1 Introduction: Moving Beyond Access to Learning Careers and Identity

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In recent years the nature of European adult education research has changed. There is now an increased interest in looking at the processes and experiences of adult learning in terms of a learning career across the lifecourse and its subsequent impact upon identities in a range of educational contexts rather than simply access issues. This reflects the growing concern about and focus upon identity within the social sciences generally as the uncertainty, risk and individualisation of life in late modernity makes the maintenance of identity problematic (Giddens, 1991, Castells, 1997, Beck, 1992). Individuals, groups and society are experiencing social, economic, political and technological changes which are making life unpredictable and unstable as the traditional linear lifecourse patterns of the past, such as a job for life, disappear (Bauman, 2005). Biographies of adult learners reveal this uncertainty and complexity of modern life as they juggle multiple identities and sometimes fragmented lives resulting in learning careers which may not always be linear. Research indicates, as evidenced by the chapters in this book, that engagement in learning and the development of a learning career has an impact upon the identity of the self and sometimes others (family and friends) in both individual and collective ways. Whatever context adults are learning in most leave a programme a changed person, some in more pronounced ways than others (West, 1996, Merrill, 1999). Some adults become 'hooked' on learning and progress through different levels from returning to learn to higher education study although not necessarily in a continuous fashion.

This book looks at the issues of access, learning careers and identities in a diverse range of settings with diverse groups of adult students across Europe largely through the voices of adult students themselves. Life history approaches or biographical approaches are now a favoured method of researching the access and experiences of adult students in contrast to the earlier quantitative studies using questionnaires such as Bourner et al (1991) and Woodley et al (1987). Most of the chapters in this book reflect this trend. Some of the chapters explore the learning experiences of adult educators and educators more generally and what this means for their identities as they find themselves in a changing adult education environment. A few chapters focus on institutional perspectives and how institutions and their cultures impact upon learning careers and identities.

A changing adult education

Adult education and learning now takes place in a diverse range of sites and contexts, both formally and informally such as in the family, community, civic society and the workplace. Sometimes there is a blurring of boundaries. In the UK, for example, many higher education programmes for adults are now taught in further education colleges (post compulsory institutions) and these institutions are now being referred to as the lifelong learning sector. Adult education is also no longer confined to educational institutions as other sectors and professions are showing an interest such as health services. What adult education is can no longer clearly be defined as it has become, as described by Edwards (1997), a 'moorland'.

At the same time there has been a policy push by national governments and the European Commission (EC) to open up opportunities for adults to learn through lifelong learning strategies. Some European countries have developed further along this road than others, particularly in relation to the higher education sector. While, for example, higher education institutions are relatively open in countries like Sweden and the UK they remain mostly closed in Spain and Portugal. Accessing formal adult education, therefore, is not always easy and varies by institution and countries. Despite the continuing policy push for lifelong learning the rhetoric continues to be stronger than the practice. What is happening is that adult education is being channelled into a particular and narrow direction, gradually changing the nature of adult education. The 'push' by governments, the European Commission (EC) and policy makers, though, is largely an economic one driven by technological changes and globalisation and the need to compete in the world market. (see John Field's chapter). As Edwards et al argue:

> Despite many controversies, however, the idea that the present is a period of intense structural and destabilizing change has become inherent in establishing policy contexts, to which there needs to be a response. Change and adaptation to change have become watch-words of policy, including educational policy (2002: p.526).

Liberal adult education and 'learning for learning's sake' is increasingly under attack in many European countries as marketisation and the stress on vocational learning, skills and competencies becomes more dominant. However, there are still spaces where learning is not vocationally focused as some of the chapters in this book illustrate. Importantly participating as an adult student in education can offer a space for individuals to work out different, changing or new identities in order to adapt to the transformations of life in late modernity.

There are wider benefits, therefore, to participating in education (Schuller et al, 2004) for both the self and society, including the possibility for self development, transformation and changing identity. For some this process will be more transforming than for others. The learning career and journey of an adult learner may not always be straightforward, and for some, keeping on going on may be difficult because of personal, institutional and structural pressures. In developing a learner identity (or not) the stories that adult students tell reveal the interaction of structure and agency in a person's life. Some of the chapters illustrate how individuals use their agency to both get into formal education and also to manage/cope within the educational institution against a background of structural factors such as class, gender, poverty, etc. Adult learners are not homogeneous and as a result learning careers and identities are shaped by issues of class, gender, ethnicity, disability and age. At the same time adult educators also face challenges in terms of their learning and identity as educators in a changing adult education world. This book aims to explore the learning journey and changing identities of adult learners and adult educators in a range of educational settings such as further and higher education, adult and community education, the workplace as well as informal spaces such as the family or civic society.

The story of this book

The European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) provides opportunities for adult educators from across Europe to meet, discuss and exchange research ideas. ESREA has several research networks covering a range of adult education topics. This book has developed from the work of the ESREA Access, Learning Careers and Identities Network and the meeting of researchers from across Europe to discuss their research at Louvain-la- Neuve in 2006. The life history of this network reflects the changing nature of research in this field. This network started its life in 1996 as the Access Research Network and held its first network conference in Leeds, UK. The convenors were Chris Duke, Etienne Bourgeois and myself. As the publication -*Access, Equity, Participation and Organisational Change*- (Hill & Merrill, 1997) from the conference illustrates the theme of the network was a narrow one focusing only on higher education, access and participation. This focus dominated the themes of the next two network conferences in Barcelona and Edinburgh. Ten years later the network was re-launched under its new title of Access, Learning Careers and Identities to reflect the new and wider concerns in adult education research around the concepts of identity and learning experiences and processes. The emphasis was no longer on getting in and accessing an institution.

Moving to the chapters

As stated above the chapters in this book embrace a wide range of adult education contexts looking at the concepts of access, learning careers and identities. Although different European countries are represented in this book each with different histories the discussions reveal many commonalities as well as some differences in relation to adult education and student experiences. Some of the authors have worked together on several European, EC funded research projects (a TSER project on adult access to universities and LIHE and PRILHE both of which focus on the learning process and experiences). These are referred to in the chapters by Rennie Johnston and Barbara Merrill, Peter Alheit, Ewa Kurantowicz and Adrianna Nizinski and Ana Maria Ramalho Correia et al.

In chapter two John Field argues that many social theorists assert that late modernity is characterised by increasing change across all areas of adult life, leading to a continuing experience of transition in the adult life course. Education and training is one area which can provide a stimulus to further change in work or everyday life. The chapter explores the role of social networks in adults' strategies for coping with learning transitions. It draws on recent research into social capital and adult learning, which has pointed to a largely beneficial relationship between participation in learning and engagement in social and civic activity. It also addresses more intimate forms of social capital such as family life. Drawing on life history data from a large national UK study (*'Learning Lives: Learning, Identity and Agency'*) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council) on agency, identity and learning among British adults, a series of broad strategic categories are identified. These are explored through illustrative case studies of the life stories of three individuals. Field suggests that some combinations of social support seem better suited to promote successful transitions than others.

Chapter three, written by Michael Tedder and Gert Biesta, also focuses on research from the *'Learning Lives: Learning, Identity and Agency'* project. Using a biographical approach they explore how participation in learning enables people to learn from their lives. What is the meaning of these learning processes and how does such type of learning help individuals deal with processes of change and transition? In doing so Tedder and Biesta examine the concept of biographical learning by drawing on the work of Peter Alheit and Bettina Dausien. They illustrate their ideas through the case study and biography of one male adult learner. Using the transcripts of seven interviews they examine his learning career, identity and the transitions he experienced. His story illustrates how education enables people to find the space to acquire tools and reflect upon their life experiences through the process of biographical learning.

Simon Warren and Sue Webb also centre their chapter (chapter four) on biographical research and the narrative of a female adult student (Jenny) in a further education college in the UK. They look at how her life trajectory is shaped and given meaning through key events in her life. In Jenny's case her narrative is constructed around a key event of the death of her aunt. Warren and Webb illustrate the consequences of this event: Jenny's decision to enter social care work and then later to participate on a part-time Health and Social Care course at a further education college. They argue that her narrative highlights the causal relationship between these events. In theorising their work they examine how stories are 'socially organised' and 'saturated by social structure'. For them Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field or structure and agency provide a means to develop a 'recursive methodology' which enables them to illustrate the particularities and richness of an individual life while also taking into account the role of social structure.

In chapter five Paula Guimarães and Amélia Vitória Sancho shift the focus of learning from adult students to adult educators. Through participation on a training programme they explore the meanings of learning experiences which adult educators have while working as practitioners in Portugal. Guimarães and Sancho focus on informal learning in the workplace. Informal learning is seen as an open, indeterminate, flexible and a not necessarily organised process. They argue that informal learning is not a linear process but rather one that is frequently interrupted, resumed, and discontinued which occurs in response to constraints, requirements or arbitrary or contingent possibilities. Informal learning in the workplace enables adult educators to change attitudes and behaviour. The narratives of adult educators are used to explore the practitioners' own 'ways of knowing' about the effects of workplace practices on learning. The narratives are drawn from an EC funded project involving eight European countries entitled '*A Good Adult Educator in Europe' project'* (AGADE).

Chapter six by Rob Evans also focuses on professionals and learning but from the perspective of looking at organisational discourse(s) of learning through the narratives and talk of employees working in international corporations in Germany. Evans argues that professional knowledge management and organisational/ intercultural learning processes takes place within the framework of globalising contexts. He also examines how the learning experiences of employees are enacted out between demands for tacit/informal and /or explicit /formal knowledge, whereby the former is mainly experiential and subjective while the latter is market-oriented and codified and dependent on specific (and changing) work-place profiles (Evans, 2001). Evans uses biographical narrative unstructured interviews as a means of critique to identify current deficits in organisational communication and intercultural learning.

Life history methodology is also the approach used in chapter seven by Patricia Gouthro. This chapter, however, takes us to Canada and to a study

funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Council which examines the learning trajectories of women learners. This involved forty female participants from across Canada. The women were asked to trace their lifelong learning trajectories and highlight any concerns they faced in continuing their formal education. For Gouthro, a key objective is to assess, using critical feminist analysis, existing educational policies and practices in adult and higher education in Canada. She argues that gendered differences are not addressed in adult and higher education policies and practices. Instead such institutions serve to reinforce structural barriers and hence perpetuate women's inequality in the learning society. Critical feminist perspectives also reveal that differences in lifelong learning trajectories are due to both individual and social contexts.

In chapter eight Tamsin Hinton-Smith continues with Gouthro's theme of looking at the experiences of non-traditional adult learners in higher education. In this chapter the focus is on lone parents studying a range of courses in further and higher education institutions in the UK for a longitudinal project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Biographical approaches are used to illustrate the uncertainties and complexities of modern life which impact upon everyday life and learning careers of lone parents studying in higher education. Juggling and balancing roles and tasks characterise their lives as they take on multiple identities and struggle with the uncertainty and risk that studying as a lone parent brings. The chapter is set within a policy background of a declining welfare state and an increasing emphasis on individual economic self-sufficiency against a background of a national policy push towards widening participation.

Chapter nine again continues the theme of non-traditional adult learners in higher education. Rennie Johnston and Barbara Merrill explore, through two life histories (female and male), the learning experiences and learner identities of working class adult students. The stories are taken from an EU project entitled *Learning in Higher Education.* The chapter highlights the complexity of a learning identity in relation to working class adult students. Johnston and Merrill argue for the centrality of social class in UK society despite its recent downturn in popularity in UK sociology. They draw on the work of Bourdieu and in particular his concepts of habitus and capital in order to examine how learning identities are constructed. The role of agency and structure is also explored through two life stories to identify how a learner identity is shaped and transformed while at the same time maintaining working class roots.

Chapter ten centres on a different aspect and arena of adult education and on an under-researched area. Nalita James and Bethia McNeil discuss their research study on young adults (male offenders) involvement and engagement in a drama programme in prison. Funded by the Arts Council England and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) the project explored the use of drama and theatre as a site for learning. In particular James and McNeil are interested in

how participation in drama and the process of drama as tools may encourage the personal and social development of the offenders. They look at how the programme enabled the young men to act as agents in their own learning and development and offers the time and space to explore images and projections of the self and identity.

The institutional habitus and the symbolic power of German universities is the concern of Peter Alheit in chapter eleven. Specifically the chapter focuses on the role of gatekeeping in relation to non-traditional adult students but looked at through the stories of four academics in a range of hard and soft disciplines. In drawing on the work of Becher (1987) he examines the impact that particular soft and hard disciplines may have in shaping disciplinary cultures and the habitus of academics. Using Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital he identifies four different types of habitus enacted by the four academics interviewed. The 'exclusive habitus' of the pure and hard scientist, the 'ambivalent habitus' of the soft and pure sociologist, the 'pragmatic habitus' of the hard and applied of the mechanical engineer and lastly the 'inclusive habitus' of the soft and applied social scientist.

The theme of universities and non-traditional adult students is continued by Ewa Kurantowicz and Adrianna Nizinski in chapter twelve. This chapter takes us geographically further east in Europe to Poland. Like Peter Alheit they draw on research undertaken in the PRILHE project on the critical, autonomous and reflective learning of non-traditional adult students in higher education. The focus here is on Polish adult students. In order to understand the present they examine the history of Polish universities and the impact of the events between 1980 and 1989 in Polish society. Although universities are the fastest growing and changing institutions in Poland they explore why there is little debate on the learning process. Using life history stories and students' diaries collected through the PRILHE project they discuss the impact of higher education institutions in enabling (or not) non-traditional adult students to become reflective, critical and autonomous learners.

In chapter thirteen Ana Maria Ramalho Correia, Duce Magalhães, Ana Vristina Costa and Anabela Sarmento look at knowledge sharing and learning processes in a comparative study of technological schools and higher education institutions in Portugal in relation to adult students. The data for this study again draws on the European PRILHE research project. In Portugal there has been an increasing interest in adult learners over the last few years. They assert that while learners' biographies reveal uncertainty and sometimes a lack of confidence concerning their learning potential some do develop approaches to deal with these difficulties and become autonomous and independent learners. They argue that this may be related to pathways chosen during the course of their life. They examine whether or not the choice to study at either a technological school

or a university is dependent on their biography and how the learning context may also affect their ability to become autonomous and independent learners.

In the final chapter – chapter fourteen – Jan Frederiksen takes us to northern Europe in a study of social educator students in Denmark. The chapter discusses how social educators who have extensive professional practice in the field become adult students and the opportunities that the professional training offers them. He applies theories of control to the grading of students and the role of grading as a social practice and explores what impact this has on the learning identities of the students. He draws on Bernstein's concept of pedagogical devices and Foucault's concept of governmentality to look at how a lenient and considerate grading system helps to develop the students' understanding of their professional and educational field. And also how students learn how to govern themselves without losing control in the classroom and lastly how self-governance provides a matrix for the subjective experience of becoming and being a social educator student.

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