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Narrating unfinished business: the accumulation of credentials and re-imagined horizons across the life-course. (0142)

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Introduction

This paper examines the relationship between lifelong learning and the lifecourse and draws on the findings from interviews with part-time mature learners who are either completing previous studies from another institution or returning to higher education to study further undergraduate level qualifications. In this work we position past learning as institutional cultural capital and explore the role of this past capital in enabling students to orient towards their future self (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011) and realise imagined career horizons (Hodkinson, 2008). Adopting a narrative analysis, the paper outlines three emerging narrative themes, *travelling*, *exploring* and *unfinished business*. We need to understand a range of possible narratives that students draw upon to support successful learning and to move forward the flexibility of our student centred curriculum.

Credit transfer and lifelong learning

Broadly, credit transfer (“topping-up”, “advanced standing”, “accreditation of prior learning” or “direct entry”) is viewed as the full or partial completion of study/credit elsewhere (QAA, 2008) and often denotes movement between organisations and/or higher education providers. There are a number of common credit transfer routes however the emergent literature largely focuses on the transition from studies completed at Level 3 to 5 of the National Qualifications Framework to direct-entry to qualifications at Level 6 (Barron and D’Annunzio-Green, 2009; Dumbleton et al, 2008; Lintern and Hicks, 2007; and Tait and Godfrey, 2001). This paper approaches the issue from a student experience perspective and examines the way in which individual students narrate their use of previously accumulated institutional cultural capital within their lifelong learning journey.

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme (<http://www.tlrp.org/>) work on individual learning biographies and lifelong learning evidenced the need for effective pedagogy that “recognises the importance of prior experience and learning” (TLRP accessed 2011) and established the importance of recognising the ways that narratives of learning are important for ‘*people’s identity and agency*’ (TLRP 2008). Exploring the different narratives that people use when moving out of and back into formal learning helps us to explore how people

may or may not strategically draw on institutional cultural capital in the form of credit transfer to develop their learning identity and to achieve their working and learning goals

(Bourdieu, 2002) posits “institutionalised” capital as a form of cultural capital which exists in societies with a system of formal education. We draw on this notion to explore how transferable credit and past experiences of higher education also constitute a form of institutionalised capital. We initially began to explain why some students opt to transfer credit whilst others end their studies or drop-out by drawing on (Hodkinson, 2008) notion of “horizons for action” which provided a way of understanding career decision-making and progression. Considering the interviews in more detail we moved to a lens of narrative accounting to begin to understand the different ways in which credit transfer is, for some, an indication of blockage (Lynch and Field 2007) yet for others a stepping stone towards their ‘horizon of action’ and achievement of personal aspirations.

Data collection and analysis

Interviews were conducted with 25 mature students who had successfully transferred credit to the [university name removed] and who had completed, or almost completed, their studies. Students participated in a recorded telephone conversation which asked about the type and location of their previous study, if they completed or received any certificates for that study, the length of time between past study and the current course, their current study area, future plans and experiences of credit transfer. The interviews were transcribed and examined by both researchers using a lens of narrative accounting (de Fina 2009) to explore the different ways in which the students’ narrated the use of credit transfer within their successful learning journey.

From Gergen’s (2001) perspective narratives of successful learning are progressive over time, moving forward to the endpoint goal, however, within the interviews it became clear that there were a range of narratives in use that were not solely progressive in nature. We have started to examine these in more detail and discuss three of the emerging narrative themes below.

Developing narrative themes: travelling, exploring and unfinished business

Travelling: This was a clearly articulated progressive narrative within which students described their credit transfer and lifelong learning. They established a clear ‘endpoint’ in relation to their personal or career goals, illustrating a clearly imagined ‘future self’ (Stevenson and Clegg,) or horizon of action (Hodkinson). They seemed to adopt a strategic view of credit transfer, and most clearly identified this as a resource to be drawn upon to hasten their progress towards their goals. In this narrative learners articulated a coherent identity across time, even where there had been a long period of time between studies.

Exploring: Here the narrative was less closely connected to an ‘endpoint’ and the ordering of events was less linear. This narrative seemed to more closely connect to what Gergen

(ibid) identifies as a 'stability' narrative, where the individual's learning life went on, and accumulation of awards or qualifications seemed a by-product of learning rather than the learning goal. Credit transfer here did not seem to be used strategically towards a goal, but more incidentally, when pointed out by others as a possibility. These learners seemed to have most in common with Stevenson and Clegg's 'student' identity positions where the imagined future was to continue to study for the sake of learning and personal satisfaction rather than other, extrinsic, goals.

Unfinished business: A final, small group, of learners clearly articulated the way that they were drawing on credit transfer to achieve an imagined 'future self' that had been 'interrupted' or blocked – a hiccup in the progressive narrative of movement towards their learning identity. This group drew upon their credit transfer strategically, but seemed to view their learning history as inadequate – the institutional cultural capital that they had already acquired did not accurately represent how they saw themselves as learners or achievers. These students were particularly interesting as they narrated a strong agency in overcoming constraints and barriers to achieving their goals, often over considerable periods of time.

Understanding the different narratives that students may use to discuss their lives is important to support students in their learning through connecting with their personal lives.

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