Words into worlds: the significance of language in the great unravelling of biographical narratives of adult learning

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Paper presented at the 40th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 6-8 July 2010, University of Warwick, Coventry

This conference wishes, amongst other issues, to explore the ways the changing biography of adult education and lifelong learning has influenced and transformed adult learning and teaching, and asks what the role of adult educators and their biographies may have been in this. Changes in teaching and learning paradigms have affected the learning experiences of adult students in all kinds of settings, just as the experience of researchers has undergone continual modification as it confronts the changing biography of adult education.

One of the most widespread outcomes of the last years in Europe and beyond, culminating most recently in economic recession on a global scale, has been an even more marked sense of insecurity than the various 'runaway worlds', 'liquid modernities' or 'risk societies' seemed to hold in store. Or perhaps, they are becoming simply more real because they are becoming a daily accompaniment of working and learning lives.

Naturally, educational paradigms, and this increasingly affects the education chances of adult populations, are shifting, too. Historical landscapes of institutional learning established over decades of optimistic gradualism have experienced tremendous shifts as the political-economic benchmarks of formal learning have been redefined. The new and contradictory challenges now posed by the 'new educational order' (Field 2001) may increase the social isolation of the individual in her choices, but they challenge education, too, to evolve in untried 'lifewide' directions which address the demands of emerging learning environments (Alheit and Dausien 2002).

'Out there' in such emerging learning environments, big' things, like 'globalisation', the internet, the world-wide-web, ICT in schools and at work, have transformed daily life, without doubt. Mobile telephony, perhaps, will turn out to have broken down still more barriers for an immeasurably larger number of people, including some of the most poor and vulnerable. Significant challenges to prevailing hegemonies stirred and aroused by the pace of change (NGOs, initiatives, popular education, oral histories, etc) are 'out there' too.

Yet they are in 'small things', here, close to us individually, as well. In biographical narratives of learning, for example, in the language which unfolds in the interaction examined in qualitative interviews. In interviews, narratives emerge as evolving accounts of motives, choices, renunciations, and change. They are stories of the self, and they chart the difficult process of reflective construction of a (potentially)
more secure, cohesive self. In these biographical stories which we as researchers ‘collect’, the context of the research interview is a learning space in which the many stories of experience can be tried out, and new attempts at coherence and security can be made.

Instances of just such micro work drawn from a research site involving adult learners will be examined in this paper. With the help of these, the paper will consider the theoretical and methodological adequacy of the interview as a space in which learning and change can be questioned, chronicled and theorised through close analysis of the language shared in the research interview. 'Languaged' experience, locally co-constructed and constituting the sequential emergence of meaning, will be discussed as examples of the potential of the biographical interview and of its real usefulness in research in unravelling the 'small things' of learning and social agency. Attention to such 'small' big things, I argue, is one reflection of the changing biography of adult educational research.

The discourses, governmental and academic, about the 'empowerment' of learners and 'flexibilisation' of learning paths and learning careers, about 'competitiveness and employability' (EU 2008) of adult learners, about the responsibility, too, of the learner to equip themselves with specified skills and knowledge, and the pressure on individuals - and indeed, whole populations in the throes of system change in an enlarged Europe – to 'refurbish' their qualifications or make haste to 'acquire' (or assume) a suitable career biography while there is yet time, are in our ears and are the siren songs of the new 'liquid' modernity which is deservedly the object of much critical research writing (Alheit and Dausien 2002, Bauman 2008, Field 2001, Jarvis 2000, 2006).

The learning environment in the large private company is by definition a non-public space in which learners (and trainers) are removed from public gaze and control and distanced from social policymaking. Formalised learning takes place (or not) at the behest of the employer and is a cost factor. Supply and demand – available skills, age, gender, health – and opportunity costs – the return on investment - decide on the availability of spaces in which recognised learning may justifiably take place. 'Valued' learning is determined, sometimes across a whole working life, according to the movements of the market or the fortunes of management. Likewise skills, knowledge, experience (Evans, K. 2001).

In order to examine how formal and non-formal learning are fought for, and how learning experience – positive and negative – acquired or claimed across the life course is transformed by, and transforms the individual biographies of learners, this paper will examine discourse(s) of learning and professional identity elicited in depth-interview talk in the headquarters of a leading German steel trading company.

Starting from the understanding that interactive context (social, institutional, physical, or emotional, and so on) and meaning are built in and through talk and are radically local in their construction, I will examine here micro-discourses of experience and the language through which a professional woman in her mid-forties incorporates differently grounded pieces of her life – institutional learning, everyday life-course experience, crises, stops and successes - into an ongoing biographical narrative (Alheit 2007, Alheit and Dausien 2002). Central aspects of this view of the learning
experience include subjective experiences of learning and the construction of own
discourses of knowledge and self, change and experience of diversity through the
acquisition of professional, institutional or new 'cultural' or gendered identities.

To understand better the motivation to carry on learning and to re-commence
interrupted learning experiences (or, alternatively, to account for breaks and
biographies of delusion) researchers and educators need concepts of education and
learning that embrace the complexity of learning environments today in which
learning is shaped and expressed as biographical learning, as gendered learning,
and so on. These include an understanding of the following: (1.) the spaces in which
people live and learn and through which they progress while building relationships
and careers; (2.) the language(s) that constitute(s) these spaces as knowable and
accessible and (3.) the individual rhythms of narrative and 'grammars' of experience
that they develop in order to build their learning into their changing lives.

Shifting spatial and bodied dimensions of learning
The management of one's own development, means self-imposed pressures to
adapt to new knowledge demands, to fulfil own projects and desires for change (see
for example Alheit 2007). This is happening while the learner's place within
mainstream, access, further or lifelong education and her performance in the
'entrepreneurial' and 'competitive' environments of higher and further education, of
business learning and internationally marketed learning models becomes itself more
and more fragmented and individualised (Avis, et al. 2001, see also Corson 2000,
and Evans, R. 2003). Jutta Ecarius points out how 'upbringing, learning and
education take place within structured spaces which offer socially unequally
distributed opportunities' for schooling, work and citizenship' (Ecarius 1997: 33)\(^1\).
Learning, she argues, has 'spatial' and 'bodied' dimensions (1997: 33), while learning
over a whole life means that a subject moves through various 'spaces' appropriating,
losing, and gaining resources and capital (Ecarius 1997: 36). The unequal allocation
and appropriation of learning opportunities according to age, gender and ethnic
background in German enterprises continues to be a significant factor determining

'Ecologies of biographical knowledge' and identity formation
The contexts of learning identity formation are understood here as interconnected
"ecologies of knowledge" in which situation-specific interactional meanings are
organized (Miller 1997: 168). Discursive processes of identity construction are
situated in language interaction at many, at multiple, levels. Interaction and relations
of reciprocity between individual subjects and others provide the framework within
which 'selves' are constructed in communication with others.

The biographical method allows us to ask how change in people’s environments is
recognized subjectively by individuals, and how such change influences learning in
life/work/study situations. The routine of daily existence, offers some security and
naturalises the seemingly given order of things (Alheit 1983). Stepping out of frame
allows/requires the individual to see things and themselves diversely, reflectively.
Stepping out also means, however, challenging outright the situation that is 'given'.

\(^1\) 'Erziehung, Lernen und Bildung finden in räumlichen Strukturen statt, die sozial
ungleich verteilte Möglichkeiten bieten'
Looking through the lens of biographical learning processes, via the biographicity of learning (for example Alheit and Dausien 2002: 10), at the progress made along rough educational pathways, uncovers relations in the diverse, multiple areas/spaces of experience in time and over time that are drawn upon in the construction of the biography of learning.

**Frau G: the small detail of learning**

Language resources, their use in the co-construction of meaning and of the learning space itself, help to follow how learning and diversity of experience can be told. The biographical method allows us to ask how changes and structural contradictions in people’s environments are recognized subjectively by individuals. In the auto/biography of the woman talking here, learning is shaped and expressed as biographical learning, and both difficulties and success have their place in the rich contexts in which learning takes place. We can see in the language of interaction in the biographic interview the shifting elements of what can be loosely called a ‘grammar’, that is, the analysable language resources used in constructing and sharing relationships, identities, and views (Capps and Ochs 1995, and Evans, R. 2008).

The company in which I collected the data used here combined life-long employment with vocational training and a high level of employee identification with the firm and with the locality and the history of the firm within the social history of that locality. My own presence in the company, as a language trainer for English, lasted 11 years, from 1992 to 2003. The interviews from which extracts are provided here were conducted in 2002 and 2003. By that time the company was in a state of forced and difficult change, bordering on trauma. This turbulent period marked the end of the company's paternalistic tradition. Repeated, unsuccessful processes of being put up for sale and the presence of 'outsiders' in the 'House' only increased the sense of dislocation and de-centredness so often heard in individuals' learning biographies (Risberg 2001: 69-70).

The necessarily brief discussion here of the data is confined to extracts² from one of two interviews with a Controller, Frau G. In her middle 'forties, divorced and mother of one pre-teenage son, Frau G. belongs to group of non-management higher employees with special responsibilities. She reflects critically and openly on the crises the company has gone through. She possesses a political consciousness sharpened by years of in-company union struggle for women's rights and general company democracy. Her talk is given in the original German with an impressionistic English translation. Analysis of the language she uses, however, refers at all times to the German original.

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² The following markup is used in the interview transcript extracts produced here:

| xx:: = | Word-lengthening |
| (.) | Pauses (audible breaks in flow of speech) |
| (1.0) | Pause timed in seconds (to nearest second) |
| hh | Out-breaths/laughter |
| .hh | In-breaths |
| °xxx°° | Quiet speech |
| +xxx++ | Rapid speech |
| xxx::: | Drawn-out utterance, drawl |
The limited/limiting horizons of choice

Extract 1: Career choice

[R = researcher; G = Frau G]

1 R: wie haben Sie dann das die bereiche ahh ausgewählt dann (.) wie sind Sie darauf gekommen? How did you choose then the areas ahh then (.) how did you come to do that?
2
3 (1.0)

4 G: hmm die bereiche waren ja irgendwie eingeschränkt bin mit einer ganz normalen kaufmaennischen ausbildung gestartet und da sind natürlich die horizonte nicht Hmm the areas were you know somehow limited I started with a really normal commercial training and there the horizons aren't of course

5

6

7

8

9 [R: warum?]

10 [R: why?]

11 G: so riesengross ja warum? (.) das ist vom elternhaus gesteuert glaube ich ja So gigantic yeah why? (.) that was steered by my parents I reckon yeah

12 R: ja? Yeah?

13 R: also wie wirklich? So really like that?

14 G: ich denke schon I think so

15 R: Sie Sie koennen sich daran erinnern You can remember that can't you?

In Frau G.'s account of her choice of vocational training as an adolescent, she is initially hesitant. Her account is 'hedged' (l.4 irgendwie/somehow) and neutralised (her commercial training is 'ganz normal', i.e. really normal, nothing special - l.6) and qualified with a further edge of neutralising modality (the 'natürlich'/of course in l.7). When we speak of hedging, we mean intensifiers (such as 'really', 'a lot of') and de-intensifiers ('like', 'kind of/sort of', 'maybe', 'just'). Frau G. layers her narrative, in fact, with approximations, hesitations, hedging qualifications and silences. This active negotiation of meaning through circumlocution is the site where the speakers' mutual relationship is established and where positions of certainty, necessity, opinion, belief and factuality are adopted (for more discussion of this, see Wierzbicka 1991: 341).

It is noticeable how consistently Frau G. develops the semantic choice in her self-ironic (face-saving) use of the term horizons: a 'normal' commercial training is, she suggests, obviously limited, and its learning 'horizons' are not 'riesengross'/gigantic (l.10). When we continue to follow her narrative Frau G. develops a discourse of opposed spaces in the following talk which possesses interesting consistency in its semantic structure. She speaks, for example, of her apprenticeship as laying 'a foundation' and uses a series of metaphors of 'frames/frameworks' which she tries to 'burst' or which she accepts as a framework of 'available [learning] opportunities'. Taken together with the initial lexis of narrow possibilities (ridiculed as not-gigantic-horizons of opportunity) we hear in her narrative elements of that 'willful' subjective appropriation of learning chances which render possible the 'construction of new cultural and social structures of experience' (Alheit and Dausien 2002: 10)\(^3\) we call 'biographicity'.

\(^3\) '… der 'eigensinnigen' subjektiven Aneignung von Lernangeboten [...] die Chance der Herstellung neuer kultureller und sozialer Erfahrungsstrukturen …'
Gendered spaces in the working life

Extract 2: The inevitable routines of closed hierarchies

1. eine eigene unzufriedenheit mit dem
2. strukturen ich hab ubere:: in meinen ersten
3. Jahren im controlling bereich als einzige
4. frau gearbeitet als junge frau und hatte da
5. naturlich "gegen" ganz viele:: (. ahn (.)
6. altersstrukturen anzukaempfen das hat
7. mich zum teil mass::los geaergert hab
8. meine hilflosigkeit gespuert hab dann
9. gegen windmuehlen angekaempft aber
10. ich hab dagegen angekaempft .hhh
11. vielleicht hab ich erst jahre spaeter begriffen
12. (. uhm warum dat alles so zwangslaefig
13. war mit diesen alten strukturen diesen
14. alten maennern die zum teil ja noch
15. vorherrschten .hhh dass das nicht richtig
16. sein kann und nicht stimmt und nicht
17. rundlief war fuer mich zu spueren mit
18. jeder faser ahn un warUm war nich klar

The words and phrases highlighted above in bold type trace the further development of Frau G.'s draft of a life-world of conflicting structures. Space in her working life is heavily, punishingly structured. In the phase she is narrating here, the structures are made to be heard as unmoving, rigid, and inevitable. They are structures of age (l.6), in which she - the only woman, the only young woman (l.4), - is evoked as physically irritated, forced to feel helpless (ll.8-10). The structures, then, are inscribed in her feelings and in her body (l.18 'mit jeder faser'/with every fibre). The further examples here of rhythmic repetitions (the repetition of 'I fought against' ll.8-10) and the particularly effective creative embellishments of emphatic, emotionally programmatic phrases (ll.15-17: 'dass das nicht richtig sein kann und nicht stimmt und nicht rundlief'/that that can't be right and isn't right and didn't work right or 'diesen alten strukturen diesen alten mannern'/these old structures these old men at ll.13-14) are set within an account of checks and troubles which Frau G. punctuates prosodically (emotionally) with hesitations, breaks, telling in-breaths and self-directed questioning ('warum'/why at ll. 12 and 18). The whole picture of inevitable time-worn hierarchies is set, it must be remembered, within the narrative frame of the present looking back, and this ex-post-facto stance is underlined in Frau G.'s knowledge claim of having understood only much later the restricting confines of her earlier career and its physically embodied structures (ll.13-14). Her institutional memory recalls the different spaces and their transformations. The listener understands implicitly that this image of immobility is intended by Frau G. to act as a contrast to her own trajectory, her exit from the confines of the devalued former activities.

Concluding remarks

With Alheit (Alheit 2007: 79) I would argue that Frau G.'s transitions from relative continuity to the discontinuity of change – more than once –is experienced as a 'learning history' (Lerngeschichte). This learning process allows her to develop what Alheit calls 'post-conventional' frames of action (i.e. breaking with the 'inevitable'
routines of everyday experience) which provide access to new biographical spaces in which to position herself anew.

The learning experiences discussed here stem from auto/biographical narratives of a woman involved in differing processes (and stages in those processes) of educational change and, we can say, of rupture with former educational experience. Her talk encompasses both experience of learning and its absence. Aspects of this view of the learning experience that I consider important include subjective experiences of learning and the construction of own discourses of knowledge and self, change and experience of diversity through the acquisition of professional, institutional or 'cultural' identities, and the gendering of new learning processes. Change and troubles, but new insights and rich 'incidents', too, are voiced and constructed in biographical narratives which let us hear the construction of new knowledge (Alheit 2007), one of the small things of great import in narrated lives.

References
Evans R (2003) 'Language barriers and learning (mis)chances, 'intercultural' or 'xenophobic' communication, organisational 'interculture' and discourses of learning in a business context' in I Davidson, D Murphy and B Piette (eds) SCUTREA 2003 Speaking in tongues: languages of lifelong learning, pp.57-63.

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