What does it take to learn from one’s life? Exploring opportunities for biographical learning in the lifecourse

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Introduction
In this paper we are interested in a particular aspect of learning from life, namely, the way in which ‘life’ can be(come) an object of learning so that we can explore the ways in which people learn from their lives, and also the significance of such learning processes. If lifelong learning is to be more than the acquisition of qualifications through participation in formal education; if, in other words, an important aspect of lifelong learning has to do with the ways in which people learn from their lives and, through this, learn for their lives, then we must ask what opportunities people have to engage in processes of ‘biographical learning’. We must ask how opportunities for biographical learning and access to such opportunities are structured at different ages and stages in our lives.

We begin the paper with a brief overview of literature on biographical learning, focusing on contributions made by Alheit and Dausien. In the next section we focus on Russell Jackson, a participant in the Learning Lives project (for more information on the project see www.learninglives.org). We introduce Russell through an account of his career constructed from the transcripts of seven biographical interviews between November 2004 and December 2006. We then interrogate the account with the help of the following five questions:

1. What has Russell learned from his life?
2. How has he learned?
3. When did he learn?
4. What has been the role of narrative in his learning?
5. What has been the significance of this learning?

The questions are used heuristically in order to explore connections between Russell’s learning and changes and transitions in his life. In the final section of the paper we draw some tentative conclusions and argue that biographical and life history methods are crucial for understanding learning through the lifecourse.

What ‘is’ biographical learning?
Over the past three decades the field of research in adult education has witnessed a strong rise in the use of biographical and life history approaches (see, e.g., Alheit et al., 1995; Alheit and Hoerning 1989; Bron and West 2000; Coare and Thomson, 1996; Dominicé 2000; Erben 1998; Goodson 2001; Hoar et al., 1994; West et al., 2007). The “turn to biographical methods” (Bron et al., 2005, p.12) can be understood in part as reflecting contemporary interest in working with biography as a way of constructing ‘meaning and authenticity’ from people’s experiences of a rapidly changing modern world. It is also a means of articulating the stories of people who can be marginalized in traditional forms of research yet whose stories may enable us to develop a more nuanced understanding of learning and educational processes. The ‘biographical turn’ engages with a broad conception of learning, one which

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1 We are aware that Alheit and Dausien are not the only ones who have written on biographical learning. For the purpose of this paper, however, we confine ourselves to their contribution.
does not restrict the meaning of learning to institutional definitions, but which includes the cognitive and reflexive dimensions of learning as much as the emotional, embodied, pre-reflexive and non-cognitive aspects of everyday learning processes and practices.

A feature of the rise of biographical and life history approaches is an interest in biographical learning (e.g., Alheit 1995; Alheit and Dausien 2002; Dominicé 2000; Biesta and Tedder 2007) which encompasses an interest in both the influence of biography on learning processes and practices, and an interest in biography as itself “a field of learning” (Alheit 1995, p. 59). Alheit and Dausien define biographical learning as “a self-willed, ‘autopoietic’ accomplishment on the part of active subjects, in which they reflexively ‘organise’ their experience in such a way that they also generate personal coherence, identity, a meaning to their life history and a communicable, socially viable lifeworld perspective for guiding their actions” (Alheit & Dausien 2002, p.17). They argue that lifelong and lifewide learning are “tied at all times to the contexts of a specific biography” (ibid., p.15), which implies that “(w)ithout biography there can be no learning, without learning, no biography” (ibid.).

Alheit and Dausien highlight three aspects of biographical learning: the implicit dimension, the social dimension and the ‘self-willed’ dimension (see ibid., p.15-16). They note how learning that is implicit and tacit “form a person’s biographical stock of knowledge” (ibid., p.15; emphasis in original) and that we can retrieve such learning “when we find ourselves stumbling or at crossroads” (ibid.). They emphasise that reflexive learning processes do not exclusively take place ‘inside’ the individual “but depend on communication and interaction with others” (see ibid., p.16). Alheit and Dausien argue that learning within and through one’s life history is interactive and socially structured, on the one hand, but also follows its own ‘individual logic’ generated by the specific, biographically layered structure of experience. However, it remains possible to encounter “unexpected experiences and surprising transformations that in many cases are not foreseen by the ‘learner’ himself, or are not ‘understood’ until after the event” (ibid., p.16).

Alheit (1995) links biographical learning to emancipatory adult education. The main task of such education, he argues, is that of ‘biographical coaching’ (ibid., p.68), which involves “the joint discovery by teacher and learner of biographical opportunities for shaping social, occupational and political existence more autonomously” (ibid.). Coaching also means “exerting a particular influence on the ‘social ecology’ of learning – i.e., in practical terms, the framework of social conditions – in order that individuals’ hidden possibilities are brought to the surface and developed, and that ‘unlived’ lives can be lived instead.” (ibid.) He highlights that the ‘basic structure’ of such educational processes is narrative (ibid., p.69). He also points at the importance of communication, since it is communication with others which “triggers ... a new dimension of self-referentiality” (ibid.).

From this Alheit and Dausien conclude that “(i)f the biographical organisation of learning processes is to be given practical educational (and institutional) support, then spaces for reflection and communication, as well as interaction with ‘spaces of opportunity’ are at least as important as developing ‘instruments for individual self-management’” (Alheit and Dausien 2002, p.16). The implication of this observation for empirical research is that, if we seek to understand the significance of biographical learning in people’s lives, we need to inquire about the ‘spaces of opportunity’ they have accessed and about their ‘spaces for reflection and communication’ and their ‘instruments for individual self-management’. We need to be sensitive to their uses of narrative within educational processes. We need also to
Russell Jackson: A career narrative

When Russell was first interviewed in November 2004 he held a fixed term contract as an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Development Tutor working for a county council adult education service in a rural area of the UK. His job comprised taking a set of laptop computers to different locations in order to provide tuition in ICT skills for people in so-called ‘hard to reach’ groups. The first interview took place at a Job Centre after he had concluded a session with a small group of unemployed people. The second and subsequent interviews took place at his home, a substantial detached bungalow that bears witness to Russell’s building and woodworking craft skills with many examples of his handiwork inside and outside the building.

Russell is a man who deploys and values practical skills but our interviews elicited a complex and at times surprising set of stories through which that quality evolved. From our interview data we have constructed a narrative about Russell’s career in three stages: the first stage lasted nearly twenty years when he worked as an engineer in mining and quarrying; the second stage began with a conversion experience after which Russell studied to become a priest and spent nearly a decade working in the church; the third stage is Russell’s most recent employment in adult education. The period covered by the interviews was one of continuing uncertainty and change: Russell was employed in a job that he enjoyed and found meaningful but he would have much preferred to be continuing his vocation as a priest.

Russell was born in 1951, the sixth of seven children in a working-class family living in a small town in the south west of England. Russell passed the eleven plus examination and went to the local grammar school but his experience there was not a happy one and Russell described being a victim of bullying which he attributed to his being small in stature, being rebellious and coming from a working class background in a predominantly middle class institution. When he was asked to leave school at the age of 16, Russell followed his father’s advice and applied for an apprenticeship at a local engineering company where he immediately felt more comfortable:

I walked through the green doors of the apprentice school and was hit by the noise and the smell and the sheer engineeringness of that place and I changed direction [laughs] like on the spot. (Interview 1, Nov 2004)

This transition was important: not only did it mark the start of his employment career but in a subsequent interview Russell recalled that his first autonomous decision was the way he ignored his father’s advice to apply for a craft apprenticeship (there were over 70 available places) and instead applied – successfully - for a technician apprenticeship (for which there were only six places).

Russell served his time as an apprentice and achieved a full technological certificate from his local college after five years in 1972. He worked as an engineer for the same company for a further six years during which time he married and became father of two children. However, he could see few prospects for career advancement and applied for a job in Scotland where he stayed for two years and then moved to the Midlands where he worked for a succession of
engineering companies. His career advanced following a trajectory in which he steadily increased his managerial responsibilities.

In the mid-1980s came the event that would lead to a major disruption in Russell’s life, what he described in the interviews as a conversion experience. Although he swore, ‘I was damned if I was going to get religion, you know,’ (Interview 1, Nov 2004) he was able to describe eloquently the occasion when he underwent an epiphany:

> In the garage doing the woodturning and … You reflect there quietly, you’re at ease with yourself. You’ve got a whole pile of things to - you got to sort out. … I’m now turning away happily and minding my own business and I stop the lathe and I’m turning the big pine bowl … I’m surrounded with chippings … It’s in the evening and I’ve got the light on in the garage shining on this bowl, and I just have an overwhelming sense of a presence with me really. It’s really difficult to be, to describe this in rational terms. It’s as real to me now as it’s always been … I had a sense of the real presence of God (Interview 1, Nov 2004)

Not only did Russell feel called to become a Christian but also a vocation to become a priest in the Church of England. He undertook a two year full-time course of study at a theological college. After ordination Russell was appointed to a curacy back in the south west of England and this was followed by a decade of working as a priest, not only in parishes but also in a diocesan role that involved training others to support children and young people.

In retrospect, Russell judged that he overworked and that his relationship with his wife suffered as a consequence. They undertook marriage guidance but he had started a relationship with another woman before he divorced his wife. A scandal ensued that ended with Russell’s resignation as a priest and thus the end of the second stage of his career. A further career transition occurred, in that Russell still needed to earn a living but had to adjust to the loss of the role that was central to his identity, his vocation to the ministry. He needed to adjust to changed domestic circumstances when he married his second wife and gained two step children. Acting on the suggestion of a friend, he secured a fixed term contract with the adult education service to teach the computing skills he had learned during his engineering life and ventured onto the third stage.

Russell became a participant in the Learning Lives project after three years of involvement in the adult education service. Our interviews traced his changing perspective on teaching as a professional practice alongside his changing relationship with the church during the latest phase of his career.

In the second interview (December 2004), Russell said he had no inclination to return to engineering but had hoped that, at some point it would be possible to return to parish work. However, he had received an official letter stating that such a return would not be possible in the same diocese. Russell indicated a change in his attitude to being an adult education teacher, that his role as an ICT development tutor was becoming less peripheral to his life:

> where teaching has been until very recently a stopgap measure … I’m in the process of really coming to terms with the fact, and not quite as reluctantly as I might have supposed, that, really the teaching is my career. (Interview 2, Dec 2004)
In the third interview, five months later, Russell’s professional refocusing as a teacher of adult learners was evident when he elaborated on the ideas and values that informed his practice. He spoke of the challenge of teaching new courses and of teaching in new locations. He spoke of the growing confidence that he had in his work and of the working relationships he had established. However, he was sanguine about the prospects for the service, fearing that, in the present funding regime: ‘Adult Ed I think, will just wither on the vine’ (Interview 3, May 2005).

At the start of the next academic year, in September 2005, the fourth interview found Russell still wrestling with the call of the ministry and striving to reconcile it with his occupation as an adult education tutor. In essence, Russell thought he should ‘make the most of it’ (Interview 4, September 2005). He asserted that he loved teaching and recognised that the role had been a central part of his ministry as a parish priest. He expressed some resentment of what he saw as ‘callous and indifferent’ treatment from an institution – the church - that uses the language of compassion and forgiveness but, he felt, did not show those qualities to him.

The fifth interview at the end of 2005 revealed that Russell had stopped attending his local church. As his hopes for a return to the ministry faded, so Russell described as ‘becoming ambitious within the context I find myself in’ (Interview 5, December 2005). He was articulate about the professional autonomy in teaching that he saw being eroded by government bureaucracy and a regime of inspection. However, he also perceived a lack of challenge in his teaching. Russell was becoming dissatisfied with holding simply a teaching role in adult education and said he was interested in strategic issues and wanted ‘to make a difference’.

The sixth interview took place in July 2006, shortly after Russell had been interviewed for two Assistant Principal vacancies that had emerged as part of the re-organisation of adult education. It seems he had been a serious contender for both positions but others had been appointed; Russell was demoralised and disillusioned. The end of his ICT contract was drawing closer and he found himself in a shrinking organisation with a new line manager. His response was to meet with senior managers to secure a clearer idea of his prospects within the organisation and to ensure they were aware of his continuing commitment.

At the final interview in December 2006, it emerged that one of the two individuals appointed to Assistant Principal posts the previous summer had decided to leave after a few weeks. Russell was approached and had agreed to accept the vacant post. He found his new job a congenial one:

> My first sort of reaction to that is I’m enormously comfortable in this role. It’s like putting on a well-worn coat and just all of a sudden, just go and do the business ... There are some issues that are going to get addressed and we’re going to sort them. (Interview 7, December 2006)

Russell had formally retired from the Church of England but continued to have a sense that he had come closest to what he ‘was intended to be’ in the days when he was a priest and was working on youth matters for the diocese:

> I still find it really hard to talk about um the things that I did as a parish priest and as a children’s adviser…. we ran courses for clergy and young people on
child protection issues, I did a lot of good in that role. … I learned lots of things … so you see, it’s really close to my heart…. It’s been the role um that I felt most truly mine, to what makes me most truly the person that I was intended to be. (Interview 7, December 2006)

Learning from life
In this section we explore aspects of this account of Russell’s life more systematically using five questions. The questions are easily stated though challenging to answer, not least because there are two perspectives: the actor-perspective and the researcher-perspective. We take into consideration not only what Russell says he has learned but also what we, as researchers, might interpret as his learning within the narrative.

(1) What has Russell learned from his life?
Russell himself summarised how his lifetime experiences of working, from the age of sixteen to his late 50s, have been a source of learning from his life that have given him the confidence and self-assurance to adapt to new circumstances. It is possible for us to infer from his stories certain identifiable ‘things’ that he has learned for his life, the knowledge he has acquired that enables him to follow a career, and the values that are revealed in his reflections on significant events within his life. However, such identifiable learning is inseparable from the understanding that Russell has developed over the years about himself, about his character and dispositions, and how that self relates to others in his family, in his workplace and in his social networks. Our career narrative shows how such understanding enables Russell to effect action in his life and to reflect on the outcomes of such action.

Knowledge, skills and competencies
The life stories show how Russell has learned information, skills and competencies within formal education and training that have enabled him to earn a living and pursue a career in different fields. At times the periods of education and training had direct instrumental relevance to his work. Thus his apprenticeship and college qualifications gave Russell entry into a professional career structure as an engineer. His two years at theological college provided entry to a career structure within the church. More recently, Russell has undertaken part-time courses of teacher education that relate to his current occupation. However, having secured entry to these different fields, Russell’s progress within them has depended on other forms of learning. His career trajectory within engineering moved steadily away from engineering towards more managerial responsibilities. His church career included short courses of formal learning but also extensive experience in non-formal settings. In the period covered by our interviews, our longitudinal approach has enabled us to monitor the way Russell’s aspirations in adult education have evolved and refocused. Thus stories of formal education and training with defined or identifiable content merge within the narrative with forms of learning that have significance for the maintenance and development of the self.

Values
The biographical dimension of Russell’s learning is even more evident when we look at the values that frame his approach to life. Russell’s stories reveal that he has a normative and ethical stance from which he can evaluate his experiences. Such values may have come from experiences within formal education though they were not necessarily part of the formal curriculum. In his stories of grammar school life and his comments about bullying, for example, we find some of the origins of Russell’s opposition to injustice. He recognises this school experience as “one of the formative things for me” and asserted that “I will not be
bullied, I will not be intimidated, I will not be forced into anything that I don’t wish to be” (Interview 1, Nov. 2004). In stories of later events, such as dealing with the problems of parishioners when he was a priest, Russell demonstrated a continuing determination to take a stand against perceived injustice.

The scandal occasioned by the loss of his career as a priest appears to have enhanced the empathy that Russell has with people who are disadvantaged or who have experienced disasters:

That is one of the hardest lessons I have ever learned about my own frailty and fallibility, really. I’ve sat the other side of the table on many occasions helping people who have found themselves in difficult situations …. To find myself the other side of that coin, with failure and disgrace and everything around, extraordinarily difficult …. (Interview 1, Nov 2004)

Russell’s stories reveal the sympathies and beliefs that have been learned from his experiences within life and such sympathies and beliefs offer a key to understanding Russell’s sense of what are appropriate actions for his life. They are part of the tacit framework upon which we draw when, as Alheit and Dausien (2002) described it, “we find ourselves stumbling or at crossroads”.

Sense of self
In Russell’s stories there were several events, such as his response to being bullied, or his becoming an engineering apprentice, that had consequences for his sense of self. The most remarkable turning point was the conversion experience which led him to the decision to become a priest. In terms of learning it resulted in the insight that the role of priest was the one that fitted him best, the role that he felt was ‘most truly’ his and which he saw as “most truly the person that [he] was intended to be”. Russell also clearly learned from the events around the end of his career as a priest and in the adoption of his new professional identity as an adult educator. A tentative conclusion here might be that Russell’s accounts of the events that have led to significant learning from his life all seem to be related to his sense of self, to the person he is, the person he wants to be – in terms of his values and normative orientations – and most specifically the person he was intended to be.

(2) How has Russell learned from his life?
The opportunities that Russell has had for learning from experiences within his life are most apparent in two areas: through the periods of formal education and training that he has undertaken and through the relationships he has developed in different workplaces and in his social life. The three stages of Russell’s career were each associated with a period of formal education which enabled him to make a transition to a quite different role with new sets of responsibilities and expectations. Each of those periods of formal education offered immersion in the culture of different communities and practices, and offered opportunities for interaction and communication with others as well as for reflection on his life.

In respect of Russell’s relationships, he has given prominence in the interview stories to colleagues and friends who have been important at different times in his career: the colleague in the diocese with whom he worked on matters affecting children and young people; his adult education line managers; the friend in the education service who suggested that Russell consider teaching adult students.
In the final interview Russell was able to identify a range of experiences and resources from which he draws when confronting problems. In managing such challenges, he spoke of such factors as the training he received in counselling skills in a number of different courses and the importance of his own reading. Such threads have become intertwined with the accumulated experience of being a parish priest. Russell consistently emphasised the importance of reflection in learning from his life and how taking part in the Learning Lives project had required such reflection.

(A)ctually trying to work out what it is that you want to say in a coherent way when you’re being faced with personal and piercing questions then that’s a really useful reflective tool that has been of great value to me. (…) The other thing that’s happened is reading the transcripts and the transcripts have been hugely moving for me on occasion to read. (…) Unless you are asked the question, unless you’re pressed, unless you’re asked to explain that, what is just internal, what is just accepted within yourself as being the way the world is, is not brought out, you know? (Interview 7, December 2006)

This, then, gives an indication of how Russell’s has learned from his life. But it immediately raises important issues for our next question: When has Russell learned from his life?

(3) When has Russell learned from his life?

We have identified three significant transitions in our construction of Russell’s life story and each were key moments for his learning. The first was a transition he shares with most people in our society, the transition from school to work. The other two transitions appear not be structural in the same way but individual and personal. Nevertheless, the significant learning each time depended crucially on the social context in which those transitions played out. The second transition arose from Russell’s conversion experience and was narrated in his story as a personal ‘calling’ - a vocation - to the church. However, Russell had been made redundant not long before from his engineering post, it took place in the early 1980s, a period of decline and retrenchment in the engineering industry. Russell was dissatisfied with the international lifestyle associated with his industrial career. Despite his protestations that ‘I was damned if I was going to get religion,’ (Interview 1, Nov 2004) there were elements within his life that predisposed him to a life-changing experience. The third transition also would appear to be specific to Russell in that the end of his career as a priest and his transition to adult education came about as a consequence of his behaviour in his marriage. Even here, though, there are issues around the significance of relationship breakdown and how such traumas are managed within institutions like the church and perceived by public media. Within Russell’s story there were evident and continuing tensions between different perspectives on the significance of his divorce for his ability to continue his vocation.

There are three related issues that make the answer to this question still more complicated. The first issue is that it seems reasonable to assume that what Russell has learned from his life is a mix of more implicit and more explicit learning, where things are learned but only become clear over time, as a result of later experiences or as a result of reflection. For this reason it is difficult to point to particular points in time as the moments when Russell learned something from his life. The experience of bullying was ‘formative,’ as he put it, but it is likely that it took time before the formative effect of this experience became ‘operative’ and it took presumably even longer before Russell became fully aware of how this experience and his response to it had formed him. The conversion experience has a very clear location in time
and in Russell’s biography but the learning that followed from this was again something that took time to emerge.

The second issue concerns life history methodology and the fact that the accounts we have of Russell’s learning are all retrospective. In the stories Russell is able to link particular events in his life to what he learned from them. Although this sometimes may give the impression that the learning happened at that particular moment in time, this is most likely an artefact of the life history approach. Retrospectively Russell is able to identify the events that turned out to be significant for his later life, which means that the learning that followed from the events gave the events their significance.

If we take these points together, there was at least one ‘moment’ in Russell’s life where it is clear that he was learning from his life, viz., the time when he was asked to tell the stories of his life for the Learning Lives project which enabled him to become aware of life themes and ‘lessons’. Taking part in the research interviews has enabled Russell to articulate how learning occurs within particular spaces. Some questions elicited a spontaneous response that suggested new insights into his life. At other times, it seems a particular understanding had taken much longer to emerge. He acknowledged that understanding the full impact of participation in the project was going to take time. “I think I probably need to answer that question in five years time or ten years time” (Interview 7, December 2006).

(4) What has been the role of narrative in Russell’s learning?

It is clear that stories are important for Russell’s learning and that storying his life for the Learning Lives interviews and subsequently reading some of the transcripts have helped Russell to become more aware of the significance of particular events in his life and of what he has learned from them. We could say that the life stories allowed Russell to ‘objectify’ his life – i.e., made it into an object of reflection – and it is this which can help us to understand, for example, why on occasion Russell found reading the transcripts of his own interviews a ‘hugely moving’ experience. Through the stories Russell experienced his life in a new and sometimes different way. In this way narratives are an important ‘vehicle’ for biographical learning.

For Russell the ‘power of narrative’ goes further than this. As he observes in the final interview:

(T)he one thing I’ve got is the power of narrative. I’m not well qualified. I’m not, you know, hugely intelligent or all those really worthwhile things, I’ve just got a story. And the story informs who I am and the story makes me who I am and out of that I have an ability and a confidence and the ability to deal with people in their stories. (Interview 7, December 2006)

Such understanding suggests one of the means by which Russell achieves agency in his life and he gave examples of the way story telling about his life has given him the ability to influence others and to affect their decision-making.

What distinguishes Russell’s stories from the stories of some other participants in the Learning Lives project is that Russell’s stories have ‘real’ narrative quality in that they are organised around a ‘plot.’ The ‘plot’ of Russell’s life story concerns his ‘core identity’ of being a priest. Although it is possible to construct a story of Russell’s life in a chronological way, for Russell (or, to be more precise, in the story that Russell constructs about his life) the
‘priest-position’ is the centre from which the story is constructed and from which many if not all events in the story get their meaning. The priest ‘position’ works in an evaluative way, in that many of the things Russell tells about his life are presented in relation to how close or how distanced he is/was from this ‘core’ identity. Russell’s narrative has a strong evaluative character in that life-events have positions and are evaluated in relation to the ‘self’ that is most central and most important for Russell. At least in terms of his life narrative we can say that this is the most central thing Russell has learned from his life. This became very clear in the final interview when he said: “I’m haunted by my vocation” (Interview 7, December 2006)

(5) What has been the significance of what Russell has learned from his life?
In our analysis we have focused mainly on what (and how) Russell has learned from his life. While it is interesting from a research perspective to find out how, where and when such biographical learning takes place, from an actor perspective it is much more important to ask about the relevance of this kind of biographical learning. Does learning from one’s life matter? Does it make a difference for one’s life? There is clear evidence that some experiences in Russell’s life have been formative and have had an impact on Russell’s agency, on the ways in which he has made decisions about his life and the ways in which he has responded to particular live events. There is also some evidence of the impact of participation in the interviews themselves, although Russell is the first to acknowledge that this itself a learning process that will take time. The most significant event – at least in the way in which Russell has storied his life – is, of course, the ‘discovery’ of the person he was intended to be. This discovery is clearly something that he learned from his life – through a complex process of experience, reflection, communication and interaction – and it is something that not only had significant impact on his life as an ‘event;’ it also had a significant impact on the perception of his life, his life narrative, and hence on the way in which he was able to make sense of his life and of himself.

Conclusion
In this paper we have attempted to shed light on a particular dimension of biographical learning, namely, the way in which people can learn from their lives. Our interpretations are tentative and we need to expand our understanding of this aspect of biographical learning across our whole sample, but the analysis of Russell’s stories provides some valuable insights in the ways in which people can learn from their lives and the significance of such processes.

Our analysis shows some of the connections between change, transition and biographical learning in the life of this Learning Lives participant. The transitions we identified in Russell’s life opened spaces for reflection within which he brought to bear certain instruments or strategies that enabled him to consider the exigencies of those transitions. Episodes of formal education have a role to play in providing space for people to reflect on their lives; indeed, they may be more significant as spaces for reflection and identifying opportunities for further development than as opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills. (For a related discussion of using a biographical approach to understanding the effects of formal education, see Tedder 2007.)

Our career narrative shows that, through his earlier education and training, Russell acquired tools that enabled him to analyse and reflect on his experiences. Such instruments were deployed and refined through experiences at work in different organisations and in different parts of the country as the three stages of his career unfolded. At key junctures Russell was
able to identify significant others, friends or relatives, who enabled him to retell his narrative and explore possible courses of action (the biographical coach, in Alheit’s terms, 1995). There is, of course, no certainty in such circumstances as Russell described that there will be others in a position to act as catalysts for change. What Russell confirmed was the centrality of narrative both as a means of communicating with others about the meanings of life course conditions and as a means of effecting change in those conditions.

Our analysis has shown that biographical learning processes are difficult to pin down and that biographical learning literally takes time. This is why biographical and life history methods are so important in trying to make sense of learning through the life course.

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