was an exploration to understand issues associated with literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, moderating the focus groups myself would have no significant effect on the participants' responses. I then tested the interview questions on the students, who gave answers as anticipated that were relevant to the research questions.

To arrange the focus groups, I wrote to all the students in the classes I planned to observe, and invited the students to attend a focus group (Appendix C). I discuss my communication with participants prior to generating the data later in the chapter when I discuss the ethics associated with the study. I was aware that my position as a member of staff in the college could result in students feeling they were compelled to attend. My aim in writing to the students was to reduce the feeling students may have had of being coerced into attending. In the letter I invited students to attend the session ten minutes before the start, so that I could greet the students when they arrived, offer refreshments, and help the students feel at ease. My aim was to create a permissive and non-judgemental environment in which the students could feel they were able to say what they really thought and felt about their experiences and perception of literacy and the literacy classes they attended.

As I was not a teacher of any of the groups, at the start of each focus group I introduced myself and explained to participants that the session was part of a study I was doing for a Doctorate in Education degree that I was taking at the Institute of Education, and that I was carrying out an exploratory investigation into literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs. I explained that there were no right or wrong answers to my questions, and that I was interested in listening to all participants' experiences and perspectives on literacy and the literacy classes they attended in college. I explained that I was less concerned with the people involved in the activities than the activities themselves (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). I also explained to participants the procedure for allowing all participants to contribute to the session, and I let everyone know that they were welcome to get up and take refreshments at any time during the session.

I audio recorded the focus groups, in order to transcribe the recordings in preparation for analysis. I took notes during the focus groups in order to give a two to three minute summary at the end of each session to verify with the students what had been said during the session. At the end of each focus group, I wrote a diary entry intended to provide an additional element in the trail of evidence that could be used to verify the findings I reached, and that I discuss in the final chapter (Reish, 2007). The diary entries were in answer to the following questions:

- What themes emerged from the session?
- What important points did I learn from the session?
- Was there anything surprising or unexpected?
- Were there any particularly helpful quotes?
- How was this session similar to or different from other sessions?
- Does anything need to be changed before the next session?

(Kreuger & Casey, 2009)

Out of a possible 130 student participants, 86 students took part. The smallest focus group had six participants, and the largest fourteen.

4.6 One-to-one interviews with teachers

In this section I describe the steps I took to design the questioning route I followed, and the questions I asked the teachers during the one-to-one interviews, including excerpts from the interviews to illustrate the kind of responses the questions elicited. I end the section with a description of the steps I took to arrange and conduct the one-to-one interviews.

4.6.1 The one-to-one interview questioning route

In a similar way to the planning of the focus groups, I took the position that the most important aspect of the one-to-one interviews with teachers was that the participants felt able to express their experiences and perceptions of their Level 2 Functional Skills English classes in the way they wanted to (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). My aim was to elicit teachers' accounts of their experiences teaching literacy to 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, more than to collate answers to questions, and so to encourage teachers to talk about their concerns about literacy education for 16-18 year olds in FECs in general and their Level 2 Functional Skills English classes in particular as they felt they needed to (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; King & Horrocks, 2010). I therefore drew on a semi-structured questioning route that sought to allow participants to express their experiences and perceptions in their own terms, using open-ended questions that require explanations, descriptions

or illustrations to reveal what participants' really wanted to say (Morgan, 1997; King & Horrocks, 2010). There were six questions in all. The questioning route I used and the questions I asked were as follows:

Question 1 - an opening question: *Can you tell me about when you started teaching literacy to 16-18 year olds in FECs? How long ago was it? How did you feel about it?* The purpose of the question was to give the teachers the chance to feel comfortable talking to me by talking about a topic they were familiar with, and for the teachers to get used to the interview being recorded.

Question 2 – an introductory question: *Think back to a Level 2 Functional Skills English lesson, or any literacy lesson for 16-18 year olds that seemed to go well. Why do you think this class went well?* The purpose of the question was to enable the teachers to start thinking about the topic of the research and their connection to literacy education for 16-18 year olds in FECs. The question invited the teachers to think back to a Level 2 Functional Skills English lesson that they thought went well, and to consider why they thought it went well.

Question 3 - a transition question: *What do you think about the way Functional Skills English courses are organised at college? Do you think it could be done differently?* The question was intended to enable the teachers to make connections between the topic of the research and their actual work at college through a consideration of the way literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications is organised in the college.

Question 4 – the key question: *Why do you think literacy is perceived to be a problem among 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs?* This question was intended to generate data directly relevant to the research question.

Question 5 - an ending question: *If you had one minute to talk to the Principal about the literacy education the college offers to 16-18 year olds, what would you say?* As with the focus group questions, this question was critical to analysis as it allowed the teachers to reflect on previous comments and determine their final position on what they wanted to say on critical areas of concern to them.

Question 6 – a final question: *Did I correctly describe what was said? Did I miss anything out?* This question was following a two to three minute summary of what was said in the interview taken from my notes. As with the focus group questions, this question was also critical to analysis as it allowed data generated through the one-to-one interviews to be verified by the participants (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

4.6.2 Arranging and conducting one-to-one interviews with teachers

As with the focus groups with students, my aim in planning and conducting the one-to-one interviews with the teachers was to provide a permissive, non-judgemental environment that would allow the teachers to feel comfortable and so say what they really thought and felt about literacy, literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, and their Level 2 Functional Skills English classes (Kreuger & Casey, 2009). I arranged to meet each teacher individually, and explained that I was studying for a Doctorate in Education degree with the Institute of Education, and that I was carrying out an exploratory investigation into literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs. I asked each teacher if they would like to be a participant in the study, and if they would be happy to be interviewed by me on the topic of literacy education for 16-18 year olds in FECs.

Each teacher consented to be interviewed. I asked the teachers where and when they would like to be interviewed, and made arrangements for the interviews around the teachers' suggestions (King & Horrocks, 2010). At the start of the interviews, I reiterated that the interview was part of a project I was carrying out for a Doctorate in Education degree I was taking with the Institute of Education. I explained that I was interested in listening to their experiences and perspectives on literacy and the literacy classes they taught, and that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions. I also explained that I was less concerned with the people involved in the lessons than in the lesson activities (King & Horrocks, 2010). I audio recorded the interviews, in order to transcribe the recordings in preparation for analysis. I took notes during the interviews, to give a two to three minutes summary at the end of each interview to verify what had been said with the teacher.

As with the focus group interviews, at the end of each session I wrote a diary entry intended to provide an additional element in the trail of evidence that could be used to verify the findings I reached, and that I discuss in the final chapter (Reish, 2007). The diary entries were in answer to the following questions:

- What themes emerged from the session?
- What important points did I learn from the session?
- Was there anything surprising or unexpected?
- Were there any particularly helpful quotes?
- How was this session similar to or different from other sessions?
- Does anything need to be changed before the next session?

(Kreuger & Casey, 2009)

4.7 Observations of Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons

In this section I describe the steps I took to design the observation schedule for observing Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, and the approach I took to arranging and carrying out the observations.

4.7.1 The lesson observation schedule

My reason for using lesson observation as a third method of generating data was to allow a more comprehensive approach to data generation that did not focus on students' and teachers' perspectives, and that offered further insights into literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs. I did not intend any of the research questions to be answered from the lesson observation data alone. I nevertheless planned to follow a deliberate and articulated process to show how the data was generated.

I took observation notes under four heading that focused on classroom activity in terms of what the teacher intended the students to learn, the tasks the students completed, the degree of student involvement in the lesson, and the success with which the students completed the tasks, but not directly related to what the students

think literacy is or how they viewed their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons. I therefore took notes under the following lesson observation headings:

- What the teacher intends the students to learn in the lesson
- The tasks students complete during the lesson
- The degree of involvement with which students complete tasks
- The degree of success with which students complete tasks

4.7.2 The procedure for observing lessons

I arranged the lesson observation schedule with the teachers of the Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons. The observations were my first direct contact with the students. I aimed to establish an atmosphere of mutual co-operation with the teachers and students from the start by sharing my reasons for carrying out the project with them before starting the observations (Appendix A), and through my approach to carrying out the lesson observations themselves. I discuss the information I shared with the teachers and students prior to the lesson observations later on in the chapter when I discuss the ethics associated with the study.

During the lesson observations, I positioned myself as much as possible, so that I was visible to all students (Wragg, 1999). I remained seated throughout the observations, and did not communicate with the students or the teacher during the lessons. In terms of Gold's classification of observer roles: complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant, and complete observer, I positioned myself as a complete observer (Gold, 1958). I wanted to assure the students that I had no motive for carrying out the observations other than to investigate whether data generated from the observations offered further insights into the issue of literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational programmes of study in FECs. I took notes during the observations using a semi-structured observation schedule described above, focusing on the whole class rather than any one particular student. I acknowledge that in taking notes, I was making a subjective judgement based on what seemed to be apparent to me as an observer in the lessons. I am aware that a consequence of my presence in the classroom may have resulted in some students

pretending to be involved in tasks in which they were actually not interested. I aimed to reduce the effects of my presence in the classroom by establishing an atmosphere of mutual co-operation with the students at the start (Wragg, 1999). I'm also aware that in some cases, some students may have been interested in tasks they did not get involved in completing because of external circumstances beyond the control of the teacher.

I did not plan to carry out a language analysis of the lesson observation data, and so did not record the lessons. In a similar way to the focus groups and one-to-one interviews, at the end of each observation I kept a diary entry to allow further evidence to enable the verification of the findings (Reish, 2007). The diary entries were in answer to the following questions:

- Did any themes emerge from the observation?
- What important points did I learn from the observation?
- Was there anything surprising or unexpected about the observation?
- How was this observation similar to or different from other observations?
- Does anything need to be changed before the next observation?

I now describe the steps I took to establish trustworthiness in the data.

4.8 Trustworthy data

My intention is to enable the reader to decide if the outcomes of the project are transferable to other contexts or situations, having supplied the reader with an account of my own biases and subjectivity in relation to the project, how the project was planned, how data was generated and analysed, and how the outcomes were reached (King & Horrocks, 2010). I do not seek to generalise the results of the project into other contexts as with quantitative studies, and so do not seek to account for the reliability and validity of the data as associated with quantitative research and statistical analysis. I seek to establish the trustworthiness of the data, and to develop a credible approach to using my own subjectivity to generate, analyse and interpret the data. To do this I drew on Rubin and Rubin's three criteria for establishing the

trustworthiness of data; that of Transparency, Communicability, and Coherence (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Transparency refers to an explicit description of the steps taken in generating and analysing the data, and so arriving at an interpretation of the data (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). As such, I have aimed to follow a planned and deliberate procedure in setting up and forming observations of Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, focus groups with students, and one-to-one interviews with teachers, a planned and deliberate procedure for the conduct of the focus groups, one-to-one interviews and lesson observations, and a planned and deliberate procedure for the analysis of focus group data, one-to-one interview data, and lesson observation data.

In the planning and conduct of the focus groups and one-to-one interviews I:

- designed questions that were direct, clear, and straightforward
- pilot-tested the questions to check they were intelligible and understood in the way I intend them to be understood
- sought clarification on areas of ambiguity through a meeting with potential participants
- consulted potential participants on a suitable time and place to conduct the focus groups and interviews
- provided a permissive and non-judgemental environment in which focus groups and one-to-one interviews could take place, to allow participants to feel comfortable and say what they really thought and felt about literacy, and literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs
- gave participants a summary of the key points covered in each of the focus groups and one-to-one interview sessions and asked participants to verify and amend the summary
- accounted for my own subjectivity in the generation and analysis of the data (King & Horrocks, 2010)

- identified a trail of evidence through notes on lesson observations, oral summaries, diary notes and transcriptions, so that the outcomes of the project could be checked against them (Reish, 2007)

As such, I have sought to provide the reader with a clear account of how I planned, carried out and analysed the student focus group data, the one-to-one interview data, and the lesson observation data, and from that how I arrived at the interpretation of the data I discuss in the following two chapters on data analysis and findings.

Communicability refers to whether the themes and findings I arrived at through analysis were seen to make sense to participants and other researchers. While it is not possible to test out my analysis with student participants, as almost all the student participants left college in June 2013, I have nevertheless verified the outcomes of my analysis with the five teachers, who were all still working at the college in September 2013. I did this by arranging to meet the teachers who had participated in the project in September 2013, shortly after the start of term. At the meeting, I described to the teachers my initial findings. I invited the teachers to say to what extent the findings represented what they had said when they were interviewed. The teachers confirmed that my initial findings were a valid representation of their perspectives on the literacy education the college offered to its 16-18 year old students.

Coherence refers to the extent to which patterns identified in the data fit together and tell a coherent story (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In analysing the data I took steps to:

- identify relevant text in the data
- identify key themes in the data
- identify theoretical constructs in the data
- use the language of the participants in writing up the participants' stories

As such, the planning, conduct and analysis of the project aligns with Rubin and Rubin's three criteria in establishing trustworthiness in the generation and analysis of data (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

I now discuss ethical concerns involved in generating, storing and analysing the data.

4.9 Ethics and data collection

This section deals with the plans I made to secure the rights, dignity and well-being of the participants. The research involves two groups of people: 16-18 year olds taking Level 2 Functional Skills English classes as an element of a full-time vocational programme of study, and a group of teachers of Level 2 Functional Skills English classes. I also consider the implications of carrying out the research in the institution where I work as a teacher and manager of literacy courses for 16-18 year olds.

Malone argues that for a participant in a research project to give informed consent, this necessitates not only knowing what will be researched, but also having a clear understanding of the research methodology. Without this, gaining truly informed consent is practically impossible (Malone, 2003). Berg also makes the point that ‘knowing consent’ is a process rather than an event (Berg, 2014), and that participants would only be in full possession of complete knowledge of what participation in the study really meant when they had taken part in a focus group or a one-to-one interview (King & Horrocks, 2010). With this in mind, I made a commitment to consider ethical issues relating to the study at each stage of the process, and I now describe the steps I took to secure the rights, the dignity and well-being of the participants at these stages of the process. In doing so, I refer to the ethics involved in generating a sample of student participants, in accessing participants, in generating and storing the data, and in writing the final report.

4.9.1 The ethics involved in generating a student participant sample

My main ethical consideration in generating the student sample was to ensure that all personal information relating to potential student participants was accessed and stored securely. I therefore decided to generate the student participant sample through the college’s Management Information System (MIS). The college’s MIS is a secure data base used to record student information. It holds information on students’ age, gender, ethnicity, and whether students have a language additional to

English (EAL). The information is disclosed by students on the college's enrolment form.

I generated a randomly selected sample of 70 students enrolled on Level 2 Functional Skills English from the whole Level 2 Functional Skills English student population. Following this, I generated a further three versions of the sample to stratify the sample by gender, EAL and ethnicity. The fourth version of the sample represented a randomly selected sample of Level 2 Functional Skills English students, selected from the whole population, stratified to incorporate a diversity of experience and perspective, and large enough to achieve theoretical saturation. To ensure the security of student information, I drew up each version of the sample within the college's MIS. No student information was taken outside of the College's MIS in drawing up the student participant sample.

Students in the sample were spread across eight Level 2 Functional Skills English classes. However, not all of the students in those classes were in the sample. The students in the classes but not in the sample would be involved in a lesson observation, but not a focus group interview. I was concerned that some of these students might wish to contribute to the study by attending a focus group, and might feel excluded from participating in the study if not invited. I therefore invited all the students in the Level 2 Functional Skills English classes in which there were students in the sample to participate in the study. This served the dual purpose of ensuring that no students felt excluded from participating in the study, and of ensuring that the size of the student participant sample remained large enough to achieve theoretical saturation if some students from the sample declined to participate.

4.9.2 The ethics involved in accessing participants

In terms of accessing the participants, I followed a planned procedure designed to give potential participants the opportunity to consider my reasons for undertaking the research, why I asked them to participate in the study, and information about the research methodology and what I intended to do with the findings of the research, to enable participants to decide whether they were happy to consent to take part in the study. At each stage of the process I emphasised the voluntary and mutually

beneficial nature of the research, and of my intention that the main beneficiaries of the research should be the participants.

I used five documents (Appendices A-E) in the process of informing participants about the project, and to request from participants that they consent to take part in the project. The documents were:

- a leaflet to student participants about classroom observations (Appendix A)
- a student and teacher participant classroom observation consent letter (Appendix B)
- a letter inviting student participants to attend a focus group (Appendix C)
- a student focus group consent letter (Appendix D)
- a teacher interview consent letter (Appendix E)

I took the view that informed consent is a process rather than something achieved through the issuing of a single leaflet or conversation, and so explained the purpose of the research in the leaflet to student participants about classroom observation, and repeated the explanation in the other documents. This was to give potential participants multiple opportunities to consider what the research was about and whether they were happy to consent to participate.

As the teachers of the Level 2 Functional Skills English classes were known to me, I also used individual face-to-face meetings with the teachers to take the time to explain to the teachers why I was carrying out the research and why I was asking them to take part, and to address any concerns the teachers had about the research. The main concern was whether the classroom observations would contribute in any way to the college's performance management system. I assured the teachers that they would not, and that data generated for the purpose of the research would be used only to inform the research and would not be used for any other purpose.

My first step was to meet with the five teachers of the Level 2 Functional Skills English classes individually to seek their participation. All five teachers agreed to participate. I then arranged a schedule of lesson observations with the teachers, and

agreed with them the time and the room in which to carry out one-to-one interviews. I also asked the teachers to give out the leaflet about classroom observations to the students in the classes I planned to observe (Appendix A). Before students and teachers took part in lesson observations I ask them to sign a letter of consent, indicating that they had understood the purpose of the research and agreed to take part in the lesson observation (Appendix B).

Following the lesson observations, and as part of the process of gaining informed consent, I wrote to students to invite them to attend a focus group interview (Appendix C). My reason for writing to the students was to enable them to attend the focus groups without feeling coerced. I gave the students a date/time and place for when and where the focus groups would take place. Students who did not wish to take part in the focus group were able to decline to take part by simply not attending the focus group session. I arranged for the focus groups to take place in a location advised by other students in the college. Before conducting the focus groups and one-to-one interviews, I asked students and teachers to sign a letter of consent to say they had understood the purpose of the research and consented to take part (Appendices D & E).

I intended that the leaflet to students, the signing of a letter of consent prior to taking part in a lesson observation, participation in a lesson observation, and a separate invitation to a focus group would enable students to gain sufficient insight into the research to give a more knowingly informed consent prior to taking part in focus groups if they chose to attend.

4.9.3 The ethics involved in generating and storing data

I realise that students and teachers may perceive talking openly about their experiences of Functional Skills English as a risk, as what they say could count against them at college, particularly as the students and teachers know I am a manager of Functional Skills English courses in the college.

I first of all sought to reassure the teachers through individual meetings, and students through an information leaflet, of the intended mutually co-operative and beneficial

nature of the study, and of my reasons for asking them to take part. I sought to emphasise that my only interest was in participants' views on literacy and on the literacy education they experienced at college, and I made it clear to participants that no data generated as part of the research would be used in any way to make judgements about individual teachers or students in the college. As such, I sought to enable the student and teacher participants in the research to say what they really thought about their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, and the literacy education offered to 16-18 year olds in FECs, and this contributed to the trustworthiness of the data.

I explained to the teachers and students through leaflets, letters, and face-to-face meetings that all information generated in lesson observations, focus groups and one-to-one interviews was confidential, and would only be used to inform the research. I explained that all identities and information relating to individual people would be anonymised, but also stated that it may be possible to identify a participant in another way, although this would be unlikely. I explained that I would take notes during the focus groups, one-to-one interviews and lesson observations, and that this was to give participants a summary of the session to verify what had been said, and to keep a record of the session as further evidence for the verification of the data. I explained to participants that the notes I took would be stored in my personal desk in my home. I explained that all electronic data would be stored on my personal, desktop computer in my home which is password protected, that there would be no other copy of the data, and that the data would be erased following completion of the study.

I was aware that students may wish to disclose confidential information about their Level 2 Functional Skills English classes during focus group interviews. I therefore said to students at the start of the focus groups that if they wished to disclose any confidential information, such as information about their teacher or other members of their class, they could contact me separately after the focus group. I informed the teachers and students that they could decline to take part in the project at any point, or say that they did not want data about them to be used in the project report, and if they did decline to take part in the project that there would be no consequence at college to them declining to take part.

I informed the participants that they could request access to any data I generated about them at any point in the research, and that this would be made available to them. I did this by making my email address available to all participants at the end of each interview, focus group and lesson observation. I made it clear that the research findings would be made available to them on request, and to staff at the Institute of Education as part of my Doctorate in Education degree. I also made it clear that the results of the research would be available publically through the Institute of Education, that I intended to publish the research through academic journals, and that the results of the research may be used to inform Level 2 Functional Skills English courses and other literacy courses for 16-18 year olds in college and possibly in other colleges in the future.

4.9.4 Ethics and the final report

In terms of the final report, I wanted to consider how the knowledge developed through the study might shape Level 2 Functional Skills English courses and other literacy courses in college, and what the consequences of this might be on any particular participant (King and Horrocks, 2010).

In order to be transparent about the generation and analysis of data, I state my own position in the research, and follow a planned and deliberate procedure for generating and analysing the data. My intention in doing this is to enable readers to evaluate how and why I reach the findings that I discuss in the final chapter of the thesis. I make it clear that I do not claim that my interpretation of the data is the only possible interpretation, and acknowledge that my understanding and interpretation of the data is relative to my own specific cultural and social references (King & Horrocks, 2010). I invite the reader to consider the extent to which the findings are transferable to other contexts.

At the end of each focus group and one-to-one interview, I verified with participants what had been said. My intention was to allow participants to consider if there were any potential adverse consequences for them in the data, and whether they remained happy for the data to be used in the study. As such, I offered each participant the opportunity to consider what consequences there might be for them in participating

in the study at the end of their participation, when they would be most likely to be able to give knowing consent to their participation.

The research is intended to be mutually beneficial, and the outcomes intended to serve the participants. I intended that the knowledge developed through the study to have only a beneficial effect on the participants, by leading to improvements in the provision of literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs.

4.10 The procedure for analysing data

In this section I describe the procedure I planned and followed for analysing the data generated from the focus groups with students, the one-to-one interviews with teachers, and the lesson observations. It is a procedure for a qualitative analysis of qualitative data. I did not intend to carry out a statistical analysis of the data, although I was prepared to include numerical analysis such as the number of groups or the number of participants in a group that mention a topic (Morgan, 1997), if such a numerical characterisation aided an understanding of the topic.

An important consideration was to draw on a procedure that enabled me to avoid imposing my own subjectivity on the analysis in an arbitrary manner. I acknowledged at the start of this chapter that there may be more than one way of interpreting the data, and that my interpretation is just one interpretation based on my subjective position in the research. I do not seek to eliminate or control my own subjectivity, but rather to account for it, so that the reader can evaluate my analysis and interpretation of the data as such. I have therefore stated explicitly that I am a teacher and manager of literacy courses for 16-18 year olds who are taking vocational qualifications in a FEC, and that the FEC where I work was the research setting where I generated the data. While I see it as inevitable that I will bring my own perspective on literacy and literacy education offered to 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs to the analysis and interpretation of the data, the reasons I aimed to follow a deliberate and planned procedure was to avoid imposing my own perspective on the analysis in an arbitrary manner.

I audio recorded all focus groups and one-to-one interviews, and transcribed the data in preparation for analysis. I used the transcription system given in Table 5 below, taken from Poland (2002), which was consistent with the level of detail I needed for the analysis I intended to carry out.

Table 5: Transcription System

Transcription feature	Representation in text
Emphasis	Capital letters
Very short pause	[p]
Long pauses	[p-----]
Interruptions
Overlapping speech [overlap]
Inaudible speech	[inaudible]
Laughing and other features	[laugh]
Tone of voice	[..... tone]; e.g. [angry tone]
Direct speech	‘.....’; e.g. The participant said, ‘I remember it from an English class when I was at school.’
Non-verbal communication	[NVC]; e.g. [NVC stretches arms]

Based on Poland (2002)

I based the procedure for analysing the lesson observation data on the procedure for analysing the focus group and one-to-one interview data. I now describe the procedure I followed to analyse the student focus group data, the teacher interview data, and the lesson observation data.

4.10.1 Focus group data

My intention was to focus the analysis on the concerns of the students rather than on my own concerns as manifested in the questioning route. While the questioning route was intended to generate data relevant to answering the research questions, I was aware that participants’ responses to my questions may result in the data being structured according to my concerns about the literacy education offered to 16-18

year old students taking vocational qualifications in FECs, and may miss out on some aspects of the students' experiences and perspectives that they believed were important to the research. I therefore carried out the analysis by identifying patterns in the data rather than by an analysis of the responses to questions.

I identified patterns in the data through coding, drawing on Auerbach & Silverstein's approach to coding that they used in their 2003 study of Haitian fathers (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Examples of coding are given in Appendices F and G. Auerbach & Silverstein drew on Miles & Huberman's three categories for analysing transcripts: text-driven, coherence-driven, and theory-driven categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994), referring to them as text-based, sensitizing, and theoretical constructs categories (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003), and developed the categories into six stages.

I used this six-stage procedure as a planned and deliberate procedure for the analysis of the data, and through this approach sought to preclude an arbitrary imposition of my own subjectivity on the analysis. I also intended the procedure to provide a detailed trail of evidence of how I analysed and interpreted the data that could contribute to the verification of the data and my approach to establishing trustworthiness in the generation and analysis of the data. The six-staged procedure was as follows:

Text-based category

Stage 1: To create a transcript of the raw data from the audio recordings of the focus groups as a Word file, one file for each focus group – an example is given in Appendix F: Transcription of Student Focus Group 2 (relevant text underlined)

Stage 2: To identify and underline passages of text in the transcripts that were relevant to the research concerns, to copy the underlined text into a separate file, one file for each focus group, and to code the data using single words or phrases from the transcripts – an example of the identification of relevant text is given in Appendix F; an example of coding of relevant text is given in Appendix G: Student Focus Group 2 – Relevant Text with Coding

Sensitizing category

Stage 3: To identify ideas that were repeated in two or more files/focus groups, to combine the repeating ideas into one list, and to locate them in a new file. Then to code the passages using single words or phrases from the transcripts

Stage 4: To organise the repeating ideas into groups with common themes, to locate the themes in a new file, then to code the themes using phrases from the transcripts

Theoretical constructs category

Stage 5: To analyse the themes using the theoretical constructs and language from the theoretical framework I discussed in Chapter 3.

Stage 6: To draw on the theoretical constructs and analysis of the themes to organise the participants' subjective experiences and perspectives into a coherent story.

Stages 2 and 3, described as descriptive and interpretative coding by King and Horrocks (2010), were intended to maintain a direct link between the analysis of the data and the research setting, by using coding that draws on words or phrases from the transcripts. In Stage 4, I drew on King and Horrocks' definition of a theme; 'a recurrent and distinctive feature of participants' accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question' (King & Horrocks: 2010, p.150), but unlike King and Horrocks, I did not seek to abstract ideas from the data at this stage. I continued to locate themes directly in the research setting by coding the themes using words and phrases from the transcripts. I present this stage of the analysis in the following chapter, Chapter 5 Analysis.

I planned to move the analysis to a more abstract level in Stage 5 by drawing on the theoretical discourse that I discussed in Chapter 3. I give an account of this in Chapter 6 Findings, where I show how the theoretical constructs I discussed in Chapter 3 enable an understanding of the data, and enable the findings to be taken beyond the research setting and into other contexts or situations. In Stage 6, I planned to summarise where the analysis had led through a discussion of the findings. I do this in Chapter 7 Discussion, where I draw on the findings from

Chapter 6 to inform a discussion on insights I have gained into the issue of literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs that I structure around the research questions.

4.10.2 Teacher one-to-one interview data

I took a similar approach to the analysis of the teacher one-to-one interview data as I had with the analysis of the student focus group data. I carried out the analysis by identifying patterns in the data, rather than analysing the responses to questions, in order to capture aspects of the teacher participants' experiences and perspectives of literacy and literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs that they believed were important to the research. As with the procedure for analysing the student participant data, I drew on Auerbach & Silverstein's six-stage approach to qualitative data analysis as described in the previous section (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Stages 2, 3 and 4 coding of the teacher interview data was intended to locate relevant text, ideas and themes in the research setting by using words and phrases from the text. Stage 5 was intended to move the analysis to a more abstract level by drawing on the theoretical discourse associated with literacy and literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs that I discussed in Chapter 3. In Stage 6, I planned to summarise where the analysis had led through a discussion of the findings in Chapter 7 Discussion, where I draw on the findings from Chapter 6 to inform a discussion on insights I have gained through the study that I structure around the research questions.

4.10.3 Lesson observation data

I did not plan to answer any of the research questions from the lesson observation data alone. The purpose of the lesson observation data analysis was to allow a more comprehensive approach to the analysis of data, and to offer additional insights into the topic. I used a similar procedure for analysing the lesson observation data as I used for the analysis of the student focus group data and teacher interview data. I carried out the analysis by identifying patterns in the data, drawing on Auerbach &

Silverstein's six-stage approach to qualitative data analysis as described in section 4.10.1 (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). I used my lesson observation field notes as raw data. Stages 1 to 4 of the procedure were as follows:

Text-based category

Stage 1: To make an electronic Word file of the lesson observation field notes, one file for each lesson observation

Stage 2: To identify and underline passages in the field notes that were relevant to the research concerns, to copy the underlined text into a separate file, one for each lesson observation, and to code the passages using single words or phrases from the field notes

Sensitizing category

Stage 3: To identify ideas that were repeated in two or more lesson observation files, to combine the repeating ideas into one list, and to locate them in a new file. Then to code the passages using single words or phrases from the field notes

Stage 4: To organise the repeating ideas into groups with common themes, to locate the themes in a new file, then to code the themes using phrases from the field notes

As with the student focus group and teacher interview data, stage 5 of the process was intended to move the analysis to a more abstract level by drawing on the theoretical discourse I discussed in Chapter 3. I present this stage of the analysis in Chapter 6 Findings. Stage 6 of the process was intended to draw on these findings to inform a discussion on insights I had gained into the topic, which I present in Chapter 7 Discussion. I did not however intend to answer any of the research questions from the lesson observation data alone, but to use the findings from the lesson observations as a way of generating additional insights into the topic.

4.11 Insider research

The reason I chose to carry out the fieldwork for the study in the institution where I work was because I wanted the findings of the study primarily to inform my own

professional practice, and to be of benefit to the teachers and students at the college where I work. I drew on Banks' (1998) categories for researcher positioning to identify my position within the research. Banks suggests a four part categorisation of true indigenous-insider, the indigenous-outsider, the external-insider, and the external-outsider (Banks, 1998). I identified myself as a true indigenous-insider; someone who had knowledge of the context of the research setting, the participants that were the focus of the study, and the values and beliefs of those participants in the context of the research topic. In this section I consider my position in the research as a true indigenous-insider in terms of ethical issues associated with the study and my methodological approach to the study, with particular reference to the trustworthiness of the data.

My position as an insider in the research brought with it some benefits. Bell (1999) notes how insider-researcher knowledge of the context of the research setting enables the researcher to access participants quickly and intimately, and formulate meaningful questions and conduct interviews sensitively (Bell, 1999). I believe I benefitted from these advantages in conducting this study. I was able to access participants in a straightforward and unproblematic manner. I was able to conduct the interviews thoroughly, following the questioning routes I had designed, and did not receive any negative feedback from participants at any time on any issues arising from the interviews or the way the research was conducted.

Researching an aspect of the organisation where the researcher works nevertheless raises ethical considerations about the relationship between the researcher and the participants, and methodological considerations about objectivity and bias, and by extension the trustworthiness of the data. Aguilier (1981) notes how familiarity with the research setting potentially narrows the perception of the researcher, which in turn potentially impedes analysis of the data (Aguiler, 1981), and Merriam et.al. (2001) note how the insider researcher's closeness to the research setting potentially impedes their ability to ask difficult questions if or when required, and as such may compromise the trustworthiness and analysis of the data (Merriam et. al., 2001).

I therefore sought to counter any ethical or methodological issues that may have cropped up during the study because of my position as an insider researcher by

taking steps to account for my own subjectivity in relation to the participants. I did this by drawing on a planned and deliberate procedure for generating and analysing the data that sought to preclude my own subjectivity being applied to the generation and analysis of the data in an arbitrary manner. I first of all presented myself to the participants as a co-creator of the research with them. I planned and followed a deliberate procedure for selecting and briefing the participants, I described to the participants the potential for them and for others to benefit from the research, and I described the possible negative consequences of taking part in the research and the steps I had taken to limit any negative effects. I described the arrangements I put in place to gain participants' consent, and I made it clear to the participants that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

To counter any potential bias and as such ensure the trustworthiness of the data, I drew on the three-stage approach for generating and analysing data that I articulated in Section 4.8; that of Transparency, Communicability, and Coherence (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). To establish the three-stage criteria I followed a planned and deliberate procedure to set up and conduct lesson observations, focus groups, and one-to-one interviews, and to analyse the focus group, one-to-one interview, and lesson observation data. I also generated a trail of evidence through notes on lesson observations, diaries and through transcriptions to enable the outcomes of the study to be triangulated (Reish, 2007). In analysing the data I followed a planned procedure to identify relevant text, key themes, theoretical constructs, and use the language of the participants in writing up the participants' stories. Although it was not possible to test out my analysis with student participants, I nevertheless verified the outcomes of my analysis with the five teachers, who were all still working at the college in September 2013. As such, I took steps to protect the rights and dignity of the participants, and the trustworthiness and analysis of the data in respect of my position in the research as an indigenous-insider researcher.

In the next chapter, Chapter 5 Analysis, I give a summary of my analysis of the student focus group data, the teacher interview data and the lesson observation data. In the summary I present the repeating ideas I identified in the data, and how I grouped the repeating ideas into themes.

Chapter 5: Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the analysis of data generated from the student focus groups, one-to-one interviews with teachers, and lesson observations. I present the analysis as a summary in table form, showing the repeating ideas I identified in the data, and how I grouped the repeating ideas into themes.

As I stated in Chapter 4, I do not seek to generate neutral or value-free knowledge through the study, nor do I claim that my analysis of the data is the only possible analysis. I acknowledge that any analysis is relative to the specific cultural and social references of the person or people carrying out the analysis (King & Horrocks, 2010). While I have followed a deliberate and articulated process to enable the reader to understand how I arrived at my analysis of the data, I nevertheless acknowledge that my analysis is relative to my own specific cultural and social references. I also acknowledge that different readers may interpret the study differently. My aim is to offer an analysis that I derive from my current perspective on literacy and literacy education as offered to 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs.

5.2 Organisation of the Chapter

I begin the chapter with a summary of the repeating ideas I identified in the student focus group data, and how I grouped the repeating ideas into themes. I present the summary in table form. I continue with summaries of the teacher interview data and the lesson observation data, and show how I grouped the repeating ideas I identified in the teacher interview and lesson observation data into themes. I also present these summaries in table form.

5.3 Analysis: Student focus group data

Table 6 lists the student focus groups by number and by name. SFG1 refers to the first student focus group, and so on. In Table 7, I present the repeating ideas and themes I identified in the student focus group (SFG) data. Altogether I identified 16

repeating ideas which I collated into nine themes. The table shows which focus groups made reference to which repeating ideas, the number of times a focus group made reference to a repeating idea, and how I grouped the repeating ideas into themes.

Table 6: Student Focus Groups by Number and Name

Student Focus Group Number	Student Focus Group Name
SFG 1	Travel & Tourism and Catering
SFG 2	Computing
SFG 3	Health & Social Care
SFG 4	Creative Arts
SFG 5	Childcare
SFG 6	Hair & Beauty
SFG 7	Sports & Football
SFG 8	Digital Media & Performance

Table 7: Student Focus Group Data Analysis – Repeating Ideas and Themes

Repeating Ideas	Theme	SFG1	SFG2	SFG3	SFG4	SFG5	SFG6	SFG7	SFG8
It's really basic	It's really basic	✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓		✓	✓ ✓		✓ ✓
When we do discussion	When we do discussion	✓ ✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓ ✓
We did how to explain what words mean	When we do discussion			✓					
It was a really big group of self-learning	When we do discussion			✓					
If it's interactive, you're more likely to learn	When we do discussion			✓				✓ ✓	
One of the most important life skills	One of the most important life skills	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓
It could be more organised	It could be more organised	✓		✓ ✓ ✓	✓	✓	✓ ✓		
Isn't that creative writing	Isn't that creative writing		✓				✓ ✓ ✓		✓

Letter writing doesn't relate to real life	Isn't that creative writing		✓						
Learning something new	Isn't that creative writing		✓						✓
The way the teacher explained it to us	The way the teacher explained it to us				✓	✓		✓	
The teacher would give you points on how to make it better	The way the teacher explained it to us		✓				✓		✓
Proofreading is important	Proofreading and games				✓	✓			
Games get your mind working	Proofreading and games							✓	✓
What's the main purpose?	What's the main purpose?				✓				
It doesn't seem to have progressed from the Level 1 to the Level 2	It doesn't seem to progress from Level 1 to Level 2		✓						

5.4 Analysis: Teacher interview data

In Table 8, I present the repeating ideas and themes I identified in the teacher interview data. TP1 refers to the first teacher participant, and so on. There were five teacher participants in all. The repeating ideas are presented using the words of the teachers, as this is useful in showing the variety of responses the teachers gave to some of the prompts. Altogether I identified 22 repeating ideas which I collated into five themes. The table shows which teachers made reference to which repeating idea, and how I grouped the repeating ideas into themes.

Table 8: Teacher Interviews Data Analysis – Repeating Ideas and Themes

Repeating Ideas	Theme	TP1	TP2	TP3	TP4	TP5
We could improve organising the information a little earlier ... that does have an impact on the students' first impression	There are some negative attitudes			✓		✓

The view learners have is that it's a standout element that they have to do	There are some negative attitudes				✓	
There are some negative attitudes ... partly because they're not sold the idea of Functional Skills by the tutors	There are some negative attitudes	✓	✓			
A lot of the vocational tutors don't have a qualification at that level – it's a subject that they don't want to have anything to do with	There are some negative attitudes	✓				
If we're to improve the success rates, we need to continually work to learn about the standards and how to embed them into our lessons	There are some negative attitudes			✓		
It's quite a big jump to go from Level 1 to Level 2	It's quite a big jump to go from Level 1 to Level 2	✓			✓	
I don't see how you expect a tutor to teacher 23 completely different groups of students ... they probably won't even know all their names	It's quite a big jump to go from Level 1 to Level 2		✓			
The College doesn't have enough Level 1 courses	It's quite a big jump to go from Level 1 to Level 2		✓			
Is there enough time based on the students' starting point	It's quite a big jump to go from Level 1 to Level 2			✓		
I think there's a big gap between the standards [of the students] and the requirements to pass that exam	It's quite a big jump to go from Level 1 to Level 2			✓		
Each year we're moving students up into the Level 2 bracket who probably can't pass it	It's quite a big jump to go from Level 1 to Level 2					✓
English Level 2 you have to write lots, and the students aren't used to writing that much	It's quite a big jump to go from Level 1 to Level 2					✓

It was a constructive thing to do because they actually wanted to achieve the qualification	They could see the benefits	✓				
I find what's usually pretty good is application forms ... what they like about it is it's real life	They could see the benefits		✓			
They worked together a lot, pronouncing new words, complex words to them	They could see the benefits			✓		
It's something they can take away and use as soon as they leave the classroom – a transferable skill	They could see the benefits				✓	
They could see the benefits, and I think that's really important, especially in literacy classes	They could see the benefits				✓	
Where there is a little bit of impact on their own vocational areas – we had a look at the police database	They could see the benefits					✓
[In the exam] they're supposed to write formal language to a friend and I just think that's ridiculous	They are not clear what they want from Functional Skills English		✓			
I don't think they are quite clear what they want from Functional Skills English	They are not clear what they want from Functional Skills English		✓			
There are sort of issues with English and Maths going back to schools	There are sort of issues with English and Maths going back to schools	✓	✓			
It differs to GCSE English, the English that they've studied at school	There are sort of issues with English and Maths going back to schools			✓		

A point of interest to note in the analysis of the teacher interview data is the extent to which the teachers' perspectives diverge in the theme 'they could see the benefits'. While the teachers' perspectives converge on other themes, and each teacher contributes to the content of the theme, their perspectives diverge on what the teachers see as the benefits of their literacy lessons to the students. I refer to this issue in the final chapter, Chapter 7 Discussion, where I discuss insights I have

gained from the perspectives of the students and teachers on issues relating to literacy education as offered to 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs.

5.5 Analysis: Lesson observation data

Table 9 lists lesson observations by number and by name. LO1 refers to the first lesson observation, and so on. In Table 10, I present the repeating ideas I identified in the lesson observation data and how I organised the repeating ideas into themes.

Table 9: Lesson Observations by Number and Name

Lesson Observation Number	Lesson Observation Name
LO 1	Travel & Tourism and Catering
LO 2	Computing
LO 3	Health & Social Care
LO 4	Creative Arts
LO 5	Childcare
LO 6	Hair & Beauty
LO 7	Sports & Football
LO 8	Digital Media & Performance

Table 10: Lesson Observation Data Analysis – Repeating Ideas and Themes

Repeating Ideas	Theme	LO1	LO2	LO3	LO4	LO5	LO6	LO7	LO8
Lesson in response to a request from students	Negotiating learning aims	✓				✓			✓
Content of lesson decided by the teacher	Negotiating learning aims		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Focus on technical vocabulary	Negotiating learning aims						✓		✓
Completing vocational course assignments	Negotiating learning aims					✓			✓
Main focus on spelling, punctuation and grammar	The Level 2 Functional Skills English exam		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓

Writing tasks (CVs, letters to newspaper, reports on crime) as per L2 exam	The Level 2 Functional Skills English exam	✓			✓			✓	
Worksheet on punctuation and capitalisation	The Level 2 Functional Skills English exam		✓						
Reading and forming an opinion	The Level 2 Functional Skills English exam			✓	✓			✓	
Reading comprehension	The Level 2 Functional Skills English exam						✓		
Feedback on writing from the teacher	The Level 2 Functional Skills English exam	✓			✓	✓		✓	
Discussion as a literacy activity	Discussion	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
Students don't want to write about opinions they don't hold	Students don't want to write about opinions they don't hold			✓					
If some students don't buy into the lesson, there isn't the time to differentiate learning outcomes	The difficulty with differentiating learning			✓	✓		✓		
Some students didn't complete the main activity	The difficulty with differentiating learning		✓	✓	✓		✓		

In the next chapter, Chapter 6 Findings, I present the findings from my analysis of the student focus group, teacher interview and lesson observation data. I structure a discussion of the findings around the themes I identified in the data, and link the discussion to the theoretical constructs I discussed in Chapter 3. I then discuss the extent to which the findings from the lesson observation data and the notes I took at the end of each focus group with students and interviews with teachers corroborate the findings from the student focus group data and teacher interview data, and the extent to which the lesson observation data and the notes I took at the end of the focus groups with students and interviews with teachers provide additional insights into the topic.

Chapter 6: Findings

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I present the findings of my analysis of the student focus group data, the teacher interview data, and the lesson observation data. I structure the discussion around the themes I identified in the data, and as such show how I arrived at the themes and the findings. I discuss how the theoretical constructs I referred to in Chapter 3; literacy as a skill, literacy as social practice, literacy-in-action, and the theories of learning I discussed in the chapter aid an understanding of the data in terms of what students understand literacy *is* in the context of their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, how students' perspectives on literacy change as their literacy needs change, and how different literacy activities are predicated on different perspectives of literacy.

The findings show that there is no single or fixed perspective on literacy or literacy education that students and teachers hold, and that can be reported on unproblematically. All eight focus groups followed the same questioning route in the same way, as articulated in the semi-structured interview schedule in Chapter 4. While probing and clarification questions may have investigated aspects of the students' responses differently from one another, none of the focus groups were asked additional or different prompts from other groups. Differences in the responses given by the students were not a function of differences in the prompts or questions the students were asked. Such differences where they occur were a function of how the different groups of students responded spontaneously and differently to the prompts as articulated in the student focus group interview schedule.

An understanding of what students thought literacy was in the context of their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, and how students viewed the literacy education offered to 16-18 year olds in FECs requires an understanding of the complexity of the perspectives the students and teachers brought to literacy and literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs. I deal with this complexity through a discussion of the themes I identified in the previous chapter, and I draw on these themes in the final chapter, where I present insights I gained

through the study into the issue of literacy education as offered to 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs.

6.2 Organisation of the Chapter

The chapter begins with a summary of the themes I identified in the student focus group data in the previous chapter, followed by a discussion of the findings structured around the themes. I continue the chapter with a summary of the themes I identified in the teacher interview and lesson observation data, and follow this with a discussion of the findings that I structure around the themes. The chapter ends with a section on the extent to which the findings from the lesson observation data and my post interview notes corroborate the findings from the student focus group data and teacher interview data, and the extent to which the lesson observation data and post interview notes provide additional insights into the topic.

6.3 Findings: Student focus group data

I identified 16 repeating ideas in the student focus group data, and grouped these repeating ideas into nine themes. I used language from the focus groups as codes for the themes, and did this to maintain a visible link between what I identified as a theme and the words of the students. I chose the themes either because of their commonality across focus groups, or because of their interest or connection to the study.

The themes I chose because of their commonality across focus groups were:

- It's really basic
- When we do discussion
- One of the most important life skills
- It could be more organised
- The way the teacher explained it to us

The themes I chose because of their interest and connection to the study were:

- That's creative writing
- Proofreading and games
- What's the main purpose?
- It doesn't seem to have progressed from the Level 1 to the Level 2

I give an account of the findings from the student focus group data through these nine themes. The order I present the themes in is slightly different from the order of the themes as listed above. I begin by discussing the themes I chose because of their commonality across focus groups. Following the theme 'it could be more organised' I discuss the theme 'that's creative writing', then go back to the theme 'the way the teacher explained it to us'. I did this because of the connection between the themes and the way one follows on from the other. I end the section by discussing the themes I chose because of their interest and connection to the study.

I refer to student focus groups via their reference tag, for example Student Focus Group 1 as SFG1. S refers to Student; M to Moderator. I moderated all the focus groups. Where an extract has more than one student, I label the students by number; e.g. S1, S2. The names of the student focus groups are given in Table 6, Chapter 5.

It's really basic

A dominant theme and finding that emerged in the student focus group data was that some of the content in the Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons 'is really basic'. I coded the theme as 'It's really basic', because the word 'basic' was the word the students most commonly used to express the point of view that some of the content in their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons covered things they already knew or had done before when they were at school. Most focus groups referred to the theme, and the majority of students in these groups reiterated the point during their focus groups. The following extract from SFG1 illustrates the point:

S1: It's really basic now. It's like, I'm not complaining, but it's more like, like Year 9 work rather than actual GCSE work. It's really basic.

S2: Yeah, it's easier.

M: OK, and, is that a good thing or a bad thing or ?

S1: It's good in the sense of, like it's easier, but it's so basic, it's stuff that you'd probably already know anyway. (SFG1)

A further five groups (SFG2, SFG3, SFG5, SFG6, and SFG8) talked about their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons as 'really basic'. Students' first thoughts about their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons were dominated by this initial negative perspective. Two reasons emerged for this perspective. In the following extract from SFG6, students made a link between a lesson that was really basic and a focus on grammar and punctuation:

S1: It's just going over stuff we've already done.

S2: It's like capital letters and full stops, work that we've ...

[p]

M: Yeah.

S2: ... just punctuation, like simple stuff we're learning now.

S1: Like which words need capital letters in them and that.

M: So, it focuses on punctuation and capitalisation?

S1: Yeah, like proper easy stuff. It'll be like some sentences, and you have to read it, and put the capital letters where they go, and then put the full stops where they go ...

[p]

M: Yeah, OK.

S2: ... so pretty simple stuff. (SFG6)

The students described an activity that involved the explicit study of grammar and punctuation, and that addressed explicitly the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the Level 2 Functional Skills English writing exam. Through its focus on the correct use of grammar and punctuation, rather than the communicative value of the language, the activity was neutral or value-free in its content (Street, 1984), and as such predicated on a skills perspective of literacy (Ofqual, 2011).

In the next extract from SFG2, a student talked about letter writing tasks the students were given to complete in their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons:

S: ... I mean, it's the kind of stuff that we did before we did our GCSEs. It's like, the tutor taught us how to write a letter, last week or the week before, and we've been doing things about that calibre since the start of Functional Skills. It's really sort of Year 6, Year 7. ...

M: Who else has the same feeling?

Ss: Yeah (SFG2)

In a similar way to the previous extract, the students referred to a literacy activity that involved writing tasks using given formats and given information, and that addressed explicitly the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the Level 2 Functional Skills English writing exam. As such, as with the example in the previous extract, the activity alluded to a skills perspective of literacy (Ofqual, 2011). In a similar way to students in SFG1, students in SFG2 compared the activity to their experience of studying English at school, and viewed the letter writing activities of the Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons as being easier than the GCSE English work they did at school, and as such of little value.

In the next extract however, a student from the same focus group expressed a counter argument in the discussion on letter writing activities:

S: ... my former college was really good because we wrote loads of letters, ... and basically what we would do is that, we do compare each other's letters because some people don't know how to make short statements. They don't use punctuation marks like commas ...

M: So she was really helping you to ...

S: She helped us. She made us write loads of letters, and she actually made us see the more we write the more we improved, because she pointed to the mistakes we made in the last one, and when you write the second one you're going to say, oh, I didn't make that mistake again. So you're actually improving.

M: So you found that really good.

S: Yeah. (SFG2)

As with the previous examples, the student described an activity that had the aim of students making improvements in punctuation and grammar, and as such alluded to an activity that was predicated on a skills perspective of literacy. Because of the way the teacher used the activity however, this student viewed the activity positively. The student described how the letter writing activity was used to enable him to perceive his own improvement in literacy, through practising writing ‘loads of letters’ and through the feedback he received on his use of punctuation and grammar. The feedback from the teacher enabled the student to improve his writing and perceive his own literacy learning and development. As a result, and in contrast to the students in the previous extracts, this extract shows how the student valued the letter writing activity with its focus on punctuation and grammar, and skills perspective of literacy.

The theme ‘it’s really basic’ shows that the majority of students’ first thoughts about their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons were about activities the students completed alone, that were neutral or value-free in their content, that focused on the correct use of punctuation and grammar and the completion of writing tasks in given formats using given information, as required in the Level 2 Functional Skills English writing exam. They were as such predicated on a skills perspective of literacy and alluded to a cognitivist approach to teaching and learning in which students worked by themselves, achieving one learning objective before moving onto the next (Rogers, 2002).

The theme shows how students did not value these literacy activities if they were perceived to be easier than the GCSE English work the students had done at school, but also shows how some students did value the letter writing activities they described, if the activities were used to provide feedback that enabled those students to perceive their own literacy learning and development. In this sense, the theme shows that for some students, what they saw as literacy activities that were relevant to their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, and what they thought of as good teaching and learning were related.

The literacy as a skill metaphor aids an understanding of the theme ‘it’s really basic’ in that it shows that it was not the perspective of literacy that informed the teaching

of the literacy activities the students described that resulted in the students liking or not liking the activities, but the way the activities were used by the teacher, and the extent to which the activities enabled the students to perceive their own literacy learning and development.

When we do discussion

Another dominant theme and finding that emerged from the student focus group data was how the majority of students saw discussion as a literacy activity they valued in the context of their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons. Students in all eight focus groups talked explicitly about discussion and other interactive activities, as exemplified by the following extract from SFG1:

S: I think this is one of our Functional Skills English lessons. I think that when we do discussions, I feel that you can learn a bit more with it, 'cos you like get other people's opinions about it, and also you're getting your opinion about it, and learning different things as well.

(SFG1)

The student talked about how discussions helped not only to share opinions, but also to discover and form opinions, and how discussion enabled them to perceive their own literacy learning and development. In the next extract, other students in the group acknowledged their agreement:

S1: ... there was one of our Functional Skills lessons, English, and what were we talking about? We were doing Agony Aunt letters, and instead of like giving them to our partner, we actually read them out, and we got everyone's opinions about it, ...

M: ... did the teacher do anything with the material after that?

S2: We all done a letter; we all done it. We all gave our answers and that. ...

M: So what did you do first? ...

S1: The letter first, and then the discussion.

(SFG1)

The students described a literacy activity with a social dimension that was completed in a group. The activity was not neutral or value-free but required students to form and express opinions, and was as such dependent on the specific classroom context and the interaction of the students involved in the activity. It was as such predicated on a social practice perspective of literacy (Street, 1984), and the students adopted this perspective of literacy when taking part in the discussion. In as much as the participants in the discussion had an effect on one another in forming opinions, and that this effect was an essential part of the literacy learning process, the activity also alluded to a literacy-in-action perspective of literacy (Brandt & Clinton, 2002), to include not only what participants in the discussion did with literacy, but what the literacy event that was the discussion reciprocally did to the participants in enabling them to form opinions and develop their own use of literacy.

In the next extract, students in the same group, SFG1, for a third time talked about their view of discussion as a literacy learning activity:

S1: ... it's like our lessons are more enjoyable.

S2: As well as we learn things as well.

M: Could you give me an idea ... about something that you did that you thought was enjoyable or something you did where you felt you learned it?

S2: A lot of the times we had like discussions, so like we do like, we do what we have to do, then we start doing discussions like, it's like speaking and listening.

S3: It's like sometimes we might deviate from what we're meant to do, but because of it we end up coming out of the lesson learning more than we would have if we didn't.

(SFG1)

The extract emphasises the relevance of discussion to the students as a literacy learning activity relevant to their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons. It was in response to the prompt about what the students would say if they had one minute to talk to the Principal about their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons. The students wanted to convey to the Principal their view of discussion activities, as

though the Principal might then require teachers to use discussion more in their literacy lessons. In the next extract, students in SFG8 expressed the same idea:

S1: The things we liked were the discussions. We do some work, then we discuss what we have been doing. The discussions are really helpful.

S2: It might not be like what we're meant to do, but we feel like we've learned more anyway, doing that. (SFG8)

As with the students in SFG1, this student also wished to convey to the Principal their view of discussion as a literacy learning activity relevant to their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, as though the Principal might then require teachers to use discussion more in their literacy lessons. In a similar way to students in SFG1, this student expressed the view that discussion was not an activity they associated with formal education. While the college had policies on standards in teaching and learning, on setting learning objectives for students, on feedback to students, and on assessment, none of the college policies referred specifically to pedagogy or teaching and learning strategies that teachers were encouraged to consider in planning lessons and teaching students. Pedagogical matters such as the adoption of a constructivist approach to teaching and learning and the use of discussion were left to the discretion of the teacher.

Students in SFG4 and SFG5, talked about how they saw discussing, or talking through their vocational course assignment briefs with one another as a valuable literacy activity in the context of their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons. It was a suggested activity, in response to the prompt on how literacy lessons could be done differently. This extract from SFG4 exemplified the point:

S1: ... like activities or something that relates to whatever we're meant to be doing in the subject I guess.

M: Like reading and discussion on Art subjects?

S2: We're doing that with our briefs. We get briefs at the start of new projects, so we could always take them along, and then read through them, study them, so ...

M: Would that be a good thing to do?

S2: Yeah, because it gives us time to actually understand our brief. As well as it helps us understand briefs for the business as well, so ...

(SFG4)

In both SFG4 and SFG5, students saw discussion as a literacy learning activity relevant to their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, and showed an awareness of how discussion could aid their understanding of what they had to do to complete their vocational course assignments successfully. The students alluded to the notion that an understanding of the literacy involved in completing their vocational course assignments was better understood when approached as a social activity.

Students in SFG3, talked about how discussing the meaning of abstract words helped them develop their understanding of those words. In the extract below, the student gave an example of how they learned the difference between the meanings of abstract verbs through a discussion on the meanings of the words:

S: ... we did like how to explain, what is it, 'persuade' and 'argue' and things like that, and that was a really good lesson. Like, I didn't even expect it to be that good. But when we were doing it, it was really interesting. It was like a fun task to do.

(SFG3)

And in the next extract, students in SFG7 made a connection between a good literacy lesson, interactive activities, and discussion:

S1: Some teachers like to make it like, more interactive and stuff.

M: Can you tell me a bit more about what you think interactive looks like?

S1: Like, it's just you're taking different opinions and ... obviously we're talking, we're not writing things down and like giving in a sheet, do you know what I mean? ...

M: So do you think discussion is an important part of a lesson?

Ss: [all students] yeah.

S2: The teacher can give you a question, and you need to discussion with another people, to have a different opinion about what they are saying and something like that. (SFG7)

Students in SFG7 expressed the view that the ‘interactive’ aspect of working with their peers through discussion aided their personal learning and development, and enabled them to perceive their own literacy learning and development.

The breadth of the theme ‘when we do discussion’ indicates how significant discussion was as a literacy learning activity to students in the context of their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons. All groups made reference to discussion as a literacy learning activity, and all the references to discussion were positive. The majority of students saw discussion as enabling them to form opinions, and perceive their own literacy learning and development.

The literacy as social practice and literacy-in-action metaphors aid an understanding of the theme ‘when we do discussion’, in that they show how students perceived the social interaction involved in discussion as enabling them to perceive their own literacy learning and development through the formation and expression of opinions that were situated in the specific contexts of the students’ literacy lessons. The use of discussion as a literacy learning activity as such alludes to a constructivist approach to teaching and learning in which ‘... learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them’ (Vygotsky, 1978; p.88), and alludes to the value of a constructivist approach to teaching literacy to 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs.

Some students however did not see discussion as a literacy activity they associated with formal educational settings, and for those students, discussion was an activity that was either underused or not used by teachers in their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons.

One of the most important life skills

A third theme and finding expressed by a number of student focus groups was the view some students had of literacy as an important life skill; one they would need in

their life after college. Students in five of the eight focus groups expressed the view, as exemplified by the following extract from SFG1:

S1: When we're doing Functional Skills, we would learn about the skills we would use in work environments.

...

M: Do you agree with that?

S2: Yeah, I do.

M: Would you tend to agree with that? Does anyone have a different idea?

S3: It's to develop your skills, isn't it [confirmation] [p]. Like you already have, or something like that. (SFG1)

The students in SFG1 agreed with one another on this view of literacy as a skill. The students showed awareness of the discourse of literacy as a skill, as used in official discourse on literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs. As with the students in SFG1, students in the other four groups, SFG3, SFG5, SFG7 and SFG8, all talked about literacy as a skill in response to the first prompt on what comes to mind when students first think about their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons. Although none of the groups developed the idea to say what they perceived literacy skills to be, the breadth of response made the perception significant. Students in SFG3 and SFG5 talked specifically about English as a skill to use in the workplace. While the students did not elaborate on why or in what way they saw literacy as a skill, they nevertheless showed awareness of the discourse of literacy as a skill, and talked about literacy as a skill, and as one of the skills they would need to progress in education and employment.

The theme 'One of the most important life skills' shows students' awareness of the discourse of literacy as a skill, but does not show an awareness of the official description of literacy as a skill, with its focus on spelling, punctuation and grammar, and the production of written texts using given formats and given information, as stated in the learning outcomes and assessment criteria for Level 2 Functional Skills English (Ofqual, 2011).

In this study, when students talked about what they thought literacy was in the context of their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, they talked mostly about discussion and other interactive activities; activities that had a social dimension that were dependent on the specific context of specific literacy lessons (Street, 1991). As such, the theme shows how differences existed between what some students thought of as literacy as a skill, and the official description of literacy as a skill as stated in official literature (Ofqual, 2011), that was intended to inform the teaching and learning of literacy in post-16 vocational education and training.

It could be more organised

A fourth significant theme and finding I identified in the student focus group data because of its commonality across focus groups was the view that the way Level 2 Functional Skills English courses are set up ‘could be more organised’. Students in five of the eight focus groups, SFG1, SFG3, SFG4, SFG5, and SFG6, referred to the theme. I use the phrase ‘could be more organised’ because that was the way the students most commonly described this view, as exemplified by the following extract from SFG1:

S: It could be more organised I think.

M: Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

S: With our Travel course, like we know what to do to pass; like we’ve got it written down. We haven’t got it written down what we need to learn in English. (SFG1)

The student talked about how sharing course objectives and learning outcomes on their vocational course enabled them to understand what was expected of them and what they had to do to pass the vocational qualification they were taking. In the case of their Level 2 Functional Skills English course, the student neither knew what was expected of them on the course, nor what they had to do to pass the Level 2 Functional Skills English exam. The student described this lack of knowledge of the Level 2 Functional Skills English course objectives and learning outcomes in terms of a lack of organisation on the course.

The student did not elaborate on why the Level 2 Functional Skills English course objectives and learning outcomes were not shared with students, whether it was a function of the teacher or the qualification, but expressed the view that a lack of knowledge about the learning outcomes made the qualification more difficult to pass. It is apparent from the breadth in perception that the literacy courses ‘could be more organised’, that the lack of clarity in sharing the learning aims and objectives of the literacy course with the students contributed to the negative perspective some students had of their literacy education at college, and of their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons.

That’s creative writing

Students in three focus groups, SFG2, SFG6, and SFG8, talked explicitly about their view of creative writing as a literacy activity, and as an activity that helped them perceive their own literacy learning and development. Although students from only three of the eight focus groups talked about creative writing, I identified ‘that’s creative writing’ as a theme because of the extent to which those students talked about creative writing as a key literacy learning activity for them.

In the following extract, a student from SFG6 talked about a poem she wrote about her teacher:

M: Can you think back to an English lesson you did ... where you felt you really learned something?

S: Yeah, I wrote a poem about a teacher, ... I did a love poem about him.

M: ... tell me what was good about the lesson. OK, so what was the lesson?

S: English, with my teacher, like I had to write a poem about him, and I thought I did really good when I did the poem, ‘cos I had to like make up stuff about like, you know, I said to him, you look like a broccoli [laughter]

...

M: So the good thing about the lesson was that you made up a poem.

S: Yeah, I know it's not something big, but like I never did much English, so doing that made me feel proud, because I'd actually done some sort of work. (SFG6)

Although the student talked about how she 'never did much English', she was nevertheless able to complete the creative writing task, and talked about the sense of accomplishment she felt through completing the task. From a pedagogical perspective, the student's description of the task alludes to a humanist perspective of teaching and learning, in that the student completed the task she believed she wanted to complete, in the way she wanted to complete it, and subsequently felt the requisite sense of accomplishment on completing the task.

Another student from the same focus group went on to talk about how she learned to 'structure paragraphs and stuff like that' (SFG6) through a story she wrote in an English lesson, and a third student identified the story as creative writing:

S2: I liked writing a story [laughter].

M: And what was your story about?

[p]

S2: Er, don't know, a little girl.

S3: Isn't that creative writing ...?

S2: Yeah.

M: Do you remember doing creative writing?

S2: Actually my story's still at home. I'm not joking. It wasn't meant to be about my life, but it really sounds about my life [laughter].

M: Yeah, do you feel you learned something by doing that?

S2: Yeah, 'cos you just learn how to structure paragraphs and stuff like that. (SFG6)

The student made a connection between completing the creative writing task and improving the way she paragraphed her writing, '... you just learn how to structure paragraphs and stuff like that.' The student was aware of being able to improve the way she paragraphed her writing, because of her work in completing the creative writing activity.

The literacy-in-action metaphor aids an understanding of the effect the creative writing activities had on the students in both extracts. The students described literacy activities that had a noticeable and positive, reciprocal effect on them. Through their sense of accomplishment in completing the creative writing tasks, the students showed how the effect of completing the creative writing tasks was as significant as what the students did with literacy in writing their poem and story. The students as such alluded to a literacy-in-action perspective of literacy (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). In the second extract, the student also talked about the activity in terms of how completing the activity enabled her to improve her ability to structure paragraphs, and as such implicitly talked about the creative writing activity in terms of literacy as a skill.

The extracts show how the metaphors literacy-in-action and literacy as a skill were not mutually exclusive to the students, but were both useful and relevant to the students in the context of the literacy lesson. The metaphors aid an understanding of how the students did not restrict themselves to any one perspective of literacy when completing the creative writing task, and how the students were able to make use of both perspectives of literacy within a single activity. The theme also shows how this was enabled through an approach to teaching literacy that allowed the students to draw on more than one perspective of literacy when completing the creative writing task, if the students believed that drawing on different perspectives of literacy would enable them to complete the creative writing task more effectively.

In the next extract, in a similar way to students in SFG6, a student from SFG2 talked about the sense of accomplishment they felt in completing a creative writing task, and their view of creative writing as a literacy activity relevant to their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons:

S1: If it's sort of more creative writing, rather than writing a letter about this, this, this, using this information. You know, I mean, one of the courseworks I had to do for GCSE was for creative writing, and I enjoyed that immensely. I handed it in the day after it was given. I got a B on that; the only B I'd ever got on English in my life. I enjoyed it.

...

M: Anyone here agree.

S2: Yeah, I agree.

M: Do you think of something that might be different?

S3: I agree with what he said. It's easier to learn new things with creative writing. (SFG2)

Students in SFG8 also expressed the view that creative writing activities enabled them to perceive their own literacy learning and development:

M: Can you tell us how things could be different with Functional Skills English?

S1: ... If it was more like creative writing, I'd enjoy it more. I just get annoyed with this stuff. It's not very difficult, but I don't do it very well.

M: OK, anyone agree with that?

S2: Yeah, I agree.

M: What do you think might be different though?

S2: I agree that you learn more with creative writing.

M: Does it make it easier to learn?

S3: Yes, I think so. (SFG8)

In both extracts, students talked about literacy activities that explicitly adopted a skills perspective of literacy, as in writing tasks that were based on given formats and that required given information to be included in the text, '...rather than writing a letter about this, this, this, using this information' (SFG2), and compared this type of activity with creative writing. The students saw creative writing as a more effective literacy learning activity.

While references to creative writing were restricted to three focus groups, the references were all positive. There were no examples in the data of students who viewed creative writing negatively. The theme 'that's creative writing' shows how these students saw creative writing as a literacy activity that was relevant to their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, and one that enabled them to make improvements to their writing following feedback from the teacher. This in turn

enabled those students to perceive their own literacy learning and development, and gave them a sense of enjoyment and accomplishment when they completed the work. None of the examples given by students of creative writing activities however were from the students' Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons. The theme 'that's creative writing' shows how students from the three focus groups saw creative writing as a literacy activity that enabled them to learn and perceive their own literacy learning and development, but as with discussion, was either not used or was underused by teachers in their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons.

The metaphors of literacy-in-action and literacy as a skill aided an understanding of the data by showing how the effect of completing a creative writing activity was as significant to the student as what the student did with literacy in order to complete the activity, and by showing how the student was able to perceive their own literacy learning and development by completing the writing activity following feedback from their teacher. The metaphors show that the different perspectives of literacy were not mutually exclusive to one another, and show how students did not restrict themselves to any one perspective of literacy, but were prepared to draw on different perspectives of literacy to complete the creative writing task, if the pedagogical approach to the teaching of literacy adopted by the teacher allowed them to do so. From a pedagogical perspective, the extracts show how a skills perspective of literacy is not exclusively the domain of a behaviourist or cognitivist approach to teaching literacy, but may be included in a humanist view of teaching and learning, if the student sees this view of literacy as of interest to them and one that meets their literacy learning needs.

The way the teacher explained it to us

I included the theme 'the way the teacher explained it to us' in the findings from the student focus group data because of its commonality across focus groups. Students in six of the eight focus groups, SFG2, SFG4, SFG5, SFG6, SFG7, and SFG8 talked about the role their Level 2 Functional Skills English teacher played in helping them understand and improve their use of literacy, with particular reference to the clarity of teachers' explanations and how feedback on written work enabled students to perceive their own literacy learning and development. The following extract exemplifies how a student in SFG8, in response to the prompt on thinking about a

task that worked well, talked about the benefits of the feedback students got from their teacher on ways to improve their writing:

S: ... my last Functional Skills English class was good because we wrote a lot of letters, and we compared everyone's letters, and the people that didn't know really how to write things out and use punctuation could check the other letters.

M: So you found that helpful.

S: Yeah, it was good; we had to write a lot. I could see how I improved, and he showed me the mistakes I made. (SFG8)

While the theme 'it's really basic' shows how students did not see letter writing activities that involved the transfer of information from a question sheet to a letter as activities that helped them learn, the theme 'the teacher would give you points on how to make it better' shows how students did see letter writing activities as valuable literacy learning activities, if the feedback they received on their written work enabled them to both improve their work, and perceive their own literacy learning and development.

Students in SFG4, SFG5 and SFG7 talked about how they valued clear explanations from the teacher, as exemplified in the following extract:

M: Can you tell me what was good about the lesson?

S: ... the way the teacher explained it to us in the classroom. Because we were doing a poem, and she explained it in a more [pause] she made it fun, 'cos we didn't enjoy doing English, but she made us like that subject. She included other bits in it. So I think that's the other thing, to make them understand what you are talking about, and the reason why we are doing it there.

M: OK, so is the reason it was fun or interesting because you had understood it?

S: Yeah.

M: Have I got that right?

S: Yeah, 'cos if you understand it, then you know the reason why you are doing it, so it doesn't become pointless in a way. (SFG4)

The student attributed the success of the lesson to the fact that he had understood the poem he was learning because of the way the teacher had explained its meaning.

In each of the groups, the students talked about how they were able to understand the content of lessons because of the clarity of the teacher's explanation. The clarity of the teacher's explanation of the meaning of words or texts enabled the students to perceive their own literacy learning and development. The reaction of the students was to re-frame a negative perception of their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons to a more positive perception when they said: 'if you understand it, then you know the reason why you are doing it, so it doesn't become pointless ...' (SFG4).

The theme 'the way the teacher explained it to us' shows again that it was not the perspective of literacy that the activities were predicated on that resulted in those activities being successful literacy learning activity, but how those activities were used by the teacher, and whether the pedagogical approach taken by the teacher allowed the students to adopt the perspective on literacy they wanted to take according to their literacy learning needs at the time.

Proof-reading and games

Students in SFG4, SFG5 and SFG7 talked about proof-reading activities and games as literacy learning activities. I included the theme in the findings because of its connection to the study and the way it further exemplifies what some students thought of as literacy learning activities, and how those students drew on different perspectives of literacy and learning to meet their literacy learning needs.

Students in two focus groups, SFG4 and SFG5, talked about proof-reading written work from their vocational course as a 'helpful' literacy learning activity to complete in their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, as exemplified by the following extract from SFG4:

S1: The English part for Graphics is pretty important, because we need to proofread all our work.

M: OK.

S2: Maybe if they done something like where you could bring work to them and maybe like get an evaluated piece of work, and they could go through it with you and like improve it; that would be helpful, instead of doing worksheets and that kind of thing. (SFG4)

In that the students worked individually following feedback from their teacher to make improvements to spelling, punctuation and grammar in their vocational course assignments, the activity drew on a cognitivist approach to teaching and learning literacy and aligned to a skills perspective of literacy.

In the next extract, students from SFG7 talked about how they saw games as a literacy learning activity:

S1: There was one game. I can't remember what it was called, but it was a good one.

M: All right, but the general idea is that it was a game.

S1: It gets your mind working.

S2: Like, it helps you remember ...

...

S1: Like the teacher would say a question and throw a little ball to us, and we'd have to answer it. So like that helped.

M: Yeah, so, is that a general principle, like a game will help you to remember?

S1: Yeah, it's more fun, then you remember more.

M: OK.

(SFG7)

The game the student described had a social dimension. The student said, '... the teacher would say a question and throw a little ball to us ...'. It was as such contingent on the context of the group that took part in the game, and as such aligned to a social practice perspective of literacy, drawing on a constructivist approach to teaching and learning.

Students in SFG4 and SFG5 showed how they saw proof-reading activities as enabling them to make improvements to grammar, punctuation and spelling, and through games, students in SFG7 showed how taking part in an interactive activity helped them perceive their own literacy learning and development. Although the two activities were essentially different from one another, one aligned to a skills perspective of literacy and a cognitivist approach to teaching and learning literacy and the other to a social practice perspective of literacy and a constructivist approach to teaching and learning literacy, they nevertheless had in common the notion that students in these groups viewed the activities as literacy learning activities that enabled them to perceive their own literacy learning and development. The literacy as a skill and literacy as social practice metaphors show again how students implicitly adopted a perspective on literacy according to their literacy learning needs at the time.

The two activities, as well as being literacy learning activities, are also general teaching and learning activities. Through the identification of the two activities as literacy learning activities, the students were saying that what they thought of as good teaching and learning and what they saw as good literacy learning activities were connected. The theme ‘proof-reading and games’ also shows through the alignment of the proof-reading activities with a cognitivist approach to teaching and learning literacy and the alignment of games with a constructivist approach to teaching and learning literacy that there was no one pedagogical approach to teaching and learning literacy that met the literacy learning needs of those students in all situations.

What’s the main purpose?

The theme, ‘what’s the main purpose’, as with the final theme ‘it doesn’t seem progress from Level 1 to Level 2’, were only referred to by one student each. I included the two themes in the findings because of their interest and connection to the study, and because of the strength of feeling the students showed when expressing the ideas.

One of the students in SFG4 expressed a question about the purpose of the literacy lessons in response to the prompt on what the students would say to the Principal if

they had one minute to talk about Level 2 Functional Skills English. The student says:

S: Probably ask him what's the main purpose of this; what he really thinks about it.

M: All right.

S: See his own point of view towards it. What the college is aiming to achieve in having students do it, ...

M: OK.

S: So that would be the main question to ask him, like what do you, what's the main purpose of it? What's the aim for it to be here?

(SFG4)

The student rhetorically asked what the Principal thought the purpose of their literacy lessons was, in the sense of asking whether the College had a stated purpose in requiring all 16-18 year old students to take Functional Skills English, other than to comply with government requirements. The student's lack of clarity was not around the structure or organisation of the course, so much as the overall purpose of the course. It is apparent from the student's question that although the college had an English & Mathematics Policy, and a stated purpose in providing literacy education for 16-18 year old students, this student was not aware of the policy and of a shared purpose in what the college and the students were trying to achieve through the literacy part of the students' vocational programmes of study.

It doesn't seem to progress from Level 1 to Level 2

A student in SFG2 expressed the view that the content of the student's Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons did not seem to differ from the content of the student's Level 1 Functional Skills English lessons the previous year, and as such did not enable the student to perceive any improvement or development in their use of literacy from one year to the other. The student says:

S: ... it doesn't seem to have progressed from the Level 1 to the Level 2.

It doesn't seem like any of it has really changed.

M: Really?

S: Like, ... I did the Level 1 in English and the Level 2 in Maths last year, and it's exactly the same as we did last year. (SFG2)

The content of the lessons and the literacy activities experienced by the student in his Level 1 and Level 2 Functional Skills English classes did not enable the student to gain an understanding of what was expected of him in terms of learning literacy and passing the Level 2 Functional Skills English qualification, and did not enable the student to perceive any improvement or development in his use of literacy.

The two themes, 'what's the main purpose' and 'it doesn't seem to progress from Level 1 to Level 2', although only expressed by individual students, show how for those two students a lack of clarity in learning aims and overall purpose precluded the students from being able to perceive any literacy learning and development, and contributed to a negative perception the two students had of their literacy education at college, and of their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons.

6.4 Findings: Teacher-interview data

In this section I present the findings from my analysis of the teacher interview data. As with the findings from the student focus groups data, the teachers had no single or fixed perspective on literacy or literacy education as offered to 16-18 year old students taking vocational qualifications in FECs. I deal with the complexity of the teachers' perspectives through a discussion of the themes I identified in the previous chapter, and draw on these themes in the final chapter, where I present insights I gained on the literacy education offered to 16-18 year olds in FECs from the perspectives of the students and teachers.

I interviewed five literacy teachers who were teaching Level 2 Functional Skills English in the college where I work. Some of the teachers had also worked in other colleges and settings within the field of literacy education for 16-18 year olds and adults, and brought their knowledge of these contexts to bear in the responses they gave.

I identified 22 repeating ideas in the teacher interview data, six more than in the student focus group data. Some of the ideas were expressed by only one teacher, but were repeating in the sense that the teacher reiterated the idea during the interview. I chose the themes because of their commonality across interviews, or because of their interest or connection to the study. A feature of the teacher interview data was the commonality of responses to aspects of their work over which they had little or no control, such as the number of hours allocated to literacy education for 16-18 year olds in FECs, and the variation of responses to aspects of their work over which they did exercise some control, such as pedagogical approaches to literacy teaching.

I grouped the 22 repeating ideas into five themes. As with the analysis of the student focus group data, I used language from the interviews as codes for the themes, and did this to maintain a visible link between what I identified as a theme and the words of the teachers.

The themes I chose because each teacher contributed to the theme, whether or not there was variation in the teachers' responses were:

- There are some negative attitudes
- It's quite a big jump to go from Level 1 to Level 2
- They could see the benefits

The themes I chose because of their interest and connection to the study, although not all of the teachers contributed responses to the themes were:

- They're not clear what they want from Functional Skills English
- There are sort of issues with English and Maths going back to schools

I give an account of the findings from the teacher interview data through these five themes. TP refers to Teacher Participant; I to Interviewer. I was the interviewer for the five interviews.

There are some negative attitudes

One of the dominant themes and findings in the teacher interview data was ‘there are some negative attitudes’ within the college towards literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications, and that these negative attitudes were generated by factors that were external to the literacy teachers and beyond their control. The theme was raised by four of the five teachers. I included the theme in the findings because of its commonality across the interviews. To exemplify the point, TP1 says:

I think there are some negative attitudes towards Functional Skills from the students, which I think is partly because they're not sold the idea of Functional Skills by the tutors. I think it would really help if there was a more positive attitude right from the start, from vocational tutors as well as Functional Skills tutors. (TP1)

The teacher's comments were speculative in that they were not corroborated by other data, such as the student focus group data. It was nevertheless a perspective held by four of the five literacy teachers. The comments were directed towards teachers of vocational courses. The relationship students had with the teachers of their vocational courses was a key relationship for the students. Students often identified with their vocational teachers, as people from the vocational area in which the students sought to progress and ultimately work. TP1 reiterated and expanded the point later in the interview. The teacher says:

I think all the staff in the College should take Functional Skills Level 2 English, they should all have a qualification at Level 2 in English, and that includes all the tutors not just the admin staff, and I think that would make a difference to the results in the college because if all the staff were qualified, they would feel much more confident themselves about incorporating Functional Skills English into their own vocational lessons. ... A lot of the vocational tutors don't have a qualification at that level. ... So it's a subject that they don't want to have anything to do with. (TP1)

TP1 suggested that the vocational teachers' negative attitude to their students' literacy classes may have stemmed from the fact that they did not have a Level 2 qualification in English themselves, and may have felt vulnerable in front of their students when it came to their own standard of literacy. From TP1's perspective, the vocational teacher played down the significance of the literacy classes to the students, who then took a negative perspective of literacy into their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons. TP2 agreed with the perspective. Comments made by some of the literacy teachers in respect of literacy qualifications held by teachers of vocational courses were however also speculative. Of the 139 teachers of vocational courses working at the college in 2014/15, the time of writing, approximately three quarters held a Level 2 qualification in English.

TP3 and TP4 saw the matter not in terms of the vocational teachers' qualification level in English, but their understanding of the Level 2 Functional Skills English qualification standards and assessment criteria. TP3 says:

If we're to improve the success rates, we need to continually work to learn about the standards and how to embed this into our lessons
(TP3)

The teacher goes on to say:

All the teachers involved in developing students' skills and knowledge should have an awareness of the standards for Functional Skills
(TP3)

For TP3 and TP4, the college had a role to play in developing vocational teachers' understanding of the Level 2 Functional Skills English standards and assessment criteria.

TP3 and TP5 also talked about organisational factors as reasons why students may have developed a negative impression of their literacy course. TP3 says:

T: I think quite possibly one thing we could improve is organising that is based on the information a little earlier, because the students are already with us, and it's taking a couple of weeks for us to gain assessment results, and then organise classes. So that does have a bit of an impact on the students' first impression really of the lesson, they just think about it with regards to that lesson. They might actually relate the organisation of it to the teacher as well, and that's not necessarily done by them.

(TP3)

The teacher talked about the way the programme was organised, and how the students experienced their literacy classes at the start of the year. If the initial organisation of the programme lacked coherence, students were likely to view their literacy lessons negatively, and may have even blamed the teacher for organisational problems, which were in fact beyond the teacher's control.

The theme 'there are some negative attitudes' shows that from the perspective of the literacy teachers, there were external factors that gave students a negative impression of their literacy classes, and that these factors were beyond the control of the teacher. Although the comments were speculative, the literacy teachers saw the relationship between the students and their vocational teachers, who the students saw more often on their course and identified with more closely, as having an influence on how students viewed their literacy classes, and that this influence was sometimes negative. The impression students got at the start of their literacy course, if there were organisational problems with their course, may also have resulted in students adopting a negative attitude towards their literacy lessons. The theme 'there are some negative attitudes' resonates with the theme 'it could be more organised' from the student focus group data, although this theme places the matter beyond the control of the teachers.

It's quite a big jump to go from Level 1 to Level 2

A second theme and finding from the teacher interview data that I chose because of its commonality across the interviews was around the qualifications driven nature of literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, and the notion that many students found it difficult to bridge the gap between the

standards and assessment criteria of Level 1 literacy qualifications and Level 2 literacy qualifications in the time allocated to the literacy programmes, especially when students entered college at Entry 3 literacy and were expected to progress to Level 1 then Level 2 in consecutive years.

All five teachers contributed to the theme ‘it’s quite a big jump to go from Level 1 to Level 2’, and referred specifically to Functional Skills English qualifications. They expressed the view that the expectation that students would unproblematically progress from Entry 3 to Level 1 one year, and from Level 1 to Level 2 the next, and then pass a Level 2 literacy exam in the time allocated to the literacy course was unrealistic. Although the teachers’ comments were speculative, it was significant that the perspective was held by all five of the literacy teachers. TP4 exemplified the point in the following extract:

I just think that the jump is far too high, and at Level 2 to try and cram all that information into one year is not beneficial for the learners ... I don't think they have enough skills at Level 1 to progress to Level 2.

(TP4)

TP5 commented on the expectation that students would progress unproblematically from Entry 3 to Level 2 in consecutive years. The teacher noted that while students were able to pass the Level 1 Functional Skills English qualification in one year, it did not necessarily follow that those students would pass the Level 2 Functional Skills English qualification the following year, as the gap between the standard and assessment criteria for Level 1 and Level 2 Functional Skills English was wider than that of Entry 3 and Level 1 Functional Skills English. The teacher said:

I think it's because we're about three years into it [Functional Skills English] now, and obviously when a student passes Entry 3 next year we move them up, if they pass that we move them up again, but I don't think even after three years they've got enough to pass Level 2. If they come in at low Entry 3, and then the next year they pass Level 1, we're moving the students up each year so I think each year we're moving

students up into the Level 2 bracket who probably can't pass it. ... And I think that's where it comes from. (TP5)

The teacher went on to say why there was a gap between Level 1 and Level 2 Functional Skills English that was hard to bridge. The teacher talked about the difference between Level 1 and Level 2 Functional Skills English in terms of the amount of writing that was required at each level, and suggested that it was the amount of writing the students were required to complete at Level 2 that they were not used to doing that was the issue. The teacher went on to say:

I think a lot of them get into that frame of mind, which is just it's too much for them. 'I can't do this' rather than 'I might be able to do this'. (TP5)

TP1 and TP2 saw the issue of literacy teachers teaching multiple groups of students for short periods of time as problematic, as this did not allow the teachers to develop the relationships they needed to develop with their students to make the literacy classes successful. TP2 said:

I think the way it's being done at the moment is absolutely ludicrous, I don't see how you expect a tutor to teacher 23 completely different groups of students. ... They probably won't even know all their names by the end of the year. (TP2)

TP3's perspective on time was in relation to the students' starting points:

I think they're finding it difficult skills wise, and in the timeframe that we have, some will achieve but it's actually thinking about that curriculum planning, and is there enough time based on the students' starting point. (TP3)

TP2 made one further general point about students working at Level 1, and the opportunities available to students working at Level 1 to take courses that were of interest to them:

The college doesn't have enough Level 1 courses either for these students to go to for a year to then go on to ... [p] we still don't have them. So students are being accepted onto Level 2 courses 'cos people want to get the numbers and they may be at Entry 2 or Entry 3 literacy
(TP2)

The teacher offered a possible solution to the predicament of students being progressed too quickly through Functional Skills English levels, by the college offering more vocational courses at Level 1 that would give students working at Entry level 3 literacy more time to work through the levels and potentially achieve a Level 2 literacy qualification when they were ready to do so.

The theme 'it's quite a big jump to go from Level 1 to Level 2' revealed that all five of the literacy teachers saw the qualifications driven nature of the literacy education offered to 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs resulted in some students being progressed between levels more quickly than they were able to keep up with, and that the gap in standards and assessment criteria between Level 1 and Level 2 literacy qualifications was too big for some students to complete in one year with the time allocated to literacy education in FECs, and given the students' prior learning and starting points. Students were either moved up to Level 2 before they were ready, or were not given enough time to prepare to take the Level 2 exam. The issue was made more problematic for the literacy teachers because of the lack of time available to the literacy teachers to build meaningful working relationships with students that would have enabled the teachers to prepare the students more effectively for the Level 2 Functional Skills English exam.

They could see the benefits

A third theme and finding that emerged from the teacher interview data was the importance of students being able to see the benefits of literacy education, and of taking the Level 2 Functional Skills English qualification. All five teachers referred to the theme 'they could see the benefits'. Although there was variation within the theme in the responses of the literacy teachers, I included it in the findings because all of the teachers contributed to the theme, as in the following extract from TP4:

T: Some of the learners had jobs and so it was just for them to brush up their communication skills, presentation skills, speaking with clients and things like that, so it was beneficial for them. They could see the benefits, and I think that's really important, especially in literacy classes, if learners can't see the benefit of why they're acquiring what they're acquiring in the lesson, they don't engage as well. They just don't see the point. (TP4)

The same teacher went onto say:

T: The feedback that I gain from the students is something they can take away and use as soon as they leave the classroom. So a transferable skill was in fact some of the best classes that I taught, where the learners could pick up what they learnt inside the classroom, and actually step outside of the college and use the information that they'd acquired. (TP4)

The teacher went on to give speaking in a job interview and breaking down writing CVs as examples of transferable skills lessons in which the students were able to see the benefit of the lesson to them. The notion of students being able to see the benefits of a literacy activity to them through a perception of their own literacy learning and development resonates strongly with the findings from the student focus groups.

While each teacher stressed the importance of the students being able to see the benefits of their literacy lessons, the teachers gave different reasons why the lessons may have been perceived as beneficial. TP1 referred to students who wanted to pass the Level 2 Functional Skills English qualification, and that the students' awareness of the value of the qualification to them was the beneficial aspect of the lessons. TP2 on the other hand referred to students' ideas of beneficial as when the lesson contained elements that helped the students in their lives outside of college, such as learning about filling in job application forms. TP3 talked about students saying that the practice they did on specialist words that they didn't know and really got to learn in the literacy lessons was beneficial, and TP5 talked about how linking Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons to the students' vocational programmes made the

benefits of the lessons visible to the students. In other words, there were significant differences in what the five literacy teachers saw as beneficial literacy learning activities, and as such in those teachers' perspectives on literacy in the context of their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons.

The teachers' belief in the importance of students being able to see the benefits of what they were learning in their literacy lessons concurs with the findings from the student focus group data, where students talked repeatedly about activities that enabled them to perceive their own literacy learning and development. The way the literacy teachers saw their lessons as beneficial to students however varied across the five teachers. While TP2 and TP4 referred to literacy activities that involved students maintaining their lives outside of College, TP1 and TP3 talked about literacy activities that helped students prepare to take the Level 2 Functional Skills English exam, and TP5 talked about literacy activities that involved students completing their vocational qualification. The variation in the responses of the teachers to why the literacy lessons may have been beneficial to students emerged as an area of interest in the findings from the analysis of the teacher interview data.

They're not clear what they want from Functional Skills English

The fourth theme and finding that emerged from the teacher interview data was that the Level 2 Functional Skills English exam gave mixed messages about what the qualification aimed to achieve. Although the theme was only referred to by one teacher, I included it in the findings from the teacher interview data because of its connection to the study and the notion of a lack of clarity in learning aims that emerged in the student focus group data. The issue arose through a perceived misalignment between examination questions and text types. TP2 says:

T: [In the exam] they do an email and they're supposed to write formal language to a friend and I just think that's ridiculous because no one, not even myself, who's very good at English, writes formal emails to friends. So why would you tell 16 year olds to use, you know, formal language to write this email and then tell them to write it to a friend for their meeting for a concert. So I don't think that's realistic.

(TP2)

The teacher went onto say:

I don't think they're [Qualification Awarding Bodies] quite clear what they want from Functional Skills English. ... I think they need to be, if you want formal then give a formal context, if you want informal, give an informal context. But I think that's a problem. (TP2)

The theme 'they're not clear what they want from Functional Skills English' shows the concern this teacher had about the literacy the students were asked to produce in the Level 2 Functional Skills English writing exam in relation to the tasks they were given to do, and saw a misalignment between the two. Although only one teacher referred to the theme, I retained it in the data because of the way it resonated with the students focus group finding that Level 2 Functional Skills English could have been more organised, and with some students' concerns about a lack of clarity in what was expected of them on their literacy course and the literacy exams they were entered for.

There are sort of issues with English and Maths going back to school

The final theme and finding that emerged from the teacher interview data traced the issue of literacy for 16-18 year old students taking vocational qualifications in FECs back to the students' experience in school, prior to joining the college. Three teachers referred to the theme. The following extract exemplifies the point:

I think it's quite hard for the students when they've not really had much background of learning about grammar and punctuation and spelling, to start to prioritise those things and to learn those things. (TP1)

Later on in the interview, the teacher said:

There are sort of issues with English and Maths going back to school. If they weren't good at English and Maths at school, it's quite hard for them to come to college and do English and Maths again. (TP1)

TP3 characterised the issue in terms of the assessment the students had to complete, and the difference between the GCSE English assessments the students were used to completing at school, and the literacy exams the students took at college with a focus on spelling, punctuation and grammar. The teacher said:

I think there's a big gap between the standards and the requirements to pass the [Functional Skills English] exam. And I think it differs to GCSE English, the English that they've studied at school.

(TP3)

While the comments of the teachers were speculative, the perspective that ‘there are sort of issues with English and Maths going back to school’ was referred to by three of the five literacy teachers in terms of what they believed the students understood literacy to be when they arrived at college from school. Two of the teachers acknowledged that the college’s focus on spelling, punctuation and grammar, as in the standards and assessment criteria of the literacy qualifications the students took at college, was different from the literacy criteria the students experienced at school, and was not necessarily an aspect of literacy that resonated with the majority of students. The difference between what students understood as literacy at school, and what they experienced as literacy in their literacy classes at college, may have resulted in some students’ perspectives on the literacy education offered to them at college as being of little relevance to them. This perspective corroborated findings from the student focus group theme ‘it’s really basic’, where students viewed literacy activities they believed were easier than the English activities they had taken at school as being of little relevance or value to them.

6.5 Findings: Lesson observation data

In this section I present the findings from my analysis of the lesson observation data. I state in Chapter 4 that I did not plan to answer any of the research questions from the lesson observation data alone. The purpose of the analysis was to allow a more comprehensive approach to the generation and analysis of data, by including data that did not depend on students’ and teachers’ perspectives, and that could offer further insights into the topic.

In 2012/13 when the data was generated, there were 15 Level 2 Functional Skills English classes taking place in the college, which were the literacy part of a larger vocational programme of study. I observed eight lessons altogether, one lesson from eight of the 15 Level 2 Functional Skills English classes. The classes were chosen because at least one student in the student participant sample was attending the class. The classes that had no students from the student participant sample were not observed.

I identified 14 repeating ideas in the lesson observation data, and grouped the repeating ideas into five themes. I coded the themes as follows:

- The Level 2 Functional Skills English exam
- Discussion
- Negotiating learning aims
- The difficulty with differentiating learning
- Students don't want to write about opinions they don't hold

I give an account of the findings from the lesson observation data through these five themes. I refer to lesson observations by their lesson observation number; e.g. the first lesson observation reads as LO1. A list of the lesson observations by name and number is given in Table 9, Chapter 5.

The Level 2 Functional Skills English exam

The theme 'The Level 2 Functional Skills English exam' alludes to a finding from the lesson observation data around the extent to which the literacy activities used by the literacy teachers related directly to preparing students to take the Level 2 Functional Skills English reading and writing exams. Activities included writing activities (CV writing, a letter to a newspaper, a report on a crime), reading comprehension activities (a newspaper article and an online text) to form opinions and respond to questions, and a worksheet on the rules of punctuation and capitalisation. Although the activities had in common the notion that they all sought to prepare the students for the Level 2 Functional Skills English reading and writing exams, they were not all received in the same way by the students. The reading

comprehension activity in LO6, and the activity on the rules of punctuation and grammar in LO2, predicated on a skills perspective of literacy and a cognitivist approach to teaching literacy, resulted in low levels of involvement and only partial completion of the activities by students. The finding resonates with the student focus group themes ‘it’s really basic’, ‘when we do discussion’ and ‘that’s creative writing’, which show how students saw literacy activities that focused directly on the Level 2 Functional Skills English learning outcomes and assessment criteria as being of little value and of less relevance to them, if the activities did not enable the students to perceive their own literacy learning and development.

The theme ‘The Level 2 Functional Skills English exam’ shows that teachers drew significantly on literacy activities that directly prepared students to take the literacy assessments they had been entered for, but that in itself did not necessarily lead to high levels of student involvement in those activities if the activities, and the approach to literacy teaching taken by the teacher, did not enable the students to perceive their own literacy learning and development.

Discussion

Another theme that emerged from the lesson observation data was the extent to which discussion was used as a classroom activity. Six of the eight lessons employed discussion at some point in the lesson. Although discussion was not the main focus of any one lesson, it was nevertheless the most commonly used activity across the eight lessons. Discussions generated high levels of student involvement, which resonates with findings from the student focus group data and the theme ‘when we do discussion’, and alludes to a preference among the majority of students for activities with a social dimension, that drew on a constructivist approach to teaching literacy, and that the students saw as literacy learning activities that enabled those students to perceive their own literacy learning and development.

Findings from the student focus group data however indicate that students were not aware of discussion being used so often in their literacy lessons, which may indicate that the lessons I observed were not necessarily typical Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons.

Negotiating learning aims and classroom activities

Another theme and finding from the lesson observation data was the extent to which teachers negotiated learning aims and classroom activities with students, and as such adopted a humanist perspective on teaching literacy, taking students' perspectives on literacy into consideration in planning and teaching their lessons.

Teachers negotiated learning aims and classroom activities with students in three of the eight lessons, LO1, LO5 and LO8. In the other five lessons, the teacher decided the learning aims and activities for the lessons themselves. In only one of the three lessons in which the learning aims and activities were negotiated with the students, LO1, did the strategy result in full involvement by the students in the lesson. In LO1, the students were looking for part-time jobs while at college, and requested a session on CV writing to help them find a part-time job. This resonates with findings from the student focus group data and the theme 'that's creative writing' in that the effect on students of completing real-life job application forms was as important to the students as the literacy involved in completing the job application forms, and as such alludes to a literacy-in-action perspective of literacy and a humanist view of teaching and learning.

In the other two lessons, groups of students asked if the lesson could be on completing their vocational course assignments, and the teacher take the role of monitor, giving students feedback on their use of English during the lesson. The teacher accepted the requests, although not all the students agreed with the outcome of the negotiation. These students, who were participants in a literacy activity predicated on a skills perspective of literacy, but who were not necessarily receiving feedback on their work, were consequently less involved in the lesson. As such, the theme 'negotiating learning aims' corroborates the findings from the student focus group theme 'the teacher would give you points on how to make it better' and shows how students valued literacy activities that were predicated on a skills perspective of literacy when they received feedback on their work and were able to perceive their own literacy learning and development as a result of the activity, but did not value literacy activities predicated on a skills perspective of literacy if the activities focused explicitly on the correct use of spelling, punctuation and grammar at the

expense of a communicative purpose for the activity, and did not enable the students to perceive their own literacy learning and development.

The theme ‘negotiating learning aims’ shows that literacy lessons in which learning aims were negotiated with students, and as such took account of students’ perspectives on literacy may have, but did not necessarily result in high levels of involvement in the lesson by students.

The difficulty with differentiating learning

Another theme and finding that emerged from the lesson observation data was the difficulty teachers had with differentiating learning outcomes for students who did not immediately become involved in the lesson. In four of the eight lessons, LO2, LO3, LO4, and LO6, the involvement of some of the students was partial in that they were not able to complete the main aim of the lessons. In LO3, where students were asked to form an opinion about immigration rules for overseas workers in the care sector, and write an article to a newspaper in support of their opinion, two students were unable to form an opinion, and did not want to write a letter that was not based on their opinion. These students were given the reduced aim of reading the newspaper and forming their opinion, but were not involved in completing the main writing activity as preparation for their literacy exam. Because of time constraints and numbers of students in the lesson, the teacher was not able to address the individual learning aims of these students in a different way, and was not able to discuss with the students an appropriate writing task for them to complete.

A similar situation occurred in LO4, where students were asked to reply to a reader of a newspaper who had written in with an agony aunt question. In this lesson, as in LO3, time constraints and numbers of students resulted in some students not completing the writing task and the teacher not being able to address the individual learning aims of these students to enable the students to work on a more appropriate writing task. It was noticeable that in each case, the lessons where the teacher was unable to differentiate students’ learning aims on an individual basis were the lessons where the teacher decided the learning aims without negotiation with the students.

The theme ‘the difficulty with differentiating learning’ resonates with the analysis of the teacher interview data, in that the time allocated to the literacy lessons was not sufficient to give all the students the support they needed to complete all the activities the teacher had planned to do. It also reveals that negotiating learning aims with students may have precluded a situation in which some of the students did not achieve the main learning aims of the lesson.

Students don’t want to write about opinions they don’t hold

This final theme and finding from the lesson observation data is connected to the theme ‘the difficulty with differentiating learning’ but is one that I believe worthy of note separately. It is around the reason why some students did not want to complete the writing tasks in LO3 and LO4, as mentioned in the previous theme. In LO3 and LO4 students were required to form an opinion on a topic before completing a writing activity. Some students, who had not formed an opinion in the time that had been allocated, did not want to or felt unable to complete the writing activity as a theoretical exercise using a point of view that was given to them. The students only wanted to complete the writing tasks when they had formed an opinion and could write about what they really thought. I identified this theme separately because of its resonance with the theme and findings from the student focus group data ‘when we do discussion’ in which the majority of students said that they valued discussion as a literacy learning activity that they saw as relevant to their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, because of the way the act of discussing enabled the students to form opinions, which the students saw as an essential element of literacy learning.

I now discuss the extent to which the findings from the lesson observation data and my post interview notes corroborate the findings from the student focus group data and teacher interview data, and the extent to which the lesson observation data and post interview notes provide additional insights into the topic.

6.6 Lesson observations and post interview notes

In this section I consider the findings from the lesson observation data and the notes I took at the end of each student focus group, teacher interview and lesson observation to consider the extent to which the notes and the lesson observations corroborate the

findings from the student focus group data and teacher interview data, and the extent to which they offer additional insights into the topic. The findings from the lesson observation data and the notes I took at the end of each student focus group, teacher interview and lesson observation corroborate the findings from the student focus group data and teacher interview data on the following points, and as such contributed to the trail of evidence I aimed to generate in the formation of trustworthy data:

- The importance students placed on discussion as a literacy learning activity that enabled them to perceive their own literacy learning and development
- The importance students placed on forming opinions and learning new things in the context of their literacy lessons
- The importance students placed on the connection between literacy and progress in education and work
- The activities used in lesson observations were similar to those referred to by students in the student focus group data
- The lack of clarity some students had on what they were trying to achieve in their literacy lessons
- Whether the time and resources allocated to literacy lessons was sufficient for some students to achieve the literacy qualifications they were enrolled on given the gap in standards between Level 1 and Level 2 literacy qualifications

The activities I observed in lesson observations were similar to those referred to by students in student focus groups; these included CV writing, letters to newspapers, reports, and worksheets focusing on the correct use of spelling, punctuation and grammar. The lesson observation theme ‘discussion’ corroborates the importance students placed on discussion as a literacy learning activity in the student focus group

data, although some students stated that discussions were either not used or were underused in their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons.

The lesson observation theme ‘students don’t want to write about opinions they don’t hold’ corroborates the finding in the student focus group data on the value students placed on activities that enabled them to form opinions. In lessons where students were not willing or able to complete a writing activity, it was noticeable that those students were required to form an opinion before completing the activity, such as a response to an agony aunt letter or a letter to a newspaper about immigration rules and working in the UK, and where those students were not able to form an opinion, they were either not willing or not able to write about an opinion which was not their own. The extent to which 16-18 year olds taking vocational programmes of study were unwilling or unable to abstract ideas or opinions they did not hold in order to complete formal writing tasks may be an area worthy of further investigation.

The lesson observation theme ‘the difficulty with differentiating learning’ aligns with the issue referred to by the literacy teachers in the teacher interview data around the time allocated to literacy lessons and whether this was sufficient for teachers to include all students in lessons if those students were not able to respond immediately to learning aims and activities the teacher had planned.

The notes I took at the end of the focus groups with students generally corroborated the findings from the student focus groups data, although some points of emphasis came across in the notes that did not necessarily come across as emphatically in the findings from the student focus group data. One such point I made note of in the sections on what I learned from the sessions and if there was anything surprising or unexpected, was the interest students across all focus groups took in their Functional Skills English classes being taught well. To illustrate this, after SFG1 I wrote:

If there was any idea of antipathy on the part of the students towards Functional Skills, it wasn’t evident in this focus group. The students were interested in conveying their thoughts and in making improvements to Functional Skills.

I also noted how students seemed to be aware of the need to improve their use of literacy, but that they were not sure what that involved. This point aligns with the student focus group theme 'It could be more organised'. To illustrate this, after SFG2 I wrote:

It seems to be a reasonable conclusion that the students want to improve their standard of literacy, but are not sure what that involves, or how to do it, and that they don't value the approach taken in their Level 2 Functional Skills English classes, where the focus is mainly on the accurate use of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

In the notes I took at the end of the interviews with teachers, one aspect I noted was about how the teachers believed the time allocated to literacy lessons, considering the jump up from Level 1 to Level 2, was insufficient to enable some students to pass the Level 2 Functional Skills English exam. I also noted the literacy teachers' perception of the extent to which teachers of vocational courses seemed not to encourage their students to improve their use of literacy, because of concerns about their own use of literacy, although I acknowledge that no other data corroborates this perspective. To illustrate this however, at the end of the final teacher interview, TP5, I wrote:

The session was similar to the two previous sessions in that the teacher saw problems with Level 2 Functional Skills English as starting with the impression the students first get of the subject, and this is to do with what they hear about Functional Skills English in their vocational lessons and from their vocational teachers.

In this interview, the teacher placed responsibility for the issue on the college for not having a coherent plan to resolve the problem.

One difference that emerged between the findings from the lesson observation data and the student focus group data was around the extent to which discussion was used in literacy lessons. Discussion activities were more evident in observed lessons than was alluded to by students in the findings from the student focus group data, although this may have been due to the sample of lessons I observed.

In the next chapter I discuss the findings from the student focus groups, the interviews with literacy teachers and the lesson observations in relation to the research questions. I then draw on the findings to inform a discussion on insights I have gained into the issue of literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This thesis started with an account of the policy context of literacy education for 16-18 year old students who take vocational qualifications in FECs, the conflicts and tensions that exist in the area at a political, economic and institutional level, and the perspective the government, the CBI and the media have of literacy and literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications at a FEC. It ends with a consideration of the perspectives of those students and their teachers on literacy and the literacy education offered to 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs. This is because I believe that the problems that are perceived to exist with literacy among 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs cannot be understood or addressed without a consideration of those problems from the perspectives of the students and teachers involved in the practice of teaching and learning literacy as one aspect of a larger vocational programme of study.

In this final chapter I offer insights I have derived from the findings of the study that I presented in Chapter 6 on literacy education for students between the age of 16 and 18 who are taking vocational qualifications in FECs. The findings indicate that there was no one, single or fixed perspective on literacy education as offered to 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs that defined what those students thought literacy was in the context of their literacy lessons, or how they viewed the literacy activities used in those lessons. The insights gained through the study are derived from an understanding of the complexity of the perspectives held by the students and teachers who took part in the study.

The theoretical constructs, or perspectives on literacy I discussed in Chapter 3, literacy as a skill, literacy as social practice and literacy-in-action proved useful in interpreting the data, particularly in terms of the extent to which literacy activities were predicated on a particular perspective of literacy, whether explicitly or implicitly, and in the way students adopted different perspectives of literacy according to their literacy needs at any one time. What emerges from the analysis is

not the formation of new theoretical constructs on literacy, but insights into how existing theoretical constructs aid an understanding of what the 16-18 year old students who took part in this study thought literacy was in the context of their literacy lessons at college. The analysis shows how those students viewed the literacy activities used in their literacy lessons, and reciprocally how insights into the students' perspectives on literacy and literacy education re-positioned my understanding of the theoretical constructs, in particular the relationship between the social practice and literacy-in-action perspectives of literacy.

7.2 Organisation of the chapter

I begin the chapter by re-stating the research questions I articulated in Chapter 4, and continue with a discussion of the findings and the insights gained through the study that I structure around the research questions. I go on to consider the contribution to knowledge the study has made, and the implications this has for my professional practice as a teacher and manager of literacy courses for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in the college where I work, and for policy makers and college management teams, whose decisions have implications for the literacy learning and development of those students. I end the thesis with a consideration of the limitations of the study and possible areas of further investigation that emerged as a result of the study.

7.3 Restating the problem

This study was an exploration into perspectives on literacy and literacy education of students between the age of 16 and 18 who were taking vocational qualifications in a FEC. The contribution I intended the study to make was to look at the issue of literacy and literacy education for 16-18 year olds in FECs from the perspectives of the students and their literacy teachers. The questions I asked were about what 16-18 year old students in FECs thought literacy was in the context of their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, how those students viewed the literacy education offered to them, and what teachers of literacy to 16-18 year olds in FECs thought were the greatest challenges to literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs.

In the next three sections I discuss the findings and the insights gained through the study that I structure around the research questions.

7.4 What 16-18 year old students taking vocational qualifications in an FEC in England think literacy is

A key finding from the student focus group data was the way the 16-18 year old students who were taking vocational qualifications in the college where the study was carried out adopted pragmatically a perspective of literacy that suited their literacy needs at any one time, and that this perspective changed according to the students' changing literacy needs. In this study I used a skills, a social practice, and a literacy-in-action perspective of literacy to aid an understanding of the data, and a behaviourist, a cognitivist, a constructivist and a humanist perspective on teaching and learning to consider how literacy learning activities that aligned to certain perspectives on literacy were used in the classroom. It was apparent from the analysis of the student focus group data that the majority of students aligned themselves implicitly to any one of the perspectives on literacy depending on their literacy needs at any one time. The majority of students did not have a single perspective on literacy or literacy education that aligned unproblematically with any specific type of literacy learning activity or pedagogical approach to teaching literacy.

The findings show that there were differences in the way some students understood the metaphor of literacy as a skill, and the teaching of literacy as a skill, as derived from the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the Level 2 Functional Skills English qualification. The majority of students saw literacy as an important life skill, and acknowledged it as something they would need in their life after college. While the literacy qualification the students were taking referred to literacy as a skill in terms of the accurate use of spelling, punctuation and grammar, and the ability to produce writing in given formats using given information, in this study, although students showed awareness of the discourse of literacy as a skill and used this discourse to talk about literacy, what students repeatedly talked about as literacy activities relevant to their literacy lessons was discussion and interactive activities that had a social dimension.

The findings show how the majority of students saw discussion as a literacy learning activity that they believed should have been used extensively in their literacy lessons in college. The students talked about discussion in particular as an important literacy learning activity, how the act of discussing enabled students to form opinions and learn new things, and how the formation of opinions and the generation of new knowledge were essential aspects of good literacy learning activities. The majority of students in this study therefore thought of literacy in the context of their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons at least in part as a social activity. Some students also talked about creative writing as a literacy learning activity that should be used more extensively in literacy lessons in college. Those students saw creative writing activities as opportunities to improve their spelling, punctuation and grammar, which they saw as important. The findings also suggest how discussion and creative writing activities were either not used or were underused in the students' literacy lessons from the students' perspectives.

The findings show that the students valued literacy learning activities when those activities enabled students to perceive their own literacy learning and development. From a pedagogical perspective, what students in this study talked about as 'helpful' literacy learning activities either had a social dimension that aligned closely to a constructivist view of teaching and learning, or drew on a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning, such as a humanist approach, that allowed students the flexibility to adopt more than one perspective of literacy in order to complete activities successfully. In the case of literacy activities that were predicated on a skills perspective of literacy, that aligned to a cognitivist or behaviourist approach to teaching and learning and focused explicitly on the correct use of spelling, punctuation and grammar, or on the production of written texts using given formats and given information but with no clear communicative purpose, students did not value those activities or see them as relevant to their literacy lessons, if feedback from the teacher did not enable them to perceive their own literacy learning and development.

The findings also show how some students saw proof-reading as a 'helpful' literacy activity that enabled them to improve their spelling, punctuation and grammar, and how some students saw games as literacy learning activities that helped them

improve their use of literacy and learn new things. While the two activities are essentially different in that proof-reading is predicated on a skills perspective of literacy and games have a social dimension to them, the activities together indicate that it was not the perspective of literacy that the activities were predicated on that made them 'helpful' literacy learning activities from the perspective of the students, but the way the activities were used by the teacher. Games, as well as being seen as literacy learning activities by some students, are also general teaching and learning activities, and show that what some students thought of as good teaching and learning and what they saw as good literacy learning activities were connected.

7.5 How 16-18 year old students taking vocational qualifications in an FEC in England view the literacy education offered to them

The findings show that the majority of students viewed the literacy activities they took part in, in their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, as activities that were predicated on a skills perspective of literacy, as defined in the Level 2 Functional Skills English learning outcomes and assessment criteria (Ofqual, 2011), and focused primarily on the production of written texts using given formats and given information and the correct use of spelling, punctuation and grammar. The findings show that the majority of students thought that improving their spelling, punctuation and use of grammar was something they valued and would need when they left college and progressed into education or into work, and wanted the literacy activities they took part in in their literacy lessons to contribute to such improvements.

The findings however show that the majority of students did not value these activities as literacy learning activities, because the perspective of literacy the activities were predicated on, and the approach to teaching literacy, did not enable the students to perceive improvements in their literacy learning and development. The majority of students viewed activities that they completed individually and without a clear communicative purpose, that were predicated on a skills perspective of literacy and aligned to a cognitivist approach to teaching and learning, as uninteresting and unhelpful. Some students however did value such literacy learning activities, if feedback from the teacher on the completion of the activity enabled them to perceive improvements in their literacy learning and development.

The findings show that the activities the majority of students described as literacy learning activities that helped them improve, and perceive improvements to their own literacy learning and development, such as discussion and creative writing, were not activities they commonly experienced in their literacy lessons. While the lesson observations found discussion to be the most commonly used activity in Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons, this was not corroborated by the findings from the student focus group data, where students cited discussion as a literacy learning activity they valued, but did not commonly experience in their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons.

The findings also show how some students were unclear about what was expected of them in the literacy lessons they attended as an element of their vocational programmes of study, and when they took the Level 2 Functional Skills English assessments. Students compared this to the vocational qualifications they were taking, and found that in the case of the vocational qualifications, they were aware of the knowledge and skills they were required to learn, and the assessment criteria they had to meet, in order to pass their vocational qualifications. Some students were not aware of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria for Level 2 Functional Skills English, and as such felt unaware of what they had to do to pass the Level 2 Functional Skills English reading and writing exams.

7.6 What teachers think are the greatest challenges to literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs

The findings show concern among the literacy teachers about the time and resources allocated to the literacy part of the students' vocational courses. All five teachers expressed concern about whether the time allocated to the Level 2 Functional Skills English classes was sufficient for the students to pass the Level 2 literacy qualifications they were enrolled on, particularly given the gap in assessment criteria that existed between Level 1 and Level 2 literacy qualifications. Teachers saw the gap in assessment criteria between Level 1 and Level 2 literacy qualifications as too large for some students to pass the Level 2 Functional Skills English assessments, given the students' starting points and the relatively short amount of classroom time allocated to the literacy classes, especially when students entered college at Entry

level 3 literacy and were expected to progress to Level 1 then to Level 2 in consecutive years. One teacher emphasised the point by describing how students were progressed through literacy levels more quickly than the teacher thought they were able to cope with.

Another challenge from the perspective of the literacy teachers was accounting for the influence the teachers of vocational subjects had on their students' attitudes towards their literacy lessons that the literacy teachers saw as being beyond their control. From the literacy teachers' perspective, if the teachers of the students' vocational subjects were not supportive or were critical of the idea of their students studying literacy, the students' attitude to their literacy lessons would be adversely affected. One literacy teacher talked about the need for staff development across the college in Functional Skills English to overcome the problem, and another about the need for all teachers of vocational courses to hold a Level 2 qualification in English. While the teachers' comments were speculative in that they were not corroborated by other data, either by the number of teachers of vocational courses who held a Level 2 English qualification, or by findings from the student focus group data, it is nevertheless worthy of note that all five literacy teachers held this point of view.

Some of the teachers located the origins of perceived problems with literacy among 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs in the school system, and a lack of attention paid in schools to aspects of literacy such as the accurate use of spelling, punctuation and grammar. This perspective however was also speculative, and held by a minority of the teachers.

An incidental finding that emerged from the teacher interview data was the differences in the teachers' perspectives on what the teachers saw as the benefits of their literacy lessons to the students. While this was not a challenge to literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs that was identified by the literacy teachers, it nevertheless emerged as a factor in the analysis of the teacher interview data. While the teachers' views converged over issues they perceived as beyond their control, such as the gap between the Level 1 and Level 2 Functional Skills English assessments and the amount of time allocated to the literacy part of the students' vocational programmes of study, their perspectives on

what constituted appropriate literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs diverged, and this divergence in teachers' perspectives on literacy and literacy education may have had implications for some students in terms of their understanding of what was expected of them in their literacy lessons, and when they took their literacy exams.

The challenge for teachers is not so much to form an opinion on what they perceive the 'correct' perspective on literacy to be, so much as to find ways to account for the differences in perspectives on literacy that are held between the different stakeholders in the field, and to make these different perspectives visible to their students, enough to enable the students to understand what they are trying to achieve when they attend the literacy element of their vocational course, and when they complete the assessments for the literacy qualifications they are enrolled on.

I now discuss the contributions to knowledge the study has made, the implications of this for my professional practice as a teacher and manager of literacy courses for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs, and for college management teams and policy makers in the field of vocational education. I then discuss the limitations of the study, and the implications the study has for further investigation. I conclude the thesis with some final comments and thoughts.

7.7 Contributions to knowledge

The findings of the study concur with some aspects of the *Literacies for Learning in Further Education* (2007) and *Progress for Adult Literacy Learners* (2007) projects that I discussed in Chapter 3. As with the *Literacies for Learning in Further Education* project, students in this study valued literacies that were clearly purposeful to them, had a clear audience and generated new ideas or knowledge (Ivanic et.al., 2007). This was exemplified through the students' emphasis on discussion and some students' emphasis on creative writing as valued literacy learning activities, and the extent to which students wanted to form opinions on topics, and were unwilling to complete writing activities until they had formed those opinions.

As with the *Progress for Adult Literacy Learners* project, by the way students in this study adopted different perspectives of literacy pragmatically according to their literacy needs at any one time, and in the way students valued activities predicated on a skills and a social practice perspective of literacy, this study concludes that a skills-based approach to literacy teaching and learning does not have to be at the expense of a social practice approach, and that the two approaches need not be mutually exclusive (Burton et al., 2007).

In terms of a theoretical contribution to knowledge, the theoretical constructs I introduced in Chapter 3, literacy as a skill, literacy as social practice, and literacy-in-action aided an understanding of how the majority of the 16-18 year olds who took part in the study took a pragmatic view of what they thought literacy was in the context of their literacy lessons, and aligned themselves implicitly to a skills or social practice perspective of literacy according to their literacy needs at any one time. While a skills perspective of literacy was useful in understanding students' perspectives on literacy activities that focused on the production of written texts using given formats and given information and the correct use of spelling, punctuation and grammar, the social practice and literacy-in-action perspectives of literacy both seemed useful in gaining an understanding of literacy activities that had a social dimension, such as discussion and games.

In Chapter 6, Findings, I discussed literacy activities with a social dimension mostly in terms of literacy as social practice, although those activities could have been understood in terms of the literacy-in-action perspective of literacy through the effect the activities had reciprocally on the students. I described the students' discussion of creative writing in terms of literacy-in-action, because of the demonstrable impact the creative writing activities had reciprocally on the students and their feeling of accomplishment in completing the creative writing tasks. This however could have also been conceptualised in terms of literacy as social practice, in that the writing tasks were set in specific, real-life contexts and had a real communicative purpose. As such, in this study there seemed to be no readily distinguishable difference between the social practice and literacy-in-action perspectives of literacy.

While the study did not reveal new theoretical constructs of literacy, it did show how differences existed between the different stakeholders in the field of literacy education for students between the age of 16 and 18 who were taking vocational qualifications in FECs, particularly in their interpretation of the metaphor literacy as a skill. While the majority of students drew on the discourse of literacy as a skill to talk about their literacy classes, what the students talked about as good literacy learning activities were mostly discussion and other interactive activities, activities that were predicated on a social practice perspective of literacy rather than a skills perspective of literacy, as articulated by government and in the Level 2 Functional Skills English learning outcomes and assessment criteria (Ofqual, 2011).

In terms of contributions to knowledge that relate to my professional practice as a teacher and manager of literacy courses for 16-18 year olds that are part of a larger vocational programme of study, the study shows that the 16-18 year olds who took part in this study saw literacy in the context of their literacy lessons at least in part as a social activity. This was in contrast to the findings of my IFS in which I explored the literacies used on an adult literacy course in the College where I work, and the extent to which the teacher of the course drew on the literacies the adult literacy students were familiar with in their everyday lives.

The findings from my IFS showed that the students wanted to learn and be taught only the variety of literacy they associated with formal educational settings. The adult literacy students who took part in the study did not want varieties of literacy other than the literacy they associated with formal educational setting, predicated on a skills perspective of literacy, to be used in their adult literacy lessons. While the findings of my IFS are limited to the specific context of the research setting, which was one group of adult literacy students in the college where I work, and are not necessarily transferable to other contexts, in the context of my own research of literacy education in the college where I work, they nevertheless contrast to the findings of this study.

The majority of 16-18 year old students who took part in this study said that although they did not see discussion as an activity they associated with formal educational setting, they did see discussion as an activity that helped them form opinions and

learn new things, and that the formation of opinions and the learning of new knowledge were essential aspects of good literacy learning activities. The students also said that they did not recognise discussion as an activity they took part in in their literacy lessons in college.

The study also shows that what students talked about as good literacy learning activities in the context of their literacy lessons, such as discussion and other interactive activities, and what they thought of as good teaching and learning generally were connected. I believe this has implications for pedagogy in the post-16 vocational education sector in general, as well as for teachers of literacy to 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs.

7.8 Implications for professional practice

The findings have implications for my practice as a teacher and manager of literacy courses for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in the college where I work, for myself as a researcher of literacy education for students between the age of 16 and 18 who take vocational programmes of study in FECs, and for policy makers and college management teams, whose decisions affect so significantly the literacy learning and development of the 16-18 year olds for whom those literacy courses are intended.

In terms of my professional practice as a teacher and manager of literacy courses for 16-18 year olds, the findings suggest that interactive activities such as discussion should be planned into the literacy courses the students attend as part of their larger vocational programmes of study. The students who took part in this study were able to perceive their own literacy learning and development through involvement in interactive activities such as discussion that had a social aspect to learning and were aligned to a constructivist approach to teaching literacy.

The findings also show how teachers and managers in FECs need to find ways to make visible to 16-18 year old students the differences and similarities between teachers' and students' perspectives on literacy in the context of the students' literacy course, and how their perspectives on literacy may be different from the perspective

implied in the assessment criteria of the literacy qualification they are taking. Making perspectives on literacy visible to students may enable those students to better interpret what is being asked of them in the literacy lessons they take part in as part of their vocational course. One way of doing this may be through discussion activities on what students think literacy *is* in the context of their literacy lessons.

A further implication for my professional practice is about the feedback literacy teachers give to their 16-18 year old students, and the extent to which this feedback enables the students to perceive their own literacy learning and development. The study shows the importance to students of improving their spelling, punctuation and grammar and ability to produce written texts such as letters and other texts associated with the world of work, which are associated with a skills perspective of literacy and a cognitivist perspective of learning. The students however were unequivocal in their comments across all focus groups that they found literacy lessons based on a skills perspective of literacy and aligned to a cognitivist perspective of teaching literacy unhelpful and uninteresting, if the feedback they received on their work from the teacher did not help them perceive improvement in their literacy learning and development.

Insights gained from the study suggest that policy makers and college management teams should consider moving away from the use of literacy qualifications that impose a single perspective of literacy on students and teachers, and find ways to account for differences in perspectives of what literacy *is* that currently exists that include 16-18 year old students' perspectives on literacy in the context of the literacy part of their vocational programmes of study. This may mean moving away from assessment practices that draw on the abstracting of knowledge and information for the purposes of completing formal literacy assessments, and assessment practices that take a punitive approach to a perceived correct use of spelling, punctuation and grammar, into assessments that allow 16-18 year old students who take vocational programmes of study to express opinions and ideas in contexts that are credible to them and have a clear communicative purpose.

7.9 Limitations of the study

In terms of the generation and analysis of data, while I was able to hold a second series of meetings with the literacy teachers to verify my analysis of the data and my findings with them, I was not able to do so with the students who took part in the student focus groups. This was because the majority of students had left the college by the time I had carried out the analysis of the data. I was therefore not able to find out from the students what they thought about some of the views expressed by the teachers, such as the influence the teachers of vocational subjects had on the students' attitudes to their literacy classes. To hold a second series of meetings with the students to verify my analysis and findings from the student focus group data, and to ask the students about some of the themes that emerged from the teacher interview data was beyond the parameters of the study.

The study was also limited to 16-18 year old students' perspectives of literacy and of the literacy education offered to them as part of their vocational programmes of study, and the perspectives of the literacy teachers who taught the literacy part of those vocational programmes of study. The study did not draw on the views of the teachers of the vocational subjects the students were taking that made up the larger part of the students' programmes of study at college. This perspective on the issue of literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs may be worthy of further investigation in the future.

Lastly, while the student participant sample was stratified by gender, ethnicity and EAL, to ensure that those categories of students' views were represented in the student focus group data, it was not possible to extend the analysis of the student focus group data into an analysis of the data by those categories, and this may also be an area worthy of further investigation in the future.

7.10 Areas of further investigation

The purpose of this study was to explore perspectives on literacy and literacy education for students between the age of 16 and 18 who take vocational qualifications in a FEC in England. The areas of further investigation I refer to below

are issues that emerged during this exploration. One such issue that was beyond the scope of this study was around the teachers of the students' vocational subjects and their perspectives on what they think literacy *is* in the context of a vocational programme of study, and the extent to which the influence those teachers have on their students' attitude towards literacy and literacy education is present in the students' literacy lessons.

Three other issues that emerged as a result of the study, that were also beyond the scope of the study to explore further were about the relationship between the students' understanding of what they saw as good literacy learning activities, and what they thought of as good teaching and learning, about the extent to which literacy teachers' perspectives on literacy and literacy education for 16-18 year olds in FECs diverged from one another, and about the need for students who take vocational programmes of study to abstract information in order to complete formal literacy assessments.

In terms of the relationship between the students' understanding of what they thought literacy was in the context of their Level 2 Functional Skills English lessons and what they thought of as good and bad teaching and learning, this blurring of what constituted good literacy learning and what constituted good teaching and learning generally, has implications both for pedagogy in post-16 vocational education, and for the teaching of literacy to 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs, and is as such worthy of further investigation. The issue of how and why teachers had developed such different perspectives on literacy and literacy education from one another, and the implications for students of teachers holding different perspectives on literacy and literacy education is also worthy of further investigation.

Lastly, I believe that the extent to which 16-18 year old students who take vocational qualifications in FECs are able to abstract information and write about opinions that are not their own as a theoretical exercise for the purpose of completing literacy activities and formal literacy assessments, and the extent to which this group of students require a credible activity with a credible audience and clear communicative purpose in order to complete literacy activities and literacy assessments at all is an area worthy of further investigation.

7.11 Concluding remarks

I carried out this exploration into perspectives on literacy and literacy education of students between the age of 16 and 18 who were taking vocational qualifications in a FEC because I was aware of the conflicts and tensions that existed in the field, and how business leaders and the media routinely characterised literacy among 16-18 year olds who left vocational education and entered the workforce as problematic (CBI, 2006; THES, 2007; The Guardian, 2011). I wanted to find out from the 16-18 year old students and their teachers themselves what their perspectives on literacy were and on the literacy education offered to 16-18 year olds in FECs.

The study shows how this group of students' perspectives on literacy differed from official perspectives on literacy and from the perspective of the adult literacy students who took part in my IFS study that I carried out before the thesis. It may be that the conflicts and tensions I described at the start of the thesis were borne out of these differences in perspectives on literacy and literacy education, and that a resolution of those conflicts and tensions may be contingent on stakeholders taking into consideration the differences in perspectives on literacy and literacy education among the different stakeholders in the field, and accounting for those differences in the context of the literacy lessons the students attend as part of their larger vocational programmes of study. This may involve the formation of a pedagogy for teaching literacy to 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in FECs that is specific to the field, and that allows 16-18 year old students to draw on different perspectives of literacy and learning pragmatically in order to meet their literacy learning needs at any one time.

In the meantime, teachers of literacy to 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs need to find ways within existing structural constraints to make visible to students the different perspectives that exist on literacy and on literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in FECs, to enable their students to reconcile their perspectives on literacy with the perspective of literacy implicit in the literacy qualifications the students are enrolled on, enough for those students to understand what is required of them on the literacy part of their vocational course. This may go some way to improving the perspective the

government, the CBI and the media have of literacy among young people leaving vocational education and entering the workforce, and may help those 16-18 year olds cope better with the situation they find themselves in, when they attend the literacy part of their vocational course.

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Appendix A Leaflet to Student Participants about Classroom Observation

This leaflet is to give you information about a research project I am carrying out, and to invite you to take part in the project. My name is Eamonn Egan. I am a Functional Skills English teacher and manager at college. My research project is on literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications at college. I am doing it as part of a Doctorate in Education degree I am taking at the Institute of Education in London. The project is an exploration into what 16-18 year old students who take vocational qualifications in college think literacy is, how they view the literacy education offered to them, and what their teachers think are the greatest challenges to literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in further education colleges.

As part of the project, I would like to observe a Functional Skills English class on your course, and use my notes from the observation as a source of data for my project. I am interested in the tasks you complete in your Functional Skills English lessons and why they might work. Before the classroom observation begins, I will ask you to sign a form to show you have understood the purpose of the project and have agreed to take part. I would also like to let you know that you can request at any time that you do not want data about you to be used in the observation notes or the project report.

All information from the classroom observation will be confidential. My observation notes will only be used for my research, and nothing from them will be reported to anyone else. All the information will be anonymised by name. However, it may nevertheless be possible to identify you in another way, although this is unlikely. I will be happy to provide you with the notes from the observation and/or a report of the project on request. I would also like to let you know that I will invite all the students in your class to attend a focus group on literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications at college following the classroom observation. I will write to students separately with invitations to attend the focus group.

Appendix B Student and Teacher Participant Classroom Observation Consent Letter

Dear Participant,

My name is Eamonn Egan. I am a Functional Skills English teacher and manager at college. I am carrying out a research project on literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in college, as part of a Doctorate in Education degree I am taking at the Institute of Education in London. I am interested in what 16-18 year old students who take vocational qualifications in college think literacy is, how they view the literacy education offered to them, and what their teachers think are the greatest challenges to literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in further education colleges. I would like to invite you to take part in this project.

I would like to observe one of your Functional Skills English classes. I am interested in the tasks you complete in your Functional Skills English lessons and why they might work. During the classroom observation I will make notes about the tasks students complete during the lesson and the degree of involvement with which students complete tasks.

All information from the classroom observation will be confidential and will only be used to inform my research. Nothing you say will be reported to anyone else, and all information will be anonymised by name. Although it is unlikely, I should tell you that it may nevertheless be possible to identify you in another way. I would like to let you know that you can request at any time that no data about you is used in the project report. I would also be happy to provide you with a copy of the notes from the observation and/or a report of the project on request. I would also like to let you know that data that is generated from the classroom observations will be stored in one location only; that is on my personal desk top computer. There will be no other copies of the data, and the data will be erased following completion of the project.

If you would like to take part in the research project, could you sign below, to show you have understood the purpose of the project, and have agreed to take part.

I (name) have understood the purpose of the research project ‘An exploration into perspectives on literacy and literacy education for students between the age of 16 and 18 who are taking vocational qualifications in a further education college’, and agree to take part in the classroom observation. I understand that the notes from the observation will be used only to inform the research project, and that I can withdraw from the project at any time.

Signed

Date

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix C Letter Inviting Student Participants to attend a Focus Group

Dear,

My name is Eamonn Egan. I am a Functional Skills English teacher and manager at college. I am doing a research project on 16-18 year old further education college students' perspectives on literacy and literacy education, as part of a Doctorate in Education degree I am taking at the Institute of Education in London. I am interested in what 16-18 year old students who take vocational qualifications in college think literacy is, how they view the literacy education offered to them, and what their teachers think are the greatest challenges to literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in further education colleges.

I would like to invite you to talk with me about literacy, and how you view the literacy education offered to you at college. This will be as part of a focus group, and will take about 30 – 45 minutes. The information from the focus groups will only be used to inform the project and will not be used as part of my work at college. I will audio record the focus group. Before the focus group begins, I will ask you to sign a form to show you have understood the purpose of the project and have agreed to take part. I would also like to let you know that you can ask at any time that you do not want data about you to be used in the project report.

All information from the focus group will be confidential. What you say will only be used for my research, and nothing you say will be reported to anyone else. All the information will be anonymised by name. However, it may nevertheless be possible to identify you in another way, although this is unlikely. All data from the focus groups will be stored in one location only; that is my personal desk top computer. I will erase all the data following completion of the project. I will also be happy to provide you with a report of the project on request.

The focus group will take place on [date / time / location]. If you wish to take part in the focus group, please arrive shortly before the start of the focus group. I look forward to seeing you.

Eamonn Egan

Dear Participant,

My name is Eamonn Egan. I am a Functional Skills English teacher and manager at college. I am carrying out a research project on 16-18 year old further education college students' perspectives on literacy and literacy education, as part of a Doctorate in Education degree I am taking at the Institute of Education in London. I am interested in what 16-18 year old students who take vocational qualifications in college think literacy is, how they view the literacy education offered to them, and what their teachers think are the greatest challenges to literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in further education colleges. I would like to invite you to take part in this project.

I would like to invite you to take part in a focus group on the literacy education offered to you at college. The focus group will take about 30 – 45 minutes, and will be audio recorded. I am interested in your views on literacy and how you view the literacy education offered to you at college.

All information and recordings will be confidential. What you say will only be used for my research, and nothing you say will be reported to anyone else. All the information will be anonymised by name. A report of the project will be made available to teachers and students on request, and although unlikely, it may nevertheless be possible to identify you in another way. I would be happy to provide you with a transcript of the recordings and/or a report of the project on request. I would like to let you know that you can ask at any time that no data about you is used in the project report. I would also like to let you know that data from the project will be stored in one location only, that is my personal desk top computer, and that this data will be erased following completion of the project.

If you would like to take part in the focus group, could you sign below, to show you have understood the purpose of the project, and have agreed to take part.

I (name) have understood the purpose of the research project, ‘An exploration into perspectives on literacy and literacy education for students between the age of 16 and 18 who are taking vocational qualifications in a further education college’, and agree to take part in the focus group. I understand that what I say will be used only to inform the research project, and that I can withdraw from the project at any time.

Signed

Date

Signature of researcher

Date

Dear Participant,

My name is Eamonn Egan. I am a Functional Skills English teacher and manager at college. I am carrying out a research project on literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications at college. I am doing it as part of a Doctorate in Education degree I am taking at the Institute of Education in London. The project is an exploration into what 16-18 year old students who take vocational qualifications in college think literacy is, how they view the literacy education offered to them, and what their teachers think are the greatest challenges to literacy education for 16-18 year olds who take vocational qualifications in further education colleges. I would like to invite you to take part in the project.

I would like to invite you to take part in an interview on literacy, and on the challenges facing literacy education for 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications in further education colleges. The interview will be a one-to-one interview. It will take about 30 – 45 minutes, and will be audio recorded. I am interested in your views on literacy, and the challenges you face in your work as a teacher of literacy to 16-18 year olds taking vocational qualifications at college.

All information and recordings will be confidential. What you say will only be used for my research, and nothing you say will be reported to anyone else. All the information will be anonymised by name. A report of the project will be made available to teachers and students on request, and although unlikely, it may nevertheless be possible to identify you in another way. I would be happy to provide you with a transcript of the recording and/or a report of the project on request. I also like to let you know that you can ask at any time that no data about you is used in the project report. I would also like to let you know that data from the interview will be store in one location only, my personal desk top computer, and that this data will be erased following completion of the project.

If you would like to take part in the interview, could you sign below, to show you have understood the purpose of the project, and have agreed to take part.

I (name) have understood the purpose of the research project, ‘An exploration into perspectives on literacy and literacy education for students between the age of 16 and 18 who are taking vocational qualifications in a further education college’, and agree to take part in the interview. I understand that what I say will be used only to inform the research project, and that I can withdraw from the project at any time.

Signed

Date

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix F: Transcription of Student Focus Group 2 (relevant text underlined)

Computing Level 3

13 December 2012

Scripted introduction

Let's begin by going round and saying who we are and what we most enjoy doing when we're not studying at College?

Individual student responses

M: So, the next question is, when you think of Functional Skills English, what's the first thing that comes to mind?

S: Dread.

M: Sorry?

S: Dread.

S: A wasted hour.

M: So why is that?

S: I've got nothing against doing Functional Skills, you know, it's required, your basic Maths and English, but it's just what we do in English Functional Skills. I mean, it's basic; the kind of stuff that we did before we did our GCSEs. It's like, the tutor taught us how to write a letter, last week or the week before, and we've been doing things about that calibre since the start of Functional Skills. It's really sort of Year 6, Year 7 ...

M: What level Functional Skills are you doing?

S: 2.

M: So that's Level 2?

S: Apparently is equivalent because it's a C grade in GCSE.

M: That's right.

S: I think we're all doing Level 2.

M: You're all doing Level 2.

S: Yes.

M: Who else has the same feeling?

Ss: Yeah.

S: I'm not even [inaudible word], because there's no point. I honestly don't think, whenever I go I just feel like, I just don't see the point in it, 'cos I'm not learning anything. It's stuff that I already know. It's a waste of an hour.

S: It's what we did in junior school. I'm mean, we've done GCSE, which was quite a struggle with GCSE, and I've come to this and I can do the work in about five minutes. You need a challenge to be able to move forwards.

S: I was a D / E grade student for most of my GCSE English course. As it stands now, I'm just breezing through the stuff. It's not improving what I'm going to learn in any way at all. It's going over things we learned in middle school. I mean, GCSE would have made us struggle, and this is just basic.

M: Would anybody else like to comment? [p] OK, if I ask you the next question, erm, if you could think back to a Functional Skills English lesson, or any other English lesson, where you felt you really learned

something, can you tell us what was good about that lesson?

S: When we do discussions, like in English. We discuss things and [p] the fact that I'd learned something that, ... there's no such thing as useless knowledge, ... learning something new rather than going over the same thing over and over again. It was interesting. I enjoyed it because I learned something new, rather than just spending hours doing the same old stuff.

M: Anybody else? Can you think of a lesson that was really good?

S: A Functional Skills English lesson?

M: Any English lesson.

S: In about Year 9, when we really started to do GCSE, so we started learning the higher grades, then it was Year 10 and 11 you were just making it, you just improve it.

M: So what was good about what you can remember?

S: I felt like I could start doing English again, because I'd always struggled; where I was supposed to have got A grades, but I wasn't getting anywhere near it. I started learning something new, and my grades went up, so I felt really good that my grades were improving. And that's like the other good thing about it.

M: Anybody else got any comments? Can anybody think of a really good English lesson that you've had in the past?

S: Yeah, when I learned about juxtaposition. Learning new literary techniques expands my knowledge of

the writing [inaudible word]
[laughter].

S: Is that a quote from Shakespeare or something? [laughter]

M: OK, any other comments on that then? You're really saying that learning something new is what's important.

S: Yeah.

M: Is that what you all feel?

Ss: Yes.

M: Yeah, OK, so can you now think back to a task that you've completed and that worked well in a Functional Skills English lesson, or any other English lesson, any other one?

S: What do you mean by worked well?

M: That you felt was a good task, you learned from it, it was satisfying to complete, enjoyable to do, and why did it work? Can you think of something that you did in ...?

S: ... I don't think English is really one of those subjects where you, you've been learning all your life. It's not something you really improve on that much ...

S: Yeah.

S: ... unlike say Maths or Science where you learn new stuff. English is more of a [pause] ...

S: Go on then [laughter] ...

M: Because you've been doing it all your life.

S: Yeah, there's not really that much to expand upon, in English. [pause] I

suppose in English literature, maybe, but actual English, not so much.

M: OK, [p] maybe the way you write something or ...

S: ... sorry, are you talking about in college, or about other colleges?

M: Anywhere.

S: Erm, for me, my former college was really good because the place did a lot of [inaudible word] like. We write loads of letters, and the teacher then, she was PhD order from Oxford, and basically what we would do is that, we do compare each others' letters because some people don't know how to make short statements. They don't use punctuation marks like commas or they don't know how to write short statements and make their writing look good.

M: So she was really helping you to ...

S: She helped us. So she made us write loads of letters, and she actually made us see the more we write the more we improved, because she pointed to the mistakes we made in the last one, and when you write the second one you're going to say, oh, I didn't make that mistake again. She would give you points on how to make it better. So you're actually improving.

M: So you found that really good.

S: Yeah.

M: OK, thank you. OK. [pause] Can you think now about how Level 2 Functional Skills English could be different? And tell us how things could be different with Functional Skills English. What could be done that's different?

S: Most of Functional Skills English is so far, from what I've seen, is almost like the courseworks I've had to do for GCSE. And as you say, OK, write about this, in this format, like this, and that's it. And you write it, it's boring, and it doesn't help me do anything, and you end up getting 'nos'. If it's sort of more, creative writing, rather than write a letter about this, this, this, using this information. You know, I mean, one of the courseworks I had to do in GCSE was for creative writing, and I enjoyed that immensely. I handed it in the day after it was given. I got a B on that; the only B I'd ever got on English in my life. I enjoyed it. I sat down and I spent about eight hours doing it, and I enjoyed all eight hours of it, rather than going home spending twenty minutes doing it, getting annoyed at it, and ignoring it for a week then trying to pick it up again, which is the case for Functional Skills English, like courseworks for English, and write a report on this using this, and so on.

M: Anyone here.

S: Yeah, I agree.

M: Can you think of something that might be different?

S: I agree with what he said. It's easier to learn new things with creative writing.

M: It makes it easier to learn.

S: Yeah.

M: Anybody else got any ideas about how Functional Skills English could be different?

S: Making it a bit more difficult, maybe. It's just too easy.

M: Making it more difficult.

S: You're getting bored because it's just basic. You're thinking why am I here? Then you don't bother. So you make it a little bit more of a challenge, you're more likely to think I need to work on this, and you might start actually improving.

M: OK, OK, erm, any other ideas anybody, that you could do in Functional Skills English? Something that you could do in Level 2 Functional Skills English that would be different from now.

S: I don't think Functional Skills are actually like [p], they just need to teach you and that, because obviously we are in the college now, and whatever you think you're not good at, you can go and meet the teacher and OK, you know, I've got these difficulties and can you help me with this. But whereas they don't help you then, they need to improve on what they're doing, [p] because [p] you can't just go into the class and expect the teacher to know that, because we all came from different backgrounds, from different colleges, we're not in the same level, so the teacher, he won't have the idea of, OK, this is the place you are going, so obviously he's just teaching you a general thing, and some people might be benefitting from that as well. But if you don't learn that, you might not be benefitting from it, so I think it's your own thing, like this is where I'm faulty, or this is where I'm not good in English, and you go and meet the teacher and say this is where I want to improve on that.

S: What we're doing now is oh, this is how you write a letter, like, and it's great if you've been, if you're learning

English. Most of us aren't learning English, we already know English ...

M: Yeah.

S: ... most of us are English, whereas if someone doesn't know English, then yeah, that'd be great. They'll learn how to speak English, write English, write letters in English, do this that and the other in English, but for the rest of us it's not challenging at all. It's basic. Write a letter; most of us can write a letter, so OK, you're going to write a letter to Santa or something, yeah.

M: So if I just ask you, this is the last question, if you had one minute to talk to the Principal about Level 2 Functional Skills English, what would you say?

S: I'd just say about how it feels so basic. It feels like I'm back in junior school. It's like I've done all this work through high school and struggled, now I've got to college where it should be more difficult, and it's like I'm back in junior school. I don't know where, why that would have happened. It should be getting more difficult, not easier.

S: It needs to be more challenging. Challenge yourselves rather than [inaudible word].

S: Yeah, 'cos I'm not going to learn anything if I'm not struggling, 'cos you learn by finding something that you don't know, or you can't do, and improving on it. But if you already can do it, you have a little room for improvement, but you don't feel like you need to, because you can already do it.

M: Thank you.

S: And Functional Skills is a Level 2 qualification and we're doing Level 3, so it's something we're supposed to know before. It's what you're supposed to have achieved in GCSEs, but obviously if you didn't achieve, you know, that's what we're coming back to do, because it's not Level 3 where you're coming to learn something higher, or more advanced English. So obviously there wouldn't be something new, because this is something you should have done before that you didn't pass, and you're coming to refresh your memory on that knowledge. So I'm not expecting them to teach you something new. There should be a way about this that is what we're learning, and not just going there and just writing letters, and actually [inaudible word] give us real essays and letters to write and see what our weaknesses is.

M: So you want help to improve.

S: I'm just talking about giving us past papers or something, past questions to actually, you know, this is the exam, and this is what we are going to face, because it's not about teaching, it's what we've learned before, it's a Level 2 class, which, maybe one or two reasons we didn't actually pass, and we're trying to repeat it.

M: Any other ideas here about what you'd like to talk to the Principal about?

S: Well what I was going to say was that it doesn't seem to have progressed from the Level 1 to the Level 2. It doesn't seem like any of it has really changed.

M: Really.

S: Like, 'cos I did this last year, 'cos I did A-levels here last year, but then I

developed a fear of exams somewhere down the line, and had to drop out. And I did the Level 1 in English and the Level 2 in Maths last year, and it's exactly the same as we did last year.

S: And you say about the past papers, you don't need it. Honestly, as long as you can write your own name, you'll probably pass [laughter], it's really not that hard.

S: You'd be surprised. I'm terrible at exams. I really am. You'd genuinely be surprised. I spelt my own name wrong once. I had to cross it out and write it underneath [laughter].

M: Any more comments from anyone? What you would like to talk to the Principal about? [pause] Anything else? Would anyone else like to comment?

S: We've all got pretty much the same idea.

M: If I just summarise what you've said, ...

Summary of focus group 19 mins 5 secs to 21 mins 33 secs

M: Do you think that's about right? Have I left anything out?

S: It does rely a lot on sheets, on worksheets. I understand that you can use them to help with the task, but he just says 'do that', and that's it.

S: And the letter writing doesn't seem to relate to real life, 'cos in this new, modern age of emails, I'm not sure many of us write letters on a daily basis.

S: No, you'd write an email.

S: ... yeah, exactly.

S: I did a letter writing task at school when I was eight.

S: Yeah, exactly.

M: So what you're saying is you just get a worksheet, and there's no explanation as to why you're doing it or what you're going to learn from it.

S: The scenario's on the sheet, but it doesn't really explain the scenario. .

S: Yeah, and there's no difference between Level 1 work and Level 2 work.

S: It also feels a bit weird, because I've got a C in English and then an A in Maths, and I'm still doing both of them, and it's like well these UCAS points are actually worth less than my GCSE grades ...

S: Yeah.

M: But you will get your UCAS points, won't you?

S: Yeah. It's just less UCAS points.

S: It's just not as valuable.

S: Yes.

M: OK, any other comments anyone would like to make? [pause] OK everyone, thank you very much.

Scripted end

Appendix G: Student Focus Group 2 – Relevant Text with Coding

Computing Level 3

Relevant Text

S: I've got nothing against doing Functional Skills, you know, it's required, your basic Maths and English, but it's just what we do in English Functional Skills. **I mean, it's basic**; the kind of stuff that we did before we did our GCSEs. It's like, the tutor taught us how to write a letter, last week or the week before, and we've been doing things about that calibre since the start of Functional Skills.

Relevant Text Codes

I mean, it's basic

S: I was a D / E grade student for most of my GCSE English course. As it stands now, I'm just breezing through the stuff. It's not improving what I'm going to learn in any way at all. It's going over things we learned in middle school. I mean, GCSE would have made us struggle, and **this is just basic**.

This is just basic

M: ... can you tell us what was good about that lesson?

When we do discussions

S: **When we do discussions**, like in English. We discuss things and [p] the fact that I'd learned something that, ... there's no such thing as useless knowledge, ... learning something new rather than going over the same thing over and over again. It was interesting. I enjoyed it because I learned something new, ...

S: Erm, for me, my former college was really good because the place did a lot of [inaudible word] like. We write loads of letters, and the teacher then, she was PhD order from Oxford, and basically what we would do is that, we do compare each other's letters because some people don't know how to make short statements. They don't use punctuation marks like commas or they don't know how to write short statements and make their writing look good.

She would give you points on how to make it better.

M: So she was really helping you to ...

S: She helped us. So she made us write loads of letters, and she actually made us see the more we write the more we improved, because she pointed to the mistakes we made in the last one, and when you write the second one you're going to say, oh, I didn't make that mistake again. **She would give you points on how to make it better.** So you're actually improving.

M: So you found that really good.

S: Yeah.

If **it's sort of more, creative writing**, rather than write a letter about this, this, this, using this information. You know, I mean, one of the courseworks I had to do in GCSE was for creative writing, and I enjoyed that immensely. I handed it in the day after it was given. I got a B on that; the only B I'd ever got on English in my life. I enjoyed it. I sat down and I spent about eight hours doing it, and I enjoyed all eight hours of it, rather than going home spending twenty minutes doing it, getting annoyed at it,

It's sort of more, creative writing

and ignoring it for a week then trying to pick it up again, which is the case for Functional Skills English, ...

M: Anyone here.

S: Yeah, I agree.

M: Can you think of something that might be different?

It's easier to learn new things with creative writing

S: I agree with what he said. **It's easier to learn new things with creative writing.**

M: It makes it easier to learn.

S: Yeah.

M: Anybody else got any ideas about how Functional Skills English could be different?

It's just basic

S: Making it a bit more difficult, maybe. It's just too easy.

M: Making it more difficult.

S: You're getting bored because **it's just basic.** You're thinking why am I here?

S: ... most of us are English, whereas if someone doesn't know English, then yeah, that'd be great. They'll learn how to speak English, write English, write letters in English, do this that and the other in English, but for the rest of us it's not challenging at all. **It's basic.** Write a letter; most of us can write a letter, ...

It's basic

M: ... this is the last question, if you had one minute to talk to the Principal about Level 2 Functional Skills English, what would you say?

It feels so basic

S: I'd just say about how **it feels so basic**. It feels like I'm back in junior school. It's like I've done all this work through high school and struggled, now I've got to college where it should be more difficult, and it's like I'm back in junior school.

M: Any other ideas here about what you'd like to talk to the Principal about?

It doesn't seem to have progressed from the Level 1 to the Level 2

S: Well what I was going to say was that **it doesn't seem to have progressed from the Level 1 to the Level 2**. It doesn't seem like any of it has really changed.

M: Really.

S: Like, 'cos I did this last year, 'cos I did A-levels here last year, but then I developed a fear of exams somewhere down the line, and had to drop out. And I did the Level 1 in English and the Level 2 in Maths last year, and it's exactly the same as we did last year.

S: And **the letter writing doesn't seem to relate to real life**, 'cos in this new, modern age of emails, I'm not sure many of us write letters on a daily basis.

The letter writing doesn't seem to relate to real life

S: No, you'd write an email.

S: ... yeah, exactly.