

EXPERIENCING UNDERGRADUATE LEARNING AS A NON-TRADITIONAL ADULT STUDENT: A BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

Higher education institutions have opened up their doors (albeit some institutions and some countries more than others) as a result of changing state/university relationships, economic and social changes and globalisation. Externally universities are now engaging with other sites of knowledge producers while internally new student groups are entering. As Barnett points out: 'Institutional boundaries become less tight as interrelationships with the wider society grow' (2003: 27). This change process has enabled non-traditional adult students to re-engage with learning and enter the world of academia. Such students bring with them to the learning process their life experiences and their biographical and cultural baggage or, to draw on Bourdieu, a particular habitus or a set of dispositions which incline agents to react in certain ways. During their university career adult students develop and (re) construct a learning identity. However, the integration of adult students into a university culture is not always straightforward.

This paper draws on the experiences and lives of some non-traditional adult students interviewed for an EU funded Lifelong Learning Programme project entitled *Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education*. This project involves eight partners from across seven European countries (Germany, Ireland, England, Scotland, Spain, Sweden and Poland). The focus of our research, using biographical approaches, is to understand why adult students, despite often experiencing struggles, keep on going on with their undergraduate studies while others from a similar socio-economic background may drop-out. A non-traditional adult student includes one or more of the following categories: first generation students, working class, single parents (often women), ethnic minorities and students with disabilities.

During their university career adult students learn to develop and (re/) construct a learning identity in a learning environment, culture and structure which is largely geared towards meeting the needs of younger, 'traditional' undergraduates. This paper will explore the learning experiences through the voices and biographies of Spanish and English non-traditional adult students. In doing so we will look at the role and interaction of agency and structure in shaping their learning experiences and developing (or not) a learner identity which helps them to succeed at undergraduate level. The learning experiences of the adult students are contextualised within the different higher education institutional cultures through interviews with senior management, lecturers and support staff. Undertaking comparative European research is interesting yet challenging. This paper will also discuss the methodological issues of undertaking biographical interviews and the different cultural traditions in undertaking such research as well as the richness of such data.

Keywords: Non-traditional adult students, learning experiences, learning identity, higher education, social class, gender, transnational research, biographical research

1 INTRODUCTION

Universities across Europe are communities which are largely elite and the preserve of middle class younger students. In recent years widening participation and access policies under the umbrella of lifelong learning have enabled some adults to enter higher education although more so in some European countries and institutions than others. For non-traditional adult students the hurdles and struggles of entering and learning in higher education can be hard and risky but the process of learning can also be beneficial to the self, family and community. The aim of this paper is to look at the learning experiences of non-traditional adult students in higher education. This paper emerges from a European EC Lifelong Learning project (2008-2010) entitled '*Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education*' (RANLHE) ((Ref. 135230-LLP-2007-UK-KA1SCR), The project focuses on issues of widening participation and the provision of fair access to higher education to under-represented and excluded groups as well as looking at what keeps non-traditional adult students going on and completing and why others from a similar background drop-out (Thomas & Quinn, 2007; Crosling, Thomas & Heagney, 2008; Merrill, 1999; Merrill & González Monteagudo, 2010; West, 1996; Nizinska, 2009).

Seven countries and eight partners are involved in the project: Sweden, Germany, England, Scotland, Ireland, Poland and Spain. Our research approach centres on the use of biographical interviews in a framework which takes into account national, cultural and institutional contexts. In the context of our research non-traditional adult students refers to the following categories: first generation students; working class women and men; students on low incomes; single parents; minority ethnic groups; students with disabilities (Johnston, 2009). This paper will focus particularly on questions regarding the benefits of learning in relation to self, access to the labour market and social participation. One of the objectives of the RANLHE project consists in assessing the benefits for self, community and society of participating in learning in higher education.

2 A CHANGING HIGHER EDUCATION?

Universities are changing, albeit slowly, as they respond to the impact of globalisation and the knowledge society. These processes have undermined their ivory tower image so that they are no longer the sole preserve of knowledge (Delanty, 2001). As Barnett (2003) asserts universities now have to engage and connect with the wider society which is opening up institutions to more humanistic value systems: 'the spaces that are opening for the university to take on new value systems are also opening spaces for a leadership that deliberately attends to communicative and community values and for values in which individuals matter' (Barnett, 2003: 129 -130). However, while universities may be opening up their doors to allow some adult students in the symbolic and intellectual cultures of universities remain significantly different to the culture and communities from which non-traditional adult students come from. Institutional, structural and cultural differences, and sometimes barriers, have to be overcome if they are to develop a learning identity and succeed in higher education as working class adult students arrive with different social and cultural capitals, in Bourdieu's terms, than the university and younger middle class students.

Economic structural factors sometimes tend to be marginalized, emphasizing the role of institutional and cultural factors. Nevertheless it is necessary to pay more attention to economic factors which influence academic success, completion and dropout. The family income available, the national and regional economic structure, the labour market and the possibilities of employment are important traits. The current economic crisis seems to have a double and paradoxical influence on university studies. On the one hand, degrees are not considered as a necessary requirement to access to employment or to progress in the labour market. In the current context of high unemployment, degrees are not a guarantee to access to the labour market and to stay in it (Quinn, 2004, 68, for example, refers to the decline of traditional industries, the limitation of working opportunities and the lack of an apparent transition from the university degree to the local labour market). On the other hand, the increasing of unemployment and the decreasing of possibilities for accessing to a job by young people are raising the interest towards HE as a path to improve employability and a useful resource while the economic situation makes better.

The impact of social class in relation to university students (learning careers, identity, drop-out, specific difficulties, institutional habitus) remains in many occasions hidden. Social class is considered as an important dimension to analyze primary and secondary teaching. Nevertheless, in HE class tend to be ignored or marginalized as a perspective of analysis. Many academics do not perceive the social

class as an important issue. It is supposed that, after having accessed the university, there is equality among students, regardless their social or family backgrounds. In this case, there only seem have an interest towards the fact that students with less economic resources have available grants and financial support. This issue seems to be very relevant for our project (on class and class debates, see: Crompton, 2008).

3 DOING EUROPEAN RESEARCH

We are a transnational research team. Our research project involves eight partners from seven European countries (England (2), Germany, Ireland, Poland, Scotland, Spain and Sweden. Researching transnationally can sometimes be problematic and yet at the same time 'engaging in this type of research is exciting, interesting and challenging' (Merrill, 1997:2). For example, higher education systems differ across Europe despite the impact of the Bologna process which has implications for comparing data. Also as researchers we come from different theoretical and methodological traditions, disciplines and cultures and bring these baggages with us. Some of us draw on socio-cultural or socio-economic perspectives while others look to psychological ones. This is reflected in our different approaches to undertaking and analysing biographical interviews as we range from the objectivist stance through to the subjectivist stance. These differences in academic cultures and theoretical and methodological perspectives have to be worked through but can be helpful in developing an in-depth interdisciplinary approach to understanding issues of access, retention and drop-out in relation to non-traditional adult students across Europe.

As a way of moving towards an interdisciplinary approach we chose to employ three key sensitising concepts in helping us to analyse our data and inform our theoretical and conceptual frameworks. First, we are developing the idea of *habitus*, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's work on social and cultural capital, building on previous work by members of the research team (Peter Alheit, John Field and Barbara Merrill). Bourdieu's work on cultural capital is useful for looking at how working class adult students learn to cope, or not, with the symbolic and intellectual capitals of the university. They become, in Bourdieu's terms, either a 'fish in water' or a 'fish out of water'. The idea of social capital is also helpful, in that it draws attention to the ways that people's social connections shape educational decision-making. More broadly, the concept of *habitus* provides a powerful tool for revealing the dialectics of agency and structure in people's lives. Bourdieu's work, however, can only take us so far as there are limitations with his concepts and theory in relation to our work.

Our second sensitising concept, proposed by Linden West, offers a psychological perspective on non-traditional adult learners. This is the notion of *transitional space*, which draws on Donald Winnicott's work on human childhood development (1971). Extending this idea to learning in adult life, we can see higher education as a:

transitional space in which there is a constant negotiation and renegotiation of self in relation to others and the cultural world of the university...Basic questions may be asked in entering university...of who a person is, has been and might want to be. This in turn may provoke intense anxiety about a capacity to cope with change or whether a person is good enough in the eyes of significant people, whether other students or tutors. New transitions via 'unconscious memory in feeling'...may evoke connections with earlier transitional moments. Past and present may elide at such times and transitions may be especially fraught if past ones were traumatic (Johnston et al. 2009: 288, 289).

Equally, though, those who have experienced smooth transitions in the past may wrongly assume that higher education will be similarly problem-free. Some of us are exploring a sociological use of the concept by viewing university as a transitional space for working out new identities with the potential

for a changed self. Universities can also be viewed as a safe space, a temporary space away from life, for example, on a deprived estate, poverty or family problems.

The third sensitising concept is recognition, introduced by the Irish team, (Ted Flemming and Fergal Finnegan). This idea straddles, in some ways, the concepts of habitus and transitional space. The concept of recognition derives from critical theory and the Frankfurt School and the work of Axel Honneth. In developing a critical theory of recognition Honneth focuses on the role of intersubjectivity in shaping a person's identity (1995a). Honneth argues that the individual strives for recognition through developing relationships of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem in the family, civil society and the state

4 BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH.

Debates about how to conduct biographical interviews have been taken place in our project on non-traditional learners and retention in higher education. The debate has partly focused on the role of the researcher and the structuring of interviews. One perspective is influenced by German biographical-interpretative methods. It has been a challenging question to find out a common perspective within our transnational research team about interviewing. Our national and disciplinary contexts are important, but also the will of arriving to a shared space constructed from curiosity, learning and dialogue. We can think of interviews as transitional spaces for learning in which there may be changes in the interviewee's understanding and more confident story telling. This may be especially true in research processes which plan to interview the same individual several times (longitudinal studies).

The use of biographical methods enables the non-traditional student participants 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. Interviewing a cohort of students three times during their undergraduate study 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 in this research as they will inform the strategies identified for policy and practice. Also we have been trying to involve student participants in the research in the dissemination process as they will participate in workshops and other activities.

As the participants have been interviewed more than once, biographical interviews have been carried out throughout most of the period of the project in order to gain the maximum longitudinal approach for identifying changes in their learning career. Three different student groups have been interviewed: students in their first year of study (15 students in each case study institution interviewed three times during their degree programme); students who are in their last year of study (15 students in each case study institution); and a sample who have left before completing their studies and a sample who have left and later re-engaged with learning (15 in each case study institution).

The interview is a good instrument for collecting data about adult learners. Interviewing is an easy way of introducing adult learners to research and fieldwork, connecting research goals to lived experiences in personal, family, educational, and social sectors. In order to explore student experiences, it is useful to facilitate to adult learners some orientations on selected topics deserving attention. Thompson (2000, 3rd ed., 309-323), from the perspective of an oral historian, proposes this general elements in his life story interview guide: general information; grandparents' generation; parents' generation; siblings/cousins/uncles/aunts; daily life in childhood; community and class; school; employment; leisure and courting; marriage and children; changing daily life; later life.

The length of the biographical interview is variable and it basically depends on the student. Usually the interview takes between 60 and 90 minutes. In the interview we explore these questions: family issues; school experiences before University; access and initial adaptation to HE; teaching, learning, assessment and lecturers; institutional atmosphere; and personal and educational identity. The narratives produced by students offer a broad framework in order to understand learning experiences and broader institutional and social contexts. The analysis of these narratives makes possible to consider from new perspectives learning, identity and the biographical itinerary of Non-traditional students in Higher Education (Merrill & West, 2009; González Monteagudo, 2010).

5 STORIES FROM THE UK

Since the Dearing Report (1997) the value of widening participation in higher education in the UK has been stressed in relation to the social and economic benefits for individuals, communities and nations. Besides the instrumental benefits of earning more or getting a better job, participation in higher education can contribute to personal development, identity and social issues such as improvement of familial and community life (Archer, 2003). Research has largely focused on access and experiences of learning and it is only in the last few years that systematic research has been developed in order to gain “a clearer understanding of how learning affects people’s life, especially in the positive sense of generating individual and collective benefits” (Schuller, in Schuller, T.; Preston, J.; Hammond; Brassett-Grundy, A. & Binner: 2004, 4). This research is based on the concepts of human capital, identity capital and social capital (Schuller, Preston, Hammond, Brassett-Grundy & Bynner, 2004; Field, 2009).

Social class remains a dominant aspect of UK society although sociologically it was ignored when postmodernism became ‘vogue’ and influential. Some sociologists like Pahl, (1989) tried to lessen its importance. The tide is now turning and sociologists such as Skeggs, 1997, Savage, 2000, Devine et al, 2005, have brought it back onto the sociological agenda. Beverly Skeggs in her research on working class women studying at a further education college (a post compulsory institution) stresses the reality of class in everyday lives: ‘To abandon class as a theoretical tool does not mean that it does not exist anymore; only that some theorists do not value it...Retreatists either ignore class or argue that class is ‘an increasingly redundant issue’ (1997: 6-7). The participants in the RANLHE project interviewed at the University of Warwick all described themselves as working class. Many of them are women and some are single parents. For the women issues of class are inter-linked with issues of gender in their lives so that they identified themselves as working class women. The biographies of non-traditional adult students in this study reveal the commonalities of class and gender, for example in their experiences of initial schooling, family life, the labour market and learning in higher education. Biographies also highlight the interaction between structure and agency in shaping a learner identity. While class and gender had shaped and continues to shape their lives they were also able to use their agency to change their lives in some way.

5.1 Julia’s story

Julia is white and was 37 and in her final year of a Health and Social Policy degree when interviewed. She is a single parent. Her ex-husband is African-Caribbean so her son is of dual heritage. Julia re-entered education through participation on a Certificate in Community Research course taught by the Sociology Department at Warwick. As a result of her class background she experienced severe financial difficulties and housing problems during her studies and at times it was a struggle for her to keep going. She also suffered from dyslexia and dyspraxia.

Starting the degree programme marked a change in Julia’s life but she found the modules hard and felt that that was due to ‘not having a good education from junior and secondary school’. Compared to the Certificate course she found the degree subjects very abstract and described this period as ‘a bit of a dip’. She felt lost with the learning as she had difficulty in understanding the meaning and purpose of it. Studying at an elite university raised issues of class as she found that some lecturers were ‘very different from myself, from different backgrounds’. Most Sociology lecturers, however, were supportive and could understand what being a single parent, living in poverty on a deprived and rough council estate (social housing) meant:

One of my tutors had already done lots of books and studies about poverty and things like that and, you know, poverty was a really big issue for me at the time. I was really, really struggling and it was nice to know that she understood, whether she’d experienced it herself or not in her own life that didn’t really matter because she really understood it at a very deep level. – what single parents go through. I got a lot of support and I found they were quite significant to me personally which then gave me the confidence to carry on working and to concentrate on my academic stuff.

Like many working class women she lacked confidence in her academic ability:

I never actually thought I’d make it to the end, so, each year that went by was quite a shock because I’d go through another year but I was determined to make things different for myself and for my son, so again this goes back to a personal side, that, I’d realised through all the

reflective work that we'd done - I'd realised that I couldn't really make any changes in my personal life unless I really, really changed. What I was learning and how I was learning and what academic qualifications I was getting. It is determination that I wanted to change things and make a difference and be able to support us financially and move out of the neighbourhood that I was in too. I just thought I can't afford to drop out now because I'll have nothing to show for it but I will have lots of student debts.

Being a mother and an adult student also means that studying has to revolve around childcare, limiting time on campus. Despite the constraints Julia enjoyed university life; '...it was still a nice feeling. I don't know how to explain that in words. I suppose it's a feeling of being included. I felt like I was a part of something'. At the same time many women experience difficulties, often multiple ones, which affect their studying. Lack of finances was a big problem for Julia:

If you're worrying about silly things like whether you've got enough petrol to drive into University that really hinders your learning so much and it did get to the stage where I was struggling to even pay utility bills and buy food and it just seemed ridiculous that I was having a university education but I just couldn't afford it.

During her studies Julia moved to another council estate because she was fearful of where she lived after several violent incidents occurred. Some of this was associated with racial tension so she was afraid for her son. Moving to a better estate improved her quality of life and enabled her to focus back on her studies. Cultural differences of gender and class, however, meant that she did not get support from her family while she was studying. She explains:

It's not because people didn't want to support me. It's because my family - nobody in my family has been to university. My mum has supported me through my whole life but she couldn't even remember the name of my course, let alone what university I went to. She had no clue because my life was so different from anything she'd experienced so it was really hard for her to support me.

Studying at university also made it harder for her to relate to other women on the estate:

I couldn't talk about University to any other mum's as I walked to school because I felt that they had snubbed me a bit, you know like, 'look at you with your big briefcase'. It was really tricky to explain to people why I wanted to progress myself. I withdrew from my friends on the estate a little bit because I found it hard to explain to them why I wanted something different but I understood why they didn't or why they were happy in the situations they were in.

Participating in education, at whatever level, does change women in different ways. For Julia:

Yes definitely although I still question myself a lot, I still worry about lots of things and I sometimes don't feel as confident as I should, it's nowhere near how I was five years ago. I've gained tremendously in confidence, being able to talk to people and not worrying so much if I get something wrong and take part in meetings. I don't feel threatened or nervous to open my mouth.

Women, like Julia, who participate in HE are affected by the experience, often in critical ways in terms of how they see themselves and society. Julia, like many of the working class women we interviewed managed to develop a learner identity and habitus which managed to keep them going on and find their place within an elite, middle class university. There were moments along this trajectory when she nearly dropped out as structural factors constrained her but her 'determination' (as echoed by others) kept her going. She was trying to change her situation for both herself and her son. She did not want to go back to the life she had before starting the degree and knew that she would have a large debt if she dropped out. The campus offered her a safe space where she could temporarily forget about her problems and develop her self and her academic learning. At the same time she continued to not feel confident as a learner although she did admit that by the end she was more confident as a person and had gained more self-esteem. She also gained recognition as a student and a person. However, her habitus remained working class and like many working class students she had to cope with two identities: an academic identity and a working class identity. This was not always easy.

6 STORIES FROM SPAIN

The Higher Educational system in Spain

Under the “Napoleonic” system of HE adopted by Spain in the nineteenth century, universities were completely regulated by laws and norms issued by the State. This strictly regulated higher system was also an elitist system. This situation began to change during the 1970s, when the system started to shift from an elite to a mass higher education system. After the restoration of democracy (Franco’s dictatorship went by 1939 and 1975) and the promulgation of the new constitution in 1978, university transformation was one of the main objectives of both academics and political parties. There has been an important process of political and administrative decentralisation. At present Spain has 50 public universities (with 91% of registrations) and 27 non-state universities (9% of registrations; of these 27 private universities, one third is owned by the Catholic Church).

Student mobility is very low in Spain though the State government tries to enhance it through special programmes. Most students do not move to another region to study (or to another city if they can study their desired degree in their own city). In 2004-2005 around 1.5 million students were enrolled in university education, which was 45% of the population of the cohorts between 18 and 25 years of age (in 1985 were enrolled in university education 22% of these same cohorts). Women students in Spanish HE are currently around 56% of students and 60% of graduate students.

Over the last three decades the number of students and universities has increased three-fold. Currently 30% of women and 22% of men between 24 and 34 years have graduated from universities. In spite of the progress made in widening university access, data on the socioeconomic origin of university students show a marked orientation towards families with medium to high incomes, indicating that there is much room for improvement in the area of equity. It is important to stress that there is an important rate of drop-out in the Spanish compulsory stage of the secondary level, one of the highest of the OECD. Around 30% (in Andalusia, around 40%) of Spanish students leave the compulsory secondary education without official certification. The proportion of young people taking a university course when their parents had no schooling was 9%, whereas this proportion was 65% (seven times greater) for young people whose parents had completed a university degree (the last three paragraphs are based on: Ministry of Education and Science –Spain: 2008). In 2009 the unemployment in Spain was 18.8% for people between 25 and 64 years. But for those with high education (university degree or qualified vocational training) the rate of unemployment was 8.8% while in the case of people with low educational level (pre-primary, primary or secondary education) the unemployment was 21.7% (Tobarra, 2010). These data show clearly the added value of education, especially in the current situation of economic crisis.

6.1 Laura’s story

We will look now at a case study from one of the three Andalusian universities which have been participating in our research project. Laura was 45 years old at the moment of the interview. For approximately 20 years she has been working like nurse aide and carer. Nowadays she feels burnt out in this work. Her work consists of doing basic tasks in relation to food and hygiene of the elders, a hard task. This point has been very relevant to initiate and to continue her university studies. In 2004 Laura had started to think about the idea of doing the entrance examination to the university for people over 25 years old. Her sons were older and she had more free time. Another important factor has been the search of professional improvement. Laura, after approximately two decades like nurse’s aide, feels burnt out in her job. Laura wouldn’t like to continue all her life doing the same activity:

I have some friends and I tell them that they study, that we should not to remain the whole life here. My job is nurse aide but what I do mainly is to wash the elders. And I use to say them: ‘well, are we going to remain here all our life washing asses?’.

Laura did not have a computer. When she has started to study, she did a course on computers and she bought a computer after the course. She says that, before, she had enough with the household appliances:

I had not knowledge about computers. I felt obliged to do a course on computers, and I felt obliged to buy a computer. This opened many things. I was a typical woman who was at home. I go to work, I go back home, but... I didn’t have a computer, only my household appliances. I felt obliged to enter into a new world.

Laura feels deeply proud of her university itinerary (decision to do university studies, preparation to the entrance examination, overcoming of the entrance examination, beginning of her studies, successful progression along the three university years). Also she says that her family and neighbours feel very satisfied of her tenacity, dedication and academic success. It is a double process: she is recognized by herself and also the others recognize her:

I have to endure the jokes at work... 'well, she speaks in a different way'. The true is that I look at many things from another perspective... At the workplace I used to say: 'the social worker, why she is permitting this situation?' I approach the questions in a different way... Knowledge is there. And when I speak, in many occasions I speak very well, using technical words.

For Laura, the main contribution of the university studies is to acquire knowledge and to know many persons, to be to the height in social, professional or labour situations where it's necessary to have a better and deeper knowledge:

One day we went to a seminar, it was nice. A lecturer sent us an email; there was a seminar on social exclusion and poverty that could be interesting for me... And we went together, three students. It was a nice day... To know people, they speak well, they communicate well, very interesting... And you don't already see yourself strange. You say: 'I am a professional, I understand these things, I can speak'. This is important. You can speak, you are going to a place and you say: 'well, but I'm also to the same high of other people. It has been an inner reinforcement, I have gained many knowledges, it's true. And also I have obtained friendship.

Laura raises with clarity her professional perspectives, as soon as she concludes Social Work studies: to obtain a job as a social worker, for internal promotion, in the regional Ministry of Equality and Welfare, where she is employed as a health care helper. This case shows us the relevance of doing a university degree as well as the challenges that it's necessary to deal with. This woman student left her studies when she was sixteen years old, after her family decided to return from France, where they lived many years as migrants. Now, in her forties, she has decided to do a degree in order to improve her work conditions and also to gain more autonomy. Her case represents the efforts of many men and women who in Andalusia are trying to overcome past experiences of inequalities, family difficulties and poor teaching conditions during the compulsory education.

7 PERSPECTIVES

Different national contexts have general traits which influence upon HE. In our research project we are stressing these specific situations while at the same time developing a comparative approach (Thomas & Quinn, 2007: 13-15). Some of these traits are: recent history, political system, educational policy, family socialization, impact of parental education on access and success in HE, values, use of time, private economic sector, position of HE institutions in relation to the state and private sectors, funding of HE institutions and price of tuition fees.

Spain and the UK share important traits as States which are members of the European Union and key actors of economic development. In this sense both States need to respond to common challenges in a globalized economy. Nevertheless both have a specific landscape in relation to social policy, unemployment and HE system. In both contexts Higher Education continues to be a pathway to empowerment, autonomy and better jobs.

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