

Chapter 10

Approaching Higher Education: A Life–World Story of Home–Places, Work–Places and Learn–Places

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ABSTRACT

The chapter tells of two women with low educational qualifications who embark on a journey into higher education by taking a distance course to introduce them to and induct them into academic practices, under the auspices of their trades union. In order to analyse and describe their learning, we look more closely at their contexts for learning, their life-worlds, using the conceptual framework of life-world phenomenology. Learning, in this case, means learning to find their place in higher education, and we place this against a background of the variation of ways in which the whole cohort of students was found to conceptualize the university. Grounded in an analysis of two interviews and written course assignments, we find superficial similarities and deep differences in their journey into higher education, and we give consideration to this from a gendered perspective.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we will be looking at two women who undertook the challenge offered by their trades union, to take a distance course that would not only give them some insights into being a student at university, but would even count as credit towards a degree if they decided to move forward in that direction. We will look at their experiences and the outcomes of their venture in the perspective

of their life worlds – home-places, work-places and learn-places – and the role their new-found prospects played there.

We did not start out to study the experiences of women, and did not ground our work in a feminist or gender perspective. Rather we were interested in the learning that took place during the course, which one of the authors (Eva Wigforss) developed and ran, in contrast and comparison with other distance learning enterprises that the university was supporting. In distance courses directed to three different non-traditional groups of university

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students, and which embodied high degrees of flexibility in different dimensions, we wished to examine how the study impacted on the lives of the course participants in their lived context. However, having studied interviews with these two women in one data collection, and preparing to make another more life-world oriented interview, we noted not only that their lives had both superficial similarities and deep differences, but also that the course played different roles for them. It thus became a challenge to consider their lives from a gendered perspective, the importance of which was supported when we read:

A striking example of the difference made by applying a gender perspective in [distance education] is the area of students' private lives. This is usually seen as something which does not concern the [distance education] institution (other than granting the occasional dispensation due to family commitments interfering with the meeting of deadlines). It is strictly the student's responsibility to fit his or her distance studies into their work day. [...] It is inevitable, given the structural differences between the private situations of men and women, that men have less of a problem setting up a conducive study system for themselves (von Prümmer, 2004).

Given that, as we will elaborate below, the course was initiated by a trades union and pedagogically designed to offer good support to the distance learners, we needed to research the consequences for their approach into higher education, and in particular as it relates to their private lives, or as we choose to term it, their life-worlds.

THE BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY: THE DISTANCE COURSE

The distance course was designed as a collaboration between Lund University and the Municipal Labour trade union (Kommunal) in Sweden. It

could be seen from the trades union side as a move towards their members taking the inevitable step into more qualified work, and from the university's side as a move to a more diversified student population (Wigforss et al., 2004). The full course had the goal of introducing the adult students, often with poor educational background, inadequate for entrance to further studies, to higher education as well as inducting them into its academic practices as a concrete complementary workplace for lifelong learning.

The course had three main attributes:

- it was totally off-campus with telephone conferences and IT-communication as the medium that linked participants, teachers and subject matter;
- it was highly flexible in time, in that as soon as four union members declared a commitment to taking the course, they were brought together in a conference mode and a course was started just for them;
- It was problem oriented and group-based, in that the course was focused around 5 problems, or cases, which the group of 4 could work with in order to meet the goals of the course.

The five problems that comprised the learning objectives of the course took up different critical aspects of academic practices: Studying in higher education; What is a university?; Learning and researching in higher education; Academic language and its practices; and Critical information literacy. The analysis we are presenting here is based on the papers written as one of the assignments and on two interviews with two successful course participants, one year apart (Wigforss & Booth, 2006).

The principal of problem-based learning was adopted in order to hand the adult learners some autonomy from the start. While the five themes were chosen in advance, and ways of tackling them were sometimes suggested and other times

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