

# Learning Lives

Learning, Identity and Agency in the Life Course



*Welcome to the second newsletter of our project !*

*The Learning Lives project aims to deepen understanding of the complexities of learning in the life-course, which can then be used in identifying, implementing and evaluating strategies for sustained positive impact upon learning opportunities, dispositions and practices and upon the empowerment of adults. The research combines multiple retrospective life history interviews with a group of 120 adults with a series of 'real time' interviews tracking people's life courses, together with an analysis of all 13 waves of the British Household Panel Survey.*

### **Our work so far.....**

After two years of fieldwork and preliminary data analysis, the project is now in the process of producing early findings. We have talked about our work at a number of seminars and conferences, as listed below. In addition we prepared two papers for the annual conference of the **British Educational Research Association (BERA)** in September 2006, as well as running two symposia at the **Standing Conference on University Teaching & Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA)** in July. We are also participating in the **TLRP** conference in Glasgow in November.

We are in the second year of data collection, and each of the 120 respondents in the Learning Lives project will have their own views of the experience of being interviewed, and the effect it has had on their understanding of their own lives.

One person being interviewed by the Leeds team took the time to send us his comments on what it felt like to be involved in the research. All interviews cover the formal as well as the informal learning, but it was the informal side that caught his interest.

He writes:

*Being interviewed about learning from life as opposed to the formal setting of a classroom is a revealing process. It causes one to take stock of one's life in a way that in many respects is more constructive than the competitive demands of a contemporary CV. One is able to think about what one has learned from other people and what one has observed about the pressures of organisations or other environments. One can also think about what has been good or strengthening as well as the negatives. Probing questions by the interviewer encourages one to reassess one's own psychological profile as well as attitudes to life in general. For example, I was able to trace inclinations I had for environments that were disciplined and ordered and where there was opportunity for experimenting with one's identity-whether it be as an actor or wearing the uniform of a soldier in the regular army-to early childhood events. The interviews were conducted in an atmosphere that was both friendly and encouraging. They taught me that considerable value can be placed on life experience as well qualifications in the job selection process.*

## **In this issue: Progress reports from all partners**

Introduction: our work so far	1
Brighton Life-History Team	2
Leeds Life-History Team	2
Exeter Life-History Team	3
Exeter Survey Team	3

## Brighton Life-History Team

We are well into the second year of data collection and have managed to maintain good relationships with most of our project participants. Increasingly we are focussing on what we are calling 'primal or narrative' learning – a particular theme that has emerged in a good deal of our work.

Analysis of the data is ongoing and we are beginning to define a series of themes. One of these will be explored in the paper to be given at the ECER conference in Geneva and deals with the question of how the personal knowledge we are generating relates to the identity agency and learning of our participants.

### **Recent and upcoming contributions include presentations at the following events:**

- **September 2006:** *Coming to Know: Personal Knowledge, Expert Knowledge and the Construction of Knowledge in Research Knowledge* (ECER, Geneva)
- **July 2006:** *Bathing (or Drowning) in Data* (working paper for Learning Lives Workshop, University of Leeds)
- **May 2006:** *Curriculum, Narrative and Social Future* (World Curriculum Conference, Tampere)
- **May 2006:** *Interrogating Educational Reforms: The Contribution of Biographical Studies in Education*, ('Répenser la justice dans le domaine de l'éducation et de la formation', INRP, Université de Lyon)
- **March 2006:** *The Rise of the Narrative* and *In Search of 'Home': Becoming and Belonging* (ESREA Conference, University of Thessaly, Volos)
- **February 2006:** 'Developing Life History' & 'Professional Life Politics' (Presentation and workshop at CVU Midt Vest, Denmark)

## Leeds Life History Team

The Leeds team have produced a Working Paper on the patterns of adult engagement with formal learning, the reasons for that engagement, and its significance in people's lives. Our findings suggest that engagement with formal learning is often associated with significant life changes and is intertwined with informal learning, which can take place in all or any aspects of a person's life. For a small but significant minority of people, engaging in formal learning becomes a key part of their life and identity. The full working paper can be found on the Learning Lives website (<http://www.learninglives.org/publications>).

At Leeds we are focusing particularly on adults enrolled on education programmes and on older adults who have sought careers advice before the start of the project. We have found that there are many other respondents in the wider project sample, of all ages, who have received help at some time either from guidance services or other agencies or individuals and, as Fellows of the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC), two members of the Leeds team (Geoff Ford and Ruth Hawthorn) have a particular interest in career choice and the development of careers advice for adults.

Some early findings from the project have fed into the current Government review of DfES provision for adults (<http://www.iagreview.org.uk>). This currently includes 'next step' information and advice on learning and employment, and the 'LearnDirect' national helpline, as well as specific local initiatives provided by FE colleges, or the 'adult guidance' offered by numerous not-for-profit groups, or European-funded services for specific target groups in and out of employment, as well as Jobcentre Plus provision. More about this work can be found on the Learning Lives website (<http://www.learninglives.org>).

### **Key findings with implications for public policy include:**

- that adults participate in education and training throughout their lives, but many do so intermittently, with periods of engagement interspersed with periods of non-engagement: this suggests a need not only for adult guidance provision but also for simple, clear marketing so that when it is needed, people remember having heard how to access it;
- although there are examples in the study of individuals making decisions as a direct result of advice from a guidance worker, more common are decisions shaped by family, people met through agencies not specifically for career advice, friends or employers: in order to improve the quality of such informal advice, a well-known, reliable and accessible source of information to improve and strengthen these helpers' advice would improve the life chances of those seeking their help.

## Exeter Life History Team

We too are well into the second year of data collection and have completed as many as five interviews with some of our first project participants. In addition, some new participants have been recruited whose narratives offer the possibility of insights into particular issues. As in most biographical research, the life stories that have emerged in the interview transcripts reveal extraordinary complexity and diversity and we now confront the challenge of making effective use of our data.

We are increasingly working on systematic analysis of the data. A particular focus of our analysis is on exploring what the life-stories have to say about agency and learning in the lifecourse: that is, what our narratives can tell about the ways in which people are able to give direction to their life, and the learning that informs and follows from this.

We have also been involved in a number of conference presentations and we have written a substantial working paper on *Theorising and researching agency in the life course*. (See [www.learninglives.org/publications](http://www.learninglives.org/publications) for a downloadable version). This work is being used to inform papers written for sharing insights and ideas at other seminars and conferences.

## Exeter Panel Survey Team

The quantitative part of the project is using archive data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) which started in 1991 and is an ongoing panel survey of a representative sample of over 5,000 households resulting in 10,000+ interviews of adults. There are three areas of activity and work is now well underway in each.

The first is using the BHPS questionnaire to develop robust measures of learning, identity and agency in their different dimensions and the testing of the validity of these against a range of outcome variables. A paper on the conceptualisation and measurement of agency using the BHPS is currently being written and will be presented at BERA (2006). This has involved turning category component variables that measure different dimensions of agency into separate 'scales' (or latent variables) that allow these dimensions to be measured independently, thus allowing their determinants and consequences to be measured separately.

The second is mapping case study participants' learning trajectories onto the wider trends and processes in the UK as revealed through analysis of the BHPS. This has involved designing a questionnaire for the case study participants using carefully selected BHPS items which will be used as reference points in the mapping exercise. We are currently piloting this work and will be reporting on our findings shortly.

The third area of activity involves working cross-sectionally and longitudinally with the BHPS data to gradually move towards applying multilevel models of change and event history analytic techniques to explore (a) the significance of learners' identities and agency for their learning, learning dispositions, learning practices and achievements and (b) how transformations in these dispositions, practices and achievements impact upon learners' sense of identity and agency and their abilities to exert control over their lives. Much of the work to date has involved studying participation in formal adult learning. Papers have been presented at **SCUTREA 2006** and **BERA 2006**.

Drawing from an increasingly sizeable and rich collection of interview data, Stirling produced a working paper on working learning lives, now available on the Learning Lives website. Stirling is focussing on learning in connection with work and unemployment. Our interviewees include a number of people working in the 'new economy' (such as call centre workers), in established industries such as engineering or construction, in public services (particularly local council employees) and in creative activities. Some are unemployed people learning in various types of community based activities.

As well as asking them to tell us about their life stories in general, we are looking at learning in a broad sense, covering their experiences in formal educational institutions like school or college, and also their experiences of learning in less formal ways, particularly in or around their jobs.

During the year, the Stirling team gave a number of presentations. Irene Malcolm explored issues of emotional labour at the ESREA Life History Network conference at Volos, Greece; John Field gave papers on learning generations (Birkbeck Institute for Lifelong Learning) and workplace learning (University of Lancaster). Joint papers were given at SCUTREA, CRLL and the annual TLRP conference. John Field was approached by the Scottish Funding Council for evidence as part of its Skills Committee's report on student choice.

**Dr Heather Lynch** started in spring as Stirling's new Research Fellow, replacing Irene Malcolm (who is now a Lecturer in the Institute of Education at Stirling). Heather's background is in the creative arts; immediately before joining Learning Lives she was a researcher on a community arts project funded by the Scottish Arts Council.

**For more information about the project and downloads of project presentations and working papers, please visit our project website at: [www.learninglives.org](http://www.learninglives.org)**

**For General Enquiries Contact the Learning Lives Project Office**

Hilary Olek (Project administrator),  
Lucy Smith (Project secretary)

[h.e.olek@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:h.e.olek@exeter.ac.uk)  
[l.m.e.smith@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:l.m.e.smith@exeter.ac.uk)

Tel: +44 (0) 1392 264910

Tel: +44 (0) 1392 264910

School of Education & Lifelong Learning  
University of Exeter  
Heavitree Road  
Exeter, EX1 2LU

Fax: +44 (0) 1392 264865

**Learning Lives (RES-139-25-0111) is a collaboration between the Universities of Exeter (lead-applicant), Brighton, Leeds and Stirling and is funded by a major grant from the Economic and Social Research Council as part of their Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). See [www.tlrp.org](http://www.tlrp.org)**

