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Biographical contexts of experiencing HE: educational journeys in search for life improvement

RANLHE project – structural context of the Research

This paper will explore the partial results of LLL RANLHE project - *Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education*. Project which involves eight universities from six countries: Ireland, Spain, Poland, Sweden, UK, Germany, among many other issues will look at how non-traditional students in HE experience the processes of learning, how they perceive themselves as learners and how their identity as learners develops (to explore more see: www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl)

One of the key objective of the project is to illuminate and theorize, using in-depth biographical and collaborative methods, the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in students' lives. Researchers and theorists in area of adult learning highlighting the relations between formal and everyday life learning and point out that learning is as spontaneous, natural and necessary for human being as breathing (Jarvis, Rogers, Mezirow, Brookfield and many others).

Ranlhe Project takes a biographical research approach to examine and understand the experiences of non-traditional students in relation to access and retention. It will focus primarily on the key factors which influence retention and drop-out in higher education. It will investigate access in relation to these key outcomes and how it affects non-traditional students. By 'non-traditional' we mean students who are under-represented in higher education and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors. This would include, for example, students whose family has not been at university before, students from low-income families, students from (particular) minority ethnic groups, mature age students and students with disabilities.

However, at this point of research I will focus on educational journeys of non-traditional students. In this paper I will present an individual stories of educational journeys undertaken by Polish non-traditional students based on biographical interviews. This journeys are not just an actions pointed toward an entering the HE and getting a diploma – they are embedded in a complex, rich worlds of meanings and experiences of individual everyday lives, which creates a unique context for each students' learning identity. A decision about becoming a student emerge from the sets of biographical events and is always linked with everyday life spaces. In Polish students' stories one can see how entering HE may help individuals in many dimensions such as making sense of painful experiences (family crisis, death, sickness, unemployment, single parenthood), overcoming personal weaknesses and self- limitation, searching for life improvement and self – growth. Because of the life circumstances that leads them toward HE learning is not just a quest for academic knowledge, it's a searching for themselves in a quest of life.

Biographical interview and researching educational lives

In recent years one can observe growing interests in biographical research in the area of adult learning and education (West 1996; Merrill, 1999; Johnston & Merrill, 2005; Allheit 1995; Bron 2005; Dominice 2000). Together with the 'paradigm shift' qualitative methods turns out to be insufficient in giving wide context and deeper understanding of the processes and nature of the learning embedded in everyday life experiences. Those experiences are accesable in all its richness

only through the story of the people. The power of the story lies in its unique ability to reconnect past with present and future, and keeping the multidimensionality of human life such as the psychological, social, cultural, historical, cognitive, affective, spiritual, and somatic dimensions (Brooks and Edwards 1997). Seeing the effort people put into making sense of their story not only gives a researcher more complex perspective on learning processes in adult lives, it gives a sample of learning in itself.

Bron et al (2005, p. 12) claims that *turn to biographical methods* "can partly be understood against the background of rapid changes in modern societies where, as some have argued, "people need, constantly, to work on their biographies and find some authentic rhythms, in the lights of change, and to find the resources of hope ... to compose a biography, and some stability, meaning and authenticity, from the fragments of shifting experience.

According to Allheit telling story is a way of re-living the past. This can be beneficial not only to the researcher, but to the story teller as well, giving him/her new perspective, critical insight, 'new voice'. Flemming (2003) claims that the learner is the main character and also the author and can find a more critical, confident and agentic voice through the process of story telling itself.

Biography can not only contextualise learning enriching research results and knowledge of researched, it can be (and very often is) understanding as a trigger to learning, a primary place, where learning occurs. It leads to at least two kinds of focuses on biography: one would be the influence of biography on learning processes and practices, second: biography in itself would be seen as "a field of learning" (Allheit 1995, p.59).

From the field of adult education biography might create a reflexive framework for understanding educational experiences and its deepest meaning for the individual:

Educational biography is neither an instrument for collecting data nor a new model for teaching. Instead it offers a way for an adult education practitioner to incorporate a modest and often exploratory inquiry project into an educational program for adults" (Dominice, 2000).

The most common understanding of learning is formal education, institutions, curriculum, teachers that comes to an end once you get a diploma/ certificate, pass the exam. It is indeed a kind of learning, but not the only one. Educational biographies, focusing more on experiential learning and informal education shows that learning is located in many areas of adult life (it is lifewide) and takes place continuously throughout adult life (it is life long). Interests in educational biography is not only a way to avoid reductive understanding of learning, complex and comprehensive definition of learning with its multidimensionality leads to a discursive notion of knowledge respecting cognitive, social-cultural, emotional, personal agents. It also allows to increase and contextualise adults' motivation to learn, growing from everyday life practices, emotion, conscious and subconscious needs.

Polish students narratives

According to Tedder and Biesta what makes a story a narrative is a plot (see: Tedder, Biesta, 2007). In Polish non-traditional students narrative presented below there are some commonalities (experience of sickness), but the way they building their plots around and about it is different. This is only an early analysis stage, so there is no formal and closed conclusions, only early interpretations which may be redirected as a result of other people's narratives' impact.

Each new narrative may change the way other where understood because of the new social dimensions they bring together. Allheit highlights the presence of social in individual stories, which gives a story teller "socially viable lifeworld perspective for guiding their actions" (Allheit 2005, p.209). The frame of reference is always co-constructed as a result of socialisation (see lifeworld concept in phenomenology, critical theory), although biographically layered structure of experience is influential in terms of generating an 'individual logic' of the narration (ibidem). Stories presented below are plotted around similar experience – sickness, but the way individuals making sense of that experience and structuring it is completely different.

Barbara – learning as a way of building self confidence/ fighting for yourself

Barbara is a 42 years old single woman. She lives in a middle -sized town and works as a surgical nurse. Her parents live in the same town and she visits them a lot. One of the reason is her father's condition – he had a two stokes and requires medical attention and constant special care. She decided about entering HE in the context of personal conflicts in her work environment (hospital). She felt under- preciated and wanted to prove to others and herself that she's capable of being a successful student.

I've got so pissed of on the girls and tell myself – I'll show you all, I' m going to study – and I applied without telling anyone at work. Three of my collegues figured it out and started to comment it in a very unpleasent way (..) Once I heard accidentally one nurse asking the other 'what does she study anyway?' - and the other replayed ' probably nothing, cause nobody would expected her', wasn't nice...

Why do you think they did not want you to study?

It was all about the atmosphere of the jealousy at the hospital but I thought -I'll show you... and look at me now - I got the degree (B.A.) at special pedagogy and I really enjoyed studying.

Being a student at B.A. level brings back a lot of good memories. She felt accepted by the group of peers and the whole dynamic was very positive – they were supporting each other, studying and partying together, having fun. When she talks about this period of her life it sounds like she gain not only an education, but a social life as well. That is probably way she decided to take the next step – M.A. , right after graduating. This time it was a different experience – most of her peers where much younger, mature students were minority and she felt a lack of connection, like she does not belong again. She was not able to prepare her M.A. thesis on time and her wealth got worse, so she decided to postpone her finals. What is interesting is that she claims she knew that she would not make it:

I had a guts that I will fail this time, that something will go wrong, I just knew it.... ... I felt worse and worse, the doctors suspected a blood disease.. I got depressed...They conducted more tests and turned out it was not a blood disease after all....different disease, which I don't want to discuss at all, which I don't accept, specially because I had it coming... It really brought me down, made me think about my whole life... Later on I've decided to have a surgery, I was nervous, so all educational plans was out of the horizon. But I also know that it gave me a reason not to work on my M.A. thesis, I'm not sure if it scared me or I just didn't want to do this anymore? But my classmates from B.A. level starts to convincing me to move forward, do the finals, so I thought – if people are asking me, I should do it .

There is some kind of „magical thinking” present in a way she tells her story. Specially the importance of external odds like a disease (her own and her father's as well) was seen by Barbara as a kind of the signs or even a punishment:

When they diagnosed me it was terrible, why me? Why now? But like I said it before – I had it coming...(..) I just belive that things happened for a reason, every actions caused a reaction... it is like a message – stop and rethink your life, think about other people cause what goes around, comes around, cause you will be punished later

So you think you're a bad person?

No, not a bad to the bone, but no good ...

She said that every time she tries to do something for herself, strange things happened: her father's stroke, her disease, like she's got a bad luck or she's being punished. Low self esteem seems to be a crucial issue which affects her learning in a dual way: on the one hand she wants to change it, so it is a trigger to learn, but at the same time it stops her and blocks her efforts, her activity. Learning and being a student is not strongly connected with external motivation, cause her professional life is all about medicine and she studied peadagogy. Formal learning is like a challenge leading to another kind of learning (social, emotional, existential), although it is a rocky road for her, she is not giving up. An important role of „significant other' was played by her M.A. supervisor (tutor)

When dr K start to guiding me to put me back on track with my thesis I found it easier.. It was like she made me stronger. When I called her in one of my weak moment, whining that it is too difficult for me, it's too ambitious, she said: „let me be the judge, but now keep on working”. It was just what I needed, she taught me how to write and now I'm almost done. I have two weeks and I now I have to finalize it..

It looks like other people's attention is really needed in order to reinsure Barbara that she is worth an effort, it was a friend and a tutor who „pushed” her back to study when she was struggling with health problems. Biographical events can create the opportunity to learn, but other people may have a power to increase or diminish this potential. For Barbara struggling with herself in order to improve her life and make it meaningful is a learning path.

Paul – learning as a way of „catching up” with life

Paul is 21, he lives in a small town near Wroclaw (capital of Lower Silesia region) together with two younger sisters and older brother. Just after starting primary school he got sick – acute leukemia- and the rest of his childhood was burdened with (by?) fighting the disease. The doctors were not optimistic and thought he would not make it. He spent most of the time in the hospital, during the remissions he attend a hospital school, make friends with other kids at children ward but also watched his friends dying.

I remember all very clear, I was running through the hospital corridors with chemo i.v bag, because it had helped me with the pain...but turned out it did not cure me, just eased the pain ,I started to weakened, could not even grab the spoon. They had to locked me in an isolation, only parents and doctors for two weeks. When I got better I came back to open ward, meet other kids with cancers, even my first „puppy love” happend there, probably like for other healthy children. The only different was that I had to see my girl covered with white sheet when she passed away...I believe it affects my choice , to study pedagogy, to help people...

Because of the disease (condition?) he was not able to attend to primary school, some education was provided in the hospital, but it was not sufficient enough, so when he got better and came back to school he could not catch up with the curriculum:

Till the end of primary school (in Poland it was 8 years, he spent 3 in hospital – A.N.) I've been dragging from counselor to counselor, my grades were really bad, so at the end it turned out that I have no chance to apply to a good high school, I wanted to learn in Wroclaw. Beside, doctors advised my parents to keep me close to a home and local hospital, because I was still monitored. That's how I end up in basic vocational school in my home town. It was not long till i started to make a progress and had really good grades, at the end I was an A- student! Of course there were some classes I could not attend like practical subjects, I was not allowed to engage in force works. Other students were working with machines and I had to be isolated in instructor's room. Even later on, when there were no doctors disapproval, the intructors were to anxious, they said they would not take a risk that something happen to me, they did not want to take responsibility...

In the meantime he got engaged in voluntary work in a local social day care center for childrens with disadvantages in their social family backgrounds and he got really interested in . He mentioned earlier that when he was tested for a future profession preferences by counselors the results were always in „social area” and they claimed that he is a „people person”, but he always resented it as not possible

I remember when school psychologist inform me about the results I thought „that's rubbish, it has to be something wron with this test...” and when it was repeted half a year later in different school they had exactly the same findings. Now I now it's true, but back then I thought – now way I could find this kind of job a good for me, social work, troubled kids... I'm just not suitable.... (...) I wanted to be a fireman (laugh)

He decide to study part time (B.A. level) at Lower Silesia University, although his friends advised him to go somewhere else, where the level of demanding is not that high. He admitted that at first he

thought he should follow this advise, because the curriculum was difficult:

My first impression after a day in a lecture room 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

His family was divided in opinions about his education. He got a lot of support from his mother and sisters, but his older brother reacted in a way Paul could not understand:

My brother was sort of scared or something, when he found out about my decision, he never got higher than basic vocational training and he was probably jealous, he kept talking on and on to my parents and sisters," things got so easy for him, now he will have a white-collar job..." it was weird, this whole talking and his attitude....

He claims that being a student have changed his view on life in many ways, he realize that world is not one dimensional and things can be different when approached from many perspectives:

I believe that with formal knowledge I got the ability to seek for different explanations. I used to think in a very conventional way, now I'm more 'out of the box' person, I realize there is no black and white, true or false, things are relative...

In Paul's story dominant area fo learning is an attempt to „get his life back” to live it the way he probably would do if he'd never got sick. The factual structure of his story (events) shows mostly how the disease affects his education, but I believe that just because of this particular situation beeing at school may had a different meaning to Paul , different in manner that other healthy kids with „regular” childhood rhytm usualy tend to have. Shooling means a normality, it means that your disease it is not what defines you, you're not labeld as a „leukemia kid” for the rest of your life. What is different from Barbara's narration is that the experience of sickness is not presented in a story as a dramatic one, it is just the part of Paul's childhood and he is really calm even when he talks about near death experience or witnessing other children dying. Paul's pursuit seems very deliberate, he takes one step at the time nad he is not giving up easily, there is no signs of looking for someone to blame for what happend to him while Barbara is wondering whether she was punished or it was just the twist of faith. Paul takes his life the way it is, but he is not passive. He got the B.A. degree and continue to study at M.A. Level. He also works on establishing day care facility helping children coming from disadvataged background in a small village.

Conclusions

Although it is a work in progress, some initial findings may be formulated. One of the most important seems to be the power of the individual story as a frame of reference and a space of learning. Similar life events experiencing in similar cultural contexts may results with different 'emplotment' of life stories, so to speak, a critical and transformative potential of crisis will vary and re-shape peoples experiences and self understanding in a different way. *It seems reasonable to assume that the construction and narration of such stories forms itself an important part of such learning processes.* (Biesta et al., 2008).

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