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A LEARNING JOURNEY. A NARRATIVE-AUTOETHNOGRAPHICAL REFLECTION

ABSTRACT: This essay is based on autoethnography and reflects on experience, meaningful moments, positive turning points in the author's learning journey as a scholar, university teacher and adult educator. Becoming and being somebody has been a long, lifelong, and emotional process. The author asked this question: what does the learning journey mean and why is it meaningful for her? The essay shows how the author reflected on the experience, and used a personal diary, memos, and notes. For the reflective writing, the author based themselves here on a narrative and autoethnographic approach, having in mind concentrating more on peak, positive and meaningful rather than negative experience. The final writing process was a kind of retelling that involves re-reading the diary and rewriting this essay in the form of a personal narrative. To make the essay coherent the author relied upon the structure of the narrative.

KEYWORDS: narrative, autoethnography, COVID, reflection, learning journey.

Introduction

The present moment is a time of big and small narratives. There are world views which require and presuppose stories. There are standpoints which attempt to overcome the narrative. However, sometimes only a narrative or a concrete story can describe or represent the existential. In other cases, when an appropriate theory is being applied, other forms of expression or means of representation can be used instead of a narrative. Stories differ from other forms of representing experience, like for instance, concepts or theories, in their time aspect, but also in being particular, concrete, and experiential. Unlike in theories, the separate, unique, and random acquires meaning in stories (Väljataga, 2008: 688).

Writing this essay, I was looking in the literature for epistemological assumptions related to learning and experience, autoethnography, narrative identity and positioning. I asked myself a question: what does my learning journey mean and why is it meaningful for me? It is a challenge to answer such a question if you do not have empirical evidence. As Peter Raggat states, this kind of question may be impossible to answer satisfactorily (Raggat, 2006: 15). To write this essay and answer this question, I used my notes and reflected on my experience, analysed inductively several meaningful parts from my autoethnographic diary and looked for the stories. I coded narratives

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(Saldana, 2015) and extracted from them several stories with the idea to write this essay in the form of a narrative.

In writing the autoethnography, the researcher is at the centre and we write about ourselves, and our experiences in interaction with others (Edwards, 2021). Autoethnographical writing and reflexive learning processes do not take place inside the individual but depend on interaction and communication with others and relations to a social context (Alheit, 2016: 56), therefore I had several conversations with my colleagues and reflected on my personal and professional experience. Learning through one's life history is therefore interactive and socially constructed, on the one hand, but it also follows its own "individual logic" that is generated by the specific, biographically layered structure of experience (Alheit, 2016: 57).

Self-reflection is a narrative act or narrative exercise where the researcher reflects on some aspects of experience (Formenti & West, 2016: 17). Experience is formed by existential diversity (Phillips & Soltis, 2004). Also, telling oneself about oneself is like making up a story about who and what we are, what's happened, and why we're doing what we are doing (Bruner, 2001: 64).

I also used selected academic papers and relevant books that helped me to be in dialogue with myself and readers of this essay. I rely on the narrative (Horsdal, 2009) and autoethnographic approach (Adams & Herrmann, 2020; Andersson, 2006; Sparkes, 2020) and employ self-reflective writing about my personal journey, professional experiences and challenges as a scholar, adult educator, and university teacher.

A narrative, a scientific theory or theoretical conceptions are complementary ways of grasping and experiencing the world, where one attempts to "time" the world, while the others seek to "space" it (Väljataga, 2008: 694). The narrative gives a ready and simple means for dealing with uncertain outcomes and anticipation (Bruner, 2001: 28).

Events, time, places, people, and relations have their own place, meaning and synergy in the context of a narrative as one possible story as well as in the context of learning and experiencing (Horsdal, 2009).

Beginning of my story

I shall start from the very beginning and put my biographical experience into a social and professional context. My professional journey began at the university at the groundbreaking time when there was transition from the socialist social order to the one based on a liberal market economy in Estonia, when there were a lot of transformative changes, confusion, self-transcendences and dedication. The year 1986 was the turning point, which even now carries a symbolic meaning for me and will remain memorable for my whole life, with its numerous happenings, people, choices, decisions and events.

Fifty years of disruption was coming to an end. It was a time in Estonia when people felt and experienced that they are responsible for themselves and others and that they can defend their freedom and rights themselves. The restoration of independence was the start of systematic changes in Estonian society, which also included the educational sphere. They lasted for decades, and their result was transformative social, cultural, and economic changes, and the substitution of the social order. The Soviet order was done away with, and this brought about changes in the whole society, to people's values and identities (Lauristin et al., 2017). At exactly this time I, by chance, started work in the Chair of Andragogy, which had just been opened in the Tallinn Institute of Pedagogical Sciences. That year my daughter was five, my mother sixty and I decided to commence my doctoral studies.

I have had numerous challenges in my life as well as opportunities to learn to be a university teacher, researcher and adult educator. Every next year brought even more opportunities which made me choose, change, feel fear, overcome oneself and make decisions as well as learn a lot. Chance led me to the opportunities where I could learn and experience more than during all the previous studies and years. There was not much time to practice, but there were opportunities to improve one's knowledge and learn together with colleagues.

Such an experience of cooperation at work has given me the conviction for my whole life that this is the way one can accomplish a lot and do something with devotion, this is the way that provides everyone with more opportunities and advantages, this is the way one can do something differently. I believed and trusted everybody I worked together with. I lived and believed in free Estonia. These experiences of my life forty years later have transformed into values, which can be expressed through the words: trust, capability, cooperation, communication and belief in people.

Estonian poet Doris Kareva (Kareva, 2011) wrote that time can be compared to a river and a human life to a boat, which people build in early youth and later on improve or repair if necessary. Time and life have constantly provided challenges and opportunities to learn and the necessity to delve into the values of society and oneself. In my opinion, we are currently living in a similar ground-breaking and polarising time, when not all social groups can positively adapt to the changes in the same way, which, in its turn, places society's stability and coherence in danger (Lauristin et al., 2017: 8). The Russian-Ukrainian war has forced us to think about the need to maintain democratic values, to learn about humanity, collaboration, collectivity, solidarity. This war has brought out the highest values – the meaning and value of human life and made us think about fear, disorienting experience, anger, care, compassion and past, present and future time.

Time has been the time of search and discovery as a person and a woman; the TIME of inspiration and creation as a scholar, learner, and university teacher. In this time, I have become more mature, experienced grief and deep sorrow, strong positive emotions of the joys and success of my daughter, students and close colleagues. All this has helped me to adapt and realise that a person may be weak and very strong at the same time in their essence, feelings, and choices. Peter Jarvis (2007) sees adults' learning as a life-long and ongoing process which takes place at any stage of life; and conscious living as lifelong learning, emphasising that adults have always possessed the ability to learn and it is not a new phenomenon, simply in earlier periods of history there was less need for that.

Thus, TIME acquires the meaning of operational time in the narrative, where the order and coherence of events have their own significance. TIME may be considered as a self-reflective perceptual experience that has importance and meanings for the person themselves in the duration and coherence of events and their reciprocal influence (Bruner, 2001).

Temporality is an important characteristic of a narrative: to be able to see the relation between the temporal coherence and the meaningful coherence of events. The past is not fixed, it lives and changes its shape in the same way as the future. Relating the past to the present, it is possible to contemplate and understand "why I am the way I am now" (Paul, 2002: 31).

We have to deal with conflicting narratives, with ourselves, and we had to support others when we all were forced to be isolated from others. COVID time was demanding in all aspects of life, including challenges for personal and collective coping strategies (Ogueji et al., 2022). Certain major changes took place in academia during and after COVID. For my university, the COVID time was a time of reorientation and transformation. One of the major challenges was reaching out to and engaging students, regardless of their specific needs and circumstances (Ulzheimer et al., 2021). The health crisis became not only a social, but a multiple crisis, and caught the attention of many researchers. Restrictions and the limitation of direct contacts with other people, needs for the new coping strategies, and uncertainty about the future were the biggest issues for many institutions and for many people (Maison et al., 2021).

Story from the COVID period

For myself and my colleagues the COVID period (2019-2022) was an unusual time with a huge number of ZOOM meetings, but it was also paradoxically a fruitful time for reflection, slow thinking and doing research in a particular way, as you cannot meet people face to face. The COVID pandemic, the related lockdown and physical

distancing forced not only the digitalisation of education and training but pushed us all to explore and experiment with new ways of communication and interaction, teaching and learning support.

Learning was disrupted not only for adult learners, but also for adult educators in their professional practice and context. The crisis related to COVID also affected the professional practice and social positions of adult and youth education professionals. Therefore, educators were facing multiple challenges in adapting to the new situations.

Together with the colleagues from my research group, we decided to explore what the social positions of adult and youth educators are, and how social positions are formed and manifested¹. What were the challenges to professional practice and changes in the social positions during the COVID crisis? Our aim was to explore and discuss the social positions of educators, especially from the point of view of Estonian adult education and youth work in the COVID time. We applied position theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; 1999) as an analytical tool for analysing the social positions of educators. Positioning theory provides an overarching analytical means for understanding social positions. Positioning theory frames ways of examining position and positioning relationships as dynamic and as developing within and across time, events/episodes, and configurations of actors, social spaces and social contexts (Green et al., 2020: 119). Position can be defined as collections of beliefs that individuals have. For data collection we conducted six individual in-depth semi-structured interviews and had five focus group interviews with 20 adult and youth educators, working in different settings of non-formal learning: youth workers from youth centres, educators from youth programs, the leader of a professional association, adult educators from public and private organisations, a coach, a school director and a personnel specialist.

Our findings showed that social positions exist in diverse social situations, sustain different orientations, professional, personal and future perspectives, roles, values, beliefs. Social positions can be relatively stable, consequential or relatively inconsequential, formal or informal. Four modes of positions emerged: interactive and reflective, rational and emotional. The rational mode explains attitudes and actions towards the society/community as related to the profession. The emotional mode could be viewed as a part of the interactive mode, and it was mostly evident in fact in relation to the learner. Our data analysis demonstrated that adult and youth educators position themselves as professionals within four main positions: *noticer and creator*, *partner*, *supporter* of the development and *confident questioner*.

What did we learn from our research? There was no confusion or weakening of positions in the context of COVID, but rather positions were streamlined and strengthened.

¹ The project is described in detail in a chapter due for publication by Brill in 2023.

Two positions are particularly meaningful: the positions of the *noticer and creator* and of the *partner*, which crystallised even more and became, in a way, pre-conditions for fulfilling the position of *supporter* of the learners' development. Modes of positioning and the positions of the educators are coherent and display similar patterns: for instance, the pattern of relations and of interaction with the learners; the patterns of understanding adult learners and learning in non-formal learning settings. The educators also have similar professional values and beliefs: trust, care, maintaining dialogical relationships.

Thus, the findings from our research demonstrate that the pandemic strengthened the social aspects and value-based nature of adult education and youth work, with the interactive positions of the educators being most prominent. Even though a rational position is primarily visible and valued externally in the non-formal learning setting, all positions – rational, emotional, interactive and reflective – are necessary from the educator's point of view. From the point of view of a formal position in the educational field, where both adult education and youth work are commonly related to the ideology of economic growth, interactive positions are not valued as highly as rational ones.

What I learnt in the process? I learned from this research process that the interactions between researchers in times when you cannot meet face to face were demanding, sensitive, emotional and linked to our capacity to feel, support, listen to each other and act in new ways. And this process itself involved clear signs of transformative learning and was an inspirational and supportive experience.

I have learned to notice, listen to, and value that which is unique, special, authentic, natural; and I learnt, too, to discern that which disturbs and causes helplessness; I learnt to be surprised, baffled, to discover and respect learners, people, friends, colleagues and nature. Sometimes such realisation comes only then, when there are no alternatives, when one is ready to take risks in life, understanding that one has to move on anyway (Paul, 2002: 33).

On my journey there have been many people and situations which have influenced me in a special way, forced me to stop, think, delve, change my understanding; to be more tolerant, more listening, not to rush, not to intervene and not to chat. This has been the journey of getting to know the adult learner and also myself as a researcher, teacher and learner.

On this journey there have been meetings with learners whose capability, will, values, learning and ability to adapt as well as independence have set an example for me. On the other hand, there have been situations, when facing incapability or helplessness has forced me to learn more and muster all my skills, setting the time aside to try to understand the person and support them as a learner. Behavioural choices, attitudes, socialisation, sense of worth and value depend on the self-image and vision of oneself as a learner. Kristi Lonka (2018) considers the learner's self-image a phenomenon in

which one can differentiate the sense of worth and the sense of competence as essential components. The sense of worth indicates understanding oneself as important and valuable as well as recognition of oneself as an autonomous and independent person. The sense of competence means valuing one's abilities.

I have noticed that students' attitude to themselves as learners is difficult to change, as this is a long-term process. Recognising such processes and looking for their reasons and explanations is a part of the learning process of a university teacher, which requires from them consistent approaches and choices, persistence and cooperation. What are such circumstances and situations in university studies where a learner becomes needy, dependent, dissatisfied, when they lose their aims and objectives, their confidence and sometimes even their self-esteem as well as others' trust and belief in their abilities? What do I as a university teacher need to notice and how can I support them in such situations? And what, on the other hand, creates the feeling that translates into the learner's balance, satisfaction and confidence, results in the wish to move forward and the attempt to understand themselves and their surroundings, to learn in depth, so that they do not have to apologise, feel guilty and accuse others in their inability? What makes a learner search for solutions or faults outside themselves or, on the contrary, to see themselves as a doer, thinker, debater, self-manager and the one responsible for their actions?

These are situational problems university teachers face in addition to teaching and doing research, and no one prepared me for that. However, such situations influence the self, present challenges and force us to learn. Understanding others and oneself requires common sense and self-education, feeling and the willingness to engage deeply, the wish to notice and understand as well as the ability to analyse and to discuss systematically.

Thanks to meeting diverse learners, the texts that I read and my experience as a researcher, I have acquired, I feel, a much clearer comprehension of the essence of adults' learning and of the connection between their learning and experience. I have time and again found proof of the paradigmatic understanding of their life context of learning. Separation of a learner from their life context may lead us to wrong ideas and controversial choices in our work as university teachers and adult educators.

A photo is a thought

I belong to those thousands of people who take pictures a lot and whose hobby is to capture moments, emotions and feelings. This way of capturing and experiencing moments has helped me to realise that pictures, feelings, experience, idea and text are complementary. Thus, the works of Estonian photographer Sven Začek resonate with me as well as the lifestyle and wisdom of Estonian nature researcher Fred Jüssi.

Similarly, Peeter Linnap's book *Fotoloogia* (2008) has become meaningful reading, which inspired and assisted my understanding of various possibilities for using photographs to support adults' learning.

When taking pictures, I have sometimes been thrilled, when I captured a special or simple moment, and have perceived myself as a doer, when I look afterwards at the outcome and the photos on the computer screen. In the context of learning, probably the most important thing is that doing something oneself, in this case creating the picture, capturing a moment and seeing something in it, provides the experience of creative self-expression as well as satisfaction with the work accomplished. It is a supportive emotion and an experience for oneself, even though one has not learned photography from a professional photographer.

The photograph has come into my life as a university teacher and researcher and acquired meanings which create and inspire the need to delve into issues and ask questions. What do photos speak about? What do photos/pictures want to say? What has the photo got to tell me? What can be related to the photograph? How can we use photos in research? Why are photographs important to me as a university teacher? How can I use photos and text together? What does the photograph teach me/us?

A photo is a thought (Leito, 2009). Using photographs, we support transformative and in-depth learning and formation of new perspectives of meaning (Mälkki, 2010). Photos enable us to activate feelings, ideas, comprehension, experience, as well as beliefs and understanding oneself in a perceptible form and a simple way (Weiser, 1999). A photo has influence (Moxey, 2009: 167), which emerges as light, image, feelings, emotions and anticipation. Meaning has its shape and form. The experience captured in the photo at a certain moment or situation (Halkola et al., 2009) is connected to some time, place, event, or person, all together.

In this way, a photo is an opportunity to express the experience and to learn from it as well as a possibility to create a visual narrative. A photo and work with photos enable learners to restructure and construct their own learning experience, to experience a creative way of expression and learn with the support of visual meanings (Weiser, 1999). Visual meanings and denotations help to relate to oneself and comprehend the emotional and rational dimension of the experience (Moxey, 2009: 173).

I teach qualitative research methods in research seminars and have noticed that the use of autoethnographic and visual research as research methods can be difficult tool for novice researchers to use, but it has been very inspiring for many students. Autoethnography is a widely used research methodology and practice whereby the researcher is deeply immersed in self-experience while observing, writing, journaling and reflecting (Edwards, 2021). I have supervised several autoethnographic research projects where students dared to use photographs to collect and analyse data and, in

this way, learned visual literacy. Visual literacy here is the ability to interpret and create meanings on the basis of the picture, which, in its turn, creates an experience to help students understand scientific texts and be more conscious in their research process. The photos produced in the process and used for the sake of understanding complicated abstract texts or concepts, broaden and visualise that which is not yet perceived, understood or impossible to understand yet. A photo is a way and a possibility to express an experience; thus, a photo may support in-depth learning, creating new meanings and can further the formation of visual literacy of the students.

Making sense of my story. Conclusion

Writing this essay, I asked myself a question: what does my learning journey mean and why is it meaningful for me? The contextualisation of the story is demanding. How much context is needed? According to narrative research tradition I follow the idea that narratives contain their own context: sufficient, contextual background information is included for the readers to understand the main meanings (Cortazzi & Jin, 2009: 42). My story is about growing and becoming. It is about understanding self. Understanding ourselves in relation to the academic communities in which we interact is only possible through careful self-examination (Allen, 2015: 35). Through the writing process, I found that reflecting on experience with the story is more meaningful than reflecting on the story. I started my learning and professional journey almost forty years ago. During the years I became a narratively minded qualitative researcher and scholar who is interested in different aspects of identity formation including narrative identity. I believe that adult learning is an aspiration and an opportunity to grow and become somebody. At the very beginning I was interested in learning and how adult learning is understood by different scholars like Peter Jarvis and Jack Mezirow. Later I was interested in phenomenological, narrative and biographical approaches. After the meeting with Marianne Horsdal and participation in her workshop related to narrative analysis, I became more aware of the challenges and perspectives of narrative research. The telling and exchanging of human narratives is the primary way of making sense of, and creating meaning for, our own being (Horsdal, 2009).

The theoretical literature has provided many exciting perspectives and frameworks that have helped me to interpret my own experiences as well as to analyse the empirical material collected through different studies. I like the idea that the field of adult education practices can be studied as learning context or learning environments (Pastuhov & Sivenius, 2020) and for autoethnographers, like adult educators, context is hugely important: researchers are always real people in real contexts that shape, and are shaped

by, our commitments and interests. Autoethnography is a method wholly congruent with adult education (Cormack et al., 2020: 73).

I have thought about what else I need to learn and the list could be quite long. At the moment, it seems that being silent and looking are the things to learn. What we see in pictures and photos is a construction of colour, shape and lines, and it does not describe, but creates meanings and is meant for looking at (Moxey, 2009: 171). How we conceptualise the self in time is fundamental to how we conceptualise our learning and identity (Clark & Dirkx, 2000). I have not yet detected any signs of me being bored, quite the opposite. I have noticed, to my own surprise, that it is all getting even more thrilling. I experience a feeling of wonder, the beauty of nature, even more need to delve into issues and to feel the joy from little things, ideas, people, relationships – it all helps to understand oneself and others, and again learn something new. People connected with education, teaching and learning create, support, care and learn – and this sets certain obligations for me too.

In this essay, I focused more on the positive and “peak” rather than on “nadir or dramatic” personal experience (McAdams, 1985) and it expanded my understanding of my professional identity and my hope for the future. The story about oneself creates a narrative identity that encompasses memories, events, and experiences and is comparable to the substantial consciousness which is understandable in itself and via itself (Veidemann, 1999). This story continues through both sense making and ongoing construction, allowing you to better understand your surroundings and what is important to you.

As a researcher and adult educator, I have experienced how dialogue is an opportunity to interact with myself, colleagues and other researchers. It is my personal story, but I would like to believe that for readers it could assist them to pay attention to their own stories and think about how they conceptualise their self, learning and identity. Writing may open new perspectives and provide encouragement to reflect. The process itself is creative, exploratory, reflexive, and it can make us more aware of who we are in this world.

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