

## **Travelling in time via narration: Three types of biographical learning**

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*This is a study of the process of biographical learning and how it can be observed in narration. There have not yet been empirical studies focused explicitly on the learning aspects of biographical learning, as scholars have focused more on the biographical part of the concept – more on the question of what is learned than of how it is learned. This text therefore concentrates on the learning process itself within biographical learning, using data from 29 biographical narrative interviews with mature students studying for education degrees in Czech higher education. The results show that narrators do not present their experiences separately in their narration, one after another. The narrative analysis revealed that their experiences are intertwined. In adding another experience, the narrators discover new meanings. It is therefore possible to talk about the learning process going on in the narration. The narrative analysis identified three types of this biographical learning as reflected in narration: learning by analogy, learning by audit, and learning by authority. In learning by analogy, experiences are compared to one another, creating an analogy between them. Learning by authority involves the influence of a past experience on the present day. Learning by audit is a retrospective movement,*

*looking at a past experience through the lens of the present. The results presented here have implications for both adult education research and practice.*

**Keywords:** *biographical learning, adult learning theory, narrative analysis, mature students*

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## **Introduction**

This study concerns how adult learners learn to understand their lives when they are storytelling them. Storytelling is a social activity by which we deliver stories; it has long been recognized as central to human cognition and communication (Gelman & Basbøll, 2014). The result of storytelling is a narrative. Goodson et al. (2010, p. 2) and other scholars have stressed the significance of those narratives for our learning: “The stories we tell about our lives and ourselves can play an important role in the ways in which we can learn from our lives. Such learning, in turn, can be important for the ways in which we live our lives.” This capacity to constantly learn how to live our lives is referred to as biographicity. It has become crucial in the changing conditions we encounter in societies in which wars alternate with pandemics.

The life course approach involves inspecting lives from a diachronic perspective, which becomes especially relevant under conditions of knowledge societies with their demand for lifelong learning. However, the ways we follow our lives during the life course have become increasingly diverse among individuals in society and can even change multiple times within a single life. Acknowledging the inner tensions between the “instrumentalist” and “emancipative” power of lifelong learning (Hallqvist et al., 2012), Alheit and Dausien place some confidence in the emancipative view, calling for an outlook in which the learning individual “is taken more seriously” (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 5). To this discourse, the biographical learning approach offers a solution by providing an “alternative configuration of lifelong learning, intending to increase knowledge about the relation between individual biographies and institutions of adult education” (Hallqvist, 2014, p. 3). One phenomenon in which the intersections between the individual and the institutional are sharpened is the re-entry of adults to formal

education. This study deals with an example of that phenomenon – the return of adults to Czech universities after reaching the age of 26 years. The Czech Republic is one of the countries with the most significant increases of older students (both 25-34 years and over 35) according to a study analysing the delayed participation of adult students in higher education in fifteen European countries (Souto-Otero & Whitworth, 2017). Adult learners coming to university education at this age are arriving from their work and family life, and they can be conceptualised as "non-traditional students" or "mature students". The broadest definition of non-traditional students is that of underrepresented groups in higher education. Still, its concrete definition depends on the educational system in question, and most countries include multiple criteria within their definition. Narrators in this study were non-traditional in relation to their age and trajectories, which corresponds more to the concept of mature students as one of the groups within the non-traditional student body.

Trajectories are parts of the life course and Schatzki (2022, p. 23) defined them through space and time: "A life trajectory is, first, the space-time path of a life, that is, the path through space and time that it traces as it proceeds." Educational trajectories then refer to the understanding of "how individuals proceed through different educational stages, how they combine them with other life spheres, how they cope with transitions and how they take decisions regarding their educational career" (Cuconato et al., 2016). When studied individually, trajectories in social space can be also framed as biographies (Bourdieu in Alheit, 1992). Biography is conceived as a "social creation" that "constitutes both social reality and the subjects' worlds of knowledge and experience, and which is constantly affirmed and transformed within the dialectical relationship between life-history knowledge and experiences and patterns presented by society" (Fischer-Rosenthal & Rosenthal, 1997, p. 138). To distinguish between life course and biography, Stauber and Ule (2015) explained that whereas the life course points to an institutionalised construction of lives, the biography can be regarded as the "told life," i.e., the subjective meaning-making with regard to one's individual life course. As this study deals with the told life, it will use the concept of biography as central. The life course is the standard biography (Alheit, 2021), but such "biographical

normality schemes are unable to anticipate all the options that appear in a specific biography and there remains an abundance of alternative courses of action that we as individuals have to decide for ourselves” (p. 113). According to Tennant (2018, p. 166), “there is uncertainty and fragmentation in our life trajectories.”

This paradigm shift to paying more attention to individual biographies started with the biographical turn in social sciences (Wengraf et al., 2002). Alheit (1995) asserted that we learn authentically when we involve our biographies, referring to this phenomenon as biographical learning. The concept of biographical learning is useful for understanding the processes in which people are involved when forming their lives through storytelling (Alheit & Dausien, 2000). However, it has not yet been clearly stated how exactly this biographical learning takes place, what its parts and outcomes are, and how it can be identified in the narratives. Empirical contributions using biographical frameworks shed light on the connections of biographical learning with other concepts rather than on the pure process of learning biographically. For example, Bilon (2021) investigated the relationship between biographical learning and agency. Coming more closely to the process of learning, Hallqvist et al. (2012) found types of biographical learning processes in creative action and reflexive identity work. Christensen (2012, p. 409) pointed out that “research into biographical learning as such is rather infrequent.” The research questions addressed in this study were therefore formulated as follows: 1. How do adults learn when storytelling their educational trajectories? and 2. What do they learn when they are storytelling their educational trajectories?

### **Previous contributions on learning in the biographical and narrative perspectives**

To study the research problem of learning from biographies, the term “biographical learning” was introduced into social research. It refers to “the relationships that exist between learning and biography, the influence of biography on learning processes and practices, and biography as a type of learning” (Tedder & Biesta, 2007, p. 3). Even though there are several coexisting conceptualisations of biographical learning, none of them explains how exactly this learning takes place and therefore how it can be captured in storytelling. A significant part of the contributions to biographic learning are aligned with the

emancipatory tradition of adult education (e.g. Alhadeff-Jones, 2019). This paper, in its theoretical contribution, identifies two dimensions within biographical learning that can help to understand the character of the learning processes going on in the narration: biographicity and narrativity.

### ***Biographicity: the content of biographical learning***

Biographicity is a key competence in contemporary societies, as “biographies are becoming more complicated, more individual, less ‘normal,’ but at the same time more colourful, autonomous and self-willed” (Alheit, 1994, p. 285). This shift reflects the capacity of individuals to continually re-interpret their lives in the social contexts in which they have new experiences and link these new experiences to what they have already learnt. Thus, they are continually re-interpreting their biography and experiencing their lives as dynamic and “mouldable” (Alheit & Dausien, 2000). Through this competence, individuals can experience some sense of coherence in their lives and manage breaks in educational trajectories and careers in the context of flexible work. This is also reflected in the biographies of adults returning to formal university education.

To further understand the learning process, we can look into adult learning theories. Early learning theorists already pointed to the connections between the life course, its content, and learning. Lindeman asserted that “the whole life is learning” (1926, p. 5). In his theory of andragogy, Knowles acknowledged that learners bring their lifetime experience to the learning situation: “As people grow, they accumulate an increasing reservoir of life experiences that becomes an increasingly rich source for learning” (Knowles, 1980, p. 44). However, those authors did not concentrate on how exactly we learn from those life and lifelong experiences when we are telling them to ourselves or others.

Jarvis was one of those that elaborated more on this issue. He asserted that “while an experience is sub-consciously meaningful, it is not a learning experience” (Jarvis, 2006, p. 167). In this conceptualisation, the experiences do not have meaning in themselves, but individuals assign meaning to some of their experiences. More importantly, only those meaningful experiences are incorporated into the biography. In this way, Jarvis conceptualises learning as “a continuous process

which seeks to give meaning to the daily experience, connecting human conscience with time, space, society and their multiple relationships” (1991, p. 11). In transformative learning, the learning process is linked to meaning-making (Mezirow, 2000). Biographical learning and transformative learning are both change-oriented theories (Illeris, 2014). Transformative and biographical learning frameworks can thus be combined, as some scholars have done. This study does not combine them, as transformative learning captures the transformation in the synchronous moment, whereas biographical learning works with the diachronic perspective.

More specifically, learning is seen as the transformation of experiences into the elements of the biography. Those specific elements can be knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, emotions, the senses – or any combination of them (Jarvis, 2006), which is the input of the learning. However, Jarvis did not mention how we put the relevant elements into our biography in order to learn from them nor what the outcome of this process is, other than biography and learning.

Biography is, in this perspective, seen as the content of biographical learning. Every time we learn, we add another story to our biography; we are both being and becoming simultaneously: “our experience is not a mirror image of the external world; we perceive the world and thereby select from it those things that are relevant to our biographical development” (Jarvis, 2006, p. 72). Stories here are the outcome of learning; the “what we learn” question is crucial for the biographicity dimension.

### ***Narrativity: the structure of biographical learning***

From the biographical perspective, learning comes from biography, from its elements and how they are linked together and transformed. Analogically, the concept of narrative learning highlights the role of story for learning and its impact on identity. Narrative researchers see the narrative as being situated “among the most important social resources for creating and maintaining personal identity” (Linde, 1993). In the theories of narrative learning, we can see this emphasis on the self more than on the learning process. According to those theories, people construct the reflexive self – the stories they produce about themselves upon reflection – in the context of a research interview (Bruner, 1996;

Gee, 1999; Roth et al., 2005, cited in Black, 2010).

Within biographical learning studies, Hallqvist and Hydén (2013) located themselves within the narrative approach to biographical learning and explained why: “We would like to argue that some parts of the life stories are more important than others in terms of learning about and from one’s own life” (p. 1). Narrativity therefore stresses the role of the story, thus more the context in which the learning occurs. From a constructivist psychological point of view, when people tell stories, they constantly reconstruct themselves (Bruner, 1994). Also, as Goodson et al. (2010, p. 2) put it “whilst most stories are about something – an event, an experience, an encounter, a person – they always also express something about ourselves, even if it is only our particular perspective on the situation.” Similarly, Tedder and Biesta (2009) offered a narrative perspective on biographical learning connecting biographical learning with narrative theory; the authors found that the differences between the stories people tell “correlate with ways in which people learn from their lives and with ways in which such learning bears significance for how they conduct their lives” (p. 79).

However, there are also holistic definitions of narrative learning that are more similar to the definitions of biographical learning. Similarly to Jarvis’s theory about meaningful experiences, Clark and Rossiter (2008, p. 66) explained the link between meaning-making, narration (the told life), and learning: “meaning making is a narrative process and meaning making is the constructivist definition of learning.” Interestingly, biography is also conceptualized within this perspective. Bruner (1990, p. 119) understood autobiography in the following narrative way:

*And I do not mean an autobiography in the sense of a “record” (for there is no such thing). I mean, simply, an account of what one thinks one did in what settings in what ways for what felt reasons. It will inevitably be a narrative, as Polkinghorne remarked, and to pick up Schafer’s point, its form will be as revealing as its substance.*

From the narrative perspective, biography is thus seen as a narrative, as confirmed by Goodson et al. (2010, p. 2):

*It is not that the story is just a description of the life and the self, a kind of picture we can look at in order to learn from it. In a*

*very real sense, the story constitutes the life and the story. What complicates the matter further is that the self is also the author of the story. All this means that the construction of the story – the storying of the life and the life – is a central element of the learning process.*

Narrative scholars discuss transformative learning, similar to the biographical dimension. Rossiter and Clark (2007) pointed to the difference between Mezirow's modernist and unitary conception of the self and the postmodern and fluid conceptualisation of the self that is typical for narrative learning.

The autobiographical narratives are characterised by a "segmentation of the stream of remembering and description into units of narrative" (Schütze, 1984, p.108). This specific structure matters, as in this perspective narrative learning can be defined as "learning done through the construction and reconstruction of the story of one's life" (Goodson et al., 2010, p.127). Goodson et al. (2010) further specified that "narrative learning can be evidenced in the substance of the narrative but also in the act of narration" (p. 127). This study focuses on how the learning can be identified in the narration and narrativity is seen as the structure of learning. One typical question in the studies of narratives within various fields is "How are stories structured?" When we are interested in the learning aspect of the narration, it can be translated into the question of how we learn in the narration.

## **Methodology of the study**

The study sample was composed of 29 non-traditional students, who are, by the Czech definition, adult students at least 26 years old studying part time or full time and who had had at least one year break in their educational trajectory before coming to Czech universities. Moreover, we narrowed down the choice to only students who were enrolled in education degree programmes, including teacher education programmes, social pedagogy, special pedagogy, adult education, etc. Adult students returning to study social sciences "choose courses in the humanities and social sciences which cannot be regarded as the most obvious or surest route to employment or a better job; factors beyond pure economic rationality seem to be at play" (West (1996, p.4). Moreover, in the Czech Republic, there are no alternative

pathways to higher education: all the higher education students have to meet the requirement of the Matura [graduation] exam, and upper-secondary tracks leading to this qualification, especially the general ones (gymnasiums), are already considered to be selective; this group is thus more homogenous than in other countries. University access programmes don't exist, so it can be assumed that fewer socioeconomically disadvantaged adult students return to university. The sample was also not gender balanced and included more women than men, which corresponds to the gender imbalanced educational professions.

Biographical narrative interviews were based on the biographic narrative interview method (BNIM) that was originally established and developed mainly by Schütze (1992) and Rosenthal (2004) and later on developed by Wengraf (2011). The traditional BNIM consists of three sub-sessions (Burke, 2014). The interview scheme used in this study was in line with Rosenthal's conceptualisation (2004): the interview started with a period of main narration with the initial narrative question; this was followed by a questioning period beginning with internal narrative questions and continuing with external narrative questions. In the first phase, the respondents were asked a broad initial narrative question (inspired by Lieblich et al., 1998 and Rosenthal, 2004) that started as follows:

*Please imagine that you would like to write a book about your educational trajectory. A book that describes your educational trajectory from the beginning to the present day. By this, we mean the educational trajectory in the broadest sense, that part of your life that concerns education, study, and learning. Imagine that your book on your educational trajectory would have chapters. What chapters would there be? (...)*

In the second phase, they were asked questions coming strictly only from their previous narration, i.e., from what they just said. In the last phase, the interviewer asked pre-prepared questions to clarify aspects that had not yet been mentioned. The biographical narrative interviews lasted from one to two hours. As this study is concerned with the narrative analysis of this data, the respondents will be subsequently designated as "narrators" and have been assigned pseudonyms from mythology.

Following Horsdal's (2011) conception of the main focus of narrative analysis, the underlying presumption was that this specific type of analysis enables researchers to understand how the narrator tries to make sense of lived experiences through narration. The first phase of analysis included the word-by-word coding and structural description documented by Schutze (1984) and Alheit (1994). The structural description is valuable primarily because it can make "systematic use of the very strategies that the narrator uses to structure and develop his impromptu narrative" (Alheit, 1994, p.28). These strategies tend more to unfold the material than to encode it prematurely (idem) and can help to unveil the structural level of the narrative.

The second step of the analysis was the process of theoretical sensitising. Theoretical sensitivity can be defined as the capacity to see relevant data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), i.e., "to reflect upon empirical data with the help of theoretical terms" (Kelle, 2007, p. 163, in Bron & Thunborg, 2017). Within the question of what adults learned from storytelling, two fundamental elements can be identified– the storytelling part and the biographical learning part. In this study, "storytelling" is understood as the process of giving a story of one's life, and the narrative is the result of that, as the biographical interview is an in-depth interview in which the respondents tell their story (Thunborg et al., 2021). The process of storytelling is captured when it is recorded and transcribed in a text – the narrative. The data from such an interview can then be seen not only as narrative data per se but also as the narrative of some specific experience or phenomenon. According to Thunborg et al. (2021, p. 87), "a biographical story consists of several narratives of the past, present, and future." This study has chosen the first part of the interviews – narratives about the educational trajectory in a broad sense, in the way the respondents understood for themselves the narratives of learning or not-learning in various educational settings they experienced before coming to higher education.

The other part of the question, the learning, is more challenging to operationalise. Nevertheless, it can be revealed by dividing biographical learning into distinctive parts. As this study deals with biographical learning, I considered biographicity, narrativity, and learning itself. With the help of the adult learning theory, learning from storytelling can be translated as (A) the transformation of biographical experiences (Jarvis) and (B) the narrative (re)construction of the self (Bruner).

Within the analysis, this distinction was reflected in the attention paid to both the content (A) and the structural level (B) of the narrative. These two levels correspond to the two main types of narrative analysis (Lieblich et al. 1998) and the biographicity (content) and narrativity (structure) of biographical learning discovered in the theory. In interpreting the biographical data, I applied abductive reasoning (Bron & Thunborg, 2017) as “abduction is intended to help social research, or rather social researchers, to be able to make new discoveries in a logically and methodologically ordered way” (Reichertz, 2010, p. 4). The types of learning that are the results of the analysis are ideal narrative types. This technique is used to emphasize the collective nature of the experiences described in the narratives and form each of the narratives identified into a narrative type that embodies the range of experiences of the narrators sharing that narrative type (Honkasilta et al., 2016). The use of narrative types, rather than descriptions of individual life stories, can overcome the possible idiographic character of the biographical research.

### **Results: Three types of biographical learning**

During the process of remembering and reflecting upon their biographies, the narrators are faced with an abundance of material in their memory. The biographicity of the learning is present in the narratives when the narrators anchor the point of view of the narration in the present moment: “And what I remember to this day was just a terrible trauma for me...” (narrator Mnema). The selection of the expression “to this day” connects the past experience with the present.

The memories presented in the narrations are episodes from the narrators’ life stories and contain biographical experiences. Biographical experiences are part of the biographical material – or even the whole, as some scholars claim. From among all the life experiences to which they have access through memory, narrators choose which ones they will talk about. This choice is made in relation to the topic of the interview. The process of storytelling is thus socially shaped and co-created by the presence of other people who listen. Therefore, we can never have a pure, unbiased idea of the content of biography. Because the biography emerges from memory through telling or writing, it always has to be narrated.

First, I identified biographical experiences as events from the biography of the narrators within their narrations. Those experiences were subsequently thematically analysed to find their central theme. In this way, three main categories of biographical experiences were revealed: (1) educational experiences, (2) familial experiences, and (3) work life experiences. This article focuses on just one: educational experiences – the narrators’ memories of education that have a more direct link to the narrative assignment to tell the story of their educational trajectory. In their accounts, the narrators move through different school levels. The structure of their narration about each of those stages depends on how strong the memories are and/or how strong the experiences’ influence on biography was. An example of remembering educational biographical experiences in different intensities can be taken from the following narration:

*Then came elementary school. I think I was not able to perceive the time before the fifth grade, the first to fourth grade – we all learn to read and write, but I have no one there who I might miraculously remember. I admit that when I meet a teacher who is still alive, I like to say hello to her, I like to spend some time with her, but it’s more polite like “I’m glad you’re doing well.” Sometimes we reminisce about something, but there’s not much to remember. Then it was the fifth grade, there are some memories of, on the one hand, there were some relationships by then in that class, and I can even name some specific teachers that I remember to this day, who somehow got stuck in my life. (narrator Alectrona)*

On the other hand, some narrators refer to their previous educational experiences more indirectly, connecting them with their current study experiences. They talk about them without exactly describing them; they do not start from the beginning but from the end – their university studies:

*So that was the field (laughs) that I applied for [to university] because I actually graduated almost during the time of totalitarianism, when we actually had a completely different education structure and other subjects and everything, so it was probably the most difficult for me prepare for those entrance exams at all. (narrator Calliope)*

Narrators choose a specific and distinctive way of selecting the experiences from their memories and ordering them in the narration. By doing so, they are transforming the initial narrative question – to imagine a book about their educational trajectory – into a personal story about the experiences that are for them meaningfully related to this trajectory. The selection and subsequent transformation of the experiences can be reflected in the structure of the narration: its form, its flow, and its architecture. In the way the narrators relate to those past experiences selected from their memories, we can distinguish three types of travel via narration; this travelling occurs by connecting the biographical experiences. Various biographical experiences from different times are connected through historical and biographical time and space; we can thus speak of travelling through the time of the narration. The event itself is less important than the new meaning afforded to it. Meaning is given by how the narrator selects and aligns various experiences. This construction can be done in three different ways that constitute three different types of travelling via narration. They are “types” in the meaning of “ideal narrative types” and their names symbolically describe the process that is performed (analogy or audit) or used directly by the respondents (authority).

### **Learning by analogy**

The first type of travelling in time via narration is learning by analogy. It occurs when two different events from a biography, distinct in time, are connected by creating an analogy between them in the narration. The narrator was not aware of this link before and they are thus learning something new about their identity, both biographically (through recalling the experiences) and narratively (by storytelling and reconstructing them). In the narrator Mnema’s story, the analogy was created to understand a specific experience for which she did not initially have a prepared explanation:

*They were still admitting students to medical college, so I applied there. I did it quite enthusiastically, but as soon as the rehearsal period was approaching, I backed out...I just couldn't.... I do not know why. To, to.... That was kind of when I had.... I think that I had set myself up – because I never really had to study. Because*

*I just remembered things and I enjoyed it, and even if I had to buckle down and study for a test, no-o. I just couldn't do it and I got stubborn that I wouldn't be doing it. (...) so I got stubborn and decided to go abroad.*

In this part of the narration, two distinct experiences, A and B, are intertwined. In the first experience (A), the narrator talks about her first experience with tertiary education when she applied to a medical college and faced the entrance exams and the fact she could not study for them.

(A) *They were still admitting students to medical college, so I applied there. I did it quite enthusiastically, but as soon as the rehearsal period was approaching, I switched myself out...I just couldn't.... I do not know why.*

Experience B concerns the high school exam period and the fact she did not study for the tests there either.

(B) *I think that I had set myself up – because I never really had to study. Because I just remembered things and I enjoyed it, and even if I had to buckle down and study for a test, no-o. I just couldn't do it and I got stubborn that I wouldn't be doing it. (...) so I got stubborn and decided to go abroad.*

The narrator first stated she did not know why she could not study for the entrance exams. However, as she continued to talk more about that specific experience (A) and linked it with another experience from the past (B), she suddenly discovered the explanation for experience A. In trying to find an explanation for what happened, the narrator actively linked the fact she never had to study in school during the previous educational stages and put it together with the narrated experience of studying for university exams. By creating this new connection between two experiences from different times, the narrator learned something new about herself, about one part of her learning identity. She was not consciously aware of that connection in the biography at the moment she decided to talk about it, as she claimed: "I don't know why." This moment was also a significant turning point in her life, as she chose not to continue studying at that college and travelled abroad to become an au pair instead of studying to become a nurse (at the medical college). This change later created a break in her formal educational trajectory, resulting in her becoming a non-traditional student.

## Learning by authority

The second type of biographical learning is when the narrators' experiences are linked to the present day. The narrators become aware of the effect of their past and reflect upon it during storytelling. The influence is intertwined into the biography and their narrative identity, i.e., the presence can also be depicted later on in the narration. The narrators explicitly use the word "influence," as for example the narrator Lethe in explaining how her story was very strongly shaped by her French language teacher at high school even after his presence in her life story ended:

*It probably starts with the fact that when I was in high school, I was very influenced by the professor, my professor of French, and ah, in the last year, I was deciding whether to go to study at the Faculty of Arts or the Faculty of Education. (...). Ah, so my professor told me, and that was probably the key sentence, as it all happens there, that he hoped that I would go into the arts one and not go to the Faculty of Education. And I didn't take it as derogatory at all, not at all, maybe he wanted to let me know that I could do more, or I don't know, but I was 17 at the time and still had no experience and didn't know and listened to the authorities, and so on, so it started when I started applying to the Faculty of Arts and it took me four years to get to the Faculty of Arts in (name of the city), and ah I functioned there for two years, then I couldn't handle it.*

The biographical experience is shaped by the influence of a teacher who was perceived as an authority and this influence persisted in other educational experiences in the narrator's life story, i.e., in her whole educational trajectory. We can therefore speak of learning by authority, which creates a red line going from that experience throughout the subsequent narration. This type of learning was also very important in shaping the whole educational trajectory of the narrator Nephele:

*Well, basically, so I could, I could start from elementary school, because these are the people who have shaped my educational trajectory in some way. When we had an amazing teacher – who was able to convert also a boring subject, -who taught us civics when I was in um elementary school. (...) And to get up*

*there, I somehow remarked that I would like to be a teacher too. And that, therefore, my educational trajectory was predicted in advance that I will probably want to be a teacher too.*

Here the influence of the teacher's authority was converted into the desire to become a teacher. Later in her story, a similar experience happens with another teacher who influences the choice of the subject of teaching. This study therefore suggests that learning can multiply in the narration and does not appear independently, as shown in the next and last type of biographical learning.

### **Learning by audit**

The third type of biographical learning found in the narratives occurs when the narrator is analysing the past experiences with the current biographical knowledge containing all the experiences that came afterwards. The lens of the present is applied to the past experiences, the movement is thus opposite than the previous type where we were dealing with the influence of the past on the present day.

The narrator Peitha started her story by stating that she always knew that she would become a teacher. But her statement did not stand alone. She analyses all her experiences with this in mind – from her current position as a kindergarten teacher – and interprets all previous experiences through this lens. She thinks that she is a good teacher and compares herself to others she has seen. The narrator attributes the power of performing a didactical analysis of the comportment of teachers to herself in kindergarten – it is not very probable she really had this competence as a child of 3 to 6 years old, or at least not consciously as described in the life story:

*So, if I imagine my book, I would definitely start with kindergarten. Where I already knew as a little girl which teacher taught me well and which didn't. Where it suited me and where it didn't.*

*Then elementary school – second grade, because I don't remember the first grade much. Right away, I knew what was wrong there, too – I understood it exactly as a child, and I still remember it.*

*Um, I was in second grade when the Velvet Revolution was a turning point, so I experienced the way the teachers shifted there, but it was still the old ways.*

*And then definitely a high school that didn't give me anything at all, even though it was... Secondary pedagogical school, so I was again in the grasp of teachers who couldn't teach at the time. And then I was so disgusted by the education, and I actually felt it didn't matter at all.*

*So, I started working, I was a kindergarten teacher, where several people independently (inspectors and principals) told me that I was good at what I was doing and that I was doing it right, even though I was a young beginning teacher.*

When the narrator puts her experiences into the narration, it helps her to give them meaning and thus construct the picture of her (professional) narrative identity. This type of learning can bring narrators a deeper understanding of what their biographical experiences are, why the experiences happened as they did, and how they are linked to the identity of the narrator.

## **Conclusions and discussion**

This text showed that the study of narrated biographies in adult education research by applying learning theories to live accounts can help understand how, whether, and what people learn from their biographies. In the theoretical contribution, this article distinguished the biographicity within biographical learning, added the dimension of narrativity as its counterpart, and linked those with different accents existing with the biographical learning perspectives. The argument that biographicity corresponds to the content of learning was also made by Illeris (2007).

Within this biographical learning framework are theoretical studies concerned with describing the placement of this concept among other learning theories or concepts (e.g. lifelong learning, Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Hallqvist, 2014) or concentrating on one of its dimensions – biographicity (Alheit, 2021) or narrativity (Goodson et al., 2010). There are also empirical studies that use the biographical learning perspective

as a conceptual framework. Their results provide knowledge not directly about learning, but about e.g., identity formation and biographical work (Bron & Thunborg, 2017), biographical transitions (Hallqvist, 2012), and biographical ageing (Malec-Rawinski, 2021). There have not yet been studies focused specifically on the learning aspects of biographical learning; previous studies concentrated more on the biographical part of biographical learning. This research has contributed to this previous knowledge with a view of the nature of learning processes – how we learn when narrating our biographies.

There are some studies within biographical research (and also beyond) with which this research can enter in discussion. Thunborg and Bron (2019, p. 36) identified constant transition and recurrent formation in non-traditional students' narrations. Recurrent formation appears when the narrators are "returning to well-known paths in life and learning reactively by reflecting on experiences" (p. 36). This reactive reflection on experiences can be likened to the directions of movement in learning by analogy and learning by audit. Constant transition, on the other hand, refers to "a constant focus on what is next in life and a constant commuting between reactive and proactive learning" (p. 36) and the proactive movement can be compared to learning by authority. Other scholars see storytelling as transformative learning (Tyler & Schwartz, 2012).

If we return to Jarvis's statement that "our experience is not a mirror image of the external world; we perceive the world and thereby select from it those things that are relevant to our biographical development" (Jarvis, 2006, p. 72), we can say that the way the narrators select experiences and give them new meaning in their narration is crucial for their personal development, their educational trajectories, and their lives. On the other hand, Bruner's (1991) concern was not how the narrative as text is constructed, but how it operates as an instrument of the mind in the construction of a reality that was also reflected in the narrative analysis. This study used the structure of narrative to come to the meaning of experiences for the identity of the narrator. It revealed that the learners can reconstruct their identities by reconstructing their biographical experiences and thus learning from them. To sum up, this article showed that the two dimensions, biographical and narrative, are interconnected: biography (the content of learning) is used to learn about ourselves by making new structures in it (the process of learning).

In the setting of a biographical narrative interview, the narrators in this research presented meaningful biographical experiences that were crucial for the development of their educational trajectories. Those experiences were in their nature either educational, familial, or work-life related. For a deeper and more focused analysis, this article concentrated on one: the experiences primarily related to education. Investigating students' educational biographies helps them understand the interdependence of education and biography (Merrill & Alheit, 2004). Dominicé (2000, p. 102) stated that “educational biographies reveal that each adult has a frame of reference, a way of thinking, a cohesiveness that can be understood as a type of structure of interpretation” but did not specify what those structures look like. In another article (Brücknerová et al., 2020) we identified what types of educational trajectories non-traditional students travel before arriving to current university studies. The present contribution has added how they can learn from those educational experiences.

The narrators gave meaning to their experiences when they placed them in a meaningful order in their life stories and interpreted them. However, this study has shown that the narrators do not present the experiences separately, one after another. The narrative analysis revealed that those experiences are intertwined. In adding another experience, the narrators discover new, previously unseen meanings. It is therefore possible to talk about the learning process that was referred to as travelling in time via narration. When it comes to travelling in time via narration, Andrews (2014, p. 3) also used this expression in connection with narrative imagination in our everyday lives, stating that “we constantly move backward and forward in our mind’s eye.” Biographical scholars have also noted such movements (Merrill & West, 2009). This study clarified the character of those movements by revealing three qualitatively different types of learning that go on in narration: learning by analogy, learning by authority, and learning by audit. However, this is a typology of learning and not a typology of learners; different types of learning can therefore occur in the same narration.

How do those types relate to each other? In the narration, the first type of travelling can be framed as learning by creating a new connection

between two distinct and distant past experiences. In learning by analogy, the experiences are compared to one to another, creating an analogy between the two experiences. The other two types of travelling go to previous experiences while keeping one foot in the present. However, the directions of the narrator's movements in the second and third types are opposite. In the second type, learning by authority, the direction is from the experience to the present; it is prospective. It involves the influence of a past experience on the present day. The third type, learning by audit, is a retrospective movement, looking at a past experience through the lens of the present.

The results of this study suggest that the use of stories can be beneficial for enhancing learning for non-traditional students in higher education institutions. As mentioned by Goodson et al. (2010, p. 2), "it is only in more exceptional circumstances that we engage deliberately in narrative construction in order to learn from it." However, there are some records of programmes that focus on autobiographical work of adults in education (Dominicé, 2000; Van Houten, 1998; Rossiter & Clark, 2007). Alterio and McDrury (2003) dedicated a text to learning through storytelling specifically in higher education settings. Also, Lohr and Hayley (2018) successfully used and analysed the possibilities of biographical prompts in an online graduate course with adult learners. The present study indicates that the biographical narrative method could be used initially for determining and evaluating the prior experiences of non-traditional students coming to higher education. Next, it can enhance their learning and make their experiences consciously meaningful. In the sample of this study – students in education degree programmes – biographical learning is crucial for enabling them to explore and shine more light on how they were shaped by their educational trajectory in order not to let those influences unintentionally and unconsciously influence their teaching praxis. This can be seen both as an important goal for teaching education programs and as an emancipatory goal typifying adult education and resulting in the liberation from the constraints made by the education system on individual biographies.

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