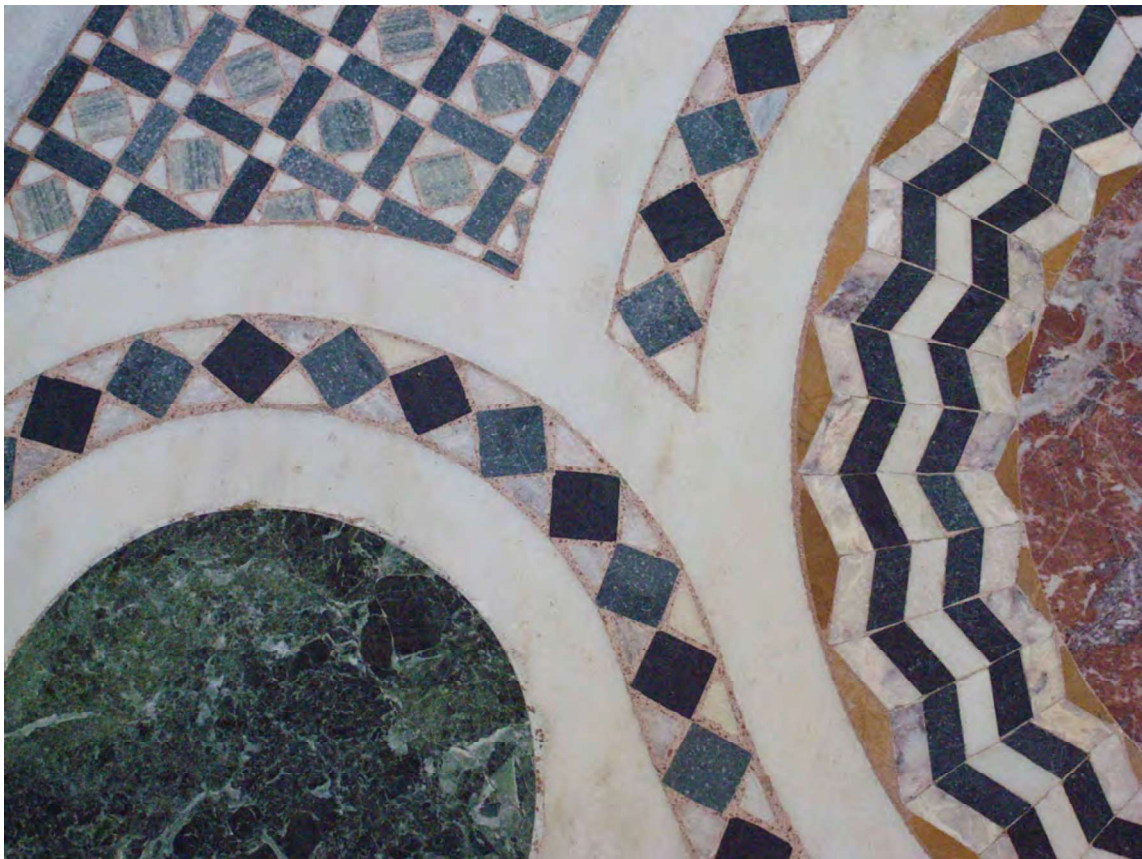


The International Transformative Learning Conference in Europe  
9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Transformative Learning

# **Transformative Learning in Time of Crisis: Individual and Collective Challenges**

May 28<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> 2011  
Pre-conference May 27<sup>th</sup> 2011  
Post-conference May 30<sup>th</sup> 2011

Athens, Greece  
Hotel Classical Athens Imperial



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# **Autobiography and Transformative Learning in Adult and Higher Education**

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## **Introduction**

In this paper I address the use of auto/biographical methodology in adult and higher education for working on autobiography. This use of community, family and personal life stories is set in a critical and emancipatory model of lifelong learning and in an epistemological model based on the co-construction of knowledge from the analysis of personal and social experience oriented by a complex and systemic perspective (Mezirow, 1991, 2009; Freire, 1970; Gelpi, 2005; Formenti, 2000). Critical and experiential learning is a powerful heuristic concept for confronting adult learning. The paper explores the use of autobiographies by adults in formal educational contexts, pointing out its sociological, anthropological and pedagogical implications (for an overview, see: González Monteagudo, 2008). Concepts such as collective memory, social change, cultural transmission, cohort generation, family communication, self and identity are explored in relation to personal growth and lifelong learning. Also, I outline some features of a pedagogical model based on an experiential and emotional framework. A central issue of the paper is to deal with transformations lived by university students in relation to generational changes, personal itineraries and educational transitions through the life-span course.

## **Experiential Learning and Emotional Education through Auto/Biographical Methods**

Experiential learning and communicative interaction is the base for learning and change. Experiential learning is a notion grounded in John Dewey, David Kolb and Malcolm Knowles, and it supposes, as Fraser explains (1995, pp.4-23), a challenge to post-school structures and curricula, combining individual development and social change. I think of the learner as a subject that knows, without reifying or acritically legitimizing that knowledge. Learning means integration of processes. As pointed out by Kolb (cited in Fraser, 1995, p.6), “[...] learning and change result from the integration of concrete emotional experiences with cognitive processes: conceptual analysis and understanding”. Through learning, the adult symbolically travels from dependence to autonomy, from passivity to activity, from selfishness to altruism, from self-rejection to self-acceptance, from imitation to originality, from narrow interests to broad interests (Fraser, 1995, p.9). In this perspective, sharing autobiographical writings and oral accounts in small groups often promotes support and understanding as participants reflect on their lives, in an informal atmosphere of free exchange (Aminoff, 1995).

Traditionally education has been conceived as mere instruction and transmission of objective knowledge as a result. In more recent times, important changes in social context, educational policies and pedagogical methods have contributed to change the perspective. Nevertheless, education, including some sectors of adult education, has continued to be above all a rationalistic and cognitive process. The affective, emotional and interpersonal dimensions have largely been underestimated. This panorama is congruent with the patriarchal system, based on authority, hierarchy and rationalism (Naranjo, 1993, 2004). According to Steiner (2003, p.34), “[...] emotional education consists of three skills: the skill to understand emotions, the skill to express them in a fruitful way, and the skill to listen to everybody and to feel empathy in relation to their emotions”. Self-understanding implies, among other things, “[...] an activity of reminiscence, which involves a contact, through remembering, with the past experience; this retrospective clarification is stimulated by the

written and oral expression” (Naranjo, 2004, p.185). Emotional education should be pervaded by a critical and emancipatory approach. In the last few years, under the influence of market and efficiency, emotional intelligence – and all what has been derived from this field in relation to education- runs the risk of turning “[...] in another lubricant of corporate human engineering used to help companies to identify optimistic dreamers and to avoid sad lunatics” (Steiner, 2003, p.13).

Autobiographical learning is very fruitful to work with the past, elaborating conflicts and crises and, then, as a useful instrument for emotional and interpersonal education. The guided writing of educational autobiography, that we have been using with university students, helps work in depth around personal world of students, integrating and creating skills in cognitive, operative, and affective dimensions. Work with oral and written personal narratives improves self-knowledge as well as a more mature approach to problems, difficulties, crises and interpersonal relationships. Explorations of past, family experience, formal and informal educational itineraries, are excellent ways of working with identity. “The idea that reflection on the personal past, and through it acceptance of change, might be essential to the maintenance of self-identity through the typical transformations of the cycle-life [...]” (Thompson, 2000, 184).

The main trend that has boosted the use of biographical focuses in training has been a group of French-speaking authors with a strong interest in life stories as an instrument of adult experiential learning. These authors are grouped together around the *Association Internationale des Histoires de Vie en Formation* (ASIHVIF), with its headquarters in Paris (France). In 1983, Gaston Pineau published, in collaboration with Marie-Michèle, *Produire sa vie. Autoformation et autobiographie* (Pineau and Marie-Michèle, 1983). This is a suggestive and innovative book that marked the beginning of life histories in adult education. To illustrate how life stories are worked on within this collective, I refer to the work of Pierre Dominicé (2000, 2002) and his team, carried out with students in Geneva (Switzerland), at the Faculty of Educational Sciences and with adult educators in an extra-university framework.

### **Educational Autobiography: A Tool for Self-Learning, Emotional Education and Reflexivity**

This paper presents my experience with undergraduate students in a Spanish university the focus is on autobiography as a tool of experiential and emotional learning, critical self-reflection and wisdom. That is, we are dealing with the art of narrating personal history through writing and of what we are able to learn about ourselves through such an undertaking. We shall consider this narration as both an innovation within the lecture hall and as a tool with which to strengthen and enrich experiential sensitivity and critical reflection.

To give students some idea of what we mean by critical reflection and of what is required of them before they commence work on their autobiography, I present them with a list of factors or elements which generally contribute to the above: serious commitment in terms of time and energy; the comparison and contrast of differing perspectives; intelligent reflections upon spatial and temporal dimension; an analysis of the concept of culture (and of sub-culture) as applied to different spheres of life (family, school, media and ICT, peers and leisure time, etc.); originality and creativity in the layout and presentation of one’s life history; the ability to distance oneself and to provide objective criticism with respect to one’s family environment, school and socio-culture; and the correct use of language. The writing of an autobiography is an intensely educational activity in which both the students and I have learned a great deal. 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 of the whole. The autobiography 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, religious beliefs, shared experiences, death, sadness and personal crisis.

The autobiography is an innovative 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.

Auto/biographical methods are a way to access to experiential, subjective, affective and reminiscent pedagogical work. Personal narratives help the expression of feelings, and at the same time they sensitize people to the feelings of each other, increasing empathy and tolerance. Life histories contribute to the production of grounded, experiential and dialectic knowledge, derived from the ongoing interplay among theory, research, learning process, and personal and group experience (Pineau & Le Grand, 1996; Josso, 2000; Dominicé, 2000). Work with oral and written personal narratives improves self-knowledge as well as a more mature approach to problems, difficulties, crises and interpersonal relationships. Exploration on past, family experience, and formal and informal educational itineraries, is an excellent way for working identity.

The application of auto/biographical methods in lifelong learning and HE institutions is an innovative solution in view of the increasing impasse of conservative adult educational programs and politics as well as the confusion of many teachers. So, adult educators have found in life histories a methodology for learning (and also for researching) with a strong potential in to foster a situated and democratic learning. In the last 25 years this approach has been used in very different contexts: writing workshops, higher education, associations, youth groups, women groups, immigrants and ethnic minorities, accrediting prior learning, workers, adult learners, educators, social workers, and so on. Mixing cooperation, work from experience, and self-directed learning, auto/biographical methods can help to enhance the power of action of the person on himself/herself and on the environment, associating him/her to the construction of produced knowledge. This approach is qualitative, trans-disciplinary and collaborative. It has rejected the gap among disciplines. The partnership among educators, researchers and learners in all phases of the process is promoted (Pineau & Marie-Michèle, 1983; Dominicé, 2000).

Over the last few years some papers searching for links between autobiographies undertaken in educational contexts and transformative learning have been published (Johnson, 2003; Karpiak, 2000; Nelson, 1997). These papers try to identify the ways in which transformative processes are operating in the writing of autobiographies within formal educational contexts.

I will comment on the experience of the educational autobiography that I have carried out in recent years and in which I have come across a very reasonable way of matching teaching educational innovation and research (González Monteagudo, 2006). I consider educational autobiography as an instrument of experiential training, a tool that favors critical reflection and an innovative method of university teaching. Among the aims that I propose for autobiography are the following: to develop personal self-awareness; to favor the capacity of analysis and criticism of our different daily settings (family, school, the mass media, groups of peers and friends, churches, leisure and spare time, work); to connect personal biography, the family and local context, and the global social and cultural area; and to favor the student's experiential involvement in the teaching-learning process. The main activity has consisted of writing educational autobiography, guided by written orientations and by sessions of motivation aimed at the class group (between 50 and 60 students). Some complete

group sessions have been developed to motivate activity, socialize the process and the product of autobiographical writing and exchange ideas about the activity.

The *family tree* consists of a graphic representation of the family roots (cf. Lani-Bayle, 1997), with some information of paternal and maternal antecedents, situated in their social, economic, cultural and axiological context (places of birth and residence; important dates; economy and occupations; beliefs and ideologies; learning, training and cultural aspects; personal and family evolution; crises and significant transitions). The *analysis of the family group* begins with the material elements of housing and also spans symbolical and axiological levels that make up the family system and the complex relationships between the different components, with special attention being paid to generational and gender differences, family re-compositions and family change (cf. Formenti, 2002; Lani-Bayle, 1997). The *life line* 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 favorite leisure activity; and 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 (e.g., West, 1996; Merrill, 1999; Dominicé, 2000, 2002; Demetrio, 2003; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). *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.

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 (i.e., 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. In the final moments of the writing of the autobiography, students focus on systematic interpretations and reflections about the whole process of the activity. This process allows a look at the sum total of the student's educational experience and enables us to establish connections between the different areas worked upon during the composition of the autobiography. In many cases this phase implies to establish links amongst past, present and future. Here we reconsider the meaning attributed to our lifetime and also examine the very process of autobiographical writing itself. This requires us to reflect upon our personal identities and their relationship to our personal and inter-personal history. The interpretation of one's own life entails a study of the relationship between personal trajectory and education. In this sense, the autobiography provides an opportunity for us to re-evaluate our own projects, hopes and ambitions, in the search for a coherent life narrative beyond mere fragments.



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; and 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. This must also be respected by the students 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. We also aspire to favor the classic aims of psychoanalysis, such as P. Ricoeur describes them: “[...] to substitute fragments of histories that are at the same time unintelligible and unbearable with a coherent and acceptable history” (Ricoeur, 1985, p.444). As an appraisal of the process, we stress the intensity and dedication with which the students are writing about their experiences, as well as the high value that they attribute to this experience. For many students, this represents a task that is very special and completely different from the rest of the compositions or written work that they carry out during their university training because of the strong connection between what is personal and what is academic, and the affective work linked to the remembrance of the past.

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