Auto/biography, learning and education: the critical and reflexive imperative

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Paper presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008
University of Edinburgh

But all we can confess of what we are
Has in it the defeat of isolation-
If not our own, then someone’s, anyway. (Adrienne Rich, 1975, pp.10)

Introduction

This paper has arisen from conversations between us, over many years, about the nature and purposes of adult education, and, more recently, the potentially deleterious effects of the currently dominant discourses shaping lifelong learning. Our dialogue found a specific focus in working on a new Masters programme, designed to create some transitional space for professionals working in what is termed the ‘lifelong learning sector’ in the United Kingdom. Our intention was to encourage participants to question and interrogate those dominant discourses, and their own practices, at a time when the curriculum, in the context of adult learning, seems to have become pervasively instrumentalised. We want, in this paper, to share some of our dialogue and its auto/biographical roots – using auto/biography, in the sense understood by Liz Stanley (1992) and Nod Miller (2007) – to denote a process in which we use others’ stories to make sense of our own, and our own to make sense of the other. Our focus, both in this paper and for the programme, is on the purpose, spirit and forms of adult learning. Our intention is to encourage diverse ways of knowing, to strengthen the critical imperative and, perhaps, to allow space for living with doubt and uncertainty; ‘the coming face to face, again and again, with our ignorance; with our not knowing’ (Brew, in Fraser, 1995, pp.60)

Some of our recent conversations revolved around whether to use the term ‘lifelong learning’ or ‘lifelong education’ in the title of the Masters course. Using the former risks, as many commentators have observed, signifying an overly economistic and instrumental agenda – around fitting people into an increasingly fragile, anxiety ridden world of conspicuous consumption - rather than critically interrogating its assumptions and presumptions (Field, 2000). Lifelong learning can also be a synonym for worklong learning and the perpetual and frenetic updating of knowledge and skills. Its preoccupations are with individuals’ capacity to adjust, (under the impact of globalisation, technological and scientific innovation) to a constantly changing work environment. Thus, adaptability rather than criticality is the order of the day as people are encouraged to constantly reinvent themselves as marketable products. The pressure for perpetual reinvention is partly a consequence of deregulation and flexibility in the labour market, but also reflects an associated rise of more unanticipated and risk-laden transitions across the life course. This, in turn, has emphasised the importance of learning and reflexivity in re-composing bio-narratives in response to this more individualistic, uncertain, ‘liquid’ and runaway world (Giddens, 1999; Bauman, 2000; Alheit and Dausein, 2007). In part, such processes have been fuelled, over three decades and more, by the politics of identity in which increasing numbers of people have been reluctant to accept inherited local and familial templates and have sought, under the influence of feminism, for instance, to build lives on more of their own terms. Thus, lifelong learning can have a critical and questioning edge, as people
focus on their learning – lifewide as well as lifelong – as a basis for questioning their own practices and encouraging a critical spirit in others (West, 2001; 2007). There can, therefore, be a broader, more humanistic imperative at work.

Yet it is the neo-liberal imperative of adapt and survive, or perish, that has become pervasive within the lifelong learning discourse, which is why we finally chose ‘lifelong education’ as the title for our programme. But this title, too, is weighted with a particular discursive ballast which also needs interrogating. Lifelong education is a product, in part, of earlier, more liberal approaches to the empowerment and cultural enrichment of people, individually and collectively, across the lifecycle (Field, 2000). Its use, therefore, partially reflects an understandable yearning for those older, more progressive and, perhaps, more certain narratives in the face of our current times. Yet there is a need for caution; nostalgic yearning can cloud our memories of that ‘older world’, where it was often difficult to articulate notions of collective and individual empowerment, of critical and transformative learning, or even to agree what these terms might mean. Such ideas could be deeply masculinist, and Cartesian assumptions about the supremacy of mind, and a corresponding neglect of the body and emotionality, were pervasive. Moreover, the analytic focus tended to be on the public worlds of organised labour and class formation rather than on the private (and public) worlds of gendered relationships. Thus, the disciplinary orientation, whilst progressive in intention, was often overly sociological and structuralist in ways that neglected the complicated ‘psychosociology’ of human agency and processes of learning and meaning-making (Steedman, 1986; West, 1996). There could be neglect, too, of the spiritual in heavily materialist readings of history, despite adult education, historically, being rooted in a progressive, non-conformist ethos (Goldman, 1995).

Auto/biographies

We want, at this stage, to connect such arguments with our own biographies, as a way of setting our thoughts in context, and of deepening what we wish to articulate. C. Wright Mills famously observed that biography:

> enables us to understand the larger historical scene in terms of the meaning for the inner life. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self and to see the relations between the two (C. Wright Mills, 1970, pp.12).

We consider, like Mills, that attending to biographies takes us far beyond individualistic or narcissistic preoccupations, to thinking about how macro-level processes play out in our lives and, therefore, of how agency can be nurtured in new and more meaningful ways. More prosaically, we consider an awareness of our own learning biographies to be important in thinking about educational programmes for others (Dominicé, 2000).

Wilma’s biography includes twenty years in the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA), in various roles including managing and delivering liberal and community education courses across the South East of England. She served on the National Women’s Education Committee (Fraser, Scarlett and Winner, 2007) for a number of years, and ran a national Women and Health programme; her work reflecting her choice of epistemological and political discourses, including feminism, which were then available to her. Her move to higher education in 2004 signalled a shift in both perspective and affiliation; a shift comparable to that which has been helpfully articulated by Jean Barr (1999, pp.15-16).

> Briefly, I have moved from a belief - however implicit - in the potentially transformative power of adult education…to a belief in a much more
modest project, namely in terms of (its) contribution to what Susan Bordo depicts as 'the messy, slippery, practical struggle' to 'create institutions and communities that will not permit some groups of people to make determinations about reality for all' (Bordo, 1990, pp.142)

Wilma is now working on a PhD which is about the messy, practical as well as conceptual struggles to articulate the purposes of adult education and lifelong learning, through making more sense of her own epistemological, political and experiential biography. Her concern to find an authentic, authorial voice in an academic context – itself problematic given the contested nature of such a space – is a search for greater agency and authenticity in learning. She seeks to combine personal, political, and critical analysis, alongside reflexivity, for her own development and, hopefully, that of her students. Mining the auto/biographic has led her to an esteemed relative - the Gaelic poet, Sorley Maclean - of whom she has written (Fraser, 2007):

One of Maclean's greatest achievements, and gift to Gaeldom, was his ability to universalise from the local; his community, his culture, was his well-spring; but it fed and informed his responses to the horrors and madnesses of the twentieth century.

Maclean represents, for Wilma, but one ‘frame of knowing’ - what she terms the ‘genea/mythic’. In terms borrowed from Seamus Heaney, when talking of Maclean, Wilma’s thinking now encompasses a ‘spiritual geology’ alongside an ‘emotional geography…(both) at once part of her personal apparatus of feeling’ (Heaney, in Ross and Hendry, 1986 pp.4, 215) in connecting a raced, classed and gendered identity with struggles for meaning and critical voice. She refers, in her writing, to a range of significant others when thinking about adult education, the cultural imagination and auto/biography; each playing their part in helping to articulate different kinds of epistemologies of which the genea/mythic is only one. There can, in such a project, be no simplistic nostalgia for an older world of adult education per se. For Wilma’s work is also about the potential for unknowing, and for the ability to live, as the poet Keats urged, in negative capability, that is when a man (sic) is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. (i)

Linden has worked in adult education since 1969, for universities, local education authorities, for the Workers’ Educational Association: as a teacher, administrator and researcher. He has written at length about living in doubt and uncertainty as well as of experiences of difficult change. This has included rejecting those aspects of adult education neglectful of inner life and experience. Linden’s work on families has identified a need for new kinds of psychosocial and biographically informed understandings, which straddle the space between outer and inner worlds. But if these must recognise that claiming space requires psychological understanding of becoming a person, or building agency, such processes do not take place exclusively ‘inside’ peoples’ heads but depend on communication and interaction with others, and in relation to social contexts and competing ideologies. He urges us to be mindful of the fragile but also potentially resilient humanity we share and acknowledge our common need for love, care and social solidarities, alongside democratic experience. We are all enmeshed in relationships, structures and language, which encourage or stifle that humanity (West, 2007). Adult education was historically rooted in some aspects of this yet could neglect interiority (dismissed as epiphenomenal), and be suspicious of biographies as a kind of self-indulgent escape into ‘fine, meaningless detail’ (Fieldhouse, 1996). There may also have been, in its masculinist guises, a searching for certainties, and a suppression of doubts, that has bedevilled many radical projects.
Developing the masters programme

Our debate, therefore, about whether to use ‘lifelong education’ or ‘lifelong learning’ has to be understood through these biographical frames, and through the interplay of macro and micro level processes, and struggles, in our lives. Our biographies, and conversations about them, shape our thoughts about how to build a critical and questioning spirit in the programme. This includes playing with notions of ‘really useful knowledge’ as a sort of antidote to dominant trends, where space might be found to engender critical intelligence and reflexivity as a means of interrogating individual, collective and professional identities. And, as suggested, we saw a key place for auto/biographical work, in which to consider more intimate and personal experience. We wanted to create an alternative collective, questioning and supportive culture that was safe enough for people to interrogate their lived experience, in all its dimensions, as a basis for talking back to power, and for exploring uncertainty and doubt.

There were to be four compulsory modules: ‘culture, policies, meanings and values’, ‘critical pedagogy’, ‘naming literacies’ and ‘lifelong learning and auto/biographical perspectives’. Thus, the MA was conceived, partly, as a medium for the revivification, exploration and dissemination of some key conceptual tenets and approaches which comprise the ‘field’ or ‘moorland’ of adult educational theory and practice (e.g. Usher et al., 1997, pp.1). Time and space were needed to explore and interrogate the links and ruptures between personal and academic lives – for both staff and students - during a time of increasing de-professionalisation and the concomitant conformity of regimes of measurability and accountability. In short, we wished to argue the case, and explore the place, for a more holistic, yet critical spirit that sought to connect private concerns with the need for new forms of collective and dialogical enquiry.

At the end of the first module, one student wrote:

As a teacher, and as a community education manager, I saw myself as a midwife, an enabler and a progressive. In my current role I attempt to carry these roles with me. However, in order to do so I have to be something of a guerrilla, but find myself a gatekeeper, expected to herd the students through the gate required by the local economy, whether or not it is right for them. Therefore my ethical self is called into question. The question then must be, can the projects I have set up create the borderlands? Will I be able to find new possibilities for identity within this work and will I be able to find ways to speak from the margins? I wish I could be more optimistic, but I believe that my ‘success’ will depend on finding others with similar motivations to work with me. They do exist, but they are beleaguered by the demands of their teaching and by their struggle with inadequate resources, and therefore have little time and little space to think. With ‘tribes’ dispersed, and practitioners disillusioned and de-motivated, who will act alongside me as the guerrillas and organic intellectuals? (Cormack, 2008)

This eloquent plea constituted the conclusion to a paper by a student, Denise, at the end of the first module. Denise’s plea could be replicated across the terrain; she concluded her introduction with the following:

Finally, I will address the ways in which this discourse and policy focus frame my own professional life and subjectivity, limiting possibilities and making my role either an ethical compromise or a site of struggle (ibid).
That was our dilemma too; of having to face our own ‘ethical compromises’ in working in a university. If adult education has been a contested space, higher education is no less so. What characterises current discursive practices and the zeitgeist of lifelong learning, in its colonising tendencies, is, to borrow from Abbs, framed in a language of deathly grey wash ‘derived from mechanics …and military manoeuvres’ (1979, pp.11). Our programmes are set within institutions caught up in the pursuit of ‘efficiency’; and words like ‘empowerment’, ‘choice’ and ‘freedom’ might add spice to the menu, but the meal does not sustain, there is no real nourishment there. As Denise, again, remarked in an email exchange with Wilma:

Just wanted to say that this course is really helping me to ‘see things’ again. I think I’d dived into the ‘passion for ignorance’ and the ‘consume therefore I am’ position. (April 18th 08)

Our challenge as tutors is two-fold; to sustain the possibility of this ocular space whilst also recognising, acknowledging and engaging with Denise’s plea to ‘find new possibilities for identity within this work and …find ways to speak from the margins’ (ibid). The fourth module, ‘lifelong learning and auto/biographical perspectives’ was composed with this challenge in mind.

Linden’s use of auto/biography in research and teaching is well known (West, 1996; 2001; 2007; Hunt and West, 2006; Merrill and West, 2008; forthcoming). He brings, as a practising psychotherapist, an added dimension to struggles to compose and elicit meanings and agency across personal and professional lifeworlds. The exploration and interrogation of auto/biographical perspectives offer a crucially insightful means of challenging the banking concept of learning and celebrating human agency. There have been criticisms, primarily of ‘the danger of neglecting how we are ‘storied’ as well as storytellers in learning lives’ (Merrill and West, forthcoming), but the spaces proffered by this approach can encourage deeper understanding of the nexus of factors, elements and characteristics which comprise our professional and personal selves.

Marie, another student on the programme, provides a case in point. She works as a language tutor and reflects upon how life events have had a strong effect on her attitude to language teaching, and upon what she perceives to be the pervasive instrumentalist discourse. She uses, in an assignment born out of collaborative work in the group, building on oral accounts, some psychosocial understanding of how language speaking operates at a very primitive level. For Marie, this connected with her mother and her need, too, to speak in another language, in a foreign culture. Marie’s compulsion to learn languages has been compounded by the extent to which this can liberate but also evoke deep existential anxiety. This highly personal struggle is translated into the public spaces she inhabits as a teacher. She writes of;

[how] language displays mechanical metaphors…with terms such as feedback, input, or strategic orientation….from the ideological perspective lifelong learning is under the rule of a managerial form of education, using business related images and describing students as customers. (Watson de Freminville, 2008)

Marie speaks of how she is ‘confronted again by the necessity to convey messages using discourse that is alien to me’. This reductive way of dealing with language learning provision has dramatic consequences for the actual delivery of classes where personal voices can be drowned. Marie prefers to think of language learning as storytelling; exchanging thoughts, ideas through the vehicle of narrative. But the pressure of
completing tasks for accreditation closes such narrative potential. She proceeds to reflect on her tutor training, and on how the compulsory learning journal was framed by prescriptive agendas, including a discourse of learning styles, which she felt was simplistic and crass; ‘today my lesson referred to the cognitive domain of learning…’ What hope for the spirit of learning in such a reductive framework? Maria concluded her assignment by reference to the fact that the auto/biographical approach helped her to assemble different pieces of her story, and to name and accommodate those uncertainties engendered by language’s ability to both empower and domesticate.

Conclusion

Implicit in our exploration has been a concern about a paradoxical totalising tendency, within postmodernism and post-structuralism, to relativise knowledge construction to the point of reducing opportunities for meaning-making by emptying spaces and places in which to contemplate the ‘unsayable’. As well as ‘speaking back’ to reductive discursive practices, we want to rescue the potential for the transcendent in our professional and personal lives; to allow that kind of negative capability which Peter Abbs has framed so urgently;

Not-knowing is often, paradoxically a positive opening, a clearing of the mind, and a creative pre-condition for finding out, for the beginning of wisdom... It has the power to question any conviction. It is the enemy of fanaticism, of fashion and of all forms of general linguistic fraudulence (2003, pp.73).

With grateful thanks to both colleagues and students on the MA in Lifelong Education and Professional Practice at Canterbury Christ Church University, UK, 2006-8

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(i) The notion of negative capability was introduced by Keats in a letter to his brothers, 21st December 1817.


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