

Empowering non-traditional students' careers through autobiographical writing

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Abstract

The target group of non-traditional students includes adults, but also first generation students, women in a situation of inequality, workers, people with immigrant origins, and generally students from educationally disadvantaged background conditions. In this paper we will concentrate on autobiographical writing as a tool of empowerment, reflectivity and creation of personal resources to promote completion and avoid drop-out in HE.

Autobiography makes it possible to explore the past and the present of the autobiographer in the framework of the family, of the local community and the widest institutional and sociocultural contexts. As a training instrument, autobiography favours: self-knowledge, the ability to analyze the past; the setting up of connections between the experience lived, the present and future projects; and the identification of the most important factors that condition the personal and educational evolution of the autobiographers.

Our proposal of educational autobiography has a guided approach. In the training we have aimed to combine group sessions, centred on oral work, with the students' autonomous work which consists of developing the educational, family and social life story.

At the end of the process, each student will have produced two written documents: an autobiographical story and an analysis of this story. In this paper we will present a case study of a disadvantaged student from a rural area, stressing the contributions of autobiographical writing to develop reflective competences and awareness about the relations between individual itineraries, family contexts, and broader sociocultural frameworks. We will specially focus on the analysis of the autobiography done the own student, navigating from subjective narratives to social and cultural comments and reflections. This approach favours innovation and empowerment in HE contexts, making possible the development of the reflectivity competence.

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ERASMUS–ESIN). The team leaders are Dr. Paolo Valerio and Dr. Maria Francesca Freda, University of Naples, Italy. The rest of the partners are as follows: National School of Political and Administrative Studies (NSPAS), in Bucharest, Romania, Dr. Dan Florin Stanescu; National University of Ireland in Maynooth (NUIM), Ireland, Dr. Úna Crowley; and University of Seville, Spain, Dr. José González–Monteagudo. The project undertook research and intervention between October 2011 and March 2014 in relation to university disadvantaged students, in order to promote social inclusion and to avoid early drop–out using narrative tools. The information and views set out in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Neither the European Union institutions and bodies nor any person acting on their behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained herein.

1. Introduction

The target group of non–traditional students includes adults, but also first generation students, women in a situation of inequality, workers, people with immigrant origins, and generally students from educationally disadvantaged background conditions. In this paper we will concentrate on autobiographical writing as a tool of empowerment, reflexivity and creation of personal resources to promote completion and avoid drop–out in HE.

It is not our purpose in this paper to describe the conceptual underpinnings of the INSTALL training. We have presented this in more detail elsewhere (see for example Freda *et al.*, 2012). Yet we want to offer some guidelines in order to contextualize our research. INSTALL is an European funded project which aims to prevent university drop–out of students who need support to fulfill their educational potential because of disadvantages caused by personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances. In general, Non Traditional Students are more exposed to the risk of dealing with phenomena of drop–out and low performances due to the difficult tasks of development and evolution they have to deal with, being disadvantaged subjects from a socio–cultural point of view. The need to face such disadvantage leads them to take longer in the achievement of their university goals and sometimes, as a consequence, to abandon their studies.

The project promotes acquisition of the key competence of Learning to Learn at the university level by developing and implementing a

training course focused on narrative tools. This narrative methodology is aimed at sustaining the development of a reflexive competence, based on the process of mentalisation of learning experience on the part of individuals. This process of mentalization, also known as reflexive competence, aims to understand the reasons of own and others behavior to act in a functional way to academic achievement. The project is based on the key role of narration as instrumental for the reflecting process of mentalization (Freda, 2008a; 2008b; 2011).

So, INSTALL proposes an innovative methodology based on Narration, the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP), with the aim of promoting the Learning to Learn competence by developing mentalization/reflexive competence. Specifically, NMP consists of a group training process targeted to groups of disadvantaged students enrolled in the second year of university and in late with passed examinations. NMP combines into one methodology four discursive narrative modes: metaphoric, iconographic, writing and bodily. These four modes are implemented in a cycle of seven meetings conducted by Narrative Group Trainers (NGTs) who were been trained to use such methodology with disadvantaged students.

2. Context and aims

This paper is not focused on the specific tools used in the INSTALL training, but on autobiography as developed in educational university settings. Nevertheless, there is a strong connection between the writing mode of the INSTALL training and the project of the autobiography taking into account the subjective and emotional dimensions of both tasks.

Autobiography makes it possible to explore the past and the present of the autobiographer in the framework of the family, of the local community and the widest institutional and sociocultural contexts. As a training instrument, autobiography favors: self-knowledge; the ability to analyze the past; the setting up of connections between the experience lived, the present, and future projects; and the identification of the most important factors that condition the personal and educational evolution of the autobiographers.

Autobiographies are related to self and agency as well as to culture

and social dimensions. In order to stress the complexity and holism of autobiographies, we focus on Bruner's contributions (González–Monteagudo, 2011). The problematic and unstable character of stories becomes expressly evident in narrative autobiographies, or to put it another way, in the narratives where the author, the narrator and the main character coincide. Bruner goes as far as to claim that the development of autobiography may be the most important research project in the field of psychology. At this point he cites Ricoeur, who argued that past experiences could only be described by way of a narrative (Bruner, 1987). Autobiography assumes a set of procedures in order to relate past experiences and, in this way, to create life itself. Autobiography is simultaneously a cognitive and an emotional achievement. Bruner links autobiographical narrative modalities to culture, given that culture provides cognitive and linguistic models to guide narratives. In the end, « we become the autobiographical narrative by which we “tell about” of a life » (Bruner, 1987). Culture then provides the tools, resources and sets of regular processes within a collective setting of possibilities and limitations. To address autobiography means to deal with the conceptions of self.

Bruner criticizes the essentialism, realism and objectivism of classical conceptions of self, and praises — following contributions from cognitive psychology and constructivism — a self that is transactional, distributed, dialogical, narrative and agentive (Bruner, 1990).

There is no such thing as an intuitively obvious and essential self to know, one that just sits there ready to be portrayed in words. Rather, we constantly construct and reconstruct our selves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter. . . (Bruner, 2002, 64).

On one hand, self is a product of the conditions and contexts in which it operates. On the other hand, self is constructed and transformed through the stories it receives, creates and shares. Such dialectics between structure and agentivity make it possible to carry out the kind of studies on self and identity that overcome the limitations of traditional — individualist and essentialist — approaches to psychology.

3. Methodology

Our proposal of educational autobiography has a guided approach. In the training we have aimed to combine group sessions, centered on oral work, with the students' autonomous work, which consists of developing the educational, family and social life story. Educational autobiography is a suitable instrument to explore the deep roots of learning carried out throughout life. The genealogical tree, the analysis of the family group, the commentary on the local environment, the lifeline, the personal shield or coat of arms and the learning narratives in different contexts (family and couple, school, peer groups, associations, information and communication technologies, leisure, the world of work) are some of the questions proposed as storylines of the written autobiography. These themes are offered as work possibilities and never as points that must be tackled.

In spite of the university institutional framework, the experience of autobiography has known how to preserve the spontaneity, creativity and freedom inherent to profound and experiential training activities, those that make progress in self-knowledge and the development of those taking part possible. In this sense, autobiography has a very open format and we believe that this is an important reason for the richness and strength of this training activity. Autobiography helps students to explicitly state their personal models and paradigms connected with culture, knowledge, representations, interpersonal relationships and educational values (Alheit et al, 1995).

In this section we will be presenting some biographical tools, used to develop the project of the writing of the own autobiography (Galvani, 1997; Lainé, 1998). The *lifeline* or timeline consists of a chronological representation of the most important events in a person's life, along a temporal axis that is developed between birth and the current moment. This makes a first representation of the personal path organized around the family, school and other environments easier. The *personal shield* or blazon is a symbolic representation of personal identity, articulated around four elements:

- a) the most important memory of childhood;
- b) the most fervent wish concerning the future;
- c) the favourite leisure activity;

d) the main quality subjects attribute to themselves.

The shield favors work on the imaginary through graphic expression and the freedom of criteria to communicate one's own identity.

The *narratives of learning experiences*, from birth to the current moment are organized in connection with the major educational stages: between 0 and 6 years; between 6 and 12 years; and between 12 and 18 years. The students face, for the first time, the making of their personal educational history, articulated from experience, but which aspires to generate knowledge about socialization, education and teaching (West, 1996; Merrill, 1999; Dominicé, 2000). *Photographs* are documents of a major importance in educational autobiography. Digital technology facilitates the task of reviewing, ordering and reproducing the most significant images. The comments on the photographs by the autobiographers develop the capacities of observation and description, at the same time as they very naturally connect the different moments of the vital cycle (Ochoa–Palomo & González–Monteagudo, 2013).

Finally, the *reflective and interpretative balance* makes an overall view of the process carried out possible, as well as establishing connections between the different contents worked on, susceptible to a personal and narrative articulation (for example, from a temporal perspective, connecting with the past, present and future; or in terms of learning settings, such as the family, school, means, peer groups and others). It is a matter of building meaning from lived–out and recounted experience. This implies reflection about personal identity and its connection with the personal and interpersonal history, as well as a reflection on the different types of ego: told, occult, secret, perceived by others, desired, public, and reconstructed (Bolívar, Domingo & Fernández, 2001; Denzin, 1989).

In this activity *the trainer takes on various roles*:

- a) the facilitating of clear guidelines to carry out the activity, from its own voluntary nature, to guarantee that the activity be a joyful experience of creative work, intellectual autonomy and profound affective experience;
- b) the motivating of the desire to search and research, aimed at recuperating evidence, experience and feelings, in dialogue with the family, mentors, friends and educators;

- c) the accompanying of the process of writing and the facilitating of strategies to unblock difficulties and encourage progress;
- d) the reduction and relief of anxiety and unease that some students experience, who refuse to abandon the activity in spite of the difficulty that they experience.

The educator is the guarantor of what is secret and confidential. The students must also respect this when they carry out oral exchange sessions or when the students exchange their autobiographies to read them. By its aims, methodology, context and contents, educational autobiography is a training activity and cannot be conceived either as psychological aid or as psychotherapy. However, it can have, and in fact in many cases this does happen, a therapeutic effect, connected with the redefining of some events of the past and the achievement of a more integrated and mature perspective of personal evolution.

4. Results and conclusions

The autobiography permits us to establish close links between the education offered by the university, the experiential world of the student and the socio-cultural background to the whole. Also it opens up a powerful process of personal reflection, analysis, questioning and maturation. In the work produced by students we encounter the living pulse of human experience: illness, friendship, loss, pain, joy, that which has been long forgotten, separation, jealousies, all manner of other feelings, religious beliefs, shared experiences, death, sadness and personal crisis.

The autobiography is an innovatory educational project at university level, a practical activity in writing which focuses upon life histories and an attempt to conduct educational investigation from the standpoint of practical teaching. The autobiography is at the same time an adventure, a risk and an open project. It is also a self-generating project, continually renewed through the course of its own development (Pineau, 2000; Pineau & Le Grand, 2002).

We can think of autobiographies as transitional spaces for learning in which there may be changes in the students' understanding as well

as positive benefits of story telling. This may be especially true in the case of students with low cultural and economic capital.

The use of biographical methods enables the non–traditional student to reflect upon their learning and experiences in higher education. This process also enable them to identify what facilitates their learning or not and identify strategies for improvement at an individual, departmental and institutional level to develop a successful learning career. Autobiographies also will provide an in–depth understanding of how non–traditional students develop or not a learning career and identity. The voices of participants are central, as they will inform potential strategies identified for policy and practice. Also we have been trying to involve students in the process of planning and implementing autobiographical writing.

The intense personal involvement favoured by group sessions centred on orality promotes an appropriation of experience. This appropriation is worked specifically in the final phases of the activity when requesting students to re–read the autobiographical text produced and to undertake the difficult work of submitting it to a critical analysis (Plummer, 2001). The students gradually discover that they are not only able to write their life stories — a question that many doubted when beginning the experience — but also, furthermore, they can become hermeneutist of their own writing and, consequently, of their own lives. The transition between the autobiographical story and the written analysis marks the genuine formative moment of the autobiography.

The analysis of the autobiography has a basically socio–cultural approach, although the student can decide the content and the approaches of his analysis. The aim of the analysis is for the student to place his biographical path in the framework of its genealogical and family context, of its local community and of its broader socio–cultural structure. The students place their own story better, this being understood as their personal itinerary and as a development that can only be clearly understood in the context of broader family, educational, historical and socio–cultural contexts. We believe that this effort of understanding the relationships between the individual development and the contexts of development promotes the construction of a theory by the students. This theorizing — which turns out to be very inconsistent, depending on the capacities of the different students

— aims to contribute to the most difficult problem that this activity displays. We are referring to the construction of a personal theory that sheds light on the relationships between the personal biography, the contexts of the development of the intermediate level (the family, the school and the community environment) and broader socio-cultural areas. In the intersection of these three vertices — biography as a micro-level; close contexts as an intermediate level; and global contexts as a macro-level — is, we think, to be found the most decisive formative and reflexive principle of educational autobiography. The theorizing that is attempted is backed by the group debates, the carrying out of biographical activities in small groups, the search for relationships between worked out readings and the autobiographical story, the autonomous search for documentation and the analytical and reflexive writing.

Autobiography trains skills of observation, research and documentation. Gathering biographical material and documents is an exciting task whose limits are those that the students themselves set out. The micro-interviews carried out with family members and close educators start off as brief, simple and motivating research. This is an important methodological dimension of the activity. The students become more mature gathering, organizing and analyzing biographical material. The experiential initiation, carried out with this fieldwork in the family and local settings, increases interest and understanding about ethical questions (privacy, respect for the informers, the dynamic of secrets, trust in the testimonies), the work procedures (instrument design, data gathering problems, technique and data triangulation) and the hermeneutic problems derived from the analysis of the experience lived out (the involvement of the student who researches and documents, the diversity of perspectives, the difficulties of writing life stories, the variety of audiences of the stories produced, the usefulness of analysis for constructing a personal educational theory). For all of these reasons, autobiography is an easy path to provoke the debate about culture, education, new technologies, personal and collective identity, values, and pedagogical contents and methods (Mitchell et al., 2005).

To conclude, we would like to plant some questions that have arisen from various issues encountered during the above outlined work with autobiographies. Considering a few such 'dilemmas' seems to us an

appropriate way to end. The first dilemma is one that concerns the divergent standpoints of the teacher and of the student. From our perspective as teachers, the autobiography is an educational tool, which contributes towards the development of critical thought and expression.

From a student's perspective, however, the autobiography is an activity very different from — and sometimes an alternative to — other university tasks. Students bring a lot of enthusiasm to their portrayal of family life and school life and tend to forget the educational objectives and criteria of the activity. Students tend to value the autobiography in terms of it as a door to their emotional nature, subjectivity, experience and personal recollections whereas for us, as lecturers, we value it as an instrument with which to consider experience, to amass knowledge and understanding of education in its multifarious contexts, and to augment students' ability to evaluate the phenomenon of learning through a diachronic perspective, within the framework of various spheres of socialization (family, school, peers, means of communication and information, free time and leisure, etc.). Up till now it has been difficult to reconcile both viewpoints.

Autobiography makes possible navigate between subjective narratives and sociocultural analysis and reflections. This approach favors innovation and empowerment in HE contexts, making possible the development of the reflectivity competence. Even in the current critical situation of the European societies, Higher Education continues to be a pathway to empowerment and intellectual and moral autonomy. In this context autobiography has already produced fruitful results.

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