Introduction

In our research report *Living in a Learning Society* (Antikainen, Houtsonen, Huotelin, and Kauppila 1996) we argue that from a history perspective people seem to learn mainly by living. Learning is not just restricted to school and other educational institutions. People live in a kind of ‘learning society’ (Husén 1974, Ranson 1994). Nevertheless, the meaning of various institutions and of spheres of life, as well as the identities of learners, have changed historically. Assuming that we are presently moving towards an era of lifelong learning, or a global learning society, we need to ask what this means in the everyday lives of people. How have the positions of various institutions and communities involved in an individual’s learning been transformed? What are the consequences of growing individualism? Is there still a need for solidarity or sense of community in learning?\(^1\) Does, education still have an emancipatory or empowering meaning in contemporary, late-modern culture?

In our study we analysed the meaning of education in the light of a three level conceptualization.\(^2\) At the level of life-course, we asked how people use education in constructing their life-courses. At the level of identity, we asked what educational and learning experiences mean in the production and formation of individual and group identity. At the level of significant learning experiences, we asked what sort of significant learning experiences do people have in different stages of their lives, and whether those experiences originate
in school, work adult study or leisure-time pursuits. In this paper, I will address the level of significant learning experiences, which is perhaps the narrowest, but also the most subjective of these three levels.

On reading the very first life-story interview we conducted I note that the life-course was organized as a series of key learning experiences. These turning points of educational and learning life-story we called significant learning experiences. Thus, in the context of a life-story, we defined significant learning experiences as those which appeared to guide the interviewee's life-course, or to have changed or strengthened his or her identity. A significant learning experience identified by the researcher in the course of analysing a life-story may just be an epiphany in the story (Denzin 1989 pp. 70). If, however, it is verified by the interviewee as one of his or her significant learning experiences, and its form, content and context are considered in a long thematic interview, as was the case in our study, I would argue that it really was a turning point in the life-history of learning in that person's life.

What then does a significant learning experience theoretically represent? It is a life-event; it is a change-event; it is an event of creativity. A more sociological concept than creativity is that of empowerment. The core of the empowerment concept is a participatory approach (Nederveen Pieterse 1992 pp. 10). Empowerment means a transformation in the individual's self-definition and his or her participation, a result of which may be change even in the social structures of subordination. In our study, we represented three factors which could be seen as indicators of empowerment: the expansion of a person's world-view or cultural understanding, the strengthening of one's 'voice' in discourse, and the broadening of the field of social identities or roles (Livingstone 1987).

I now discuss the significant learning experiences people have had, and which have led to self-empowerment by analysing the life-histories of two women from different generations, Anna and Taru.
Two Cases: Early-Modern and Late-Modern?

Anna was 66 years old when she was interviewed (70 years old now). She has been living in the countryside as a housekeeper and family mother. According to our generational analysis, Anna is from ‘the generation of war and scant education’ (Antikainen, Houtsonen, Huotelin and Kauppila 1995, 1996 pp. 36.) For her generation ‘education is an ideal and life a struggle’. In my opinion Anna's life-history includes many elements of the story of traditional Nordic and Finnish popular adult education. Taru was a 20-year-old student and at a vocational school when she was interviewed (23-years old now) and has lived in various cities in southern Finland and Sweden. According to our generational analysis, Taru is from ‘the generation of social welfare and many educational choices’ (Antikainen, Houtsonen, Huotelin and Kauppila 1996). For Taru's generation ‘education was a commodity or self-evident, and the self a problem’. Taru's life-history includes some elements of late-modern or post-modern culture. In both Anna’s and Taru’s case, education has some empowering meaning, the basis of which seems to be a continuity and accumulation of their significant learning experiences.

Anna (born 1924)

Our first informant Anna is 66 years old. She is married and has two children. Born in that part of Karelia which later became the Karelian Russian (Soviet) Republic, from where she was evacuated at 16 years of age. She worked as a housekeeper, caterer and family mother. Anna's life story has been work, human relations, and, as a hobby, study. Two evacuations during the war, marriage and migrations within Finland are manifest markers in her life course, while her parents' divorce and an unintentional end to a love affair during the war serve as invisible markers. Anna's own voice is clearly audible in her story.
Her formal education comprised of four years of primary school plus one year in upper grade; her second upper grade was interrupted by the war. While her formal schooling was exceptionally modest, it corresponds fairly closely with that of her generation, particularly that of the rural population. The seven-month course in home economics that she took at the age of 17 was very significant in her life, vocational career, hobbies, and life experiences. It frequently appears as a source of significant learning experiences.

Handicrafts and home economics or housekeeping, and later in life, learning the English language, reading books, and, recently, regular reading of health magazines have provided Anna with knowledge. In Mezirow’s (1981) terms, Anna’s learning interests and domains are mainly practical and partly technical.

Her significant skills and learning experiences are:

1. Household work and needlework. These experiences go back to her childhood home, where she was taught these skills by her aunt. She started needlework at the age of 7 and has continued with this throughout her life (see point 3 below).

2. Plant-growing. During the war, as an 18-year-old evacuee, she was assigned by the official local crop manager - a peculiar civil servant at that time - to grow tomatoes, turnips and cabbage plants. This was not a well-known skill to the villagers, but it was very important during that period of short food supply. Anna’s efforts were very successful, and she was duly proud of her success. She has continued to grow plants throughout her life.

3. Independent house-keeping. Anna was 31 when she was hired as a housekeeper by two farmer brothers. Her duties included all household work, from baking and vegetable gardening to cattle tending. She was given a free hand in her work, and the farmers treated her as their equal. In the interview she told us about cases of cattle diseases where her action saved the lives of the animals. With the experience she gained from housekeeping she later took on catering jobs, and continued to tend cattle until recent years.

4. Sewing and other needlework. All her adult life Anna has been attending study circles at adult education centres, and still belongs to some sewing circles. She is highly skilled in many kinds of needlework that she herself claims she has at
least ‘completed secondary education and passed the Matriculation examination in sewing’.

5. Elementary English. Anna had her children at an advanced age. When they began learning English at the comprehensive school, Anna was inspired to join the English circle at the local adult education centre. In her home village the news about her English studies was first received with astonishment and even derision. But she went on, obviously supported by the self-confidence she had gained from her previous positive learning experiences. After five years of language studies she visited London, which was her first journey abroad. She found she could understand and even speak some English. In the interview she described London as almost ‘like a favourite child to her’.

Anna’s learning experiences have accumulated throughout her whole life. They have definitely contributed to the construction of both her social and her personal identity. According to her story, the experiences have been very intensive and have enhanced her self-confidence. Previous positive learning experiences, and the ensuing self-confidence, enabled her to study English in spite of the fact that people close to her, even her husband, made fun of her efforts.

The first four learning experiences above started at home and were informal in nature. Her aunt, who taught many things to Anna, served a great deal as a significant other. The course in home economics, as formal training, added to her existing knowledge and skills. Anna still remembers many of the teachers by name and is informed about their later careers. The ultimate learning took place through reflection and experimentation in the work context.

Anna has no stigma about her social identity. Indeed, she has led a colourful and active life. Her personal identity, and her self-identity, or her sense of identity, reflect a pride in her vocational skills and hobbies. All in all, Anna’s story includes many of the features associated with the traditional popular (or liberal) adult education story.
Taru (born 1970)

Taru was born into a Finnish family in Sweden and moved to Finland as a child. She spent her childhood and youth in a small bilingual seaside town. She dropped out of upper secondary school, moved to Helsinki and got a job as a baby-sitter. She also started studying make-up skills. Currently, she is in a vocational school training for the clothing industry. Taru's story is rather disconnected; friendly relations, self-actualization, search for pleasure and fun represent transitional stages in her story.

Taru’s education has comprised comprehensive school, a couple of months in the upper secondary school, six months in a school for beauticians, and one year in the clothing department of a three-year vocational school. While the comprehensive school has only been of instrumental value in Taru's life course, the school for beauticians carried a true inner and social meaning for her. It gave her vocational skills, reinforced all areas of her identity, and clarified her plans for the future. The vocational school serves as an instrument with which she will try to realise her plans.

Taru’s most significant domains of learning are language proficiency, mathematics, sports, cosmetics, and sewing, which she is currently learning. Her interests in all domains were originally utilitarian (technical and practical by Mezirow's terms) but later acquired emancipatory aspects.

Taru’s significant learning experiences are:

1. Sports as a hobby from childhood to puberty.
2. Acquiring language proficiency in everyday life and at school, ever since she was a child.
3. School for beauticians at the age of 17 to 18, as a source of self-assurance and vocational skills.

The different learning experiences have common features: independence, self-assurance, and sociability, reflecting continuity in terms of content. According to Taru, being together with others and pleasure
are the most important features in sports. Sport has taught her about sociability and helped her to become independent of her parents. The sports club provided an environment for learning social skills and independence. Taru’s relationship with other sportsmen / women, her father, and her trainer has been egalitarian and understanding.

Taru first acquired the Swedish language, Finnish becoming her mother tongue when she was four. She learnt Swedish and English at school, in a language club, and later in her home town when speaking with Swedish speakers and tourists. The mass media also helped her in learning languages. She acquired Finnish in the playground and at home. Thus, the contexts for learning have included the playground, home, school, clubs and working life. The significant others in her language acquisition have been friends and family members; as for English, Taru’s teacher was a particularly important person.

In the school for beauticians Taru learned vocational skills and self-assurance. It clarified her future plans and her concept of herself as a social human being. In mastering a skill, it is important to derive pleasure from it, to be enthusiastic about it, to show initiative, and to dedicate one’s spare time to skills development. According to Taru, studying at the school for beauticians was quite informal. She learned social skills from her school friends, and she examined her learning from the viewpoints of vocation and identity. At that time she lived in Helsinki, looked after children, took driving lessons and attended evening classes at the cosmetics school.

In Mezirow’s (1981) terms, Taru's learning experiences do not involve critical reflectivity, but her experiences in the school for beauticians represent self-empowerment. She has been highly motivated and learning has continued after school. Now she is drawing up definite plans for the future. On completing her present vocational studies, Taru wants to qualify for the post of make-up and costume designer in a theatre. She emphasises that her personality is suitable for the job, and the qualities that helped her to enter the cosmetics school were enthusiasm and sociability. The school experiences tie the areas of identity closer together, and Taru relates her personal
identity and her lifestyle a make-up designer's job. The school has reinforced her self-identity.

**Significant Others of Learning**

It now seems very obvious that the concept of significant learning experience was created in our study while analysing the life-story of our first informant, Anna. We noticed that significant learning experiences had been organised by personal and social relationships in various communities. Throughout Anna’s generation, collectivity and communality were very visible. Using the language of symbolic interactionism we call these supporting or collaborating personal and social relationships the significant others of learning.

The following communities and significant others of learning can be seen in Anna’s significant learning experiences. She learned the skills of household work and needlework from her early childhood at home. The significant other of learning was her aunt, not her divorced mother who was too busy with cattle. Anna learned about plant-growing as a young girl in the starving Karelian village community during wartime, guided by the local crop manager. She learned about housekeeping as a young woman in a farm run by two farmer brothers. The studies in sewing, and other needlework, continued during a seven month vocational course in home economics, and later in study circles at local adult education centre. This study was supported by Anna’s peers and teachers, whom she still remembers. Her English studies at an advanced age took place mainly at a study circle run by the local adult education centre, but it was made possible by her independence and self-confidence. We argue that these studies would not have been possible without the accumulation of her earlier significant learning experiences.

We did not expect to notice a sense of community in Taru's significant learning experiences, but it is there. Sometimes it is less
definable than in Anna’s case, indeed, in Taru’s case it is a multipli-
city of communities. For instance, sports as a hobby emerged by
Taru’s own expression:

... it just started when we swarmed around with my pals (se vaan tuli, että kun
kavereiden kanssa pyörittiin ...).

In addition to her peers, a sports club and her father were also guid-
ing and supporting significant others. Taru learned the Swedish lan-
guage within her family while they were living in Sweden. She
learned Finnish after the family moved back to Finland. At the age
of 4, her parents and her Finnish speaking friends acted as signifi-
cant others of learning. The English language she learned at school, in
the classroom and in a language club, but also from television, cor-
respondence and exchange students. Taru described her English
teacher as a ‘good and encouraging teacher’, and said that the entire
comprehensive school class was exceptional for its interest in En-
lish.

Frequently in Taru’s story we can see the influence of com-
community. During the last grade of comprehensive school she tired of
it, went to school irregularly, but passed nonetheless. She also
entered the upper secondary school, but quickly dropped out al-
though her father tried to keep her in school by providing financial
support.

Eventually, she moved to Helsinki and worked as a child's nurse. In
her first interview, a life-story interview, she mentioned that her idea to
study make-up skills was influenced by the films she watched. In the
second interview, a thematic interview, she answered the question on
how she got the idea in the following way:

... well, I don’t t know, the idea just suddenly came into my mind, I just started to
elaborate upon the idea of becoming a beautician ... (niin en mä tiedä, se vaan tuli
vaan niinku tavallaan yhtäkkiä mä aloin kehitellä sitä niinku mielessäni, että ...
On learning the skills of the beautician she says:

... to manage on one's own initiative is needed, one's own interest and enthusiasm, so that one can do make-ups and have an eye for the skill of drawing ... (kyllä on täytynyt vähän oma-aloitteisuutta, että omaa kiinnostusta ja semmosta niin kun innostusta olla, että osaa niinku maskeerata ja vähän semmosta silmää, että on lahjakas piirtäjä...)

These technical skills she learned in the beauty school, admission to which was not easy. After a first unsuccessful attempt, Taru was prepared to leave to study abroad, but she was successful on her second attempt. Taru's appreciation for her teachers was based, in part, on the fact that they worked in TV and had studied abroad.

At the time of our interview Taru was studying the clothing business in a vocational school. She felt that the school was boring and too disciplined, but ‘a bet’ made with her parents kept her there. Another factor was the suicide of her drug-addicted girl friend. Taru wants to qualify for the post of make-up and costume designer and possibly work abroad. When asked about the significance of her knowledge of languages, she answered in the following way:

It has an enormous significance ...getting a summer job... in communication it's alpha and omega in communication. I already mentioned that I might move abroad as my brother did. As a make-up and costume designer in a theatre... it's a profession you could do in any part of the world ... but it's easier if you know foreign languages.

In the case of Anna, an early-modern case, significant learning experiences are connected with each other the skill, once learned, used and developed throughout the life-span. In the case of Taru, in part a late-modern case, her life-story in general, and her life-story of learning, includes breaks and jumps. At least at the time of the interview, her knowledge of languages seemed to have maintained its position and also to have made new skills and knowledge meaningful.
In this sense, the continuity and accumulation of learning experiences and the role of education therein were creating empowerment in Taru's life as well.

Based on ideas presented by Jan Nespor in *Knowledge in Motion* (Nespor 1994), we made a differentiation in our study between local significant others of learning and distant significant others of learning. Distant significant others are often representations, not concrete persons like local significant others. In the case of Anna, we argue that her distant significant others of learning can be found in the discourses of nation-building, patriotism and agrarian class society. For instance, the representations of ‘farmer’, ‘worker’, ‘house-keeper’ and ‘house-wife’ are probably familiar to Anna. In the case of Taru, her distant significant others of learning can be found in the discourses of international networks, mass media and postindustrial society with multiple identities. For example; the representations of ‘entrepreneur’, ‘business manager’, ‘actress’, ‘model’ and ‘designer’ are probably familiar to Taru.

From the point of view of social theory, we could name distant significant others as constitutive significant others. According to the future vision of Anthony Giddens (1994):

> The post-traditional society is an ending; but it is also a beginning, a genuinely new social universe of action and experience. What type of social order is it, or might it become? It is, as I have said, a global society; not in the sense of world society but as one of ‘indefinite space’. It is one where social bonds have effectively to be made, rather than inherited from the past - on the personal and more collective levels this is a fraught and difficult enterprise, but one also that holds out the promise of great rewards. It is decentered in terms of authorities, but re-centered in terms of opportunities and dilemmas, because focused upon new forms of interdependence. To regard narcissism, or even individualism, as the core of post-traditional order is a mistake - certainly in terms of the potentials for the future that it contains. (p. 106)
Conclusion

In our study, we found that at least in transitions and breaks in life-course and identity, for example in the case of widowhood or divorce or unemployment, education may have empowering meanings. There are also some other structural cases of empowerment described in our book (Antikainen et al. 1996). In this article, however, I have addressed two female life-histories that do not contain any strong structural constrains upon their ability to seek empowerment. I hope I have succeeded in demonstrating that education had some emancipatory meaning in the life-histories of Anna and Taru.

In his analysis of the cultural construction of educational identity, Jarmo Houtsonen found a group of young people for whom education was a tool. It was a means towards the realisation of a personal or social dream regarding particular issues, issues such as ecology or the women's movement or sexual marginality, or for a corresponding personal lifestyle (Houtsonen 1994, Antikainen, Houtsonen, Huotelin & Kauppila 1996, chapter 5). I refer to Jarmo's analysis here in order to posit whether there are any corresponding features in the life-stories of Anna and Taru. I think that we can identify signs of life projects in their stories too. In the case of Anna, it is more an ‘accepted’ life project, while in the case of Taru, it is more a ‘discovered’ life project - so far.

The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) advises us to make meaning and harmony by choosing a project or life theme:

The life theme, like a game that prescribes the rules and actions one must follow to experience flow, identifies what will make existence enjoyable. With a life theme, everything that happens will have a meaning - not necessarily a positive one, but a meaning nevertheless. If a person bends all her energies to making a million dollars before age thirty, whatever happens is a step either toward or away from that goal. The clear feedback will keep
her involved with her actions. Even if she loses all her money, her thoughts and actions are tied by a common purpose, and they will be experienced as worthwhile. Similarly, a person who decides that finding a cure for cancer is what she wants to accomplish above all else will usually know whether she is getting closer to her goal or not - in either case, what must be done is clear, and whatever she does will make sense. (p. 230)

I have shown, however, that a life project is just only a matter of choice, but also a matter of constraint depending on generation, class and gender.

Finally, I suggest it was not accident that both Anna's and Taru's significant learning experiences were realised in communities supported by significant others. Education has to respond to the individualism and narcissism of young people, but even so, it would be a mistake to deny that solidarity and communality still exist in Finnish society or in Nordic societies in general. The form of communality found today probably differs from the traditional one, but based on our study I would argue that this communality is needed in learning (Wexler 1992). In learning both ‘self’ and ‘others’ are always present at least in representational form. Communal identity within Finnish or Nordic culture and educational institutions needs to be appreciated, not discouraged.

Notes

1. The term ‘communality’ is used in this article as a synonym for the sociological concept of solidarity, but stressing the level of everyday life.

2. We used a life history approach with a biographical narrative interview and semi-structured thematic interview (Goodson 1992). In accordance with our purpose, we interviewed many kinds of people: women and men, representatives of different social classes and ethnic groups, and of various ages (N=44, approx. 3000 pages). The remarks and interpretations made in this article are largely based on
these data although I demonstrate our analysis throughout the lives of Anna and Taru.

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Bibliography


