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**Crisis as a Learning Resource - Understanding Non-Traditional Students' Experiences
in RANLHE Research Project**

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This paper will present the findings of an international research project RANLHE (Access and Retention: Experiences of an Non-Traditional Learners), with the focus on the Polish team's research report. RANLHE is a research initiative funded by EU Lifelong Learning Programme (Transversal) and involves eight universities from seven countries: Ireland, Spain, Poland, Sweden, England, Scotland and Germany. The project looked at how non-traditional students in higher education experience the processes of learning, how they perceive themselves as learners and how their identity as learners develops in order to understand the experience of access, retention and dropout. By 'non-traditional' we mean students who are under-represented in higher education and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors. This includes, for example, students whose families have not been to university before, students from low-income families, from (particular) minority ethnic groups, mature students and students with disabilities.

One of the key objectives of the project was to illuminate and theorize, using in-depth biographical and collaborative methods, the structural, cultural and personal narratives of learning and agency in students' lives. In order to understand this better, biographical interviews with the focus on learning experiences were conducted. As a research team we've shared the belief in the potential of the stories to reveal hidden aspects of learners' experiences and the dynamics of tensions between structure and agency, between the given 'lifeworld' and imagined 'lifeworld', a uniqueness of the interplay between individual and social phenomena. Seeing the effort people put into making sense of their story not only gives the researchers more complex perspectives on learning processes in adult lives but it gives a sample of learning itself. In our national context, this perspective revealed how intense the relation was between engaging in HE and dealing with personal crises.

This paper will analyse the experiences of those learner for whom engaging in HE was not only a play for knowledge and instrumental learning, it was about improvement of the quality of life, work identity, and reinventing themselves. Crisis was both an 'ignition mechanism' that initiated changes (i.e. becoming a student) and a vast reservoir which provided a rich, vital resources for communicative and transformative learning. The theoretical framework of transformative learning theory by Mezirow and the concept of recognition by Honneth was used in order to shed light on dialectic of crisis as a resource and input for change and development.

HE and non- traditional students in Poland

Higher education in Poland – both as a system and as a concept – is a dynamically changing social phenomenon. Beside extensive changes in terms of numbers (growth of student body), finance and organisational aspects (growth of non-state universities) we are witnessing a change of the learning identities of the new groups of students. Non-state university students tend to come from lower-socio economic groups and from smaller towns and rural areas. Most of these students study part-

time and work to pay their fees. Their motivation is high, but they also struggling with economic difficulties, demanding employers, family obligations and, surprisingly often with personal issues and crisis such as health problems, abusive relationships and painful divorces. It is interesting here to note that personal crisis, prolonged experience of disrespect or a major life changing event are often the trigger that leads to engaging in HE in the first place. Their needs as learners are more complex than instrumental learning, it calls for a transformative process. As stated by Mezirow (1977), in situations of disjunction, often caused by life crises, individual's construction of reality may be transformed as a result of critically reflecting upon their experiences and plotting new strategies of living as a result of their assessment of the situation (p. 157).

The sudden growth of students and popular (mass) aspects of HE in Poland it looks like access is no longer a problem – almost everybody can enter tertiary education institutions, but different status of ownership structure (public, non public) create a peculiar paradox – more privileged students, from educated and well established families attend public, free of charge universities, which can be more selective because they've been financed by the state budget and non- public, because of their self financed model of management, are charging fees, but they attract non-traditional students for whom it is easier to keep up with learning in more flexible time frames (part- time courses are the majority). These non-traditional students struggle with the learning demands in higher education institutions, which is a result of their previous experiences with early education, low self-esteem and lack of support from their families of origin. Being often the first generation in HE, they are not always in a position to articulate their needs and mobilise pragmatic, adequate resources necessary to become a successful learner. Space, language and social dimensions can make them feel like - in Bourdieu's terms - 'fish out of water', in contrast to 'traditional' students compared to 'fish in water'. As stated by Reay et al (2005) traditional students' choices and careers are a result of living out 'normal' biographies which are described as linear, anticipated and predictable, often gender and class specific, rooted in well-established lifeworlds. Non-traditional students whose educational choices are influenced by external factors like financial and family circumstances, employment status encounter higher education as an unfamiliar field and are 'fish out of water.' Learning culture may be as alienating, confusing, demanding and difficult to relate to their previous life experiences. The way they describe themselves reveals the self- image of 'unsuited' or 'unfitted learner':

My first impression after a day in a lecture auditorium was that I've never spend 10 hour in any school. I had a headache because of all this theories, definitions etc. then we had a seminar in smaller groups and I got a list of books and articles I should read for the semester – I've never read so many during my whole previous education together! And that was just one course....I never thought I will be able to make it through the first exam session (Ranlhe interview data, male student)

This new type of students is currently changing and undermining more traditional images of studying and being part of academia. It is a challenge for the learning culture of universities, but it serves the purpose of critical education by recruiting non-traditional students to realize the goal of equity and, in the process, identify the social and cultural barriers to participation (Tennant, 2006). Therefore, transformational learning, even if is located at the individual, micro – level, has wider social effects and benefits. In adult education theory the realization of the conditions for democracy are the same conditions necessary for adult learning according to Mezirow. Habermas sees education as developing in learners critical reasoning necessary for a democracy, which puts a learning project at the centre of democratic society. The learning project of Habermas involves the hope that we can resist colonisation and develop democratic processes inherent in interpersonal communication – that is where the mission of universities is located and where it can be exercised. These ideas support the view that universities can be a force for democracy (Fleming, 2009)

Entering HE with 'risky capital' can generate a crisis as well as 'biographical opportunity' (see Alheit & Dausien, 2000). Reay et al (2005, pp. 28-34) argue HE, that when habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, the resulting disjunctures can generate change and transformation but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty. That is why this new, growing group of non-traditional students in Poland has a particular need for transformative learning with an emancipatory intent. For Mezirow transformative learning is:

the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.

(Mezirow, 2000, 7–8).

In order to transform their 'meaning schemes' students must engage in critical reflection on their experiences, which in turn may lead to a perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167). However, it was stated by Mezirow that transformative learning is not a frequent phenomenon and usually results from a "disorientating dilemma". Crisis or major life transition becomes an important trigger for those dilemmas, which make a powerful learning resources (Mezirow, 1995, p. 50). As a result of discordant experiences specific learning sequences, based on ten stages, can be established:

- 1) disorientating dilemma
- 2) self-examination
- 3) critical assessment and a sense of alienation
- 4) relating discontent to the experiences of others
- 5) exploring options for new ways of acting
- 6) building confidence in new way of behaving
- 7) planning a course of action
- 8) acquiring knowledge in order to implement plans
- 9) experimenting with the new roles
- 10) reintegration into society (Mezirow, 1981, p.7).

What seems to be a specific value of transformative learning, beside new knowledge, new roles and new action course is – in the context of Polish non-traditional students – emancipatory aspect of transformation, liberating from 'libidinal, institutional or environmental forces which limit our options and rational control over our lives' (Mezirow, 1981, p.5). It allows students to experience a major change of self-awareness and quality of life.

While Mezirow's ideas explain how transformative learning is happening from the procedural point of view, Honneth's work grasps both multiple reasons for distortion (seen as a result of being disrespected and denied) and social significants of being recognised by the family, peers and community. It was a repeating pattern in Polish narratives:

When I started high school I was an A-student and I was the only one in the class with such an attitude, truth to be told - this did not make me a lot of friends ... I stopped studying, stopped caring, because I wanted to be liked, have friends, so my grades went lower and lower (...) Other kids were teasing me, pushing, I was bullied.. ... So I stopped being active in the classroom, backed out. In the end, I barely graduated from high school. (...) I believe if I had gone to a different high school or got some help back then I would be an M.A. today without a problem (Ranlhe interview data, female student)

The intersections of both Mezirow's and Honneth's ideas create a comprehensive framework for

analyzing data gathered in the RANLHE project and enables to make sense of the students' narratives. They are in need of being recognized and respected as much the same as they are in need of critical awareness and transformation. Honneth's theory of recognition provides an important factor here – a recognition and self-respect as key aspects for critical transformative learning. In the RANLHE research project the team, the use of Honneth's work in the educational field was initiated by researcher from National University of Ireland, Maynooth. As they stressed importance of Honneth's ideas for researching learning process is grounded in 1) a wide range of intellectual resources he deploys in his model (Bowlby, Habermas, Hegel), 2) the ambition of the model in terms of its explanatory value and 3) author's emancipatory hope as a part of social theory (Fleming and Finnegan, 2010).

Adults who have returned to education frequently express their deep satisfaction with the learning experience and inform evaluators that their self-confidence and esteem has been greatly enhanced. What does this enhancement involve? Does this gain in sense of self reflect the increasing importance of credentials in the labour market, a successful adaptation to, often classed and gendered, social norms, a new form of reflexive individualism or provide more evidence of the pervasive use of therapeutic language in society ?(...) With an interest in critical pedagogy we have been looking for ways of empirically deepening our understanding of what they mean when they make such observations.

(Fleming and Finnegan, 2010)

It is implied in the work of Honneth that a pursuit of respect and recognition in all forms is an important part of experiencing HE by non-traditional students: there is a social dimension as a society or community is, through the validation and qualification of higher education, acknowledging and respecting the individual in ways that issue in increased social solidarity and identity (Fleming and Finnegan, 2010). This is a process of identity development with all aspects of learning stressed by Mezirow – instrumental, communicative and emancipatory. There is also an explicit link in gathered data between experiencing disrespect, being prone to crisis and as a result – tendency to enrol in education. Thus education becomes an important social space that could support or hinder individual and collective transformation and recognition for particular groups, such as non-traditional students.

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