

BETWEEN STRUCTURE AND SUBJECTIVITY: LIFE-HISTORIES AND LIFELONG LEARNING

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Abstract – This article deals with lifelong learning in the perspective of individual life-histories. The author examines examples of learning experiences which have shaped the life-course of the subject or have changed or influenced his or her identity. The nature, form and social context of these significant learning experiences are examined, with a particular focus on empowerment and transformation. The data used was collected by means of interviews with people from various social and cultural backgrounds. Assuming that we are moving towards an era of lifelong learning, what does this mean at the level of the individual life? The present article addresses this question in the light of the data collected.

Zusammenfassung – Dieser Artikel beinhaltet lebenslanges Lernen unter der Perspektive individueller Lebensgeschichten. Der Autor untersucht Beispiele von Lernerfahrungen, die den Lebensweg der Person geformt haben oder ihre/seine Identität geändert oder beeinflusst haben. Die Art, Form und der soziale Kontext dieser bedeutenden Lernerfahrungen werden unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Selbstbefähigung und Umwandlung untersucht. Die angewandten Daten wurden durch Interviews mit Menschen unterschiedlichen sozialen und kulturellen Hintergrunds gewonnen. Gehen wir von der Annahme aus, daß wir uns auf eine Ära lebenslangen Lernens zubewegen, was bedeutet das dann auf der Ebene des einzelnen Lebens? Der vorliegende Artikel behandelt diese Frage nach Gesichtspunkten der gesammelten Daten.

Résumé – L'article traite le concept d'éducation permanente sous l'angle de l'histoire de vie individuelle. L'auteur étudie des exemples d'expériences éducatives qui ont modelé le cours de la vie d'individus, ou bien modifié ou influencé leur identité. Il examine la nature, la formule et le contexte social de ces expériences décisives d'apprentissage, en approfondissant l'aspect d'autonomisation et de transformation. Les données étudiées ont été collectées au moyen d'entrevues avec des personnes appartenant à divers milieux socio-culturels. Si nous partons du principe que nous évoluons vers l'ère de l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie, quelles en sont les conséquences pour la vie de l'individu? C'est cette question que l'article analyse à la lumière des renseignements recueillis.

Resumen – Este artículo se ocupa del aprendizaje de por vida desde la perspectiva de historias de vida individuales. El autor examina ejemplos de experiencias de aprendizaje que han formado el desarrollo de la vida de los sujetos o que han cambiado o influenciado su identidad. Examina la naturaleza, la forma y el contexto de estas significantes experiencias de aprendizaje, con un énfasis especial en la adquisición de poder y en la transformación. Los datos usados se recogieron a través de entrevistas realizadas a personas con diferentes trasfondos sociales y culturales. Si partimos de la base de que nos estamos moviendo hacia una era del aprendizaje de por vida, ¿qué significa esto en los niveles de la vida individual? El presente artículo plantea esta cuestión a la luz de los datos recogidos.

Резюме - В статье рассматривается непрерывное образование в перспективе индивидуальных биографий. Автор исследует примеры опыта обучения, которые сформировали жизненную траекторию человека, изменили его/ее идентичность или оказали на нее влияние. Изучаются природа, форма и социальный контекст этих значимых опытов обучения с особым акцентом на повышение самостоятельности и на преобразование. И использованные данные были получены с помощью интервьюирования людей из различной культурной и социальной среды. Если исходить из того, что мы движемся в направлении непрерывного образования, что это значит на уровне индивидуальной жизни? Автор задается этим вопросом в свете собранных данных.

The biographical method in educational research

The subject of life-as-lived, life-as-experienced and life-as-told has long interested authors and researchers (Bruner 1986). The biographical method with its various forms has been a part of sociology's history since the Chicago School in the 1920s (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918–20). In the 1980s and 1990s, sociologists and scholars in other disciplines have expressed a renewed interest in the biographical method. As the life experiences of a person are the very foundations of educative processes, it is natural that the biographical method is used also in educational research and especially in adult education.

From numerous life course studies done in different countries, Peter Alheit (1994) argues that “living a life” has become more problematic and unpredictable. It is “a laboratory for developing skills whose usefulness is uncertain”. This does not of course invalidate the biographical approach to education. On the contrary, in late modern culture we still have enormous opportunities to organize our biographies, and in the course of our lives we produce many meanings related to ourselves and our social framework. From a biographical or life history point of view, we have more choices than we can ever put into practice. “Biographicity” – as Alheit (1992) calls biographical knowledge and the qualifications based on this knowledge – involves a huge capacity for learning. At the same time, while feeling that we can act independently in our lives, we have to recognize the structural limitations imposed by our social and ethnic origins, our gender and the era in which we are living (Stanley 1993). Thus Alheit (1994: 288) makes a remark which could have been a methodological principle in our study of the meaning of education and learning in the lives of Finnish people: “The learning processes between structure and subjectivity are manifold, but they can only be understood if we do justice to *both* poles: the structural framework of conditions

governing our lives and the spontaneous dispositions that we adopt towards ourselves.”

Lifelong learning in a changing society

The dynamic that unfolds in the interaction between these two poles lies at the heart of the research project described here, which we have called “In Search of the Meaning of Education”. The aim of this project is to examine the meaning of education and learning in the lives of Finns (Antikainen 1991; Antikainen et al. 1995, 1996; Antikainen and Huotelin 1996). In addition to formal education, the study is also concerned with adult education and other less formal ways of acquiring knowledge and skills. In short, we are dealing with life-long learning in the Finnish context. A number of things make Finland a particularly interesting setting for such a study. Finnish society is a mixture of old and new, of well-developed formal education and a long tradition of grass-roots learning. At the same time, the country is changing rapidly as a result of the same processes that are affecting the rest of Europe.

The term “meaning” in the title of the project refers to both method and theory. The basis of the investigation is qualitative logic rather than statistical representativeness. We are using a biographical method, namely a life-history approach comprising a narrative biographical interview and a thematic interview (Denzin 1989; Goodson 1992). According to our theoretical framework, the meaning of education can be analysed on three levels, as reflected in the following three questions:

1. How do people use education in constructing their life-courses?
2. What do educational and learning experiences mean in the production and formation of individual and group identity?
3. What sort of significant experiences do Finns have in the different stages of their lives? Do those experiences originate in school, work, adult study or leisure-time pursuits? What is the substance, form and social context of significant learning experiences?

Education is considered to be a productive factor – not just a reproductive one – in the individual’s life. We do not question the institutionalizing influence of education on the life-course and the creation of inequality. At the same time, we argue the hypothesis that the situation on the biographical level is more complex, and that education has several, also emancipatory meanings (Antikainen 1991). This paper will address the question of significant learning experiences, which is closely connected with the question of emancipatory or empowering learning. Does education still have any emancipatory or empowering meaning in contemporary, late-modern culture?

Collection of data

The data used in the project were collected by means of biographical and thematic interviews. In the initial interviews the interviewees related their life-stories orally. As needed, each interviewee was also asked more specific questions about education, self-definition, and areas of knowledge important in his or her life. An interview typically lasted three to four hours. We then picked out a list of significant learning experiences from each life-story and presented it to the interviewee for approval or revision.

At the beginning of the second interview we considered each significant learning experience and its social context in greater detail. Assuming that education can also destroy identity, we asked, finally, for the interviewee's most negative education-oriented experience. The second interview usually lasted about as long as the first.

In accordance with our purpose, we interviewed many kinds of people: women and men, representatives of different social classes and ethnic groups, and persons of various ages. Of the 44 interviewees (approximately 3000 pages) 28 were Finnish-speakers, but the group also included Swedish-speakers, Samis (Lapps), Romanies (Gypsies) and individual members of immigrant and refugee groups. The interviews with members of ethnic minorities were, on average, less complete than those conducted with Finnish-speakers. The interviewees were classified into four age groups or cohorts whose representation we wished to guarantee. In accordance with our grounded-theory approach, we ended the collection of the data when we reached the saturation criterion.

Learning experiences as indicators of change

The use of the term "significant learning experience" arose out of our first interview, which was with a 66-year old Karelian housekeeper and mother, Anna. Her interview indicated that a life-story may include distinct turning points, marking important steps in the educational and learning biography. These turning points we began to call "significant learning experiences". We defined these experiences as follows: *significant learning experiences are those which appeared to guide the interviewee's life-course, or to have changed or strengthened his or her identity* (Antikainen 1991).

We soon found out that the life-story of each interviewee included significant learning experiences. These varied in number from one to ten. Our search for the learning experiences followed a specific pattern. After a biographical interview the researcher or group of researchers picked out events described in the interview that bore the characteristics of significant learning experiences as we have defined the term. A list of these events was presented to the interviewee at the beginning of the follow-up interview. He or she then

decided whether these were the significant learning experiences of his or her life. Very few of the interviewees made any alterations to the list compiled by the researchers, and the few changes that took place were very minor indeed – sometimes an interviewee questioned whether a particular experience belonged in the list at all, or felt that a certain significant learning experience was missing from the list. In other words, our approach to the research was a collaborative one, and the interviewee acted as the judge of his or her own experience.

Thus, the starting point of our study is the life-story based on a narrative interview, but this was refined and complemented with semi-structured interviews conducted in two separate stages. In addition to making the data thicker, this method can be assumed to bring it close to “reality” and “experience” (Bruner 1986; Antikainen et al. 1996: 27–30).

What then is the meaning of a significant learning experience? What does it represent theoretically? It is, first, a certain sort of life-event. Further, it is a *change-event* not located in an institutionalized life-course (cf. Schutze 1981). A significant learning experience may include a creative achievement such as a result of work or activity, or a meaning which is new from the agent’s standpoint (Häyrynen 1994).

Another important aspect of such experiences is that of *empowerment*. The term empowerment makes no distinction between ability to (power in) and control (power over), and it can also include the meaning of adjustment or integration (power with).¹ For example, according to Nederveen Pieterse (1992: 10–11), the core of empowerment can be found in a participatory approach, and it includes two aspects linked with each other: *transformation in the individual’s self-definition and transformation of social environment through participation*. The focal point in the change of social structures is the breaking of the structures of subordination. Empowerment can thus be defined in relation to the old concept of emancipation: it is a necessary but inadequate condition for emancipation. Empowerment may also lead to the adjustment to dominant power structures. In any case it strengthens the agency of its subject.

Significant learning experiences can mean empowerment especially if we use as indicators of empowerment the three factors proposed in our research plan: the expansion of an interviewee’s world-view or cultural understanding; the strengthening of a person’s “voice” so that he or she has the courage to participate in dialogue or even break down the dominant discursive forms; and the broadening of the field of social identities or roles (Antikainen 1991: 5). It is possible, however, that an event which an interviewee has defined as a significant learning experience has not included empowerment. In other words, we have to take each learning experience as an entity and conduct an empirical study of whether it includes empowerment, and if so, to what extent.

Varieties of learning experience

Learning experiences may vary in their *duration*. One end of the spectrum is represented by clearly definable events generally of short duration, whereas the other end consists of vaguer, cumulative experiences, generally of long duration.

Secondly, experiences may vary in their *quality and continuity*, as John Dewey stated as early as 1938. The concept of significant learning experience does not include an evaluation which makes the experiences in question positive by definition. Practice, however, confirms the validity of the old Finnish saying: "What does not kill makes one stronger". Experiences that seemed very negative or painful at the time they occurred are later experienced as a positive resource. An extreme example is when one adjusts to the death of a close relative or accepts one's own illness.

The number of learning experiences in a person's life is not decisive, especially when the experiences differ in their intensity. As an example of the accumulation of learning experiences we can present the case of Anna (66). This woman, living in a rural village, whose formal education consisted of four years of primary school plus one year in upper grade (the second upper grade was interrupted by the war), began learning English in her 50s. The case of Ville is similar. This 50-year-old building contractor, whose basic education is nearly identical to Anna's, has continually taken up university studies and night-school classes. In both cases it is easy to claim that without the continuum or accumulation of previous positive learning experiences these actions would not have taken place.

Experiences may occur in a variety of *learning interests or domains*. Applying the ideas of Habermas, Mezirov (1981) classifies learning interests as technical, practical and emancipatory. Our preliminary experiments have indicated, however, that classifying interests is problematic, and according to our preliminary results even a very technical learning interest may later on lead to studies which are definable as practical or emancipating (Antikainen et al. 1993).

Learning experiences may vary according to the *situation* in which they take place. Jarvis (1987) classifies situations as individual, informal, non-formal and formal. Our initial observation in the pilot study was that significant learning experiences can take place, and do go on in various situations. *We discovered also that rarely, or hardly ever, had a significant learning experience event taken place when an interviewee was studying in a compulsory school or in general education.*² Instead, school was represented as one environment among others in cumulative experiences. A possible interpretation is that school is such an institutionalized and often routinized environment that no "subjective" significant learning experiences take place there. An enlightening example of this is the fact that learning to read before going to school was seen as a significant learning experience in a couple of interviews, but learning to read in school never made it to the list once.

Finally, experiences may vary in their *learning content*. In many learning experiences it is a question of learning skills. In the classification of Jarvis (1987) this type of learning is seen as “learning a reflexive skill”. These skills can be cognitive, and connected with performing an individual occupation, task or job, for instance, or they can be communicative or social and connected with proficiency in languages or getting along with other people.

Life-story, learning experiences and social background

The life-story of an individual can be structured around these significant experiences, which are the turning points of a person’s learning biography. Employing a semi-structured thematic interview was an attempt to strengthen the relation of the turning points of “narrative” to “reality”. Given this approach, what kind of stories, and stories of what kind of reality are then the life-stories of the people we interviewed?

I am inclined to interpret the lists of learning experiences produced as *stories to manage life*. They relate the knowledge and skills that have helped one to cope with problems in life. Naturally they do not reveal all the experiences, situations and knowledge that interviewees have needed in various phases of their lives. As we noted earlier, experiences connected with an institutional life-course may be left untold. Furthermore, experiences that are painful and still not worked through by the interviewees are sometimes not discussed.

The description of differences in accordance with *age and generation* corresponds with the description of educational generations (Antikainen et al. 1996: 34–52). The narratives of the oldest generation are most pronouncedly stories of survival, or as Kauppila says, for them “life is a struggle”. For instance, the experiences coded as significant experiences of 66-year-old Anna (four years of primary school plus one year in upper grade, vocational course, a variety of adult education courses) and the 66-year-old Unto (secondary school, a part of upper secondary school, a college degree) are as follows:

Anna, 66

1. Learning the basics of household work and needlework at home from the age of seven onwards.
2. Growing plants for her family and her whole Karelian village in the time of short food supply during the war when she was about 18.
3. Learning independent housekeeping and cattle tending as a housekeeper about the age of thirty.
4. Becoming more and more skilled in needlework in adult education study circles.
5. Learning the rudiments of the English language in her 50s.

To the questions “Who are you, how would you describe yourself?” Anna responds: “Now well . . . I must say that I haven’t, like, had any complexes, neither an inferiority complex, nor a superiority complex, what I always say is that I use the same door as everyone else does . . .”

Unto, 66

1. Learning the reality of life from the stories of log floaters in his childhood.
2. Learning the skills of a wireless operator while in the army in his youth.
3. The general education provided by his discontinued studies in upper secondary school.
4. Increasing his foreman skills in adulthood.
5. Increasing his general education in adulthood.

To the question “Who are you?” Unto responds: “Wait a moment . . . it’s not such a simple matter . . . to put into words. Well, first of all . . . I’d say . . . I’m quite a . . . quite a typical case of a person . . . with an average education . . . a person educated for tasks . . . such tasks that demand . . . demand well . . . no big decisions of eco . . . well in an economic sense and . . . it’s not so . . . I don’t actually know . . . now when you take . . . well take time into consideration . . . it’s perhaps that as a negative side I’d say that perhaps I have . . . drifted to something . . . drifted to this field that hardly was meant for me . . . like . . . I have drifted to it by force of circumstances . . . for instance to this trade of which I’m not sorry about in the least, but . . .”

The narratives of the middle generation – especially men – reveal the importance of constructing one’s *career* and of education – especially formal education – in this process. A fitting example is Ville, a man who has moved to town from the countryside.

Ville, 50

1. Participating in the building of a cowshed in youth.
2. Demonstration of physical strength and working capacity in youth, before the onset of a back disease.
3. Learning the land surveyor’s trade as a young adult.
4. Graduating from technical school, in spite of his disease, before the age of 30.
5. Studying shooting and blasting, and successful blasting contracts at about the age of 35.
6. Acting as technical designer and expert in constructing a running track at the age of 35 to 40.
7. Contributing to the establishment of a municipal engineering college at a vocational school at the age of 40.
8. Studying law at a university summer course at the age of 45.
9. Studying in the evening classes of technical college at the age of 50.

To the question of identity, “Who are you, how would you describe yourself?” Ville responds: “I am Ville and I can say my name and show that on no account I’m ashamed of it!”

In the narratives of the younger generation we can easily detect the increase of *reflexivity and individualism* compared to the earlier generations. As examples of the learning experiences of the younger generation I present Taru (comprehensive school, school for beauticians, clothing department in vocational school) and Petri (completed Matriculation Examination, discontinued studies in a commercial college, about to graduate from a nursing college).

Taru, 20

1. Sports as a hobby from childhood to puberty.
2. Acquiring language proficiency in everyday life and at school, ever since she was a child.

3. School for beauticians at the age of 17 to 18, as a source of self-assurance and vocational skills.

To the question of "Who are you, how would you describe yourself?" Taru responds: "Decisive . . . and then friendly and one to make friends easily." . . .

. . . "that I think I'm easy-going and awfully natural, I really am what I am" . . .

Petri, 23

1. Growing self-confidence in youth and early adulthood during civil alternative service.
2. Consideration of other people and nursing skills from the childhood onwards but particularly at the college of nursing.

To the question of his self-identity Petri answers: "Well, you could always think that does it really exist any 'self', but I don't think like that, however. I'm an evolving person."

. . . "for quite some time now I've been happy with my own person . . . I love myself and I'm a bit selfish as well" . . .

Gender differences in life-stories are somewhat evident. Some female life-stories are characterized by love affairs and taking care of the spouse and children to such an extent that in our pilot study we indicated that Mervi (39), for instance, appears to have lived through other people (Antikainen et al. 1993). Merriam (1991) makes the general interpretation that the centre in women's lives is love, whereas for men it is work. In Finnish society this statement is not so simple, however. Mervi has completed the Matriculation Examination and a two-year diploma in tourism. Her husband is a teacher, and she too is working as a temporary teacher. We were able to identify the following two experiences as her significant learning experiences:

1. Acquiring language proficiency at school, at college and in everyday life.
2. Development of self-knowledge mainly in adulthood and in teaching.

Perhaps we were unable to see all her "through others" experiences connected with human relations. To the question of "Who are you? How would you describe yourself?" Mervi responds: "I'm an ordinary Finnish woman who is soon approaching middle-age, and a family mother, wife and working woman. In all of these roles what I am . . . in my own opinion I'm obviously worse than I ought to be. All the time I feel like I should be more or better than what I really am able to be."

The differences according to *social class* are parallel to generational differences, as Jarmo Houtsonen observed earlier regarding identity (Antikainen et al. 1996: 53–67). Life is more of "a struggle" for the representatives of lower social classes than for the representatives of upper social classes. For the representatives of the latter group more than for the former group, education is more often an instrument for realizing a "personal dream". According to Houtsonen, to a great extent "theoretical" or "practical" orientation is parallel to social class and educational status.

Negative experiences in secondary education

Generational differences appear to have a bearing on positive and negative perceptions of education. Negative experiences often mentioned by the oldest generation include lack of education, the difficulty of getting into education, and the necessity of discontinuing school. These were connected with the idealization of education by this generation. The other category of negative experience among the oldest generation consisted of single factors, such as a severe or mean teacher. Only in the younger cohort of the middle generation did getting bored and tired of school rise to the central position among negative experiences. In all cases the upper grades of intermediate school, comprehensive school, or upper secondary school are the stages of school tiredness. We can link this to the observation that, whenever significant learning experiences have taken place in formal education, the school in question was never a school of general education, but a vocational school or a university. How can this greater experiential significance of vocational and university education be interpreted? One thing is certain, this remark is logical in relation to the construction of identity: surely vocational and university education are closer to an individual's social and personal identity than general education.

This interpretation of the slight experiential significance of general education is not completely watertight, however. Previously we referred to the importance of general education and upper secondary school in the life of Unto (66). In his usual manner during the biographical interview, Unto gives a wide description of the importance of general education: "They come and ask me all kinds of things not related to work . . . it may be something to do with some discussion that took place during the lunch hour, it may be connected to, well we were discussing here so what does the boss think, does the boss know about this thing, and this is how they approach me . . . if you are able to answer them for sure you feel pleasure, it extends then the . . . the reflex extends to my field of work . . . it is directly reflected there and is measured as the increase of authority then, from either side, if there has been an argument then . . . for sure it is the disadvantaged side that . . . that has lost the argument or has to adm . . . give in so in this situation diminishes . . . the value of the person who gave the information diminishes too, even though that person had been right, because this is how people are." . . .

In the thematic interview he continues: "The increase in general education. It's quite a funny matter in the sense that, as these modern times are what they are, that one doesn't really see that a person is . . . I'd say that in the end, the world belongs to the humanists." . . .

Another interesting case is Jani, a vocational school student. His significant learning experiences are the following:

Jani, 19

1. Learning to deal with the different, owing to the mentally retarded child adopted into his family.

2. Learning weightlifting and other sports.
3. Skills and knowledge provided by the tenth grade.

Jani's interview is relatively directive, proceeding on the terms of the interviewer. In any case, to the thematic interview question of what the tenth grade was like he gives the following answer:

"Well it was . . . my average grade improved with 0.7, so in that sense it was good and it was quite all right . . . in a sense it was a great place, as it wasn't so much a nuisance as the ninth grade was and also it was . . . it was different. There was more freedom, and the gang spent evenings together too, it was a bit of a party." . . .

He goes on to answer the question of what he found important about mastering the knowledge provided by the tenth grade:

"To keep your eyes open and to keep up with the time, well that's what it is . . . read the papers, watch the news and whatever."

Interviewer: "Do you think that you can learn these same things in everyday life, so that you don't necessarily need, say, school, schoolbooks, teachers . . ."

"Well, you learn things but have no, like, foundation for your knowledge, like what is which trade union and whatnot, you know what it is but you don't know in more detail, so school does give you this basic command of things." . . .

Even though the opinions of Unto and Jani about the importance of general education are more unusual than common, their contents reveal the *complexity of youth education* (cf. Young 1993). Knowledge acquired at school may be experienced as unimportant, unless it is connected with the out-of-school experiences of the young people. The "boring" learning taking place at school and the "interesting" out-of-school learning ought to connect. At the same time, youth is the developmental stage in which people are best equipped to acquire analytic and abstract skills and knowledge. I am inclined to believe that it is tremendously difficult to organize youth education in a way that would not be experienced as more or less boring. But even a boring school should provide some interesting and intensive experiences. The experiences of young people also relate to the fact that it is difficult to imagine returning to the days when school still held the monopoly of knowledge – if it ever had it in the first place.

"Significant others" in the learning process

In each significant learning experience, personal and social relations that support learning are easily detectable. They are not included in the definition of a significant learning experience, however, and this tendency is interesting. It means that learning can be studied as personal relations even in technological society. Applying the language of symbolic interactionism, we referred to personal and social relations as *significant others of learning*. Getting acquainted with learning theories and the attempt to link learning in its social context led us to notice that learning has both its local environment and distant

environment (Antikainen et al. 1996: 90–101; cf. Lave and Wenger 1991). Thus it also has *local* significant others and *distant* significant others. The former are always concrete human beings, the latter are often symbolic or representational images.

On examining the relations between the learner and local significant others, we noticed that the character of this relationship had more to do with community (*Gemeinschaft*) than with association (*Gesellschaft*). In this respect, differences between generations do exist, for example, but they are much less significant than I expected.

If we are to study this chronologically with respect to an individual's ageing, the first community experienced most often is one's own *family*. Even in cases as different as those of the old Sami reindeer owner, Niilo (72); the wealthy Swedish-speaking scientist, Allan (61); and the vocational school student, Pasi (19) we can say they have inherited their occupations and qualifications from their families.

After the family, there are two communal spheres in which significant learning experiences take place: 1. hobbies pursued with peers and possibly under the guidance of a coach or a teacher; 2. the sphere of schools, working life, various organizations and adult study circles. Hobbies have kept their position as contexts of significant learning experiences in spite of education becoming more and more general, and despite the increase of mass media. There can be various reasons for this, but on reading the interviews one's attention is drawn to subjectivity connected with hobbies.

This appears to be a question of "*subjectivization*" in the very sense that Peter Berger et al. discuss the concept (1974: 186). Despite the institutionalization of the life-course in a secularized industrial society there is space and need in one's personal life for subjective choices without the support and guidance of the institution – or at least one dominant institution. We can assume that young people choose their hobbies partially in terms of supply and institutional life-course – that is, under social influence or as an outcome of socialization, but there are a number of hobbies in which "*subjectivization*" is present and the choices are made by themselves. At the same time, we have to remember that a self-made choice could have been affected more directly by things like mass media and advertising than a more social choice might have been. Furthermore, as Dale Dannefer (1981) points out in his study of collectors of old cars, the lack of sisters and brothers may indicate the choice of such a hobby. In other words, certain significant learning experiences acquired in connection to hobbies are examples of experiences in which individuality and self, to the point of subjectivization, are central. In these cases, significant others are more difficult to detect, especially in the local environment.

In a recent article I compare two women of two different generations, Anna (66) and Taru (20), the former of whom I see as an example of an "early-modern" case and the latter of a "late-modern" case (Antikainen 1996a). Expressed in the terms of educational generations, Anna belongs to

the “generation of war and scant education” for whom life has been a struggle and education is an ideal. Taru is one of the “generation of social welfare and many educational choices” for whom education has been self-evident, or a commodity, and the self is a problem. The communities of learning and significant others of Anna run as follows:

- Anna learned household work and needlework in her home; the significant other of learning was in particular her aunt who had more time for her than her divorced mother who was responsible for the cattle tending.
- Anna learned plant-growing as a child in her home and later in the school for home economics. During the war she was assigned by the official local crop manager – a civil servant specific to that time – to grow tomatoes, turnips and cabbage plants for the use of her village in Karelia.
- She learned independent housekeeping as a housekeeper for two farmer brothers. She was given a free hand in her work and was treated as an equal.
- She learned more complicated needlework in the seven-month course of home economics that she attended at the age of seventeen during the war. She still remembers her teachers by name. Later, she studied needlework in various adult study circles; she still remembers the names of other participants. She describes herself as having at least “completed secondary education and the Matriculation Examination in sewing”.
- Anna began to study English at an advanced age when her children took up English at school. She joined the English circle at the local adult education centre, even though the news of her studies was received at first with astonishment, laughter and derision by her husband and the people near her.

Similarly, with Taru’s significant learning experiences, it is surprisingly easy to trace her community and significant others:

- Taru took up sports with friends in her childhood. Also an “important”, “enthusiastic” and “supportive” father and a “not-uptight” and “humorous” sports coach gave her guidance and help. In puberty she gave sports up.
- Taru acquired the Swedish language in her home during early childhood when her family lived in Sweden; she learned Finnish from parents and playmates when her family returned to Finland when Taru was four; she learned English at school and in her English club, but also from television, foreign correspondents, and exchange students; Taru depicts her English teacher as a “good and encouraging teacher” and says that her whole class in comprehensive school was particularly interested in English.
- In her biographical interview, Taru tells us that she got the idea of going to the school for beauticians from a film, but in the thematic interview she says: “Well, I don’t know, it just kind of appeared that idea, and I, like, began to develop it in my head that . . .” Her respect for the teachers is partially based on the fact that they have worked on television and have studied abroad. They are “exceptional personalities”. About the skills of the make-up artist she says, among other things

“Yes you have to have a certain amount of initiative, to show interest, sort of like interest in knowing how to do make-up and have the eye for, to be a talented drawer . . .”

At the time of the interview Taru was studying in a vocational school, which she found boring, but she had made a “bet” with her parents that she would stay in school. Taru wants to qualify as a make-up and costume designer for theatre and hopes to work abroad.

In Anna’s life significant *learning experiences were connected with each other, and a skill, once mastered, was developed throughout her life*. Taru’s life-story and learning biography included *breaks and jumps* (such as transfers from one hobby to another, absence from and dropping out of school, moving from one location to another, etc.). At least at the time of the interview, her knowledge of languages seemed to have maintained its position, thus linking new skills and knowledge together. It is clear from Taru’s interview that in her case, the sense of community has a post-traditional quality and a diversity.

In addition to the local environment, the *distant environment*, which to a great extent constitutes the local one, is detectable in the learning experiences of both Anna and Taru. Anna’s distant significant others can be found in the discourses of nation-building, patriotism and agrarian class society. Taru’s distant significant others can be found in the discourses of international networks, mass media and post-industrial society with multiple identities. For Taru, society can be the post-traditional society described by Giddens (1994: 106), the society that is global not in the sense of world community, but rather as an undefined space in which it is possible to transfer from one place to another both concretely – by travelling – and symbolically – via communication systems and images. In a post-traditional society social ties are not ascribed but achieved or made. It is decentralized with regard to authorities and control, but centralized regarding opportunities and problems. The life-stories and life-histories of both women bear the characteristics of *life projects*. In Anna’s case, the project is adjusted to a great extent; in Taru’s case the project is discovered – so far (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). The life experiences of both also include the characteristics of the enchantment of doing, that is, the flow-experience. Both women have been active and have been rewarded with pleasure more than with material rewards. Finally, Anna’s and Taru’s learning experiences, according to my view of learning in general, include “*self*” (individual identity), “*us*” (community in a traditional or post-traditional form) and “*others*” (society).

Does education empower?

The observation and interpretation of empowerment entails at least three problems. First of all, the concept of empowerment is general and indefinite. Secondly, in a biography it is often quite difficult to differentiate empower-

ment from events such as developing, growing up and maturing, events that are basic components of the life of each living and experiencing individual. Thirdly, there is no data available concerning community that would make possible the study of the structures of subordination. For these reasons I have chosen as a method the inductive sampling of cases that are as clear or indisputable as possible. Based on intensive case analysis individuals in the following types of case exhibit life-histories that include empowerment by means of educating oneself:

- Surviving widowhood (or similar traumatic experiences such as divorce or unemployment) by means of education acquired and by means of the position, qualifications or new self-definition that education gives (Antikainen 1996b: 274–278).
- The strengthening of Sami (Lappish) ethnic identity (or corresponding ethnic minority identity) by means of managing in the educational system of the mainstream Finnish culture and by returning to one's own culture as its defender after completion of education (Antikainen 1996b: 275–286).
- Migrators from the countryside to the cities who, by means of education, transferred from manual work to white collar professions, for instance because of their health (Antikainen 1996b: 287–288).
- The realizers of social or personal dreams, that is, the representatives of various social movements or corresponding life-styles³ (Antikainen 1996b: 288–291).

Life-history and lifelong learning

In our study, we have not restricted learning to school and various educational institutions but have made an attempt to analyse people's everyday life as it appears in narrative biographical interviews and themed interviews concerning learning biography. From this point of view we can argue that people *learn by living*.

By life-history we mean the life-story located in the social and situational context. We have indicated that there are generational differences in the meaning of education constructed in the context of the major social changes. The decisive factor has been the cultural resources available for a person. The most significant "subjective" learning has often taken place in a communal context with supportive personal or social relations. These I have called the significant others of learning. I have argued that there exist both local significant others of learning and distant significant others of learning. In addition, an individual's former life experience or subjectivization may be key. The accumulation or intensity of learning experiences may have led to new learning experiences as well.

In conclusion, through our study we are able to categorize the meanings of education as follows (Antikainen et al. 1995 and 1996):

1. *Education as resource*

This characterization may not be far from Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (1984), but our interpretation puts emphasis on everyday life. Despite the surprisingly low level of education that the older generations have reached, it may have proved to be a resource used throughout life. In a late-modern society various transitions of life-course and breaks of identity may be situations in which education is required and used as a resource for managing.

2. *Education as status*

Degrees produce status. However, as the number of educated people has increased, the process producing this status has become increasingly more complicated and indirect. Status is not always based on material rewards, it is a question of more symbolic distinction as well.

3. *Education as conformity*

Industrialization and modernization have resulted in conformity, which has affected the whole population. One cannot avoid coming to this conclusion especially when listening to the representatives of ethnic minorities. At the same time we must point out that people can use the skills and knowledge they have acquired for various purposes, as our analysis of the Sami activists indicates. A change is taking place and an awareness of plurality is growing in Finnish society.

4. *Education as individualization*

The whole educational situation has been constructed to produce individualization. Regrettably, however, the individual is often seen as a creature without cultural and social qualities. In the modern capitalist welfare state, individualization has resulted in the emergence of clients of educational institutions and consumers of education. Currently and to a growing extent, individualization is seen as becoming an entrepreneur. The biographical method we have used provides the opportunity to consider the individual from a more pluralistic perspective.

What is the point of our interpretations with regard to an individual learner? What directions are we able to suggest to an individual who is making plans for his or her education?

First of all, we can obviously state that planning for the skills and knowledge that one intends to use in one's life, and then acquiring these skills by education, has not lost its meaning in Finnish society. Skills, knowledge and qualifications are resources throughout life. Secondly, the life-course includes plenty of events one cannot prepare oneself for. Life requires some inherited resources or fool's luck (Allardt 1995).

In contemporary dialogue *learning society* is to a great extent seen as a synonym for lifelong learning. I am inclined to see lifelong learning not as a new phenomenon. Rather, the representatives of each generation we studied

have acquired learning experiences throughout their lives. What is new is the context and situation in which lifelong learning is currently required. We have to note, however, that this context is only now being constructed. I am referring to a society in which agents have become individualized and in which occupations and social roles keep changing. In this kind of a society preparedness for lifelong learning may well become a constraining challenge.

The concept of learning society can be used in a more general way to refer to the relationship between learner and society. In this sense every society has been a learning society more or less, even if it did not call for such preparedness for changes as our contemporary society.

According to our study, the significance of family as a mediating institution and learning community is central. Children's and teenagers' hobbies alone or with peers have established institutionalized and less known subjective and subjectivizing sides. This subjectivization cannot be studied with traditional concepts of socialization and development.

School as a place for general education has lost some of its meaning. This situation calls for discussion of the relations between the institutionalization and the seemingly mindless routine of school and that of the in-school and out-of-school life of a young person. Vocational and university education are also at risk of losing their meaning if unemployment remains high in the long term.

The line between education and work has already become blurred and may in future become increasingly more obscure. Thus, the socio-political decisions concerning working life are at the same time decisions concerning education.⁴

Our interviews indicated that a group of young people have learned to use institutional education in the manner of Nordic popular (or liberal) adult education. They choose studies that are connected with the social movement and ideology or corresponding lifestyle they represent. These young people may well turn out to be the most active citizens of our future society. It is likely that in the future, education, work and leisure time will be linked with each other even more fundamentally.

Learning has both its local environment and distant environment. The distant environment has become increasingly more global but also more chaotic. The future of a learning society depends more and more on the construction of a world community between and within societies.

A slightly different version of this article appears in Power and Education, edited by Shirley Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe (New York, Peter Lang, 1998).

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Notes

1. I would like to thank everyone who took part in the dialogue in the Finnish women's study network in February and March 1996.
2. We need to distinguish a significant learning experience from an experientially or subjectively significant learning experience. Learning to read and write, for example, are significant learning experiences in a person's life, even though the learner is not aware of it in his or her institutional situation. If school does not produce anything that is experientially significant, I would be very worried about the situation.
3. According to Melucci (1989), new social movements are characterized by four factors. 1) They challenge the system to a great extent on symbolic ground. 2) The forms of movements – such as personal relations and structure of decision making – are signs or messages to the rest of society. 3) Movements basically consist of invisible networks of small groups in everyday life. 4) Movements are aware of the global dimension of complicated contemporary societies.
4. With this I assume that no one is seriously looking forward to a society based on the polarization of employed and unemployed.

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