



Transcultural Biography Work (TBW) for Adult Education

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1. Introduction

REALIZE Project is funded by the European Union - Lifelong Learning Programme - Grundtvig Multilateral Project, and it has been caught up by a silent partner from Switzerland, the Swiss Federation of Adult Learning (SFAL). From 2010 to 2012 seven institutions from five countries will work together to exchange and share their competencies with regard to biographical research and Biography Work, transcultural and migration issues, in the field of adult education and trainers' training: the Süleyman Demirel University of Isparta in Turkey, the Mykolas Romeris University of Vilnius in Lithuania, the guidance and training centre Speha Fresia and the Intercultural Association Griot, a non-profit organisation for the integration of migrants, both in Rome, Italy, and finally the adult education centre Haus der Begegnung as well as the Centre of Social Scientific Research, Education and Information FBI, both in Innsbruck, Austria.

Project partners elaborated the contents, potentials and aims of Transcultural Biography Work and developed pilot training modules for further education of professionals who work or will work with migrants, respectively in transcultural contexts. Those modules were tested in the four countries in the autumn/winter 2011/12. In November 2012, during the final conference in Innsbruck, the "Handbook for Trainers" will be presented. It will contain the TBW approach, and report the outcomes of the Pilot Courses, with the precious feedback of the expert participants, and it will suggest methods and course designs for a wide range of social/education workers.

2. TBW approach

REALIZE has two meanings: first to comprehend or become aware of, and secondly to actualize or make come true something. Through biographical self-exploration, patterns of thinking, feeling and acting become conscious and can be re-evaluated.

In this spirit, Transcultural Biography Work supports individual and collective processes of becoming aware of ones roots, resources, of biographically shaped patterns, which may hinder or help.

And it encourages making come true beneficial behaviour and decision-making practices as well as to create empowering future visions.

Transcultural biographical self-awareness raises individual self-esteem, but at the same time it strengthens the consciousness of human interdependence, of the ongoing mutual influence. Living means learning by facing new situations, people, cultures, or ages. Learning means transforming.

A stable self-esteem consolidates a successful entrance to education and working carriers, a satisfying study and working life as base to gain a sense of ones meaningfulness for the society.

Transcultural contexts may overwhelm with contradictory demands. Transcultural life practice challenges individuals to develop a stable psychic and mental base of decision making – to find out selection criteria and dynamic modes to interpret perceptions and experiences, to find ways to balance varieties, differences and contradictions.

With the means of Transcultural Biography Work communication processes are initiated to gain mutual subtle and empathic understanding of experience and motivations. Transcultural communication can be practiced and trained on this basis as a communicative style which supposes and therefore is aware of connection, relation, similarity, of difference in degree of human beings rather than separation and unbridgeable difference in kind.

Furthermore, through Biography Work people can explore how to work through difficult situations in ones life. It offers – especially to marginalized people lacking space, time and means of self-determination – gaining new awareness and realization possibilities.

Biography Work slows down. It needs time and space to make possible unexpected learning processes and transformations. Transcultural Biography Work orients on the realization process. Aims will be defined, but always original results will be achieved.

Biography Work also is rooted in biographical research as developed mainly in ethnological field studies, sociological qualitative research, and Oral History and since the 1990th in educational science.

The argument of opponents of narrative research that people would not remember real truth, would remember selectively, biographical science faced mainly with the following argument: We do not aim at writing truth but at understanding the production of meaning which is relevant for the historic process. We explore people's perception and interpretation of experience. We explore how reality is produced. The interpretation of related histories finally underlies a constructivist approach. Biographical historians state that written sources are not objective either; they are selective and have to be subjected to critical analysis.

While carrying out narrative interviews and therefore getting in close contact with the interview partner, researchers have to reflect ethical, moral, methodological questions. Memory work impacts on interview partners. Relaters cannot be treated like paper or material sources. They are able to react personally to what scientists make out of their relations. Narrations initiate thinking processes, re-evaluation of old memories respectively



habituated interpretations of memories; bring up memories which had been laid idle for long time; also force memories to appear which were repressed.

"Texts", notions, imaginations, and memories are created – they are synthetic constructions. Criteria of selecting perceptions are biographic incorporated pattern. People select, evaluate, organize hierarchically what they memorize, what they remember, what they narrate. Working with biographies intends to reconstruct what people made out of the world they found. But the perception and meaning of the biographical itself – of memorizing and narrating the past – underlies historical change.

Biography Work with people with migrant experience or background therefore has to be based on a transcultural concept of perception, interpretation, and practice.

Following the assumption of the philosopher Welsch "The concept of transculturality aims for a multi-meshed and inclusive, not separatist and exclusive understanding of culture. It intends a culture and society whose pragmatic feats exist not in delimitation, but in the ability to link and undergo transition. In meeting with other life forms there are always not only divergences but opportunities to link up, and these can be developed and extended so that a common life form is fashioned which includes even reserves which hadn't earlier seemed capable of being linked in. Extensions of this type represent a pressing task today.

It is a matter of readjusting our inner compass: away from the concentration on the polarity of the own and the foreign to attentiveness for what might be common and connective wherever we encounter things foreign."

3. TBW modules

Biography Work activates biographical resources to cope with, to mould or just to understand life. For respective contexts where TBW should be applied appropriate methods, media, activities, settings have to be selected and combined. It is extremely important when applying TBW to be conscious and to respect the border between therapy and education.

The setting in which Transcultural Biography Work will be conducted depends on the specific professional context. Learning from success and failure stories works both individually (e.g. in counselling) and works very well too in groups (e.g. in adult education). Working in groups, people have the chance to compare, to exchange, to react to each other, to give feedback.

At the beginning principles should be introduced as a basis for mutual estimation. Such principles also should make people aware of transference, which inevitably will go on.

1. "I see in your picture, I hear from your words..." Group members are not judging but talking about the own perception of the other's expression. That way somebody can provide valuable impulses through a feedback but without devaluing the person addressed. Furthermore – with regard to transference – it will be clear that the perception of the person who says: "I see, I hear, I perceive this ..." has probably more to do with him/herself than with the expression of the other.

2. "Your experience is unique, because it is yours, but you are not alone with it. Some of us know similar situations." Group members are not pocketing the experience of others but find out connection points. The group's awareness of the uniqueness **and** interrelatedness of each story should be heartened. If people state that they know exactly what the other person experienced it may again be a question of transferring the own experience and impose it instead of giving floor to a subtle approach and growing understanding.

Working in a group permits to experience directly the interconnectedness of biographically shaped individuals. The unity of individuality/uniqueness and interconnectedness/sameness can be methodologically comprised. Remembering and accounting provokes associations at the side of the listeners and memories will come up. When people react on each other by telling associated stories a texture of stories will be generated. People can react on each other with regard to familiarity or strangeness and reflect on those reactions.

An important task of a trainer in an adult educative group will be not only to support the individuals but also to support the group development. Group development means that the individuals not only collect their stories and exchange them but that they develop something together, that they react on each other, find interconnections; that they take the chance to learn about their biographical experience connected to groups and communities. A method to visualize such a process e.g. can be to produce together an exhibition of objects or photos of the group members and to combine them to tell a common story; or to produce a sculpture together out of objects which are biographically important for the individuals; or to design a novel out of group members' memorized stories – to interweave them: What if I had met you at that certain phase of my life?

Sitting in a circle is the best educational setting: this setting underlines the ambition to avoid hierarchies among group members as far as possible – and also not to stress a hierarchy between trainer and participants. Hierarchies may hinder trust that is a pre-condition for open exchange. If there is a formal or informal hierarchy existing because e.g. the group of people already works together, the trainer has to be aware of the limits for the open exchange. The trainer has to offer a secure frame – e.g. through offering to work on delicate issues in small groups where people can choose with whom they work.

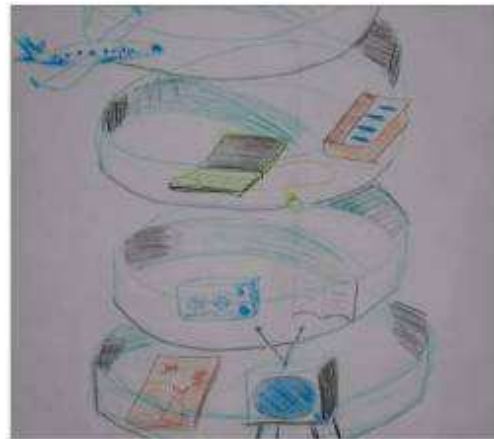
The core of Biography Work is to stimulate and express memory. A lot of methods respectively media are suitable. First of all a question has to be posed and an exercise to be described. For example: "Draw a picture on how your situation was when you came to the receiving society." "Think about how you experienced the first time when you went to school. Go for a little walk and look for some object to bring it back afterwards to the plenum."

Memory can be stimulated and focused through activities like drawing, painting, collecting objects, selecting a picture, dancing, or listening to music.

After such an exercise memory will be accounted – connected to the picture that has been produced or the object that has been found. Other participants can then give a feedback. But as already remarked the feedback has always to express that it is the perception of the feedback giver and not a judgement, not a truth.

The narration of the person and the feedback can lead to a reflection, to new perspectives on the memory, to new insights and conclusions. Therefore space has to be conceded to reflection on what happened while memorizing, narrating and exchanging with the group.

A finalizing step – probably close to the end of a workshop or seminar – will be to identify former steps to be taken, intentions, plans, or visions for the near future, which arouse through the Biography Work experience.





References

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[2] Wolfgang Welsch "Transculturality - the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today", from: Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World, ed. by Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash, London: Sage 1999, 194-213.