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Henriette Lundgren

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Me, Myself, and I

On the Role of Self-Reflection in Adult Education

Henriette Lundgren
University of Hamburg, Germany

Keywords: self-reflection, identity, transformative learning, competence development

Abstract: This study builds on contemporary adult learning theories that deal with reflexivity and the construction of self, and its purpose is to explore in an empirical research setting how self-reflection is depicted in three dimensions – cognitively, emotionally, and socially – by participants of workplace training workshops.

To “know thyself” is one of the ancient Greek maxims that was found as an inscription in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. But what does “thyself” refer to? Is it the “I”, that is the person as a psychological self? Is it the “me” as I exist in my social context? Or is it the process of becoming “myself”, that is the person I want to be? Since the de-traditionalization and liberation from a broad range of norms and values in post-war Western societies and especially during the 1960s and ‘70s, we have seen a strong trend towards individualization, with an endless number of choices and options in life. As a result, our individual identity has become much more important, especially for people who grew up in the 1980’s (like myself), and the task or duty of defining and creating our own identity, each for him or herself, has become a central theme. So the question “Who am I?” is not merely a philosophical question but a question that demands us to reflect upon and find answers for at home, at school and at work. We have become “reflexive actors” where the word reflexive stresses the fact that individuals must constantly check and challenge self-awareness and self-perception. This trend of individualization has also impacted the way we learn and teach later in life, as nearly all education initiatives for personal change – and isn’t that what “significant” adult learning is all about? – have a dimension of “knowing thyself” built into the learning design. So what is it that comes to be known with self-reflection? What role does the learner’s reflexive self play in adult learning? And can reflecting on self be seen as a personal competence that enables the learner to further define “me, myself and I” in today’s individualized world?

Theoretical Framework

Many authors have theorized on “self” in adult learning. The American Carl Rogers (1959), for example, highlights what happens to the self in significant learning: “The person comes to see himself differently. He accepts himself and the feelings more fully. He becomes more the person he would like to be” (p. 232). According to Rogers, significant learning takes place deeply in the learner, and it refers to cognitive as well as emotional changes in the awareness and definition of self. Similarly, the Australian Mark Tennant (2012) elaborates on “the learning self” where he examines what kind of learning leads to significant personal change. Tennant highlights the importance that self-knowledge plays in adult learning where self-knowledge is always in process and the knowledge of self never definite because “the self is dynamic and always changing” (2012, p. 112). Also, the Brit Peter Jarvis (2006) argues that human learning always begins with the nature of the person. It is the whole person who learns, and the person is always embedded in a social situation.

The Danish Knud Illeris agrees with Jarvis on the point that adult learning always centers around the “I” (person) as well as the “me” (person in society). Illeris hence prefers the term *identity* (as opposed to *self*) when he writes about the learner’s role in adult learning in general (2002, 2007) and in transformative learning specifically (2013). Building on the psycho-social tradition of identity research (see also the German-born American Erik H. Erikson’s work on identity, e.g. his (1968) publication), Illeris elaborates why he finds the term *identity* most suited: As “the conditions of society are both liquid and incalculable, individuals have an urgent need to develop a personal mental instance that can keep together everything in her or his own understanding” (2013, p. 68). Illeris goes on by stating that this is precisely what the term *identity* addresses. Here, Illeris portrays a broad, multi-layered structural model of the learner’s identity, consisting of a preference, a personality and a core identity layer, of which the core identity is depicted at the center of his model. Illeris combines his model on the learner’s identity with his earlier model on the three basic mental dimensions of learning (2008) that consists of two inward directed learning dimensions (*cognitive* and *emotional*) and one outward directed *social* dimension. His newly combined model now depicts the three dimensions of learning with the learner’s identity in the middle. In response to the American Jack Mezirow (1978, 1991) and various other researchers who have coined and shaped the term *transformative learning* over the last 35 years, Illeris offers a new definition of this concept, which he defines as “all learning that implies change in the identity of the learner” (2013, p. 40).

So while acknowledging the writings of other authors, the perspective of this paper is to focus on Illeris’ updated definition of transformative learning and identity, to review the cognitive, emotional and social dimensions of learning when reflecting on self, and to confirm learning outcomes in a specific empirical adult education setting.

Methodology

In order to research different dimensions of learning and identity, I chose a workplace learning setting, in which workshops on personal change and team development took place. Each of the workshops included 15-20 participants from one organization, and in each instance a personality profile was used for developmental purposes. A personality profile is a psychometric test that measures personality traits against established norms. According to Tennant (2012) such a test or profile can be one form of “knowing oneself” whereas Illeris (2013) has his reservations towards such profiles as he finds that they only represent a small and specific selection of the total mentality, and therefore cannot do justice to the complexity of the learner and her or his social context.

Despite these different positions and tensions that exist around the use of personality profiles in workplace learning, I became interested in studying this field further. First findings were published in an ethnographic study where I describe the personality testing industry, its main actors and its areas of application (Lundgren, 2012). I found that personality profiles were often “re-labeled” by facilitators and used in a developmental way with a focus on the participant’s self-reflection and personal development in view, which made this arena an interesting research setting for the current study.

Consequently, I gathered data from participatory observations and semi-structured interviews with workshop participants. Typically, participants of a workshop would complete the personality profile questionnaire before the workshop. During the workshop, the facilitator would then hand out the profiles and give each participant time for reading and for asking questions. Next, the participants were asked to do certain exercises in order to explore their own

profile as well as the team profile further. Some of these exercises involved standing up and moving around in the conference room.

For my participatory observations, two organizational settings were selected and contrasted: one corporate setting and one higher education setting. In both instances, workshops were observed and a total of 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted between three to six months after the workshop events. In this paper, I will, however, focus on the six interviews conducted in the corporate setting.

A qualitative research design was chosen in order to analyze workshop field notes as well as subjective interview accounts of participants who had engaged in such workshops. During the workshops, pictures were taken. These pictures were not analyzed as such but they were used during interviews in order to stimulate re-call of the learning event (Fielding & Thomas, 2001). The interview guide addressed all three dimensions of learning: the cognitive, the emotional and the social. Two approaches were used for data analysis: open coding according to Grounded Theory (Strauss, 1987) and qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2007). In the latter approach, coded interview paragraphs were first paraphrased, then generalized and lastly reduced and grouped into coding categories and meaning structures relating to the purpose of this study.

Findings

Based on my understanding from the study's literature review and the results of the empirical data collection, findings will be presented in two sections. The first section refers to the learning process when it comes to reflecting on self and others. The second section highlights learning outcomes and tries to give an answer to the question whether *transformative learning* has taken place.

1. *Personality profiles can trigger reflection on self and others by touching the cognitive, emotional and social learning dimensions.* The literature confirms that learning takes place on different levels, or in Illeris' words, on different "learning dimensions". In an earlier study, I concluded that personality profiles in workplace learning were used less as an instrument to predict human behavior but more as an instrument of reflection on self and others (Lundgren, 2014). So whereas the personality profile addressed mostly the "I" of the learner, participants of workshops reflected much wider and included their social context, e.g. colleagues, friends and family, in their subjective accounts. In this present study, Illeris theoretical framework allowed me to dig one level deeper into the different dimensions of learning as laid out above.

On the *cognitive dimension*, the personality profile tool itself as well as privacy concerns were addressed by learners. Also, the role of the facilitator – who conducted the workshop – and the line manager – who initiated the workshop – were discussed with regards to learning intent and learning effectiveness. Further, participants of these workshops referred to the personality profile as a sort of validation instrument that would either confirm or challenge their own construction of self: "I suppose it made me feel validated in some way that I was, you know, I was like this for a reason or this is how I liked to be. You know these are my preferences" (Jane, 60 years, paragraph 203). At the same time, the situational context was reflected upon and how different situations make us see and adapt ourselves in different ways. The topic of pigeonholing was among those themes that emerged. On a cognitive level, participants found that the workshop led to a reduction in "stereotyping" and "putting people into boxes" behavior but instead to more understanding about differences in people and across working teams.

On the *emotional dimension*, the learning journey was described with both positive ("exciting", "enthusiastic", "motivational", "feeling stronger") and negative ("quite upset and

anxious”, “stressing”, “torn in between”, “all the insecurity”) feelings. Especially one participant reported back more explicitly on her negative feelings after her workshop experience. The fact that personality profile details were publicly shared in exercises among workshop participants was taxing for this participant: “It’s quite stressing to get your personality out like this, before other persons” (Veronique, 34 years, paragraph 27). For one participant, the workshop was emotionally neutral, the remaining participants interviewed found the experience motivational to exciting; some of this variance in perception could possibly be explained by comparing the participants’ dispositions when it comes to learning in groups and actively sharing information about self (which was not explicitly done as part of this study).

Becoming to know oneself while reflecting on self and others also manifested itself on a *social dimension* of learning. On this dimension, relationships were visualized through workshop exercises and self-images were compared to the perceptions of others: “I found it fascinating to see who stood in my immediate proximity [...] and who stood further away. And then to realise for myself “OK, where do I stand?” and where do I find friends [...] this was good and I still have that picture in front of my eyes [...] who stood where during the course” (Thomas, 45 years, paragraphs 10 and 12). Without the workshop interaction and exercises on their personality and team profiles, the re-call on spatial “proximity and distance” would probably have been less present. Also, participants reported back on having had so called “aha-moments” as part of their interaction during the workshop. These “aha-moments”, which were only possible through the workshop’s social interaction with colleagues, can be seen as yet another building block of the social dimension of learning.

2. *When personality profiles are used for personal development in a workplace learning setting, no changes in the “core identity” of the learner can be observed.* Where some form of learning and personal development did take place, it mostly referred to changes in one of the other layers of Illeris’ (2013) model of identity. This is in line with Illeris’ reservation towards such personality profiles where he states that they only represent a small and specific selection of the total mentality of a person. The most far-reaching learning outcome could be observed in Veronique, an IT specialist who found the profile useful as a reminder of her own personal preferences and as a guide for her patterns of collaboration with others: “When I read the profile it reminds me of who I am, and how I need to be with other people” (Veronique, 34 years, paragraph 95). Also for Jane, a Professional Development Advisor, the learning experience seemed to have triggered a change in the way she looked at herself and her current work situation: “The other thing I started to recognise was that I was doing a job that didn’t fit with my personal values” (Jane, 60 years, paragraph 83). Here, Jane realises that she would have to leave her job in order to stay integer with the things she believed in (→ Illeris’ “personality layer”). For other participants adaptations in “meaning schemes” (Mezirow, 1991) or minor adjustments the way they usually did things were more likely to occur as a learning outcome (→ Illeris’ “preference layer”). Peter, a Team Leader, explained his workshop outcome and developmental opportunity as follows: “trying to convince someone on the subject matter is maybe difficult. I then need to find the right approach, need to think about the person’s extraversion and so forth so that I know how to adjust the way I communicate” (Peter, 34 years, paragraph 39). Other participant referred to their workshop outcomes as “interesting” and “nice to know” but with very little or no change in the way they thought, felt or acted at work or beyond.

Implications

The findings of this study provide implications for practitioners, empirical researchers and those who theorize about learning and identity in adult education. On a *practical level*, the use of personality profiles for developmental purposes is an attractive idea, however, the spectrum of emotions that can be triggered as part of the learning journey should not be underestimated by educators and facilitators as shown in this study. Also, possible learning outcomes should not be advertised as transformative but could be more realistically described as explorative and awareness raising; workshops of such kind could lead to small changes in how we see ourselves and how we communicate and collaborate with others. The Dutch Marianne van Woerkom (2004), who researched reflection in a human resource development context, found that both – organizations and the individuals – benefit from employees who reflect on themselves. However, she sees reflection more as a process of becoming and not so much as a definite end result, which is in line with Tennant’s (2012) view on the learning self.

On an *empirical research level*, this study has shown how Illeris’ latest model and definition on transformative learning and identity could be operationalized, at least in part. Here, I found that the three dimensions of learning were more easily built into the research study and identified during data analysis as opposed to the different layers of identity. What constitutes a change in the core identity? What does a shift in the personality layer look like, and how does preference and possible changes thereof manifest itself in empirical data? These questions remain unanswered and this finding is in line with a theorizing paper where I looked at the functionalization of reflection levels in empirical transformative learning research (Lundgren, 2013). Here, I found that the highest level of reflection, the so-called “critical” reflection leading to transformative learning is hardest to “detect” in an empirical setting. This could have to do with its rare occurrence, of course. Learning is simply not that often “transformative”. However, another explanation could be our preference to certain research designs. Given that transformative learning or changes to the identity of the learner mostly occur over an extended period of time, many of our empirical studies consisting of observations and/or semi-structured interviews simply do not capture this change over time that would call for a longitudinal design.

On a *theorizing level*, the question whether self-reflection through a personality profile can be seen as a mean for (personal) competence development yet needs a definite answer. Traditionally, personality psychology has created tools that dealt with the structure of personality and identity more than with its development. However, in adult education the developmental aspect is seen as more important: we focus on what the individual can do with his or her acquired knowledge as opposed to the content of this subject knowledge itself. So, if through self-reflection Jane understands her team dysfunction better and hence acts upon this enhanced understanding by choosing to leave her current workplace, then this might exhibit her newly learned competence. According to Illeris, the competence approach now often applied in adult education might be a good integrator between subject knowledge (what we learned) and personality development (what this means to us as a person). In the here-exemplified case, Jane could integrate her subject knowledge on team dynamics with her personality development need of staying truthful to her values. She could then act on both as an outcome of her self-reflection competence.

This study explicitly used contemporary adult learning theories that deal with reflexivity, self-knowledge and the construction of self in order to raise questions on the learner’s identity and its role in learning processes. I hope this study has highlighted some new aspects of the intersection between adult learning, identity and competence development that will stimulate informed debate and discussions beyond the summary presented here.

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