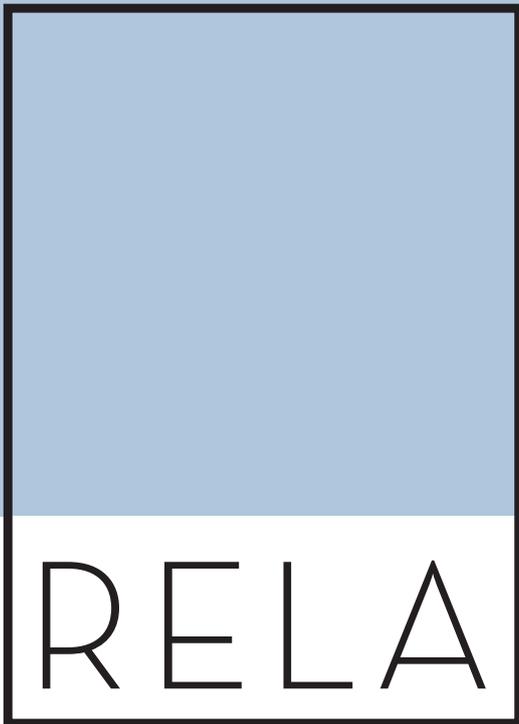


OPEN ISSUE



European Journal for Research on  
the Education and Learning of Adults

2012, Vol. 3, No. 1



# RELA

European Journal for Research  
on the Education and Learning of Adults

Volume 3, No. 1, April 2012

Linköping University Electronic Press

ISSN 2000-7426

[www.rela.ep.liu.se](http://www.rela.ep.liu.se)



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# European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults - RELA

VOLUME 3    NUMBER 1    APRIL 2012

## Contents

- 7 Editorial  
*Henning Salling Olesen and Kathy Nicoll*

## Open Papers

- 11 Adult education and the State: Gramsci, the historical materialist tradition and relevant others  
*Leona M. English and Peter Mayo*
- 29 Autobiographical research: Memory, time and narratives in the first person  
*Maria Helena Menna Barreto Abrahão*
- 43 Exploring nurses' learning  
*Lioba Howatson-Jones*
- 59 Staying the course: Examining enablers and barriers to student success within undergraduate nursing programmes  
*Victoria Boyd and Stephanie Mckendry*
- 77 Life history approaches to access and retention of non-traditional students in higher education: A cross-European approach  
*John Field, Barbara Merrill and Linden West*



## Editorial

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The present ‘Open issue’ consists of five articles submitted to the European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults (RELA) under the ‘open paper’ category. These focus quite disparately on adult education in different contexts. The first article, drawing on Gramsci, explores the relation of adult education with the State in neoliberalism and social and economic conditions for transformative adult education. The second, concerning autobiographical research in Brazil is a research project into teachers’ memories of education development in Rio Grande do Sul. Here the life stories of highly regarded teachers are seen to allow for the emergence of knowledge that may be useful for teachers’ work as reflexive-transformational professionals today. The third, fourth and fifth articles are similar in their focus on higher education contexts across Europe. However, they differ in the work that they do - towards pedagogies for the nursing profession that are less technical and performative than is often the case, or in supporting the success of university students, either of student nurses or more generally those from non-traditional backgrounds. This collection of quite unconnected articles is however marked by in a tendency to towards life history and auto/biographical approaches to research, and, in one way or another, socially transformative interests in adult education. The third thus uses autobiographical methods to investigate UK university-based nursing students’ lives and identities, to consider the forms of pedagogy and support implicated. The fourth, from a Scottish context and again focussing on university-based nursing education, uses an autobiographical and narrative approach to explore supports for student success in study. The fifth article engages directly with questions of methodology for life history approaches at the same time identifying and exploring factors supporting the access and retention of non-traditional students across a range of European university contexts. That these approaches and ‘transformational’ interests dominate the most recent open submissions to RELA may be coincidental. But, certainly the articles illustrate that life history and /or auto/biographical approaches are being used quite widely in different contexts and locations.

Perhaps these locations are at the ‘interstices’, which Leona English from Canada and Peter Mayo from Malta suggest in their article provide openings for critical and transformative work. Exploring the relationship between the State and adult education in contexts where neoliberal ideology dominates today and processes of globalization

are pervasive, English and Mayo reflect on the possibilities for this. They consider adult education to sit in a contradictory relationship at the interstices of relations between, now multiple States, extra-economic forces and capitalism. Arguing that the State has functioned on the one hand to ensure capital accumulation and on the other by responding to voices from the social sectors and fostering social consensus and harmony to support its own legitimization, this relationship has allowed for the emergence and support of adult education with both economic function and socially transformative aims.

Over the years auto/biographical and life history approaches have had a strong appeal to adult and continuing researchers and educators. Their use in European contexts has increased (Alheit, Bron-Wojciechowska, Brugger & Dominicé, 1995; Dominicé, 2000; Weber, 2001; West, Alheit, Siig Andersen & Merrill, 2007). The book edited by Linden West, Peter Alheit, Anders Siig Andersen and Barbara Merrill (West et al., 2007), reflecting the work of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults biography and life history research network, offers perhaps the broadest introduction to these and the current debates surrounding them.

Through these approaches researchers have built humanistic and social traditions of solidarity with the learner, giving voice to those who often have had little public space for articulation of their interests. They have offered professionals' insight into the experience and subjective engagements of their clients or users. That these approaches have emerged strongly alongside policy discourses of lifelong learning may of course be significant. In relating abstract ideas of lifelong learning to the lives of flesh and blood of people, they have perhaps offered comfort for those who have found the commonplace abstractions and generalizations of discourses of lifelong learning a little 'inhuman'.

Sympathetic as they are, the approaches have been argued over the years to entail a temptation for a focus on the individual - itself an abstraction and generalization. This has then raised the question of how we can avoid the individualizing of the individual that is a tendency in biography and life history research. There is also a further temptation. Here, for the biography of the individual to become abstracted and generalized from the context in which it has been uniquely experienced.

Current life history and biography-based research in adult and continuing education offers a huge array of perspectives and approaches. Researchers have looked in many directions for inspiration in their attempts to broaden the horizon and understand adult learners and the profession more fully. They have been united perhaps only by a loose methodology and small range of methods. This diversity has been invaluable in stimulating scholarly communication and a broad recruitment. However, the heterogeneity also shows a field yet young. How to define the domain is a question yet addressed only in a preliminary way. Approaches range from projects with exclusively theoretical agendas, those aiming to influence professional or political life or actually *being* the learning arrangement in itself. So, boundary crossing has been already successfully achieved, to use a well established mantra. Such diversity will no doubt be fruitful and it will be important to trace the ways in which different approaches contribute. How do and can biographical and life history research contribute to the constitution of the research field in support of these interests? The articles in this volume are thus illustrative as answers to this question.

The first article in this issue taking this kind of approach is authored by Maria Helena Menna Barreto Abrahão (the second article in this issue). She is representative of a lively group of biographical researchers from Brazil where research is a result of the bottom-up tradition in academic work and reflects a historical awareness of the

emergence of an educational profession (Vicentini & Abrahão, 2010). Building partly on a Francophone European inspiration, she takes a socio-cultural approach in *Autobiographical research: Memory, time and narratives in the first person*. She reflects on the relations between autobiographical research, life stories and life narratives and attempts to tease out and theorize aspects of memory and time. Here the life stories of highly regarded teachers are the focus. Highlighting the way in which the memories of narrator and researcher are intertwined and co-defined through social and cultural relations, she argues that the narrators' memory and analysis and the interpretation made by the narrator and researcher are complementary to each other. In this way she makes approaches that individualise memory problematic. She argues memory as the interplay between the narrator and researcher; in drawing on memories and constructing new meanings for narrated facts. This, for Abrahão, gives autobiographical research political and ethical dimensions.

A strong tradition in biographical research has celebrated the lives of individual educators and teachers. In this sense auto/biographical research into individual professional lives and identities has offered important insight into pedagogical practice and its conditions. Here Abrahão shows us that not only is pedagogical practice a collective effort and socially conditioned, but so also is life history and auto/biographical work. Biographical and life history research can illuminate the societal nature of individual engagement and in this way provide tools for critical self-reflection and collective professional insights (Salling Olesen, 2012).

Focusing on data and interpretation, Abrahão differentiates between her own socio-cultural approach and a positivist or interactionist model. She shows how she triangulates with other sources (photographs etc.) to verify and enrich her data. She concludes that it is through a metaanalysis of her research that she can go beyond research goals to theorize and consolidate elements of research more generally.

In the third article, *Exploring nurses' learning*, Lioba Howatson-Jones considers a way to deal with individual, the collective and socially conditioned in auto/biographical methods. She explores the learning of nurses in a specific UK higher education context, and argues as she investigates their individual professional lives and identities that they might benefit from interaction with their patients and peers through practices of story telling.

Howatson-Jones transfers the tradition of practicing biographical approaches as pedagogy from general adult education (Dominicé, 2000) into the domain of professional education. She argues that contemporary forms of pedagogy for the education of nurses drawn on in this UK university context are not 'compelling' - in their focus on clinical competence and forms of institutional learning they are akin to forms of risk management. She proposes work with biographical experiences as more conducive, making it possible to integrate what she calls the 'art' and 'science' of learning.

The fourth article, *Staying the course: Examining enablers and barriers to student success within undergraduate nursing programmes*, focusses again on learning for nurses in a UK university context. Here, Victoria Boyd and Stephanie Mckendry write from Scotland. Upholding interpretivism in a postmodern era they draw on grounded theory, collect autobiographical data and adopt a narrative approach to analysis. The emphasis on grounded theory allows for the establishment of themes and their relative significance to emerge from the interview data. Thematic analysis involved the students' in giving their views over the validity of the themes identified. This approach allows for them to consider student progress and engagement along a continuum where identities are transitional, and as a form of 'staged persistence'.

John Field, Barbara Merrill and Linden West, in the fifth article *Life history approaches to the access and retention of non-traditional students in higher education: A cross European approach*, consider factors that support retention, and support and limit the construction of students' identities as learners and understandings of themselves as 'integrated'. Drawing on their experience of a seven-country European study of retention and access for non-traditional learners in higher education (RANLHE), they discuss the complex challenges of translation and comparison across languages and systems, and offer the reader some methodological insights in relation to resolutions within their study.

These articles demonstrate how life history and auto/biographical approaches help researchers avoid didactic instrumentalism in various ways. In education there is a permanent pressure to achieve greater efficiency, and the authors illustrate that the point of 'giving voice' is exactly not such technical improvement of pedagogical intervention in general or specific cases. They demonstrate that a professional interest can be one supporting a more comprehensive idea of the adult - as that with a societal and cultural background, a life outside the education institution and future yet to be developed.

### Acknowledgement

Kirsten Weber, Anders Siig Andersen and Barbara Merrill contributed to parts of this editorial in preparing the book *Using Biography and Life History Methods in Adult Education and Learning research* (eds. West, Alheit, Andersen and Merrill), Peter Lang 2007. However, they bear no responsibility for the editorial paper.

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# Adult education and the State: Gramsci, the historical materialist tradition and relevant others<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This paper focuses on the relationship between adult education and the State within the context of hegemonic globalization and the all pervasive neoliberal ideology. It draws from a variety of sources and provides an overview of discussions concerning the State giving pride of place to the Historical Materialist tradition in the area. Using a gramscian perspective, it argues that contrary to the widespread mantra that the state has receded into the background in this era of globalization, we argue that the State remains ever so present in this context and, if anything, remains central to the Neoliberal project.*

**Keywords:** State; neoliberalism; globalization; network; competition; Gramsci

## Introduction

Adult educators and their work are contextualized within the nation states of the world, with many adult educators operating across national boundaries and focusing on issues that concern discussions of the nation state such as identity, politics, policy and mobility. Yet, the term 'The State' is one of the most slippery concepts in social and political theory, which form by and large the theoretical basis for adult education. Major writers often demonstrate this slipperiness by using the term differently. There are those, for instance, such as Gramsci (1971), who use the term both with reference to the institution holding a monopoly over the repressive forces, reminiscent of Max Weber's definition and Lenin's 'special bodies of armed men,'<sup>2</sup> and also as representing an ensemble of relations of production (in his Factory Council Theory) and, one can add, broader capitalist social relations, as indicated by Corrigan and Sayer (1985). The State

is not a 'thing' (Corrigan & Sayer, 1985; Corrigan, 1990) in the sense that it should not be reified.

### **This paper**

In this paper, we will look at issues concerning the State and adult education from a gramscian perspective. We will do this against the background of a variety of conceptualizations regarding the State and its implications for adult education, according pride of place to the Historical Materialist tradition and its echoes (Youngman, 1987; Allman, 2010). This is, after all, the tradition within which Gramsci worked. When and where appropriate, we make connections with insights from other writers, for instance Foucault, Lyotard, Castells and Jessop, whose views are increasingly having a bearing on contemporary conceptualizations of the State.

### **Contextual variations**

The level of social inequality varies from state to state. State formation varies from country to country within capitalism (see Corrigan & Sayer, 1985 with regard to England; Green, 1990, with regard to England, France, Prussia and the USA; Marx and Engels (1978) writings on England and France; Gramsci (1971) on England, France, Italy and Germany). Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who once engaged the historical materialist tradition, is on record as having referred to the state, in a context of dependent/peripheral capitalism, as a 'pact<sup>3</sup> of domination,' to underline the power dynamics that characterize the ensemble of unequal social relations involved (Cardoso, 1979, p. 38, in Morrow & Torres, 1985, p. 350).

Especially in the western hemisphere, one is more likely to hear the word 'government' than state, and to have this linked to the government's responsibilities in terms of social welfare, jobs, and health. The term state, and even government (which constitutes only a part of the state), is increasingly dismissed as there is a growing belief, albeit inaccurate, that ours is a globalized society in which markets not governments make the difference. Yet for adult educators the notion of a state is very real and tangible.

The state in most western countries is responsible for primary and secondary education, and for the subsidization of nonprofit organisations, health and higher education, either in whole or part. It is the state typically that funds teachers and schools. In many cases the state provides ad hoc funds for literacy, training for work, and nonprofit education through such organisations as the YMCA/YWCA. For debate is just how much the government funds and how much more responsibility it should assume. Adult educators frequently argue that existing adult education programs are poorly funded and quite marginalized, which often runs counter to state policy to support programs such as literacy. And, of even more concern to adult education is when the state has no policy on issues such as education and lifelong learning. As Selman, Cooke, Selman & Dampier (1998) point out, no policy becomes unofficial policy.

Clearly there are many different conceptions of the State and we shall take a closer look at these theories further on in this paper. What we attempt to do here is provide an overview indicating the role which adult education plays or can play within the contexts of these conceptualizations. One major attempt at discussing adult education and the

State, drawing on a range of writers, was produced in the 90s (see Jarvis, 1994). This was preceded by brief discussions on the State and Latin America with regard to popular education (Carnoy in Torres, 1990) and more recently the state in relation to public and adult education in Brazil and other parts of Latin America (Morrow & Torres, 1985; O'Cadiz, Lindquist Wong, & Torres, 1998).

### Traditional conceptualization

It is common knowledge that the most traditional conceptualization of the State is that of a large entity comprising its primary powers: legislative, executive and judiciary. This 'separation of powers' thesis can be attributed to Baron de Montesquieu in his study of England and the British constitutional system. According to this conceptualization, state sponsored adult education would thus feature as part of the State's executive mechanism. Raj Pannu (1988), writing on adult education and the State in Canada, posits that the liberal democratic state comprises the government, the military, the judiciary and representative assemblies including provincial, municipal and other forms of government. This renders the situation most relevant to adult education when so much of the provision falls under the most subsidiary forms of state direction such as for instance regional and municipal governments. Italy would be a case in point where much provision occurs within the context of the *territorio* approach (Allulli, 1990). However later theories would underline the complexities surrounding the State and the agencies with which it operates.

### Different Marxist conceptualizations

While the State is conventionally also regarded as the mechanism for regulating and arbitrating between the different interest groups within society (Poggi, 2006), several authors writing mainly from a historical-materialist perspective underline its role in serving the interests of the ruling capitalist class. It does so by reproducing the social conditions for a dominant class to reproduce itself. Writing about adult education and its function within the State, Carlos Alberto Torres (1991) wrote:

Since the capitalist state has a class content reflected in its policy-making, adult education policies constitute an example of class-determined policies oriented to confront the political and social demands of the powerless and impoverished sectors of any capitalist society. (p. 31)

One would argue, along the same vein, that adult education has traditionally often had other contents reflected in its policy making, notably those related to sex, gender, 'race'/ethnicity, ability, religion and other categories of social differentiation. Torres's quote encapsulates the classic Marxist position which lends itself to different nuanced interpretations that stretches beyond the idea of the State's 'executive' being 'a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie' (Marx & Engels, 1848/1998, p. 5).<sup>4</sup> It takes into consideration all well researched historical sociological accounts of state formation in say France and England as produced by Marx and Engels themselves<sup>5</sup>, its role as a form of cultural revolution in England (Corrigan & Sayer, 1985) and education and state formation, including popular education, in a number of countries (Green, 1990).

In Ralph Miliband's view (1969), the state agencies are characterized by the disproportionate presence of civil servants and other senior administrators of capitalist class background. The State mainly acts in the interest of the capitalist class but there are moments when it can extricate itself from this hold during, for instance, times of war (Held, 1987, p. 174). The State through its institutions or what Althusser calls 'apparatuses' provides the conditions for the accumulation of capital. Adult education, therefore, has an important role to play here, more so at the present time, when education for the economy, including adult education (or lifelong learning) for the economy, is said to perform a crucial role in attracting and maintaining investment. In the post war (WWII) period, a welfarist notion of state provision, undergirded by a Keynesian social and economic policy framework was provided (Pannu, 1988). This was in keeping with 'the new deal' seen by many as a concession by capital to labour. It was however seen within labour politics as very much the result of the struggle for better living conditions by the working class and its representatives, thus underlining an element of reciprocity here. Much of what passed for social programmes was welfare oriented, including adult education for employment and adult education conceived of within the traditional parameters of social work. It very much suited a sociological framework, known as structural functionalism, within which the modern state provides the mechanisms, including, for example, 'second chance' education, and adult education combined with social work (*sozial pädagogik*), as in Germany (Hirschfeld, 2010), to enable those who fall by the wayside to reconnect with the system or, better still, be integrated into the system. Marxists of different stripe and radical leftists exposed this as a palliative that served to maintain the status quo rather than to provide the means for such programmes to contribute towards social transformation.

### **State's legitimation-accumulation functions**

Others such as the then Stanford University researchers, Martin Carnoy and Henry Levin (1985), drawing on the work of James O'Connor (1973) (see Pannu, 1988), Claus Offe (1984) and others, emphasized the dual role of the state. On the one hand it had to tend to the basic function of ensuring the conditions and mechanisms necessary for the accumulation of capital and, on the other, to legitimize itself democratically by listening to and acting upon the voices emerging from different social sectors (see also Held, 1987). As Raj Pannu (1988) argues, drawing on O'Connor, 'the State must try to perform two basic but often contradictory functions: (a) to foster capital accumulation and (b) to foster social harmony and consensus' (p. 233).

### **Reconciling social demands with technical-rational requirements**

This allowed possibilities for people to operate tactically within the system (London and Edinburgh Weekly Return Group) in a 'cat and mouse' game to channel funds into adult education programmes with socially transformative ends (see Mayo, 1999). Examples of tactical resistance include pre-employment and ESL programs offered through local nonprofit centres, whose staff use the funded educational program as a place to increase immigrant's knowledge of women's rights as well as to bolster self esteem. Though the state is officially in control, the nonprofit organisation resists with subterfuge, a classic Foucauldian case of resistance to the exercise of power by the state (English, 2005).

This approach to adult education was given importance in both minority and majority world contexts especially in revolutionary contexts such as that in Nicaragua where much publicized revolutionary adult education campaigns such as the *Cruzada*, which served to legitimize the revolution and keep the revolutionary momentum going, had to be reconciled with the more technical rational demands of the economic system which was crucial to the country's economic development. In many cases, the citizens assumed authority or used various means and strategies of subterfuge to push back at the state. The point of having to reconcile the social and technical-rational demands was underlined by Carnoy and Torres' account (1990) of popular education in Nicaragua in the eighties.

Does this situation apply also to Venezuela which, according to UNESCO's special envoy, María Luisa Jáuregui, 'is the first and only country to meet the commitments adopted by the region's governments in 2002 in Havana to drastically reduce illiteracy' (Marquez, 2005)? The State kept the Bolivarian revolutionary momentum going by teaching one and a half million people to read and write through the support of another revolutionary state, Cuba, who had Venezuelan literacy tutors trained in the 'Yo si Puedo' pedagogical method created by Cuban educator Leonela Realy (Marquez, 2005). This satisfied a great social demand and it was then followed by an attempt to articulate the achievements of the crusade with the formal, technical-rational demands of a state educational system that is crucial to Venezuela's development (Cole, 2011). Would a revolutionary state (see Arnove, 1986; McLaren, 2000; McLaren, Companeros & Companeras, 2005; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005) be in a much better situation to reconcile these demands given the level of ideological commitment involved on both sides?

### **Policy implementation and its mediations**

As far as a more capitalist orientation to adult education is concerned, however, the relationship between economic requirements and the State has always been complex. Roger Dale (1982) argued persuasively in the early 1980s that State policies do not translate into practice in the manner they are intended for a variety of reasons, not least being the state agencies meant to execute them which, as with all bureaucratic agencies, generate their own rules and modus operandi as Weber's own theories of bureaucracy and related neo-Weberian theories have shown. The process of social and cultural reproduction is not as smooth as the ruling class and policy makers (who also follow their own set of procedures) would intend it to be, and this apart from the subversive roles that agents within the system, such as adult educators, have played in pushing actual provision in a certain direction.

### **Hegemonic globalisation, neoliberalism and the shredding of the social contract**

While much of what has been attributed to bureaucracy and the State still holds, things have changed considerably in recent years. With the onset of Neoliberalism (loosely defined as fiscally and socially conservative, and regressive), and therefore the ideology of the marketplace, which underlies hegemonic globalization, the social democratic arm of the State as presented by Carnoy and Levin (1985) has been severely restricted in its operations. The State has lost its welfarist function (the discourse shifted from welfare state to welfare society and more recently, as a result of Third Way politics, to workfare

society) as it plays a crucial role in terms of providing a regulatory framework for the operation of the market; so does the EU as a supranational state (Dale, 2008). It is a Neoliberal State that provides the infrastructure for the mobility of capital, and this includes investment in Human Resource Development (note, not adult education) as well as the promotion of an 'employability' - oriented Lifelong Learning policy, with the onus often placed on the individual or group, often at considerable expense. Welfare to work programs in the United States, for instance, have often been charged with blaming the poor for being poor, and for moving welfare clients to the unemployment line.

Adult education represents a curtailment of social oriented adult education in favour of a market oriented notion of economic viability also characterized by public financing of private needs. Adult education is no longer conceived of as a public good. Instead, it becomes a consumer good whereby the only programs that are funded are ones with goals that can be weighed, counted or measured such as employment statistics, GDP, and Return on Investment. In short, this is what Jean Francois Lyotard (1989, pp. 47-48) would call 'performativity'. In countries undergoing the transition from socialism to a market economy, such as those of the 'old' Yugoslavia (which had a strong adult education tradition that fore-grounded the concept of andragogy, see Reichman, 2005), former worker universities (reminiscent of the Josip Broz Tito period and its self-management programmes) are transformed into HRD centres (Mayo, 2002). The discourse on the promotional material for these HRD centres is linked to efficiency, productivity and usability. We are reminded here of University of Toronto intellectual Janice Gross Stein (2003) who questioned the use of efficiency in everyday discourse, asking the crucial but answerable question: 'Efficient at what?' The effect on the hearer of the word 'efficiency' is either dismay or cynicism.

Furthermore, attempts are being made all over the world to leave as little as possible to the vagaries mentioned by Dale in his 1982 paper, a point he himself recognized as far back as that year when he mentioned the onset of standardization, league tables, classifications and, we would add, more recently, harmonization. This is today reflected in the language of benchmarks and 'quality' indicators (almost always of a quantitative nature) applied to lifelong learning which incorporates (or is often erroneously used interchangeably with) adult education. This is to render agencies of the State or that work in tandem with the State, through a loose network or 'heterarchy' (Ball, 2007) in this day and age, more accountable, more subject to surveillance with the danger that it can ultimately become more bureaucratized.

### **Not so lean a State**

Despite all the talk of the State withdrawing from the social sphere and the introduction of deregulatory measures, in keeping with neo-liberal trends, we have witnessed moments when its presence continues to be strongly felt. Its role in serving the interests of capital is very much underlined whenever a fiscal crisis occurs such as the recent credit crunch. Depending on its relative strength, the State has no qualms about its role in bailing out the banks and other institutions in situations such as these. For instance in the recent credit crunch in the US with the collapse of the housing market, the State bailed out, in an unprecedented move, many large banks and financial institutions which then paid their CEOs obscene amounts of money in bonuses. The discursive effect of such munificence to its friends is global cynicism and despair.

As Paulo Freire put it so clearly years before the recent credit crunch:

Fatalism is only understood by power and by the dominant classes when it interests them. If there is hunger, unemployment, lack of housing, health and schools, they proclaim that this is a universal trend and so be it! But when the stock market falls in a country far away and we have to tighten up our belts, or if a private national bank has internal problems due to the inability of its directors or owners, the State immediately intervenes to 'save them'. In this case, the 'natural', 'inexorable', is simply put aside. (Freire, in Nita Freire as interviewed in Borg & Mayo, 2007, p. 3)

The State is very much present in many ways (Meiksins Wood, 2003), a point that needs to be kept in mind when discussing adult education. One wonders what possible scenario opens up for adult education in this regulatory context: courses in financial services and regulation as a form of 'sponsored mobility' within restricted and elite circles? Would there be similar continuing professional development courses in sensitive areas such as banking and public accounting? The idea of the State playing a secondary role in the present intensification of globalization is very much a neoliberal myth. As Corrigan, Ramsay and Sayer (1980, pp. 8-9) underlined three decades ago, drawing on Marx's writings, 'State formations are *national* states since capitalism as a global system involves national organisation to secure the *internationalization* of its production relations.'

### The repressive, carceral State

The state organizes, regulates, 'educates' (the ethical state), creates and sustains markets, provides surveillance, evaluates (Gentili, 2005), forges networks and represses. One should underscore the role of the repressive factor as manifest by the State during this period. Behind the whole facade of consent lurks naked power which, in Mao's famous words, lies in 'the barrel of a gun.' The state also provides a policing force for what can easily be regarded as the victims of neoliberal policies as well as related 'structural adjustment programmes' in the majority world. These victims, as Giroux has shown, include blacks, latino/as and those regarded by Zygmunt Bauman (2006) as the 'waste disposal' sector of society. Prisons have risen in the US which has witnessed the emergence of the 'carceral state' (Giroux, 2004). The prison metaphor can be applied on a larger scale to incorporate migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa knocking on the doors of 'Fortress Europe' and who are contained in veritable prisons referred to as detention centres. Adult Education, in this context, might well include prison education, education for integration or resettlement of immigrants. A number of NGOs are actively involved in this field. Issues relating to migration are expected to feature prominently in the agenda for the EU's adult learning programme, as part of the Lifelong learning programme, in the forthcoming years. These programmes will no doubt be developed in light of the much awaited (at the time of writing) communication on lifelong learning by the European Commission ten years after the publication of the European Memorandum on Lifelong Learning. To what extent will such programmes be conceived of outside the carceral framework which has been characterising the life of many immigrants in Mediterranean shores of late, most notably in islands such as Lampedusa (Italy), Malta and the Canary Islands (Spain)?

On a less literal level, as Foucault has shown, the public reacts to the coercive and threatening nature of the state by policing itself, in a form of self-regulatory behaviour. Citizens assume they are being watched so they silence their own voices of opposition, allow the state to take away human rights, and act as if they will be jailed for their own

thoughts (English, 2005). This is part and parcel of his concept of the State ruling by proxy through ‘governmentality’ (Foucault, 1988).

### **The State and its apparatuses**

The carceral function of the state with its manifestly repressive orientation but not without its dose of ideological support takes us back to the writings of one of the major theorists on education and the state, the structuralist Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser (1971). At a more general level we have had Althusser pointing to the existence of the state, within a capitalist economy, having two important apparatuses serving the interest of capital, the repressive and ideological state apparatuses (RSA and ISA respectively), with the important caveat that there is no 100% purely state apparatus and no 100% purely repressive apparatus, the difference being one of degree. He referred to the school being the most important ISA. We feel that, had he been writing today, he would have probably referred to the media, an important source of adult learning, as the most important ISA. This calls for the kind of engagement in adult learning referred to as critical media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2009). Douglas Kellner (2005) wrote about ‘media spectacles’<sup>6</sup> which have come to dominate news coverage and deviate public attention from substantial public issues. Media politics play a crucial role in advancing foreign policy agendas and militarism.

Recall that, echoing Gramsci’s writings on hegemony, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky had much earlier illustrated the way the ‘propaganda model’ relies on the media to manufacture consent for policies in the public mind (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Kellner argues that political forces such as Al Qaeda and the Bush administration construct or, in the latter case, have developed media spectacles to advance their politics. This has particularly been the case with the Tea Party in the US which has built on public spectacles, including the self-identification with conservative speaker and so-called ‘feminist’ Sarah Palin, to advance itself. The theme of the ‘spectacle’ has also been broached by Giroux (2006) among others. These writings highlight the link between the State and the corporate media during the period of US Republican government under George W. Bush. In this regard, therefore, critical media literacy becomes an important feature of a critical engagement within either the interstices of State involvement or social movements, in the latter case taking on the form of alternative media circulated via YouTube, Twitter and a variety of websites. These have a role to play in adult education in this day and age. Electronic networking has opened up a variety of spaces in this regard. More than this, however, critical media literacy provides an important and vast dimension to the meaning of critical literacy. Progressive social justice oriented social movements have proved to be very adept and savvy in making use of the current media to promote an alternative agenda.

There are times when social movements often engage in a cautious game of working in tandem with (actually being ‘tactically inside and strategically outside’) the State, as with the MOVA-SP project in São Paulo, Brazil (see O’Cadiz et al., 1998) when Paulo Freire was Education Secretary in the Municipal Government of the Brazilian megalopolis.<sup>7</sup> Where Althusser seems to be right on target is in his pointing to there being no 100% ideological state apparatus. Despite its obvious connection with the ideological arena, education has always had a very strong repressive function, more so today. Witness the US High School model with security guards making their presence felt in a heavy handed manner (Giroux, 2009). One can also argue that the apparent violence is not only real in a manifestly repressive sense but also symbolic (in

keeping with an ISA) because of its important signification regarding their identities. They are potential outcasts ripe for eventual incarceration. The repressive, therefore, is, at the same time, ideological.

Education can also play a repressive role among adults. Witness the provision, in a number of countries, of *forced* adult training programmes for those registering as unemployed and often deliberately meant to target their involvement in the ‘hidden economy.’ There is both an ideological and coercive element to this kind of adult education. As a matter of fact, one of us was once invited by an employment agency to address potential adult educators in the field. As soon as they were exposed to the scenario in which they will be working, involving people who are forced to attend at the expense of earning undeclared revenue, they balked at the prospect; many of the prospective adult educators pulled out.

### Gramsci and the State

Althusser’s conceptions regarding state apparatuses lead us to ‘revisit’ the work of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci is probably one of the most cited 20<sup>th</sup> century writers with regard to adult education and the State, and his relevance is still underlined today despite the fact that much of his analysis focused on Italy and the rest of the world until the first part of the previous century. Gramsci argued that, in terms of the way power operated and was consolidated, there was a great difference between the situation in predominantly feudal pre-1917 Russia, the site of the first socialist revolution, and that obtaining in Western capitalist social formations (Hobsbawm, 1987). In Russia, the locus of power rested with the state army and police. The country was virtually held together by force. Gramsci therefore considered it possible for a revolutionary group to wrest power from the grasp of the Tsar and the aristocracy by means of a frontal attack. However, a ‘war of manoeuvre’, the term Gramsci used to describe the tactic of engaging in this frontal attack, was not regarded by the Italian theorist as likely to prove effective in Western capitalist social formations. In these formations, the state is propped up by a network of cultural and ideological institutions that Gramsci referred to as ‘civil society.’ This is part and parcel of the notion of the ‘integral state’ so well described by Peter Thomas (2009). Both political and civil society are facets of the same state in western society. Their conceptual separation in Gramsci’s *Quaderni* is primarily for heuristic purposes. One cannot exist without the other and the two are much more related than the heuristic separation would suggest. The same applies to the relationship of repression and ideology which co-exist in a variety of institutions, as shown earlier.

In Gramsci’s view, the institutions of civil society function with regard to the state as a ‘powerful system of fortresses and earthworks’ that assert themselves whenever the state ‘tremble[s]’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 238). Civil society, as used by Gramsci, is therefore not conceived of primarily as an arena of popular oppositional politics. On the contrary, it is conceived of as a domain comprising ideological institutions that consolidate the existing hegemonic arrangements. It also contains spaces, often within the ideological institutions themselves (they are not to be regarded as monolithic), where these arrangements can be contested and renegotiated, having ‘to be actively constructed and positively maintained’ (Hall, 1996, p. 424). In view of his conception of the state and civil society, Gramsci felt that a frontal attack could not lead to a seizure of power in Western societies. For such a seizure to occur, one would first have to engage in a ‘war of position’, which involves social organisation and efforts in the direction of

cultural predominance. Yet, this talk of physical disruption and of attack has not left our adult education conversation. Australian Michael Newman, who frequently refers to Gramsci in his works, asserts that there may be times when such defiance may indeed be necessary. In his book *Teaching Defiance* (2006) he offers stories and strategies for training the activist educator.

## Education, the State and hegemony

Gramsci attributed great importance to the sphere of civil society that, within orthodox Marxism, had been confined to the superstructure, namely education. For Gramsci, it is partly in this sphere that the prefigurative work (Allman, 2010) for the conquest of power must take place. Of course, the process of ideological domination and modification of class consciousness cannot be completed, according to Gramsci, prior to the conquest of the State (Gramsci, 1997). Significantly, with a few exceptions (Nesbit, 2005) talk of class has been eclipsed in North America by gender, race and other identity politics. There seems to be an unwillingness to publicly recognize the power of social class and its impact on opportunity, education and employment. Yet, class is a major ‘factor in’ on that continent. When one of the authors was a graduate student at an Ivy League university in the US, the question she was most often asked was, ‘Where did you go to college?’ with college being the code word for social class. Higher education is a sorting mechanism, funded by capitalists to ensure the reproduction of class.

Nevertheless, there is important prefigurative work that, according to Gramsci, involves working both within and outside existing systems and apparatuses to provide the basis for an ‘intellectual and moral reform’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 132). Such work occurs primarily in the context of social relations, which, for Gramsci, are established through the process of hegemony. Hegemony incorporates not only processes of ideological domination and contestation but, as Raymond Williams (1976) argues, a ‘whole body of practices and expectations’ (p. 205).

Gramsci (1971) regarded every hegemonic relationship as an ‘educational’ one (p. 350). That is, hegemony entails the education of individuals and groups in order to secure consent to the dominant group’s agenda (see Buttigieg, 2002; Borg, Buttigieg & Mayo, 2002). Engagement in a war of position to transform the state similarly involves educational work throughout civil society to challenge existing relations of hegemony.<sup>8</sup> For Gramsci, ‘intellectuals’ are key agents in this war of position, this ‘trench’ warfare (Gramsci, 1971, p. 243). And we can include adult educators of a socially transformative kind here. Gramsci did not use the term ‘intellectual’ in its elitist sense (see Hobsbawm, 2011, p. 325); rather, Gramsci saw intellectuals as people who influence consent through their activities and in so doing help forge alliances. They are cultural or educational workers in that they are ‘experts in legitimation’ (Merrington, 1977, p. 153). Their ‘intellectual’ activities take a variety of forms, including that of working within the state and other institutions of capitalist domination, or to use the one-time popular British phrase, working ‘in and against the state’ and other dominant institutions (see London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980). Michael Welton (1995) echoes this sentiment when, clearly drawing on Jurgen Habermas (1970, 1998), he talks of being in ‘Defense of the Lifeworld’ (*lebenswelt*), which he sees as threatened by the hegemony of class, capital and marketization.

## Gramsci and the network State

This theorization of the State and its potential for an effective adult education policy has some affinities, despite a strong (we emphasise ‘strong’) political/ ideological difference, with some of the modern managerial technical-rational conceptions of the State with regard to policy formulation and action. The state and its agencies are nowadays said to work not alone but within a loose network of agencies – governance rather than government in what is presented as a ‘heterarchy’ of relations (Ball, 2010) and therefore what Martin Carnoy and Manuel Castells call the ‘network state’ (Carnoy & Castells, 2001). A gramscian perspective would nevertheless underline that, despite appearing *prima facie* to be ‘heterarchical’, such relations under capitalism are, in actual fact, hierarchical and less democratic than they might appear to be. This certainly applies to relations between state and NGOs or labour unions.

On the other hand, one encounters situations when NGOs, especially those based in the west, are powerful enough to have leverage over certain states (e.g., Oxfam during the Brown government in the UK in relation to African states). Structured partnerships between state and business as well as between ‘public’ and ‘private’ tend to emphasize the link between the state and the imperatives of capital accumulation. For Gramsci, the agencies, constituting bourgeois civil society (*burgherliche gesellschaft*), buttressed the state. While Gramsci focused primarily on the ideological institutions in this network, which he calls ‘civil society’ (used differently from the way the term is used today – see Korsgaard, 1997), one must also mention the point made by Nicos Poulantzas (1978) when underlining that the State also engages in economic activities which are not left totally in the hands of private industry (Carnoy, 1982). One might argue that this point has relevance to the situation today. A word of caution is, however, necessary here. State systems or simply states differ among themselves in their internal coherence, given their historical and other contextual specificities. It would be dangerous to infer that all states are equally positioned in terms of their power to intervene in the economic sphere, especially when one takes into account their own differential location within the global market system.<sup>9</sup>

Industry often collaborates in policy formulation in tandem or in a loose network with the State just like NGOs or labour unions do, the latter often being co-opted in the process in a form of corporatism<sup>10</sup> (see Offe, 1985 on this in terms of disorganized capitalism; Panich, 1976). Nowhere is the role of the state as economic player in western society more evident than in university continuing education, as well as in university education more generally (see Giroux & Searls Giroux, 2004 with regard to the US). The division between public and private becomes blurred. So-called ‘public universities’ (in places like Italy, all universities approved by the education ministry [MUIR] are designated ‘public’) are exhorted to provide services governed by the market and which have a strong commercial basis. Furthermore the State engages actively through direct and indirect means, and, in certain places, through a series of incentives or ‘goal cushions’ (see Darmanin, 2009), to create a Higher education competitive market (in which adult education plays a prominent part through colleges of further education, polytechnics or technical universities and institutes having the franchise for established foreign universities) as part of the ‘competition state’ (Jessop, 2002). Drawing on Jessop (2002), Jane Mulderrig states that the competition state was already conceived of in the 80s with, for instance, OECD documents ‘on the importance of structural competitiveness for government policy’ (Mulderrig, 2008, p. 168). Here the focus is ‘on securing the economic and extra-economic conditions for international

competitiveness' in a globalising knowledge based economy (Fairclough & Wodak, 2008, p. 112).

In many western democracies, such as the UK and Canada, the state exercises considerable control on higher education through its granting councils and funding bodies. The state, working through the people it hires and appoints to these councils and bodies, sets the direction for research and teaching, rewarding those who comply with their neo-conservative agendas. Increasingly the state is directing research efforts in the social sciences to practical and useful research, especially including Research & Development [R&D], that will further its economic and workplace goals. A popular topic for research funding in the west at the time of writing is financial literacy; adult educators have pursued these grants with gusto, paying little attention to the fact that the idea of financial literacy is to blame the poor for being poor. Under the guise of providing information to the public to help them save for education and the future, the state is controlling the household and emphasizing that the good family saves, wastes little and is to blame for not having enough money for higher education expenditures. We become complicit in a government plan to relieve itself of responsibility for education and welfare.

The foregoing points, regarding the State working in concert with a variety of players, vindicate Gramsci's position regarding relations between different institutions and agencies constituting what he calls 'civil society' in the context of the capitalist state. The state regulates these agencies by having its own institutions working in tandem with them. It is certainly no neutral arbiter of different interests, even though it appears to be so, as it also engages in structured partnerships<sup>11</sup> with industry to secure the right basis for the accumulation of global capital. In this regard one can argue that the state is propped up not only by the ideological institutions of what Gramsci calls 'civil society' but by industry itself (of which it is part), while it sustains both (propping both the 'civil society' institutions and industry) in a reciprocal manner to ensure the right conditions, including the cultural conditions, for the accumulation of capital. All this goes to show that the state, the nation state, is an active player and has not receded into the background within the context of hegemonic globalization. On the contrary, in its repressive, ideological and commercial forms, the state remains central to the neoliberal project (Mayo, 2011).

## Conclusion

Given this scenario, the implications for state involvement in adult education are enormous. Our excursus has taken us through various conceptions as manifest in different historical periods. In continents like Europe, the EU plays a major role in funding adult education projects along the policies it formulates for its member states and would be member states. However it does this mainly through national state agencies. The State has not gone away. As Ellen Meiskins Wood has argued:

The argument here is not that of capital in conditions of 'globalization' has escaped the control of the state and made the territorial state increasingly irrelevant. On the contrary, my argument is that the state is more essential than ever to capital, even, or especially, in its global form. The political form of globalization is not a global state but a system of multiple states, and the new imperialism takes its specific shape from the complex and contradictory relationship between capital's expansive economic power and the more limited reach of the extra-economic force that sustains it. (Meiksins Wood, 2003, pp. 5-6)

Adult education, often transmuted in terms of terminology to be lost through its encapsulation in the broader and vaguer term ‘lifelong learning’ (a ‘catch mechanism’ for funding and therefore more state regulation), plays an important role as part of this extra economic force that sustains capital’s expansive power. This role is characterised by the dominant discourse of HRD, entrepreneurship and competitiveness. Yet this extra-economic force is never monolithic and it is in the interstices of this non-unitary force where avenues for critical and transformative adult education need to be explored.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This chapter draws on another published paper, Mayo (2011). The difference though is that this chapter is co-written and deals specifically with adult education doing so from an international perspective. The paper on which it draws is a straightforward theoretical piece on the centrality of the State in neoliberal Times argued from a Gramscian perspective. We are very indebted to Professor André Elias Mazawi, from the University of British Columbia, Canada for his advice and his many insightful suggestions to strengthen the paper. We also acknowledge feedback provided by Professor Joseph A. Buttigieg, from Notre Dame University, Indiana, USA, on our formulations regarding the concept of ‘civil society’ in Gramsci. Furthermore we derived valuable insights from Professor Carlos Torres from UCLA, USA, and Michael Grech from the Junior College, University of Malta and Left Action Movement in Malta (MAX). The usual disclaimers apply.

<sup>2</sup> See Lenin (1917), section on special bodies of armed men, prisons etc.

<sup>3</sup> A pact can be understood as a platform that enables disparate elements to operate with some coherence in relation to political and economic end, and strategic visions of power.

<sup>4</sup> This assertion seems to allow for more loosely coupled configurations than Cardoso’s notion of ‘pact’ which accords the state a more deterministic weight.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, *Contributions to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, or *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Marx & Engels, 1978).

<sup>6</sup> Shades of Guy Debord’s (1967) *La Société du spectacle* with its Marxist theses representing the shift from being to having to representing oneself (thesis 17), with images mediating social relationships among people (thesis 4). See also Debord, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> The book provides a fine discussion regarding theories of the state and then dwells, at considerable length, on the role of social movements in the struggle for power, with specific reference to Latin American social movements. The authors also provide a highly illuminating account of state-social movements relationships in Brazil and the kind of relationships the Freire secretariat sought to establish with respect to the process of educational reform in São Paulo. We consider this to be one of the most important discussions in the book that dwells on transformative education being carried out in the context of broader social movements. The study also conveys the idea that those engaged in the desired process of curriculum reform can constitute a social movement.

<sup>8</sup> According to the Gramscian conception, ‘civil society’ constitutes the terrain in which most of the present ideological domination takes place. Global civil society is therefore the terrain wherein a lot of the global domination, via global cable networks, information technology etc. occurs. Once again, however, it creates spaces for renegotiation in that it offers the means for progressive groups, located in various parts of the globe, to connect electronically or otherwise. This is what is referred to as ‘globalisation from below’ (Marshall, 1997) or what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls ‘counter-hegemonic globalisation,’ counter-hegemonic being a term which Gramsci never uses probably not to demarcate a binary opposition. Hegemony is characterised by a process of negotiation and renegotiation. Information Technology is a double-edged sword in that, as an instrument of capitalism, it can constitute an effective process of domination but can also offer alternative possibilities in the fostering of international alliances.

<sup>9</sup> We are indebted to Professor Andre’ Elias Mazawi, from the University of British Columbia, for this point.

<sup>10</sup> These organisations establish formal and informal links, parliamentary and extra-parliamentary with key agents of the state in return for the advancement of their corporate interests (see Held, 1987, p. 206).

<sup>11</sup> Let us take higher education as an example, to extend the discussion around the example provided in this section. In 2008, the first European Forum on cooperation between Higher Education and the Business Community took place (CEC, 2008). The communication on the modernisation of universities and HE institutes underlines the importance of a ‘structured partnership with the business community’ (CEC, 2006a, p. 6). It is intended to create opportunities for the sharing of research results, intellectual

property rights, patents and licences and allow for placements of students and researchers in business, with a view to improving the students' career prospects. It is also meant to create a better fit between HE outputs and job requirements. It also can help convey, according to the communication, a stronger sense of 'entrepreneurship' to enable persons to contribute effectively to a competitive economic environment (CEC, 2006a; CEC, 2006b).

## Acknowledgements

We are very indebted to Professor André Elias Mazawi, from the University of British Columbia, Canada for his advice and his many insightful suggestions to strengthen the paper. We also acknowledge feedback provided by Professor Joseph A. Buttigieg, from Notre Dame University, Indiana, USA, on our formulations regarding the concept of 'civil society' in Gramsci. Furthermore we derived valuable insights from Professor Carlos Torres from UCLA, USA, and Michael Grech from the Junior College, University of Malta and Left Action Movement in Malta (MAX). We thank the two anonymous reviewers of the submitted manuscript for their insights which helped us strengthen the paper. The usual disclaimers apply.

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## Autobiographical research: Memory, time and narratives in the first person

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### Abstract

*This text is about life narratives, memory and time as basic elements in autobiographical research. Aspects of these have seemed important to me whilst I have been conducting and coordinating a research project involving a team of researchers from Brazil and other countries. In this article I take the memory of the individual narrator as the focus, despite the fact that the memories of narrator and researcher are intertwined and co-defined through social and cultural relations and that the narrators' memory and the analysis and the interpretation of the narrator and researcher are intertwined and complementary to each other. I deal with time since the narrator's perspective on the past reality is involved in any narration.*

*The article has four parts. The first is focused on the research approach in general. Among other concepts I distinguish between autobiographical research, life stories and life narratives. The second part is focused on a specific research project that studied peoples' memories about distinguished educators and education development in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. This project offers the backdrop for understanding representations of memory and time. The third part draws on examples from this project to clarify the dimensions of memory and time as I understood them. Finally, in the last part, but not aiming to conclude, I relate these findings to some concepts from the literature.*

**Keywords:** autobiographical research; life stories; life narratives; memory; time

## I - A general note on autobiographical research

To begin I should clarify that I understand life history as a methodology in autobiographical research. Autobiographical research uses various empirical sources (life narratives, oral stories, documents - both official and personal -, diaries, memorials, epistles, videos, photos) and techniques (triangulation of information and in-depth analysis of the sources) (Abrahão, 2008a). This understanding can also be found in Pineau (2010)<sup>1</sup>.

Life history is, in my view, a (re) construction made by the researcher, through the research as he or she analyses empirical sources (above mentioned), in a critical dialogue with research findings from elsewhere, and with a global view of a social-economic and cultural environment where the studied lives take place (Abrahão, 2008a). Life history is a product, not a process.

I want to clarify how I work with the dimensions time and memory in my efforts to develop life histories in autobiographical research. To deal with autobiographical research means to make use of the practice of memory as a *sine qua non* condition. Individual memory is the focus in this article despite the fact that the memories of both the narrator and researcher are intertwined with and co-defined by social and cultural relations (Abrahão, 2008b; Josso, 1991, 2010).

Memory is the key-element of autobiographical research. It is an essential characteristic of the narrator and component for narration. It is a component with which the researcher works in order to (re)construct elements of analysis that may help in understanding the object of study.

Memory is an active process of the creation of meanings. Life narrative study is therefore a process of collecting different facts in various narrative contexts and also of participating in the elaboration of a memory which constructs meaning, thanks to the request of an investigator (Abrahão, 2004b). Costa (2001, p. 73) has called attention to the fact that the narrative must be understood ‘as a construction of the narrator and of the hearer and, still, as a peculiar expression of the moment of its production [...] (since) in the construction of the narrative, both narrator and hearer share memories, which allow the past to appear as present [...]’.

Thus, it is in this act of constant reinterpretation of the facts of the past into the present that the narrator and hearer ‘weave the threads of the narrative as a shared memory’ (Costa, 2001, p. 82). A narrative is therefore a construction in which the investigator also participates, due to the peculiarity of its mode of production. This characterizes the process of research that consists in making memorials, life stories, autobiographies, diaries, in other words writings about oneself, in histories that are rich in meaning and in which particularly subjective aspects appear. So, in this kind of study the researcher does not want to know what or how facts “really” happened, but how the narrator thought about it at the time and how he or she remembers it in the present (Abrahão, 2003).

The act of giving a new meaning to a narrated fact indicates that the researcher consciously tries to capture that fact and is aware that it is being reconstructed by a selective memory, intentional or not.

Thus, according to Santamarina and Marinas (1994), autobiographical research has an ethical and political dimension to the extent that it ‘bets in the capacity of retrieving memory and narrating by the social actors themselves’ (p. 259). It breaks with the crystallized forms of investigation that have given more value to the finished data, and moves on in order to capture those meanings of ‘social life that are not easily discovered [...] (in search of) the meaning of the historical time and the meaning of the stories of

the various processes of construction, re-elaboration, of individual identities, of group, of gender, of class in our social context' (p. 259).

This reconstructive memory ("innocent" or not) is talked about by Soares (2001), in her habilitation lecture for Head Professor at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil (in Brazil, a professor in a Federal University has to take an examination to achieve the top position):

This is exactly how I feel: with my hands tied by what I am today, conditioned by my present when I try to narrate a past in which I re-do, re-build, re-think with the images and ideas of today. The selection of what I include in the narration obeys the criteria of the present: I choose what bears relations with the system of references that direct myself today. The (re)construction of my past is selective: I do it from the present, because this is what tells me what is important and what is not; I do not describe; I interpret. (Soares, 2001, p. 40)

So I can say that 'By means of the narrative, people remember what has happened, place experience in a sequence, find possible implications for this and play with the chain of events that build individual and social lives' (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2002, p. 102).

Using a methodology and sources of this nature, the researcher consciously recognizes that the social reality is multifaceted, complex and socially constructed by human beings who experience their lives in a holistic and interrelated way, and that people are in a constant process of self-knowing.

I remember Moita's stand (1995) when she considered autobiographical research as a method that bears potential for addressing questions of the individual and the socio-cultural environment, since it 'puts into evidence the way in which each person mobilizes his knowledge, his values, his energies in order to gain his own identity in a dialog with his own contexts' (p. 113). This understanding clarifies why autobiographical research may be understood as referring to a system in which a plurality of expectations and memories is a corollary of the existence of a plurality of worlds and a plurality of social times (Abrahão, 2008c).

The temporal character of personal/social experience is articulated by the narrative, in particular when it clarifies the duality of "chronological time/ phenomenological time". The correlation between time and narrative pointed out by Paul Ricoeur causes the researchers to inquire about the origin of a historical narration of a historical consciousness, in which the present, the past and the expectation of future mix in a three-dimensional perspective (Ricoeur, 1983, 1995).

This three-dimensional temporal characteristic of narrated time may be detected in different autobiographical narratives, whether they are found in literature or in the field of historiography – at least as long as the latter respects the reconstruction and re-signification of history that the subject who remembers makes; narratives are linked both to the moment of the experience and to the moment of the utterance.

In academic and literary works there are a great number of examples that show the occurrence of this three-dimensional characteristic of narrated time. For example, Soares (2001, p. 41) in her habilitation lecture said: 'I tell about the past – a past in which I was a contemporary of the one I had been – knowing the future; therefore in fact, I rebuild it based on this future, which is my present today'.

To situate the reader with these conceptual remarks in mind, I will now describe some aspects of the autobiographical research that I and my team developed in the field of teacher education. What I intend with this text is to emphasize some aspects of the

data that appear within the data, but are beyond anything of interest in relation to the research objectives.

## II - The research: “Identity and teacher education: narratives in the first person”

### *1 - general information*

The research entitled “Identity and Teacher Education: narratives in the first person” has been ongoing since 1998. It is an investigation conducted by a national and international research team coordinated by me at Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul – PUCRS (Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul), Brazil.

I would like to start by commenting on the theoretical framework and research methodology.

The current relevance of life story research was emphasized by Nóvoa (1995), who considered the life of teachers as having long been a “lost paradigm” in Education - ‘today, we know that we cannot separate the personal from the professional self, mostly in a profession that is impregnated with values and ideals and that is very demanding from the standpoint of commitment to human relations’ (Nóvoa, 2005, p. 7). Thus, I believe in the ‘growing importance that life stories have gained in the case of teachers, their profession and practice’ (Nóvoa, 2005, p. 7).

With this point of view, the non-detachable character of the personal from the professional self takes us back to the identity building problem between feeling like being a teacher and actually being one. Professional teacher identity is made up throughout professional life in different and successive stages; beginning from the choice for the profession, through initial education and onwards over the teachers’ whole professional career trajectory (Abrahão, 2006).

The aim is that the research methodology allows the building of knowledge of the process whereby teachers become professional. In this process I explore the contribution of contextual stories told by teachers, not only in the personal dimension, but also in other dimensions and at professional and sociopolitical levels.

In the State of Rio Grande do Sul there are educators who have written the history of education through their achievements. Their life stories are, however, likely to vanish as a result of lack of patrimony. The life story and career of each educator is a potential database to be explored and rich source for students, educators, and particularly researchers of Teacher Education and Teaching History.<sup>2</sup>

### *2 - objectives*

To guide our research study I have kept the following aims in mind:

- To give visibility to the life stories of teachers’ who contributed to the history of education in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, by understanding the educational relations and identities built through the education of and the working practices of these teachers, and, to construct a patrimony to be used by students in the field.
- To better understand the history of education in the State of Rio Grande do Sul, through the history of its ways of thinking and pedagogical practices.

### *3 - characters*

The teachers selected were intentionally selected as research subjects. They were those who contributed significantly in Rio Grande do Sul, applying their talents, knowledge and effort so as to transform those conditions that inhibited teachers more broadly from being education professionals<sup>3</sup>.

The thirty-six educators, whose life stories I studied were chosen on the basis of indication by their peers, principals and students that they were committed to education, having, thus, a high profile within the communities in which they act/acted. The participants who were selected all live in different cities in the interior of the country and in the state capital. The study is therefore of teachers who come from different inland places.

The narration of the life stories of these highly recognized teachers allows for the emergence of knowledge of their education, which then provides a framework for understanding the education of professional teachers. This thought is based on Shulman and Colbert (1989), who consider the narratives of the teachers' practices as catalyzing elements for the reflection of teachers about their own profession.

In this respect, the research has not been intended to be a reflection mirroring the past, rather, it is aimed at the reconstruction of teachers' work as reflexive-transformational professionals, whereby professionals constantly re-think and balance their social practices at the limit of the concrete possibilities of the work of the educator. I understand the life stories of these outstanding teachers in Rio Grande do Sul for their potential in the construction of meaningful and current day proposals for the education of teachers.

In identifying such characteristics, I have not forgotten that these great teachers are not above ordinary human beings and thus are not "super-man" or "super-woman". Although these life-stories highlight the positive rather than negative features of these teachers, they are consistent. What I mean is that the teachers have been chosen primarily because they have special characteristics which people remember positively. Our research object was the reconstructive memory of these teachers and other sources.

The teachers lived or still live their professional lives either in the capital or the interior of the state. They were selected for their outstanding status as people who really had an influence on communities and generations, "writing" the history of education in Rio Grande do Sul by their achievements. Most of these teachers lived on a time-line starting in the beginning of the last century and continuing to the present day. Some died whilst others retired or are still active at work. Bearing in mind the different historical events that took place over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I may, through an horizontal analysis, perceive points within these diverse life stories that are common or convergent - this both on an individual basis or in terms of the social, economical, political and cultural environment through which these stories are built, and the implications of this environment for education.

### *4 - method*

International and national research explicates practical experiences through research using life story methodology brings us a rich theoretical and practical contribution. Other research specifically develops a critical analysis in France, England, Spain, Italy, Portugal and Brazil. However the specific theoretical contributions that sustain our own study are those of Santamarina and Marinas (1994), and Pujadas (1992). Their approaches, in particular, helped in the establishment of the specific theoretical base of our method of research.

So, in the present study I worked with participants' who were or are outstanding teachers of this perspective, as taught by Santamarina and Marinas (1994, p. 282). I was not concerned with their representative potential for sampling purposes, since I did not aim at uncovering the way opinions and answers were distributed over the entire investigated population, but to explore the meanings these teachers assigned or assign their experience and practice.

*a) - data and information production*

In a positivist point of view, life histories are understood as positive documents, to the detriment of any understanding of their genesis as life histories. Life stories are seen as a clue to a given moment in a past time, and not as a theme of the present moment of enunciation. In an interactionist view what really matters is the construction of situations in the process of the production of accounts. These are considered quite apart from any reflection of the context of the utterances themselves - therefore ignoring the emergence of the macro-context (socio-political, cultural and economic) of interaction, by which a life story acquires meaning.

There is a third methodology, beyond these first two approaches, employed in the research team I coordinate. This is a methodology presented by Santamarina and Marinas (1994, pp. 268- 269). Here life stories are understood as dialectically inserted in a system. Without being disconnected from the moment of enunciation or utterance, they are treated as stories of people (individual or group) that are constructed from within the micro and macrostructures of the social reality to which they refer.

The materials used in the production of data and information for our life narratives, follow the specification by Pujadas (1992, p. 14), of: a) personal documents (diaries, mails, photos, videos, cds, published materials, etc.), and b) biographical records (cross report life stories, preferably contemporary/on-time reports).

*b) analysis of data and information*

Coherent with the theoretical line adopted, I have used procedures of analysis for the process of interpretation that are different from those adopted through positivist or interactionist model. In the positivist approach analysis favors a model essentially operating as a documentary, determinist source, analyzed to exhaustion, or saturation, without bothering about the biographical peculiarities that a field research may have. In the interactionist model, analysis presupposes text (in this case a narrative) as given and finished, and is concerned just with discovering, by means of a detailed and deep analysis, the hidden meanings in the text. Life story is reduced to the text as the producer of meanings.

Opposed to these interpretations, the conception and approach I use views the category of subject as a space of enunciation. The pertinent elements are being designed, similarly is the relation between the narratives and their contexts. Santamarina and Marinas (1994, p. 270) call this mode 'comprensión escénica', which I translate as 'context comprehension'. In a more recent publication Marinas (2007) describes this construct in detail.

This understanding highlights that the origin and the deep meaning of texts is something that I build *pari passu*, on a daily basis. The method I use means going beyond a single structure of a story according to the original meaning of texts or of the deep elements of its hidden meanings. The authors aforementioned suggest what I consider a two-stage type of comprehension: the context of the past, which encompasses the totality of the biographical and social references of the interviewed people, and the context of the present of the subjects. This understanding presupposes the research

subjects' present network of social relations and those that emerge in the concrete situation of the interview. It also presupposes the forms of agreement and cooperation that make the interview effective, as the relation between listening and transmitting in reciprocity is a condition for reflection.

The understanding of context implies a process in which the subjects '(re)update, (re)elaborate the meaning, the collective ideological positions of the vital processes' of the stories' (Santamarina & Marinas, 1994, p. 272). Considering both the moment of enunciation and the moment of utterance, the research has to interpret 'not only the stories in the games and dimensions of its weaving (context is what it is woven with), but also in the dimension of the construction of self [...] so as to place the stories of life in their plural processes and subjects' (1994, p. 272).

Nevertheless, recognizing the risks of using memory that I consider selective and reconstructed by definition as the main source of analysis, I deal with triangulations of other sources and with several life stories of crossed reference.

The material collected has been triangulated with the narratives (documents, videos, photographs, crossings of reports of life stories). The analysis employed has allowed me an organic understanding, not only of the individualities under study but of the educational context of Rio Grande do Sul through which these individuals were produced and as they produce it. Thus, the memory of the narrators, although respected in its reconstructed rationality, had modes of verification by means of the triangulations that have been referred to (Abrahão, 2010, 2004a, 2004c, 2004d, 2004e, 2002).

In the first section of this article, I talked of discussion and examples from the literature on memory and the three-dimensional nature of the narrated time. In the second section, I made a brief description of the research as the backdrop, just in order to make the reader aware of how the concepts about memory and time were being understood. In the next section, I would like to bring examples of these elements, as well as of the reconstructive and also selective nature of memory in the subjects' life narratives.

### III - Capturing traces in our research

The research conducted with outstanding educators from the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil<sup>4</sup> has allowed various analytical generalizations, especially regarding dimensions of the educational background, professional education and identity construction of the educator, as subject and professional. These analytical generalizations have allowed, among other aspects, the comparison of the professional lives of thirty-six educators who have made history in the area of education in Rio Grande do Sul, and the cycles of the professional life of educators as studied by Huberman (1995)<sup>5</sup>. The research made it possible for me to show that the teacher profession and of teaching practice present analytical dimensions that are similar to universal elements introduced by Nóvoa (2001), These elements are a result of research the author has conducted with educators from several countries<sup>6</sup>.

So, depending on the way they are told, narratives of lives allow us to understand the experiences lived by the subjects of research projects as universal.

Thanks to our transversal readings of the experiences of professional and personal lives in our research, I have been able to understand their theories and practices about: their education, their teaching, their interpersonal and institutional relations, their construction of identity – of the act of being an educator – related to the different

moments and socio-political, economic and-cultural scenarios of between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century (Abrahão, 2002, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d, 2004e, 2005, 2008c, 2010).

Beyond these categories I want to emphasize in this text the three-dimensional characteristic of narrated time that I captured in analysis of the memories of the outstanding educators in our study. They all appear side by side within the same excerpt of a detached educator narrative:

So, in the day we left the Secretariat<sup>7</sup> we went to look for a house [...] where we began our school with 115 students (**perspective: past**). Today [1992 MHBA], there are more than 2.000 students (**perspective: present**). One of the aims was to found a school with the participation of the parents, teachers, students and employees, in such a way that when we enrolled the student we were “enrolling” the parents too. Later, we bought a piece of land and built the school. We created a not-for-profit community school (**perspective: past-present-future**). Today it is a foundation kept by parents who have taken over the community life of the school, where the teacher, the employee and the student have their own life, and they have reached the conclusion that the school has to be kept by them (**perspective: present-past**). I have always said that we had to build a great school not a big school, but it has had such high prestige, it began growing and growing and it was hard to avoid its growth. When I left in 1973 there were not so many students as there are today but it was already very big (**perspective: past-present-past**). In my point of view, the school has grown a lot. It would need to stop a little bit to keep the quality because it is not easy to do this job (**perspective: present-future**).

This autobiographical excerpt shows what I have already stated before, i.e. that the narrative breaks with the linear space-time mode of giving meaning to experiences, once the memory retrieves history, the past, present and future are intertwined in the moment of telling the story. Narratives are, thus, elements that carry a strong personal meaning and articulate the present, past and future, instigated by remembrances, telling not a life as it really happened but a life remembered by the ones who lived it (Abrahão, 2008a).

In our research, described in the second section, I was aware (in a meta-cognitive sense) that I was developing narratives based on the selective and reconstructive memory of our outstanding teachers and the other source-people. It is possible to find theoretical explanations in the literature for reconstructive memory; I may refer, among others, to: Bosi (1994), Catroga (2001), Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2002).

Thanks to this research I have been able to identify some aspects of this rebuilding of memory. In the first place, it appears that memory is not intentionally selective. Selection occurs in situations in which the narrator keeps in his memory of the facts, people, relations and situations to which he attributed relevant meaning when he experienced it.

Similarly, this occurs with elder narrators. They remember facts of their initial education and from the beginning of their professional practice, but had enormous difficulty narrating events or facts that happened later in time, or simply did not remember them. Even when I used techniques such as viewing pictures of the time being reported, the elicitation of memory was not expressive. In this case, the narrative of their students and younger relatives, besides documents, very much helped in the filling of gaps.

A second expression of selective memory occurred when the narrator intentionally selected the information so as not to remember disagreeable facts, many of which made him remember moments of intense suffering, or situations that he thought should not go public. Or still, with the intention of pleasing me – this became obvious many times – the narrator presupposing what I wanted to hear.

Another expression of memory rebuilding became evident when the narrator of an event or a fact used various translations of a specific fact in successive narrations about the same fact, during the same narrative discourse or in the narrations conducted in different moments.

Also there is a case of what I call “memory of shared life”. The source-person, when narrating facts about another person, in this case one of the outstanding teachers, added their own experience in the report. This was in fact the most frequent situation. I have not found in the literature the description of this kind of memory. I shall exemplify this:

When I was four years old I met my godmother, for whom I had, from the very first moment, a feeling of love and care. Thanks to her I met my godfather Ary<sup>8</sup> and his eldest daughter, Maria da Graça, who was my friend and companion during many years. When looking at him with my childhood eyes, I saw him as a giant... At the time I met him I lived at 823, João Alfredo street, where the *Nacional* Supermarket today stands. The cars were rare at that time but my godfather owned a black Citroën. In fact, the majority of the cars were black. The fact is that a number of times he would drive me around the block just to see my happiness, as a child wanting to have a sweet. When it was carnival, which he did not like very much, Maria da Graça and I would put on our costumes and he would take us to see the parade on the streets.

Later, my parents and I moved to a different neighborhood. Right after this they moved too. On many Saturdays my mother and I would visit them. When it was raining, and Maria da Graça and I were bored, he would spend the whole afternoon playing domino to distract us. I still did not know anything about my godfather’s profession but I recognized in him many qualities and the affection he had for me.

When I was 13 and studying in the 2nd year of Secondary School I decided I was going to take Mathematics and only then I found out that he was a Math teacher and, not convinced, I went to him, communicating my decision. Very happily he gave me a wide smile and said: “Very well! If you need a little hand, don’t feel embarrassed to ask”.

Another example of a “memory of shared life” the reader may see in the following narrative:

I met Ary in September 29th, 1942, in a spring prom that took place in one of the social clubs. I was wearing a blue dress and he said: “a blue sky with no need of stars, because it is already luminous”. And from then on we began to see each other, frequently. In September 1943 we got married. When he opted for the teaching career, I became enthusiastic because he was involved with teaching. I just did not know how much solitude this would bring me in the future (his Wife’s narrative).

About another outstanding educator:

I used to love Zilah. She was a very intelligent person, very interesting and modest. From her qualities what I admired most was that she was always fine in any situation. We studied together all our primary and secondary education. Zilah was always a brilliant student; before exams we (a group of classmates and I) would go to Zilah’s house to study with her all the contents. There were even some funny events. Our teacher gave us verses by Camões for us to analyze. At that time Camões was obligatory in the curriculum. Zilah was a genius. She would analyze those verses in a marvelous way! Sometimes I would copy from Zilah and the teacher would give her a ten and two or three for me. I could not complain, for the teacher knew that I had copied from Zilah, because I did not have the capacity to do what Zilah did (cousin, friend and classmate).

Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2002, p. 110) introduce the reader to some features of narratives as representations of the reality, bringing features of narratives that help to synthesize and better qualify the previous examples:

- ‘ - The narrative shows the reality of what is experienced by the storytellers: the reality of a narrative refers to what is real for the teller of the story.
- The narratives do not copy the reality of the world before them. They propose private representations/ interpretations of the world.
- Narratives are not open to corroboration and may not be simply judged as true or false: they express a truth from a point of view, of a specific situation in time and space.
- Narratives are always inserted in a social-cultural context. A specific voice in a narrative may only be understood in relation to a context that is wider; no narrative may be formulated without such system of references’.

The fact that a researcher understands memory as selective and reconstructive, and memory as people’s perceptions of “reality”, that is, re-signified along experiences of life, does not avoid that in the interpretation of narratives he or she also gives a meaning, founded on the set of elements that he or she has, by the triangulation of content of narratives with content from other sources, such as: documents, narratives of other people, and so on.

The interpretation of the researcher does not disqualify the interpretation/reinterpretation of the narrator, who will be respected in his or her “establishment of truth”.

Nevertheless, the interpretation of the researcher represents an analytical view of the narrative material, bearing in mind a “reference of truth” beyond the narratives, in an effort of understanding the object of study in several perspectives: in the personal/social perspective of the narrator – who represents the individualities –, in the perspective of the contextual dimension from which these individualities are product and through which they are producers, and in the perspective of some interests related to theoretical aims, as, for instance, the understanding of the mechanisms that memory uses in a narrative situation.

These were the mechanisms I intended to analyze in this paper when presenting the dimensions, both in theory and empirical material, those mechanisms: the tri-dimension nature of narrated time; the selective and reconstructive nature of memory in a narrative situation.

#### **IV - Ending, but not aiming to conclude ...**

This text is not about the research itself. So, in this moment I do not intend to analyze or report the life stories of educators studied, neither the history of education in Rio Grande do Sul. Both were the subject of previous of my texts (Abrahão, 2010, 2005, 2004a, 2004c, 2004e, 2002). Information of the research was brought to the previous sections only in order to contextualize other findings from the meta-analysis.

I understood memory and time dimensions during the process of analyzing narratives of life as a construct resulting from the meeting of two personalities at the time of narration – the individualities of narrator and researcher. This makes the narrative of a life as a different kind, since the narrator and the researcher are not concerned with the “truth” in the sense of the close relationship between the events

narrated and the reality. Rather, the interest here is with the significance of these events to the narrator, at the time of narration, and as affected by their meeting.

Advancing this understanding, I am theorizing some dimensions that seemed important. My contribution for this text means to clarify the understandings that research, of the kind referred to above, can go beyond the specific research goals. In this sense, this research enabled a syntheses that allowed me to consolidate different theoretical and methodological elements of autobiographical research, especially dealing with dimensions of narrative memory and narrated time, during the encounter between narrator and researcher.

These dimensions, emerged through the life stories of prominent educators. They were considered in the light of theory, namely through:

- a) the question of memory in relation to the three-dimensionality of narrated time, especially inspired by Ricoeur (1983, 1995, 2000, 2007), which is due to the temporal nature of human experience (personal/social) articulated by life narrative, especially when clarifying the duality “chronological time”/“phenomenological time”. The correlation between time and narrative by Paul Ricoeur makes me wonder about the influence of a historical narration upon a historical consciousness in which the present, the past and the expected future intertwine in a three-dimensional perspective. So, the temporal three-dimensional nature of narrative accounts (looking back to the past with the eyes of the present and allowing prospecting the future), offers a reason why narrative discourse does not necessarily follow a linear and sequential logic;
- b) the conception of reconstructive memory, understood as the reconstructions of meaning which the subject who recalls his own trajectory in the moment of enunciation links to the subject of his narration as he is seeing it in the present moment (Benjamin, 1988);
- c) the understanding about the selectivity and the reconstructive nature of memory in relation to the forgetfulness, because the new meaning of the events let the researcher be aware that she or he will try to capture the events knowing that they were rebuilt by a selective memory, intentional or not (Catroga, 2001);
- d) the memory sharing during the narrative act between narrator and researcher thanks to the joint construction at this time, because understanding memory at the time of narration means establishing an active process of creating significant meanings to both narrator and listener (Passerini, 1988);
- e) the truth of the events is what is true for the narrator. Thus, the trajectories when narrated provide the construction of a sense of life - the story of this trajectory is not the result of what really happened in terms of experience and knowledge, but is the result of the organization of these elements as an argument with temporal dimension, space and multiple social relations (Bolívar, Domingo, Fernández, 2001);
- f) the “shared living” memory (Abrahão, 2010, 2008a), as evidenced by virtue of the sources when narrating the trajectory of another person, usually overlap her or his own trajectory in the account;
- g) the art of narrating is ‘an artisanal mode of communication’ (Benjamin, 1988, p. 205). However, the narratives are not just an individual construct; they acquire real meaning when they are placed in the historical context and socio-political and economic culture of the narrator (Abrahão, 2008c).

These theoretical and methodological dimensions were seized by me through the intersection of the empirical data with the literature, briefly mentioned here. This whole relation was important for me to understand the autobiographical narrative in its triple dimension: as PHENOMENON (the story, the event), as METHOD (research) and as PROCESS (the signification of the experience for both: the narrator and the researcher (Abrahão, 2008a).

So, in this research process the narrators' memory and the analysis and interpretation of the researcher are elements that are intertwined and complement each other in understanding the representative dimensions of life narratives.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Other approaches to memory, such as collective and public memory, see, among others: Halbwachs (1990), Le Goff (1995).

<sup>2</sup> (Abrahão, 2004e, 2004c, 2004a, 2005, 2010). Beyond these publications I employ discussion about the results of this research in my classes at the Graduation and After Graduation Courses of Teacher Education. The research about the life of outstanding teachers is very significant to teacher education. In a second stage my students construct and discuss their own narrative about their lives, their education and their professional career (Oneself Memorial). I have presented the results of this research in many seminars on teacher education, in Brazil and in many other countries.

<sup>3</sup> In other texts of mine there is much material and I discuss it on the three main dimensions which appear in the 36 teachers' life stories studied: **teacher education; teacher professional identity; theory and teaching practice**. This is not the aim of this paper. Here I present a reflection on memory and time dimensions in autobiographical narratives, as result of a meta-reading I made based on the narratives of our 36 teachers whose life stories I have been working with since 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Research: "Identity and Teacher Education: narratives in the first person" with results published in seven books and several articles in national and international publication (reviews, journals). In section II of this paper I described some aspects of this research.

<sup>5</sup> Abrahão (2004a).

<sup>6</sup> Abrahão (2004a).

<sup>7</sup> Secretariat of Education of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, where the narrator was the Secretary of Education.

<sup>8</sup> One of the outstanding teachers studied by us.

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## Exploring nurses' learning

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### Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to explore the concept of compelling space for learning. The research presented uses an auto/biographical methodology to explore nurses' learning. Theoretical perspective is drawn from biographical approaches and ideas around development of the self, to examine the nature of people's experience. The argument is advanced, through the narrations of three study participants from a PhD study, that there is a need for nurses to have space to tell their stories of learning and to reconnect with personal experience. The narrations focus upon learning by mistake, developing an interpretive imagination and using biography in teaching and learning and have something to contribute to the development of spaces of learning. This is developed further by considering how biographical method and reflexive responses offer opportunity to find the personal voice and make spaces more compelling and integrative as a different form of pedagogy for nurse education.*

**Keywords:** compelling space; auto/biography; interpretive imagination; dehyphenation

### Introduction

Nurses are perpetually learning as they try to keep abreast of healthcare and technological advances. But how nurses learn is open to question when considered from less formal perspectives. This paper intends to draw upon some of the findings from a PhD study (Howatson-Jones, 2010a) undertaken to explore nurses' learning. The paper uses theories of emotional development and ideas of the self to discuss nurses' learning in less formal ways. The argument is advanced that when people are not distanced from one another psychologically, they can begin to discern where they might learn from, as well as with, one another when given the space and time to tell their stories. This argument is developed further by drawing from three participant accounts to consider how biographical approaches to learning might be used as a different form of pedagogy for nurses' learning. From here I develop the concept of a compelling space that invites

meaningful learning, where people feel able to take the risk of acknowledging that they do not know and become proactive in developing enquiry. All the names used are pseudonyms and consent was given for use of the material in keeping with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) (2008) Code of Conduct, and research principles.

### Context of the enquiry

Carper (1978) conceived fundamental patterns of knowledge in nursing which drew on ideas of process relating to building relationships and caring and ethical behaviors. Her purpose was to liberate nursing knowledge from becoming defined by medicine. Nursing knowledge, in this sense, was more interconnected and emerging as a discipline in its own right. However, Carper's (1978) patterns of knowing also leave out other ways of coming to know particularly the '*sociopolitical*' concerning cultural identity (White, 1995, p.83). Historical and cultural contexts do not appear to be adequately considered despite their relevance to nurse preparation and educational provision, particularly in emotional and developmental terms.

Nurse education in the United Kingdom (UK), has undergone considerable change in the last three decades since Carper's (1978) attempt to differentiate nursing knowledge from medicine. Nurses currently undertake a 3 year preparation course that is 50% university and 50% practice based and which culminates in a diploma or degree in nursing. Nurses are expected to complete all theoretical and practical aspects in order to be able to register with the NMC, nursing's regulatory body in the UK. Therefore, both the practical and University elements are circumscribed by regulatory requirements that often leave little room for meaningful reflection to take place. By meaningful I am talking about encompassing the nurses lifeworld illuminating understanding and other courses of action. Learning from this perspective, even if undertaken in different ways, becomes formalised through processes of recording for evidential purposes to meet a conforming standard. Although nurses are encouraged to reflect in the University and in practice, such reflection tends to be superficial demonstrating awareness of advancing practice through formulaic use of reflective cycles and is less sensitive to more informal forms of learning. Such spaces are consequently often not compelling for learning.

Equally, government policy is again focusing on clinical competence (Great Britain (GB): Department of Health, 1999; GB: Department of Health, 2000), seemingly elevating particular forms of knowledge. Nurses are themselves increasingly confused about what is required of them and how meeting diverse imperatives might benefit them, or their patients (Watson & Thompson, 2000). For example, how to reconcile person-centredness with academic knowledge and technical skill. This seemingly begs questions of where the space for nurses to reflect on their learning is and indeed who they are as nurses. While space does exist in the University and in practice the reality also facing many nurses is a pressurised environment with a multitude of tasks which need to be completed taking time away from actually being able to connect and reflect.

Recent research studies suggest that organisational imperatives for learning are a part of institutional risk management, rather than personal development, with formal learning undertaken mainly to keep up with change (Bahn, 2007). Nurses want to feel valued and one mode of continuing professional development does not suit all (Gould, Drey & Berridge, 2006). Similar findings suggest that nurses' learning is influenced by career development, the effort of juggling home commitments and the level of support from management (McCarthy & Evans 2003; O'Donohue & Nelson, 2007; Cooley, 2008). Despite the motivational focus, there is little exploration of what is brought from

a life history or the relevance of emotional learning to motivation in these studies. Others identify that there are complex interrelationships between individuals and the organisations they work in (Fagerberg, 2004) which seems to suggest issues around how people connect. Nurses become unsure as they find themselves increasingly isolated. It also appears that how at ease nurses feel with themselves is influential in the approach they take to learning and working. A more reflective approach to learning encompasses all areas of a life journey, to profile learning (Maich, Brown & Royle, 2000). For some this becomes played out in their practice as they share their learning with their patients as a collaborative endeavour (Perry, 2005). This might be described as an auto/biographical approach to practice learning. Others reflect with peers as part of collaborative inquiry helping to review and reconsider knowledge (Phelan, Barlow & Iversen, 2006). In this way story telling can be used to help integrate the art and science of nursing (Hunter, 2008).

What is central to these studies is that they appear to be talking about the quality of the spaces in which nurses exist. Nevertheless, although some life and emotional aspects are described they remain under-developed as a part of interrogating learning. The biographical accounts within this paper contrast this by illustrating some of the human factors that may contribute to not being at ease with oneself. What this paper adds, is the argument that engaging biography as a teaching and learning tool offers space for nurses to work with their learning stories and from which they may also draw emotional development which can lead to more positive encounters of learning and working as a nurse. I call this 'developing compelling spaces for learning' because of how nurses become engaged in authentic learning drawing from their lifeworld which helps them to come to a new understanding of themselves, those they work with and potentially those they care for.

## Methodology

The overall purpose of the PhD (Howatson-Jones, 2010a) research was to develop an understanding of registered nurses' lifelong learning and subjective agency within their learning in order to inform the development of learning opportunities for nurses. The particular focus was on illuminating what motivates and shapes nurses' learning experiences, their use of resources and how they define knowledge, from a biographical perspective. Auto/biographical approaches to methodology were considered as a means to illuminate nurses' experiences and lifelong learning and to help build dialogue around what it means to be a nurse and a learner. Auto/biography considers how the 'I' interacts with the lives of others (Stanley, 1993). For example, how the narrator interacts with the narrated within their story as well as the people listening to the account and who bring their own 'I'. Participants can find a voice through their own histories through the interwoven lives spoken about and the researcher and participant are drawn closer together in the research process. Inclusion of the auto/biographical interrogates the relationship through examining experiences within a historical and personal context that are written into the narratives produced that are shaped by us (Stanley & Wise, 1993).

The research questions used were:

- What does an exploration of the learning biographies of nurses, including my own, say about what helps and hinders the learning of nurses?

- What is meant by learning and knowledge in the professional context of nursing?
- How do qualified nurses' learning biographies and their professional contexts influence their perceptions of resources for learning?
- What can an analysis of the learning biographies of nurses, and my own auto/biographical experience, contribute to the development of nurse education?

I want to clarify why this approach is so important and has validity despite being marginal in nursing research. The validity in using an auto/biographical approach over possible others lies in the richness and holistic nature of the accounts produced, and the transparency of researcher involvement (West, Alheit, Andersen & Merrill, 2007). In view of my experiences of nursing, teaching and learning it seemed counterproductive to 'write myself out' of the research, as these experiences provided a valuable resource upon which to draw. Equally, the historical and cultural context of changes experienced in nursing seemed to be an important focus. Subjective understanding is more than simply foreknowledge or pre-understanding in that it informs interactions and therefore, the quality of the spaces of the research itself and what takes place within them. Consequently, the questions considered both participant and my own contributions to the enquiry. Focus groups were employed and the silenced individual was followed up with two in-depth biographical interviews. Eight focus groups and twenty four biographical interviews were carried out involving twenty nine participants in total in the PhD study. However, in a brief paper such as this it is only possible to draw from three participants in any depth.

An interpretive frame for analysis was used based on merging meanings of participants interpreting themselves, my interpreting them and connective auto/biographical moments. Through inclusion of the auto/biographical I was endeavouring to promote transparency by making apparent what knowledge I brought to the research, and the decision-making processes involved. Themes were developed through use of a pen portrait. The pen portrait utilises a proforma which includes the historical context of the interviews, methods and processes and emerging themes, to help record issues relevant to individuals and the research in a holistic sense. The pen portrait is constantly added to throughout the research and analysis process, to incorporate a complete view in the final representation that could have a bearing on interaction and interpretation. This enables themes to emerge through gestalt moments of understanding (Merrill & West, 2009). An academic colleague acted as a guide for reflecting on the research processes helping to examine professional issues in participant stories.

I proceed now to illustrate, through the biographical accounts of three of the study participants, how reflexive responses to emotional learning can assist to making spaces more compelling for learning. Through the example of a mistake I identify problems which can arise when people are distanced from each other and how this inhibits learning. This is contrasted with an example of developing an interpretive imagination which connects people in making sense of situations – an important feature of a compelling space for learning. Lastly through the example of using biography for teaching others I illustrate how biography can make spaces more compelling as experience is shared, lives connect and new insights are drawn. The intention is to examine, through each of the narrations, how a biographical perspective potentially contributes another form of learning to the pedagogy of nurse education and how these dimensions together can form compelling spaces of learning. In doing so I draw on

theories of development derived from Winnicott (1965, p.150) who explored the qualities of space between people and developed the concept of '*transitional space*' as people adapt and make changes over the course of their lives. In the first narration I examine some of the stages of development that can emanate from learning by a mistake in terms of shock and anxiety as an emotional response to realising the mistake, with subsequent limited transition to cognitive and affective responses. I explain how clinical supervision – as a form of guided reflection – is utilised to offer support for the anxiety linked to this experience helping to develop and deepen learning. A pen portrait theme of containment is also interrogated.

### Learning by mistake

Sorin came from the Philippines. He described a competitive path to get to University. He had originally wanted to train as a doctor, but family finances could not support this and so he chose nursing instead. He left to work in the Middle East and then came to the UK for better pay. Like many nurses he had a regular job as well as working as an agency nurse to earn extra money and appeared quite tired when I met with him. In the initial focus group Sorin was ignored when trying to talk about his learning. The directional slash marks indicate cutting off points with the forward slash indicating trying to voice an opinion and the backward slash as cutting off.

Ariel: I think you're learning all the time....the thing is have you got any evidence that all this academic training us is making any better nurses?

Lilith: I think it is.

Sorin: It's/

Ariel: \ really?

Sorin's description of arriving in the UK was of feeling '*degraded*' because he was classed as an assistant nurse until he was able to register with the NMC.

Sorin But coming here is....degrading everything.... Because....here we are not qualified nurses we are graded....like auxiliary nurses....until we get our PIN (nursing registration) number. So it's....really tough. And....you know we've been to....this nursing business for quite a while and coming here is turning down to 0.

Sorin needed to learn what constituted best practice in the UK, but was hampered in this by feeling excluded from the discussions between senior staff in his workplace and his loss of status.

Sorin So I think F and G (senior nurse grade at that time) they have their sharing of best practice. I don't know how they weigh what is the best practice.

Where spaces lacking in feeling, what I term '*empathic vacuums*' appear it becomes much harder to acknowledge less mainstream and difficult forms of learning. The following biographical interview excerpt revealed a form of '*learning*' which was much more personal and hidden at the margins of practice and which Sorin is struggling to articulate.

Sorin            Every day you get experience and you learn from it... when you've had a little bit mistakes and those mistakes putting your heart... like I mean two weeks ago the doctor was quite busy, I know...busy is not an excuse. I got two patients, one ventilated and one less...and then during handover time they said, "The doctor... is trying to seek advice from (named hospital)...what they have going to the patient" So in handover... doesn't say that this was given...So because it has all been written and signed I don't go and look in the details because it's all been already given. But the doctor doesn't have proper communication of what is happening, and the nurses also we don't have proper communication, so I missed that point...So in that scenario you reflect... that next time...even though we are doing... two person check, sometimes it's still miss[ed] because you don't...properly check it... You need to reflect on your practice, safe practice is very important... you know the five rights of giving medication... You need the qualification to be a nurse, but after that you need to improve your progress in the way you care for your patient.

There appear to be definite stages to Sorin's 'learning'. First there is an emotional response of worry, followed by thinking things through and reflecting culminating in acknowledging the need for different behaviours.

*Emotional response*

Stage 1 – shock and worry – it is not by accident that Sorin tells us early in his story of 'putting your heart...' as a 'heart stopping' moment of realising the error

Stage 2 – defending by projecting blame            rationalising by blaming others 'is sometimes busy... So in handover time doesn't say that this was given... But the doctor doesn't have proper communication of what is happening...'

*Cognitive response*

Stage 3 – scrutinising own contributing practice            acknowledges own shortcomings 'So because it has been all written and signed I don't go and look in the details.'

Stage 4 – scrutinising others contributing practice            identifies others actions 'it's all been already given.'

Stage 5 – identifies core problem            accepts joint responsibility 'and the nurses also we don't have proper communication, so I missed that point.'

Stage 6 – checking core knowledge            does not lack knowledge – 'you know the five rights of giving medication.'

*Affective response*

Stage 7 – reflection on error & how to change            presents behaviours and values 'even though we are doing check, two person check, sometimes it's still miss because you don't do properly check it... You need to reflect on practice.'

Stage 8 – regaining confidence identifies how ‘you need to improve your progress... in the way you care for your patient.’

Sorin's ‘learning by mistake’ illuminates challenges to the self-concept and staff relations lacking in communication. It could also be argued that this is not learning but working through responses. The empathic vacuum he is experiencing in practice limits his ability to make sense of his reactions and therefore the depth of his learning as well. It has been suggested that the process of learning encompasses the social, cognitive and emotional (Illeris, 2002). I wish to argue that it seems important to acknowledge the emotional first in order to be able to raise cognitive insights and develop action. Nurses do make mistakes and there are procedures in place to help them learn from their mistakes. These include having access to clinical supervision. However the reality is that such provision is patchy and most nurses have to manage their own learning.

Using an auto/biographical methodology demands an authentic response from the researcher. The reason for this is to draw out learning about the research topic but also to enable the participant to learn something. From this perspective my response focused on using the whole self to identify learning in this situation. This required ‘dehyphenation’ of my identity removing the boundaries between being a researcher and nurse, enabling me to be more genuine and communicate authentically. I conceptualise ‘dehyphenation’ as eliminating the artificial line of a hyphen between researcher identity as something half connected to being a nurse or, in a sense, being me. Chan (2005, pp.53, 55) calls this trying to become disentangled from *‘formalistic thinking’*. ‘Dehyphenation’ is a conscious act by the researcher to be connected to their whole self. Using the auto/biographical approach meant utilising personal resources available and so I brought clinical supervisory skills into play to identify what kind of learning this was and enable Sorin to tell his story in a ‘safe’ way that also ensured the outcome had ultimately been safe for the patient. Clinical supervision is a form of guided reflection which enables exploring issues, including the emotions generated, through discussion with another more experienced person and reflecting on significant aspects to gain insight into the learning achieved (Bishop, 2007). Did I confuse the situation? We were reflecting on learning, and reached a deeper reflection which, if anything, clarified what we meant by learning. Such circular questions are sometimes considered hesitantly in scholarly work as perhaps not being entirely appropriate (Hunt, 1998). And yet they are important to reflecting upon actions that give rise to such hesitancy and for bringing everything into view, which auto/biographical methodology demands.

#### *Pen portrait themes*

Sorin was somewhat haphazard in the way he answered as he struggled with a second language. Practical and professional knowledge are the primary aim for Sorin in order to fit in. Emotions are briefly referred to, but learning in this domain becomes suppressed to fit in with a perceived professional image by switching to recounting what should be normal practice. I recognised the circumstances that led up to the incident and the fear and concern attached. I too have made mistakes and have felt the intense anxiety. It seems that the quality of the facilitation of working through the circumstances and learning are key elements to what learning and behaviours are taken forward. Punitive models of dealing with mistakes in healthcare have moved to more educationally focused interventions. Nevertheless, nurses who have come from other cultures which

still use punitive models may experience heightened levels of anxiety. Equally, there are wider implications here of being found fallible.

The opportunity for reflection within the research space did appear to counterbalance the effects by allowing assimilation of competence and skill to help Sorin re-affirm himself. The research space is bounded by confidentiality and offers focus on particular issues. In this sense it also offers somewhere that learning can be realised. In responding to Sorin's narrative I could have kept to the research script. But in doing so this might also have sent a message that the emotional aspects of this experience did not really matter which could have been damaging and limiting to transitional development. Sorin's 'learning by mistake' experience had left him doubting his value within the team. By using clinical supervision techniques I was able to demonstrate valuing Sorin as a person and valuing best practice. The processes used within clinical supervision offered some containment for the emotional developments taking place which are the main theme of Sorin's learning.

Containment involves a person feeling sufficiently psychologically supported in order for development work to take place (Horowitz, 2004). Relationships that are supportive and secure enough to allow exploration of thoughts and feelings can provide a form of containment for anxiety (Holmes, 2005; Hunt & West, 2007). Psychoanalytic theory suggests that lack of containment may force individuals into false behaviours that are unhelpful to learning because they avoid connecting with what is disturbing them (Riesenberg Malcolm, 1992). From this perspective although Sorin had completed the tasks required by practice following an error, he had not really 'learned'. Making use of clinical supervision was more encouraging helping to reduce anxiety and make it possible to develop ideas in a space that felt safe and free from judgement. As such, the research space also becomes a learning space for both the researcher and the participant. It needs to be clarified that the research space is an opportunity for finding out about people's experiences. Nevertheless this can also constitute learning about themselves, making this also a learning space. While Sorin initially appears to have been left with a sense of being an 'outsider', telling his story appears to have helped to consolidate his knowledge of drug administration and what to do. The research space provides an opportunity to sustain critical reflexivity that might be freer from professional agendas allowing deeper connections to develop (West, 2006). I proceed now to discuss an imaginative approach to learning which can help to make such spaces more compelling of learning.

## Developing interpretive imagination

Eowyn also came from the Philippines and had worked as a nurse in the Middle East. Eowyn had also found it hard coming to the UK and practising in the very busy healthcare environment. Of great concern to her were some differences in caring for patients that required enormous socio-cultural imagining and change on her part to 'love', or care differently.

Eowyn	It's about wanting to know more, not being stagnant, being professional, moving on.....We ask each other how far we have come.... Because it was hard for me ....Because in the Philippines we are used to care for the elderly, and respect the elderly....Here ...the first few months...we were shocked...their families don't take care of them. They do take care of them, but in a different way. The carers....might feel love, but different love... but it is just a matter of understanding the cultures.
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Eowyn equated 'love' with care. She struggled with a more detached approach that she was experiencing in the UK. Her interpretive imagination begins to emerge in trying to explain and understand nursing through other possibilities and translate love into care in the way she would like to be cared for herself through cultural understanding (Howatson-Jones, 2010b).

Eowyn: I wanted to join this research to help foreign nurses who come after me, to make things better....

....And then I don't know, how did it change?....Yes, I have to get used to it first and I think I need more studies....That's my anxieties as well....that's the....most horrifying...to become in charge....I might encounter a relative who is racist what do I do?

.... I've learned a lot of things personally, academically and professionally.

To develop the interpretive imagination involves starting from a position of uncertainty emotionally:

Eowyn: Because it was hard for me.

Uncertainty is the point of, what Jarvis (2007, p.11) calls '*disharmony*' that disturbs the mind. The first consideration is the meaning that is given to a situation drawing from personal and cultural scripts.

Eowyn: They do take care of them, but in a different way.

If the meaning is discussed, concepts can become translated with consideration of others' views:

Eowyn: It is just a matter of understanding the cultures.

Ideas continue to develop and there is a possibility to diversify experience and reach to the unknown considering reflexively how the self is changing.

Eowyn: I wanted to join this research to help foreign nurses who come after me, to make things better.... How did it change?.... I think that's the important and the most horrifying.....to become in charge...I've learned a lot of things personally, academically and professionally.

### *Pen portrait themes*

Eowyn was known to me from a previous clinical practice role and she had been very keen to join the research. For Eowyn relationship is the key component of her experiences and learning. We met in a quiet spot outside which helped to set a different context. Emotional aspects of learning emerge as she experiments with asserting herself and making decisions. She assimilates feedback from many sources such as the patient, colleagues and managers, to try to make sense of this different setting and culture as she works through transition. Her interview is full of imagination and interpretation as she tries to make connections with her cultural understanding and possibilities for her future. There are concerns about judgement from her Philippino colleagues of how far she has come and of racism from some patients and how she might respond to these

concerns. But underlying this is also personal learning of who she is and might be becoming. As she talks about assertiveness she recognises some of her own values of respect. Imagining what it might be like enables her to take the risk of moving on.

I propose interpretation and imagination co-operate in ways of coming to know that open up compelling spaces of learning. In Eowyn's narration uncertainty is the stimulus for trying to orientate her ideas about caring and nursing and develop understanding of how and what she is learning. She is able to see the UK system from a different perspective partly because she is a foreign nurse imagining herself in a variety of situations, to make sense of it. Imaging, in the form of building a mental picture, can be a way of thinking about and questioning possibilities as part of human becoming (Parse, 1998; Bunkers, 2002). C. Wright Mills (2000) developed the idea of the sociological imagination. This type of self-consciousness enables individuals to envision themselves and their problems within a larger historical and social scene. Eowyn may not share a history or culture, and this can make it difficult for her to develop a sociological imagination in the workplace and the University in the UK. But she is able instead to develop a compelling space for learning through translating concepts via interpretive imagination which helps to integrate her thinking. I proceed now to consider how using biography in teaching and learning can contribute to making spaces of learning more compelling as follows in the next account.

### Using biography in teaching and learning

Larissa was married with grown up children. She had always wanted to work with children, either as a nurse or a teacher. Significantly, she accompanied her mother as a child on Red Cross work, which instilled a sense of vocation in her. Larissa had done well at school, but had also been teased for this which led her to question difference.

Larissa        I don't know, maybe it is because I was in the top stream....used to get some saying: 'You....snobby (insult that suggests a superior attitude to others) lot....you only use your brains'....I did quite a lot with special needs children....I've got a very good friend who's got cerebral palsy (brain injury which results in mental and physical problems) and I met her at the Red Cross holidays....we didn't really think about it. And it never really struck me that (named) went to.... boarding school....And they were actually shut away.

Larissa felt strongly that respecting difference in teaching and assessing were important ingredients of a learning relationship.

Larissa        We need to talk about that.... not with the sense that they think 'Well I made a right mess of that, failed everything.' But....understanding that we don't always get everything right....let us work through it and let us not destroy you in the process....Let us be positive about it.

It was important to Larissa to acknowledge fallibility as being part of professional practice to promote integrity in the developing professional. Larissa drew on her biographical experience to help others learn.

Larissa        We need to be....enthusing them to learn and talking to them about things, ....So what I did for this talk was I started where I started with nursing....I started thinking about (named institution) where I did my training....And I

started there and built this up and lead it through the process that I had seen developing....

....about a month later we had one of the students....came up to me and said 'I really enjoyed that talk....it was really interesting.

Larissa also drew on her biographical experience to help her reflect upon and develop understanding about her own learning.

Larissa        Last week I went to visit a lady who....was suddenly falling into a big heap and realised she [has] got far too much on her plate....And talking to her....you never end up being the one comforting and talking, you always get something back from that don't you....So I think....learning....reflective thinking....I have come away having learnt a lot myself.

Larissa's professional and personal growth in terms of her experiential learning, her deepening emotional awareness and, in particular, how she used her biography to develop personal and reflexive understanding made the space compelling for learning.

#### *Pen portrait themes*

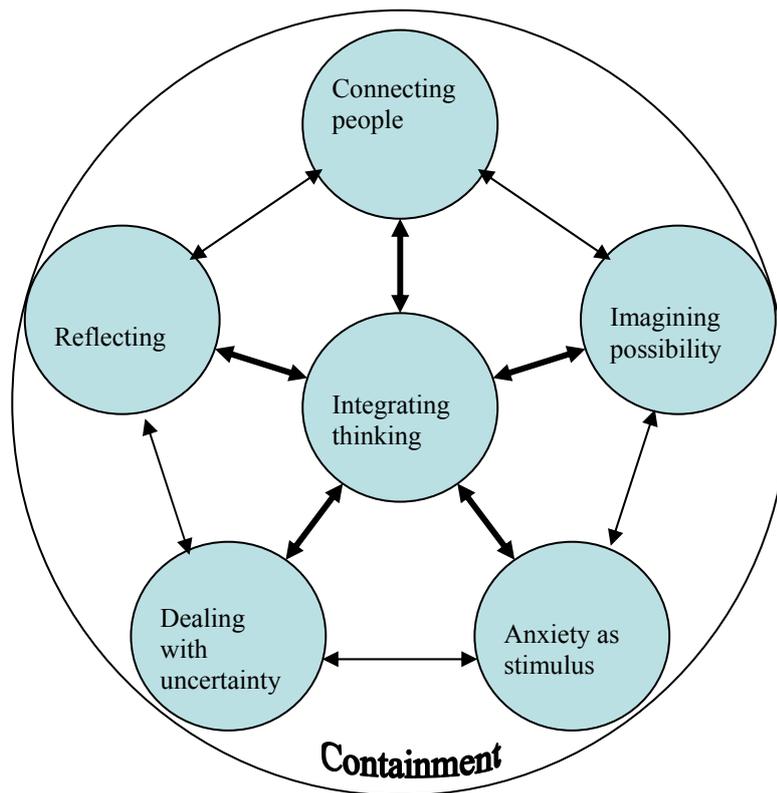
We met in Larissa's workplace and she made sure that she saved some of our refreshments to share with her staff acting out what she had narrated in her story. Larissa had undertaken a traditional form of training which now required her to return to formal learning to underpin her teaching. Learning for her occurred in social dimensions in the main with relationships critical to achieving learning. Biographical aspects were important to the authenticity of the processes of teaching and learning. I recognised many elements in Larissa's story that are important for me in teaching and learning. Nevertheless, using biography is also fraught with considerations about purpose and motivation. Larissa challenged me to reconsider how as teachers we use experiences in teaching.

I suggest that it is important to bring subjective processes to learning in terms of values, beliefs and biography because these can offer authentic and humanistic ways of engaging that develop insight and personal responsibility for change. Dialogue, from one perspective, can be viewed as being part of '*dimensions of development*' that include coming to know through examining personal assumptions, ways of thinking and taking responsibility for the '*authorship*' of personal actualisation (Taylor, 2000, pp. 159,161,162). Larissa's account has summarised the importance of emotional and biographical engagement with learners and each other as more informal and neglected forms of learning which are relevant to nurse education. However this requires authentic and reflexive responses from those facilitating such learning and not all teachers may feel ready or qualified to do this. By this I mean being able to think biographically about whom we are and what has shaped us. This is important for nursing because it helps to highlight the progression of individuals as well as the profession and can potentially help others to find points of reference to help integrate themselves when perhaps joining the healthcare system from elsewhere in the world. A view of biographical telling suggests that new stories may emerge which can be empowering (West, 2001). I proceed now to suggest ways how the interweaving of biographical experiences can make spaces compelling to learning.

## Compelling space

The participant accounts have highlighted aspects of a ‘compelling space’ which include containment and support for emotional aspects of experience, developing a different vision of oneself and relationships with others. These support learning, not in the sense of coercion, but through the creation of the desire to learn through developing an interpretive imagination and biographical processing. Developing an interpretive imagination is a first step involving examining one’s own ideas and assumptions to begin to interpret others (Howatson-Jones, 2010b). Ideas of new possibility can then begin to develop. Within such a space it becomes possible to build better relationships with one another through authentically acknowledging vulnerability and not knowing, which is a crucial part of a compelling space for learning. This space builds on Winnicott’s concept of transitional space that exists between people as they negotiate and renegotiate their place in the world (Winnicott, 1965). Key aspects of compelling space are illustrated in figure 1.

*Figure 1.* Key aspects of a compelling space (Howatson-Jones, 2010b). Used with kind permission from Learning Matters.



Integrating thinking lies at the heart of a compelling space, as the participant narratives have suggested, in the way they have tried to develop understanding as it connects to their lives. Connecting with others, reflecting and imagining are important for reaching out to inform as well as to be informed. Compelling space is found in formal and less formal situations such as teaching in practice, reviewing personal development and within spaces for research as well as the lifeworld. This suggests that compelling space can be created in both University and practice with the right facilitation and commitment from teacher and students. What is needed is a reflexive focus on

biographical elements and responses to these. Biographical approaches offer an opportunity to open up compelling spaces for learning but are reliant on teacher skill.

Lives can be drawn together through processes of biographical reflecting and imagining and, when drawn together, may collectively expand reflection and imagination as is suggested in Larissa's narration. When these connections are encompassed in a containing space that frames the processes within clear and manageable boundaries, it might be said that this is a compelling space for learning to take place. Learning becomes irresistible and undertaken for its own sake. Innovation in teaching might be better served, not through increasingly complicated technological systems but, through facilitators and tutors collaborating with learners on a more equal plane of really reflexive learning.

## Conclusion – Shaping future learning

What this paper contributes is the idea that biographical work can be used as a different pedagogy for nurses learning because it enables nurses to make sense of what they bring to learning, what they do as well as how they might develop. Such approaches have been shown to be important to emotional development, a sense of self and are an important vehicle for creating compelling spaces of learning. My argument, derived from the research, is that embedding biographical reflexivity into nurse educational provision could help to harness nurses' biographical experiences and enable nurses to use these not only in their own learning, but in helping to create more compelling spaces of learning when teaching others. Competency needs to reach further than just practical applications to include embodied responsiveness to others including patients.

## Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the contributions of her PhD supervisors Professor Linden West and Professor Susan Holmes, towards the completion of the research. She also thanks the participants for sharing their life stories which made this work possible. Lastly, she also acknowledges the constructive comments provided by the anonymous reviewers which helped to refine the paper.

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## Staying the course: Examining enablers and barriers to student success within undergraduate nursing programmes

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### Abstract

*In line with current trends towards a positive and enhancement-led perspective, this account of a research project carried out in a Scottish university considers the student nurse experience as a lens for examining retention enablers. Two phases of interviews with final year students from a diverse cohort, many of whom were adult learners, informed the development of a series of themes and recommendations for better understanding factors which encourage persistence. A combination of grounded theory thematic analysis and narrative interpretation was used in this research to encourage a rich biographical component.*

**Keywords:** retention enablers; persistence; adult learning; nurse education

### Background and context

#### *Retention and withdrawal studies in higher education*

Higher Education's long-standing interest in student retention and withdrawal is well-documented. Seminal modelling of withdrawal patterns and catalysts (Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1982, 1993; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980) has given rise to a dedicated and prolific research community which considers the potential and actual impact of various aspects of the student experience in the decision to stay on or withdraw from an academic programme of study. Bean and Metzner (1985) identify four such areas where a correlation could be noted, since corroborated by further research; academic achievement (Bennett, 2003), learner confidence and engagement (McGivney, 1996), previous educational experiences (Johnston, 2000), and

environmental variables, such as finance or employment (Lucas & Lammont, 1998; Thomas, Adams & Birchenough, 1996; Harrison, 2006).

Further work specifically identifies additional variables such as assessment and approaches to new forms of learning and teaching (Yorke, 2001; Packham, Jones, Miller & Thomas, 2004), attendance (Dancer & Fiebig, 2004), the significance of peer support and social networks (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Beder, 1997), appropriateness of choice of programme (Yorke, 1999; Davies & Elias, 2003), as well as variances in background characteristics such as gender, race, ability and work experience and the demographic characteristics of families and students' activities and prior achievements (Bank, Biddle & Slavings, 1992). All of these components are synthesised in Thomas's influential concept of 'institutional habitus' (2002), which promotes effective social integration through building academic communities and engaging students in collaborative learning and teaching activities.

Institutional habitus is notable for its focus on widening participation amongst 'non-traditional' students. The conceptual framework considers types of scaffolding and provision that institutions can implement in promoting retention, and in affording an opportunity to ask 'in what ways can institutions support non-traditional students to succeed?' (Thomas, 2002, p. 425). Such strengths highlight the research and framework as instrumental in providing scope to better understand the complex nature of the adult learner experience, and a context in which to locate the learning experiences and changing dynamics of the nursing student journey.

#### *Nursing context*

Attrition studies of nursing students comprises a considerable body of literature within mainstream withdrawal research, though the rate of students withdrawing from nursing programmes within the UK is favourable in comparison with trends in other countries and other programmes (Hall, 2001; Prymachuk, Eaton, & Littlewood, 2009). Significantly, however, outcomes of the nursing-specific research not only improve understanding of the student nurse experience and factors influencing their decision to stay on or withdraw from a programme, but have tangible implications for funding, future work-force planning, and the ongoing development and implementation of effective student support.

As with mainstream withdrawal studies, evidence from research into the experiences of nursing students suggests the interplay of a variety of complex and inter-linked variables (Glossop, 2002). Within the literature, the familiar causes of academic failure (White, Williams & Green, 1999), balancing personal commitments with work and study (Glossop, 2001) and the impact of financial difficulties (Glossop, 2002; Last & Fulbrook, 2003) all feature. They are cited as potentially having significant enough an effect on the student experience to precipitate withdrawal from a programme of study.

The literature also suggests that there are additional factors which affect the student nurse experience and which may impact on the decision to continue on or withdraw from a programme in a particular way. For example, the pivotal role played by placement, (Last & Fulbrook, 2003; Bouden, 2008) and how this may affect levels of stress amongst nursing students (Steele, Lauder, Caperchione & Anastasi, 2005) appear key.

*Common themes*

Two central themes in withdrawal and retention studies are the roles played by effective engagement in the first year of study (at whatever academic level) and clear expectations on the part of the student. It is widely recognised that engagement within the first year of study has a significant effect on student retention and progression (Yorke, 2001), as well as on the longitudinal learning journey (Yorke & Longden, 2008; Pitkeithly & Prosser, 2001). It has also been generally agreed that the first year is a pivotal juncture in the creation of learner identities (Trotter & Roberts, 2006) in the context of adaptation to new teaching, learning and assessment methods (McInnis, 2001). Indeed, in Scotland, the first year has become a specific area of dedicated focus within the Quality Assurance Agency's Enhancement Themes (QAA, 2005).

For nursing students, this need for integration additionally extends to professional requirements, competencies and identity. Joining a degree programme for a nursing student requires more than just joining an academic institution, and students must adapt to learning in both an academic and clinical setting at an early stage (Carr, 2005; Andrew, McGuinness, Reid & Corcoran, 2007, 2008). This balance of the clinical as well as the academic in terms of skills and knowledge is a concurrent theme throughout literature surrounding the student nurse experience. It carries significance, not only for learning, but also the creation and management of the dual identities of clinician and student, which propose challenges for any student, but arguably more so for adult learners who may have a variety of responsibilities and priorities to manage.

The complementary theme of expectations stands alongside issues raised in considering the first year experience. Unclear expectations and lack of preparedness on the part of the student have been identified as a core part of the complex and interlinked processes which can influence disengagement and eventual withdrawal (Ozga & Sukhandan, 1998). However, the responsibility for managing expectations does not lie solely with the student. Fitzgibbon and Prior (2006) acknowledge a mismatch between the expectations outlined by the student and the institution, and both Lowe and Cook (2003) and Ramsden (2008) underscore the duty of care placed on the institution to offer targeted, accurate and supportive information, advice and guidance in assisting new students to clarify expectations and negotiate the transitional space of the new academic environment. For those students returning to or embarking on study later in life, this is clearly of vital importance.

In the case of nursing students, distinct modes of learning such as Problem Based Learning (PBL) are a central feature of many nursing programmes (Barret, 2005; Murray, 2003). However, adult learners returning to study, who may not have had any direct experience of this type of learning may not necessarily have particularly clear expectations (as borne out in the interviews conducted as part of this research). By engaging in this type of scenario-based research exercise, students are given an opportunity to take responsibility and ownership of both learning and the decision-making process within the context of a shared hypothetical clinical situation. This clearly has advantage in terms of engagement, helping learners to develop confidence, and vital skills for the profession, but in order to fully participate, the roles and outcomes must be made clear to students in advance.

*Characteristics of withdrawal studies*

Though many themes run throughout the vast body of research on retention, progression and withdrawal, the only real consensus is the acknowledgement of a hugely complex and multi-faceted explanation for attrition trends.

Tumen, Shulruf and Hattie (2008) have suggested that there are three types of withdrawal study: firstly, largely demographic; based on the characteristics of the student. Secondly, those based on the student's academic achievement and approach to study, and thirdly, those specific to the area or subject of study. However, a fourth subset of studies looks at the role played by the institution: its responsibilities, the systematic data it makes available for the purposes of research (Caison, 2007; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005) and what action/ intervention can be put in place to better understand or even actively discourage withdrawal. The research which will be discussed within this paper is a fusion of all these types of study.

By drawing on institutional data at an overall population level, we have been able to build a comparative picture of the characteristics and persistence of the students involved in the research (according to the first and fourth types of study). We were also able to investigate, through interview, students' individual learning preferences and approaches (as per the second type), and incorporate within this their experiences of being embedded within a specific subject discipline and prospective profession (the third).

Methodological criticisms have been made of many withdrawal studies, in that data is often collected after withdrawal has occurred (so-called 'post-mortem' studies), and that those students who contribute to such research are a self-selecting sample, and have also already, arguably, disengaged from the institution. Furthermore, a re-conceptualisation of the 'deficit discourse' (Lawrence, 2005) has been identified as one way of taking a more pro-active understanding of what can practically be done to promote positive student choice and autonomy in decision-making, rather than focussing on the existence of barriers and obstacles.

### *Student persistence*

As with mainstream retention studies, increasingly, research surrounding the experience of nursing students has turned its attention from deficit approaches to focussing on retention enablers, such as the role played by key staff in delivering information, advice and guidance (Bouden, 2008; Royal College of Nursing (RCN), 2008). An accompanying trend has developed throughout contemporary retention, progression and withdrawal research to see withdrawal as, for some, a positive choice; one which underscores ownership of an informed decision-making process and, thus, promotes flexibility in future learning and learner autonomy (Quinn, 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

Within this research literature, varying terms are used to represent 'at risk' students; i.e. those considering withdrawal. These adapted terms sit under the broad auspices of 'student persistence', a term which itself has roots in Pascarella and Tintos' work of the 1980s and 90s. They include 'student doubters' (used in some UK studies, and arguably a terminologically problematic label which risks pathologisation), 'student resilience' and 'student enablers'. References to 'dropping out' still persist, despite having been aligned with the 'deficit discourse'.

### **The research**

A research project within a Scottish university sought to identify some of the aspects of support and the overarching student experience which contribute to resilience. The aim

of the research was to better understand the factors which allowed students to overcome potential difficulties and resolve to persist in their studies. The research questions were:

- How might features of the holistic nursing student experience allow us to understand retention enablers?
- Which personal or institutional factors contribute to students considering withdrawal?
- Which personal or institutional factors facilitate student retention?

The research was conducted by two members of academic staff in the School of Health at the university over two consecutive academic years (08/09 and 09/10) and comprised two cycles (phases) of data collection. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with final year nursing students in both phases.

Appendix one shows the questions used in both phases of the interviews. Following a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987), the researchers sought to identify a number of shared experiences amongst the participating students which would constitute thematic commonalities. The use of grounded theory permitted the researchers, through analysis and coding, to establish patterns of recurrence and significance amongst factors which influenced retention from within the student interviews (the data) (Stern, 1985). The nature of the research area itself is particularly suited to such a methodology as grounded theory allows for focus on meaning through interpretive understanding (Charmaz, 2003), and looking for this meaning in the shared experience of the students provides an opportunity to identify areas for intervention, as well as to consider the individual lived experience.

As a result of the rich, biographical nature of much of the data collected, the researchers were also keen to incorporate an element of narrative analysis, not least because of the central importance of making meaning from direct experience within this methodology (Mishler, 1986). In addition, we also wished to incorporate the notion of temporality; the roles of past and present in the formation of the learner identity/identities (Williams & Keady, 2008; Bruner, 2004) and in the students' reflections and projections towards their future career.

Thematic and narrative analyses can be combined to illustrative effect (Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke & Townend, 2010) in facilitating capture of both the communal and individual experience. Both methods strongly uphold the cornerstone of interpretivism within the postmodern tradition (Denzin, 1989), providing an opportunity to question assumptions and offer a space for conceptual re-building within the context of the lived experience (Derrida, 1972). The researchers considered it important to foreground the biographical aspect of the students' identities by using narrative analysis to consider transformational learning and the creation of learner identities, as well as to provide scope to draw recommendations from the identified themes, and thus encourage discussion. The methodology, therefore, borrows elements from both thematic analysis and narrative approaches.

## *Methodology*

### *Interviews*

Ethical consent was acquired from within the institution and an email circulated to all final year nursing students, inviting them to participate in a short, informal interview about their experiences of learning. Students in the final year of their degree comprised a unique population, who inhabited the liminal state between student and nurse, novice

clinician and professional. This transient phase was of particular interest in that students at this stage of study were equipped with the opportunity to reflect on their university experiences to date, discuss reasons for considering withdrawal and what consequently made them stay, but also to project to the future and registration. At this juncture (spring), students were approximately one month away from their final placement, and approximately eight months from graduation and entry to the nursing register. As a consequence, the students interviewed spoke about still feeling very much a part of the institution.

As part of the call for participants, the researchers highlighted that the research was, in particular, interested in the experiences of those students who had made a conscious, positive decision to stay on their programme. It is worth noting that by choosing to take part in the research, the students who opted in were essentially a self-selecting sample.

In the first phase of research, six third year students responded to the call for participants and took part in interviews. All six noted that at some point in their three years of study they had been close to withdrawal, but had subsequently chosen to stay. All students were given participant information, the opportunity to discuss any queries about the logistics or intent of the research, and consented to the recording and transcription of the interviews in which they took part. A summary table of these students is presented below:

*Table 1.* Summary table of students in phase one (all female)

ID	Phase	>21	Prior learning
1	1	N	School
2	1	Y	Work
3	1	N	School
4	1	Y	College
5	1	Y	College
6	1	Y	College

Source: Authors

The researchers conducted and transcribed the interviews. We both then individually read all transcripts, noted observations as regarded themes (at this stage engaging in open coding to identify categories), and also recorded contextual, biographical components of the interviews which we thought important to include in locating student 'stories' of identity creation, transformational learning and lifelong learning. These biographical components enhanced the richness of the theoretical and selective coding processes. The researchers then met to discuss and cross-reference our interpretation of the interview content and mooted categories to establish emerging themes and compare narrative components. Overall, five key themes emerged in the first phase.

The same process to recruit students in phase one was also used in phase two at the same juncture in the following academic year (spring 2010). Five students responded and took part in interviews. These interviews used the schedule from phase one, and in addition, in adopting a grounded theory, iterative approach, also asked students to comment on the five themes identified from the initial analysis. The purpose of including these themes was to seek comment from the students interviewed in the latter phase as to their perceived value of the continued relevance of the phase one themes.

A summary table of phase two students is presented below:

*Table 2.* Summary table of students in phase two (all female)

ID	Phase	>21	Prior learning
7	2	Y	College
8	2	Y	College
9	2	Y	Work
10	2	N	School
11	2	N	School

Source: Authors

## Discussion

### *Emerging themes*

A number of factors emerged that appear to play a major role in positively influencing students' decisions to stay on their course. Themes one to five emerged during phase one of the research. As noted, students' perceptions of the validity of these themes were sought in phase two, and observations are made within the discussion (and summarised in the thematic matrix in Table three) on how these were either corroborated or seemed to increase in complexity. Themes six and seven were additional themes that were identified from analysis of the phase two transcripts. A third phase was not planned as sufficient saturation had been established within the data during cycles one and two. Furthermore, the logistics of incorporating additional narrative components risked the possibility of excessive detail without scope for mapping themes to experience.

### *One: The value of problem based learning*

All students noted the usefulness of problem based learning (PBL) as a learning strategy and its effectiveness in developing critical skills, learner confidence in using research to inform decision-making and enhancing students' ability to participate in group work. Students discussed the importance of this critical, evidence-based approach to problem solving in developing effective skills for practice:

I have actually seen (PBL) used in clinical situations... it's not that you go out equipped and you've actually got all the knowledge that you need. It's do you have the ability to find out? (Student 2 – phase one)

This investment in professional qualities and attributes, in Student 2's eyes, validated this pedagogical approach for her as a learner. As an adult learner, and with considerable work experience in the clinical area, she acknowledged the significance of developing effective communication skills, confidence and autonomy as core attributes for effective engagement in learning and practice.

In this context, other participants highlighted inherent value in the scope for self-directed study and active participation in learning afforded by PBL, in the appreciation of a move away from traditional, didactic information delivery modes and, again, alignment with professional attributes:

PBL I like in the sense that you can split up all the work. And go away and get stuff and come together. (Student 7 – phase two)

[66] Victoria Boyd and Stephanie Mckendry

It's all our ideas...and then we go away and learn it and it's our work. And instead of somebody just standing there lecturing and then you going away and doing it on your own, everybody comes back and feeds back their opinion and their perspective and ...I really like it. (Student 3 – phase one)

Table 3. Comparison mapping of themes from phases one and two

Theme	Phase 1	Phase 2
PBL	Educational value noted by all students, even if purpose/ rationale not immediately obvious.	Recurring theme. Lack of clarity of learning outcomes a key feature of students' reflections.
Role of placement	Universally raised. Positive and negative aspects highlighted as key factors in decision to stay on course.	Reinforced as pivotal aspect of learning, identity formation and motivation.
Readiness for practice	Students recognised learning with their 3 years of study, but were still apprehensive about final registration.	Pre-registration anxiety and uncertainty widespread in phase two.
Career as motivator	A key motivator for all students which acted as a focus in times of doubt.	Corroborated as a main theme, but with more visible stratifications: is motivation vocation based or strategic employment decision?
Support of staff	Staff commended by those students who had experienced difficulties in both academic and personal aspects of student life.	Supported as a key reason for students staying on their programme. Staff encouragement and empathy praised.
Staged persistence	N/A	Emerged through biographies in phase two. Many students spoke of setting short-term goals during difficult times to enable completion.
Peer support	N/A	Not evidenced in phase one, but central to many students' experience in phase two.

Source: Authors

Both of the students quoted above noted an ownership of the learning process (e.g. 'it's our work'), which was important for them as adaptable, responsive learners and clinicians (Student 7 having joined the programme after raising a family, working and studying at a local college, and Student 3 having joined directly from school). Approaching the end of their third year of study and nearing registration, this alluded to an increased sense of identification with the autonomy of professional values.

Indeed, this value placed on the skills developed, according to the students as a direct result of participation in PBL, interestingly was not acknowledged until third year, with many of the students citing challenges with the learning method until then.

...once you're at the end, you see everything coming together. I hated PBL! But now I understand that the idea of that was to teach you how to continue you learning...even after you've finished university. (Student 5 – phase one)

Again, having joined the programme from college, Student 5 as a mature learner took time to adjust to this new independent way of learning. However, on reflection in her interview, she stated that in the interests of the professional competencies which the method afforded, the pedagogy was well-placed and highly valued within the curriculum.

From a logistical point of view, students noted that where explicit links were made with programme content, engagement with the process of PBL was more straightforward, as this facilitated prioritisation and focus within a large volume of programme material. Where this focus was not present, students suggested that a lack of clarity in learning outcomes meant that they were at risk of disengaging with the process:

Sometimes, you're not 100% sure of what it is they (staff) want you to get out of it (PBL). I know it's all supposed to be so that you go off and learn what you want to learn...but sometimes I think it's good for someone to turn around and say, you know, you should have learned this, this, this and this. (Student 6 – phase one)

I don't think they ever really explained problem based learning to us. Why it was useful and... I do think it's a good thing. But I think they should maybe just give a lecture and say, this is why we do PBL, because we want you to get to a stage when you've finished university that you do continue to learn. (Student 5 – phase one)

In recognising a need for transparently articulated purpose earlier in the degree programme, Student 5 reflected on the assumptions made about clarity and expectations within learning, which map clearly to concerns raised within student retention literature (Fitzgibbon & Prior, 2006; Lowe & Cook, 2003; Ramsden, 2008).

#### *Two: The pivotal role of the placement experience*

Unsurprisingly, all students commented on the crucial role played by placement learning. Both positive and negative placement experiences were underscored, and the students demonstrated a pragmatic approach to the evaluation of these. Students 3 and 11 noted that although challenging, balancing placement and university offered a necessary variation in routine and stimulus within the programme; an aspect of the course that they valued and regarded as vital in maintaining interest and motivation.

I enjoy it all, I like being on placement...I mean, there's good points and bad points about being on placement ...but I do love getting to do things. (Student 3 – phase one)

I love being at uni, but then at certain points I'm so fed up of uni, I'm like 'I just want to go to placement!'. When you first come off of placement going back to uni's hard... you want your twelve hour shifts and to chat with patients and to get your hands on and do something, whereas uni's obviously all academic. (Student 11 – phase two)

Both Students 3 and 11 were younger students who had joined the programme from school, and for whom a range of learning experiences was important in ensuring

effective and continued commitment, echoing the significance of two of Bean and Metzner's (1985) themes, namely learner confidence and engagement and the significance of prior educational experiences on shaping approaches/ adoption of new ones.

Students recognized the importance of good placement experiences in buoying their enthusiasm, and the potential for negative placement experiences to play a role in making them question their motivations and commitment. As Student 6 stated, this need not even be from personal experience, but rather as a direct result of knowing about other students' experiences.

I haven't had a placement that's been absolutely disastrous, which I think has been good. And I know there have been a few people who have had that experience... and that's really rocked their confidence in their abilities to do things. (Student 6 – phase one)

The ownership of learning which emerged in the first theme related to PBL was also present in students' statements of assuming control of opportunities during placement, in the interests of maximising their inclusion in different clinical scenarios.

... with placement, you just have to make the most of it. And ...if you see an opportunity that's there on the ward, if they're going down to theatre maybe, or going with the incontinence nurse for a day... just ask, you know. (Student 1 – phase one)

I've had really good mentors that have supported me. And I'm not scared to ask either. If I don't really know something or remember how to do something I'll always ask. (Student 8 – phase two)

Student 8 raised an important issue related to her confidence that was not a universal attribute for other participants. Student 8's occupational background was in the Royal Air Forces, and as such she was very self-aware and confident. But for other students (notably younger students, wary of repercussions from vocalizing negative placement experiences, for example) looking for learning opportunities may not be such a straightforward process. The central importance of personality, identity, and the arguably strategic approach to learning of seeking out new and diverse learning experiences on placement underscore the students' recognition of their inhabitation of a transient space between novice/ student and professional/ nurse.

### *Three: Playing nurse?*

Another key similarity across all students' experiences was a feeling of not quite being ready for registration/ practice, and the uncertainty associated with the liminal space between the two identities. Though in their third year of study, students could reflect on their accomplishments to date, yet the prospect of being a fully registered staff nurse and the associated responsibilities weighed heavily. In both phases of the research, many of the students pinned hope on their final year placement in consolidating their knowledge, experience and confidence:

... my placement this year was quite stressful because obviously ...I'm nearly a staff nurse so I need to go out and be a staff nurse, as opposed to just playing nurse. (Student 3 – phase one)

I feel at the moment that, personally, I'm maybe not at a stage where if someone said to me, 'well, tomorrow you can be a nurse', that I would actually be ready. I feel like I definitely need the next twenty odd weeks that we've got left. (Student 6 – phase one)

In the case of all the interviewees across both phases of the research, the obvious enthusiasm of the students was tempered by anxiety and uncertainty in their own abilities and the associated professional responsibilities that entry to the register necessitates. In this way, the significance of ‘institutional habitus’ (Thomas, 2002) in fostering engagement and familiarity extends from beyond the academic sphere to also apply to the clinical, and as such, potentially increases its scope and function.

#### *Four: Nursing career as motivator*

In both phases of the research, several students spoke not only of the importance of nursing as an aspiration in choosing their area of study/ profession, but also of the pivotal role it played in maintaining momentum and motivation when they had considered withdrawal. For many students, their commitment to the course and academic achievement was based on a love of caring, and a desire to become a registered nurse.

I just like looking after people, I like caring for people. I just think the whole idea of being a nurse...I just love it. (Student 3 – phase one)

All I really want to do is care for people, and nurse them. And being on a ward is totally different maybe to what I thought but it’s good, it’s positive. It’s what I want to do. (Student 8 – phase two)

Again, the importance of personal attributes was raised as significant for Students 3 and 8. Discourses of ‘love’ and ‘caring’ highlighted their enthusiasm and commitment, and the significance of this in their persistence on the programme of study.

Not all students enjoyed the academic demands of being a student nurse, though they recognised its necessity. Despite alignment of key academic skills within programme documentation to core activities of the profession, many students remain more motivated by the clinical aspects of the course (and profession) than the academic ones:

That’s the thing that’s keeping me going. The fact that I want to be a nurse. And I’ve been working towards this goal for the last three and a half years. It’s that prize at the end of it as far as I’m concerned. (Student 7 – phase 2)

Interestingly, during phase two of the research, it became apparent that some students were taking a more pragmatic approach to their career choice, and that the career of nursing as a motivator was more complex and comprised more dimensions than initially established in the phase one interviews. Without exception, the fact that a nursing degree leads/ or will very likely lead to a career in nursing was of huge importance to each student. For some, the strong desire for a caring career was the most important motivator and was described in emotional and passionate language or in terms of a personal desire or attribute ‘to care’ (as quotations above illustrate). For others, however, the outcome was held in much more pragmatic terms; a good career with strong prospects and many options. Notably Student 11, a younger student who had joined her programme from school commented:

I made a very rational decision on doing nursing. I wrote a list of pros and cons and I just decided I was going to be a nurse. (Student 11 – phase two)

Returning to the measured aspect of her nature at several points during the interview, Student 11 actually documented her dispassionate approach as an advantage in practice,

[70] Victoria Boyd and Stephanie Mckendry

and an attribute that in fact enabled her to perform her role in a more effective, professional and less subjective manner:

...it was just an inclination, I just decided I was going to be a nurse. But I don't think it makes me any worse a nurse, and sometimes I think it might make me better cos I'm not sooo desperate to do it...and I think sometimes that kind of desperation might affect people in not such a positive way. (Student 11 – phase two)

The financial opportunities involved in the choice of career were also significant for many of the students, notably those interviewed in phase two of the research who discussed the current economic uncertainty and the importance of the expectations of their families, a key feature for many adult learners (Elliot & Brna, 2009). In the students' views, becoming a nurse would afford a lifestyle that would not have been achievable otherwise. The long-term prospect of increased future earnings allowed both Students 7 and 9 to make negotiated, short-term sacrifices with their families, and additionally kept their enthusiasm on track in times of doubt.

And I know that once I get a job as, a nurse, then my family finances will be better. As well as getting job satisfaction I'm going to have money. To do the things that I want to do with my family. (Student 7 – phase two)

And I've apologised probably about ten million times to them... especially like last Christmas, because we had our exam in January...I went over for Christmas dinner to my mum and dad's, and then that was it. I got my head back in the books...so, things like that. But I'll pay them back. (Student 9 – phase two)

#### *Five: Support of staff in times of crisis*

As previously noted, all students had at some point considered withdrawing from their programme of study, and many highlighted moments in their student journey which were particularly problematic. During these times, the support and guidance of members of academic staff was underscored as vital in enabling continuation.

I had to leave and take time out, and the only reason I came back was because I was supported by the staff. (Student 3 – phase one)

I did actually have some quite serious family circumstances. And lots of people I think possibly expected to drop out. But I didn't. And I'm so glad that I didn't. I got lots of support...I got the support to do things the way I wanted to. (Student 2 – phase one)

This empathy with the complexity of the student experience also extends to placement, and the key role which clinical mentors play not only in facilitating learning but also providing support. Again, in times of difficulty, students noted how central mentors had been in influencing their decision to stay on the course:

There was a family tragedy, and I was just miserable. I spoke to the uni because I needed time off...but I didn't...I told them about it, and they were really lovely. I was on placement at the time and my mentor was brilliant as well...if I looked like I was about to drop, she would give me a little 5 minutes to go and collect myself, just that time to sort myself out... (Student 11 – phase two)

Students commended the richness of support when communication between placement areas and the institution was transparent, again insinuating that the boundaries between the academic and clinical/ professional were blurred and mutable.

*Six: Staged persistence/ sticking on in*

In phase two of the research, students spoke of being able to continue on their course despite difficult personal circumstances/ troubling placements or problems with academic demands by crossing small hurdles and taking a staged approach. Students used language of persistence or perseverance in describing how they set themselves goals (e.g. 'by the end of April', 'give it til Easter').

I've just told myself by the end of April all I've got left is that one little essay. (Student 7 – phase two)

I decided I was going to give it to Christmas, then I was going to give it to Easter...then I was going to give it to the end of the summer. (Student 11 – phase two)

For Students 7 and 11 above, observations about innate characteristics were also key; their ability to be persistent (or show 'stubbornness', as they both said) and also to manage time/ workload effectively. These attributes helped the students to negotiate each barrier, and persist until the next stage, before evaluating whether they chose to stay on the course:

The only thing that's kept me here is my total stubbornness and determination because I do want to be a nurse, you know. (Student 7 – phase two)

It was just stubbornness. It was 'I'll give it til Easter' because I don't want to...I suppose I don't want to fail., and I didn't want to disappoint people...but I didn't want to disappoint myself either, because I knew I'd probably regret it, if I did. (Student 11 – phase two)

*Seven: Peer support*

Also within phase two of the research, students increasingly described how they encouraged one another to stay on their programme when experiencing academic, personal or placement-related difficulties; a recurring topic in much of the retention literature (Wilcox et al, 2005; Beder, 1997). Interestingly, none of the six students who took part in phase one attached any significance to the role played by peer networks in assuring persistence, despite it being included in the interview schedule.

Those students who noted the importance of friends and classmates related how these groups were one of the main reasons that they had decided against withdrawal from the programme. Student 7 discussed the importance of emotional support as well as academic:

And my friends. If I didn't have them... we all just pull each other through and help each other out. With physical things and emotional things as well. Even just to have a rant with them, you know. (Student 7 – phase two)

Many students also recognised these supportive and encouraging qualities in themselves, and reflected on how they had assumed their own role of empowering, empathically in the mutually nurturing relationship. Both Students 8 and 9 were mature learners, and confident in their roles and identities as learners, and as empowered leaders within their peer groups:

I did encourage her to stay on, well not just kind of encourage her. I told her she would be mad to leave and while she's nearly finished. (Student 8 – phase two)

[72] Victoria Boyd and Stephanie Mckendry

I remember one of the girls saying, in third year, I'm not going to do the degree. I was like, 'yes you are! I see you as a specialist nurse. You've got to do this. I know you can do this'. I think sometimes you just need someone to say, you're doing amazing. (Student 9 – phase two)

There appears to be a complexity of reasons behind the formation of peer networks; assessment driven, understanding course content, or socialisation and integration, for example. Students also spoke of the importance of enduring friendships, and the need to maintain these throughout the course.

I said 'Let's do this 1<sup>st</sup> module and see how we get on. Because we've got a good wee group. Let's do it together. And we can help each other out.' (Student 9 – phase two)

I remember the people I met on the first day...I think those are probably the people I speak to the most, even now...apart from people on my course that I see every day...but people that I met, you know, within first year are still friends. (Student 11 – phase two)

## Conclusions

Analysis of research from the two phases enabled the researchers to gather and interrogate the experiences, perspectives and reflections of students at a key transitional point in learning and the development of their professional identity. Particular areas of interest that were examined included the characteristics, both personal and institutional, which influenced students' decisions to stay on their programme of study. Whether these factors, as enablers, have motivational aspects, are personal in nature or have resonance in institutional logistics, the emergent themes resonate with the key areas identified both within mainstream withdrawal research, as well as work which has been more nursing specific.

For example, the students evidenced the importance of adaptation to new forms of learning and teaching in embracing PBL (Yorke, 2001; Packham et al, 2004), reinforced appropriateness of choice of programme in using a career in nursing as a motivator (Yorke, 1999; Davies & Elias, 2003) as well as the undeniable impact of personal attributes and circumstances (Bank et al, 1992). In nursing terms, the complex nature of developing, managing and nurturing dual identities (Carr, 2005; Andrew et al, 2007, 2008) was also well-documented. However, additional considerations for ongoing support may also be shaped by new perspectives of staged persistence, and the central theme of balance; that from the shared biographies of these students it is vital to consider the progress, engagement and support of students as a transitional continuum within a specific and complex discipline.

The 'stories' of the research participants which illustrate this continuum are populated with accounts of negotiating support to overcome personal, academic or professional obstacles; of accessing flexible, tailored and appropriate provision to facilitate achievement of 'the prize at the end of it all'; of their own personal resilience, and the complexity of motivations which enable them to achieve. In moving away from the 'deficit discourse', the joint responsibility of both the student and institution must be acknowledged. Moreover, scope must be attributed to both when considering the provision of transparency of choice in learning experience and the development of professional identity in nursing education.

## Recommendations

Based on the interviews and emergent themes, and in line with common themes from the literature, a number of recommendations can be made towards providing effective support across the learning continuum. Although the research was located within nursing, these recommendations, no matter how simplistic, have implications for all students on professionally aligned degree courses.

Firstly, positive feedback was requested by the majority of the research participants as a possible mechanism for fostering engagement and improving learner/ professional confidence. Students commented that, although constructive, most feedback had highlighted areas for improvement rather than of strength, and certainly at the juncture of joining the nursing profession they were keen to know where they had performed well, in addition to areas of their performance which they needed to address.

The need for institutional recognition of logistical considerations inherent amongst the student population was also of vital importance for the research participants. A spectrum of responsibilities is characteristic of a diverse student demographic, including issues surrounding financial constraints, part time work commitments and family/ caring commitments, for example. Students underscored an absolute need for the institution to be aware of the potential (and often unpredictable) effect of these facets of their lives on their study, suggesting that staff could adopt a practical role in signposting to further, appropriate information.

As a result of some of the uncertainties surrounding raising concerns about placement learning, the students also mentioned scope for a generic feedback mechanism, to offer an anonymised facility for students to share learning or placement anxieties or uncertainties. This may take the form of an impartial, pastoral adviser or an online environment, and was highlighted as one way of allowing students to raise issues which they may find difficult to discuss in other fora.

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[74] Victoria Boyd and Stephanie Mckendry

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## Life history approaches to access and retention of non-traditional students in higher education: A cross-European approach

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### Abstract

*Higher education participation has become an important focus for policy debate as well as for scholarly research. Partly this results from ongoing attempts to expand the higher education system in line with wider policies promoting a 'knowledge economy'; and partly it results from widespread policy concerns for equity and inclusion. In both cases, researchers and policymakers alike have tended to focus on access and entry to the system, with much less attention being paid to the distribution of outcomes from the system. This paper reports on a multi-country study that was aimed at critically understanding the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education, and in particular on the factors that helped promote retention. In doing so, the study straddles the sociology of social reproduction and the psychosociology of learner transformations.*

**Keywords:** higher education; adult students; retention; Bourdieu; Winnicott

### Introduction

Higher education participation has become an important focus for policy debate as well as for scholarly research. Currently, for example, the Council of the European Union has adopted a series of policies around the 'social dimension of higher education' as part of the Bologna Process, aimed at 'raising aspirations and increasing access to

higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds' as part of the process of university 'modernization' in Europe (Council of the European Union, 2010, p. 6). Until recently, discussions of equity and inclusion in higher education tended to focus on access and entry to the system, with much less attention being paid to the distribution of outcomes from the system. This paper reports on a multi-country study that was aimed at critically understanding the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education, and in particular on the factors that helped promote retention. In doing so, our study straddled the sociology of social reproduction and the psychosociology of learner transformations in an attempt to examine the relationships between agency, structure and identity as they play out in students' lives.

The paper draws on the experience of the RANLHE project, a seven-country study of retention and access for non-traditional learners in higher education. Our main concern here is to reflect on the value of life history approaches in tackling this subject. We have reported elsewhere on other analyses of student, academic and administrative staff and institutional data (see the project website at <http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl/>), and will therefore provide only a brief summary of our overall approach. Each partner researched three case study institutions which reflected the different types of universities in their countries, for example, reform or elite; public or private. The prime focus of the research is on the student experience and how adults perceive themselves as learners. Using biographical narratives we interviewed students from four different categories: those in their final year, those who leave but return to study later, those that drop out as well as following a cohort, longitudinally, from first to final year, over three cycles of interviews.

The paper presents reflections on the life history approach that we adopted, with illustrations taken from our student data from Britain, in order to extend our presentation of the method. While the project was transnational, each national team analysed the data it had collected for its home country; and because of the challenges of translation and comparison across languages and systems, we are not yet in a position to offer a transnational account of students' experiences. However, brief reference is made to the wider context and significance of the study towards the end of the article.

### **The RANLHE project**

Although our evidence here comes mainly from Britain, the research involved eight partners from seven different countries: England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Scotland, Spain and Sweden. The main research questions concerned (a) the relative position of non-traditional students in different European systems; (b) the extent to which access and retention of non-traditional students are treated as distinctive policy concerns; and (c) whether particular interventions are believed to affect successful access and retention for non-traditional students. While we do not accept all of Tinto's arguments about retention and success, like many other researchers we see student integration as critical in understanding retention, which therefore led us to focus on the extent to which people see themselves as belonging in university, and as inhabiting comfortably the transitional status of studenthood (Tinto 1975, 1987).

This interest in integration led us in turn to explore what promotes or limits the construction of a learner identity among non-traditional adult students. Our definition of 'non-traditional' was pragmatic, recognising the variety of 'normal' pathways into seven different higher education systems. Issues of class, gender, ethnicity and age were important in our definition of 'non-traditional' students, which primarily rested on

easily-defined categories such as adult entrants, first-generation students, or single parents; and some categories whose definition is problematic, such as people with disabilities. An identity as non-traditional may in itself form part of the integration process which enables people to become effective learners and which promotes or inhibits completion of higher education (HE), so we were also interested in how our learners defined their own position as students.

The following section explores the theoretical and methodological approaches used by all the research partners. Theoretically, we adopted an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on a number of key concepts from sociology, psychology and social history. In particular, we adopted a small number of 'sensitising concepts', which were intended to offer the eight teams of researchers 'a general sense of reference and guidance', which we could 'use to think with' across the project, but not follow blindly through the eight different sets of national experiences (see Blumer, 1954, p. 7). From sociology we took Bourdieu's ideas of *habitus* as a way of exploring the social and cultural worlds – dispositions, in Bourdieu's terms - of non-traditional students, and from psychoanalysis we drew on Donald Winnicott's notion of *transitional space* as a way of understanding the university. While we do not discuss his work further in this paper, we also drew on the writing of Axel Honneth (1995, 2007), who has explored the idea of *recognition* as an important aspect of full community membership. To achieve this, the project partners developed in-depth life history methods to illuminate and theorise the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in adult student's lives.

### Life history methods in transnational research

Life history or biographical research (and for present purposes we are using these terms interchangeably, which can be a point of contention for some (Merrill & West, 2009)) is by no means a single, unified field, with its own clearly defined and universally accepted methods. It has its origins in a number of different disciplines and theoretical approaches. While life history methods were pioneered in Znaniecki's early work on Polish peasant immigrants in Chicago, which belongs broadly within the interpretative tradition of symbolic interactionism, similar approaches were developed within disciplines such as anthropology and social history, often inspired by semi-political desires to record lives and cultures that are seen as neglected or misrepresented for one reason or another (see Thompson, 1978, p. 52-60).

This approach has become remarkably popular in recent years, for a number of reasons. Partly, biographical research has benefited from the wider 'cultural turn' in the social sciences, with its focus on language and narrative. It speaks to a humanist emphasis on 'lived experience', as well as to interpretative concerns with understanding meaning and subjectivity as key dimensions of people's identity (Merrill, 1999, p. 45-51). It may have a particular appeal for adult education researchers who are also adult education teachers, identifying strongly and personally with their students.

Second, biographical research is highly compatible with other approaches to analysing the life course. This can be very helpful in helping to explain why significant episodes of learning are often most apparent at turning points. These are particularly so at significant moments of personal change, which tend to foreground issues of identity for the person (Biesta, Field, Hodkinson, Macleod & Goodson, 2011); or even more fundamentally, perhaps, can pose ontological questions of selfhood (West, 1996). The most charged turning points may help promote reflexivity about identity which then provides a basis for what we have described as narrative learning. They are therefore

extremely important in our account of significant changes in someone's experiences in prompting or constraining learning.

Biographical approaches thus allow researchers to explore the meanings and importance that people attach to particular changes in their lives, including those that have to do with transitions between different life stages, which we probably expect to go through at some time as we grow older, and those that involve significant and often unexpected challenges to someone's status and role. Both force us to ask who we are, and who we should relate to and how, requiring us to reconsider more or less explicitly our capacity for learning from and for our lives (Field, Gallacher & Ingram, 2009).

The method's popularity also reflects the broad socio-cultural changes that such contemporary sociologists as Giddens and Beck have emphasised in their work on institutionalised reflexivity. While people have always experienced their biographies as a field of learning, in late modernity 'transitions have to be anticipated and coped with, and ... personal identity is liable to be the result of long and protracted learning processes' (Alheit, 1995, p. 59). Moreover, these learning processes take place in circumstances where routine and habit have been devalued: we cannot use templates inherited from the past to anticipate an uncertain and rapidly changing future. Biographical learning therefore becomes 'a self-willed, "autopoietic" accomplishment on the part of active subjects' (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 17). If we wish to understand learning as a fundamental and pervasive human activity, then we need to see it as integral to people's lives and the stories that they tell about their lives in their attempts to understand and shape their situations.

Biographical or life history research is therefore an important and powerful way of seeing learning as a fundamental dimension of living. There are, though, risks of an excessive methodological individualism, for at least two reasons. The first is the extent to which learning and narration are still conceived as primarily an individual capacity and/or process. Although many life history researchers insist emphatically that their approach is not solely individualistic, the approach nevertheless clearly focuses on the individual's capacity for narrating their own life in such a way as to reflect on their own experiences. However, cultures and their dominant discourses speak through individuals, and the development of a broader narrative repertoire, including the capacity to play with other narratives, and to revise the stories we tell about ourselves, in the light of new experience, can be seen as part of embodying more agentic ways of being in the world.

The second issue is the emphasis placed on the story as a distinctive account; yet narration never takes place in a social vacuum. On the contrary, life stories are inseparable from 'the relationship of teller and audience in which it is occasioned', a relationship that is always particular to a given time and place (Tonkin, 1995, p. 2). In our study, the life histories, at least for some of us, were recounted in the relationships of dialogue that constituted the research itself, which may include the shaping of the story in the here and now. A focus on the process alerts us to the ways in which the reflexivity of the researcher, as well as her attentiveness, can influence the quality of the story-telling, and foregrounds the importance, in the words of Liz Stanley, of the auto/biographical or relational dimension of research (Stanley, 1992; Merrill & West, 2009). For other researchers in the team, greater emphasis was given to minimising the influence of the researcher, in the interests of building reliability in generating data. While the former enriches our ability to understand the complexity of stories and experiences, it can also lead us, as some colleagues perceive it, to focus on uniqueness and difference at the expense of our understanding of common, shared human conditions. This is a continuing debate in the biographical research community.

Methodologically, then, there are tensions in developing life history research in the context of comparative educational research. One particular issue for the research team was the ‘embeddedness’ of people’s stories in specific contexts and experiences. The particularity of the data, which were produced by life history interviews, means that we cannot simply treat each individual story as ‘representative’ of a wider, national story. Yet cross-national comparative research is commonly undertaken on the basis of a number of assumptions, one of which is that the ‘national’ framing of educational systems and institutions provides a way of organising data so that they can then reasonably be compared with one another. There is no easy way of balancing the particularities of student experiences and narratives with the relatively clear-cut divisions between national systems and policies. Nevertheless, clearly there are ways in which national policies and institutional forms shape the experiences of students, as well as ways in which the category of ‘non-traditional’ includes some groups who are excluded from higher education in most national systems. Arguably, though we are keen to avoid an essentialist view of nationhood, national identities and cultures are also to some extent ‘lived’ in distinctive ways in each country. This, though, can be overstated; students from the popular social strata can confront remarkably similar procedures and structures when seeking to enter university and develop survival strategies within higher education. And as researchers, by adopting shared ‘sensitising concepts’, we aimed to provide common ways of seeking to understand the student experiences and stories, in all their particularities but also commonalities.

Narration, and the experiences that we try to make sense of when we tell our story, is embedded in a particular habitus. We have drawn on this term, which was used by Pierre Bourdieu to point to a social milieu in which a great deal of everyday life is conducted on the basis of shared values, norms and routines that are largely taken for granted (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 169-173). Life history research can, as suggested above, help us understand where storying not only serves as a ‘site’ of reflection and learning, but as a ‘site’ of reflection and learning that clearly has an impact on action and agency. Yet if we take the ideas of structure and resources seriously, we also need to examine the positions and dispositions that people occupy within a particular social space and Bourdieu’s ideas are particularly helpful here.

### **Habitus and the transitional space of higher education**

Bourdieu distinguishes between the idea of *position* as a specific social, economic and cultural locus in the social space; and that of *habitus*, which comprises a set of *dispositions*, or propensities towards particular values and behaviours. Our interest, clearly, lies in the relationship between position, disposition and learning. In his work on taste, Bourdieu argues that a particular disposition – for example, towards a type of music or film - has to be learned. Yet although these competences are closely associated with educational level, he believes they are less likely to be learned consciously, by formal effort, than from the ‘unintentional learning made possible by a disposition acquired through domestic or scholastic inculcation of legitimate culture’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 28), so that their cultural taste is closely related to the social milieu that they inhabit. Bourdieu, of course, defined this acquisition of taste as a form of capital; he also noted that people could reproduce privilege by the use of personal connections, which he defined as a form of social capital.

In the case of university students from non-traditional backgrounds, there is likely to be a mis-match between the student’s cultural capital and the taken-for-granted

cultural capital of the dominant groups within the university. There is similarly likely to be a mis-match between the social capital that students have found helpful in their previous environments, and the networks that might prove valuable in the new context of higher education. Our expectation was that such mis-matches, and the way that they are handled by the actors concerned, would be an important factor in explaining retention. We also wished to expand the notion of capital, adding to Bourdieu's potentially rather reductionist classification. We prefer to separate out familial ties from other network assets; while Bourdieu treats both as elements of social capital, we see them as playing different roles for adult learners; not all families are identical, nor are family ties always aligned simplistically with other network assets, nor do they necessarily work in the same ways.

We were also interested in the idea of psychological capital, which we understand as the qualities that may be forged as an individual encounters and deals with life crises such as divorce, unemployment, bereavement and so on, and which may result in the individual developing new capabilities such as resilience, flexibility, or determination. To some extent, we see this as related to what Côté refers to as 'identity capital', a concept that he developed initially to refer to school-work transitions among young people (Côté, 2005). Finally, we also drew on Jocey Quinn's concept of 'imagined social capital', which refers to the resources people may derive through their imagined connections with – say – inspirational others who are known to them (Quinn, 2010).

Another factor in understanding retention was, in our view, the nature of the university as a transitional space. Here we drew on work by the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, who developed the idea of the 'transitional object' in his work on early childhood development. For Winnicott (1971), the transitional object was something that enabled the child to make a transition from complete dependency towards partial autonomy, particularly in its relations with his or her mother, by providing a degree of continuity and thus security. By extension, we can see the university itself as a kind of transitional space, in which everyday life is organised on the assumption that most of the actors will leave after a more or less fixed period; in such cases, the *normative* transition concerned will also be experienced as part of the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Viewed as a transitional space, university study can be seen as a process of constant negotiation and renegotiation of self in relation to others and in relation to the socio-cultural world of the university. The experience of studenthood can pose basic questions of who a person is, who they have been, and who they wish to become. This in turn may provoke intense anxiety about one's ability to cope with change, or about whether a person is good enough in the eyes of significant people, whether fellow students or lecturers; or conversely, it may provoke excessive (and often ill-founded) confidence about these things. Like all new transitions, studenthood may encompass movements of 'unconscious memory in feeling' that in turn evoke connections with earlier transitions. At such times, past and present may elide, creating considerable tensions and stresses if past ones were fraught or traumatic; or if they were problem-free, encouraging excessive confidence that higher education will be similarly problem-free. Some of these processes have been chronicled, in considerable depth, in earlier biographical research (West, 1996).

## Illustrations from the research

### *Belonging in this space*

Entry into university was often understood by students as a challenging transition in itself. One woman, a single parent at the end of her first year, said that ‘the hardest thing with being an adult [student] is you’re always waiting on someone to kind of say you don’t belong here, and I’m hoping that’s something that’ll go - but I still have it’. ‘Anna’, (all names are pseudonyms), a mature student at a Scottish university, told us that: ‘I think well done, although I know it’s happening, it’s surreal, it’s as if it’s not happening’. We can see the interplay of her dispositions as a highly motivated learner, and the new habitus into which she had moved and felt herself an outsider. We can also see how this ‘surreal’ experience is connected to the discrepancy between her status as an outsider, who had not pursued the normative route taken by most students: ‘I don’t think younger, you know, students coming through from school, would be – ‘cos it would just be next step for them’.

At the same time, we can see that Anna understands university as a community, and she clearly aspires to membership. By the end of her first year, she felt more at ease with her new milieu:

We had our culture shock last year ... we had this big building, with thousands of students, and, you know, the library, to find your way about, and how everything worked ... we’ve done that now.

A number of other students mentioned the physical and mental challenges of navigating a university campus, and in two of our three case study universities, students specifically mentioned the library as an especially complex site. ‘Suzie’ used the metaphor of walking into a party to convey her sense that people saw her as an outsider:

Once you kind of know where things are, you don’t feel so conspicuous, and I mean that’s what happens if you walk into somebody’s party or, you know, it’s the same sense of “Oh, goodness, everyone’s looking at me”. No, they’re not – get on with it, you know.

For these students, a sense of being physically lost became a metaphor for their student identity more generally; once they started to ‘know where things are’, they were able to negotiate a new way of interacting with this still-unfamiliar world.

### *Ontological questioning and doubt*

By definition, non-traditional students are less likely than more conventional higher education entrants to possess the cultural and social capital that enable successful integration within the dominant academic culture. This affects their experiences of the dominant academic culture, particularly in so far as a transitional space like university encourages a questioning and open orientation, and forms part of the process of ‘demystification’ of habitual behaviours and accepted beliefs.

Several students in our study reported that they had started to question their identity and behaviour more broadly while at university. One way in which this was experienced was through the medium of language. Britain may be unusual in the variety of accents, dialects and variants of English that are used, but often these are class-based. One man, an Education student, explained how he had been struck by watching a recording of himself, taken as part of a micro-teaching exercise:

[84] John Field, Barbara Merrill and Linden West

you see yourself on video, you never speak how you sound, and I seemed to develop into, whilst I'm speaking in front of children, I don't know if it's just children, I've been told it's not, a few friends have said that it's not just children, you do it when you're - when you're speaking to say other people as well, people you don't know well, people who are in a position of authority and should be in a position of respect. . . . and I seem to develop an accent and a way of speaking that is, is from the streets.

The convoluted sentence structure here conveys something of this person's sense of embarrassment that he 'seemed to talk in quite a rough kind of accent for some reason', and he worried that he might 'come across as being someone who - who -who is maybe dumbing down'. He speculated 'whether subconsciously I thought I would get more engagement from pupils by speaking like them'. Be that as it may, he worried that his accent might damage his career as a teacher.

### *Distancing mechanisms*

Often, interviewees used humour and self-deprecation to describe the ways that they related to their new social connections and cultural context. Suzie, a first generation student in her first year of a degree in design, expressed her sense of distance from her fellow students: 'When I came in here, they all looked like stockbrokers. I mean, the girls are so cute and the boys are so smart, I mean it's just so funny'. Mags, who was hoping to become a painter, said that she had not even applied to one of the major universities in this area because 'they don't take the Individual Learning Account, which is really important . . . so it's no riff raff - no paupers'. Of course, we need to bear in mind that people deployed such humour during the interviews, so we can also understand it as a way of handling the experience of being interviewed by a stranger!

People also used irony and self-mockery as a way of helping to reinforce informal support networks. One mature returner said that she and her friends called themselves 'the front-row students', or the 'oldies', while another called her group 'the ladies who lunch'. By contrast, younger students were often able to develop new networks through membership of student sporting, political or leisure associations. Some younger students, who were non-traditional entrants in less visible ways, spoke about their social ties with fellow students without any such irony. For them, it was a taken-for-granted pattern of student life.

### *The benefits of dissonance*

Integration is clearly different in different disciplines. In professional fields, there is a relationship (and sometimes a tension) between academic integration and professional integration. Usually, this was simply a felt mis-match between initial student expectations of the profession and actual experiences during practice placements. Nursing students, for example, said that workplace colleagues tended to dismiss university teaching as excessively academic, while university lecturers sometimes disparaged the culture and practices of nurses. Professional students sometimes spoke of a particular challenge in dealing with academic requirements for 'critical analysis' that they saw as conflicting with more practical professional demands. One Education student told us that he simply couldn't understand why his lecturers criticised the Scottish Government's curriculum policies when what he wanted to know was how to implement it.

Sometimes, though, non-traditional students felt that they were at a relative advantage in that their experience added to their subject knowledge. Nursing students from mature age backgrounds were proud of their ability to integrate practical

experience into clinical practice, and students from working class backgrounds felt themselves in a majority in this area. Comparable experiences were narrated by students in Education and Social Work, particularly by those with experiences of working with children and vulnerable adults as parents, volunteers or care workers. Equally, a number of lecturers in our sample recognised the value of such experience. Pedagogic strategies that draw on relevant experiences, and relate them to academic knowledge, are likely to enhance integration and promote completion.

### *Understanding early leaving*

If life history interviews proved a fruitful way of exploring student identities in general, they were particularly productive in helping understand early leaving. Some of our interviewees had been unnerved by the experience, even where they had left because of institutional failings. One wheelchair user, who had dropped out and then later entered another institution, identified a number of problems at her first university, but did not 'want to be known as a campaigner or a moaning person. I don't want to get somebody in trouble - and I also don't want to be known as a disabled person who complained'. Younger students who dropped out often did so because they felt that had selected the wrong subject. Interestingly, this appeared less of an issue in Scotland (if by no means absent), where most universities allow a degree of flexibility in subject choice, particularly in the first two years of study.

The interviews also led us to question the general applicability of terms like 'drop-out' (see also Quinn, Thomas, Slack, Casey, Thexton & Noble, 2005). All the students who dropped out stated that they had benefited from the learning. One woman who left in her third year because she could not face doing exams said that she had no negative feelings about doing the degree and added that she would have completed it if it had been fully assessed. She feels that the experience has changed her in terms of being more confident and she looks at 'things' in a different way and is able to discuss issues in more depth. Jenny (outlined above) explained and reflected:

I do feel knowledgeable. I feel very privileged to have actually done that. I'm pleased with myself that I did well in the first year. I'm not cross but sad that events took the course they did and in a way I know myself, I know very well that the confidence issue would have been awful, would have become a problem. I really don't think I could have resolved that one. ...I've reflected a lot as you can appreciate. I think Open Studies (pre degree courses) was more my bag. Maybe trying to do a degree was a little bit too ambitious but then on the other hand I think no Jenny you did well in the first year. There's no reason to think you wouldn't, as time went on. I'll never know.

The younger and adult students who stayed all mentioned that they had changed as a person and growth in confidence was a common benefit that they identified as well as becoming more knowledgeable and critical. Some of the adult students felt that studying at university had an impact upon their children's education and encouraged them to study at school and think about going to university.

### **Extending capital**

We have already mentioned the notion of capitals as expressed in Bourdieu's work. While we have found ideas of social and cultural capital helpful in allowing us more precisely to explore learner habitus, we also recognise the importance of psychological capital and – in respect of social capital – the familial resources that many learners draw

on. We can also recognise students as themselves being agents, who (re)negotiate their way through higher education, and can exploit and sometimes even challenge the human and symbolic capital of the university. What people bring, psychosocially, and how they make use of particular constellations of resources, can be understood as shaping the way they manage transitional processes, including transitions into, through, and out of higher education. Change processes are iterative, relational and often subtle – including in the individual’s relationship to the university milieu, to their own habitus, and finally in their own identity.

Sue, for example, is a passionate student of Law, based in an elite university. Divorced with two children, she has lived on welfare benefits, and was her father’s main carer in the period before his death. She then returned to her childhood ambition of practicing law. Her biography embodies determination to overcome difficulties, which include poverty, divorce and emotional vulnerability. She perseveres with the challenges of learning in higher education, and – although deeply disturbed by social class and its manifestations in the academy – is resilient. We noted with interest that while the class system bothered her, she saw gender as relatively unimportant. She looked for recognition in the academy, feeling awkward and ill-at-ease in lectures and in the Inns of Court, but felt comfortable when being an adviser in a law clinic and a trainee advocate in a court, especially when representing marginalised and stigmatised people. She spoke about her relative ‘lack of education’ and constantly found herself asking in seminars for someone to explain particular words that she did not understand. She described herself as having learned ‘the confidence to speak up and say, “Oh, what’s that then”...and I’ll look it up later’.

Sue spoke at length, across three interviews, and over three years, about her background. She thought of the law as ‘just part of your everyday life’, having grown up in South London where arrests, even murder, were – as she put it – everyday events. She also mentioned feeling herself an outsider in the community, ‘not wanting to push buggies down the High Street’. She worried about moving between the different milieus of the university and the street, and over what others might think about the way she came across to them:

I’ve really agonised over the way I speak and stuff, I think you know, I’m not going to be able to speak how I would wish to speak, and I’ve got to be comfortable with that and if I make slips so be it, I’ve got to say this is me and here we go . . . and you know you do get, I mean when I’ve been in many courts and listened to advocates and you get sort of international words of English together. So I think, well, never mind, I can’t speak English – neither can you [laughing].

A local accent, Sue said with pain, might be equated with negative qualities:

. . . to ignorance and bad manners, and you know all of that, and lack of intelligence. . . . I’ve got to understand that it is natural, and just think and overcome that with my own abilities. It’s like an inner turmoil, almost every walk of life comes with prejudice and - you know – discrimination, and I put it akin to racial discrimination, it’s no different really from social discrimination, you know, but that’s not recognised.

We have already noted the importance of language to some of our learners; such anxieties about such a powerful marker of status appear to be widespread.

Family and imagined ties provided counterbalancing resources. On the one hand, family expectations could help to hinder change. In this instance, Sue had been fearful of ‘messing it up, and then you’ve humiliated yourself because you’ve pretended to be something you’re not’. She no longer attempted to speak in a particular way; anyway, if

she changed, ‘then I would have all my family ridicule me’. Nevertheless, she thought of the law as a ‘kind of close knit community’, and imagined herself as a future member of it; for two years, she had been subscribing to the *Times*, which routinely carries regular court reports. While this imagined space was not easy to penetrate, she was inspired by her family to persist, and by her father in particular. She talked in her second interview of her Dad and his struggles against injustice by the authorities, including the police, and saw him as an important influence and model. His influence thus provided a resource that was both familial and imagined. Finally, Sue can be understood as having developed psychological capital that was both vulnerable and strong. She had been a successful business woman, and had endured difficult circumstances, including a divorce; she was also something of a lifelong learner. She was managing her learning transition rather well, drawing on a range of resources that also included her teachers, her own biography, and indeed the opportunity to talk and reflect with us, the researchers, about the changing stories she told.

### Comparisons and generalisation

The distinctive findings from the UK data centre on issues of class. Many of the non-traditional adult students, particularly in the elite universities, like Sue and Anna, perceived themselves to be different to the ‘other’ younger students and many of the lecturers. This was manifested in a variety of ways. They lacked confidence in their learning and stated that ‘they didn’t belong’ at university and felt like ‘fish out of water’. In seminars this sense of being ‘other’ was highlighted by language differences between themselves and younger middle class students. Campus buildings, and in particular the library, also created unease and anxiety as they are unfamiliar spaces. For many their classed experiences were also related to ones of gender, and for some, ethnicity. These factors were not as pronounced in the other countries in this study.

One common factor across the countries, except for Poland and Germany, was the importance of support from staff and institutions in helping to raise their confidence as learners and as a source of help with personal, health and financial issues. For some the role of one particular lecturer was critical in keeping them going on with their studies. In Poland on the other hand adult students receive little institutional support but still manage to complete their studies while in Germany students prefer to be more autonomous. Family support was also a significant factor in the partner countries although there were differences between the countries. Such support was particularly important in the Catholic countries of Spain and Ireland while for some of the English working class adult students partners or parents did not understand why they wanted to become ‘educated’ and this led to a distancing with their family members. Mental health issues emerged as another common theme as the study progressed. This was expressed by feelings of anxiety and stress as they navigated the challenging process of moving into and through the transitional spaces of the learning environment.

Despite the diversity of the European higher education system the stories told by the adult students from the different countries revealed some shared experiences and understandings of what they would like higher education institutions to do to enhance their learning journey. However, the cross-national findings are tentative as the project team are still in the process of analysing the data at this level.

We have also alluded to the fact that biographical research is often criticised on individualistic grounds: producing fine detail, but without wider relevance. However, individual case studies, like Sue’s, illuminate complex features of the interplay of

structure and agency, old and new narratives, that would be lost or obscure in other kinds of research: of the subtlety of the habitus, as subjectively experienced, in which there were places, like a free legal advice centre, in which she worked voluntarily, where the capital she brought – including life experience – was valued and of direct utility. We are also given glimpses into the complex interplay of selfhood and recognition – of acceptance by tutors and significant others, in the past as well as the present – that were important to her keeping on keeping on and in taking risks.

Clearly, Sue's narrative cannot simply be generalised, but we begin, interpretively and theoretically, to make interdisciplinary connections between inner and outer worlds, self and other, immediacy and memory, in subtle ways that can be explored across other cases, and in other countries. Moreover, such a case takes us into the Bourdiean territory of the interplay of dispositions and capital in elite contexts such as a law faculty: and we begin to understand more, psychosocially, of why some students survive and prosper and others do not. In all these senses we can observe how what is more universal is played out in particular lives, but also how this can be challenged and changed by particular people in ways that are of general interest. Theoretically, this is important as part of a wider effort to avoid reducing biographical narrative material to either the social or psychic; we cannot talk of one without the other (Clarke, 2008).

## Conclusions

When adults and other non-traditional students articulate narratives of their HE experiences they often tell stories of increased self-confidence and self-esteem. These findings are consistent with the results of other recent studies of the wider benefits of learning. However, they are narrated within a particular set of storylines that are familiar from other qualitative studies of adult learners within tertiary education. Those who leave early, without completing their qualification, appear not to have any such access to existing storylines; their life histories offer few common clues to the experiences of what is conventionally referred to as 'drop out', and often the story is narrated through experiences of rejection, failure and shame.

Conversely, some of those who had dropped out were able to specify benefits from their period of study. Those who had left for practical reasons (usually funding or family crises) were particularly likely to say that they had proven that they were capable of study at university level, and see this as a positive reason for returning later on. However, in a system with high completion rates, drop-out carries a risk of stigma. Those who cited academic reasons for withdrawal shared negative views of the process, with two expressing a degree of bitterness against academics who they thought had failed them, and others expressing a strong sense of shame and loss; none in this group was thinking of returning later on.

The significance of this is that the enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem that successful students who have been interviewed talk about is not only an important developmental experience but also provide part of the habitus (or dispositions) that enhance access and retention in higher education. Our work has aimed at understanding the anxieties and joys that students may experience but also the resources and processes they may use, often unconsciously, to manage transitional processes in higher education. These include the importance of significant others, such as teachers, who can make us feel understood and legitimate, alongside new and creative forms of storytelling – like feminism, for instance - to symbolise new biographical possibilities. Our findings in respect of withdrawn students are still highly provisional, but they

Life history approaches to access and retention of non-traditional students in higher education [89] suggest the difficulties first of developing a compelling self-identity as a member of the ‘imagined community’ of university students; and also the apparent impossibility of then constructing a positive narrative of leaving tertiary education without completing a qualification.

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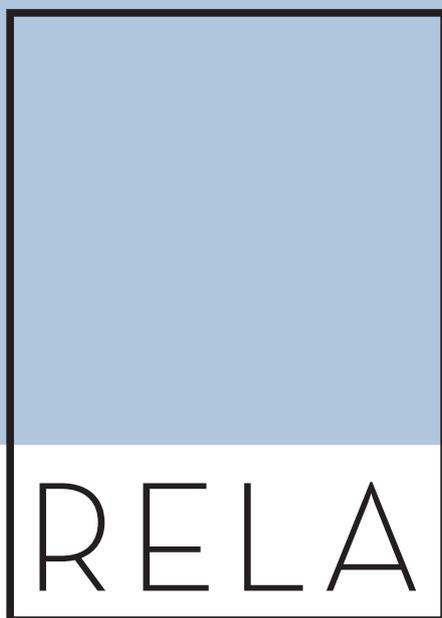
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# Aims & Scope

The European journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults (RELA) is a refereed academic journal creating a forum for the publication of critical research on adult education and learning. It has a particular focus on issues at stake for adult education and learning in Europe, as these emerge in connection with wider international and transnational dynamics and trends. Such a forum is important at a time when local and regional explorations of issues are often difficult to foreground across language barriers. As academic and policy debate is increasingly carried out in the English language, this masks the richness of research knowledge, responses and trends from diverse traditions and foci. The journal thus attempts to be linguistically 'open access'. Whilst creating a forum for international and transnational debate, contributions are particularly welcome from authors in Europe and other locations where English is not the first language.

RELA invites original, scholarly articles that discuss the education and learning of adults from different academic disciplines, perspectives and traditions. It encourages diversity in theoretical and methodological approach and submissions from non-English speakers. All published contributions in RELA are subjected to a rigorous peer review process based on two moments of selection: an initial editorial screening and a double-blind review by at least two anonymous referees. Clarity and conciseness of thought are crucial requirements for publication.

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ISSN 2000-7426