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A time for learning: representations of time and the temporal dimensions of learning through the lifecourse

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Gert Biesta/John Field/Michael Tedder

A time for learning: Representations of time and the temporal dimensions of learning through the lifecourse

Abstract: Based on findings from a large-scale longitudinal study into the learning biographies of adults, this paper focuses on the different representations of time in the interview data. The paper discusses three such representations: chronological time, narrative time, and generational time. The authors show how different notions of time operate within the construction of life stories. They also analyse the ways in which different representations of time impact upon and serve as resources for reflection on and learning from life, thus contributing to understanding the complex relationships between biography, life and time.

1. Introduction

It is a truism that learning takes time. But how does learning take time and what kinds of notions of time are relevant if we wish to understand the temporal dimensions of learning? In this paper we explore these questions in relation to findings from the *Learning Lives* project, a large-scale longitudinal study into the learning biographies of adults.¹ In the project, which ran from 2004 to 2008, we conducted series of interviews with 117 adults aged between 25 and 84. On average each participant was interviewed 4 or 5 times over a three-year period, although in some cases we conducted up to 8 or 9 interviews. The interviews explored the life histories of the participants and tracked their lives during the project.

The overall ambition of the project was to investigate what learning ‚means‘ and ‚does‘ in the lives of adults. To this effect we used a broad conception of learning so as to be able to include learning in the context of formal education and work-settings but also learning in and from everyday life. The project took a biographical approach, focusing on individual adults and their biographies and trajectories rather than on institutional contexts or educational provision (see Alheit 1995, 2005; Tedder/Biesta 2009a; 2009b). For the purpose of the project we approached learning as having to do with the ways in which individuals respond to events in their lives, often, but not necessarily or exclusively, in order to gain a degree of control (see Biesta/Tedder 2007). We thus saw learning as *contextually situated* and as having a history (both the individual's life history and the history of the practices and settings in and through which learning takes place).

¹ Learning Lives was part of the UK's Teaching and Learning Research Programme and was sponsored by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. For more information see www.learninglives.org.

Time played a crucial role in the project. After all, by inviting participants to talk about their lives ‚so far‘ – the life history dimension – and by interviewing them repeatedly over a three-year period – the ‚real time‘ or ‚life course‘ dimension – we were from the very outset focusing on learning processes and on the interrelationships between life and learning, rather than looking for ‚outcomes‘ of learning or snapshots of life events (see Biesta/Hodkinson/Goodson 2005). Whereas the longitudinal design thus brought a strong temporal dimension into the project, the most significant aspect from the perspective of data-analysis had to do with the different *representations* of time in the stories we collected. In this paper we focus on three such representations – chronological time, narrative time and generational time – and on their significance for understanding the temporal dimensions of learning through the lifecourse.

2. Chronological time

When asked the opening question „Tell me about your life“, almost all of the participants in the project responded with a more or less chronological account of their life, one in which they presented life events in a chronological sequence. Some started with their early or earliest experiences or even with background information about the family and context into which they were born. Others, probably because they were aware of the fact that the project was about learning, started with a chronological account of their school career, often followed by an account of their family career or professional career. In some cases these accounts were extremely detailed so that after a first interview of several hours participants would only have ‚covered‘ a small portion of their lives, thus encountering the problem that a complete representation of one’s life takes at least as long as the life itself. In other cases the accounts were brief and structured, consisting of a short ‚list‘ of main events and milestones. In some cases the accounts were quite ‚polished‘ as if participants were recounting a version of their life story that they had already constructed and perhaps already rehearsed and recounted in other situations. (At least in one case there is evidence that the version of the life story we were presented with had been constructed and rehearsed in a psycho-therapeutic setting.) In other cases the project provided participants with a relatively unique and new opportunity to tell a story about their life so that the particular version of the life story was more constructed in and through the interviews and as a result sometimes presented participants with really new insights and understandings.

While at first sight it may not seem remarkable that most participants choose to talk about their lives in a chronological way, on closer inspection it is at least noteworthy that the modern idea of life as a linear course of events was considered to be the normal way of ‚framing‘ one’s life, irrespective of age or background of the participants in the project. It is important to be aware that such a depiction is in no way natural. As Czarniawska (2004, p. 5) has emphasised, the life story – both as biography and autobiography – is itself a *genre*; a genre, moreover, with a particular and recent history. The word ‚biography‘ became a recognised term only after 1680 while the word ‚autobiography‘

was found in English texts for the first time in 1809. Czarniawska claim that the life story is „one of the most central contemporary genres“ (ibid.) was in this regard clearly confirmed by our findings.

There were, however, also exceptions and they were generally of two kinds. On the one hand there were participants who simply were not used to talking about their life at all; being asked to do so felt artificial to them. We might say that they were not familiar with the ‚genre‘ of the life story (see, for example, the case of John Peel in Goodson et al. 2010). On the other hand there were a very small number of participants who did talk about their life and did so in an elaborate way, but did not use a chronological ordering. Maggie Holman (all names are self-chosen pseudonyms) was one of the few participants who told her life story much more in a thematic and in a sense pictorial way (for the latter notion see Goodson et al. 2010, chapter 4), zooming in and out, so to speak, rather than presenting event after event. ‚Colour‘ was one of the key-themes in the way in which Maggie spoke about her life, and the importance of colour was the very first point she made in the very first interview:

„I always wanted to do something with colours (...). As a child I used to play with coloured clothes pegs on the floor (...) and go into an art shop or a stationery shop I would just drool over rows and rows of paints and coloured felt tipped pens and rows, pieces of coloured tissue paper (...). I have to have that“ (Interview 1, November 2004).

Exceptions like these help us to be aware of the fact that a chronological representation of one’s life events is still a representation. It is a particular *interpretation* of one’s life, not just an objective description of life events. This raises the important question about the selections that operate in the construction of one’s life as a chronological series of events. On the one hand there is the question of the selection of form, that is, the selection of the chronological representation of time as the form in which to represent one’s life. On the other hand there is the question of the selection of content – the question as to what is included and what is left out. This question gives us a first angle on the role of time in learning in that it can be argued that all stories that people tell about their lives, all biographies they construct, are in a sense already *learning* biographies in that they can be understood as the outcome of a learning process. After all, the particular selections made do in some way signify what people have come to understand as being important about their lives, and the emergence of such understandings can be characterised as a learning process, albeit one that will predominantly operate in an implicit manner.

‚Past‘ and ‚present‘ interact in a number of different ways in relation to this. Given that a life story is the *current* interpretation of the past, the way in which the life is storied and the particular selections that are made, crucially depend on the present. In this regard the ‚now‘ is always present in one’s story about the past. This is not to say that each different ‚now‘ will produce a completely different life story. But people do adjust their interpretations and evaluations of their past in the light of new experiences. Current experiences of success, for example, may lead to a quite different account of one’s

past than current experiences of failure. It is not just the present *situation* which influences one's understanding of the past. The way in which people *understand and articulate* their present situation is important as well. It is, in other words, not just the ‚now‘ that is always present in one's story of the past; it is also one's *story of the ‚now‘* that impacts on one's story of the past. But just as the present and our understanding of the present influence our stories and interpretations of the past, the past also impacts on the present. Past events do both enable and restrict our opportunities to act, think and be in the present. Yet it is not only the way in which the past enables and restricts what is possible in the present that is important. The past also influences our *understanding* of the present and our ability to articulate and narrate the present, just as our stories of our past and our ability to make sense of our past influence the present and the stories we tell of it.

The longitudinal approach of the *Learning Lives* project did make it possible for us to witness such shifts in understanding, interpretation and representation of the past in relation to changes in the present, thus documenting some of the implicit – and to some extent explicit – learning processes going on in the representation and interpretation of life. The case of Marie Tuck (see also chapter 3 in Goodson et al. 2010) not only contains many examples of a shifting understanding and representation of her life as a result of changes in the present. More importantly, it documents how in this process she was also beginning to envisage a different future for herself, one without her husband. It appeared during the fifth and sixth interviews that she wanted their relationship to survive but felt undermined by a lack of reciprocity and co-operation. She was annoyed that he needed to be asked repeatedly to do things and her comment on this indicates something of the change in her own perspective on and evaluation of her situation.

„I find that ... that makes me feel un-regarded, un-appreciated... Whereas all my thoughts are about my family and what their needs and wants are and I just don't think it's too much to ask to expect the same thing back. I appreciate men don't necessarily think that way, but you know, I think after fifteen years that he might have a little bit of a clue about how I tick“ (Interview 6, September 2006).

The eventual decision to break-up with her husband can in this regard at least partly be seen as being influenced by the way in which her perspective on herself and her life changed over time and indicates one of the ways in which learning ‚takes time‘.

3. Narrative time

Given that life is lived as a series of events, it is tempting to use the chronological representation of time as the main device for making sense of the life story data we collected in the *Learning Lives* project. In the project we did indeed make use of chronological techniques such as the drawing of time lines in order to plot the events recounted in the life stories in a chronological order (for an example see Farnes 1996). While this did allow us to get a better sense of how the different events in the stories of the partici-

pants were located in time and how they were located in relation to each other, it also led us to another important insight which had to do with the discrepancy between the ‚objective‘ depiction of events in chronological time and the ‚subjective‘ representation of these events in the stories of the participants. The discrepancy we noticed, in other words, was between the objective duration of events and the subjective meaning of these events in the stories told by the participants. Whereas some events and periods in the lives of the participants received much attention, other events and periods were only mentioned in passing or, as we discovered when we tried to plot the stories onto time lines, were not mentioned at all.

The fact that there is a difference between ‚objective‘ time and time as experienced and narrated is, in itself, not very remarkable. It simply indicates that not all events in one’s life carry the same meaning and significance. This was clearly visible in how life stories are constructed and recounted and is another dimension of the selection that goes on in the representation of life through story. But focusing on the narrative representation of time as we suggest to call it, not only revealed that life stories are always selective accounts, but also helped us to see how some events or experiences in the life story function as ‚organising principles‘ for the story as a whole. Using insights from narrative theory helped us to see how such events function as plots within the stories told. As Polkinghorne (1995, p. 5) explains:

„Narrative descriptions exhibit human activity as purposeful engagement in the world. Narrative is the type of discourse composition that draws together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed purposes.“

Whilst acknowledging that there are multiple uses of the term ‚narrative‘, Polkinghorne favours conceptualising narrative as a *story* in which the distinctive feature is a *plot* (see Polkinghorne 1988; Bruner 1990). A plot serves as „a type of conceptual scheme by which a contextual meaning of individual events can be displayed“ (Polkinghorne 1995, p. 7).

Plots function to compose or configure events into a story by: (a) delimiting a temporal range which marks the beginning and end of the story, (b) providing criteria for the selection of events to be included in the story, (c) temporally ordering events into an unfolding movement culminating in a conclusion, and (d) clarifying or making explicit the meaning events have as contributors to the story as a unified whole (ibid., p. 7). A plot thus provides structuring and ordering of a story and enables the selection of events for their *relevance* in the story.

An example of the way in which a plot functions in a life story can be found in the case of Russell Jackson, who was born in 1951. In the first interview Russell provided a fairly chronological account of his life, recounting his family background, his experiences at primary and secondary school, his apprenticeship with a local engineering company, his career in engineering, his marriage and the birth of his two children. In the second interview, however, he added something very significant to his story, namely a religious conversion experience he had had in the mid 1980s.

„It's in the evening and I've got the light on in the garage shining on this bowl, and I just have an overwhelming sense of a presence with me really. It's really difficult to be, to describe this in rational terms. It's as real to me now as it's always been ... I had a sense of the real presence of God ... it's as though something touched me on the shoulder, and I was quite clear in my mind that there was, this was a point of decision for me, that one of the things that God wanted me to do was to become a, er, Christian ... and to join the Church of England, and, and, and to – that there was a special job“ (Interview 2, Dec 2004).

The conversion experience not only led to a number of very significant changes in Russell's life – he left his job, sold the house, used the money to fund study at a theological college, was ordained and worked for about 10 years as a parish priest. It also affected his understanding of himself to the extent that he realised that being a priest and doing work in the service of others was not only his vocation but, as he expressed it, „the role um that I felt most truly mine, to what makes me most truly the person that I was intended to be“ (Interview 7, December 2006). Whereas from a chronological point of view the conversion experience is just one of the events that make up Russell's life, the significance of this event in Russell's life and in the story of his life can in no way be captured through a chronological lens. In Russell's case the conversion experience functions first of all as the main organising principle in his life story in that all events in his life in a sense become (re)interpreted in terms of the extent to which they brought him closer to or further away from the person he was intended to be. Russell's life story becomes, in other words, a story about how events led up to his conversion experience and his ‚discovery‘ of the person he was intended to be and how they lead away from this, particularly in his account of his extra-marital relationship, his divorce and the subsequent end of his career as a priest. In this sense the representation of time in the story is no longer strictly chronological but can be characterised as narrative: in Russell's story time runs in function of the plot of the story, so we might say. While in the chronological representation of time, time runs in a forward direction, the narrative representation of time leads to a retrospective reinterpretation of life events; a reinterpretation that works from the present into the past, not from the past into the present.

A focus on the narrative representation of time also sheds a different light on the temporal dimensions of learning. On the one hand the plot as it appears in the life story is clearly an outcome of learning. It represents, in other words, a particularly significant *insight* about certain life events. At the very same time the plot can function as a resource for learning as it generates a perspective through which other life events become seen and understood and can gain a new or different significance. This in itself is not a chronological process; life events can gain a new significance as a result of the emergence of different plots over time, which also means that life events can be re-evaluated and either gain or lose in significance. Plots are therefore not only organising principles within the *life story*; they also function as evaluative principles within the *life* as they help to give life events a particular significance and meaning. In this regard they play an important role in the ways in which individuals can learn from their lives – a process which, in a

general sense, we can refer to as biographical learning (for this term see Alheit 1995; Tedder/Biesta 2009b) or, if we wish to focus on the role of narrative, plot and emplotment in such processes, as narrative learning (see Goodson et al. 2010).

4. Generational time

The third representation of time that played a role in the stories of the participants in the *Learning Lives* project is generational time. Generational time focuses on the ways in which life events are part of shared or collective experience. On the one hand, the notion of ‚generation‘ refers to family positions and relationships and thus marks off phases of the life course in terms of being a child, parent, or grandparent. The notion of ‚generation‘ also encapsulates a broader socio-economic outlook as an age-based form of social identification that is structured around people’s shared experiences and understandings and the specific social and political events that have occurred throughout their lifecourse. Whereas family-based generations are subject to transition, generational cohort groups can provide lasting but perhaps less solid sources of identity. Some of such markers come to represent particular sets of values and orientations, such as notions like ‚the sixties generation‘ or ‚baby boomers‘. Research into cohort based generational groupings has its roots in sociology. Karl Mannheim (1952), for example, drew comparisons between generational bonding and class solidarity, drawing a distinction between the shared objective conditions of a cohort and their subjective consciousness of a shared interest based on age. In recent years educational researchers have paid considerable attention to generational analysis (see, for example, Antikainen et al. 1996; Alheit 2003; Olkinuora et al. 2008; Ecclestone/Biesta/Hughes 2009), with a particular but not exclusive focus on generational differences in experiences of the education and training system in relation to such dimensions as changes in the education system itself (for example the raising of the school leaving age), those that are external (for example the disruption caused by war), and those that concern the system’s relationship with its immediate environment (which include transformation in family structures, or sharp variations in the youth labour market).

Generational references and markers – and thus a more general generational representation of time – played a significant role in the stories of the participants in the *Learning Lives* project (see also Field 2008). Some spoke explicitly of generations as a way of signalling continuities between past and future. Archie Bone, a coal miner in his late 50s at the time of the interviews, connected his narrative with a broader family history when he pointed out that „five generations of our family go back in the mining industry.“ When an injury had led him to retire he undertook local historical research into a mining accident. After publishing a short book on the accident, Archie then started to campaign for a memorial to the dead miners, so as to „have something there lasting to let future generations know“ (Interview 1, November 2004). Archie took education seriously as an intergenerational project, volunteering to speak in local schools about the area’s history, and telling young people of his own early life as a coalminer. Billy Mil-

roy, a Glaswegian ex-prisoner in his early 40s who was persuaded to take a course in order to improve his employability, initially reacted badly when he found his fellow students included „people that didn't go to school and the older generation like people of my parents' age“ (Interview 5, May 2006). Only when he struck up a relationship with his numeracy teacher did he decide to stay the course. While for Billy the idea of generation mainly served as a negative marker that signalled a difference between him and his fellow students, Archie used it to signal intergenerational continuity, providing him with a language that allows him to explore the relationship that he desired with those who were younger than himself. What is striking is that they, and others, spoke of generation as a form of community.

Some younger interviewees used generational notions of time to distinguish themselves from people from earlier or later cohorts. The young woman who chose ‚Brother Raphael' as her pseudonym was very much the daughter of a „sixties mum“. She spoke of the strong state education that her parents had enjoyed, adding that „they were the first generation to be able to do that“. She described her father as affectionate but reserved, which she saw as a product of the fact that „he was just from a different generation“ (Interview 1, June 2006). Helena Johnstone, an adult educator in her 30s, deliberately used signals of youth such as ‚cool' during her interviews. Like Brother Raphael, she contrasted herself with earlier generations, joking that „I've been lucky that I've come from a generation where you didn't marry the first guy that you got together with“ (Interview 1, January 2005). Jeannie Taylor, a call centre manager in her mid-30s, referred to the poor IT skills of workers from „generally the older generation“, but saw them as potentially good call centre workers nevertheless, because their experience gave them greater resilience (Interview 2, February 2005).

Some interviewees used the language of generations to depict both difference and community. Lui Carter, born to Pakistani parents, used the term to draw attention to what he shared with other British-born Pakistanis, as well as what they did not share with their parents.

„I'm probably the first generation of, you know, British Asian children that have been born and brought up in the UK, so that in itself is a completely new, different experience, we see and address things and view things differently from how our parents did“ (Interview 4, September 2005).

Being „born and brought up as a first generation Asian Brit as they call it“ was, he thought, a source of ambiguity and uncertainty, where

„what we're trying to do in my generation is trying to maintain the peace and respect of our parents and understanding, you know, respect of the family and the honour and not bringing on shame, you're torn between that and the life that you're really leading which is living in the western open-minded world where things aren't as suppressed and frowned upon as they are back in India or Pakistan or wherever“ (Interview 5, June 2006).

Kathleen Donnelly, a youth worker in her 40s who originally came from a manual worker milieu, had been taken aback by the behaviour of the younger generation: „meeting the up and coming generation, it’s shocking, really shocking, I’m shocked to the core what actually goes on in society“ (Interview 1, January 2006). She also contrasted the educational careers of her own age group with those of older family members: „you can see the difference in the generations like from my granny, my mum, to like me and my sisters“ (Interview 1, January 2006). Later on, she spoke about her aim of improving life for members of her own daughter’s generation, remarking that

„I feel as though my generation’s been lost, really lost, I know it’s dead easy to blame Margaret Thatcher and the Tory administration and all that, but it’s been lost, there’s a lost generation out there where my friends, the friends I used to hang about at school with, are heroin addicts and stuff like that“ (Interview 2, June 2006).

What these examples show is that the generational representation of time works differently from both the chronological representation and the narrative representation. In contrast to the chronological representation of time, generational time is meaningful time, time understood in relation to experiences and events that have meaning for individuals. In contrast to the narrative representation of time, generational time provides *shared* experiences and reference points and, in this regard, allows for a positioning within wider temporal and experiential patterns and processes. Whereas generational time can be said to add a dimension to both chronological and narrative time, the examples show how engagement with generational time allows for a different kind of reflection on and learning from life events and experiences, both in terms of identification with generational groups and cohorts and, perhaps even more strongly, in terms of possible disidentification, highlighting how one’s own experiences are distinct from those of previous or later generations.

5. Concluding remarks

While it is not difficult to acknowledge that time plays a role in learning and even more so in learning through the life course, the question as to how time and temporality affect and shape such learning is a complex one. In this paper we have approached this question through an exploration of different representations of time in the life stories of participants to the Learning Lives project. By distinguishing between chronological, narrative and generational time we have not only shown how different notions of time operate within the life stories, but have also tried to shed light on the differing ways in which such representations of time make reflection on and learning from life possible. While a focus on the representation of time does not provide simple answers about the role of time and temporality in learning through the life course, it at least makes it possible to ask more precise and more specific questions for further research and analysis.

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