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## **The Practice and Dilemmas of Life History Seminars: Working at the Edge to Foster Individual and Collective Transformations**

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**Abstract:** This symposium articulates the contributions of three seasoned practitioners using life history and auto/biographical approaches as a method to reflect on significant life experiences (including potentially transformational ones), and eventually trigger shifts in meaning perspectives among learners in the context of adult and higher education. We assume the potential value inherent in the experience of dilemmas as a catalyst for learning, growth and development. Considering the potential limitations inherent in the use of this method, the aim of this symposium is to discuss the conditions in which there is real educational value, in contrast to those that can prevent meaningful learning from occurring. The reflection is conducted from the learner's perspective, and from the practitioner's point of view too. The questions considered include those regarding the choices and tensions involved in the process of generating material for, and writing an auto/biographical narrative; dilemmas involved in the implementation and the facilitation of life history seminars; the reception of participants' tales, the necessity to choose between competing interpretive frameworks, the options available to facilitate inclusive dialogue between learners with heterogeneous backgrounds; and the tensions inherent in the different temporalities of formal organization and experiencing the process.

**Key Words:** Experience, Dilemma, Life History, Autobiography, Narrative

### **Introduction**

This symposium articulates the contributions of three seasoned practitioners using life history and auto/biographical approaches as a method to reflect on significant life experiences (including transformational ones), which can trigger shifts in meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1991) among learners in the context of adult and higher education (e.g., Dominicé, 2000; West, Alheit, Andersen & Merrill, 2007). Assuming the potential value inherent in the experience of dilemmas, as a catalyst for learning, growth and development (Mezirow, 1991), the aim of this symposium is to discuss the conditions in which there is real educational value, and those that eventually prevent or inhibit meaningful learning from occurring.

## **Canterbury Tales (Linden West)**

Auto/biographical narrative workshops have been held in Canterbury over several years. The inspiration came from the work of the ESREA Life History and Biography Research Network and encompassed the development of new forms of research as well as specific taught modules at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU). These included a Masters' Programmes in Career Guidance and Lifelong Learning, and a specific Doctor of Education module. Pierre Dominicé's (2000) work in Geneva on educational biographies was inspirational. Here was an iterative process of generating oral accounts of significant life experience, among groups of professionals, on to working intensively in groups, then to making formal presentations and refined written account, combining self reflexivity and theory. The workshops at CCCU were used to introduce would-be researchers to these methods and auto/biographical narrative research encompassed studies of family learning projects, career guidance, teacher, nursing and other forms of professional education, while students themselves completed doctorates on topics such as "Gendered learning in families", "Using biography with trainee nurses", "Life stories and teaching literacy" as well as "Wisdom in adult learning and teaching" (West et al., 2007; West, 1996; Merrill & West, 2009; Reid & West, 2014, 2016, 2018; Howatson-Jones, 2016; Fraser, 2018). I used the methods in researching the lives of family doctors operating in difficult inner city locations (West, 2001). Recently there was a week long, intensive workshop for teacher educators from Georgia and Israel, who came to Canterbury under the auspices of the EU funded CURE project. This focuses on the cultivating democratic values and active citizenship, using auto/biography among teachers in schools, colleges and universities.

### **Differences in Design: An Eclectic Framing**

There were differences in the design of the Canterbury programme: the distinction between 'educational biography' and sociological or even psychoanalytic enquiry was looser, although there was never any claim to doing 'analysis' or 'therapy'. The intention was to build an interdisciplinary theoretical repertoire, drawing on psychoanalysis, especially object relations theory and ideas of 'biographicity', as developed by Alheit and Dausien (2007). Careers theory was drawn on, especially the interplay of structure and agency in lives and decision making; later in the programme, perspectives from critical theory were introduced, especially the work of Axel Honneth on self/other recognition (West, 2016; Honneth, 2007; 2009). This was partly an outcome of the EU RANLHE interdisciplinary research on non-traditional learners in universities, which was an experiment in integrating various theoretical psycho-social 'sensitizing' frames in studying learning lives (Finnegan, Merrill & Thunborg, 2014).

There were dilemmas in the workshops from the beginning for both students and practitioners. There was a dilemma – part of a wider, sometimes acrimonious debate about the relationship between 'education' and 'therapy' (Hayes & Ecclestone, 2009), and the place of psychoanalytic ideas. Therapy has been regarded as anti-educational, while psychoanalysis gets mistakenly elided with this. Students were often attracted as well as suspicious of looking at their lives through psychoanalytic lenses. They were aware that I straddled this boundary, as both educator and psychoanalytic psychotherapist, although making it clear that the work was not psychotherapy (although it could be therapeutic, by naming difficult experience and being listened to respectfully). Small numbers of students were anxious and suspicious because the modules were seen to dabble in 'subjectivity', to the neglect of more propositional or abstract forms of knowledge. There were constant dilemmas around boundary issues and avoiding

opening Pandora's Boxes. Boundaries mattered, and individual projects had to be manageable, emotionally and academically.

### **An Interdisciplinary Framing**

The interdisciplinary framing of the programme was a strength and weakness, as experienced by students. They were given space to consider different theories, while the line between personal and professional issues and objectives could get muddled (Hunt & West, 2012). Was the programme about improving practice and/or could it be more personal, focused on long-standing issues of concern around gender, class, sexuality or emotionality and relationships in lives? The gendered nature of schooling and university curricula was a constant source of debate. Psychoanalysis was new to many students, (and there were many fantasies about what it involved, including tutors making psychoanalytic 'judgements' on them); although humanistic psychology, at least, has a place in careers guidance and counselling. However, counselling or guidance practice was becoming more instrumentalised, as neo-liberal agendas invaded guidance workplaces. Getting people into jobs – any jobs – was the pressure, while the modules could awaken thoughts about the absurdity and ethics of these changes (Reid & West, 2011, 2016). One way of managing contradictions, for some, was to cut themselves off emotionally from their work, bringing professional alienation in its train. Auto/biographical narrative modules could remind people of why they chose a career and contradictions between values and practice became more intense. Forging connections between theory and storytelling was challenging too, especially around the praxis of becoming critical as well as reflexive. The personal is highly charged and vulnerable territory, and students had permission to bring this into an academic setting, perhaps for the first time. They could feel aggrieved and angry when people seemed to judge their experience and interpretation. Moving from storytelling to reflexivity, and criticality, and from individual work to collective discussion was a big step for some. Various 'psychosocial' theories also constituted new territory, needing time to digest as lives were considered in new ways. But students could thrive in the freedom and integration offered by the seminars. Ideas could come alive through an integration with lived experience. An old stifling binary between the personal and the academic was under challenge.

### **Writing in a Personal Mode, Defences in Border Country**

Writing in a personal mode and relating this methodological as well as theoretical issues was a dilemma: people could get stuck in the personal, or become overly theoretical, prematurely. I was also sensitive to more unconscious forms of communication, including how specific students could be very needy or withdrawn, but defences had to be respected. The seminars represented a kind of border country between education, research and therapy, and questions of identity, of who people are and wanted to be came to the fore (Hunt & West, 2012). I felt it might have been easier to keep my academic and psychoanalytic work in separate boxes. Was there a kind of grandiosity in me, I wondered, using the courses to heal a fracture in the academy between objective knowledge and subjective experience? But truth seeking mattered and some students felt liberated.

### **CURE, Al Nakbar, and Margaret Thatcher**

Very recently, a colleague and I ran a week long intensive seminar on auto/biographical narrative methods in teacher education for groups of teachers from Georgia and Israel. The project is financed by the European Union through a Special Mobility Strand. The methodology 'we' - (Dr Alan Bainbridge and I) used was essentially similar to the above (Bainbridge & West, 2012; Bainbridge, 2015). After a theoretical and methodological introduction, we role played a narrative interview, explored autobiographical writing, and facilitated the learners' work in five

small groups of four people, from various backgrounds. These included Arab Israelis (who might insist they were Palestinians), as well as Jews. The Georgian group was more homogenous, or at least it appeared so. The students interviewed each other and experimented with being interviewers and observers. The aim was to encourage respectful listening and then turn the material into a written auto/biographical piece on citizenship and democratic values in their own lives. They continued to work on written accounts in small groups; everyone presented auto/biographical pieces, either individually or as a group.

There were many dilemmas. Most colleagues were unfamiliar with the methodology and anxieties had to be contained. As the work unfolded, the learners were excited but concerned about revealing painful material or how they might interpret and theorise the personal. We, the facilitators, were aware of tensions in the group. Particular Palestinians talked of perpetually being silenced, and how difficult it was to mention Al Nakbah or the Catastrophe, as they perceived it: the displacement of 750000 Palestinians in the 1948 War and the Israeli occupation of 'their' land. Discussing Marxism was difficult for the Georgians: we Westerners, some insisted, knew little of living under such a regime. If there was citizenship education in schools and universities under the Soviet Union, it was morally bankrupt, going through the motions without meaning or clear purpose. The 'threat' of Russian invasion and the continued occupation of the specific provinces of Ossetia and Abkhazia after the 2008 War was a constant theme. Identity and disrespect was a major issue for an Arab Israeli woman who described herself as a Christian Palestinian. She could feel rejected on all sides, as nationalist identity politics reduced people to rigid categories. Our job was to keep dialogue going, and openness to the other, and his/her suffering. We needed to remind ourselves of the importance in biographical enquiry of seeing the world through the others' eyes. And if a week is a long time in politics, it was too brief to break through to deeper reflexivity and fulsomely engage with the other. Notwithstanding, the workshop was powerful for all involved, and built deeper understanding, in the face of difference. We may know little of the other in working contexts: doing such workshop helps build forms of self/other recognition, in Honneth's language: for the intimate self, for self in a group, and when taking responsibilities for the group's well-being and development.

So, to what extent are such processes and dilemmas transformational, and if so on what terms? Several CCCU students completed doctorates, building on the work in the modules. Others were excited and challenged by the prospect of working in a more integrated way: combining storytelling and the personal with academic and critical reflexivity. However, this was no easy, uncomplicated transcendence of dilemma, especially when engaging with the pain of lives in Israel and Georgia. It was a starting point, no more, no less. Several Masters students imagined auto/biography to be an easy option and struggled. I admit to some skepticism in claiming the work as transformational, when viewed through a lifelong or lifewide view. On the other hand, various students produced doctoral theses of the highest standard – some being published – and their continuing, enthusiastic participation in our auto/biographical research community suggests the seminars were significant; for some they involved a change in how they saw themselves, as whole people, as agents in the world, more able to claim space in the academy and more personally. This found expression too in their writing.



## **Temporal Dilemmas Inherent to the Use of Life History in Higher and Adult Education (Michel Alhadeff-Jones)**

Considering the theme of this symposium, I would like to explore more specifically the relationships between the experience of dilemmas in the educational praxis, the experience of time as an '*analyste*' revealing broader social tensions, and the conditions required for such tensions to trigger transformative processes. To proceed, I will discuss three dilemmas I have been experiencing since I have facilitated life history seminars at Teachers College, Columbia University.

### **Designing a Safe Space and Time for Fostering Critical Self-reflection on Power Dynamics**

One of the life history seminars I am facilitating at Teachers College, Columbia University, is entitled « Leadership and self-development: A biographical approach ». In this class, participants share, orally at first, and then through a written narrative – submitted to the rest of the group for collective interpretation – significant life experiences related to ideas such as power, authority, control or mastery. Inspired by my collaboration with Pierre Dominicé (2000), the aim of this seminar is to provide students with a 'safe' space and time to formulate and question the way they give meanings to their life experience and to critically reflect on the assumptions through which they interpret power dynamics in their life. The form as well as the type of experience described are freely chosen by each participant.

Since 2011, this seminar is proposed during the Summer semester. It is organized around six sessions. The two first sessions serve as an introductory period aiming at building positive group dynamics, preparing and sharing two rounds of short oral narratives. This first introductory period is also required for the participants (12 maximum) to have enough time to write their life history (approx. 4000 words) at home. The three following sessions are dedicated to the reading and the collective interpretation of all the written narratives. I usually allocate an hour for the narratives, with 15-20 minute breaks in between, and plan to have enough time for debriefing at the beginning and end of each session. That means that three narratives are discussed per session. Such a schedule involves intensive work, considering that each narrative is loaded with a lifetime of meaningful experiences to interpret and it is important that everyone can share their own interpretations and questions. The last session provides time for a synthesis and for formulating new questions based on the insights gained throughout the process; depending on the number of participants, additional narratives must be included in the first half of the last session. These past years, the seminar was scheduled on Tuesdays from 4:40 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. (including a 30 minute break), over a period of five weeks, with sessions #2, #3, #4, #5 and #6 having to be scheduled over a period of four weeks. Because class participation is critical and to accommodate the fact that students usually work during the day and follow different courses at night, I usually wait for the beginning of the first class to finalize the course schedule with participants, taking into consideration their number and their own schedules.

When I started working at the University of Geneva in 2000, courses like this one were provided on a yearly basis over a period of eight months. In 2005, when I designed this specific seminar for the first time at Columbia University, I had to adjust a process that used to be facilitated over 30 sessions to fit within a sixteen-week period (Spring semester). Since I no longer live in New York, it is now offered in the Summer semester, and has been compressed over a period of four to six weeks. Such a process of 'acceleration' (Wlodkowski, 2003) reinforced the experience of dilemmas and 'rhythmic dissonance' (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017), raising questions about the temporalities involved in this learning and developmental process. In the next sections, I have chosen to elaborate three of them.

### **Conflicting Priorities and the Temporal Design of the Seminar**

The first dilemma I have been experiencing on a regular base has to do with how priorities are set when it comes to the temporal design of the seminar. Such kinds of dilemma emerge each time a decision must be taken regarding class schedule and the planning of activity: determining whether the course should be scheduled as full-day weekend sessions or proposed through end-of-the-day time slots, choosing the starting and ending times, deciding how much time is allocated for breaks and for discussing each narrative, etc. The dilemma can be formulated as following: Whenever there is room for adjustment, should the class activity be ‘compressed’ so that participants get more time for recess and to accommodate their extra-curricular commitments, or should the time dedicated to the class activity (e.g., dialogue) be ‘extended’ so that participants have more room for sharing and confronting their points of view and to elaborate their reflection in between formal time? In other words, what level of temporal pressure should participants feel in the classroom – for instance when we have time for experimenting with questions – and outside, when students must deal with conflicting temporal demands, such as those involved in the preparation of their class assignments, in their personal and professional lives, or to accommodate their own biological rhythms (e.g., eating, resting)?

Beyond the strictly organizational aspect of this dilemma, what is at stake relates to the way priorities are set by students and myself regarding the organization of their activity. Higher and adult education, family and work are institutions organized according to different temporal logics. As shown in the field of dual education (Pineau, 2000), whenever a planning or a schedule can be negotiated, such a situation opens a process of negotiation and ponderation of interests, within each participant and between all of us. It relates to personal preferences and needs (people react differently based on their own psychological and biological rhythms). It depends too on the social and cultural context of the activity (e.g., temporal norms and expectations are different at work, in family and at the university). Such a process relies on the specific nature of the competing activities themselves (some may require ‘efficiency’ and a ‘rational use’ of the time available, or at the opposite being in the ‘flow’ and losing track of one’s time). To some extent, the temporal organization of a course and the way it is experienced shape how people conceive and prioritize different temporal logics, norms and pressures that express biological, psychological and social constraints and therefore power dynamics (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017).

### **Conflicting Temporalities Involved in the Learning Process**

A second dilemma I am regularly experiencing has to do with the learning processes involved in the classroom discussion. Such a kind of dilemma emerges whenever there is a limited time sequence for participants to learn how to formulate relevant questions in order to bring the author of a narrative and themselves to critically assess their own assumptions. Typically, the learning process requires one to move from asking ‘anecdotal questions’ (focusing on contingent details) to elaborate ‘deeper questions’ targeting one’s own assumptions; it may also require the introduction of theoretical considerations to complexify what is at stake in the discussion. This dilemma can be formulated as following: How much freedom should be given to students to formulate their questions without any guidance, and when should they benefit from modeling questions and the introduction of objective knowledge?

Such a dilemma is present in any educational setting. It raises temporal issues, because with time participants tend to experiment with various types of questioning. Such a dilemma also demonstrates the fact that temporal pressure impacts on the very nature of the learning processes and the different psychological and social effects they carry. To understand it, it is relevant to

consider Lesne's (1977) contribution. According to his model, at least three types of pedagogical process (*modes de travail pédagogique*) are found in adult education, depending on the weight given to the learner's agency (i.e., object, subject, or agent) and the source of knowledge privileged (i.e., external-objective, internal-subjective, social construct articulating different sources of knowledge). These three modes are described as: transmissive, incitative and appropriative. Transmissive methods (e.g., banking education) tend to subjugate the learner's sense of autonomy by privileging preexisting knowledge as the normative framework through which learning is conceived. It would suggest for instance that the facilitator – as an 'expert' – shows participants which questions to ask, as a model to replicate. Incitative methods (e.g., group dynamics) tend to locate the source of knowledge within the learner, privileging experiential learning and the educational value of one's own subjectivity. It would suggest that participants may find themselves what are the questions 'worth' asking, strictly based on their own subjectivity. Appropriative work, may appear as more complex – and therefore 'slower' – as it articulates established knowledge (e.g., objective and scientific observations) with the subjective preferences of the learners. Typical of the work done through life history seminars, this approach requires that participants confront their own spontaneous questions with those raised by the facilitator, based on her/his expertise of the process, so that new knowledge emerges from the otherness and leads to the identification of hidden assumptions framing questions and responses.

From a temporal point of view, those three modalities of pedagogical activity do not require the same temporal framework and the same rhythms between participants and facilitator's interventions. From that perspective, the temporal dilemma inherent in the timing of a class discussion is not just about the way dialogue is regulated; more deeply, it reveals diverging pedagogical strategies that carry heterogeneous learning outcomes (e.g., reproductive, assertive, transformational).

### **Heterogeneous Temporal Horizons of the Formation**

A third kind of temporal dilemma that can be experienced when facilitating a life history seminar concerns the different expectations that participants may have regarding the seminar and the goals it is supposed to fulfill. On the one hand, the relevance of the course typically appears to the participants through their short-term instrumental needs. For instance, it may provide them with specific tools and methodologies to apply in their current professional setting (e.g., how to use narrative approaches for enhancing team collaboration). On the other hand, the relevance of the seminar also appears through its long term transformational effects. For instance, it may provide participants with resources to critically interpret what is at stake with the development of their professional identity, as they slowly navigate and shape their professional journey and learn to challenge their own assumptions over time.

Mezirow (1991) distinguishes instrumental, communicational and emancipatory learning, to differentiate the kind of learning that may occur in the praxis of adult education. From a temporal point of view, those three educational aims may not relate to the same temporal horizons. Instrumental learning is shaped by the temporality required to complete a predefined goal; it suggests a sense of objectivity, rationality and measurement in the way time is managed. Communicational learning depends on interpersonal dynamics that remain contingent and vary depending on the setting and the people involved; it requires time to be regulated. The emergence of emancipatory learning is unpredictable and non-linear, as it emerges through discontinuity that cannot be anticipated; it is valuable only when the meaning of an educational setting is envisioned through the long-term temporality of one's existence. From that perspective,



conflicting expectations that may appear toward a life history seminar translate not only diverging interests (e.g., solving problems, understanding each other, challenging one's own assumptions), they also reveal how such interests relate to heterogeneous temporal horizons, more or less closed or open, short or long, manageable or not.

### **Learning from Both One's Existence and the Temporal Conditions through which it is Reflected on**

Using life narratives with adult learners may trigger transformative processes, because they provide space and time to identify and challenge core assumptions about oneself, others and the world, based on the participants' past history (Dominicé, 2000). However, such a transformative function requires specific conditions to occur that may or may not be available. The three dilemmas I have described question how people envision the conditions for emancipatory learning to unfold, considering conflicting priorities between different spheres of activity, diverging learning processes and competing finalities. Questioning the temporal design of a course, the temporality of the learning process involved, and the temporal horizon through which it is framed, therefore reveals broader tensions between antagonistic values and principles that are shared by all the participants. Thus, from a transformative perspective, what is at stake in such a course is twofold. Transformative processes may be triggered through self-reflection focusing on past life experiences. They may also emerge from the analysis of the current pedagogical setting and the way the temporalities involved shape the learning that is supposed to occur. In congruence with pedagogical approaches such as *analyse institutionnelle* (Lourau, 1997) or conceptions such as double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974), it appears therefore particularly critical to question not only past life experiences, but also the conditions through which they can be interpreted in the present. Considering such dilemmas as an additional locus to trigger transformation, it appears that the transformative potential of life history seminars belongs as much to its process (sharing and discussing participants' life histories), than the capacity to critically reflect on its modalities of implementation.

Considering the contemporary process of social acceleration (Rosa, 2005/2013) that influences Western society and impacts practices in adult and higher education, time to reflect on one's own life history becomes scarcer. One of the consequences of this phenomenon is that the transformative effects associated with this kind of praxis may diminish. In that context, putting the stress on the temporalities involved in the learning setting may become a new priority for the facilitator. By raising questions about what can or cannot be done in the classroom, educational dilemmas emerge that relate to biological, psychological and social constraints. Despite not being connected with the past life of the participants, they may nevertheless provide them with triggers to critically reflect on what is taken for granted, that is the assumptions through which people give meanings to their current everyday life and their ongoing journey through lifelong learning.

### **Narrating Life from the First-person Perspective: Dilemmas Encountered by the Adult Learner and Practitioner During Life History Seminars (Hervé Breton)**

I will pay attention during this symposium to the dilemmas I have been experiencing (or notice) during life history seminars for students in adult education courses. My encounter with life history dates to 1997, when I participated as a student of an adult education program focused on "Training support functions: skills assessment, career support, recognition of prior learning".

I then worked with biographical approaches in the field of research, doing a PhD with Gaston Pineau as research director. My practice of facilitation in life history seminars began in 2004 within the education sciences department of the university of Tours. It had begun with a portfolio in vocational education training which integrated biographical approaches (Pineau, 1984, 1986). In 2012, I had the responsibility to facilitate a training session of 25 hours based on life narrative, and then, in 2016, I became the educational manager of a long-term degree named “Diplôme universitaire Histoire de vie en formation”. This degree is deeply specialized on biographical approaches, life seminars, lifelong learning processes, and adult education. It lasts for two years, with eleven three-days teaching seminars during which students experience doing research using the life history approach.

### **The Setting of Life History Seminars at the University of Tours**

The students of the master courses of the university of Tours are all adults. The biographical sessions are integrated into (or in complementarity with) master’s curricula that aim to acquire skills for adult education, vocational education training guidance, prior learning assessment. The narrative and biographical work during these sessions are organized around three dimensions: the temporalization of the life course; autobiography and life storytelling; life narrative collective expression. The pedagogical setting includes different supporting times:

- Times during which students explore, temporalize and write, at home, lived moments relating to periods of life.
- Workshop times in sub-groups allowing a first socialization of the story which then allows an exchange of views in relation to the biographical narration, in progress.
- A collective moment of expression, at the end of the seminars, dedicated to the expression of each of the stories within the training group of the life history seminar.

### **Biographical Narration and the Capacity to Express the Experience**

To progress in the biographical narration praxis, students begin with an examination of some past moments in order to describe them in words. This activity mobilizes different kinds of “acts of language” whose functions deserve detailed examination. We have already studied in this symposium different kinds of dilemmas in relation to temporality during life story seminars. A second perspective can now be examined: the different way by which experience is translated into words. From the point of view of the subject who engages him/herself in biographical work, one of the first trials she must face is the following: to find suitable words to express different moments of her past, at first for oneself, then to others. We will then consider the dilemmas in relation to language, and, precisely, in order to understand the dynamics by which experience becomes words, and from these words, is developed into a story.

This dynamic through which experience arises into language, then into narrative, is therefore a source of dilemma, from the point of view of the subject, but also from the point of the practitioner who is facilitating the seminar and the narrative activity during the life history session. For the narrator, the problem can be divided into three main issues: the identification of the experiences considered as legitimate or valid to be included in the storytelling; the choice of words to express them; and the anticipated consequences of the expression of a first-person narrative that includes experiences struck by prohibitions, shame, or *indicibilité*. We propose below to examine these points based on an example.

### **The Dilemma for Adult Learners of Choosing Moments for the Life Narration**

To go further in the study of dilemmas; we are now proposing a short study, coming from a testimony (Breton, 2017), which exemplifies processes at work:

*The situation mentioned takes place in 2012, during a life history seminar in an adult education program. The participants are invited to narrate a period of their lives, starting from the identification of various significant moments included in it. At the end of the second day, one of the participants asks to speak individually with one of the practitioners, in order to consult about difficulties emerged from the proposed work: "I am unable to engage myself in the writing and in the narrative work for the following reason: I cannot enter into the narration without telling a short period I have lived when I was twenty years old, during which I lived a wandering moment. However, I don't want to talk about this experience in the group because it could marginalise me during the seminar."*

The analysis of these passages indicates the existence of a dilemma which is lived by the narrator. We are formalizing it in this way: for the narrator, the telling of one's story requires one to consider a specific moment in the narration. It appears, from his point of view, essential for the overall coherence of the biographical narration: however, the perspective of an expression of this moment to others is perceived through its negative consequences. Indeed, the perception of the person is that s/he may endure a danger of marginalization if s/he shares this experience. The dilemma lived here is an experience of inertia, which, paradoxically, has the effect of producing the effect that is feared: the feeling of not being able to remain in a collective that mobilizes a biographical approach as a mean for or of self-development and emancipation.

### **To Guide Narrative Work in a Biographical Approach: What are the Limits of Encouraging the Expression of Experience?**

The proposal made by the practitioner in charge of the facilitation of the life history seminar, is presented below:

*Perhaps you can simply describe this moment without feeling compelled to tell it to others. Then write and proofread the text. Then, you will be able to decide how to proceed when it will be time for you to express some part of your life history.*

How to understand the proposition made by the practitioner? He is encouraging the person to continue the process, by giving two indications: at first, to write on this moment, by taking time to see how the experience can be expressed and integrated in the life history; and then, from a first-person perspective, to consider whether its expression within the group is relevant. The hypothesis made by the practitioner is the following: the experience, before being shared with others, must be recognized by the person himself, through its integration within his own life story. The perspective proposed can be examined in this way: to help the continuity of the biographical work, it is required, from the practitioner point of view, to help the person to maintain contact with the past experience to which perceptions of shame and secrecy are attached.

### **Lifting the Dilemma: The Choice of Words for a First-person Expression**

However, the emancipation from the experience of shame – and the lifting of the dilemma – presupposes one to differentiate two dynamics: on the one hand, the dynamic through which the experience comes into words and thus allows a process of self-recognition to arise; on the other hand, the dynamics through which the expression of this narrative is expressed to the community. In other words, the practitioner is proposing to solve the dilemma by enunciating two principles: one principle of succession (narrative of oneself; then, expression of the autobiography within a group) and one principle of recursivity (the narrator must be able to

proofread his autobiography before it is shared with the community). These two principles are thought as a way out of a paralyzing contradiction.

*About six weeks later, a new phase of the life history training takes place, which is devoted to the expression of each life history. At this moment, the person who was impressed and scared to express an experience of marginality he had lived, is beginning to express himself in the following way: "... then, at the age of 20, I lived a period of wandering that lasted two years. This led me to live forms of vagrancy and to move from one place to another without fixed directions." He then continues to express his life history without further comments or particularly visible emotions.*

It is possible to imagine, in this last passage, that the dilemma is resolved. Indeed, what manifests itself here is an ability to tell the period of life without excluding the marginal moment that was initially banned. This new capacity to express the life history can be understood according to a dynamic of transformation of the modality through which a moment is being integrated in the life history. The dilemma there is located, from the point of view of the narrator, in the choice of the terms used to express the marginal moment in the relevant composition process through which this moment can be expressed in the life story. The narrative praxis, by transforming the comprehension of this event the person has acquired, contributes to a kind of metamorphosis. This work of integrating a moment of social marginality into the history of the subject seems to have continued in the development of self-confidence, with the effect of an increased capacity for integration and recognition of a greater diversity of experiences as a moment of formation in life.

### **Final Synthesis**

The life history and auto/biographical activities described above generate many dilemmas for adult learners and practitioners. The paper illuminates some dilemmas, based on a reflexive analysis of the work. The dilemmas can be classified in four ways: those relating to the institutional context and constraints; those to temporality in diverse ways, not least for students in managing their learning in the context of whole lifeworlds; there are those that derive from the unpredictable, often idiosyncratic rhythms of experiential learning among adults; and, finally, dilemmas can be deeply emotional, intra as well as intersubjective, encompassing individuals and groups. There are processes generated within the dynamics of groups, about what can be said or not, and anxieties over the judgement of others. We can link this to the notion of the defended self, alongside the occasional inadequacy of words to encapsulate difficult experience. But when a story is witnessed respectfully by a tutor, and the possibility of sharing it, in meaningful ways, in a group and wider public space is enhanced, the effects can be powerful. These seminars are at an edge, or, to mix metaphors, represent a kind of border country between the personal and public, emotion and cognition, self, other, and groups, as well as therapy and education. They can be transformative, but time and its constraints surround the work too. Taking time, in hyper modernity is an increasing issue: giving space and time in seminars, for storytelling, in ways increasingly unavailable at work, or in families and intimate relationships, can be both liberatory and terrifying. Giving time to tell difficult stories can expose the stress and strain of work, and the colonization of space by managerialism, and the conflict between personal values and how people are expected to perform.

Auto/biographical and life history seminars involve the strongest possible involvement of learners, taking them and their lived experience as the prime focus. Research on the types of

dilemmas experienced during biographical narration activity allows us to examine and illuminate the processes that facilitate or, to the contrary, discourage learners' involvement in narrative praxis. Moreover, by seeking to understand the movement of self-comprehension from a biographical perspective, processes of transformative learning are better understood in a longitudinal and lifewide way, grounded in individual stories and emphasising the potential transformations in self-narrative structures. There is also an issue to do with the guidance practices at work during the life story narration in seminars: the capacity of professionals to use such methods in their vocational education settings, presupposes that they have learned the transformative effects of life storytelling themselves as well as how best to manage the whole process. This is complex: supporting individuals and groups of learners in life history seminars requires a praxis grounded in clear epistemological perspectives as well as a good enough containing and transitional psychosocial space. Tutors have a crucial role in managing anxieties for individuals and whole groups as well as themselves. Our paper offers a clearer understanding of temporal, epistemological, personal, group, narrative and pedagogic dilemmas in life history seminars, and of their transformative potential, complex management as well as inevitable constraints.

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## Promoting Civic Capacities through Transformative Learning

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**Abstract:** The working group will discuss the topic of promoting civic capacities and civic culture through transformative learning from complementary international theoretical and empirical perspectives. The two main topics will be (1) the possibilities of transformative learning in different forms of civic education in different societies and (2) to what extent transformative learning can foster civic politics and civic initiatives and thereby contribute to democratic development. Presenters will offer theoretical perspectives on the tension between personal and societal transformation. Then the far-reaching civic dimension of transformative learning will be discussed using examples from transitions in Eastern Europe after 1989, where transformative learning will be considered as a process of dealing with the past in the light of the need for democratic reorientation. The working group will end with discussions of recent developments in civic education (in the US, with reference to other countries) and whether they offer any possibilities for transformative learning.

**Key Words:** Individual and Community Transformation, Social Change, Eastern Europe, Social Heterogeneity, Civic Education in the USA

### Transformative Learning Theory: Between Personal and Community Transformation

As an “an approach to teaching based on promoting change, where educators challenge learners to critically question and assess the integrity of their deeply held assumptions about how they relate to the world around them” (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009, p. XI), transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) is concerned with both personal transformation *and* social action. As such it has to constantly balance the tension between the two and at best utilize that tension as a source of autonomy and creativity. Mezirow’s theory emerged from a massive study of women returning to college after a long hiatus during the 1970s, investigating their learning experience. Most of them experienced what Mezirow later referred to as a personal transformation (Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b). The intersection of adult education and civic movements (namely the women’s movement in the US) contributed to Mezirow’s notion of TL. One key aspect is the realization that a personal problem is shared by others, that power structures break into the private life. “He [Mezirow] wants to situate transformative learning within an emancipatory framework, but at the same time his model seems to emphasize personal transformation to a greater extent than social transformation” (Taylor, 1998, p. 25). That tension, given our diverse, transdisciplinary perspectives, highlights different aspects of TL within the field of civic studies in an international comparison in order to build bridges between individual and community transformation. We go back to the roots and explore recent developments in civic education (in the US, with reference to other countries and Eastern Europe) and discuss whether they offer any possibilities for TL.



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