Introducing Concepts of Learning and Contrasting Research Methodologies: some strengths and weaknesses of life history research

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Introduction: conceptualising learning

Our combined experience of researching learning using different methodologies, raises issues of importance about the relationships between any one methodology and the ways in which learning is conceptualised. Before engaging with the issue directly, we need to say a little about the concept of learning.

Learning is a conceptual and linguistic construction that is widely used in many societies and cultures, but with very different meanings which are at least partly contradictory and contested. Learning does not have a clear physical or reified identity in the world, in the way that many other things, such as schools, children or books do. Rather, learning is a concept constructed and developed by people, to label and thus start to explain some complex processes that are important in our lives. For many enlightenment writers, the ability to learn was what makes humans distinctive. For such writers, learning entails purposeful activity by the learner, and is thus different from structural accounts of socialisation, the process whereby people are moulded by their sociological context. On the other hand, behaviouristic studies of learning assumed that learning by people was very similar to learning by animals, such as mice in a maze. These and other different groups of writers each construct learning in different ways. The differing concepts are often at least partly incompatible, so that what learning is actually differs in different accounts, despite sharing the same label.

Of course, if we briefly consider the concept of ‘child’, things are far from straightforward here also. Like learning, ‘childhood’ is also a constructed concept. Its purpose is to emphasise the different between very young humans and older ones (adults). This constructed nature of the term can be seen in common debates about the supposed loss of childhood in contemporary society, and arguments about when childhood begins and ends. However, the construction of the concept of childhood has one significant difference with that of learning. In the case of childhood, there are actual entities, pre-fully grown people and their experiences, to which the concept is applied. There is no such entity which lies behind the concept of learning.

The consequences of the differences between these two concepts, learning and childhood, is important. For whilst use of the concept childhood constructs our understanding of pre-mature people in a particular way, which becomes real in its effects on our culture and practices, learning has no semblance of anchor, other than the cultural history of the contested uses of the term. That is, in using the term ‘learning’ in particular ways, we are constructing what learning is and to whom (or what) it applies. Thus, from differing perspectives, organisations can learn, families can learn, individual people can learn, animals can learn and maybe computers can learn.
To substantiate this point we briefly discuss some common, often tacit, root metaphors which are utilised or implied when learning is thought about. Sfard (1998) drew our attention to the significance of metaphors in relation to learning, when she analysed recent debates about the nature of learning as a contest between the metaphor of acquisition and that of participation. These two metaphors, she argued, present largely incommensurable views of what learning is. Acquisition focuses either on learning as a commodity or, perhaps more accurately, as a process whereby commodities of, say, knowledge are acquired. At its crudest, this amounts to little more than what Bereiter (2002) terms the folk theory of learning – putting stuff (what is learned) into vessels (the human mind). Participation, on the other hand, entails seeing learning as the undertaking of activities within a social context, sometimes conceptualised as an activity system (Engestrom, 2001, 2004), sometimes as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). However, despite the wide impact of the Sfard analysis, acquisition and participation are not the only contenders as root metaphors of learning. Thus, there is a long tradition of seeing learning as construction. In addition to the intellectual movement that is often termed constructivism, which focuses mainly on the ways individual learners engage with new knowledge, Hager (2005) has recently argued that workplace learning is also best seen as construction, arguing that both acquisition and participation can imply learning as static, rather than as a process. If we move beyond English as a language, other root metaphors become apparent. We draw upon Dominicé (2000, p11) to introduce the French concept formation ‘[which] describes the alliance of formal and experiential learning that gives shape to an adult life’. More recently, Hodkinson, with others, has started to think about learning as becoming – a metaphor that we use to signify a blending of learning as participation with learning as embodied construction, in a broadly Deweyan sense.

When researchers study learning, one way in is the ways in which they already understand the concept. This is partly related to the context in which the learning is to be investigated, as can be seen by the dominance of broadly participatory views of learning in studies of workplaces. The other starting point is the chosen methodology. We are suggesting here that different methodologies have affinities towards different conceptions of learning, and we next illustrate this point with three examples from our experience.

**Ethnographic approaches and participatory theories of learning**

In the *Transforming learning cultures in Further Education* (TLC) project, Phil Hodkinson worked with others, to study learning within English Further Education Colleges. The main investigatory method was a longitudinal study of 17 ‘learning sites’ in four different colleges. In effect, each of those sites was seen as a mini-ethnography – but without the complete emersion that is normally entailed in ethnographic approaches.
(Wolcott, 1999). The main tutor in each site was an active partner in the research, and kept a dairy. In addition, there were repeated observations of the site, and repeated interviews with the tutor and a small sample of students. We also collected questionnaire data from a wider sample of students within these case study sites.

The approach was selected to help us examine the complex interrelationships between a wide range of factors which we predicted would influence learning in the sites. They were:

- The positions, dispositions and actions of the students
- The positions, dispositions and actions of the tutors
- The location and resources of the learning site which are not neutral, but enable some approaches and attitudes, and constrain or prevent others
- The syllabus or course specification, the assessment and qualification specifications
- The time tutors and students spend together, their interrelationships, and the range of other learning sites students are engaged with
- Issues of college management and procedures, together with funding and inspection body procedures and regulations, and government policy
- Wider vocational and academic cultures, of which any learning site is part
- Wider social and cultural values and practices, for example around issues of social class, gender and ethnicity, the nature of employment opportunities, social and family life, and the perceived status of Further Education as a sector.

In making this methodological decision, we were paralleling Flybjerg (2001), who argues that case studies are the best way to study relational complexity. What may already be obvious to readers was gradually noticed by us. By centring our investigation on the cultural practices of each learning site, we also decentred the students. They were seen as an important part of something bigger, and we had neither time nor inclination to produce many individual student stories (but see Davies and Tedder, 2003, for one example). Put simply, there were too many students in each site for us to focus on each of them seriously.

This centering of the study on locations has much in common with other work done under what Sfard (1998) terms a participatory metaphor of learning. Here, the focus in on the activities and practices of a situation where learning takes place. The lens through which those practices are examined differs from researcher to researcher, and two common ones are the cultural and historical activity systems of Engestrom (??), and the communities of practice of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). Like us, these studies also see learning as relational, though the nature of that relationality vary from one account to another. Lave and Wenger’s work is more concerned with relationships between people, and a sense of belonging, whilst Engestrom is more concerned with structures, rules and procedures. In both cases, learning is not seen a somehow separate process in its own right. As Lave and Wenger (1991, p p.35) write,

“In our view, 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.”
Because such accounts focus on the practices or activities through which people participate, most see learning as embodied (Beckett and Hager, 2002). That is, engaging with practice, and therefore learning, always entails more than cognitive activity. People physically do things, and react emotionally to things. Partly because of this, and partly because of the fact that many of the participatory studies are located outside educational institutions, there is also a major focus on what is often termed informal learning. Colley et al. (2003) suggest that the often assumed division between formal and informal learning is unjustified. From their perspective, one of the possible weaknesses in some participatory accounts is a devaluing of the role of formal instruction (but see Billet, 2001), and of the value of learning in educational institutions (Brown et al., 1989, Lave and Wenger, 1991).

As the TLC work progressed, we engaged fairly deeply with this participatory literature, identifying several short-comings in it, and advancing some new thinking of our own (Hodkinson, Biesta and James, in press; Hodkinson with others, in press). Our evidence suggested that it was important to adopt participatory approaches to learning in college that did not see this as inevitably second best to ‘authentic’ everyday learning. Another weakness has already been implied above, for very few studies of learning which adopt a participatory perspective deal adequately with individual learners (Anderson et al., 1996). Whilst we agree with Cobb and Bowers (1999) that it is possible to do both, and recognising that there have been some recent attempts to do just that (Billet and Somerville, 2004; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004; Hodkinson et al., 2004), we felt that there were some difficult conceptual problems to be overcome to pull off the full integration of individuals into theories of learning focussed on the situations where learning takes place. Those conceptual issues are not our prime concern here. Rather, we wish to point up a methodological problem.

This problem can be expressed very simply. Centring the learner and their processes of learning is very difficult in any research approach adopting a broadly ethnographic stance. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) partly overcame this in a study of schoolteachers’ workplace learning, by focussing on very small school departments, so that individual teacher differences did not disappear. The decision to do this skewed their sample away from larger departments (with more than five members of staff!!!), and could not be replicated in the TLC site studies. In the latter case, we were able to focus on the tutors as individuals, because we had one main partner in each site. We could not do the same for the students. Both the Hodkinson and Hodkinson study and the TLC marginalised individual learning outside the specific contexts being studied. This is another common problem with participatory accounts. Lave and Wenger (1991) for example, implicitly write about newcomers as if they arrived as tabulae rasa.

Thus, there is a natural affinity between an ethnographic, case study research approach, and participatory ways of conceptualising learning. We will discuss some of the implications of this affinity, after we have described two different examples of research approach towards learning.
Life history and learning as construction

Like ethnographies, life histories are also case studies. But unlike ethnographies, they place the individual at the centre of investigation. Both authors have recently been working together on the *Learning Lives* research project. This is an on-going four year investigation of the relationships between learning, agency and identity in people’s lives. A significant part of this project is concerned with constructing life histories of over 100 adults, of differing ages and differing background and positions. In the *Learning Lives* study, as with many other life histories, the prime unit of analysis is the individual stories of people’s lives, based upon what they say to us in our interviews. These stories are, of course, rich and complex. They share with ethnographies the facility to deal with complexity, within people’s lives, and the patterns between different lives. In revealing that complexity, it is relatively easy to explore the significance of informal as well as formal learning in people’s lives, especially of the researcher is tuned in to look for informal learning, and progressively helps the research subject to become aware of it in their own lives. Another obvious strength of the method is that learning can be seen and understood over very long time frames within the life course, whereas ethnographies tend to give a snapshot, taken over a relatively short time span.

Much life history is also good at placing the subject in a social, economic and historical context (e.g. Antikainen, 1996). Indeed, for some, it is this attention to contexts that distinguishes life history from life stories (Goodson and Sykes, 2001). However, the method is arguably less good than ethnographies in unpicking and understanding the significance of practices in particular locations for a person’s learning. That is, whereas with ethnographies, the differences between individuals tends to disappear, or at least be backgrounded, so with life histories, the significance of particular situations and their learning cultures (ref) tend to disappear or be backgrounded.

What this means is that there is a likely disjuncture between understanding learning as participation and a life history approach. Rather, there is an affinity between life history and conceptualising learning as a form of construction or as *formation*, in Dominice’s sense. This is because the construction metaphor centres upon the ways in which people make sense of any learning experiences they have – the ways in which they construct their own versions of what is being learned, and/or construct themselves, through that learning. Furthermore, life histories are themselves constructed from the subjective perceptions of the subjects, as revealed in the ways they tell stories about their lives and learning. As a direct consequence, the method is very good as revealing ways in which people learn through the process of narrative construction, and through reflection upon their own narrative accounts of their lives. It is no coincidence that Alheit’s work on biographicity (see also Biesta and Tedder’s paper in this conference) and Dominice’s (2000) use of research to promote self learning, both come about of and adopt life history methods.

Much of the early constructivist literature on learning was inherently cognitive, but this does not have to be the case. More recently, there has been a revival of interest in
construction from a more explicitly Deweyan perspective (Hager, 2005). Learning is then seen as a form of embodied practice, or embodied judgment making, and life history can be very effective in bringing out the practical, physical and emotional dimensions of learning that are often omitted in more cognitive accounts.

Hodkinson has argued elsewhere (Hodkinson, Biesta and James, forthcoming) that the view of learning as embodied construction and that of learning as taking place through participation in learning cultures are mutually complementary, and that they can and should be combined. Whether this argument is accepted or not, and that lies beyond the scope of this paper, we would contend that both ethnography and life history entail strong affinities with particular, but different understandings of learning: participation on the one hand, and construction on the other. We now turn to our third example.

**Quantitative Panel survey analysis and learning as acquisition**

Alongside this life history work, Macleod has been analysing existing longitudinal panel survey data. This shares with life history a focus on longitudinal data collected from individuals, rather than a focus on locations where learning takes place. The main purpose of a social survey is to produce quantitative numerical descriptions (statistics) about some aspects of the population that has been surveyed in order to develop and test theory. Survey research uses a methodology that is set firmly within the ambit and rules of science of which measurement of concepts is a fundamental part. Thus in a project that sets out to gain a deeper understanding of learning in the life course using panel survey data, it is necessary to begin from a point where learning is theorised, conceptualised, operationalised and thus made measurable. Inevitably this involves a process of reification whereby statistics (in this case numerical descriptors of learning) become measures of a conceptualisation of learning that purports to have an objective reality. That is ‘an existence as real’ to the extent that science is about providing ‘true’ descriptions of a real world or, at the very least, descriptions that appear to work in practice.

Learning, in common with other complex concepts, has potentially a whole range of directly observable characteristics, which are taken to be indicative of single underlying hypothetical (or ‘latent’) variable. In other words, although learning does not have a clear physical or reified identity in the world, it can be argued that at least some of its characteristics can be observed directly and quantified. For example, the number of times an individual participates in formal learning events or the time spent in formal education or training. Also the ‘static’ products of learning such as qualifications obtained can be said to be straightforward manifestations of learning that can be counted or measured. These are the ‘factual’ material or manifestations of learning which may safely be collected by direct questioning. However, these directly observable characteristics of learning are all indicative of seeing learning as acquisition.

In some versions of learning as acquisition, these are not serious problems. But learning, when it is conceptualised as participation or formation, can neither be observed directly nor quantified very easily as the emphasis is on subjective processes rather than objective
products. The social science solution is to design items (questions) on a survey instrument (questionnaire) that purport or, at the very least, appear to be valid measures of the phenomenon in question. This is a very difficult problem, not because surveying subjective phenomena is not possible, but because the more complex the phenomenon the more difficult it is to find measures of demonstrable validity.

Both informal learning practices and learning as participation in the workplace have both been surveyed before, the former by Livingstone (2000) and the latter by Felstead, et al (2004). However, the particular problem Macleod faced was to find good operationalisations of non-formal or informal learning using an existing dataset. If her starting point had been to collect her own data then it would be reasonable to argue that she could have designed a ‘fit for purpose’ survey instrument from scratch. This would have been possible at least in the sense that any phenomenon that is definable can be operationalised and thus can be measured using a survey instrument. Of course, had she done so, the question of how good her operationalisations of learning were would still have been an issue as indirect measures are always only indicators or proxies of concepts that have no physical presence in the world. For example, in our panel dataset there are eight items (questions) that could be proxy measures of the latent variable ‘social networks’ the strength of which could, in turn, be taken to be an indicator of one dimension of informal learning. The problem is that the sorts of social networks that are more conducive to self development and self transformation are unevenly distributed across social groups. Thus finding good measures of learning for population sub groups, a more nuanced and subtle approach involving the validation of subjective questions and testing their applicability to subgroups is necessary before their power as measures can be demonstrated. But all this takes time and effort which begs the question of whether breaking learning down into its constituent dimensions and relentless pursuing proxy indicators for each of these is the best use of time. This is especially the case when one considers the aims of the Learning Lives project and the potential of playing to the strengths of panel data (as opposed to its weaknesses) to achieve these.

Whereas life history work centres individual lives, the strengths of panel data lies in seeing people as members of groups or clusters rather than individuals. The research focus is on teasing out large-scale patterns and trends over time rather than on stories of individual lives. As such, survey datasets deal better with the sort of information about people that enables them to be described as members of population (sub)groups, or be compared with other groups. But for group descriptions and comparisons to be authoritative (credible) it is necessary to have consistency and precision of the measures across respondents. Differences between survey respondents must be based on differences in their views and experiences rather than anything else. This means not only having valid and reliable measures, it also means having standardisation are every level so that the data can be relied upon. Survey questions, for example, must be designed in such a way that they mean the same thing to all respondents otherwise comparisons are invalid. Answering questions should be possible and easy for all respondents. The words of the interview schedule needs to be an adequate script that all interviewers can follow in a standardised way so that they avoid misreading or misdirecting the interviewee. Thus, unlike the life history interview, the survey interview schedule is deliberately made
generic and not tailored or customised to the individual interviewee and, as such, is not conducive to eliciting the nuances and subtleties found in participatory and formation accounts of learning.

From a participatory or formation perspective learning does not come about as a result of causal relations among variables in the traditional sense. Instead, learning reflects a process that is largely responsive to broader social and cultural conditions and/or norms. This means that a focus on causal relations, in the traditional counterfactual sense, may hide the life long learning as formation, or biography, or narrative, shifting inquiry away from the whole towards its constituent parts as though these were independent processes. Learning, conceptualised as participation or formation, can involve the rational calculation and assessment of current situations or circumstances. It can involve projection into the future that serves to orientate present activities. It may involve the effects of past on the future but also the anticipated future on the present. These ‘reverse causations’ (Marini and Singer, 1984) means that trying to unravel causes and effects of life long learning may do little to deepen understandings of learning across the life course. It also means that an examination of lifelong learning using participatory and formation conceptualisations is not well accommodated with statistical models which require the researcher to clearly delineate independent and dependent variables, exogenous and endogenous variables, causes and effects. It would thus seem that traditional statistical techniques have few tools at their disposal to examine learning that involves a view of relationalism found within participatory and formation accounts.

**Consequences and implications**

The core argument of this paper is that different research methodologies have fairly strong affinities with particular conceptualisations of learning. That is, the strengths and weaknesses of ethnographies are closely related to participatory views of learning; the strengths and weaknesses of life history are closely relate to views of learning as construction, and those of large scale survey research are closely related to views of learning as acquisition. If this argument is accepted, then, at least in relation to learning, it decentres some very common assumptions about research. Put bluntly, it means that choice of a particular research methodology is likely to skew the research into understanding learning in particular ways. No methodology can act as a conceptually neutral lens, transparently revealing what learning is. That is, in relation to decisions about how learning should be conceptualised, research methods are all biased.

The consequences of this bold claim are significant in some ways, but less so in others. If a researcher has already decided, for whatever reasons, to adopt a particular view of learning, and therefore asks research questions deriving from that conceptual position, it is natural and sensible to adopt a methodology that can answer those questions, and is

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1 We are using this term to mean ‘mental tendency or inclination’ towards a particular view of learning, but NOT ‘irrational preference or prejudice’ (quotes from Collins Concise Dictionary, 1985).

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sympathetic to the understanding of learning being adopted. This is what happened in the TLC project, as we had already identified the list of influences we wanted to investigate, before the research was done. In Learning Lives we had not as a team thought through our stance on learning, but our explicit focus on agency and identity influenced our research questions, and were arguably already pushing us towards various conceptions of learning as construction, of biographicity, and learning as becoming, and it was these interests that also pushed us into choosing a life history approach.

However, the affinities of different research methodologies with different conceptualisations of learning influence research, but are not deterministic. It is quite possible to hold a view of learning that is at odds with the selected methodology, but to do so requires both considerable effort, and a clear awareness of the limitations of the methods being used. The TLC ethnography did not prevent the team from conceptualising learning in ways that went far beyond most participatory approaches, by theoretically blending what we termed participation in learning cultures, with a cultural theory of learning that owes much to Deweyan construction (Hodkinson, Biesta and James, forthcoming). Similarly, in Learning Lives, the panel survey work is striving to go beyond an acquisitional understanding of learning.

Of greater significance is the fact that, if we are right in our analysis, empirical research alone cannot adjudicate between different understandings of learning. It can and does produce evidence that may support one version of learning and undermine another, but it always does so from a non-neutral position. Two things follow from this. Firstly, arguments about preferences for one view of learning as opposed to others, or between those who strive for a unified understanding of learning as against those (Hager, 2005) who argue that there are different types of learning or that we need pluralistic ways of understanding learning (Sfard, 1998) are essentially conceptual and philosophical arguments, where empirical evidence plays an important but supportive role. This means that researchers into learning need to engage not only with the implications of the strengths and weaknesses of the methodologies they adopt, but also with the on-going debates about how learning can and should be conceptualised.

Our final point is a practical one. In the learning Lives project we are struggling to integrate three methodologies: life history, longitudinal qualitative research conducted in real time, and the panel survey. The first two blend together fairly easily, apart from some tensions about interview approaches, which do not need discussion here. This relatively easy fit is because both methods share the same affinity with understanding research as construction. However, it is proving much more difficult to ingrate the panel survey findings with those from the qualitative research. This is partly because the affinities of these methodologies with different conceptualisations of learning means that integration is not simply a matter of blending empirical data. Similar problems would occur if we were trying to combine life histories with ethnographies of particular learning locations.

This difficulty points to the limitations of one obvious solution to the problems identified here. At least in the UK, there is a strong movement favouring mixed method research –
a movement of which the Learning Lives project is a part. The assumption is that because all research methods have different strengths and limitations, we are more likely to discover a triangulated truth by using more than one. There is a very powerful appeal in that argument, in relation to learning. Perhaps we need to use mixed methods, in order to overcome the inherent biases towards different ways of understanding learning in different methodologies. To a point, we would agree with this. The contrasts between the qualitative and quantitative parts of Learning Lives have sharpened our awareness of and thinking about these issues of methodological bias, in ways that might not have happened had both approaches not been used. Because of the overall concern with the relationships between learning, identity and agency, leading to progressive adoption of a view of learning as construction or becoming, the panel survey research team have been working hard, within the limits of the methodology, to find ways to use the survey data to further illuminate these issues. However, the difficulties we are facing are large, and out solutions are likely to be partial. The use of mixed methods, including mixing different qualitative methods, cannot, of itself, solve the difficult issues around the blending of different conceptions of learning. At root, the problem is philosophical, not empirical.

All researchers, including life historians, need to remain fully aware of the orientations towards learning that are implicit in any chosen methodology. Furthermore, these differing conceptual orientations mean that mixing methods, at least in relation to learning, is not just a technical problem, but also a conceptual and theoretical process, which can be much more difficult than most methodology texts recognise.

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