

Learner identity. An educational and analytical tool

La identidad de aprendiz. Una herramienta educativa y analítica

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Abstract

In this article we elaborate on the notion of learner identity, presenting a sociocultural approach to its conceptualization. At the core of our proposal is the idea that learner identity deserves particular attention in educational situations because it is founded on experiences of participation in learning activities. These are distinct from other activity types in that they are explicitly directed towards learning objectives. Learner identity is a functional identity type for the educational contexts where it mediates the individual's processes of attribution of meaning and sense making.

We argue that educational practitioners and many students at all levels need support, guidance and material and symbolic resources in order to become aware of learner identity as a concept and a phenomenological experience. We suggest that the concept of learner identity is a symbolic mediating resource that should be systematically and methodically managed in educational practice. We acknowledge the close relationship between learning and the construction of multiple identities, and argue that learner identity is the basis for the construction of other identities. Therefore learner identity needs to be considered in curriculum and educational practice in order to promote the construction of favourable learner identities and to improve the management of the interplay between the individuals' learner identity, the educational activity and its outcomes.

The sociocultural approaches to identity construction provide us with a solid basis for the conceptualization of learner identity, where we distinguish between two modalities of

learner identity: situated/short timescale construction (LIP) and the cross-situational/long timescale construction (LI). The two modalities are in constant interaction across formal and informal educational contexts and experiences. We suggest that this conceptualization of learner identity would enable a holistic view of how students are influenced by the informal as well as formal educational experiences, across time and situations.

Key words: functional identity, learner identity, learner identity process, meaning making, sense making.

Resumen

En este trabajo presentamos una aproximación sociocultural al concepto de Identidad de Aprendiz –LI, por las iniciales en inglés de *Learner Identity*. En el núcleo de la propuesta se encuentra la idea de que en las situaciones educativas la LI merece ser objeto de especial atención debido a que esta identidad tiene su fundamento precisamente en las experiencias de participación en actividades de aprendizaje. La LI es una identidad funcional en los contextos educativos, en los que interviene como mediadora de los procesos de construcción de significado y de atribución de sentido.

Profesionales de la educación y estudiantes de todos los niveles educativos necesitan apoyo, orientación y recursos materiales y simbólicos para tomar conciencia de la LI como concepto y como experiencia fenomenológica. La LI es la base para la construcción de otras identidades. De ahí la propuesta de tomarla en consideración tanto en el currículum como en la práctica educativa con el fin de promover la construcción de LI favorables para el aprendizaje.

Las aproximaciones socioculturales a la construcción de la identidad proporcionan una base sólida para elaborar el concepto de LI, en el que proponemos distinguir dos modalidades: una modalidad situada y vinculada a actividades de aprendizaje concretas con un proceso de construcción que tiene lugar en períodos de tiempo por lo general más bien cortos –LIP, por las iniciales en inglés de *Learner Identity Process*–, y una modalidad trans-situacional, fruto de la participación en múltiples y diversas actividades de aprendizaje, y cuya construcción tiene lugar en períodos de tiempo largos o relativamente largos. Las dos modalidades están en constante interacción y tomadas en conjunto proporcionan, a nuestro juicio, una visión holística de cómo las experiencias educativas formales e informales educativas influyen sobre las personas a través del tiempo y de las situaciones.

Palabras clave: atribución de sentido, construcción de significado, identidad funcional, identidad de aprendiz, proceso de construcción de la identidad de aprendiz.

Introduction

Considering the preoccupation of most modern societies with identity issues, it is surprising and alarming that this rarely is reflected in educational practice. In Foucaultian terms (Foucault, 1988), the educational practices, both in formal and informal learning contexts, could be described as lacking systematic management of adequate technologies of the self in order to support the favourable construction of different types of identities. In an account of Foucault's philosophy and thoughts on the technologies of the self, Besley (2005) argues that the schools of today should be more aware of the technologies of power and self that are used when influencing the formation of their students.

The institutions of formal education are fundamental arenas for, not only construction of knowledge, but also the construction of a sense of self. In Wenger's (1999) terms, learning enables participation in communities of practice, and participation in communities of practice enables learning. Through this participation individuals become members of communities and occupy a certain position in them. This participation enables a sense of recognition as someone or something to a higher or lower degree. Individuals are considered and consider themselves as belonging to a context to a different extent depending on how they are recognized in them. For example, the more someone is recognised as a good professional, the easier it is for the person to maintain a sense of belonging in the profession. Getting access to a community of professionals requires learning and the construction of an identity as a doctor, hairdresser, teacher, etc. Similarly, failure to learn can cause feelings of doubt about belonging. If a small boy fails to learn to play football as expected, the sense of belonging in the football team might be seriously threatened, both by himself and the others.

In accordance with Besley, we suggest that the educational systems need to provide students with spaces, means and educational support to explore how they pave their way into different communities through a process of learning. They need to understand how they become the persons and learners they are in different situations and why they do so. The technologies of the self which are needed are in part, as Foucault suggests, concrete actions and methods to make this exploration, through writing, talking, engaging in individual and collective reflection, etc. However, we also claim that the students need to be provided with adequate concepts and notions for this exploration. Inspired by the differentiation

between physical and symbolic artifacts as mediators of goal directed action, we suggest that the technologies of the self which mediate the individual's processes of reflection over himself can be physical, such as a special time and place for reflection, the use of personal journals, etc., as well as symbolic, such as concepts that help organize and direct these reflections. A similar view can be found in the approach of situated cognition, where identities are constructed artifacts of various types and with multiple uses, which can serve as tools for thinking and acting (Wilson & Madsen Myers, 1999). In other words, specific notions that support the mediation of the individual's reflection on himself are a type of symbolic or conceptual artifacts. Therefore, providing the students with concepts of specific identity types, (gender, ethnic or, as we suggest, learner identity), and the means to explore their construction of these identities implies the use of two types of technologies of the self: the concepts and the actions to explore these concepts.

As indicated, we propose that «identity» is in itself a conceptual technology of the self, which is, in our judgement, best suited to enable the exploration of the processes of recognition in a social context. Moreover, we argue that there should be a critical assessment of the kind of identities that are decisive in formal and informal educational situations. We suggest that while it is crucial to understand and have insight into the influence of different types of identity on learning and its outcomes, the educational systems should consciously and systematically foster the development of the learners' learner identity, that is to say, their recognition of themselves as learners.

In the following we shall elaborate on two main questions. The first one concerns, why it is relevant to focus on learner identity in the educational system. The second one focuses on how learner identity can be theoretically conceptualized.

Identity as an educational tool

Identity as a theoretical and phenomenological notion in connection to the education of young and adult citizens has become an important topic of interest for different disciplines. (See for instance Creese et al., 2006; Gee, 2000; Locke

Davidson, 1996; Osguthorpe, 2006; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Solomon, 2006; Wenger, 1998; Wortham, 2006). Hoffman gives a graphic description of the situation stating that «Identity has become the bread and butter of our educational diet» (in Sfard and Prusak, 2005, p.14). Wenger (1998, p. 215) claims that learning is «an experience of identity», and in an earlier book (1991) with his colleague Lave they establish the intrinsic interconnectedness of learning and identity when newcomers become part of a community of practice, for example in a work place. Gee (2000) and Sfard & Prusak (2005) go as far as identifying identity as analytical aid in educational contexts, and suggest that inquiry into the identity construction of the students can shed light on how they perceive their educational experiences and academic results. From our point of view, none of these two attempts offer a sufficiently detailed description of what identities are, what they consist of, how they are constructed, or why they are functional analytical tools.

Though there are more generic explorations of the relation between identity and education, the interest in the construction of national, ethnic and cultural identities in educational contexts dominate the field of research (A query in any specialized or general search engine offers countless results covering the issue). Two exceptionally valuable contributors in this field are Locke-Davidson (1996) and Wortham (2006), who offer concrete insights into the construction of students' social identities at the intersection of the societal macro and school and classroom micro contexts. The concentration of research on this specific identity issue is possibly due to the increased level of social and political preoccupation with the multicultural and diversified populations of many countries as a result of processes of migration. In a 2006 address David Begg, the general secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, illustrated the point when declaring that: «For whatever reason, immigration is fuelling a debate about identity» (Begg, 2007, p. 181).

Though some identities (such as gender and ethnic) are privileged with more attention in educational research, there are multiple identity types at stake in both formal and informal educational contexts. However, not only are identities constructed through learning, but because they are a kind of conceptual artifacts, they also mediate participation and learning. The identities that are formed and the learning that takes place are mutually influential. Learning forms identities and identities shape learning.

If learning implies identity construction, then, how can educational contexts be provided with a concrete approach that explains the intricate connection between knowledge and identity construction? And, is it possible and relevant to establish which identity type should be viewed as particularly important in the educational arena? The answer to these questions can be sought in the value of learning as a basic activity of construction. At any occasion the appropriation of new knowledge has a potential influence on the individual's perception of himself as a person in a certain given context. In the abovementioned terms of Lave and Wenger, through participation in communities of practice and their activities, individuals not only learn the actual practices, but they also learn to be members of these communities. Becoming members of communities implies the construction of community adequate identities of different types. Hence, learning is, as indicated earlier, the means of constructing identities and therefore the identity of a person as a learner is essential to other identity construction. For this reason, we suggest that learner identity is the core identity in an educational situation. In the following we shall present the arguments for why learner identity is functional, relevant and deserves particular attention.

The sociocultural conceptualization of learner identity and its function

Theory and research offer a vast spectrum of clues about the general conceptualization of identities, and the sociocultural perspectives on learning devote particular attention to this concept (Osterlund & Carlile, 2003). Hegel is identified as the basis of many socioculturally oriented approaches to identity, including his identification of relationships, interaction, activity, discourse and recognition as essential constituents of an identity (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). However, most theories do not tend to cover all aspects simultaneously or even assign them the same level of importance. The theories applied in our conceptualization of learner identity mainly use three recurring aspects of the sociocultural approach to identity. These are the theories that identify the discursive or rhetorical nature of identity (Bruner, 1996; Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; Gee, 2000; Penuel and Wertsch, 1995; Ricoeur, 1990, in Roth et al., 2005; Sfard and Prusak, 2005), those which view identity construction as deeply embedded

in activity and as part of social practice (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Holland *et al.*, 1998; Lemke, 1997; Roth, 2007), and finally approaches that emphasize recognition as essential to identity construction (Bernstein & Solomon, 1999; Gee, 2000; Taylor, 1994).

In our conceptualization of learner identity, all these aspects are equally important but fulfil different functions (Coll & Falsafi, submitted; Falsafi & Coll, in press). As explained later, the activity is defined by its object, which in turn defines the nature or the type of identity. In other words, the activity defines the content of the identity or the meanings that are being constructed about oneself. When playing football the meanings that the individual constructs about himself concern his recognition as a team player, a skilled ballplayer, an individualist goal hunter, etc., whereas the activity of coaching the football team drives the construction of meanings about himself as an instructor, motivator, game strategist, etc.

While the activity provides the identity with meaning material, the discursive or rhetorical features of identity is in our view a reference to the mode in which the identity is being constructed. We suggest that discourse is the primary mode of identity construction, but not the only, since non-discursive actions, e.g. gestures, physical positioning, level of exposure to the surrounding etc., also are used. The mode of construction is related to the sight of identity construction, that is to say, whether it is taking place within the activity (participation in the classroom) or outside of the activity (talking about the participation in the classroom) (Falsafi & Coll, in press).

Finally, we identify the notion of recognition as essential to any conceptualization of identity construction. In order to be, the individual requires the co-recognition of himself and others of this being. Hence, having an identity is to have a sense of recognition as someone. The meanings that are being constructed about oneself need to be recognized or else they cannot endure throughout and beyond the activity.

Yet another shared feature of most of the socioculturally oriented approaches is the emphasis on the two-dimensional nature of an identity as part individual and part social. The extent to which the individual and social are emphasized differs between the perspectives, and the operationalization of the distinction between the two dimensions and their point of overlap seems to be an ongoing theoretical and empirical challenge. However, regardless of other differences, this two-dimensional conceptualization of identity seems to be a

common denominator of most socio-culturally oriented approaches to identity construction. In Vygotskian terms, this specific feature could be expressed as the connection between the interpsychological and intrapsychological processes of identity construction. This implies that though an identity most certainly is experienced as a personal resource, the origin of its constituents, its value and its mediating function are socioculturally defined and constructed through relations. It takes at least two to construct an identity, but no matter how social and relational its construction and use always requires the subjective experience of an individual.

It takes learning to become a learner – identity and learning as the construction of meanings

Though the notion of identity seems to be occupying an increasingly larger space in educational research, the interest in learner identity has so far been limited. The interplay between the social identities, the learning situation, the academic subjects taught and other aspects of the educational situation intrigues many researchers. Despite this, the process of becoming and changing as a learner is either neglected or not ascribed much significance. Sinha (1999) highlights this point in reference to theories of learning in general, pointing out the common assumption that the learning situation makes the individual a learner; that is to say, learners are made or constructed. He claims that there are no natural born learners, but that the individual learns to become a learner and that «... to position herself and be positioned as learner in the complementary structure of roles (teacher and learner), is something that requires prior experience of, and introduction into, such learning situations» (*ibid.*, p.41).

Sinha's point is that learning how to learn requires learning to be a learner, which is a discursive construction defined by the dynamic and changing situatedness of learning. These thoughts are a much-needed focalization of the subjective perspective of the learning individual as a learner in relation to the teacher, and as we would add, to other learners. Furthermore, Sinha makes an important acknowledgement of the relation between the situation and the making or becoming of a learner. He does not extend the argumentation to the

issue of the identity of the learner as a learner, although what he is describing is, in our view, the construction of the individual's learner identity.

The individual's subjective experience of the learning situation is also identified by Coll (1988) as essential to a constructivist view on meaningful learning. According to him, meaningful learning is about the construction of meanings and making sense of these meanings. Learning is meaningful when the acquired information is ascribed meaning. Coll refers to Ausubel who distinguishes between two conditions for attribution of meaning. First, in order for learning to be meaningful, the individual needs to make a certain level of logical sense of what she has learned, in the sense that she needs to understand the internal structure and coherence of that which is learned. For instance, learning the periodic table of the elements by memorization is different from learning it through understanding the organization of the table and the relation between the elements.

Second, besides making logical sense, the learned subject also needs to make psychological sense, which implies that the pupil is able to relate the new knowledge to the larger system of previously constructed knowledge. It will be easier to make sense of the periodic table of the elements if it connects with knowledge of the atomic constitution of things. Hence, the previous knowledge is of highest relevance when new knowledge is constructed. However, Coll also draws attention to other aspects of the educational experience that are relevant for the students' achieved level of learning, such as their perception of the school and the teacher, the parents and the confidence in his/her ability and knowledge in a given area, their motivation, interests, feelings, expectations etc., and on the situation of learning and its end purpose. So, new educational experiences do not only depend on previous knowledge, but also on previous learning experience as a whole. These experiences are identified as *mediators* between the teaching and the final results of the learning process, indicating that the previous experiences mediate the construction of meanings of that which is learned as well as meanings about the educational experience as a whole (Coll, 1988). In our view, *learner identity* is the conceptual artifact that contains, connects and enables reflection over the emotional and cognitive processes of the experience of becoming and being a learner, in the past as well as in the present and the future (Coll & Falsafi, submitted).

We argue that the situated construction of oneself as a learner is a fundamental part of the educational experience. In order for meaningful learning to take place,

the individual needs not only to make sense of the learned subject matter and the learning situation, but also make sense of himself in the specific learning situation. As a result, the educational experience includes the construction of meanings about oneself as a learner, that is to say, a learner identity. These meanings are constructed throughout multiple and diverse educational experiences that mediate the construction of meanings about oneself as a learner in new learning situations.

In other words, we suggest that the educational situations where learning is taking place foster a specific type of identity that is constructed alongside other identities, but is indeed context specific according to the characteristics of the activity. Following Burke's (2003) definition of identities as the individuals' meanings about what it means to be who they are and Bernstein's (Bernstein & Solomon, 1999) description of identities as means to achieve a sense of belonging and recognition of self and others and to manage a specific situation, the learner identity consists of generalized meanings about how one is recognized as a learner by oneself and others, which then mediate the sense making of the participation and the perceived sense of recognition as a learner in specific situations and activities of learning.

Learner identity is defined by the specific situation and the diverse aspects of the learning activity with particular characteristics, in terms of, for example, tasks, objectives, learned subjects or abilities etc. (Coll & Falsafi, submitted). We suggest that this identity is present and active in formal as well as informal learning situations, though it is rarely spoken of. Parents might be aware of the class, ethnic and gender identities that they want to foster, but do not really have a concept that facilitate the recognition of their children as learners. Unfortunately, this is also often the case in formal education.

Though the interest in learner identity presently is somewhat limited, there are some valuable works available. Osguthorpe (2006) includes learner identity in his general conceptualization of the relation between learning and identity construction. According to him there are at least five different kinds of identity that are influenced by learning, namely professional, personal, talent, character and learner identity. According to Osguthorpe the learner identity is affected by every new learning experience and he claims that all the other identities revolve around this one. A change and development in any of the other identities depends on the condition of the learner identity. Osguthorpe's definition of the learner identity focuses on the general long term perception that one has of

oneself as someone who easily can learn whatever necessary or as someone who has to overcome problems in order to learn.

Though in total agreement with Osguthrope's suggestion that learner identity is the basis of all other types of identity development, we find that his notion lacks the necessary consideration of its dynamic nature. In our view, his conceptualization of learner identity does not pay sufficient attention to the situatedness of its construction and the contextual differentiation that defines the subjective perception of the conditions that enable or hinder learning. Nor does he give an adequate description of the relation between the different and at times conflicting educational experiences that still bring about a certain dominating perception of oneself as a learner. In our view, a conceptual understanding of learner identity has to contemplate its spatial and temporal situatedness. For this reason, we conceptualize learner identity construction in two modalities or dimension: a long timescale dimension, which is cross situational, and a short timescale dimension, which is highly situated (Falsafi & Coll, in press). As explained further on, this theoretical differentiation is crucial for the solution of how identities can be conceptualized as dynamic and changing but still be perceived as fairly stable by the individuals.

We also find a tentative exploration of how learner identity can be changed by pedagogic strategies made by Chappell et al. (2003). However, they never offer any concrete definition or explanation of learner identity. Finally, Hughes and Lewis (2003) make an important contribution to the conceptualization of learner identity, where they establish its dynamic, changing and context dependent nature and further make the link between the individual experience of the learner and the analysis of the learning environment.

Despite the abovementioned intents to understand learner identity, further conceptual and empirical explorations are required. If learner identity is to become matter of course for educational policy making and practice, more research is required based on solid conceptualizations and with higher levels of concretization. To begin with, we need a theoretical understanding of its composition, function and development that permits the analysis of its construction and enables its practical application as a conceptual technology of the self.

Stories and moments of learner identity construction

One major challenge of the sociocultural approach to identity construction is the vision of identities as social, situated and dynamic to the extent of being constantly (re)constructed. This complicates the compatibility of the theoretical and analytical vision with the individuals' subjective experiences of their identities as more or less unchanged, continuous and recognizable from situation to situation (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). People do not feel that they are fundamentally different from context to context, though they might experience and express situated adjustments and differences. The educational situations where individuals participate change, and though the individuals' meanings about themselves as learners shift as they accumulate different learning experiences (sometimes several times a day, going from one classroom to another), they maintain a coherent perception of themselves as learners from class to class, home to school, semester to semester, and year to year. What is more, their surrounding, the teachers, parents and peers, also perceive them as basically the same.

This problem gives rise to two questions. The first is how the subjective sense of continuity can be explained from a theoretical and analytical point of view. The second question is why some experiences and the meanings about oneself that are constructed in these are more important than others for the definition of the overall sense of recognition of oneself as learner. Why does a student with poor results in one subject never define himself as a poor learner in general, whereas another who achieves high grades in most subjects and has one less successful experience still is affected by this experience years later?

As mentioned above and informed by Lemke's (2003) differentiation between identity-in-the-moment, or in-practice, and identity-across-events, or across-the-life-span, learner identity is conceptualized as having two modalities. Individuals have a long timescale cross-situational learner identity (we denominate this modality LI) and a short timescale situated process of experiencing and adjusting the LI to the specific learning situations. We call this latter modality Learner Identity Process (LIP)¹. While the LI maintains the abovementioned sense of continuity

⁽¹⁾ In later modified versions of the model the denominations have changed. One important change consists of removing the word "process" in the denomination of the short timescale dimension LIP in order to avoid confusion regarding the process in the long timescale dimension. Evidently, both dimensions imply a process, but in the short timescale dimension the process of adjustment to the new learning situation is a stronger subjective experience for the individual.

across different learning situations, the LIP is the identity construction that best corresponds to most sociocultural approaches' description, that is to say, the changing, situated activity based identity construction. These two modalities are intrinsically connected, though they are different types of resources for meaning construction and sense making, and are therefore constructed in different modes. The LI is mainly constructed through narratives, which evidently also are situated, but not in an actual learning situation. The LI narratives are rather constructed, for instance, under discursive activities with the objective of conveying some meaning about oneself as a learner (e.g., convincing a parent that one will take responsibility for the private music lessons one is begging for, talking to the teacher about why an assignment is late), or achieve a certain recognition from a peer (asking what someone really thought of something one said during class) or in evaluative conversations or job interviews where one is asked to describe oneself as a learner in different or specific learning situations. The construction of the LI is an activity with its own objective, namely the construction of meanings about oneself as a learner and having them recognized, whereas the objectives of the LIP are intertwined with the objectives of the learning activity. The LIP is a cycle where making sense of the learning depends on making sense of the participation, which depends on the recognition as a learner, which depends on the making sense of the learning and so on.

The special significance ascribed to the learning objective in educational situations is informed by the theory of activity of Leontiev (1978). His hierarchical conceptualization of the goals in an object oriented activity is highly useful for an understanding of the relationship between the LI and the LIP. The motives operate as high-level objectives that orient the activity. These are in turn transformed into concrete lower level goals that drive the actions in the activity. Without motives the actions can still move towards achieving the objectives, but will suffer from the lack of driving intentions. The motives for wanting to be a successful learner can be to fulfil the goal of achieving good grades in order to be able to be admitted to a high quality university, which in turn is important for future social and financial security. Or the motives might be decided by the importance of maintaining the family tradition by assuming responsibility for the family business. The motives are the result of the interplay between the influences that are executed by the formal as well as informal educational experiences. The home situation provides the individual with one part and the educational institutions with the other, though to differing extents. Furthermore, these motives influence the individual's

objectives in each new learning situation and the construction of each new LIP. The activity comes with an objective that gives it direction and gets it started (Kaptelinin, 2005). When the objective gets out of sight, is misunderstood or not understood at all, or if the objective mismatches the individual's motives, or if the activity is experienced as having multiple and possibly conflicting objectives, the attribution of meaning and the sense making is disrupted and the sense of recognition threatened.

For example, in a post graduate level course about the construction and educational use of web-quests, which was partially web based using an online educational platform, one student wrote in his logbook that he understood what a web quest was, «but it is not clear to me what we are going to do. I know that it is not an excuse for not collaborating but I feel lost». Not knowing what is expected and what to do, then, prevented him from participating in the activities in his group. The reason behind this specific student's confusion could for instance be difficulties in participating in the shared construction of an understanding of the objective, or a lack of motivation if he experienced that the objective of the activity would not support his motives for participation in the activity. Regardless the reason, the inability to maintain a shared vision of the objective impaired him from participating. As mentioned earlier, and in agreement with Lemke, the construction of identities is embedded in participation in educational practice. Without participation the possibilities of taking advantage of the acts of recognition is highly limited. Consequently, the sense of recognition as a learner in the activity is threatened.

The confusion in the abovementioned case could, however, also be caused by the novelty of the educational practices as such. For instance, the shift to an online learning context constituted a challenge in itself. The educational practices are culturally defined. The favourable LI is the LI that permits easy access to new learning situations through its ability to mediate between past and present LIPs and promote a successful learning experience. The shift in educational practices through the introduction of technology-based learning environments complicates the sense of continuity of the LI across situations and experiences. With the increased use of technology and web-based learning activities, the characteristics of the learning activities have changed and with them the norms and ways of social interaction and participation (Vuorela and Nummenmaa, 2004). This argument highlights the social nature of the LI as well as the LIP. These new conditions can be assumed to challenge the LI of many students, at least during a

transition period of change in educational practices. Though there are individual differences in how this challenge is experienced, it is nonetheless one that is shared by many students.

From LI to LIP to LI

In LI narratives the patterns of accumulated LIP experiences across time become apparent. Some of these experiences stand out and mark the shift that is evident in retrospective but that might have passed by more or less unnoticed in an attempt to maintain coherence and continuity. The exceptional teacher that came and turned someone's motivation around, the change of schools that changed the course of everything to better or worse, the participation in an online course, a failed exam, driving practice with the less patient parent, etc.

One commonly used tool of LI construction, which is rarely if at all viewed as such, is the application letter that educational institutions use in their evaluation and screening of prospective students. In these, students often describe their previous successes as learners and convey a vision of how they will flourish and develop as learners and individuals. The application letter is a particular type of narrative genre since it serves the purpose of obtaining a position as a learner. Students tend to highlight their most positive LIP experiences that they successfully have managed to reproduce from situation to situation. Some typical formulations are: «I am a fast learner», «I like to be challenged when I am learning something», «I like to do things that make me learn something new», etc. They both convey how the individuals have been recognized in the past and how they think that they should be and want to be recognized in the future.

As a narrative construction, the LI can be described as a story of oneself as a learner, and as such it contains not only representations of past experiences of learning but also their significance for future learning experiences. Consequently, the LI carries experiences across different timescales and situations. Once a child enters the formal education provided by pre-schools and schools he or she already has a set of generalized meanings about herself as a learner, though they might be intuitive and not easily made conscious. These have been obtained through the learning experiences in informal educational situations, in anything from learning how to use tableware when eating, tying shoes, riding a bike or how to operate a Gameboy. By the time a person reaches higher education, a

long series of experiences in formal and informal educational settings have been accumulated resulting in a set of more or less coherent generalized meanings about herself as a learner, which enable the sense of being one and the same learner over the years though conditions might have changed and with them these meanings. The meanings are generalized in the sense that they are the rough sum total of the accumulated LIP experiences that have left more or less strong impressions. Not all experiences are as important for the construction of the meanings, and because the meanings change over time the value and significance of different experiences can also change over time. This means that a specific learning experience might not seem relevant at the time of experiencing it, but can be part of a meaning at a later time depending on other experiences. Hence, the individual uses these meanings as a resource to mediate the sense making of past and future learning experiences.

Not only does the LI mediate in the past and the future, but also in the present during ongoing participation in learning situations, when the mediation is active in the present and the LI is being negotiated and adjusted to facilitate the construction of a sense of recognition in the present. This is where we speak of the LIP. Accordingly, the LIP is taking place in specific learning activities with specific characteristics and learning objectives that define the activity. As such it is enacted through discursive as well as non-discursive actions. Students are given praise or corrected through direct and overt discursive interventions. The non-discursive actions might be less evident, but are nonetheless influential in the construction of a sense of recognition. Amongst these are encouragements, rebukes or any other type of recognition that is conveyed by the tone of voice, the extension of the interest in statements through follow up questions, the acts of listening and inviting to participate, etc.

The educational situations are full of manifest and hidden acts of recognition. We define acts of recognition as any explicit or implicit actions on the individual's behalf to seek, an provide receive recognition. The identification of these acts is the identification of the social dimension of an identity. Instead of analyzing individual properties such as attitudes, feelings and thoughts, the acts of recognition are the social and explicit reflections of the inner, enacted in action. The writing of the abovementioned application letter is in itself a kind of act of recognition. In an online learning situation, these acts are for example the explicit reference or feed back to others, the explicit intention of participating in multiple spaces (forums, chats), asking if other people agree with one's point of view, etc.

These acts are distinguished from other goal-oriented actions in an activity in that their main objective is, as indicated in the denomination, to achieve some kind of recognition of oneself or an *other*. In the ideal scenario the distribution of the acts of recognition are symmetric and mutual. However, the power relations in a social context often define certain patterns for how these acts should be directed. In a classroom situation the teacher often has a preferential status as provider of recognition. This can and often results in the students' acts of recognition being directed towards the teacher more than towards others.

Because there are many different identity types at stake in the educational situation, the same act of recognition can be relevant to multiple identity types. The process of co-recognition can fail if an act of recognition that is intended for recognition of meanings about oneself as a learner instead results in the construction of other identities, such as gender identity, ethnic, class or even an identity related to a specific subject matter such as mathematics, English or geography. A somewhat gruesome example of this is the teacher of a nurse training program who in a positive tone said to two male students in the class that she was surprised by their responses in an exam. «It made me think men can actually be empathetic». While the exam result should be constructor of the learner and nurse identity, the teacher's act of recognition focused on the gender identity.

Acts of recognition are not necessarily always of a positive nature or intended to supply the individual with positive recognition. Conveying criticism and correction in the least constructive and desirable manner is still an act of recognition. The individual is always being recognized as something. The question is whether the recognition that the individual receives coincides with the recognition that he seeks, and whether this recognition favours the sense making or obstructs it. Equally, what might seem a complete lack of recognition is also an act of recognition. The lack of physical, visual and verbal acknowledgement of someone's presence is indeed an act of recognition, but with obstructive consequences for the construction of meanings about the subject matter as well as himself.

Each time the individual enters a new learning situation the LI is used to mediate the new process of sense making of his participation and the construction of new meanings about himself as a learner. In order to maintain the sense of coherence the individual will take part in acts of recognition that confirm the general sense of recognition as a learner, as reflected in the LI, rather than

challenge it. A motivated person will get engaged in acts of recognition that reinforce previous experiences of being a good learner, whereas the unmotivated person is more likely to do the opposite. The maintenance of this sense of coherence and acknowledgement of the LI can be classified as a higher-level motive that mediates and drives the actions that constitute the acts of recognition in the activity, with the goal of contributing to this maintenance. Because the preservation of the LI works across situations, it will influence the development of the LIP. However, it is crucial to remember that the LIP is where the LI meets and is confronted by the situation: therefore, the acts of recognition that shape the LIP seek to confirm the sense of recognition in the LI, in the given situation, in order to maintain coherence and at the same time facilitate the attribution of meaning to the learning activity. The constant confirmation and challenging of the LI through the LIPs is why it can be said to be constantly re-constructed, though it might appear to remain unchanged.

In this sense, as indicated earlier, learning is truly connected to identity construction; to the construction of the LI, which is indeed shifting, dynamic and under constant reconstruction. However, the reconstruction does not necessarily imply change. It can just as well be a re-construction that strengthens the previously held meanings. We assume that this is more likely to happen when the characteristics of the different learning situations where the individual participated and participates are very similar or not sufficiently different to force a drastic re-construction and enable a possible change in the generalized meanings, i.e. the LI.

Though we are proposing that learner identity should be considered the main functional identity type in educational contexts, evidently there is a complex interaction between it and other identity types. One frequently discussed phenomenon that could be analyzed in terms of the mutual influence and interplay between the learner identity and other identity types is the popular notion that boys and men are superior to girls and women in natural sciences. Obviously, these days this idea is challenged both theoretically and empirically. However, it remains a dominant notion influencing many girls in how they direct their interests at school and later in their choice of profession. Similarly, the social class and ethnic identity of students can influence their interest in higher education. Consequently, the construction of the LI and the LIP are perceived as highly complex processes where the social and the individual interact on multiple levels. However, the suggestion is that making learner identity the point

of attention enables an analytical approach to the interaction between identity and learning. Learner identity as a concept facilitates the use of identity as an analytical tool in the educational context. Moreover, we suggest and hope that the conceptualization offered here, based on two modalities (LI and LIP), can allow and assist the pedagogic work with learner identity construction alongside knowledge construction.

Learner identity – the educational tool of the next generation?

As societies develop, so do the expectations regarding what people need to learn, in what way, how much and for how long. In traditional societies there were phases of going from novice to expert in different fields, through the participation in the so-called communities of practice.

However, the individualized modern societies of today are ruled by another norm. They depend on the intellectual flexibility of their citizens in order to be able to keep up and secure economic and social growth. The model citizen is expected to be a life long learner. The construction of new meanings about different private and professional areas of life depends on the meanings that have been, are being and will be constructed about oneself as a learner. Assuming that making sense and the construction of meanings are two complementary aspects of learning (Coll, 1988) and that learning and a sense of identity are inseparable (Lave & Wenger, 1991), then we need to be able to conceptualize the meanings that are constructed about oneself as a learner. This conceptualization is not only relevant for educational researchers, policy makers and practitioners, but also for the individual learner. We need to provide individuals with a notion that supports their conceptualization of how their actions, emotions, thoughts and motives about themselves in learning situations are interconnected.

If learning is a resource for individual and societal survival, it is surprising that the identity that mediates it is not privileged with more attention. We argue that learner identity is the main mediator of participation in learning situations and as such deserves the special attention of policy makers and practitioners. It allows educational systems to address and understand participation in learning situations, and how individuals become and are learners within and across different situations.

Bruner (1996) identifies the narrative mode of construction as the only way to construct an identity and a place in the surrounding culture, and Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argue that identity does not exist until linguistic and other semiotic practices are applied. As the line of argument above indicates, we suggest that this vision simplifies the conceptualization of the construction of identities. The very basis of learner identity (as well as other forms of identity) construction is participation in learning-oriented activities. Participation requires discursive and non-discursive action, and can be experienced as well as represented before, during and after it occurs. However, Bruner's and Bucholtz and Hall's perspectives bring attention to the fact that unless learner identity is spoken out and talked about it will remain in the educational underground. The educational arenas need to develop and apply methods to bring out the LI narratives and use them as a mediating tool for the growth of individuals as learners and ultimately as participants in their cultures.

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