

Learning Lives: Learning, Identity and Agency in the Life Course

The ambition of the Learning Lives project was to investigate what learning means and does in the lives of adults. Over a three-year period we conducted more than 500 interviews with about 120 adults aged 25-84. In addition we analysed data from the British Household Panel Survey, an annual survey of about 5,500 UK households. The Learning Lives project took a biographical approach, focusing on individual adults and their learning biographies and trajectories.

- Learning is ubiquitous at all stages of life and varies in its significance and value. → Broad and varied opportunities for learning need to be available throughout the life course, and should be underpinned by accessible information, advice and guidance.
- Learning is complex and multi-faceted, and can only be understood relationally. → Support for learning includes but goes far beyond teaching. Good support requires adaption to personal circumstances and situations, and the building of valued relationships.
- People can learn from their lives through the stories they tell about them. This is important for their identity and agency. → There is no ready-made curriculum for narrative learning. Prescriptive modes do not fit the process of narrative identity construction.
- Following individuals over time generates a different understanding of participation in formal education and training from that gained by a snapshot view. → Understanding participation in formal education and training requires a life course perspective which pays attention to differences between generations.

The research

What we found

We found that learning of some sort is ubiquitous in people's lives. We generated extensive, fine-grained longitudinal evidence of the variety, scope, characteristics and trajectories of learning in the life course. This has helped us to understand the value and significance of learning in people's lives. Our analyses have also generated insights into the relationships between learning, identity and agency.

Longitudinal evidence of learning through the life-course

This project generated detailed evidence of the ubiquity and variety of learning in adults' lives. We found that much learning is tacit and routinised. Just as learning can lead to significant changes in people's lives, life-changing events often trigger learning. We also showed that adults have widely differing dispositions towards learning. For many, learning is merely a factor of life, a continual striving to deal with problems. For a minority, the sense of being a learner is an important part of their identity. In some cases this learner identity is focussed on formal education, but substantial informal learning is always related to it.

While learning is sometimes valued for the outcomes it brings, people often value engagement in learning for its own sake. Individuals differ in their judgements of what counts as good or worthwhile learning. The judgements of individuals may be at odds with official policy, and this can impact negatively on adults' opportunities to learn what is important to them. Learning is not necessarily a positive experience and does not always have positive outcomes. Progression and transitions in people's lives, such as retirement, can valuably be understood as learning processes. Especially within education and employment, there are significant barriers to progression for some people.

Longitudinal evidence of learning from life through narrative and narration

This project has generated detailed evidence of the ways in which adults learn from their lives. Life history methodology has helped us to explore the significance of narrative and narration in these learning processes, something we have captured in the idea of 'narrative learning'. We have found that stories and story-telling are important vehicles for learning from one's life. We have been able to show how differences in the 'narrative quality' of life stories, including their intensity, their descriptive or evaluative content, their

flexibility and the presence of a plot, correlate with learning processes and outcomes.

We have found important differences in the efficacy of life stories and have shown that there are relationships between styles of narration, forms of narrative learning and agency. We have found that the capacity to learn from one's life is not fixed but can be learned. Life stories play a crucial role in the articulation of a sense of self. This means that narrative learning is a form of identity work which involves internal conversations and social practices of story telling. Social opportunities for narrating one's life story are important for practising and improving narrative learning.

Longitudinal evidence of trajectories of participation in part-time education and training

Our analysis of qualitative data identified two types of engagement with part-time education and training. Some participation involved low levels of involvement, with little impact upon identity. But other adults develop a high level of involvement in which being a learner or student becomes an important part of their life and identity. It is this high-level involvement which can lead to personal change, including the achievement of agency. For these people, participation in part-time education and training is a long-term process, not a quick fix. Analysis of British Household Panel Survey data gave us a detailed empirical understanding of participation in part-time education and training, of the factors influencing such participation, and of trajectories of participation. Knowing change at the level of each individual gave us a more accurate picture of the true extent of change and non-participation than has been available hitherto, and drew attention to the need for a longitudinal perspective which avoids a focus on instantaneous effects.

The evidence shows that (i) most participation did not result in a higher level qualification; (ii) gender effects are more important than age effects, particularly among younger people, although young women who made an early transition into parenthood had a higher probability than any of their contemporaries of returning to formal learning later on; (iii) there is a strong age effect whereby almost everybody stops participating by age 55; (iv) participation patterns are influenced by prior learning and, separately, by employment, including whether it was manual or non-manual; (v) participation is affected by externally imposed events in people's lives as well as by the choices they made, including the timing of these events and choices; (vi) social class status at age 14, and mothers' and fathers' education and work histories, affect participation in education.

Learning and identity

We have defined identity as one's sense of self and have theorised this in terms of the dispositions people have towards themselves and towards their life and learning. We found that people's dispositions and their social positions can both enable and constrain learning. Many aspects of the sense of self remain implicit. But they can become more explicit at times of change and crisis, although particular dispositions and a particular sense of self may sometimes prevent learning and change. The narration of one's life story is an important vehicle for expressing one's sense of self, and also for articulating and actively constructing it. When people go through major life-changing events, they are often presented with a need to learn, so that relationships between identity and learning often become clear at times of crisis and change. Learning can then contribute to changes in some dispositions, and thus to changes in a person's identity. But in some cases, existing dispositions are so strong that learning and subsequent change in identity do not happen. Our data suggest a widespread need for the construction of a coherent life-story that helps individuals to make sense and come to terms with their life, and adjust to changes in their lives.

Learning and agency

We have taken agency to be about the situated ability to give direction to one's life. We have found that learning itself may or may not be driven by the decisions of the individual. It can be self-initiated or forced by others, or be incidental. Learning may result in an increase or decrease in agency. Increased agency seems to be more obvious and common, but much depends on the extent to which people acknowledge that they have learned something. This is more obvious in relation to formal education and training, often because qualifications open up new possibilities for action. Experiences of successful learning also impact positively on people's self-confidence, which in turn can lead to increased agency in many aspects of their lives. The research indicates that the extent to which learning translates into agency depends on a range of factors including the particular ecological conditions of people's actions. Learning can damage people's agency when they find that things are too difficult or that they cannot cope, which in turn impacts upon their sense of self.

Theorising learning through the life course

Learning, position, identity and agency

Building on earlier work on learning cultures and a cultural understanding of learning, we have developed a framework for understanding learning through the life course. It sees learning as being enabled or constrained by the relationships between the positions of the learner and their learning, and by the dispositions and actions of the learner. There are different types of position including social structures, such as class, gender and ethnicity; the generations to which people belong; and the situations where learning takes place. Any situation in which people are active has a learning culture, made up of the cultural practices that enable and constrain learning in that situation. These cultural practices consist of positioned and unequal social relations. The various forces making up the total field are relationally interdependent.

Using Bourdieu, we understand identity as the dispositions people have towards themselves. Identity is embodied, not just cognitive, and is partly tacit. If and when identity changes, learning is an inherent part of that change process. Learning can contribute to and facilitate identity modification, but can also work to consolidate existing identities. Relationships between the person and their positions are mediated by the availability and utilisation of economic, cultural and social capital, which work partly via the actions of the learner and others. Some of these actions can be seen as either achieving or utilising agency. Learning, dispositions, identity and positions all enable or constrain agency.

Activity which is driven by agency can contribute to changes in dispositions and identity, and to some aspects of a person's position. Agency can also help to reorient and reposition people in relation to the generations and social structures they inhabit, and the learning cultures they participate in. It can contribute to activity in new situations and therefore to new learning cultures. Agency is influenced by the positions of the actor, the positions and actions of others, and by the identity and dispositions of the actor. It can contribute to consolidation or change in any of these. The achievement and utilisation of agency are enabled and constrained by learning, and can enable or constrain new learning.

Narrative learning

Building on existing research on biographical learning, we have paid specific attention to the role of narrative and narration in the ways in which people

Major implications

Our research shows that people can experience learning as valuable in the following circumstances:

- Learning can help people with the processes of routine living
- Learning can help people adjust to changed circumstances
- Learning can provide valuable knowledge or skills for particular purposes, including employment and career change
- Learning can contribute to changing self-identity
- Learning can contribute to the achievement of agency.

Learning for any person or group is always enabled and constrained by their horizons for learning. There are always limits to what can be learned, so that strategies for improving learning need to vary to meet different people's needs and different circumstances.

Our research suggests four broad approaches to improving learning:

- Provision of formal education and training (courses, workshops, etc.)
- Personal support for the learner, which may be professional (career guidance, workplace mentoring, tutoring, provision of learning materials, etc) or informal (friends, colleagues, family, local community)
- Enhancing learning cultures, that is, improving opportunities for learning in particular locations (workplace, local community, etc).
- Providing opportunities for self-reflection, including talking, writing, thinking about our own life histories and life circumstances.

learn from their lives. We have developed a theory of narrative learning in which the life narrative is not only the outcome of learning, but is also seen as a site for biographical learning. What distinguishes a life narrative from a life story is the presence of a plot, an organising principle that allows the narrator to select, organise and present life events in a particular order, which might be sequential or thematic. The presence of a plot can be taken as an indication of biographical learning. The efficacy of such learning is related to the extent to which the narrator is aware of the plot.

Key concepts in our theory of narrative learning are 'narrative quality' (a range of different characteristics of narratives);

Our research further suggests that:

- Broad and varied opportunities for learning need to be available throughout the entire life course, and should be underpinned by widely accessible information, advice and guidance.
- Support for learning includes but goes far beyond teaching. Good support requires adaptation to personal circumstances and situations, and the building of valued relationships.
- Narrative learning can be important for people's identity and agency. There is no ready-made curriculum for narrative learning since prescriptive modes do not fit the process of narrative identity construction.
- Understanding participation in formal education and training requires a life course perspective and needs to pay attention to generational differences and effects.
- Intergenerational learning is a neglected aspect of lifelong learning
- Participation in formal education and training is determined by employment status, so a large part of the adult population is not likely to be included. This is particularly important because recent changes in the lifelong learning system have strengthened its relationship to employment.
- Participation in formal education and training, both to enhance employability and for personal development, is likely to be hindered by policies which focus on short course content acquisition and remove public funding from equivalent or lower qualifications.
- Serious thought needs to be given to the relationship between new forms of personalised learning and the definitions of narrative learning emanating from this project.

'learning potential' (the extent to which life narratives allow for learning from one's life); and 'action potential' (the practical outcomes of narrative learning). Action potential is important for agency, whereas identity is an important aspect of the learning potential of narratives. Although there has been attention to narrative and narration in adult learning and in educational research more generally, the Learning Lives project has been the first to develop this into a theory of narrative learning.

Further information

The best source for further information is the project website which provides access to many project publications, including conference presentations, a short film, and a series of occasional project working papers. The website can be accessed at www.learninglives.org or via the TLRP website: www.tlrp.org.

We have documented our main findings in four summative working papers, which can be downloaded from the project website:

Hodkinson, P., with H. Hodkinson, R. Hawthorn & G. Ford (2008). *Learning through life*. Learning Lives Summative Working Paper 1.

Biesta. G.J.J., Goodson, I.F., Tedder, M.T. & Adair, N.A. (2008). *Learning from life: The role of narrative*. Learning Lives Summative Working Paper 2.

Field, J., Lynch, H. & Malcolm, I. (2008). *Generations, the life course and lifelong learning*. Learning Lives Summative Working Paper 3.

Macleod, F.J. & Lambe, P. (2008). *Understanding the place of part time education and training in the lives of adults in Britain 1991-2005*. Learning Lives Summative Working Paper 4.

A Gateway book on the project, entitled *Improving Learning Lives*, and a book on *Narrative Learning*, will be published by Routledge in 2009. A special issue of the *Oxford Review of Education* devoted to the Learning Lives project is scheduled for publication in 2010.

The warrant

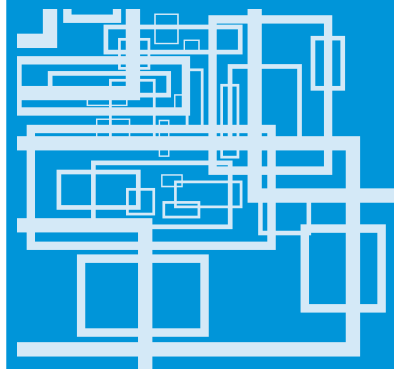
This project combined retrospective life-history research, longitudinal interpretative life-course research and quantitative survey research. We conducted 528 interviews with 117 people (59 male; 58 female) aged between 25 and 84 over a three-year period. We further analysed data from the British Household Panel Survey, an annual panel survey of each adult member of a nationally representative sample of 5,500 British households (ca. 10,000 individuals per wave). A total of 15 waves were available and were used for analysis.

Thematic analysis of interview data focused on larger numbers of cases around particular themes, using both theoretically driven analysis and data-driven analysis. Biographical analysis focused on the in-depth analysis of individuals and resulted in the construction of detailed individual case studies.

Five analyses of BHPS data were conducted. They looked at patterns and trends in part-time formal education in the UK in relation to nation, class, place, gender, age and disability (1998-2003); predicting the occurrence and timing of transition into adult education amongst 1997 school leavers; the dynamics of participation between 1992 and 2005; mapping trajectories of participation in education and training in relation to other life course events (1992-2005); and outcomes of education and training in terms of qualifications across all 15 waves.

Whereas biographical and life-history methods have been utilised in previous research on adult and lifelong learning, the Learning Lives project has been exceptional because of its scale, length and its longitudinal real time design, and because it has combined interview data with quantitative longitudinal data.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP involves some 90 research teams with contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Work began in 2000 and the Technology Enhanced Learning phase will continue to 2012.

Learning: TLRP's overarching aim is to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK.

Outcomes: TLRP studies a broad range of learning outcomes, including the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

Lifecourse: TLRP supports projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning.

Enrichment: TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. It promotes research across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports national and international co-operation.

Expertise: TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research informed policy and practice.

Improvement: TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and policy and practice in the UK.

TLRP Directors' Team
Professor Andrew Pollard | London
Professor Richard Noss | London
Professor Miriam David | London
Professor Alan Brown | Warwick
Professor Mary James | London

TLRP Programme Office
Sarah Douglas | sarah.douglas@ioe.ac.uk
James O'Toole | j.o'toole@ioe.ac.uk
tlrp@ioe.ac.uk

TLRP
Institute of Education
University of London
20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL
UK

Tel +44 (0)20 7911 5577



Project website:

www.learninglives.org

Project contact:

Professor Gert Biesta

The Stirling Institute of Education
University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA Scotland UK
e-mail: gert.biesta@stir.ac.uk
phone: (+44) 1786-466136

Project team:

Project Directors: Professor Gert Biesta (Principal Award Holder), University of Stirling, Dr Flora Macleod, University of Exeter, Professor Ivor Goodson, University of Brighton, Professor Phil Hodkinson, University of Leeds, Professor John Field, University of Stirling

Research Fellows: Dr Michael Tedder, University of Exeter, Dr Paul Lambe, University of Exeter, Dr Norma Adair, University of Brighton, Irene Malcolm, University of Stirling, Dr Heather Lynch, University of Stirling, Geoff Ford, Senior Consultant TAEN (The Age and Employment Network), and Fellow of the National Institute of Careers Education and Counselling, Ruth Hawthorn, Fellow of the National Institute of Careers Education and Counselling

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