

Changing Identities and "Dual Professionalism"
in the Learning and Skills Sector
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“Almost a Therapy” Taking Part in a Life History Research Project

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Overview

- **Personal Story – a cultural aside**
- **Context for the Paper**
 - *Learning Lives: learning identity and agency in the lifecourse*
 - Therapy and the emerging critique of the ‘therapeutic ethos’
- **Empirical Data from Learning Lives**
- **Insights and conclusion**

Context

■ *Learning Lives: empirical overview*

- Three year longitudinal study of learning biographies of 150 adults aged 25+
- Participants interviewed up to eight times between 2004 and 2007
- Collection of retrospective life stories as well as accounts of lives through the duration of the project
- Final interview, participants asked about taking part: how they felt about **the interviews** and about receiving **the transcripts**

Context

■ *Learning Lives: analytical framework*

- Bruner (2002) *...we constantly construct and reconstruct ourselves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter ... Telling oneself about oneself is like making up a story about who and what we are, what's happened and why we're doing what we're doing*
- Polkinghorne (1995) interest among qualitative researchers in narrative inquiry is well merited because narrative is the linguistic form suited for displaying human existence as *situated action*

Context

■ Critique of the 'therapeutic ethos' (1)

- Language, symbols and codes used in psychoanalysis or counselling are being extended into new areas of private and public life – a diminished language of damage, fragility and dysfunction: learners 'at risk', 'vulnerable' or suffering from 'fragile learning identities', people with 'low self-esteem'
- Growing policy commitment to the promotion of personalised services (e.g. 'personalised learning') using language of responding to individual needs and feelings, promoting emotional engagement
- Traditions in adult education – experiential learning, reflective practice, counselling-based pedagogy and life history research – perceived as part of the problem

Context

■ Critique of the 'therapeutic ethos' (2)

Dangers:

- New forms of surveillance, control and dependency
- Individualistic language - issues and problems concerning education and people's existence become individualised

Context

■ Ambivalence of responses

- Enduring appeal of humanistic ideals in education – positive regard, empathy, congruence supporting autonomous learning
- Anxiety about surveillance of professionals and pathologising of learners

Empirical Data

Anne Wakelin made transitions:

- (a) geographic from industrial Midlands to rural South West
- (b) occupational from hairdresser to community development officer

Empirical Data

- *I've really enjoyed doing it. I've enjoyed doing it because it's, it's not very often that somebody sits there and lets you tell them about what you are and what you do and how you do your [pause] how your life has been, has been really*
- *I'm doing more for a starter. I'm completely different in what I do. I'm working now. More confident in myself as I was three years ago, and more knowledgeable in what I do as well. The different outlook on things, you know, in my work, because I'd only ever been, as I say I'd only ever been a hairdresser*

Anne Wakelin - Interview 6, June 2007

Empirical Data

Russell Jackson made transitions:

- (a) from clerical to lay life
- (b) from service deliverer to service manager

Empirical Data

- *It's been an opportunity to reflect on my own life... trying to work out what it is that you want to say in a coherent way... a really useful reflective tool that has been of great value to me. ... the transcripts have been hugely moving for me on occasion to read... one is both embarrassed and I found, touched by the story that [laughs] one is reading... but that has been a new experience for me.*
- *(T)he one thing I've got is the power of narrative. I'm not well qualified, I'm not, you know, highly intelligent or all those really worthwhile things. I've just got a story. And the story informs who I am and the story makes me who I am and out of that I have an ability and a confidence and the ability to deal with people in their stories.*



Russell Jackson - Interview 7, December 2006

Insights

- **Narrative learning**
- Narration of life - the storying and the emplotment of life - is an important vehicle for learning
- Life can be a 'site for learning' through the narration of life events or through reflection on a narrative - telling stories provides a technique within which to explore significance or to reach judgements
- Many people engage in much useful reflection and narration in order to lead their lives – they resolve issues and problems through such processes – there is spontaneous meaning making through narration that is definitely helpful for some

Insights

■ Narrative learning

- Narration of life - the storying and the emplotment of life - is not an *essential* vehicle for learning and is not *necessary* for everyone. Some people do not find they learn through such processes. There are many ways in which people learn other than through narration.

Conclusion

- The problem of therapy in education is superficial use of the language and symbols of therapy and lack of rigour in observing the practices
- Treat critical warnings seriously but don't abandon progress made in creating spaces for people to consider and reflect on their lives
- Need for opportunities to 'translate' private reflections into more collective learning processes