'A Community of Support': the RANLHE project and learning experiences of non-traditional students in higher education.

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Summary:

This paper will explore the provisional results of the LLL RANLHE project - Access and Retention: Experiences of Non- traditional Learners in Higher Education. Project is focused on how non-traditional students in HE experience the processes of learning, how they perceive themselves as learners and how their identity as learners develops which , hopefully will lead to revealing a mechanisms of droping out from HE and retention in the system. Analyzing biographical material collected by Polish team of the RANLHE project one can observe that beeing a part of the community seems to have a crucial meaning for the students and it is an important factor in the context of further participation. This paper will explore this idea based on selected theoretical approaches and evidence from collected data.

The RANLHE project – the structural context of the research

This paper will explore the provisional results of the LLL RANLHE project - Access and Retention: Experiences of Non- traditional Learners in Higher Education. The project which involves eight universities from seven countries: Ireland, Spain, Poland, Sweden, Scotland, England, 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 objectives 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 the area of adult learning highlight the relationship between formal and everyday life learning and point out that learning is as spontaneous, natural and necessary for human being as breathing (Jarvis 1992, Rogers 2003, Mezirow 1991, Brookfield 1986, and many others).

The Ranlhe Project takes a biographical research approach to examine and understand the experiences of non-traditional students in relation to questions of access and (study) 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 to university before, students from low-income families, students from (particular) minority ethnic groups, mature age students and students with disabilities.

Community of learners - community of support

A community of practice really must have three elements in it: domain, community,

and practice. The first one is that it must have a domain - a specific area of expertise that members share. The second thing that you want to have is a community - a set of people who interact with one another, who engage with one another, who talk with one another, who think together and develop relationships with one another in that process. And the third important element to have is a practice - ways of dealing with the problems typical of their domain - that is developed over time (Interview with E. Wenger, cited in De Cagna 2001: p. 6).

As with any community of practice, a learning community must find common ground. When first establishing itself, it must reconcile, negotiate, and transform that particular triangulation of the community, the individual identities belonging to it, and the knowledgeable skills they are practicing and learning (Lave and Wenger 1991). Developing a community of learners is important to any educational environment whether that setting is an individual classroom, a school, or a teacher education program (Peterson 1992). According to Evans and Nicholson (2003) being part of the community brings up the importance of the individual's emotions and feelings, attitudes, values, and interpersonal skills including open communication and the value of every student. This translates into an environment where students feel safe and secure, and where they are valued and feel that they belong (Evans and Nicholson 2003: p. 138). These factors play a crucial role in promoting and hindering retention among HE students in Poland.

A decision about becoming a student emerges from a range 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.

Creating a supportive learning environment is very important, especially for more mature students who very often felt like 'fish out of water' at first, when entering HE. Barbara's and Paula's stories below are examples of learning journeys influenced by these two feelings: belonging to the group and being excluded and not accepted.

Barbara
Barbara is a 42-year-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 reasons for this is her father's condition - he has had 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 (a hospital). She felt under-appreciated and wanted to prove to others and herself that she was capable of being a successful student.

> I got so pissed off with 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 colleagues figured it out and started to comment about it in a very unpleasant way ... Once I heard, accidentally, one nurse asking the other 'what is her major anyway?' - and the other replied 'probably none because no university would accept her', it wasn't nice...

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

It was all about the atmosphere of jealousy at the hospital but I thought - I'll show you ... and look at me now - I got the degree (B.A.) in 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 supported each other, studying and partying together, having fun. When she talks about this period of her life it sounds like she gained not only an education, but a social life as well. That is probably why she decided to take the next step – an M.A - right after graduating. This time it was a different experience - most of her peers were much younger, mature students were a minority, and she felt a lack of connection, like she did not belong again. She was not able to prepare her M.A. thesis on time and her health 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 gut feeling that I would fail this time, that something would 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 it turned out it was not a blood disease after all ... a 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 decided to have surgery, I was nervous, so all educational plans were off the horizon. But I also knew 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 the B.A. level started convincing me to move forward, do the finals, so I thought - if people are asking me, I should do it.

Learning and being a student is not strongly connected with external motivation, because her professional life is all about medicine and she studied pedagogy. Formal learning is like a challenge leading to another kind of learning (social, emotional, existential), and although it is a rocky road for her, she is not giving up. The important role of 'the significant other' was played by her M.A. supervisor (tutor).

When Dr K started to advise 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 moments, 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 now I have to finalize it.

It looks like other people's attention is really needed in order to reassure Barbara that she is worth the 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. Being a part of a community makes this decision easier for her, as it is the group and significant others who can push her 'back on track' when she fails, doubts in herself or wants to quit. However, had she

not been excluded from the working community before, she may never have decided to engage in HE.

Paula

She is a 31-year-old B.A. student. She lives in a middle-sized town with her parents and 11-year-old son, and she is divorced. Her ex-husband had a gambling problem which led not only to divorce, but also to financial, emotional and health problems (her son's epileptic seizures). She moved back to her parents to start a new life and to help in taking care of her father who got cancer.

Her educational experiences within HE are quite extensive, but not always successful: she started a B.A. programme in Finance, then she took a postgraduate course in Hotel Management. She dropped out from Finance because of problems with mathematics and statistics quite early (after the first semester), but she successfully graduated in Hotel Management and worked in that field for a few years. In 2007 she re-engaged in a B.A programme; this time it was counselling at Lower Silesia University. She claims that the help she got here was more than she expected:

> It is really amazing how much help I've got here....I've had a lot of issues, I still have, with my ex-husband, mental health, the past still influences my present. I'm a rather open, friendly person, but life was not kind to me … even now, with my dad's cancer ... All these things made me talk to one of the teachers and she sent me to a counsellor. This person was a career counsellor, but she gave me a lot of support, she was very warm and sympathetic ... not only did she make me feel better with myself, her advice helped me to get a new job!

> Congratulations!

> I'm really happy, I used all the guidance she gave me and just yesterday they called me and let me know that they're hiring me! So help in this school is not only an 'empty word', it's real ... now I feel I'm finally in the right place, studying pedagogy and counselling, and I know that this is my thing ...

These new experiences are radically different from what she remembers from high school. She was always a good student, but she never got accepted by her peers in the classroom, and with time her achievements started to work against her, with the result that she was bullied.

> When I started high school I was an A-student and I was the only one in the class with such an attitude, truth to be told - this did not make me a lot of friends ... I stopped studying, stopped caring, because I wanted to be liked, have friends, so my grades went lower and lower

> You did it deliberately?

> Yes

> Was it difficult to stop doing what you knew you're good at?

Other kids were teasing me, pushing, I was bullied...Once they locked me in a toilet ... Hostile comments all the time ... So I stopped being active in the classroom, backed out. In the end, I barely graduated from high school. (…) I believe if I had gone to a different high school or got some help back then I would be an M.A. today without a problem ... this was like a domino effect …

What were your expectations, fears and hopes before entering this recent stage of your learning? What was memorable and significant at the very beginning?

First of all I was anxious about being the oldest in a group and that I would not fit in with people ten years younger than I am. I'm in a mixed group in terms of age, so I don't feel so different, besides the group is very open and welcoming, no matter the age, maybe it is because of the human science we're studying, we are 'people persons' (*a social and communicative person – A.N.*). We have had tests for communicative skills as a part of the course and almost everybody has a high social skills level (…) My first experiences with the group were that everybody was sitting nice and quiet at his/her desks and watching the others, next day - relationships have already been established, acquaintances have been made and we all 'clicked together' as a group. Today we are very supportive and helpful, the relationships are very strong, we call each other, help with tasks, borrow notes and books, we can really count on each other (…) I feel like I can spread my wings now, I'm more brave ...

What else makes you feel different?

I believe that this freedom of speech during the seminars, everybody can make a statement, nobody's interrupting, showing disrespect, people are open to a different opinion, It is some kind of trick to not only teach us, give us the knowledge, but this way of thinking, I really value that... it makes me feel very positive about this whole experience with learning

Paula's story, although different to Barbara's, brings up again the issues of belonging and being part of the community as a crucial aspect of building self confidence and learning identity. Her earlier negative educational experiences prove that the need for acceptance can be stronger than building individual success. Being a student in HE, which was for her both joining and creating a learning community, is also an important biographical turn in her life, taking into account other changes she's facing. For Paula - in order to be a successful learner - support in the learning processes is not as important a support as the acceptance of her peers. In both stories the second dimension of Wenger's community of practice seems to be crucial to Polish students: 'a set of people who interact with one another, who engage with one another, who talk with one another, who think together and develop relationships with one another in that process' (from an interview with Wenger as cited in De Cagna 2001, p. 6).

Conclusion
Kauchak (1997) claims that in order to develop a culture and a sense of community within that culture you must have a shared sense of purpose where each individual can develop a sense of

identity that bonds him or her to the unit. Culture refers to the attitudes, values, beliefs, and ways of acting and interacting that characterize a social group, which include the attitudes and beliefs about learning and the views about the nature of HE processes. Based on research data, one can stress how important it was for the students to be with other people in a particular learning community - peers or teachers, and that this factor at the moment seems to be crucial in terms of the project's objectives. It works both ways - being a part of a strong community may help the process of learning and reduce drop out rates, but lack of the feeling of belonging and being supported hinders the rate of completion and may indirectly induce a failure. If an individual finds themself in a supportive environment, this sometimes may be a trigger to change, to transform. King (2001) points out that this transformative process depends on the degree to which the members feel a sense of belonging and are aligned with the community's goals. When affected successfully, 'individuals commit themselves to their own growth through the growth of the collective' (King 2001: p. 2).

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