

Editorial

Henning Salling Olesen

Roskilde University, Denmark (hso@ruc.dk)

Kathy Nicoll

University of Stirling, UK (katherine.nicoll@stir.ac.uk)

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.

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