

Life History Approaches to Access and Retention of Non-traditional Students in Higher Education: A Cross-European Approach

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Introduction

Higher education participation has become an important focus for policy debate as well as for scholarly research. In many contexts, this debate has had a particular relevance to wider social concerns over equity and inclusion. Until recently, discussions of equity and inclusion in higher education tended to focus on access and entry to the system, with much less attention being paid to the distribution of outcomes from the system. This paper reports on a multi-country study that was aimed at critically understanding the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education, and in particular on the factors that helped promote retention. In doing so, the study straddles the sociology of social reproduction and the psychosociology of learner transformations.

The paper draws on the experience of the RANLHE project, a seven-country study of retention and access for non-traditional learners in higher education. Our main concern here is to reflect on the value of biographical and life history approaches in tackling this subject (we are aware that 'biographical and 'life history' research can mean different things to different researchers, but for the present paper we are using the terms interchangeably; see Merrill and West (2009), for a discussion of these issues). We have reported elsewhere on other analyses of student and institutional data (see the project website at <http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl/>), and will therefore provide only a brief summary of our overall approach. The paper will then present reflections on the life history approach that we adopted, with illustrations taken from our student data from the UK, in order to extend our presentation of the method.

The RANLHE project

The research involved eight partners from seven different countries: England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Scotland, Spain and Sweden. The main research questions concern (a) the relative position of non-traditional students in different European systems; (b) the extent to which access and

retention of non-traditional students are treated as distinctive policy concerns; and (c) whether particular interventions are believed to affect successful access and retention for non-traditional students. While we do not accept all of Tinto's arguments about retention and success, like many other researchers we see student integration as critical in understanding retention, which therefore led us to focus on the extent to which people see themselves as belonging in university, and as inhabiting comfortably, or at least in a good enough way, the transitional status of studenthood (Tinto 1975, 1987).

This interest in integration led us in turn to explore what promotes or limits the construction of a learner identity among non-traditional adult students. Such an identity is itself part of the integration process which enables people to become effective learners and which promotes or inhibits completion of HE. We adopted an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on a number of key concepts from sociology, psychology, especially psychoanalysis, and social history; from sociology we have taken Bourdieu's ideas of habitus as a way of exploring the social and cultural worlds of non-traditional students, and from psychoanalysis, more specifically object relations theory, we have drawn on Donald Winnicott's notion of transitional space as a way of understanding the university. Issues of class, gender, ethnicity and age are important in our research. To achieve this, the project partners have developed in-depth life history methods to illuminate and theorise the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in adult student's lives.

Life history methods in transnational research

Life history research is by no means a single, unified field, with its own clearly defined and universally accepted methods. It has its origins in a number of different disciplines and theoretical approaches. While life history methods were pioneered in Znaniecki's early work on Polish peasant immigrants in Chicago, which can be understood as belonging broadly within the interpretative tradition of symbolic interactionism, similar approaches were developed within disciplines such as anthropology and social history, often inspired by semi-political desires to record lives and cultures that are seen as neglected or misrepresented for one reason or another (see Thompson 1978, 52-60).

This approach has become remarkably popular in recent years, for a number of reasons. Partly, biographical research has benefited from the wider 'cultural turn' in the social sciences, with its focus on language and narrative. It speaks to a humanist emphasis on 'lived experience', as well as to

interpretative concerns with understanding meaning and subjectivity as key dimensions of people's identity (Merrill 1999: 45-51). It may have a particular appeal for adult education researchers who are also adult education teachers, identifying strongly and personally with their students.

Second, biographical research is highly compatible with other approaches to analysing the life course. This can be very helpful in helping to explain why significant episodes of learning are often most apparent at turning points. These are particularly so at significant moments of personal change, which tend to foreground issues of identity for the person (Biesta et al 2011); or even, more fundamentally, perhaps, of selfhood (West, 1996). The most charged turning points may help promote reflexivity about identity and self which then provide a basis for what we have described as narrative learning. They are therefore extremely important in our account of significant changes in someone's experiences in prompting or constraining learning. Biographical approaches thus allow for researchers to explore the meanings and importance that people attach to particular changes in their lives, including those that have to do with transitions between different life stages, which we probably expect to go through at some time as we grow older, and those that involve significant and often unexpected challenges to someone's status and role. Both force us to ask who we are, and who we should relate to and how, requiring us to reconsider more or less explicitly our capacity for learning from and for our lives (Field, Gallacher and Ingram 2009).

The method's popularity also reflects the broad socio-cultural changes that Giddens and Beck have emphasised in their work on institutionalised reflexivity. While people have always experienced their biographies as a field of learning, in late modernity 'transitions have to be anticipated and coped with, and ... personal identity is liable to be the result of long and protracted learning processes' (Alheit 1995: 59). Moreover, these learning processes take place in circumstances where routine and habit have been devalued: we cannot use templates inherited from the past to anticipate an uncertain and rapidly changing future. Biographical learning therefore becomes 'a self-willed, "autopoietic" accomplishment on the part of active subjects' (Alheit and Dausien 2002: 17). If we wish to understand learning as a fundamental and pervasive human activity, then we need to see it as integral to people's lives and the stories that they tell about their lives.

Biographical or life history research is therefore an important and powerful way of seeing learning as a fundamental dimension of living. There are, though, risks of an excessive methodological individualism, for at least two reasons. The first is the extent to which learning and narration are still conceived as primarily an individual capacity and/or process. Although many life history researchers

insist emphatically that their approach is not solely individualistic, the approach nevertheless clearly focuses on the individual's capacity for narrating their own life in such a way as to reflect on their own experiences. The second issue is the emphasis placed on the story as a distinctive account; yet narration never takes place in a social vacuum. On the contrary, life stories are inseparable from 'the relationship of teller and audience in which it is occasioned', a relationship that is always particular to a given time and place (Tonkin 1995: 2). Moreover, stories are also told in the relationships that constitute research itself, in which power and unconscious processes between people may be at work, shaping the stories people tell. A longitudinal element in the method can, for such reasons, be considered important in encouraging reflexivity in the research itself, including towards what may be shaping the story in the here and now: a focus on the process, in which the reflexivity of the researcher as well as her attentiveness can influence the quality of the storytelling and its understanding foregrounds the importance, in the words of Liz Stanley, of the auto/biographical or relational in research (Stanley, 1992; Merrill and West, 2009).

Methodologically, life history research cannot readily be reconciled with the underlying principles of comparative educational research. One particular issue for the research team was the 'embeddedness' of people's stories in specific contexts and experiences. The particularity of the data, which were produced by life history interviews, means that we cannot simply treat each individual story as 'representative' of a wider, national story. Yet cross-national comparative research is commonly undertaken on the basis of a number of assumptions, one of which is that the 'national' framing of educational systems and institutions provides a way of organising data so that they can then reasonably be compared with one another. There is no easy way of balancing the particularities of student experiences and narratives with the relatively clear-cut divisions between national systems and policies. Nevertheless, clearly there are ways in which national policies and institutional forms shape the experiences of students, as well as ways in which the category of 'non-traditional' includes some groups who are excluded from higher education in most national systems. And by adopting shared 'sensitizing concepts', we aimed to provide common ways of seeking, however tentatively, to understand the student experiences and stories, in all their particularities but also commonalities.

Narration, and the experiences that we try to make sense of when we tell our story, is also embedded in a particular habitus. We have drawn on this term, which was used by Pierre Bourdieu to point to a social milieu in which a great deal of everyday life is conducted on the basis of shared values, norms and routines that are largely taken for granted (Bourdieu 1984, 169-73). Life history

research can, as suggested above, help us understand where storying not only serves as a 'site' of reflection and learning, but as a 'site' of reflection and learning that clearly has an impact on action and agency. Yet if we take the ideas of structure and resources seriously, we also need to examine the positions and dispositions that people occupy within a particular social space and Bourdieu's ideas are particularly helpful here.

Habitus and the transitional space of higher education

Bourdieu distinguishes between the idea of *position* as a specific social, economic and cultural locus in the social space; and that of *habitus*, which comprises a set of *dispositions*, or propensities towards particular values and behaviours. Our interest, clearly, lies in the relationship between position, disposition and learning. In his work on taste, Bourdieu argues that a particular disposition – for example, towards a type of music or film - has to be learned. Yet although these competences are closely associated with educational level, he believes they are less likely to be learned consciously, by formal effort, than from the 'unintentional learning made possible by a disposition acquired through domestic or scholastic inculcation of legitimate culture' (Bourdieu 1984: 28), so that their cultural taste is closely related to the social milieu that they inhabit. In the case of university students from non-traditional backgrounds, there is likely to be a mis-match between the student's cultural capital and the taken-for-granted cultural capital of the dominant groups within the university. Our expectation was that this mis-match, and the way that it was handled by the actors concerned, would be an important factor in explaining retention. However, we were also aware of a danger of being overly reductionist in considering the idea of 'capital': alongside the more familiar categories of social, cultural and education capital, we might place 'familial' (not all families are identical nor are the qualities of relationships that we may draw on); and psychological capital, that may be forged in a person's responses to various life crisis, like divorce, unemployment etc., in which people can learn a resilience to cope, or to keep on keeping on; there is also 'imagined capital', where an individual draws, for instance, on inspirational others known to them, including in literature (Quinn, 2010).

Another factor in understanding retention was, in our view, the nature of the university as a transitional space. Here we drew on work by the psychoanalyst and paediatrician Donald Winnicott, who developed the idea of the 'transitional object' in his work on early childhood development. For Winnicott (1971), the transitional object was something that enabled the child to make a transition from complete dependency towards partial autonomy, particularly in its relations with his or her mother, by providing a degree of continuity and thus security. The prime care giver herself could be

vital for more, rather than less, healthy development processes: if the mother encouraged play and imaginative activity, and was felt by the infant as supportive, the infant was more easily able to let go and fulsomely engage in play, with all its emotional, imaginative and cognitive learning significance. By extension, we can see the university itself as a kind of transitional space, in which symbolic play is important, including, perhaps, the capacity to let go of what is known and comforting and to engage in the new and experimental. Furthermore, everyday life is organised on the assumption that most of the actors in universities will leave after a more or less fixed period; in such cases, the *normative* transition concerned will also be experienced as part of the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Viewed as a transitional space, university study can be seen as a process of constant negotiation and renegotiation of self in relation to others and in relation to the socio-cultural world of the university. The experience of studenthood can pose basic questions of who a person is, who they have been, and who they wish to become. This in turn may provoke intense anxiety about one's ability to cope with change, or about whether a person is good enough in the eyes of significant people, whether fellow students or lecturers; or conversely, it may provoke excessive (and often ill-founded) confidence about these things. Like all new transitions, studenthood may encompass movements of 'unconscious memory in feeling' that in turn evoke connections with earlier transitions. At such times, past and present may elide, creating considerable tensions and stresses if past ones were fraught or traumatic, or if they were problem-free, encouraging excessive confidence that higher education will be similarly problem-free. Some of the processes have been chronicled, in considerable depth, in earlier biographical research (West, 1996)

Illustrations from the research

Belonging in this space

Entry into university was often understood by students as a challenging transition in itself. One woman, a single parent at the end of her first year, said that 'the hardest thing with being an adult [student] is you're always waiting on someone to kind of say you don't belong here, and I'm hoping that's something that'll go - but I still have it'. Anna, a mature student at a Scottish university, told us that: 'I think well done, although I know it's happening, it's surreal, it's as if it's not happening'. We can see the interplay of her dispositions as a highly motivated learner, and the new habitus into which she had moved and felt herself an outsider. We can also see how this 'surreal' experience is connected to the discrepancy between her status as an outsider, who had not pursued the normative

route taken by most students: 'I don't think younger, you know, students coming through from school, would be – 'cos it would just be next step for them'.

At the same time, we can see that Anna understands university as a community, and she clearly aspires to membership. By the end of her first year, she felt more at ease with her new milieu:

We had our culture shock last year ... we had this big building, with thousands of students, and, you know, the library, to find your way about, and how everything worked ... we've done that now.

A number of other students mentioned the physical and mental challenges of navigating a university campus, and in two of our three case study universities, students specifically mentioned the library as an especially complex site. Suzie used the metaphor of walking into a party to convey her sense that people saw her as an outsider:

Once you kind of know where things are, you don't feel so conspicuous, and I mean that's what happens if you walk into somebody's party or, you know, it's the same sense of "Oh, goodness, everyone's looking at me". No, they're not – get on with it, you know.

For these students, a sense of being physically lost became a metaphor for their student identity more generally; once they started to 'know where things are', they were able to negotiate a new way of interacting with this still-unfamiliar world.

Ontological questioning and doubt

By definition, non-traditional students are less likely than more conventional higher education entrants to possess the cultural and social capital that enable successful integration within the dominant academic culture. This affects their experiences of the dominant academic culture, particularly in so far as a transitional space like university encourages a questioning and open orientation, and forms part of the process of 'demystification' of habitual behaviours and accepted beliefs.

Several students in our study reported that they had started to question their identity and behaviour more broadly while at university. One way in which this was experienced was through the medium of language. Britain may be unusual in the variety of accents, dialects and variants of English that are used, but often these are class-based. One man, an Education student, explained how he had been struck by watching a recording of himself, taken as part of a micro-teaching exercise:

you see yourself on video, you never speak how you sound, and I seemed to develop into, whilst I'm speaking in front of children, I don't know if it's just children, I've been told it's not,

a few friends have said that it's not just children, you do it when you're - when you're speaking to say other people as well, people you don't know well, people who are in a position of authority and should be in a position of respect . . . and I seem to develop an accent and a way of speaking that is, is from the streets.

The convoluted sentence structure here conveys something of this person's sense of embarrassment that he 'seemed to talk in quite a rough kind of accent for some reason', and he worried that he might 'come across as being someone who - who -who is maybe dumbing down'. He speculated 'whether subconsciously I thought I would get more engagement from pupils by speaking like them'. Be that as it may, he worried that his accent might damage his career as a teacher.

Distancing mechanisms

Often, interviewees used humour and self-deprecation to describe the ways that they related to their new social connections and cultural context. Suzie, a first generation student in her first year of a degree in design, expressed her sense of distance from her fellow students: 'When I came in here, they all looked like stockbrokers. I mean, the girls are so cute and the boys are so smart, I mean it's just so funny'. Mags, who was hoping to become a painter, said that she had not even applied to one of the major universities in this area because 'they don't take the Individual Learning Account, which is really important . . . so it's no riff raff - no paupers'. Irony and self-mockery could also help to reinforce informal support networks. One mature returner said that she and her friends called themselves 'the front-row students', or the 'oldies', while another called her group 'the ladies who lunch'. By contrast, younger students were often able to develop new networks through membership of student sporting, political or leisure associations.

The benefits of dissonance

Integration is clearly different in different disciplines. In professional fields, there is a relationship (and sometimes a tension) between academic integration and professional integration. Usually, this was simply a felt mis-match between initial student expectations of the profession and actual experiences during practice placements. Nursing students, for example, said that workplace colleagues tended to dismiss university teaching as excessively academic, while university lecturers sometimes disparaged the culture and practices of nurses. Professional students sometimes spoke of a particular challenge in dealing with academic requirements for 'critical analysis' that they saw as conflicting with more practical professional demands. One Education student told us that he simply couldn't understand why his lecturers criticised the Scottish Government's curriculum policies when what he wanted to know was how to implement it.

Sometimes, though, non-traditional students felt that they were at a relative advantage in that their experience added to their subject knowledge. Nursing students from mature age backgrounds were proud of their ability to integrate practical experience into clinical practice, and students from working class backgrounds felt themselves in a majority in this area. Comparable experiences were narrated by students in Education and Social Work, particularly by those with experiences of working with children and vulnerable adults as parents, volunteers or care workers. Equally, a number of lecturers in our sample recognised the value of such experience. Pedagogic strategies that draw on relevant experiences, and relate them to academic knowledge, are likely to enhance integration and promote completion.

Understanding early leaving

If life history interviews proved a fruitful way of exploring student identities in general, they were particularly productive in helping understand early leaving. Some of our interviewees had been unnerved by the experience, even where they had left because of institutional failings. One wheelchair user, who had dropped out and then later entered another institution, identified a number of problems at her first university, but did not 'want to be known as a campaigner or a moaning person. I don't want to get somebody in trouble - and I also don't want to be known as a disabled person who complained'. Younger students who dropped out often did so because they felt that had selected the wrong subject; interestingly, this appeared less of an issue in Scotland, where most universities allow a degree of flexibility in subject choice, particularly in the first two years of study.

The interviews also led us to question the general applicability of terms like 'drop-out' (see also Quinn et al 2005). All the students who dropped out stated that they had benefited from the learning. One woman who left in her third year because she could not face doing exams said that she had no negative feelings about doing the degree and added that she would have completed it if it had been fully assessed. She feels that the experience has changed her in terms of being more confident and she looks at 'things' in a different way and is able to discuss issues in more depth. Jenny (outlined above) explained and reflected:

I do feel knowledgeable. I feel very privileged to have actually done that. I'm pleased with myself that I did well in the first year. I'm not cross but sad that events took the course they did and in a way I know myself, I know very well that the confidence issue would have been awful, would have become a problem. I really don't think I could have resolved that one. ...

I've reflected a lot as you can appreciate. I think Open Studies (pre degree courses) was more my bag. Maybe trying to do a degree was a little bit too ambitious but then on the other hand I think no Jenny you did well in the first year. There's no reason to think you wouldn't, as time went on. I'll never know.

The younger and adult students who stayed all mentioned that they had changed as a person and growth in confidence was a common benefit that they identified as well as becoming more knowledgeable and critical. Some of the adult students felt that studying at university had an impact upon their children's education and encouraged them to study at school and think about going to university.

Extending capital

We have mentioned the importance of extending our conventional understanding of capital, as expressed, for instance, in Bourdieu's work. This could include the importance of familial and psychological capital. We might need to recognise students as agents who can exploit and even challenge the human and symbolic capital of the university. What people bring, psychosocially, and how they can make use of particular resources in universities, can be seen as a crucial in managing transitional processes within higher education. In Bourdieu's terms, if we think of students as either 'fish in or out of water', and we want to understand more of how subjective experiences of objective phenomena may develop, this requires more holistic interpretation of subtle interactional and change processes: including in the individual's relationship to the university habitus and in their own sense of identity.

Sue, for example, is a passionate student of Law, based in an elite institution. Divorced with two children, she has been on benefits and was a carer for her father till his death. She had returned to a childhood ambition to practice law. Her biography embodies determination to overcome difficulties, which include poverty and emotional vulnerability. She perseveres with the challenges of learning in higher education. Whilst deeply disturbed by class and its manifestations in the academy, she is resilient. We noted with interest that the issue of gender was relatively unimportant to Sue; rather, the class system troubled her. She looked for recognition in the academy, feeling awkward in lectures and in the world of the Inns of Court, but good when being an advocate in court, especially when representing marginalized people. She talked of her relative 'lack of education' and constantly asked in seminars what words meant. She said she had learned 'the confidence to speak up and say oh what's that then....and I'll look it up later'.

Sue talked at length about her background, across three interviews, over three years: the law was 'just part of your everyday life'. She grew up in South London, where arrests and even murder, as she put it, were frequent companions. She also mentioned feeling an outsider in the community, at times, of 'not wanting to push buggies down the High Street'. Sue agonised about moving between the different habitus of the university and the street and over what others might think. Negotiating the space was hard:

I've really agonised over the way I speak and stuff I think you know I'm just not going to be able to speak how I would wish to speak and I've got to be comfortable with that and if make slips so be it I've got to say this is me and here we go.... and you know you do get I mean when I've been in many courts and listened to advocates and you get sort of international words of English together. So I think well never mind I can't speak English but neither can you (laughing).....

In the classroom, accent could be equated, she said painfully, with very negative qualities:

...to ignorance and bad manners and you know all of that and lack of intelligence...I've got to understand that it is natural and just think and overcome that with my own abilities. It's like an inner turmoil almost every walk of life comes with prejudice and you know discrimination and I put it akin to racial discrimination, it's no different really from social discrimination you know but that's not recognised, it doesn't really.

She had been fearful of 'messing it up and then you've humiliated yourself because you've pretended to be something you're not...' She was, she said, past trying to speak in a particular way; and if she changed, 'then I would have all my family ridicule me.' She had also subscribed to *The Times* newspaper for 2 years, and thought of the law as a 'kind of close knit community'. The space was difficult to enter. In a second interview, Sue talked more of her Dad and his heroic struggles against legal authorities, including the police. He was, she said, an important influence, inspiration even, whose struggle, she said, continued to inspire her against injustice. This could be seen as a kind of imaginal capital. She had been a successful business woman too and had survived in difficult circumstances, including a divorce. Her psychological capital was both strong and vulnerable. And her story telling could be vibrant and she felt we, as researchers, really listened. She was no feminist or socialist, she said – values often promulgated by members of the law faculty, (which had a radical reputation) – but she felt deeply about injustice. She was managing the transition rather well and the resources drawn on included some of her teachers, her own biography as well as, however minimally, the opportunity to talk and reflect with us.

Conclusions

When adults and other non-traditional students articulate narratives of their HE experiences they tell stories of increased self-confidence and self-esteem. These findings are consistent with the results of other recent studies of the wider benefits of learning. However, they are narrated within a particular set of storylines that are familiar from other qualitative studies of adult learners within tertiary education. Those who leave early, without completing their qualification, appear not to have any such access to existing storylines; their life histories offer few common clues to the experiences of what is conventionally referred to as 'drop out', and often the story is narrated through experiences of rejection, failure and shame.

Conversely, some of those who had dropped out were able to specify benefits from their period of study. Those who had left for practical reasons (usually funding or family crises) were particularly likely to say that they had proven that they were capable of study at university level, and see this as a positive reason for returning later on. However, in a system with high completion rates, drop-out carries a risk of stigma. Those who cited academic reasons for withdrawal shared negative views of the process, with two expressing a degree of bitterness against academics who they thought had failed them, and others expressing a strong sense of shame and loss; none in this group was thinking of returning later on.

The significance of this is that the enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem that successful students who have been interviewed talk about is not only an important developmental experience but also provide part of the habitus (or dispositions) that enhance access and retention in higher education. Our work has aimed at understanding the anxieties and joys that students may experience but also the resources and processes they may use, often unconsciously, to manage transitional processes in higher education. These include the importance of significant others, such as teachers, who can make us feel understood and legitimate, alongside new and creative forms of storytelling – like feminism, for instance - to symbolise new biographical possibilities. Our findings in respect of withdrawn students are still highly provisional, but they suggest the difficulties first of developing a compelling self-identity as a member of the 'imagined community' of university students; and also the apparent impossibility of then constructing a positive narrative of leaving tertiary education without completing a qualification.

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