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Changing Learning Identities in Higher Education

Abstract

In Sweden, since the 1970's, political motives (Rubenson, 1996) and reforms (Bron & Agelii, 2000) initiated an increasing participation of non-traditional groups in higher education. Non-traditional students are defined as the first generation in a family to study in higher education. Age, class, gender, ethnicity and disability are often used categories for defining non-traditional groups. In this paper we are focusing on a student returning to higher education for the third time. About 25 percent of students in higher education have been studying before. Most of them are returning to be more qualified due to their earlier studies, occupation or work. Others are starting a new student career (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2008). The aim of this paper is to understand changes in learning identities in being a student returning to higher education. More specifically we are going to focus on the following questions:

- What experiences of learning can be related to different life spheres and educational contexts?
- What learning identities (what is it like to be a learner, what is learnt and how) are formed due to these experiences?
- What learning crises are connected with those changes in learning identities?

This paper is based on a biographical interview with a female, mature, non-traditional student, here named Lena and her journey in and between educational programmes¹. Lena's journey shows how she becomes a "good student" but also of the crisis involved in changing learning identities and the demands and expectations she is facing. Three learning identities are identified: The learning failure, the instrumental learner and the "good learner". The forming of these identities are analysed as a relation between agency and structure (Giddens, 1984), and the changes of these learning identities are related to learning crisis. Finally, the handling of the crisis is discussed as a returning to learning.

Changing Learning Identities in Higher Education

In Sweden, since the 1970's, political motives (Rubenson, 1996) and reforms (Bron & Agelii, 2000) initiated an increasing participation of non-traditional groups in higher education. Non-traditional students are defined as the first generation in a family to study in

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higher education. Age, class, gender, ethnicity and disability are often used categories for defining non-traditional groups. In Sweden, political reforms have mainly focused on access to higher education. In an international perspective, the Swedish system is considered open (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000) and relatively uniform as it comprises all types of post-secondary education. As a complement to upper-secondary education, a diploma from municipal adult education and Swedish Folk High Schools gives eligibility for studies at the university level. There are aptitude tests and since a long time there have been certain quotas for work experience (Bron & Agelii, 2000). Today, most students in higher education in Sweden are women, 15 percent are from other ethnical backgrounds than Swedish (SCB 2006 A, SCB 2006B) and it is quite common to start studying after the age of 21 (Bron & Agelii, 2000). However, working-class students are still underrepresented (HSV, 2007) especially in educational programmes in law or medicine. Educational programmes in technology are also still something for men (HSV, 2007).

Research on non-traditional learners concerns issues about entering, experiences of participating, drop-out and retention in higher education. The research show interesting relations or contradictions between the individual subjects, their background and the educational system. Merrill and Alheit (2004) describe eight types of adult students entering higher education: the integrator, the patchworker, the emancipator, the careerist, the educational climber, the hesitator, the postponer and the formaliser. In research concerning participation in higher education, clashes between learners and the academy have been identified in different ways. Leathwood (2006) shows for example that there is a discourse of the independent learner in higher education, which is inappropriate for the majority of students in a mass higher educational system. Coronel Llamas (2006) shows that there are several technologies used in higher education to control and discipline students into the discourse of the “good student”. Non-traditional learners and the clashes they meet in education are often focused. West (1996) shows, for example that perspectives due to human experience, adult learning, the problems of adult learners and the ways of communicating are underdeveloped in academic institutions which have consequences for adult students. Murphy & Fleming, (2000) identified a clash between “college knowledge”, presented by the universities and “common knowledge” related to the life experience of mature students. Collier & Morgan (2008) found differences between the first generation students and traditional college students concerning their way of interpreting faculty expectations. Quinn (2004) shows that working class students experience a tension between their class identity and the middle class study culture when studying. They also see themselves as facing a paradox of a double failure. They are on the one hand starting to study to get a better job. On the other hand, if they fail and drop-out they are risking a worse job, than if they never entered higher education (Quinn, 2004). Bron & Lönnheden (2004) show on the contrary, that mature students in social sciences and humanities develop a new way of participating in society. They view their meeting with higher education as a democratic process where they gained the self confidence needed for being part of their own life and learning.

In this paper we are focusing on a student returning to higher education for the third time. About 25 percent of students in higher education have been studying before. Most of

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them are returning to be more qualified due to their earlier studies, occupation or work. Others are starting a new student career (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2008). The aim of this paper is to understand changes in learning identities in being a student returning to higher education. More specifically we are going to focus on the following questions:

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- What learning identities (what is it like to be a learner, what is learnt and how) are formed due to these experiences?
- What learning crises are connected with those changes in learning identities?

This paper is part of a European research project: Access and retention in higher education: Experiences of non-traditional learners (www.ranlhc.dsw.edu.pl) financed by the Life Long Learning Programme within the European Union. In this paper a biographical interview with a female, mature, non-traditional student, here named Lena is used for describing her journey in and between educational programmes. At the time for the interview she is soon finishing Magister degree (which is a Swedish degree between Bachelor and a Master degree) in Molecular Biology. Lena is in her thirties. Her journey shows how she is becoming a good student but also of the crisis involved in changing learning identities and the demands and expectations she is facing as well as her learning interests and intentions. In the following section we are presenting her journey.

Lena's journey of learning in higher education

This journey consists of the period before Lena is entering higher education, a period she describes as a learning failure, the instrumental learning period, the life crisis, the period of being a good learner and the future.

Before higher education

Lena grows up in a small town in the Middle of Sweden. When she is five years old, her parents divorce. She and her one year younger brother stay with her father and his new wife. Her biological mother, barely finishing first and secondary school, is addicted to pills and rather absent when Lena is growing up. At the age of fourteen her mother is seriously injured in a car accident and since then partial paralysed. Even if Lena is in contact with her from time to time, she is not considering their relation a mother – and daughter-one.

“It's a difficult contact. I mean, partly because it's hard to hear what she's saying and then...we have not any kind of a mother – and – daughter-relation.(...) But somehow I know that she's my mother. I know that she's fond of me”.

Instead she is describing her father as her supporter in life. Her father is an electrician with an upper secondary education. He has been working at a mill and been further educated at work. He is interested in science, an interest that Lena shares with him.

“But yes, my father has been really great!” ”...and my father is a scientist just like I am”.

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Lena describes herself as “good in school”. After nine years in first and secondary school she starts to study economics in upper secondary school but she finds it very boring. After one year she changes to a technical upper secondary school. This requires a supplementary examination in mathematics but she has no difficulties passing it. Studying technology is really “her cup of tea” and she comes out well.

The learning failure

After upper secondary school she does not know what to do. Her aunt persuades her to apply to higher education. She moves to Stockholm and begins at a Master programme at the Royal Institute of Technology. She describes this period of her life as a crisis. She has difficulties coping with the curricula and feels that there is no time for reflection.

“...and then I asked the lecturer because I didn't understand and I almost got a telling-off. And I felt so bloody stupid!”

She also misses home and her new boyfriend is disturbing her studies. She feels all alone in this new situation and has no-one to support her.

“ Yes but all of a sudden everyone....I lost everyone.”(...) “I moved 300 kilometres! Thus...350 kilometres away from home. And father kind of dumped me in some kind of student's lodging at X and it was the first time I saw my father cry you know...”(...)“...I have a map of X-town in my head and suddenly you stood there...in that giant city. You didn't know where anything were situated. It felt so confusing”(...)”Beyond that I off course had met a boy in X one month before I were supposed to move to Stockholm who was from Stockholm (...) Then he entered into the picture. He was supposed to show me Stockholm and everything. I sure was in love and had a hard time concentrating...of other reasons as well... (laughter)..”(...)“ I felt...it was too much. So I intended to take a break in my studies and...a misunderstanding... I didn't retain my admission place and...so then I was...I was registered as a drop out and then CSN didn't allow me any study loans...And then I couldn't continue at KTH”.

Before the first exam she decides to take a small break. She takes a job as a secretary in an office. When she wants to start her studies again she has been registered as a drop-out student. She feels that it is impossible to go back. She is not allowed any aid and loan for her studies. When she describes this period she doesn't regret anything but still thinks that it might have been nice to be a Master of Science in Engineering.

“...I was going to be en Master of Science in Engineering. And I think that...and I think that I would have managed it if I had been more, better kind of prepared. I was extremely tired of school (...) So I believe that if I had taken a year off and had a kind of break then I had kind of made it. (...) It simply was too much.”

The instrumental learner

All of a sudden she applies to the nurse educational programme. As she was considered nice when she was a kid, and once as a teenager practiced at a hospital, she regards this as a good solution. She has to persuade CSN (the authorities for finance of student aid and loan) to help with financing her studies. She is describing the nursing education as unscientific and too theoretical in relation to the work practice. She is interested in the medical practical issues of curing, but the education is focusing on caring in an abstract way.

“Because it is like this, in the eagerness that it should be...an university education with scientific aim. Because it became just...ridiculous”.

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“Because it’s caretaking that is the engine of the education to be a nurse. But when they get unwell? What are you supposed to do then?”

After three years in nursing school she works as a nurse for eight years at different wards and at different hospitals but the occupation does not suit her. She describes the job to “be like a spider in a web”, “serving doctors” and “caring for patients”. She envies her colleagues that are proud of being nurses because she is not. Finally she feels very poor.

“I’ve some difficulties to act like the doctors little servant...”

“So you’re really the spider in the web (...). You take care of everything. And then you’ve got to answer for keeping things going. And there are many people you can get a lot of crap from, you know, if it doesn’t work...”

“I never felt like a nurse (...). I mean I know colleagues who were kind of really proud of being nurses but I felt kind of that.. ‘so what?’, like that”.

“And in that case you had to be a superior to a set of mad women (laughter)...”

Life crisis

When she is giving birth and is at home with her son she is getting depressed. She decides to leave the nursing profession and starts studying again, for the third time. This time she is taking her time, going through catalogues from different universities. She is also discussing with her husband, who is an educated chemical engineer, about different educational programmes. She finally chooses to start studying Molecular Biology. To afford the studies they decide to sell their house, and get a cheaper one.

“Thus, I felt really very, very poor because I felt that I kind of was at a crossroad and that I was tramping but I couldn’t come any further and I didn’t know what to do...”

“We had to leave our nice house...and then we moved to a small terrace house”.

The good learner

Lena is concerned of how to manage her studies. The study counsellor informs her that this education is tough and that there will be a lot of drop-outs. At the first lecture there is a bunch of unmotivated students sitting in the back of the lecture room talking with each other. The motivated students are sitting in the front trying to understand what the lecturer says. She is using the expression “slackers” for describing these young, not motivated students, just studying to get loans and aids and something to do. Lena thinks that they do better quit and that the requirements for getting access are too low. Related to “the Slackers” she is however considering herself a “rising star”, “the best of students”. She also finds new friends among the “front students”, all younger than her.

“And then you experience this almost...like a day nursery for adults, kind of. Like that. And suddenly you appears like a rising star because they...I had imagined that I should be like the scrapings and all the others like Einsteins, like that.”

Although the demands on the students are high, Lena thinks that it is a good way for the lecturers to find out what the students understand. She finds her lecturers very supportive

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as they treat her like an interested adult student. She is now studying “real science” and learns laboratory experiment to practice the “real scientific method”. She has made a lot of sacrifices to make her studies possible but she really thinks that it has been worthwhile.

“I felt that my brain was kind of expanding every day. It felt so...right. Thus it was so...I can't explain it. The self-confidence expanded.”

“...they kind of make heavy demands but it's not like this set-a-trap kind of way. It's more like they want to know that you've understood what they've wanted to say.”

When Lena starts studying at the University of Stockholm she does not want to take any more study loans while she already is indebted since her previous studies. Her income detracts from 25 000 to 2 000 SEK per month. The family has to sell their newly renovated house and move to a less expensive terrace house. Later they move once again in order to live closer to the university. Lena's husband works full-time and takes care of the household and their son. Her husband has a Master degree in Chemical Engineering. She describes him as supportive both to her and her fellow-students.

“But we have somehow got used to this. We are living a, mummy-is-always-studying-life. And...and we try to help each other in the weekends and things like that.”

“... I could ask him about everything. He knew everything! Everything about chemistry. That was no problem. Then...we had kind of study circles in my home...(laughter)...”

The future

Lena wants to continue her studies and get a Doctoral degree. She is therefore trying to make a good impression and is becoming more nervous and afraid of failing. Her demands on herself have increased. Her gained knowledge and experiences have at the same time made it somehow easier.

“Now the university means all the world to me!...But now the university is the most important for me. So now when you have to do an account....AAAHHH...(laughter)...”

“You had to study like an animal all the time just to kind of get it. Now it's more like to apply what you already can....So it's not so..it's not all that deadly anymore I think.”

“...but now it is this that is kind of my future.”

Lena is trying to live “here and now” and prefers not to think about the future. She thinks that it will be hard to get an interesting job if you are not a Doctor and she worries about her age. She wants to give birth to another child but thinks that she after that might be too old to get the Doctoral degree.

Right now I regard the future as very open and uncertain. Such matters make me try to live here and now, and I will think that is great”.

“When I have got my Doctoral degree I will be kind of 42. Then you might be on kind of the limit to when they do not want to employ you because you cost too much. I don't know. Maybe you wouldn't be productive enough.”

In figure 1 we are trying to summarise Lena's journey in relation to different learning identities and crisis.

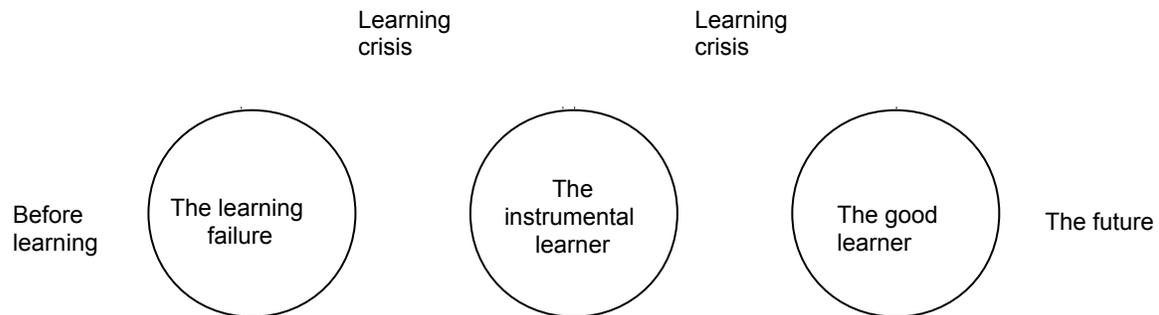


Figure 1 Three learning identities identified related to higher education and the relation and crises between them.

What is a learning identity?

A learning identity is, in this paper defined in terms of how actors experience themselves as learners in different life spheres. The last decade the concept of identity has attracted attention in a number of disciplines. The concept has been given various interpretations and is used in somewhat different ways (International Encyclopedia of Adult Education, 2005). In this paper we are focusing on identity as a social identity. According to Goffman (1959) a social identity is related to the presentation of oneself in relation to other groups or individuals in a specific situation or context. Two foci could be identified from this point of view. One focus concerns shared presentations by people in for example an occupational group (Thunborg, 1999), an organisation (Hatch & Schultz, 2005), a community or a specific life setting (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). Another focus is about the individual integration of different life spheres in terms of their own subjective experience (Salling-Olesen, 2006).

Learning is also a central concept used in this paper. It could be defined in different ways. One distinction attributed to Bruner (1990) is to separate “learning about” from “learning to be”. “Learning about” seeks knowledge about how learning of a given content or a concept of a specific subject, while “learning to be”, is focusing on learning to become someone in a specific situation or context. To become a learner in higher education could for example be discussed in terms of how students relate themselves as agents also structured by their social background or previous learning experiences to the specific educational academic institutions, their expectations of how to be a good student in relation to a specific subject or occupation (Alheit, 1995). “Habitus” is used as a concept for understanding how the subjective and objective aspects of social life are connected with each other (Alheit, 1995).

In accordance with Giddens (1984) social identities are formed in the relation between agency and structure. Ashwin (2008) is further developing this theoretical concept by focusing on the interactions between teaching, learning and assessment in higher education. He means that interactions shift over time and between situations, due to both structural and “agentic” factors. These factors are used by actors’ in their interpretation of

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a particular situation. This situation includes an individual biography, the institutional setting, the historical moment and wider social-political factors. The biography is here used to view the social order being created in, through and from interactions between members of different life spheres and settings in everyday life (West et al. 2007). Assuming the individual to be an acting agent and considering the agent/structure as having a reciprocal influence (Giddens, 1984) makes it possible to get an understanding of how learning identities are formed by using an individual biography. Within the concept of agency, on the one hand, both intentionality and competence to act are involved. Structures could be defined in terms of normative, regulative and cultural processes used in social practices (Scott, 1995).

Learning identities

In this section, what it is like to be a learner, what is learnt and how is described more detail. This is related to how Lena describes herself as a learner in relation to her private life and the educational contexts that she meets. To turn back to Lena's journey described above, it is focusing on her subjective experience and integration of herself as a learner in relation to different situations in life, from a perspective here and now. Her subjective experiences are however formed in relation to different kinds of structures. To return to the journey of Lena, she could be seen as an intentional, competent woman, deciding her life course, in the relation to different structures like norms, expectations and rules that are taken for granted by her or others in the different context she meets. She is referring to structures involved in her personal and social life. Her family, previous boyfriend, husband and son, friends and the local cultures in the middle sized city as well as the big city are referred to as normative and cultural processes. In meeting with different educational contexts norms about the good student (Leathwood, 2006, Coronel Llamas, 2006), ideals about knowledge (Murphy & Fleming, 2001), faculty expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2008) and so forth could be viewed as normative and cultural aspects. Lena is however, also referring to regulative processes such as for example study funding and aid, registration policies at the faculty and discourses related to the good, independent student (Leathwood, 2006; Coronel Llamas, 2006). Behind the structural processes referred to by Lena, both these settings are structured by discourses of gender, class and age.

The learning failure

In figure 2 the identity of learning failure expressed by Lena is showed and how it relates to her view of herself and her previous learning identity, the educational setting she meets, the regulative processes in higher education and her private and social life.

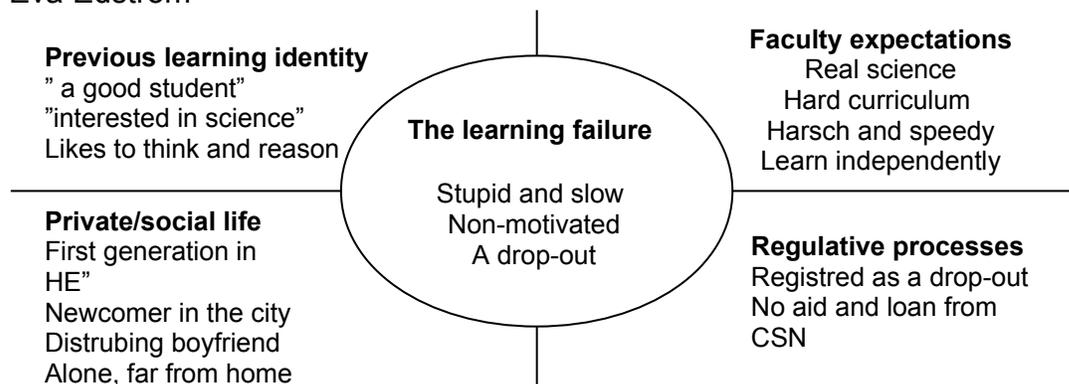


Figure 2. The identity of "the learning failure" related to different settings and structural processes

The identity of the learning failure shows a young person with a technical interest facing faculty demands as a hard curriculum based on the idea that you have to comprehend a lot of information in a very short time and that some questions are really considered stupid by the lecturers. The learning failure identity also consists of experiences of not being at home, cut off from family and social and the local culture at home. It is also about being young and meeting a boyfriend that is not interested in her studies.

The instrumental learner

The identity of the instrumental learner is summarised in figure 3.

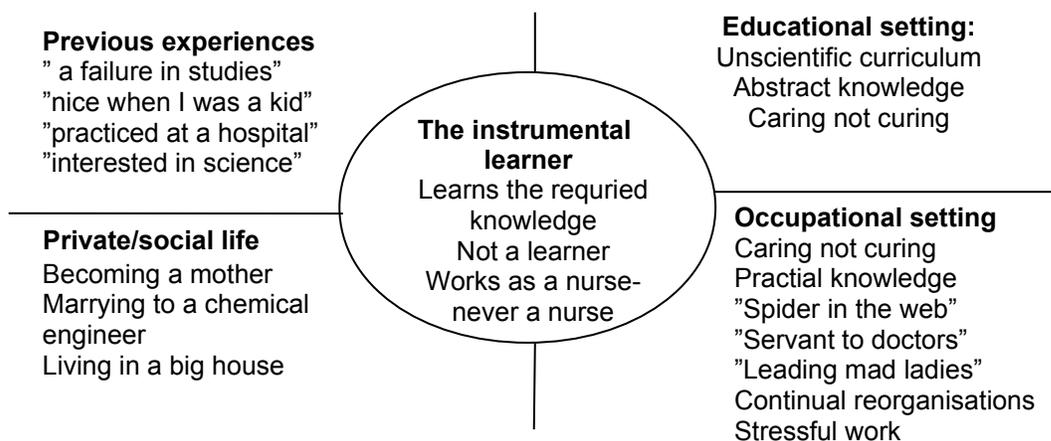


Figure 3. The "identity" of the instrumental learner related to different settings and structural processes.

In figure 3 we are trying to show how Lena is describing her identity as an instrumental learner and how this identity is related to the educational setting, herself and her previous experiences, the work place norms she meets as a nurse and her private and social life. The instrumental learning is about meeting all the demands within an education with a distance, never feeling that she is belonging to the educational setting or is engaged in her own education, just studying for her future occupation, without caring for it at all. The faculty demands are here described as unscientific with no connection between what is

studied and the practice. The education is all about caring not curing, which Lena is interested in. The instrumental learner is also about not coping with the occupation as a nurse. It is a stressful job with continual reorganisations. During this time she settles down, marries a chemical engineer and moves in to a nice house that they renovate together. They also become parents.

The good learner

The identity of the good learner in relation to different settings and structural processes is summarised in figure 4.

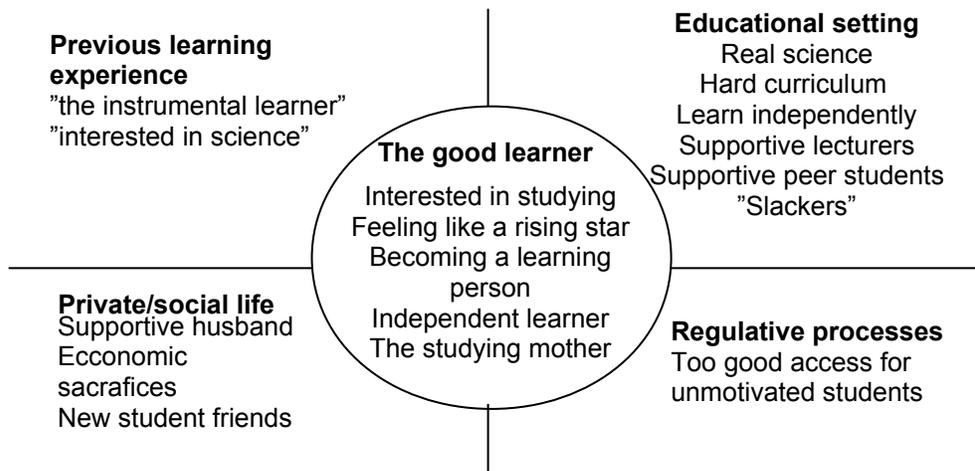


Figure 4. The "identity" of the good learner related to different settings and structural processes.

The good learner is described in terms of studying real science and facing the same faculty demands that she already met at the Royal Institute of Technology with a hard curriculum based on the idea that you have to comprehend a lot of information in a very short time. This time the lecturers and her peer students support her. Lena also finds "slackers" which irritate her but at the same time make her look like a rising star. She is also facing economical sacrifices. Her husband is supportive economically, with the work in the household but also by helping Lena and her new student friends in their studies.

Changing learning identities?

There are different ways of defining and analysing changes of identities. According to Giddens (1984) changes could be discussed in relation to the duality of structure. As structures are conditions for actions to which individuals act upon and at the same time formed by the actions of agents, structure both implies limitations and possibilities. Changes in learning identities are, from this point of view, discussed as a relation between agency and structures as forms of identity crises (Giddens, 1984). Crises could both be related to changes within a social institution. Changes in regulations, expectations or norms could be seen as ongoing processes. Even if agents are seen as competent to act in

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a different way in social practices, they however tend to reproduce rather than changing (Giddens, 1984) them. Alheit (1995) uses the concept “biographicity” to analyse how changes between different settings and human crises could be understood both by the learners themselves and researchers. The individual biography by Lena shows that she is changing her learning identity in relation to the different settings she is attending to. The interesting question is however in what way her learning identities should be seen as changing or reproduced in relation to for example different expectations, norms and discourses in education as well as the society as a whole. Bron (2000) is using 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 for example a move from one country to another, the countryside to the city (or the opposite), one educational setting to another and/or from an occupation to another. How do actors handle crisis? Reflection is a concept used for understanding how actors change their ways of looking at themselves as learners. Interaction between actors and tensions between institutional settings is often seen as a starting point for the reflective processes (Mead, 1934). In the next section we are focusing on the two crises described in Lena’s journey.

Identity crisis

Lena refers to two major crises in her learning career that change her learning identity. The first one relates to the identity of learning failure, the other to her life crisis that finally implied her to go back to studying for a third time.

The learning failure was a change in Lena’s learning identity, from being a good student in school she ended up as a drop-out student from the Royal Institute of Technology. This crisis led her to start study nursing, to get a proper occupation, but the identity of a learning failure stays despite the fact that she accomplish to finish nursing school. The second learning crisis is defined as a real life crisis by Lena. She did have an instrumental learning identity for twelve years and finally got depressed. She describes this crisis as a “crossroad”, that she could not come any further. During this period she is reflecting (Mead, 1934) about what she is, what she likes to do, and is also discussing the crossroad with her husband, finding solutions, making sacrifices.

Lena’s description of her identity as an instrumental learner that did last for twelve years could be interpreted as a period of floating (compare Bron, 2000). She is during this period studying, learning and working without a feeling of belonging. The life crisis she is describing could be seen as a major change in her life as well as a beginning to form a new learning identity. In figure 5 we are sketching the crisis in Lena’s journey and relating them to the different processes.

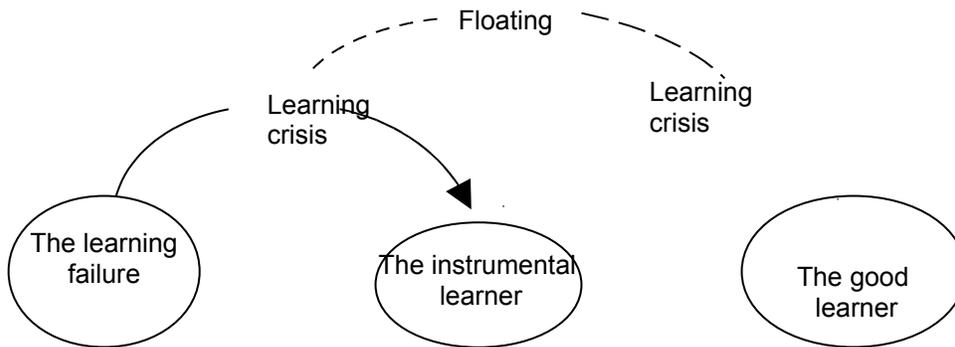


Figure 5. Crises related to learning identities.

Returning to learning

The aim of this paper is to understand changes in learning identities using an individual biographic interview with a mature student returning to higher education for the third time of her life. According to Goffman (1959) a social identity is related to the presentation of oneself in relation to other groups or individuals in a specific situation or context. Basically the learning identities that are described in this paper, relate to three different educational settings at three different periods of her life. In figure 6 we make a final sketch of her journey related to the learning identities, crisis and returning to learning.

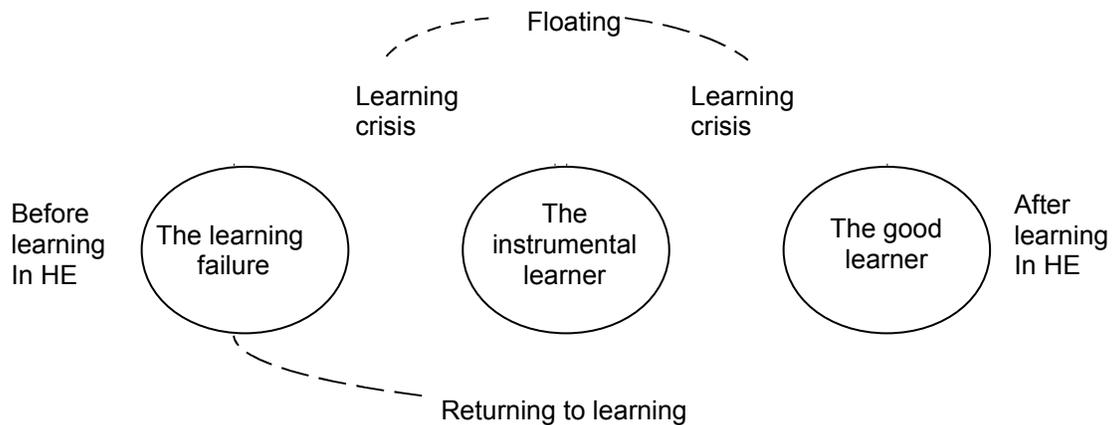


Figure 6. *Returning to learning.*

Despite the learning identities formed in relation to different educational settings, her concept of the “good student” remains (see for example Coronel Llamas, 2006; Leathwood, 2006). She has learnt to become “the good learner”, even if the learning process went through stages of failure and instrumental learning. She is from that point of view returning to learning, to her view of “real science”, to become an independent learner, to meet the expectations that she failed to meet when she started at the university.

Her journey also shows clashes between different educational settings that relates to her being the first generation in her family, studying in higher education. Despite her interest

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of technology she fails to interpret the faculty demands (Collier & Morgan, 2008) that could be viewed as a system for excluding students not passing their first exam. When she returns to learning molecular biology her situation in life has changed. She is not a first generation student anymore, she is a returner. She is well aware of the faculty demands and appreciates them. She also longs for harder requirements for access to higher education. In forming an identity to become a “good student” she relates to the “slackers”, and separates herself from them. She could have become a “slacker” herself, but she never did.

Another clash is related to different kinds of “college knowledge” (compare Murphy & Fleming, 2000). Her definition of “real science” and “real scientific method” are related to the discourses of science and technology, while the nursing education is more related to social science and the nursing profession that she is considering “unscientific”. When she is returning to learning “the real science”, she relates to the unscientific curriculum at the nursing school. The clash between different “college knowledge” could however also be discussed in terms of gender. Both educations in technology and nursing could be described as “genderised” (Connell, 1987; 1995). Technology could be seen as a male discourse built on “real science”, where men are overrepresented (Salminen-Carlsson, 1999). For Lena, her interest is shared with her father. Nursing could be related to a female discourse, based on the idea of “caring” and being a good woman (Öhlén & Segersten, 1998; Thunborg, 1999), where women are overrepresented. Maybe, on one hand, the failure within the male discourse had consequences for her decision to become a nurse. On the other hand, she never becomes the “good nurse” in her own eyes.

Her private and social life has also changed. Instead of being young and alone in her studies far from home, she is a mature woman, with a husband, who is experienced in higher education, within the same field as herself. Her class identity has probably changed as a consequence of both her previous experiences and her situation in life. At the same time her returning to learning also could be seen as a revenge for failing and avoiding a double failure (Quinn, 2004)

Finally, Lena seems to have been “floating” for twelve years (Bron, 2000). Both the learning identity of failure and the identity of the instrumental learning could be seen as learning identities and identity crisis at the same time. During this time she learned to cope with her failure, to work as a nurse and to change her private situation. An interesting question is how she finally broke with the instrumental learning identity, the period of “floating” and returned to learning. The motivation related to this returning is however not analysed further within this paper.

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