The biographical approach to lifelong learning

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Introduction

‘Lifelong learning’ continues to be a somewhat diffuse term (see Field, 2000). On the one hand, it is obvious that we learn our whole lives long. From our first attempts at walking and talking, to familiarising ourselves with the old people’s home, we experience new things, acquire new knowledge and new skills. We definitely cannot refuse learning. On the other hand, we do not know what ‘lifelong learning’ theoretically means. The following lines of thought are concerned with the conceptual side of lifelong learning. Interest centres here not on policies and institutions and also not on situative learning acts by isolated individuals, but on learning as the (trans-)formation of experience, knowledge and action structures in the context of people’s life histories and lifeworlds (i.e. in a lifewide context). I therefore speak of ‘biographical learning’, by which I mean not so much sharply and empirically delineated entities – such as learning processes that are bound up with specific forms, locations or times – but rather a theoretical perspective on education and training that takes as its starting point the life history perspective of the actual learner (Krüger and Marotzki, 1995, 1999), in the sense of a phenomenological concept of learning (Schulze, 1993a, 1993b).

At the level of biographical experience, analytical distinctions such as those between formal, non-formal and informal learning (Commission of the European Communities, 2000: 9) are not necessarily sharp. On the contrary, one of the peculiar features of biography is that, through the accumulation and structuring of experience in one’s life history, institutionally and socially specialised fields of experience become integrated, congealing to form a new and particular construct of meanings. This accomplishment on the part of living subjects can be circumscribed with the term, ‘biographicity’ (Alheit, 1993; Alheit and Dausien, 2000b), which embraces the notion of ‘self-willed’, subjective appropriation of learning schemes (Kade, 1994; Kade and Seitter, 1996), while going beyond that aspect to accentuate the opportunity to generate new structures of cultural and social experience. Policies and pedagogical concepts of lifelong learning take the potential for education and training implicit in the biographical, constructional logic of experience and action as their cue – usually in an affirmative, rather than analytically reflected way.

Nevertheless, the distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning also makes sense from the perspective of biography theory, as long as it is not interpreted as a typology of learning processes, but is related instead to the structures and frames of the respective learning contexts. Learning processes take place in educational institutions and formalised learning settings to a lesser extent only, but structured institutions for education and training nevertheless structure the ‘option spaces’ for biographical learning processes.
(Kade and Seitter, 1996); they also shape the historical and cultural notions of ‘biography’, within which frame subjects interpret their experience and generate biographical meaning. Biographical learning is embedded within societal structures and cultural contexts of interpretation. For that reason, it is also essential when analysing educational and learning processes at the individual, biographical level to be clear about the ‘external’ structures that frame the life course. The following conceptualisation begins with this aspect and goes on to differentiate between some empirical phenomena of lifewide learning.

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The social structuring of the life course by educational institutions

The life course is an institution that crystallised with the onset of Modernity (Kohli, 1985) and provides a formal ‘framework’ for the biographical education and training processes that individuals undergo. This framework exists regardless of the specific way in which individuals orient themselves to it (e.g. in an affirmative manner, striving for preset goals, or rubbing up against it, breaking with it, modifying it, etc.). There is a societal ‘curriculum’ for the individual’s life from birth to death that is more or less defined in norms and expectations, constantly renegotiated and subject to historical change.

One part of the education and training processes that we pass through or actively shape during our life is based relatively closely on this curriculum and regulated by formal learning objectives and qualifications. To emphasise this aspect, Schulze (1993a) speaks of ‘curricular learning’. ‘Learning in the life history context’, in contrast, obeys other (biographical) rules, but cannot dissociate itself entirely from the aforementioned framework. There are tensions and frictions between these two dimensions, which are mutually dependent on each other (Schulze, 1993a; Kade and Seitter, 1996).

In order to understand biographical learning processes, it is therefore essential to reflect on the respective life course models that operate within a given society. These are not ‘external variables’ that are always pre-existent, but are shaped and formed in decisive ways by institutionalised education, for example. This was shown by Kohli (1985) for the classical subdivision of the life course in modern Western societies into ‘preparatory, activity and retirement phases’. In the latter life course model, times and spaces of formalised learning are defined by institutional classification (school, vocational training system) and by the temporal localisation of socialisation and skilling in childhood and youth, and all members of society are obliged to pass through these predefined phases. However, the role of education and training in the life course is not confined to the ‘preparatory’ phase, but it structures, in the form of a chain of options and branching points, the entire biographical curriculum. This holds true for the model, described by Kohli, for the standard biography in modern societies – the school system for general education, and the skilling levels and profiles defined by it, specifies certain starting opportunities and establishes the direction that the individual’s life subsequently takes, as well as the social positioning of the individual; these steps are almost impossible to achieve with subsequent qualifications (Rabe-Kleberg, 1993b). The school is simultaneously a key location for practising formal learning. By internalising the specific content of learning, individuals also learn the various forms of learning.

Qualifications and experience gained in school structure the subsequent status passages of biography to an enormous extent – vocational training and/or the transition to employment – and together with initial vocational training they establish the framework for the entire employment biography. Although continuing vocational education or retraining can create new options, these are always dependent on the initial level achieved and on prestructured career patterns that differ considerably not only from one occupation to the next, but also according to social positioning criteria (class, gender, ethnicity, nationality), and are largely absent in the typical women’s occupations, for example (Rabe-Kleberg, 1993a; Born, 2000). The last major phase of biography, retirement, is also defined in crucial ways in terms of its basic conditional framework – not only one’s economic, cultural and social capital, but also one’s health, physical and (life)time resources – by one’s previous employment biography, and to that extent is dependent at least indirectly on the person’s education and training history.
Although the three-phase life course regime has lost some of its validity with changes in the nature of employment, the new, individualised and ‘pluralised’ life course patterns are still shaped, in increasing measure, by educational institutions that for their part must adapt to the new ‘lifelong learning biographies’ (Faulstich-Wieland, 1997; Nuisl, 1997). However, the type of structuring has changed – education and training are not necessarily linear any longer, in the sense of continuous skilling and social positioning (‘career’), but are ‘patchworked’ or cyclically repeated in the sense of a ‘timeless, sectoral life form’ (see Kade and Seitter, 1996: 143ff).

Independently of this differentiation of the biographical forms taken by education and training, which are only starting to be researched, it remains a fact that education and training, as a social institution or as a system of interwoven institutions, shapes typical life course structures and exerts a major influence on subjective life plans and experience. A historical and sociostructural comparison reveals that this shaping process occurs along the social axes of differentiation – class, gender and ‘ethnicity’ – and that life courses distribute opportunities unevenly and typify them according to social position. From the lifeworld perspective of individuals, they represent ‘models for a possible life’.

The temporal organisation of education and learning in the life course

In addition to one’s positioning in the social space, education and training generates above all a temporal order for learning processes along the axis of an individual’s biography. At present, we have to assume a mixture comprised of persistent norms dating from the three-phase, ‘standard’ (i.e. male) career, and a more contradictory model for the ‘standard female biography’ (for a critique, see Dausien, 1996), on the one hand, and more recent models involving flexible ‘lifelong learning’, on the other. Ever since the educational reforms of the 1960s, especially, new skilling pathways have been created by education policymakers that enable formal education and training in adulthood as well. These second and third routes to formal education and training (especially on the part of women) have been accepted and have not only led to higher educational mobility (for women’s mobility, see Schlüter, 1993, 1999), but have also generated new life course patterns in which ‘work’, ‘family’ and ‘education’ may frequently alternate and be combined with each other in different constellations. Although space prohibits a review of specific, empirically identified patterns, we should distinguish here between three aspects of the temporal ordering of education and training within the life course that do not follow linear trajectories or curricula, but which are typical for biographical experience within the context of increasingly individualised conduct of life:

- **Educational qualifications and alternative routes to training and education for adults**: These are schemes providing adults with a second (third, fourth, … ) ‘chance’ to make up for missed opportunities or to correct a previous educational status by means of various adult learning pathways within the education and career system. However, the possibilities for making up lost ground are limited, simply by virtue of the fact that lifetime cannot be repeated, and by the lack of opportunities for follow-up and further advancement within previous education and training. This is clearly evident, for example, in typical women’s occupations (Rabe-Kleberg, 1993a), which are also referred to as ‘dead-end occupations’. The subjective enrichment that adult learning usually provides is offset by social structures that until now have predominantly imposed negative sanctions on any deviations from the standard (male) model of an ongoing career, despite the newly propagated flexibility in education and training (Rabe-Kleberg, 1993b). In Germany, neither the education and training system nor the occupational system are systematically geared to recognising and integrating ‘deviating’ skills and competencies acquired during the individual biographical process, especially when these were acquired through non-formal biographical learning or – in the case of migrant biographies – in other societal and national contexts (cf. the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning tradition in England, Alheit and Piening, 1999). The problems of ‘fit’ that arise must be handled by the individuals concerned and in certain circumstances may lead to
unforeseeable conflicts, to discontinuities and ‘distortions’ of educational schemes offered by institutions. The freedoms gained from the opening of the education and training system also conceal new biographical risks (Kade, 1997).

- *Continuing training and skillling as an ongoing task*: The experienced necessity and/or subjective interest in continuing vocational and occupation-related training has increased enormously in recent years (see Field, 2000: 69ff). The causes are generally seen to lie in the faster pace of technological change and the ever-shorter ‘half-life’ of job-related knowledge. Education and skillling are no longer restricted to ‘preparation’ for working life, but are becoming a permanent support factor within individual careers. Two other social changes contribute to the greater relevance of ongoing continuing education and training: the social transformation of the old-age phase, in combination with the changed biographical significance of old age (S. Kade, 1994a, 1994b; Mader, 1995), which is progressively becoming a separate learning phase (S. Kade, 1994a). Women, too, are expressing greater interest in a continuing (occupational) education and training. As Schiersmann (1987, 1993) has shown, however, this area of education and training is part of a genderised structure. Systematic disadvantages and barriers for women in the vocational training system extend the reach of gender-specific channelling and hierarchisation within that system. The gender-critical perspective on continuing (vocational) education and training also highlights some new aspects, however. For women, continuing training is not a ‘neutral’ instrument of career planning, but is embedded within a form of life planning that is closely tied to opportunities and perspectives in the familial domain. This experience of biographical networking between different areas of life is increasingly a general feature of continuing training (also for men).

- *Education and training in ‘one’s own time’*: Achieving formal schooling qualifications as an adult, as well as ongoing vocational training also have a personal, biographical significance alongside the strategic value aspect. People’s concerns are not restricted to what is often an uncertain outcome when exploiting their acquired skills on the labour market – in many cases this is not even their prime concern – but are also focused on compensating for biographically experienced *deficits in education and training*, and unfulfilled *educational wishes*. Such biographically based motivation leads similarly to the ordering of life-time by decisions, transitions and learning processes. The inherent temporal structure of education and training may be based on and utilise institutional structures during specific phases, but it can also subvert them or even have ‘contrary’ effects. Temporal patterns that are biographically organised follow an individual logic in which past, present and future are linked, often across large intervals of time and areas of life that are institutionally separated. Within the individual, biographical perspective from which individuals draw meaning, there is a temporally structured need for education, training and personal development that influences learning processes reflexively in terms of an ‘implicit’ biographical structure. There are recurrent phases or situations in which the need for reflectivity and reconstruction, for synchronisation and to redesign one’s ‘own life’ is uppermost. These phases or situations are often provoked or occasioned by conflicts with socially structured (educational) timetables. As empirical studies using the methods of biographical research have shown, adults often use continuing training schemes not merely in an instrumental way in order to follow pre-structured learning pathways, but also to gain spaces of time for their ‘own’ learning processes and reflection (e.g. in adult education courses, see Alheit and Dausien, 1996; or in distance learning courses, see Kade and Seitter, 1996).

### Education as a biographical process

This pointer to the individual, biographical time structure of learning processes leads us to the fundamental question as to how education and training can be conceived of as a biographical process that is relatively autonomous in relation to life courses and curricula. Education and training do not only take place in organised and institutionalised forms. They also include the shaping of everyday, life-historical experiences, transitions and crises. Thus, lifewide learning is also tied at all times to the context of a specific biography. On
the other hand, it is also the precondition or the medium in which biographical constructions can be created and modified at all as reflexive forms of experience. Without biography, there can be no learning; without learning, no biography.

- **Implicit learning, reflection and pre-reflexive knowledge:** Many learning processes occur ‘implicitly’ and congeal to form patterns of experience and dispositions without these being explicitly reflected upon in every case. Concepts such as implicit, tacit learning emphasise this aspect, but say nothing about the complexity of this phenomenon in the dialectics of appropriating the world and forming one’s self. Through implicit learning processes that operate from the beginning of one’s life, both inside and outside institutions, we not only appropriate single experiential elements as components of the social world, but we develop the ‘appropriation system’ itself. What this process involves, therefore, is the formation of supra-ordinated, generative structures of action and knowledge that can be interpreted, depending on one’s theoretical leanings, as the acquisition and expansion of biographical ‘learning dispositions’ (Field, 2000), cognitive structures in Piaget’s sense, ‘emotional orientation systems’ (Mader, 1997), habitus formation (Bourdieu, 1987) or the construction of self- and world-references (Marotzki, 1990).

All these experiential processes form a person’s biographical stock of knowledge (Alheit, 1993; Alheit and Hoerning, 1989) consisting, like a landscape, of different layers and regions, some near, some far, and which changes in the course of time (through learning). In everyday action (and also in explicit learning situations; Dewe, 1999) we focus explicitly on a particular ‘problem’ – a mere excerpt from our stock of knowledge, experience and actions – and make recourse at the same time to large portions of our knowledge (and non-knowledge) in a taken-for-granted way, without querying what we do. In a certain sense, we ‘move’ within our biographically acquired landscape of knowledge, without consciously reflecting on every step we take, every twist in the path and every signpost along the way. In many cases, we do not turn to such elements in our biographical ‘background knowledge’ until we find ourselves stumbling, or at a crossroads, or we feel as if the ground is slipping away from beneath our feet. Theoretically, at least, we are able to retrieve large parts of this pre-reflexive knowledge into the present, to process it explicitly and perhaps even to change structures of the entire landscape in which we find ourselves. Such reflexive processes can be interpreted as moments of self-education (Alheit, 1993). They are the basis of each person’s organising of learning and justify speaking about the biographicity of all educational processes.

- **Sociality of biographical learning:** Reflexive learning processes do not take place exclusively ‘inside’ the individual, but depend on communication and interaction with others and relations to a social context. Biographical learning is embedded in lifeworlds that can be analysed under certain conditions as ‘learning environments’ or ‘learning milieus’. Experience-based, lifeworld learning or learning in contexts are terms that take this aspect of lifelong learning into consideration, as is also reflected in the greater interest now shown in integrating and shaping learning environments (Dohmen, 1998). However, there are two tendencies that can be observed here and which need to be critically assessed using the biographical analysis of education processes: an ‘anti-institutional’ interpretation of lifelong learning, whether welcomed or feared (Gieseke, 1997, Nuissl, 1997), that overlooks the fact that biography (biographical learning) and institutions are inter-related (see, for example, the study by Seitter, 1999); and the technological idea of the trivial ‘feasibility’ of learning environments. This latter idea overlooks the fact that ‘learning worlds’ are embedded within historically rooted, interactive and biographically produced lifeworlds that are integrated and shaped in education processes, but which cannot be artificially generated or managed (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

- **Individuality and the ‘self-willed’ nature of biographical learning:** Learning within and through one’s life history is therefore interactive and socially structured, on the one hand, but it also follows its own ‘individual logic’ that is generated by the specific, biographically layered structure of experience. The
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biographical structure does not determine the learning process, because it is an open structure that has to integrate the new experience that it gains through interacting with the world, with others and with itself. On the other hand, however, it significantly affects the way in which new experience is formed and ‘built into’ a biographical learning process (Alheit and Dausien, 2000a). There is a necessity here, as well, to subject some current concepts such as self-organised, self-determined, self-managed or self-directed learning (Straka, 1997; Dohmen, 1998; Konzertierte Aktion Weiterbildung, 1998) to critical debate (Report 39; Hoffmann and von Rein, 1998). All too often, they presume an autonomous learner who has a reflexive and strategic ‘grip’ on his/her own education and training. This model overlooks the multi-layeredness of biographical reflexivity. Biographical education and training processes operate in self-willed ways, they permit unexpected experiences and surprising transformations that in many cases are not foreseen by the ‘learner’ themself, or are not ‘understood’ until after the event, but which still pursue their own ‘direction’. Terms such as ‘seeking movement’ or ‘diffuse directedness’ are more appropriate here than cybernetic models involving some well-targeted ‘self-management’ that for its part is oriented to institutionalised pre-givens (e.g. the acquisition of knowledge). A biographical understanding of ‘self-determination’ would have to be developed with reference to the ‘formation’ concept (Bildung), rather than the notion of learning as ‘training’. If the biographical organisation of learning processes is to be given practical educational (and institutional) support, then spaces for reflection and communication, as well as interaction with ‘spaces of opportunity’ are at least as important as developing ‘instruments for individual self-management’.

Education as the ‘formation’ of social structures

If lifelong learning is researched using an approach based on biography theory, the various aspects of that approach that we have discussed above would provide ways of relating back to a macro-perspective of learning. Biographical education and training processes must be understood not only as appropriational and constructional accomplishments, given the individual and reflexive organisation of experience, knowledge and ability. They also include the biographical formation of social networks and processes, of collective knowledge and collective praxis, which can be also understood theoretically – as in Berger and Luckmann (1969) – as ‘institutionalisation’, as the formation of social networks and ‘social capital’ or as the crystallisation of cultural practices (empirical examples include the formation of cultural and social centres, associations, local community initiatives, etc.; Setter, 1999; Field, 2000; Alheit and Dausien, 2000b). It holds true for these collective formation processes, too, that they are explicitly negotiated and reflexively planned only to a partial extent. Social formations, such as new models and experiential contexts for possible educational routes, for potential women’s and men’s biographies, for gender relations, for learning processes and forms of interaction between cultures and generations can ensue even from the uncoordinated, biographical praxis of individuals in educational matters.

The biographicity of social experience lends itself here, too, as a useful theoretical concept for explaining such phenomena. If we conceive of biographical learning 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, 1993; Alheit and Dausien, 2000a), it becomes possible to comprehend education and learning both as individual identity work and as the ‘formation’ of collective processes and social relations.

The analysis of biographical learning has shown clearly that, within this analytical perspective, there is not only a focus on individual processes, but also that different levels converge within it and may generate discrepancies that must be dealt with biographically and coped with in a pragmatic way by the subjects themselves: one aspect is that the programatics of ‘lifelong learning’ evoke new patterns of expectation and interpretation that may be experienced subjectively as burdensome pressures, but also as a biographical
opportunity. Secondly, biographical learning processes and life plans depend on institutional structures and lifeworld contexts that may foster or obstruct education and training processes that are ‘self-determined’ by individuals and collectives. Finally, from the perspective of subjects, there is not only a contradiction here between ‘wish’ and ‘reality’ – both levels are biographically ‘real’, must be processed by the individual and re-integrated into his/her own educational history again and again in a genuinely lifelong process of biographical construction and reconstruction. Yet, if we are to grasp and explain these processes with greater theoretical precision, to analyse them with greater empirical differentiation, and on this basis to design methods and approaches for possible educational practices, then further empirical research studies are urgently necessary. The complexity of the problem certainly demands a substantiated, well-grounded framework concept – such as the biographical approach outlined here – that is able to fill the lifelong learning programme with theoretical and empirical substance.

References


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