

Agnieszka Bron and Camilla Thunborg
Department of Education
Stockholm University

Floating and crisis in HE students' learning identity formation

Identities can be seen as formed in the relation between agency and structure assuming an individual to be the acting agent (Giddens, 1984). How individuals are defining his/her identity is depending on different contexts and previous experiences (Mead, 1934). Identity is also related to social background, i.e. class, ethnicity, gender and age. We have earlier found three explanatory types of identity forming in HE: integrated multiple, floating and adopted. An integrated multiple identity is a story of oneself as a multiple person with different life experiences that exist parallel to each other and at the same time integrated. A floating identity is present in stories of struggles between who I am and supposed to be in relation to different experiences and expectations. In having a floating identity adults seem to be insecure and commute from one identity to another, they have different 'MEs'. Finally, an adopted identity is found in stories where different backgrounds and experiences are hidden behind a coherent presentation of one single identity related to each new situation. The three types of identities could be seen as temporary in relation to different situations in life.

A learning identity is specifically related to "how actors experience themselves as learners" (Thunborg & Edström, 2010). To become a learner in HE is discussed in terms of how students relate themselves as agents, structured by their social background and previous learning experiences to the specific educational academic institution, and their expectation of how to be a good student in that context. In relation to expectations of being a good student, being a learning failure or an instrumental learner has been found as a contrast (Edström & Thunborg, 2010).

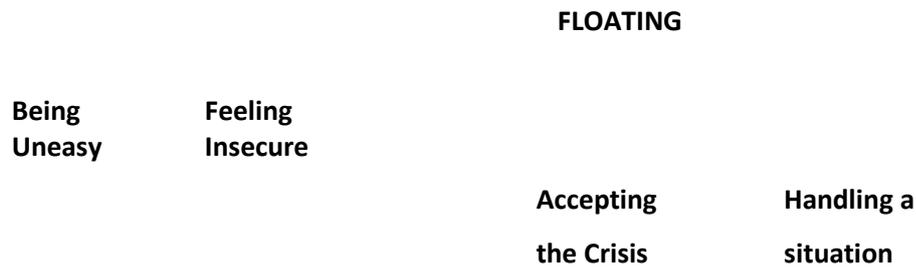
Changes in learning identities are conditioned by learning crises. Bron (2000) uses the concept "floating" to understand identity crises. To be "floating" relates to an experience of being fragmented, without a feeling of a passed and of being unable to create a future. Floating is experienced when people are confronted with a new culture as a consequence of changing life settings such as moving from one country to another or from countryside to cities, changing education or occupation. This article is about struggles in forming a learning identity. In forming and changing learning identities, people experience struggles in relation to who they are in a specific situation or context. Transitional space, firstly defined by Winnicott (1971), is a concept for understanding the exploration process of self-negotiating that learners are involved in when trying to form and change an identity in relation to others. This concept is used in biographical research (Merrill & West, 2009), where there is a time for reflection and self-negotiation and struggles can be

discovered and understood. What is more, it seems to be a difference between forming a learning identity as an academic or in relation to a profession. (Edström, 2009).

When students face a cultural clash coming to and learning in higher education a situation of floating may occur. 'Floating', which A. Bron has generated from her empirical research among mature students, describes theoretically the process of ambivalence and uncertainty while dealing with personal and cognitive change.

Floating is a deep feeling of being paralyzed by events or experiences that a person cannot cope psychologically, emotionally and socially. It involves being stuck and unable to move either backwards or forwards. In the sphere of higher education the students can be trapped with new knowledge and different perspectives of meaning which are strange and different in comparison to their own. Higher education implies perspective change. But it cannot be done at once; the student has to go through different dilemmas and uncertainties, which takes time. What students experience is a clash between the old and secure way of perceiving reality and a new way or ways which they get to know while studying in higher education. Floating can be outlined as a sequence of events, not necessarily linear, consisting of four stages. The first phase is a feeling of being unable to make any decision concerning one's own situation, because the solutions or possibilities which are at hand either to continue as usual or to choose a new way are not good enough. A person is at a crossroads but choosing one of the roads does not feel right at all at the moment. At the next stage the person lacks the basic feeling of security within the social environment of other people. But it is not primarily a physical insecurity but rather psychological and emotional one. The old, habitual way to be, to act and think or be able to (know-how) does not apply any longer. Everything all around seems very strange and unfamiliar and makes the person feel very lonely and/or lost. Her/his old and proved ways of knowing are no longer accepted by the group to which one belongs. A student feels, even physically, that others think differently than she/he does, which is not a pleasant feeling. The third phase is the time when one has to admit suffering from a crisis or a loss of a 'right' way of knowing, acknowledge it and find one's own space within the circumstances. In other words, to accept to oneself that something is wrong and try to understand what this situation is about to be able to see the consequences. The last phase is the decision about what to do next and begin acting, or dealing with the crisis. Thus, the student finds finally a solution by accepting to go on and deal with the problem. The whole situation can be seen as a paradigm shift or transformation of own thinking into a new way, and a better adjustment to the circumstances. The process of floating can be visualised as follows:

Figure 4. The process of floating



The experience of floating can be shorter or longer but might even last for several years, as research results have shown. When recognised through self-reflection it triggers a process of learning. The concept of floating helps to elucidate biographical learning. Biographical learning includes changes in identity because of new experiences and new knowledge. Mature students can change and exchange their identities or may even have several at the same time depending on the situation and context. They are challenged by group pressure, but without critical reflection changes are not possible. Feelings of connection and belonging with others, and feelings of being among people is an important aspect of life. Adjustment to how the group, in this case other students and lecturers, makes meaning, understands and uses concepts and is involved in discussions is vital for feeling well. Changes in identities, however, are not always connected with feeling well but might contribute to an increased feeling of being an outsider or incompetent in some respect (Bron 2000; 2007).

Floting can also be presented as a poem:

I am at sea
drifting in a open boat
on the deepest and least charted waters
fleeting clouds feed me rain
and shield me from the sun
morning comes
evening comes
night falls
I am adrift still.
Ania Plank, 2008

References:

Bron, A. (2000). Floating as an analytical category in the narratives of Polish immigrants to Sweden, pp. 119-132. In: *Allvarlig debatt and rolig lek*. En festskrift tillägnad Andrzej Nils Uggla, Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, Centrum för multietnisk forskning.

- Bron, A. (2005). Understanding learning processes through adult education theory, pp. 181-192. In: Sabour, M'hammed & Koski, Leena (Eds.) *Searching for the Meaning of Education and Culture*. Joensuu: Univ. Press.
- Bron, Agnieszka (2007) *Learning, Language and Transition*, pp. 205-220. In: West, Linden et. al (Eds.) *Using biographical and life history approaches in the study of adult and lifelong learning: perspectives from across Europe*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang
- Edström, E. (2009). Wanting to become something: about forming identities in Higher Education. Paper presented at the third Nordic conference on adult learning: Communication, collaboration and creativity, 22-24 April 2009, University of Southern Denmark, Odense.
- Edström, E. & Thunborg, C. (2010). Changing learning identities and higher education, pp.76-87. In: Merrill, B., Monteagudo, J. G. (Eds.). *Educational Journeys and Changing Lives. Adult Student Experiences*. Vol. 1. Sevilla. Edición digital@tres
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Mead, G.H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society. From a standpoint of a social behaviourist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Merrill, B. & West, L. (2009). *Using biographical methods in social research*. London: Sage.
- Winnicott D. W. (1971). *Playing and reality*. London: Routledge.