

WORKING PAPER 7

Learning *from* life and learning *for* life: Exploring the opportunities for biographical learning in the lives of adults

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March 2007

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Learning Lives 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



The Learning Lives Research Project

The Learning Lives research project began in June 2004, and runs until the end of January 2008. The project is a collaboration between the University of Exeter, the University of Brighton, the University of Leeds and the University of Stirling, all in the UK. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). The award number is RES-139-25-0111.

The focus of the research is on the interrelationships between learning, identity and agency in people's lives. There are two strands to the data collection, involving the integration of three different methodologies. The first strand is a qualitative study of around 120 people, drawn from different walks of life, living in different parts of the country, and of different ages, gender and ethnicities. Each of the university partners has its own sub-sample, with different core interests. The Exeter team (Gert Biesta and Mike Tedder) are focused on learning, identity and agency in relation to family and the local community. The Brighton team (Ivor Goodson and Norma Adair) are focused on issues of migration, including within country migration. The Leeds team (Phil Hodgkinson, Heather Hodgkinson, Geoff Ford and Ruth Hawthorn) are focused on people engaged in adult learning and/or guidance, and on older adults. The Stirling team (John Field and originally Irene Malcolm, now Heather Lynch) are focused on work and unemployment. Of course, these issues overlap. On the qualitative strand, we are combining two normally separate methodologies: life history research and longitudinal qualitative research. Though we will have a shorter engagement with some of the sample, we are following most subjects for over 3 years, involving about six sweeps of interviewing.

The second strand of our work is quantitative. A second Exeter team (Flora Macleod and Paul Lambe) is using the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) – a data set of 10,000+ adults from across the UK who have been interviewed annually since 1991 – to develop robust measures of formal and informal learning, identity and agency in their different dimensions and to test the validity of these measures against a range of outcome variables. Once these theoretically informed instruments have been developed using BHPS variables, longitudinal data analysis techniques (multilevel models of individual change and hazard/survival models of event occurrence in both discrete and continuous time) will be applied to explore the significance of learners' identities and agency for their learning, dispositions, practices and achievements and how transformations in a given individual's dispositions, practices and achievements impact upon their sense of identity and agency and their ability to exert control over their lives.

To establish an iterative relationship between the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data we are mapping the case study participants' learning trajectories onto wider trends and processes in the UK as revealed through analysis of the BHPS.

Working Papers

This paper is one of a series of working papers being produced as part of the Learning Lives research. These papers are of very different types, and their prime purpose is to help the team with its on-going analysis and synthesis of findings. Consequently, they represent work in progress. A second purpose is to share some of our preliminary findings and thinking with a wider audience. We hope that you will find this paper, and others in the series, of interest and value. If you have constructive critical comments to offer we would love to hear from you. Please send any comments to the contact author, identified on the front cover.

Learning *from* life and learning *for* life: Exploring the opportunities for biographical learning in the lives of adults

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Introduction

Over the past three decades the field of adult education has witnessed a strong rise in the use of biographical and life history approaches (see, e.g., Baacke & Schulze 1985; Alheit & Hoerning 1998; Alheit *et al.*, 1995; Erben 1998; Bron & West 2000; Dominicé 2000; Goodson 2001; West *et al.*, in press). The “turn to biographical methods” (Bron *et al.*, 2005, p.12) can partly be understood against the background of rapid changes in modern societies where, as some have argued, “people need, constantly, to work on their biographies and find some authentic rhythms, in the lights of change, and to find the resources of hope ... to compose a biography, and some stability, meaning and authenticity, from the fragments of shifting experience” (*ibid.*; see also Biesta & Tedder in press). However, the ‘biographical turn’ can also be understood “as a reaction against those traditional forms of research, which marginalized the perspectives of subjects themselves or reduced social processes, including learning, to overly abstract entities or largely socially determined processes in which individuals had little space for creativity” (Bron *et al.*, 2005, p.12). Such research, so Bron *et al.*, claim “gave little or no credence to the idea that participants might shape, however contingently, the social and educational worlds they inhabited and might have important stories to tell in building a better, more nuanced understanding of learning and educational processes” (*ibid.*). The ‘biographical turn’ is thus not simply connected to the adoption of new research methods and methodologies in the study of adult learning. It is also motivated by an explicit intent to bring different *dimensions* of the learning of adults into view, and to understand these dimensions in relation to transformations in late- or post-modern societies, without reducing them to such transformations.

One important advantage of the ‘biographical turn’ is that it allows for a perspective on the meaning and significance of learning through the life course that is distinctly different from the predominant view in contemporary lifelong learning policies. Whereas many such policies only seem to acknowledge the economic function of lifelong learning (see Biesta 2006), biographical and life history approaches have the potential to highlight what learning actually ‘means and does’ in the lives of adults, also, but not exclusively, in relation to questions of employability. As a consequence, the ‘biographical turn’ engages with a much broader conception of learning, one which does not restrict the meaning of learning to institutional definitions, but which includes the cognitive and reflexive dimensions of learning as much as the emotional, embodied, pre-reflexive and non-cognitive aspects of everyday learning processes and practices.

One aspect of the rise of biographical and life history approaches is an interest in what several researchers have referred to as *biographical learning* (see, e.g., Alheit 1995; Bron 2001; Alheit & Dausien 2002; see also Dominicé 2000). Although there does not yet seem to be an agreed-upon definition of biographical learning (see below), and although, as Alheit and Dausien (2002, p.18) have argued, we are still missing “a systematically elaborated theory of *biographical learning*,” the literature on biographical learning is generally characterised by an interest in relationships between learning and biography. This encompasses both an interest in the influence of biography on learning processes and practices, and an interest in biography as itself “a field of learning” (Alheit 1995, p. p.59).

In this paper we are interested in a particular aspect of biographical learning, viz., the way in which life itself can be(come) an object of learning. (We are aware that the three key-terms here – life, object and learning – all need further elaboration. We will return to this below.) We are interested, in other words, in *the ways in which people learn from their lives*, and also in *the significance of such learning processes*. In this paper we explore this through a discussion of aspects of the life stories of Russell Jackson, one of the participants in the *Learning Lives* project, a three year longitudinal study into the learning biographies of adults of 25 and older (for more information on the project see Biesta *et al.*, 2005; see also www.learninglives.org).¹

We begin this paper with a brief overview of literature on biographical learning, focusing on the contributions made by Alheit and Dausien,² after which we make some observations about the particular focus of this paper. In the next sections we focus on Russell Jackson. We first introduce Russell and provide a brief overview of some key events emerging from his life stories. We then interrogate these stories with the help of the following five questions:

- (1) What has Russell learned from his life?
- (2) How has he learned it?
- (3) When did he learn it?
- (4) What has been the role of narrative in his learning?
- (5) What has been the significance of this learning?

We use these questions heuristically in order to explore aspects of Russell's biographical learning. In the final section of the paper we draw conclusions and raise further questions about this aspect of Russell's biographical learning and about the approach taken in this paper more generally.

What 'is' biographical learning?

Alheit and Dausien define biographical learning as “a self-willed, ‘autopoietic’ accomplishment on the part of active subjects, in which they reflexively ‘organise’ their experience in such a way that they also generate personal coherence, identity, a meaning to their life history and a communicable, socially viable lifeworld perspective for guiding their actions” (Alheit & Dausien 2002, p.17). They argue that lifelong and lifewide learning are “tied at all times to the contexts of a specific biography” (ibid, p.15), which implies that “(w)ithout biography there can be no learning, without learning, no biography” (ibid.).

They highlight three aspects of biographical learning: the implicit dimension, the social dimension and the ‘self-willed’ dimension (see ibid., p..15-16).

- (1) Alheit and Dausien stress that a substantial part of learning is implicit and tacit. But this does not mean that it is without significance. Rather, such experiential learning processes “form a person's *biographical stock of knowledge*” (p.15); *emph. in original*). In many cases “we do not turn to such elements in our biographical ‘background knowledge’” (ibid., p.15), but we can do “when we find ourselves stumbling or at crossroads” (ibid.). “Theoretically at least, we are able to retrieve large parts of this pre-reflexive

¹ *Learning Lives* is part of the UK's Teaching and Learning Research Programme and is sponsored by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. The project is a collaboration between the University of Exeter (Gert Biesta, Michael Tedder, Flora Macleod, Paul Lambe), the University of Brighton (Ivor Goodson, Norma Adair), the University of Leeds (Phil Hodkinson, Heather Hodkinson, Geoff Ford, Ruth Hawthorn) and the University of Stirling (John Field, Heather Lynch). We are indebted to the team for feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

² We are aware that Alheit and Dausien are not the only ones who have written on biographical learning. For the purpose of this paper, however, we confine ourselves to their contribution.

- knowledge into the present” (ibid.). Such reflexive processes “can be interpreted as moments of self education” and since they are the basis of each person’s organising of learning Alheit and Dausien conclude that it is justified to speak of “the *biographicity of all educational processes*” (ibid.).
- (2) According to Alheit and Dausien reflexive learning processes do not exclusively take place ‘inside’ the individual “but depend on communication and interaction with others” (ibid., p.16). This concerns the “sociality of biographical learning” and brings in questions of context or ‘learning in context’. It makes visible that the biographical and the institutional are always interrelated (see ibid., p.16).
 - (3) Against this background Alheit and Dausien argue that “(l)earning within and through one’s life history is ... interactive and socially structured, on the one hand, but also follows its own ‘individual logic’ that is generated by the specific, biographically layered structure of experience. The biographical structure does not determine the learning process ... [but] it significantly affects the way in which new experience is formed and ‘built into’ a biographical learning process” (ibid., p.16). Alheit and Dausien warn against an individualistic interpretation of self-willed learning. “All too often, they [such concepts] presume an autonomous learner who has a reflexive and strategic ‘grip’ on his own education and training. This model overlooks the multi-layeredness of biographical reflexivity.” (ibid., p.16) The point here is that although biographical learning processes operate in self-willed ways “they [still] permit unexpected experiences and surprising transformations that in many cases are not foreseen by the ‘learner’ himself, or are not ‘understood’ until after the event” (ibid., p.16).

The idea of biographical learning is closely connected to the notion of ‘biographicity’ which Alheit introduces as a ‘hidden capacity’ to lead one’s own life (see Alheit 1995, p.61). The idea of ‘biographicity’ can be seen as an attempt to reclaim a place for agency in sociological theories about the transformation of modern societies (see for more detail Alheit 1995, pp.61-65; see also Alheit 1990). This is not an idea of agency ‘against’ structure, but more of agency ‘within’ structure. As Alheit explains: “Biographicity means that we can redesign again and again, from scratch, the contours of our life within the specific contexts in which we (have to) spend it, and that we experience these contexts as ‘shapeable’ and designable. In our biographies, we do not possess all conceivable opportunities, but within the framework of the limits we are structurally set we still have considerable scope open to us.” (Alheit 1995, p.65). To ‘utilise’ the ‘capacity’ – if it is a capacity³ – of biographicity we need to engage in learning processes and, if we see it correctly, these learning processes are referred to as ‘biographical learning’ (see for the first use of the term in Alheit 1995, p. 69).

Alheit links biographical learning to emancipatory adult education. The main task of such education, he argues, is that of ‘biographical coaching’ (ibid., p.68), which involves “the joint discovery by teacher and learner of biographical opportunities for shaping social, occupational and political existence more autonomously” (ibid.). Coaching also means “exerting a particular influence on the ‘social ecology’ of learning – i.e., in practical terms, the framework of social conditions – in order that individuals’ hidden possibilities are brought to the surface and developed, and that ‘unlived’ lives can be lived instead.” (ibid.) He highlights that the ‘basic structure’ of

³ Elsewhere Alheit and Dausien state that ‘biographicity’ is “a capacity people have and not an ability they have to learn or which could be taught by teachers or experts” (Alheit and Dausien 1999). The distinction between capacity and ability suggests that it may not be something that is itself amenable to learning.

such educational processes is narrative (ibid., p.69). He also points at the importance of communication, since it is communication with others which “triggers ... a new dimension of self-referentiality” (ibid.).

From this Alheit and Dausien conclude that “(i)f the biographical organisation of learning processes is to be given practical educational (and institutional) support, then *spaces* for reflection and communication, as well as interaction with ‘spaces of opportunity’ are at least as important as developing ‘instruments for individual self-management’” (Alheit & Dausien 2002, p.16).

Learning from one’s life

Although for Alheit and Dausien biographical learning entails more than learning *from* one’s life – it also, and in a sense more explicitly, involves attention to the influence of biography on learning – their considerations provide some helpful reminders for the exploration of the particular aspect of biographical learning that we are interested in. The first thing to bear in mind is that the ways in which people learn from their lives do not necessarily have to be understood as conscious and reflexive processes. Much biographical learning remains implicit and tacit – although the question can be raised whether in order to learn from one’s life, at some point such learning should be made the object of attention and reflection. Secondly Alheit and Dausien remind us of the fact that biographical learning is not necessarily a solitary process but that it involves – or can involve – communication and interaction with others, and it is here that they locate the importance of narrative as a way to share and communicative one’s life story. Thirdly they warn against the idea that biographical learning emanates from an autonomous individual who has a reflexive and strategic ‘grip’ on his or her own learning. There is still scope, as we have seen, for “unexpected experiences and surprising transformations that in many cases are not foreseen by the ‘learner’ himself, or are not ‘understood’ until after the event” (ibid., p.16).

If, against this background, we ask how we might gain an understanding of the ways in which people learning from their lives – and, in the context of this paper, more specifically, how Russell Jackson has learned from his life – the question to start with is a simple one: **What has Russell learned from his life?** To say that the question is simple, does not mean that it is easy to give an answer to this question because, as we will show below, this depends, for one thing, on the person answering the question – i.e., whether it is Russell or whether it is us as researchers. It also depends on how we understand the word ‘life’. Although we shouldn’t deny the materiality of all lives, we wish to suggest that a life only becomes available as an object for learning if it is in some way or form represented. Life history research works predominantly with narrative representations, i.e., with life stories – although it is conceivable that other forms of representation, such as photos or time-lines, can be used within a life history methodology, for example to elicit life stories.⁴ Once we have an answer to the question what someone has learned from his or her life – and we will show below that it is highly unlikely that people will only have learned one thing – the next question to ask is **How has Russell learned this?** Again we must bear in mind that the answer to this question will also be different depending on whether we take an actor- or a researcher-perspective. Even though the data available through life history interviews do not go beyond the accounts given by the interviewee, the person in question may have different things to tell – or nothing at all – than what the researchers might be able to come up with (which, in turn, raises important questions about the validity of such interpretations). Given that the aspect

⁴ In Russell Jackson’s case we did make use of a time-line representation of key events from his life stories.

of biographical learning that we are interested in, has to do with the ways in which people learn from their lives, it is also important to ask **When Russell learned this?** Here as well, we must be aware of the possibilities and limitations of the life history approach. On the one hand the life stories themselves may contain retrospective accounts of when someone has learned something from his or her life. It is, however, also conceivable that interviewees will only become aware that they have learned something from their lives through and as a result of the life stories they tell in the context of the research project. And it may even be that the research process itself, i.e., the telling of one's life stories, is a key trigger for and hence the moment of biographical learning (see also Lönnheden & Bron 2006). This brings us to our fourth question: **What has been the role of narrative in Russell's learning?** Although we do not want to claim that narratives are a necessary condition for biographical learning, we do think that they are important and the life history approach can help us to gain an understanding of their importance for learning from one's life. The fifth and final question – **What has been the significance of this learning?** – reminds us of the fact that learning is hardly ever a descriptive term but almost always involves an evaluation; i.e., when we say that we have learned something we do this because the learning has a particular – positive or negative – significance for us. In the context of biographical learning the question that is important is to gain an understanding of why and how learning from one's life might be important or relevant, and again we need to make a distinction between the answer given by the actor and the answer given by the researcher.

These considerations show that although the question how people learn from their lives may be a simple one, answering this question is far from straightforward and potentially fraught with difficulties. In the next sections we present parts of Russell's life stories and use the five questions to explore what he has learned from his life.

Russell Jackson

Seven interviews took place with Russell Jackson between November 2004 and December 2006 and Russell was aged 53 at the time of the first interview. Physically, he is quite short and stocky, he dresses conventionally, and several times described himself in humorous, slightly self-deprecating terms. He identifies with the part of the country where he was born and has a strong local accent. When Russell was first interviewed he held a fixed term contract as an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Development Tutor working for the county adult education service in a rural area. His job comprised taking a set of laptop computers to different locations in order to provide tuition in ICT skills for people in so-called 'hard to reach' groups. The first interview took place at a Job Centre after he concluded a session with a small group of unemployed people. All the subsequent interviews took place at Russell's home, a substantial detached bungalow in a small village. The house bears witness to Russell's considerable craft skills: over the time of the project he rebuilt the main entrance and there were many examples of Russell's woodworking and woodturning skills in the house. He described how he had re-organised the water and sewage arrangements of the building.

Thus the initial impression one receives of Russell is of someone with considerable practical skills and his life story confirms that he is a man with a strong engineering background. The surprise in Russell's narrative of his career after school is that he spent ten years as a priest. One way of constructing Russell's career is in three stages: the first lasted nearly twenty years when Russell worked as an engineer in mining and quarrying; the second stage followed his conversion experience when Russell studied to become a priest and spent nearly a decade working in the church; the third stage is Russell's current career as an adult education tutor. The period

covered by the interviews was one of uncertainty and transition for him: Russell was employed in a job that he enjoyed and found meaningful but he would have much preferred to be following his vocation for the ministry. As the interviews progressed, we were able to trace the uncertainties that Russell confronted in his everyday life as a result of re-organisation and change in his employment and at the same time document the deeper transition that was taking place as he adjusted to becoming distanced from his vocation. Russell himself commented how changes at one level - in his work place - were 'nested' within the deeper change.

Russell was born in 1951, the sixth of seven children in a working-class family that lived on a council estate in a small town in the south west of England. His father worked in the dockyard and his mother was a housewife. Russell said that he 'always wanted to escape from there. ... out into the big wide world' (*Interview 1, Nov 2004*) and an opportunity arose when he passed the eleven plus examination and went to the local grammar school. The experience was not a happy one and Russell described being a victim of bullying:

I was small, I was from (the) working class, I was rebellious at school ... in the grammar school, a very snobby grammar school with middle class parents, middle class teachers, meant that I stood out. I was, I didn't have the latest bike and I didn't have a new uniform every term or year. I wore my sister's blazer, I remember when she outgrew it, and I was picked on and bullied absolutely dreadfully at school and that's one of the formative things for me. I will not be bullied, I will not be intimidated, I will not be forced into anything that I don't wish to be. (*Interview 1, Nov 2004*)

Russell left his secondary education at the age of 16 years with General Certificate in Education (GCE) 'Ordinary' level qualifications in a number of subjects and Certificate in Secondary Education (CSE) awards in others. He also stated that his grammar school experience left him with a residual bitterness that caused him to detest schools, teachers and everything to do with education for twenty-five years.

It was with some reluctance that Russell followed his father's advice after leaving school and applied for an apprenticeship at a local engineering company. Despite his initial reluctance to apply to the company, he immediately felt comfortable there:

I walked through the green doors of the apprentice school and was hit by the noise and the smell and the sheer engineeringness of that place and I changed direction [*laughs*] like on the spot. (*Interview 1, Nov 2004*)

This transition was an important one: not only did it mark the start of his first important adult career but in a subsequent interview Russell recalled that his first autonomous decision was the way he ignored his father's advice to apply for a craft apprenticeship (for which there were over 70 available places) and instead applied for a technician apprenticeship (for which there were only six places). Russell recalled his father as somebody who was ambitious for his children but fearful of the risks they might take; he was surprised at his son's assertiveness that technician training was what he wanted to do.

Russell served his time as an apprentice and achieved a full technological certificate from his local college after five years in 1972. He worked successfully as an engineer for the company for a further six years. During this time he married and the first of his two children, a daughter, was born; Russell's son was born three years later. However, he could see few prospects for further career advancement and Russell applied for a job hundreds of miles from home:

I ended up in Scotland at twenty-eight, as a short baby-faced Englishman in a hard-nosed quarry of drunken Scots [*laughs*] and I learned more about handling people and seeing things through in those first six weeks of that job than any other period of my life, really. (*Interview 1, Nov 2004*)

Of his working relationships in this company, Russell commented that 'the board of directors were the most immoral group of people I've ever met' but he also conveyed his respect for the workforce and recalled them having an innate sense of fairness. After two years in Scotland, Russell and his family moved to the midlands in England where he worked for a Scandinavian engineering company for several years. His career was following a conventional trajectory of progress where he steadily increased his managerial responsibilities - for managing projects, for managing people and for managing money. He found himself undertaking international travel, living in hotels, going to nightclubs, taking business decisions with substantial financial implications. However, from his perspective years later it seems Russell had doubts:

I'd done lots of things that my family thought were wonderful but actually were boring um and I had this great illusion of being a travelling um up and coming, you know ... I'd been to nightclubs, three or four nightclubs in cities all over Scandinavia and Europe, and it was all very good stuff um but actually, having done it, you wonder what it's all about. (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

Russell was commissioned by this company to produce a report on its future and recommended that either they invest in a substantial expansion of the business in Britain or cease operations and focus their activities elsewhere. They chose the latter option and Russell was made redundant.

In the mid-1980s came the experience that would lead to a major transition in Russell's life, what he described in the interviews as a conversion experience. Although he swore, 'I was damned if I was going to get religion, you know,' (*Interview 1, Nov 2004*) he was able to pinpoint the occasion when, while undertaking some woodturning at home, he felt his life move in a different direction, the circumstances of an epiphany:

In the garage doing the woodturning and ... I always get immersed in the woodturning. ... You reflect there quietly, you're at ease with yourself. You've got a whole pile of things to - you got to sort out. ... I'm now turning away happily and minding my own business and I stop the lathe and I'm turning the big pine bowl ... I'm surrounded with chippings and this bowl is really nice, you know, it's a lovely shape and it's, and it's there. It's in the evening and I've got the light on in the garage shining on this bowl, and I just have an overwhelming sense of a presence with me really. It's really difficult to be, to describe this in rational terms. It's as real to me now as it's always been ... I had a sense of the real presence of God ... I was quite clear in my mind at this moment of just putting this bowl, taking it off, putting it down on the table and was just sort of smoothing it and it's as though something touched me on the shoulder, and I was quite clear in my mind that there was, this was a point of decision for me, that one of the things that God wanted me to do was to become a, er, Christian ... and to join the Church of England, and, and, and to - that there was a special job. (*Interview 1, Nov 2004*)

Russell's narrative gave a wider contextual setting for this experience. He found it surprising that he should have such conviction about joining the Church of England when his family background had strong Methodist traditions. He also referred to his recent redundancy as one of the things at the time he had 'to sort out':

I don't think those sorts of thing happen out of the blue ... I think that you come to that sort of point unconsciously, that you've reflected on parts of those stories you then, over a period of time, it comes to a point where all those bits of the jigsaw come together, and it makes sense. (*Interview 2, Dec 2004*)

Shortly after, Russell was contacted by the engineering company where he had served his apprenticeship and worked at the start of his career and asked if he would return. Even though he lacked the qualifications specified in advertisements for the post, he was offered a job that would enable him to return to his home county. The company was running down and eventually closed but, while he worked there, Russell confirmed his vocation to become a priest and, in 1988, he and his wife sold their house and used the proceeds to help fund a two year full-time course of study at a theological college.

I had a great, great time. It was a time of great exploration of ideas, of bouncing ideas off other people, debates, ferocious debates sometimes, passionately held discussions. (*Interview 1, Nov 2004*)

After his ordination Russell was appointed to his first curacy back in the south west of England and this was followed by a decade of working as a priest. Russell spent time in parish work and also undertook a wider diocesan role that involved training others to support children and young people. This was a role he particularly valued and enjoyed. However, in retrospect, Russell judged that he overworked and that his relationship with his wife suffered as a consequence. They undertook marriage guidance but Russell started a relationship with another woman before he had divorced his first wife. A scandal ensued and this led to the end of Russell's ministry as a priest.

Thus a further transition occurred, in that Russell still needed to earn a living but he had to adjust to the loss of the role that was central to his identity, his vocation as a priest. He also needed to adjust to changed domestic circumstances after he married his second wife and gained two step children. Acting on the suggestion of a friend, he managed to secure a fixed term contract with the adult education service to teach computer skills to students who were classified as 'hard to reach' and thus became involved in a new career as an adult tutor.

Russell discovered that he had joined an adult education service where there was uncertainty about the future and he responded in a multi-faceted way: firstly, he wanted to ensure his teaching met the formal requirements of the service so he undertook part-time teacher education courses at a local college. Secondly, he developed a close working relationship with the local Principal so that she became aware of his qualities and was aware that he was capable of making a contribution to the service other than by teaching students.

Russell became a participant in the Learning Lives project after three years of the third phase of his career. While it started with a contract to be an ICT tutor charged with teaching computer skills in remote areas of the community, he has steadily developed the significance and scale of his role within adult education. Our

interviews have traced how Russell has adapted to the latest phase of his career and reflected on his relationship with the Church.

In the second interview (December 2004), Russell said he had no inclination to return to engineering. He had hoped that, at some point it would be possible to return to parish work and he claimed to have significant support for such a return among parishioners in his local church. However, he had received an official letter stating that it would not be possible in the same diocese. Russell indicated a change in his attitude to being an adult education teacher, that his role as an ICT development tutor was becoming less peripheral and more central to his life:

where teaching has been until very recently a stopgap measure against the day where I might return to the ministry within the church, I can't see returning to church, so I'm in the process of really coming to terms with the fact and not quite as reluctantly as I might have supposed, that, really the teaching is my career. (*Interview 2, Dec 2004*)

In developing his new career, Russell admitted he had no qualifications in ICT and said he had no intention of working for any, going as far as saying that 'All the work I've done with techy stuff is detrimental to me.' He spoke of the close working relationship he enjoyed with the Principal of the local adult education service in the wake of an Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) inspection:

In the same week as the (official) letter arrived, I had a letter from my boss, a little Christmas card to ... thank me for being a great help and support and a wise counsellor [pause] in a difficult week. (*Interview 2, Dec 2004*)

In the third interview, five months later, there was clear evidence of Russell's professional refocusing as a teacher of adult learners when he elaborated on the ideas and values that constructed his practice. He spoke of the challenge of teaching new courses and of teaching in new locations. He spoke of the growing confidence that he had in his work and of the working relationships he had established. He considered himself expert – despite being unqualified - in his subject area and able to adapt to new courses and new groups. He was involved in a pilot foundation degree course in computer science that his employers had established in partnership with one of the London universities. The positive working relationship with the Principal had continued and Russell commented on the way he provided support for her and for younger colleagues in the office. However, he was sanguine about the prospects for the service:

I think that the unique and distinctive role of Adult Ed in terms of supporting genuine life long learning in communities is ... going to be removed entirely... I think the stuff that fits in with government policy in terms of education and family support and basic skills ... will survive, probably much more linked with colleges ... and Adult Ed I think, will just wither on the vine. (*Interview 3, May 2005*)

At the start of the next academic year, in September 2005, the fourth interview found Russell still wrestling with the call of the ministry and striving to reconcile it with his occupation as an adult education tutor. In essence, Russell thought he should 'make the most of it and let's do the best at it'. He asserted that he loved teaching and recognised that the role had been a central part of his ministry as a parish priest. He expressed some resentment of what he saw as 'callous and indifferent' treatment from an institution that uses the language of compassion and forgiveness but, he felt, did not show those qualities to him:

in the secular world, if I might put it in that way right, I would have been sentenced, I would have served my sentence and I would now be out ... And in the community which is supposed to be exercising compassion and mercy and forgiveness, that should have been manifested in a practical way, sometime ago. (*Interview 4, Sept 2005*)

It transpired that a crisis had developed with the foundation degree pilot. Russell said that the students had complained about being asked to undertake additional work for assessment that they had not been notified about and that there were problems in accessing course resources. He had to deal with the students' anger and also had to accommodate the conflicting demands of the university and the adult education service.

The fifth interview at the end of 2005 revealed that Russell had stopped attending his local church. Despite his closeness to the people there, he was finding it increasingly difficult to reconcile his strong sense of personal vocation to the ministry with the treatment he was receiving. He still loved and admired the Church of England for being an 'all-embracing, all-inclusive organisation' and yet he found his treatment by the organisation made his relationship with the local church problematic.

Concurrently there was a significant shift in his thinking about teaching. While there had been the prospect of returning to the ministry, teaching was 'perhaps a stopgap measure'. However, as the prospects for such a return started to recede, so there had been a change of mind which, with some equivocation, Russell described as 'becoming ambitious within the context I find myself in'. Russell was increasingly articulate about his professional teaching role, defensive of the professional autonomy that he saw being eroded by government bureaucracy and a regime of inspection. However, he commented on the lack of challenge in the teaching he was doing, a sense that he could do what he was doing in his sleep. Russell was becoming dissatisfied with holding simply a teaching role in the organisation: he said he was interested in strategic issues and wanted 'to make a difference':

I've come to recognise ... that I can't continue to operate as a tutor. It will not be good for me ... I'll stay here because um this is where, for home reasons, I need to stay um but if I were – you know, if I were completely free, I would be long gone. (*Interview 6, July 2006*)

When Russell was contacted to arrange the sixth interview, he was about to be interviewed for two Assistant Principal jobs which had emerged as part of the re-organisation of adult education. Our interview actually took place after the job interviews and Russell had not succeeded in getting either appointment: it seems he was a very serious contender for both positions but others were preferred;

I'm getting over this now, but, you know, for the last week I've been hugely demoralised and hugely disillusioned. (*Interview 6, July 2006*)

The end of his ICT contract was drawing closer and he found himself in a shrinking organisation with a new line manager. He arranged to meet with senior people in the hierarchy to try and secure a clearer idea of his prospects within the organisation and to ensure they were aware of his continuing commitment and desire to keep a position within the structure, despite its problems. He left the meeting reassured that his abilities were appreciated and that he had indeed been a very serious contender for the two recent appointments.

At the final interview, it emerged that one of the two individuals appointed to Assistant Principal posts the previous summer had decided to leave after a few weeks. Russell was approached to see whether he would be willing to accept the post and had agreed. His responsibilities included such functions as 'improving learning and teaching' and Russell was excited by the potential for becoming involved in more strategic decision-making. He found his new post a congenial one:

My first sort of reaction to that is I'm enormously comfortable in this role. It's like putting on a well-worn coat and just all of a sudden, just go and do the business. Um there are things that need to be tackled. There's little things that need to be sorted. There are some issues that are going to get addressed and we're going to sort them. (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

Asked how he thought things would develop, Russell said he expected the adult education service to change dramatically over the next three years and that it would become a very different organisation from what it had been in the past. He anticipated such change would be painful and saw his role as being supportive of those most affected. He commented that the service had been moved into a different section of the local authority and that a possible scenario for the future would involve much closer work with social services, particularly adult social services.

Russell had formally retired from the Church of England but there continued to be a sense that he had come closest to being what he 'was intended to be' in the days when he was a priest and was working on youth matters for the diocese:

I still find it really hard to talk about um the things that I did as a parish priest and as a children's adviser.... we ran courses for clergy and young people on child protection issues, I did a lot of good in that role. ... I learned lots of things ... so you see, it's really close to my heart.... It's been the role um that I felt most truly mine, to what makes me most truly the person that I was intended to be. (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

Learning from life

Our account of the stories of Russell's life which, in itself is, of course, already a selection of the material, provides clear indication of learning. In this section we explore this more systematically, using the five questions outlined above.

(1) What has Russell learned from his life?

One way of approaching the question of what Russell has learned from his life, using the stories collected in our interviews, is to consider what Russell has learned about himself and what he has learned about the world. As we indicated earlier, there are at least two perspectives on this matter: what Russell says he has learned and what we, as researchers, might interpret as his learning within his narrative. What is abundantly clear is the extent to which the stories illustrate the complexity of the way Russell learns from his life experiences and how different aspects of learning are reflexive and inter-dependent.

We can start by noting the identifiable 'things' that Russell has learned *for* his life, the knowledge he has acquired, the information, skills and competencies that enable him particularly to follow a career. However, such identifiable learning is inseparable from the understanding that Russell has developed over the years about himself, about his character and dispositions, and how that self relates to others in his family, in his workplace and in his social networks. There are also his understandings of the world

that enable Russell to effect action in his life and to reflect on the outcomes of such action.

Knowledge, skills and competencies

If we take each of those aspects in turn, firstly, and most obviously, the life story shows how Russell has learned knowledge, skills and competencies within formal education and training that have enabled him to earn a living and pursue a career in different fields. At times the periods of education and training have had direct instrumental relevance to his work while at other times formal education has had less obvious significance. Thus his apprenticeship and college qualifications gave Russell entry into a professional career structure as an engineer. His two years at theological college provided entry to a career structure within the church. More recently, Russell has undertaken part-time courses of teacher education that relate to his current occupation. However, having secured entry to these different fields, Russell's progress within them has depended on other forms of learning. His career trajectory within engineering moved steadily away from engineering towards more managerial responsibilities and this occurred largely without attending any formal training. The narrative about his church career again suggested a variety of subsequent learning - in formal courses and in informal and non-formal settings - that enabled Russell to sustain and diversify his career. Within adult education, our longitudinal interviews have enabled us to monitor how Russell's aspirations have evolved and refocused, how his ideas of the person he might be in this setting have changed. Consideration of formal education and training with defined or identifiable content thus shifts imperceptibly within the narrative towards forms of learning that have significance for the maintenance and development of the self.

Values

The biographical dimension of Russell's learning is even more evident when we look at the values that frame his approach to life. Russell's stories reveals that he has a normative and ethical stance from which he can evaluate his experiences. Such values may have come from experiences within formal education though they were not necessarily part of the formal curriculum. In his stories of grammar school life and his comments about bullying, for example, we can find some of the origins of Russell's opposition to injustice and his commitment to taking a stand in unjust situations. His sense of injustice within the educational field surfaced when he commented on the social value placed on different kinds of learning:

I still feel strongly about the difference between vocational and academic because you don't have to be thick to be a very gifted and very astute and very intelligent engineer, quite the reverse ... for me, in engineering, to be a true engineer, involved all those things. You know, to be truly clever is to be gifted both manually and mentally. (*Interview 1, Nov 2004*)

The scandal occasioned by the loss of his career as a priest appears to have enhanced the empathy that Russell has with people who are disadvantaged or who have experienced disasters:

That is one of the hardest lessons I have ever learned about my own frailty and fallibility, really. I've sat the other side of the table on many occasions helping people who have found themselves in difficult situations To find myself the other side of that coin, with failure and disgrace and everything around, extraordinarily difficult (*Interview 1, Nov 2004*)

Thus Russell's stories reveal the sympathies and beliefs that have been learned from his experiences within life and such sympathies and beliefs offer a key to

understanding Russell's sense of what are appropriate actions for his life, particularly when he arrives at a point of 'stumbling or crossroads' (Alheit & Dausien 2002).

Learning from work

In the interviews Russell also described how his lifetime experiences of working, from the age of sixteen to his late 50s, were a source of biographical learning, in that they have given him the confidence and self-assurance to adapt to new circumstances. Asked how he prepared for his most recent job as an Assistant Principal he suggested that confidence is the most important quality he has learned from his working life:

(W)hen I decided that I would take the job I was confident that I would be able to do it, even though there's a whole pile of things that I haven't got the slightest idea about which I've got to learn. There's a huge amount of learning going on ...I have not got a clue, at this point, which piece of paper [*laughs*] is totally immaterial and has no application to me whatsoever, or which piece of paper is vitally important. So I've got to read every bit of paper [*laughs*] and learn. (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

Describing his first day he spoke of a difficult situation affecting his line manager and other colleagues and identified the skills he used to deal with that situation, highlighting tacit knowledge that he called 'instinct', which he analysed as an ability to interpret non-verbal language, to understand the issues that were involved in the situation and to assess priorities. He summarised this approach as 'drawing on life-long learning', requiring interaction between academic or theoretical learning and life-experience.

Key-events

In Russell's stories there are several events that seem to have been of particular significance for what he has learned from his life. One is his response to the experiences of bullying in the grammar school he went to. In the interviews he recognises this as "one of the formative things for me" and he describes what he has learned from this as "I will not be bullied, I will not be intimidated, I will not be forced into anything that I don't wish to be" (Interview 1, Nov. 2004). Another significant event concerns the feeling of 'being in the right place' he experienced when walking through the doors of the apprentice school. At the time it confirmed a particular identity that suited him. The most remarkable turning point in Russell's life is the conversion experience which, gradually, led him to the decision to become a priest. In terms of learning it resulted in the insight that the role of priest was the one that fitted him best, the role that he felt was 'most truly' his and which he saw as "most truly the person that [he] was intended to be". Russell also clearly learned from the events that led to the end of his career as a priest, and, as we have documented, there was significant learning involved in the adoption of his new professional identity as an adult educator. A tentative conclusion here might be that Russell's accounts of the events that have led to significant learning from his life all seem to be related to his sense of self, to the person he is, the person he wants to be – in terms of his values and normative orientations – and most specifically the person he was intended to be.

(2) How has Russell learned from his life?

The opportunities that Russell has had for learning from experiences within his life are most apparent in two areas: firstly, through the periods of formal education and training that he has undertaken and, secondly, through the relationships he has developed in different workplaces. The three stages of Russell's career were each associated with a period of formal education and transition: the apprentice school

before his engineering career; theological college before his career as a priest; teacher education courses in a local college while he became an adult education tutor. Each of those periods of formal education offered immersion in the culture of different communities and practices, and offered opportunities for interaction and communication with others as well as for reflection on his life.

In respect of Russell's workplace relationships, he has given prominence in the narrative to colleagues and friends who have been important at different times in his career: there was a woman with whom he worked in the diocese on matters affecting children and young people and she was significant for communication at work and for engaging in discussion and reflection about their work; more recently, Russell appears to have developed a good relationship with adult education line managers who have come to value his experience and perspective and the discourse that this enables.

Russell has access to particular resources to support his career. His stories have drawn attention to the importance of interventions by certain individuals at key points in his life. His father's intervention was crucial to him securing access to engineering and to a practical ambience which he found conducive to his learning. The co-operation of his first wife appears to have been crucial for Russell to secure access to theological college and to turn aspirations for a career as a priest into an active pursuit of vocation. Russell has also spoken in several interviews of an old friend in a different sector of the education service whose advice and support he has appreciated. It was this friend who suggested that Russell consider teaching adult students.

In the final interview Russell was able to identify a range of experience and resources from which he draws when confronting problems, and spoke of the training received in counselling skills in a number of different courses, alongside his own reading and the accumulated experience of being a parish priest who has had to deal frequently with very difficult and conflicting situations.

Taking part in the research interviews has also enabled Russell to articulate how learning occurs within particular spaces in noting how certain questions have elicited a spontaneous response that have suggested new insights into his life. Using computer jargon as a metaphor, for example, he mentioned the insight that his stories are 'nested' within others. On a separate occasion he coined metaphors about the nature of learning:

The idea of cycle I'm not sure. I tend to think in terms of streams of fluid that um that merge, you know like hot and cold water tap on or blue and white water or something, oil and water or something that tend to emulsify and move on but there are still, in some sense, separate (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

Throughout the interviews Russell showed an awareness of the importance of reflection in learning from his life. His answer to the question what the effect of taking part in the Learning Lives project had been, was particularly significant. He acknowledged that understanding the impact of participation was probably going to take time. "I think I probably need to answer that question in five years time or ten years time" (*Interview 7, December 2006*). But he had more to say about this.

I think it's been an important one and one which is immensely personal. It's been an opportunity to reflect on my own life and ... in ways which I do anyway but, you know, within a formal context (...) (A)ctually trying to work

out what it is that you want to say in a coherent way when you're being faced with personal and piercing questions then that's a really useful reflective tool that has been of great value to me. (...) The other thing that's happened is reading the transcripts and the transcripts have been hugely moving for me on occasion to read. Somehow it definitely makes you step aside from the talking and then to go back and read this, one is both embarrassed and I found, touched by the story that [laughs] one is reading and that may sound sort of selfish or sort of self sort of narcissus-like, but that has been a new experience for me. (...) Unless you are asked the question, unless you're pressed, unless you're asked to explain that, what is just internal, what is just accepted within yourself as being the way the world is, is not brought out, you know? (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

This, then, gives an indication of how Russell's has learned from his life. But it immediately raises important issues for our next question: When has Russell learned from his life?

(3) When has Russell learned from his life?

There are three related issues that make the answer to this question complicated. The first thing is that although there is clear evidence in Russell's stories that he has learned from his life – and that this learning was significant for later events in his life – it seems reasonable to assume that what Russell has learned from his life is a mix of more implicit and more explicit learning, where things are learned but only become clear over time, as a result of later experiences or as a result of reflection. Already for this reason it is difficult to point to particular points in time as the moments when Russell learned something from his life. The experience of bullying was 'formative,' as Russell put it, but it is likely that it took time before the formative effect of this experience became 'operative' and it took presumably even longer before Russell became fully aware of how this experience and his response to it had formed him. Perhaps the experience of entering the apprentice school had a more direct 'learning effect'. At least there is evidence that this experience gave Russell the confidence to make a decision that went against his father's advice. Although the conversion experience has a very clear location in time and in Russell's biography, the learning that followed from this was again something that took time. Russell, as we have seen, was quite articulate about this relationship between experiences and events and the learning that follows from it. As he put it: "I think that you come to that sort of point unconsciously, that you've reflected on parts of those stories you then, over a period of time, it comes to a point where those bits of the jigsaw come together, and it makes sense." (*Interview 2, Dec 2004*)

The second problem with answering the question when Russell has learned what he has learned from his life, has to do with the life history methodology and the fact that the accounts we have of his learning are all retrospective (even where it concerns learning that happened during the years of data-collection). This helps to explain why in the stories Russell is able to link particular events in his life to what he learned from them. Although this sometimes may give the impression that the learning happened at that particular moment in time, this is most likely an artefact of the life history approach. Retrospectively Russell is able to identify the events that turned out to be significant for his later life, which means that the learning that followed from the events gave the events their significance. This indicates that the selection interviewees make of their lives is at least partly based on what they have learned from their lives. In this sense we might say – but this is a hypothesis that needs further exploration – that life stories are always learning biographies.

If we take these points together, there is at least one 'moment' in Russell's life where it is clear that he was learning from his life, viz., the time when he was asked to tell the stories of his life for the Learning Lives project. The project at least allowed him to become aware of life themes and 'lessons,' but since the process of becoming aware of this is itself a learning process, we can indeed conclude that telling one's life stories is – as Lönnheden & Bron (2006) have put it – an important 'trigger' for biographical learning. This brings us to the fourth question: What has been the role of narrative in Russell's learning?

(4) What has been the role of narrative in Russell's learning?

In one sense we have already given our answer to this question: it is clear that stories are important for Russell's learning and that storying his life for the Learning Lives project, and subsequently reading some of the transcripts of the interviews, have helped Russell to become more aware of the significance of particular events in his life and of what he has learned from them. We could say that the life stories Russell told us allowed him to 'objectify' his life – i.e., made it into an object of reflection – and it is this which can help us to understand, for example, why on occasion Russell found reading the transcripts of his own interviews a 'hugely moving' experience. Through the stories Russell experienced his life in a new and sometimes different way. In this way narratives are an important 'vehicle' for biographical learning. For Russell the 'power of narrative' goes further than this. As he observes in the final interview:

(T)he one thing I've got is the power of narrative. I'm not well qualified, I'm not, you know, highly intelligent or all those really worthwhile things. I've just got a story. And the story informs who I am and the story makes me who I am and out of that I have an ability and a confidence and the ability to deal with people in their stories. (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

While there is clear evidence of learning from his narratives as a result of participation in the Learning Lives project, there is also some evidence of the importance of stories within Russell's life. In the last interview, Russell commented on the way he had spent twenty-six years with his first wife, whom he acknowledged as an intelligent and capable woman, and yet he felt he did not know very much more about her at the end than he did at the beginning of their marriage. Discussion of the nature and function of stories in an individual's life led to the observation: "I didn't know her story because she never told me her story, in that sense. I never knew her interpretation of the story that we shared." (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

The achievement of such understanding in some circumstances may become a means by which Russell achieves agency in his life: he can give examples of the way story telling about his life appears to have given him the ability to influence others and to affect their decision-making:

I went to see the deputy-head of service to tell a story, to say that, "here is a narrative which I want to have on your table ... the only thing I leave on her table is the story and all she's promised me is to have heard that story. ... I'm not well qualified. I'm not, you know, hugely intelligent or all those really worthwhile things, I've just got a story. And the story informs who I am and the story makes me who I am and out of that I have an ability and a confidence and the ability to deal with people in their stories. (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

There is also something special about Russell's stories, something that distinguishes his stories from at least some of the stories of other participants in the Learning Lives

project. The point is that Russell's stories have 'real' narrative quality in that they are organised around a 'plot.' The 'plot' of Russell's life story concerns his 'core identity' of being a priest.⁵ In Russell's story this is not simply one of the roles that he took on throughout his life. He perceives and positions it in a much stronger sense, viz., as a vocation that was there for him to 'discover'. For Russell being a priest is being the person *he was intended to be*. What is important for the reading of his life-narrative is that this plot becomes the organising principle for the whole story. Although it is possible to construct a story of Russell's life in a chronological way – where being a priest is simply the second professional role in his life – for Russell (or, to be more precise: in the story that Russell constructs about his life) – the 'priest-position' is the centre from which the story is constructed and from which many if not all events in the story get their meaning. The priest 'position' works in an evaluative way, in that many of the things Russell tells about his life are presented in relation to how close or how distanced he is/was from this 'core' identity. Russell's narrative is, therefore, not so much a descriptive narrative of a succession of life-events. It has a strong *evaluative* character in that life-events are positions and evaluated in relation to what is most central and most important for Russell, viz., being a priest. At least in terms of his life narrative we can say that this is the most central thing Russell has learned from his life. This became very clear in the final interview when he said: "I'm haunted by my vocation" (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

Here again we can see how Russell's life story is actually always already a learning biography, i.e., a story told on the basis of what Russell has learned from his life – or at least what he has learned so far, since there is always the possibility that the whole perspective might change again in the future, just as it did at the time of Russell's epiphany.

(5) What has been the significance of what Russell has learned from his life?

In our analysis we have focused on mainly on what (and how) Russell has learned *from* his life. While it is interesting from a research perspective to find out how, where and when such biographical learning takes place, from an actor perspective it is much more important to ask about the relevance of this kind of biographical learning. Does learning from one's life matter? Does it make a difference *for* one's life. Most of what have to say in response to these questions has already been said. There is clear evidence that some experiences in Russell's life have been formative and have had an impact on Russell's agency, on the ways in which he has made decisions about his life and the ways in which he has responded to particular live events. There is also some evidence of the impact of participation in the interviews themselves, although Russell is the first to acknowledge that this itself a learning process that will take time. The most significant event – at least in the way in which Russell has stories his life – is, of course, the 'discovery' of the person he was intended to be. This discovery is clearly something that he learned from his life – through a complex process of experience, reflection, communication and interaction – and it is something that not only had significant impact on his life as an 'event' (e.g., the decision to give up his job, sell his house, be trained as a priest, etc.); it also had a significant impact on the perception of his life, his life narrative, and hence on the way in which he was able to make sense of his life and of himself.

Conclusion

⁵ This identity is not about being a priest per se, but is about what Russell was able to do in that particular role, viz., to make a contribution to the well-being of others. It is, therefore, the meaning that being a priest had for Russell, rather than the role itself that matters here.

In this paper we have, through a close reading of the life stories of Russell Jackson, made an attempt to shed light on a particular dimension of biographical learning, viz., the ways in which people can learn from their lives. Although our interpretations are tentative, and although – most importantly – we need to expand our understanding of this aspect of biographical learning across our whole sample, the analysis of Russell’s stories provide some valuable insights in the ways in which people can learn from their lives and the significance of such processes of biographical learning. Russell’s case shows the importance of his life narrative for his learning. It also makes clear how his life narrative is already structured as a learning biography. There are, of course, many questions left and probably many aspects that need further elaboration. One question we want to put on the ‘agenda’ concerns the role of narrative in biographical learning – and this is related to our particular observations about the ‘quality’ of Russell’s narrative. In general the question we want to ask is whether narratives are a necessary condition for biographical learning. Is it the case that we can only learn from our lives if the life is narrated? Or are other forms of biographical learning possible, forms that do not rely on the availability of a life story? The question here is the extent to which a life needs to be ‘objectified’ in order to become available as an ‘object’ of learning. A related question has to do with the particular quality of narratives. Russell’s narrative has strong evaluative dimensions and make particular ways of biographical learning possible. Other narratives we encounter in the Learning Lives project appear to be much more descriptive. This raises questions about the learning potential of different kinds of narratives. (And there, are of course, also questions about what the distinction between evaluative and descriptive narratives actually entails.) The final point to make is one about the function of narratives in people’s lives, and it is a point that should help us to raise questions about what actually is ‘good’ about having a narrative of your life. Could it be the case, that having a life narrative is actually more a sign of weakness than a sign of strength? Could it be that having a narrative of your life is a particular strategy to keep your life ‘together’ and that it’s only those who have difficulty doing so need this strategy? We do not – yet – have an answer to this question, but we find it helpful to raise this question in order not to be drawn to the conclusion that having a life narrative is the normal situation, and not having it the exception – something which we think is important for the life history researcher to consider.

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