From aspiration to opportunity – using narratives for IAG

Michael Tedder and Ruth Hawthorn

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contact details:
Dr Michael Tedder
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of Exeter
Heavitree Road
Exeter EX1 2LU
M.T.Tedder@exeter.ac.uk

Ruth Hawthorn
National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling
15 Leighton Grove
London NW5 2QT
0207 267 3572
ruthhawthorn@btopenworld.com

Learning Lives Project Website:
www.learninglives.org.
Round table discussion

“Round table or think pieces will involve a short presentation by an individual or group which identifies a theme or issue to be discussed by participants. Each round table requires a facilitator and a rapporteur. The rapporteur will note agreed summaries of the discussion which will then be placed for further debate on the LSRN website.”

In late modern society it is claimed that people are engaged in the ‘reflexive project of the self’ as they cope with the ever-changing learning demands of the workplace and of everyday life. Among the key spaces for learning and reflection for adults is post-compulsory education, and systems of information, advice and guidance are crucial at this interface of the personal and the social, between the individual and the institution.

The ‘Learning Lives’ research project has been engaged in longitudinal qualitative research to co-construct narratives about the place of learning in the lives of adults. In this round table discussion, two members of the project team will use stories of the learners they have interviewed to explore issues around the potential of narrative within information, advice and guidance provision for adults. The concern will be to promote discussion of what is required to connect aspiration with opportunity.

Overview of the Learning Lives project

The Learning Lives project was funded as part of the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). Its aim is ‘to deepen understanding of the meaning and significance of formal and informal learning in the lives of adults’: a fuller description of this, and working papers from the project, can be found on the website, www.learninglives.org.

The main focus of the project is on the interrelationships between identity, agency (the ability to exert control over one’s life) and learning over the lifecourse, including informal as well as formal learning. We have been working with 120 adults aged between 25 and 85 over nearly three years of their lives, conducting at least six in-depth interviews with them at about six-monthly intervals. These have all been transcribed and analysed, giving rise to a vast amount of data (around 750 hours of interviews) which is not only for use in this project but is also banked for use by future ESRC researchers. One of the unusual features of Learning Lives is that alongside the qualitative research, we have been looking at comparable quantitative data from the British Household Panel Survey (a national longitudinal survey).

The interviews have been conducted by a team of six research fellows, based at four different universities (Exeter, Stirling, Leeds and Brighton). Generally the respondents have been local to those centres, with some of the Leeds sample being drawn from London, giving a geographical spread within the UK. The methodology for collecting the qualitative data has used a life-history approach as part of a longitudinal qualitative study of learning in the lifecourse: the first two interviews with each person focused on their life up till then, and the remainder took the form of updates on their learning, and what else was happening in their lives.
The Leeds experience

The four research centres recruited participants from different perspectives. For example, the Exeter sample was selected with an interest in learning in relation to family and community. The Leeds sample consisted partly of adults who were actively involved in adult education in some form, and partly of older adults who had recently sought help from a careers guidance service. Because of this career guidance interest, two of the research fellows working with Leeds were from the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling, an independent research organisation that focuses on career development (www.nicec.org.uk). This has given us an opportunity to use the data to understand more how people’s careers unfold, and also explore the usefulness of identity and agency as constructs in career theory.

There are at least five aspects to this.

- At a very practical level, ten of our Leeds sample had by definition a recent experience of careers advice, and they talked to us about how useful it had or had not been, and then, in great detail, what happened next over three years.

- From the project sample as a whole, not just those in Leeds, we have in-depth data on the nature of career choice, and its determinants other than the careers adviser: a great deal is known about this in relation to young people, but we now have material to understand better how this works for people at all stages of their lives.

- The Leeds sample looked particularly at people now over 50. This ties in with an active government policy interest in how to encourage older adults to stay in work in the run-up to the raising of the state pension age. The data we have on this is being fed in to policy discussions about the adult careers service proposed by Leitch and now promised by the government.

- The project has generated a great deal of data and insight into the role of narrative in career planning, which we are going to focus on in this paper.

- Narrative includes our account of life as lived so far; it also applies to the stories we tell about what we plan or hope to do. Successive, spaced interviews collected information about what our respondents were doing or planning, and why, and provide time-lapse snapshots of how or narratives of the future change in response to current experience.

An interest in narrative has emerged recently in a number of helping professions, notably medicine\(^1\). In careers guidance, practitioners and theorists are also beginning to see its relevance in the use of narrative in career planning. Bill Law\(^2\) writes about the way a guidance practitioner can interrogate a narrative to learn not just from the content but from the way it is told, and explore the significance to the teller of those around her and the context in which she lives. Without this it is unlikely that an adviser could help a client, young or old, make sound choices.

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Hazel Reid³ (2005) writes:

‘Working with narrative may be a better way of helping any individual to enhance self-esteem, by working toward a culturally appropriate and positive self-identity in order to research life/career possibilities.’

There follow three examples of narratives from Learning Lives participants which have provided insights into the way information, advice and guidance impact on learning and development in their lives. The first two examples come from the Leeds cohort and the third from the Exeter cohort.

The following questions are relevant to the discussion:

- Who is best placed to define the educational needs of such individuals?
- In what ways were different agencies responsive to their needs?
- In what ways might responses have been better?
- When and how should such needs be assessed?
- What insights does a narrative approach offer in such cases?

Life story 1: COLIN

Although the Learning Lives interviewers had no intention of helping respondents develop their careers, our very methodology seemed to contribute in unanticipated ways. One of the Leeds sample, Colin, had been 12 years at home as a house-husband, and for many of those years had been trying to get back into the labour market. Colin has a cynical disposition and he was not exactly open to careers help. His comments about the help he had received from the Jobcentre 20-odd years before reflect an often-repeated view:

‘I think I’d seen a careers adviser or something, though – through signing on, which was bloody useless, he more or less sort of sat me down and said, ‘Oh, what would you like to do?’ [laughs] ‘I don’t know’. He was supposed to be sort of advising me in what I can do. ‘Well, now what are you interested in?’ and, [sighs] ‘lots of things’. [laughs] Yeah…you know, never – as I say, I’ve never known what I wanted to do…Somehow or other I got onto a job – I got onto a training scheme to train to be a carpenter.’ (I p 22)

Colin was fond of the adviser through whom we had recruited him, who was able to work with him over a number of sessions because she was employed on a scheme especially for older adults (it folded when the funding ran out). But he was still not very impressed:

‘I’m not slagging her [Careers adviser] off, I spend most of the time listening to her stories and tales of woes and things because she’s been going through a bad patch…So I wonder who’s helping who sometimes [laughs]. (V p14)

We do not need to accept this account: it could well be that she tried to encourage him by showing that his problems were shared by others in his age group. It is also possible that the expressed purpose of her interview with him caused him to erect barriers, and that he would be more open to reflection where the job-getting was not the issue. He then went to a different adviser who was more practical in her approach, but this raised other hackles:

‘it was way before the Easter holidays and I should’ve gone back. She sort of switched on to, ‘Oh you need to get a CV’ and she showed me a few sample ones and then got a sample one out and started changing the other person’s names … So I haven’t got any further with that… But she more or less… what you’ve got to do is lie about yourself in CVs it seems, and interview. ‘Well I’ll miss out those 10 years where you haven’t done that, we’ll miss out that bit, emphasise the positive’ and all the rest of it, but that’s true enough. But then you come to an interview and you get some sharp-eyed person on the panels you know, sort of ‘What happened between these dates?’ ‘Um, um er’. I mean I think of difficulties before they happen, I suppose I do worry about things and I don’t like telling lies for that reason. (IV pp 1-2)

But between his fifth and sixth Learning Lives interviews Colin did get a job, one absolutely perfectly suited to him. In the final interview he was asked to reflect on whether he felt he had got anything from taking part in our project.

‘Um [long pause] it’s been interesting and like I say it has been good to sort of think about things and talk about things and um I suppose me going back about what I’ve done over the years, it has made me think and maybe you’ve pointed out positive things about what I’ve done and you know... yeah you’ll sort of pick on things and you’ll say ‘Well actually I remember in that interview…’ and you’ll point something out to me, the very fact that you’ve picked up on it, I sort of think ‘Oh maybe that was important’ and it’s made me feel that a lot of the things I’ve done aren’t really use-less, they’re actually use-full you know. In fact filling out the application form, having to think about relevant things that I’d done in the past you know I was trying to think ‘What have I done in the way of metalwork?’ you know, and I was sort of thinking ‘Oh I did grinding welds, you know, off safety cabs for tractors once’ and things like that [laughs] and then I thought, ‘Oh yeah I worked in a fibreglass moulding factory once you know and I worked in a plastic moulding factory once’. (VI p 21).

But working in this way takes time and other resources, and it is not going to be easy to transfer this method to most adult guidance situations. It is particularly problematic when working across class and ethnicity lines. Reid (ibid) notes:

‘… when working with diverse people in diverse settings we need to recognise that there is more than one way to tell a story…Building trust and rapport is relatively easy when the individual shares the same language, culture and values as the helper, and is traditionally ‘articulate’. … Conversely, people from different cultures, or the same culture but with different values, will need time…and this is an expensive resource. The question then arises, is this practical?’
Life story 2: SERGEI

Another respondent from the Leeds sample, Sergei, illustrates Reid’s point perfectly. His story is not so happy as Colin’s. Sergei is culturally and technically Russian, but he was born and spent the first 46 years of his life in Estonia where he trained and worked as a mining engineer. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, like many Russians ‘planted’ in satellite states, his family was left to the mercies of the nationalist government now able to exert control again over their own country. Russians became persona non grata, Sergei was unable to work, and he was harassed by the police. Russia does not make it easy for this group to ‘return’ there, and in 1999 Sergei applied for asylum in the UK. At that time he was eligible for ESOL and training programmes (no longer the case) so got basic training as an electrician. The Home Office spent five years considering his application, then Estonia joined the EU and Sergei’s case became considerably more complicated. He was turned down, and lost his appeal. During the course of the project we saw him change from a professional man with intellectual pursuits, willingly and optimistically working at manual jobs to build a life in a new country, to an illegal immigrant, with increasing physical and mental health problems, working in the grey economy, squatting in a lock-up garage and getting a significant proportion of his food from what was left on the ground at the end of street markets.

During his eight years in the UK Sergei received advice from a wide range of IAG services, including the Jobcentre, a specialist third age service, and specialist services for refugees and asylum-seekers. He has had free advice from the CAB, and expensive advice from numerous solicitors of varying professional integrity. Sergei is not a linguist: his inability to learn Estonian was one of the difficulties over his staying there, and his English is halting and heavily accented. He would not be easy to help even if his problems were more tractable. The Learning Lives interviews were certainly the longest he had during the whole of that period, and the information collected about his status, his options, and his gentle and enquiring nature are likely to be much more detailed than any other adviser could have elicited. His happiness at being listened to by someone who really wanted to understand the complexities of his life before leaving Estonia and then on arrival in the UK was palpable, and in fact presented real ethical problems to the research. As well as demonstrating the added value that real listening can make to strengthening self-esteem, his was also a good example of how the concepts of identity and agency can help understand a career path and the hurdles in its way.

It is clear to us that what we are learning about the power of narrative has important implications for career, and educational, guidance. But how useful are these insights to the highly constrained working situations of most practitioners working with adults or young people? We now turn to look in more detail at a third respondent, this time from the Exeter sample.

Life Story 3: JOHN COLLINGS

Background
John Collings is in his mid-40s and attends a ‘learning shop’ in a small market town in a rural county in south west England. He was interviewed on seven occasions between November 2004 and May 2007 as part of the Learning Lives project. The ‘learning shop’ is a centre in retail premises that provides Basic Skills / Skills for Life tuition and John has been attending twice a week in term time since the spring of 2003. He takes a literacy and numeracy
programme that he almost invariably described in our interviews as ‘maths’ and ‘English’ but also spends time learning computer skills.

John started attending the centre soon after he gave up work as a self-employed gardener. He had been experiencing back pain and debility and an MRI scan revealed a prolapsed disc in his neck and arthritis in his lower back. In October 2004 he had an operation for the prolapsed disc but his health condition meant he was unable to continue in full-time manual work. He had found out about the Skills for Life centre from an Adult Education brochure and hoped that improving his abilities in maths and English would enable him to secure another job.

John had no qualifications. He left primary school unable to read and write. At his secondary school he was placed in a remedial class where, within a year, he says he had learned to manage reading and writing. In later work-related training, however, which included attending a horticulture course around 1990, he passed practical tests and a multiple choice test in his first year but was unable to tackle written examinations in subsequent years. When he started attending the learning shop John was tested for dyslexia and assessed as having specific learning difficulties.

Early on I formed the impression that John was ‘one of life’s victims,’ someone who had been disadvantaged in his formal education by dyslexia and now, in his 40s, was further disadvantaged by health problems which prevented him from continuing with his trade. Balanced against this impression, however, might be the positive attitude he sustains in the face of his difficulties: he makes a value of not complaining, of being positive, of making the best of things. John had the advantage of living in a pleasant place with helpful neighbours although there did not seem to be any community groups or volunteer groups that work with people with disabilities. He wanted to return to employment that he could physically manage.

One of the most significant changes in John’s life during the period of our meetings was with his transport. When we first met he had an electric car that enabled him to travel around his village but he could not take the vehicle on main roads. He was dependent on a brother or on taxis for access to shopping, banking and access to the Skills for Life centre. At the time of our interviews, John was exploring ways of improving his mobility and autonomy by getting another car.

John is regularly in touch with public agencies: the local authority installed some disability aids at his home so he can be independent of carers. The Skills for Life centre provided a structure for his week and the opportunity to gain qualifications. His dealings with benefits agencies showed him in contact with organisations that he considered well-intentioned. The threads of information, advice and guidance for adults that bind education and training with employers are vital for people like John who have to adapt to a new life as a result of a change in health. They could benefit significantly from a comprehensible, consistent and efficient service but, in John’s case at least, only parts of the system appeared to be helpful.
Interview Quotations

16 November 2004
Interview 1: Commitment to employment – CV development

Yes, it’s within the last two years I’ve had to give up the self-employed side of it due to a disability, unforeseen disability. I thought it would be a good idea to improve on the difficulty with the reading and writing, so I carried on coming to (the Skills for Life centre), two days a week to improve on my skills of reading and writing. Hopefully, it’ll help within future courses or finding alternative employment to work around the disability.

It means I won’t be able to do gardening, but I’m sure there’s something I’ll be able to train and do to work around this. Well there’s got to be something, though what, I don’t know. But like I say, me hobby’s photography. Whether there could be a course within photography or something like that.

I’ve got bits to add on to (my CV), the last job I done and what hobbies I’m doing now. I just need to alter it. Obviously I put down what courses I’m doing in here, as well, even if you’ve not got a job you put it down and it shows to somebody that you’re interested in learning whatever task is put in front of you.

5 April 2005
Interview 2: Assessing his abilities

It sounds as though you’re not able to work any longer.

Well, I’m not working any longer. Whether there is a job I could do, it’s like - but I wouldn’t be able to sit down the whole eight hours of a day or stand up the whole eight hours of a day. You’ve gotta do a bit between the two, so that eases the situation of aches and pains and numbness really if you stay in one spot all the time…. I’m not academically qualified to work in but I don’t think me brain would work in a office, anyway, ‘cos I'm too used to the outdoor life.

22 June 2005
Interview 4: Commitment to learning

So as far as your work here is concerned, you plan from session to session, but you haven’t got a long-term plan?

No, I don’t know what I’ll be doing in ten, five a few years time, cause I can’t think that far ahead [laugh]….I think it’s important, yeah, now doing a bit of education for yourself. Well, even if you don’t do an exam, you’re still learning, you know; I’ve learnt how to improve my spelling without doing a test. But it’s nice to do a test to get something to show what you’ve done. Like with your time, you know, I, I, mean, if I went to a job and I said, I’ve been at home all day sitting down all day reading telly, or watching the telly all day or whatever, they wouldn’t be very impressed, will it? If they thought you’ve been at home, you’ve been doing courses to help improve your communications and reading skills, then that’s going to show them you’re interested in doing things.
16 December 2005
Interview 5: Accessing mobility

When we met last time you were talking about having a test to see whether you could drive an automatic?

I haven’t had - I haven’t had a test as such. I did ask a friend, to ask, whether they would come to take me down there and they said they would. So I said rather than ring from my house, I’d go down there and they’d ring from their house ‘cos then they, they could tell them the time that they wanted to take me. ‘Cos I couldn’t ring up and say, ‘I’ll be there,’ then ring my friend and say they can’t do it on that day. So they rung from their house, and the (disability assessment) centre said they would ring them back, and they haven’t rung them back and this was two months ago, so, so I’ve just left it.... they sent me the leaflets explaining about the mobility car scheme. And the car scheme runs – it’s um, you get - you get a car once every three years. But they’ve only given me the benefit for two years on the form, so I don’t know where I stand on that one [laugh]. …I don’t know whether to go for a mobility car or try to get one privately meself, you see.

13 October 2006
Interview 6: Getting a car – New Deal for the disabled

(T)he last time I said I was going to think about looking into getting a car. Well I actually decided to, to get a car and I got one. I got an automatic. …So I thought um [pause] I mentioned it to the local garage where I’ve always had me cars repaired and they looked out for a second-hand car [pause] an automatic and I, and I took it for a test drive and I thought, and I got on well with the test drive, ‘cause it was an automatic, you didn’t have the clutch. But I’m still limited to the distance I can drive…. I’ve surprised on the - how well I’ve got on with it

I went into the Job Centre Plus, there’s this Job Centre, which is (name of town), which has changed since I’ve last been there. They ain’t got no jobs on the notice boards any more. It’s all electronic keypads in it. [Laugh]… Yes, yes I went into there and I said to them I’ve heard about the, this scheme for the New Deal for disabled people. It’s for people who’s been on incapacity related benefits and illnesses… he told me about this scheme um but they try to do a job search with you. [Pause] They have a discussion what sort of jobs you’re interested in and they try to do a job search. …I said I don’t know what I’m going to do until I get into it to see how much I can do. Hourly, hourl-wise you don’t know how much you can cope with day-to-day.

Did they have a search when you were there?

We had a search while I was there but the jobs [background noise] really me not wanting to do them or you see. There was one - one job that they thought had come up is like a meter reading, driving around and I thought, “oh I wouldn’t be able to drive from morning to evening, day to day,” er because it would be too discomfort. Um so I, I didn’t do that and cleaning in old people’s homes and things like that.

…
They’ve got a careers advisor coming into to (the Skills for Life centre) to interview various people…and I said, “yeah, I’d like it just discussing - tell them the problems I’ve had,” and I told them about this scheme here and he said rather than for them to do a job search that you go into a job straight away…He said there’s a – he said he knows there’s a scheme where they do um job tasting… called work placement, they – you’re obviously discussing various jobs things that you want to do and they try to go around the employers and, ask the employer to provide a job placement for you. And you go to that job, you don’t get paid for it or anything like that, and there int no job at the end of it. But it gives you an idea to see if you can cope with that job, with your disability or to see whether you are able to cope with that skill that they give you.

…while I was at the New Deal, now they told me what’s involved, you know, about the hours you can do, benefits, what type of work, they, they re-amended my CV in - retyped the CV and they, they do that kind of thing as well in the New Deal. If you get an application for a job, they will actually help you fill out that application…so I gave them my old CV, told them the changes and he, he updated it and gave me four or five copies.

… I can’t go on a job placement through (New Deal) I have to go through another person and he said before you can go through that person who runs this the placement scheme you’d have to see a disability um employment advisor from the D - what is it? The D, I don’t know what’s the short thing for it, DEA isn’t it? Disability Employment Advisors. I have to go back to DEA and tell them I want to go on the placement scheme. And then [pause] she sent a letter back to me and they’re going to ring me for when I get an appointment. They haven’t yet, it’s been three weeks and they haven’t come back to me yet

18 May 2007
Interview 7: Commitment to employment – CV development (again)

I’ve been to the (local town) Job Centre, asked to see a disablement advisor for the possibilities of going back to work and then she forward me now to a - ‘cause there’s a firm, [name of company]… a private um, private contractor who’s working with Department of Works and Pensions and they’ve got a lot of um lot of skills or experience on um health and people who’s had disabilities um getting back into work again. So I went to see the disablement advisor and asked her what, what, what the options were and she said there’s a work preparation erm course that you can do….. They’ve got a – placed me with an advisor. I met her for the first time three or four weeks, I go on Monday again, next Monday, so next – the first visit she told me what it was about, work preparation um and because I’m already doing my (skills for life programme) … she said, “We don’t need to go in that area ‘cause you’re ahead of me, you’re already doing it …

Have they set anything up for you?

No, at the moment we’re just discussing what the op – of how the course, the first stage, how it works. I got to go there for six, six meeting before we end up having a work placement. What it is, is to upgrade your – she wants to look at my CV, whether they need to do any changes to it before we find a work placement.

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