

# Learning from life in the learning economy: The role of narrative

Gert Biesta, The Stirling Institute of Education, UK and Michael Tedder, University of Exeter, UK.

## Introduction

The shift from adult education to lifelong learning has not only impacted on the role and position of the adult educator, but has also had a profound effect on the legitimization of the learning of adults. Whereas adult education has historically been connected with learning for personal development and empowerment and learning for social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity (see Aspin & Chapman 2001), the rise of the 'learning paradigm' (Martin 2006; Biesta 2006a) has been accompanied by an emphasis on learning for economic progress and development. This is not only visible in policy discourse but has also influenced the allocation of public funding for the learning of adults and thus has had a real effect on the kinds of education adults are able to engage in.

The rise of the 'learning paradigm' can be seen as part of a struggle over the definition of learning: a struggle over *what* counts as (worthwhile) learning and a struggle over *who* is allowed to define what (worthwhile) learning is (see Biesta 2006b). In this context an important task for adult education researchers is to highlight the significance of the broad range of learning processes and practices that occur in the lives of adults so as to show that there is more to learning than what is acknowledged in the economic definition of lifelong learning. Doing this has been one of the main ambitions of the Learning Lives project, a 3-year longitudinal study into the learning biographies of about 120 adults of 25 and older (see [www.learninglives.org](http://www.learninglives.org)). The research was based upon a series of open-ended interviews in which we invited participants to talk about their lives and the role of learning in it, both retrospectively (using a life-history approach) and in relation to events in their lives over the duration of the project.

In this paper we focus on one particular aspect of the learning we encountered in the project, viz., the way in which adults learn *from* their lives. Our interest in this was prompted by the fact that upon reading and analysing the life-stories of participants we found that in a significant number of cases these stories articulated that participants had reached some kind of insight or understanding about their lives, themselves and their position in the world. The stories evidenced, in other words, that the participants had learned something from their lives. We also found that this learning had had an impact on the ways in which the participants led their lives. We became particularly interested in the role of stories and storying in such learning processes and in possible relationships between the 'narrative quality' of life-stories and their potential for learning and action. For our analysis we engaged with literature on narrative in the human and social sciences (Polkinghorne 1988; Bruner 1990; Czarniawska 2004), with the emerging body of work on narrative learning in adult education (Rossiter 1999; Rossiter and Clark 2007), and with

research and theory on biographical learning (Alheit 1995; Alheit & Dausien 2002). In this paper we present some of the findings from our analysis and reflect upon their significance for adult learning in the learning economy.<sup>1</sup>

### **Theoretical background: Biographical learning and narrative theory**

The idea that life itself can be or become an 'object' of learning is, as such, not new. The idea of biography as "itself a field of learning" (Alheit 1995, p.59) has particularly been developed by Alheit and Dausien through the notion of 'biographical learning' which they define as "a self-willed, 'autopoietic' accomplishment on the part of active subjects, in which they reflexively 'organise' their experience in such a way that they also generate personal coherence, identity, a meaning to their life history and a communicable, socially viable lifeworld perspective for guiding their actions" (Alheit & Dausien 2002, p.17). Alheit and Dausien highlight three aspects of biographical learning: the implicit dimension, the social dimension and the 'self-willed' dimension (see *ibid.*, p.15-16). They note how learning that is implicit and tacit "forms a person's *biographical stock of knowledge*" (*ibid.*, p.15; emphasis in original) and that we can retrieve such learning "when we find ourselves stumbling or at crossroads" (*ibid.*). They emphasise that such reflexive learning processes do not exclusively take place 'inside' the individual "but depend on communication and interaction with others" (*ibid.*, p.16). And they argue that while learning within and through one's life history is interactive and socially structured, it also follows its own 'individual logic' generated by the specific, biographically layered structure of experience (see *ibid.*).

Although the stories people tell about their lives can be taken simply as accounts or descriptions of these lives, we start from the assumption that such stories may already reflect aspects of what people have learned from their lives, either in a more self-aware or in a more tacit and implicit manner. Moreover, rather than only looking at life-stories as the *outcome* of biographical learning, it seems reasonable to assume that the construction and narration of such stories forms itself an important part of such learning processes. To think of the life-story as a 'site' for biographical learning and to think of life-storying as central to this activity, is captured in the notion of 'narrative learning' (see Biesta et al., 2008). The reason why we refer to this as narrative learning rather than 'storied' learning or learning through storying has to do with an important conceptual distinction within narrative theory between story and narrative.<sup>2</sup> Narratives, to put it briefly, are those stories that are characterised by a *plot*, that is, "a type of conceptual scheme by which a contextual meaning of individual events can be displayed" (Polkinghorne 1995, p.7; see also Polkinghorne 1988). Although 'emplotment' (Ricoeur) is often understood as a temporal and sequential organisation of events, this is not necessarily the case. Plots can also organise stories in a thematic, non-temporal manner. As Polkinghorne (1995, p.5) explains:

---

<sup>1</sup> For this paper we have chosen to focus on analysis and discussion rather than to present quotes from the data. We will do so, however, in our presentation and also refer the reader to Biesta et al., 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, this distinction does not play a role in Rossiter's and Clark's (2007) book on narrative and adult education.

“Narrative is the type of discourse composition that draws together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed purposes.” A plot thus provides structure to a story and enables the selection of events for their relevance in the story – thus making the story into a narrative.

For the analysis of life-stories this raises the possibility that the presence of a particular plot – or particular plots – may be an expression of what narrators have learned from their lives. Empirically the question is not only whether it is possible to discern one or more plots within a life-story, but also how such plots function. One important distinction here is between those situations in which the narrator seems to be aware of the plot and actively uses it to construct a particular ‘version’ of his or her life, and those cases where the plot can be reconstructed from a research-perspective but does not seem to be part of the narrative ‘strategy’ of the narrator. With regard to the question of the function of plots Bruner has suggested that we construct narrative – both at an individual and societal level – in order to justify the *departure* from established norms and patterns of belief (see Bruner 1990, p.47). Autobiographical accounts are therefore not simply descriptions of one’s life but should be understood as accounts “of what one thinks one did in what settings in what ways for what felt reasons” (ibid., p.119). Narratives thus reveal why it was necessary (*not* causally, but morally, socially, psychologically) why the life had gone in a particular way” (ibid., 121).

This means that narration is not only about the construction of a particular ‘version’ of one’s life; it is at the same time a construction of a particular ‘version’ of the self. Narrating one’s life story can therefore be understood as the act of constructing “a longitudinal version of the Self” (Bruner 1990, p.120). The self is not only the object or product of the narrative but at the very same time the subject of narration. Although stories about one’s life are about the past, Bruner argues that “an enormous amount of work is going on here and now as the story is being put together” (ibid., p.122). This is not so much because the narrator needs to work hard to bring events back from memory, but more importantly because in telling about the past the narrator must decide “what to make of the past narratively at the moment of telling” (ibid.). This is another reason why the narration is not simply to be seen as the outcome of a learning process, but can be seen as (narrative) learning-in-action.

### **A narrative perspective on biographical learning**

In our reading and analysis of life-stories of participants in the Learning Lives project we made use of the foregoing ideas in order to characterise and explore processes and outcomes of narrative learning. One of the reasons for this was our interest in the question whether a focus on the narrative quality of life-stories could reveal something about the ‘learning potential’ of different narrative forms. Another reason for this was that we were also interested in the ‘action potential’ of life-stories, i.e., the way in which and the extent to which particular narrative forms or characteristics correlate with agency, which we understood roughly as the ability to exert control over and give direction to one’s life (for more on our conception of agency see Biesta & Tedder 2006;

Biesta & Tedder 2007). In this way our analysis focused on the key-terms of the Learning Lives project, viz., learning, identity, agency and life-course.

Perhaps the most significant finding emerging from our analysis is that the differences between the stories people tell about their lives do indeed correlate with ways in which people learn from their lives and with ways in which such learning bears significance for how they conduct their lives. This not only suggests that life stories and life storytelling are important 'vehicles' or 'sites' for learning from life. It also suggests that the differences between stories matter for such learning.

One relevant dimension in this regard is the *narrative intensity* of life-stories. Narrative intensity refers to the length of the initial life story, but also to the amount of detail and 'depth' of the account offered. The extent to which life stories are more or less elaborate not only has to do with length and detail but also with the question whether the life story is predominantly *descriptive* or whether it is more *analytical or evaluative*. (Note that stories can be analytical without passing any judgements.) In our analysis we both found stories that were at the more descriptive end of the spectrum and stories that presented themselves more explicitly as attempts to 'make sense' of the life.

To make sense of one's life – or, to be more precise: to construct a story which presents the life as 'making sense' – is related to the ideas of *'plot'* and *'emplotment'* and also to questions about justification. If we see the plot of a (life) story as an organising principle by which the contextual meaning of individual elements can be displayed, then we can see that the presence of a plot is a strong indication that the narrator has learned something from his or her life. In most of the stories we analysed we were able to identify a plot and this coincided with the narrative being more evaluative and analytical than descriptive. However, not in all cases in which there was a discernable plot did this function in the self-understanding of the narrator. Some participants appeared to be aware of the plot in their life narrative from the outset, whereas for others the plot only emerged throughout the interviews. In some cases a plot was only discernable from the point of view of the researcher but there was little evidence that the narrator was aware of this plot. Not all stories carried a single plot and in cases with multiple plots we could also see that they functioned differently in the narrator's self-understanding. The absence of a plot does not automatically coincide with the absence of learning. We found examples of life-stories that lacked any emplotment but where there was still evidence that the person had learned from life. This not only suggests that narration is only one of the possible ways of learning from one's life. It also highlights the fact that the life-story is itself a particular genre (with a particular history) and that some people may be simply unfamiliar with this genre.

The question of the awareness of a plot can be connected to the question of the *efficacy* of the life story, the question to what extent particular stories allow people to *do* something – in the broadest sense of the word. This partly has to do with the question of the 'learning potential' of life-narratives, i.e., the extent to which particular narratives make learning from one's life possible, and partly with the 'action potential,' i.e., the extent to which such learning

'translates' into action. We found examples of very extensive and elaborate narration with clear episodes of analysis and evaluation that still appeared to have a different efficacy. It seems as if in some cases people are 'caught' in their story more than that their story and storying helps them to 'move on.' People can be 'stuck' in their life-story, so we might say, which means that having a 'strong' version of one's life can actually sometimes prevent further learning. There is clear evidence of this in our data.

The question of *script* is important in this regard as well, but not in the way in which this notion is often used in the literature, i.e., to highlight the extent to which individual stories and narratives make use of templates, plots and narrative structures that are available in particular cultures or segments of culture. It is evident that the stories we tell and construct about our lives always make use of 'public material' and in this respect are never completely subjective – although, as Alheit and Dausien (2000, p. 410) have argued, they are at the same time unique in that they are linked to the unique biographies of individuals. What is more important from the perspective of the learning potential of life stories is the question of *flexibility*. We call a life story scripted when there is little flexibility in the storying, when the life is lived and understood in relation to one particular 'version.' There is, as such, nothing wrong with this and the research provides evidence that for a category of people it is very important to have a 'strong' story about themselves and their lives as this gives them direction, orientation and a sense of self. Where this may become a problem is in those situations where the 'fit' between the story and the conditions under which the life (and perhaps we could also say: the story) is lived begins to shift. We did find cases where individuals did not use the potential of narrative learning to respond to important changes and transitions in their life, whereas we also found cases where the narration did function as such a resource. We are neither saying that people should act in this way, nor that narrative learning is the only way in which people can respond to change and transition. Our research only provides evidence that it can be an important resource, provided that there is a degree of flexibility in the story or, to put it differently, that there is a 'capacity' for narrative learning from life. It is important to add that this capacity is not fixed. Some of the participants in the project clearly developed their ability to use narration as a way to reflect upon their lives. In this regard a certain familiarity with the 'genre' and perhaps even a certain amount of practising of storying one's life may be an element that can help develop the ability to learn narratively from one's life.

The question of the 'action potential' of life-stories is not necessarily connected to an ability to change one's story in relation to changing circumstances. Within the project we also found evidence of situations where holding on to a particular story or version of the life – often based on strong normative ideas about what a good life should look like – was effective for individuals to achieve a degree of agency in particular situations. As we have argued elsewhere in more detail (see Biesta & Tedder 2006; 2007), the ability to achieve a degree of agency in particular 'ecological' situations partly depends on opportunities for 'imaginative distancing,' that is, for considering different ways of acting and being. In this regard flexibility of life storying is

relevant since it allows for the construction of different possible versions of one's self and one's life. The achievement of agency is also related to opportunities for 'communicative evaluation,' i.e., the evaluation of different 'scenarios' of life and self in communicative context and settings, in conversation and communication with others. For many of the participants in the Learning Lives project the project itself has provided them with such opportunities. This raises two important issues.

One has to do with the artificiality of the stories we collected in the project. Although we do not wish to doubt the authenticity of the stories nor wish to question the integrity of the participants, we have evidence that stories were told in function of the project setting and also in function of the more specific dynamics of the relationships between interviewers and interviewees. In some cases the participants were very clear that they had only given us a particular part of their life-story. Although this does not alter our conclusion about the role of narrative in learning from life, it does help us to retain a perspective on the 'nature' of our data.

The second issue this raises has to do with the question to what extent there are opportunities for narrative learning and communicative evaluation in everyday life. The important point here is that we do not wish to psychologise narrative learning and see it simply as an individual capacity that some people have and other people lack. Although there is an element of 'internal conversation' in narrative learning and although some people seem to be able to do quite a lot of 'narrative work' at this plane, we wish to see narrative learning first and foremost as a social and communicative endeavour – which goes back to the fact that stories are first and foremost 'things' we *tell*. If narrative learning is considered to be important – and our research suggests that it is or can be – then the question is not simply how we might increase the capacity of individuals to engage with such learning processes; the question is also and first of all about the opportunities that might be created for such learning. While our chosen methodology clearly has an individualistic bias, this does not mean that the implications that follow from our research should be entirely individualistic too.

## **Conclusion**

The support and promotion of narrative learning therefore first of all raises questions about the provision of social settings in which such stories can be told to others and constructed with others, so that communicative evaluation and imaginative distancing can become possible. But it also raises questions about the 'quality' of such settings and interactions. Many authors have commented on the 'individualisation' of adult learning and, more importantly, on the de-politicising effects of this individualisation (see Martin 2003; Biesta 2006b), i.e., the loss of opportunities to translate 'private troubles' into 'public issues' (C. Wright Mills). Supporting narrative learning is therefore neither only about improving people's 'capacity' for narration, nor only about providing opportunities for doing this together with others. What matters is also the extent to which such learning processes can be understood in a political way and can be lifted from the level of private troubles to the plane of public and

political issues so that the learning economy might eventually transform into a 'learning democracy' (Biesta 2005).

## References

- Alheit P (1995) 'Biographical learning: Theoretical outline, challenges and contradictions of a new approach in adult education', in P Alheit, A Bron-Wojciechowska, E Brugger and P Dominicé (eds) *The Biographical Approach in European Adult Education*, (57-74) Wien, Verband Wiener Volksbildung.
- Alheit P and Dausien B (2002) 'The double face of lifelong learning: Two analytical perspectives on a 'silent revolution', *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 34, 1, pp 3-22.
- Aspin D N and Chapman J D (2001) Lifelong learning: concepts, theories and values, *Proceedings of the 31st Annual Conference of SCUTREA*, pp 38-41, University of East London, SCUTREA.
- Biesta G J J (2005) The learning democracy? Adult learning and the condition of democratic citizenship (Review article) *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 26, 5, pp 693-709.
- Biesta G J J (2006a) *Beyond learning. Democratic education for a human future*, Boulder Co, Paradigm Publishers.
- Biesta G J J (2006b) What's the point of lifelong learning if lifelong learning has no point? On the democratic deficit of policies for lifelong learning, *European Educational Research Journal*, 5, 3-4, pp 169-180.
- Biesta G and Tedder M (2007) 'Agency and learning in the lifecourse: Towards an ecological perspective' *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 39, 2, pp. 132-149.
- Biesta G J J and Tedder M (2006) *How is agency possible? Towards an ecological understanding of agency-as-achievement*, Working paper 5, Exeter, The Learning Lives project.
- Biesta G J J, Goodson I, Tedder M and Adair N (2008) *Learning from life: The role of narrative*, A summative working paper for the Learning Lives project.
- Bruner J (1990) *Acts of meaning*, Cambridge Ma & London, Harvard University Press.
- Czarniawska B (2004) *Narratives in social science research*, London: SAGE.
- Martin I (2003) Adult education, lifelong learning and citizenship: Some ifs and buts, *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 22, 6, pp 566-579.
- Martin, I (2006) 'Where have all the flowers gone?', *Adults Learning*, 18, 2, pp15-18.
- Polkinghorne D (1988) *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*, Albany: SUNY Press.
- Polkinghorne D (1995) 'Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis', in J A Hatch and R Wisniewski (eds) *Life History and Narrative*, London, Falmer.
- Rossiter M (1999) A narrative approach to development: Implications for adult education, *Adult Education Quarterly*, 50, 1, pp. 56-71.
- Rossiter M and Clark M C (2007) *Narrative and the practice of adult education*, Malabar, Florida, Krieger.