Learning from our lives

John Field

We live and learn. Like so many popular sayings, this one seems to be stating the obvious. Yet, like most clichés, there is a reason why we all take it for granted that this is what we humans do. As individuals, we value our ability to learn productively from such everyday experiences as going about our work, caring for our family, encountering friends and neighbours, experiencing illness, enjoying sports and hobbies, or sitting around relaxing. And this capacity matters. Later in this article, I suggest that our capacity for learning from our lives is also a major influence on who we are (our ‘identity’) and how we live with others. More immediately, it can help us earn a living, avoid injury, make and repair things, plan ahead and deal with life’s crises. At a wider level, it helps to shape our social relationships and our economic position.

There have been many attempts to grasp the nature of the ways in which we learn from life. This chapter will focus on a selection of these ideas. It starts by considering the very notion of life as a permanent process of learning, which requires constant reflection on all the institutions and practices in which we engage. These ideas have helped to shape public policies on lifelong learning, and emerge from radically new conditions of everyday life. They are therefore important in establishing the context of our lives in the contemporary world, as well as underlining the importance that continuous learning has in late modern societies. I then go on to consider theories of narrative learning and of experiential and biographical learning, all of which seek to understand the relationship between learning and life. While these can be seen as educational responses to motivational psychology, I will argue here that our learning needs to be understood in socio-cultural terms, as an outcome of everyday life as it is lived in constant interaction with specific socio-economic conditions, and as experienced through each individual’s interpretations of and actions on those conditions. The chapter frames these issues in terms and concepts drawn from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. It then concludes with suggestions for policy and practice based on the preceding analysis.

A permanently learning life

In 1972 UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, created a landmark commission on lifelong education. The very title of its report, Learning to Be, tells its own story (Faure et al., 1972). The Commission’s work was based on four assumptions: first, that the world community had common aspirations, problems and trends, despite differences of all kinds between nations and peoples; second, a belief in democracy, to which education was the keystone; third, that the total fulfilment of each
individual is the aim of development; and fourth, that only lifelong education could shape a complete human being.

_Learning to Be_ is remarkable because of the strength and breadth of its vision about the significance of education throughout the lifecourse. The authors see the ultimate aim of education as ‘to enable man to be himself, to “become himself”’ (Faure et al., 1972: xxxi; emph. in original). For this, they argue that we need to learn ‘how to build up a continually evolving body of knowledge all through life – “learn to be”’ (Faure et al., 1972: vi). In turn, they believe that this implies a ‘belief in democracy, conceived of as implying each man’s right to realize his own potential and to share in the building of his own future,’ and argue that ‘only an over-all, lifelong education can produce the kind of complete man the need for whom is increasing with the continually more stringent constraints tearing the individual asunder’ (Faure et al., 1972: v–vi).

Accepting that the language was too gendered even for its own times, let alone today, this is nonetheless a broad, ambitious and humane definition of lifelong education and its aims.

Such views stand in sharp contrast to the policies and practices that dominate the ‘new educational order’ (Field, 2006) of lifelong learning today. Twenty-five years after the publication of _Learning to Be_, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development issued its own report on lifelong learning, _Lifelong learning for all_ (OECD, 1996). The OECD emphasised the economic rationale for lifelong learning, presenting the idea of ‘lifelong learning for all’ as the guiding principle for policy strategies ‘that will respond directly to the need to improve the capacity of individuals, families, workplaces and communities to continuously adapt and renew’ (OECD, 1996: 3). According to _Lifelong learning for all_, the disappearance of many unskilled jobs, the more rapid turnover of products and services, and the fact that people change jobs more often than previously, all point to the need for ‘more frequent renewal of knowledge and skills’ (OECD, 1996: 13). Lifelong learning ‘from early childhood education to active learning in retirement’ will thus be ‘an important factor in promoting employment and economic development’ (OECD, 1996: 13). The focus of policy therefore appears to have shifted over the past three decades from lifelong learning as a means for personal development and social progress to lifelong learning as a means for economic growth and global competitiveness.

This is no mere problem of definition. Broad-ranging areas of human practice like learning are always hard to define with any precision; they cover a wide terrain of knowledge and skill, they are carried out in a reflexive and iterative manner, and they can take unpredictable turns. We should not worry too much about setting linguistic boundaries to learning. But learning can also be defined in a narrow and restrictive manner, making a material impact on people’s opportunities to engage in different forms of learning throughout their lives. Think, for example, of the way in which learning for personal development has been reclassified in many countries as ‘leisure learning’ and how, as a result, the opportunities to obtain public funding for such forms of learning have significantly decreased. The shift from ‘learning to be’ to ‘learning to be productive and employable’ can thus be read as a struggle over the definition of what counts as lifelong learning and, more importantly, about what counts as _worthwhile_ lifelong learning.

During the 1990s, a number of adult educators started to debate ideas of reflexivity as a basic feature of life in late modernity (Schemmann, 2002). This discussion was hugely influenced by two eminent sociological theorists: Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. Both had written independently, and then in collaboration, about the extent to which life in late modernity is characterised by the way in which people must constantly reflect on every aspect of their lives, and review their behaviour and relationships in the light of their reflection (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). For Giddens, the reflexivity of late modern societies ‘extends into the core of the self’: it not only shapes who we are and how we see ourselves, but is an intrinsic element in how others see us as well (Giddens, 1991: 32). Our identity today is no longer something that is ‘just given’ and taken for granted, but must be understood as ‘something that has to be routinely created and sustained’ (Giddens, 1991: 52).

The reason for this perpetual practice of self-examination is, Giddens argues, the speed and pervasiveness of change. Every social institution and practice is subjected routinely to the same reflexivity as the self.
Giddens argues that this holds true just as much for our intimate relationships through to our dealings with large, impersonal institutions. All aspects of human life, Giddens says, are ‘constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information’ (Giddens, 1990: 39). As a result, the reference points for reflexivity of the self cannot be derived from outside alone, but rather must also be drawn ‘from the inside’, in terms of ‘how the individual constructs/reconstructs his or her life story’ (Giddens, 1991: 80).

Elsewhere, I have criticised Giddens and Beck for tending to universalise these tendencies (Field, 2006: 71–73). They can be faulted for underplaying the constraints that inhibit reflexivity, as well as downplaying the extent to which certain actors and institutions can manage information and resist attempts at change. They also see identity as largely constructed in individual terms, while Beck in particular dismisses collective identities like class or gender as ‘zombie categories’ that no longer correspond to lived experience (Beck, 1992). Yet, as Mike Savage has argued, individuals are still formed by cultures of class, and must position themselves socially in order to make sense of and act upon the risks and information that pervade everyday life (Savage, 2000). Beverley Skeggs goes further, suggesting that the construction of biographies is never neutral, but rather depends on ‘access to the resources by which the self can be known, accessed and related’ (Skeggs, 2004: 53). We might add that the construction of biographies – which is always a process of learning – also requires resources to handle aspects of the self that remain unknown, for biography encompasses the hidden and unconscious as well as the conscious and narrated self (West, 1996: 30–31).

A framework for understanding learning from life

In recent years, a number of attempts have been made to examine how people learn from their lives. I am particularly concerned in this chapter with those approaches that focus on learning that takes place outside educational programmes. This is not to say that formal and planned instruction has no connection to the way we learn informally; on the contrary, there is always a relationship between the different domains of our lives, and sometimes the link is a very direct one. The focus here, though, is firmly on the ways in which we learn simply by living our lives, through everyday experiences, as we weave our way through our life course.

One common way of looking at this has been to understand it as experiential learning. Considerable attention has been paid to the idea of experiential learning, by professional trainers and educators as well as by researchers. Some years ago, Tara Fenwick warned against the ‘troubling orthodoxies’ that she saw as dominating much discussion of experiential learning (Fenwick, 2003: 1–10). Much of the drive behind the movement has been concerned less with how people learn to live their lives, and learn from their lives, than with how to assess those aspects of experiential learning that are relevant to employment, seeking to ‘capture’ tacit and embedded capacities so that they might have a commercial value (Field, 2006: 99–100). Its contribution to equity and social justice is uncertain, and may possibly be negative, as those who end up relying on the assessment of experiential learning are likely to be those who were not able to benefit from formal educational qualification in early life. As operationalised in this way, experiential learning approaches tend to understand learning as a very individualised process, neglecting the possibility that knowledge generation and exchange arises from and is dependent on complex group interaction. Moreover, as Dewey noted a century ago, although ‘direct experience has the advantage of being first hand, it also has the disadvantage of being limited in range’ (Dewey, 1916: 315). So assessed experiential learning is unlikely ever to acquire the exchange value of a planned educational programme.

These are real and important problems, but ideas of experiential learning have a strong history in educational thinking. Its value is in providing some rather limited insights into how people learn, and in offering a theoretical underpinning – however eclectic – for the design of some types of planned learning activity that incorporate at least some element of explicit reflection upon experience (Jarvis, Holford and John Field)
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Griffin, 1998: 46–52). Beyond that, it seems to be of limited value in understanding learning as a fundamental dimension of everyday life, which is not confined to the workplace, the atomised, the explicit and the abstract.

Biographical or life history research represents one way of understanding learning from life. Rather than focussing on the learning, as defined by its applicability within a formal qualification scheme, biographical research concentrates on the life and the place of learning within it. This approach has become remarkably popular in recent years, for a number of reasons. Partly, biographical research has benefited from the wider ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences, with its focus on language and narrative. It speaks to a humanist emphasis on ‘lived experience’, as well as to interpretative concerns with understanding meaning and subjectivity as key dimensions of people’s identity (Merrill, 1999: 45–51). It may have a particular appeal for adult education researchers who are also adult education teachers, identifying strongly and personally with their students.

Second, biographical research is highly compatible with other approaches to analysing the life course. This can be very useful in helping to explain why significant episodes of learning are often most apparent at turning points. These are particularly so at significant moments of personal change, which tend to foreground issues of identity for the person (Biesta et al., 2011). The most charged turning points may help promote reflectivity about identity which then provide a basis for what we have described as narrative learning. They are therefore extremely important in our account of significant changes in someone’s experiences in prompting or constraining learning. Biographical approaches thus allow for researchers to explore the meanings and importance that people attach to particular changes in their lives, including those that have to do with transitions between different life stages, which we probably expect to go through at some time as we grow older, and those that involve significant and often unexpected challenges to someone’s status and role. Both force us to ask who we are, and who we should relate to and how, requiring us to reconsider more or less explicitly our capacity for learning from and for our lives (Field, Gallacher and Ingram, 2009).

The method’s popularity also reflects the broad socio-cultural changes that Giddens and Beck have emphasised in their work on institutionalised reflexivity. While people have always experienced their biographies as a field of learning, in late modernity ‘transitions have to be anticipated and coped with, and … personal identity is liable to be the result of long and protracted learning processes’ (Alheit, 1995: 59). Moreover, these learning processes take place in circumstances where routine and habit have been devalued: we cannot use templates inherited from the past to anticipate an uncertain and rapidly changing future. Biographical learning therefore becomes ‘a self-willed, “autopoietic” accomplishment on the part of active subjects’ (Alheit and Dausien, 2002: 17). If we wish to understand learning as a fundamental and pervasive human activity, then we need to see it as integral to people’s lives and the stories that they tell about their lives.

This brings us to the question of narrativity – that is, the ways that people structure their life stories. In particular, I am interested in the role that stories and storying might play in how people learn from their lives. Of course, people can live good, happy and rewarding lives without learning, without stories and without narrative learning. Nevertheless, recent research has pointed to a relationship between the narrative quality of life stories and their potential to generate learning and facilitate action. From this perspective, the way in which someone can ‘construct a story that presents the life as “making sense”’ is related to ‘the ideas of “plot” and “emplotment” and also to questions about justification’ (Tedder and Biesta, 2009: 79). This implies that different ways of telling your life story may involve differences in the learning involved, depending on whether the narrative is ‘more evaluative and analytical than descriptive’ (Tedder and Biesta, 2009: 80).

In a more detailed analysis, this research has focused on particular aspects of what Goodson et al. called ‘narrative learning’ (2010). First, they distinguished between the narrative quality of life stories and storying and the efficacy of narrative and narration. Within the latter, they then further distinguished between the
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learning potential – the ways in which and the extent to which certain narratives allow for learning and people are able to learn from their stories and storying – and the action potential – the ways in which and the extent to which such learning ‘translates’ into action. By narrative quality, they referred to formal characteristics of the stories people tell about their lives. This then provided a framework for understanding the ways in which narrative can shape and organise the life story in ways that enable what some have called ‘expansive learning’ (Engeström, 2004). Narrative and narration, they suggest, always contains a potential for learning and a potential for action, which are related but distinct. The notion of learning potential is central to the idea of narrative learning, as it refers to the ways in which and the extent to which the life narrative and the narration of life function as ‘sites’ for learning.

This is an important and powerful way of seeing learning as a fundamental dimension of living. However, it raises as many questions as it answers, and two issues in particular are important here. The first is the extent to which learning and narration are still conceived as primarily an individual capacity and/or process. Although Goodson and his colleagues insist emphatically that their approach is not solely individualistic, it nevertheless clearly focuses on the individual’s capacity for narrating their own life in such a way as to reflect on their own experiences. The second issue is the emphasis placed on the story as a distinctive account; yet narration never takes place in a social vacuum. On the contrary, life stories are inseparable from ‘the relationship of teller and audience in which it is occasioned’, a relationship that is always particular to a given time and place (Tonkin, 1995: 2). Narration, and the experiences that we try to make sense of when we tell our story, is embedded in a particular habitus – a term used by Pierre Bourdieu to point to a social milieu in which a great deal of everyday life is conducted on the basis of shared values, norms and routines that are largely taken for granted (Bourdieu, 1984: 169–73).

One way of understanding the different ways in which people learn from their lives is certainly by looking at the nature of their stories. Narrative analysis can, as suggested above, help us understand where storying not only serves as a ‘site’ of reflection and learning, but as a ‘site’ of reflection and learning that clearly has an impact on action and agency. Yet, if we take the ideas of structure and resources seriously, we also need to examine the positions and dispositions that people occupy within a particular social space, and Bourdieu’s ideas are particularly helpful here.

Bourdieu distinguishes between the idea of position as a specific social, economic and cultural locus in the social space; and that of habitus, which comprises a set of dispositions, or propensities towards particular values and behaviours. Our interest, clearly, lies in the relationship between position, disposition and learning. In his work on taste, Bourdieu argues that a particular disposition – for example, towards a type of music or film – has to be learned. Yet, although these competences are closely associated with educational level, he believes that they are less likely to be learned consciously, by formal effort, than from the ‘unintentional learning made possible by a disposition acquired through domestic or scholastic inculcation of legitimate culture’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 28), so that one’s cultural taste is closely related to the social milieu that one inhabits. It is clear that dispositions influence learning and that learning equally influences the nature of a person’s dispositions. This is so whether the dispositions change over time or remain largely intact. In practice, these two reciprocal influences are continually interwoven with, and constantly influence, each other. How we orient ourselves towards life and its many possibilities and positions will influence what and how we learn; and our learning in turn directs our orientation towards our lives.

People’s positioning tends to influence their learning in three broad and overlapping ways. First, people occupy what might be called positions within a wider social and economic context. All of the stories in this book show the significance of such structural positioning on lives and learning. Of course it is true that these structures are made and remade by people, but their effects are nevertheless felt and narrated as very real. For example, gender, ethnicity and social class are all important and they influence life and learning in complex ways. One way of illustrating this is to imagine that one of these structural factors is suddenly and radically changed: it becomes immediately obvious that one’s life, and one’s learning, would not be the
same as it is now. So, although we are not arguing that social structures determine learning, we are clear that learning lives are always structured lives.

Second, position is always historical and geographical. Place is always important in our stories, though often it is taken for granted, at least until someone moves their location. And, by the historical dimension, we are noting that each person’s narrative is a story of its time, so that people who belong to a particular generation will often narrate some similar experiences, as a result of living their lives through a given historical period (Field and Malcolm, 2007). Once more, we are not claiming that these dimensions of position invariably determine lives and learning, simply that their influence is ever present. The strength and significance of those influences will vary from person to person, from place to place, and from time to time; they can be more or less significant in different parts of a person’s life and learning. In some cases, as suggested above, they may be subjected to narrative reflection, and also become resources for narrative learning. However, they can never be completely transcended.

The third way of understanding position in relation to learning is in reference to the places where people learn. There is now an abundant literature on the ways in which learning is rooted in specific webs of social relationships and cultural contexts. Much of this writing has come in response to Jean Lave and Ettienne Wenger’s idea of ‘situated learning’. As Lave and Wenger put it, learning is not solely a cognitive activity taking place inside the brain (itself part of the body), but is always also a social practice through which people co-construct knowledge. Further, they claim that:

learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world.

(Lave and Wenger, 1991: 35)

Lave and Wenger’s approach has generated considerable debate in recent years, prompting a flurry of empirical studies and attempts to apply the theory to practical educational settings (Lang and Canning, 2010). Indeed, it is one of the most influential ideas to be found in current scholarly work on adult and workplace learning.

In recent years, ideas of situated learning have started to challenge excessively individualistic accounts of learning from life. Rooted in cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), this perspective is part of the turn to examine learning in systems as involving the personal, the social, and the material (Lave and Wenger, 1991). CHAT focuses upon activity as the unit of analysis, where people’s learning is understood to be practice-based and embedded in everyday relational action. CHAT studies examine a system’s historical emergences and relations among divisions of labour, tools/technologies, cultural norms and perspectives enmeshed in the system; particular emphasis is accorded to the system’s “objects” (the problems or goals at which action is directed) and the contradictions or frictions between these (Sawchuk, 2006). These then shape what and how a system’s members learn individually and collectively, how practices become reconfigured, and what knowledge is recognised and valued by these members. Learning is thus understood as a participatory process which involves continuing reworkings of meaning and knowledge (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Jarvis, Holford and Griffin, 1998; Felstead et al., 2009). What Bourdieu’s work brings to this approach is a recognition that the ‘situation’ in ‘situated learning’ is highly structured, constraining learning as well as enabling it.

Conclusions

Learning to Be: the provocative title of Faure’s report reminds us that becoming an adult person is a journey through the social space. It is both individual and social, with important tensions between the two that can both provide and prompt reflection and action, and place constraints on them (Jarvis, 1992). This recognition
helps us reconsider the ways in which adults learn from their lives. The life-history methodology has helped many scholars to explore the significance of narrative and narration in such learning processes, something that some researchers have tried to capture in the idea of ‘narrative learning’. Stories and storying are important vehicles for learning from one’s life, and there appear to be important relationships between styles of narration, forms of narrative learning and agency. Life stories play a crucial role in the articulation of a sense of self, which means that narrative learning is a form of ‘identity work’, in which people seek to place their own experiences within a wide framework of meaning.

In articulating one’s sense of self across the life course, change and transition assume a particular significance. Relationships between identity and learning often become clear at times of crisis and change. People’s major, life-changing turning points often involve a need to learn. Learning can then contribute to changes in some dispositions, and thus a person’s identity. It is, however, possible that existing dispositions are so strong that learning and subsequent change in identity do not happen. This suggests that there is a widely felt ‘need’ for the construction of a (coherent) life-story that helps people make sense of and come to terms with their life. This cannot be seen as simply an individual process; rather, we need to understand lives and life-stories as situated, and embedded in particular relationships, and wider, public histories over particular periods of time.

Learning from life is, of course, pervasive. A number of studies show that for many people, for much of the time, learning from and for life is a taken-for-granted activity that goes on continually, utterly regardless of any educational programmes or institutions or professionals (Alheit, 1995; Biesta et al., 2011). And there is a risk that some might conclude from this that formal and structured learning programmes are unnecessary or even undesirable. It is particularly clear that ‘expansive learning’ – that is, learning that involves ‘creation of new knowledge and new practices for a newly emerging activity’ (Engeström, 2004: 15) – may require access to resources that are not easily available to those in the least advantaged or privileged positions and with the most marginalised types of habitus. Yet this is precisely the type of learning that is likely to serve people well in dealing with the most challenging and unexpected transitions in their lives, and in articulating new stories of the self that enable new potentials for learning and for action. The idea of learning from and for life, far from denying the role of professional support, suggests rather that new forms of support for ‘transitional learning’ are urgently required.

References


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