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*Students' perceptions of the use of seminars in teacher education.*

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**Students' perceptions of the use of seminars in  
teacher education**

**Ayalnesh Fufy Demissie**

**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Sheffield Hallam University for the degree of Doctor of Education**

**DECEMBER 2011**



## Abstract

The student experience of university is a key driver of policy and practice in the UK higher education context, and seminars are an important part of this experience. Effective seminars can enhance engagement and promote key higher education dispositions and attitudes such as problem solving and critical thinking. However, unlike the research on students' approaches to learning and their perceptions of teaching quality, few studies have addressed students' experiences of learning in seminars. This study uses Bourdieu's theory of practice to investigate students' perceptions of learning and participating in seminars.

Using semi-structured interviews, I interviewed 5 undergraduate second year teacher education student teachers on 3 occasions over a period of 12 months. The findings suggest that participants' perceptions of seminars are constituted by peers, families, and most significantly by tutors' practices. Dominant discourses such as 'education as transmission' and 'good practice' in particular seemed significant in connecting these constituents to influence participants' perceptions of seminars. Thus, the high dissonance between the participants' expectations and actual seminar practices led to less favourable perceptions of seminars, whereas low dissonance was associated with positive perceptions of seminars. In line with Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus, the findings suggest that seminars are contested entities where cultural artefacts and individuals' practices create a complex learning context. Together with the notion of symbolic violence, Bourdieu's concepts highlighted how individuals' practices can sustain dominant cultural practices to reinforce the power inequalities of the seminar field.

The study's findings have implications for practice, research and policy both within the teacher education context and across disciplines. In terms of policy, recognition of the complexity of the learning context cautions against conceptualising student learning mainly in terms of students' conceptions, and/or their approaches to learning. With regards to research, the findings make a case for a focus on the meso level of student learning and the usefulness of theoretically informed research. Finally, the practice implications relate to my own pedagogy and to a general implication on how tutors' and institutional practices can be critically examined to assess the extent to which they complement the aims and purposes of higher education.

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# 1 Introduction

Universities are increasingly prioritising the student experience in response to policy changes in higher education (HE), the widening participation agenda and concerns about student engagement and retention (BIS, 2009; Barnett & Coate, 2005; D'Andrea & Gosling 2005; DfEs 2003; Haggis 2003). For example, in relation to student learning, universities actively promote key policies on teaching, learning and assessment to promote effective approaches to learning (Biggs, 2003; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983). The recent changes in HE funding which position students as paying customers are likely to heighten universities' concerns with the 'quality' of the learning experiences offered (BIS, 2011). In a competitive environment, universities will want to claim high levels of student satisfaction, and this will include positive learning experiences.

A key influence on the student learning agenda is the 'approaches to learning' perspective. This is based on Marton & Saljo's landmark study which suggested that the way individuals approach their learning has a significant influence on what they learn (Marton & Saljo 1976a, 1976b). Following on from this work, Biggs and others have argued that good teaching can be a catalyst for promoting more effective approaches to learning (Biggs, 2003). The dominance of this perspective has had important consequences for understanding student learning in HE. Notably, there has been a considerable emphasis on cognitive outcomes and a corresponding focus on effective teaching strategies. Consequently, as Haggis found in her research on students' perspectives of HE, institutional quality measures have prioritised students' perceptions of teaching quality rather than the effectiveness of their learning (Haggis, 2003).

There is, however, a growing body of critique of the assumptions that inform the 'approaches to learning' perspectives (Mann, 2001; Houston & Lebeau, 2006; Haggis, 2003; Brown, 2010). Social and cultural perspectives highlight the contextual nature of learning by considering the influence of affect (Beard *et al.*, 2007), relationships, prior experiences and the meanings people attach to these, as being influential on what is learnt and how it is learnt (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Brennan, 2010).

In the next section, I outline how my rationale for focussing on seminars relates to my professional and personal contexts. In section 1.2, I outline the study's substantive,

theoretical and methodological aims, followed by the research questions that arise from these aims. After discussing the scope of the research questions in sections 1.2.1, I critically analyse the theoretical, policy and research literature to justify my research focus and research questions.

## **1.1 Rationale**

Students' views about their experience of HE are central to universities' policies and practices. However, policy makers rarely seem to recognise the complexity of 'experience'. Not only is experience a multi-layered phenomenon liable to change over time and in different contexts, philosophers also disagree about what counts as experience. Some see experience in terms of its 'pure' and decontextualised state, whilst others prioritise the context that gives meaning to the pure experience as the most important part of individuals' experiences (Crotty, 2003).

Similarly, the student learning literature rarely articulates how the concept of experience itself is conceptualised. As Fung argues in her study of students' experiences of learning in HE, the use of evaluative tools such as the National Student Survey (NSS) tend to reduce 'experience' to discrete and measurable entities that can undermine its complexities (HEFCE, 2005-11; Fung, 2006). In addition, it also means that some aspects of experience are prioritised over others; thus, resources and teaching quality seem to be valued more highly than learning experiences and learning contexts. Consequently, whilst much is known about students' perceptions of institutional policy and practices relating to resources, teaching and assessment, less is known about their actual experiences of learning (Ertl & Wright 2008).

### ***Seminars***

The view of seminars as a place for learning through interaction and dialogue is part of the tradition of higher education in the UK (Fry *et al.*, 2009). By seminars, I refer to a teaching context where groups of up to 30 students meet regularly over one or two terms as part of their formal timetabled course of study (Fry *et al.*, 2009). Effective seminars may have many benefits; they can open students to alternative perspectives, increase tolerance of ambiguity, strengthen engagement, and develop the ability to communicate ideas (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

The widespread use of seminars in HE reflects its origins in church seminaries and early universities, as a place for learning and development (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). 'Seminar' comes from the Latin for 'seed bed'; a place for growth and development. Modern definitions also echo the sense of seminars as a place for growing or constructing knowledge, and define it as a 'class at which a group of students and a tutor discuss a particular topic' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989).

Seminars are diverse and complex learning contexts. For the student, they are learning spaces that are constituted by cognitive outcomes, the physical space, relationships and the style and skills of the tutor (Gunn, 2007). At the same time, conceptions of seminars vary between modules, courses and institutions; they can be tutor-led, student-led, or a mixture of the two (Fry *et al.*, 2009; Light & Cox, 2001). Moreover, student numbers can vary considerably, as can the frequency of seminars in different academic programmes. At the same time, there is the increasing influence of skills-based employability outcomes such as team work and problem solving (Hind & Moss, 2005) that can further complicate the aims and objectives of seminars.

For students, effective participation in seminars can also be challenging. On one level, effective participation assumes that students know how to be, and how to learn through dialogue and discussion (Knights, 1995). On another level, the need for participation and collaboration makes additional social and emotional contextual demands on learners (Light & Cox 2001). Not only do students have to be willing to express ideas, ask questions, and comment on others' ideas, they also have to take account of complex group dynamics. The fear of being wrong or ridiculed by peers can be a deterrent to effective seminar participation (Jacques, 2000, Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

### ***Personal and professional context***

My own reasons for undertaking this study are both professional and personal. I work in a post-1992 university, where students undertake a 3 year teacher education course. The course involves both university based and placement related aspects (Appendix 26) Professionally, I was concerned about the lack of student engagement and participation in seminars. However, there seemed to be little in the research literature about how students conceptualised seminars and made sense of their experiences of learning and participating

in seminars. Instead, the emphasis seemed to be on managing students' approaches to learning and improving teaching strategies.

At the same time, I was inspired by the school-based 'communities of enquiry' approach that seemed to be an ideal model for the kind of enquiring, collaborative learning environment that I wanted to promote in my seminars (Lipman *et al.*, 1980; Appendix 24). Indeed, when I used this approach in seminars, it seemed to transform the seminar culture; the students seemed more confident and willing to participate, and by listening to others' perspectives, they were beginning to question and challenge their own views.

Beyond this, my role as a teacher educator is another important stimulus for this enquiry. As highlighted already, seminars are particularly pertinent as the students' own experiences as learners resonate with their professional concerns as classroom teachers. As part of their professional role, they strive to set up learning environments that develop and promote children's talk and dialogue. Furthermore, in my own workplace, seminars are the dominant pedagogical context for teacher education. As Appendix 28 shows, seminars are a significant part of students' learning experiences; a typical second year student can be timetabled for as much as 20 hours a week. Thus, I wanted to gain some insight about how the students conceptualised their seminar experiences.

So far, I have argued that seminars are an important part of the student learning experience generally, and in particular, for teacher education students. Based on this premise, the following section outlines the study's aims and objectives.

## **1.2 Aims and objectives**

The central question that guides the enquiry is 'what are second-year student teachers' perceptions of the use of seminars in university? As stated earlier, this question arose out my professional and personal context, and the apparent lack of research and policy literature about seminars. Hence, the study's intellectual project is exploratory, so prioritises knowledge for understanding. In addition, as this is a professional doctorate, the project also aims to identify possible insights for policy and practice. In the following sections, I outline the theoretical, substantive and methodological aims that arise from the central question, before going on to identify and justify the specific research questions.



### ***Substantive aims***

The substantive aim follows on from the study's rationale in section 1.1. As highlighted already, the prevalence, importance, and challenges of seminars suggests that an enquiry into seminars is a worthwhile undertaking. The focus of this study, therefore, is on the meso level; the juncture between individual learning experiences and the macro structure of teaching and learning such as courses and departments. By undertaking this study, I hope to present an alternative view of students' learning experiences that prioritises a particular learning context and is based on their perspectives. The substantive aim of this study therefore, is to investigate student teachers' perspectives of learning and participating in seminars in a way that recognises the complexities of the concepts outlined so far.

### ***Theoretical aims***

A focus on participants' experiences and meanings about seminars requires theoretical perspectives that can accommodate complexity. As argued already, the seminar context from student teachers' perspective is potentially problematic because of the similarities between students' school biographies, and the professional context of teachers. As Britzman argues, teaching is '...one of the few professions where newcomers feel the force of their own history of learning, as if it telegraphs relevancy to their own work' (2003, p.1). Therefore, the theoretical aim is to use perspectives that prioritise meaning as a way of researching the social world. I will explore the theoretical perspectives in more depth in chapter 2.

### ***Methodological aims***

Quantitative data is useful for identifying overall trends and themes. Indeed, surveys are widely used in the student learning literature in HE. However, from the perspective of this study they are problematic; as they cannot adequately account for complex issues such as experiences of alienation or engagement (Mann, 2001). Survey data reduces the student voice to numerical data so that the conclusions can lack depth, context and meaning (Mann, 2002; Haggis, 2004).

The methodological aim, therefore, is to use approaches and philosophical positions that recognise the complexity of the substantive topic and the theoretical perspectives. For

example, the methodology needs to address the epistemological challenges of producing knowledge about complex concepts such as perceptions, experience and learning (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). In chapter 3, I will consider these aspects in more detail, by outlining the rationale for the methodology and the study's research design. So far, I have outlined the study's aims; in the next section I outline the study's boundaries.

### ***Delimiters***

In this section I highlight the study's limits and boundaries. Firstly, whilst I make extensive reference to the student learning literature, I do not attempt to address all the different themes within it. For example, the literature I have consulted excludes aspects relating to information and communication technology, and specific student groups including distance learning and international students. I also exclude the literature on group work, because my interest is in the seminar context as a whole rather than on group dynamics. Secondly, the data are based on a small sample of teacher education students who volunteered for the study. Therefore, the study is not representative of all students' views on teacher education courses. In addition, because the study is exploratory, I do not focus on a specific kind of seminar, or a particular variable such as language or emotion. Finally, the study does not consider tutors' perspectives or teaching strategies *per se*; thus any reference to tutors is from the students' perspectives.

Based on the study's aims and objectives, the rationale and my professional context, the study's research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What kinds of meanings do participants attach to the constituents of their seminar experiences?

RQ2: How might these constituents work together to create and sustain meaning about seminars?

#### **1.2.1 The scope of the research questions**

***What kinds of meanings do participants attach to the constituents of their seminar experiences?***

This research question is based on a specific theoretical assumption. That is, it draws on some of the assumptions of the symbolic interactionism that insights into the kinds of meanings participants' attach to experiences are important, because meanings and interpretations influence individuals' behaviour (Mead in Crotty, 2003). For example, the levels of participation and engagement in seminars can be influenced by the meanings people attach to cultural tools and practices, such as learning materials and the teaching strategy.

'Meaning', nonetheless, is a contested term. Firstly, what is meaningful can vary between individuals and in different contexts. For the researcher, categorising data can be problematic as it requires making decisions about what is meaningful. Consequently, transparency and careful justification are important. Secondly, there are also perspectival questions in terms of whether it is the researcher's or the participants' meanings that are prioritised and communicated (Schwandt, 2000). For example, my positionality and professional and personal contexts can influence which meanings are prioritised and influence subsequent conclusions. Finally, because of the interpretive nature of the enquiry, it is also possible that positivist inclined methodologies may question the reliability of the evidence for influencing policy and practice (Mason 2002). Nonetheless, for an interpretivist study such as this, I consider a focus on meaning to be necessary for addressing the intellectual project about insight and understanding (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

To get some insight into participants' meanings about seminars, I will identify some of the constituents of their experiences. I use the term constituent mainly as an 'element, or part of' seminar experiences. I also use it in terms of 'constitute' to indicate that tutors and peers 'make up or compose' the seminar experience (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). I am aware, however, that constituents can differ between contexts and that in identifying constituents, I might over-simplify the multiple and interrelated elements that constitute or make-up seminar experiences (Fung, 2006). In this study, the rationale for using 'constituents' is as an aid to gaining insights in broad terms, rather than to suggest that there is a finite set of identifiable elements that make up seminar experiences. Identifying the significant constituents and the meaning participants attach to them sets the scene for the second research question that focuses on the process of meaning making.

### *How might these constituents work together to create and sustain meaning?*

Having identified some of the constituents of seminar experiences, this question is an enquiry into the processes of meaning making. More specifically, it refers to the ways in which participants create or reproduce meanings about learning and participating in seminars. The question aims to explore how constituents relate to each other and how they might work together to create shared and individualised constructions of seminar experiences.

A focus on processes could give insights into why particular meanings seem to dominate. As Hodkinson *et al.*'s research into further education (FE) argues, examining the ways in which cultural meanings are produced can highlight the influence of both the immediate and the wider context on how individuals construct meanings about learning experiences (Hodkinson *et al.* 2007a). This research question is highly relevant to addressing the study's central question because it goes beyond identifying the constituents of seminar experiences to ask critical questions about how meanings are constructed.

Having outlined the research questions, the next section attempts to justify the questions on the basis of a critical examination of the empirical, theoretical and policy literature. The organising theme for the review is centred on how different conceptions of learning have influenced how and what we know about student learning in general, and in particular, about student learning in seminars. In the theoretical literature section (1.3), I examine how ideas about learning have shaped understandings about student learning in general, and more specifically about learning and participation in contexts such as seminars. In the research literature section (1.4), I will consider what is known about student learning and learning contexts in HE, and to what extent the claims relate to the theoretical literature. In the policy literature, I will explore the assumptions that inform the policy context, and how changing policy priorities influence and are in turn influenced by the empirical and theoretical literature.

To contextualise the substantive and policy literature, I will first consider the theoretical literature on learning and learning contexts (section 1.3).

### **1.3 Theoretical literature on learning**

The theoretical literature on learning is vast, encompassing philosophical, educational and professional dimensions (Illeris, 2009). Early theories prioritised the cognitive aspects of learning, whilst behaviourists prioritised behaviour change as a result of conditioning and reinforcement. Constructivists, on the other hand, primarily saw learning in terms of how the individual interacted with the environment (Illeris, 2007). In terms of this study, a common feature of these approaches is that they see learning from an individual rather than a social and interactional perspective. Nevertheless, since the 1980s, there has been an increasing emphasis on the importance of social and cultural perspectives as a way of understanding learning (Illeris, 2009).

One of the key differences between individualised and social and cultural perspectives is in the way they treat context. Dictionaries define context in two senses. The first relates to meaning, in terms of the significance of events that precede or follow a word or phenomena. The second sense relates to the places where events take place; thus, referring to the 'associated surrounding, setting and background' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989).

Thus, in trying to examine the 'history' of the substantive topic, the review of the theoretical literature will address the extent to which contrasting conceptualisations of learning have treated the concept of 'context'. In the rest of this section, I undertake this analysis by examining the individualised, socio-cultural and cultural theoretical perspectives. I begin by critically examining the individualised and the socio-cultural theoretical perspectives.

#### **1.3.1 Theoretical perspectives on learning**

##### ***Individualised perspectives in the student learning literature***

Individualised perspectives have a long history in education and in HE. For example, Bloom's taxonomy of learning, an influential work in HE pedagogy, outlined the progressive development of individual's thinking and cognition (Bloom *et al.*, 1956). More recently, the 'approaches to learning' theory has dominated the HE literature. Based on constructivist principles, it is primarily about identifying individuals' preferred approaches to learning as a way of understanding and improving their progress in HE (Marton & Saljo, 1976a; Biggs, 2003).

Based on Marton & Saljo's original work, Biggs devised the pedagogical tool of constructive alignment as a way of enhancing student learning and engagement. In line with constructivist principles, he argued that carefully designed learning activities that are aligned with learning objectives and assessment requirements can promote deep approaches to learning (Biggs, 1999). Deep approaches to learning are characterised by students' preferences to grasp the underlying principles and concepts rather than learning superficial facts (Marton & Saljo, 1976a). Thus, when learning is aligned,

'... learning objectives express the kinds of understanding that we want from students, the teaching context encourages students to undertake the learning activities likely to achieve those understandings, and the assessment tasks tell students what activities are required of them, and tell us how well the objectives have been met' (Biggs, 1999, p.3).

Constructive alignment can be a useful pedagogical tool for planning and reflecting on teaching approaches, and a positive approach to improvement and change (Biggs, 1993). In some sense, it also recognises the role of context. For instance, the environment can be seen as the context; in that unless the learning environment is aligned, it is less likely that effective learning can take place. However, the use of context is limited to the 'place' or 'situation' in which learning occurs; it does not consider the influence of preceding or subsequent events such as emotions, prior experience or relationships on learning (Cobb & Bowers, in Hodkinson *et al.*; 2007; Illeris, 2007).

Thus, whilst individualised perspectives give useful insights about the psychological dimensions of learning and teaching approaches, they can only give limited understanding about the influence of affect or prior experiences on learning (Mann, 2001). As Malcolm & Zukas also argue:

'Dominant psychological approaches to teaching and learning are identified as promoting a limited conceptualisation of pedagogy as an educational 'transaction' between individual learners and teachers, and an asocial construction of the learner' (Malcolm & Zukas, 2001, p.33)

Consequently, their usefulness for a study that examines a social and interactional context such as seminars may be limited. In the next section, I will analyse perspectives that prioritise the impact of context on learning.

### *Social and cultural perspectives*

In contrast to individualised perspectives, social and cultural perspectives prioritise the influence of context on learning. Socio-cultural perspectives are primarily concerned with how social contexts influence and shape the meanings individuals attach to events in the social world. These perspectives are based on Vygotsky's attempt to describe and explain the unique patterns of humans learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). Although his focus was mainly on children's cognitive development and schooling, his underlying ideas have made important contributions to views on culture and cultural development. His key ideas relate to the historical and developmental nature of culture, social context as precursor to individual learning and development, and the role of tools and signs in mediating human action (Wertsch, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978).

The social dimension is central to Vygotskian perspectives. When individuals interact with others, cultural meanings about artefacts and practices are encountered at the external level (interpersonal). Once internalised, cultural meanings shape and inform individuals' actions (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, '... the social dimension of consciousness is primary in time and in fact. The individual dimension of consciousness is derivative and secondary' (Vygotsky, in Wertsch, 1985, p.58). At the same time, humans also actively shape and change cultural tools. For example, universities' assumptions about seminars may be about dialogue and discussion, but when students are passive and disengaged, this can alter and change the tools, so that seminars are no longer associated with their original cultural meanings. Thus, 'Learners are not passive recipients of culturally valued concepts, but are actors in and on their cultures, both being shaped and shaping the social situation of theory development' (Edwards in Ellis et al.; 2010 p. 64).

Nonetheless, some have challenged the focus on the individuals' higher mental development at the expense of collective cultural development (Engestrom 2009). Ashwin, for instance, argues that a focus on individuals' social practices limits socio-cultural perspectives explanatory powers about, for instance, the influence of the wider aspects of

university cultures on practice (Ashwin, 2008). Others also question whether a Marxist inspired theory can seem to disregard how individual psychological processes relate to the wider political and historical context such as class struggle and alienation (Wertsch, 1991).

Wertsch's argument has clear resonances with cultural and sociological perspectives that I examine below. He uses a linguistic perspective to argue that the wider social and political context is an ever present phenomenon that is reflected in our everyday utterances.

'Production and reproduction of cultural capital may serve a major function in shaping the existence of privileging and its patterns. By the same token, an account of speech genres ... can provide insight into the concrete practices, specifically in the form of mediated action, that underlie the broad statistical trends identified in sociological research '(Wertsch, 1991, p.146)

It relation to the role of context, the assumptions of socio-cultural perspectives easily complement the definition of context in terms of meaning (see p. 14). In a Vygotskian sense, the emphasis on social interaction, and the spaces in which interactions take place fits in with the 'meaning' and 'place' sense of context. In the next section, I will argue that cultural perspectives give a more holistic insight into context and that this perspective can address the study's substantive aims more fully.

### **1.3.2 Cultural perspectives**

In the discussions so far, I have referred to culture as if it is an uncontested phenomena. However, whilst culture is a widely used concept in a range of social science disciplines, it is a highly disputed phenomenon. As Agar argues, 'Culture is one of the most widely (mis)used and contentious concepts in the contemporary vocabulary (Agar, 2006). For some, culture is seen in terms of traditions and values that are transferred from generation to generation. It is '...composed of meanings and rules by which people orientate themselves in their everyday lives' (Alasuutari, 1995, p.27). Vygotskian perspectives, on the other hand, emphasise the social nature of culture, and see it as a fluid and socially-constructed phenomena, where individuals are part of a culture, but also create culture (Ellis *et al.*, 2010).



Recent perspectives take a more problematic view of culture. Some see culture as relational and socially constructed, but also as ‘...closely linked to power and politics’ (Alasuutari, 1995, p.24). Thus, there are cultures rather than a culture, and some cultures dominate other subcultures (Said, 2008). Consequently, culture takes a broader definition to include the ‘...resources or the material, the codes and frames that people use in building and articulating their own world views, their attitudes to life and social status’ (Peim and Hodkinson, 2007, p.26).

In this study, it is Alasuutari’s as well as Peim & Hodkinson’s perspective of culture that I will use, rather than culture as a set of traditions and rules. Such an approach gives a more in-depth consideration of context, because it takes more account of the meanings that inform the immediate as well as wider contextual aspects. It is for this reason that Hodkinson’s *et al.* proposed the notion of ‘learning cultures’ as something that is more than a learning site, but as a relational entity where practice is ‘...constituted by actions, dispositions and interpretations of the participants’ and where learning cultures are evident in...the social practices through which people learn’ (Hodkinson *et al.*, 2007, p.419). Hence, as, Hodkinson *et al.* argue, a cultural perspective can tell us a lot about educational practices and institutions, because,

‘Cultures have history and endurance. Artefact and institutions are not only expressions of cultural practices, they also embody and reify such practices and thus plays an important role in the continuation of cultures.’ (Hodkinson *et al.*, 2007a, p.419)

Writing from a linguistic perspective and echoing Wertsch, Knights also proposes a more complex view of contexts. Thus, seminar contexts are not just ‘containers’ for learning, but spaces that enable a ‘...weave of voices whose polyphone produces meaning...’(Knights, 1995, p.5). Utterances are highly meaningful, because they reflect who we are, and where we come from. Consequently, tutors’ reflexive insights about the struggles and histories that inform utterances can give a more enriched perspective of the seminar context, to give better insights into the challenges of engaging and participating in seminars (Knights, 1995).

The review suggested that individualised and to a lesser extent, social and cultural perspectives have influenced ideas about student learning. The latter prioritises context and its influences on learning, whilst the former sees learning mainly in cognitive terms and as separate from context. I have also argued that cultural perspectives give a richer insight into context compared to socio-cultural perspectives. Thus, whilst acknowledging the contribution of socio-cultural perspectives, my focus will be on a cultural perspective, which Alasuutari argues, can give a better understanding of the social world, because culture can act like a ‘...mirror or prism that throws light on the dark centre of normal everyday life’ (Alasuutari, 1995, p. 27).

Thus, in chapter 3, I will consider how far Bourdieu's theory of practice, and the concept of discourse as representations of dominant cultures, can help to gain insights about the cultural meanings participants attach to their experiences of seminars.

#### **1.4 Research literature**

The review of the theoretical literature in the previous section argued that despite the emerging influence of social and cultural perspectives, individualised perspectives continue to dominate the student learning theoretical literature. In this section, I will analyse the research literature to find out the following:

- the knowledge claims about student learning, and in particular about learning in seminars, and,
- the extent to which dominant theoretical approaches have influenced knowledge claims about student learning in general, and more specifically about learning in seminars.

To contextualise the subsequent analysis of the literature on seminar learning contexts, I will begin the review by analysing the generic literature on student learning and conclude the section by identifying the gaps and limitations in the research literature that justifies the study's research questions.

As outlined in the rationale, the research output on student learning has been dominated by survey based studies that prioritise students' approaches to their learning and perceptions of

teaching quality. Nonetheless, there have been several criticisms relating to a lack of criticality about the assumptions that inform the approaches to learning perspective (Ertl & Wright, 2008), ontological issues around the definitions of key terms, (Webb, 1997), the validity and reliability of the instruments used (Marshall & Case, 2005), and the un-theorised, impressionistic nature of most of these studies (Tight, 2007).

More recently, social and cultural perspectives have provided alternative insights into students' experiences, particularly with regards to students' transition to HE. Haggis's study, for example, highlighted how mature students' learning narratives related to the different ways they interacted with university cultures (Haggis, 2004). Similar to Watson *et al.*'s Bourdieuan analysis of transition, Crozier *et al.*'s longitudinal study also highlighted how familiarity with the cultures and expectations of university appeared to advantage some students over others (Watson *et al.*, 2009; Crozier & Reay, 2011). Similarly, the academic literacies literature has shown how students' difficulties with academic writing would be better understood and addressed from a perspective that valued and recognised the role of prior learning experiences (Lea & Stierer, 2000). The large scale social and organisation mediation of university learning (SOMUL) project undertaken in 15 universities also highlighted how course organisation, spaces for learning and peers and relationships seemed to impact on what is learnt at university (Bernnan & Jary, 2005; Jary & Shah, 2009).

These research findings have made important contributions to what we know and how we know about student learning by prioritising the social and cultural context of learning. Nonetheless, few of these studies have examined the social and cultural dimensions of student learning at the meso level of seminar learning contexts. In the following section I will examine the research literature on seminars and related learning contexts.

#### **1.4.1 Substantive literature -learning contexts**

Compared to other forms of learning context such as lectures, seminars are a complex entity (section 1.1; Light & Cox, 2001). This diversity has implications for the current study for identifying relevant research, and evaluating the significance of findings for the study. Moreover, depending on the search terms used, it is possible that I may have inadvertently missed out on relevant seminar-related literature. This is because of the

various ways that researchers have defined and categorised seminars. In the following section, I will analyse empirical work which relates to the broad definition I have outlined above.

### ***Research themes about seminar contexts***

Within these contradictory conceptions of seminars, it is possible to detect a number of themes in the research literature. One theme relates to strategies for improving student engagement in seminars through problem-based learning (PBL). Although PBL is used in different ways, in most cases, the tutor usually sets a trigger or problem so that students work in groups to define their own questions and address their enquiry. PBL originates in the medical education field, but its learner-centred approach and the value on team work, listening and problem solving skills has meant that a wide range of courses and disciplines have adopted PBL (Savin-Baden, 2000).

The claims for PBL pedagogy, nonetheless, are increasingly contested. Deignan, for example, conducted a large scale survey to find out perceptions of PBL in a range of courses and institutions. His conclusion was that the benefits of PBL were highly contextual (Deignan, 2009). This, according to Savin-Baden's review of the literature is because PBL looks at teaching strategies in isolation from the social and cultural factors and issues of power. Besides, differences between teaching contexts, courses and institutions have meant that assessing the benefits of PBL proved problematic (Savin-Baden 2003).

A second, though limited, theme focuses on the seminar learning context as a whole. For example, Casey *et al.*'s (2002) study of sociology seminars compared perceptions of student-led and tutor-led seminars. They found that students were unclear about the purposes of seminar discussions, and seemed to prefer workshop style tutor-led seminars. They concluded that students' lack of engagement and participation in student-led seminars was due to uncertainties about the purposes and benefits of seminar. In contrast, students preferred tutor-led seminars because outcomes and expectations were perceived to be more explicit. The strength of the study is that it problematises seminar contexts by highlighting the contextual demands of learning and participation in seminars. However, the absence of

a theoretical perspective means that the reasons why students might prefer tutor-led seminars are not examined.

The theme of uncertainty and conflicting conception of seminars was also evident in Dawson & Evans' follow-up study, where they examined tutors' and students' views about the purpose and meaning of sociology seminars and workshops (2003). They concluded that the students mainly see seminars as a context for clarifying and elaborating ideas from lectures, whilst the tutors saw them as spaces for dialogue and discussion around set readings. Significantly, students also attributed the lack of engagement in seminars to the social and emotional dimensions, and in particular to concerns about expressing mistaken viewpoints or ideas. Consequently, they preferred seminars with opportunities for small group discussion that provided less risky context for participation.

Dawson & Evans's (2003) study used a range of research methods to provide useful sights into tutors' and students' perspectives of seminars. Similar to the current study, they focussed on students' perceptions of learning and participating in seminars. In particular, the notion of epistemological gaps between tutors and students as a potential constituent of seminar experiences is relevant to this study's investigation into what constitutes seminar experiences. However, whilst the substantive points are highly relevant, similar to Casey *et al.*' (2002), the significance for the current study is limited due the absence of a clear theoretical framework to support the findings.

Fejes *et al.*'s (2005) study also prioritised seminars as a site of enquiry. Using observations and interviews, they investigated how postgraduate students' negotiated meanings in their initial encounter with seminars at university. The foci were on how students negotiated meanings about what to discuss, how to discuss, and their perceptions about the purposes of seminars. Using the concepts of participation and reification they concluded that through the use of cultural tools, tutors and students were engaged in complex negotiations about learning, content and structure.

The study has a number of strengths. For example, access to observational data meant that the authors had first-hand insights into the ways in which meanings might be negotiated in seminar contexts. Furthermore, together with the interview data, the findings illustrate the complexity of seminar contexts as spaces for meaning negotiation in the context of implicit

tensions between the tutor and the students. There are, nevertheless, limitations in relation to the current study's aims and objectives. For example, although the authors highlight the power and control as dimensions of meaning negotiations, they do not fully examine their significance for learning and participation in seminars. Furthermore, contextual differences, in terms of the types of students and the study's non-UK setting may limit the significance to the current study.

A third category addresses the perspectives of specific student groups such as part-time, mature and international students. In most cases, the focus is on the difficulties students face, and the strategies they adopt in adjusting to an unfamiliar learning context. For example, Merrill *et al.* (2001) used a life-history methodology to show how mature students coped with the expectations of seminar pedagogy. Others have identified specific variables such as collaboration and cooperation during online seminar contexts (Timmis *et al.* 2010). However, contextual differences, for example, relating to the difference between online and physical seminars mean that their significance is limited. Nonetheless, by highlighting the complexities and challenges of learning in seminars, like the other studies addressed so far, the conclusions help to strengthen the rationale for the substantive topic.

The studies so far have either lacked sufficient theoretical underpinning (Casey *et al.* 2002), or used a socio-cultural theoretical approach (Fejes *et al.*, 2005). However, few have used a cultural perspective to investigate the seminar context. An exception is the findings from the transforming learning cultures project (TLC); a longitudinal, multi-site (further education) FE based project. Based on their findings, the authors argued that learning contexts can be better understood when seen in relation to the wider cultural context of the institution. For example, in one institution, the relationships between tutors and students became an important variable in how participants constructed success on the course. However, divergence between the college's and the tutor's views about roles meant that the tutor began to use strategies that contradicted preferred teaching strategies and negatively impacted on students' success (Hodkinson *et al.*, 2007c). In contrast, in settings that demonstrated convergence, the outcomes were generally more successful because '...the forces between different factors are pushing or pulling in broadly the same direction' (Hodkinson *et al.*, 2007, p. 405).

Based on this and similar findings, they argued that to understand learning cultures of a particular site, it was necessary to understand the field as a whole, 'and the relationship of the site to that field, and to other fields of which it was part or with which it interacted.' (Hodkinson *et al.*, 2007, p.423). Otherwise, when classroom cultures and practices are seen in isolation from the wider contexts of course and institution, improvements to students' learning experiences were less likely to be effective. More generally, they concluded that a wide range of factors including the positions, dispositions and actions of tutors and students, location of the learning site, management procedures, and the wider social and cultural values and practices, as well as the relationship between these different aspects all influenced learners' experiences of classroom learning contexts (Peim & Hodkinson, 2007).

The findings from the 'transforming learning cultures' project make convincing claims about the influence and importance of context; the studies were collaborative, large scale, and employed a range of research methods. With its emphasis on holistic and in-depth insights into learning contexts, the current study draws on some of the key aspects of the TLC project, such as the way in which '...particular practices impact upon the learning opportunities of the participants' learning cultures (Hodkinson *et al.*, 2007, p. 420). Admittedly there are cultural differences between HE and FE, but the substantive points are insightful. In arguing for teaching strategies and policies that recognise the relational nature of learning and learning contexts, the findings provide useful insights for HE policies and practices at both the meso and macro level, in line with emerging theoretical perspectives that recognise the complexity of learning (Illeris, 2007; Engestrom, 2009; Ashwin, 2008).

The review so far seems to suggest that in the HE context, the knowledge claims about seminars relate to the experiences of specific groups such as part-time or international students, or address a specific aspect such as collaboration. The few studies that have looked at the seminar context as a whole suggest student uncertainty about the purposes and aims of seminars, and a preference for tutor directed seminars. Furthermore, whilst there is extensive research about the effectiveness of seminar pedagogies such as PBL, there are few studies that have undertaken in-depth qualitative studies about students' perspectives of their learning experiences. This suggests that the research literature is limited both in terms of the amount and type of research and the relevance to teacher education contexts.

The lack of research knowledge about learning contexts is significant. The paucity of research into seminar contexts suggests the influence of the dominant perspectives of student learning that have neglected the role of context. As Gunter & Ribbens mapping metaphor of research highlights, a narrow research focus can limit the kinds of maps we can draw about student learning, and limit what we can know about an important area such as seminars (Gunter & Ribbens, 2003). Based on her recent review of the student learning literature, Haggis also identifies the limitations of a narrow research focus and reminds us that, ‘...what we know about student learning is a reflection of specific purposes and interests...’ (Haggis, 2009, p. 388).

In conclusion, the review of the research literature shows that there is a gap in the empirical literature that relates to seminars as context for learning and students perspectives of their experiences of seminars. The insights from the 'transforming learning cultures' (TLC) project will be useful for examining the role of context on seminars and students' experiences. In the analysis of the policy literature that follows, I aim to address the following questions:

- What are the knowledge claims that arise out of the key policy documents?
- How do they relate to knowledge claims in the theoretical and empirical literature?

### **1.5 Policy context in HE**

In the past 20 years, the knowledge economy has been the key driver of HE policy in both UK and European contexts (Bologna 1999; Singh & Little, 2011; HM Treasury, 2006). In the UK context in particular, policy initiatives on widening participation, university funding, and accountability have dominated the landscape. One outcome of these initiatives is an increased emphasis on teaching quality and associated policies, stemming from an assumption that ‘quality’ teaching can deliver disciplinary knowledge and understanding, employability skills and consequently, student satisfaction (DFES, 2003; BIS, 2009, 2011).

The importance of teaching in HE is also evident in institutional policies and practices (DFES, 2003; HEFCE 2005-2011). Policies and strategies include requirements for new professional standards for teaching, and a commitment to continuous professional



development programmes. One of the most significant initiatives was the establishment of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at a number of universities, with large sums of money invested over a number of years. The project brief was ‘... to reward excellent teaching practice and to invest in that practice further in order to increase and deepen its impact across a wider teaching and learning community’ (Saunders *et al.*, 2008, p10).

There are important assumptions in the policy initiatives to date. For instance, there seems to be a widely held view that good teaching results in good learning (Biggs, 2003). While it is true that good teaching is an important variable in the learning process, whether good teaching always results in good learning is questionable (Hodkinson *et al.*, 2007). For instance, ‘good’ teaching is itself a complex concept. As Haggis’s research in HE suggests, for different people and in different contexts the same teaching style and approach may be perceived differently (Haggis, 2004). In a similar vein, a recent evaluation of CETL concluded that, ‘...there is no necessary connection between wonderful practice within a CETL and the chances it might have for wider engagement...’ (Saunders *et al.*, 2008, p.5). If institutional policy documents indeed adopt an unproblematic perspective of ‘good’ teaching, then it would seem that the acontextual assumptions of the constructive alignment model are still prevalent and a key influence on policy (see p14).

The widening participating agenda is another key aspect of policy (TLRP, 2009). As the SOMUL research has shown, students bring with them increasingly diverse experiences, attitudes and priorities (Brennan, 2010). Yet, it seems that students’ learning continues to be conceptualised in ways that give limited attention to the contextual influences on their learning and participation (Haggis, 2009). Thus, despite increasing student diversity, teaching and learning policies appear to assume that learners have uniform needs and expectations of learning at university (Houston & Lebeau, 2006; D’Andrea & Gosling, 2005). For example, whilst universities may prioritise learning through discussion and dialogue, culturally, this pedagogy can be alienating for some. Thus, despite the diversity of the student population, teaching and learning policies appear to assume that learners have uniform needs and expectations of learning at university. This suggests some disconnect between policies that recognise the diversity of learners, and teaching and

learning policies that are based on assumptions that see learners mainly in terms of deep and surface learners.

The dominant individualised perspective of learning however is unlikely to give in-depth insights into student learning. In contrast, the findings from the social and cultural perspectives provide richer insights for institutional policy makers because they recognise the influence of wider and immediate context on what happens in seminars. For example, in Newton *et al.*'s study of a university's policies and practices, students' critical stories of their experiences of learning in seminars became the focus for an institutional wide enquiry, the findings highlighted how gender and race issues were implicated in personal and institutional practice and how these practices impacted on how students conceptualised and interacted in seminars (Newton *et al.*, 2001).

The central argument of this review was that theoretical perspectives' conceptions of learning can be used to interrogate the literature on student learning and learning in seminars. To varying degrees, the influence of individualised theoretical perspectives is evident in the research as well as the policy literature. In the latter's case, the assumption that good teaching results in quality learning suggests some neglect of the complexities of learning contexts. The danger is that when teaching and learning policies are only conceptualised in narrow terms, they dislocate learning from its immediate and wider contexts to give limited insight into students' learning experiences in HE (Houston & Lebeau, 2006; Crozier & Reay 2011; Hodkinson *et al.*, 2007).

This introduction set the context for the study by identifying the central research question and the methodological, theoretical and substantive aims. Based on my critical evaluation of the theoretical, empirical and policy knowledge claims, I argued that the review justifies the research questions I outlined in section 1.2.1. Despite the prevalence and importance of seminars in student learning experiences, there is a gap in the HE student literature that considers the nature and characteristics of learning context such as seminars, and students' perceptions of learning and participating in seminars. To this end, the rest of the thesis is structured as follows.

In chapter 2, I will examine in detail the limits and possibilities of Bourdieu's theory of practice for interpreting the data. In chapter 3, I will critically analyse the methodological

literature to justify the study's methodology and research design. After presenting the emerging findings in chapter 4, I will analyse the significance of the constituents of participants' seminar experiences using Bourdieu's theory of practice in chapter 5; this will address the first research question (RQ 1) 'What meanings do participants attach to the constituents of their seminar experiences? Chapter 6 addresses RQ 2 'how might constituents work together to construct meanings about seminars?' to analyse how discourse connects the constituents to influence the kinds of meanings participants attach to their experiences. Chapter 7 also address RQ 2, and will consider whether the patterns in individuals' practices suggest a form of habitus that interacts with the seminar field in ways that reproduce particular cultural meanings about learning and participating in seminars. In Chapter 8, I will present a reflective chapter on the process of knowledge production, a summary of the finding and implications for research, policy and practice. In Chapter 9, I conclude the study and outline possible areas for further research.

## **2 Theoretical perspectives**

In the review of the theoretical literature in Chapter 1, I argued that social and cultural theoretical perspectives offer richer insights into student learning experiences because they recognise the influence of context on learning. In this chapter, I critically examine key aspects of Bourdieu's cultural theory of practice and the concept of discourse to evaluate their relevance for interpreting the study's findings. The chapter is structured as follows: after summarising the main themes of theory of practice (section 2.1), I outline the key conceptual tools (section 2.1.1), followed by a critical perspective of theory of practice (section 2.1.2 ). I follow this with a section that outlines how theory of practice and the concept of discourse overlap (section 2.1.3), and how the study will use them to address the research questions (section 2.1.4).

### **2.1 Theory of practice**

According to Jenkins, Bourdieu's status as major figure is 'incontrovertible', and that he is 'widely regarded...as among the most important contemporary sociologists, his legacy clear and secure' (Jenkins, 2002, p. xviii). The purpose of this section is to give a brief overview of his main conceptual tools, to analyse the links with other theoretical traditions, and to outline its relevance for a study into students' perspectives of seminars.

At the heart of Bourdieu's intellectual project was a search for a cultural theory of human behaviour (Bourdieu, 1977). Drawing on the ideas of Durkheim, Weber and Marx, Bourdieu attempted to present a theory of human behaviour that reconciled the subjective and the objective dimensions of the social world. Therefore, for Bourdieu, the task of sociology is to 'uncover the most profoundly buried structures of the various social worlds which constitute the social universe, as well as the mechanisms which tend to ensure their reproduction or their transformation' (Bourdieu, 1992 p.7). In this way, he hoped to highlight how through their actions and interactions with the objective world, people are involved in cultural production.

Cultural reproduction refers to the way in which certain views of the social world continue to be unquestionably reproduced through individual and institutional practices. It is particularly relevant to educational contexts, and the way in which reproduction happens is articulated by Bourdieu's use of the concept of 'symbolic violence'. Symbolic violence

refers to the hidden ways in which dominant cultures influence individuals' practices, because individuals often fail to recognise the influence of these dominant cultures; thus it is '...the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. xiii).

Furthermore, misrecognition is reinforced through 'pedagogic action', where peers, families and teachers contribute to sustaining influential cultural norms. Pedagogic action is the way in which '...every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those in power relations' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p.xv). For example, the education system the curriculum, teaching approaches and examinations can all become ways of reproducing arbitrary cultural values that are seen as meaningful and valued only because they are sanctioned by the ruling class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). For Bourdieu, analysing the way individuals' experience cultural practices and meanings as legitimate gives sociology an emancipatory role (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In the current study, examining the meanings participants attach to experiences in seminars provides an opportunity to examine what types of cultures are reproduced and how they may be reproduced.

Bourdieu also makes important methodological points about the role of the researcher that is relevant to the current study. Based on the findings from his early anthropological works with the Kabylas' marriage traditions, he concluded that the basis of behaviour cannot be deduced from agents' accounts of rules and customs. This is because native theories can be misleading; '... they lead research towards illusory explanations...' and reinforce '...the intellectualist tendency inherent in the objectivist approach to practices' (Bourdieu, 1977, p.19). By this, he seems to suggest that anthropological approaches often fail to illuminate the principles or logic that generate practice because they are over-reliant on agents' accounts of practice (Bourdieu, 1977). In essence, he is arguing that a non-dualist perspective on the social world is inadequate unless it is based on what people actually do rather than on their accounts of practice. The emphasis on practice has clear methodological implications for the study in terms of ontological and epistemological assumptions (see p. 42)

In conclusion, Bourdieu's ideas are widely used because his ideas about culture and power provide a common language for talking about a wide range of research concerns in a variety of social and institutional contexts (Reay, 2004). However, there are issues around the complexity of his concepts (see section 3.3.2), the wide scope of his work, as well as problems around translations have often proved problematic and have influenced the way his work has been interpreted and used (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Calhoun *et al.* 1993).

So far, I have outlined the main aspects of Bourdieu's theory of practice. In the next section, I outline the main conceptual tools that Bourdieu used to operationalise his anti-dualist perspective, undertake a critical evaluation of these tools, and analyse the ways in which theory of practice links to other theoretical perspectives. The section concludes by showing which aspects of theory of practice I intend to use for the data analysis and interpretation in chapter 4, 5, and 6.

### **2.1.1 Bourdieu's conceptual tools: capital, field, habitus**

Capital, habitus and field are the main conceptual tools that Bourdieu uses to analyse the social world (Grenfell & James, 1998; Reay, 2004). These concepts arise out of his central themes of practice, relationality and cultural production, which Bourdieu uses to account for individuals' social practices. Thus, I will start by outlining the defining features of each, although, as the concepts are interlinked, it is difficult to summarise one without referring to others. I will then go on to summarise how they operate relationally to influence practice, followed by an overview of their significance for Bourdieu's theory of practice.

The concept of relationality is key to Bourdieu's theory of practice and is articulated in his concept of 'field'. Bourdieu defines field as:

'... the space of relations of force between different kinds of capital or, more precisely between the agents who possess a sufficient amount of one of the different kinds of capital to be in a position to dominate the corresponding field...' (Bourdieu, 1998, p.34)

The above suggests several characteristics of field. Firstly, that it is a kind of structured social space where individuals and institutions occupy different social positions. The different positions are hierarchical, and are often characterised by struggles in which

individuals' strategise to preserve or enhance their positions in the field, often in relation to what is prized or is at stake (Jenkins, 2002). For instance, a seminar group is an example of a field, with its defining characteristics located in the relations between student and tutor, as well as the relationship between the seminars, the course and the university.

Capital is what is at stake in any field, and an expression of the unequal distribution of scarce resources in the form of culture or knowledge (Reay, 2004). It is closely linked to the notion of field because access to capital enables groups and individuals to occupy dominant positions in the social place. Thus, the positions individuals occupy in a field is related to the power inequalities by virtue of the access they can afford to the goods or resources which are at stake in the field (Bourdieu, 1998). For example, in the educational field, tutors and students have unequal access to educational and cultural capital that might be seen in terms of access to different levels of educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1993).

But not all forms of capital are easily identifiable. Symbolic capital refers to the relative degree of prestige and status associated with the different positions individuals occupy in the field (Bourdieu, 1998). Unlike economic capital, symbolic capital can be hard to quantify and is often misrecognised. In Bourdieu's study of French society, this is evident in the way primary school teachers and small merchants may have similar levels of economic capital, but behave and act differently because of the prestige and status that is associated to teachers' status. In the seminar context, tutors also have higher symbolic capital that comes with their status and prestige that is often associated with working in a university.

Whilst capital and field are important facets of theory of practice, habitus is the key to Bourdieu's intellectual project that attempts to bridge the subjective and objective world. Its significance is twofold. Firstly, habitus generates practices; it is a '...the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations...that produce practice...' (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 78). Furthermore, practice is improvisational; thus, it is not rule-bound but more akin to an intuitive 'sense of the game' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97).

Secondly, habitus itself is a structured entity as it is the '... the product of history produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history' (Bourdieu, 1977, p.80). For example, in his study of the French

higher education system, he attributed privileged students' familiarity with university cultures to a habitus and the associated practices that complemented university cultures. Thus, for these students, success at university was less problematic because they were more familiar with its cultures, thus, '...when habitus encounters a social world of which it is a product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu, 1992, p.127).

In the current context, the participants also share similar historical relations. As a result of schooling and/or family cultures, they interact in similar ways with the objective structures of educational institutions. As Bourdieu argues, '...the homogeneity of conditions of existence...' can lead to '...practices to be objectively harmonised without any intentional calculation or conscious reference to a norm...' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 80). By highlighting the historical nature of habitus, and the way habitus structures practices, Bourdieu illustrates how habitus connects field (schools/classrooms) and capital (degrees/certificates) to generate practices that produce and reproduce cultural meanings. In chapter 7, I will consider the extent to which individual practices denote a type of 'student' habitus and the extent to which habitus interacts with the seminar field (see page p. 111).

This section has outlined the key conceptual tools of habitus, capital and field, the relationship between them, and the significance for understanding the social world. As mentioned earlier, a central theme in theory of practice is the idea of cultural reproduction that is enabled by the way habitus, capital and field interact to create and sustain particular meaning about the social world. From the discussion so far, it is clear that habitus is the critical concept because it is due to habitus's durability that practices tend to reproduce the objective conditions that created them in the first place (Bourdieu, 1977). In the next section, I will explore some of the criticisms of Bourdieu's ideas, before considering how Bourdieu ideas fit in with discourse based theoretical perspectives (see 2.1.3).

### **2.1.2 Critical perspectives on theory of practice**

Bourdieu's work is widely recognised for the depth and range of his theoretical and empirical work. His work has contributed to key sociological debates on agency and structure, reflexive approaches to research, and the links between theory and practice. For Connell, Bourdieu's contribution is his way of '...talking about what the living in the world



is really like, its shadows and its sunlight...' (Connell in Jenkins, 2002, p. 119). Similarly, Jenkins praises Bourdieu's theoretical, philosophical and empirical work and the questions he poses about the social world, as a theorist who is 'good to think with'.

Whilst Bourdieu's popularity is undeniable, critiques have also highlighted important shortcomings. The first relates to how Bourdieu presents and communicate his ideas. Many find his writings to be highly inaccessible and accuse him of a tendency to be, '...unnecessarily long-winded, obscure, complex and intimidatory' (Jenkins, 2002, p.9). Although it is possible some of this may be due to meanings and nuances that are lost in translation from French to English. Nonetheless, few have engaged with the full breadth of his work, resulting in a selective use of his ideas that miss out on key works such as 'Distinction' (Bourdieu, 1984; Jenkins, 2002). Secondly, the accessibility issues have also meant that few have managed to know his work well enough to be able to fully question the assumptions that inform his work. Consequently, we have to rely on the few individuals who undertaken the level of engagement that his work demands (Margolis, 1999; Jenkins, 2002).

Jenkins detailed critique provides accessible insights into Bourdieu's key ideas. The most relevant aspects to this study address habitus, capital and field, and their application to the field of education. One of his criticisms relates to ontology of his theoretical concepts. For example, Bourdieu's description of field is as a social space or a specific institution; a point where structure meets individual practice. According to Jenkins however, it is unclear if field is an analytical construct or something that exists 'in the social consciousness of those actors who inhabit the social space...' (Jenkins, 2002, p. 89). His main criticism seems to be the lack of clarity about how fields are defined and the limited theorisation about how institutions, as examples of fields, actually operate and how they relate to social life.

But his most detailed criticisms relates to habitus. As outlined already, habitus is variously defined as an acquired system of generative schemes that are objectively adjusted to fields, and also as a set of dispositions that modify or reinforce the structures encountered in fields. Similar to his criticism of field, Jenkins also questions the definitions of, and assumptions that inform habitus and the related concepts of strategies and dispositions. For example, he questions whether the distinction between class and individual habitus, whether each field has its own habitus, or what if any pre-existing habitus individuals bring

to a field. Additionally, Jenkins also questions whether institutions can have a habitus when Bourdieu argues that habitus is the property of embodied individual agents.

Conceptual uncertainties are often problematical in the theoretical and empirical literature. However, it is interesting that Reay defends the ontological uncertainties around habitus that others have questioned. Indeed, she seems to argue that habitus's changing meanings is advantageous because it provides flexibility and avoids '... the more constricting straightforward adoption of the concept within empirical work' (Reay, 1995b, p. 357, in Reay, 2004).

Jenkins's other critique relates to the agentic yet unconscious role of habitus that is also structured by the fields (Bourdieu, 1977). For instance, working class students' practices and behaviour reflect an unconscious feel for what is right and appropriate in educational fields that is at the same time, restricted by their habitus. Bourdieu argues that because individuals make these unconscious choices, they have agency and are actively constructing the social world. However, according to Jenkins and other critiques, agency is still determined by the structures or the fields in which they operate because habitus is structured and individuals can never fully escape the objective relations that formed their habitus. These criticisms raise questions about the extent to which theory of practice transcends the dualist divide (Margolis, 1999).

Bourdieu has responded to these challenges in a number of ways. Firstly, he cites the problems of translated work and cultural context in which his work has been interpreted as causes for some of the misunderstanding (Bourdieu, 1990). In his subsequent works, he has also clarified and modified his definition of habitus (Reay, 2004). His later thinking shows a more flexible view habitus, as durable, but not necessarily eternal. Furthermore, he argues that practices are not uniform or inevitable; '...depending on the stimuli, the very same habitus will generate different even opposite outcomes ...' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 135). In his educational works he also seems to suggest that individuals can be trained to acquire different habitus, although this adds to the ontological uncertainty about what habitus actually is. My personal view is that a less rigid view of habitus goes some way to recognise the complexities of individuals and the fields in which they operate, but that the ontological issues still remain.

This section presented some of the criticisms of Bourdieu work that is mainly based on Jenkins's critique of Bourdieu's work. As outlined already, the nature of Bourdieu's work means that there are few in-depth evaluations of his work. It is possible that Jenkins's own assumptions about the social world may have influenced his views on Bourdieu. Therefore, relying on Jenkins's criticisms may give a limited perspective of the difficulties of Bourdieu's work. Nonetheless, his in-depth engagement with Bourdieu's work and the significant questions he raises about the ontological aspects makes Jenkins's work a useful and important contribution to understanding Bourdieu's ideas.

So far, I have given a broad outline of Bourdieu's key arguments about culture and its reproduction, and its influence on individuals' behaviour. In the next section, I argue that the concept of discourse is a useful way of conceptualising Bourdieu's idea of culture to explore student teachers' experiences of seminars.

### **2.1.3 Theory of practice and discourse**

Discourse has been variously defined as the meanings of texts and utterances that have an effect on the world or more specifically, as meanings that have 'coherence and a force to them in common' (Mills, 2003, p. 6). For example, this could refer to the curriculum of teacher education and how the way students, government policies, and tutors talk about teaching and learning that is informed by shared assumptions about the nature of teacher and learning. From Foucault's work on the origins of knowledge, discourse can also be defined as the rules and structures that govern particular utterances and texts, as '...a regulated practice that accounts for a group of statements' (Foucault, in Mills, 2004, p. 6). For example, students might not feel they have the permission to think about seminars in a way that contradicted the shared assumptions about the role of teachers and students; thus, they might rarely challenge tutors' practices or question tutors' knowledge. Foucault, calls these cultural meanings 'regimes of truth' that are powerful because they influence what is said or known by different people, the ways in which information is transmitted, the type of information/knowledge that is made available, and the preferred ways of accomplishing tasks (Foucault, 2002; McLaren in Darder *et al.*, 2008; Mills, 2004).

Gee's work on language also employs the concept of discourse in terms of the linguistic as well as the structural aspects of discourse. In the latter, his concept of 'big D', referring to

the social and political contexts in which language is used mirrors Foucault's view of discourse. Thus, discourses are '...the socially accepted means among many ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting, in the right places and at the 'right' times with the 'right objects...'(Gee, 1999, p. 17). Gee and Foucault emphasise different elements of discourse, however, both use discourse/s as the central concept for unravelling the influence of power and hegemony on the social world (Mills, 2004; Foucault, 2002).

As stated already, there are overlaps between Bourdieu's theory of practice, critical perspectives of culture and the concept of discourse. Theory of practice is about culture and the reproduction of culture in the context of unequal access to capital. As stated in the introduction (section 1.1.2), recent perspectives of culture also see individual and institutional practices as entities that are closely linked to power and politics' (Alasuutari, 1995). Similarly, like Gee's big 'D' and Foucault's conception of discourse as 'regimes of truth', Bourdieu also sees these dominant cultures and meanings as the 'ruling ideas of the ruling class, which when institutionalised, legitimatise their basis in the power of the ruling class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, Foucault, 2002).

For the purpose of this study, I will use discourse in terms of the cultural meanings that dominate educational contexts to influence the meanings participants attach to their experiences of seminars. The quote below summarises the definition I will use in examining some of the discourses that are pertinent to the current study.

'Discourses are understandings and knowledges about the way in which the world is organised, that connect together quite powerfully, they make themselves into themes; they are often institutionalised, they define the ways in which things can be understood; they tend to cut out other ways of explaining and understanding, and they are quite powerful ways of constructing meanings and understanding (Ferguson, 1998, p. 14)

In the following section, I will critically examine the 'education as transmission' and 'good practice', discourses as examples of dominant discourses, before outlining how the study will use theory of practice and discourse for subsequent data analysis and interpretation (section 2.1.4).

### 2.1.3.1 Discourses in educational contexts

Education is a cultural activity; the curriculum and teaching and learning strategies reflect society's values and perspectives about what is considered to be valuable (Darder *et al.*, 2008). Some of these long established ideas about teaching and learning continue to exert their influences on educational policy and practice. For instance, seeing education primarily in terms of knowledge transmission is an influential perspective that is based on particular views of teachers as infallible experts, and learners as 'empty vessels' (Giroux, 2009; Freire, 2000). The significance of these discourses is that, not only can they shape how we think about education, but they can also cut out other ways of conceptualising educational issues. For instance, in terms of student learning in HE, they can influence what is considered problematic or beneficial, what should be promoted or not, and how educational problems should be addressed.

Freire's 'banking' metaphor is an apt summary of this discourse; 'Education becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor' (Freire, 2000, p. 72). Consequently, learning is conceptualised as a step-by-step acquisition of facts from the more, to the less knowledgeable. The implication of this discourse is that by creating consensus about schoolings' norms and expectations, these discourses help to sustain hegemonic practices that reproduce dominant cultures and disempower learners (Freire, 2000).

The good practice or 'what works' discourse is another discourse that is increasingly associated with change and improvement in educational policy and practice. Critiques have challenged it on epistemological as well as ontological grounds. Critical pedagogists such as Freire have challenged the assumptions of knowledge as discrete and certain. Instead, they see knowledge as a conditional and emerging phenomena that comes about through '...invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry (we) pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other' (Freire 1970, p. 53).

Alexander, on the other hand, questions the assumptions behind what is actually meant by 'good practice' and the associated evaluative aspects of this discourse. He contends instead, that the concepts of 'good' and 'practice' are inherently complex, and therefore difficult to evaluate. Therefore, to judge the adequacy of good practice claims, '...we need to not only

to examine the criteria by which practice is judged to be good, but also to be clear about which aspects of practice are defined in this way and which aspects are ignored' (Alexander, 2002, p.159). Consequently, assuming that what works in one context can work unproblematically in another is a questionable assumption (Alexander, 2002). For Standish, the pervasiveness of powerful discourses is understandable; in a 'culture of aggressive accountability and credentials, the promise of new techniques ...may lure not only policy makers... but also teachers and students themselves...' (in Cigman & Davies 2009, p.x).

Discourse therefore, can be powerful in the way it contributes to and shapes meanings. Additionally, the way it emphasises the centrality and relationality of meanings makes it a useful tool for conceptualising culture and the process of cultural reproduction. In the current study, discourse can be a useful way of examining the cultural meanings about seminars, and how, through their practices, participants construct meanings about seminars. In the next section, I will outline how I plan to use Bourdieu's theory of practice and the concept of discourse to address the study's central question 'What are teacher education students' perceptions of the use of seminars?'

#### **2.1.4 How the study will use Bourdieu's theory of practice and the concept of discourse**

Using Bourdieu's approach to investigate students' perspective of seminars has many advantages. Firstly, it legitimises the study's preference for theories that recognise the complexities of learning (Illeris, 2007). Besides, habitus, field and capital are useful tools for examining contextual factors such as personal histories, and the wider social and political structures on learning and participation in seminars (James, in Grenfell & James, 1998; Ashwin, 2008).

Field, as outlined already (see p. 36), can be an important concept for analysing students' perspectives of seminars. The seminar could be seen as the main 'field', because it is inherently hierarchical, and a context where tutors and students have varying levels of access to capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Seminars have their own traditions in relation to artefacts, room organisation, and forms of capital (Morgan & Grenfell, 1998). At the same time, they also exist in the wider 'power field' so that they are not immune to the influences of the wider hierarchical structures, such as course, departments, institutions

and government bodies. Field raises many questions about the nature and constituents of the seminar learning context, the significance of cultural artefacts and practices, and the role of the tutors and the impact of the wider context on students' perspectives of seminars.

Habitus (see p. 36) is another important tool for analysing the data. Habitus enables a focus on practice, in terms of what participants actually do, think, or say they do, in their participation and engagement in seminars. By looking at the patterns in responses, as well as individual perspectives, I plan to do several things. Firstly, I aim to analyse whether participants' responses about their experiences of seminars exhibit a type of student habitus. Secondly, I intend to explore the extent to which individual practices interact with the seminar field, and how far participants' responses suggest 'misrecognition' of cultural arbitrariness about teaching and learning. In addition to using the key tools to interrogate the data, I will also examine the extent to which the data illustrate some of the controversies that surround habitus (Jenkins, 2002, section 7.4).

## **2.2 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued that social and cultural perspective can give useful insights into students' experiences of seminar culture. As higher education and education in general are cultural phenomena, (Trowler, 2008), habitus and field in particular, can give in-depth insights into what it means to learn and participate in a complex context such as seminar to reveal the significance of taken for granted practices and artefacts that might otherwise be hidden.

Undoubtedly, there are challenges associated with the difficulty and complexity of Bourdieu's ideas, as well as the debates around his key concepts and their underlying assumptions. Therefore, part of the analysis will examine the extent to which field, and habitus in particular can contribute to insights about seminars and participants' seminar experiences. In the following chapter, I will make the case for a methodology that takes into account the need for an approach that recognises the necessity and challenges of in-depth contextual data, the context of the study, as well as an approach that recognises the complexity of the research process and knowledge production.

### **3 Methodology**

In the previous chapters I argued that learning is a complex phenomenon, and that it requires methodological approaches that recognise complexity. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to identify a methodological approach and research design that can accommodate the following: the distinctive characteristics of qualitative/interpretive research, my philosophical assumptions, the study's context and its intellectual project. The chapter is organised in two sections. The first section provides the rationale for a reflexive methodological approach (see p. 41-50). The second section outlines the research design that includes the research methods, ethical considerations, data collection, transcription approaches, and the analytical strategy (section 3.5, see p. 51-68).

#### **3.1 What is the theory that guides the research approach?**

'Research ... always conveys a commitment to philosophical beliefs even if unintended and even though it remains implicit and unacknowledged...' (Carr, 1995, p1. in Bridges & Smith, 2006).

Methodology is a central element of the research process (Delanty & Strydom, 2003; Denscombe, 2003; Crotty, 2003; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). But its use in the social sciences indicates contrasting assumptions about the nature and purpose of methodology. For some, the purpose of methodology is to 'describe and analyse the methods, throwing light on their limitations and resources, and their suppositions...' (Cohen *et. al.*, 2000, p.39). Others, echoing methodology's etymological origins, argue that methodology refers to researchers' theories about the ways of attaining research goals (Delanty & Strydom, 2003).

The implication of Delanty & Strydom's view of methodology is that it highlights the philosophical nature of methodology. Methodology is an important part of the research process, as assumptions about 'method' and 'logos' can vary between different research approaches, as well as within similar research approaches (Sikes *et al.*, 2003). Thus, recognising its importance has the following benefits. For instance, knowledge of contrasting methodological positions can inform selection of methods and tools for analysis (Crotty, 2003; Mason, 2002). In addition, it can improve the study's credibility and trustworthiness by alerting researchers to mismatches between methodology and theoretical



perspectives. Finally, clarity about the philosophical assumptions can help others to make informed judgements about the basis of the knowledge claims (Mason, 2002).

In the following section, I will briefly summarise key philosophical concepts, before going on to consider the impact of these concepts on educational research and the implications for the current study.

## **3.2 Philosophical Perspectives on methodology**

Theories about what constitutes researchable reality (ontology) and what might represent knowledge or evidence of phenomena (epistemology) are critical aspects of the research process (Crotty, 2003). Once identified, the strategy for the project becomes much clearer, and likely to increase the study's methodological accountability (Seale, 1999). In the following section, I briefly summarise the key features of ontology and epistemology and the implications for educational research in general, and for the current study.

### **3.2.1 Epistemology**

Epistemology refers to the theories about what constitutes knowledge. More precisely, it is a branch of philosophy that investigates '... the possibility, limits, origin, structure, methods and validity or truth of knowledge' (Delanty & Strydom, 2003, p.x). In the natural sciences, there is a greater degree of consensus about what is 'true' knowledge; few contest the idea that there is a researchable reality that scientists can investigate to formulate theories about the natural world. Equally, the ways of establishing 'true' knowledge, through tools such as validity and reliability are also widely shared (Cohen *et al.*, 2000).

In the social sciences, however, epistemology can be problematical. For example, there are contrasting views about what can be classified as knowledge. Some qualitative researchers adopt realist perspectives that see knowledge as discrete and acontextual (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Others adopt constructivist and post-modernist perspectives that consider knowledge as constructed and context bound (Charmaz, 2006). The implications are significant because different views about knowledge can influence key decisions about research methods, strategies for ensuring quality and data analysis, as well as the possibilities and extent of generalisations (Delanty & Strydom, 2003).

### **3.2.2 Ontology**

A major debate within qualitative/interpretivist research relates to ontology. Ontology refers to perspectives on reality, specifically, it is a ‘...philosophical practice of making truth claims about the generic beings of things, humans, human nature, social facts...’ (Reed & Lamb-Brookes, in Zake, 2011, p. 27). For some, the substantive aspects such as experiences and perspectives are important, whilst others prioritise the ways in which participants talk about experiences (Gibbs, 2007). For example, in narrative analysis and life histories, the researchable reality is participants’ accounts of key events and the stories they tell about these events (Gibbs, 2007). On the other hand, in discourse analysis and conversational analysis, the researchable reality is how individuals use language to talk about their experiences (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

The relative importance of researchable realities is another ontological debate. For example, critical theorists see the process of knowledge production, rather than what people say and do, as the ‘...aspect of reality that is the most important for the attainment of knowledge’ (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009, p. 4). Consequently, the impact of the cultural, cognitive, social backdrop on the constructed knowledge becomes the important foci. For post-modernists, on the other hand, there are multiple realities, each as important as the other resulting in multiple interpretations and 'truths' about the social world, (Crotty, 2003). The debates about theories of knowledge and reality have influenced key debates in educational research. In the following section I consider how philosophical assumptions have affected the ways in which educational research has been conceptualised, before going on to explore the implications for the current study.

### **3.2.3 Educational research**

The purpose of this section is to analyse whether the key debates in educational research have any resonance for the current study. Educational research is a contested concept, with debates centring on the process, purpose, and content of this type of research (Carr in Sikes *et al.*, 2002; Hammersley, 2001). Educational research in the UK, for example, is characterised by a large number of small scale projects, and a smaller number of large-scale publicly-funded projects. With reference to the former, critiques argue that studies are often illustrative in nature, and lack theoretical perspectives that explain and justify their

conclusions (Mason, 2002; James 2006; Pollard, 2006), whilst others question their usefulness and generalisability (Slavin, 2002).

Philosophical assumptions characterise some of the criticisms of qualitative/interpretive based educational research, often these are based on assumptions that inform the ontology and epistemology of the natural sciences (Hammersley, 2002; Sanderson, 2003). Qualitative/interpretivist research relies on in-depth contextual data using non-experimental approaches, whilst critics advocate the use experimental approaches such as randomised control trials as more reliable and therefore more useful (Fitz-Gibbon, 2003, Oakley, 2001, Biesta, 2007.) There is, however, increasing recognition of the benefits of incorporating quantitative data. Consequently, recent large-scale research projects have used mixed-method approach, using both quantitative and qualitative/interpretive data to inform professional practice. These debates highlight contrasting epistemological as well as ontological standpoints about the extent to which knowledge can be verified and can be generalised to other contexts (Seale, 1999).

There are some differences, however, between educational research in general and pedagogical research in HE. Not only is pedagogical research into HE is relatively recent (Saunders *et al.*, 2008), but until recently at least, there has been less political interest in the generalisability and quality of HE research. Nonetheless, the influence of positivist methodologies is increasingly evident in the widespread use of surveys and questionnaires to inform policy and practice, and the increasing demand for useful HE research (TLRP, 2008; 2009).

The use of large scale surveys (HEFCE 2005-11), and initiatives such as CETL (centres for excellence in teaching and learning, HEFCE, 2005) all suggest the influence of assumptions about knowledge that, to some extent, disregard the influence of context (Haggis, 2009). According to Gunter & Ribbens, our assumptions can influence what kind of knowledge is considered reliable, important or even possible and can determine what we know about a problem, and ideas about how we can best approach it (Gunter & Ribbens, 2003). For instance, when education and schooling is mainly seen in terms of accountability, it is likely that the findings from large scale quantitative studies are seen as definitive and unproblematical (Bridges & Smith, 2006). In contrast, when education is seen as part of the wider context of society and influenced by its inherent complexities, researchers are

more likely to take more complex perspectives of reality and epistemology, and suggest more contextualised conclusions (Kincheloe, 2010).

In conclusion, the debates in educational research illustrate the ‘ineliminably philosophical’ nature of methodology (Bridges & Smith, 2006, p.131). Different perspectives (logos) of how we can come to know about phenomena can influence how we choose to proceed (method) to find out about the phenomena (May, 2001). For Bridges & Smith, despite the policy pressures educational research must resist the temptation of ‘oversimplification and closure’ because understating the complexities of education requires insights into meanings and understandings. The debates also have implications for a professional doctorate that aims to make some practice and policy recommendations, but is based on less valued methods of enquiry. In the next section I outline the study’s context and examine the suitability of a range of methodological traditions.

### **3.3 The study’s context**

The current study is located in the qualitative/interpretivist research traditions that prioritise people and their experiences of the social world (Mason, 2002). The substantive aim (see p. 9) is to explore student teachers’ perspectives of learning and participating in seminars. Thus, the ontological position is that participants’ perspectives are researchable phenomena; that is, *what* participants say is a researchable reality. The epistemological stance is partly influenced by the theoretical aims of the study that recognises the influence of context on the meanings participants attached to their experiences (see p.9). The study’s context therefore is non-scientific because to address the study’s aims requires the researcher to interpret and construct the significance of contextual factors. Thus, my epistemological position is that I can obtain research knowledge by interpreting others’ perspectives, but at the same time, that this ‘knowledge’ does not necessarily reside in individuals’ heads, but it is constructed and reconstructed in different contexts (Crotty, 2003). Therefore, the epistemological position is broadly constructivist, with some expectation that aspects of reality can be grasped as a result of in-depth qualitative study.

Finally, because the research is a professional doctorate the philosophical dimensions of educational research, as discussed in section 3.2.3 will also be relevant. Besides, my own researcher context and positionality and the associated power dynamics are all part of the

study's context, and will impact on the kind of knowledge that can be generated. For Bourdieu, researcher reflexivity is necessary to undertake research practice that avoids an '...overly constructed interpretation, where the researcher's conclusion can be regarded as the uncovering of a God-given truth' (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 176).

In the next section I will outline the study's context and the professional dimensions of the study, as starting points for evaluating possible methodological strategies and approaches to address the study's central question 'what are teacher students' perspectives of seminars? This will enable me to articulate the most appropriate and realistic methodological strategy that will inform the research design. After considering the possibilities of positivist and phenomenological perspectives briefly, I give extended consideration to critical, grounded theory and reflexive perspectives.

### **3.3.1 Methodological perspectives**

A study into students' perspectives can employ a range of methodological approaches. For example, it would be possible to use positivist methodologies such as large scale surveys; they are practical and efficient and advocates argue that they give a 'sound' evidence base for policy makers. However, whilst they can be used to identify possible research themes, the philosophical assumptions lack methodological validity, as they contradict the study's epistemological assumptions of knowledge as contextualised and complex (Seale, 1999).

A subjective methodology such as phenomenology is also possible. Phenomenology tries to 'activate' the primitive meaning or structure of the concept from participants' careful description of phenomena, so that '...one is led to depth' (Husserl, in Luckmann 1978, p.46). Phenomenology's emphasis on individual perspectives complements the study's epistemology. There is also some similarity between the study's ontological assumptions about the researchability of experience, and the phenomenological tradition. Thus, in contrast to positivist approaches, phenomenological approaches would have methodological validity (Seale, 1999).

There are, nonetheless, dimensions of my research questions that phenomenology cannot address fully. For example, phenomenology requires researchers to 'bracket' or sidestep their interpretation of participants' accounts (Crotty, 2003) and focus instead on pure descriptions. Many question the possibility of accessing such pure descriptions (Van

Mannen, 1997, Wolcott, 2009); even if pure description was possible, the assumption that context is irrelevant does not fit in with the study's emphasise on participants' perspectives of seminar experiences in relation to the influence of situational and contextual influences on meanings about seminars.

### **3.3.2 Critical perspectives**

Critical perspectives represent a diverse research tradition, but can be distinguished by their focus on '...the spotlight on power relationships within society so as to expose the forces of hegemony and injustice' (Crotty, 2003; p. 157). Critical perspectives can contribute to the study's project of gaining in-depth insight and understanding. As discussed in chapter 3, these approaches problematise taken-for-granted assumptions and practices to challenge and transform the structures that impose on marginalised groups (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009). Thus, they see settings and contexts as sites for struggles and domination, rather than as neutral containers for social activity. Thus, an underlying assumption is that knowledge and 'truth' about phenomena cannot be separated from the wider context of power relations (Hodkinson *et al.* 2007).

The advantage of these approaches is that by analysing the ways in which power informs cultural practices and artefacts, they can help to formulate different kinds of questions about the social world (Gunter & Ribbens, 2002). Thus, conclusions about recommendation for practice and policy can be informed by more in-depth insight into the complexities of seminar learning contexts. However, unlike grounded theory (see section 3.3.3), critical methodologies are often associated with approaches to research, rather than a specific research strategy. As my research is exploratory, adopting a particular critical standpoint may not be appropriate. Secondly, although, critical approaches are sensitive to the power dynamics within society's rules and structures, they can sometimes also disregard researchers' positionality and the possibilities of multiple perspectives (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). Nonetheless, critical perspectives resonate with my interest in unravelling the assumptions that inform how participants talk about their experiences and as outlined in chapter 3, I will draw on some of these concepts and ideas to inform my interpretations.

### 3.3.3 Grounded theory

Grounded theory is a widely used qualitative research approach. Through the use of inductive approaches, its aim is to discover theory, to create 'useful and meaningful knowledge through action and interaction (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Similar to phenomenology, it prioritises meaning and is both a methodology and a research method. Yet, unlike phenomenology, it gives the researcher an important role in interpreting data.

In the context of the study's aims and theoretical orientation, grounded theory offers many advantages. For example, it recognises and values research using small- scale unique cases to generate complex data. Moreover, in contrast to the traditional linear models of research, grounded theory has 'circularity' (Flick, 2009). It is a reflective and critical approach that continuously interrogates key decisions, such as categories, methods, theories. This close link between 'collecting and interpreting data' enables researchers to accommodate the complexity of studying complex human beings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Its pragmatic aim to 'systematise insight' and to gain practical understanding also has a particular relevance for the professional nature of this study (Flick, 2009).

However, despite the emphasis on meaning and interpretation, the popular use of grounded theory also has positivist tendencies (Flick, 2009; Charmaz, 2006). For example, the idea that researcher can 'discover' theory suggests that knowledge is an objective reality. As Alvesson argues 'data never comes in the shape of pure data from an original source; they are always merged with theory...' (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 58). In contrast, Charmaz's 'constructive grounded theory' addresses some of the positivist philosophical assumption in grounded theory. Unlike 'traditional' grounded theory, constructive grounded theory recognises the theory-laden nature of enquiry. Thus, it '...not only theorises the interpretive work that research participants do, but also acknowledge that the resulting theory is an interpretation' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130). For the research aims of this study, constructive grounded theory offers many benefits; it has tried and tested analytical approaches and strategies for interpreting qualitative data, and complements the study's epistemological position of knowledge as contextual and constructed.

### 3.3.4 Reflexive perspectives

The study's context has a number of methodological characteristics that have implications for the methodology. For example, the professional nature of the study means that a degree of realism is expected. At the same time, there is also a hermeneutical dimension where interpretation and meanings are essential to address the research questions. Furthermore, prioritising the influence of the wider context on meanings about seminars also suggests that some kind of critical perspective is required. It seems, therefore, that one methodological approach is unlikely to address the different elements of the study's contexts. Indeed, Seale argues that as long as methodological validity is not compromised, it is possible to use a combination of methodological approaches (Seale, 1999).

Reflexive methodology is one way of reconciling the challenges of methodology (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). Adopting a reflexive approach involves two aspects: in-depth reflection on the findings, as well as the process through which the empirical data is generated. For example, a reflexive methodology would take into account the influences of the researcher's positionality and the research context. Consequently, context becomes an important variable in how research findings are analysed and evaluated, and what kinds of knowledge claims can be made. At the same time, unlike the post-modernist perspectives it does not discard 'reality', and unlike realist perspectives it embraces how the process of knowledge production impacts on empirical reality (Calas & Simirchich in Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2006, p. 9).

In the current study, a reflexive methodology can be useful on many levels. For instance, the ongoing reflection on processes of knowledge production helps to ensure that ethical and positionality concerns are at the heart of the research process. Using a reflexive methodology also complements Bourdieu's concerns with reflexive approaches to research (Bourdieu, 1977) and enables use of the ideas and principles of grounded theory without succumbing to its positivist tendencies (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, in the context of constructivist perspectives of epistemology, reflexive methodology also recognises that some generalisations and conclusions about the social world are possible. Thus, it is an approach that starts from,



‘...a sceptical approach to what appear at a superficial glance as unproblematic replication of the way reality functions, whilst at the same time maintaining the belief that the study of suitable (well thought out) excerpts from this reality can provide an important basis of generation of knowledge that opens up rather than closes, and furnishes opportunities for understanding rather than establishing ‘truths’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 9)’

Nonetheless, for the novice researcher, using a reflexive methodology can be a challenging undertaking; developing awareness of analytical and interpretive ‘blind spots’ can be difficult (Hellawell, 2006). Equally, analysing and interpreting data that recognise possibilities for alternative perspectives and interpretations can also be difficult. Thus, it is with some risk that I attempt this methodology, but with anticipation that such an approach will result in qualitative interpretivist study that acknowledges, and works with the complexities of studying human phenomena.

### **3.4 Summary**

To establish my methodological standpoint, I have examined the substantive and philosophical dimensions of the study’s context to evaluate the relevance of a range of methodological approaches. Based on this, I concluded that a reflexive methodology that incorporates elements of constructive grounded theory and critical perspectives is the most suitable approach both from a practical, as well as a philosophical viewpoint. As Alvesson & Skoldberg argue, ‘...there is no reason why researchers cannot make their own choices according to individual needs, appropriating individual tips and techniques from the rich material on offer, provided that these can be integrated into an overall interpretive awareness’ (2009, p. 74).

The methodological position outlined so far provides a useful starting point for decisions about the research design. In the next section, I show how I used the study’s methodological position to select and evaluate possible approaches and research tools. Thus, after discussing the data collection tools below, I outline the findings from the pilot study (section 3.5.3) and conclude by outlining the research design (section 3.6).

### 3.5 Methods

Decisions about choice of methods are primarily influenced by the research question (Blaikie, 2000; Mason 2002). For example, biographical research is more likely to use interviews and documentary evidence rather than observations (Creswell 1998). As I have already argued, the choice of methods is also influenced by philosophical assumptions about knowledge and reality. For instance, positivists are more likely to use surveys rather than open-ended interviews, because they see knowledge as a reality that can be investigated objectively (Delanty & Strydom, 2003).

As stated already, the main purpose of this study is to investigate students' perspectives of seminar experiences. Generating participants' views can be achieved in a number of ways. For example, a carefully designed closed questionnaire can give a useful overview of the substantive topic (Creswell 1998). Indeed, for the first phase of the study, I used an online questionnaire as a way of identifying general themes and starting points for formulating the research question (Appendix 1). Online data collection has the advantage of anonymity and potential to reach a large number of students. Nonetheless, as May argues, questionnaires offer limited insights about the significance and meanings of participants' responses (May 2001).

In contrast, open-ended interviews can provide unplanned yet useful insights and have the potential to give more participant centred perspectives (Silverman 2005), but they can also be time consuming (Mason 2002). Moreover, depending on the research strategy used, 'answering' the research questions might be problematical (Creswell, 1998). Nonetheless, it is a method that suits the purposes and philosophical assumptions of methodologies and research approaches such as phenomenology and biographical research. In relation to the present study its usefulness is limited because the study is framed by specific research questions.

The use of focus groups is another possible way of generating participants' views about phenomena. In focus group interviews, individuals with a shared interest discuss key themes/question, and/or respond to questions put forward by the researcher (Finch & Lewis, 2003). The technique can be a way of addressing the study's research questions because it provides a way of obtaining some insights into students' perspectives.

Furthermore, from a philosophical perspective, it provides an opportunity to construct knowledge. However, its relevance is limited because my focus is on how individuals make sense of their experiences of seminars. From a practical perspective, it also has resource implications; focus group interviews require careful group management to ensure that the data reflects all members' views rather than a select few (Ritchie & Lewis 2003).

Observations can also provide important insights into seminar learning contexts. Rather than relying on participants' perspectives, researchers can get first-hand insights into the seminar constituents and the social and cultural dimensions of seminars (Creswell, 1998). Nevertheless, observation data on its own may not address the study's research questions on participants' perspectives (Mason 2002). In addition, there are important practical and ethical considerations about observing colleagues and obtaining ethical consent from up to 30 students.

### **3.5.1 Semi-structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews occupy a middle ground between questionnaires and open-ended interviews. The advantages are that whilst they are often guided by specific themes/questions, the interviewer is also able to explore related themes, or follow up participants' responses with further questions. In addition, they enable researchers to address specific research questions to give insights into individuals' perspectives. Similar to focus group interviews, they are congruent with the study's methodology; although the conversation is directed and structured by the researcher, there is room for constructing new knowledge (Creswell 1998; Cohen *et al.* 2000).

Semi-structured interviews, nonetheless, have practical and methodological challenges. For example the interview questions need to be carefully designed so as to avoid ethical problems and to ensure they are related to the research questions (May 2001). Personal skills in conducting effective interviews can also impact on the quality of interviews. Irrespective of the philosophical stances and the aims of the enquiry, researchers need good listening skills, empathy, and a good memory to conduct high quality interview based research (Seale 1999; May 2001; Mason 2002).

The methodological challenges relate to issues around data status. For example, seeing interview data as a representative of reality makes contestable assumptions about reality

and knowledge (Kvale, 1996). For example, in Kvale's 'miner' metaphor of interview data, data is seen as a reality that can be easily accessed by researchers. On the other hand, the 'traveller' metaphor illustrates a more contextualised view of knowledge. Sacks also highlights the challenges of relying on what participants tell us and the conclusions we might draw from this type of data, because,

'...telling someone about our experiences is not just emptying out the contents of our head but organising a tale told to a proper recipient by an authorised teller. In this sense, experiences are 'carefully' regulated sorts of things' (Sacks, in Silverman, 2007, p. 248)

Silverman raises further ontological issues about interview data. His argument is that unlike observations, the research context is something that is created to generate data. Hence the data is 'manufactured' because the reality may not necessarily exist outside the context of the interview. Consequently, the findings from 'manufactured' contexts such as interviews have limited use. In the current study, it is also possible that reflecting on seminar experiences is a reality that I created in the interview context. On the other hand, it is also possible that in the context of teacher education students, that views about learning and learning contexts might already exist as thinking and reflecting about classroom learning environments is an important part of school pedagogical discourses.

Finally, interviews have important ethical implications, because they 'they concern interpersonal interaction and produce information about the human conditions' (Cohen *et al.* 2000, p. 292). Participants may talk about potentially upsetting events or might themselves be unethical, in terms of what they say about others. There is also the serious issue of whether participants feel intimidated or feel unable to talk because of my position as course tutor (section 3.6.1). Furthermore, how participants' voices are represented in text is also something that needs to be addressed (Mason, 2002).

Despite the limitations and challenges, there are good reasons for using semi-structured interviews. Firstly, the method is congruent with the study's research questions because it enables access to individuals' perspectives and provides an opportunity to clarify and construct meanings (Seale, 1999). Secondly, interview data enables analysis of how

participants talk about their experiences. Thirdly, interviews provide a rare platform for students' voices about things that matter to them (Denscombe, 2003; Mason, 2002).

### **3.5.2 Documents**

As research tools documents have several advantages. They provide valuable of additional evidence, avoid costly transcription issues (Silverman, 2005) and can be used for generating rich interview data. For example, diaries can provide a written or visual representation of participants' perspectives, and they can also encourage reflection to provide a useful starting point for interviews. Official documentary evidence can also provide useful sources of data, as they are less manufactured than interview data, and can give useful insights into how particular discourses shape cultural artefacts (Silverman, 2007). However, like interview data, they are also constructed texts and should not be seen as representing an objective reality of phenomena. As the current study takes a cultural theoretical perspective, documents can be an invaluable tool for examining how the wider contexts, in terms of institutional artefacts contribute to meanings about seminars.

So far, I have analysed the potential and limitations of semi-structured interviews and documents as potential source data. In the next section, I highlight how the insights from the pilot study contributed to planning the research design that includes the ethical consideration (section 3.6.1), data collection (section 3.6.2) transcription (section 3.6.3) and the rationale for the analytical categories (section 3.6.5 ).

### **3.5.3 Pilot**

Pilot studies are intended to clarify intentions and plans (Denscombe 2003). The pilot study identified important methodological and practical shortcomings. For example, one outcome was that participants found it hard to recall significant details of their experiences. This was a useful for designing the study because uncommunicative participants can reduce the quality and richness of data. A second outcome related to my interviewing style. For example, one of the participants commented that my interviewing style did not enable her to elaborate on her responses. This is another significant insight, as interview styles can also affect the quality and richness of the data (Gibbs, 2007).

The pilot study also highlighted the challenges of adhering to the philosophical premise of the study. My aim was to undertake a constructivist 'traveller' approach to data, rather than

the realist 'miner' approach (Kvale, 1996). As the excerpt below illustrates, analysis of the interview showed a distinct over-reliance on 'prompt' style questions, rather than questions that probed interviewees' responses. Indeed, most of the questioning was based on my agenda, and an over-emphasis on the 'factual' rather than the 'meaning' aspect of participants lived everyday world (Kvale, 1996).

*Fufy: What was your impression when you came here was it all familiar, or different? – (factual question)*

*Rosie: Yes it was familiar, size too big, but the lectures were the most different thing - have not done anything like that ... sheer size. ..And seminars were really similar... obviously, you're input at the beginning, discussions something you have done, and then going off, - there were a lot of group work, which I think is here as well...*

*Fufy: And do you like doing that? – (leading question)*

*Rosie: yea I do*

*Fufy: Why do you like it? – (factual)*

*Rosie: I am just a people person, I like being with other people, rather than on my own... I find it easy to build relationships, I find it easy to fit in a group...even though I am quite talkative, I would easily take on someone else's' perspective... I am not argumentative... If I felt strongly about something, I would. Say... (opportunity for elaboration, meaning, probes)*

The above also illustrates the limitations of my interviewing skills (Mason, 2002). For example, Rosie's last response was a potentially fruitful line of enquiry that I could have followed up by asking for further examples or counter examples (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The pilot study also highlighted some ethical concerns. For one participant in particular, a realisation that she had inadvertently talked about an emotional episode from her home life was somewhat uncomfortable for both of us. It is not possible to avoid such situations, but the experience gave me some insight into how to handle any further similar incidences.

The online survey I posted provided an opportunity to 'test the waters' and (phase 1, Appendix 1) to get some initial indications about the substantive topic of seminar experiences. The questions addressed the following themes: perspectives on seminars in general, and views about their own and peers' levels of participation and engagement in seminars (Appendix 1). Unfortunately, the response rate was very low; out of nearly 200

students, only 5 responded. This might be due to the students' busy schedule, or as one of the participants suggested, because students receive many such requests through university's virtual learning environment.

The pilot data showed that the participants conceptualised their seminar experiences in distinctive ways (Appendix 1). For example, they commented on the emotional dimension of seminars, the importance of friendship groups, and issues around feelings self-confidence. But significantly, perspectives about seminars were mainly seen in terms of what the tutor does or does not do. References to learning objectives and importance of firsthand experience also suggested the possible influence of their professional context as student teachers. Even with limited data, these findings suggest that seminars are potentially rich sites for enquiry.

In conclusion, undertaking a pilot study identified potential pitfalls and useful pointers for the research design. For example, reflecting on my interviewing approaches and skills gave me good insights into how to manage interviews, the methodological and ethical challenges, and the implications for the research design. Having identified a methodological position, possible methods for enquiry and insights from the pilot study, I will now outline the research design for the study.

	Phase 1 online survey	Phase 2 pilot study	phase 3 invitation to participate	Initial meeting	Phase 3 interviews	Phase 4 interviews	Phase 4 documentary evidence	Phase 5 interviews	Phase 5 documentary evidence	Report back to participants on findings
actual number of participants	5	3		6	5	5	2	4	0	1
potential participants	240	240	240	6	6	5	5	5	5	5
population	BA teacher education students year 3	BA teacher education students year 3	BA teacher education and early childhood studies year 2	BA teacher education year 2	BA teacher education year 2	BA teacher education students year 2	BA teacher education students year 2	BA teacher education students year 2	BA teacher education students year 2	BA teacher education students year 2
date	June 2009	June 2009	September 2009	September 2009	September 2009	January 2010	January 2010	June 2010	June 2010	September 2010

**Table 1: summary of research life cycle including participants, dates and population**



### **3.6 Research design**

The research was carried out over a nine-month period from October 2009 until September 2010. Table 1 (p.57) shows the 5 phases of the interview. In the first instance, phase 1, I invited all Year 3 BA teacher education students to take part in an online survey about their experiences of seminars (Appendix 1). The purpose of the questionnaire was to gain an overview of students' views, and to identify possible starting points for planning the interviews. Based on the insights from the survey, I invited the same group of students to take part in the pilot interviews in phase 2.

In phase 3 of the study, I invited all Year 2 BA students in the teacher education and early childhood studies courses. This was because I wanted to have a wider range of participants and to ensure that I recruited a suitable number of participants. The two courses have similar intake of students, but the latter does not award qualified teacher status as part of the degree. Unfortunately, there were no volunteers from the BA early childhood studies course, perhaps because I did not teach on the course and I was not familiar to the students. Therefore, all the participants from the subsequent phases came from the BA Teacher Education course (Appendix 26). Although I was a tutor on the teacher education course, I had only previously taught one of the participants in the first year.

Once I got the responses, I had an initial meeting to explain the purpose of the research (Appendix 4). I also explained the consent form and its implications to address any anxiety they might have about the taking part in the study (Appendix 4, Appendix 5). In phases 3, 4, 5, I conducted a series of in-depth interviews.

#### **3.6.1 Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations are an important part of any research study because they are central to the trustworthiness and credibility of research claims (Mason, 2002). In qualitative/interpretive interview based research in particular, the ethical dimension is particularly significant. The study incorporated the principle of 'informed consent' at all stages of the study. In line with recommended practice, I gave participants a detailed form to indicate the level of consent they were willing to give, and to ask their permission for a range of possible situations in which the data may be shared with external bodies (BERA,

2011). In addition, to enable participants to make a fully informed decision, I provided relevant information about the research aims and plans (Appendix 5).

In relation to 'beneficence', I was aware that participants' may see their time being used to benefit the researcher and not themselves. Nonetheless, as the course provided limited opportunities for in-depth reflection I was reasonably confident that my study could be of benefit to them. Moreover, as they were due to undertake their own dissertation the following year; I felt they benefited from taking part in a research study.

Thus, in addition to informed consent, I also clarified how I intended to address confidentiality issues. I promised to guarantee confidentiality to the best of my ability, asked their permission for consent for every stage of the study and for every level of dissemination that may take place (Denscombe 2003, Kvale, 1996). I also assured them that the data would be destroyed once I completed the study. I also outlined the ways I intended to ensure anonymity and invited them to select a pseudonym (Appendix 6).

I was also aware, however, that many aspects of ethics, including anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent are vulnerable to unequal power relations. For example, participants might still feel unable to refuse consent even if they were able to indicate their preferred levels of participation and knew they were able to withdraw at any time (Brooker, 2003). Indeed, one potential candidate decided not to take part after signing the consent form. For the remaining participants, at each interview, I checked if they still wished to take part in the research. However, although I took reasonable steps to minimise ethical dilemmas, it is likely that I could not eradicate all possible difficulties. This section articulated how I proposed to address the ethical dimensions of the research. In the following sections, I outline the process and rationale for data collection, data transcription, participant selection and choice of analytical strategies.

### **3.6.2 Data collection and justification**

All the interviews took place in a meeting room in the departmental building. Before each interview, I invited participants to bring written accounts of significant seminar experiences. Whilst a more neutral space would have been preferable to reduce the power imbalance, resource limitations meant that it was not possible. I used a digital recorder to record the interviews. The timing of the interview was planned to fit in with existing

timetable commitments so that participants did not have to make a special journey to attend the interviews. I also planned the interviews to ensure that I had some time after the interview to record any notes and to reflect on the interview process. The questions for the first interviews in phase 3 were broadly similar (Appendix 7). At subsequent interviews, I planned the interview to take into account emerging issues that were specific to each participant. The last interview was planned to address any gaps in the data, and to give an opportunity for the participants to reflect on my on-going data interpretations.

### **3.6.2.1 Interviews**

Based on the research questions, I devised a schedule for the first interview (Appendix 7). To ensure rigour in my interview technique, I used Mason's advice to formulate a loose interview structure containing the broad research questions as well as the sub-questions (Mason 2002). The first interviews took place in the autumn of 2009 (phase 3, see p. 52). The first interviews mainly addressed the participants' experiences of learning before university. This enabled a more informal start to the study and provided useful biographical data for later analysis. The semi-structured nature of the interview provided opportunities to probe and follow up emerging themes and issues (Mason, 2002).

The second interviews (phase 4), took place in the January 2010 (see table 1, p.57). Based on an analysis of the data from the first interview, I prepared an interview schedule for each participant that allowed me to address any remaining aspects pertaining to the research question. In addition, the structure enabled the participants to follow up and expand on earlier responses. In phase 4 and 5, three of the participants responded to my request to bring written accounts of significant seminar experiences (Appendix 25). Two of them referred to these when talking about their experiences. In the final interview (phase 5), I followed up any remaining issues, gave the participants an opportunity to comment on selected extracts of data and shared some of my initial interpretation of the data (Appendix 9).

The iterative nature of qualitative interpretive research meant that during the interviews I continuously reflected on my interview skills and the participants' responses. Both informed subsequent phases of the interview. My reflective notes, in particular provided

useful opportunity for initial data analysis and for planning the next interviews (Appendix 21).

### **3.6.3 Data transcription**

I transcribed as I went along, and always before the next interview so that the emerging findings informed subsequent interviews. My transcription was word-for-word rather than selective because I was concerned that I might miss important insights. On-going transcription also helped me to continually evaluate my interview style and to critically analyse my interactions and interview styles. So as not to distort meanings, where possible, I also decided to transcribe informal and non-standard language features as they occurred.

The initial plan was to transcribe as much of the data as possible, including my interjections, participants' hesitations and emphasise on key words. But, transcribing my 'listening' responses, such as '*uhum*' and '*ok*' meant that the transcript became disjointed and lengthy. Therefore, in the later interviews I did not include these language features. A problem with this strategy is that I may remove evidence of the ways in which I may have influenced the dialogue (Silverman, 2007). On the other hand, as I had a record of the data, if necessary, I could always revisit specific sections of the data. In addition, as I was not planning to undertake conversational or discourse analysis, the implications may not be as serious.

I also transcribed each interview in its entirety and before the next interview. This gave me an opportunity to get a sense of the interview, and to formulate the questions for subsequent interviews. It also meant that I could start the analytical process at a much earlier stage. The disadvantage is that I may have become too engrossed in the data and lost the critical distance that is required for a reflexive approach to research (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2006).

### **3.6.4 Participant selection and justification**

One indication of high quality case study research is the careful selection of participants (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). Unfortunately, in this study, I had no opportunity to select participants because of the small numbers of responses. Thus, using an opportunity sample, as I did, has certain drawbacks because participants cannot be selected on specific criteria to achieve a balance of participants. In addition, the perspectives of self-selecting

volunteers could give a skewed impression of the seminar learning context and have implications for the kind of conclusions I can draw (Denscombe, 2003).

In summary, in line with my methodological aim (see p. 10) I have outlined the assumptions that informed my methodology and the steps I took in designing the research study. In the following section, I outline the analytical strategy, followed by the initial outcomes of data reduction (see p. 63), and the process by which I arrived at the analytical categories (see p. 66).

### **3.6.5 Analytical strategies**

Analysis is a key part of research; how it is done has profound implications for answering the research questions and drawing relevant conclusions (Wolcott, 2009). Decisions about the strategies for data analysis are influenced by the study's theoretical, substantive and methodological aims (see p. 9). For example, the analysis needs to articulate what kind of data is meaningful or significant. Furthermore, the interpretive and deductive nature of the study requires that analysis and interpretation is concurrent with data collection (Gibbs, 2007).

The philosophical assumptions are another influence on analytical strategies. In relation to my ontological assumptions, my analysis strategy needs to take into account what participants say about the phenomena, as well as the concepts and assumptions that they draw on to talk about their experiences. Epistemologically, the view that knowledge is constructed means that the analysis needs to recognise the contextual nature of data. For example, the research questions and my theoretical framework are likely to influence the kind of categories I prioritise when analysing the data. Thus, how the knowledge was generated also needs to be part of the analytical process (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

Rigour is another consideration for data analysis. The quality of qualitative/interpretivist research is often criticised so ensuring transparency needs to be part of the analytical strategy (Gibbs, 2007). As Ritchie and Lewis argue, researchers need to ‘...build a structure of evidence rather than jump in straight from data to analytical/abstract accounts...’ (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). I aim to achieve this by using analytical strategies from grounded theory, such as field notes and on-going reflections at all stages of the enquiry. In addition, I intend to incorporate participants’ perspectives so as to enhance the study's trustworthiness

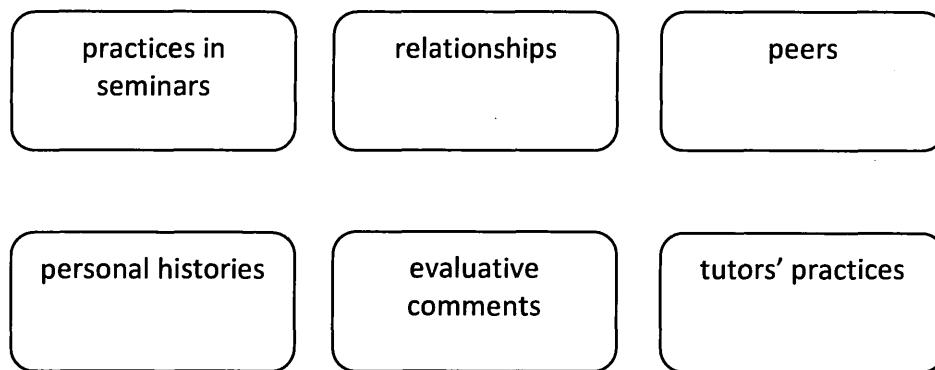
and credibility, and one of the reasons why I planned to share my emerging analysis at the final interview (Appendix 9).

In this section, I attempted to highlight some of the important aspects that are involved in making decision about analytical categories. Informed by the considerations above, the next section illustrates how I developed the broad themes and analytical categories.

### 3.6.5.1 Data reduction and broad themes

In this section, I build on the study's methodology, insights from the pilot study, and the issues in qualitative analysis highlighted above to outline a strategy for analysing the data. Specifically, I describe how I undertook data reduction and identified the emerging themes and the analytical categories.

The emerging themes below were both concept as well as data-driven (Gibbs, 2007). The data was guided by the interview question as well as intense engagement with the data. The initial coding, based on-going analysis and interpretation, suggested that significant aspects of the participants' account related to some or most of these categories (Appendix 12).



**Figure 1: broad themes from initial data reduction**

Whilst these broad themes provided a useful strategy for data reduction, further refinement was necessary in order to undertake a more refined level of coding (Mason, 2002; Richardson, 2005; Gibbs, 2007).

The following analytical categories emerged from further intensive reading of the data and analysis of initial themes. The participants talked about their experiences in relation to

tutors or peers, and often related to what they (participants) or others (peers, family) did. Thus, practice became the other analytical category (Appendix 11). Therefore, using context and practice as the key concepts, my initial analysis of participants' responses suggested the following categories (see table 2 below)

<p><b>Seminar practices</b></p> <p><b>Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling contexts -tutors:</li> <li>• Enabling contexts -students:</li> <li>• Disabling contexts -tutors</li> <li>• Disabling contexts -students:</li> </ul> <p><b>Practice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling practice -tutors</li> <li>• Enabling practice -students</li> <li>• Disabling practice -tutors</li> <li>• Enabling practice -students</li> </ul>
--

**Table 2: initial analytical categories**

Nonetheless, using these categories was problematic as I did not have a clear definition of each category. In addition, as I was not certain if my categorisation was consistent or reliable. I refined the codes to include the external context, the general backdrop to seminar contexts, views about pedagogy of seminars, and practice within seminars. To help with the categorisation, I also included brief definitions for each category. As the table 3 below shows, the key areas were: events, (what happens both within and outside seminars), what people do, (whether it is pedagogical or not) and the meanings participants attached to these experiences (views about what is enabling or disabling, or neutral).

1. **Seminar activities:** events that took place in seminars
2. **External contexts:** events that took place outside seminars and university
3. **Seminar contexts:** the backdrop to practice, both overt and hidden
  - 3a. enabling seminar contexts: unplanned enabling contexts, e.g. positive atmosphere,
  - 3b. disabling seminar contexts: unplanned disabling contexts, e.g. large group sizes
4. **Pedagogy of seminar contexts:** reference to teaching and learning aspects
  - 4a enabling pedagogy of seminar contexts: planned events e.g. clear objectives, relevant activities
  - 4b: disabling pedagogy of seminar contexts: planned events, e.g. discussion based seminars, didactic teaching styles
  - 4c: neutral pedagogy of seminar contexts:
- 5: **Practice:** general things that people do
  - 5a: own practice: e.g. attend seminars
  - 5b. tutors' practice: e.g. sense of humour
  - 5c: peers' practice: e.g. background chatter, not participate, and use mobile phones
  - 5d; families' practice: encourage, share experiences,
6. **Pedagogy and practice:** reference to pedagogical aspects and practice
  - 6a: pedagogy and own practice: asking questions
  - 6b: pedagogy and tutor's practice: explain, give assignment guidance
  - 6c: pedagogy and peers' practice: not participate in seminars, expect others to speak

**Table 3: refined analytical categories with definitions**

As the categories became clearer, I found the data easier to categorise using the categories in table 3. However, it seemed that table 3 could be further refined to illustrate more clearly the main focus of the study and participants' views of seminar learning contexts.



Thus, as shown below, I re-worked the categories in table 3 into a more useable matrix (table 4) that addressed the shortcomings of the categories in table 2 and 3.

	<b>Non-seminar related events</b>	<b>Practice in seminars what people do non-pedagogic aspects</b>	<b>Pedagogical practices: what people do related to teaching and learning strategies/approaches in seminars</b>
<b>Events/practice</b> e.g. part-time work, social events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happens</li> <li>• What people do</li> </ul>	<b>Self</b>  <b>Tutors</b>  <b>Peers</b>	<b>Self:</b>  <b>Tutors:</b>  <b>Peers</b>	<b>Self:</b>  <b>Tutors:</b>  <b>Peers:</b>
<b>Views: about events and practices</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling</li> <li>• Disabling</li> <li>• neutral</li> </ul>	<b>Disabling:</b>  <b>Neutral:</b>  <b>Enabling:</b>	<b>Disabling:</b>  <b>Enabling</b>  <b>Neutral</b>	<b>Enabling:</b>  <b>Disabling:</b>  <b>Neutral:</b>

**Table 4: matrix showing how data was categorised**

I used these categories to further analyse and interpret individual participants' perspectives of seminars (Appendix 7). The stages I went through illustrate some of the principles of grounded theory such as using categories and constant refinement of categories; iterative process to undertake ongoing evaluation of emerging themes, and ongoing reformulation of themes. In addition, I used an online memo writing package, 'pebblepad' to record ongoing evaluations and thoughts about the analysis (Appendix 20-Appendix 23).

### **3.6.5.2 Analytical categories from participants perspectives**

To complement the study's methodology I required analytical categories that move beyond the descriptive to analyse how participants talk about their experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Gibbs, 2007, figure 1, p.63). Therefore, to identify the analytical categories, I decided to focus on meaningful or significant data that were based on selected extracts. This stage of the analysis required further intensive immersion in the data, and use of the reflective analytical notes to ensure that I selected appropriate extracts and analytical categories (Appendix 16).

I used the following criteria to select the extracts. Firstly, the extract had to be meaningful on the basis of use of emotive language, body language or presence of narrative (Gibbs,

2007; Appendix 19). According to Gibbs, use of stories in participants' accounts can be revelatory and worth investigating; similarly, Rubin & Rubin also argue that researchers should pay attention to stories, because, '...stories often communicate significant themes that explain a topical or cultural arena' (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; p. 231). Finally, I also considered extracts that seemed interesting and worth following up in relation to the research questions (Gibbs, 2007; Mason, 2002).

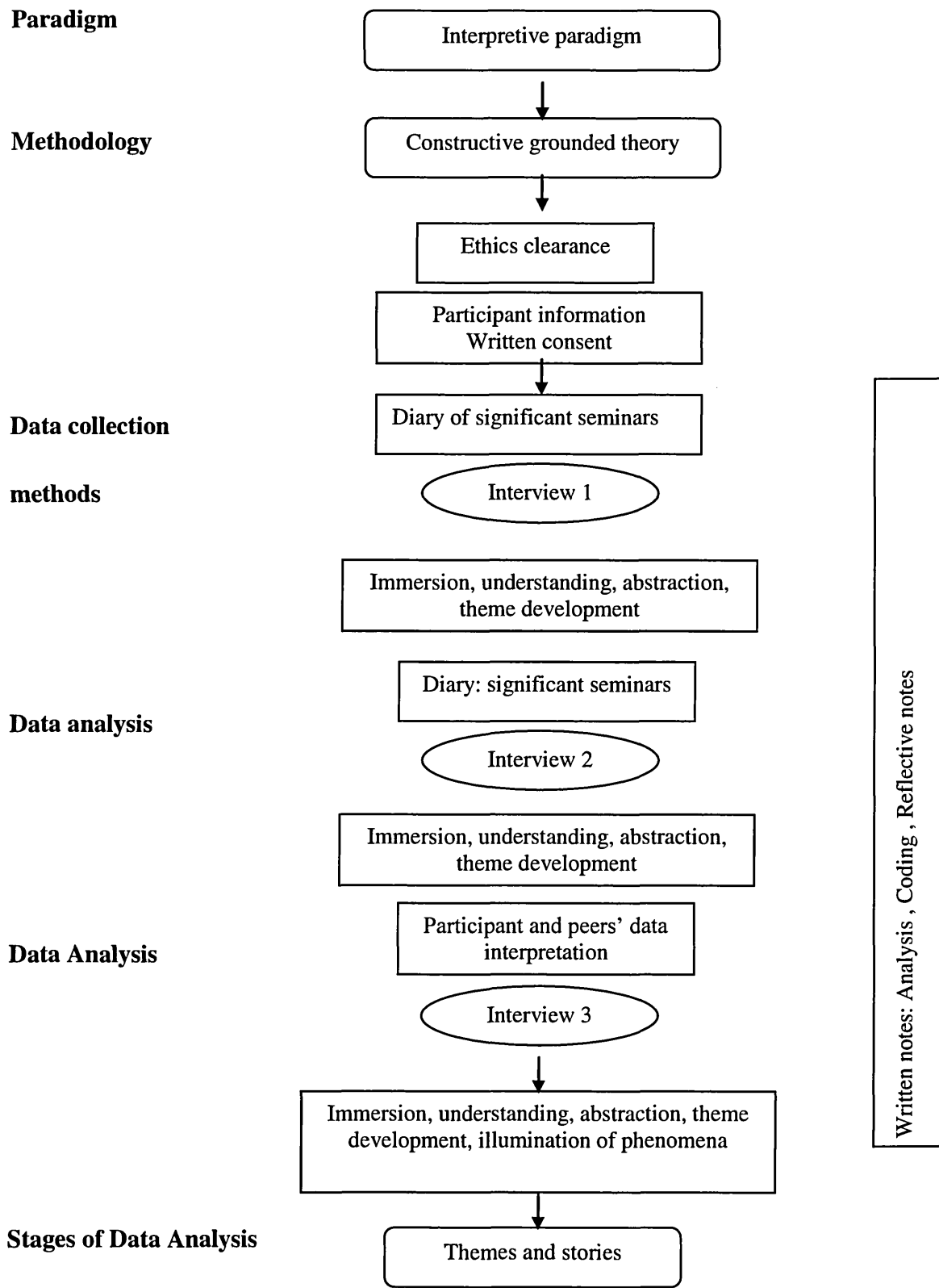
Once I had identified the extracts, I used some of the strategies from grounded theory to undertake further intensive reading of the data. Thus, after skim reading the data, I identified what appeared to be meaningful or interesting aspects, and then compared these occurrences with other similar occurrences in the data to evaluate their significance (Appendix 16). Throughout, I asked questions about particular phrases and statements words or sentences. In addition, as suggested by Richards, I looked out for 'red flag' words such as 'never' and 'always' and compared interesting phrases and words with extreme examples (Gibbs, 2007; Richards, 2005, Appendix 17). In addition, I extended the analysis by 'opening up' the data further. For example, I chose a specific concept such as 'relationships' and explored the conditions under which I might hear the phrase, the consequences, and the impact on strategies and interactions (Gibbs, 2007; Appendix 19).

Devising the analytical categories was a challenging part of the study. I found some contradictions with my view of data as constructed, and the inordinately long periods of time I spent analysing the data on my own. Thus, I shared examples of the extracts with the participants to get their perspectives on my selection of significant data and whether my interpretation of these extracts (Appendix 22). Although one participant questioned the significance of one of the extracts, on the whole, most seemed to concur with my choices and interpretations. But as highlighted in the ethical section of this chapter (see p. 58), it is difficult to know whether they felt able to contradict or challenge my interpretation. Despite the uncertainties, this stage of the analytical strategy gave an opportunity to explore what participants talked about as well as the potential influence of discourses on the meanings they attached to their experiences.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

Based on the study's philosophical assumptions and the context of the study, I have argued that a reflexive 'meta' methodology together with some of the principles of constructive grounded theory and critical perspectives was the most suitable way of addressing the study's research questions. As a result of this decision, I analysed and evaluated possible inquiry methods, and identified semi-structured interviews and documentary sources as the most appropriate data sources. Next, I used insights from the pilot study to outline a research design that considered the ethical dimensions, the research strategy, data collection and transcription, and finally, the strategy for data analysis (see figure 2, p. 66). In the next chapter, I will summarise the initial findings and the implications for analysing and interpreting the data.

**Figure 2: overview of the research strategy (adapted from Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007)**



## 4 Emerging findings

### 4.1 Introduction

The purpose of the study was to find out about seminar learning contexts by talking to students about their experience of taking part in seminars. The specific research questions were:

RQ1: What kinds of meanings do participants attach to the constituents of their seminar experiences?

RQ 2 How might these constituents work to create and sustain meaning?

In this chapter I present the emerging findings and themes and the implications for subsequent data analysis and interpretation. As the table below shows, the findings are based on interviews and documentary evidence. The majority of the data was from the interviews; this highlighted the broad themes, as well as participants' individualised perspectives. By 'individualised', I refer to individuals' views of seminars rather than their approaches to learning. I used all the data sources to address both RQ1 and RQ2.

The chapter is structured as follows: first, I outline the emerging themes from the initial stage of the analysis (section 4.2). I follow this with participants' individualised perspectives (section 4.3), and evidence from documentary sources (section 4.4). In the conclusion, I outline the methodological and theoretical implications of the findings for subsequent data analysis and interpretation.

Interviews	Documentary source 1	Documentary source2
5 BA 2 <sup>nd</sup> teacher education students  3 interviews each	Diary entries from 3 interview participants	Learning teaching and assessment policy SHU 2006-2011  Module evaluation: BA teacher education 2010/11  Staff student representative meetings: BA teacher education 2010/11

**Table 5: Data sources**

## 4.2 Interviews - Overview of events and practices within seminars

Several broad themes arose from the initial analysis of interview data. The first related to how participants categorised seminars. In the seminars they categorised as ‘practical’, tutors appeared to model classroom related topics or concepts and students worked in small groups to reflect on teaching strategies and approaches. Practical seminars also seem to involve workshop style sessions, particularly in mathematics related modules that might involve students taking part in open-ended challenges or workshops that resembled the kind of teaching activities they might provide for children in school.

Types of seminars	Meanings about seminars	Tutors	Family and personal histories	Peers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information giving</li> <li>• Presenting new experiences: ‘Diversity’</li> <li>• Practical: investigative maths</li> <li>• Modelling: Science</li> <li>• Small group discussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevance</li> <li>• Theory/practice</li> <li>• Content</li> <li>• Amount of Engagement levels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enthusiasm</li> <li>• Confidence</li> <li>• Knowledge</li> <li>• Identities</li> <li>• Teaching styles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influencing expectations</li> <li>• Sharing learning</li> <li>• Influencing identity</li> <li>• Evoking different identities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positioning</li> <li>• Shared expectations</li> <li>• Presenting barriers</li> <li>• Presenting</li> </ul>

**Table 6: broad categories of participants’ responses**

The second category related to events and practices that were centred on educational ideas, policies and pedagogies and involved a degree of reflection and discussion, or group activities around problems and scenarios. Some categorised these as ‘information giving’ or reading sessions that lacked the ‘practical’ dimensions of the first category. It is not clear, however, whether the categories were as distinctive as the responses suggested. For example, I did not clarify whether the ‘information giving’ types of seminars also involved other types of activities.

Informing most of their reflections on seminars was the professional context of their course. For example, there was some indication that their ideas about school teachers’ roles and characteristics coloured their reflections about tutors at university. Some prioritised the tutors’ enthusiasm or personality and its impact on their interest and motivation and how they felt about the seminar. For others, the tutor’s management and organisational role was significant; for one participant in particular, assertive tutors who had ‘presence’ managed the seminar better and also posed challenging questions and demanded responses. It

seemed that the extent to which tutors acted in a 'teacherly' way influenced some participants' view of seminars. In addition, they also seemed to take a highly instrumental view, and categorised between the good seminar and less effective seminars. The former involved mainly practical and 'hands on' seminars which they felt equipped them for school placements and explicitly supported assignments. The latter, mainly discussion based seminars, however were seen to be less useful.

To a lesser extent, peers also seemed to contribute to participants' experiences of seminars. For some, peers reinforced implicit rules about who spoke when, and how much. Others mainly talked about the limited nature of peers' involvement in seminars, and how like some of the tutors, their peers relied on a few individuals who were willing to contribute to seminar discussions.

The final theme related to participants' accounts about the role and significance of families and others. In different ways, participants related how these relationships indirectly contributed to their seminar experiences. For one participant, it was about influential adults in school who encouraged particular attributes and attitudes and to whom she attributed her confidence in taking part in seminars. For others, it was about family values and expectations that seemed to encourage particular ways of being in seminars. In one case, it seemed that ingrained family values about making the most of opportunities seemed to influence how she constructed her views of effective and ineffective seminars. Another participant made references to her social background as an explanation for the ways in which she engaged and participated in seminars. Significantly, in one participant's case, the family's influence was ongoing in the way she at times, shared some of her positive seminar experiences with them.

In summary, when participants talked about their experiences they did so in terms of a wide range of factors, including types of seminars and associated meanings, the role of tutors and peers and aspects of their personal lives. It seems that tutors, peers, families are important constituents of participants' seminar experiences. To get more in-depth insights into individual's seminar experiences, the next section will present individual participants' perspectives of seminars that are mainly based on the analytical categories identified in the previous chapter.

### 4.3 Individualised perspectives

In this section I introduce each participant with a brief pen portrait, together with my interpretation of some of the distinctive aspects of their personal perspective of seminars. For each participant, an edited version of the data analysis matrix provides a summary of their responses and perspectives about significant pedagogical events and practices (Appendix 14 for a complete matrix). This is based on the analytical categories I identified in the previous chapter (Appendix 16). The headings before each extract are based on my interpretation of the extracts' essence.

#### 4.3.1 Daisy's significant events and practices

*I am a 20 year old student in my second year of a degree in teacher education. I came to University with a background in A levels and health and social care qualifications. I live at home with my parents and work for 8 hours a week. I am a conscientious student and like to give my absolute best in everything I do. I would describe myself as super-organised, which has been useful trait for my studies. I volunteered for the study simply because I wanted to help out and to be honest I am quite good at talking. Fufy asked me questions about my studies I hadn't considered before, but I do have strong ideas about what I think of my learning experiences. I really like this course, I am always recommending it to everyone.*

In addition to attending a fulltime intensive course, Daisy's student life appears to be characterised by a multitude of factors including the demands of work commitments, the desire to succeed and a strong work ethic. It also seems to feature interesting links between seminars and home, as exemplified by the enthusiasm some seminars generated and her readiness to share her experiences with her family and friends.



	<b>Pedagogical practices:</b> what people do related to teaching and learning strategies/approaches in seminars
<b>Events/practice</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happens</li> <li>• What people do</li> </ul>	<b>Self:</b> Writing lists, cramming information, asking tutors questions <b>Tutors:</b> giving information, inviting discussion, asking questions, <b>Peers:</b> checking on each other about assignments, seeking information
<b>Views:</b> about events and practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling</li> <li>• Disabling</li> <li>• Neutral</li> </ul>	<b>Enabling:</b> tutors making you think, controlling discussion, giving teaching ideas, enabling sharing of ideas, giving new knowledge , creating interactive learning environment , using a variety of resources, fun <b>Disabling:</b> reading tasks, uncontrolled discussion, too many viewpoints, lack of answer, irrelevance, repeating content, uneconomical use of seminar time, <b>Neutral:</b> teaching style

**Table 7: matrix showing how Daisy’s responses were categorised**

The course and some aspects of the seminars nevertheless, are a cause for uncertainty and anxiety. This is shown in the above table through Daisy’s practice of writing lists and regularly consulting tutors about the module requirements. Managing the workload is also problematic; *‘everything comes at once... and that’s when panic comes in...’*. In addition to causing stress, assignment hand-in times also seem to be catalysts for ‘background chatter’ in seminars. Daisy reports how these disruptions affect her concentration and often make her question her own ideas and approaches to the assignment. This anxiety is compounded by her ongoing and sometimes unsuccessful attempts at extracting useful clues and guidance about the assignment from tutors.

Uncertainty also arises when students are actively engaged in discussing a topic, and where the tutor might not express a strong view. In contrast to tutor controlled discussions, Daisy seems to see these seminars as problematic *‘...because there is no final ‘right answer’*. It seems that the same feelings of anxiety surface when seminars appear to lack relevance to classroom practice and instead focus on policies and/or theory.

In the following extract Daisy is reflecting on her notes about a seminar that in her view, illustrates the features of a good seminar.

### **'The ideal seminar'**

*Daisy: and then the other one. I did Science..Oh I do make sense, this links to everything I said. Science I put it was highly interactive.. ehm and we actually got to do the investigation and write them, so we can remember them and then I put that we were given thinking time and it created a bit of suspense..., he is so good at it...he is like 'what do you think it is going to happen?' and everyone was like oh and then it is like 'wow' and then I said, we got to work in a group and , and oh my god.. we know how to adapt the investigation to suit the classroom.. and that's what I mean, it is good to be able to apply it and then again I said that he used ICT.*

*Fufy: and how does that feel ...coming out of that? how does it feel?*

*Daisy: in science/?... oh it is brilliant, you come out and you think...oh I am going to use that, I am going to use this...I go home and I do the experiments to my mum and dad. They never work when I try and do them but...got so many ideas and the assignment for that is actually creating a science file, which is going to be full of facts and ideas... it's all in a topic, so if you are doing sound, you go back to sound and you are going to use it*

*Fufy: so it ticks that box..of direct relevance*

*Daisy: yes, definitely*

One interpretation is that for Daisy, this seminar appears to be a model of good practice. Not only does the tutor minimise uncertainty through a display of in-depth knowledge, and an engaging pedagogy, but also in the provision of an end product in the form of a file of ideas.

My interview notes indicate that compared to the other interviews. Daisy talked in a markedly animated style, as highlighted by her use of emotive words highlighted above. Part of her excitement appeared to be her realisation that her notes of the above seminar summarised what she really thinks about seminars, as exemplified by the comment '*Oh, I do make sense*'. Not only is 'the ideal seminar' engaging and relevant, it also evokes a feeling of contentment.

In context of this study at least, Daisy's views appear to be structured around managing uncertainty and anxiety. As the analytical table suggests, her views also seem to be closely tied to her evaluation and assessment of enabling learning contexts.

### 4.3.2 Jess's significant events and practices

*I am 20 yr old student, I have a great tutor group, after the initial awkwardness of getting to know new people, and I have formed great friendships. I am an outgoing and bubbly person. I have made great friends in university.. My friends, are really supportive, I often asked them for advice and help each other out. I enjoy my course, my first year was a bit overwhelming, I know now what should have done, at I am catching up now.*

For Jess, seminars are an environment where she interacts and participates fully. The experience is coloured by a wide range of events and practises, ranging from strategies for managing blood sugar levels, loss of concentration, and attempts at making sense of group tasks and activities. Different feelings and emotions are provoked by different kinds of seminars, such as frustration, boredom as well as elation and satisfaction.

	<b>Pedagogical practices:</b> what people do related to teaching and learning strategies/approaches in seminars
<b>Events/practice</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happens</li> <li>• What people do</li> </ul>	<b>Self:</b> interactive, join in discussions, asking 'stupid' questions, look at things from different view points <b>Tutors:</b> positive feedback, contradicting own advice, e.g. time talk through PowerPoint, provide different kinds of seminars <b>Peers:</b> no data
<b>Views:</b> : about events and practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling</li> <li>• Disabling</li> <li>• neutral</li> </ul>	<b>Enabling:</b> process based learning, understanding, short and focused group work, link seminars to how it might be with children <b>Disabling:</b> when tasks taking too long, repeated content, boring, slow pace, too much time, limited feedback on group activities, mobile phone ,lack of enthusiasm, <b>Neutral:</b> no data

**Table 8: matrix showing how Jess's responses were categorised**

As table 8 illustrates, seminars become a challenging learning environment when group tasks are give too much time, content from previous seminars is repeated, or when tutor appears unenthusiastic and is overtly didactic. But it seems that Jess will try her utmost to maintain concentration by '*drinking lots of coffee*' or '*playing with plasticine*'. She also expresses disapproval when her peers do not seem as conscientious and when they talked or use their mobile phones.

Jess's experience is also characterised by an evaluative perspective about the content and process of seminars. As the table above shows, there are a number of issues that create a disabling environment. Interestingly, when seminars seem ineffective, she often talked about the deficiencies in relation to her own school experiences. Good teachers in school were knowledgeable, enthusiastic and maintained discipline. At the same time, however, she would rationalise disruptive behaviour in seminars, for example, mobile phones and poor attendance, as an inevitable outcomes of uninspiring content or poor teaching.

The excerpt below illustrates a strong sense of what is right. It is possible to interpret from Jess's perspective that the tutor in this case demonstrates the behaviour and attributes of 'good teacher'; he is inspiring, encouraging and motivating. The tutor's preparation and flexible approach '*you can interpret on your own*' also seem to create a supportive environment for learning.

### **'When tutors are enthusiastic'**

*Jess: so, I just think it does mean , xxx enthusiasm is really important*

*Fufy: it is important for you..isn't?*

*Jess: definitely*

*Fufy: you said a few times , well.. if you don't want to be here, why should I be here/ (laughter)*

*Jess: yeah, and especially in that maths lesson that we had.. because he was so enthusiastic, I was like 'oh yeah (feeling I can do this...and I want! to do this.. and ehm, you could tell he was well prepared.. and, you know you could use this, and you could use this... and we have got these resources that you can use.. and if you don't want to use these and you have got a better idea.. so it is like, we can give you..you know what you need, or you can interpret on your own...ehm, and he, like, just..when you can see enthusiasm for a subject*

In summary, for Jess, at least some of her experiences appear to be characterised by her desire to be a good student, and the influence of school discourse on her evaluations and assessments of seminars.

### 4.3.3 Linzi significant events and practices

*I am 20 yr old student in my 2<sup>nd</sup> year of teacher training course. I come from down South and Sheffield is the furthest North I have been – but I like to so much I would like to stay and work in Sheffield. I wanted to take part in this research because I wanted to be involved with the university in a different way. I already volunteer as a course rep. I enjoy my course and I like to get really involved with whatever is going on.*

Linzi experiences are coloured by a range of events and practices. She displays a strong self-awareness ‘*I am a loud person*’, and a willingness to participate fully in seminars which, in part, she attributes to her early school experiences. As the table below suggests, central to Linzi’s responses seemed to be her desire to make learning experiences meaningful. For example, she would often get frustrated by what she considered to be intellectually undemanding tasks, such as reading and reporting back, or if the relevance of seminar tasks is unclear. Or, she would use her expertise in one subject area to understand and work out work out challenging aspects in another subject.

	<b>Pedagogical practices:</b> what people do related to teaching and learning strategies/approaches in seminars
<b>Events/practice</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happens</li> <li>• What people do</li> </ul>	<b>Self:</b> like to take part, enthusiastic, likes doing things, ask questions, always trying to find relevance of seminar activities to teaching, offers opinions and views  <b>Tutors:</b> reading slides without enthusiasm, reams and reams of slides  <b>Peers:</b> staying quiet, not willing to take part
<b>Views:</b> about events and practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling</li> <li>• Disabling</li> <li>• neutral</li> </ul>	<b>Enabling:</b> peers teaching, small group research, Investigative activities, ideas for how to teach, tutors show own gaps, feeling like an adult, a gathering rather than a lesson  <b>Disabling:</b> tutors and peers' lack of enthusiasm, reading tasks in seminars, activities that take too long, repeated content, activities without context/relevance, going through policy documents.  <b>Neutral:</b> like lessons at school, give and take, parallel to good school practice (VAK) learn more, dissonance between message and practice

**Table 9: matrix showing how Linzi’s responses were categorised**

This desire to make meaning and to be actively engaged in the learning experiences offered in seminars is closely mirrored by the direct and assertive role she takes in seminars. For

instance, rather than wait for tutors to explain and guide her learning, she often takes an active role. The following excerpt is from the final interview, where Linzi was commenting on the role she takes in her own learning:

### **'Being at the centre'**

*'... yeah, yeah definitely, cause its (pause) it's me kind of going in there and right, I am gonna go in there and listen and participate, and I go in there knowing that I can and I will do that ...it is kind of me being, not at the centre, cause it is not...cause I am in a class full of people, but being part of a core that makes the lesson, as opposed to me standing outside and watching. I prefer being in the middle and looking out'.*

Relationships also seem to play an important, but contradictory role in her experiences of seminars. On the one hand, her evident confidence and willingness to express her views means that she has to be careful that she does not dominate seminars. On the other hand, she also seems uncomfortable with peers' expectations that she plays the role of the reliable contributor. Over the course of the interviews, she also began to reflect on the challenges of this role, and the consequent limitations. The following excerpt shows her thoughts on this ambiguous role.

### **What is your misconception?**

*Fufy: do you see that as a positive as well as a negative thing?*

*Linzi: I suppose it is.. because I am one of the ones who do put my hand up..ehm my questions are answered.. do you know what I mean? that sounds really selfish, but, you know, if I have got a misunderstanding, it will be covered, and it's probably the same misunderstanding that quite a lot of the other people have.. so that's quite good, but it, I get a bit annoyed, because sometimes I feel I kind of taken over.. and I don't really want to..*

*Fufy: you don't want to...*

*Linzi: no, I wanna know what other people think, I want to know 'what is your misconception?' because I might think I have got it right, not realising it is a misconception ...and if somebody asks, 'Oh I thought that too! . is that wrong?' so..*

Relationships with tutors are equally ambiguous. On the one hand, they too, sometimes see her as the reliable spokesperson who is willing to express her viewpoint when others do

not. On the other hand, she values them highly and actively cultivates a strong and positive relationship that enables her to exercise her highly proactive approach to learning. One interpretation, therefore is that because she feels she can 'have a banter', this kind of relationships enables her to challenge or to ask her tutors to clarify issues and difficulties and to interact more collegially mirroring her own preferred teaching approach. The extract below illustrates an instance where Linzi had an unusual encounter with one of her tutors that highlights her affinity with informal learning and teaching approaches:

#### **'Makes you feel like an adult'**

*I am quite confident with algebra, a few of the girls I sat with, we were quite able in it, the tutor came over and said... can you explain this to me? she wasn't that confident in algebra. so it was quite nice to be able to share .. cause obviously I don't know certain things.. and she was showing me she didn't know certain things, and I can explain it ...yes, it was unusual, but it was nice, because it makes you feel like an adult rather than a.. I think that is the difference between 6th form and school and the university, cause she said, I don't understand that, can you explain it? that was quite nice...*

In summary, from Linzi's point of view, it seems that significant aspects of the seminar learning context appear to relate to some of the following: her constant quest for meaning making, her own active role in making that happen, the relationships she has with tutors and peers and the effect these have on her quest for meaning making.

#### **4.3.4 Natalie's significant events and practices in seminars**

*I am a mature student with a young family and a very busy life. Before I came to University, I worked as a teaching assistant. I used to think that University was for very clever people, a close family has a PHD, and it was only late on that I thought I could go to University. My access course prepared me well for university study and helped to overcome some of my uncertainties. I have busy life, but I always give my best and try and attend most of the session at university. I still sometimes feel that University is scary but I am beginning to think and speak like someone who is at university.*

Natalie comes across as an enthusiastic and hard working individual who seems appreciative of the opportunity to attend university. According to her accounts, she seems motivated to carry out tasks diligently, and is often one of the few people in her seminar

group willing and able to contribute to discussions. Natalie holds her tutors in high esteem; respecting their superior knowledge and experience and apparently reinforced it seems, amongst other things, by the tutors' positioning in the room and what they do. The extract below illustrates her perceptions of tutors.

*'...if they were telling you about... language development, an things that where they were telling you stuff, where you don't think they are wrong obviously, they have looked at the research, I imagine they would look at the research, I would be surprised if they didn't... so they have obviously backed it up with stuff they have read.. Things they know about, so I wouldn't challenge that...'*

These expectations seem to influence how she participates. She contributes to discussions and express viewpoints, but would rarely challenge or question what the tutors said.

	<b>Pedagogical practices:</b> what people do related to teaching and learning strategies/approaches in seminars
<b>Events/practice</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happens</li> <li>• What people do</li> </ul>	<b>Self:</b> contribute most of the time, discuss in small groups, encourages others to speak likes to show her interest, <b>Tutors:</b> rely on a few people to contribute, share knowledge and experience <b>Peers:</b> not contributing
<b>Views:</b> about events and practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling</li> <li>• Disabling</li> <li>• Neutral</li> </ul>	<b>Enabling:</b> practical ideas/tips for class teaching <b>Disabling:</b> tutors checking up on group work, <b>Neutral:</b> no data

**Table 10: matrix showing how Natalie's responses were categorised**

One of the interesting aspects is how, over the course of the year, she began to re-evaluate this view. A comment from a tutor encouraging students to challenge and critique tutors appeared to trigger a re-evaluation of her expectations of the tutors' role, as illustrated below:

*'...yeah, it is difficult sort of to take on board, I think.. I don't know why... like I said, if I was talking to her just one on one, and she said something I didn't agree with, I probably like, no, no, or if is elsewhere, because it was sort of more formal , you are in university, you have come here to learn.'*



Her tone of voice suggested some surprise that what the tutor was asking her to do was actually something that was quite familiar to her in her home life, but she had not necessarily associate with university. It was also a surprise to me to see how unlikely this way of being in seminars seemed to a highly articulate and engaged student. The quote illustrates the contrasting and distinctive identity she appears to have at home, and how she acts at university:

**'I do it at home!'**

*'... me and my husband , we disagree on everything..we are always debating stuff, and I am throwing ideas, and he is throwing ideas... and the kids are always there when it is happening. And we value their opinion, and if they think something else, we ask them why and things like that...'*

The summary of Natalie's and others pedagogical practices, and the selected extracts suggest that Natalie is a student who seem to accept of established cultures and someone who seems keen to work around them to the best of her abilities. She is a reflective individual and during the course of the year she was beginning to question her assumptions about the role of the tutors and students in a university context.

**4.3.5 Lilly's significant events and practices**

*I am a conscientious and quietly confident student. I do not always say a lot in seminars, but if I feel strongly about issues, I am confident at expressing my opinions. I have had an uneventful and straight forward educational experience before I came to university. I have always known that I want to be a teacher.*

Unlike the other participants Lilly talked less, but her responses were succinct and to the point. Like most, Lilly seemed to have clear expectations of seminars that resonate with aspects of school pedagogy. Thus, as the table shows, she considers tutors modelling and demonstrating classroom related aspects as more enabling than seminars with limited tutor direction.

	<b>Pedagogical practices:</b> what people do related to teaching and learning strategies/approaches in seminars
<b>Events/practice</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happens</li> <li>• What people do</li> </ul>	<b>Self:</b> participate as and when I feel it is necessary <b>Tutors:</b> some give clear learning objectives, some do not <b>Peers:</b> no data
<b>Views:</b> about events and practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling</li> <li>• Disabling</li> <li>• neutral</li> </ul>	<b>Enabling:</b> when tutors model/demonstrate good practice <b>Disabling:</b> when ideal pedagogy is not evident in seminars, there is little or limited direction from tutors, when I feel I haven't taken anything away, repeated content <b>Neutral:</b> no data

**Table 11: matrix showing how Lilly's responses were categorised**

At the same time, Lilly's comment about the two seminars below also shows that clarity about the purposes and aims of seminars is also an important consideration. The following illustrates the dilemmas of seminar attendance when the outcomes do not match expectations:

**'Should I have gone?'**

*Lilly: sometimes (hesitant), but not always, I don't see it... like our DN ones are really clear, this is what you are going to be learning, this is quite good. I think some xxx do try, because they always have at the beginning, this is the aim xxx out of it, that's good; but maybe the aims aren't 'what we need' (very slowly and hesitant).*

*Fufy: have you thought that about yourself or is it something you talk about..*

*Lilly: after the geography and history, we were a bit like, we didn't feel we were getting enough out of it , so we like , we discussed what we thought could have been better..but, yeah, sometimes when you come out and you are really like.. should I have gone.. you learnt that in the lecture and they haven't developed it...then lots of times and you come out that was really good, I 've got, I have learnt a lot from that lesson, kind of depends on the subject, what we are doing, and how it is done...*

Lilly's reflective approach is illustrated in the second part of this extract. Here she acknowledges the frustrations of some seminars, but also shows an ability to critically reflect on the possible reasons for her dissatisfaction.

*Fufy: it seems like there are lots different varieties and things that can come out of seminars*

*Lilly: yeah, I'd say there is... I think it is hard because we are teachers, we are training to be teachers.. we are told like, this is. How you need to teach like creatively, this was, this way... so when we are taught in seminars, I think we can be quite critical... they are not doing it critically...they are not always doing it creative that was quite boring (sing song voice).. you can be too critical*

The participants' responses show distinctive ways of 'doing' seminars. For Daisy, it was uncertainty and anxiety that seemed to colour her responses, while Jess's responses were characterised by her desire to be a good student, together with her doubts and questions about the experiences that are offered. The salient aspect of Natalie's responses was the contrasting roles and identities she took in her personal life and within the university. At home, she seemed more critical and questioning, but less so in seminars. In Linzi's case, a striking aspect was her pro-activity and assertiveness in ensuring that she is an active participant in her learning. Lilly was the more non-committal of the group approach; however there was some indication of a reflective perspective about her experiences and some uncertainties about the pedagogy and practice in some of her seminars.

#### **4.4 Documentary evidence**

To get an insight into how learning and learning contexts are represented and conceptualised at institutional level, I examined the following documentary sources.

- staff/student meeting agenda and meeting notes, where selected student representatives meet with course tutors and administrative officers on a regular basis.
- module evaluation form that students complete at the end of the module.
- a policy document that outlines priorities for teaching, learning and assessment (Sheffield Hallam university, 2006/10)

The staff/student meetings are intended to give students an opportunity to voice their views about matters that concern them. Analysis of the minutes highlighted several characteristics of institutional practices. For example, the agenda is pre-determined and includes a set number of key categories (Appendix 29). The analysis of one of the

meetings 2009/10 suggests that students mainly used these meetings to ask for clarification on a wide range of topics, such as payment for travel money or to find out about the timing of specific training events (Appendix 29). In addition, they used these meetings to report concerns about course experience relating to the perceived variability in placement grading, or confusing instructions with regards to school placements. References to seminars appeared under the ‘university-based’ training agenda. The majority of the seminar related comments/questions usually centred on issues around equity regarding different levels of assignment support, typified by comments such as, ‘xxx was brilliant, but, in another group, Y only gave a brief overview’, and tutors’ apparently contradictory definitions of key words and concepts and the way tutors dealt with peers’ inappropriate behaviour.

In the module evaluation forms students were given 10 questions to answer. Out of the 10 questions, 8 asked students to rate the module on content based questions, such as ‘did the module meet its objectives’? Only two questions directly related to the learning context, and referred to teaching quality and the quality of tutor support (Appendix 27). In my institution’s teaching, learning and assessment policy document, it was clear while the student experience informed the policy document, reference to learning context was limited.

Learning, teaching and assessment policy	Module evaluation faculty of development and society	Staff student meeting agenda-faculty of development and society
no specific reference to learning context and pedagogy	focus on evaluating ‘teaching’, e.g. rate the quality of teaching  typical questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• did you have support</li> <li>• did it meet its objective?</li> </ul>	priority to organizational and management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• no mention of learning</li> <li>• seminar relegated to university matters</li> <li>• ‘complaints ‘ forum rather than discussion</li> <li>• learning about teaching</li> </ul>

**Table 12: summary of relevance of key institutional documents to seminar related aspects**

The analysis of the institutional documentary evidence suggests a number of things. Firstly, references to learning contexts are at best minimal, implicit and at worst non-

existent. It also seemed that organisational and management rather than learning related aspects seem to dominate these valuable spaces for student voice.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

There were considerable overlaps in what participants talked about in the interviews (see table 6, p.71). This is unsurprising, as the participants responded to similar interviews questions, and were all undertaking an intensive 3 year teaching degree. The individualised perspectives also suggested that underpinning participants' reflections are the individual histories and experiences, as well as their assumptions about teaching and learning. The documentary evidence also suggests how institutional tools and practices might contribute to views about seminars. Therefore, one of the implications of the findings is to use cultural perspectives such as Bourdieu's theory of practice to analyse the significance of the data.

In addition to substantive issues, there are also methodological implications in terms of further analysis and interpretation. For example, there is the ethical question of using participants 'innocent' responses for perusing my own research agenda in ways that do not make any sense to the participants. Further, there is a danger that in pursuing my agenda, I am prioritising my meanings over what the participants' said (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). In reality, it is inevitable that meanings will be transformed in some way over the course of the research process. However, by presenting participants' experience first (in chapter 6), and providing examples of extended extracts rather than quotes, I hope to show some transparency about how I interpreted the data (Mason, 2002).

The data also raises epistemological issues; for instance, the study's epistemological position is that data is constructed contextually. However, my interpretation can only be based on participants' reflection on their experiences, and within the context of the interview. This has implications for kinds of analysis and interpretation that I can do, and the conclusions I can draw (Silverman, 2007). Using Bourdieu's theory of practice will be helpful in turning the focus on the wider social and cultural meanings that underline participants perspectives rather than a focus on what participants said (Hodkinson *et al.* 2007c).

The rest of the chapters are structured as follows. In chapter 5, I will use Bourdieu's theoretical perspectives to analyse the meanings and significance of the elements that constitute participants' seminar experiences. Therefore, chapter 5 addresses the research questions, 'What kinds of meanings do participants attach to the constituents of their seminar experiences? In chapter 6 and 7, I focus on the mechanism of meaning making using the concept of field and habitus respectively. In chapter 6, I will explore the role of discourses in how seminar constituents might work together to create meanings about the seminar 'field. This chapter address the research question, 'how might these constituents work together to create and sustain meaning'. Chapter 7 also address the research question how might these constituents work together to create and sustain meaning? By using habitus as a tool for examining how far individuals' strategies reflect a specific habitus, and how practices interact with the field to create and sustain meanings about seminar experiences.

## **5 What kinds of meanings do participants attach to the constituents of their seminar experiences?**

As outlined earlier, the majority of the participants' reflections referred to peers, families and in particular, to tutors' practices and pedagogies. Evidence from documentary sources also suggested that in indirect ways, they also constituted seminar experiences through the structure and content of practices that they enabled and disabled. Using Bourdieu's theory of practice, the purpose of this chapter is to analyse and interpret the meanings participants attach to the constituents of their seminar experiences. The chapter is structured as follows: in section 5.1, I outline the significance of tutors and interpret the findings using aspects of theory of practice. I follow the same pattern for peers (section 5.2) families (section 5.3) and institutional artefacts (section 5.4).

### **5.1 The significance of tutors**

A recurring theme in participants' accounts was the centrality of tutors in their experiences of seminars. This is perhaps unsurprising as conceptualising learning in terms of teaching quality is a popular educational discourse. For example, in latest student experience survey for higher education students in England, (HEFCE 2005-2011) one of the key variables were tutors' enthusiasm, ability to explain, and disciplinary/subject knowledge. The importance of the 'teacher' is also reflected in Biggs's constructive alignment teaching model for HE (Biggs, 2003; Fry *et al.*, 2009, see p. 14). In the following section, I consider the significance of tutors using a Bourdieuan perspective.

#### **5.1.1 What tutors do**

What tutors did in seminars was a key mediating influence on the seminar experience. Seminars about the practicalities of classroom teaching had different meanings compared to those that focused on background contextual issues such as policy. Moreover, where tutors positioned themselves, how they talked and whether they left the room or not during seminars seemed highly significant. As the following extract shows, even the mere act of a tutor's 'walk about' during small group discussion had particular significance and meaning for Natalie.

*Natalie: every time she came and stood, we all seemed to go quiet, I don't think it is intentional, you just go oooh!! and you don't realise and then it is hard to go back on track*

*Fufy: right, what does it make you feel like when, you might be saying the wrong thing or is it automatic?*

*Natalie: I think it is just automatic don't think it is the wrong thing, kind of fear... I just think you sense that they are coming over, and everyone clams up or the person who is speaking is really conscious of what they are saying and then they are like, and they are like 'um , I am going to start winding down'*

I was surprised to hear Natalie's account, as this is reaction was something I would expect in a school rather than a university context. As the extract shows, it seems that the tutor's presence influenced the learning context; a relaxed discussion suddenly became uncomfortable.

Natalie's use of the terms '*it is automatic*' and '*it is not intentional*' are also significant. On one level she might simply be referring to her immediate emotional reaction. A Bourdieuan perspective, on the other hand, would see these comments as evidence of participants' ingrained responses in the presence of more knowledgeable and powerful others (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). It is also possible that her reaction to the event only acquired significance and meaning during the interviews and that I may be over-interpreted her comments. Nonetheless, the account does seem to fit with how Natalie general perceptions of learning in HE (see section 4.3.4).

### **5.1.2 Relationships**

The relationship between tutor and participant was an important constituent of the seminar experience. Some actively cultivated their relationships with tutors. For instance, in Daisy's case, good relationships with tutors enabled her to ask for specific guidelines for assignments without apparent risk of embarrassment. Linzi, on the other hand, seemed to see positive relationships with tutors as a useful means of achieving her learning goals (see p. 78). In general, however, it seemed that participants avoided challenging or questioning tutors to maintain respectful relationships with their tutors (see p. 82).

In Bourdieu's theory practice is a consequence of the differing positions members occupy within a given field. Thus, participants' practices with regards to relationships could be seen as outcomes of their perceptions of differences between tutors and students. Thus, Daisy's and Linzi's active management of their relationships with tutors could be seen as a



way of accessing scarce resources. In Daisy's case it was about accessing additional information about assignments, whilst for Linzi it was about creating the kind of environment that enabled her to relate to tutors in more collegial ways. For Bourdieu, these practices show how the social world and the associated practices are always constituted by the hierarchical and unequal social spaces individuals occupy. Consequently, the relationships between students and tutors would be much more significant than the relationship between peers (Grenfell & James, 1998). Nonetheless, Bourdieu's apparent reductionist perspective does seem to rule out the influence of affect and individual personality. For example, individuals' behaviour might be due to dispositions that have nothing to do with unequal relationships. However, by problematising the importance and consequences of relationships with powerful others he raises interesting questions about the seminar field.

## **5.2 The significance of peers**

Participants mainly talked about their peers in relation to peers' impact on the learning environment. For instance, Jess valued her group's positive environment that made it safe for her to express her viewpoints, because the seminar group is *'quite close and get on'*. On the other hand, Daisy's peers' practices sometimes proved to be a barrier to achieving her goals. For example, when there is lively discussion, she seems dissatisfied which she described as follows: *'...it ends in an uproar...I think this and I think this, I don't know sometimes, I just think...what is right?'* Natalie and Linzi, on the other hand, reflected on the ambiguity and uncertainty about their student identities due to their role as their groups' 'unofficial' spokespersons.

Participants' accounts of their peers suggest a sense of struggle and competition, rather than collaboration and cooperation. Bourdieu's concept of capital can be a way of thinking about some of the tensions between peers. For example, Linzi disapproves of students who rarely speak, so that she sometimes does not want to contribute her ideas and insights for others' benefit. Daisy is frustrated with her disruptive group and also sees the open-ended discussion based seminars as distractions from the ultimate goal of academic success. In both cases, it is possible to see their reflections in terms of access to educational capital. Similarly, Natalie and Linzi's uncertainties about their role in seminars could also be seen in terms of the struggles that Bourdieu associates with fields. Whilst the difference between

peers in terms of educational capital is clearly less than the one between tutors and students, the insights seem to suggest that, on a lesser scale, how participants see their peers' roles and practices could also be seen as struggles to maintain and enhance their positions in the seminar field.

### **5.3 The significance of families and significant others**

All the participants, apart from Lilly, made references to families and significant others in the course of the interviews. In Jess's case, her 'make the most of it' attitude, seemed part of her family values and expectations, and something that seemed to play a part in the way she participated in seminars (see p. 76). Similarly, Linzi recalled having influential teachers in primary school, which helped her to overcome her '*issues about being wrong in class*', to develop the confident and assertive identity she now has. In line with both socio-cultural and cultural theoretical perspectives, the way the participants related the influence of these early experiences to their seminar experiences highlights the historical and social dimension of culture and its production (Vygotsky, 1978).

From a Bourdieuan perspective, families and significant others play a critical role in cultural reproduction. As a result of their own interactions with societal contexts, and the way they position themselves in the social world, families are early contributors to enculturation. Therefore, they have a powerful role to play in developing the dispositional and attitudinal elements of their children (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). As shown above, some of the participants did reflect on these early experiences to explain some of their practice in seminars. However, in contrast to Watson *et al.*'s findings about students' transition to university, the participants in this study did not make specific links between their early experiences and practices and current perspectives of teaching and learning (2009). For example, there was no reference to family or school experiences in relation to their conception of tutors, and what and how they should learn in seminars. Whilst this was a surprising outcome, it may be due to the limited amount of biographical data.

### **5.4 The significance of institutional artefacts –physical space, module evaluation forms and staff student meetings**

The physical context as described in the study's context is an important part of the seminar experience. Although the learning environment is often taken for granted, a closer look

suggests that, in fact, many of the features are meaningful. For example, the way the room and resources are organised can impart implicit messages about what will happen in that space, and how it will happen (Appendix 31). For example, grouped tables would seem to prioritise group work and an expectation that knowledge is constructed collaboratively. In contrast, rows of tables and static lecterns could reinforce a transmission view of learning. The significance of this variety is that potentially, students receive mixed messages about what is valued and their own and tutors' role in teaching and learning in an HE environment.

A Bourdieuan perspective suggests a further level of complexity about the meaningfulness of the physical aspects of seminars. Room layout, for example, triggers far more than an individual interpretation of cultural tools. Instead, it might be seen as promoting the 'ruling ideas of the ruling class'. In this case, it could be seen to reinforce the tutor's status and authority, and students' view of tutors as all knowing authorities that further reinforces and sediments inherent societal inequalities (Darder *et al.*, 2008)

As shown in the findings chapter, evaluation questions and agenda items appear to promote particular meanings about seminars (Appendix 27, Appendix 29). For example, whilst the use of staff student meetings might be seen as a good way of prioritising the student voice, the use of pre-set agenda items could also be seen to favour some discourses at the expense of others. Similarly, the questions in the module evaluation survey appear to prioritise instrumentalist views of knowledge that could also implicitly reinforce the transmission discourse about teaching and learning (Ashwin, 2008).

These artefacts illustrates the idea of field of power that Bourdieu articulates to highlight the relational nature of fields and the opportunities institutional artefact might provide for symbolic violence (see p. 29). For instance, they could be seen as ways of maintaining the hierarchal nature of the institutional field of power. In contrast, if student/staff meetings encouraged students to debate teaching approaches or examined how far students' experiences promoted critical thinking and reflection, such a culture could challenge established views of authority and status. Equally, if student evaluations assessed the extent to which the modules developed critical and collaborative thinking and knowledge construction, then these too could be problematical for the existing institutional hierarchies. As Hodkinson *et al.* argue, artefacts and institutions play an important role in the

continuation of culture (Hodkinson, *et al.*, 2007a). By drawing on the wider field of power, and the relational nature of different fields, Bourdieu focuses attention on practices that sustain the dominant cultural meanings about teaching and learning.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to gain deeper insights into meanings about seminar experiences by analysing the significance of the constituents of the seminar experience. From the participants' experiences, the seminar context does seem to be a complex learning environment where meaning permeates all levels of the seminar experience. By using Bourdieu's theory of practice, I have undertaken an analytical interpretation of the significance of the constituents that suggests complex cultural meanings about seminar experiences. From this theoretical perspective, there does seem to be a degree of permeability in the seminar field that suggests the influence of the wider context through dominant cultural meanings. Nonetheless it is more than likely that the participants may not recognise this interpretation; according to Bourdieu, however, this is part of individuals' misrecognition of the way the social world works.

So far, I have outlined the key constituents of participants' seminar experiences and explored their significance in terms of Bourdieu's theory of practice. In chapter 6, my focus is on the mechanism of meaning making, and mainly draws on Bourdieu's conceptual tools of field. As I have argued in chapter 3, there are close parallels between dominant discourses and Bourdieu's theory of practice. Thus, in chapter 6, I will analyse the role discourses play in connecting the constituents of seminar experiences to influence participants' experiences and perceptions of the seminar field.

## **6 How do constituents work together to create meaning?**

The purpose of this chapter is to get more in-depth insights into seminar fields by examining how participants' construct meanings about their experiences. As shown in chapter 3, field is an important concept in Bourdieu's theory of practice (see p.31). It is often conceptualised as a semi-porous space of relationships that is defined by members' unequal access to capital, and the site where cultural meanings about the social world are produced and reproduced (Bourdieu, 1977). Thus, unlike individualised perspectives of learning, seminars are context rich; in addition to the physical structures curriculum and teaching strategies; they also include relationships, practices and the influence of the course and department fields.

In this chapter, I examine how far discourse is implicated in the kinds of meanings participants attach to constituents of their seminar experiences. Thus, using the concept of discourse (see section 2.1.3.1), I will analyse the extent to which in the seminar field discourse connects constitutes to create and sustain meanings about seminars. Another focus for this chapter is whether participants' experiences of contrasting and overlapping discourses, in any way influence the way they construct seminars. Thus, I use the concept of dissonance to explore how the meeting points and disjuncture between different discourses might contribute to participants' constructions of seminars. In this context, I use dissonance to express a state of 'want of concord or harmony (between things); disagreement, incongruity' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989).

Thus, the objectives of chapter 6 are:

- To analyse how discourse connects constituents to create and sustain meanings, and,
- To analyse the effect of contrasting and overlapping discourse in how participants constructed seminars

The chapter is structured as follows. In the first part (up to section 6.1.2), I analyse selected extracts from the perspectives of the discourses I discussed in chapter 2 (see p.38): the 'good practice' and 'education as transmission'. From section 6.2 onwards, I analyse the extent to which the dissonance between powerful discourses and HE discourse might influence how participants construct meanings about seminars.

### 6.1.1 The discourse of good practice

In Daisy, Natalie and Jess's narratives, there were frequent references to the role of the tutor as modelling good practice for classroom teaching. Consequently, when tutors engaged in such practices, participants often saw this positively. As Jess commented, '*this is what we are here for...*'

In her diary extract below, Natalie's is distinguishing between an effective and less effective seminar. It is possible to see this as reflecting the influence of the good practice discourse. In contrast to the English seminars, the Music and Art seminars seem more useful because the tutors demonstrate techniques and activities to do in school:

*'I feel perhaps that English and Maths session could be like this. They seem to be directed at our knowledge and I understand what this is, but it would be beneficial to have more ideas on how to teach it. For example, when being told about complex sentences, it would have been nice to have ideas on how to teach it...'*

The phrase '*it is directed at our knowledge*' is interesting because it seems to suggest a categorisation of seminars in terms knowledge and practical application. Clearly, Natalie seems to suggest that whilst the knowledge is beneficial, the absence of practical applications seems problematic. It is also possible to see the use of the phrase, '*it is more beneficial*', as the influence of the good practice discourse because it implies that what works in one context can work just as well in another context (Alexander, 2002). It is also possible, however, that a preference for practical seminars is for starting points to develop her own ideas rather than an expectation that the tutor's ideas to work in another context.

The importance of teaching ideas is also evident in Daisy's accounts. In the extract below Daisy is reflecting on the relevance of discussion based seminars. By this, she is referring to the kinds of seminars that invite students to discuss and debate educational issues. She seems to imply that because these seminars lack relevance to the assignment or to teaching practice, they are unsatisfactory.

*Daisy: like...for example, maths, this is an example, we always say this in Maths ...you will be discussing something, fair enough...or you will be...getting something on PowerPoint or whatever else...but when you really relate it to what we are doing sometimes you really think, well, let's think of some teaching ideas or let's think of ways we can assess or*

*something... so you can think... I learnt this in this seminar... in my block placement I am going use this...*

*Fufy: right*

*Daisy: so, in terms of what is useful and not...sometimes, maybe that's not...*

*Fufy: in terms of... transferring it?*

*Daisy: yeah sometimes, we could do with a lot more...ideas, you know? ideas... simple things to use...*

In the above extract, although Daisy seems to give some recognition to the relevance of the seminar, her body language seems to suggest that she was not convinced. In the extract below, when I asked her to reflect on the generalisability of 'teaching ideas', she seemed surprised and passionately insisted that her view is 'realistic' and an articulating of her views about what a teacher education course should be. The last phrase, referring to implications for school placement further illustrates its importance.

*Fufy: do you think they will work... I mean why are they...why do people think it is important?*

*Daisy: because that is the realistic, that's realistic, that's why we are here... we are learning ...all right...there is the background of it and all that... but...when you are in that block placement, in that classroom... it is no good if you have not got any teaching ideas or... any ways of putting things across...or activities.*

Once more it is possible that Daisy is referring to practical ideas as starting points. However, the way she contrasts these seminars with non-practical discussion based seminars suggests a possible influence of the good practice discourse. A consequence of this might be the influence it might have on the meanings she attaches to the constituents of her seminars experiences. Thus, it is possible to argue that by connecting the way participants interpret tutors' practices, peers' views and the priorities of the module evaluation tools, the good practice discourse promotes particular ways of constructing and interpreting seminar experiences at the expense of others (Appendix 27).

### **6.1.2 The 'education as transmission' discourse**

As I argued in chapter 3, the education as transmission discourse tends to conceptualise teaching and learning in terms of learners as an 'empty vessels', and the teacher as the

expert who transmits knowledge (Freire, 2000). This discourse was a recurring theme in most of the participants' reflections, and particularly salient in Natalie and Daisy's views on discussion-based seminars. For example, when Natalie says '*most of my friends agree that seminars don't help with the assignment*', it suggests a view of seminars as spaces for finding out about how to do assignments successfully. On the other hand, the interpretation could be different if by 'help' Daisy was referring to the extent to which the seminar develop an understanding of the aims and purposes of the module.

A more specific instance of the education as transmission discourse is outlined below, where Daisy is talking about seminars that take place near assignment hand-in time.

*Fufy: I like that ...just stop you there...cramming as much information as you can into our brains*

*Daisy: yes we are...*

*Fufy: just tell me, what do you mean?*

*Daisy: we are turning up to every seminar in the hope that it tells me something that...is going to make this assignment a bit more clear...that I might use...and it's like panic overload ...you are trying to get it all in your head*

*Fufy: right*

*Daisy: and everyone is like...if you still at the back you can see it...like...the teacher will say something and you see everyone's pen going 100 mile an hour and you think ...that's going in every single person's assignment! (laughter). I always think that...*

There is vivid imagery of 'cramming' as if the brain is a piece of luggage that can be stuffed with objects. Practices such as '*turning up to every seminar*' and pens going at '*100 miles an hour*' are evocative of seminars that are seen as a space for information gathering that appears to get particularly desperate nearer assignment dates.

Related to the idea of education as knowledge acquisition was the role of the teacher/tutor. Highlighting the importance of tutors, Natalie's response to a suggestion that books can be a source of ideas was '*...sometimes, the book is not enough sometimes, you need the teacher to actually say, if you do this, you do this...*' Similarly, in the extract below, having



reflected on the similarities between school and university pedagogy, Jess also appears to stress the importance of enthusiastic and knowledgeable tutors. Jess's conclusion seems to be that in some aspects at least, such as giving feedback, having authority and explaining, tutors should mirror school pedagogy.

*Jess: but some...but we have had some people just, quite ...quiet, and you just can't imagine them being in the classroom. We are ready to talk, ready to feedback now...even though we are adults, you still need... I still see them as the figure in front of the classroom, who still has to teach you...talking about tutor styles and how it falls short of expectations.*

*I need a little bit more than a 'right ok': because it doesn't say what we've you know... it's the best thing we have discussed, on the right lines ...or we are totally gone the wrong way*

*Fufy: so, you need that sometimes, is that how you feel?*

*Jess: ...kind of... the kids need it in school, you need it... not all the time...just, when you are talking about a topic that seemed, that you know has a right or wrong answer*

From Jess's perspective, it seems that the tutor clearly needs to demonstrate authority and be able to explain and scaffold the learning. There is no indication, however, that she could have addressed the concern in any other way, such as asking the tutor, asking peers or reading a text book on grammar to check her understanding. Furthermore, when she says '*the kids need it (feedback) in school, you need it*'; it also suggests some parallels between school and seminar context to be alike.

Similar to the good practice discourse, the education as transmission discourse also seems to connect some of the constituents of the seminar experiences. For example, both Jess and Daisy made frequent references about the extent to which school and university pedagogy should overlap. As the dominant discourse in schools is of teachers as information providers, then it is possible that seminar constituents such as tutors, practices are also interpreted from this perspective. At the same time, although in the university context views about knowledge should be distinct from school models of learning and learning processes (Bloom *et al.*, 1956), the institutional tools and their own professional context also appear to reinforce some aspects of the knowledge as transmission discourse.

## **Summary**

In conclusion, based on the evidence presented there seems to be some indication that the good practice and education as transmission discourse may be important part of the meaning making process in the way they seem to link constituents identified in chapter 6. It is important to note, however, that whilst I have made distinctions between different discourses, in reality these are my own constructs and one based on my interpretations of patterns and themes from the data. Moreover, I may not have fully considered overlaps between the discourses; for example, it is possible to see a connection between the good practices discourses that is expressed as participants' desire for teaching ideas, and the discourse of education as transmission, where tutors are seen as transmitters of knowledge.

So far, I have focussed on the influence of discourse in connecting aspects of seminar constituents to influence how participants construct their views of seminars. In the following section, I use the concept of dissonance to get further insights about the seminar field by examining participants' seminar constructions in more depth.

## **6.2 Dissonance and discourse**

In chapter 3, I argued how Bourdieu's theory of practice can be a useful theoretical approach to explore the influence of the wider context on perspectives of seminars. I also argued that 'discourse' complements Bourdieu's 'ruling ideas' and can be a useful concept to investigate how powerful ideas contribute to cultural reproduction. 'Education as transmission' and 'good practice' discourses are examples of the way powerful ideas can define the ways in which education practices and policy are understood. In contrast, higher education also has pedagogical discourse about learning through collaboration and dialogue (Fry *et al.*, 2009, Savin-Baden, 2000). In this section, I use the idea of dissonance to explore what happens when dominant discourses come into contact with other discourses and practices. I hope to arrive at some conclusions about the extent to which dissonance between discourses and seminar practices contributes to perspectives about seminars.

### **6.2.1 How does dissonance between discourses construct perspectives of seminars?**

A significant theme in the participants' account was a polarised view of seminars along the 'good' and 'unsatisfactory' dimension. When dissonance was low, participants' seminar

experiences concurred with one or more of the dominant discourses on teaching and learning. The data showed that this was the case in most instance ‘good’ seminar experiences. The table below summarises the types of seminars that participants constructed as good or unsatisfactory. In most cases it is possible to detect the influence of particular discourse. The 'good' seminars were characterised either by their fast pace, enthusiastic tutors, ideas for teaching, or explicit support with assignment expectations. In contrast, participants constructed seminars as unsatisfactory when there was high dissonance between their expectations and the seminar reality.

	<b>Good</b>	<b>Unsatisfactory</b>
Linzi	Relationships Investigative Maths	Main speaker Didactic
Natalie	Know the tutors inspirational	Tutor standing over you Being judged Only one seminars with no teaching ideas
Daisy	science	discussion Lack of relevance
Jess	Enthusiasm Recognised – felt proud	Boredom repetition policy discussion
Lilly		No specific application Tutors don't follow good practice

**Table 13: examples of factors that characterise good/unsatisfactory and ‘neutral’ seminar experiences**

The matrix below (figure 3) illustrates how participants constructed their experiences in relation to perceived levels of dissonance; however, the crosses are illustrative and do not represent actual numbers of participants’ responses. The matrix also gives an opportunity for generating questions to explore the data in more depth. The following questions form the basis of analysing participants' constructions of seminars.

- Does high dissonance always result in ‘unsatisfactory’ seminars?
- Does low dissonance always result in ‘good seminars?’

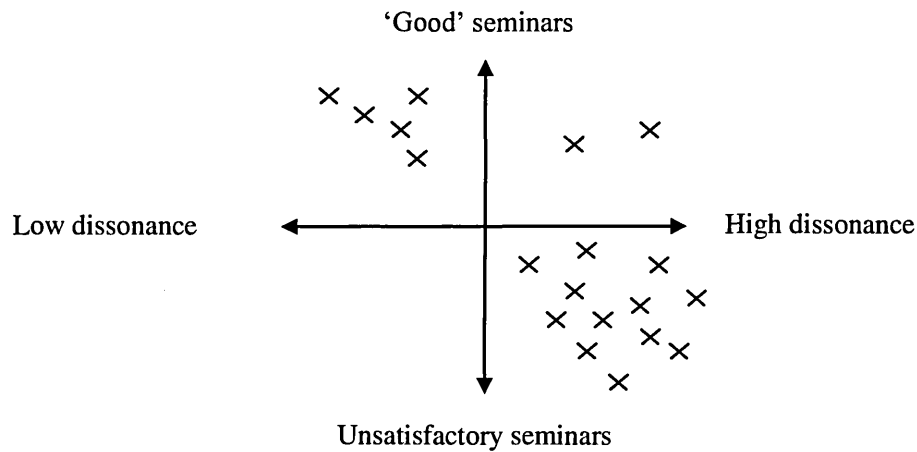


Figure 3: matrix to explore relationships between dissonance and seminar experiences.

### 6.2.1.1 Low dissonance and 'good' seminars

When there was low dissonance, that is, when the seminar practices matched the dominant discourse such as 'good practice', there was synergy between participants' expectations and the seminar. The extract below, which I have already included in chapter 4, is a good example of low dissonance and perceptions of 'good' seminars. Daisy had been reading an extract from her diary about this particular seminar, when she realises that what she has written in the diary clearly expresses her, as yet, unarticulated views about seminars: *'oh I do make sense' this links to everything I said.'*

The extract is an example of low dissonance between what happened in the seminar and dominant discourses. The influences of dominant discourse are clear; school pedagogy is indicated in terms of the tutor's practice (thinking time, engagement, information), education as transmission in relation to 'a file full of good ideas', and good practice as exemplified *'...Oh I am going to use that!'*. The terms *'it's brilliant'* and *'oh my God'*, further illustrate the meaningfulness of this experience.

## **‘Oh, I do make sense’**

*‘...and then the other one. I did science...Oh I do make sense, this links to everything I said. I put it was highly interactive.. ehm and we actually got to do the investigation and right them, so we can remember them and then I put that we were given thinking time and it created a bit of suspense..., he is so good at it...he is like 'what do you think it is going to happen?' and everyone was like oh and then it is like 'wow' and then I said, we got to work in a group and, and oh my god.. we know how to adapt the investigation to suit the classroom.. and that's what I mean, it is good to be able to apply it and then again I said that he used ICT.*

*oh it is brilliant, you come out and you think...oh I am going to use that, I am going to use this...I go home and I do the experiments to my mum and dad. They never work when I try and do them but...got so many ideas and the assignment for that is actually creating a science file, which is going to be full of facts and ideas it's all in a topic, so if you are doing sound, you go back to sound and you are going to use it’*

There is no evident discrepancy between what happens in the seminar and Daisy's expectations of a 'good' seminar, events are predictable and carefully managed by the tutor. It is notable how this contrasts with the less powerful HE pedagogical discourses such as learner autonomy and learning through collaboration and dialogue. If learner autonomy is interpreted as developing students' independence and ability to learn for themselves, then, the highly dependent student role in the above extract clearly seem contradictory.

Similarly, Jess's reflections on a 'practical' seminar offer another illustration of how low dissonance leads to views about 'good' seminars. The context was an open-ended task for which she was complimented for the unusual way she tackled the problem. It was particularly significant for Jess, as she reflected ‘... He was really impressed and he got the other teacher to have a look... I was really sort of proud of myself’. In contrast to Daisy's extract, the influence of key discourses was not as explicit, although there was some indication of school related pedagogy in the way she communicated her delight at being recognised and publicly commended by the tutor.

### **6.2.1.2 Low dissonance and ‘unsatisfactory’ seminars**

There was no evidence in my data to support the idea that low dissonance was associated with ‘unsatisfactory’ seminars. For instance, none of the participants expressed

dissatisfaction with practical seminars. It is possible that the particular context of teacher education course and professional standards (Appendix 26, Appendix 30) promote the idea that there are discrete teaching approaches that can be replicated in different context might be one reason. Another reason might be that the participants did not have positive experiences of engaging and stimulating discussion based seminars. Surprisingly, there was some anecdotal evidence from a student and staff course meetings that suggested that students wanted more discussion based seminars. However, without knowing what is meant by 'more discussion' it is difficult to comment on the significance of this comment, although it would appear to contradict participants' dissatisfaction with discussion based seminars.

In summary, it seems that low dissonance between popular discourses and what happens in seminars seems likely to lead to positive rather than negative constructions of seminars. The next section explores what happens when there is high dissonance between discourse and seminar practices.

#### **6.2.1.3 High dissonance and 'unsatisfactory' seminars**

In general, participants related more accounts of unsatisfactory seminars than good ones (see p.99, table 13). I define high dissonance as situations where participants' experience of seminars contrasts with HE pedagogical discourses that see effective learning as a product of collaboration and knowledge construction. For example, when seminars prioritised educational policy or ideas and concepts, participants seemed to see these as less effective.

Jess, for example, expressed dissatisfaction when content appeared to be repeated in different seminars. Her comment that repetition '*doesn't seem productive*' once again suggests a view that reflects the education as transmission discourse. In the following extract Jess is recounting her assessment of the tutor's response to the repeated content in the seminar:

*'She was like 'ah, we will do it again...' but if you have already done it twice, you don't want t...especially when you are in your second year... you don't feel you need to do the same thing three times... it doesn't seem productive.*

Lilly's account of a seminar on risk assessment also highlighted some tensions between her expectations and a seminar and the tutor's expectations of self-directed learning.

*'...we got told to go and do a risk assessment, that was it risk assessment...we didn't really go over...I thought it would have been better if we did it as a group, and could have picked up bits as a group like this is how you would do it with children rather than we go out to do it ourselves, because we didn't actually learn anything...from us trying to do it ourselves...'*

It seems that Lilly could not see this seminar positively, as illustrated by the comment '*...we didn't actually learn anything...from us trying to do it ourselves*'. It was also interesting that like all the other participants, while Lilly was full of ideas and suggestions on how to improve things, she seemed unable or unwilling to share this insight with tutors.

It seemed that when there is high dissonance, participants were more likely to construct seminars in negative rather than positive terms. Lilly preferred the tutor to be like a 'teacher' and did not see the value or potential of independent learning. In this case, the lack of tutor direction seemed to create a high degree of dissonance resulting in unsatisfactory experiences of seminars. The examples cited above also further illustrate the influence of dominant discourse on how participants' constructed their experiences of seminars.

As stated earlier, participants recounted more experiences of ineffective seminars than good ones. However, without detailed knowledge about the seminar contexts, it is difficult to come to any firm conclusions about these polarised perceptions. The prominence of negative experiences could also be due to the particular context of the interview; the research context was an unusual opportunity for students to talk to tutors about things they do not usually have an opportunity to express. As one of the survey respondent commented, '*we never get asked about things like this...*'

#### **6.2.1.4 High dissonance and 'good' seminars**

As indicated in previous sections and shown on figure 3, low dissonance characterised most of the views about good seminars. Nonetheless, in one instance, Jess positively reflects on a 2 hour seminar/lecture by a visiting school teacher. This was surprising, as in her other accounts, she clearly expressed her preference for active teaching styles and dissatisfaction with didactic approaches to teaching. On further probing, however, it appeared that, the

fact that this was a visiting teacher and not a university tutor, who was talking about her specialist interest in school. This seemed to be a factor in the way Jess rationalised her positive assessment of the seminar due to the potential usefulness of the teacher's perspective that was based on real school experiences. It would seem that high dissonance is contextual, in some cases potentially unpopular seminars could be perceived positively.

In summary, it seems that discourse has a role in how participants constructed their experience and perception of seminars. The analysis so far suggests that the context in which students learn is in fact a much more complex than Biggs and others might suggest (Hodkinson, *et al.*, 2007; Grenfell & James, 1998). In the next section I conclude the chapter by analysing the significance of the analysis from a Bourdieuan perspective.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

Examining the influence of discourses on participants' experiences and perceptions has illustrated the permeability of the seminar field. For example, because of the influence of transmission discourse, Jess takes a highly instrumental perspective of seminars, and consequently disapproves of other types of seminars where discussion rather than information is a priority. Furthermore, it also seems that discourse plays an important role in connecting the significant constituents of seminar experiences to maintain the existing inequalities in the seminar field. For example, the good practice discourse can link the different constituents to sustain particular cultural meanings about seminars.

The concept of dissonance further illustrates the complexities and relational nature of the seminar field. On one hand there are university pedagogical discourses about effective seminar learning, and on the other hand, there are the powerful discourses educational discourses. Unlike Bourdieu's study of the French higher education context, there is no clear case of students either seamlessly participating in, or being out of line with the university cultures. In different times and different contexts the seminar field appears to be constituted by contradictory and sometimes complementary discourses. Thus, in the context of teacher education students, the analysis of the seminar field suggests that seminars are more complex than Bourdieu's study of French higher educational context of the 1960s.



Exploring seminar as field has given useful insights into participants' perspectives of seminars. The analytical strategy, however, is not without its drawbacks. In addition to the issues around discourse (section 6.1.2), using dissonance as an analytical construct may have also favoured particular conclusions at the expense of others. For example, there seemed to be clear examples of dissonance between dominant discourse and university discourses about teaching and learning, but the analysis is based on the assumption that so called discussion based seminars are uniform. Similarly, there is an assumption that my own perspective of seminars as a site for learning and development mainly through dialogue and discussion is necessarily the same thing as the discussion seminars that the participants were referring to.

So far, I have examined some of the characteristics of the seminar field in broad terms, focussing on the shared perspectives about the meanings participants attach to their seminar experiences. In the next chapter, my focus once again shifts to the individual participants. Using the concept of habitus, I will analyse how individuals 'do' seminars, and if there are patterns of practices in their approaches to seminars that suggest a particular habitus. In addition, I will also consider how habitus relates to the seminar field, and how far the criticisms of habitus limit its usefulness as an analytical tool in the context of the current study.

## 7 Habitus, practices and meanings about seminars

In the previous chapter, I used Bourdieu's concept of 'field' to argue that in the seminar field, discourse appears to connect aspect of seminar constituents to influence participants' meanings about seminar experiences. In this chapter, I consider the extent to which individuals' practices are involved in reproducing cultural meanings about teaching and learning. Starting from the individuals' accounts, I analyse the data by examining the practices the participants are most and least likely to engage in. From this, I will consider where these practices suggest a form of habitus and the extent to which they link the individual and the social (p. 31).

The analysis is based on 3 of the participants Jess, Linzi and Natalie (see section 4.3). I exclude Daisy and Lilly because their patterns of practice were less explicit, and/or broadly similar to the others. For the purpose of continuity, I introduce each participant with the same pen portrait as chapter 5. Thus, the analysis and interpretation of the following cases attempts to address the following questions:

- To what extent do individual practices relate to a type of 'student' habitus?
- In what ways do participants' practices interact with the seminar field?

### 7.1 Jess

*I am 20 year old student, I have a great tutor group, after the initial awkwardness of getting to know new people, and I have formed great friendships. I am an outgoing and bubbly person. I have made great friends in university. My friends, are really supportive, I often asked them for advice and help each other out. I enjoy my course, my first year was a bit overwhelming, I know now what should have done, I am catching up now.*

The analysis of Jess's reflections suggested a particular pattern of practices (see p. 76). For instance, she is more likely to attend seminars even when she finds them irrelevant or uninteresting, and would often articulate clear expectations about her own and others' behaviour in seminars. For example, comments such as 'you can't go round telling people that they are wrong' or, that in seminar discussions it is important to '...see that not

*everybody agrees with everything, but you need to be able to say why you think'* characterised her responses.

Nonetheless, there are some things that Jess is less likely to do. For instance, although she would often question the relevance and usefulness of some seminars, she would not consider challenging a tutor. Indeed when I asked her why, her response was: *'I don't want to embarrass them; I could be in the same position'*. In the extract below Jess is responding to my question about the possibility and usefulness of student-led seminars. Her response gives a vivid illustration of practice that Jess is unlikely to consider appropriate.

*'... I think... I can see where they are coming from..., but I think they do need to be tutor led... especially in ours... because if... like the tutor obviously poses the point, and we could sit there for two hours speaking about the same point over and over again.. and the tutor does..like...just holds it all back and makes you stop and think and then you have considered the different viewpoints...,I think the tutor is there....to help...to give you...to pass on their knowledge and to make you think about things they have seen and done...and if it is student led, you wouldn't get all... I don't think they would be able to talk through their knowledge they have seen in school, because it will be more focussing on what we talk...like want to know...but they (tutors) do know anyway...they do know the best things we need to know about to get into school, because they have done it...*

This is perhaps an extreme example; I include it here because of the visible uncertainty and confusion that student-led seminars seemed to evoke, and the layers of discourse that seemed to permeate her response. Assuming that Jess and I had the same conception of student-led seminars, it would seem that what Jess considers normal and acceptable in seminars would be practices that fitted in with the idea that the tutors *'do know all the best things we need to know'*.

## 7.2 Natalie

*I am a mature student with a young family and a very busy life. Before I came to University, I worked as a teaching assistant. I used to think that University was for very clever people, a close family has a PhD, and it was only late on that I thought I could go to University. My access course prepared me well for university study and helped to overcome some of my uncertainties. I have busy life, but I always give my best and try and attend most of the session at university. I still sometimes feel that University is scary but I am beginning to think and speak like someone who is at university.*

Similar to Jess, Natalie's practices also suggested some patterns of behaviours (see p. 80). For example, Natalie is more likely to carry out activities in seminars with diligence, complete independent tasks related to seminars, attend seminars, and also participate and expresses her opinions freely in seminars. At the same time, she is equally likely to have informal chats with her tutors but only it seems, as long as they take place 'outside in the corridor...' In the seminar itself, Natalie is less likely to have informal chats or to question and challenge her tutors' knowledge. Indeed, she recalled her surprise when one of her tutors suggested that challenging tutors' knowledge was a good thing to do.

The patterns in Natalie's practices are further complicated by her account of her home practices. As indicated already, in contrast to seminars, debate and discussions are a daily part of life (see p. 80). On one level, this seems to challenge Bourdieu's idea of practices as durable and transposable. However, when he states that 'It is only in relation to certain structures that habitus produces given discourses or practices...' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 13), he seems to be suggesting that in different fields the same habitus might result in different practices. It is possible therefore that the university cultural context generates one set of practices whereas the home environment produces another. It is still not clear nonetheless, whether individuals can have more than habitus, and if not, how the same habitus can generate such contrasting practices (Jenkins, 2002).

### 7.3 Linzi

*I am 20 year old student in my 2<sup>nd</sup> year of teacher training course. I come from down South and Sheffield is the furthest North I have been -but I like to so much I would like to stay and work in Sheffield. I wanted to take part in this research because I wanted to be involved with the university in a different way. I already volunteer as a course rep. I enjoy my course and I like to get really involved with whatever is going on.*

As discussed in chapter 6, Linzi's account was markedly different from the other participants (see p. 78). On one level, Linzi's practices, like her peers also adhered to standard student type behaviours; for instance, she respected her tutors' authority and knowledge and was least likely to challenge or question what they say. However, compared to her peers, she was more likely to express her ideas without fear, actively nurture relationships with tutors, and ask questions to clarify understanding or to express her viewpoint.

On the other hand, she was unlikely to engage in the more familiar student practices, such as taking a back seat and deference to tutors. Reflecting on the extracts I chose for in-depth analysis, she agreed with my selection '*...yes, it's me going in there and right, I am going to go in there and listen and participate, and I go there knowing that I can and I will do that...*'

The significance of the differences between Linzi and the other participants was that in some seminar contexts, her 'hidden' practices came to the fore. In the extract below, Linzi comments on a rare occasion where a seminar seemed more collegial rather than hierarchical.

*Linzi: ...it was unusual, but it was nice, because it makes you feel like an adult rather than a... I think that is the difference between 6<sup>th</sup> form and school and the university, cause she said, I don't understand that, can you explain it? That was quite nice*

*Fufy: and is that rare?*

*Linzi: yeah,, quite a lot of it, I don't know... but because physics and the maths background, I am quite confident with that...yes, it is quite nice...*

This extract suggests that in the right context, Linzi, like Natalie has the capacity to be and act differently, supporting Bourdieu's other view of practices as dependent on the type of field individuals interact with. However, there are unresolved questions about the supposed durability and transposability of habitus, which I will explore in the next section.

In summary, the three participants' practices do seem to suggest patterns of practice that fit in with traditional expectations of student and teacher. However, in Linzi's and to a less extent Natalie's case, the patterns of practices are less clear cut. In the next section I evaluate the extent which these practices suggest a type of habitus and if so, how far they sustain cultural meanings about seminars.

#### **7.4 Reflections on individual practices in relation to habitus**

As discussed in the previous section, there seem to be patterns of practices in Jess's and Natalie's and to a lesser extent in Linzi's practices. The patterns seem to broadly fit into cultural ways of being a student. For example, few if any would step out of this student role; all the participants attended seminars regularly, carried out given tasks in seminars, looked to tutors as sources of authority and rarely, if ever, challenged the status quo. The idea of tutors as authoritative and powerful and students as dependent seemed to permeate patterns of practices.

Bourdieu would argue that the commonalities of prior experience '...the homogeneity of conditions of existence....' in terms of schooling and current experiences and the similarity of seminar practices is indicative of a type of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 80). Habitus therefore, has the power to structure practices so that individuals can only act within a given possibility of practices. It is possible to argue that based on the data, the participants also acted within a restricted set of possibilities. The nature of these practices also suggests that on the whole, they interacted with the field in ways that sustained the dominant cultural meanings rather than challenge them.

Moreover, participants' resistance to seminar practices are also noteworthy. The participants rarely questioned or challenged seminar practices and neither did the institutional tools such as module evaluation. In Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence, he argues that members often misrecognise the forces that disadvantage their own empowerment. Thus, participants' apparent preferences for more school-like seminars

compared to discussion based seminars, or acceptance of the values and assumptions of the institutional artefacts suggests misrecognitions of cultural arbitrary values. The analysis of cultural meanings about seminars and individual practices is in line Bourdieu's view that the habitus interacts with the field in ways that sustain dominant cultural meanings.

Nevertheless, some of the participants' practices did not easily conform to a particular to a 'student' habitus. For example, despite the likelihood of 'homogeneity of existence' she shares with her peers, Linzi's practices were clearly distinctive. This raises questions about the role of other factors, such as reflection, personality or previous experience on individual practices (Bohman, in Shusterman, 1999). For instance, although the distinctive practices provide Linzi with different choices on how to act, they do not have a history of objective relations. As Jenkins argues, habitus '...fails to allow or account for social change at the level of the system and does not allow for meaningful agency or process at the individual level' (Jenkins, 2002, p. 118).

## **7.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I explored the nature of individuals' practices and the ways in which they interact with the seminar field to contribute to cultural meanings about ideas of being and learning in seminars. The analysis does seem to suggest that in broad terms, participants seem to have patterns of practices that suggest a type of habitus. Additionally, through these practices they interact with the seminar field in ways that reflect and sustain dominant discourses about teacher and student.

These conclusions are nevertheless, highly tentative; on a methodological level, the practices and categories are based on my selection and interpretation of patterns of responses. There may be other trends in the responses that I did not recognise or included due to over sight or because they did not fit in with my research questions and interests. Secondly, the complexity and imprecise nature of habitus means that conclusions about the nature of cultural meanings and their reproduction through participants' practices can only be partial. Nonetheless, as Nash argues, habitus is 'worth the candle', because it 'forces one to think' by prioritising the principles of action and its explanatory power about the way the social world works (Nash, 1999, p. 185). In this case, the analysis does give some indication of broad trends in participants' practices that appear to 'explain' how and why

participants' practices appear to sustain rather than question the dominant discourses about learning and participation in seminars.

Chapter 8 brings to a close a journey to find out the meanings participants attach to their seminar experiences, and how meanings about seminars might be reproduced in the seminar field. Having established a reflexive methodology in chapter 4, I began by identifying and analysing the constituents that contribute to participants experience of seminars (chapter 4), the meanings individuals attach to these constituents (Chapter 5), and how cultural meanings about seminars are produced through the influence of discourse on the seminar constituents (chapter 6). In chapter 7, I used the concept of habitus to examine what an analysis of participants' practices contributes to understandings about the process of cultural reproduction. Patterns of practice did seem to suggest some convergence with a student habitus. However, the limited data and some of the philosophical and practical difficulties with habitus meant that conclusion about how individuals strategies interact with field are highly provisional. In chapter 8, I provide a reflective account of the research process, the strengths and limitations, as well as the implications for research and policy. In chapter 9, I conclude the study by outlining recommendations and identifying possible areas for future research.



## **8 Discussion: reflections on research context, findings and implications**

As outlined in the introduction, the rationale for this study was based on the following assumptions: seminars are a significant part of the learning experiences in HE yet remain relatively under-researched, and that examining students' experiences and perceptions of seminars could give better insights into their learning experiences in HE. In the rest of the chapter I present the key conclusions in section 8.2, the strengths and limitations of the study 8.3, and the implications of the findings 8.3.1-8.3.3. I begin, however, by reflecting on key aspects of the research process that influenced the development of the research questions, the theoretical perspective and data collection, as a way of contextualising the study's conclusions.

### **8.1 Reflections on the underlying process of the research,**

The presentation of research reports can sometimes imply that research is a linear process, whilst in reality it is often iterative (Flick, 2009). For instance, in this study, placing the theoretical chapter before the methodology chapter might suggest that I identified the theoretical framework prior to data analysis. Or, having the research questions in the introductory chapter might also suggest that these were fully determined before the start of the research. However, whilst some aspects, such as the research focus were pre-determined, others evolved from the data. Flick argues that this 'process-orientated' understanding of research is a necessary and fundamental part of qualitative/interpretive research and reflects the particular characteristic of qualitative/interpretive research. This is because a 'process-orientated' understanding '...allows one to realise the epistemological principle of 'Vertschen' with a greater degree of sensitivity than in linear designs' (Flick, 2009, p. 94). Thus, by highlighting and reflecting on the research process, I can show how understanding of the substantive topic developed. In this section I trace the development of the research process to illustrate the study's iterative aspects.

The starting point for the research was my experience of two contrasting seminar contexts (1.1), which led to the first research question about the constituents of participants' experiences and perceptions of seminars, and the meanings they attached to these experiences. The emerging findings (4.1) in turn shaped three key aspects of the research

process: the theoretical perspective, the formulation of the second research question and the research methods.

In relation to the theoretical perspective, I had initially considered using socio-cultural perspectives to analyse the participants' perceptions and meanings. However, the emerging data suggested that socio-cultural perspectives may not sufficiently account for the complexity of the data. For instance, using socio-cultural perspective, I could not examine the significance of discourses in relation to the meanings participants attached to their experiences, thus limiting the in-depth insights I sought about students' perspectives of seminars (Appendix 32). Thus, similar to Hodkinson *et al.*'s research on FE students' experiences of learning, I adopted Bourdieu's cultural perspective to analyse the participants' social worlds (Hodkinson *et al.* 2008).

Using a cultural perspective impacted on the research process in two ways. Having analysed some of the key constituents of the participants' perceptions of seminars, I wanted to find out how and why meanings about seminars were generated. This led to second research question: 'how might constituents work together to create and sustain meaning?' Secondly, Bourdieu's emphasis on the role of the wider context led to an additional data sources. Thus, I also analysed the content of cultural artefacts such as module evaluation forms and staff student meeting agendas to get insights into the wider cultural context of participants' seminar experiences (p. 91).

In this section, I highlighted the iterative nature of the research process and the rationale for key decisions about theory, research questions and research methods. The significance of these decisions was that in turn, they influenced subsequent analysis and interpretations and the study's conclusions. In the following sections, I discuss the main findings and conclusions, the limitations of the study and the implications for practice, policy and research.

## **8.2 What have we learnt about participants' perceptions of seminars?**

The study's central question was 'what are second year teacher education students' experiences of learning and participating in seminars?' As highlighted in chapter 1, this question had specific aims and objectives (see p. 9) that arose out of the study's intellectual

project of knowledge-for-understanding and knowledge-for-practice (Poulson & Wallace, 2004).

The study met its theoretical aims; despite the limitations, Bourdieu's conceptual tools enabled a more in-depth engagement with the complexities of seminar contexts, and the consequence they appear to have for participants' perceptions of seminars. The study also met the methodological aims; both the research tools and the methodology complimented the theoretical and substantive aims.

The study addressed its substantive aim of providing in-depth insights into student teachers' experiences of seminars. In relation to RQ1, 'What meanings do participants attach to the constituents of their seminar experiences?' chapter 5 showed the meaningfulness of many aspects of participants' experiences. This was evident in the way peers' practices appeared to influence participants' practices, and how families contributed to meanings about seminars. Tutors' practices in particular played a major role in participants' experiences and perspectives of seminars. For instance, taken-for-granted practices such as tutors' positioning in the room, as well as associated pedagogies and practices appeared to affect how participants interpreted their experiences. Socio cultural perspective illuminated some of the significance of these findings. However, by highlighting the explicit and implicit ways in which these constituents might be meaningful, Bourdieu's theory of practice provided a more in-depth perspective of the significance of the participants' cultural practices.

In relation to RQ2, 'How might these constituents work to create and sustain meaning?' chapter 6 provided useful insights about the influence of context on participants' learning and participation in seminars, highlighting the complexity and permeability of the seminar field. The analysis of individual practices in chapter 7 also highlighted how some of these meanings are reproduced through individual practices. Whilst there were some significant individual differences, on the whole, there was a noticeable 'student habitus' that contributed to the reproduction dominant cultures. The analysis of documentary evidence also suggested that through 'pedagogic action', institutional and individual tutors' practices also played a part in sustaining dominant cultural meanings (Bourdieu, 1977).

The participants' reflections also gave useful insights about the characteristics of the seminars they experienced. There seems to be a wide range of seminar pedagogies and practices including discussion based, practical and workshop style seminars. At the same time, institutional tools and artefacts appeared to reinforce instrumentalist ideas about seminars (p. 91). Both these factors reinforced the complexities of learning and participating in seminars, supporting Knight's assertion that seminars are not merely containers for learning (Knights, 1995). Instead, they are spaces where participants' experiences are constituted by at least some of the following: the meanings participants attach to the constituents of their experiences, the variety of seminar contexts they experience, and the influence of the wider context on the kinds of meanings they construct about seminars.

The findings addressed the substantive aim of the study by providing in-depth insights about students' perceptions of their experiences of learning and participating in seminars. Nonetheless, the insights have limitations; they are based on students' perspectives only, so can only give partial insights about seminars. In addition, I have not analysed how participants locate seminars in the wider context of their university experience; for example, examining their accounts about related activities such as assignments, lectures, and school placements may have given different insights about their perspectives of seminars. Finally, as the analysis is based on multiple levels of interpretations of 'significant' events the conclusions are highly contextualised and are therefore unlikely to represent the actual reality of what happens in seminars.

In conclusion, despite the limitations identified, the study fulfilled the methodological, theoretical and substantive aims to give important insights into the meanings individuals attach to their experiences. The conclusions have several implications which I will examine in section 8.3.1-8.3.3; but first, I will evaluate the research design on which these conclusions are based.

### **8.3 Evaluation of the research design**

The study fulfilled its methodological aims as the research design helped to address the study's central question. For example, by using a reflexive methodology that included aspects of grounded theory, such as constant comparison and ongoing critical reflection on

data (section 3.3.3), I gained an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions and the meanings they attached to their experiences. In addition, a focus on a few cases provided rich and multi-layered data that would have not been possible otherwise. The iterative nature of the research process also meant that I was able to gather rich data that was mindful of ethical considerations at key stages of the enquiry (Appendix 9). For example, using interview data from 3 interviews, I developed a sufficient degree of familiarity with the data and intensively re-read and reflected on my on-going analysis at both descriptive and analytical levels to inform my interpretations and conclusion (Charmaz, 2005, Appendix 12, Appendix 15).

The research design, nonetheless, had several limitations. For instance, the self-selecting nature of the sample may have meant that I missed the perspectives of the less motivated or alienated members of the group. Some aspects of the data also impacted on the interpretation and analysis; for example, RQ 2 was mainly about how discourse influenced how different constituents related to each other to influence meanings about seminars. However, the bibliographical data was not detailed enough to give an in-depth account of the influence of families and early schooling experiences on the other constituents. Besides, as the study was not longitudinal, it was not possible to see if perspectives about seminars changed with increasing enculturation and socialisation.

The reliance on only 3 participants in chapter 7 (p. 107) is another potential shortcoming. However, as I argued in chapter 7, the data suggested a particular 'student' habitus; the participants appeared to conceptualise the importance and significance of key seminar constituents in broadly similar ways. The similarity was particularly pronounced in Jess, Daisy and Lilly's practices and perspectives. As the purpose of the chapter was also to critically examine the extent to which the concept of habitus played out in the data, I decided to use Jess's data as a 'representative' of the three participants, and as a contrast to Natalie and Linzi, whose distinctive practices challenged some aspects of the habitus concept. Thus, the rationale for focussing on the 3 participants was to enable a more in-depth analysis of how the concept of habitus played out amongst these contrasting cases, to highlight the potential and limitations of using habitus empirically.

The study's claims were mainly based on interview data. Thus, as discussed in chapter 3 (p. 52), Silverman's critique of the 'artificial' nature of interviews and the credibility of the

resulting research claims is another possible limitation (Silverman, 2007). For instance, it is likely that my role as a course tutor influenced what participants talked about and how. Therefore, it is possible that ideas about the significance and meanings about seminars did or could not have existed outside the interview context. Yet, it is noteworthy that some of the participants did recall instances where they sometimes talked about their experiences of seminars, in terms of the contrasts between tutors' seminar pedagogy and the creative and student-centred classroom pedagogies they urged students to take. In other ways, it is also possible that my positionality may have inhibited the participants from being frank about their experiences, although I was often struck by the candid nature of the participants' responses.

The research claims were based on the findings from 5 participants; therefore, the relevance of the findings to other student groups may be another limitation. It is true that the responses of a small number of self-selecting individuals cannot be generalised to other groups of students. However, in this study, I did not seek out to generalise in the tradition of positivist perspectives of truth and reality (Mason, 2002; section 3.3). Instead, I wanted to gain an understanding of the diversity and richness of individuals' experiences to examine whether these diverse perspectives reflected shared ways of thinking and talking about seminar experiences. Thus, generalisability in this study is about the relevance of the debates that the findings raise about the significance of students' perceptions of learning contexts in general.

In conclusion, whilst there are valid questions about the generalisability of the findings, I would argue that for an exploratory qualitative/interpretive study, the findings from a sample of 5 participants can provide useful insights outside the context of the study and the specific teacher education context. The conclusions are also strengthened by the trustworthiness of the research design that fulfils the methodological aims I stated in section 1.1.2, and has sufficient credibility (section 3.6) to justify the conclusions for the particular context I examined. In the next section, I outline the implications for research, policy and practice.

### 8.3.1 Implications for research

Effective student pedagogical approaches (Biggs, 1999) and teaching strategies to stimulate student interests (Savin-Baden, 2000) are important aspects of improving the student learning experience. Indeed, the majority of the research into student learning has prioritised these aspects of student learning (Ertl & Wright, 2008). A key claim that arises out of this study, however, is that without an in-depth understanding of the context in which students learn insights into students' approaches to learning or the effectiveness of teaching strategies may be limited.

In highlighting the importance of learning contexts, the findings from this work can contribute to the literature on improving student learning experiences. The findings support the work of Fejes *et al.* (2005), Deignan (2009); Casey *et al.* (2002), and Knights, (1995), on the significance of learning contexts for the kinds of meanings students attach to their experiences of learning in HE. Furthermore, the findings add to the evidence base generated by the transforming learning project work in Further Education on the importance the wider cultural contexts in understanding learning contexts (Hodkinson *et al.*, 2007). Nonetheless, unlike the extensive literature on students' approaches to learning, research on students' perspective of learning contexts is limited. Thus, one implication for more research is to investigate whether the findings from this study have resonances for other students and other contexts. More generally, the focus of student experience research may also begin to build on the extensive research base on the social and cultural context of university learning (Brennan, 2010), to a more specific focus at the meso level of seminars, to give a more holistic insight of students' perspectives of learning in HE.

The implications for teacher education research are significant. The teacher education context is distinctive; students' own school biographies provide relevant insights into their experiences in seminars (Britzman, 2003). Additionally, students experience seminars as learners, and within these seminars, they are also encouraged to reflect on appropriate pedagogical practices for their own classrooms. It would seem, therefore, that the seminar context is comparatively more problematic for teacher education students, further problematising their experiences of engaging in, and making sense of seminar learning contexts in HE. Therefore, in the light of the current policy context about student teachers'

training (DfE, 2011), there is an urgent need to critically examine student teachers' learning contexts in HE.

In relation to research methodologies, there are implications about how we come to know about students' perspectives about their learning experiences in HE. Commonly used ways of identifying students' views involve the use of surveys and questionnaires. However, as argued in the introductory chapter, not only do in-depth qualitative studies give richer insights into how students conceptualise learning, they also provide a more meaningful way of prioritising the student voice to balance the dominance of survey based ways of knowing (Ertl, & Wright, 2008). Another implication therefore, echoing the Ertl & Wright's review of the research literature in student learning, is for more in-depth qualitative studies that can provide insights into student perspectives (Ertl & Wright, 2008).

Ertl & Wright also highlight the generally atheoretical nature of research into student learning. Using Bourdieu's theory of practice has shown how examining the cultural dimension of learning can give important insights. In this study, Bourdieu's theory of practice highlighted the complexity of context and therefore enabled alternative ways of conceptualising learning contexts in HE, something that Haggis argues is necessary but is lacking in HE research on student learning (Haggis, 2009). A third implication therefore is for more theoretically informed research as a way of developing more nuanced insights into students' learning experiences.

### **8.3.2 Implications for policy**

In the literature review, I argued that teaching quality and the emphasis on a narrowly-defined measure of student perspective drive many of the initiatives at institutional levels (BIS, 2011; HEFCE, 2005-11). The findings from this study have implications for the assumptions that inform some aspect of the policy literature. Firstly, the findings show how different ways of engaging with students about their learning can enrich insights about what students find difficult when learning at university. From a personal perspective, I found the in-depth reflective encounters I had with these 5 students about their experiences of seminars highlighted important issues that did not arise in the staff-student meetings I chaired as a course leader.



The significance of seminars as a learning context requires more emphasise. Seminars are important learning contexts that constitute the majority of students learning experiences. Yet, the policy documents such as institutional policy on teaching and learning and criteria for evaluating module success do not give seminars the priority it requires. Thus, I would argue that in the light of current national policy context, institutional teaching and learning strategies need to prioritise a learning context that is a significant part of the student learning experience.

There are also implications at the national policy level. Whilst widening participating is an important policy (TLRP, 2008), the instruments used to measure students' experiences in the HE context do not sufficiently prioritise how students learn (HEFCE, 2005-2011). This is in contrast to North American student surveys, where amongst other things, student engagement in terms of contribution to seminars and discussing ideas from reading feature strongly (NSSE, 2006). From a student engagement perspective, Bryson & Hardy also argue that broader notion of the student experience that sees experiences as a holistic and socially constructed may be more useful and appropriate than approaches that prioritise student motivation and approaches to learning (Bryson & Hardy, 2011). Therefore, evaluation tools should also pay more attention to measures that evaluate how effectively provision caters for valuable learning and student diversity.

The significance of the implications highlighted, nonetheless are constrained by policy makers' priorities and perspectives of higher education (Pratt, 1998). Undoubtedly, from the institutional policy perspective, insights about students' perceptions of a key learning context are critical. For instance, student uncertainty about the purpose of seminars could result in poorer student experiences. Furthermore, from the perspectives of the influential employability agenda in HE, students' preferences for seminars that prioritise specific skills could influence the kinds of seminars universities may see as more appropriate to what students want.

Equally, in relation to teacher education, whether policy makers see teacher education as knowledge-*for*-practice, knowledge-*in*-practice, or knowledge-*of*-practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), can influence the significance of the findings. Clearly, from the perspective knowledge-*of*-practice that is associated with discussion and reflections about practice, the low status of discussion based seminars might raise concerns about the

opportunities for critical reflection and exploration of educational ideas (Reid & O'Donoghue, 2004; Brown, 2010; Britzman, 2003). However, the indications from the emerging views about the future direction of teacher education (DfE, 2011) suggest that the knowledge-for practice perspective and the ensuing focus on practice related seminars may come to dominate views about the content and pedagogical practices in seminars.

### **8.3.3 Implications for practice**

The research has also had important impacts on my own professional practice. Undertaking a Bourdieuan analysis of a familiar teaching context certainly made the 'familiar strange' (Watson *et al.*, 2009). Firstly, the enquiry into students' perspectives of seminars unexpectedly led to reflections on my pedagogy. For instance, I began to recognise how my teaching approach took little account of the amount of seminars students took part in, and the consequent information overload that they appeared to struggle with. I now spend more time analysing the clarity of my module aims and increasingly employ a conceptual approach to my teaching.

Thinking about seminars as a site for where contrasting discourse are played out has also influenced my seminar approaches. Increasingly, I feel confident to challenge students and attempt to make them conscious of the taken for granted practices and assumptions. For instance, recognising module evaluation documents as artefacts that reflect dominant discourses of teaching led me to include questions that required students to assess how they contributed to their own learning and to 'rate' their levels of interaction and autonomy (Appendix 31). Finally, as well as increasingly incorporating some of the principles of communities of enquiry into my day to day practice, I also explicitly highlight its importance and significance to my students.

The in-depth insights I gained into participants' experience of seminars highlighted the diversity of student expectations. Having listened first-hand to students' perspective of seminars, I am also more aware of how my everyday practices might inadvertently discourage opportunities for discussion and reflection that some of the participants clearly valued (Linzi 4.3.3; Natalie, 4.3.4). Consequently, I now explicitly state my values and priorities, and unlike previous years, set more challenging activities and reading materials to the many 1<sup>st</sup> year students I teach. This approach has been supported by another insight

form the research on the importance of relationships. By actively building on relationships, for example, by learning names and finding out about students' interests, I have been able to 'sell' my philosophy in a more receptive environment. More specifically, the research has given me invaluable insight into the student teacher mind set, the challenges and fears as well as the expectations. My teaching is increasingly taking these insights into account (Appendix 31).

There are several broader implications for practice. Firstly, the findings raise important questions about the different ways seminars are conceptualised and the consequence this may have for pedagogical practices. As evident from the data, the range of seminar contexts and the discourses that seem to influence participants' perceptions of seminars could be barriers to the kind of learning cultures that universities have traditionally tried to promote. Secondly, the opportunity for in-depth reflections on learning experiences benefited both myself and the participants. Providing more meaningful reflective spaces for students to think about their learning and approaches to learning could be a powerful learning context that could also impact positively on their general approaches to learning in HE.

From a reflexive perspective, the findings also raise questions about the ways in which tutors engage with institutional tools and practices, and the kinds of messages our practices send about seminars (Bourdieu, 1977). For instance, having undertaken this study, I also see the necessity to question and challenge the effectiveness of my seminar provision in terms of how well it reflects my values within the constraints of university structures and systems. As Haggis argues, it is time for tutors to become more critically reflexive about their own assumptions and practices (Haggis, 2009). As the findings suggest, whilst there was evidence of particular type of student habitus, some of the participants displayed dispositions and attitudes that would respond to different ways of knowing and being.

The significance of the implications may depend on institutions' and individuals' values and perspectives of learning in HE. My personal view is that university-based teacher education should have a strong component of critical enquiry and dialogue because of the complexities of classroom and school contexts. Hence, I agree with Reid & O'Donoghue's view that the demands of the post-modern world require teachers who can critically reflect on ideas about teaching and learning (2004). Consequently, the participants' apparent lack

of interest in seminars as a site for learning through dialogue and reflection is concerning. On a personal level, as I have argued in my paper (Appendix 32) using a cultural perspective enabled me to articulate important questions about my practice and the nature of my 'living educational theory'. According to McNiff & Whitehead (2009) engaging with our living educational theories is an important starting point for action and reflection. For example, I could investigate the consequences of implementing self-evaluation for student at the end of the module and the impact on students and on my practice.

In this chapter, I began by articulating key aspects of the research process to contextualise the claims and conclusion I draw from this study. In addition, I argued that despite the methodological and practical shortcomings identified, the research makes useful contribution to the student learning literature in HE. In the next chapter, I conclude the study and indicate possible avenues for further research.

## 9 Conclusion

The conclusions of this study are based on an exploratory study of teacher education students' perceptions of seminars. The findings suggest that participants' perceptions of their seminar experiences are constituted in broadly similar ways and refer to a rich tapestry of constituents that point to the influence of dominant discourses. Significantly, their perceptions of seminars suggest a preference for seminars that conceptualise knowledge treat as discrete and given, rather than fluid and constructed.

In the light of the changing HE contexts and teacher education courses in particular, the conclusions have implications for pedagogical practices and HE policies. In the increasingly dominant accountability culture, it is possible that students' views could influence policy so that some pedagogical practices become more valued than others. For instance, when students rate 'practical' seminars as more relevant to their needs, this may devalue seminars that prioritise discussion and reflection. Thus, students could miss out on the potential benefits of the kinds of seminars that are more likely to strengthen engagement, develop higher order dispositions and skills, as well as develop their ability to communicate ideas.

If universities still value traditional academic discourse of dialogue and reflection as a way of developing HE attributes, skills and knowledge, it seems imperative that universities actively counter the influence of dominant discourses. It is possible that unless students are aware of and understand these valuable ways of learning, seminars may increasingly resemble school pedagogies rather than university seminars. Indeed, a recent survey of university students suggested that a significant majority considered teaching at school as better than teaching at university ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)). Whilst there may be other reasons why students preferred teaching at school, it seems that students' views about teaching and learning are deeply held. This highlights the need for a programme of enculturation from the earliest days of students' HE experiences to highlight and promote alternative ways of knowing and conceptions of knowledge.

At the micro level, tutors' practices need to create and nurture enabling learning cultures where students can take risks, so they become more autonomous, questioning and open to alternative conceptions of learning. At the institutional level, it is important to assess the

extent to which the different cultural tools, artefacts students encounter reinforce a consistency message about HEs' perspective of learning at university.

My overall conclusion is that despite the prevalence of individualised perspectives of learning in the research and policy literature in HE, context matters. Seminars are diverse and complex contexts, with cognitive, physical, interpersonal and experiential dimensions. In addition, as Bourdieu's theory of practice helped to illustrate, cultural meanings outside the immediate context can permeate and influence seminars, further adding to richness and complexity of the seminar context. Like Hodkinson et al. studies (2007, 2008), I would argue that analysing and understanding the students learning contexts can provide a more proactive and a fruitful starting point for understanding the complexities of student teachers' learning experiences in HE. By raising important questions about some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about learning, this research provides a basis for understanding some of the challenges that are associated with improving the student learning experience.

#### ***Lesson learnt and implications for future research***

The experience of undertaking research in my own professional context has been invaluable. There are undoubtedly challenges in researching a familiar context; for example, being aware of my 'blind spots' and the effects of my positionality was often difficult to negotiate and accommodate within my research design and analysis of data. However, by adopting a reflexive methodology, together with a Bourdieuan perspective it was possible to use the findings from a contextualised mainly interview-based research to make a contribution to the student learning literature.

The study suggests can lead to further areas of research. From a practice perspective, there is potential to undertake action research to examine the impact of enculturation strategies such as alternative ways of evaluating learning experiences to enable reflection and professional dialogue. To extend the initial findings, further work could focus on more in-depth studies about individuals' social and cultural contexts to examine how early experiences contribute to conceptions of knowledge and learning. Following the work of Newton *et al.*, the role of class and gender could also be explored to examine their contribution to the seminar context, and possible influence on the way students

conceptualise seminar experiences (2001). Finally, any future research would benefit from a wider range of participants outside the teacher education context to see if the issues raised in this study resonate with other types of students and courses.

Word count 41, 472



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### Students' perspectives on seminars

Thank you for filling in the questionnaire. I am currently undertaking doctoral research into students' perspectives of seminars. The purpose of this questionnaire is to gain preliminary data to inform the focus of my research. My main foci are your views of what makes a good seminar, and yours and your peers' levels of contributions during seminars. Some of the questions include suggestions to help you answer the questions – but please note that 'other reasons' are equally welcome! The survey is anonymous, except for course title, year of study and age. However, the data may be used in my dissertation and the findings presented at seminars both within and outside the university. I would be happy with any level of responses -from the briefest, to the more detailed! Thank you again for your co-operation!

Course: BA Primary Education 5-11 years  
Age 21

Year of study 3

#### A: About seminars

##### **1. From your experience, what happens in effective seminars? *You might like to think about the role of the tutor and your and others' roles or any other reasons***

The seminars that are most effective are those that meet the same standards that we as trainee teachers are intended to teach, e.g. a balance of (i) visual (ii) kinesthetic and (iii) auditory learning styles. As trainees we discuss that it is difficult to be taught to teach in a particular way but then not have this reciprocated. A number of seminars throughout my time at university have been chalk and talk which with a lecture that has already been taught in the same way can be pretty tedious. The seminars that have been most useful are those that are interactive, use group and partnered talk etc One thing I think is lacking is self and peer assessment e.g. where can we go next, how is this effective etc

##### **2. From your experience, what happens in ineffective seminars? *You might like to consider the role of the tutors, your own and other roles or any other reasons***

I think I might have covered this already above.

#### B. Your participation and engagement

**3. What aspects positively influence your seminar participation, e.g. contributing ideas/experiences, asking questions. *You might consider the role of the tutors, yours and others' roles or other reasons***

Interactive activities which then inspire me to reflect on what I have done. Experiments etc  
The things that I would do with my pupils to encourage enthusiasm for learning. I think it is also important that tutors are up to date with what is currently happening in the classroom. I found it difficult to be inspired by a tutor who was checking my planning and asked why I wasn't using the NC and wasn't sure on how to use the primary strategy.

**1. What aspects negatively influence your participation in seminars? *You might consider the role of the tutors, yours and others' roles or other reasons***

When the tutor explains at the beginning of the seminar that they haven't seen the slides yet. I think if the tutor doesn't seem enthusiastic then this reflects on how we as students feel. There are a number of tutors who are passionate about what they are teaching and it is those seminars that I really enjoy!

**C. Peers' participation and engagement in seminars**

**2. From your perspective, what are the main features of group dynamics? E.g. do most people contribute, or only a few, are some happy to contribute to small groups but not to whole class discussions, good relationships?**

There are definitely dominant characters and even in a university course with 300 + students they are recognized. I think this is why seminars in comparison to lectures are really important because they give students the opportunity to discuss matters in smaller groups.

**3. Identify 3 factors that would, in your view, make seminars more effective and beneficial to your learning.**

- interactive
- peer and self assessment
- enthusiasm and a passion for what is being taught

Thank you for your time in completing this questionnaire.

## Appendix 2 Feedback on interview style from pilot study

**How I conducted the interviews, e.g. What did I do that helped or hindered the interview process, e.g. did I ignore what you wanted to talk about and push too much on my agenda?**

I felt that the interview was conducted in a free-flowing way. Although questions were asked as a respondent I felt that I could move away from and back to the main theme of the question freely. During the interview I was not fully aware of your exact agenda and I felt that you were interested in any comments related to our experiences of seminars and lectures.

**Did I listen to what you were saying?**

I felt that you listened to everything that I said.

**Did the questions make sense?**

Yes the questions were explained and asked clearly.

**Did I interrupt too much? Or did the conversation flow?**

I do not feel that you interrupted at all. I thought that you waited until I had said everything I wanted to say before moving to the next question

**Was the physical surrounding conducive or got in the way of the interview?**

I thought that the physical surroundings were ideal for the interview.

**To develop my interview skills, what do you think I should?**

It really depends upon the agenda and the required outcome. After doing my dissertation and reading about interview methods it became evident that the method depends upon the required outcome.

*Do more of.....* If you wanted specific answers, perhaps ask specific, perhaps closed questions. But if you wanted a more general opinion of how students felt about the seminars then I think that the interview was conducted in the best way.

*Do less of.....* I don't really think that you need to do less of anything.

**Any other comments?**

The interview was good in that it enabled the respondent to talk about the various teaching and learning strategies used in university. We were able to compare and comment on lectures, seminars and the P4 method of delivering learning (I can't remember the exact name, sorry). Before the interview I thought that we would just talk about the p4 method, but it was good to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the different ways of conducting lessons. I enjoyed taking part and believe that the experience has made me more aware of how students (and children) feel in the learning environment and during lessons that are conducted in a particular way. I would never have thought about using the p4 method of teaching in the classroom, but recognise the benefits now. I have learnt what I consider it to be a valuable teaching strategy that I can now use in the classroom. I think you are very brave taking this up, and hope it goes really well.

### Appendix 3 Interview schedule for pilot- Phase 2

#### Background/context: Engagement/participation

- Why I am doing this: preliminary data
- Why did you volunteer?
- Structure: show questions - you, the group and reasons why...
- Ethics: may be presented, recorded - please let me know if not - you can withdraw or I will take notes and not record... you could just talk - look at questions...

#### Thinking about your experience of taking part in seminars...

1. Could you tell me a little bit about your experience of taking part in seminars at SHU? - Perhaps you could start by telling me about what happened in a particularly memorable one?

- Can you describe what you get from seminars that are **useful and effective**?
- Can you be specific about how **feel** or what you **do** when seminars work for you?
- for you, **why** do you think these seminars **work**, e.g. interest, tutor,
- Can you describe what it is like for you when seminars **do not work** so well?
- For you, **why** did these seminars **not work**? E.g. content, tutor? - Previous experiences?
- What are your expectations of your learning in seminars - has that changed at all over the years?

#### .Thinking about how the group works during seminars

2. Can you tell me your impressions of most typical seminar experiences - or one that has made an impression?

- what is your expectation of a **good seminar discussion**
- What factors seemed to be **critical** in producing good seminars? , group dynamics, tutor, content?

Or not so good ones?

#### Finally

- Finally - does all this matter in your opinion - if yes or no - why not?

## Appendix 4 Initial meeting schedule: phase 3

**Study title:** Students' perspectives on seminars -research undertaken as part of Doctorate in Education at Sheffield Hallam University.

Information about research project

**Rationale for the research:** I am fascinated and interested in student learning. In this study, I want to get your perspectives on the seminar experience. whilst there is much survey based evidence of the student perspective on facilities at university, support from tutors, and quality of teaching, there is less research (survey or interview based information) on the student experience of learning contexts such as seminars

**The research questions:** In relation to their learning, what do students do in seminars, and what does their actions mean to them?

**Researcher's role:** is to try and see your learning experiences from your perspective, through the use of semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews are based partly on the researcher's questions, but also on ideas that might come up during the interviews - so it is a flexible interview structure

**Participants' role:** to reflect and talk about your experiences, without any pressure about 'giving the right answer' - because there aren't any....

**Ethics:** you are guaranteed confidentiality - none of the module or personal tutors know who is involved in the project. You are also able to withdraw at any time for any reason and this will not affect you in any way.

**What I hope you will get out of it:** an opportunity to reflect on your learning, to gain some insight into the research process, and an insight into the learning process

**What I hope I get out of it:** better understanding of how students learn, so that I can develop and enhance my teaching and share my knowledge with others.

## Appendix 5 information for participants: Phase 3

**Title:** Perspectives on seminars research project

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. Please read the information about the study, and if you would still like to take part, please sign the form to indicate whether you give your consent for the interview data to be used in my research.

In the following sections, I hope to inform you about the aims and practicalities of the study as well as the ethical considerations that have informed the study. If you are happy with the information you have received and would still like to participate, I would like you to sign the consent form on page 2.

**What does the project involve?** I am interested to explore your experiences and thoughts about seminars. I want to find out how you participate in seminars by asking you to reflect on what you typically do in seminars and how you feel about your experiences in seminars.

**Who will benefit from the study and how?** In addition to giving you an opportunity to reflect on your learning experiences, I hope the research will enable tutors to enhance approaches to teaching and learning as a result of insights gained about how students experience the seminar learning context.

**What is expected of me?** In addition, to a short initial meeting, I would like to have a further 3 individual meetings of approximately 1 hour between November 2009 and May 2010. I would also like you to record your experiences of seminars (a maximum of 3) focussing on your participation and how you felt about it and/or responded to it.

**When will the interview take place?** I will arrange a time that fits in with your existing timetable. All the interviews will take place at City campus

**What will happen if I decide to participate?** The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed by myself. In the transcription, names will be anonymised and once the project is completed, the tapes will be destroyed.

**How will the data be used?** You will be able to see the transcripts and I will seek your views on my approach to analysing the data. The data will then be used to complete the dissertation and may also be used in journal papers and/or presentation at conferences.

**Who else will look at the data?** The anonymised data may be seen by my supervisors and by colleagues outside teacher education for the purpose of validating my interpretations and analysis I will seek your permission first if I have to get help with transcribing the data.

**Can I withdraw from the research?**

You have a right to withdraw from the study at any time and without giving a reason. This will not adversely affect you in any way.

Fufy

Appendix 6 Consent form: phase 3

Consent form

Please tick in the appropriate column

	yes	no
I have read and understand the information about the study		
There is enough information about the study		
I feel I can request further clarification at any time of the study		
I understand that all references to my name will be anonymized		
I understand that my confidentiality will be guaranteed and I will be notified of any changes to agreed procedures		
I understand that the data will be used as part of a Doctorate thesis and some of the anonymised data may be used in publications and conference presentations		
I understand I can withdraw form the study at any time		
I give permission for the following to look at my responses: Fufy Researcher's supervisors Tutors from outside teacher education		
Do you agree to take parting the study?		

Signature of participant

Date

Name:

Signature of researcher

Date



## Appendix 7 1<sup>st</sup> interview questions: phase 3

**Tell me about your learning experiences, from as early as you can remember**

Positive. negative aspects

**What is it like to be a learner at university? (tutorial, lectures, seminars)**

- What about seminars?
- What do you expect to happen in seminars? (link to theories, previous experiences)
- What do you expect to do?
- What do you expect the tutor to do?
- Is that what happens in most of your seminars?

**tell me about the seminar you focussed on**

- What did you do?
- What did your tutor want you to do?
- Do you know what your tutor's expectations are?
- Is your expectation and tutors sometimes different?
- How do you feel about letting tutor know of your expectations?

**Any other seminar experiences that are different/same?**

- expectations
- what you did
- tutor's expectation

### **Natalie 2nd interview questions**

Last interview, you recalled experiences of learning before university, described significant events from seminars, gave me a glimpse of the seminar as you see it, shared some of your thoughts, feelings. e.g. I would like to explore some aspects in a bit more depth

#### **1. Recent seminars**

- Tell me about recent seminars - what were significant bits? Did you approach your diary the same way as before?
- Different same or different things stand out?
- 

#### **2. You gave me the impression that you liked 'discussions'- tell me more about it?**

- Can you tell me a bit more? Examples?
- How does it make you feel?
- What does it 'discussions' do for you? How does that impact on your experience/learning at university?
- Is your 'learning' different when you don't get a chance to discuss why?

#### **3. Another aspect - it may not be hugely important, but you commented on the different ways you relate to tutors/university - both challenging and also respectful?**

- Tell me a bit more about it - any more examples?
- What influences the way you relate?
- What is the same/different between teachers at school/college and tutors/lecturers?

#### **4. How do you see the role of seminars in teacher education courses?**

- Can you describe a good seminar?
- What specific thing happens in a 'good' seminar? (Others, you...)
- How do you feel about these seminars?
- What makes the seminar good? E.g. memorable, helped you to do something, challenged you?
- Do you relate your judgments to what you know and experienced 'good' learning experiences in schools?

**5. Can you describe an ineffective seminar?**

- What kind of things happen or don't happen?
- How do you feel about these seminars?
- What makes these kinds of seminars 'bad'? difficult,
- Do you relate your view to what you know and experience of teaching and learning in schools?

**6. What aspects have you found:**

- What stays the same for you across most seminars?
- What changes depending on seminar, module, tutor...
- Easier to talk about (have thought about before)
- Found it harder
- Thought about only because of taking part in research?

Appendix 9 **3<sup>rd</sup> interview schedule: phase 5**

I have chosen some interesting bits from the interviews. I want to hear your interpretation of these bits, in relation to the research questions. Please don't feel you have to second guess what I might like you to say – one of my aims is to seek alternative interpretations (if there are) of the same scenario. So I will be just as interested in interpretations that are wildly different as those that may be similar to mine.

**Purpose:** to get your take /interpretation about some of these excerpts

**Aim of study:** to get student perspectives on learning in seminars

**Show you how far I have got...**

**Can you sort them into ones you would like to talk about and ones you don't feel you have much to say about?**

*How do you interpret them?*

*does this imply anything about your view about learning in seminars? , e.g. content, tutors, your learning, others?*

*Does it say anything/something about what you think about your learning in seminars?*

## Appendix 10 Feedback to participants

### **What I am trying to do**

Trying to capture your perspective on seminars - to see it through your eyes...

The difference between how I see it and how you see it from your perspective... (Struggle - *between my ideas of university learning and what happens*)

### **General:**

message we send about learning and being in HE - are they consistent? E.g. seminar most common form of teaching, but in reality is it not always top priority..?

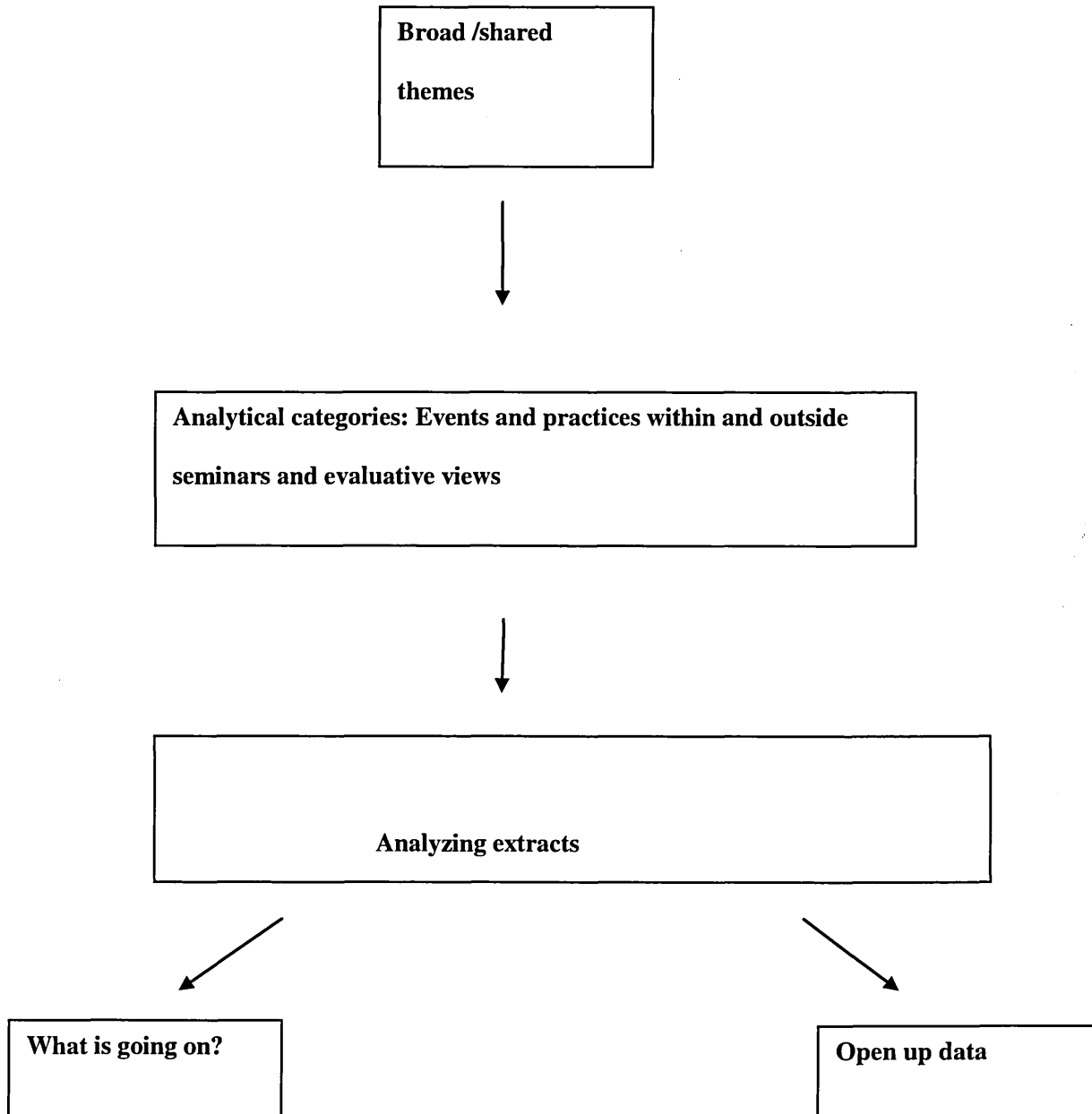
how effectively do we create the LE that promotes high level learning?

### **Your contribution:**

Helped me to see that although students appear to respond in similar ways, there are differences in how they make sense of their experiences

Used your approach - 'meaning making' to challenge my ideas that not all students want/expect to be told everything..

Appendix 11 Analysis strategy:



## Appendix 12 Categories for coding individual responses

1. Seminar activities: events that took place in seminars
2. External contexts: events that took place outside seminars and university
3. Neutral Seminar contexts: the backdrop to practice, both overt and hidden
  - 3a. enabling seminar contexts: unplanned enabling contexts, e.g. positive atmosphere,
  - 3b. disabling seminar contexts: unplanned disabling contexts, e.g. large group sizes
4. Neutral Pedagogy of seminar contexts: reference to pedagogical aspects
  - 4a enabling pedagogy of seminar contexts
  - 4b: disabling pedagogy of seminar contexts
- 5: practice: what people do?
  - 5a: own practice
  - 5b. tutors' practice
  - 5c: peers' practice
6. Pedagogy and practice: reference to pedagogical aspects and practice
  - 6a: pedagogy and own practice
  - 6b: pedagogy and tutor's practice
  - 6c: pedagogy and peers' practice

### Appendix 13 Outcome of intensive reading' of the transcript to identify the categories

- Reference to own personality
- Reference to other's personality
- Tasks to do
- Discussion
- Opportunity to go back
- Opportunity to learn new things
- Benefits of peer presentations
- Bouncing ideas off each other
- Being told at our level
- Tutors as more knowledgeable
- Expectations of tutors
- Hierarchy
- Contrast to own background
- Questioning tutors
- 'Speak outers' and 'non-speak outers'
- Strategies used by tutors
- Small group discussion
- Small group discussions and tutors
- Behaviour control/management
- Improvement suggestions
- Being judged/fear by peers
- Perceptions of peers
- Comparing to pervious experience
- Interaction
- Learning style
- Writing/scribbling



- Seminars as lessons
- Physical demands
- Contrasts to home
- Lack of involvement by peers
- Frustration personal
- Engagement personal
- Active style
- Ideas ‘importance of’
- Passion – tutors’
- Inspiration – tutors’
- Theory and practice]
- Giving information - tutors role
- Standing at the front

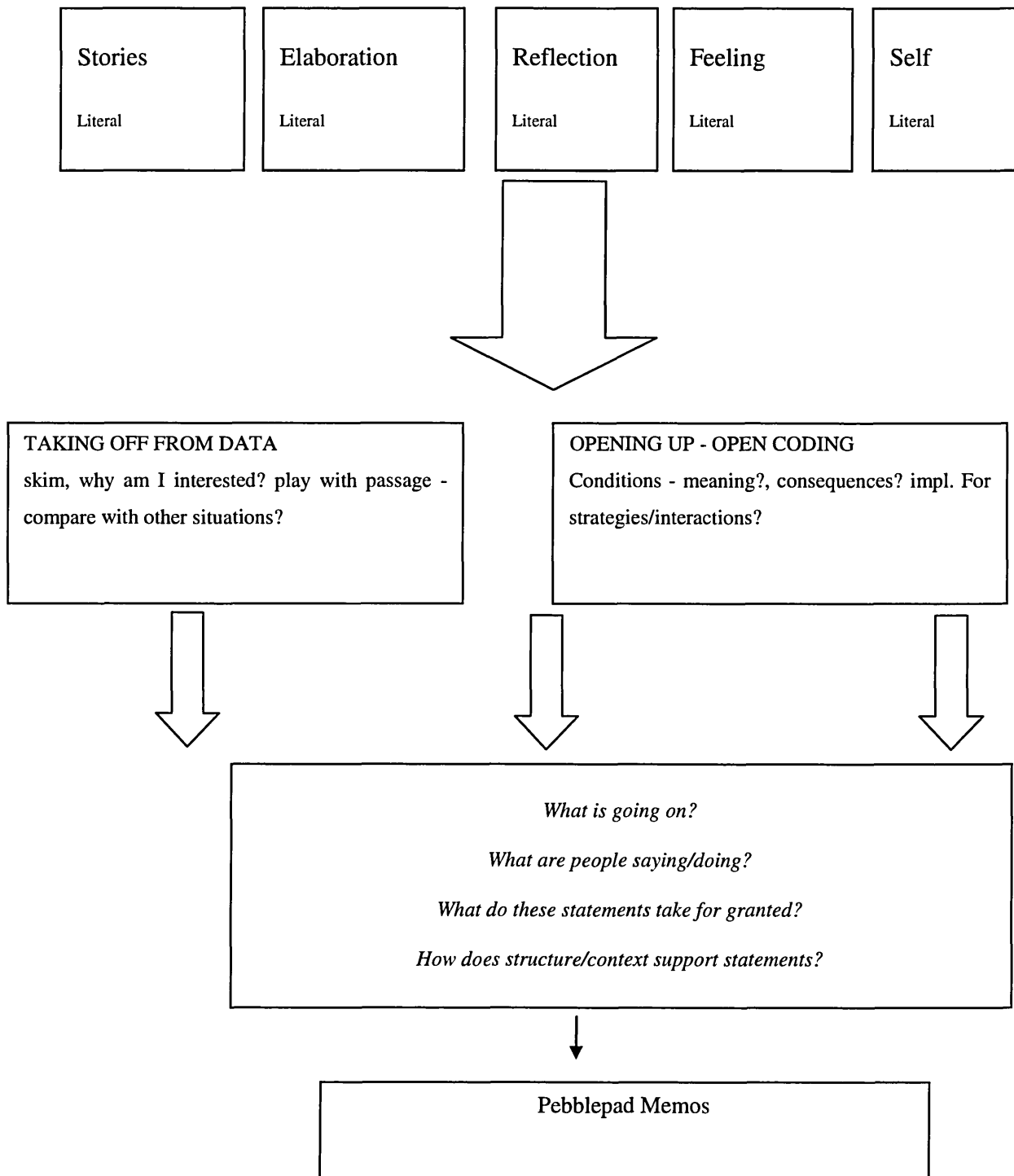
1: matrix showing how data was categorised

	<b>Non-seminar related events</b>	<b>Practice in seminars – what people do – non pedagogic aspects</b>	<b>Pedagogical practices: what people do related to teaching and learning strategies/approaches in seminars</b>
<b>Events/practice e.g. Work, social events</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happens</li> <li>• What people do</li> </ul>	<b>Self:</b>  <b>Tutors:</b>  <b>Peers</b>	<b>Self:</b>  <b>Tutors:</b>  <b>Peers</b>	<b>Self:</b>  <b>Tutors:</b>  <b>Peers:</b>
<b>Views: about events and practices</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling</li> <li>• Disabling</li> <li>• neutral</li> </ul>	<b>Disabling: s</b>  <b>Neutral:</b>  <b>Enabling:</b>	<b>Disabling:</b>  <b>Enabling</b>        <b>Neutral</b>	<b>Enabling:</b>  <b>Disabling:</b>        <b>Neutral:</b>

**Appendix 14 Example of complete matrix showing how Jess's data was categorised.**

Categories	Categories		
	<b>Non-seminar related events:</b> no data	<b>Practice in seminars –</b> what people do – non pedagogic aspects	<b>Pedagogical practices:</b> what people do related to teaching and learning strategies/approaches in seminars
<b>Events/practice</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happens</li> <li>• What people do</li> </ul>	<b>Self:</b> no data  <b>Other learning contexts:</b> no data  <b>Outside university:</b> friends socialising with peers, school	<b>Self:</b> playing with plasticine, explaining to others, switching off, talking about something else, thinking about food,  <b>Peers:</b> no data  <b>Tutors :</b> no data	<b>Self:</b> interactive, join in discussions, asking 'stupid' questions, look at things from different view points  <b>Tutors:</b> positive feedback, contradicting own advice, e.g. time talk through PowerPoint, provide different kinds of seminars  <b>Peers:</b> no data
<b>Views :</b> about events and practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling</li> <li>• Disabling</li> <li>• neutral</li> </ul>	<b>Enabling</b> helping each other,  <b>Disabling:</b> no data  <b>Neutral:</b> no data	<b>Enabling:</b> , when able to: annotate slides in seminars, know peers well to participate, ask stupid questions, practical ideas to try, relating to classroom practice, feeling involved, reinforce, motivating, practical or relate to practice  <b>Disabling:</b> when tutors 'talk' at students, don't take seminar seriously, switching off <b>Neutral</b> no data	<b>Enabling:</b> process based learning, understanding, short and focused group work, link seminars to how it might be with children  <b>Disabling:</b> when tasks taking too long, repeated content, boring, slow pace, too much time, limited feedback on group activities, mobile phone ,lack of enthusiasm,  <b>Neutral:</b> no data

## Appendix 15 Analytical strategies for categories of extracts



## Appendix 16 Example of general strategy for analysing data extracts

### What is going on?

1. Skim and then read thoroughly
2. record anything interesting about the text

*reiterates not wanting to 'take over'*

When something interesting, ask why?

*This passage is interesting because lots of issues are raised here - makes a nod to 'saying the right thing?'*<sup>4</sup>. Focus on interesting passages and play with them - what is it about - compare with other situations *where this might happen - write any ideas in memo*<sup>5</sup>. interesting passage *ask why am I interested in that? - Record*

### Opening up the data:

Chose an interesting concept/interrogate, ask questions...<sup>1</sup>. under what conditions I might hear the phrase - what would it mean then? *I am quite a loud person - dating sight, facebook - trying to make friends, establish a certain persona?*<sup>2</sup>. Consequences: when someone uses that phrase, what is the consequence

*people might react negatively,* <sup>3</sup>. strategies and interactions: - what will it mean for their strategies and interactions? Gives them confidence?

Posted by Fufy DEMISSIE at 16:28

Appendix 17 Example of analysis of key words and phrases –  
'having a banter'.

*'Having a banter'*

yes, I had never met that tutor before so, I couldn't just go 'hang on, could we just read this..'

I: relationship

PL: yes, maybe in diverse needs, I am quite like, I can have a bit of a banter with N, so I find actually, hold on, let me read this... she'll ask you've finished? I say 'NO', and that is not a problem with certain tutors, and maybe the ones we had last year and things like that

I: it is interesting, it is one of the things I picked up from last time.. relationships I felt/seemed important to you - is that right? tell me

PL: ..sounds really selfish but..I want the tutors to care what I say, and sort of value, not value my opinion, because I know they do! cause they are there as an educator, but sort of to not be teacher/pupil.. because I don't like being teacher/pupil in the classroom.. I like chatting with the kids about the latest craze or whatever, coming down, not coming down to their! level but finding a happy medium where you can still be a professional, but you can still have a chat and a bit of a laugh. I find with some tutors it is very easy to do..I have found that if you are passionate about your subject.. I found from day dot in education.. if you like their subject, they like you! but, its I find it easier if I prefer it..

**Why did I choose it?** *Elaboration of role of relationship in her experience of seminars why is it interesting: 'not a problem with some tutors' - means it obviously is a problem with some, that she can't say 'No'. She has got quite personal in a surprising way - opening up 'I am being selfish', by saying this sounds selfish..*

*seems to suggest that sometimes or often, she doesn't feel like an equal, but in a student/teacher relationship - yet, lessons and seminars are the same...- she is also relating what she likes with how she behaves herself in her own class*

**literal:** relationship is important

**interesting words/phrases:** banter, 'No' 'I don't like being teacher/.pupil in the classroom' - what does that look like? Banter?

*What is going on?* She is telling me a more equal relationship feels right? - Some level of emotional literacy going on - I know what they like, will give it to them, so they can give me what I want...

see also 'Mrs. Potter' - relationships

Posted by Fufy DEMISSIE at 15:43

## Appendix 18 Example of analysis and interpretation from a narrative

ongoing memo about how I created data for from Linzi narrative Story -

### 'Mrs Potter'

*Linzi: so, that was kind of like , the top end of it and in year 3,, I was with a lovely woman called Mrs Potter, she was my teacher, and I did choir with her, church choir and sung Thursdays and Sundays with her ... Participant: and had quite a lot of interaction outside of school .. and she kind of went, no, just pulled it out of me and then Mr alders the , the year 4 teacher, he sort of,, I think they must have chatted because because he continued to sort of pull it out*

*Fufy: what kind of things did they say to you?*

*Linzi: sort of, contribute, not quite like that... but sort of 'what do you think?' directing it at me, so I kind of didn't have an escape! cause outside of the classroom, I was exactly like lively and loud*

**Why did I choose it?** Because it was a personal and very honest response. I was interested in it because it was a story, therefore meaningful and also seemed to indicate that teachers meant something special/interesting to her. The metaphor of 'pulling out' was also interesting - as if her personality or way of being was a concrete thing that could be 'pulled out. I can hear a similarity to relationship with close family friend or family who notices things perhaps parents wouldn't? - Something about being special and recognized and trust. A feeling of bonding and relationship creating possibilities. I wonder in what ways is it similar to relationships with tutors and other teachers in her experience so far, does this excerpt say anything about how she approaches/interacts with teachers in subsequent contexts?

**What is the context:** it is in talking about experiences at school and talking about her personality that generated this exchange pulling out: possible meanings, teeth, and turnip - gives impression of something hard and not easy? 'I didn't have an escape' statement would suggest that it was a hard thing...

**Emerging theme:** to what extent was this experience significant in informing views about the teacher/student relationship? is student/teacher relationship important to her?

Appendix 19 **Examples of narrative extracts –a story about a survival strategy**

**Daisy:** *that brain is going to be expanding.. more and more things can go in.. but it makes me forget other things then. like.. oh...don't know how to explain this, but I say it all the time...like, uhumm, sounds really stupid, and you will laugh when you hear this.. but...I work in a pub right.. and I don't remember the price of things or I don' remember directions to things.. and my excuse is. there is that much in my head that I have to take something out.. And that is exactly what I say, and say, I don't remember things that I don't need to remember.. I say it all the time ... I think only know what I mean*

**Fufy:** I think it makes sense...

**Daisy:** *yeah and I forget things I don't need to really know that I can press a button for or something... ... but when I really need to know it, I keep that space in my head.. there is only so much room*



Appendix 20 Samples of reflections on interview data –1<sup>st</sup>  
interviews – phase 3

**Lilly: After 1st interview**

*started off talking about diary/notes she recorded for the interview - and based questions around it.. then asked her to comment on selected scripts. my final question about where do your expectations come from.. was good. Generally, it felt like a 2 dimensional thing.. the school/ assignment end point is really strong it seemed - and is taken as a given - unquestioned. The role of seminars is to give us ideas about what to try in schools - I would have been questioning about it - but she did report using some of these ideas in school - what is wrong with that? a vocational course should be about preparing students? I should perhaps look at other professional courses.*

*'Money's worth' was interesting - and the need to do things in things e.g. seminars, otherwise, not being done - there is something about security and getting value for money. But at the same time, she recognises that independent learning is also important - but don't feel like those seminar where that might be suggested might go down very well - the 1.5 session re good - not too much time for discussion and going off subject... why is that a bad thing/ is it because it is top down rather than bottom up ...*

*Posted by Fufy DEMISSIE at 10:08*

*08 December 2009*

**Daisy - after 1<sup>st</sup> interview**

*seemed very honest and thoughtful - obviously seemed as something not really had thought of before - very open at times, but keen to explore own thinking as she was going along - very involving of the tutor , mentioning tutor' s name - which made it a bit difficult to have that 'interviewer' role... Was happy to express own perspectives and make it very clear that it might not be what others are thinking. But at the same time, was happy at times to express what seemed to be like a group /class view. 'we sometimes wonder...'. It seemed like a voice wanting to be heard - it is not that we don't value the course' but we have to work. self aware intensely and clear strategies for dealing with own needs and shortcomings - a very relaxed and enjoyable interviews but can't get away from the possibility that it was staged for a tutor as interviewer...?*

## Appendix 21 Samples of reflections on interview data -phase 4

### **Daisy: after 2<sup>nd</sup> interview**

*A more fraught presentation - about to hand in an assignment. probably late nights - it was more like a chat. This wasn't one of the best interviews, in terms of the interviewer listening - I interrupted too much - I think I got excited when things were mentioned that fitted in with my interests and showed this excitement - at times, even teasing her? which was really unprofessional - but the problem is that she invites conviviality - especially as she keep saying your name - and giving you recognition - that is a good point Fufy? She is chatty by nature, and admits to be able to easily 'talk form the top of my head'. What does that mean?*

### **Lilly - after 2<sup>nd</sup> interview**

*somewhat stilted interview - maybe I was too tired. I found it difficult. Very enthusiastic - but everything was simple, straight forward. school was great, expectations of seminars and lectures were very clear - everyone communicates shares their viewpoints. does not feel intimidated about speaking. away form home, but doesn't seem to be a big problem. happily volunteered for next meeting... Posted by Fufy DEMISSIE at 13:21*

## Appendix 22 Reflections on interview data: phase 5

### Jess: after 3<sup>rd</sup> interview

*This was a very excited participant, just back from a trip abroad, linked to her studies. IT was good to let her talk about this very important thing she had done - so quite a bit of time was spent on this.*

*J didn't need much encouragement to talk. - she was very hyped up too from just handing in an assignment - and in fact, in one stage of the interview, what she was talking about was mostly about what she had written in her assignment!.*

*Same as last time, I felt a strong sense of duty , practicality and perseverance in her responses. doing things which was right, even if it wasn't what she believed in it.*

*appeared sometimes quite rigid, but at other times, quite reflective and thoughtful - but also very sympathetic to tutors - although this may be a sudden realisation that the interviewer was also a tutor - I noticed also that talking about the positives was an important way of talking about things that weren't so good - so it is ok, makes it acceptable to say things?*

*seemed very enthusiastic, appeared to be making links from previous interview and also as we were getting through the interview. expressed usefulness of the process for her own understanding - reflective practice? I use to just do it, but now, I am aware of it a bit more?*

## Appendix 23 General Reflections on my interview style and approaches to data analysis

01 November 2010

*'My questions were obviously about what is significant from the perspective of what they noticed, liked didn't like etc.. only thing I could say is that it struck me as lightening - no other solid basis - a bit of imaginative thinking - 'this is about how they manage to cope' because at the back of my mind, I had got the sense (evidence) that things were a strain in some way, there were a lot of demands, dealing with a scenario that did not always confirm with expectations (e.g. too much talk, boring lectures, - evidence), because of overriding obsession with assignments and success on placement (evidence). each seem to approach in a different way - whether conscious or not, but what seemed to come out of the data - being in control (L - but what did I silence when I did that, it might be the ideal set up), or D (reducing anxiety - maybe this is the way she does everything - less about the seminar world and more about her... - less about the seminar world as ..?). Just getting on with it, I interpreted as recognising status hierarchy, eg. not questioning. she might never have thought about it - does it matter? never brought herself into it, although prominent in other aspects). J and I only talked about significant ones, where she contrasted 2 different ones - obviously there are different experiences of what it means to be in seminar, does it matter if that sense wasn't present at the time, what have I done by bringing it out? )*

*If I go back and ask different questions - e.g. about friendships with groups, how they supported each other, if I didn't ask, e.g another student asked the question - same or different perspectives? how much of it was presented to me in a particular way and for what purpose? relationship came up because I asked, or would it have come up? (other research?). family and relationships - there is a nice story, family, relationship, tools - al l fit in with a socio-cultural perspective...?*

5<sup>th</sup> of March, 2011

*Since the last time I considered the data, some things have moved on. I have found a way of going into the second phase of the interview - very much based on the research questions - identifying gaps and elaborating on earlier themes. I really want to avoid the danger of too early and simplistic categorisation of the data, especially, since my own positional is such a factor in this research. I have to be careful that I consider the different ways in which the data can be interpreted. Firstly , and obviously there are my own..' biases present in the research question and then in the kind of things I will be looking for - things I know that will interest others and my own views - so it is definitely not in a vacuum!!*

**Appendix 24 P4C methodology (Philosophy for children) for  
conducting an enquiry that is based on the community's  
question**

- Stimulus
- Choosing questions
- Voting on one question
- Airing
- Discussions
- Final words

(SAPERRE – Society for Advancing Philosophical enquiry and Reflection in Education)

## Diverse Needs

This seminar was mainly used to discuss the assignment and to do reading for it. The environment was too loud to concentrate to read. As we discussed the assignment, it took quite a while to reach the answer. Not everyone was on task. ICT was used.

## Science

This seminar was highly interactive where we got to do the investigations and not just write about them. We were given questions and time to promote thinking and 'suspense' created a fun atmosphere whilst learning! We had the chance to write down our findings and were able to work in a group to support each other. We know how to adapt the investigations to suit the classroom. ICT was used.

## Appendix 26 Course context

**Course title:** BA honours with QTS (qualified teacher status)

**Course length:** 3 years

**School placements:** 4 weeks (1<sup>st</sup> year), 5 weeks (2<sup>nd</sup> year), 8 weeks (3<sup>rd</sup> year)

**Academic year:** September –June

### Modules

1 <sup>st</sup> year	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	3 <sup>rd</sup> year
Personal and professional learning Maths English Early years curriculum Child development	Diverse needs Maths English Electives Science Foundation subjects (Art/music, physical education, geography, history)	Dissertation Wider issues in English Wide issues in Maths Policy and practice High quality provision Whole curriculum Learning across the curriculum

### Teaching strategies:

Lectures: 1 hour

Seminars: 2 hours

Tutor-led discussion based seminars e.g. Diverse needs, child development (2<sup>nd</sup> year)

Small group tasks/activities that focus on students' subject knowledge, e.g. grammar, that might also involve sharing/discussing reflections with the rest of the seminar group

Workshops style seminars for art, drama/PE where students try out techniques and approaches they might use in school

Workshop style seminar, e.g. for mathematics, problem solving tasks where students work through teaching activities that they might use in school

Talks from visiting teachers on current topics, specialist knowledge



## Appendix 27 Module evaluation forms

### Questions

- How well has this module enabled you to meet the QTS standards?
- How did the quality of summative/formative feedback enable you to set targets to progress (if appropriate)?
- How well did this module enable you to make progress on placement?
- How well has this module enabled you to improve your subject knowledge?
- How well did the module help you to develop your knowledge and understanding of child development?
- How well did the module enable you to develop an understanding of observations?
- How well did the module enable you to understand the link between theory and practice?
- Rate the quality of teaching
- Rate the quality of individual support in tutorials or sessions (where appropriate)
- How well did the module address current Primary or Early Years curriculum developments?

Appendix 28 A typical week for a BA2 teacher education student (2009/10).

	9:00	9:30	10:00	10:30	11:00	11:30	12:00	12:30	1:00	1:30	2:00	2:30	3:00	3:30	4:00	4:30	5:00	5:30	6:00
<b>Monday</b>									Module 1										
<b>Tuesday</b>	Module 2				Module 3						Module 4				Module 5				
<b>Wednesday</b>																			
<b>Thursday</b>				Module 6													Module 7		
<b>Friday</b>																			

Total: 16 hours

BA2            Primary            Staff-Student            Committee            Meeting

Tuesday 2nd March 2010, 13.00-14.00

Arundel 10111

Present

Apologies

**1. Aims/membership and conduct of staff/student committee**

- No issues

**2. Partnership**

*Staff:* I apologise for the delay in sorting out the placements. We had to recruit new schools. We are aiming to let you know tomorrow or Thursday at the latest.

*Student:* My group wanted to know why we couldn't have been made aware at least of which of the two weeks we would be doing...

**3. Assessment Procedures**

*Staff:* Sorry for changing the electives hand-in date, twice.

Just to confirm, the hand-in for the electives is Monday 22nd March...

**4. Resources, timetabling**

*Staff:* The information we were given for the Maths would have been useful to have had BEFORE the assignment...

**5. Course content, teaching methods**

**School-based training**

**University-based training**

*Student:* Will we be getting training in the new National Curriculum next year?

*Staff:* Yes, we will ensure you receive support in it.

*Student :* xxx has told us to have a look at it.

Student: Are there facilities/opportunities to learn Spanish/other languages here at uni?

*Staff:* Google translate is a big help.

Student: Re the professionalism session we had: should we try to enact a rule that anyone coming in more than 15 minutes late can't come in to the session?

*Staff:* Tricky because they might have a genuine reason.

*Staff:* If we make that kind of rule then they won't bother to come at all.

## **5. Equal opportunities**

- no issues raised

Appendix 30 Professional standards for qualified teacher status (QTS)

**A. PROFESSIONAL ATTRIBUTES**

Those recommended for the award of QTS should:

**Relationships with children and young people**

**Q1** Have high expectations of children and young people including a commitment to ensuring that they can achieve their full educational potential and to establishing fair, respectful, trusting, supportive and constructive relationships with them.

**Q2** Demonstrate the positive values, attitudes and behaviour they expect from children and young people.

**Frameworks**

**Q3**

(a) Be aware of the professional duties of teachers and the statutory framework within which they work.

(b) Be aware of the policies and practices of the workplace and share in collective responsibility for their implementation.

**Communicating and working with others**

**Q4** Communicate effectively with children, young people, colleagues, parents and carers.

**Q5** Recognise and respect the contribution that colleagues, parents and carers can make to the development and well-being of children and young people and to raising their levels of attainment

**Q6** Have a commitment to collaboration and co-operative working.

**Personal professional development**

**Q7** (a) Reflect on and improve their practice, and take responsibility for identifying and meeting their developing professional needs

(b) Identify priorities for their early professional development in the context of induction.

**Q8** Have a creative and constructively critical approach towards innovation, being prepared to adapt their practice where benefits and improvements are identified

**Q9** Act upon advice and feedback and be open to coaching and mentoring.

## **B. PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING**

Those recommended for the award of QTS should:

### **Teaching and learning**

**Q10** Have a knowledge and understanding of a range of teaching, learning and behaviour management strategies and know how to use and adapt them, including how to personalise learning and provide opportunities for all learners to achieve their potential.

### **Assessment and monitoring**

**Q11** Know the assessment requirements and arrangements for the subjects/curriculum areas in the age ranges they are trained to teach, including those relating to public examinations and qualifications.

**Q12** Know a range of approaches to assessment, including the importance of formative assessment.

**Q13** Know how to use local and national statistical information to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching, to monitor the progress of those they teach and to raise levels of attainment.

### **Subjects and curriculum**

**Q14** Have a secure knowledge and understanding of their subjects/curriculum areas and related pedagogy to enable them to teach effectively across the age and ability range for which they are trained.

**Q15** Know and understand the relevant statutory and non-statutory curricula, frameworks, including those provided through the National Strategies, for their subjects/curriculum areas, and other relevant initiatives applicable to the age and ability range for which they are trained.

### **Literacy, numeracy and ICT**

**Q16** Have passed the professional skills tests in numeracy, literacy and information and communication technology (ICT)

**Q17** Know how to use skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT to support their teaching and wider professional activities.

### **Achievement and diversity**

**Q18** Understand how children and young people develop and that the progress and well-being of learners are affected by a range of developmental, social, religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic influences.

**Q19** Know how to make effective personalised provision for those they teach, including those for whom English is an additional language or who have special educational needs or disabilities, and how to take practical account of diversity and promote equality and inclusion in their teaching.

**Q20** Know and understand the roles of colleagues with specific responsibilities, including those with responsibility for learners with special educational needs and disabilities and other individual learning needs.

### **Health and well-being**

**Q21** (a) Be aware of current legal requirements, national policies and guidance on the safeguarding and promotion of the well-being of children and young people.

(b) Know how to identify and support children and young people whose progress, development or well-being is affected by changes or difficulties in their personal circumstances, and when to refer them to colleagues for specialist support.

**C1. PROFESSIONAL SKILLS - Planning**

Those recommended for the award of QTS should:

**Planning**

**Q22** Plan for progression across the age and ability range for which they are trained, designing effective learning sequences within lessons and across series of lessons and demonstrating secure subject/curriculum knowledge.

**Q23** Design opportunities for learners to develop their literacy, numeracy and ICT skills.

**Q24** Plan homework or other out-of-class work to sustain learners' progress and to extend and consolidate their learning.

**C2. PROFESSIONAL SKILLS - Teaching, Learning Environment and Team Work**

Those recommended for the award of QTS should:

**Teaching**

**Q25** Teach lessons and sequences of lessons across the age and ability range for which they are trained in which they:

- (a) use a range of teaching strategies and resources, including e-learning, taking practical account of diversity and promoting equality and inclusion;
- (b) build on prior knowledge, develop concepts and processes, enable learners to apply new knowledge, understanding and skills and meet learning objectives;
- (c) adapt their language to suit the learners they teach, introducing new ideas and concepts clearly, and using explanations, questions, discussions and plenaries effectively;
- (d) manage the learning of individuals, groups and whole classes, modifying their teaching to suit the stage of the lesson.

**Learning environment**

**Q30** Establish a purposeful and safe learning environment conducive to learning and identify opportunities for learners to learn in out of school contexts

**Q31** Establish a clear framework for classroom discipline to manage learners' behaviour constructively and promote their self-control and independence.

**Team Working and Collaboration**

**Q32** Work as a team member and identify opportunities for working with colleagues, sharing the development of effective practice with them.

**Q33** Ensure that colleagues working with them are appropriately involved in supporting learning and understand the roles they are expected to fulfil.

**C3. PROFESSIONAL SKILLS - Assessing, monitoring and Giving feedback**

Those recommended for the award of QTS should:

**Assessing, monitoring and giving feedback**

**Q26** (a) Make effective use of a range of assessment, monitoring and recording strategies.

(b) Assess the learning needs of those they teach in order to set challenging learning objectives.

**Q27** Provide timely, accurate and constructive feedback on learners' attainment, progress and areas for development.

**Q28** Support and guide learners to reflect on their learning, identify the progress they have made and identify their emerging learning needs.

## Appendix 31 Module evaluation II

1 = very good 2 = good 3 = adequate 4 = poor

1. How well has this module enabled you to meet the QTS standards (Q14) 1 2 3 4
2. How did the quality of the formative feedback enable you to set target or progress (if appropriate)  
1 2 3 4
3. How well will this module help you to make progress on placement? 1 2 3 4
4. How well has the module helped you to improve your subject knowledge? 1 2 3 4
5. How well has the module helped you to make links between theory and practice? 1 2 3 4
6. Rate the quality of teaching 1 2 3 4
7. Rate the quality of individual support in the tutorials/session (where appropriate) 1 2 3 4

**Please state 3 positive impact of this module**

**Please make 3 suggestions of how this module could be improved**

**Additional comments**

### Self evaluation

Ensured that you know and understand the module aims? Y/N

Did you contribute in seminars Y/N

undertake general background reading related to module Y/N

Complete formative tasks Y/N

Work on your EY subject knowledge file Y/N

Undertake suggested reading Y/N

Undertake self-directed work to further own knowledge and understanding Y/N

Rate the quality of your involvement and engagement in the module 1 2 3 4 5



## Appendix 32 Investigating student teachers' perspectives of learning and participating in seminar

DEMISSIE, F. (2012) Investigating students' perspectives of learning and participating in seminars using a Bourdieuan perspective. **Student Engagement and Experience Journal**, Available at: <<http://research.shu.ac.uk/SEEJ/index.php/seej/article/view/32>>. Date accessed: 07 May, 2012

### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine how Vygotsky's and Bourdieu's theoretical perspectives contributed to the insights I gained about student teachers' perceptions of seminars and my role as a seminar tutor. The paper is based on the findings from a doctoral study into students' perspectives of learning and participating in seminars. Using a constructive grounded theory approach, I interviewed 5 2<sup>nd</sup> year teacher education students and consulted relevant institutional documents. From a Vygotskian perspective, the data highlighted the complexity and dynamic nature of seminars where relationships, pedagogical tools and artefacts played an important meditational role. By highlighting the significance of the wider context, however, Bourdieu's theory of practice and in particular his concept of symbolic violence gave a richer perspective of participants' perspectives of seminars. In particular, by drawing attention to the impact of dominant discourses on individuals' practices, it provided a more nuanced view about the meanings they attached to their seminar experiences, and enabled a deeper reflection about my own practice and values as a tutor/lecturer in higher education.

### Introduction

The view of seminars as a place for learning through interaction and dialogue is part of the tradition of higher education in the UK (Fry *et al.*, 2009). Effective seminars may have many benefits; they can open students to alternative perspectives, increase tolerance of ambiguity, strengthen engagement, and develop the ability to communicate ideas (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

Seminars can be defined as classes where a group of students and a tutor discuss a particular topic (Oxford online dictionary, 1989). However, there are variations in terms of how individual tutors, courses and universities interpret the purposes and practice of seminars. In some

cases, they are the main teaching and learning contexts where students are actively involved in leading seminars. In others, they are mainly tutor-led and involve group activities and/or are discussion based (Gunn, 2007).

Seminars can be a challenging learning context. On one level, effective participation assumes that students know how to be and how to learn through dialogue and discussion (Knights, 1995). On another level, it assumes that students are able to manage the social and emotional dimensions that effective seminar participation involves. For instance, the literature on group dynamics highlights how the fear of being wrong or ridiculed by peers can be a powerful deterrent to effective seminar participation (Jacques, 2000; Fry *et al.*, 2009).

My reasons for undertaking a study into students' perspectives of seminars were both professional and personal. Professionally, in my work as lecturer in primary teacher education, I promote the provision of learning environments that enhance dialogue and talk (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Consequently, the apparent lack of students' engagement in seminars was concerning and at the same time, I felt I had limited insight about how they conceptualised their role in seminars. Additionally, there seemed to be little in the research learning literature that addressed this aspect of student learning.

Personally, I was also inspired by the 'communities of enquiry' approach which provides a simple methodology for promoting enquiry based learning in a collaborative context (Lipman *et al.*, 1980). Indeed, when I used this approach in my teaching, it had a noticeable impact on the seminar learning context. In contrast to other seminars, the students seemed more confident and willing to participate, and by listening to others' perspectives had begun to question and challenge their own views.

## **Research methodology**

The paper is based on a small scale in-depth study of 5, BA 2<sup>nd</sup> year teacher education students. As I was interested in their views and perceptions, I used interviews rather than

observations. I conducted 3 in-depth qualitative interviews over a period of a year, and a final brief meeting to share my findings and interpretations with the participants. I also obtained participants' informed consents and ensured confidentiality by using pseudonyms throughout the research process. Additionally, I discussed with the participants the potential benefits of taking part in the study in relation to opportunities it offered for in-depth reflection on their learning experiences. To obtain some insights into how seminars are conceptualised at institutional levels I also consulted related documentary evidence such as student staff meeting agendas and module evaluation forms.

Using a grounded theory research strategy enabled a focus on a small number of unique cases to generate complex data and fulfilled the study's pragmatic aim to 'systematise insight' to gain practical understanding (Flick, 2009). The resulting data also enabled me to articulate important questions about my practice and the nature of my 'living educational theory'. According to McNiff & Whitehead's perspective of action research, engaging with our living educational theories is an important starting point for action and reflection (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009). Thus, not only does grounded theory provide insights that are student centred, it also provides a useful starting point for action research. Consequently, it is a useful methodology for enquiring into and making informed conclusions about student engagement.

### **Vygotskian theoretical perspectives**

Socio-cultural perspectives are primarily concerned with how social contexts influence and shape the meanings individuals attach to events in the social world. These perspectives are based on Vygotsky's attempt to describe and explain the unique patterns of learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). Although his focus was mainly on children's cognitive development and schooling, his underlying ideas about the historical and developmental nature of culture, the social context as precursor to individual learning and development, and the role of tools and signs in

mediating human action (Wertsch, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) have made important contributions to understandings about culture and cultural development.

Vygotskian perspective illuminated many aspects of the data. By paying attention to the role and significance of mediating tools in seminars such as teaching approaches and artefacts, I was able to get insights into the kinds of meanings participants attached to their experiences. It seemed that relationships with tutors, between peers and family members were important because of their mediational role. Equally, pedagogic tools and practices also appeared to mediate participants' actions (Vygotsky, 1978). This is illustrated in the following example in which Natalie reflects on a practice that most tutors' might take for granted. The tutor is on a 'walk about' during a group work activity in a seminar.

#### *The walkabout*

*Natalie: every time she came and stood, we all seemed to go quiet, I don't think it is intentional, you just go oooh!! and you don't realise and then it is hard to go back on track*

*Fufy: right, what does it make you feel like when, you might be saying the wrong thing or is it automatic?*

*Natalie: I think it is just automatic don't think it is the wrong thing kind of thing kind of fear...: I just think you sense that they are coming over, and everyone clams up or the person who is speaking is really conscious of what they are saying and then they are like, and they are like 'um, I am going to start winding down'*

Natalie's reaction and interpretation of the events vividly illustrates how taken for granted practices can be meaningful to students in surprising ways. Similarly, in Daisy's account of the 'ideal seminar' below, the mediational role of seminar tools and practices such as assignments and their potential uses seemed highly meaningful.

#### *The ideal seminar*

*Daisy: ...oh I do make sense, this links to every thing I said ... it was highly interactive... and we actually got to do the task so we can remember them and then I put that we were given thinking time and it created a bit of suspense... xxxx is so good at it...It is like 'what do you think it is going to happen?' and everyone was like 'oh' and then it is like 'wow' ... and oh my God ... we know how to adapt the task to suit the classroom... and that's what I mean, it is good to be able to apply it.*

*Fufy: and how does that feel ...coming out of that? how does it feel?*

*Daisy: in xxxx?... oh it is brilliant, you come out and you think...oh I am going to use that, I am going to use this ...got so many ideas and the assignment for that is actually creating a xxxx pack, which is going to be full of facts and ideas ... it's all in a topic, so if you are doing xxxx, you go back to xxxx and you are going to use it.*

*Fufy: so it ticks that box...of direct relevance?*

*Daisy: yes, definitely*

The significance of a Vygotskian interpretation is in the way it highlights the significance of cultural tools such as the 'pack' and how these meanings affect individuals practices and perceptions of phenomena. In the extract above, the meanings Daisy attached to the cultural tools seemed to reinforce certain ideas about effective teaching and learning that influenced her practices in the way she shared her experiences with her family.

A closer analysis of the data however, suggests the possible influence of the wider context on how the participants conceptualised their experiences. For instance, Natalie's use of the phrase 'it is automatic', Daisy's reflections on the features of the ideal seminar and Natalie's reflections on tutors' knowledge below hint at the possible influences of dominant educational discourses.

*'...if they were telling you about... language development, and things that where they were telling you stuff, where you don't think they are wrong obviously, they have looked at the*

*research, I imagine they would look at the research, I would be surprised if they didn't... so they have obviously backed it up with stuff they have read.. Things they know about, so I wouldn't challenge that...'*

Discourses, according to Ferguson are the ways in which we organise our ideas about the social world and can be a significant part of our meaning making processes because discourses:

*'... connect together quite powerfully, they make themselves into themes; they are often institutionalised, they define the ways in which things can be understood; they tend to cut out other ways of explaining and understanding, and they are quite powerful ways of constructing meanings and understanding' (Ferguson, 1998, p. 14).*

Recognising the possible influence of discourse therefore meant that Vygotskian perspectives focus on individual cultural meanings, may not, on their own, provide the in-depth insights I sought about seminars.

Indeed, both Ashwin and Wertsch argue that a Vygotskian approaches may have limited explanatory powers because they does not consider the significance of the wider political and historical context such as class struggle and alienation (Ashwin, 2008; Wertsch, 1991). Thus, together with insights I gained about the implications of reflexive methodologies (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009), it seemed that to obtain in-depth insights I needed a perspective that considered the influence of events and practices outside the immediate context of the seminar (Bourdieu, 1977). In the next section I outline the key concepts of the Bourdieu's theory of practice, and how it contributed to insights about student teachers' perceptions of seminars.

### **Bourdieu's theory of practice**

At the heart of Bourdieu's intellectual project was a search for a cultural theory of human behaviour that can 'uncover the most profoundly buried structures of the various social worlds which constitute the social universe, as well as the mechanisms which tend to ensure their

reproduction or their transformation' (Bourdieu, 1992, p.7). By field, Bourdieu is referring to a relational space, such as a seminar, where individuals' habitus or dispositions influence behaviour due to the unequal access to educational and cultural capital, in this case, between tutors and students (Bourdieu, 1998). Habitus is highly significant because it is enduring and generates practices, which Bourdieu defines as '...the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations... that produce practice...' (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 78). In this case, a student habitus, for example, could be seen to enable some practices, such as deference to tutors but not questioning or challenging tutors. By highlighting the relationality between field (seminars), capital (educational status) and habitus (practice), Bourdieu articulates how people are involved in cultural production through their actions and interactions with the objective world (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence in relation to cultural production is particularly relevant to educational contexts. Symbolic violence refers to the hidden ways in which dominant cultures influence practices because individuals often fail to recognise the influence of these dominant cultures. Thus, it is '...the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. Xiii). Moreover, through 'pedagogic action', the way in which '...every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those in power relations' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p.xv), peers, families, tutors, and the curriculum also help to reproduce arbitrary cultural values that are seen as meaningful and valued only because they are sanctioned by the ruling class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In the current study, examining the meanings participants attach to their experiences in seminars provided an opportunity to examine what types of cultures are reproduced and how they may be reproduced.

### **Findings from a Bourdieuan perspective**

Bourdieu's conceptual tools enabled a different way of interrogating the data. For example, I was able to examine the extent to which participants' constructions of seminars reflected the

influence of dominant discourses such as 'education as transmission'. This is a powerful discourse that emanates from educational perspectives that see teachers as infallible experts and learners as 'empty vessels' (Giroux, 2009; Freire, 2000), and can cut out alternative ways of conceptualising the student teacher relationship.

The influence of powerful discourses is further illustrated through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence. Thus, Daisy's reflections on the 'ideal seminar', Natalie's expectations of tutors, and Jess's reflections below on self-directed learning suggest that the participants saw certain practices as legitimate and therefore seem to accept and seek pedagogical practices that sustained rather than challenged dominant discourses.

*'...and then I think, like how, we got told to go and do a risk assessment, that was it; risk assessment... we didn't really go over.. I thought it would have been better if we did it as a group, and could have picked up bits as a group like this is how you would do it with children rather than we go out to do it ourselves, because we didn't actually learn anything... from us trying to do it ourselves.. I don't know if that makes sense... like we didn't really learn ourselves, we are just finding our way round kind of thing...'*

From alternative discourses such as learner autonomy, however, Daisy's apparent tutor dependent practices in the 'ideal seminar' and Jess's resistance to independent learning could be seen to be detrimental to students' success in HE. For Bourdieu, it is participants' habitus and the way habitus interacts with the seminar field that leads them to misrecognise how practices can sustain powerful discourse that are ultimately disadvantageous to participants own interests.

Finally, considering the role and influence of discourse also encouraged me to take into account institutional practices such as module evaluation forms and staff student meeting agenda to explore how individuals' perspectives of seminars related to the wider context. In both cases, the emphasis on the quality of teaching at the expense of the quality of learning suggested that aspects of institutional practices play a part in sustaining particular discourses about teaching and learning.



Using Bourdieu perspective highlighted some of the implicit overlaps and contradictions between students' expectations and perceptions, the accountability measures that rely on student perceptions and some of the discourses of higher education. It also raised questions about the way ideas of student engagement are conceptualised and addressed in the context of dominant discourse about teaching and learning.

### **Challenges of using theory or practice**

In the previous section I argued that analysing the possibilities of symbolic violence in participants' reflections enabled me to get more nuanced and deeper insights into participants' perspectives of learning and participating in seminars. However, there are limitations in Bourdieu's conception of the social world that could impact on the significance of the interpretations so far. For instance, Bourdieu argues that through their habitus and associated practices, individuals actively construct culture. However, some have argued that because Bourdieu also sees habitus as limiting the possibilities for agency, the extent to which cultural production is constructive is questionable. Thus, his conclusion from his study of French universities that working class students' practices are restricted by their social positions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), in fact suggests a form of determinism (Jenkins, 2002). Similarly, Margolis argues that seeing individuals as unreflecting beings who are not able to escape their destiny reduce human beings capacity for reflection and transformation (Margolis, 1999).

There was some evidence from the findings in this study that alternative ways of being are possible, as illustrated in Linzi's case below.

*Linzi: ...it was unusual, but it was nice, because it makes you feel like an adult rather than a... I think that is the difference between 6<sup>th</sup> form and school and the university, cause she said, I don't understand that, can you explain it? That was quite nice*

*Fufy: and is that rare?*

*Linzi: yeah,, quite a lot of it, I don't know... but because physics and the maths background, I am quite confident with that...yes, it is quite nice...*

In contrast to Bourdieu's expectations that students act in student-like ways, Linzi seems to show that she has a disposition to act outside her 'designated' habitus. She appears to relish a rare seminar dynamic where she was more knowledgeable and powerful than the tutor as a result of her confidence in Maths and Physics. In this case, it meant that she could be a different kind of student, suggesting a more varied repertoire than would be normally expected from similar contexts.

Indeed, Bourdieu's later work suggests a more flexible view of habitus that acknowledges variations between group members who share a similar student 'history'. Thus, habitus is not necessarily a fixed choice of behaviours, but, '...depending on the stimuli, the very same habitus will generate different even opposite outcomes (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.135). Whilst this perspective goes some way to addressing the criticisms, its reductivist tendencies are still significant; it seems to ascribe all that is significant and meaningful in terms of the struggle for capital, and gives limited room for diversity of individual experiences and the social and emotional dimensions of practice (Jenkins, 2002).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to examine how Vygotskian and Bourdieuan perspectives contributed to insights about participants' experiences of seminars. Vygotskian perspectives highlighted the significance and meaning of culturally valued tools and practices for individuals' cultural development. On the other hand, by prioritising the role of the wider context in terms of the influence of dominant cultural meanings, a Bourdieuan perspective, despite its limitations, gave more in-depth insights about the seminar context and participants' perception of this learning context.

Bourdieu's ideas also enabled deeper reflections about my own practice. Generally, they increased my sensitivity towards and awareness of the influence of dominant discourses on the meanings of

everyday taken-for-granted seminar tools and practices. The concept of symbolic violence in particular, raised important questions about how my everyday practice might inadvertently 'shut the gate' for those students who may be open to different ways of being in seminars. Thus, whilst a Vygotskian perspective also offers important insights into practice, Bourdieu's concepts posed more searching questions about my practices in relation to how far they sustain or challenge dominant discourses and cultures.

The argument in this paper is situated in the particular context of teacher education students. Nonetheless, using Bourdieu's concepts has wider implications for some of the ways in which students' engagement in seminars is conceptualised. If the relevance of the wider context such as discourse is indeed influences perceptions, then an important step to engagement might be to encourage students to reflect on the assumptions and implications of contrasting discourses. In relation to tutor practices, awareness of the role and impact of dominant discourse on students' perspectives of seminars could provide opportunities for reflection and action that leads to genuine student engagement and participation in seminars.

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Wheatsheaf

Appendix 33 Photograph of a typical seminar room

