Life-histories of Learners, the ‘Learning Society’, and Globalization: the case of Finland from an international perspective

Ari Antikainen, Department of Sociology, University of Joensuu, Box 111, FIN-80101 Joensuu, Finland    email ari.antikainen@joensuu.fi

Abstract

The article discusses a research project that is exploring the meaning of education and learning in the lives of Finns, with particular focus on lifelong learning in the social context of a swiftly changing society. This social transformation towards a late-modern society is based on globalization. Thus, the concepts of globalization and lifelong learning are side by side investigated. The theoretical framework analyzes the meaning of education on three levels: (1) How do people use education in constructing their life courses? (2) What do educational and learning experiences mean in the production and formation of individual and group identity? (3) What significant experiences do Finns have in the different stages of their lives, do those experiences originate in school, work, adult study, or leisure-time pursuits? What is the substance, form and social context of significant learning experiences? Education is considered as a productive - vs. only reproductive - factor in the individual's life. It is hypothesised that education has several, emancipatory meanings. Also considered is whether a cultural pattern of lifelong learning exists in Finnish society and whether a new learning society is emerging.

Problem

The idea of lifelong learning is very old, but just in recent decades lifelong learning has become an issue in educational policy and planning. This paper deals with the following two questions:
- In what way does lifelong learning represent an educational model of contemporary globalization?
- How has the meaning of education and learning changed in people's everyday life? Does there exist a move towards the era of globalization and lifelong learning?

The case here is the Finnish society as a swiftly changed Nordic information society. Castells and Himanen (2001; 2003) argue that in Finland a unique mixture of technological-economic innovation, welfare state policies and national identity has developed. They compare this Finnish model with Silicon Valley and Singapore in terms of some technological, economic, welfare and openness indicators. Finland is successful in this comparison, or should we say that the Nokia Mobile Valley is successful.

Globalization

Tehranian (1998; Riggs 1998, 1) defines globalization in the following way:

---

1 The article is a revised and updated version of my unpublished paper presented at the XIV World Congress of Sociology, in a session of RC 04. Sociology of Education, July 26- August 1, 1998, Montréal, Canada.
"Globalization is a process that has been going on for the past 5000 years, but it has significantly accelerated since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. Elements of globalization include transborder capital, labor, management, news, images, and data flows. The main engines of globalization are the transnational corporations (TNCs), transnational media organizations (TMCs), intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and alternative government organizations (AGOs). From a humanist perspective, globalization entails both positive and negative consequences: it is both narrowing and widening the income gaps among and within nations, intensifying and diminishing political domination, and homogenizing and pluralizing cultural identities."

Based on Tehranian, Riggs distinguishes historical globalization and contemporary globalization. The former is a long-term process and the later is an accelerated process of the 1990s. This later period I call the age of globalization.

Jeffrey Hart (1998; Riggs 1998, 2) identifies five concepts represented by globalization and he lists them as follows: the existence of global infrastructure, global harmonization or convergence of some important characteristic feature, borderlessness, global diffusion of some initially localized phenomenon, and geographical dispersion of core competencies in some highly desirable activities.

As for education, the following tentative remarks can be made:
1. Education can be seen as a part of global infrastructure. Simultaneously education is a very national social institution. New information technology forms the contemporary global infrastructure of education and learning. 
2. The goals of education policy have more or less changed from social integration and citizenship formation to economic advantage and skill formation in the context of intensified economic competition between nations. Increased convergence of education systems is a trend. Still there exist remarkable differences between educational systems. (Green 1998.)
3. Flow of information and knowledge as well as students, and to some extent graduates across national borders is a contemporary trend.
4. Westernization of education could be an extreme example of global diffusion of a localized phenomenon. There are numerous individual examples.
5. The three R’s represent historical globalization, computer literacy represents contemporary one.

Lifelong Learning

The idea of lifelong learning is old. Its origin could be located in ancient times. A Czech philosopher and pedagogue Johan Amos Comenius, who lived in the 17th century, is the "founding father" of lifelong learning. The idea is old, but it became an education policy issue in the 1960s. Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), especially the UNESCO, functioned as the engines of this policy formation. Edgar Faure et. al. (1972, v-vi) refer in their pioneer committee report straight to international community:
"Four basic assumptions underlay our work from the start. The first, which was indeed the justification for the task we undertook, is that of the existence of an international community which, amidst the variety of nations and culture, of political options and degrees of development, is reflected in common aspirations, problems and trends, and in its movement towards one and the same destiny. The corollary to this is the fundamental solidarity of governments and peoples, despite transitory differences and conflicts."

In Finland, at least the following phases could be seen in education policy discourse on lifelong learning:

1. In the late 1960s, a central national committee referred lifelong education by the UNESCO (KM 1969).
2. In 1970s and 80s there was a lively debate on the views of UNESCO, OECD and EC incorporated in the concepts of lifelong education, recurrent education and continuing education (Alanen 1981). In practice, formal education and its vertical integration were stressed. (KM 1984).
3. A new emergence of lifelong learning occurred in the context of information technology revolution, fast changes in Europe and the membership of the European Union in 1990s. The major actors in this re-emergence were besides national governments and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) also transnational corporations (TNCs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like European employers’ organizations. The year of 1996 was a theme year of lifelong learning in the European Union. Instead of vertical integration of formal education, informal education and horizontal integration between education and work were emphasized. Humanistic aims were replaced by the discourse of human capital and skill formation. The growth of adult education in 1980s and 90s was growth in vocational and in-service education (Tuomisto 1998, 253-256). Instead of international community, nation-state and its survival was presented as a major function of lifelong learning. (KM 1997 ; Silvennoinen & Tulkki 1998.) The original, humanistic concept of lifelong learning survived in adult educators’ discourse and community.

International organizations (IGOs, TNCs, NGOs) have been pushing lifelong learning to the agendas of national governments and the new emergence of lifelong learning has been related to the context of global change and global economic competition. In this respect, lifelong learning is undoubtedly a production of contemporary globalization. In addition, I would like to argue that the emergence of lifelong learning is associated with a deep shift in socialization and identity production. David Riesman et.al. (1961) see, that through the changes of population and way of life in early industrial society the transition was made from tradition-directed socialization to inner-directed socialization and society type. Urbanization and mass society were bringing other-directed "social character" or identity as a dominant type. No doubt, we are still living in an other-directed social world, but remarkable changes have taken place, too. In risk society (Beck 1994) or in post-traditional community (Giddens 1994), "individualization" is a major tendency. It does not mean atomization, isolation or the end of social, but transformation of ways of life in industrialized societies. Individuals have to plan and adjust their own life-histories. In this respect, individualization and reflexivity or self-directed socialization become a dominant type. Lifelong learning is not needed just to grease the machines of globalized economies, but lifelong learning is also, in accord with the prevailing mode of socialization, a way to keep individual life-history going on. Within a mode of socialization, a way of glocalization or globally interactive locality changes, too (Riggs 1998, 8).
Life-history and Learning

Life-as-lived, life-as-experienced and life-as-told has long interested authors and researchers (Bruner 1986). The biographical method in its various forms has been a part of sociology's history since the Chicago School in the 1920s (Thomas & Znaniecki 1918-20). In the 1980s and 1990s, sociologists and scholars in other disciplines have expressed a renewed interest in the biographical method. As the life experiences of a person are the very foundations of educative processes, it is natural that the biographical method is used also in educational research, especially in adult education.

Based on numerous life course studies conducted in different countries, Peter Alheit (1994) argues that "Living a life" has become more problematic and unpredictable. It is "a laboratory for developing skills whose usefulness is uncertain". Still, in the late-modern culture individuals have their everyday competence to organize their biographies, and in the course of our lives we produce meanings related to ourselves and our social framework. From a biographical or life history point of view, we have more opportunities than we can ever put into practice. "Biographicity" - as Alheit (1992) calls biographical knowledge and the qualifications based on this knowledge - contains a huge capacity for learning. We may have a feeling that we can act rather independently over our biographies, and simultaneously we have to recognize the structural limitations imposed by our social and ethnic origins, our gender and the era we are living (Stanley 1993). Thus, Alheit (1994, 288) makes a remark which could have been a methodological principle in our study of the meaning of education and learning in the lives of Finnish people:
"The learning processes between structure and subjectivity are manifold, but they can only be understood if we do justice to both poles: the structural framework of conditions governing our lives and the spontaneous dispositions that we adopt towards ourselves."

The Meaning of Education and Learning

The research project "In Search of the Meaning of Education" studies the meaning of education and learning in the lives of Finns (Antikainen et al 1995, 1996 and 1999; Antikainen 1998; Antikainen & Kauppila 2002; Antikainen & Harinen 2002). In addition to formal education, we are interested in adult education and other less formal ways of acquiring knowledge and skills. In fact, we are dealing with lifelong learning in the social context of swiftly changing Finnish society.

According to our theoretical framework, the meaning of education can be analysed on three levels, as reflected in the following three questions:

1. How do people use education in constructing their life-courses?
2. What do educational and learning experiences mean in the production and formation of individual and group identity?
3. What sort of significant experiences do Finns have in the different stages of their lives? Do those experiences originate in school, work, adult study or leisure-time pursuits? What is the substance, form and social context of significant learning experiences?
In this kind of study education is considered to be a productive factor - not just a reproductive one - in the individual's life. We do not question the institutionalizing influence of education on life-course and inequality, but we do make a hypothesis that the situation on the biographical level is more complex, and that education has several, also emancipatory meanings. Does it already exist a cultural pattern of lifelong learning in Finnish society? Then I will continue to a educational policy discussion. Are we moving towards a new learning society? What kind of society is it?

**Interviews**

We collected our data by means of biographical and thematic interviews. In the initial interviews the interviewees related their life-stories orally. As needed, each interviewee was also asked more specific questions about education, self-definition, and areas of knowledge important in his or her life. An interview typically lasted three to four hours. We then picked out a list of significant learning experiences from each life-story and presented it to the interviewee for approval or revision.

At the beginning of the second interview we considered each significant learning experience and its social context in greater detail. Assuming that education can also destroy identity, we asked, finally, for the interviewee's most negative education-oriented experience. The second interview usually lasted about as long as the first.

In accordance with our purpose, we interviewed many kinds of people: women and men, representatives of different social classes and ethnic groups, and persons of various ages. Most of the 44 interviewees (approximately 3000 pages) were Finnish-speakers (n=28), but the group also included Swedish-speakers, Samis (Lapps), Romanies (Gypsies) and individual members of immigrant and refugee groups. The interviews with members of ethnic minorities were, on average, less complete than those conducted with Finnish-speakers. The interviewees were classified into four age groups or cohorts whose representation we wished to guarantee. In accordance with our grounded-theory approach, we ended the collection of the data when we reached the saturation criterion.

**Learning Experiences, Significant Others of Learning, and Learning Community**

The construction of the term "significant learning experience" can be attributed to our first interviewee, the 66-year old Karelian housekeeper and family mother, Anna. Her interview indicated that a life-story may include distinct turning points of educational and learning biographies. These turning points we began to call "significant learning experiences". We defined these experiences in relation to life-course and identity as follows: **significant learning experiences are those which appeared to guide the interviewee's life-course, and to have changed or strengthened his or her identity** (Antikainen 1998). We soon found out that the life-story of each interviewee included significant learning experiences such as defined above. The numbers of these varied from one to ten.
I am inclined to interpret the lists of learning experiences produced as stories to manage the life. They relate the knowledge and skills that have helped one to cope with problems in life. Naturally they do not reveal all the experiences, situations and knowledge that interviewees' have needed in various phases of their lives. As we noted earlier, experiences connected with an institutional life-course may be left untold. As well, experiences that are painful and still not worked through by the interviewees are sometimes not discussed.

The description of differences in accordance with age and generation corresponds with the description of educational generations (Antikainen et al. 1996, 34-52). The narratives of the oldest generation are most pronouncedly stories of survival, or as Kauppila says, for them "life is a struggle". For instance, the experiences coded as significant experiences of 66-year-old Anna (four years of primary school plus one year in upper grade, vocational course, a variety of adult education courses) and the 66-year-old Unto (secondary school, a part of upper secondary school, a college degree) are as follows:

Anna, 66
1. Learning the basics of household work and needlework at home from the age of seven onwards.
2. Growing plants for her family and her whole Karelian village in the time of short food supply during the war when she was about 18.
3. Learning independent housekeeping and cattle tending as a housekeeper about the age of thirty.
4. Becoming more and more skilled in needlework in adult study centre education study circles.
5. Learning the rudiments of the English language in her fifties.

To the questions "Who are you, how would you describe yourself?" Anna responds: "Now well... I must say that I haven't, like, had any complexes, neither an inferiority complex, nor a superiority complex, what I always say is that I use the same door as everyone else does..."

Unto, 66
1. Learning the reality of life from the stories of log floaters in his childhood.
2. Learning the skills of wireless operator while in the army in his youth.
3. The general education provided by his discontinued studies in upper secondary school.
4. Increasing his foreman skills in adulthood.
5. Increasing his general education in adulthood.

To the question "Who are you?" Unto responds: "Wait a moment... it's not such a simple matter... to put into words. Well, first of all... I'd say... I'm quite a... quite a typical case of a person... with an average education... a person educated for tasks... such tasks that demand... demand well... no big decisions of eco... well in an economic sense and... it's not so... I don't actually know... now when you take... well take time into consideration... it's perhaps that as a negative side I'd say that perhaps I have...drifted to something... drifted to this field that hardly was meant for me... like... I have drifted to it by force of circumstances... for instance to this trade of which I'm not sorry about in the least, but..."

The narratives of the middle generation - especially men - reveal the importance of constructing one's career and of education - especially formal education - in this process. A fitting example is Ville, a man who has moved to town from the countryside.

Ville, 50
1. Participating in the building of a cowshed in youth.
2. Demonstration of physical strength and working capacity in youth, before the back disease.
3. Learning the land surveyor's trade as a young adult.
4. Graduating from technical school, in spite of his disease, before the age of 30.
5. Studying shooting and blasting, and successful blasting contracts at about the age of 35.
6. Acting as technical designer and expert in constructing a running track at the age of 35 to 40.
7. Contributing to the establishment of a municipal engineering college at a vocational school at the age of 40.
8. Studying law at a university summer course at the age of 45.
9. Studying in the evening classes of technical college at the age of 50.

To the question of identity, "Who are you, how would you describe yourself?" Ville responds: "I am Ville and I can say my name and show that on no account I'm ashamed of it!"

In the narratives of the young generation we can easily detect the increase of reflexivity and individualism compared to the earlier generations. As examples of the learning experiences of the younger generation I present Taru (comprehensive school, school for beauticians, clothing department in vocational school) and Petri (completed Matriculation Examination, discontinued studies in a commercial college, about to graduate from a nursing college).

Taru, 20
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.

To the question of "Who are you, how would you describe yourself?" Taru responds: "Decisive... and then friendly and one to make friends easily."....
"...that I think I'm easy-going and awfully natural, I really am what I am"...

Petri, 23
1. Growing self-confidence in youth and early adulthood during civil alternative service.
2. Consideration of other people and nursing skills from the childhood onwards but particularly at the college of nursing.

To the question of his self-identity Petri answers: "Well, you could always think that does it really exist any 'self', but I don't think like that, however. I'm an evolving person."
"...for quite some time now I've been happy with my own person... I love myself and I'm a bit selfish as well"...

The differences according to social class and gender are analyzed in our group's recent papers (Käyhkö & Tuupanen 1997; Antikainen 1998).

In each significant learning experience personal and social relations that support learning are easily detectable. They are not included in the definition of a significant learning experience, however, and thus this tendency is interesting. It means that learning can be studied as personal relations even in technological society. Applying the language of symbolic interactionism we called personal and social relations as significant others of learning. Getting familiar with learning theories and the attempt to link learning in its social context led us to notice that learning has both its local environment and distant environment (Antikainen et al. 1996, 90-101; cf. Lave & Wenger 1991). Thus it also has local significant others and distant significant others. The former are always concrete human beings, the latter are often symbolic or representational images.
On examining the relations between the learner and local significant others, we noticed that the character of this relationship had more to do with community (Gemeinschaft) than with association (Gesellschaft). In this respect, differences between generations do exist, for example, but they are much less significant than I expected.

In addition to the local environment, the distant environment, which to a great extent constitutes the local one, is detectable for instance in the learning experiences of our most premodern case of Anna and the most late-modern case of Taru. Anna's distant significant others - or the reference group or the horizon of social world - can be found in the discourses of nation-building, patriotism and agrarian class society. Taru's distant significant others can be found in the discourses of international networks, mass media and post-industrial society with multiple identities. For Taru, society can be the post-traditional society described by Giddens (1994, 106), the society that is global not in the sense of world community, but rather as an undefined space in which it is possible to transfer from one place to another both concretely - by travelling - and symbolically - via communication systems and images. In a post-traditional society social ties are not ascribed but achieved or made. It is decentralized with regard to authorities and control, but centralized regarding opportunities and problems. The life-stories and life-histories of both women bear the characteristics of life projects. In Anna's case, the project is adjusted to a great extent; in Taru's case the project is discovered - so far (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). The life experiences of both also include the characteristics of the enchantment of doing, that is, the flow-experience. Both women have been active and have been rewarded with pleasure more than with material rewards. Finally, Anna's and Taru's learning experiences, according to my view of learning in general, include "self" (individual identity), "us" (community in a traditional or post-traditional form) and "others" (society).

Towards the Learning Society?

In contemporary dialogue learning society is to a great extent seen as a synonym for lifelong learning. Torsten Husén (1974) gave the following criteria for a learning society already in the golden days of educational optimism: 1) people have an opportunity for lifelong learning, 2) formal education extends to the whole age group, 3) informal education - such as adult studies - is in a central position and self-study is widely accepted and 4) other institutions support education which in its turn depends on them. In many recent books, the concept of learning society is in a versatile way debated (Ranson 1998; Young 1998; Hodgson 2000).

I am inclined to see lifelong learning not as a new phenomenon. Rather, the representatives of each generation we studied have acquired learning experiences throughout their lives. What was new was the context and situation in which lifelong learning is currently required. We have to note, however, that this context is only now being constructed. I am referring to a society in which individualization and globalization are simultaneously going on. In this kind of a society preparedness for lifelong learning may well become a constraining challenge.
According to our study, the significance of family as a mediating institution and learning community is central. Children's and teenagers' hobbies alone or with peers have established institutionalized and less known subjective and subjectivizing sides. This subjectivization cannot be studied with traditional concepts of socialization and development.

School as a place for general education has lost some of its meaning. This situation calls for discussion of the relations between the institutionalization and the seemingly mindless routine of school and that of the in-school and out-of-school life of a young person. Vocational and university education are also at risk of losing their meaning if unemployment remains high in the long term.

The line between education and work has already become blurred and may in future become increasingly more obscure. Thus, the socio-political decisions concerning working life are at the same time decisions concerning education.

Our interviews indicated that a group of young people have learned to use institutional education in the manner of Nordic popular (or liberal) adult education. They choose studies that are connected with the social movement and ideology or corresponding lifestyle they represent. These young people may well turn out to be the most active citizens of our future society. It is likely that in the future education, work and leisure time are linked with each other even more fundamentally.

Learning has both its local environment and distant environment. The distant environment has become increasingly more global but also more chaotic. The future of a learning society depends more and more on the construction of a world community between and within societies.

The remarks and interpretations made in our study are not in contradiction to Giddens' (1994) conceptions on the dynamics of late modernity regarding the globalization of economy and communication, the detraditionalization of social life, and the need for reflexivity in all aspects and stages of life. This tendency would mean that learning is becoming an essential and penetrating feature in late modern society.

Resources to learn and to do biographical work are not equally distributed however (cf. Käyhkö & Tuupanen 1997). The learning society is a risk society (Beck 1986; Hake 1997). First, the link between social allocation and opportunities in education and labour markets has not disappeared in late modern society. In fact, in the context of high unemployment and growing individualism, social disparities and inequalities are increasing, as the "one-third, two-third society" debate demonstrates. Social exclusion threatens aged unemployed workers, ethnic minorities, and also women and young adults in the form of part-time or temporary jobs, as well as those in lower social classes. Allocation and selection is clear on the organization level as well. For instance, Nasta (1993; Antikainen et al 1996, 98) gives a very nice description of shifts in organizational structures toward a learning organization. In the middle of his egalitarian rhetoric, he outlines the same organizational structures in terms of the classification of workers into three groups:

... "the core, which is composed of well-qualified people, professionals, technicians or managers; the contractual fringe, which is made up individuals and organizations who deliver services on a subcontracted basis for the core; and third ... the flexible labour force, those seeking part-time or temporary work".
Thus the learning society is a class society celebrating the professional-managerial class (Antikainen et al. 1996, 99).

Studies done in the former East Germany (Meier 1997; Meier et al. 1997) confirm that unemployed people also use education sooner for construction of their biographies and identities than for the formal political-economic task. If we are facing the end of work and the emergence of the third sector, or the civil society, the way Rifkin (1995) has presented, the meaning of education and learning will change dramatically. For Alheit (1997), the learning society is in the future, beyond the labour society. It is amazing how much it resembles the traditional Nordic popular adult education model! But how will people learn to survive in this coming learning society?

**Conclusion**

I hope that I have answered the two questions presented in the beginning of this paper: **First**, lifelong learning is an educational model of the age of globalization and differentiation and individualization associated with this contemporary trend. There is, however, none determined concept of lifelong learning but its meaning varies by the context. In Finnish mainstream context, lifelong learning has become much more Eurocentric, national and economic concept in 1990s than it was in 1960s and 1970s. Biographical competency is coming the key competence to ensure individual survival in late modernity. **Second**, it is possible that lifelong learning has always existed in the everyday life of some social groups. The meaning of education and learning as well as significant others of learning have, however, changed in recent decades. Also in an individualized society - or especially there - communal relations or ties are important conditions for learning. "Learning society" is worth of analysis and debate, but it has to be remembered that "learning society" is just a part of social reality that could extensively be described as global capitalism.

**References:**


