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We all have lives that have potential interest for a listener. The central argument of this chapter and the research study from which it arises is that, by talking to another about our lives we can take part in important biographical learning and develop understanding of what our lives have involved and mean. Our life-stories can have a 'plot' which serves, amongst other things, to organise our lives sequentially and thematically. The plots we construct can indicate, to ourselves and to others, what we have learned from our lives and what we consider significant. The Learning Lives Project explored these themes through in-depth interviews with about 125 adults who were interviewed up to eight times. It is suggested that when we construct our biographies – which is to some extent carrying out research on ourselves – we are, in fact, engaging in a valuable learning process.

Introduction

Lifelong learning is sometimes defined as an 'economic transaction' in which education is seen as a commodity 'a thing' for consumption. An important task for adult education researchers is to highlight the significance of the broad range of learning processes and practices that occur in the lives of adults so as to show that there is more to learning than this. The Learning Lives project, therefore, gave the participants opportunities to tell stories about their earlier lives and enabled the researchers to hear and discuss stories about changes in the participants' lives.

We became particularly interested in the role of life-stories and life "storying" in learning processes and in the relationship between the narrative quality of such stories and their learning potential. Unsurprisingly, we found that some people were more adept at telling stories about their lives than others, suggesting that the potential for their learning from their life-stories also varies. Our analysis revealed that a significant number of participants had come to some kind of understanding about their lives and

themselves and that this learning had had an impact on the ways in which they led their lives.

Biographical learning and narrative theory

The idea that life itself can be or can become an ‘object’ of learning is not new. Alheit and Dausien (2002) call it biographical learning and highlight three aspects: the implicit dimension, the social dimension and the ‘self-willed’ dimension. They note that the implicit dimension “forms a person’s *biographical stock of knowledge*” (ibid., p. 15) and that we can reflect on and retrieve such learning “when we find ourselves stumbling or at crossroads” (ibid.). They emphasise that such reflexive learning processes do not exclusively take place ‘inside’ the individual “but depend on communication and interaction with others” (ibid., p. 16). And they argue that while learning within and through one’s life history is interactive and socially structured, it also follows its own ‘individual logic’ generated by the specific, biographically layered structure of experience.

Although the stories people tell about their lives can be taken simply as accounts or descriptions of these lives, they may already reflect aspects of what people have learned from their lives, either in a more self-aware or implicit manner. It seems reasonable to assume that the construction and telling becomes an important part of such learning processes. To think of the life-story as a ‘site’ for biographical learning and to think of life-storying as central to this activity, is captured in the notion of ‘narrative learning’ (Biesta *et al.*, 2008; Goodson *et al.*, 2010). Narratives, to put it briefly, are those stories that are characterised by a *plot* (Polkinghorne, 1988). Plots can organise stories either in a sequential or in a thematic, non-sequential manner but they provide structure to a story and enable the narrator to select relevant events in the story – thus making the story into an understandable narrative.

This raises the possibility that the presence of a particular plot – or particular plots – may be an expression of what narrators have learned from their lives. Sometimes the narrator seems to be aware of the plot and actively uses it to construct a particular ‘version’ of his or her life; at other times the plot can be reconstructed by the researcher – but does not seem to be part of the narrator’s narrative ‘strategy’. Bruner has suggested that we construct narrative – both at an individual and societal level – in order to justify the *departure* from established norms and patterns of belief (see Bruner, 1990, p. 47). Autobiographical accounts are therefore not simply descriptions of one’s life but should be understood as accounts “of what one thinks one did in what settings in what ways for what felt reasons” (ibid., p. 119). Narratives thus reveal why it was necessary (morally, socially, psychologically) why the life had gone in a particular way” (ibid., p. 121).

This means that narration is not only about the construction of a particular ‘version’ of one’s life and at the same time a construction of a particular ‘version’ of oneself. Although stories about one’s life are about the past, Bruner argues that “an enormous amount of work is going on here and now as the story is being put together” (ibid., p. 122). This is not so much because the narrator needs to work hard to bring events back from memory, but more importantly because in telling about the past the narrator must decide “what to make of the past narratively at the moment of telling” (ibid.). Thus the narration is not simply to be seen as the outcome of a learning process, but can be seen as (narrative) learning-in-action.

A narrative perspective on biographical learning

In our reading and analysis of participants' life-stories we made use of the foregoing ideas in order to characterise and explore processes and outcomes of narrative learning. One reason for this was our interest in the question whether a focus on the narrative quality of life-stories could reveal something about the 'learning potential' of different narrative forms. Another reason was that we were interested in the 'action potential' of life-stories, i.e., the way in which and the extent to which particular narrative forms or characteristics relate to the ability to exert agency over and give direction to one's life.

Perhaps our most significant finding is that the differences between the stories people tell about their lives do indeed connect with ways in which people learn from their lives and that such learning affects how they conduct their lives. This not only suggests that life-stories and life-storying are important 'vehicles' or 'sites' for learning from life. It also suggests that the differences between stories matter for such learning.

One relevant dimension in this regard is the *narrative intensity* of life-stories. Narrative intensity refers to the length of the life-story and to the amount of detail and 'depth' of the account offered. The extent to which life-stories are more or less elaborate not only has to do with length and detail but also with the question whether the life-story is predominantly *descriptive* or whether it is more *analytical or evaluative*. We found stories that were at the more descriptive end of the spectrum and stories that presented themselves more explicitly as attempts to 'make sense' of the life.

To make sense of one's life – or, to be more precise: to construct a story which presents the life as 'making sense' – is related to the ideas of *'plot'* and *'employment'*. If we see the plot of a (life) story as an organising principle, then we can see that the presence of a plot is a strong indication that the narrator has learned something from his or her life. In most stories we were able to identify a plot and this coincided with the narrative being more evaluative and analytical than descriptive. Some participants appeared to be aware of the plot in their life narrative from the outset; for others the plot only emerged throughout the interviews. In some cases a plot was only discernible from the point of view of the researcher but there was little evidence that the narrator was aware of this plot. Not all stories carried a single plot and in cases with multiple plots we could also see that they functioned differently in the narrator's self-understanding. The absence of a plot does not automatically mean the absence of learning. We found examples of life-stories that lacked any employment but there was still evidence that the person had learned from life. This suggests that narration is only one of the possible ways of learning from one's life. It also highlights the fact that the life-story is a particular genre that is unfamiliar to some people.

The question of the awareness of a plot can be connected to the question of the *efficacy* of the life-story; that is, what is the 'learning potential' of life-narratives, i.e., the extent to which particular narratives make learning from one's life possible, and the extent to which such learning 'translates' into action? It seems as if in some cases people are 'caught' in their story so that their story and storying does not help them to 'move on'. Being 'stuck' in their life-story, and having a 'strong' version of one's life, can sometimes prevent further learning.

Important from the perspective of the learning potential of life-stories is the question of *flexibility*. We call a life-story scripted when there is little flexibility in the storying, when the life is lived and understood in relation to one particular ‘version’. There is, as such, nothing wrong with this and the research provides evidence that for some people it is very important to have a ‘strong’ story about themselves and their lives as this gives them direction, orientation and a sense of self. This may become a problem in those situations where the ‘fit’ between the story and the conditions under which the life (and perhaps we could also say, the story) is lived begins to shift. We are not saying that narrative learning is the only way in which people can respond to change and transition but it can be an important resource, provided that there is a degree of flexibility in the story or, that there is a ‘capacity’ for narrative learning from life. Some participants clearly developed their ability to use narration as a way to reflect upon their lives. A certain familiarity with the ‘genre’ and perhaps even practising storying may be an element that can help develop the ability to learn narratively from one’s life.

The question of the ‘action potential’ of life-stories is not necessarily connected to an ability to change one’s story in relation to changing circumstances. We found evidence where holding on to a particular story or version of the life – often based on strong ideas about what a good life should look like – was effective for individuals to achieve a degree of agency control in particular situations.

Case study

Anne Wakelin – a participant in the project – told a story that illustrates some of the foregoing themes. Anne was a willing and fluent story teller and undergoing a significant transition in her life.

She was interviewed six times between November 2004 and May 2007. With her husband and three children, Anne had uprooted in 2002 from one part of the country to another. The Learning Lives project gave Anne the opportunity to tell stories about this life-changing transition.

Anne, aged 38 and married for 16 years, was the mother of a teenage daughter and two infant sons. The family came originally from the urban Midlands of England where Anne had lived all her life until she and her husband decided to move to a village in the rural South West. She came from a close-knit family where she was accustomed to visiting parents, grandparents and sisters regularly and, despite close family ties and an established pattern of life, Anne and her husband took the risks involved in making a major change. They had no previous connection with the village they moved to and yet were willing to leave behind their familiar lives for the sake of living somewhere new that was close to the sea.

When she left school, Anne had trained and worked for several years as a hair-dresser. She described herself as being a ‘people person’ who found enjoyment in that profession. In the village and through her son’s primary school, Anne came into contact with the government initiative Sure Start, becoming a volunteer mentor for the scheme. Subsequently she was invited to become ‘parent rep’ for the village at Sure Start organisational meetings and became active in a number of community groups. In time Sure Start employed her as a community development officer with responsibility for leading several projects for parents and children. Alongside her workplace

learning were elements of formal education, including an NVQ 3 in Early Years Education. When the Sure Start initiative came to an end, Anne continued to be employed by her local authority as a community development officer.

Narrative quality

Anne is an enthusiast for life and the interview transcripts frequently quote her saying that things are ‘fab’, ‘fantastic’, ‘lovely’, ‘brilliant’. Anne’s narratives were primarily *descriptive* of events and the most distinctive characteristic of her stories was an intense *dialogic quality*: as an enthusiastic narrator of events in her life, she would frequently reconstruct conversations between key players in these. There was usually little analysis or reflection in Anne’s stories, although the final interview achieved an unprecedented depth in terms of its *analytical* and *evaluative* quality when Anne was asked to comment on her experiences of taking part in the Learning Lives project.

Plot

The plot that emerges from Anne’s narrative is of a wife and mother resuming her career after moving to a different part of the country. She presented as a vigorous, active, enthusiastic and sociable person engaged in an exuberant quest to engage in life’s opportunities. Even the interviews were scarcely episodes of quiet reflection: she emerged as the epitome of the uninhibited multitasking mother, attending to her toddler, taking care of a pet, dealing with phone calls from work and phone calls about house improvements. She was excited by life and its possibilities and this exuberance characterises her stories about her own life, even when talking about family problems and conflicts. Most striking during the research period was Anne’s resumption of her identity as a woman with a career. This resulted in stories about changes to routines, knowledge and skills and in her physical change.

The clue to Anne’s perspective on the existence of a plot in her narrative is contained in the frequently used comment that she sees herself as a ‘people person’. In her new location, becoming a community development worker enables Anne to pursue her interest in people in new ways – going into housing estates and caravans to locate small children and ensuring their carers are aware of their rights and responsibilities. Anne relishes ‘being on a mission’ and meeting the challenge of co-ordinating people and resources in projects. She loves doing this in a work environment where she can co-operate with others she finds congenial. However, she has a daily challenge of reconciling her aspirations and preferences with her concerns about her domestic life.

Learning potential

In early interviews we heard many stories *about* Anne’s learning as a result of moving to a new home. Some adjustments were material such as how to cope with everyday matters like transport and shopping in a rural area. Others involved the way she related to her husband and children as she started to develop a new sense of identity in her

new home and community. We heard of the skills and knowledge she gained from her voluntary and then her employed work for Sure Start. Anne's stories were of the experiences in which and from which she learned.

During the final interview Anne was asked to reflect on the experience of taking part in the project and this shifted the quality of her responses, away from a descriptive account to a more reflective stance. She commented on what a rare opportunity it had been:

I've really enjoyed doing it. I've enjoyed doing it because it's, it's not very often that somebody sits there and lets you tell them about what you are and what you do and how you do your [pause] how your life has been, has been really.

(Interview 6, June 2007)

It was suggested that perhaps the experience was like talking with friends or with relatives. While she agreed that friends may well get together and reminisce, it was never to the extent that someone talks about themselves at length. She added that family members have so many interests and commitments that they would not listen to each other for long.

Action potential

There was an embodied manifestation of the changes that Anne had experienced by our fifth interview. Anne had started attending a slimming club and lost three stone in weight. She resembled far more the glamorous young hairdresser featured in photographs in the family home. She spoke of having regained interest in buying new clothes and caring once more about her appearance.

A change in Anne's approach to telling stories was in the way she reported chronology: in our early interviews, Anne's sense of time was mainly 'family-centric' – she recalled chronology in terms of when things had happened to family members. By the final interviews she was 'organisation-centric'.

She said she enjoyed taking part in the interviews and reading the transcripts and found they offered an important insight into herself and the changes she had experienced:

I'm doing more for a starter. I'm completely different in what I do. I'm working now. More confident in myself as I was three years ago, and more knowledgeable in what I do as well. The different outlook on things, you know, in my work, because I'd only ever been, as I say I'd only ever been a hairdresser.

(Interview 6, June 2007)

However, in the final interview Anne communicated some of her underlying anxieties about getting older and the personal costs that were involved in pursuing her job. She said it was a 'horrible feeling that I've no baby in the house anymore'. She was moving beyond her motherhood identity to becoming someone who enjoys being at work and sees it as necessary to fulfil herself as a 'people person'. At the same time she recognises the personal cost of being no longer available for her children in the way

she was. Nevertheless her narrative justifies a *departure* from her established norms and patterns of belief (Bruner, 1990).

I would have been a right miserable bugger or, you know, I don't know how I'd have been. So life takes you in such funny ways you never know what's there... so just go with it.

(Interview 6, June 2007)

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