Configuring life histories

Conference or Workshop Item

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2008 The Authors

Version: Version of Record

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.
Configuring Life Histories

A PBPL-CETL Funded Research Project
On Student Reflection
Escalate Conference, Stirling Management Centre, 30th April 2008
Configuring Life Histories

This presentation:
• Personal introduction
• Some background on reflection
• Project methodology
• Emerging themes
• Possible implications
• Discussion of issues around ‘reflection’
Configuring Life Histories

Dr. Jonathan Hughes
Lecturer
Centre for Widening Participation
Chair of two Openings Courses (short 10 point, Level 1 courses) (Open to Change) (Understanding Children)

Have also written for another two Openings courses (Learning to Change) (Understanding Management)
and an Open University Business School course (Working and Learning)
Associate Lecturer – Introduction to social science – West Midlands
Configuring Life Histories

• “At the heart of learning lies reflection, a much used but rarely defined term in the worlds of educationalists.” (C. Day, 1999)

• “Although reflection is widely considered to be a type of learning from experience central to professional learning and the development of practice, its metacognitive, contemplative and emotional processes in continuing professional development remain underresearched.” (R. Leitch and C. Day, 2001)
Configuring Life Histories

- ‘Andragogy’ differentiated from pedagogy?
- Adults engage in meta-cognitive, reflective activity (and children don’t?)
- Has led to criticism of ‘transmission model’ of learning with adults as the ‘empty vessels’ (Shuell, 1992, Ramsden, 1992, Nicol, 1997)
Configuring Life Histories

- Favouring constructivist views of learning – students forging links between what they already know and what learning can add.
- “Reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it” (Boud et al, 1985, p. 18).
- Reflection “can be done well or badly, successfully or unsuccessfully” (Boud et al, 1985, p. 19).
Configuring Life Histories

- **Aims and objectives of the project**
- The aim of the project is carry out a short investigation to help better understand what tools/skills/ideas students need to help them learn to reflect.
- The overall aims of the project and of this proposal are to explore:
  - The difficulties students (particularly from widening participation audiences) have in engaging with reflection in general and the range of reflective activity included on courses in particular.
  - To gauge what features and what contexts of reflexive activity are best suited to encourage the use of reflection and which may inhibit reflection.
  - To establish how students have used reflection and the impact this has had on their lives.
  - To report and record this information in ways which can be accessed by students in order to enhance engagement and valuation of reflection.
  - To make available to academics and course teams information that can assist with the integration of reflective learning.
Configuring Life Histories

Methodology

• The original intention was that 6 experienced ALs would be recruited to carry out 6 interviews each from among ‘their’ students.
• In fact, 5 ALs were recruited. One had to withdraw to go into hospital. Another was unable to locate any willing students. All the remaining interviewers were women.
• Two of the 3 remaining ALs interviewed 6 students each; the other – 9 students. A total of 21 interviews.
• Ages ranged between 28 and 49. Range of ethnicity mainly White British but included Black African and Afro-Caribbean.
• There were 10 men and 11 women.
• Students on a range of course (Openings, social work and business) and at a range of levels (Levels 1-3).
Configuring Life Histories

Methodology

• The original intention was that the ALs would attend a briefing day. In fact individual briefings done by phone
• The interviews used semi-structured schedule to guide the interviewers.
Configuring Life Histories

Methodology

Interview schedule

• What aspects of reflective activity the students find difficult.
• The wider context of these difficulties.
• Students will be asked to share the resources they found most useful in developing a more reflective, critical approach. (Aspects of the course they studied or resources from their own social or work context)
• How students actually used reflection and the effects that this has had on their lives.
Configuring Life Histories

Methodology

• Interviews recorded and transcribed.
• Transcriptions the basis on which themes are identified.
• The analysis of the transcripts by the two researchers.
Configuring Life Histories

Valuable framework (Wellington and Austin, 1996)
Five orientations to reflective practice
1. Technical – reflection as an instrument to direct or control practice – facilitates conformity to a pre-determined, external standard.
3. Dialectical – uses reflection to transform practice – by capturing and reconstructing experience it facilitates political and personal liberation.
(The above are from Van Manen (1977) – seen as hierarchical, each one more encompassing than the one below).
Configuring Life Histories

**Valuable framework** (Wellington and Austin, 1996)

W&A add:

1. **Immediate orientation** – emphasis on pleasant survival – ready acceptance of status quo – focus on immediate demands of the group or task in hand. Simple reporting of event based on best memory.

2. **Transpersonal orientation** – focus on universal personal liberation – resisting imposed constraints – inner directed, focus on self-development, relationship of internal to external – leads to contemplating relationship between personal growth and vocation.
Configuring Life Histories

Using Weft QDA software – some themes:

• Educational goals
• Recollection of when first asked to reflect on a course
• Did they see the point?
• Were they expecting it?
• Has their view of reflection changed? (Do they use it more now? Do they talk to other people about it?)
Configuring Life Histories

Goals:
• Interview P1
  To improve my job prospects

• Interview P4
  My aim was just to do a degree in engineering and see where that takes me because I want to develop myself as well in the UK because my qualifications are from Nigeria so I thought that if I could do one or two courses in the UK and also a degree then I could get a better job or also be in a better situation, but now that has changed, I think I want to do system thinking up to the Masters level and even above that now
Configuring Life Histories

Recollection of when first asked to reflect on a course

• **Interview P2**
  it probably came through the through the books, probably about a month into the reading I would have thought.

• **Interview P4**
  it was just really about my life, in the first course I took with the Open University

• **Interview P4**
  there were asked to reflect on our past you know from the secondary age, what you don’t do now, to reflect on written essays and friends so yeah that was the first official one

• **Interview P5**
  Can you remember when you were first asked to reflect on something during your recent studies?  
  Student  No I can’t actually
Configuring Life Histories

Did they see the point?
- Interview L1
  Student: Definitely, yes.
  Tutor: Yes, why do you say that?
  Student: Because I have said all along that I do not want to come into study and walk out with just XYZ amount of marks from which ever courses I am doing I want to go into study and I want to learn things, not just about the subject that I am studying at the time but how I present the work and how I put the work across and um have a think about what I am doing and I want to see, I don't just want to get a mark back whether it be a pass or a fail but hopefully a pass I don't just want to get a mark back which doesn't reflect what areas of the subject that I am good at or what areas that I am not good at.

- Interview L4
  I thought it was good because it gave you a wee chance to sit down and think how your studying was going and if you could change anything.

- Interview L4
  like I said it gave me a chance to look at the way I was studying whereas if I hadn't the question there I probably would have just gone on as I was and maybe not thought about it so much
Configuring Life Histories

Were they expecting it?

• Interview L1
  No not at all, I was very surprised … Because, um when I have studied before at standard colleges and universities I have never had to do a reflection part really.

• Interview L2
  I had an idea because of um previous NVQ’s which were a little bit similar to this kind of course where I had a rough idea that I was going to have to.

• Interview L4
  I was surprised really.

• Interview P1
  No it wasn’t something I had encountered a lot of.
Configuring Life Histories

Has their view of reflection changed?

• Interview L2
Previouly, I thought it was just talking about myself and talking about what I had done, and why I did it, um, what I learnt during the course is that it really means analysing how I am thinking, why I am thinking that way, what is influenced my thinking some kind of stepping out, kind of um, observing myself from a distance, then if you like

• Interview L6
Well for me it means having to think about something and then hopefully put it in to practice to improve something’s that I am already doing.

• Interview P1
Well, reflection before is a bit like, when you throw a stone into a pond, you have the action and the affect that you want, the stone goes in and it sinks, but the reflection is about all the ripples and the rising of the water level and that is the reflection before and when you actually do it um, then you reflect upon the other person who throws the rock in from the opposite direction you know
Configuring Life Histories

Some overarching ideas

• Different reflective journeys going on – before during and after formal learning.

• Reflection has different layers or aspects – are these, perhaps, reflected in the student journey?

• Are expectations for reflection on practice different from those in relation to study?
Configuring Life Histories

A possible research question?

How does the experience of being on a taught course affect student perceptions of reflection?
Configuring Life Histories

“… educators need to acknowledge the validity of the full range of orientations. They need to recognise their own predominant mode, and they need to respect the preferred modes of others. When practitioners become aware of their own preferences and prejudices across modes, they can begin to reflect upon a wider range of questions and develop a wider range of responses” (Wellington and Austin, 1996, 314).
Configuring Life Histories

Finish – an example of a ‘reflective journey’?
Tutor: Right, OK, that makes sense, so when you signed up for your first courses where you expecting to be asked to reflect on your own development or your skills and so on
Student: I had no idea what to expect really
Tutor: No, OK, so fair enough, so what did you understand by the word reflection before you started studying, it might be too long ago for you to remember now its just changed meaning
Student: I think sort of the habit of looking back, looking back over things
Tutor: OK, and now you have encountered it in some of your courses has your understanding of reflection changed in any way
Student: Yes, because I was very naively thinking it was just sort of looking back over what has happened but it is more um, it is deeper than that isn’t it, you are analysing and actually making it useful rather just running through this happened and that happened, it is more of an analysis
Configuring Life Histories

- **References**