

CHANGING LANES: ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF RESEARCH ABOUT NON-LEARNING IN BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXTS TO AN UNDERSTANDING OF LIFELONG LEARNING PROCESSES

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Abstract – Discussion Paper

Biographical research lends itself to the scientific study of learning in life, because learning in a biographical context is connected with biographical experiences. Nevertheless, the state of empirical research, especially in relation to adult learning, had been considered to be unsatisfactory. For example, it has been brought to the attention of professionals in the field of empirical research into adult education/further education in Germany, that "little is known about the relevant contexts between the various dimensions of adult education/learning on the one hand, and their contextual conditions on the other. The step from the description to the explanation of learning phenomena is seldom ventured" (Schrader/Berzbach 2005: 56; Translation: A.S.)¹. In view of this rather meagre, level of research in the field of 'lifelong learning', a number of researchers is proposing the development of a theory of learning in terms of a biographical framework.

In relation to the context of the insufficient state of research into lifelong learning, as mentioned above, it may seem, at first glance, somewhat a faux pas to take 'non-learning' as a theme. Nevertheless, a number of questions arise from the biographical theoretical and pedagogical perspective: first, if life-stories that are narrated in the present are a mixture of lived and unlived life, which are reflecting learning processes? Can they also highlight processes or stations of non-learning? In what situation in a person's life do periods of non-learning show up most clearly? During these periods how and why people do not learn and what consequences does non-learning have for the individual?

In comparison to 'lifelong learning', the subject of 'non-learning' in the biographical context, has received little attention until now. Thus, this category of learning has been neither dealt with in terms of its relation to the descriptions of 'lifelong learning' nor have the conditions, strategies, functions as well as the consequences of 'non-learning' been identified. The schematic difference between learning and non-learning in a biographical context has not been researched until now.

This paper will address the phenomenon of 'non-learning' in biographical contexts and show the empirical materials available on the topic, as well as its significance for the subject. These phenomena were noticeable by my doctoral thesis, a project researching the learning processes amongst women with breast cancer. The phenomena of non-learning were of such special importance in the course of the lives of these ill women, that the question arose: In the research of lifelong learning, is not 'non-learning' important to be studied?

I would look forward to the opportunity to discuss this question after my presentation.

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¹ Schrader, J./Berzbach, F. (2005): Empirische Lernforschung in der Erwachsenenbildung/Weiterbildung. DIE