

# LEARNING TRANSITIONS: RESEARCH, POLICY, PRACTICE

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## TRANSITIONS IN A LIQUID AGE

References to constant change are something of a cliché, but are none the less apt. Well over a decade ago, in the early days of the current policy preoccupation with lifelong learning, Richard Edwards drew attention to the ways in which the language of change had become a pervasive theme of our times (Edwards 1997). Familiar suspects parade before us as the drivers of change: globalisation, new technologies, science-based innovation, organisational restructuring, and the search for competitive advantage (for a detailed analysis at transnational level see Schemmann 2007). To these we might add cultural and social factors, such as the continuing rise in the aspirations of – and expectations from – women, the apparently inexorable growth in average life expectancy, and (perhaps more controversially) a tendency towards individualisation of values and lifestyles.

Little wonder, then, that life transitions have become such a focus of attention among researchers. Surrounded by a wall-to-wall discourse of change, people have had to adjust their expectations; constantly told that “A job is not for life any more”, they have learned to expect uncertainty, regardless of whether things are actually changing or not. And for many people, life is bringing new challenges and experiences, which

are certainly experienced subjectively as being unprecedented in their scale and speed. This is not simply to suggest that there has been a quantitative growth in the number of transitions that any individual might make in the course of their life, though there are compelling reasons for supposing this to be the case, including the plain fact that people who live longer than previous generations are likely to survive through more changes as a result. The public discourse of change ensures that people are sensitised to the possibility and the experience of transition, and this in turn helps create a ready market for educational materials such as self-help texts that purport to help individuals navigate their way through the choppy waters of life today (Chappell et al 2003). And even when you do not really expect something to change, you are aware that other people's decisions might affect you at any time – in your job, in your family, in your home, or in your leisure activities – and you may conclude that it is prudent to adopt the old Boy Scout motto, and be prepared.

Transition is a fundamental a feature of life in late modernity. It is at the heart of much contemporary social theory, a point illustrated particularly clearly by Zygmunt Bauman's torrent of writings on 'liquid life' (Bauman 2000, 2005). For Bauman, each social routine or institution, every relationship and practice, is fluid and open to change; there are no fixed points on today's social compass. And flexible citizens need to dip in and out of education and training, constantly seeking insurance against the risks and uncertainties of tomorrow (Bauman 2001). Anthony Giddens, whose theories of institutionalised reflexivity similarly reflect a preoccupation with change and its implications, has also concluded that lifelong learning is the main educational consequence, and built it into his conception of 'Third Way' policies (Giddens 2000).

## LIFELONG LEARNING AND ACTIVE CITIZENS

Third Way policies envisage a renegotiation of the contract between citizen and the state. In seeking to 'activate' the citizen, so that individuals and businesses plan ahead for their future well-being and success and assume the lion's share of responsibility for investing in future skills and knowledge, Third Way thinking shares a very similar outlook to much centrist political thinking on the future of welfare (see for example Rosanvallon 1995). For Edwards, the discourse of lifelong learning has served a

legitimizing function, constructing notions of the learning citizen as a way of engaging people in planning for their own learning, as well as underpinning a pronounced vocational tack in funding and structures (Edwards 1997). Andreas Fejes detects similar processes at work in his analysis of Swedish policies on lifelong learning (Fejes 2006).

These ideas place the individual in the spotlight, where each person must expect and make ready for transitions and engage in learning as a fundamental strategy for handling change. And citizen-workers who dip in and out of education and training will also be engaging in almost permanent transitions in their learning as well as using learning to prepare for and cope with other transitions. In turn, each individual faces increasingly differentiated trajectories through their lives resulting from the particular constellations of transitions, and their various outcomes, which they experience. And these individualising tendencies reinforce the absence of a prescribed script for many of the transitions; habit and routine no longer provide a reliable guide to decision-making (Giddens 1990). People's trajectories are partly shaped by their own capacities for exercising control over their lives, capacities which include different degrees of reflexivity and levels of human capital; but as well as this agency, people's trajectories are embedded in a lived context of external factors, which structure the opportunities that people face (Biesta and Tedder 2006).

So how has the life course fared in liquid modernity? Have postmodern conditions thrown the life course into a chaos of endless choice? Are transitions experienced as coercion, a kind of eviction of the self, or do they represent people – either as individuals or as groups – achieving what they desire? From a broadly postmodern perspective, it has been argued that the life cycle has become increasingly elective and fragmented. Thus Glastra, Hake and Schedler recently suggested that:

As is now well established, the standard biography has been replaced by the 'elective biography' . . . This development has two corollaries. One is that in certain period of life, many different tasks must be combined. . . . The second is that given the individualization of life courses, coordination of life and work on an aggregate social level becomes problematic (Glastra, Hake and Schedler 2004, 295).

While arguably this is an exaggerated claim, it does point to some aspects of non-linearity that seem to be characteristic of late modernity. Institutionalisation has been accompanied by individualisation, in a wider context where there are strong economic and cultural pressures favouring greater flexibility; these are experienced by a variety of actors as deeply contradictory tendencies, and they increasingly form the focus for a rather heated public debate over issues such as retirement age and pensions reform (Kohli 2003, 536).

Transitions may therefore be seen as personal troubles and public issues, but contemporary conditions have tended to individualise them and emphasise the individual's responsibility for their own life planning. And this is where lifelong learning steps in. From career guidance to third age programmes, from 'learning to learn' in kindergarten to MBA, from Mozart for babies to gender re-assignment counselling, people face a crowded world of learning activities designed to help them through transitions. The 'silent explosion' of adult learning (Field 2006) that has been experienced in many western countries includes much that might be described as 'transitional learning', or in Alheit's words, as 'biographical learning', in which the capacity to learn for and from one's own life is an increasingly significant resource (Alheit 1994).

## RESEARCHING TRANSITIONS

This book presents selected papers from the fourth biennial international conference of the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRLI). A joint initiative of Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of Stirling, CRLI was established in 1999 with a view to promoting research and debate over lifelong learning in post-compulsory education and training. The volume therefore provides an opportunity for taking stock of recent research into transitions, seen in the context of lifelong learning. This introductory chapter seeks to place the papers against the background of earlier work on this theme, and notes what appear to be some general trends among scholars working in the area.

First, it should be said that when it comes to adult life, research on transitions is still relatively under-developed. There is a comparatively mature literature on transitions among young people, and particularly on the transition from youth to adulthood and from school to work, but this has yet to make a significant impact on studies of adult transitions; and this work has not yet stretched out to encompass continuing transitions through the life course. recent youth transitions research should be of considerable interest to anyone interested in transitions and lifelong learning, linking an understanding of youth agency with recognition of structures and constraints, informed by wider theoretical understandings of learning lives in late modernity – sometimes conceptualised, following Ulrich Beck, as ‘risk society’ (see for example Walther, Bois-Reymond and Biggart 2006).

Second, much adult education literature on transitions has tended to focus on movements into particular forms of learning. By far the largest body of work has concerned movement into higher education, with far less attention even within this sub-field being given to what happens next to the adults who enter university. While participation research has developed incrementally since the 1960s, research into access developed relatively rapidly as a response to policy concerns that first emerged in the late 1970s. Peter Scott has suggested that most access research falls into three broad types: macro-level studies of the evolution of higher education systems; analyses of particular policy initiatives aimed at broadening or increasing access; and detailed studies, often conducted by practitioners, of student experience (Scott 2007, 23). Effectively, though, the study of access has until recently generally meant the study of recruitment, with a particular focus on constraints – often described as barriers - to recruitment. Osborne and Gallacher correctly note that there is increasing interest in the outcomes of study, particularly in higher education where the costs of expansion have generated a wider policy debate about who benefits (and who should pay), but this is a comparatively recent development (Osborne and Gallacher 2007, 11).

Third, the adult education literature sometimes tends to pain transitions as difficult, troubling, even unpleasant. The dominant view is that people must set out to remedy deficits, such as poor literacy skills, weak employability, or a lack of cultural capital. They must then negotiate the various barriers that deny them access to learning

opportunities, and then navigate the middle class values and procedures of the providing institution and its staff. Even once they have joined a learning programme, people need access to emotional support in the form of counselling and informational support in the form of guidance, to help them make sense of the confusing and alien world that they have entered (Ecclestone 2004). Ideas of collective learning and social purpose, it is claimed, are being subordinated to the imperatives of social policy and social control (Martin 2003). Instead of bonding together in solidarity, uncovering the causes of oppression and learning how to create a new world, learners plod fearfully down individualised pathways through a hostile and threatening terrain.

Nevertheless, as these papers show, there is an emerging body of research on transitions in adult life that is promising to make a major contribution to our understanding of lifelong learning. This can be seen as part of a wider set of developments in social science research into adult learning. First, the wider biographical turn in adult education research has focussed attention on the interplay of learning with other spheres of adults' lives, as these processes work out across the life course (West, Alheit, Andersen and Merrill 2007). Second, from a rather different methodological perspective, the study of transitions has also been encouraged by the application of new quantitative techniques to longitudinal data sets, which enable researchers to trace the wider impact of changes on people's lives over time (see Bynner and Joshi 2007). This work is at a relatively early stage, however, and while it has shed considerable light on some of the wider benefits of adult learning (Schuller et al 2004), it has yet to be applied systematically to experiences of learning transitions. Third, wider theoretical preoccupations with the centrality of change and flexibility in contemporary social life have also helped to focus attention on the meaning and nature of transitions for adults across the life course.

So, to return to the agenda for researchers, this leaves us with some remarkably challenging and demanding tasks. The chapters in this volume are presented in this spirit, as contributions to an ongoing debate over the ways in which people learn for, from and through transitions across the course of their lives. While emphasising the complexity and variety of people's experiences of learning transitions, as well as acknowledging the ways in which are embedded in the specific contexts of everyday life, the authors share a common interest in understanding the lived experiences of

change from the learners' perspective. While much remains to be done, and significant gaps remain (with respect to migration, ethnicity and nationality in the context of globalised transitions, simply to take one example), the chapters confirm the fruitfulness of this agenda for continuing research. They also contain important messages for policy and practice.

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