Becoming A More Critical, Autonomous, Reflective Learner

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Promoting Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning in Higher Education

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PRILHE Project - Lecturer’s Toolkit

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Introduction

This toolkit has been produced as part of a SOCRATES Grundtvig Adult Education project entitled ‘Promoting Reflective Independent Learning in Higher Education (PRILHE)’ – 113869-CP-1-2004-1-UK-GRUNDTVIG-G1.

The aims and objectives of the project were to:

- identify the learning processes which enable (non-traditional) adult students in higher education to become critical, autonomous and reflective learners
- identify how this process could be better supported before, within and at the end of study
- examine the interface between learning from experience and academic learning – the overlaps and conjunctions – and how experience may help academic learning and future learning, including in the workplace
- identify models of good practice in higher education institutions across Europe
- produce resource materials for both adult students and lecturers.

The project focused on ‘non-traditional adult students’. By this we mean: ‘A new mature student entrant (by age in respective countries) with no previous HE qualifications whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors additional to age’.

During the process of the research we changed our focus from reflective independent learning to critical autonomous reflective learning (CARL) as we felt that this more accurately reflects what we are concerned with. We have defined CARL as follows:

Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning is:

- critical in its awareness of the wider social conditions of learning
- autonomous in its understanding of the inter-relationship between learner dependency (on the one hand) and the potential for independent individual and group learning and action (on the other)
- reflective in the way it looks, from a certain distance, both at the learning process and the assumptions that underpin it

Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning thus links individual and social learning, seeing it as a transformative process which has the potential to change both individuals and social structures. This understanding seems to be particularly appropriate for the learning practices of non-traditional adult students in HE.

The project involved the following partners;

- University of Barcelona, (CREA), Spain
- University of Goettingen, (Education Department), Germany
- University of Lower Silesia, (Department of Education), Poland
- Universidade Nova de Lisboa, (ISEGI), Portugal
- University of Stockholm, (Department of Education), Sweden
- University of Turku, (Centre for Extension Studies), Finland
- University of Warwick, (Centre for Lifelong Learning), UK
Project Methodology

The project was developed over 2 years through a literature review, questionnaires with both students and lecturers and follow up in-depth biographical interviews with key respondents. Regular project team meetings were held to plan, implement and discuss the outcomes of these different activities and to compare and contrast different national findings. Full reports on the project literature review, national questionnaire and interview analyses can be viewed on the project web-site http://www.pcb.ub.es/crea/proyectos/prilhe/index.htm. Section 1 of this toolkit identifies the key concepts which emerged from the project’s different activities and from team discussions and gives a brief overview of the areas covered in the project literature review. This toolkit aims to:

- Suggest good practices at departmental and institutional levels
- Identify learning and teaching approaches to enable non-traditional adult students to become critical autonomous reflective learners
- Identify policy issues at national and European levels

How to use this booklet

This booklet is divided into different chapters. The first chapter outlines the key concepts related to critical autonomous reflective learning and also includes a brief overview of and link to the project literature review. Chapter 2 looks at ways of creating a supporting environment for encouraging critical autonomous reflective learning and the cultural contexts of teaching. Chapter 3 identifies examples of good practice with examples from across the partner countries which could be used or adapted in other institutions. Chapter 4 discusses how to implement autonomous reflective learning through staff development and institutional change. The concluding chapter includes a summary as well as useful references to literature and websites.

This toolkit can be used and read as a whole or as individual sections.

This toolkit has been produced alongside a handbook for students which lecturers may also find useful and is available on the website: http://www.pcb.ub.es/crea/proyectos/prilhe/index.htm or as a hard copy from the Centre for Lifelong Learning, The University of Warwick, UK

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This booklet will be of use to:

LECTURERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION
CENTRES FOR ACADEMIC PRACTICE
POLICY MAKERS AT INSTITUTIONAL, NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVELS

Although this toolkit is aimed at working with adult students the ideas and approaches can be also used with younger students in higher education.
Chapter 1: Understanding Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning

This section explores some key concepts which underpin the more practice-oriented aspects of the toolkit in sections 3 and 4. It gives a brief overview of the literature which has informed the project development (with links to the full literature review) and concludes by offering an extended understanding of what the project means by ‘Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning’ (CARL).

1.1 Key Concepts

The notion of Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning (CARL) consists of several concepts which need clarification. To do that, however, we first need to explore some other concepts. Their different combinations help us understand the complexity of CARL. We begin with the concepts critical reflective thinking and reflexivity. Next we explain the relationship between: 1. independent/autonomous – dependent; 2. individual – social; 3. instrumental – discursive. Sometimes the relationship between these concepts is seen as dichotomous. Yet, we want to challenge this understanding. Finally, we concentrate on the last concept which is reflective biographical learning.

Critical reflective thinking and reflexivity

The role of higher education is to facilitate or assist students in the process of knowledge acquisition and knowledge making by developing critical reflection and self-reflection. Critical reflection means approaching scientific concepts and theories by using different points of departure, i.e. different perspectives. We engage in critical reflection when examining relationship between facts and ideas, when we test them and retest them against theories, when we look for alternative ways of understanding.

Critical reflection is not involved in the how or the how-to of action but in the why issue. In other words it has to do with the reason for and consequences of what we do and believe in. However, critical reflection cannot be seen as an integral part of an immediate action process. It can only occur where there is a hiatus and we need to question again our own understanding, and change it accordingly. Critical reflection helps to reassess and transform our understanding. On the other hand, critical self-reflection about our assumptions, which might be called reflexivity, helps us evaluate our own attitude towards the chosen perspectives and our role when involved in a process of understanding and meaning. Once reflexivity starts it becomes a continuous and all-pervasive process over the self. According to Giddens (1991, p76) we regularly make such self-observations and ask ourselves questions such as: What is happening right now, what am I thinking, what am I doing and what am I feeling?

Reflection is most visible in the context in which problems have to be solved. It is about the premises we have chosen, i.e. epistemological, socio-cultural and psychological, and involves a critical review of distorted presuppositions. Through reflection our perspectives change, of course this involves time, as well as moving within different contexts and situations.

Independent /autonomous – dependent

The most important aspect of critical reflective thinking is that the learner becomes an independent or autonomous person who can evaluate, estimate or make judgements about knowledge. In other words, it concerns attitudes to facts and ideas as well as connections between them. But there is a problem with the concept independent. When we asked students about the meaning of being independent they interpreted it as self-reliance and individual activity or positions. To them, independent means seeing themselves as unique and individual learners, not dependent on the group. At the same time, however, they feel part of a group and they experience the group as a resource for their learning in higher education. Thus we see independence as a double edged phenomenon with dependency as a part of it. In other words, to be independent one is also partly dependent. There is no possibility to be totally independent as we are social individuals.
Being an independent learner might mean being isolated from the community of other learners which is never the case while learning. In reality we are dependent on colleagues, friends, families, teachers, society, culture and time etc. and at the same time we are autonomous through seeking uniqueness, self-independence and integrity. We can never be free from this tension. We are both autonomous and dependent at the same time and we strive all the time to be the both. There might be, for example, ethical dilemmas regarding humankind or loyalty dilemmas regarding family or friends. Students can experience, for example, a dilemma when teachers expect them to become independent learners and yet demand that they reproduce knowledge on teachers’ own terms.

**Individual – social**

Individualism is a typical characteristic of the Western thinking which is prevalent today. Yet the notion of individualism is paradoxical. At the same time as being situated in a world filled with stimuli and new opportunities, we may often feel isolated and lonely. Although our lives are constructed around individuality and uniqueness, we also like to be like others. In addition, the world becomes smaller because of globalisation processes and all the advancements of new technology. Individualism itself is not only a historical idea well rooted in liberalism and modernity, but also a contemporary one, emerging from post-modern thinking where an individual is put on a pedestal and looked upon as having full potential.

Here we challenge the prevailing view in the contemporary higher education ideology that each learner, because of their uniqueness and individuality, learns differently, i.e. in a specific and unique way without being affected by others. We will, however go beyond a dichotomous approach to collective versus individual learning and discuss the idea that learning, even from the very beginning, is characteristically a social process, neither essentially individualistic nor collective.

In education, whether at a lower or higher level, individualism is stressed and demanded more than ever. This has to do with two factors: first, with the ideology of post-modernity or late modernity, and second, with the concept of learning taking precedence over the notion of education (Biesta, 2005). Even research is constructed in this way. Some educationists, who proceed from Piaget's cognitive psychology, also follow the line of individualism. At the same time there is a debate among social scientists which suggests going beyond the Cartesian split of mind and body, structure and subjectivity, individuality and society, and instead taking an inter-subjective approach.

Inter-subjectivity and the self are important concepts to point out, because sociality or intersubjectivity is not just an opposition to individuality. Unlike some educationists who use the pair of concepts individual versus collective, there is rather a combination or a close relationship between both, where inter-subjectivity is a condition and a framework for an individual to develop and change. Sociality does not lie beyond individuals or is made by particular individuals or even placed over an individual, but can be understood as conduct or action which is commonly coordinated. We can get support from Dewey (1938) for whom all human experience is ultimately social. What he means literally is that it involves contact and communication.

**Instrumental – discursive**

In some theories learning can be of two different kinds. They differentiate between learning to perform and learning to understand what adults communicate to each other. Following this logic, and based on thorough research, Mezirow distinguishes two types of learning: instrumental and communicative. Habermas in his work includes, among others, instrumental and discursive conduct which can of course be related to learning, if we see learning as a process of action.

*Instrumental learning* relates to know-how about the world around us. We learn to manipulate and control reality, e.g. we learn to swim or/and to build complex instruments. This kind of learning is characteristic of both everyday life practices as well as formal learning: it helps us to solve practical problems as well as scientific, technological problems. In instrumental learning we employ the hypothetic-deductive approach while solving the problems, i.e. from a logical and rational presumption, we attempt to collect facts (also by experimenting) to be able to test our own hypotheses. The purpose of this learning is to be able to explain nature and to deal with it by adopting it to human conditions.
We are involved in communicative/discursive learning when we want to understand what is going on, and what others communicate to us. This kind of learning involves most of all language, but also other ways of expression like dance and art. Here intuition, feeling and emotions are important but also experience of meeting others and being involved in interaction. It is through interaction that meaning is discovered and adopted.

Students practise both types of learning and neither of them is better than the other. Moreover, they use these types of learning when they study different disciplines. It is not a matter of either...or. Rather, both types of learning are important for the acquisition and construction of knowledge. Adults’ learning, both instrumental and communicative, is characterised by a reflective way of thinking (Mezirow, 1990). The concept of reflection includes all the pairs of concepts and their dimensions that have been discussed so far, that is, autonomous/dependent, individual/social and instrumental/discursive. Reflection is a typical way of human thinking (see e.g. Dewey 1938, Mead 1938, Giddens 1991).

**Reflective biographical learning**

There are many theories that try to comprehend adults learning. In the PRILHE project we further develop the concept of reflective biographical learning of non-traditional students in higher education. Reflective biographical learning is a wide and inclusive concept that, amongst other things, takes into account experiential learning theories and, by definition, understands learning as a continuous and lifelong process. Learning gives us prospects and opportunities in our lives. In this way learning becomes transitional and helps us to understand how to deal with new information and new knowledge. For Alheit (1995) there is no new knowledge other than transitional knowledge, i.e. depending on the life situation which is constantly changing. That is why knowledge can only be genuinely transitional if it is biographical knowledge. Biographical learning tends to describe learning as a process in which reflection and self-reflection is a crucial point of departure. Learning is seen not only as occurring in formal and non-formal settings but also taking place informally. In fact, the theory of biographical learning does not differentiate between these settings.

Biographical learning contributes to our knowledge about ourselves, our individuality and autonomy to act in a continuously changing world, as well as our social skills to act together with others for some better and higher societal causes. Moreover, it contributes to the reflection over one’s own life; and opens up the possibility to change, both as an individual and within a group, and be able to understand these transitions, while mediating and transferring one’s roles and identities (Bron, 2001). Personal, emotional and cognitive changes have deep consequences for the way we live our lives and deal with new challenges. Thus biographical learning is not only a cognitive development but very often combines emotions. According to Giddens (1991) the reflexivity of the self generates self-knowledge which reduces dependency in close relationships. Biographical learning thus seems to be needed to become a critical autonomous reflective learner.
1.2 Literature Review Summary (for full literature review, see Project Web-site)

The project literature review was developed by all partners in the Grundtvig PRILHE project. At the first meeting of the international project team, it was agreed to construct the project literature review both as a collaborative and a developmental process. It was intended that this process would inform the development of the project questionnaire and its overall approach to biographical research.

Preliminary discussions identified the centrality of reflective biographical learning to the whole idea of reflective independent learning. Arising from this, three formative thematic strands were agreed where project partners would make initial explorations of the available literature. The figure below represents these three strands and the involvement of the different partners in exploring the relevant literature.

**Reflective Biographical Learning**

![Figure 1](image-url)

Reflective Biographical Learning

Experiential learning

Constructivist learning paradigm

Critical learning

APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning)
Pragmatist tradition (Dewey, Mead)

SWEDEN / PORTUGAL

Expansive learning (Engeström)
Co-configuration Biographical construction (Biographicity)

GERMANY / FINLAND

Critical theory (Habermas)
Social learning Collective learning Dialogical learning

SPAIN / UK

At a later stage, the Swedish and Polish teams added a further review of Transformative Learning which complemented and, to some extent, bridged the three strands above. After all these sections had been drafted and discussed, it was agreed that the term, ‘Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning, was a more appropriate key concept than the original idea of ‘Reflective Independent Learning’ (see 1.3).
1.3 Understanding Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning (CARL)

For the project team, the CARL concept ‘bridges’ three different aspects of the learning process.

The aspect of reflectivity focuses on the learner him- or herself. A reflective learner is a person who is able to look from a certain distance at his/her own learning process, who knows how to learn, who has realised his/her own problems, his/her own limits, but also his/her own capacities. A reflective learner keeps a ‘meta-cognitive’ perspective on his/her learning process.

The aspect of autonomy refers to the fact that learning is always a biographical process. That means it is an interactive bargaining process between ‘self’ and ‘society’. The autonomous learner has built up a certain personal and social identity. This does include the awareness of the social and personal limits of learning processes. Thus, autonomous learning is far from being identical with ‘independent’ learning. The autonomous learner knows about his/her dependencies and creates a reflective distance from these limits.

The aspect of critical learning concentrates on the social conditions of learning. The critical learner is extremely aware of the odds of learning conditions. He/she looks for power structures within learning settings. He/she is interested in changing obstacles for learning in general and for special target groups (such as women, ethnic minorities, people with working class backgrounds) in particular. The critical learner is sceptical about conventions and traditions. He/she is looking for learning as a basic human right and fighting against unquestioned privileges and strategies of exclusion.

Critical autonomous reflective learning thus links individual and social learning, seeing it as a transformative process which has the potential to change both individuals and social structures. This understanding seems to be particularly appropriate for the learning practices of non-traditional adult students in HE.

References for Section 1


1 The project working definition of Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning, as stated in the Introduction to the toolkit, is based on the ideas within this section.
Chapter 2: Promoting Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning: Creating a Supportive Environment

This section examines the wider context for promoting Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning. It focuses in turn on the macro, meso and micro levels in relation to Higher Education. The macro level looks at national and European structures and policies, the meso level focuses on institutional issues while the micro level looks at the learning experiences of adult students. However, it is important to remember that all three levels also interact with each other. It then relates this exploration of different levels to the cultural contexts of teaching and learning, to differences in both subject disciplines and the ages of students, as identified within the project.

2.1. Macro Level

2.1.1 The Renewed Lisbon strategy and the centrality of critical autonomous reflective learners to this political endeavour

The Lisbon European Council in March 2000 recognised that Europe faced challenges in adapting to globalisation and the shift to knowledge-based economies. It stressed that “every citizen must be equipped with the skills needed to live and work in this new information society”. The recognition that people are Europe’s most important asset for growth and employment was clear in 2000, and has been regularly restated, most recently in the re-launched Lisbon Strategy and at the European Council of March 2005, which called for increased investment in education and skills. The adapted agenda calls for a strong and fundamental effort to equip the European citizens at all levels with the right knowledge, skills and attitudes, and society at large with a full understanding of why this is needed. (European Commission, 2005).

The European Council, at its meeting in March 2005, continued to underline the importance of developing human capital as Europe’s main asset and as a crucial element of the Lisbon strategy; the Council called for the implementation of lifelong learning as a sine qua non to achieve the Lisbon objectives. (Commission,… 2005a:62) This built upon its previous identification of the following objectives in relation to lifelong learning:

1. Put in place comprehensive, coherent and concerted strategies
2. Target efforts at the disadvantaged groups – (one of the challenges) “will be to increase the awareness of the disadvantaged groups of the advantages of education and training and to make the systems more attractive, more accessible and tailored more closely to their needs”
3. Apply common European references and principles

[Commission, 2003:14-15]

The mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy called for a strong ‘Partnership for European Renewal’, aimed at enabling the Member States, the European Union and the Social Partners to work together towards the same aim, i.e. social and economic growth and creation of jobs. The integrated guidelines for jobs and growth, proposed for this European Renewal, includes two guidelines for education and training (guidelines nºs. 23 and 24), placed in Central Policy Area 10, Increase investment in human capital through better education and skills (Commission., 2005b: 52-5); these reiterate the priorities of the Education and Training 2010 work programme (European Council, 2002), focussing on the need to expand and improve investment in human capital, and to adapt education and training systems to new competence requirements, as a major contribution to the Lisbon strategy.

Within this Partnership for European Renewal, Central Policy Area - 9: Improve the adaptability of workers and enterprises and the flexibility of labour markets, also states (Commission, 2005:48) that,
In rapidly changing economies, a high degree of adaptability is vital to promote productivity growth and to allow employment to be re-allocated towards rapidly growing sectors. Increasingly, new firms and SMEs are major sources of job creation and growth in Europe.

This means that education and training, especially at tertiary level, should prepare citizens for the labour market - every worker should be open to greater critical understanding and adaptability; the aim is to facilitate a greater ability to anticipate, trigger and take account of change. This requires from every worker the capacity to become a critical and autonomous learner, that is to be aware of and be able to interpret the signs of change in a continuously evolving labour market.

2.1.2 Higher Education Institutions in the context of the updated Lisbon Agenda


Modernisation of Europe’s universities, involving their interlinked roles of education, research and innovation, has been acknowledged not only as a core condition for the success of the broader Lisbon Strategy, but as part of the wider move towards an increasingly global and knowledge-based economy

(ibid: 2).

However, the same document recognises that

European universities have enormous potential, but this potential is not [yet] fully harnessed and put to work effectively to underpin Europe’s drive for more growth and more jobs

(ibid: 3).

European Universities need to improve their performance, to modernise themselves, to become more accessible and competitive and to play their part in the creation of the knowledge-based society, envisaged under the Lisbon strategy. This crucial sector of the economy and of society needs in-depth restructuring and modernisation if Europe is not to lose out in global competition, through shortcomings in education, research and innovation. Changes that are proposed by the European Commission include adapting higher education systems to new competence requirements.

Central to this are universities’ public missions and their overall social and cultural remit as identified in the Bologna process with reference to the following key social issues:

- equitable access, student finance, motivating members of new or under-represented groups to pursue higher education,
- adapting learning methods and institutional working schedules and certainly a host of other issues

[Bergan, 2003:14].

Complementary to this social mission, European universities should,

increasingly become significant players in the economy, able to respond better and faster to the demands of the market and to develop partnerships which harness scientific and technological knowledge. This implies recognising that their relationship with the business community is of strategic importance and forms part of their commitment to serving the public interest.

(Commission… 2006a: 6)
In this context, Universities have the potential to play a vital role in the Lisbon objective and to equip Europe with the skills and competences necessary to succeed in a globalised, knowledge-based economy. Persistent mismatches between graduate qualifications and the needs of the labour market should be overcome,

university programmes should be structured to enhance directly the employability of graduates and to offer broad support to the workforce more generally. Universities should offer innovative curricula, teaching methods and training/retraining programmes which include broader employment-related skills along with the more discipline specific (ibid: 6).

Universities are key players in Europe’s future; for the successful transition to a knowledge-based economy and society, they should grasp the opportunities and challenges of the lifelong learning agenda.

The PRILHE project has demonstrated conclusively that one of the new competencies required for the constant evolving labour market is for workers to become Critical Autonomous Reflective Learners (CARLs). All in all, Universities have to increase the relevance of its education and training programmes, addressing the needs of society and of the business world by delivering into society lifelong learners, equipped with the new competences. The PRILHE project illustrates how to become a CARL; this should be at the core of the competences portfolio provided by Universities, not just for continuous personal and societal development but also to increase employability in the rather volatile labour markets of contemporary economies. Increasing student autonomy must be one of the goals of every HEI institution.

### 2.1.3 Independent and creative learners and entrepreneurship, in the context of the Lisbon Strategy

The new start for the Lisbon Strategy focuses the European Union’s efforts on two principal tasks – delivering stronger, lasting growth and providing more and better jobs. Entrepreneurship is positively correlated with growth; countries exhibiting a greater increase in entrepreneurship tend to show greater subsequent decreases in unemployment rates. Moreover, if Europe wants to successfully maintain its social model, in a scenario of a shrinking labour force, it needs more economic growth, more new firms, more high growth SMEs – in a word, more entrepreneurs wanting to take risks and embark on innovative ventures (Commission, 2006b:3)

Entrepreneurship refers to an individual’s ability to turn ideas into action (Commission, … 2005c:18); the foundations of entrepreneurship require the development of several generic attributes and skills, complemented by better and more specific knowledge about business. Entrepreneurship is a key competence for all, helping the individual to be more creative, self-confident enough to take risks in whatever function he/she is involved and to act in a socially responsible way (Commission, … 2006b:4).

The Education and Training 2010 Work Programme (European Council, 2002) includes entrepreneurship as one of the key competences to be developed by all citizens (Commission, … 2005c: 18) An entrepreneurial attitude is characterised by initiative, pro-activity, and independence (autonomy) (ibid).

In order to create the climate for self-employment and entrepreneurial activities among Europeans, entrepreneurship training should be integrated with different subjects at all education levels including tertiary level courses. The Commission (Commission…, 2006b:12) foresees that,

> From 2007 the proposed new Community Integrated Programme on Lifelong Learning will support innovative projects with a European dimension, aiming to foster entrepreneurial attitudes and skills and to promote links between educational establishments and enterprises.

To foster entrepreneurial mindsets, capable of creating businesses that can survive in global markets, students must be trained to develop these independent/autonomous thinking skills and to be creative in applying them. These skills can best be acquired through the life-long learning process; all educational institutions must, therefore, be competent in motivating and encouraging students to be Critical, Autonomous and Reflective Learners. It must be a fundamental purpose of education to develop in individuals the ability to make their own decisions about what they think and do. The HEI mission must therefore be the development of skills of self-directed inquiry rather than just inculcation of course content, to produce not just knowledgeable persons, but lifelong self-directed learners. This indicates a need for different teaching-learning strategies designed to encourage and promote CARL
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2.2 Meso Level

This section looks at how facilities, strategies, policies and practices at the institutional level can help support and encourage the development of Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning amongst adult students. Internal factors, such as institutional departmental structures and cultures, shape higher education institutions at the meso level. However, universities do not exist in a vacuum - external factors also play a role in shaping a particular institution, such as its relationship with the local community, regional, national and European policies (Bourgeois et al, 1999). Higher education institutions across Europe are transforming, albeit reluctantly in some cases, as a result of changing state/university relationships, economic and social changes and globalisation.

Externally universities are now engaging with other sites of knowledge producers while internally new student groups are entering through the doors as universities change from elite to mass-based institutions (Trow, 1973; Scott, 1995). As Barnett points out; ‘institutional boundaries become less tight as interrelationships with the wider society grow’ (2003: 27). ‘The nature and purpose of universities in postmodernity is, therefore, being questioned, redefined and reconstructed. Yet despite these change processes, hierarchies continue to exist with some universities remaining elite institutions’ (Merrill & Alheit, 2004: 153).

Institutional policies, ethos and practices all project an image and a message of what a particular university is like and what it stands for. For many adults the institutional culture of elite, traditional universities is off-putting as they feel that this type of institution is ‘not for the likes of them’. This is related to class issues which undermine their confidence in learning in such institutions. As a result the majority of adult students opt for studying in reform universities (or the ‘new’ universities in the UK) which has consequences for their labour market potential. For a student to succeed in their learning, higher education institutions need to create a welcoming environment - and they need to be socially inclusive to all social groups and ages. A university’s mission statement and publicity about its programmes needs to state explicitly that adult students are welcomed and valued.

Universities are complex institutions and while an institution as a whole has a specific culture, individual departments also have their own cultures which may or may not reflect the institutional culture as academic faculties and departments in many universities remain autonomous. For Duke, ‘This means looking at the university in terms of interdependent competing coalitions, each seeking to win by imposing their interests on the larger system of the institution as a whole’ (2004:201). Departmental cultures are shaped and influenced by disciplines (Becher, 1989) and, as a result, departments differ in their attitudes towards adult students (Williams, 1997; Bourgeois et al, 1999). Becher (1989), drawing on a cultural approach in understanding university organisational behaviour and environment, therefore, argues that ‘there is a strong relationship between the discipline (knowledge community) and the epistemological characteristics of the discipline (knowledge form)’ (Bourgeois et al, 1999: 149). Departments are characterised by their own sub-cultures which embody particular values, attitudes, norms, codes of conduct etc. and lecturers are socialised into these.

Bourdieu’s (1984) work on French universities highlights the fact that the social space of the academic field is constructed by a range of symbolic capital, which defines the social prestige a particular discipline has, and by intellectual capital, which marks the scientific ranking of the discipline. Adult students are often only able to enter traditional universities through the low or ‘soft’ status disciplines such as the social sciences (Bourgeois et al, 1999). Departments, through admission tutors, can also act as gatekeepers keeping non-traditional students out of their departments (Williams, 1997). If non-traditional adult students do manage to enter the high status disciplines the departmental culture may make them feel that they are not wanted or valued.

Departmental cultures or, as Becher (1989) terms it, ‘academic tribes’ are significant in encouraging or not encouraging the participation of adult students in higher education. In looking at the access, and the participation of adults in higher education, Bourgeois et al stress:

> the differences that are observed in adult access policies and practices across institutions and in sub-units within institutions can, therefore be explained to a large extent in the light of the interplay of power relationships and strategies displayed by the various interest groups in the decision-making processes that underpin these policies and practices

(1999: 147).
Higher education institutions across Europe are placing increasing emphasis on the individualisation of learning and learner autonomy. This approach largely stems from economic and market-driven policies and the move towards mass-based higher education. Drawing on the work of E P Thompson (1968), Taylor, Barr and Steele (2002) argue that the democratic tradition of learner autonomy in adult education be applied to higher education. They identify three characteristics necessary for this to occur:

1) The lived experience of learners is valued through socially relevant knowledge
2) The curriculum and syllabus content is negotiated between the lecturer and learner
3) The learning process is located within a context of social purpose

(based on Taylor, Barr & Steele, 2002:121).

The cultures of many university departments need to change if they are to encourage adult students, (and also younger students), to become critical, autonomous, reflective learners in both a democratic and collective way.

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2.3 Micro Level

This section considers some key principles at the micro level i.e. at the level of the individual actors (teachers and students), that seem to be helpful in developing critical, reflective and/or autonomous approaches to learning. Here, more general factors surrounding the design of learning environments are discussed; we arrive at a more detailed picture (examples for good practice) in the chapter three of this toolkit.

The notion of ‘learning environment’ refers to the whole conditional framework in which learning is embedded and by which it is shaped. It does not merely include the organisation of physical space, but is particularly related to the social situation (interaction norms and communication patterns, relationships between students and lecturers or amongst students), the overall climate, the view of knowledge underlying the whole setting, the different approaches applied and so on.

To enhance critical, reflective and autonomous learning, what does it actually mean?

- raising awareness of the provisional (and thus contestable) character of knowledge
- encouraging students to explore, question and assess continuously their strategies and attitudes in coping with reality and how these help them to, or prevent them from, gaining further understanding
- helping students to become aware of their improvements and accomplishments on the one hand, and of their weaknesses or anxieties on the other hand
- raising confidence in one’s competences
- addressing the personal responsibility of the individual for his/her own learning
- engaging the learner actively in his/her learning process

2.3.1 Learning between challenge and reconciliation

This refers to the idea that learning is best facilitated in an environment where we can find a dialectic tension between challenging (i.e. be-strangling) experiences and experiences that connect to existing knowledge. From this, it follows that learning environments should provide experiences that do not fit completely with the familiar pathways of construction and thus “cannot be easily integrated” (Neubert/Reich cited according to Neubert 2003, pp. 10). In this way they move the learner to modify his/her reality constructions (reframing). But at the same time the experience should be sufficiently close or familiar to engage him/her; otherwise he/she could possibly discard the new experience as irrelevant or alien. In conclusion, a challenging learning environment should provide stimuli which learners are willing and able to take up (see Arnold/Siebert 1997, pp. 89f., 113; Neubert 2003, pp. 10f.).

2.3.2 Overall climate and culture

This refers to the accepted ways of doing and saying things ‘around here’. It considers the level of interaction rules (Goffman) and communication patterns that govern the establishment of relationships between students and lecturers or amongst students, hidden power relations that shape the setting and also address whether or not participation of students is welcome in the organisation of their learning. It is essential to create an environment which emphasises a kind of general openness and conveys the feeling that the context/others can be trusted. It has to be understood that it is not a problem not to know things at first, rather, that it is an opportunity and a stimulation to open up a process of exploration, to share and develop ideas with others or argue about them, to take the risk of making mistakes. Only if the environment allows learners to display their own vulnerabilities or uncertainties, can a learning culture evolve where critical discussion and reflection is possible. Unfortunately, the culture is often blurred by anxieties:
In this context I come back to the performance. In what way - - people will reveal themselves even in the classes, again depends on how you open the course and what you are able to manage. And it is not always consistently good every day. I experience this as very stressful so that I sometimes think: „I could get out more from this group if I got them to relieve their mutual anxieties.‟ A lot of teaching culture, especially in introductory seminars, er.. is coloured by inhibition, somehow.
(Lecturer, Germany)

The notion of performance mentioned in the example above is close to the theme, supporting relationships, which serves as an incentive for learning. The resulting learning processes can be affirmative, disapproving or modifying, etc. In the following example the students are related to on a personal and sort of symmetrical basis.

And I think that my success is due to the fact that I establish a relationship with students. It is not all members of the teaching staff who can do that. That is why they all experience it very differently. But I would put it like this. I / my strategy is, I manage to establish a relationship with the students, which means that they accept me as a model on the one side and on the other one that they, sort of want to show that they can do it too or that they are somehow motivated: “Now just take a look at this!” or something of the kind. So you’ve got to, it’s difficult to put it into words, in the 60s and 70s they called it “pedagogic feeling”, but I call it relationship, which ensure that a development process takes place. That often has something to do with the fact that I show that I am still learning myself. So I, er., show that I am somebody who is still learning, often show how I do it and thus I give them the opportunity to go through and to show such processes themselves. In this way an interesting learning process grows up on both sides. And I tie it to such things like: “Come on, let’s read a text together and then we will see what we are able to do with it.” And then, then I force them to concentrate and so on simply by being concentrated myself, yeah, and show them how it works and: “Now more thoroughly! What is really written there?”", and so on.
(Lecturer, Germany)

Furthermore, lecturers should be responsive to the needs, expectations and resources of the students. If there is room for processes of negotiation and participation, if students are encouraged to apply and draw on their existing knowledge and life experience, presumably they will be more committed in their learning.

2.3.3 Shared/interactive learning

Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind. This means among other things, that it is mediated by the differences of perspective among the co participants. It is the community, or at least those participating in the learning context, who “learn” under this definition. Learning is, as it were, distributed among co participants, not a one-person act."
(Lave/Wenger 1991, p. 15)

Following Lave and Wenger, learning is a social process rather than primarily an individual activity. It is embedded in and refers to a certain social environment. Cooperative learning processes where ideas, insights, experiences can be exchanged and critically discussed, where the participants are exposed to alternative viewpoints on a given issue, that is to say where they learn with each other and from each other and where they provide mutual help and solidarity, offer the opportunity for reflective and autonomous processes. Significant synergetic effects can arise and can be used to get deeper insights that go beyond that what a single person could develop. That is to say, the co-participants are used as a productive sounding board. The value of (in-) formal supporting networks of peers with shared interests and experiences is often stressed in the empirical data (see section 3.8 for project examples and quotations).
2.3.4 Interface between theory and practice

Besides co-operative and dialogical learning arrangements, practice-centred approaches such as project-oriented and research-oriented arrangements (which are often based on co-operative work) play an important role. Here, exploring learning processes occurs when theory and practice are closely intertwined. Being engaged in a ‘real’ problem - let’s say in practical training in research for instance - the students have the opportunity to gain both methodological and analytical skills and to become aware of these growing competences: to prove and modify theoretical ideas in the field, to develop questions and ideas all by themselves, and to get a sense what all the knowledge they are dealing with in their studies is for and how it can be translated into practice.

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2.4 The Cultural Contexts of Teaching

Higher education is undergoing a period of transformation and change due to the processes of globalisation and social and economic changes. Universities are now mass higher education institutions characterised by a larger and more diverse student population (Scott, 1998). Globalisation and massification are moving higher education institutions towards marketisation. The traditional mode of academic knowledge is being challenged as universities are opening up to new forms of knowledge while at the same time ‘the university is no longer the privileged site of knowledge’ (Delanty, 2001:4). External institutions also lay claim to knowledge and research. This has implications for the curriculum, context and forms of teaching. To compete in the globalised world, nation states require universities to participate in wider forms of knowledge and skills such as combining vocational approaches with academic knowledge. Lecturers have to adapt to teaching larger number of students and learning how to use technology in their teaching. At the same time there is an emphasis on introducing more student-centred approaches such as problem-solving, project work, group work although there is still, in most universities, a heavy reliance on the traditional lecture. However, as Becher (1993) reminds us, universities are still characterised by different academic tribes which are shaped by the disciplinary cultures. This has implications for the way that knowledge is perceived and taught as well as perspectives and attitudes towards non-traditional adult students.

Higher education is not homogenous but comprises different cultural contexts which mean that different aspects are taken into consideration when planning teaching and learning. Cultural contexts in this matter might mean, for example, national or provisional contexts, disciplinary or subject contexts as well as traditional university or new university cultures. Teachers become socialised into those cultures and usually act according to explicit, but also implicit, cultural rules and expectations. For an individual teacher to try other ways of teaching and examining than the cultural rules he/she is situated in is often a difficult task. Some of the lecturers interviewed in this project pointed out how difficult it might be to challenge and change both themselves and the surroundings, as, after a while, they themselves have become part of the (teaching) discourse in the institution, or more specifically in the department, where they work. This subsection is about such expectations, difficulties, and conditions that teachers pointed out in their interviews which might also be issues for further reflection with their colleagues.

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2.4.1 Differences related to subjects/disciplines

Some lecturers are one-way communicators when they deliver subject matter to students as unquestionable truth. Others use an explicit interactive and communicative approach when they are challenged (on taken-for-granted facts) and develop them further with students. Teaching cultures are not something which develop suddenly, but emerge over a long period of time and sometimes even become taken-for-granted and reproduced by new generations. But there might also be differences within the same culture.

One identifiable difference is between subjects that are theory oriented and those that are more practice oriented. Practice might sometimes make demands regarding right answers or right solutions as well as become normative in its approach. This can influence the way teaching is carried out. In theory oriented subjects, the answer is not always easy to find out or not even necessary to find out, but rather the matter is to develop the competence to analyse and see from different angles, in terms of taking different perspectives, which could be more accurate and applicable.

Being involved in professional programmes yet also trying to preserve the more academic traditions of higher education can be a dilemma for lecturers, producing possible conflicts of approach. There are also teachers who argue that practical subjects must not involve a normative attitude towards knowledge. Instead they argue the importance of student education being nuanced and analytical as well as reflective and autonomous for the sake of their future profession. However, this might not always become an issue for lecturers to reflect upon while giving lectures or having seminars. One of the teachers interviewed in the project is involved in educating teachers in pedagogy at one of the institutions. She also has experiences from a technical university and is familiar with such cultural conflicts. She understands how teachers become insecure in their academic position. They feel that they have difficulties in assessing final exams from a scientific point of view as they themselves were never brought up to such an approach.

One male Swedish teacher participated in a course in pedagogy for teachers in higher education at the institution where he worked. He found the course very stimulating and enjoyable. He teaches in the technology department himself, and, on the course, there were lecturers from different disciplines, which he found very inspiring. Because of the heterogeneity and the different experiences, they had to discuss specific issues, not only valid for their own subject, but also entailing raising the discussion to a wider level. The course was given in three phases over the year and he participated in all of them, one after the other, something that only a half of the participants did. What surprised him a lot was what he later heard from other colleagues at his own department who participated only in the first part. Many of them did not like the course at all, it was too vague for them they said. He found this strange as the course was really fruitful for him. He thinks that it is a pity that they do not want to reflect upon what they do when they are teaching. He also makes the reflection that sometimes it appears that those who seem most in need of these kinds of courses, did not participate and did not appreciate them at all. How to respond to such a critique and to solve it is not an easy question. Courses in pedagogy might have a different cultural point of departure compared to those in applied sciences, and if the answer is to adapt the courses to this kind of critique and to cultures where the right answers have to be re-produced or where reflection is not a focus, then courses in pedagogy will only reproduce a non-reflective college staff. This also happens at different institutions in Sweden when the focus in some educational courses is on technical (didactic) issues, like how to structure and plan your lecture, instead of reflecting on teaching and learning. Another important issue was also pointed out: As there is a demand in Sweden for lecturers to participate in courses in pedagogy in order to become tenured, this might mean that teachers start to perceive participation in such courses as a threat. He concludes that if lecturers’ reasons for not participating are that they realise their own shortcomings in teaching skills, then compulsory courses might eventually contribute to even more insecure teachers.

To change and challenge a given culture is not an easy task. It is easier to adapt and become socialised into it. Even if you want to develop new educational methods, to test and experience new ways of teaching, it is very easy to do just what others are doing and what you think is expected from you. There might be different reasons for that. The culture can be taken for granted by colleagues and you might be the only one who is questioning it. When there is no support or interest from colleagues, it is not an easy task to become a pioneer. One teacher in this project expresses this when he tells us about different methods to promote reflective thinking. The primarily role of lectures, according to him, is to make students interested in the subject or to inspire them, and only partly to help them understand some of the aspects that might be more difficult than others. He does not think that
students learn so much from lectures. But if they get inspired and interested, he is satisfied as it is an important point of the learning process. Learning occurs best when students are involved in tasks like projects. Then they have to work by themselves with issues that promote reflection. He continues with a self-reflective analysis, why he has not taken the full consequences of this adjustment that learning is the most important thing to promote, and, for example, why he hasn’t taken away traditional exams and replaced them with innovative assessment approaches. His self-reflective conclusion is that he does not yet dare to challenge the culture at the department as he is working in a department where the dominant position is to hold on to measurable values (in high esteem) and where traditional exams are in accordance with those values.

Another reason might be the number of students. When there are big groups of students it might be more difficult to develop new methods and it is more effective to give traditional lectures where students do not ask any questions and where the teacher can deliver what he/she is expected to do in a well-tried way. Economic reasons might be one reason behind this argument as they might become an excuse for not reflecting upon and being self-reflexive about teaching practice.

### 2.4.2 Differences related to age

There is a long tradition in Sweden of integrating different types of student in the same group. In most disciplines teachers no longer expect students to be 19 when they start their higher education study. Heterogeneous groups have been the norm in all universities for more than 30 years and one question that was raised by the teachers was therefore: “are non-traditional students different from younger students when it comes to reflective autonomous learning?” Younger students often seem to be more insecure and less experienced than older students, which is one aspect that affects the learning situation. Often, older students have developed autonomy and self-esteem in their working life and through life-experiences. Older students dare to ask questions, they take more initiatives, are more goal-oriented and ambitious, often they know why and for what they are studying. Students who have been working for some years are also more capable of separating small things from larger things, important things from lesser important and so on. The question of social class and cultural capital are important issues here. Older students from working class backgrounds often have less self-esteem in the academic culture and feel like strangers there at the beginning of their HE studies. But from the students’ stories, we know that this is something that usually changes in the first year. We also know from Swedish students’ stories that younger students may feel inferior compared to older students because they lack experiences and the ability to express themselves in the same way as older students do. Teachers, on the other hand, might be of the same age or even younger than the non-traditional students which may cause another kind of relationship between students and teachers. They might share generational experiences and understandings of e.g. technology, community spirit, music, architecture, art and other time-bound phenomena. This might create a community where younger students feel like outsiders if they are in a minority. Whether older students are in minority or in a majority seems to be an important aspect. In technical or scientific subjects, for example, non-traditional students are less prevalent compared to social sciences. And when they are in minority they also feel like outsiders.
Chapter 3: Identifying Good Practice (for Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning)

Many non-traditional adult students may have been out of the education system for a long time. Others may have been involved in learning but in smaller, more informal institutions such as a post compulsory college or a community centre. For both groups of students, entering higher education may initially be a daunting experience for a number of reasons, for example, the size of the institution, having to absorb a new academic language, being in a minority in terms of age, and cultural differences. The latter can be particularly the case in the more traditional, elite universities. Adapting to a higher education culture as an adult student can be eased by certain strategies and good practice which offer support, guidance and are aimed at the needs of adult students. This chapter offers examples of good practice in higher education institutions across Europe which enables adult students to become critical autonomous reflective learners.

3.1 Induction

Induction sessions help to introduce adult students to the practices, services, administration processes, facilities, and culture of a higher education institution. They also serve the function of helping them to get to know other students on their degree programme. Inductions are also helpful for familiarising new students with the geographical layout of a campus. These can be held either before or at the beginning of their studies and may consist of a one-off session or a series of sessions.

As the start of a degree programme approaches, some non-traditional adult students begin to feel unconfident and apprehensive about their learning and wonder if they have made the right decision. Even attending an induction session can feel overwhelming as the following student points out:

I really had to make myself come to the mature student’s induction day. I can remember sitting in the car park wondering and scared, why the hell have I done this? It would have been so easy to have driven off. By the end of that day I was so relieved that I had done it. I knew a few faces. It was chaos on the Monday morning (start of term) and if I had walked into that I would not have survived. The induction day was useful.
(S UK student)

Without planned induction processes and sessions, starting a higher education programme can be even more daunting for some students, as the experiences of this Polish student from a rural area illustrates:

A nightmare! I want to go back to my mum, home and primary school! I came to Wrocław in order to submit the documents in the dean’s office … and there, unfortunately, are so many candidates, and I’m halfway through… They ground, swallowed and digested me and I won’t write what else, but this is how I feel .. Actually, all this building is like a machine. Hubbub of voices,, people and always the feeling that you get in everybody’s way. Nobody will believe me, but I was frighted to ask for the way to the toilet….
(Student, Poland)
The following section provides one example of an induction scheme used in one UK university:

The induction process for part-time students at the University of Warwick, UK university:

- Wednesday before the new academic year starts – a session on formal administrative processes such as enrolling, payment of fees and getting their university cards and information about student finance. It also provides the opportunity for students to talk to academic staff about module choices and structure of the degree and also to have a tour of the Learning Grid (a centre with learning facilities for students).

- Saturday before term starts – this day includes sessions on study skills, introduction to IT services, making changes, introduction to the library and the Students’ Union.

- Saturday week 2 of term time – an IT session

- Saturday week 3 – a study skills session (Strategies for Successful Study) including time management, reading and note taking skills, preparing and writing essays and projects, and accelerated learning techniques.

The University of Warwick also has an on-line induction programme for all new students - see [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/dll/skills/induction/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/dll/skills/induction/)
3.2 Mentoring

Mentoring is now used in a wide range of contexts such as the workplace, in the community and educational institutions. Mentoring involves two people in a partnership relationship whereby a mentee is helped, guided and supported by a mentor to develop their academic skills and knowledge and self-confidence as a learner. However, the mentor also gains self-development and new skills. For both mentor and mentee it is a process which encourages reflection. In higher education this may involve staff-to-student or student-to-student mentoring. Sometimes mentors can receive payment or other incentives but most mentoring is still carried out in a voluntary capacity. Many adult students value the student-to-student mentoring approach as it is comforting to hear about the experiences of learning and being a student from the perspective of a peer who has gone through the experience. It is important in mentoring scheme to have clear guidelines and boundaries about the mentoring process and the roles of the mentor and mentee.

A good mentoring scheme, particularly when it is peer to peer, helps non-traditional adult students to become more confident and independent in their learning.

Example

The Part-time and 2+2 Degrees office at the University of Warwick has produced a handbook for their adult students about the mentoring scheme. The mentoring system is interpreted as more of a ‘befriending and information providing scheme’ in which ‘the role of our student mentors is to offer advice and information based on their experience of studying at Warwick and to be a friendly face around campus’. The mentors can be either current students or students who have graduated in the last three years. All mentors have to attend a training session on mentoring. Unlike most mentoring schemes where one mentor works with one individual, the mentors at Warwick work in pairs with a small group (two to six) of first year students. The mentor makes the first contact with the mentees (see over page for details and guidelines).

Mentoring can also be developed more informally:

It’s like there’s study buddying going on all the time. They seem to sort of end up in little groups where they’re supporting each other. Within weeks they’ve usually set up an email circle and they talk to each other all the time. So there’s a lot of support going on – they’ve got a network – hugely supportive of each other. We’ve found that quite a lot of third years give small tutorials to first years to help them through an essay if they get stuck or whatever.

(Lecturer, UK)
The Warwick handbook outlines factors for making sure that the experience/relationship is a success:

- clear guidelines and shared understanding on the purpose of the scheme,
- clear information about the role of mentor and mentee,
- agreed and shared understanding of the nature of support that can be offered,
- commitment towards the scheme,
- clear communication.

It is important that mentors and mentees discuss all of these factors when they first meet.

The following guidelines are also stated:

It is vital that both mentor and mentee understand the kinds of information and support that can usefully and appropriately be offered to the mentee. These include:

- practical information about the University – examples include car parking or catering facilities
- information, from a student’s point of view, about academic departments – this could be:
  - feedback on which modules the mentor had most enjoyed, and why
  - feedback on which books were particularly useful for a module
  - office opening hours
  - the relevant academic member of staff to approach with specific queries; for example, to request an extension for an essay;
- information about the Centre for Lifelong Learning – this could be about office opening hours or who can best provide particular kinds of information or advice
- guidance and/or support with gaining familiarity with University facilities:
  - finding your way around the Library
  - using Library catalogues and systems
  - accessing emails
  - where to go to find out email addresses, passwords etc.

It is not expected that mentors will be experts in all these areas, rather that they can pass on basic information and direct mentees to the relevant person/department in the University for more specific and detailed information

INFORMATION AND ADVICE THAT MUST NOT BE OFFERED BY A MENTOR

- **Counselling** – mentors are not trained counsellors and cannot help with personal difficulties or personal development issues. They can offer a friendly ear to first year students as they become established students and can suggest sources of specialist advice in the University.
- **Academic guidance** – mentors must not attempt to guide their mentees academically or advise on University regulations. Mentees should approach their personal tutors or staff in the Centre for Lifelong Learning. Mentees must never ask their mentors to look at and comment on their academic work.
3.3 Personal Development Planning

Increasingly, European Higher Education Institutions are beginning to develop Personal Development Planning approaches with students. PDP is a process which encourages students to think through their work, reflect upon it, rework and review certain aspects of it, and plan accordingly. It is meant to enable students to take stock of their abilities, experiences, qualities and skills, create a plan for further study, career and life decisions. At its best, such an approach is supportive of Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning.

The benefits of such reflection, review and planning are:

- PDP gets students organised and motivated
- PDP improves the quality of work, leading to better results
- PDP helps students plan for the future
- PDP is entirely personal and tailored to individual needs and circumstances
- PDP helps students keep track of their studies and research

PDP is particularly helpful in promoting Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning, helping students

- make sense of experience
- gain a sense of perspective
- make judgments or decisions as a result

PDP was an opportunity for reflection – it pushes me to do more work and clarify what I have done

(Student, UK)

PDP and mature Students

An approach like PDP is particularly useful for non-traditional mature students. It can help those with a range of outside family, work or other commitments both to adapt to life in an HEI and to develop more reflective learning

I’ve done a thorough plan where I can see what is happening each month or week. With just one glance I am able to see which times are more hectic, load some energy for them or even begin earlier to prepare for them.

(Student, Finland)

The best thing has been that I have been able to make a plan, which someone reads through and comments, whether it is realistic and all. I have been able to divide my time better and with the help of the plan I have realised that I have time to do other things than study, too, since there is so much else going on in life as well.

(Student, Finland)

I wrote a Personal Development Plan and studied accordingly. I mean you can never know what is the cause and what is the effect, but I really think that my plan helped me to find employment afterwards.”

(Student, Finland)
3.4 Lectures

Lectures can encourage reflection. They do not need to be one way transmissions of information. Key ways of ensuring that lectures promote reflection are:

- contextualising the lecture in terms of the overall course
- identifying the intended learning outcomes of the lecture
- structuring the lecture clearly
- linking lecture to future and past seminar discussions

One UK lecturer structures his lectures this way:

*My lectures are actually quite structured, in that I know how to break them down. . . . I always know that towards the end, I try to make some kind of ‘where are we at now that we’ve been for the last forty minutes’ kind of thing. And try to use that as a kind of signal — “and here’s something that can be done about it, this is what this leads on to, this is what you need to look at, this is what you need to think about, this is what we’ll be expanding on and developing in the seminar”, so all the signals, and the lectures always signal towards the end of them, an activity for them to follow up and normally we would do that in an interactive way, in the smaller group discussions, in a seminar*

(Lecturer, UK)

With particular reference to encouraging critical autonomous learning, lectures can:

- contextualise the lecture in terms of students’ previous experience
- actively seek feedback from students
- encourage and answer questions from students
- build in opportunities for interaction within the lecture, for example pairs works or small buzz groups focusing on specific issues or questions raised in the lecture

One Polish lecturer tries to relate his lectures to students’ experience:

*What I’m trying to do is arouse their pedagogical knowledge which they have deep inside and connect with their everyday life knowledge based on being human. I have a scheme of teaching, just a general draft which is constant, and it lets me relate to their experience in family, as a citizen, political experience, family provider experience and professional experience which create some main poles: family, nation, state, market and occupation. I perceive these areas of experience as foundations and my first classes are always about finding these foundations in my students and helping them to emerge.*

(Lecturer, Poland)
There are different ways to encourage interaction, even in lecture situations, as identified by this Spanish lecturer:

> And I think that I would work a lot with books, and then afterwards, well the fact that you can then recommend books to the pupils and have a debate in class about a book which you have recommended to them so that you can see if people have read it and also so that everyone can give their own opinion about what the author is saying and, I don’t know, I think the classes would be richer, and maybe people could learn more because sometimes talking to people helps them learn more than they do when they just memorise their notes, don’t you think?

**A Swedish Case Study**

Anders, a Swedish lecturer, sees lectures as opportunities to initiate the students and get them interested in the subject. He concludes that when it comes to promoting critical reflection in lectures, the teacher can use questions consciously as a tool. When students ask the teacher questions, the teacher replies with a question instead of giving the answer, just to help the students to reflect themselves. Anders is not a teacher who answers the questions with questions all the time; instead, he is anxious that students become involved in a dialogue both with him and each other. To always reply with a question can create insecurity and is not always the best way.

He also stresses the importance of showing that he does not always know the answers to the students. In the beginning he was afraid of doing so. He had the idea that he should know all the answers and felt unqualified as teacher if he could not answer. After teaching some years he has changed his attitude and now thinks it is a strength to have the courage to show students that he does not know everything. It gives the students courage to show their uncertainty and contributes to a climate where dialogue is possible. He has developed the ability to see what happens in the student group during lectures - he can interpret their feelings and uncertainty through non-verbal language and the gestures they make. On these occasions he uses an interactive method to pose the questions to the students to encourage them to formulate their ideas. He emphasises that when students themselves come up with interesting reflections, he, as a lecturer, has become stimulated and finds the lecturing much more interesting, which contributes to a stimulating learning environment for all including himself.
### 3.5 Group Work

Perhaps the most clear-cut finding from the PRILHE, Promoting Reflective Independent Learning in Higher Education, project research (and the prior LIHE, Learning in Higher Education project) was the preferences of non traditional mature students for learning in groups and through dialogue.

*Before I used to study in a very individual way……and now since I’ve started studying sociology, I’ve seen that working in a group has lots of benefits. When I think about the group as a whole I can see that working together has helped them and me on every level*

(Student, Spain)

*I don’t know if I would have managed that if I had learned alone. So we organized a small learning group and calculated written tests (subject accounting). And I’ve profited a lot from others who were better informed. For example, I didn’t know that it’s possible to borrow old written tests.*

(Student, Germany)

*The way the lecturer conducted his classes forced me almost to get out of my hiding. Right up to the moment of starting my studies I had been a very shy and quiet person, who couldn’t express her own opinion. Thanks to exercises which we do in groups and the discussions we have, I can now say aloud what I think, I don’t care what others think about me, I do what, according to me, is good for me and if someone appreciates my actions I have extra satisfaction that I do mean something in other people’s lives*

(Student, Poland)

Group work is closely connected with the processes of building the group or more widely with group dynamics. This is a natural development of group processes: interaction, bonds, common aims, group homogeneity/heterogeneity, the structure, leadership, roles etc., which reinforce and support the learning of group members. There is no doubt that the experience, knowledge and skills of members are enriched through belonging to a group. The effectiveness of group work depends on different factors such as group composition, size and cohesion (Zander 1982). These factors can also support the promotion of critical, autonomous and reflective learning in higher education, taking into account both the organisation of education and its content.

Importantly, the use of group discussion in university education allows us to change the „location” of knowledge in university circles. Knowledge belongs not only to teachers, lecturers or the writers of scientific publications, but also to students. It is created in the process of group discussion. The addressees of this new (created) knowledge are both teachers and students and this knowledge has the potential to challenge pre-understandings and presumptions both for teachers and students.

*….. in this dialogue, discourse, the students will be seeking their own possibilities, they will acquire courage, the courage to admit that they know a lot, that they can do a lot with it and that they have these visions which they create, which they can create. (…) but, despite this, they come and, every now and then, I hear questions of what it should be like and now, by the means of these discussions, I wanted to free them from this duty, from the correctness which they always want to interpret, „what I really mean”*

(Lecturer, Poland)
Groups are also the context in which experiences are expressed, some teachers see this as problematic,

*When students start any discussions, these discussions will be at a very low level, it will be exchanging the observations of the type: “I once met such a person, who did that and this” won’t it? …….And for me it is a waste of time, because – let’s say, generally I do not consider it a waste of time, because sharing my practice or sharing the experiences and the analysis of that is for me a very important thing. But this can be done when one has some basic knowledge about precisely some processes, methodology or something else, can’t it, then we can share these practical experiences, refer them to this knowledge, can’t we. However, if it is to be restricted to sharing an experience – then it is simply a waste of time.*

(Lecturer, Poland)

This Polish lecturer’s main concern is not the learning process but the teaching task. This encompasses a traditional view of the hierarchy of teaching and learning which does not take account of the fact that learning is always a social process even in a period of teacher’s instruction. CARL is critical of such non-reflective traditionalism. In fact, the production of knowledge in the process of group discussion allows us to realise what ‘we do not know’ and to learn about the cultural and social background of other participants of the group discussion and to disclose own life experience and the knowledge which arises on this basis. Other participants of the discussion are not only the source of knowledge about the world, but also about the people, participants of the discussion. Apart from knowledge of content, ‘a group discussion’ also teaches the skills of listening and argumentation as well as the attitudes towards oneself, others and the world. ‘A group discussion’ also creates a network of likes and dislikes and the feeling of community through the ideas, values and experiences shared with others.

The following example from an asylum seeker in Finland shows how group work can contribute to a greater understanding of diversity and can contribute to greater social inclusion:

*Once I had to make a seminar presentation and I was the last to go. I became worried that the other students might be too tired to listen to my story so I said in the beginning that I hope that you still feel up to it. Then I started to tell about the asylum process in Finland and they listened very intensely and at the end of the presentation they applauded very hard. It felt very good!*  
(Student, Finland)

In higher education, ‘group work’ can take different forms, for example, informal learning groups (ad hoc groups for discussing a problem or a question given by a teacher), formal learning groups (forming a group for performing a particular task, project or an experiment, etc.) and study teams (a long-term group of students, who work for a specified period of time, e.g. one term during which they gain specific knowledge carrying out teacher’s specific requirements (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 1991). They can also involve immediate and longer term learning processes.

Sometimes, groups can be allowed to develop organically.

*I do not plan work diversification (workshop or lecture or group work), because this is simply an issue of intuitive feeling of how the group will want to work (…) this depends on how many leaders the group has, whether the group wants to talk, whether it should be more my utterances, sometimes I provoke them on purpose with some rather irrational ideas (……)to recognize them, the group*  
(Lecturer, Poland)

But at other times, more formal structures are appropriate. One example of a formal group that involves both immediate and long term learning processes is “the competence group” used in Sweden. In one Swedish educational programme, they divide the students into small competence groups which last the whole study period. The basic structure of the groups is to promote social learning, to build a framework for different tasks during their studies but also to become the basis for the individual to grow (see Wenger & Snyder, 2000, Davenport & Hall 2002). In the beginning it can be difficult when the students get to know each other.
But after a while the group functions as a resource for the students during their learning processes. All groups have their own teacher who moderates the process and encourages students in different ways. But the groups are also supposed to arrange own meetings and take initiatives on their own.

*Those groups are real good in several ways but they could be used much more, e.g. we are only meeting the teacher once each semester and that could occur much more often.*

(Student, Sweden)

Small permanent groups are also a context where students can discuss other matters than those directly connected to courses they are participating in. The competence group involves both informal and formal learning opportunities. But it also offers an opportunity for the student to develop the courage to talk and to listen to his/her own voice as well.

*Everyone must dare to hear one’s voice, everyone must dare to hear one’s opinions I believe ….and dare to be confronted with what is your opinion and what is your prejudice.*

(Student, Sweden)

This quotation shows clearly how group work within the CARL-setting can function successfully: There is a necessity for a basic learning group culture which actually frames the whole study scheme. Building from this, smaller groups can be spontaneously constituted and encouragement given to those students who used to be shy and introverted. The different learning group levels strengthen the opportunity to learn from diversity, to find one’s autonomous standpoint and to be critical in a productive way of your own and others’ perspectives.

When working in groups, problems sometimes occur. One solution for the group might be to formulate a group contract. The teacher can prescribe what shall be in the contract, e.g. strategies for co-operation, how to solve problems and how each student makes their commitment. Another way of doing it is to let the group formulate their own contract by discussing what problems group-work might involve and how they want to solve such situations together.
Group Work: role play

Group-work is often used when doing projects, or when students are going to do research but it can also take the form of a role play or simulation. This can create a stimulating setting to promote reflective autonomous learning for both students as well as teachers. One of the interviewed teachers from Sweden described a role-play with the following scenario,

According to Swedish rules the municipality invites the public/citizens to a consultation procedure meeting, a meeting with the purpose to consult the public before executing societal plans. The purpose of the role-play is to give students who are going to work as societal engineers an opportunity for experiencing and acting in such a community meeting and analysing difficulties, possibilities and consequences of those meetings.

The role-play is based on a real situation that occurred some years earlier. The municipal plan was to compress a residential area with single-family houses and to set up some apartment housing as well as a group house for people with special needs. The houses were planned to be built in a big green space that was used for recreation. The students are told to read all documents like lists of names, correspondence between the public and the civil servants as well as letters to the editor of the local newspaper. A role-list is prepared beforehand with fictitious names which correspond to real persons from the real case. The group of about eight students individually prepare their own roles beforehand so they can take part in the meeting actively and get ready to argue the pros or cons of the compression of the residential area from the selected perspective. The interviewed teacher took the role of chairman and two other teachers acted as residents prepared to give fuel to the discussion if it ebbed away. Afterwards the role-play is analysed by students and teachers, both in content and method, i.e. how people in their roles acted in the situation e.g. emotional acting, a knowledge-based acting. The group discussion is about how to react to people and handle them in this kind of meeting. Another issue to analyse is the form of democracy that this kind of meeting produces. When is it a democratic meeting and when is it a societal information meeting, what does democracy demand and how can different conflicts of interests be approached?

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3.6 Use of Case Studies

Case studies, as a teaching approach, actively engage students in the learning process. Importantly they are a useful tool for helping students to understand theoretical and conceptual issues in an applied situation. Fry et al (1999) define case studies (as used in higher education teaching) as ‘complex examples which give an insight into the context of a problem as well as topics that demonstrate theoretical concepts in an applied setting’ (quoted by Davis & Wilcock, 2006 www.materials.ac.uk/guides/casestudies.asp) According to Mustoe and Croft (1999) the use of case studies in teaching increases the motivation and interest of students.

Davis & Wilcock (2006: 2) maintain that case studies:

- allow the application of theoretical concepts to be demonstrated, thus bridging the gap between theory and practice
- encourage active learning
- provide an opportunity for the development of key skills such as communication, group working and problem solving
- increase the students’ enjoyment of the topic and hence their desire to learn.

Non-traditional mature students often like to have a practical reference point or context in which to make sense of theory. Relating back directly to personal experience can be productive but it also raises problems about how this experience should be used (see 3.7). For example, some students can become trapped in their own experience to the extent that they do not question their underlying assumptions and cannot see other perspectives clearly.

In this context, the use of ethnographic case studies can be a fruitful approach, more particularly in the social sciences. It helps to give students a practical context in which to develop their ideas but avoids being focused exclusively on one particular experience. It also helps students to get different perspectives on key issues.

I think trying to get people to find material which is close to them, in some ways in their experience and yet perhaps challenges some of their assumptions – it’s no good just representing another point of view in the abstract or from a long way away. In the Sociology of work for instance there’s a whole range of quite rich ethnographic case studies. I think these can be very fruitful for mature students to engage with. They’re entrenched as it were. It’s very difficult for them to step back. An obvious truism is that mature students vary tremendously in both their areas of interest and their abilities. Engaging with their experience is not all straightforward and positive.

(Lecturer, UK)

Using Case Studies in Research: a German example

Students in the Department of Education at Goettingen University have the opportunity to attend a one-year practical training in research as part of their studies. In the first part of the practical training the students work out theoretical interrelations between different research methods (with emphasis on qualitative, in particular ethnographic research methods) in collaboration with the lecturers in charge. This is reached by lectures, reading and discussing texts and group work on chosen subjects. Experiences made in similar courses show that this kind of preparation meets the demands of these students that wish to have a methodological toolbox before they go into the field; besides this it conveys the necessary theoretical basics.

Many students feel insecure about doing research on their own for the first time. This insecurity consists of the fear not to know enough in the sense of “factual knowledge” (and knowing facts is still demanded at the university, so it is students’ reality that must not be ignored) or a general insecurity about giving research a try and not fulfilling scientific demands.
In the second part, exploration of the field takes place, which in this special case, is the registered association “Freie Altenarbeit Göttingen e.V3” (FAG) as a case study. The cooperation of the Department of Education with the FAG has many advantages: The students are integrated into a given structure. They have the opportunity to take part actively in the work of the FAG (by participation in the various activities of the FAG and its planning groups). So they are not only passive observers. In addition, the FAG gives help by providing volunteer tutors who support the study groups with advice and who take time to accompany the process of research critically and with interest.

During this time the students pick their field of research (guided by their own interest and influenced by the situation within the FAG, e.g. biographical work/contemporary witnesses, different kinds of living and habitation at old age, mobility at old age) and design the methodological realisation that then will be executed with advice of the lecturers and colleagues of the FAG. Finally, the students make a written elaboration of their results. This is not only evaluated by the lecturers, but also critically discussed with the involved members of the FAG. Traditionally, practical training involves the risk that students are used as cheap assistants who only carry out simple tasks like copying, filing, and brewing coffee. As a consequence, students are not able to gain scientific insights. In contrast, practical training in research at the FAG claims to connect theory and practice to the benefit of all people involved. The exchange within the “Research Triangle”, lecturers, FAG and students, facilitates a continuous process of communication. Various points of view are taken and reflected. Conflicts appear and must be solved/tolerated. Expectations and demands must be negotiated and finally a reconciliation between (university-) theory and (FAG-) practice happens and also a transfer of knowledge in both directions.

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3 “Free/open work with elderly Göttingen”
3.7 Making Use of Student Experience

Our research has demonstrated that the experience of non-traditional adult students is a key part of their personal identity. They, therefore, want their particular experience to be acknowledged within higher education and, where appropriate, used within the curriculum.

Experience can be an important factor in helping non-traditional students be more critically reflective.

“One of the adult students’ strengths is their experience. It is easier for them to relate theory to their experience. This helps them to learn faster. When I feel that they have some experience to share, I try to ask them questions so they can reflect about what they know. I try to help them to criticise what they know and have learnt.”
(Lecturer, Portugal)

Life experience contributes to recognising that I always don’t read everything and believe in everything I read (Student, Finland).

But student experience can also be challenging for lecturers in the way they try to make use of it:

“Adult students often bring with them interesting agendas and concerns to study that can be….a challenge because (their) pre-occupations and your pre-occupations or even the pre-occupations of the literature and the subject matter don’t always mesh. Generally I would far rather people come in with an agenda.”
(Lecturer, UK)

For some students, experience can bring with it emotional ‘baggage’ that can get in the way of studying:

“I would say you can distinctly observe here, that especially mature students, …..face massive biographical problems they have to cope with…. Simply due to the fact that they are studying here, something is stirred up and so they have to reconcile all this somehow. Of course this works only by means of an increased theoretical effort that you reflect upon and that then allows a new view on things. I myself experienced this and have to admit to myself that this was my greatest problem. If you really let this happen to you, you have to alter attitudes and opinions showing through biographically. And then you are having a big problem, since you do not only have to learn this about yourself, but you really have to change yourself and maybe to alter your whole idea of your life. And this is not too easy.”
(Lecturer Germany)

Also there can be difficulties relating student experience to theory in a meaningful and reflective way:

“The only downside I would say about that is that there are some staff who perhaps don’t appreciate that you do live in the real world and you have lived the real world for a long time. You probably know more about the real world than they do and I think its that (that is frustrating), dismissing the fact that you do know about these things because they don’t fit in the theory they talked about”
(Student, UK).
Connecting university learning more immediately to work life

Another perspective relates to the improvement of work life through incorporation in this what is learned at lectures. In fact, one Portuguese student felt that the most important learning takes place at work (learn and study at the same time)

*Enterprises are always at risk and if we don’t progress, the enterprise does not progress too. I have already learned a lot of things in the marketing course and have applied a lot of them in my enterprise. Classes are interesting when I can see how I can apply and change the way I work in my enterprise – this is the advantage of the evening class student – he knows real life and has practice (and the traditional student does not have this)*
(Student, Portugal).

To reinforce this point of view another stated that:

*When I see how and where I can apply what I am learning, it is easier to learn. When I don’t see how I can use that, it is very difficult to study and learn*
(Student, Portugal)

Experience, reflexivity and learning orientations/styles

The recognition (and use) of student experience was an important part for many non-traditional adult students in their construction of learning identities within higher education. A further development of this was a greater degree of reflexivity regarding their own particular learning styles and circumstances. Based on their research, the German team have suggested that different student types adopt different learning styles, either predominantly instrumental or discursive. However, in contrast, the experience of UK students indicates that most start off as discursive learners but gradually learn to combine this learning approach with a much more instrumental approach to task management and assessment processes.

*In general I would say that mature students stand out in terms of their style of work, their commitment to work and having sort of reasons which are for engaging with the material….although that can be a challenge because sometimes people are stuck in a rut and sometimes it’s difficult for people to step back from that.*
(Lecturer, UK)

The general consensus from the project has been that for non-traditional students’ learning, experience is a productive reference point in terms of motivation and in relation to work-based practice and the curriculum, although this depends on the particular discipline involved. Indeed, one lecturer went as far as to say:

*In my opinion you should not allow students under 25 years old in University. The fact is that (older students) have life experience, insight into work life and more experience with human relations. You have a lot of knowledge from the media and you are interested in the society around you. It is not just about the kids in their 20’s and life evolving around them. Only a person with insight can really benefit from the teaching at University.*
(Lecturer, Finland)

Using Student Experience in work-based practice

As mentioned earlier, having the opportunity to incorporate their experiences into their studies is helpful for non-traditional students. It is also useful to enable students to make new experiences in making their studies more application-oriented. Thus, theory and practice are bridged in taking account of the biographical background of non-traditional students without neglecting the claim for a theoretically grounded training. The examples below from Kassel University shows how this idea can be realised in everyday University life.
University of Kassel Faculty of Social Welfare

The degree course, ‘social work’ in Kassel is structured in such a way, that the theoretical and practical aspects of study are closely linked. It is based on a system of the so-called occupation-oriented practical studies. The objective of these is to introduce students to autonomous professional activity in future working fields. Through this, students learn to translate academic insights into practice; at the same time students are enabled to refer back those insights gained through their practical experience to the academic discourse and to reflect on them during an accompanying supervision.

The degree course involves a basic course which serves to introduce students to key issues within the subject. This is followed by the occupation-oriented practical studies I and II which are composed as follows:

**Occupation-oriented practical studies I**
- Students gain practical experience by working 500 hours (within a year) in fields of social work.
- Project studies (for 1 1/2 years): within this context students are planning, carrying out and reflecting an occupation-related project collaboratively or individually. This is accompanied by a project plenum, where all participants of a project are meeting each other regularly.
- Participation in a seminar which is geared to the practical activity in terms of content.
- Participation in regular supervision meetings

**Occupation-oriented practical studies II**
- Occupation-oriented activity for a period of 6 months
- Participation in 2 seminars
- Participation in regular supervision meetings

The basic characteristic of the occupation-oriented practical studies in Kassel is that accompanying supervision as a means of instructed practice reflection is firmly anchored in the degree course.
3.8 Peer Support and Review

Critical reflection and self-reflection are abilities that lecturers and tutors can help develop. However the development of these abilities also depends very much of students themselves. This can be developed in university-organised groupwork (see 3.3) and in more informally-organised peer support groups.

Informal Peer Support.

The interaction that is generated among a group of equals and the moral support created are two elements that contribute to more critical reflection and self-reflection.

I met my best friend in my first semester at the university. It has worked out very well in the first semester. And the funny thing about it is that her biography is nearly like mine, which means we had a common level from where we started. She had also problems with learning. And I have had the same personal subgroup with me since the beginning of my study. Of course some new people came to our group too and some left the group. But it was a circle of three, four, five persons, all with same subjects and related experiences. And we helped and encouraged each other. I would have been over-extended in my basic studies. Although we go different ways – we pull each other along. And if you have a bad phase, a crisis, someone will be there to help you out. And we can encourage each other. Someone knows something, another one gives a good hint, and this has helped me a lot.

(Student, Germany)

Solidarity between non traditional adult students is often an important incentive to keep going.

.........because for the exams we have met together a lot to study .... and I like it because when people want to get together to study, and you explain something you understand to another person, you have to organise your own thoughts and... when you have to explain to someone, so that they can understand it, you have to be able to understand it first, and that is very positive, very, very

(Student, Spain).

It can also help to combat feelings of social exclusion:

When I went to university I had a bit of a complex because there were so many young people, luckily I also found people of my own age. Also it seemed as if the professors thought we didn’t fit in very well. In the beginning it turned out that there was a group of more or less 8 people who were over the age of forty, and I think that in itself was a bit of an innovation for the professors too. We ended up forming quite a nice group, which included young people, and it was good. After a few months, I then started to feel good.

(Student, Spain)
More formally organised Peer Support and Review

Peer support, and the critical reflection it promotes, can also be more formally organised.

**A UK example**

At the University of Sussex, in the Foundation Degree in Community Development, students are formed into Action Learning Sets. Action Learning Sets are designed to help students reflect collaboratively in small groups on their current work situations and how this relates to, has been influenced by and can be further affected by the on-going work of the programme. The Action Learning Sets may need to be set up by tutors with ground rules etc but soon can be largely self-programming. Students bring own working problems to the action learning set and discuss them in confidence and in relation to the common understandings and language of the course and the approach to reflective practice they have developed throughout the programme.

**A German example**

More formalised peer support and review can be particularly useful in professional learning situations:

*We demand of the students that they accompany their practical experiences with supervision. And we’re organising it by having the students of the postgraduate study course learn to work as supervisors, they themselves have to practice supervision. And they do it for students taking their first degree course. Because they are people with practical experience who gets a training in supervision, a didactical chain results. The postgraduate student learns to supervise, reflects it in a training supervision and supervises others.*

(Lecturer, Germany)

**A Swedish example**

This is a formalised practice which has a long tradition in Sweden. It is a form of defending the different assignments that students get both individually and in a group such as essays, group works, papers and the final thesis (BA; MA) that students produce to be included in their final examination. Students are trained from the beginning of their studies to present their arguments and defend them as well as examine the fellow students work. But it is not only an examination occasion but most of all a learning opportunity. Students defend their theses by being questioned by their fellow students. Knowing how to ask questions and how to defend your own argument are perfect opportunities for learning. Moreover, a group of students and tutors have to take part in the defence process and learn how to participate in the scientific debate and ask questions, as well as being able to defend a thesis/paper, giving answers to the questions regardless of their complexity. These events are based on students’ peer-review but also peer-support in which they are trained to become critical and constructive evaluators going beyond the person and concentrating on content, method and results. However, lecturers have the last word in giving a final mark on the student’s achievement, taking into consideration the student’s way of defending his/her thesis or paper (also see 3.11).
3.9 Using Learning Logs/Reflective Diaries

The learning log is a focused academic journal – a diary of a student’s learning process. It combines the learning of previous and ongoing experiences with reflective reports on the learning content and the learning process itself (including time taken, sources used, etc.). Learning logs are an increasingly popular method of encouraging students to reflect on their learning. They are often used in work-based learning contexts when students are encouraged to keep a record of what they are doing in their practice or workplace, analyse it critically and relate it back to the theory and literature studied in class.

Students often are initially reluctant to use learning logs critically but, with support from lecturers and work-based supervisors/mentors a more reflective culture can be created:

"There are some individuals who don’t really like talking about themselves but when they realise what it’s for and how it helps them, they begin to open up. Initially what they talk about is very vague- ‘well this has happened’ but not really evaluating why it’s happened or the results of what’s happened. It’s more narrative to begin with and I think as time goes on they begin to… think about ‘well, why did this happen because of this’ or ‘maybe if we do it this way next time’ and it begins to become more reflective. But it does take a while sometimes and some people aren’t that way inclined."

(Lecturer, UK)

Apart for the area of practice and the work place, learning logs can also be used as a way of reflecting on students’ own reading:

"The reason why I ask them to keep reading diaries is – and I always say it – is – that these let the person notice with regard to the own writing process: “What did I achieve?”… Reading diaries should keep a diary of reading passages, they should not excerpt, they should not take minutes, they rather should record: „What have I read? Which questions have arisen? How do I connect this with the topic of the meeting that took place?“ or „Do I not see any connection?“…it should be a space where you can write freely as you do in a diary… but at the same time you should have a look at the reading matter and at the course in which it was treated."

(Lecturer, Germany)

They can also be used over time, as a way of tracking students’ learning development and competence:

"I always say that I would take out the reading diaries in the fourth or fifth year once again. […] And then – I always give them the advice – I don’t know if they act on it – but I give them the advice to take the diary out at the beginning of a new term and to see: “Oh – I was still very naive then.” Or something like that. Or that you – that you just use such a diary to become aware of your own growing competence. Thus, it should reflect: „I have become more sophisticated in my language usage.„, or: „Now I am able to see through a reading passage much better. Now I really see what the cognitive interests are. While I had only questions on the text three years ago, but didn’t know how to deal with it.” Hence it should – it should give the opportunity – to boost one’s ego a bit (laughing) through the comparison and the flow of time in between, somehow. Since I think, many of the traditional students too need to have such a feeling: “Yes, slowly but surely I get the impression that I know this subject. And I think that I slowly get to know my abilities."

(Lecturer, Germany)
Ethics and Assessment

Normally learning logs or reflective diaries are confidential between student and lecturer. It is important for lecturers to respect this in their use of the logs. However, if they wish, students can still choose to draw from them for essays, for assessment or for group discussions. If assessment is introduced into the keeping of learning logs or reflective diaries it means that the whole learning and reflection process changes. If tutors are having somehow to formally assess the learning log or diary, they have to engage with the student’s diary differently and any feeling of collaboration or support can disappear. Equally, as students are now focused more on assessment, it often means that they take fewer risks in their learning and hence are less reflective as they become more concerned about getting the right answers, meeting the right criteria or impressing the assessor.

3.10 Information literacy

*I see Information Literacy as a skill that generally has been overlooked but which all the time becomes more and more important with the drive towards making students autonomous.*

(Lecturer, Portugal)

The development of information technology has made it easier for individuals to access information and to satisfy their information needs. Educators are also largely encouraged to use ICT as a tool to enhance their teaching strategies and student experiences. Students are increasingly expected to do their own research on topics or problems, rather than following reading lists provided by tutors.

In these circumstances, students need to be more information-literate than ever before. The Web can contain information, but its validity always needs to be questioned.

**Therefore students have to be qualified**

- to identify and communicate their information needs
- to clearly define a subject or area under investigation
- to select and employ the most appropriate search strategies and search tools to gain access to the necessary information and
- to formulate a search strategy that takes into consideration different sources of information – in any channel or medium and the many ways in which it is organized.

They need to be able to analyse and evaluate information sources retrieved, for value, relevance, quality and suitability as well as interpret and apply their findings, by turning the information discovered into new knowledge. Furthermore, ethical questions also need to be considered in respect of copyright, intellectual property and plagiarism – these skills have been encapsulated in the term information literacy.

*I lecture on Information Literacy and work with students in the Faculty of Engineering in my University to help them prepare project work. It is my experience that students know very little about how to use the literature available. They think the Internet has the answer to everything; they have no idea how to evaluate what they retrieve.*

(Lecturer, Portugal)
Webber and Johnston (2000: 382) propose a broad definition of information literacy:

*Information literacy is the adoption of appropriate information behaviour to obtain, through whatever channel or medium, information well fitted to information needs, together with critical awareness of the importance of wise and ethical use of information in society.*

A recognised international consensus on valid competences will assist students’ learning approaches to information literacy. They may serve as orientation for schools, faculties, libraries and others in developing procedures for student learning in this domain. Several libraries and information professional bodies, in USA and Australia, have produced standards and statements for information literacy; the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries, UK, in turn, has developed a model for information literacy.

Below are standards and models initially addressing higher education and then extended to schools (Snavely, 2001)

**US Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,**


**URL:** [http://www.ala.org/acrl/ilcomstan.html](http://www.ala.org/acrl/ilcomstan.html)

**Information Library Standards (Australian)**

which were developed by CAUL – Council of Australian University Librarians, Australia [CAUL], based on a revision of US standards; they were approved in 2001


**In turn, SCONUL – Standing Conference of National and University Libraries**

UK Information Literacy model [SCONUL] prepared the position paper with a model (rather than a set of standards) which illustrates the spectrum of competences, from the novice to IL expert, for the development of the information literate person

**URL:** [http://www.sconul.ac.uk/activities/inf_lit/papers/Seven_pillars.html](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/activities/inf_lit/papers/Seven_pillars.html)

The CARL-setting remains critical in relation to a standardised view of information literacy, because a critical autonomous reflective learner needs to be able to create his/her own perspective on information technology and the information that he or she uses. The use of information technology should never work as a means of social exclusion. In this respect, the recent adopted Declaration on eInclusion of Riga is relevant; it was signed on 12 June 2006 by Ministers of the European Union (EU) Member States and accession and candidate countries, European Free Trade Area (EFTA) countries and other countries. They all adopted the Declaration, which will provide political guidance for future action.
Some of the aims are:

“Countries will put in place, by 2008, digital literacy and competence actions, in particular through formal or informal education systems, building on existing initiatives …

The current gaps of digital literacy and competence between [the groups which are at present marginalised from ICT benefits] and the average population should be halved by 2010 …

Digital literacy and competences actions will be undertaken, where appropriate, through partnerships with the private sector and in conjunction with initiatives on basic education and media literacy in the areas of life-long-learning, e-skills, and digital user rights.

Regular upgrading and refreshing of ICT competences will be facilitated.”

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3.11 Assessment

Introduction
Assessment is a key driver of student learning as it determines both what and how student learns. It can be used, not only as an audit, but to improve student performance and to foster growth and development. If assessment is embedded in the instructional process, it can be used for diagnostic purposes, to target learning objectives and to develop teaching strategies. It can also provide students with feedback, to improve their understanding during the course, as Brown and Glasner (1999) put it:

> When assessment is at its best, it can be motivating and productive for students helping them to know how well they are doing and what else they need to know. Poor assessment, in turn, works in the opposite direction: at its worst it is tedious, meaningless and counterproductive”

(op. cit:vii).

Integration of assessment and instruction, seeing the student as an active person who shares responsibility, reflects and collaborates with the teacher through a constant dialogue, can become a strong tool for deeper, more reflective learning. An educational process where the key aspect is no longer dominated by transmission of knowledge, but which evolves to become student–centred, can produce a truly self-determined, self-motivated, lifelong learner. This is well illustrated by the quotation from one of the teachers interviewed for the PRILHE project:

> I think there’s quite a bit of scope for some modest give and take and negotiation around the edges, particularly if students are active and committed. In the way I do my teaching assessment, there’s always scope for a negotiated essay title rather than the set ones. I would say to people who choose the negotiated format to come along to me and say ‘well I’d really like to write about x but it’s not in the list. It’s mature students with a set of concerns who will come and do that. One can negotiate then, you know, things that fit in the interface between perhaps their own working life and the literature that we’re looking at, in a way which makes it gel nicely and actually makes the work programme easier for them to pursue. So there is flexibility

(UK Lecturer).

Involvement of students in assessment as a strategy for the development of lifelong learners in learning societies.
The continuing development of learning societies depends increasingly on lifelong and self-directed learners. Employers now seek flexibility, adaptability and autonomous lifelong qualities, rather than just subject content specialists (Stefani, 1998:342). In these circumstances, an important goal of HEI study is to equip students to be flexible, adaptable and prepared to take responsibility for their own learning and their own continuous professional development.

> This places a responsibility on teachers in higher education to develop teaching environments which encourage students to take a more pro-active role in articulating and striving towards self-determined learning goals. Some of the steps in this process [include…] the use of a range of assessment and feedback procedures which enable students to relate aspects of poor performance to specific remedial activities, and look for support in the development of a clear understanding of the concept of self-assessment and evaluation.

Assessment and Autonomy

Assessment is all about making judgements. Developing students’ ability to judge their own performance early in the course, should lead to a general improvement in their achievement. After students leave higher education, they are likely to be heavily reliant on their own judgement of themselves and their peers, to estimate how effective they are in a wide variety of professional contexts. For these reasons, it is important that these skills are developed.

Boud (1988b) explains that

autonomy can be viewed as the goal of education and the development of motivated individuals capable of independence of thought and problem solving. It can also be viewed in terms of approach to learning, where students make decisions about what to learn, how to set learning objectives and how to measure achievement. Finally, it can be viewed in relation to subject matter and understanding and applying a theoretical knowledge base or discipline.

HEIs need to develop in individuals the ability to make their own decisions about what they think and do. Boud (1988a) shows that independence and autonomy are highly rated goals of teachers and is encouraged to note that this view is shared by students. The HEI mission therefore needs to be the development of skills of self-directed inquiry rather than just inculcation of course content, to produce not just knowledgeable persons, but lifelong self-directed learners. This requires different teaching-learning and assessment strategies.

I learn best … when I can determine the learning objectives, learning contents and the way of assessment self-reliantly or collaboratively (in a group) and when the learning environment is supporting this very self-directedness.”
(Student, Germany).

Assessment: purposes and types for promoting students’ responsibility, reflection and autonomy

Boud recognises that formative assessment can only have an impact on learning when it influences a student’s own self-assessment. Research shows that frequent self-evaluation is highly efficacious in enhancing student achievement (Boud, 2000:155). Furthermore, the same author states that “Reflective assessment with peers should be encouraged” (ibid).

Self-assessment refers to the involvement of learners in making judgements about their own learning, particularly about achievements and the outcomes of their learning. It is a way of increasing the role of the students as active participants in their own learning and it is mostly used for formative assessment to foster reflection on one’s own learning, processes and results (Dochy et al,1999: 334).

Regarding its implications in educational practice the same authors claim that,

Self-assessment leads to more reflection on one’s own work, a higher standard of outcomes, responsibility for one’s own learning and increasing understanding of problem-solving. The accuracy of self-assessment improves over time. This accuracy is enhanced when teachers give feedback on student’s self-assessment.
Self-assessment also can open productive student-tutor dialogues.

Peer assessment

is a process through which groups of individuals rate their peers, i.e. students are making assessment decisions on other students’ work. Student peer assessment can be anonymous, with assessors randomly chosen so that friendship factors are less likely to distort the results. (Race, 2001:4).

Group assessment

refers to the assessment by the tutor of the students group work, or to the assessment of the product by students from other groups.

Summing up, the involvement of students in their own assessment, through self, peer and group contributes to responsibility, reflection and autonomy in students. As Race puts it:

- Students already self – assess and peer-assess quite naturally and spontaneously – students learn a lot from each other, both in classes and outside classes; they compare what they have achieved with each other and use this to reflect on their learning process
- It contributes to deepen student’s learning experiences – students can learn a lot by applying assessment criteria to their work and or to two or three other students’ attempts on the same task
- It helps students to becoming autonomous learners – self assessment, in particular, can be a vital way of causing students to reflect on their progress and take stock of their learning (op.cit 6-7).

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Chapter 4: Implementing Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning

4.1 Staff Development

Universities across Europe are changing institutions. With new and diverse groups of students entering higher education and the requirement for new skills in the knowledge economy there is a need for teaching staff to reflect upon and change their teaching methods to take into account the new demands upon higher education. It is important that staff development programmes try to raise awareness of Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning in order to develop a new level of consciousness within higher education and to help staff to become ‘reflective educators’ and institutions to become ‘reflective institutions’. Staff development is essential ‘to initiate and sustain change’ (Bilham et al, 1989: 4). Similarly Marriott stresses the importance of staff development:

In a community such as a university, and in a community that wishes to remain identifiably a university, staff development broadly and flexibly conceived has to be one of the key responses to the imperatives of surviving, adapting and evolving (1988: 101).

Staff development events are important for raising awareness of issues, reflecting upon and improving practice and looking at new ways of working. It is important to offer staff development to not only full-time lecturers but all teaching staff such as part-time lecturers, and teaching assistants such as PhD students. It is also important to ensure that staff development events are not only attended by those who are sympathetic towards teaching adult students. Ideas and practices identified at staff development events also need to be embedded within departmental and institutional cultures and structures.

Examples for staff development to promote the Critical Autonomous Reflective learning of non-traditional adult students.

- Awareness of learning theories on adults
- Research on non-traditional adults in HE
- Why adults return to learn and problems and issues
- Promoting awareness of institutional, national and European policies on lifelong learning
Examples for staff development to promote the Critical Autonomous Reflective learning of non-traditional adult students.

The Learning Environment and Pedagogical Practice

- Enabling a learning environment that supports and values their learning
- Incorporating life and work experiences in the curriculum content and teaching approaches
- Teaching approaches for promoting critical autonomous and reflective learning
- Developing an innovative curriculum
- Assessment processes for critical, autonomous and reflective learning
An example of a staff development event inspired by the PRILHE project

**THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK**

**2+2 SOCIAL STUDIES STAFF DEVELOPMENT DAY PROGRAMME**

**Wednesday 13th December 2006**

10.00 a.m. – 3.00 p.m.

WCE0.10, Centre for Lifelong Learning, Westwood Campus

### DEVELOPING CRITICAL AND REFLECTIVE THINKING AND LEARNING

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<tr>
<td>9.45 a.m. – 10.00 a.m.</td>
<td>Coffee on arrival</td>
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<td>10.00 a.m. – 10.10 a.m.</td>
<td>Welcome and Introduction</td>
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<td>Dr Barbara Merrill, 2+2 Social Studies Academic Co-ordinator, Centre for Lifelong Learning</td>
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<td>10.10 a.m. – 10.45 a.m.</td>
<td>PRILHE Project, followed by Question and Answer Session</td>
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<td>Dr Rennie Johnston, Associate Fellow, Centre for Lifelong Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.45 a.m. – 11.15 a.m.</td>
<td>Developing Critical Thinking and Learning via the Warwick Skills Certificate, followed by Question and Answer Session</td>
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<td>Dr Kay Sanderson, Centre for Student Development and Enterprise</td>
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<td>11.15 a.m. – 11.30 a.m.</td>
<td>Coffee Break</td>
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<td>11.30 a.m. – 12 noon</td>
<td>Developing Critical Thinking and Learning at Level One at the University, followed by Question and Answer Session</td>
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<td>Dr Mick Carpenter, Sociology Department</td>
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<td>12 noon – 12.45 p.m.</td>
<td>Developing Critical Thinking and Learning at College, followed by Question and Answer Session</td>
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<td>Teaching Teams – City College Coventry and North Warwickshire and Hinckley College</td>
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<td>12.45 p.m. – 1.45 p.m.</td>
<td>Buffet Lunch</td>
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<td>1.45 p.m. – 2.45 p.m.</td>
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<td>Group 1 - Dr David Lamburn, CLL</td>
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<td>Group 2 - Dr Barbara Merrill, CLL</td>
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<td>2.45 p.m. – 3.00 p.m.</td>
<td>Summary and Close</td>
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<td>Dr David Lamburn, Director of Academic Studies, Centre for Lifelong Learning</td>
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### References

4.2 Working Towards Institutional Change

Modernity has brought about the need for individual and institutional reflexivity (Giddens, 1991) in order to cope with a changing and globalising world. Universities are caught up in these changes and they need to be reflexive in order to respond to social and economic changes, new forms of knowledge and new types of students emerging as a result of mass higher education. Universities have always been about promoting critical and analytical learning but this has been taught in traditional ways through lectures and seminars. As this EU SOCRATES Grundtvig project has demonstrated there are pockets of change in relation to teaching approaches and curriculum content which are helping non-traditional adult students (and traditional students) to become more critical, autonomous and reflective as learners across Europe. However, as yet, there are also many departments and individuals within European universities which have not shifted in their teaching approaches.

Bringing about institutional change is not easy in universities especially as in many institutions departments have a great deal of autonomy. Examples of good practice are a good tool for persuading colleagues and departments to change their approaches in relation to learning and teaching. Critical, autonomous and reflective learning is appropriate to all disciplines, including the hard disciplines such as mathematics and other sciences. The voices of the adult students we spoke to in this project valued and wanted to become critical, autonomous and reflective learners rather than to sit passively in lectures.

It is hoped that the Bologna process will assist the process across Europe as Europe needs critical, autonomous and reflective people in the individualising and competitive world of globalisation and modernity.

References

## 4.3 Useful References for Implementing Critical Autonomous Reflective Learning

### A. General References

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### B. Specific Learning Contexts

#### Interactive groups

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#### Peer group supervision

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#### Self-evaluation / Involvement

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#### Case studies

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#### Learning logs

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