The focus of this paper is to understand how mature students studying HE in FE experience socially and culturally situated learning. The mature student experience of teaching and learning in HE in FE is often conceptualised as catering for individual needs; small cohorts and therefore increased contact time in HE in FE is supposed to offer an individualised experience (Burkhill, Dyer and Stone, 2008). Psychological theories that view learning as primarily a cognitive and individual process understand the mature student experience as one that involves overcoming a series of individual barriers. However, to conceptualise the mature student experience in this way neglects the way in which learning can be understood as a transformative process that is socially and culturally situated. This raises questions such as: how do mature students experience the process of becoming a member of a HE educational community? What factors shape that community? And what identity shifts mature students may experience during this process?

The paper draws on a longitudinal case study of mature HE students in an FE college, a group whose specific experiences have somewhat neglected in educational research (Esmond, 2012). Critical Ethnography forms the paradigmatic and methodological position adopted in this research, since the research aims to uncover commonly accepted assumptions about HE in FE and to demonstrate the interaction between human agency and structure (Carspecken, 1996). The data was generated by participant observation over a period of 12 months with a 12 mature students studying a range of HE qualifications in an FE college, revealing interactions which might facilitate or constrain learning. This method was complemented by 24 unstructured interviews in order uncover any broader structural contexts which may be hidden during observation. Situated Learning Theory (SLT) (Lave and Wenger, 1991) is applied as an analytical tool to assist in the interpretation and exploration of data. However, due to the emphasis in SLT on agency over structure, critical ethnography offers an additional tool for data analysis to redress this.

Early findings suggest there may be a kind of ‘accidental participation’ in HE for students within an FE College. This paper therefore seeks to contribute to knowledge by developing understandings of mature students’ experiences of HE in FE and the associated identity work that may arise as a result of participation. It also seeks to contribute understandings about the way in which both agency and structure shape these educational communities and their members.