TALKING ABOUT MY GENERATION: LEARNING, IDENTITY AND AGENCY – THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL TIME AND GENERATIONAL TIME OVER THE LIFE COURSE

John Field (University of Stirling)

Irene Malcolm (University of Stirling)


Address for correspondence:

John Field
Division of Academic Innovation & Continuing Education
University of Stirling
Airthrey Castle
Stirling, FK9 4LA
UK

Tel: 01786 466145
Email: john.field@stir.ac.uk

© 2005 Work in progress; please do not quote without permission.
In most societies, it is well known that attitudes and behaviour vary by age. In respect of access to and participation in learning, age seems to be one of the most powerful influences. Surveys, in the UK and elsewhere, have shown that participation in learning declines steadily by age (Sargant and Aldridge 2002). Indeed, survey data suggest that age is a more powerful variable than gender or ethnicity, and is even more powerful than class and prior education. Yet until recently, age was a relatively neglected aspect of adult learning research.

Recently, a body of work has started to emerge which engages with age inequalities in educational participation. Broadly speaking, this work represents the confluence of two separate but related developments. The first is the increasing attention paid to the social and economic policy implications of aging, including implications for provision of learning among older adults (Tuckett and McAulay 2005). The second is the development of social models of aging that investigates both the ways in which age and old age are socially constructed, and the ways in which older people seek to shape their lives (Phillipson 1998). For both groups of analysts, the association of low learning participation with rising age is highly visible, and represents a considerable challenge.

This paper explores aspects of learning in the everyday lives of British adults, of diverse ages. It offers illustrations of the ways in which generation and history are embedded, in people's orientations towards learning. The work is drawn from the ESRC Learning Lives 1 project which is centrally concerned with learning, agency, identity, and structure in the lifespan; our own fieldwork concentrates on these in the workplace, in working learning lives. Here, we first consider the ways in which age interacts with learning, and then, drawing on the work of Ari Antikainen and his colleagues in Finland, we examine the role of generation as a particularly neglected facet of age. We also consider the ways in which working learning lives have changed and are still changing as a result of structural changes in society.

---

1 Learning Lives is a collaborative project involving a large scale qualitative study of learning biographies, both retrospective and ‘real time’, alongside a quantitative study of data from the British Household Panel Survey. It is based at the universities of Stirling (John Field and Irene Malcolm), Brighton (Ivor Goodson and Norma Adair), Exeter (Gert Biesta, Flora McLeod, Michael Tedder and Paul Lambe), and Leeds (Phil Hodkinson, Geoff Ford, Heather Hodkinson and Ruth Hawthorn). It forms part of the ESRC’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme. Further details are available on the website: . http://www.learninglives.org/