

Abstract for Conference: “Transitions, career learning and career management skills. Multi-disciplinary and critical perspectives”

Poster:

Title: Learning from ‘disjuncture’ – learning for work and life transitions

The conference theme covers “Transitions, career learning and career management skills. Multi-disciplinary and critical perspectives”, and this paper aims to shed light on how experiences from studying abroad and learning from ‘disjuncture’ facilitate young people’s and adult’s transitions into working life.

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The aim of this study is to highlight how student experiences of studying abroad and learning from ‘disjuncture’ in informal and non-formal settings whilst abroad aid in the transition into working life and life in general. The study is based on a biographical approach to learning in which the focus lies on people’s life experiences and what they have learned from their lives, assuming that a person’s biography both structures and is structured by individual learning processes as they make sense of a multitude of different learning situations in life. Additionally, this study concerns learning that can be viewed as a feature of everyday life, in which the question of what is learned is not a given but is a result of the individual’s immersion in a new and foreign context and that is not necessarily intentional.

Research question: How does a mobility experience abroad facilitate transitions into working life amongst young adults?

Theoretical framework: The present study is inspired by the biographical approach, which places learning in the life context and focuses on what learning means in the lives of adults in the construction of biographies. Individuals construct their experience, understanding and identity in the stories they share of their lives and how various life events that have shaped their life world. The story is assumed to be socially shaped and contextually bound, meaning that the context the individual is in and the societal ‘reality’ is believed to be represented in the biography of the individual. Adopting the view that our experiences add to our narrative as learners, we can see how this relates to the concept of ‘self’ development and ‘identity’. Jarvis maintains that the stream of experiences that add to current meanings contribute to a structuring of the world in people’s narratives, and to a development of self, life-world and biography. “People are therefore the result of their own learning” (Jarvis, 2009, 3). Similarly, Alheit’s

notion of biographical learning assumes that people reflexively 'organize' their experience in such a way that they also generate personal coherence, identity, a meaning to their life history (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 17).

Jarvis' model of learning will be used in this study and departs from the idea that all learning begins with a sense of not knowing and/or 'unease', whether it regards knowledge (content), i.e. *learning about*, or being, i.e. *to be*. Jarvis uses the term 'disjuncture' to theoretically describe such situations. People can experience both internal and external disjuncture and this is where the process of learning begins according to Jarvis - with either an overt question or with a sense of not knowing or unease; i.e. we are no longer in 'harmony' with our life-world.

Learning in this study is defined as "The combination of processes whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences a social situation, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the person's individual biography resulting in a changed (or more experienced) person" (Jarvis, 2007, p. xi).

Viewing learning as a lifelong process, Jarvis defines lifelong learning as: "The combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person" (Jarvis, 2007, p. 1).

While these two definitions are quite similar, the difference in the second definition emphasizes learning *through* life: "throughout a lifetime" and also indicating to a "continually" changing person as learning goes on all the time for a living human being. Both definitions point to *both* body and mind and to learning as a social phenomenon. Learning from this view opens up learning to include the emotional and practical dimensions of learning in addition to the cognitive processes of learning.

In order to understand how students have attributed meaning to their experiences abroad and how these experiences have contributed their understanding of themselves as they pass through time, Jarvis' model of learning from 'disjuncture' (either internal, external or both) will be applied. Terms including disjuncture, non-reflective learning and highly reflective learning will be used to understand and analyze student experiences of adjustments, coping,

learning and processes of reflection. By using this model, it may be possible to discern which situations and perhaps degrees of 'disjuncture' fuel the 'personal development' process and highly reflective learning. The use of Jarvis' model of learning is applied as it is recognized that there is a distinction between different types of learning and that not all learning is 'thoughtful and highly reflective' or truly 'transformative'.

Method

The empirical basis of the study was a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with Erasmus alumni from Stockholm University who studied abroad in 2013-2014, focusing on students experiences abroad in relation to their learning and personal development. A purposeful sampling strategy was chosen which involves selecting individuals who possess knowledge relevant to the research in question. Therefore, students who had studied abroad via the Erasmus program in 2013-2014 from the Faculty of Social Sciences at Stockholm University were invited to participate. It was important that at least two years had passed since the students returned from the semester abroad as I wanted to understand how the experiences of learning from a mobility period abroad were viewed in retrospect. There were no criteria for age and gender. The interview process was discontinued after 45 interviews had been carried out as the distribution of age, gender and international background was quite diverse amongst the interviewees.

While the empirical material was gathered for a PhD thesis with different research questions, several students emphasized how the experiences of studying abroad had benefitted their transition into working life and life in general in the interviews. Interviews containing statements regarding these experiences will be used in this study and will be analyzed with thematic analysis.

Expected outcomes:

Students who partake in an international academic mobility program face a multitude of challenges and unexpected situations. People cope with change by developing new ways of understanding the relation between their lives and the particular world in which they live. New 'life constructions' are made as people make sense of significant experiences that affect their biographies, which causes a change in people's 'self- and world referentiality' (Alheit, 1994, p. 289- 291).

Sharing stories about life events is a basic way to give meaning to experience, which is the foundation for this study. The experience of studying abroad engenders deeply reflective learning and influences shifting conceptions of 'self'. By understanding how students have learned from 'disjuncture' from their

semester abroad and how it has aided them in their career transitions, we can gain insight into how these experiences can 'transfer' to transitions into working life and life in general.

The intent of the publication is to understand how learning from 'disjuncture' from a study abroad experience can trigger deeply reflective learning and how it affects the lives of young adults as they transition into working life.

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