Exploring HE retention and drop-out - a European biographical research approach

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This symposium is based on the developing work of the research project 'Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-Traditional Learners in HE', funded by the European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme under Key Activity 1 "Policy Co-operation and Innovation" of the Transversal programme. (Project number: **135230-LLP-1-2007-1-UK-KA1-KA1SCR).** The project has eight partners from seven different countries: England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Scotland, Spain and Sweden and runs from 2008 to 2010.

The overall aim of the project is to examine issues of access, retention and non-completion in relation to 'non-traditional' undergraduate students (young people and adults across a wide age range) in higher education on a comparative European basis. Key project objectives are:

- To identify the factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non-completion of non-traditional students (for example, working class, gender and ethnicity issues) to HE
- To increase knowledge and understanding through interdisciplinary research of what promotes or limits the construction of a learner identity among non-traditional students to become effective learners and which enables or inhibits completion of HE

In pursuing these objectives, the project partners are particularly interested in developing in-depth biographical, collaborative and reflexive methods, to illuminate and theorise the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in student's lives. They are also interested in developing an interdisciplinary theoretical understanding of the processes involved, building, for instance, on concepts such as habitus and transitional space.

This symposium, led by the English and Irish partners, sets out to report on the project progress half way through its funded life and raise key questions about the theoretical and methodological issues involved in developing such an auto/biographical research approach across seven countries.

Access and Retention: Exploring the literature
The project literature review (http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl/files/Literature_Review.pdf) was developed as a formative document in the first year of the project. It was intended to inform and complement the main project research which takes a biographical research approach to examine and understand the experiences of non-traditional students in

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relation to access and retention. The literature review focused primarily on the key factors which influence retention and drop-out in higher education for 'non-traditional' students. By 'non-traditional' the project means students who are under-represented in higher education and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors. This would include, for example, students whose family has not been to university before, students from low-income families, students from (particular) minority ethnic groups, mature age students and students with disabilities.

The literature review was developed originally from mainly English language publications and OECD and national data sources, with a particular emphasis on the findings of recent comparative international and European studies. It was later supplemented by specific perspectives from different partner countries. It outlined the wider policy context of access and retention from a global and European perspective, seeking to identify and unpack international patterns of retention whilst also clarifying different understandings and contexts of access, retention and drop-out across Europe, more particularly project partner countries.

One key finding was the increasing differentiation of Higher Education across Europe which has a direct impact on both access and retention. The literature review identified key factors that influence retention, success and drop-out and their impact on particular under-represented groups of non-traditional students.

Key issues from the literature on retention, success and drop-out
For the purposes of this symposium, the key issues from the project literature will be derived from different theoretical perspectives on student retention as a prelude to exploring in greater depth the project's auto/biographical research approach.

Tinto's integrationist model of retention
A dominant influence in the literature on retention, success and drop-out has been the work of Vincent Tinto from the USA. According to Longden (2004: 126-7), Tinto's longitudinal view of student retention embodies three consecutive periods:

- 'separation' where a student's individual entry characteristics directly influence departure decisions, commitment to the institution and to the shared goal of persisting to graduation;
- 'integration' where initial commitment to the institution and the objective of graduation affects the student's integration into the academic and social systems of HE:
- 'assimilation' which entails structural integration through the meeting of the explicit standards required by the HE institution

Tinto's interactionist model identifies five conditions for student retention: *expectations, support, feedback, involvement and learning*. Students are affected by the climate of expectations on campus, in particular their perceptions of staff expectations of their performance. They are more likely to persist within HE in settings that provide academic, social and personal support, for example, summer bridging programmes, mentoring programmes, student clubs etc. Early feed-back and information on their performance is another factor in increasing the likelihood of persisting within HE and this is further bolstered when they are actively involved in some way as valued members of the institution. Most importantly, according to Tinto, 'students who learn are students who stay'. Students who are actively involved in learning, that is who spend more time on

task, especially with others, are more likely to learn and, in turn, more likely to stay (Tinto 2003).

Tinto's analysis has been very influential within HE. For example, it has prompted an emphasis in the UK on the 'student life cycle approach' within Widening Participation. This identifies different stages for HE intervention: aspiration raising, pre-entry activities, admissions, first term/semester, moving through the course and progression; at which university student support can be targeted. http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/institutions/wp/lifecycle.

Critiques of Tinto and Interactionist Approaches
While the student life cycle approach offers some useful practical pointers for universities, and has certainly been influential in UK policy and practice, a potential problem is that the life cycle is defined primarily in institutional terms. As such, it could be seen as an attempt to classify and control student behaviour rather than engage in institutional change. This in turn highlights a continuing concern with such predominantly interactionist approaches in that they tend to prioritise encounters within the HE system and, at the same time, marginalise the effect of student's wider socio-cultural and socio-economic circumstances. With particular reference to 'non-traditional' students, they are also 'characterized by assumptions about student conformity and adaptation to the institution which may be culturally specific, and thus not transferable…' (Ozga & Sukhandan 1998). Laing et al (2003: 178-179) are also critical of how a focus on fixed variables ignores personal meanings and so has led researchers to concentrate on the descriptive properties of withdrawal rather than trying to identify explanatory properties.

Sociocultural Theories
These critical perspectives lead on to a different theoretical approach which may have may have particular significance for 'non-traditional' students. This is concerned with social/cultural understandings and explanations of student performance in higher education. In their 2005 book on 'Degrees of Choice' Reay, David and Ball draw heavily on Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, habitus and field to understand and explain student choice in higher education. The following extract summarises several key points:

> …, the concept of habitus emphasises the enduring influence of a range of contexts, familial, peer group, institutional and class culture, and their subtle, often indirect, but still pervasive influence on (HE) choices. It foregrounds the power of implicit and tacit expectations, affective responses and aspects of cultural capital such as confidence and entitlement, often marginalised in academic research. (2005:27).

Reay et al's work highlights how previous social and cultural experience has an important impact on student access. They look at a range of higher education applicants with clear differences underpinned by class and ethnic habitus and greatly differing levels of cultural capital. They show how some 'traditional' entrants' are in Bourdieu's terms 'fish in water'. Their higher education choices and careers are a result of living out 'normal' biographies which are "linear, anticipated and predictable, unreflexive transitions, often gender and class specific, rooted in well-established lifeworlds". In contrast, students from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds encounter higher education as an unfamiliar field and are 'fish out of water.' Their higher education choices (and careers) are heavily influenced by external factors like financial and family circumstances, employment status and the apparent ethnic mix of different universities.

This emphasis on the impact of cultural capital and habitus in HE choice can be extended to interaction within higher education, and, by implication, issues of retention and drop-out. Reay et al (2005: 28-34) argue, in the context of HE, that when habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, the resulting disjunctures can generate change and transformation but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty. A sociocultural approach further highlights the importance of 'institutional habitus' where organisational culture reproduces particular social and cultural capital, usually of benefit to the middle classes (Stuart 2006: 171). This raises fundamental issues about whether, in tackling issues of student retention and drop-out, the emphasis should be on HE institutions and staff somehow filling a student cultural /academic deficit or whether the stress should be much more on the ways HE institutions need to change in order to facilitate student success.

Here, Thomas draws from the work of Bourdieu and Reay et al, in focusing on 'institutional habitus' which "should be understood as more than the culture of educational institutions; it refers to relational issues and priorities, which are deeply embedded, and sub-consciously informing practice." (Thomas 2002: 431) In relation to student retention in HE she goes on to argue that:

> ..if an institutional habitus is inclusive and accepting of difference, and does not prioritize or valorise one set of characteristics, but rather   celebrates and prizes diversity and difference....students from diverse backgrounds will find greater acceptance of and respect for their own practices and knowledge, and this in turn will promote higher levels of persistence in HE (Thomas 2002: 431)

Thomas uses this analysis of institutional habitus to argue for a comprehensive and critical exploration, understanding and development of the different institutional practices that impact on student experience, retention, success and drop-out.

Sociocultural Explanations for Drop-out
Thomas also uses her exploration of the notions of habitus and institutional habitus to focus more specifically on drop-out:

> If a student feels that they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw earlier (2002: 431

However, she later combined with others (Quinn et al, 2005) to take this view of drop-out a stage further. Based on in-depth contact with young, first generation, working-class students through a participative 'research jury' method, Quinn et al argue that drop-out should be posed not just as an educational problem, but also as a manifestation of socio-cultural change:

> Although drop-out is increasingly recognised as complex and multifaceted, it is still generally conceptualised as a path that can be traced, however winding, with problems that can be rectified through institutional change or better student support. (2005: 63)

They go on to highlight the importance of understanding drop-out as a cultural narrative that has an element of self-fulfilling prophecy:

> This narrative creates an expectation that in this (working-class) area and in these institutions (new universities) many students will drop out. (Ibid)

However in the context of this project, Quinn et al also make the important observation that:

> To understand drop-out we need to look beyond student support needs or institutional barriers to cultural narratives and local contexts. (2005: 57)

This serves to highlight the role of biographical research in exploring and illuminating student experience, prior to and within higher education. Using a more grounded biographical research, issues in retention, success and drop-out can be investigated in greater depth.

Methodological Issues: Approaching Auto/biographical Research Differently
Since the 'turn' to biographical methods (Chamberlayne et al, 2000) life history and biographical approaches are being used in diverse ways in diverse settings in European adult education research. As a result there are commonalities and differences in relation to theoretical and epistemological approaches, the relationship between researcher and researched and ways of interviewing (West et al, 2007). These commonalities and differences are reflected within our research team. Even different terms are used such as life history, biography or narrative and used in different ways. Life history and biographical research has developed from a wide range of disciplinary and philosophical influences such as the Chicago School, Max Weber, the Frankfurt School, feminism and psychoanalysis. Historically countries in Europe have their own particular intellectual traditions which have shaped the way that adult education researchers undertake biographical approaches. Importantly and fundamentally this raises issues of the role of objectivity and subjectivity in the research process:

> In the German and Danish traditions, for instance, there has been an attempt to build what is termed a more objective hermeneutics – partly to establish the efficacy of biography (or life history!) within the academy, especially in sociology. In the United Kingdom, there is greater scepticism towards the positioning of the researcher as 'objective', under the influence of feminism and post-structuralism. There is greater emphasis given to the intersubjectivity at the core of research and an associated questioning of efforts to construct the 'truth' of a life or to present the researcher as easily distinguished from the 'object' of his/her enquiry (West et al, 2007: 280).

Commonalities and differences within our research team, however, are not confined to the transnational level. Within the UK team, for example, there are disciplinary differences as the Warwick team are rooted in the sociological tradition while the Canterbury team favour psychological and psychosocial perspectives. This affects the way we use and analyse life stories with the Warwick team focusing on the collectivity of stories and issues of class and gender, for example, while the Canterbury team focus more on the individual and the self, albeit located in a socio-cultural context.

Working transnationally highlights methodological issues particularly in relation to comparing research findings when research traditions and approaches and cultural

contexts are different. These have to be worked through and discussed at team meetings. Working transnationally also has its advantages as it enables the researcher to step outside national paradigms as we are introduced to new ideas, approaches and a different verstehen of the social world (Merrill, 1997).

UK Approach to Life Histories: Barbara and Rennie
Barbara and Rennie draw on three theoretical perspectives: symbolic interactionism, feminism and critical theory – perspectives which encompass humanistic and subjectivist concerns. At first sight the choice of symbolic interactionism with feminism and critical theory may appear to be oppositional, as symbolic interactionism focuses on the individual while feminism and critical theory stress more collective influences in people's lives. However, the three theoretical perspectives can be seen to complement each other.

We draw on symbolic interactionism and the Chicago School because it recognises the potential of people as agents in shaping their lives and the social world. Symbolic interactionists view social reality from the perspectives of the social actor/s and enable us to understand how the social world is constructed through interaction with others and processes of negotiation and interpretation thus linking the self with society. The self is constructed in a social context. We use the concept of agency as developed by Mead and other symbolic interactionists, to look at how individuals use their agentic self to overcome structural inequalities and access education and then keep on going on as a learner. The concept of agency is, therefore, important in understanding how adult students develop, or not, a learning identity and career. In using the concept of career we are again drawing on the work of later symbolic interactionists such as Goffman and Becker. Agnieszka Bron, our Swedish partner, also uses the work of Mead and his ideas of the interaction between the 'I' and 'me' to understand the extent to which the roots of our individuality and self is to be found in communication between people in understanding biographies.

Feminism, as noted, has been an important influence in UK biographical research. Feminist researchers highlighted the importance of researching the lives of ordinary women in both the private and public spheres. Feminist biographical approaches importantly give voice to those being researched – often marginalised women. In an adult education context it enables us to understand the experiences and processes of learning through the voices of adult students. Subjectivity and intersubjectivity are key aspects of the research process as feminists break down the power relationship between the researched and researched. Feminist interviewers strive to build more equal and democratic relationships so that the interview becomes more like a conversation. They challenge the idea of the traditional interviewer as being the sole source of authority in relation to knowledge. Importantly feminist approaches illustrate that individual lives are collective ones and that the personal is political. For example, the working class women in our study share similar gendered and classed experiences such as having to leave school at the earliest possible age in order to get a job, then get married and have a family.

Our third influence – critical theory – has links with feminism in terms of using research to transform society and also challenges and critiques dominant ideologies:

Critical theorists have also challenged what they perceive to be an unreflexive instrumentalism, where research is constructed as a technical matter, with clearly delineated sets of problems, and the aim is to establish and measure causal links between key variables, without reference to social justice or human values…Critical theory offers a means of using individual stories and whole biographies to understand and explain how uninterrogated yet oppressive scripts, alongside harsh material realities, can shape what people say or do. Critical theory helps us to understand that, although biographies are individual, they are redolent with the collective: people share common experiences of class and gender inequalities. (Merrill & West, 2009).

By using symbolic interactionism, feminism and critical theory we can more fully understand the interaction of agency and structure and the micro and macro in shaping people's lives collectively.

UK Approach to Life Histories: Linden and Mehri
The approach to biographical research in the United Kingdom, as noted, is greatly influenced by feminism (and oral history), both conceptually and methodologically (Merrill and West, 2009). Rosalind Edwards (1993) has chronicled how higher education could have a double-edged effect on women: policies and institutions can concern themselves with inputs and outputs and privilege disciplines over students, to the detriment of women learners and their experience. Moreover, the combination of education with family life is never easy for women, given what she sees to be the masculine cultural identity of universities with its lack of concern for the emotional dimensions of learning alongside a continuing maldistribution of emotional labour in families.

It should also be noted that the use of biographical methods in studying adult learners, in the United Kingdom, was fuelled by dissatisfaction with survey and other traditional research methods. These have been seen as reductive and superficial, when, for instance, building typologies of learners and their motives. Alan Woodley et al (1987), in a large-scale survey of mature students in higher education in the United Kingdom, distinguished between vocational and 'more personal reasons' in 'choosing to learn'. Linden West (1996), using a biographical approach, illustrated, in some depth, the shaky epistemological basis of the distinction: of how vocational motivation could be rooted in deeply personal concerns, even if people might initially provide a vocational rationale for their studies, influenced by the power of instrumental ideology in the wider culture. Given an opportunity to revisit their stories, in the context of longitudinal research, participants could become more aware of how much they might have rationalized their motivation in the terms dictated by powerful cultural narratives (getting a better job, for instance) to the neglect of more personal issues (a sense of educational failure, under-achievement or feelings of meaninglessness) (West, 1996). The nature of the stories people tell, and the interplay of ideology and personal narrative becomes a prime focus in work of this kind not least because the learner is conceived to be the main character and potential author of a life and can find a more critical, confident and agentic voice in processes of story telling within educational settings (Fleming, 2003). It is also to be noted that the use of symbolic interactionism, feminism and critical theory has been complemented by the development of more psychosocial perspectives on learners and learning. This includes, (but is not limited to), the ability to conduct research that is attuned to issues of emotion, experience, subjectivity and intersubjectivity, unconscious processes and the incorporation of the researcher's subjectivity in the research. But it also suggests

sensitivity to cultural, social and political contexts in which the research is taking place (Merrill and West, 2009).

Irish Approach to Life Histories: Ted and Fergal
The Irish team's theoretical position is largely informed by critical theory (especially the work of Jürgen Habermas), the related but distinct field of critical pedagogy (Freire; Giroux and Aronowitz), social psychology (Bateson, Bruner, Fromm, Marcuse & Vygotsky) and the work of the radical historian E P Thompson.

In bringing such a wide, and in some ways diverse, set of disciplines and thinkers to bear on the research we have inevitably encountered tensions, paradoxes and contradictions. However, at the heart of our approach and what all these writers emphasise is the intersubjective, value ridden and historically conditioned nature of human life. Furthermore, within this body of work identity, and narratives of identity, are strongly shaped by power both in terms of actual experience and varying conceptions of the possible (Bloch, 1995; Freire, 1972). Recognising that social phenomena are relational, bound to material interests and are generated within social structures is integral to critical theory. This is premised on the belief "that in order to understand and explain social phenomena we cannot avoid evaluating and criticising societies' own self understanding" (Sayer, 1992, p. 39). However, perhaps where we differ with other versions of critical theory is in our strong emphasis and concern with the way people make sense of, and enact, freedom and agency (Freire, 1972; Harre & Gillert, 1994; Thompson, 1991). Finally, this theoretical position implies a commitment to critical reflexivity about how assumptions, categories, method and theoretical paradigms are related to each other and inform the process of research. Engaging in critical reflexivity also includes thinking against some of the weaknesses within critical theory itself especially in the way that a number of critical theorists avoid recognizing the value of empirical research perhaps as part of a longstanding, albeit valid, criticisms of positivism and empiricism.

Our approach to semi-structured interviews is informed by this reflexivity and an awareness of the complex, intersubjective way meaning is made in the world. In part this is based on the Freirean conception of dialogue. For Freire creating an open and genuine dialogue about needs and values is fundamental for the development of critical and theoretical knowledge. Ideally dialogue allows for an equal co-investigation of identity and the world. In reality creating the conditions for egalitarian dialogue within academic research is a difficult and fraught matter in which power, personality and setting have a marked influence on the process. To overcome these obstacles, at least partially, and lay the foundations for such a dialogue requires both flexibility and reflexivity in responding to both the explicit and tacit content of the exchange. We believe it also means the researcher should seek to remain humanly present, receptive and attentive within the interview without imposing themselves.

If the narration of experience is understood as the process of actively making meaning by thinking, valuing and agentic subjects this also sets some of the terms for our analysis. Freire (1972) and Thompson (1977) argue that to reconstruct experience within wider political and cultural contexts is an interpretive act, an interpretive act which demands rigour, respect, imagination and empathy. Or in other words, to paraphrase Ricoeur, interpretation demands both a willingness to listen and a willingness to suspect. To construct a historically aware, engaged, attentive yet sceptical version narrative research begins with the simple observation that life histories are constructed and told in

the context of a lifeworld. Without a lifeworld there are no stories. Following Bateson (1979) we believe that the meaning we ascribe to events is constituted and determined by the set of premises and presuppositions with which we operate and that in turn creates our map of the world. For Habermas this background awareness is the lifeworld. As the lifeworld is colonised by the functional imperatives of the political and economic system through the steering mechanisms of power and money, it is a fundamental position of this team that narratives are implicated in this problem. Narratives may have a dialectical relation with lifeworld pathologies. When this is applied to the field of HE the stories of students potentially tell us both about the way in which the educational system is implicated in both the reproduction of the capitalist system (Aronowitz, 2000) and is nevertheless a location for resistance and the remaking of identity (Giroux, 1983).

In this formulation narratives embody the way that individuals are constituted and make meaning in history and how power is both reproduced and potentially transformed through hegemonic and counter-hegemonic social-cultural narratives. It follows from this that we analyse narrative content and themes alongside an inquiry into types and form of narrative that are produced in a given historical conjuncture (Alheit, 2002). In this sense our inquiry is also about the structured silences, elisions and the unsayable within individual and collective narratives. This includes the way powerful, expert specialized discourses that largely remain outside of everyday experience but exert enormous influence in the world and undoubtedly have a bearing upon students and education (for a timely example one only has to look at the rarified world of financial capital).

Such an approach provides a guarantee against "methodological individualism" that is "the doctrine that facts about societies and social phenomena generally, are explained solely in terms of facts about individuals" (Bhaskar, 1979, p.34). This means that agency, choice and experience need to be theorised in relation to generating structures and social values in a manner which avoids both abstracted empiricism and the temptations of grand theory. The stories of students, the central focus of the research project, are therefore viewed as part a social and collective practice which is produced through individual agency against and within structures.

It is hoped that this methodology, which employs grounded empirical research, narrative analysis and the philosophical resources of critical theory will enrich the exploration and analysis of the qualitative data. The ultimate aim of our team is to engage with the validity and importance of subjective experience while attending to the complexity of social relations and the historically contingent nature of individual and collective social life.

German Approach to Life Histories
While the UK, Irish and other partner approaches in this research favour a humanistic and subjectivist approach our German partner, Peter Alheit and Frank Schoemer adopt a more 'scientific' objective approach influenced by the work of Schütze and Rosenthal. They use the term narrative interview. The differences centre on the role of the researcher and the structuring of interviews. In contrast they argue for social distance between the researcher and the researched. The interviewing process is divided into distinct phases with the aim of encouraging participants to speak extensively and freely with minimum intrusion by the interviewer:

> The interviewer – having explained the purpose of the study – begins with a single, open-ended question, such as: 'Please tell me about your learning life

history'. The interview is conducted …in a methodologically controlled way, in that the storyteller must have trust as well as understand that the material will be treated confidentially and that s/he is in control of things (Alheit, 1982). A second phase involves more structured questions, shaped by the researcher's theoretical interests (Merrill & West forthcoming, 2009).

The interview process is also structured by ten rules which the interviewer has to follow. Rule 7, for example, states that; 'when the interviewee has begun, remain in the background as far as possible' (Alheit, 1982). The rule continues to stress to the researcher 'don't make you the interviewee's 'mate', and never comment on his/her views' (Alheit, 1982). The narratives are analysed by a group of researchers followed by more focused interviews.

Sensitising Concepts

We are now in the early stages of analysing the interviews we have undertaken so far with first and final year students, those who have dropped-out and those who have dropped-out and later re-engaged with learning. In order to make sense of the stories we have identified some sensitising concepts which will help to inform our theoretical and conceptual frameworks. We have decided to have a flexible approach to grounded theory which is not too rigid to suit the approaches of all partners. Two key sensitising concepts have been identified reflecting the interdisciplinary of the research team: a sociological one and a psychological one. Habitus, as the sociological approach, is being used as a bridging concept while transitional space is being used as the psychological one.

Habitus

Habitus is, of course, most closely identified with the work of Bourdieu. While recognising the extraordinary contribution he has made to overcoming the antinomies between agency and structure in traditional social science, and some of the similarities with critical theory (Calhoun, 1993), we want to outline some of the ways the Ireland research perspective diverges from Bourdieu. As Giroux (1983) and Calhoun (1994) have pointed out, his theory is far more useful for explaining reproduction than transformation. Related to this is that accounts of habitus have underplayed the way people reason, value and intervene, often in unpredictable ways, in their own lives (Sayer, 2005). Habitus is nonetheless a powerful conceptual tool for describing social practices within a dynamic conception of agency and structure.

A Freirean conception of habitus was employed in a previous Ireland study of mature students (Murphy & Fleming, 2002). Freire's idea of common knowledge (Bell, B., Gaventa, J. & Peters, J. 1990) was utilised to underline the idea that adults arrive in university packed full of knowledge. However, the knowledge is subjective, experience based and frequently anecdotal. In contrast the university offers objective, theoretical and generalised knowledge. Research works between these two worlds. It is in the epistemological fault lines between these forms of knowledge that the power differentials between student and the academy are worked out - mostly through the university winning the battle for dominance. The examination and marking system are the forums for this conflict. As a way of transcending this conflicting situation Freire suggests that student have a right to know what they know already, but in a different way:

> …going beyond the common sense of the people, with the people. My
> quest is not to go alone but to go with the people. Then having a certain

scientific understanding of how the structures of society work, I can go
beyond the common-sense understanding of how the society works - not to stay
at this level but, starting from this, to go beyond. Theory does that.

When students arrive they bring with them their hopes, despair, expectations, knowledge, which they got by living. Freire puts it this way:

They do not arrive empty. They arrive full of things…they bring with them
their knowledge at the level of common sense, and they have the right to go
beyond this level of knowledge. …This is a right that the people have, and I call it
the right to know better what they already know.

Knowing better means precisely going beyond the *common sense* in order to discover the *reason* for the facts (Bell *et al.*, 1990, p. 157).

Our German colleagues draw on and use the concept of habitus and capital in the tradition of Bourdieu. They look at how a person's habitus and their experience of learning is shaped by their biography, social, cultural and economic capital and the symbolic and intellectual capital of a particular university. This process produces a range of educational biographies as the individual habitus responds to and copes in different ways to the symbolic and intellectual capital of the university. Both the person's biography and the context of the university – whether it is elitist or reform, for example, are important in shaping the habitus and learning experience of whether an adult student succeeds or not. The different educational biographies are grouped together to form different typologies of students such as 'patchworkers', 'careerists', 'integrators' and 'educational climbers'.

Transitional Space
Linden West has developed a psychosocial perspective on learning and non-traditional learners. He, as noted, is influenced by feminism and oral history but also uses psychoanalytic perspectives in considering what enables learners to keep on keeping on in what can be conflict ridden and potentially fragmenting experience (West, 1996; West, 2001; Merrill and West, 2009). Drawing on the work of Donald Winnicott (1971), he characterises higher education as a transitional space in which there is a constant negotiation and renegotiation of self in relationship to others and the cultural world of the university. (This is where there are possibilities for integrating notions of habitus, disposition and field with psychosocial ideas). Basic questions may be asked in entering university, especially but not exclusively when a 'fish out of water', in Bourdieu's sense, of who a person is, has been and might want to be. This in turn may provoke intense anxiety about a capacity to cope with change or whether a person is good enough in the eyes of significant people, whether other students or tutors. New transitions, via 'unconscious memory in feeling', (an idea deriving from clinical practice), may evoke connections with earlier transitional moments, such as going to school or in adolescence. Past and present may elide at such times and transitions may be especially fraught, if past ones were traumatic.

However, West also chronicles how transitional space may be claimed in higher education and stronger senses of self forged in the process, not least with the help of new relationships and significant others, such as the good teacher. These are people who may inspire the learner and with whom they can identify. They may be experienced as understanding and valuing what the learner is struggling to do, say and be. Students

can also draw on new discourses – such as feminism - and, in interaction with others, begin to compose alternative and less self-disparaging narratives, creating, in effect, new kinds of psychosocial capital. It is to be noted that 'stories constitute a frame of intelligibility…. it is the…self-narrative that determines which aspects of our lived experience get expressed, and it is…self narrative that determines the shape of our lived experiences …these stories actually shape…our lives…' (White, 1995: 13-14). Higher education provides potential space for creating new self-narratives.

However, it should be added that West, and other theorists (see Sclater, 2004), challenge what they perceive as a tendency to reduce processes of restorying lives – as in higher education - to a simple matter of positioning or re-positioning in discourse, as in some poststructuralist readings. This fails, they insist, to do justice to the psychological complexities of how people, to an extent, dynamically, and often unconsciously, position themselves in particular discourses as well as find the resources to challenge and change their positioning. West uses psychoanalytic object relations theory to illuminate the ambivalence and ambiguity that can lie at the heart of educational participation and the generation of new self-narratives. The self, in this perspective, is conceived to be contingent and dependent on others, not least at times of transition and change. Drawing on clinical insights, psyche works like a cast of characters in a play. There may be characters that stifle, abuse or discourage us and such intersubjective dynamics get translated into intrasubjective ones: self-disparagement can be strong, including in higher education. Learners, even apparently confident people, such as educators entering a new Masters course, can be full of anxiety when engaging with the cultural space represented by a new programme and or institution. These moments can, unconsciously, reconnect with earlier excursions into unfamiliar territory, such as going to school or even birth itself, where we are pitched out into a potentially terrifying world and are utterly dependent on others for survival. People can feel, to greater and lesser degrees, anxious and defensive as a result and older narratives may be clung on to tenaciously as a way of seeking to manage uncertainty and self-doubt (West, 2007).

This symposium reflects work in progress. It is intended to identify and develop a range of contrasting theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches which project partners have explored so far. Contributions and constructive criticism from other participants in the symposium will be particularly welcome as a way of reflecting on and refining the project's initial thinking and development.

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