CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The World of the Learner

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Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on what we are calling *the world of the learner*, which enables us to develop a more holistic description of students' experiences of learning. In Chapter 5 we described orientation to learning as a personal context of learning which illuminates the nature of the relationship between a student and the course of study within a particular educational institution. Orientation to learning is a 'learner's experience' seen as a relationship between a course and a learner—it is neither an aspect of the course itself or trait or personality characteristic of the learner, but rather the experience as a dynamic between the learner and a course in its institutional context. Having described the importance of this personal context for learning in Chapter 5, it is now possible to develop a fuller picture of the learner's world.

In this chapter we want to extend the discussion of the experience of learning in two ways. First, we shall bring together some of the concepts introduced in Part I and see how they appear within a holistic description of the learner's experience. A series of case studies is used to consider learners' realities through the 'conceptual lens' introduced earlier. Then, we shall discuss students' change and development as shown in a longitudinal study of student learning from foundation year through to graduation. Both parts of the chapter are taken from the research study with Open University [1] (OU) students, already mentioned in Chapter 5.

Case-studies of Student Learning

In Chapter 3, the concepts of *approaches to learning* and *conceptions of learning* were introduced and their importance for the quality of the learning outcomes has been stressed in Chapter 2. These concepts can be linked together with the concept of *orientation to learning* to provide a framework for understanding what a student gains from a course, in other words the outcomes of learning. These interrelated concepts can be seen as increasing levels of generality for describing students' experiences of learning; they describe different focuses of awareness in a learner's experience.

The two case studies that follow are extracted from a longitudinal study of 29 Open University students, and based on interviews carried out during their first year of study. They will be used to illustrate the links between these concepts which have been found in the main study, namely orientation to learning, conception of learning, and approaches to learning. The interviews focused on the experience of taking the Social Science Foundation Course and were carried out on three, occasions (i) before the course, about students' orientation to learning and conception of learning; (ii) during the course, about their approaches to

studying one particular piece of teaching material and completing an essay assignment; and (iii) after the course, about what they had gained from the course (Morgan *et al.,* 1982).

The two case studies, which use pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality, have been selected to illustrate how students with different orientations go about studying in vastly different ways.

Case study 1: John Williams

John Williams is a Personnel Officer working in a London firm. He is in his early forties married with two children. He has professional qualifications, and has previously attempted a degree course on a correspondence basis but the course did not fit in with his other commitments and he completed only one year. He felt however, that to get a degree would be a 'good thing' and when he heard about the Open University he decided to try again.

> It seemed a good idea to take a degree – I'd heard of the O.U. before but I was never quite sure how it operated. I'd tried before to do a degree – an external London but it was the time keeping really – it involved evening lectures and I only did the first year. This seemed like a fairly good way to have another attempt.

His main orientation seemed to be an academic extrinsic one and he described how he hoped to do the work quickly.

> I don't really know how keen I'll get. I mean one would obviously try to do as little as possible; but obviously you're going to do a fair bit to get through it properly. – If I can get it concentrated down to as few hours as possible, commensurate with getting the degree and enjoying it, I will.

The emphasis in these statements is on efficiency and from the beginning John's concern with progress through the system was clear. There were also, however, hints of vocational intrinsic orientation where he talked about why he had chosen to study social sciences.

> I think it was possibly because the sociology ones are more related to the day to day environment things that I do – I don't think it will help me in relation to employment prospects because I think when you get to a certain age, you've either got a level of experience or you haven't. It may well help me because of a broader knowledge and applying or investigating routes in relation to personnel and industrial relations problems I hadn't thought of before, but I don't expect anything very startling, you know.

In our first interviews, besides orientation to learning, we also asked John what he thought learning consisted of. He replied as follows:

> I would say assimilation of common sense in relation to the course I was doing. Common sense which was related to sociology—as opposed to sort of parrot-fashion learning.
>
> *Interviewer*: What do you mean by common sense?

> Well it seems to me there are various theories which I found when I looked at the Block [a part of the course] in relation to unemployment, crime, there are various yard sticks basic guidelines in relation to those problems and one needs to know how to apply them and what they are.

John's conception of learning appears to parallel Level 3, intermediate between reproduction and transformation, which is described in Chapter 3 as involving "the acquisition, for subsequent utilization, of facts, methods, etc.".

John's primarily academic extrinsic orientation and this procedural conception of learning links in fairly closely with his approach to learning. This was characterized by a wish to do things in the shortest possible time, using strategies of note taking that were geared to getting out the main points of the units for easy revision.

When he was interviewed again, John was half way through the course and had settled into a routine study pattern which reflected his concern with efficiency. He was enjoying the content of the course and could talk about the concepts he was learning. The overwhelming impression of his approach to learning was that it was a strategic one. He had learnt how the system operated and was working through the course in a way which was characterized by the minimum effort necessary to understand the main points. He described how he studied as follows:

> I have a quick look and see how long I am going to take on it and then I just read straight through it and use the felt tip pen . . . I ring various theories as I go through, I possibly go through it and I make a few notes on small cards on what the various theories are . . . What I tend to put down is the main points in each block what the answers are in the main points of each block. To be quite fair about the way I am doing it, I suppose I am doing the minimal study to sort of achieve the end result and so from that point of view, my need is to have something which is more succinctly encapsulated and I use the cards in that fashion.
>
> I've been a bit naughty on it because I've worked out that you don't need to do all the assignments and I am just doing the minimum. It really means that I have got to get reasonable mark for the ones I am doing because I'm not getting the average to bring me up.

John is clearly studying in what was described in the previous chapter as a strategic manner, and seems to be confident in what he is doing. In terms of *deep* and *surface* approaches to learning, he can be described taking a deep approach. He is attempting to identify the "main points" the Open University correspondence texts and summarize them more succinctly. However, he is doing this in a somewhat external, impersonal way or purely in a cognitive manner. This is not a deep approach in the "full sense" in that he seems to be taking short cuts to the main point without apparently considering all the evidence. This way of studying can be seen as a rational response to the distance learning system, since students study part-time at a distance and have to adapt to considerable demands of the course in terms of regular pacing of correspondence texts and assessment tasks. For John, his approach was successful in the sense that he was obtaining reasonable

assessment grades, however, he was well aware the learning could be a more personal activity in other situations.

> I think on some of the essay questions you have to go deeper and beyond the definitions in the block (section of the course) and perhaps try and read a bit and become more analytical and critical but this involves time, which is a precious commodity. I tend to concentrate on the middle course of getting what's in the block.

At the end of the course, in our third interview, we again asked John what learning consisted of.

> Well it certainly doesn't mean parrot fashion, I think it's understanding it...

Interviewer: What is involved in understanding something?

> Well I suppose by understanding something, it's the ability to be able to read a theory and be able to explain it to someone who hasn't read it before and doesn't understand it, to be able to relate it to someone who is unconnected with the subject.

In terms of conceptions of learning we can make a tentative interpretation that John has changed from seeing learning as making use of rules and procedures or "acquiring and using facts" to seeing it as understanding and relating ideas together, or "the abstraction of meaning" i.e. a change from Level 3 to Level 4 in terms of the framework presented in Chapter 3.

> In our third interview, although John had enjoyed the course, he felt that it was really only the basis for further in-depth studying.

> I enjoyed it – it took up more time than I thought it would. I didn't have enough time to spend on it. I think you cover a lot of things reasonably superficially; you don't get into anything in any great depth and it's made me keener to get on to something at 2nd or 3rd level where you can study one subject and spend time on it.

This attitude appears to be a reflection of his predominantly academic extrinsic orientation – i.e. to continue on the educational ladder. However, his desire to study a subject "in depth" suggests a change towards an academic intrinsic orientation.

> John's secondary orientation – vocational intrinsic – is also reflected in what he felt he gained from the course:

> If I hadn't done the course I think I would have missed a lot of what I've learnt in relation to my work – about the psychology of work – whereas I was inclined to take a decision fairly quickly on certain things, now I do have a certain experience having studied a bit of psychology and sociology and I do try and perhaps see how things are going to inter-relate and affect people – spend a bit more time on it and be a bit more thoughtful than I was before.

From this last quote, we can see that taking the course had affected John's approach to his work and that he was seeing the relevance of the course material to his

everyday life. It would be interesting to follow this student through more years of studying to see if this personal meaning extended into his orientation and conception of learning in future years.

Integrating the concepts of orientation to learning, conceptions of learning and approach to learning provides a framework for understanding John's experience of learning. His primarily academic extrinsic orientation links to his strategic way of studying, and taking a deep-approach, although in a rather external and impersonal manner. His approach is consistent with a conception of learning based on using rules and procedures. The links between concepts exists both logically and, as this case-study shows, also empirically. By the end of the course, from his perceptions of gains from studying and how he sees studying developing in the future, we can detect some change in John's orientation. He seems to be moving towards vocational intrinsic orientation to learning with some academic intrinsic orientation. The following table summarizes these links and changes.

TABLE 14.1
John Williams: a case study

Orientation to learning (before the course)	Conception of learning (before the course)	Approach to learning (during the course)	Orientation to learning (end of the course)	Conception of learning (end of the course)
Primary - academic extrinsic, based on academic progress, looking for good grades with minimum effort Secondary - vocational intrinsic	Learning as "gaining rules and procedures" (Level 3)	Deep approach; strategic	Academic extrinsic, combined with clearly emerging vocational and academic intrinsic orientations	Learning as "understanding and relating ideas together" (Level 4)

Case Study 2: Sally Brown

Sally Brown is a housewife in her mid-thirties with two children of primary school age. She had taken an 'O' Level in English at night classes some years earlier but apart from this, had no qualifications, and had not studied since leaving school. The impetus to apply to the Open University had come from her father who was half way through an OU degree and had passed on information to her.

Before the course started, Sally talked about her reasons for studying. She appeared *not* to have an intrinsic academic orientation, since she had no specific interest in the subject discipline:

> It wasn't really particularly for any of the subjects, . . . because I think that once you get started you can get really into doing it, hopefully.

She had vague concerns that in the future a qualification might be useful to get a job (vocational extrinsic orientation).

> Apart from providing me with an interest now it might be useful, to me, sort of later on when the children get older.

There was also some indication of a personal *extrinsic* orientation.

> I didn't get much academic qualification at school . . . I'm testing myself to see what I can do . . .I want in a way to prove to myself that I am capable of doing the work because I've never really done anything as an individual.

But the overwhelming impression Sally gave was of a strong personal *intrinsic* orientation.

> I'm hoping that it will give me more confidence in myself and to actually be able to cope with different situations and life in general. I feel that I need something and hopefully this is going to broaden my outlook . . . a sort of greater insight into the way other people live and the way other people think. I think one tends to be very biased. You live your own life. I'm hoping that I'll be able to see things from different points of view and lead to more tolerance really of different kinds of people and different kinds of groups . . . and to play a more active role in society instead of always being the one who sits back and does nothing. I think if you could understand it more what causes some problems you could sort of perhaps react to it in a better way, and hopefully sort of perhaps help others to do the same but I don't know whether it will really make any difference.

The main reason for doing the course for Sally was to relieve the boredom of being at home all day. She also felt a lack of confidence in herself generally and hoped that the course would change her into a more accomplished and competent person. She had chosen the course, partly through a process of elimination, and partly in the hope that the content would be relevant to her own life.

> I thought that, reading through the description of the course, it sounded quite interesting and would teach you more about life in general and the way that things arise. You hear about so many different things on the television but you don't seem to really understand what they are talking about. I thought this would be a very useful course to take.

At the beginning of the year Sally was very anxious about her own ability to cope with the course and although she wanted to become more competent in social situations, she was rather frightened by the prospect of tutorials and the compulsory residential Summer School. It was clear that the course was going to be a considerable challenge for her. She had no experience of post-compulsory

education and appeared to have a somewhat unreflective, taken for granted conception of learning (Level 1).

> *Interviewer:* When you say learning, what do you mean by it, what do you think of?
>
> Um . . . (laughter) . . . Learning? Don't know really. . .
>
> *Interviewer:* Can you describe what learning is?
>
> Gaining new knowledge of different subjects, you know. . . um . . .

This response was quite unlike the rest of this interview where she was far more articulate. She appeared to take the question seriously and to say all she was able in response. So on the one hand, Sally had a predominantly personal intrinsic orientation which one might expect to be accompanied by an understanding of personally meaningful learning, but on the other hand she actually gave an unsophisticated response to our question about the nature of learning itself. When we interviewed Sally about her approach to studying half way through the course, she revealed a slightly confusing picture. Her way of describing her studying sometimes indicated a *surface approach*.

> I have got the time, but I find it difficult to concentrate. I sit in here: and sometimes don't do anything really. I have got all the work there but it doesn't go in....I think it is easy to do them [the multiple choice questions] as you go along, . . .I tended to skim rather than reading it all properly and I don't feel at all that I have taken all this block in. I just don't . . . I mean it shows how well I read it because I can't remember half of what it said. I read it very quickly and usually I read it maybe two or three times because I don't think you take it all in at first reading.

Similarly, her description of note taking indicated a surface-approach and can be linked to her "taken-for-granted" conception of learning.

> Sometimes I underline bits—I underline things that I think are particularly important. I don't make notes very often—but because I am so bad at it, I've got this book and it's got all the bits and pieces in and various odd notes from different parts. And I decided that I wasn't doing very well at this so that is why I decided to keep it more in the Blocks themselves. I'm not very good at taking notes—they are all a bit of a muddle really.

Her problems with study techniques, note-taking for example, and dealing with the vast quantity of printed material supplied by the OU, can be seen as partly a consequence of her conception of learning and also her lack of prior experience of academic study.

In other parts of this interview, Sally seemed to be attempting to take a more active and reflective approach to study. She planned her essays, didn't like going on to new subject matter until she had completed her essay in order to avoid confusion, carefully extracted crucial points from the text, and so on. At one point in the interview she described an *outcome* of her learning which reflected her intrinsic orientations:

I think it's very interesting already when you watch the news and different things, the things they say seem more relevant now. They use the words that perhaps I wouldn't quite have understood before and having done the work, things tend to click . . . whereas I used to think that inflation was inflation before, you relate it to different kinds now and the different policies that are put in. You see the differences between them better than ever I could before.

Contact with other students and the tutor at tutorials was very important for Sally and she found that just knowing that other people had the same sort of difficulties as she had, gave her the confidence to carry on. She also felt that passing the assignments had given her much needed encouragement.

I've done four essays now and I've passed them all, so I must be doing it adequately I suppose, but I don't feel awfully confident. But then, nobody else seems to either, so I don't feel too bad about it.

At the end of the foundation year Sally presented an altogether more coherent picture of her studying. She distinguished between learning and memorizing, as follows:

Interviewer: When you think of learning in general, what does learning mean to you?

Well it certainly isn't (laughs) learning everything that's in those books. I couldn't remember half... It's a hard thing to define really. I think it's understanding more than learning by heart—learning to be more critical of things — just really broadening your outlook on things. Sometimes you don't think that you've actually learnt it but all the time it keeps cropping up...you know, you're looking for more in life and you keep thinking of things like Maslow's hierarchy of needs and things like that.

After the course her conception of learning thus fitted well with her dominant personal intrinsic orientation to study. She was even using ideas from the course to explain her own attitude to learning or needs from the course. This reflexivity shows an active approach to learning. Sally felt much more confident in herself. She had passed the course and was feeling much more positive about her ability to study. When she talked about the gains from studying the course we can see how they are related to her personal intrinsic orientation—being changes in her own ability and confidence, new interests and broader knowledge.

I feel different somehow, I feel much more confident and I think I'll be much happier next year. I don't think I will worry quite as much.

She also said that the course had changed her approach to life.

Well, I think it teaches you to be more broad minded—you don't think that you are narrow minded but you realize that you are when you learn things. Well, it's difficult to think of examples, but like unemployment in the past, I was inclined to think that some people didn't want to work, they just couldn't be bothered and preferred to be on the dole. You tend to see the other side of the coin. I've learnt to be more critical, watching T.V. programmes you

learn to be more objective to look at both sides of an argument. I argue with people now, you know, I'm not afraid to come out with an alternative view.

Again, as in the previous case study, integrating the concepts of orientation to learning, conceptions of learning, and approach to learning enables us to build up a fuller picture of Sally Brown's world as a learner. There is a clear link, both logically and in terms of her own descriptions between her personal intrinsic orientation to learning and her perceptions of gains from the course—her descriptions of an increase in confidence and seeing the world differently. In commenting on the details of how she tackled particular learning tasks, she described an active and thoughtful approach—planning essays, working on one topic at once. However, many of the details of her studying, for example, note-taking, seem to be constrained by her initial conception of learning. By the end of the course she had clearly changed in her conception of learning, from seeing it as "new knowledge of different objects" to "understanding .... broadening your outlook". With this more sophisticated conception of learning, we would expect her to take a deep approach to learning more consistently. The following table summarizes Sally's experience of learning in her first year of O.U. study.

TABLE 14.2
Sally Brown: a case study

Orientation to learning (before the course)	Conception of learning (before the course)	Approach to learning (during the course)	Orientation to learning (end of the course)	Conception of learning (end of the course)
Primary - personal intrinsic, seen in terms of self development and gain in confidence Secondary - personal extrinsic, as proof of capability	Learning as "gaining new knowledge" (Level 1)	Surface, although appeared to be attempting a more active approach	Personal intrinsic with perceptions of gains seen as changing her approach to life	Learning as "being critical and relating ideas to one's own experience" (Level 5)

Commentary

The case studies provide two examples of descriptions of the learner's world. By

relating together the concepts of orientation to learning, conceptions of learning, approaches to learning and outcomes of learning, we can develop a conceptual framework which is grounded in students' experiences of learning. The evidence is, of course, not limited to the two case studies: we are drawing on the whole sample to provide many other instances of connections between these concepts.

We have established that a *learning orientation* provides a useful construct for understanding a student's personal context for study. It encapsulates the complex nature of a student's aims, attitudes, purposes for studying. Moreover, educational orientation is not an invariable property ascribed to a student. It describes the relationship between the individual and both the course of study and the institution – it can change and develop over time. As we saw, John Williams developed, during the OU foundation course, towards a vocational intrinsic orientation with some indications of academic intrinsic orientation. Before the course, these orientations were hardly discernible.

Orientation to learning is an important construct as it contributes to our understanding of what students learn. Besides the qualitative differences in learning outcomes described by Dahlgren (Chapter 2), which focus on the variations in how students understand specific concepts, students' overall perceptions of what they had gained from studying can be understood in relation to their educational orientations. There are both logical and empirical relationships between students' perceptions and their learning orientations, which have been illustrated in the case studies of John Williams and Sally Brown. We can see how their personal context of study has a powerful influence over how they approached learning and what they gained from the course.

Students' Change and Development

How do students come to be more competent as learners? What is the nature of the changes which occur as students progress from a foundation course through to graduation? How can we, as teachers in post-compulsory education, facilitate these changes in our students? We have already seen in Chapter 4 by Lennart Svensson a discussion of 'skill in learning' as a relational concept drawing together a particular approach to learning with a related conception of learning and an associated quality of learning outcome. This part of the chapter looks at skill in learning in terms of the change and development over a six year period from foundation course through to graduation.The research presented here builds upon existing work by Perry (1970), carried out with conventional age undergraduates, and extends it for adult students studying part-time at a distance in the Open University.

In Chapter 1 we saw that Perry (1970) had explored, in a four-year longitudinal study, how students come to understand and cope with the demands of academic study. Going beyond the individuality of students' accounts of the college experience, there seemed to be a common sequence of challenges encountered by students and also a pattern to the changes they went through. Perry outlined a nine stage scheme in which there are three very clearly distinct phases. Students initially held absolutist conceptions of knowledge, where the teacher was perceived as the authority figure, 'knowing the answers'. This can be seen to correspond to

the first three conceptions of learning identified by Säljö (1979) which are essentially reproductive. Then, in Perry's scheme there was a change to more relativistic conceptions of knowledge and finally some students moved to a position of having a personal commitment to a particular position within a relativistic epistemology. The later phases in this scheme clearly parallel, to some extent, Conceptions 4 and 5 from Säljö's study, but stressing the recognition of relativism rather than the the the more general quality of understanding being sought.

Although Säljö's work identified these differences with different groups of subjects, there seems to be a developmental dimension in his work which is made more explicit in Perry's scheme. An important aspect of our research has been to investigate changes in conception of learning with the same group of students over six years of part-time study in the OU The case studies discussed above suggest relationships between concepts during student's first year of study with the OU. In the next section, we shall examine students' experiences of learning over the six year period.

The case studies already discussed were drawn from the group of 29 students who were in their first year of study. After the three interviews with students in the first year (described above in the case studies), they were interviewed on one occasion during each subsequent year of study. After allowance for drop-outs and students who for a variety of personal circumstances chose to discontinue their studies after gaining a number of course credits, we had a group of ten students who completed their studies to graduation.

The interviews were wide-ranging in-depth interviews designed to explore student experiences of OU study. For example, we asked students how they came to be taking their courses and what they have gained from study. In the later interviews we asked them about any changes in study habits and 'critical incidents' which stood out in their careers as students. Also to follow up the work of Säljö we asked students in each interview what they thought learning consisted of. Over a period of six years a unique rapport built up with the interviewees and the interviews became more conversational in style, covering more personal issues. Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed in full. Data analysis was carried out systematically through reading and re-reading interview transcripts to identify the 'essences' or 'significant phenomena' in the interview transcripts.

All students began their studies with the Social Science Foundation course. The structure of the degree profile allows students free choice across all the University courses, so students are undertaking a variety of course profiles. However, all the students were studying broadly within the social science, education and arts areas although a few students followed an introductory technology course. This group of students, although they have not studied at exactly the same rate, had all graduated by the sixth year.

The following analysis is derived from the experiences of these 10 students.[2] The evidence in the interviews provides very rich intensive case-studies from which patterns emerge beyond the individuality and idiosyncratic nature of the data. Over the six years of the research, students have obviously changed in the normal course of events. But in terms of their development as learners and in relation to their studies the interviews show clear developments and change.

From the interviews we can identify changes from three types of evidence, as follows: (i) there are answers in different interviews to the same question. By looking at the answers in early interviews and comparing with the answers in later interviews we can look for change and development: (ii) there are times when students are talking about the same topics in different interviews, although the context and the questions eliciting the response may not be the same. Here we can show that attitudes or understandings of concepts and subject material have changed and developed, and (iii) evidence for change and development is when students themselves are talking consciously of change and describing developments that they are aware of in themselves, sometimes specifically referring to earlier interviews; at other times talking generally about changes they perceive in themselves. These three types of evidence can be illustrated by taking examples from one student's transcripts, as follows:

Evidence of change 1: Conception of learning

One of the questions asked in each of the interviews was about the student's conception of learning. The question we asked to find out about this was "Can you tell me what exactly you mean by 'learning'?". This was asked at an appropriate time during the interviews when the students were talking about what they had learnt from their current course or when they used the word 'learning' in their response to another question. We wanted to find out if Säljö's five conceptions of learning would appear in our sample and if they would help to identify change over years of study. The examples below show extracts from the answers to this question for the same student in the first year and in the fifth year of her studies. A clear difference can be seen which indicates a growth of understanding and awareness of issues surrounding the idea of learning itself.

> Well, I don't know really. I suppose knowing things that I don't know about I'm still very much at school. I know it's a very different sort of learning and if I look through a book, it's still sort of learning facts and dates and names rather than the content. And if I have read something I'm so bothered about taking in what it said. (Year 1)

> 'Real' learning is something personal and it's also something that is continuous, once it's started, it carries on and on and it might lead to other things. So much learning is learned for a particular purpose, and when you have achieved whatever it was learned for then that's it, it can go away, it's disposable, you can get rid of it. – But with real learning hopefully the unit of work you are given is only the catalyst really it is only one hundredth of the learning and the rest goes on once you put the book down. And the next time you talk to someone or read something in the newspaper, that's when the rest happens because it's been started and you carry it on for yourself because you want to and you get something lasting from it. (Year 5)

Evidence of change 2: Using concepts from a subject

The second type of evidence comes from times in the interviews when the same topic concept or idea recurs. In the following quotations, from interviews in first

and fourth year of study, we can see the difference in how 'jargon' is perceived over time.

> I was really annoyed by the word 'anomie' it didn't seem to be in any dictionary or anything and the only place I found that it was in common use was in the 1750 – well that's wonderful – if people use that sort of word, and I hate that sort of thing anyway, and I was so cross – people saying things in a way that they think sounds clever. (Year 1)

> If I am speaking to somebody either that has done the same unit or the same course or whatever, then it is really nice talking about it and I don't feel silly using the same language either. It's not a conscious effort to use it, I mean obviously it's easier using it than not, it's like speaking in shorthand in a way. (Year 4)

Evidence of change 3: Change in awareness

The third type of evidence comes from parts of the interviews when students are talking consciously about changes that they feel they have gone through or about what it feels like looking back over their years of study. Here the student is reflecting on past experience and present feelings and comparing one year with another. The change is demonstrated in one quotation as the student is reflecting on the change and developments as she has experienced them and the perception of herself in relation to the course.

> One of the things that was most significant to me was realising that it was possible to miss parts of the units or even whole blocks out and you could still pass the examination. That was really liberating. I can't remember how it happened now but it was fairly early on, maybe Year 2. Anyway, after that my whole way of working changed because suddenly I wasn't constrained by the worry of covering absolutely everything.

All the above quotations come from one student who has clearly changed in a number of ways over six years of study with the O.U.

Looking at the interviews from all the students over time, there are three areas which relate to the development of the students. They are in the areas of *Confidence, Competence and Control.*

Confidence

Most of the students we interviewed had very low levels of self confidence at the start of their studies, (from their formal educational backgrounds they would have not gained university entrance). In fact, many of them were very unsure of their ability to do the course. For a few of them the effort of even applying for the course had been a great step, and they expected the course with the O.U. to help them to gain in personal confidence: it was one of their aims in studying.

> I'm hoping that it will give me more confidence in myself and to actually be able to cope with different situations in life in general. I feel that I need something and hopefully this is going to broaden my outlook.

Over their time with the O.U., and with success in passing courses, they developed their confidence in a number of important areas. They began to accept that they were intelligent adults who could pass a course of study, and that feeling was important to them. They gained in self esteem. Certainly after a few courses successfully completed, they began to relax about their ability and not to feel so threatened by the exams or by the continuous assessment on the course. By the end of the first year the student quoted above could say:

> I've done four essays now and I've passed them all, so I must be doing adequately I suppose, but I don't feel awfully confident. But then, nobody else seems to either, so I don't feel too bad about it.

After a time they also began to have confidence in their understanding of the system – the course and its structure. They were able to choose their own ways of working through material instead of constantly looking for guidance and examples of good practice from others; they became more self-reliant. Although at this point, students might still be unsure of their ability, they nevertheless knew how to use the course materials in a way which suited them.

> I have been studying more or less the same sort of way this year. I still rely on the 'in text questions' which test for understanding. I always do them because I find I need to. If I don't do them I'm not sure that I understand what I am supposed to have done. I'm still a bit nervous about all this you see.

Students then realised that total coverage of the material was not an absolute necessity and began to have the confidence in selecting certain parts for special attention because of either inherent importance or their own particular interest.

> I've got more confidence in myself now. I feel that I can afford to miss bits out that don't interest me so much. I mean I do try to do everything, I don't like missing things out. But, sometimes for time reasons I want to spend more time on one part so I miss out something else. I would never have had the confidence to do that at the beginning.

Beyond this confidence to be selective comes a confidence to question material, an ability to interact personally with the content and to engage in debate about it.

> At tutorials I don't get swept along by the 'teachers talk' [O.U. students who work as teachers], if you like. I stop and say hang on a minute. It's supposed to be a course not just for teachers but there happen to be only two of us on the course that aren't teachers. I tend to feel that I'm on the parents' side or the pupils side. It's funny taking sides at all, but I feel that they are always starting from the point of view of the teacher so it needs to be more balanced.

Further still the development brings a confidence to go outside and beyond the course material on one's own.

> It's difficult to pinpoint the change but it [the course] is less important to me now. I don't feel really that I learn any more now than I did a couple of years

> ago. I think my stage of development is the same. Maybe I should have gone on to a 3rd level course, maybe it would have been more stimulating. I don't have to work very hard to achieve a pass on an essay and because I'm not terribly keen on the particular course this year, I'm just not working very hard. – There are still courses that I'm interested in doing but right now I'm more interested in finishing and concentrating on other things for myself. I feel that I've learnt the required skills, like how to analyse and argue and in a way these courses now are just repeating what I have learnt.

The changes and development in confidence thus takes students through a stage of being anxious and unsure of themselves towards a feeling of security in their own ability and also courage to become independent in their learning.

Competence

Over their time with the Open University the students developed in their ability to cope with the system and study effectively. In their first year of study all the students had to learn how the system of distance learning was organised and how to recognise and respond to different aspects of the system.

> I think having done a course already you feel much more able to cope in the second year. You know what is coming and that things are going to have to fill in forms for registration and Summer School and you haven't got to worry about those things. Whereas last year those things were problems.

For some students this takes quite a long time whereas for other students this familiarity with the system takes only a few weeks. Once students feel conversant with the system and how it works, they are then able to develop their own way of working within it. They learn about how they can organise their own study in order to get the best from the system. This involves aspects of study strategy, for example, note-taking and organising study time in relation to assessment requirements. Again students varied in how long it took them to establish their study patterns and feel comfortable within the O.U. system. For example:

> I always read the assignment question first so that while I am studying I can underline bits and make notes of things that are relevant for the assignment. And the computer marked parts of the assignment; I do those as I'm going through, because you do have to look back and I'm finding that if I've got to do it all at the end it just wastes time. I don't take notes because it all gets very 'bitty', it's better just to make notes in the margins and underline the important bits rather than making separate notes. I did try, but it wasn't terribly successful and so I gave that up.

Once the students feel they can work comfortably within the system they begin to stand back from day-to-day studying and are able to see the course as a whole. They gain an overview of the course and are able to identify the main ideas and themes in the subject area.

I take a general look through it to see the structure of it to see what the aims of the block are and what they are expecting you to learn – so, as I'm reading it I know what is to come. I know that one part is about work and the individual and later there will be another part dealing with the economic aspects. I'm prepared for it.

Besides standing back and seeing the course as a whole, students begin to see the relevance to the outside world and to question aspects of the course in relation to their own experience. They begin to engage personally with the content of the course and to evaluate it in relation to their own lives rather than as a separate experience.

One of the units was about education through autobiography and there was a lot about your home and school life. I really enjoyed doing that because I spent hours thinking about how my parents must have felt. I spent a lot of time thinking about me from their point of view I suppose. I really enjoyed that bit and spent more time on it. The next unit was heavily philosophical and was really quite deep and confusing and I decided to ignore most of it.

Towards the end of their student career, some students are beginning to construct their own learning environment, and so feel less ready to continue taking courses and more inclined to study on their own.

The O.U. is definitely less important now, but it is only less important because I'm more important and I'm more important because of it. Because of what it has done for me or shown me – it might be just the confidence that I can look back and say well I've got through thick and thin and come out on top and pleased with myself. But, it has got a lesser place now, but only because it's given me more scope, more ammunition, more confidence. It has definitely led me to other things. It has been a self realisation I suppose of what I can do and be.

In this last quotation we can see the relationship between the two areas of confidence and competence. The two types of development move side by side and one feeds the other. We can consider the relationship not as an external correlation but as an internal logical relationship in students' experience of study. For students to become more competent in study they need to develop in confidence.

Control

Another internal relationship is a transition towards less reliance on the course and the institution to control learning and more reliance on the student to take personal responsibility for study. In many different aspects of control of learning, students demonstrated development towards independence and autonomy. Overall, they were thus showing self-regulation in studying, involving responsibility for both what is learnt and how it is learnt (Boud, 1981; Morgan, 1985). In the quotations above, we can see that students initially are anxious about their ability and unsure how to study. This makes them very tentative in their approach to learning. They

assume they must cover everything and not question the material. Later, students begin to understand the system and learn how to exercise some control over it. They begin to take charge of their own studying and to make discriminations about the depth and breadth of their study. Later still, through a more personal orientation, they stand back from the material and begin to use it for their own aims and purposes, rather than those of the teacher or the course. They are thus beginning to take control not only of the process of learning, but of the value put on the content of learning in relation to their own needs. Quotations from the first and final interviews of two students illustrate this development.

I don't mind what subject I study, I don't really know much about anything yet. It's all new and when I look at the titles they just say Psychology or Sociology or something I don't know what they mean yet. (Year 1)

I suppose it's a process because whatever I am reading now, I'm not absolutely dogmatic about things but I certainly know what my position is. Whatever it is that I'm reading I know which one of the approaches is mine. I'm not thinking "Oh yes, well it could be that or I could think this way about it". My own view jumps out at me first and then I'll consider the others. Studying didn't always seem to be like that. (Year 6)

I got worried at the tutorial because the tutor was picking the unit to bits and questioning it – I said to her, "Look, I'm a foundation student. I don't pull this unit to bits, I accept what they have told me". Sometimes I may not like something that is said, but I must accept what is there because I assume they know what they are talking about and if they are putting it to me this way – spoon feeding me, someone who is unlikely to understand any other way. (Year 1)

I used to think that you had to use your own arguments and I found that very difficult but I know now that you use other people's arguments to build up your case. So I suppose I have learnt that there are no real right answers and if you get that in your mind to begin with then you can end up agreeing with some theory if you like, but you don't have to. . . It makes you realise that you can take control of your own life. I used to think that life just took hold of you and did what it wanted with you but you come to realise that you should take hold of it and make it go your way. (Year 6)

Table 13.3 summarises the points above and attempts to show how these developments are linked both logically and empirically. We are suggesting five stages from Fresher and Novice, through Intermediate and Expert to Graduate as a conceptual model for summarising our longitudinal case study data. The five discrete stages show how a progression towards independence in study is very closely linked to students' development of confidence. It appears that in order to move to a greater level of competence in studying, students first need to develop the confidence which is a prerequisite for this competence. Similarly, once the student has gained a certain level of competence in dealing with studying, this enhances the development of a greater level of confidence. So the two aspects of change develop hand-in-hand. Alongside these areas of knowledge in new contexts

development, control of learning begins to shift from the system to the student. As students feel more confident and competent to make decisions for themselves, so they develop more independence from the teacher and the system.

TABLE 14.3
Stages of Development

Stage		Control of Learning	Confidence	Competence
Fresher	1	By the system and institution	To enrol	Understanding the system
Novice	2	By the system and institution	To attempt to study	Understanding about oneself in the system
Intermediate	3	By the system and institution	To select	Beginning to see a course as a whole
Expert	4	By self within a course	To question	Engaging personally with the content
Graduate	5	By self, in both in content and method of learning	To go it alone	Using skills and knowledge in new contexts

The successful students in our sample showed a development, albeit at different rates, throughout the six years of the study. Most of them had advanced through all the levels by year 6, but two were still not beyond the Intermediate stage. They were successful in accumulating course credits (and eventually a degree), but were still expecting the OU system to control their learning.

Orientation to Learning and Development

We have already described learning orientations and noted that many of the students have personal orientations, wanting to do the course for self development and/or to prove that they were capable of degree level work. When we look at the type of development and change that these students have undergone we can see that it is in line with their original reasons for studying. This would be expected on logical grounds and is also demonstrated empirically. What we find particularly interesting is how these changes impinge on all aspects of a student's life, suggesting major steps in personal development as an adult.

It appears that some students use OU study as a vehicle for changing many aspects of their lives beyond their educational or academic levels. The interviews with students over time drew attention to the different levels of development some of the students were moving through. Although it is likely that these students would have undergone some personal change, irrespective of their OU experience, nevertheless they themselves attribute the changes to their studying. It has been, for them, the means through which they encouraged themselves to change.

Conception of Learning and Development

One of the clearest indications of change over time was in the student response to the question about their understanding of the word 'learning'. As well as being able to identify the five conceptions of learning described by Säljö (1979), we were able to trace students' development in their understanding over time. As we might have predicted, students moved from the idea of learning as memorising and additions of knowledge towards the idea of learning as understanding and as relating to life. This development was very clear for most students and in some cases went quite rapidly from Conception 1 to Conception 5. All our successful students had Conception 4 or 5 by the end of their fourth year of Open University study. In some cases the quality of student reflection on this question went beyond Säljö's scheme. Some students spoke of learning as 'changing oneself', a definition which may suggest a sixth conception of learning. In fact, a further analysis of this data by Marton, Beaty and Dall'Alba (1993) has described this further conception of learning as 'changing as a person – a fundamental change about seeing oneself and a way of seeing what is learnt'.

Intellectual Development

The changes in students towards taking responsibility for their own learning reflected a growth of awareness of the nature of knowledge and its construction. Students in their later years of study were less willing to take for granted the words written in the course units. They began to question material and to see that analysis and argument did not necessarily require right and wrong answers. Although our students are mature adults, at the beginning of their studies they were still inclined to perceive themselves as looking to the teacher (correspondence text and face-to-face tutor) for the 'right' answers.

Although our work has been concerned with adult students studying part-time at a distance, their development as learners progresses through similar stages to those identified by Perry with 18-21 year old students. This appears in part to do with the students' perceptions of themselves. At the start of their studies, they lack confidence in their ability to study. They rely on the teaching system (the OU) to control and direct their learning. Only through experience with the teaching system do they develop confidence and as a result competence in studying. These

findings suggest that confidence is the key step, perhaps a limiting factor or prerequisite, in developing competence in learning. Belenky *et al.* (1986), who were interested in women students from non-traditional backgrounds, also highlighted the importance of confidence for many of the women they studied.

Developing skill in learning

From our research, skill in learning involves students developing confidence, competence, and autonomy in learning. By competence we refer to the specific activities a student engages in when tackling a particular learning task or a particular course. Part of this competence is concerned with the students' conceptions of learning and intellectual development. The importance of these issues is that they appear to constrain students in how they tackle a task – i.e. their approach to learning (see, for example, Morgan, Taylor and Gibbs, 1982; Van Rossum, Deijkers and Hamer,1985). The importance of approach to learning is that it is directly linked to content and quality of the learning outcomes as identified by Marton and Säljö (1976)

As Svensson argued in Chapter 4, skill in learning is a relational concept. It describes the learning of particular content within a defined learning environment and in a specific institutional context. Skill also depends on other related concepts describing the individual in that context. The inter-relationship of confidence and competence in learning is, for example, closely linked to conception of learning, approach to learning, and learning outcomes. These concepts describe learning at increasing levels of generality and provide a holistic description of student experiences of learning. This relational view of skill in learning is very different to the technical notions of study skills, such as particular ways of taking notes, or the use of mnemonic devices as embodied in many manuals on study skills.

The conceptual model suggests a number of stages through which students move as they develop skill in learning, with increasing independence from the teacher in terms of both the content and the process of learning. This study suggests that activities which build up confidence in learning and develop more complex conceptions of learning are likely to be the most beneficial in developing the lasting qualities of skill and self-regualtion in learning.

Although derived from a small number of in-depth case studies, the richness of the data provide a framework from which to reflect on learning in other contexts, and to raise the level of awareness concerning students' realities of learning. We need to raise the awareness of learners' experiences of learning with teachers and staff developers (Morgan, 1993) so that the research in student learning discussed throughout the book can inform reflection on practice (Schon, 1983) and change in our practice.

Notes

1. The Open University provides degree level education for adults studying part-time at a distance. There are no formal entry qualifications. The teaching materials consist of specially prepared correspondence texts, television and radio broadcasts, supported by face-to-face tuition at the local level. The Social Science Foundation Course is a "full credit" course extending over a nine month period. Six credits are required for a degree.

2. Some of this analysis appeared in Beaty & Morgan (1992).