Making the best of life: aged women's (re)constructions of life and learning

Barbara Pamphilon

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Making the Best of Life: aged women’s (re)constructions of life and learning

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

University of Wollongong

by

Barbara Pamphilon
B. App.Sci. (Health Education)

Faculty of Education
1997
Declaration

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being submitted for any degree.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all the sources used, have been acknowledged.

Barbara Pamphilon,
February 24th, 1997
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have come to think of the process of a PhD through the domestic metaphor of knitting a jumper, a sweater for our northern hemisphere friends. In the beginning you need to have someone show you what goes into the making, the yams possible and the tools needed—for me this came from my teachers and colleagues in the Health Education degree. As you sit down to knit, and continue to knit and knit and knit and knit, you need the company of others to sit alongside and to regularly say “put down that knitting and come out for a break!”—for me family and close friends met that need. The jumper begins to grow but as a novice you are not sure when to cast off, to add stitches or even if you should change yarn for this style of jumper—my two supervisors provided that guidance, suggesting patterns and designs that led to a product that I never dreamed that I could create. And when they asked me to unpick, they did so gently! Finally the jumper nears completion and you are back on your own—to embroider fine detail, to pick up the odd stitch and to finish the jumper as smoothly and beautifully as time permits—a stage that is curiously stressful and gratifying. This particular jumper has taken six years to complete and I must acknowledge those wonderful people who supported and inspired me over that time.

First, there are the nine good women who generously shared their life-stories with me. I fondly remember the many cuppas, the laughter and the quieter times as we shared some of the harder memories of life. They wish to remain anonymous but I thank them for their generous thought-full contributions to my learning.

Four other good women have been central to this project:

In the initial phases, Noeline Kyle encouraged me to begin this research, inspiring me with her enthusiasm about women, history and education. Thank you.

My two supervisors for the long haul, Jan Wright and Jillian Trezise, have given me so much; I have been privileged to learn from them. I have been grateful for their caring support, particularly through times of my own stress. I have been extended by their rigorous thinking. Postgraduate supervision is an art and they are exemplary practitioners of the art. Thank you.

Finally, my dearest friend and colleague, and fellow traveller on the doctoral journey, Katja Mikhailovich, who has laughed with me, cried with me, pushed me, supported me and now celebrates with me. All I can say is without you I couldn’t have done it. Thank you.
Projects like this are never just one person’s work. For over five years, Alison Mora has provided careful and efficient word processing, even in times of illness. It was a relief to have her skilled support, which was funded in part by an Introductory Research Grant from the University of Canberra. Stefanie Pearce provided skilled editing advice in the last stages. I have learnt a lot from her meticulous standards.

My colleagues in the teaching team of the Bachelor of Applied Science in Health Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Canberra have been generous in their support and encouragement. Rob Irwin and Chris Higgisson introduced me to new ways of thinking which began this path. Barbara Chevalier, Antoinette Ackermann, Katja Mikhailovich and Penny Crofts gave me space, support and a wonderful collaborative and collegial environment in which to work. I thank them all. The University of Canberra has been pro-active in its support of staff members’ post-graduate studies and I am grateful for the study leave assistance that I was granted.

And using the well-worn cliche—last but not least—I must thank my family. To my parents Lois and Dudley Sharp, and my sisters Margaret and Helen—you have all had faith that I could do it—I’m glad I could prove you right (at last!). Closer to home, my two companions, Zippy and Chino, gave a special quality to the many hours in the study. My three children have grown into young adulthood alongside this project, and indeed they have grounded much of my lived experience of informal learning. They have cheerfully accepted that “Mum’s into her PhD again!” and each has supported and encouraged me in their own unique way—you are pretty terrific kids—thank you Michael, Andrew and Kate. Finally, from my partner Peter I have truly learnt the meaning of unconditional support. It is a gift of love that is immeasurable. Thank you.

I have long been an avid reader of acknowledgment pages because they are often the only glimpse I have of the author as a living person. Thankfully as we learn to use and value our own authorial voice, the texts themselves reveal and locate the author. And so I come to conclude my own ‘acknowledgments’. My path has been enriched by the wisdom, skills and kindness of many, and it is a joy to be able to recognise this in a public way.

ABSTRACT

The oral histories of nine aged women provide the vehicle for this feminist poststructural exploration of life-long learning in its formal, non-formal, informal and incidental modes. As personal narratives are historically, culturally, socially and personally mediated, it becomes possible to see that the oral histories are at once individual and collective. The women’s accounts illustrate that despite discourses providing competing and often contradictory subject positions, it is possible, indeed necessary, to speak as a rational, coherent self. I illustrate how this group of women (re)constructed what I call ‘enabling fictions’.

The poststructural, multidisciplinary analysis consisted of four levels: the macro, the meso, the micro and the interactional. Through the macro analysis it was possible to locate the narratives in their cultural and historical time and place, revealing collective meanings as they relate to individual experience. The meso analysis drew on the personal level shedding light on individual values, interpretations and positioning. On the micro level, narratives were examined for the subtleties of the telling, exploring emotions and voice in particular. Finally, the interactional analysis recognised that these narratives were a product of the relationship between each of the women and myself.

The poststructural analysis of personal narratives reveals that what events mean to a woman depends on her ways of interpreting her world from the discourses available to her at that given moment. I do not suggest that these women’s accounts illustrate ‘the’ women’s ways of learning, rather I argue that different discourses bring with them different ways of seeing one’s self and of speaking as a learner. As a result learning is seen not as a linear progression, but rather as a constant forming and re-forming situated within a particular discursive field. The nine women were able to utilise the discourses surrounding home and family to claim particular maternal competencies which they found to be transportable into their community activities. This group of women illustrate how it is possible to (re)construct a subjectivity in a way that indeed ‘makes the best of life’.
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