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Comprehensions of learning and learners – understanding experiences of adults and experts in adult education

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The aim of the paper is to interpret personal comprehensions of learning, in order to understand the complexities, uniqueness and divides of the subjective reality of adult learning comprehensions.

“One of the major implications of lifelong learning is that we can potentially learn from every experience in life” (Jarvis, 2006; 2007).

We present an interpretation of adults and adult education experts’ comprehensions of learning and learners. According to Roger Harrison representations of learners are never neutral; rather they are active in ‘naturalising’ certain understandings of what learning means, what it means to learn and to be a learner, and in so doing define the boundaries of the educational field and whatever is possible within it (Harrison 2003).

Interpretation of empirical examples is based on two studies, comprising of 55 semi-structured interviews with adults and 14 semi-structured interviews with experts. There are tensions and divides in the comprehensions of learning, especially in understanding the adult

learner and the role of adult education by the experts. There is a need to understand different comprehensions in order to understand learning experience.

Keywords:
learning, learning experience, learning comprehensions.

Introduction

Learning comprehensions are formed in a socio-cultural context. Analyses of these comprehensions enables evaluations of the essence of adult learning and the experience of learning, and the formation of learning comprehensions in the context of the life courses of different generations (Alheit 1994; Alheit 2004; Jarvis 1992; Jõgi 2004; Jõgi & Karu 2004; Merriam & Caffarella 1999; Säljö 2003).

There is both a theoretical and practical need to find out adults’ comprehensions in order to understand learning as a whole.

We are interested about how adult education experts understand learning, learners and

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the role of adult education and to examine their comprehensions side-by-side with comprehensions of adults in order to find intersections, tensions and divides.

Our questions were:

- How adults comprehend learning?
- How experts comprehend learning and adult learners in the context of adult education?
- Are there divides between comprehensions?

The data, methods and sample

The data discussed in the article is based on two studies.

In the first study^a the analysis of interviews consisted of comparing *Datum* (van Manen 2001). Interpretation of empirical data is based on a hermeneutical-phenomenographical approach and inductive analyses (holistical aspect) (Alheit 1994; Marton & Booth 1997). We were looking for structurally significant differences (structural nexus), which are individual and unique.

In the second study^b a qualitative inductive method was used to analyze the interviews.

In the article five empirical examples from the two studies are discussed. The results of those two studies were interpretatively synthesized (Dixon-Woods *et al* 2006:36-7).

Three examples were chosen from the empirical data of the first study which is based on 55 interviews, as they present particular differences in comprehensions of learning - Heleri is a working student in her early twenties, Marika is an architect in her late thirties, Arno is a former farmer and blacksmith in his late nineties.

Two examples were chosen from empirical data of the second study which is based on 14 the interviews of 14 individuals who were key-figures in the study and experts in adult education policy. The sample was selected on the basis of their profession and position and their influence on strategic decision making. Jan, a man in his fifties, has been an educator and leader in adult education for more than 10 years while Reet, a woman in her thirties, has been a decision maker in the field of adult education for more than 5 years.

How learning is comprehended?

Learning is understood and interpreted differently in theoretical comprehensions, from restrictive to over-inclusive, both of which are almost meaningless conceptions (Tight 1998).

Learning is defined as a process of making sense of life's experiences and giving meaning to whatever "sense" is made (MacKeracher 2004:7).

At the very core of lifelong learning is the informal or "everyday" learning, which occurs in day-to-day life (Dohmen 1996:46). Adults accumulate experience and learn over their lifetime. Learning is, therefore, a socially determined life-wide and lifelong process including socialization and being socialized throughout a lifetime. A person's life and life course are connected to time which in turn is connected to changes and learning.

People seem to act intuitively, but actually they act upon lived experiences. Past experience is an essential component in learning, both as a base for new learning and as an unavoidable potential obstacle. Past experiences always enter into adult learning unless the learning experience of the content is wholly new to the learner (MacKeracher 2004:35).

The goals and scope of learning depend on the social environment and the experience, learning possibilities, socialization, the degree of individual motivation and willingness to learn throughout life.

Learning is something more than an individual cognitive process. Learning starts from experiencing, noticing and reflecting on the experience, the result of which is a changed comprehension. Learning comprehensions form through experience and are prerequisites to any possibility of learning (Alheit 2004; Kuurme 2004; Manninen, Mannisenmäki, Luukannel & Riihilä 2003; Marton, Dall'Alba & Beauty 1993).

Heleri

Heleri is 22 years old, a technical student working in an engineering company, but not in her field of studies.

Her learning conception is normative-typical and learning for her is foremost knowledge-

centred, linked with a will to know and to understand.

When I don't know something, and I want to know it, then I acquire that knowledge ... until I understand (Heleri).¹

Heleri understands herself foremost as a learner in the formal education. She emphasizes that she likes to learn (at university) and know things, but now she wants to rest and take a break. She feels she has problems with memory, concentration, being overwhelmed, and having a barrier towards learning and consequently needs to struggle with herself in order to learn. Learning at university is an abstract concept for her, not meaningful in her current life context. In learning she is orientated to understanding and a sense of achievement.

... I have liked to learn, but there has been too much learning lately, I would like to rest. ... I like to learn, not to do exams ... I like when I know the answer, it gives me so good feeling. ... I don't want to learn now. I have to do an exam anew, and I have to struggle. ... I would like to run from it, I struggle with myself (Heleri).

For Heleri, although, the importance of learning (i.e. knowing), is a matter of self-evaluation and competitiveness as she does not want to be less clever than others – the motive for learning is external. Wisdom (i.e. knowledge) enables her to understand difficult ideas.

Then I am able to compete, I am not dumber than other. ... I feel that I am wiser and able to do these things. I am able to clarify more difficult things (Heleri).

When asked about the need to learn, she describes herself as a learner at work. She connects the need to learn with challenges at work.

I have all the time to think [at work] ... I don't know how to express myself connected to work

and I have to learn new things all the time. When I came here, I was only able to plot on computer (Heleri).

Learning for her is “learning from everything”; for example she finds that she has learned to not to fear her boss.

I've learned that bosses are also human. I don't need to fear them ... (Heleri).

Heleri has not yet realized either her possibilities or her capabilities and there are limits to her understanding of learning and her self-realization in life. For Heleri the real “fruits” of learning seem to be distant, somewhere in the future, and there is a sharp divide between her and her ideals. She describes herself, as ignorant, lacking a broad vision, as well as not interesting to listen to. Furthermore, she does not present herself actively seeking for a more knowledgeable position; that seems to be in the distant future. Maybe this is the wisdom of a young person, a learner concluding there is still so much to learn.

When you clarify something for yourself. ... Then you see things from above and this is a very powerful feeling. I think that people, who know a lot of things, they are firstly interesting to listen to and then you think what kind of a feeling is it to look down on people. Not in a negative context, but they see things broader. I think it must be a great feeling (Heleri).

Heleri's comprehensions of learning are knowledge-centred and influenced by normative beliefs, and her life experiences.

Marika

Marika is 37 years old, a city planner by position and an architect by education.

Learning for her is primarily connected to experience; to knowledge and skills with a practical use that enables her to manage life.

¹ All translations are the responsibility of the authors L. Jögi, K. Karu and K. Krabi.

However she finds learning as broadening the mind equally as important because it provides the 'back-drop' to her existence.

[Learning is] acquiring new skills and knowledge what to use ... and also ... broadening the mind in order to understand things better ... obtaining experience (Marika).

When talking about self as a learner she is using a pragmatic approach of needing no more than necessary. She says that she was not initially a self-conscious learner before she started to work, later there came the understanding that you learn what is needed to learn. She says that learning at school was not hard for her, and because there was no motivation she did not need to strain. She finds that understanding whatever is learnt is important.

[As a learner I am] as a human being basically: as little as possible and as much as needed. ... During school time ... learning was not hard for me, maybe this is the reason why I had average [grades on] certifications that I didn't want to strain ... when you have graduated from university and work two or three years, then you actually understand, what do you need to learn in this field (Marika).

Interest in the topic being learnt is as important as a work-related need.

It is important that what is learnt is of interest to you ... when you are not interested, then no one can pour it from cup to you. ... Or direct need at work (Marika).

Marika's need to learn is connected with herself – self confidence and self-satisfaction.

[I learn] in order to feel good about myself, I guess. ... because of good self-feeling (Marika).

Lifelong learning is important for self-achievement and usefulness.

[Lifelong learning is important for] self-achievement ... for self-realization. In order to not be just a furniture in the corner (Marika).

Marika claims that she has learned tolerance in relationships, taking other into account, and being useful to others in a societal context. She connects wisdom to being wise in relationships and relating to people, not so much to knowledge.

[I have learned] tolerance. Especially when you are young and very square, but those squares are quickly made round. ... You will get so much more wisdom that you understand, that there are so many different opinions. I wouldn't say its adaptation, it is understanding, experience, which makes you to understand or count others. ... [Learning] is for survival, ... and for self-realization that you can be useful to others, not just for yourself. I don't know it is kind of ... being useful for society (Marika).

Marika has had a variety of roles and experiences, and her comprehension of learning is rich. She recalls several experiences from childhood, university, and work, and mentions her own family, training, social-relationships, travelling and societal connected with learning. She also describes observing others, her small child for example, in a learning situation and reflecting on it. Her varied life experience offers more learning experiences to reflect on and makes also the comprehension of learning deep.

Arno

Arno was, at the time of interview, ninety-nine years old. He had been a farmer and a blacksmith by position. Arno has, since the interview, died.

Talking about self, Arno regretted that he had little time for learning at school as all other activities were more important (e.g. fishing, skiing). There were no obstacles to learning, but his father did once interrupt his learning and gave him instruction in farming, this meant that the time for schooling was over, and the role of being a farmer had started. At the time of the interview, his physical condition was a barrier to learning. His lack of memory, and the visual and hearing problems ensured that learning was no longer dependent on learner's willing-

ness. He had a will to learn, but the process of aging was a severe limitation.

[As a school child] I had little time for learning. I have to admit now thinking about it that I should have been very good student, but I had not enough time. I had other activities. ... I had no significant barriers to learning ... But there was not enough time ... I am not able [to learn] any more, my memory doesn't hold any more ... (Arno).

The importance of learning is to create freedom for oneself and Arno's main motive in learning during adulthood was the sense of independence – in the prison camp and in working on the collective farm he tried to create spaces of his own, which in the extreme conditions was a risky and very challenging task.

Then I went to my own blacksmith's shop and there I had my own room and own permits again. Then I had no one to fuss, I did my work that needed to be done, and I went to the manager and talked (Arno).

Arno's need to learn was existential – in order to survive. The most important knowledge, for Arno, was about other people who were invariably hostile with whom he could create a sense of trust, and through this create spaces of independence and consequently the freedom to live without others' control. But learning to know people takes time.

Well, learning to know people, learning to know them thoroughly takes time. You have to be observant and I have the virtue, that I notice people well. The ones you meet first, regardless how strange to you he is and second time is clear – is he right, is he honest. ... This I have learned a lot ... I didn't notice it when I was young (Arno).

Learning takes place until you die – the wisdom of learning until dying, of being calm and of not arguing hides his struggle for survival.

You learn something more until you die ... the most important is that you are able to keep yourself calm. That there are no big differences of opinions and in life-attitudes (Arno).

He described the two main aspects of the lessons he had learned in life connected being wise with people – creating trust and overcoming violence.

[In prison camp] I learned attitudes, attitudes to people. You have to find out the ones you depend on, and you have to win his trust. And the level of trust I achieved in camp – I guess no one believes it. ... I learned that you don't conquer violence with violence (Arno).

Arno's life experience was rich. Arno had broad comprehension of learning, learning is life and life is learning, and in his case this was not a slogan but the reality.

You learn something nearly until death ... all life you learn for living (Arno).

Arno did not connect learning with knowledge or studies, but mainly with relationships and freedom which in the context of Arno's life was a lifelong perspective.

Divides in comprehensions of learning

Estonia gained independence for the first time in 1918; the Soviet Era is marked as a time of invasion and an occupation involving two major deportations to Siberia in 1941 and 1949, collectivization in 1950s, and then from 1989 a more liberal era that led to independence which was regained in 1991 (cf. Illustration 1). Arno has experienced all of these historical disjunctions and the subsequent periods of radical political, economical and political changes in Estonia including being deported to Siberian prison camp. Heleri, by contrast, has not experienced any historical changes during her adulthood. Marika has lived through one significant historical disjunction during her adulthood – regained independence.

The divides in the comprehensions require clarification. Based on Heleri, Marika and Arno comprehensions we can say that their understandings of learning diverge due to the richness of lived life.

- The divides in comprehensions of learning that exist between different generations are quite clear. The main influencing factors were the lived experiences. Heleri's comprehension of learning is quite narrow and normative because of a short life experience, whereas Marika and Arno understand learning as a construction of self. The need to learn emanates from the learner's experience, context and understandings. The varied life experience influenced Arno's comprehension of learning, the historical disjunction of the Soviet occupation creating the need for space for new reflection and beginnings. Marika connects learning with her social, personal, leisure, and work life.
- Obvious divides in comprehensions are in understanding learning as acquiring or understanding existing knowledge (Heleri, Marika), or as accommodation (Arno).
- The divides between comprehensions of learning are also manifest in being meta-conscious about self, inner life, one's learning (Marika, Arno), or lacking it (Heleri). The deeper the understanding of self, the more broad and complex is the individual's comprehension of learning.
- Divides exist when learning is limited by an inner constraint such as lack of motivation (Heleri) or an outer constraint such as a historical disjunction or health problems (Arno).
- Divides occur in the contemplation of acquired wisdom – linking wisdom with knowledge (Heleri) compared to linking wisdom with interpersonal relationships (Arno and Marika).

Jan

Jan, a man in his late fifties, has been an expert in adult education and a manager of adult education by position for over 10 years.

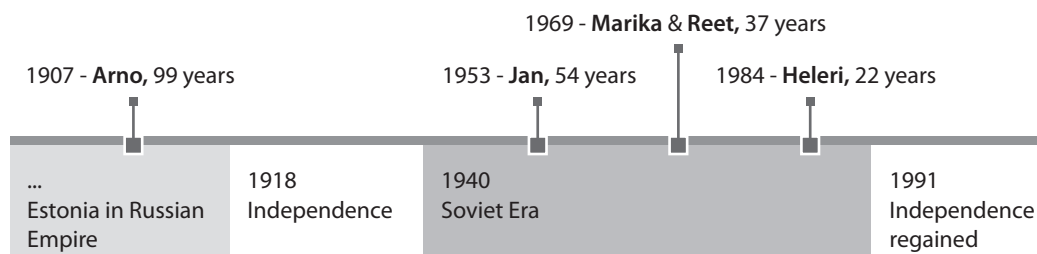
His comprehension of learning is asking questions, mapping out the unknown in a manner that can be widely understood.

Well the same question: What do we want? I think that the problem of our educational system and compulsory education is that we want one [student] to answer the right way. Not that one will ask. This interest cannot even be generated, because one's only interest is to give the correct answers. When one answers correctly, then it is all right. It is even not worth mentioning, that this kind of system is extremely expensive. I think that what is based on personal interest, would be much cheaper, but principally this doesn't create the base for lifelong learning (Jan).

Simply the time for asking questions comes later, and foremost as an adult. As an adult one understands that there is really a need. And of course this interest could rise earlier ... But it is very hard to understand that things one has learned today will not last forever. We should start by giving opportunity to ask questions and this possibility is not taken away. But now it is the opposite way, things are oriented to right answer (Jan).

Jan argues, and generalizes, that the adults' comprehensions of learning are narrow. He reaches conclusions based on information taken from his life and professional experience.

Illustration 1. Life-course context.



Actually the Estonian is not conscious that he learns. If one goes to the drama group, then nobody is telling that he learns – one attends drama group. One learns when one is at school. ... But when to make it clear to people, that this is also learning, then by asking whether you have learned anything during the last two weeks. Then they answer yes, and then we have our results (Jan).

Jan makes many generalizations, and is both critical and pessimistic. He takes an educator's position, and states that adult education is given a role for learners of filling in the gaps left by formal education, but he does not voice a more positive role. His understanding of adult education seems to be limited to educational support (i.e. leaving out the many important aspects of adult learning).

Jan is critical towards adults as learners and sounds as though he has never really listened to learners widely but has formed his comprehensions about adult learner based on a limited group. He is also critical about his fellow educators in general education who, in his words, still practice teaching through the metaphorical idea of "expecting the right answers", which does not enable learners to "raise any questions". Jan voices the opinion that he is different as an educator, that he is using another approach – enabling adults to raise questions.

Jan's view of learning is toward generative and informal approaches. But his view of the learner and the role of adult education seem to be narrow. Jan's approach is suitable for those lacking experience (Heleri), but not for those who have acquired a great deal of experience (Arno).

Reet

Reet, a woman in her late thirties, has been an expert in adult education for more than five years.

Reet takes the perspective of a government official, acknowledging that she is a mid-level executive decision maker (only senior executive decision makers are instrumental in budget and policy making). Reet seems to know different approaches to adult education, but she has to limit herself in line with overall policy; she does

not speak about herself as an actor in having either her own agenda or mission in the field of adult education.

Reet has her own inner tensions; on the one hand being part of the system requires her to voice the 'correct discourse' whereas on the other hand, she is critical towards the political system.

She does not support the liberal policy of the state which puts the responsibility for learning on the adult learner, and voices her support for inclusive education. She comprehends that adult education is marginal, peripheral among educational problems ("a thing, what should be dealt with"), giving hints that in the circles of decision makers and state officials the presence of adult education on the agenda of government policy is mainly considered due to EU pressure and that there is a lack of deep understanding of the issues of lifelong learning and education.

Access is not equal ... to everybody (Reet).

But when I look how budget of the state is discussed, then there is an attitude "let the adult pay for oneself". But at the same time, due to European Commission pressure we have got a lot of money for next period of adult education. It is so and so. It is a thing, that should be dealt with. But actually, in everyday situations, higher education, general education, and vocational education are more important (Reet).

She discusses aspects of adult education – budget, accessibility, and citizens as learners. She finds the adult learner to be superficial, taking learning instrumentally in order to profit quickly.

What I find that one problem is that people don't acknowledge their learning. That the awareness is limited. Asking, what is the use of it? (Reet).

The need [for learning in adulthood] is not enough acknowledged, ... the learner doesn't acknowledge what one does (Reet).

Reet says that in Estonia adult education is mainly, and in her opinion regrettably, oriented to the labour market needs. She is in favour of

humanistic adult education, but finds that this is impossible in the current context of liberal adult education policy.

In Estonia the role [of adult education] is like it is, but it is foremost the bridge between a person and the labour market in my opinion. It is mainly seen like this: what might enable a person to achieve relevance to the changing labour market, to the changing situation. Certainly career success is stressed in Estonia more than being a citizen or just being active, broadening the mind, social networking or something like that. It is seen the most like how the ones trained long ago could be successful and with the right skills nowadays. And especially from the labour market aspect (Reet).

Simply – with the human centred approach in adult education and policy you are not successful. This slogan is very successful in higher education ... where a politician will hit his fist to the table ..., [demanding] that a student must have a freedom to choose what to study. But when we start to talk about vocational education and adult education, then it must be according to labour market needs (Reet).

Reet's situation is very tense. Her understanding of learning and adult education is broad and in direct contrast to the narrowness of state policy on adult education which may be the cause of the distant attitude Reet displays for adult education.

Conclusions

The divides between comprehensions are clear. There are four conclusions that we would like to highlight (cf. Illustration 2).

First, learning is understood differently. The results, which we presented in this paper speak from the position of own life-course or professional experience and paradoxically do not hear each other's voices. We find that there is need for Jan and Reet as experts to hear and understand the adults' comprehensions of learning. Interestingly both understand the learners as a "they" group (Bauman & May 2005). The formation of disparate groups, the "we" – the adult education experts – and "they" – the adult learners – creates distance and tensions in understandings of learning.

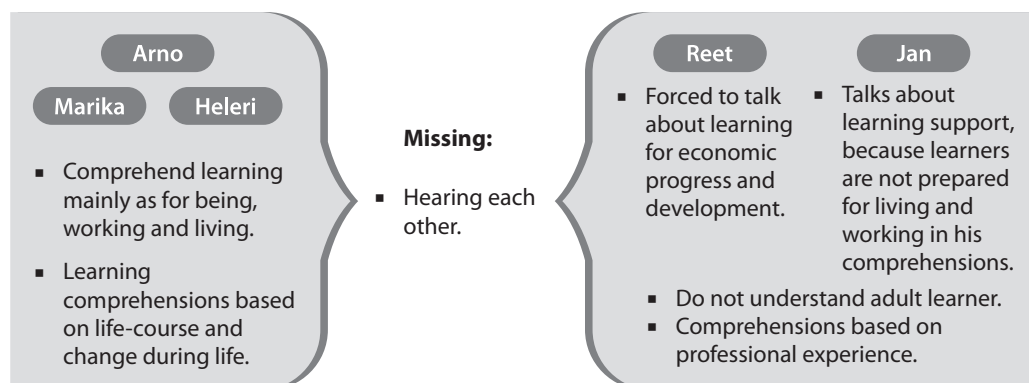
However the most significant tension, that of prejudice, is visible in the views of both experts who ascribe to adult comprehensions of learning which are not displayed.

Second, based on our interpretation we can conclude that in the life-course context of learning – Heleri, Marika and Arno connect their learning mainly with outputs for being and self-constructing, working and living.

Jan sees the lack in the preparation of the learner for living, and Reet sees that the main output of learning is work related, but finds that there should be dimensions for living and being a citizen.

Third, learning comprehensions change during life, are intertwined with life, and develop

Illustration 2. Heleri, Marika, Arno, Jan and Reet in the context of comprehensions of learning.



through experience; understanding of self increases with life experience. Learning in the context of life experience can be understood as life-based and a constant process connected to life.

Fourth, Heleri's, Marika's and Arno's comprehensions are based on life course: events, epi-

sodes, learning experience and different social situations. Their comprehensions of learning are influenced by interpretations of learning experiences in childhood, work and studies and life itself. Reet's and Jan's comprehensions are based on professional experience and they do not understand adult learner.

^a Voices of Arno and Heleri come from research project "Andragogical, social and psychological factors co-influence on learning readiness and training activeness in the context of lifelong learning" led by Ass. Prof Larissa Jõgi (Jõgi 2007).

Research question: how adults understand learning, what is comprehended as learning, what is important in learning and how comprehensions of learning differ throughout generations in contexts of different life experience and life course.

Based on 55 interviews conducted in Estonian in 2004.

The sample: 41 women and 14 men of different age and education from 9 Estonian counties and 5 cities were questioned. Purposeful sample: diversity in terms of generations, at least five interviewees were chosen from each age group.

^b Voices of Jan and Reet come from research project "Finnish and Estonian Education and the New Education Policies of the EU: the Development of the know-how and skills of the adult population as a challenge in terms of education policies and education institutes" led by Ass. Prof Larissa Jõgi and Research Fellow Tiina Jääger.

Research question: What tendencies characterize Estonian education system and how the EU educational policies influence the Estonian education during last 10 years?

Based on 14 semi-structured interviews conducted in Estonian in 2006-7.

Sample: 6 educational civil servants/decision makers and 8 experts in education.

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