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BIOGRAPHICAL LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS: CONCEPTUAL REFLECTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

ABSTRACT

Sustainability education often aims to empower individuals to help lead society toward more environmentally and socially responsible ways of living. This paper offers an alternative approach to addressing the challenges of adult learning in sustainability transitions. Rather than learning for sustainability, the processes of learning from sustainability discourses are explored. The paper provides conceptual and methodological insights into using a biographical approach to advance research in adult education and social change. Two empirical examples are provided to illustrate how individuals reframe sustainability and turn it from a public concern to a personal one, thereby developing a sense of agency. The concept of biographical learning is central, as it suggests that narrating and reflecting on one's life trajectory in the broader context of sustainability discourses can facilitate learning to understand, address, and remain an actor of one's own life in these times of rapid social change.

Keywords: *biographical learning, sustainability education, life course narratives, sustainability transitions, adult learning*

BIOGRAFSKO UČENJE V KONTEKSTU TRAJNOSTNIH PREHODOV: POJMOVNE REFLEKSIJE IN METODOLOŠKA SPOZNANJA – POVZETEK

Cilj izobraževanja o trajnosti je pogosto opolnomočiti posameznike, da pomagajo usmerjati družbo k bolj okoljsko in družbeno odgovornemu načinu življenja. V članku je predstavljen alternativni pristop k reševanju izzivov, ki se pojavljajo pri učenju odraslih v trajnostnih prehodih. Namesto na učenje za trajnost se osredotočamo na raziskovanje procesov učenja iz diskurzov o trajnosti. Opisana so tudi pojmovna in metodološka spoznanja o rabi biografskega pristopa v raziskavah o izobraževanju odraslih in družbenih spremembah. Na dveh empiričnih primerih je v članku ponazorjeno, kako posamezniki trajnost iz nečesa, kar je v javnem interesu, preoblikujejo v nekaj, kar jim je v osebnem interesu, ter s tem razvijajo občutek lastne sposobnosti za delovanje. Pojem biografskega učenja je tu osrednjega pomena, saj lahko pripovedovanje in refleksija o lastni življenjski poti v širšem kontekstu diskurzov o trajnosti podpirata učenje, ki vodi do razumevanja, obravnavanja in ohranjanja aktivne drže v lastnem življenju v današnjem času hitrih družbenih sprememb.

Ključne besede: *biografsko učenje, izobraževanje o trajnosti, pripovedi o življenjskih potekih, trajnostni prehodi, učenje odraslih*

INTRODUCTION

Social change, particularly in adult education, is often framed as a challenge requiring personal adaptation through the acquisition of new knowledge, behaviours, and competencies (Alheit, 1994). A central concept shaping current social change is *sustainability*, often used interchangeably with *sustainable development* and commonly associated with societal responses to environmental issues. However, as public awareness grows about the interconnectedness of global challenges – such as the link between climate change and migration – *sustainability* has evolved into a broad and often vague term (Lange, 2018). It now encompasses a wide range of well-intentioned efforts (e.g., United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s [UNESCO] 17 Sustainable Development Goals), sometimes functioning more as a comforting narrative, presented as the optimal solution to both global and local challenges. This normative framing has energised the development of social transformation initiatives, with learning and education situated at the core of such efforts and viewed as the key catalysts for change. For example, in 2002, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution establishing the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD 2005–2014), which aimed “to integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of learning to encourage behavioural changes toward a more sustainable and just society for all” (UNESCO, 2005).

This “act of hope in the future” (Lange, 2018, p. 2) – to educate in response to sustainability challenges – nevertheless reflects an ongoing debate within the scientific community about how to cultivate a sustainability-literate society. Specifically, the debate concerns how education (Mikulec, 2021; Schreiber-Barsch & Mauch, 2019), and by extension learning, should evolve to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to thrive in an ever-changing world, and what sustainability education should encompass. Wals (2010) underscores a paradox between the urgent need to address climate issues, which in some cases justifies an instrumental approach, and the ethical dilemma of imposing expert-determined ways of thinking and acting. Concerns include the risk of treating learners as “marionettes for the good intentions of [...] educators” (Breiting, 2009, p. 200), reducing educators to “technicians rather than participatory contributors” (Lange, 2018, p. 411), and framing sustainability thinking and practices as merely individual learning problems (Van Poeck & Vandenabeele, 2012, p. 542). Furthermore, the widely used concept of Education *for* Sustainable Development (ESD) – like education *for* anything – risks reducing education to a means “for promoting a specific kind of ‘sustainable’ behaviour” (Jickling, 1992; Van Poeck & Vandenabeele, 2012, p. 541).

In response, scholars have called for a critical examination of the underlying assumptions guiding such approaches, urging us to ask “who or what should transform, to which objective, and how this transformative process is supposed to proceed” (Schreiber-Barsch & Mauch, 2019, p. 520; see also Mikulec, 2021, p. 15). To counter tendencies toward instrumentalization, Jickling and Sterling (2017, p. 159) argue that what should be foregrounded

are the values that inform pedagogical choices, rather than prescribing fixed outcomes or behaviours. According to Van Poeck and Vandenabeele (2012), a shift in focus from the acquisition of pre-determined knowledge and competencies to a more democratic approach towards educational spaces and practices – cultivating pluralism, for example – can support the realisation that enabling people to live with social change requires creating opportunities for learning *from* sustainability. This understanding of education is central to setting transformation processes in motion. Accordingly, there is a need for educational practices “where citizens engage with, respond to, and act in confrontation with the issues at stake” (Van Poeck & Vandenabeele, 2012, p. 548). Learning *from* rather than *for* makes even more sense when considering that sustainability issues are *wicked problems*, “characterised by incomplete, uncertain or contested expert knowledge, conflicting values and objectives, a lack of unambiguous problem formulations and the impossibility to find uncontested definitive solutions” (Block et al., 2019, p. 30). The idea that sustainability holds different meanings for different people reinforces the importance of creating space for listening and exploring those meanings (Bentz et al., 2022, p. 501).

This article puts forward the argument that giving learners the opportunity to share their own experiences of contemporary social change – and thereby develop a personal understanding of how to live within this *wicked* context – is essential for strengthening their capacity to engage with such change. This process can foster the ability to form connections within a relational logic paradigm (Lange et al., 2021) or to pose challenging questions (Biesta, 2006a). Thus, rather than asking how people can learn *for* sustainability, the aim of this paper is to explore the potential of learning *from* the sustainability context, further decentred from a normative, teleological framing of sustainability. In practical terms, this implies a different approach to sustainability education, “one that aims to meet learners where they are at in terms of interests, concerns, and meanings” (Bentz et al., 2022, p. 501). The proposed conception of learning remains instrumental to some extent, but it moves away from a predetermined goal of what should be learned for the sake of sustainability issues (e.g., adopting so-called “green” practices). Instead, it suggests a non-teleological view of learning within the context of sustainability.

To this end, the paper proposes using biographical research (West et al., 2007), with a particular emphasis on the concept of biographical learning (Alheit, 1994), to examine the potential of learning *from* the sustainability context. Within scientific debates on sustainability education, biographical learning has yet to be recognised as a significant source of learning. A few notable exceptions include the work of Vandenabeele and Wildemeersch (2012), who explored how farmers learn about environmental issues through biographical narrative settings, and the work of Jaeger-Erben (2013), who proposes the biographical approach as a method for analysing changes in everyday consumption resulting from critical life events. Some academic communities, particularly in Francophone (e.g., Fabry & Luyckx, 2024; Pineau, 2023; Schmutz-Brun, 2021) as well as Lusophone and Hispanophone contexts (e.g., Serrano Castañeda et al., 2024), have conducted extensive research on the use of reflective methodologies, such as biographical narratives, to create dialogical

spaces for relearning how to live on Earth. However, concepts such as *ecoformation* have yet to gain significant recognition within international sustainability education debates, where greater engagement with these perspectives would be highly valuable.

This article explores how narrating one's life story in the context of *wicked* sustainability issues can foster biographical learning, enabling individuals to make sense of their experiences and supporting educational research in better understanding learning within these contexts. Grounding reflection in lived experience through a biographical approach offers valuable insights for both adult education and sustainability transitions research. In particular, biographical narratives of life course transitions provide a fruitful means of exploring the "latent potential of transformation," as transitions involve "movements into new social situations and positions [...] and thus become socially momentous in having social consequences and affecting individuals' life trajectories" (Walther et al., 2022, p. 11). A biographical perspective, specifically, can illuminate how individuals make sense of and articulate personal experiences of change (Eberle et al., 2022), as well as how broader contexts of social change, such as sustainability-related issues, co-shape life trajectories and transitions across the life course (Thevenot & Hof, 2024).

Given the limited scientific discourse at the intersection of sustainability education and biographical research, this article represents an initial effort to connect these two fields. Drawing on a thorough empirical study, the goal is to propose conceptual frameworks and methodological insights – relevant to both researchers and practitioners – that highlight the value of biographical approaches in understanding learning within the sustainability context.

To do so, the article will first examine how sustainability has predominantly been conceptualised as a global issue requiring intentional top-down intervention, often overlooking its personal dimension and the fact that it is a socially constructed concept that is constantly evolving. In the second part of the article, an alternative perspective on what sustainability represents for our lives and how it is being learned is proposed, drawing on biographical research theories. The central argument to be made is that the construction of personal biographies represents a means of making sense of one's agency within the context of sustainability. In the third part, the conceptual and methodological proposal will be exemplified and discussed to garner empirical insights. The biographical narrative interview passages derive from the *Working Out Sustainability in Transitions*¹ project and will provide initial indications of the potential methodological avenues that could be pursued in future research.

1 The research project *Working Out Sustainability in Transitions* examines the career transitions of people who have developed a particular interest in sustainability issues. The project is part of the interdisciplinary research training group *Doing Transitions - The Shaping of Transitions in the Life Course*, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The research group investigates the shaping of transitions in the life course, focusing on the interrelationships between discourses, institutional regulation, and pedagogical action, as well as individual learning, educational, and coping processes.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL DIMENSION OF SUSTAINABILITY: EXPLORING LIVED EXPERIENCE RATHER THAN PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

This section presents the argument that the majority of research in the field of sustainability transitions studies has focused on meso-level transformation processes, which has led to a neglect of the concept of sustainability as a personally experienced phenomenon.

Focusing on meso-level transformations offers an approach to sustainability that moves beyond assigning responsibility solely to individuals. This stands in contrast to models like the ABC framework (Attitude, Behaviour, and Choice), commonly used in economics and psychology, which have been criticised for placing disproportionate emphasis on individual responsibility in addressing climate change (Shove, 2010, p. 1274). With or without an explicit tendency to shift blame onto individuals, research over recent decades linking sustainability and individual action has primarily focused on changing or improving consumption patterns. Educational research has explored how individuals can learn to change their habits (e.g., flying less, sorting waste) and how specific spaces, such as urban community gardens or real-world laboratories (e.g., Singer-Brodowski et al., 2018), can serve as sites for sustainability education and learning. Other studies have examined how trigger events, for example, watching a documentary or taking hallucinogenic mushrooms (Hards, 2011), can lead to personal transformation. Life course transitions, such as becoming a parent (Jaeger-Erben & Offenberger, 2014), renovating a home (Winther & Wilhite, 2015) or retiring (Burningham & Venn, 2020) have also been studied as *windows of opportunity* for promoting sustainable consumption (Schäfer et al., 2012). Collectively, these studies shed light on how practices can be (instrumentally) modified to address sustainability issues, such as altering personal consumption habits by, for example, purchasing organic products, reducing plastic waste, and lowering one's carbon footprint. With their focus on the detailed description of practices, these studies have made a significant contribution by demonstrating how individually performed actions are deeply embedded in collective practices and socio-material contexts – while largely overlooking subjective perspectives. Burningham and Venn (2020), who examined potential “significant ‘moments’ at which individuals’ everyday consumption might be redirected onto a more sustainable course” (p. 115), conclude that framing such events as “moments of change” risks implying “a discrete point at which change occurs” (p. 117). Hence, in the aforementioned investigations, the personal and subjective articulations of sustainability are lost out of sight, so that the less static (Greene & Rau, 2018; Jaeger-Erben, 2013; Rau & Matern, 2024), less obvious, less impressive, less visible, less everyday social changes are not made relevant.

By employing a biographical approach, this paper explores the subjective dimension of sustainability, emphasizing how individuals' experiences, accounts, and life conditions shape and co-construct the sustainability context over time. If we consider that what qualifies as a “sustainability-related practice” is far from fixed, since sustainability discourses evolve over time and are reinterpreted across the lifespan and within biographical narratives, then a biographical approach becomes especially valuable. It allows us to examine

how individuals continuously engage with, adapt to, (re)position themselves within, and learn from this ever-changing context. Thus, a biographical approach offers insight into how lives unfold and how experiences are shaped and given meaning in relation to the sustainability context. This paper does not, however, seek to assign responsibility for who should act, when, or how, nor to prescribe the most appropriate life path or define what qualifies an individual as a so-called change agent. Rather, it emphasizes that individuals are engaged again and again in the process of learning from and about sustainability issues throughout their lives, and in ways that are unique to them (Stimm & Dinkelaker, 2024). The aim is to thematise biographical learning as a relevant topic for sustainability education both as an object of study and as a pedagogical approach that draws on individual experiences within sustainability contexts.

The following section introduces the biographical learning approach and argues that it can facilitate access to additional sustainability knowledge and highlight previously understudied forms of sustainability agency.

SUSTAINABILITY AGENCY AND BIOGRAPHICAL LEARNING

Biographical approaches to understand learning in sustainability transitions

Biographical research focuses on long-term processes of experience and meaning construction. Accordingly, we can ask to what extent sustainability, understood as a guiding principle of contemporary social change (Neckel et al., 2018), manifests as a construct of relevance in individual biographies.

The following section argues that *biographical learning* or *narrative learning*² can prove to be a valuable addition to research on sustainability transitions, as it offers new perspectives on evolving socio-cultural phenomena (Hallqvist, 2014, p. 498). It is not a new idea that life can be an object of learning. It is “itself a field of learning” (Alheit, 1995, p. 59). What is relatively new is to think about life as an object of sustainability-related learning. It is worth noting, however, that the concept of *ecoformation*, introduced by Gaston Pineau (2023) and developed with a community of researchers over the past 30 years, along with the related training program (GREF), has yet to gain full recognition as a subfield of sustainability education, specifically one focused on nature and the ecological environment, drawing on life narratives among other methods. Recent work from this research community asks: How do ecological relationships and identities emerge? How do our interactions with the world shape us, transform us, contribute to our life trajectories? What is the place of this informal learning in our lives and overall learning? How do our eco-formative experiences contribute to ecological awareness (Bischoff, 2023, p. 6)?

2 In this paper, the terms *biographical learning* and *narrative learning* are used interchangeably, as the objective is not to distinguish between different biographical research strands (see Hallqvist, 2014; Tedder & Biesta, 2009, pp.77–79). Therefore, the terms are employed based on whether the accounts are influenced by Alheit and the biographical research community (ESREA's Life History and Biography Network) or Biesta and colleagues' research for the *Learning Lives* project.

The use of biographical approaches in adult education has been a consistent and persistent practice since the 1990s (Bernard et al., 2024; Hallqvist, 2014). Those who advocate for this approach frequently highlight the valuable insights gained from the subjective experiences of learners themselves. In contrast, sustainability transitions studies have thus far tended to view learning primarily as a tool for implementing top-down strategies, with a focus on policymaking and meso-level adjustments (Köhler et al., 2019). Thus, sustainability transitions studies – and particularly those engaging with their educational dimension, namely the field of sustainability education – notably lack recognition of biographical approaches, such as autobiographical reflection and storytelling, as meaningful components of sustainability learning practices.

One possible explanation for this delay is the strong influence of international policy (e.g., UNESCO) on both lifelong learning and sustainable development, leading to the assumption that both are shaped solely by political and economic imperatives. However, scholars such as Biesta (2005, 2006b) argue that learning goes beyond the discourses of lifelong learning policymakers. Biographical learning, seen as the “individual aspect of lifelong learning” (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 5), offers an alternative approach to policy issues that is further removed from formal structures. The assertion that the issue of sustainability is shaped by and pertinent to international policy has also been challenged. For instance, Elizabeth Lange (2018) posits that sustainability “has no ideology, universal goals, slogans or key leaders. Its form grows from the context” (p. 415). Building on biographical narratives (conducted with individuals who are genuinely concerned with sustainability issues), it seems reasonable to posit that sustainability can be cultivated from personal anecdotes, experiences, and challenges. This cultivation of sustainability from below can contribute to further advances in sustainability knowledge, particularly on issues of concern to the everyday lives of adults and thus also for the fields of adult education and learning.

Articulating life stories to give meaning to and learn from sustainability

[L]earning can take place as a result of articulating stories from one’s life, through the process of talking about and reflecting on life experiences, in other words from the very narration of one’s biography; [...] by having stories with content and structure, by having a narrative that says something about what and how you have learned. Narrative and narration are not simply a vehicle for such learning processes but can be understood as a ‘site’ for learning. (Tedder & Biesta, 2009, p. 89)

Consequently, biographical narration invites individuals to create new meaning by connecting the pieces of their lives in creative ways (Alheit, 2018, p. 125; Hallqvist et al., 2012, pp. 73–76). In the research project *Working Out Sustainability in Transition*, the sample consisted of individuals who had experienced a professional transition to a sustainability-related job (e.g., from the banking sector to vegetable gardening) and who, in

the interview situation, made sense of their transition by linking their working life to the sustainability context. The professional transition experience can be conceptualised as a biographical disruption that can facilitate access to information about the processes of transitional learning (Alheit, 1994; Hallqvist, 2014, p. 499; Hof & Bernhard, 2024). As transitioners are forced to cope with change, within the scope of the biographical narration, they are compelled to (re-)interpret the relation between their lives and the world in which they live. The narrations are the result of the production of (subjective) meaning derived from past experiences and future aspirations. From there, the biographical narrators produce new “life constructions”, and with those new life constructions, “social actors take a different stance towards themselves and the world in general” (Alheit, 1994, p. 293).

In a similar way, Eberle et al. (2022) refer to modes of biographical articulation. To show “how interviewees develop new ways of self-positioning, legitimize important decisions, and give direction to their further course of life” (Eberle et al., 2022, p. 140), three different biographical interview case studies were analysed. It was concluded that “biographical articulation” relies on discourses for being “powerful opportunities to gain a voice, to be able to speak and/or to transition into new subject positions” (Eberle et al., 2022, p. 151). Articulation patterns thus “work as engines for transitions in the life course” (Eberle et al., 2022, p. 151), since, for example, “[b]iographically relevant positioning processes [occur] against the background of a diverse universe of other possible subject positions and offerings” (Eberle et al., 2022, p. 151).

This (new) “self- and world referentiality” positioning can be seen as a learning process that can cause changes (Alheit, 1994, p. 289, 291; Hallqvist, 2014, pp. 499–500). Thereby, people that can learn from their life stories “are effective ‘narrative learners’” (Tedder & Biesta, 2009, p. 89). Hallqvist et al. (2012) consider this narrative exercise to be an act of “reflexive identity” (p. 73). But that’s not all. Those who advocate for biographical learning also argue that it “has a ‘potential’ to change structures”, since “people not only reflect but also act to change their situation” (Hallqvist et al., 2012, p. 73). This is the argument of the next section, namely that biographical learning is a means to address sustainability issues.

Articulating life stories to make sense of the sustainability context

In biographical narratives, individuals tend to explore and make sense of how their life path relates to larger societal changes (Alheit & Dausien, 2002) and in the specific sample of my research project, sustainability issues were made relevant to explain life trajectories – how they are touched, affected, implicated, and in some cases mobilised. Hence,

[s]upporting narrative learning is [...] neither only about improving people’s ‘capacity’ for narration, nor only about providing opportunities for doing this together with others. What matters is also the extent to which such learning processes can be understood in a political way and can be lifted from the level of private troubles to the plane of public and political issues. (Tedder & Biesta, 2009, p. 89)

Indeed, when individuals connect their personal life trajectories to the context of sustainability – for example, by describing changes in their consumption habits – they enter a space that lies “between the personal and the political”, and “almost every ‘private’ decision has ‘public’ consequences and, vice versa, because social conditions affect individuals’ freedom of choice” (Vandenabeele & Van Poeck, 2012, p. 52; see also Sauvé, 2014, pp. 7–10). The very act of telling one’s life story can be seen as a form of participation between the personal and the political, since constructing a biography, for example, involves a number of both intentional and non-intentional decisions, i.e. giving a selective account of social forces to explain one’s actions, for example, to emphasize (or not) the impact of the sustainability context on one’s life trajectory.

Vandenabeele and Van Poeck (2012) explored the potential of narratives in sustainability education not through biographical interviews but by organising focus groups where the participants, guided by a facilitator, discussed an environmental policy plan. Their focus was on deliberation as democratic education, “an educational process in its own right, in which citizens are entitled to explore the often paradoxical and ungraspable character of their experiences” (Vandenabeele and Van Poeck, 2012, p. 52). Their findings support this paper’s claim that even in argumentation and debate, people consistently use storytelling patterns. Two key conclusions stand out: first, that “citizens’ knowledge is best articulated by stories and can be best understood in this way,” and second, that “narrating experiences can support citizens in responding to the complexity of concern-raising sustainability issues” (Vandenabeele and Van Poeck, 2012, p. 54). In short, storytelling helps people use concrete language and lived experience to navigate the complexity of sustainability.

According to Biesta and Tedder (2007), in telling and reflecting on their life stories, people can learn about their own “agentic orientations and how they play out in one’s life”, and this can have “an important role in the achievement of agency” (p. 132). In short, life stories facilitate learning processes that can enhance personal agency in the face of complex social change, providing individuals with the means to shape future actions through the act of narrating their experiences.

EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL PATHWAYS

The following section is intended to illustrate the conceptual work that has been conducted thus far and to inspire the pursuit of alternative methodological avenues, whether for the sake of research, teaching or both. A comprehensive analytical examination of the empirical material has been conducted for the *Working Out Sustainability in Transitions* research project, and the resulting empirical findings are presented in other articles (e.g., Thevenot, 2022; Thevenot & Hof, 2024). To obtain firsthand accounts of experiences pertaining to the sustainability context, the research design used biographical interviews as a data collection method. It is assumed that in contemporary Western societies, sustainability has become a mainstream topic through which individuals position themselves, legitimise certain practices, and distance themselves from others (Neckel et al., 2018).

Moreover, it has been postulated that life narrative exercises prompt interviewees to break with the routines of everyday lives and move on to new biographical spaces (Evans, 2013, p. 29). This enables them to reposition themselves, address their learning transitions, and thereby inform research about what new knowledge adults are acquiring.

Between 2020 and 2022, biographical narratives were collected from 15 individuals as part of a research project grounded in a theoretical sampling strategy (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Participants in the process of a career transition related to sustainability were recruited through snowball sampling. Biographical interviews, each lasting around 90 minutes and focused on their professional trajectories, were conducted and repeated a year later to explore personal change and evolving perceptions. Most of the interviews were held via videoconference due to the pandemic and the participants' geographic spread across six countries (in European countries and the USA).

The interview setting is interesting in view of the purpose of the methodological contribution to be made in this paper. In the recruitment process (via first contact and informed consent), the participants were first made aware that the project was related to the topic of sustainability. Because the interview questions were open-ended – beginning with prompts such as *Please describe your professional path from the very start to where you are now*, with follow-up questions like *Can you elaborate on that?* or *Can you describe this situation in more detail?* – sustainability was not addressed explicitly. It was therefore up to each respondent to determine whether, and how, to incorporate it into their narrative: whether it was a recent concern or a long-held value, how it shaped subsequent events, and whether their understanding of it was stable or evolving. This openness gave participants the space to define the relevance, form, and influence of sustainability on their own terms, shaping how it intertwined with their personal journeys, career transitions, and aspirations.

Two case narratives (Heidi and Max) are presented below. They are indicative of the argumentation made above but not to be understood as representative of the research project sample. Heidi's example offers insight into the process of reframing the concept of sustainability from one of public interest to a matter of personal significance. Furthermore, it demonstrates how sustainability as a topic can be utilised as a means of reframing one's role and sense of agency at work. Max's example emphasizes the process through which prospective actions can be articulated, reflected upon, and evaluated as feasible and achievable (or not).

Making sustainability something personal exemplified with Heidi's narration

Heidi was in her early 50s when she was interviewed about her working life. In the 1980s, she studied business administration and then went to work for a large food company. She quit after two years:

I just felt like, um, it's so unnecessary and so unimportant [...] I just wanted to spend my working hours on something that I could be, yeah, proud of or at least think that, you know, it's worth doing it. (Heidi)

From the start, she frames her professional path as a search for meaningful work. After completing a PhD in international marketing on fundraising, hoping to “get a foot in the nonprofit sector”, she instead, partly due to family plans, ended up in HR at a large for-profit travel company: “It wasn’t uninteresting. But it was in the end, the main focus was: We have to expand our business. And what I wanted inside was to reduce this business.” During a six-year parental leave spent accompanying her husband on international assignments, Heidi recounts a pivotal moment in her pursuit of meaningful work:

When I went to school, we were talking about dirty rivers and about killing seals for the fur and things like this. And this already always, yeah, kind of grabbed me. I thought, this is not right, ‘we have to do something’ and things like that. Um, but it wasn’t the big issue of how we really change our world right now. And, um, that came really when I went [abroad]. In Europe, we already have a certain common ground about things that are important. [...] [In foreign country H there was] a complete insensibility on this topic [...]. That really made me into, yeah, ‘I have to think about it in more detail and more depth’. And as I was looking for something I could change in my job anyway, also this might be a moment to get into this topic. And once you start with environmental topics you [laughs] can’t stop because it’s so interesting. And, yeah, from then on, this was my main focus. (Heidi)

Heidi describes a tipping point in her involvement and attitude to sustainability issues. After living abroad, topics that once seemed self-evident – *a certain common ground* – became visible and prompted reflection, which she suggests ultimately altered her worldview. Environmental disasters shifted from distant and abstract concerns to immediate and personal ones: “in [country H] you looked into the sky, and you could see it. And that made it much more, yeah, much more urgent from a personal point of view”. While the disasters discussed at school over 30 years ago felt like remote, sensational headlines disconnected from daily life, they have now become a “big issue” that she feels personally responsible to engage with. This shift in perspective marks a transition from passive collective acknowledgement to active personal interest. The framing of the realisation does not entail significant personal transformations; it does not result in the sudden modification of her everyday life or a shift in life priorities. For her, sustainability is not just a topic but a fulfilling pursuit: “you [laughs] can’t stop because it’s so interesting.” It also aligned with a long-standing professional ambition. To deepen her expertise, she enrolled in an environmental studies master’s program. The formal qualification gave her more confidence to promote change within the travel company, but she continued to feel isolated in her efforts. In 2013, she resigned. Over the past decade, she has worked as a self-employed sustainability consultant.

The narrative is built around the idea that she has been consistent all along in her pursuit of purpose-driven work that makes a meaningful contribution to society. What had changed between the time she left her job in the 1980s and in the 2010s was her understanding of

what counted as meaningful work. As the concept of sustainability has become a defining theme of contemporary social change, individuals seeking a sense of purpose increasingly pursue opportunities aligned with its values (Thevenot, 2022). Heidi exemplifies this trend: working to advance sustainability goals enables her to construct a meaningful life narrative that legitimises both the major and minor shifts in her life course.

Heidi was not used to telling her personal life story; nearing the end of the 70-minute interview, she mentions in a meta comment to the researcher: “you’re asking so many questions I haven’t asked myself, so it always takes a while to [laughs] to answer them”. Heidi had begun engaging in sustainability work long before she participated in this research interview, where she had the opportunity to share and reflect on her work life experiences and transitions. Tracing why and how she had made significant work-life transitions – driven by a search for purpose and justified through the concerns she articulated – proved to be a fruitful exercise in clarifying her agentic orientation toward sustainability, its relevance in her everyday life, and the agentic possibilities she is beginning to prefigure for the future.

The explosive nature of unlived lives exemplified with Max’s narration

Max was in his late 30s when he was interviewed about his working life. Like Heidi, Max’s narration begins with his choice of studies and work experience. Prior to his dual study program in the automotive industry, he finds it relevant to mention his voluntary service in a children’s hospice: “that was a really, really good year. Every day, I had the feeling I’m doing something good”. He suggests he knows how it feels to do work with a purpose. Thus, when he began working in the car industry, he recalls having doubts about whether it was right for him. He had dreams of saving up money and travelling the world by bike. Instead, 15 years later, Max was still working in the same company. He explains that the incentives and the regular promotions kept him going even if the car industry was not completely fulfilling and his desire for something adventurous, entrepreneurial, ambitious or influential kept resurfacing. He recalls two significant events from 2016 that may explain why he was questioning his work trajectory: watching a Leonardo DiCaprio documentary on climate change and becoming a father. Afterwards, he felt the need to do something “that makes the world a little bit better”. While on extended parental leave, he seriously considered changing jobs and applied to several companies that shared his environmental values. But in the meantime, his boss in the automotive industry offered him a project management position in the company’s new “sustainability” department.

In an attempt to justify his situation, i.e. staying in the car industry but on the topic of sustainability, Max’s narrative includes a series of reflexive practices:

Hmm and maybe this is the biggest topic, why I haven’t made a big cut so far. Because I don’t want to miss like the security. I think I could live within that money, hmm, and I would like to even try different things, but there are two kids now and since I’ve had an unlimited well-paid contract in the industry

since I was 21 or something, it is really hard to give this away. So, if there was a chance to have this security, trying something else with less money, I would say definitely, I will do it, I will try it. [...] Ahm so, let's see what the future brings. (Max)

Max mentions a possible life that he is not living. A life he wishes for, but at this point remains an “unlived life” (Alheit, 2018) or a life *not yet lived*. In fact, he hypothetically describes how he could get by earning less, suggesting that the fact that he is not giving up his executive position in the car industry has nothing to do with financial benefits. In the above passage, the argument that trumps all other options is the need for stability for his two children. In other words, he longs for changes in his life that are more in line with his personal beliefs, but taking action is complicated. Instead of saying “I have two kids,” his phrasing “there are two kids now” is consistent with his reflection on his lack of personal control over his situation and the options available to him.

In contrast, however, in the introductory part of his narrative, he sees his children and becoming a father as the driving force and a wake-up call to rethink his career:

When my kids are bigger and they will ask me: ‘Dad, what did you do with all your time? What did you do?’ And I have to say, you know, I did this and this but nothing really big or important or something which makes the world a little bit better. (Max)

With this sentence, Max implies that what he has done professionally so far is not yet enough and will not necessarily be received favourably by his children. It is implied that one way to change the still unsatisfactory direction of his career would be to make a significant contribution to the environment.

It can be assumed from the narrative that Max is not acting according to his desires by not putting his life opportunities into practice. Indeed, Max is faced with several challenges (e.g., his responsibility for stability in the household, which is a strong gendered expectation in Western society (see Kammerlander, 2025) versus working in a more uncertain context but doing work that makes *the world a little bit better*) for which he has no immediate answer. But the articulation process and related pre-reflexive efforts can be seen as experiences of what Alheit and Dausien (2002, p. 15) call “moments of self-education”. Furthermore, from a biographical learning perspective, the unlived life that Max narrates and reflects upon may have what Alheit (1994, 2018) calls a “socially explosive force”. These narratives are powerful as they create the space to express the options for changing one’s life – and to consider how such changes might make a difference in the world. For example, Max implies that he has options to choose from, that a somewhat traditional career path of staying in the same company for the rest of one’s life is not an end in itself. Especially at a time when sustainability concerns have become personal concerns, expressing his desire to change his life for the sake of doing something purposeful changes what it means to have a career in modern society.

CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to the ongoing discussion on sustainability education by demonstrating the value of biographical approaches to learning, which emphasize personal experience and reflection through biographical narratives. Sustainability education is not limited to the acquisition of knowledge or competencies aligned with the expectations of international organisations seeking to shape *eco-citizens* and *change agents* under a fixed normative vision. Rather, it calls for ongoing pedagogical reflection and transformation to better understand – and, in the case of educators, to support – learners as they navigate the *wicked* context of sustainability transitions.

While the majority of research on sustainability transitions tends to frame sustainability as an impersonal concept that necessitates intervention, this paper highlights the need to also consider individuals' subjective experiences and personal meaning-making. As Van Poeck and Vandenabeele (2012) note, it is essential to focus on how adults articulate and learn *from* their lived experiences with sustainability, rather than solely on how to learn *for* sustainability. This shift in perspective can facilitate the derivation of fruitful questions relevant to the field of adult education, such as the modalities of learning in light of sustainability issues. Furthermore, it supports an epistemological transition aligned with transformative sustainability education, as described by Lange et al. (2021), which sees sustainability education as an embodied relational process, emphasizing our “relational accountability” to the world (p. 44).

The sustainability context has significant implications for cultural forms of life, everyday practices, and relations to oneself (Neckel et al., 2018). It alters not only society but also its members – whether they want it or not. This is because social orders and their meaning are not fixed, but produced in communicative processes (Mezirow, 2000), with biographical rendering being one of these forms of communication. Further research using biographical approaches will enable a better understanding of how the sustainability context permeates and co-shapes our life courses, and thus what and how is being learned and for what reason. Hence, this paper advocates for the use of biographical approaches to examine sustainability as a social change phenomenon that shapes and is shaped by adult lives, with implications for both research and teaching.

The scope of this paper was to advocate for the integration of biographical approaches into sustainability education research and practice. By valuing personal narratives, we can gain a deeper understanding of how individuals experience and make sense of sustainability transitions, allowing us to learn from these experiences and act (or not) with greater reflection. It emphasizes the role of personal stories in addressing sustainability issues and suggests that telling one's life story can be a source of meaningful learning. It is not possible to quantify or prove the impact of this form of biographical storytelling on the processes of learning and action with regard to sustainability. However, in the light of the preceding conceptual and theoretical sections, Heidi's and Max's examples illustrate how making sense of and reflecting on one's work trajectory in the context of sustainability

through biographical narration can unfold. Such reflections offer a more nuanced understanding of contemporary and prefigurative life trajectories, as well as the types of life course transitions individuals navigate today. Furthermore, it contributes to sustainability education by illuminating how learning from the sustainability context can take place. The objective was also to inspire sustainability education and adult education researchers interested in social change to further empirically explore the potential of biographical narratives in sustainability education. Researchers and educators are encouraged to recognise the significance of personal experiences in shaping sustainable futures and to use such narratives as a tool for self-education and reflection on sustainability.

This approach offers an alternative understanding of sustainability education, emphasizing the need for continuous (re)learning and (re)negotiation of one's understanding, position, and the meaning of one's life course against the backdrop of rapid social change and pressing socio-ecological issues.

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