FROM MOVING BETWEEN DIFFERENT WORLDS TO PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENTS

Eva CENDON, FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany

INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on the perspective of students with professional experience who studied at a German university for professional studies in different master's programmes. The three-year qualitative longitudinal study includes students' personal statements (letters of motivation) from prior to their studies, group discussions at two different points during studies and interviews following completion of their studies. It focuses on students' expectations and perceptions with regard to their studies and their professional development, moving between their professional work and their studies before, during and after completion of their courses. The research results are presented as three cases showing students´ perceptions of their development over the course of their studies. The paper concludes with a critical discussion of the findings with respect to the role of university lifelong learning (ULLL), taking into account students´ personal transitions as regards both identity and agency.

CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The research was conceptualized as an explorative, qualitative longitudinal research study (2012-2015), accompanying students over the course of their studies in a German university specialising in professional studies. The guiding research question was how students perceive their development over the course of their studies.

Twenty-six students took part in the study, ranging in age from 25 to 55 years at the beginning of their studies. Most of them had a first academic degree and at least two years of professional experience, with some students having almost 30 years of professional experience. Their academic and professional backgrounds varied widely. The students were studying in four interdisciplinary job-accompanying master´s programmes, in the fields of education, health, and economics and management. As a compulsory component of their studies, all students were required to meet in joint study modules focusing on management skills. All study programmes followed the same blended learning model with alternating distance learning, online courses, face-to-face-seminars as well as a one-week in person component after one year of studying (Cendon, in press). Material for the analysis comprised the students´ letters of motivation (written before enrolment); two group discussions with all students (after six months of study and after one year of studies); and guided interviews with four students after the end of their studies. The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000).

DEVELOPMENT OVER THE COURSE OF STUDIES – THREE CASE STUDIES

The primary interest of this paper lies in the students' development over the course of their studies, both with regard to their studies and with regard to their professional work. Three case studies are presented illustrating student paths at different stages of their career. Three questions guided the analysis: what are the students' expectations with regard to studies and professional development before the beginning of their studies? … how do they experience their performance and development during their studies both at the workplace and at university? … finally, how do they experience and value themselves and their personal and professional development after completion of their studies? Each case study is introduced by a short description that includes their professional and academic background.

Christin: "Getting a scientific approach"

Christin (55) has been head of a nursing school for many years. She has a vocational qualification as a nurse and a certificate as a teacher. She had also studied law previously, but dropped out of university due to personal reasons. Christin looks back on almost 29 years of professional experience. In her professional environment, she experiences the consequences of the academization of nursing. In her motivation letter she states: "In my position as head of a nursing school and further education as a teacher it has become necessary to have an academic degree." Beyond this felt need she thinks that her professional actions lack a "scientific approach". Hence, her orientation for studying is directed towards her professional development. Her primary expectations for studying are knowledge acquisition and gaining a sound theoretical foundation of professional knowledge and further personal development. With regard to her professional environment, she wants to improve her professional position and increase her professionalism.

After six months of study Christin states that being a student is challenging especially with regard to managing the designated time for studying: "Time management is also something I cannot handle." At the same time, she is gaining a new perspective on structures at the workplace: "I recognize dysfunctional structures. And I have already changed three of them. It works. The team follows suit and is highly motivated."

After one year of studying, Christin recognizes changes with regard to her studies, being a student and dealing with knowledge: "What gives me food for thought is that I am not as good as I thought I am. I don´t know why. It might be related to the fact that I have been reading too much and do not know how to integrate all these things." Concerning her workplace she admits having become slower and now thinking twice before taking action: "I have become more pensive. Also in class [as teacher], I notice that I spend more time observing people, I'm not as fast anymore. I cannot pin it down yet; it unsettles me a bit, because earlier I had perceived myself as more confident when I was reflecting on myself."

Five months after successfully completing her studies, Christin reflects on her experiences. She refers to the sometimes lonesome writing of the masters´ thesis and describes her core learning as follows: "That I have confidence in myself and that I also can handle it. […] If you sit down you can explore a theme and get to the bottom of it." As a relevant academic outcome of her studies, she describes the publication of her masters thesis as a book and a presentation of the findings at an international conference on IT in health professions. With regard to her professional work, Christin perceives an important development in the social interaction within hierarchical professional settings: "What did change and what I wanted to change is the perceptions and mindsets of higher ranked managers, especially men. I often had the feeling – and this is perceptible in the hierarchical structure of a hospital – that women are on a lower level. And in fact, usually bosses are male. Now I realize that this does not intimidate me that much anymore. [...] Outer appearances make me less uncertain and I can withdraw into myself. And I believe, no I think, actually I do sense, that I can do that now."

Mark: "Confidence, that´s it"

Mark (38) works as an investigator in the civil service. After a vocational education in hotel management and some years of professional activity, he completed a bachelor´s programme with a focus on law at a university of applied sciences and entered the higher civil service. Since then he has 11 years of work experience. Mark gained a lot of practice-based knowledge at his workplace and took all opportunities for further training. But now he sees the limits of his further professional development. He wants to study in order to deepen his knowledge and to specialize in a field in which he already has some professional

experience. After graduation, he hopes for new possibilities for professional development in new fields, also outside of the sphere of civil service.

After six months of studying Mark reduces his working hours in order to have more time for studying, perceiving that as a "luxury". He expresses his enjoyment in learning and in being a student: "And because I realized: this is my thing, this is great fun, I take so much with me. I discover skills and competencies from which I say 'wow that needs to be strengthened'. However, I also discern limits, total weaknesses I will probably never be able to catch up on." With regard to work, Mark recognizes the limits of transfering his learning: "The themes are there, but I am not allowed to deal with them. They do not want that. That is a pity, because it is do-able, but as soon as you touch upon it, you get negative feedback. This is part of the organizational culture."

Half a year later, Mark looks more critically on his abilities and his knowledge: "There are fields where you lack too much [knowledge]. And I realized that I need to eat humble pie. And I think that is very important for me because I try to work on my external perception. I think that I am an offensive-oriented person and that I can position myself without always having the respective knowledge. And that helped me to get to know myself, and to see my limits; that is very, very important for me."

Regarding his professional surroundings Mark draws on his experiences from the course on leadership: "I have learned a lot about myself and the institution I work for. And I realized that one has to reflect a lot on oneself – especially if someone is a leader but also if someone is working for a superior: what are my assumptions? Are they correct? Because that way you can uncover many conflicts and you can attempt to prevent them. That is why for me personally this is extremely important because I have been able to leave my partly entrenched position and defuse one or two situations. Therefore I can say if you are able to distance yourself and to think about what you are doing … that helped me a lot."

Looking back five months after completing his studies, Mark sums up what he has gained: "[…] structured working on something, structured problem-solving and confidence, that´s it." He says that he has developed clarity about himself which helps him in his new job: "I managed to make the break [leaving the public sector and defecting to a consulting firm] and I realized that I am constantly working on new topics, as I am constantly facing challenges at the consulting firm. […] I think that's an exciting thing, I am looking forward to it and I have to say that I have become more organized. I am calmer now and more settled, because I know now what I can do. However, I also know what I cannot do, and this is very important, too."

Paul: "Like a goldfish"

Paul (27) works as an industrial engineer in a company that provides information technology services. Prior to this, he completed a vocational qualification as information manager and studied business informatics. He has been working at this company for two years and wants to stay there longer and invest in his career development. Therefore, Paul's main interest in studying is to advance his knowledge in business and develop his leadership competencies. One specific objective is to network with his fellow students and teachers, to whom he attributes in advance a lot of practice-based experience and leadership experience.

After his first six months of study, Paul describes his learning strategy as follows: "I bought this beautiful candle and thought: Tonight I sit down with my candle and a learning atmosphere and specify a target, and I work towards it. That way I put myself under a bit of pressure and at the same time motivate myself." Looking at his professional surroundings he says that now he discerns structures and patterns he did not see before: "Before, one has

From moving between different worlds to personal development: 61
the perspective of students
CENDON (DE)

been maybe unknowingly like a goldfish in the bowl, not realizing or knowing what`s going on around oneself."

After fifteen months of studying, the work in different learning groups is a central topic for Paul. He admits that the level of one´s own engagement differs in the various groups, but in general the cohesion of the study group is sound: "No matter who you are with in a role play or a simulated appraisal interview, you always sense that you can give honest and open feedback. You have your own circles but still, the whole thing works well in this group." With regard to his workplace, the aforementioned metaphor of the goldfish in its bowl gets a new frame: it stands for being trapped in one´s own point of view. Paul contemplates that: "[…] you insist on your view point, perhaps not letting any other world exist. Then you need to look, if you are maybe trapped too much in your goldfish bowl."

Five months after completing his studies, Paul summarizes his learnings from the studies with regard to his work: "What was interesting for me also, in retrospect, was this study on reflective participants [The reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983)]. To question your standpoint, also from a bird´s eye perspective or to put oneself in another person´s shoes. Reflection is very, very important, both in the professional and in the private sphere. I think that has helped me to question my own standpoint on many occasions and to look at why other people act in this or that way. How you can better respond to the other person. And this is one of the key points I took with me." With regard to content, Paul sees many topics that he can use within his professional work: "One can call [things] into question in new ways, for example why this or that change in management strategy, or, what I maybe have not questioned before, why this style of leadership. Those were the key topics that I took away with me. I think it changes you a lot without you being aware, because you simply have the possibility to critically question and to break new grounds." In his professional context, his position had changed: "There has been a merger, three additional people came on board and the division will be supervised by me as manager".

OVERALL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

All three case studies show that the students' motivation for studying and the intended aims and purpose of studies are strongly connected to goals regarding their professional development in different nuances. Following their narratives, for all of them studying had been a success with regard to their intentions and aims, as they managed to achieve what they had aspired to before studying (confirming research results from Beaty, Gibbs, & Morgan, 1997 on learning orientiations). For Christin it was settling into her professional position as head of a nursing school, achieving an academic title and working with a more academic or structured approach. For Mark it was the transition from an organization that provided him with no space for displaying his competencies to a company where he can act more freely and develop new topics. And, finally, Paul, who made a step forward in his career path, assuming more responsibility by becoming a team leader in his company.

However, behind this achievement of a professional transition to which studying contributed, a personal transition in the form of a personal development becomes apparent for all three students. They displayed an intense involvement with themselves, their strengths, weaknesses and limits, but also with their professional relationships and their respective organizational structures. This indicates an involvement with their (professional) identities over the course of their studies. All three of them achieved more self-assurance and more self-confidence to position themselves within their respective contexts. They gained more responsibility and agency within their organizational structures and were able to explore new avenues of action.

Whereas personal transitions and personal development need the will and the agency of the students, the question remains as to how ULLL programmes can support these transitions. Three aspects are outlined below:

(1) The integration of theory and practice in a systematic and structured way in ULLL programmes can be enhanced by developing adequate pedagogical models. Concepts such as work-based learning (Lester & Costley, 2010) or problem-based learning (Barge, 2010) point in this direction

(2) Distancing, taking a bird´s eye perspective, putting oneself in another person´s shoes are distinctive ways of learning from experience and of integrating reflection into learning. Hence, there need to be methods and forms of assessment that provide possibilities for reflection and reflective learning (Cendon, 2016)

(3) Providing students with spaces to reflect, to question themselves and to critically assess their professional work, as well as the academic knowledge they have acquired, has to be facilitated and moderated by teachers. It is they who support and guide a systematic integration of professional experiences into studies and vice versa. (Brockbank & McGill, 2007; Cendon, Mörth, & Schiller, 2016)

Taking these three aspects into account when developing ULLL programmes can support students in different stages of their professional careers with regard to their personal development and hence facilitate both their professional *and* their personal transitions.

REFERENCES

Barge, S. (2010) *Principles of Problem and Project Based Learning. The Aalborg PBL Model,* Aalborg, Aalborg University Press. Retrieved from http://www.en.aau.dk/digitalAssets/66/66555_pbl_aalborg_modellen-1.pdf

Beaty, L., Gibbs, G., & Morgan, A. (1997). *Learning Orientations and Study Contracts.* In F. Marton, D. Hounsell, & N. Entwistle (Eds.), The Experience of Learning: Implications for Teaching and Studying in Higher Education (pp. 72–86), Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press

Brockbank, A., & McGill, I. (2007) *Facilitating Reflective Learning in Higher Education* (2nd edition), Maidenhead and New York, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, McGraw Hill

Cendon, E. (2016) Die Rolle der Reflexion in der Weiterbildung. In M. Schönebeck & A. Pellert (Eds.), *Von der Kutsche zur Cloud – globale Bildung sucht neue Wege: Das Beispiel der Carl Benz Academy* (pp. 251–264), Wiesbaden, Springer

Cendon, E. (in press) *The Reflective Practitioner? Entwicklung und Reflexion aus Sicht von Weiterbildungsstudierenden.* In W. Jütte, M. Kondratjuk, & M. Schulze (Eds.), Hochschulweiterbildung als Forschungsfeld, Bielefeld, Bertelsmann

Cendon, E., Mörth, A., & Schiller, E. (2016) *Rollen von Lehrenden. Empirische Befunde.* In E. Cendon, A. Mörth, & A. Pellert (Eds.), Theorie und Praxis verzahnen: Lebenslanges Lernen an Hochschulen (pp. 201–221), Münster, Waxmann

Lester, S., & Costley, C. (2010) *Work-based Learning at Higher Education Level: Value, Practice and Critique,* Studies in Higher Education, 35(5), 561–575. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070903216635

Mayring, P. (2000) *Qualitative Content Analysis,* Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 1(2), Art. 20. http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-1.2.1089

Schön, D. A. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner,* New York, Basic Books

From moving between different worlds to personal development: 63
the perspective of students
CENDON (DE)