

Diepstraten, I., Bois-Reymond, M. du & Vinken, H. (2006). Trendsetting Learning Biographies: Concepts of Navigating through Late Modern Life and Learning. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9, 2.

In this article we build a theoretical framework with which to analyse trendsetting learning biographies, i.e. biographies that are prototypical realisations of a cultural script about how young people learn and live in late modernity. In the current debate on lifelong learning in knowledge-based societies learners are interpreted in an economical and psychological sense. Notions from youth, life course, and generation sociology are, however, needed to fully understand trendsetting learning biographies. We selected 14 Dutch younger adults (varying by class and gender) with these biographies, analysed their biographical narrations, and explored the importance of structure and agency in their learning biographies. Their life stories reveal a structured interrelation between an integrated life conception, special forms of social capital, and the key competence of biographicity. We conclude with some thought on the complications of theory building when interpreting learners in a biographical sense.

No conceptual scheme ever exhausts a social reality – and this is why one needs multi-conceptual prisms to show, from different standpoints, the analytical frameworks, and their weights, embedded in any society.
Daniel Bell, 1976.

Introduction

Nothing less than a 'new generation' of learners is announced in contemporary policy and education science discourses.¹ A central assumption is that today's younger generations have new learning needs. Motivations of young generations for school itself are believed to be in decline now more interesting activities outside school are available, especially activities that include high rates of changes and that give participants the impression of being the producer of their own knowledge. These activities conflict with a school setting in which young people have to 'digest' fixed and prescribed knowledge (e.g., EC 2001). The ideas on the needs of this 'new generation' of learners are vague and underdeveloped. The discourse on the need to innovate education and learning in its broadest sense is not. Especially since the Lisbon Agenda has been set in March 2000, policy makers and education scientists engage in positioning education and learning as the ultimate drivers of making Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy of the world. The central idea is that economic modernization demands a different view on education and learning. Higher qualified personnel, destandardisation of labour, flexibilisation of work relationships, decreasing importance of work at specific times and places and of work in specific life stages only, all these developments boost the necessity to develop and maintain specific skills throughout the whole lifespan, especially so skills and competences to adapt to constantly changing labour market developments (see Ester et al. 2004, Bradley & Van Hoof 2005). Lifelong and lifebroad learning are seen as key factors to ensure that as many people as possible can participate in the process of making and keeping the European economy most competitive. There is some attention for the non-economic value of education (e.g., its function of social integration), but this attention is less explicitly translated into policies (López Blasco 2003). The changing needs of learners themselves are mentioned, if not simply taken for granted in these discourses, but do not seem to be the dominant issue. The economic relevance or 'human capital' and qualification function of education is the dominant issue. At

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best the learner itself, as we will more extensively discuss in the next paragraph, is presented as a purely individual entity subject to learning psychological processes and depending on micro contexts and personal characteristics that, taken together, bring the learner more or less educational success. While the lifelong learning debate 'economizes' learners, learning psychology 'psychologizes' learners.

There is another relevant discourse, beside the one on education innovation, that strongly impacts contemporary notions on learning needs of 'a new generation'. This discourse is based in youth and life course sociology. Learning in this discourse is an integrated part of the concept of the biography: a lifestory in which learning experiences from all life domains and life phases are integrated and attain meaning. Learning in the sense of self-reflection at the same time is the prerequisite to construct one's own biography. Moreover, learning is seen from the perspective of the learner and its responses to and co-production of societal developments and demands. The process of learning and attribution of meaning is ultimately a social process. External factors, such as institutions, social positions, the social networks and previous experiences in the life course (the so-called endogeneous structuring of or path dependency in the life course), structure the possibilities and impossibilities in this process (see, e.g., Alheit & Dausien 2002; Heinz & Krüger 2001). Looking at learners in late modernity necessitates a biographical stance and with it a 'sociologization' of learners.

This article aims to build a theoretical framework combining the education innovation and the youth and life course sociology discourse. Such a framework is needed if we aim to understand and analyse the key factors of trendsetting learning biographies, i.e. biographies that are prototypical realisations of a new cultural script about how young people learn and live in late modernity. The next paragraph presents two schemes that summarize the idealtypical scripts of those discourses. Late 2004 and early 2005 the first author of this article has conducted a series of biographical interviews with expected trendsetter learners. On the basis of the schemes 14 respondents were found by applying a 'snowball method' and theoretical sampling taking account of variations in social class and gender. In-depth biographical interviews allow for thorough assessments of the relevance and content of our key theoretical concepts in late modern learning trajectories and of both structural and subjective dimensions of these trajectories. We will present main findings of these interviews focusing on the structure of learning trajectories and on the meaning attributed to learning trajectories. The final and concluding paragraph summarizes commonly shared key factors for trendsetting learning biographies related to structure and agency aspects.

Innovation and Individualisation

At least two perspectives are relevant for addressing trendsetting learning biographies: the policy-oriented education innovation discourse and the youth and life course sociology discourse. Here we will present a concise overview of these discourses in order to more precisely grasp the main concepts and expectations of trendsetting learning biographies.

Scheme 1 elaborates on the education innovation discourse which is aimed at typifying the so-called 'late modern learner' in the knowledge-based society.² Key assumption is that education-as-is should fundamentally change in order to attain maximal societal returns of education and to align with highly individual needs of learners. The 'new educational order' (Field 2000; see also Bransford et al. 2000, Vorhaus 2002) will, in summary, have to produce individuals who attain higher

² This scheme and the other are based on an extensive literature review. In this article we have to be brief and highlight only a selection of published sources from this review, i.e., sources that are most typical for the concepts and expectations in the discourses.

educational levels and who are able to individually deal with newly emerging knowledge from whatever source and whenever necessary.

Scheme 1 about here

Emphases are put on longer formal school careers, extending learning beyond the youth phase (i.e., lifelong learning, see, e.g., Tuijnman & Boström 2002), learning in non-school contexts (EC 2001, IARD 2001), and combining learning from formal, non-formal and informal contexts (Colley et al. 2003).³ Moreover, learners should develop new types of competences. Today it is about combining different types of knowledge, creativity and 'implicit' knowledge that people already have hidden in them (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). Knowledge itself seems less relevant than the competence to integrate explicit and implicit knowledge, insights, skills, and the attitude to strive for learning and achievement based on personal characteristics such as creativity and talent. So, 'soft skills' are necessary that mimic more generalized, durable (but flexible) personal competences, that not per se relate to a specific subject or profession, but more to identity issues. Today, coalitions of experts and non-experts (Gibbons et al. 1994) form 'learning communities' or 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1998) and create knowledge that directly relate to practice and its users: learning by participating, by studying sources, by talking with others and by reflection is what is called for. Experts are coaches who introduce and initiate the learner into a new community, make 'tacit knowledge' more explicit and see to it that the learner grows from the periphery to the core of the learning community. ICT's are extremely relevant in this respect as they may represent a virtual community of practice, also build on non-linear knowledge creation, inherently have a 'trial and error' logic, and allow for the establishment of an individually relevant coherent whole (e.g., Hargreaves 2003). The basic elements of learning, it is argued, are the self-regulated character of sampling and processing and the focus on meaning, understanding, and reflection on the relationship between one's personal learning conceptions and learning behaviours necessary to promote self-regulation (see Klatter 2003 for a review).

These personal learning conceptions are not clearly defined and may include all kinds of opinions on learning strategies, situations, instruction types etc. Basic element is that these conceptions are highly subjective and allow individuals to build and interpret knowledge on their own grounds (see e.g. Boekaerts & Simons 1995). The dominant constructivist approach in this discourse also highlights the element of personal change while learning. Learning thus is the competence to attain and give meaning to knowledge as an individual and as a part of one's self-concept. Diversity in learning (mostly in formal settings) is predominantly explained by emphasizing the impact of personality traits (the 'Big Five'; see e.g. Backx 2001). In another strand of studies social interaction is relevant, but only as a process that underlies the development of individual behavioural control mechanisms (e.g., internal and external locus of control, coping with stress, focusing on translating plans into concrete action, gaining and maintaining self esteem and motivation; see Boekaerts & Simons 1995 for a review).

There is little attention to social features and social forces which impact on education and learning in late modern knowledge societies. It is here that the youth and life course sociology debate comes in. It focuses on the importance of learning for the individual learner as an integrated part of one's biography. This is crucial as learners are not likely to only (if at all) perceive their own learning from either the

³ Lankhuizen (2002) argues that there are little theoretical or empirical arguments to assume that non-formal learning has compensating effects on labour market participation (compensation hypothesis). High engagement levels in all types of learning are important (interdependency hypothesis) with still the strongest relevance of formal learning.

perspective of the Lisbon Agenda (the macro or economical perspective) or their personal learning conceptions, but are also (if not more) likely to perceive learning from the perspective of the on-going construction of their own life story. We will therefore take a closer look at the discourse of youth and life course sociology on the 'biographical self-determinator' script, a script that closely relates to the individualisation thesis.⁴ Scheme 2 summarizes the results of our literature review.

Scheme 2 about here

The prolongation and individualisation of the youth phase form a starting point in this discourse. These developments are seen as structuring principles of contemporary life courses that, seen from the perspective of youth, bring new demands and opportunities and, most importantly, create ambivalence and risks (e.g., Furlong & Cartmel 2003, Walther et al. 2002, 2006). Learning is increasingly important to survive in a knowledge-based society, but at the same time the predictive power of formal learning and the schooling period itself decreases over the life course. Formal learning is no guarantee for a favourable position in a labour market that emphasizes flexibility, employability, and other competences with which to 'sell' one's human capital. Also, in line with the dominant self-regulation paradigm in learning institutions, the individual responsibility of the learner for his/her own learning (and for making the right and wrong choices) has increased (Voß 2000). Furthermore, the youth domain outside school becomes subject to the logic of the transition regime of education and the labour market (e.g., leisure time as learning time; Mørch 2003, Zeijl 2001). Learning destandardizes with young people more selectively choosing how, where and when they want to learn (Fölling-Albers 2000). School develops to just one part of the learning palette, a part that given its pedagogic regime and 'schooltype' knowledge increasingly conflicts with the paradigm of biographical self-regulation and of being the producer, in coalition with one's peers, of one's own knowledge (e.g., Williamson & Cullingford 2003). The status of peer networks as a learning context gains impetus (Du Bois-Reymond et al. 2001). Learning thus aligns more and more with living itself. Learning (and living) competences now seem to refer more to personal or identity capital (Coté 2002). The own biography becomes the central focus of living and learning and the key questions are those on who one wants to become and what choices (in any domain) contribute to becoming one's true self (Vinken 2004). With this any harsh separation of youth and adulthood or any age-related 'phase-thinking' turns obsolete (Kohli 1985; Plug et al. 2003). The predictability of biographies, moreover, might well be crumbling now that choices are regarded provisional and reversible (Du Bois-Reymond 1998).

In the youth and life course sociology discourse there is a precarious balance between the forces of agency and structure explaining the above mentioned trends. Structural forces are strong and multitude (see e.g., Furlong & Cartmel 1997, Heinz & Krüger 2001). The idealtype of the biographical self-determinator in the youth and life course sociology discourse is, according to the dominant cultural script, the desirable one while those engaged in (traditional) transition and normal biographical oriented trajectories are at high risk. Those who succeed in learning outside school and labour market contexts and who do not follow the institutional logic of transitions, but the logic of their own biographical project are the probable winners in knowledge societies. Males (as a result of gender specific leisure activities and extended and project oriented networks), those from families affluent in terms of cultural and economic capital, those having experienced a negotiation-style upbringing, and those living in a more cosmopolitan local surroundings seem

⁴ For the sake of brevity we perceive this as one discourse. In reality there are many discourses within youth and life course sociology studying different fields and aspects from different disciplines.

to have a headstart (e.g., Wyn & White 1997, Hopf 2003). Individualisation however means that the determining power of social categories (class, gender etc.) and locality diminishes. The relative impact of previous biographical choices (path dependency of the life course) and of significant others increases (e.g., choices of intimate partners; Mayer 2000) and agency becomes more important. Many agency concepts are proposed such as the personal competence of 'biographicity' (reflexivity to test and monitor choices on their identity satisfying power; Alheit 1995), coping strategies such as 'active individualization' (strategic approaches to personal growth; Coté 2002), networking abilities (Walther et al. 2005), remaining open to present respectively truly live a reflexive and flexible lifestory respectively lifestyle (Giddens 1991, Alheit 1994).

Structure of learning trajectories

Let us, first of all, introduce our trendsetter learners by looking at their current and original social characteristics. The oldest respondent is born in 1962, the youngest in 1980; most respondents were between 32 and 38 of age when we interviewed them in the course of 2004/5. We have a balanced group of seven female and seven male respondents. There is also a balance in respondents from lower and higher social strata. Most of them have attained higher shares of cultural capital compared to their parent milieux⁵. This is not always the case in terms of economic capital, but wanting to realize different life courses from their parents is a key consideration for all of them. Only female respondents reflected explicitly on gender positions. Apparently at a very early age they rejected a future of becoming a housewife, seeing children as an ultimate fulfillment, and regarding work as a second-order matter. Besides this social and gender disembedding, we witness local disembedding. Many have grown up in smaller towns and already felt attracted to 'big city' life when they were still pupils. All indeed left for the 'big city' (except the two who already lived there), usually when going to college or university. All work, totally different from their parents, in the 'creative sector' as a freelance text writer, photographer, website consultant, image researcher, trendwatcher magazine editor and/or vj-event organizer.⁶ What kind of learning trajectories have led to their current characteristics?

First look to *factual formal education*. Up to secondary education there is no news. All respondents neatly and successfully follow the prescribed paths of primary education (some with expat parents abroad). Trajectories begin to divert in secondary education: one cluster takes a regular pre-university track or higher secondary education route, another cluster stacks different supplementary steps on their way to higher levels of secondary education, a third cluster is truly non-regular in its downgrading from higher to lower secondary education levels or failed attempts to ultimately attain more higher levels later. Very remarkable or very destandardized trajectories are absent at this point. After secondary education trajectories divert more. All follow at least several years higher education.⁷ Some follow university education on a regular basis with no switches (especially people from lower social backgrounds), others aim to comply with institutional logic but quit (males), and finally, some (especially women from modal or higher social backgrounds) see higher education as a 'quest' switching from one to the other

⁵ One female and two male respondents from the highest social background have less cultural capital compared to their parents. In more than one respect they divert from the other respondents. They served as contrast cases (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

⁶ These are of course provisional indications of their work only. Many make different cross-overs between these professions or switch from one to another in the course of their life. Only the three contrast cases are not self employed and two of them work in the service instead of creative sector.

⁷ Except for two of the three contrast cases.

type of study, some of whom do in the end find a study programme that they finalize with graduation.

Organized *leisure life* is rather unspectacular and also seemed less of an item to our respondents (they did not mention this domain spontaneously when thinking of learning). Respondents are no prototypes of people indulging in a large number of divergent organized activities. Female respondents have a somewhat more varied pattern in their childhood years, but also a more capricious one, changing more often from one choice of hobbies, sportsclub, music class to another. At secondary school many men remain at sportsclubs, most women disengage altogether. There are no real social class cleavages. Non-organized leisure life was harder to pin down. It is more varied usually featuring activities that entail 'going for an adventure' and doing things with friends (at street-level, or going-out). Except for reading (which is done less by lower class background respondents) none of the respondents engage in 'canonized' high culture (going to theatre, e.g.). They all do, however, take pictures, write stories, tinker and make music to an almost extreme level at a secondary school age and they relate these activities directly to the creative process of working out and devising something by themselves that characterizes their later work. Women divert from the stereotype in disliking typical 'girl-things'. Men almost proudly mention typical 'boy-things' (e.g., playing in a band) and later in youth seem to focus monomaniacally on 'living their passion' (and aiming for success with it). Women do not mention this, on the contrary, they admit to follow the flow of the moment, to 'just do fun things' without having a moment of thought on developing specific interests. Local references are important. A surrounding that does not really stimulate (with 'movies that are weeks old') versus an experience-rich expat-environment in a very big foreign city makes an enormous difference. Later in life, during college years, when all live in a bigger city and many engage extremely actively in non-organized (youth) cultural activities (such as going out, going to the movies and concerts, but also organizing stage performances and debates) we see two clusters: those who relate their activities to the college/university environment (e.g., making student news papers, volunteering, organizing projects and stage events) with which the studies themselves foremostly seem to legitimize the exploration of a 'passion' (a word that was very frequently mentioned); in contrast to those who (like the previous one cutting across social background and gender divides) explore youth cultural activities unattached from student life, activities that signal later work trajectories (e.g., while going-out picking up new social networks and creative ideas).⁸

In terms of *work trajectories* we see two big blocks of respondents. First those who abandon education before graduation and who make a living from youth cultural experiences. In this block we may perceive different routes. Some start so many projects that take so much time and effort and yield so much rewards that studying is obsolete: they stop. After failing to finalize a study others create work related to their night-life circles (after which they pick a study related to this work, which they again do not finalize).⁹ The second block finalized schooling and in their youth years do side-jobs that require few skills and start projects in line with their youth cultural activities. This group goes different ways after their studies. In line with the subject of study they start to work without much radical changes but closely aligning with their 'passion'. Some do the same in terms of starting work in line with their studies, but more sooner than later find out that this is not what they want, they take up another study and make use of their non-formal learning capital and start a fully satisfactory working live. Finally, some start a working trajectory that is not in line with their studies, but is more part of the (youth) cultural

⁸ The three contrast cases are relatively non-entrepreneurial in their leisure life and just do little.

⁹ The contrast cases are truly fed up with school and end up in a low skilled job, much to their own dislike as after some years they feel to be underperforming.

activities they developed outside their studies. All and all, the working trajectories are typically destandardized, non-linear, and full of frequent changes, usually not aimed at growing in some or the other direction, but aimed at experiencing different types of jobs, more precisely, types of projects. Of course, the work they almost all do requires them to make cross-overs between disciplines, methods, and media, making change an inherent part of their working life. We do note that those with the lowest social backgrounds are more likely to develop and focus on a specific route and change less.

Although from a homogeneous, not per se 'rich' social environment, all develop a very heterogeneous *network*.¹⁰ A multitude of peer groups (also outside school) and, importantly, adults outside the family are central in the network of the youth years. Almost all do not regard themselves part of a specific youth cultural clique (with specific appearances, symbols, and youth centrist attitudes). Moving to the 'big city' calls for action: they invest heavily in building informal, partly overlapping, loose scenes (Wuthnow, 1998). These scenes are heterogeneous in terms of social and regional origin of the participants and in terms of activities (usually night-life, leisure and/or job related). In two ways they also provide easy exit opportunities. For those of less rich social origins they are a chance to experience another world (cf. dis- and re-embedding notions; Giddens, 1991), and for participants in these networks they yield ways to engage in 'network-hopping' whenever one feels like doing so ('real' and stable friendships are mentioned by only few respondents; most have temporary, work-related connections). Adults are part of these weak-tie networks, be it in the periphery, as long as they can, likewise to peers, be perceived as 'soul mates', people who share a certain life view and lifestyle with them. Indeed, seemingly in contrast to the heterogeneity of the networks is that, as years pass, respondents converge in terms of lifestyle and life views. This convergence is part of the next paragraph in which the attributed meaning to learning trajectories, also those related to this crucial social factor of network and networking, are described.

Meaning given to learning experiences

We focus on our respondents' experience of learning trajectories inside and outside school, of learning outcomes, ways of learning and the importance of their social network, topics that cut across the interviews from start to finish.¹¹

While noting that men had difficulties recollecting their *experiences of formal learning* from childhood onwards, we may still observe three main strands: all perceived primary and secondary school as 'something you just went along with' (an instrumental orientation), as primarily a pleasant sociable period in which engaging with peers was the key theme (social orientation), and, as regards primary school only, a period in which it was 'fun' to learn something (developmental orientation). In secondary school their attention was only drawn when 'remarkable teachers' displayed a large share of passion and made them feel part of the teacher's world of experience. In general, school and the subjects itself are regarded meaningless, rather unchallenging, and unfit to explore creativity, solving complex problems, or pursue reallife projects. Some, as a compensation, created these activities and projects at school by themselves, most did so outside school (see the leisure section in the previous paragraph).

¹⁰ The network of the contrast cases is either local, family centered and one-sided (the horeca sector) or of an anti-school and anti-societal youth cultural nature that kept them from investing in learning trajectories. Later they develop a partner centred network.

¹¹ In the interviews these topics and in general the issue of structure and meaning of learning trajectories were mentioned by the respondents at various mixed moments. It is only for analytical reasons that we disentangle them here.

Their college and university time is a separate issue. In general it is seen as a period of 'agency'. Studying allowed them to postpone definite choices i.e. the traditional transition from late youth to (young) adulthood (instrumental orientation), but our trendsetter learners indicated no desire to think in phases at all or to reflect on 'later' when making their higher education choices. Their choices are typical for their life view: general and broad studies that allowed for cross-overs between disciplines and methods and that did not prepare them for one single expert job or specialism.¹² 'Getting ahead' was an additional consideration for the lower class background learners. Social meaning of higher education (social orientation) is in every narrative, while for half the group higher education is there to feed them in intellectual and creative terms (developmental orientation). The developmental orientated respondents with clear beforehand views of their own 'passions' are those with a clearcut, fast track in an educational program that fits these passions. The other developmental orientated respondents, women only, did not first define these passions but are those with 'switch trajectories' seeking routes that fit their 'inner core'. Striking is that the developmental orientated drop out as soon as they find satisfaction on these terms outside higher education. The less developmental orientated respondents are those who follow the most regular educational trajectories.

Inside school, *learning strategies* delineated along the lines of on the one hand those with an instrumental and social orientation and on the other hand those with a more developmental orientation. The former gave just that much last moment effort in studying to make the required jumps ahead. The latter report continuous strong efforts to really try to excel. None of both strategies, however, predict school or study success or failure in our group of learners. Outside school, learning strategies of all respondents are self-regulated, reflexive, focused at depth, understanding and meaning. Dominant is learning by doing: to immerse in something, to just try it, to go for it, observe, imitate, explore, and if necessary change environments. Also learning from sources (searching new media), from reflection and analysis (e.g., to quickly map things), and from people (listening sharply, querying experts, and focusing on anyone who can compensate some lack of knowledge). Learning strategies do not vary along social or gender lines.

In terms of formal *learning outcomes* our respondents mostly only refer to their higher education period. Only those with a somewhat developmental orientation mention a number of different outcomes (those with an instrumental respectively social orientation just shortly mention that they learned something useful for their later work respectively learned something they were able to use in a group): learning things that enable one to communicate with some expertise and to synthesize distinctive real-life issues, learning a special way of viewing the reality on which they still can build today, learning that passion and a go-getter mentality for a subject or trade are crucial, and learning to explore affinities. Learning outcomes in the side-job and leisure domain are two-dimensional: they first of all learned what work not to do and with what kind of people not to work with (cf. the soulmates criterion mentioned above) and they secondly learned from passionate others (adults and peers) that passion was the key desirable for later life as well as aiming for a high-quality and unique product or project that signals this passion. This 'flow'-type of experience is the sought-after experience, now and for the future (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). In the leisure domain, later flowing over in the work domain, this experience is strongly related to outcomes such as building self-esteem, trusting one's self to explore the unknown, and integrating a lifeview and lifestyle. All and all, the learning outcomes have a soft skill and biographical nature. We do not note any variation by social class or gender or even by those who failed

¹² Except for the two male contrast cases, thinking more in traditional transitions and seeing study as a way to get a proper job.

or succeeded in finalizing a full school career. Apparently trendsetter learners with or without a diploma learn something outside school that they can 'cash' in later life.

How about, finally, the meaning of their *social network*? Referring to the majority it is clear that 'remarkable' adults played a key role in the early stages of learning life. In the youth years these were adults that represented a more attractive lifestyle, a more exciting life, than they knew from their parent milieux. In the side-job and study period these were 'passionate' adults directing them in their study, work and lifestyle choices, also in that period they (and especially so the lower class origin respondents) experienced true 'mentors' who were consulted in decision-making, who acknowledged their talents, supported their quest to live their passions and opened doors for their future career. Age contemporaries are important for collectively exploring activities. When younger (up until higher education) friendships were temporary and interchangeable, part of not per se anti-school, explicitly youth cultural or gang-type cliques, but more of the alternative, creative, societal critique group type. In these groups they were solists. They had friends, but at the same time had the strong feeling of not truly belonging to a specific group. In these groups they also wittingly emphasized their autonomous position although, as they report, they could very well adapt to any group they encountered. Lower status origin youth recall the importance of friends from higher milieux (encountered when they moved up in secondary school levels) bringing them into previously unknown worlds. All characterize their network as a network of soulmates who provide them a feeling of identity and with whom they test ideas, reflect on choices, and re-affirm that the course they are going is the right course. That is the course of following their 'inner core', avoiding to conform to expectations related to social origin or standard biographical paths, and going for a unique contribution that is their responsibility and is also truly theirs (relates to their 'inner core') and that yields independence. Learning in this sense is a co-figurative issue 'par excellence'. They are only able to learn this because of interaction with their 'allies'. With them they share successes, exchange information and support, and prepare next steps to other networks of new soulmates who might provide them with work, information and support. Those who (want to) settle down are soon disappearing from the network (including former intimate partners who stressed settling too much) as are those with whom the soulmate 'chemistry' is crumbling. In order to be able to engage in this process they also need an environment that is heterogeneous by definition and entails a minimum quantity of distinctive scenes: the bigger city. Its more comprehensive, weak tie, loose relationship networks feed on their strategy to 'place themselves in a network of opportunities'. Co-occurrence, new unplanned, unexpected experiences and changes are possible without having to sacrifice independence. Furthermore, the networks prevent them to engage in longterm formal commitments (in work organizations, in intimate relationships, or in having children; though some of the respondents saw having children as 'an interesting project') that have the danger to settle them down. Again, as regards networks, structural variation in terms of social class or gender are not observed. There is a slight tendency, however, for women to stress the support potential of a network as opposed to men who emphasize networks more as an information source.¹³

Conclusions

Before going back to our theoretical starting point, we conclude here with the key factors in relation to structure and agency. *Key factors* are flexible, constructivist

¹³ Not only their network itself is smaller and more homogeneous, but the contrast cases also contribute less meaning to their network and do not experience a lot of information and support potential of their network.

(especially self-regulated and reflexive processing), outside school learning strategies as well as the creation of youth cultural learning capital (making cross-overs between pop culture, media, commerce, etc., with inspiring others). The key biographical orientations are directed at lifelong (and lifebroad) learning framed as a permanent exploration of authentic challenges without an end goal or longterm planning but with a strong link to definitions of who they are and want to become. These key factors are developed in cosmopolitan weak-tie networks that also allow them to capitalize their learning experiences. Structure and agency play a subtle role.

Let us, as a start, elaborate on *structural factors* arising from the historic, social and local contexts. At first sight the 1990s-period with its economic upswing and the new economy boom (or 'bubble') seems a major condition for trendsetting learning biographies. It is in some sense. It gave them the opportunity to be the first to engage in non-institutionalised niches but as time went by highly regarded professions. Still, trendsetting learning biographies seem more than a temporary, economic growth issue: the oldest respondents entered the labour market when economic crises loomed that formed an important reason to start working on their own projects. All do realize that times today are harder making it more difficult, risky and stressful to cling to these kinds of trajectories and orientations. They also note that options in the 1980s and 1990s were perhaps more diverse than they are today and with this they refer directly to the longer, more obligation-free and less structured post-secondary school period of their own youth period. The institutional context, in this case related to high-level education, of an individualized knowledge-based society granted them the exploration of new, creative, and knowledge extensive professions. More in particular to combine creativity and 'being alternative' with commercial activities (e.g., in the information technology sector). Not thinking in 'either-or', but in 'and-and' possibilities, mixing styles, art and commerce, high and low culture, sustainability and business, etc., is regarded typical for their own generation, as is working as a freelancer or as a small-sized (if not, single person) network company.¹⁴ Social characteristics have a subtle impact. They seem rather vivid up until post-secondary school trajectories, both in- and outside school. Social milieux and gender determine much of the diverse schooling and leisure paths taken up until post-secondary schooling. Yet when lower class trendsetters enter higher secondary school they meet very different peers and 'remarkable' adults not common in their milieux of origin and this allows them to acquire non-typical forms of learning capital. Still, after secondary school it are those from lower backgrounds who opt for more conventional and more focused trajectories and display more perseverance to get the most out of these trajectories. Women more than men, furthermore, experiment within the system of higher education and/or go in and out of it more often. Men make one choice, finish what they have started or quit all together to experiment outside school. In both cases the lower origin and female trendsetters directly use the system to extricate themselves of the stereotypically outlined milieux and gender routes and with it aim to gain biographical control. The education institution is endured as long as it has biographical relevance and yields benefits for the quest to shape one's own authentic life project: a subtle interaction of the structural forces of education and a clear-cut agency element indicating the response to perceived individual behavioural options. This line of thought applies to the social networks of trendsetting learners as well: growing up in a heterogeneous environment coincides

¹⁴ They display receptiveness for generation perspectives by addressing societal context of their trajectories and referring to a distinctive biographical orientation (the previously mentioned 'mix', and-and or bicolage approach). They regard themselves a learning and work-related elite sharing a similar life concept and lifestyle more than a generation unit in Mannheimian meaning that is a collective in an ideological or political sense.

with more, very helpful loose and weak tie relationships later in life. For them and for those deprived of these environments in youth it still is necessary to move to a cosmopolitan urban environment, but also to actively engage in different networks of soulmates using the information (men) and support (women) potential of these networks. Again, an example of strong interactions between structural and agency powers.

Agency is in itself recognizable in the coping strategies of trendsetter learners: avoiding and parting from environments (e.g., work organizations) that endanger their autonomy. They do not aim to change their biographical orientations or to bring the environment in line with their orientations; they just, sometimes abruptly, change from environment. This type of active self-determination is however not part of a big and detailed future plan with well-defined goals that have to be attained step by step. Much more they decide step by step making sure not to become subject to other people's decisions. This strategy is central to bridge the development of an integrated self- and lifeconcept and the actual process of living this concept. This is a fine example of biographicity: the ability to draw a positively defined biographical line from lived experiences to new and upcoming ones and monitoring the fit of what they (will) do with their 'most inner core'. Again, this is not a personal, psychological issue. When addressing their learning biography they explicitly recognize the value of interdependency, of being part of loose and heterogeneous networks that enable them to develop and maintain biographicity.

Back to the two idealtypical schemes of the two discourses that formed our theoretical starting point. Many notions of these discourses can be traced back to the statements of our respondents. But the two discourses are also wrong about some necessary elements of trendsetting learning biographies. They also missed a few prerequisites. In the education innovation discourse the importance of school, at least primary and secondary school, is overrated. Trendsetters underwent school and did not display any intent to interpret their schooling career in ambitious and desirable terms (e.g., desiring constructivist learning strategies at school). The relationship between a specific learning attitude (developmental) and school success is not found; contrastingly, those with such an attitude reported to have more trouble at school. The relevance of non-formal or organized outside school learning was close to nil. They displayed the desired learning attitude (and behaviours) in the informal, non-organized domain which, also contrasting the expectations, was not per se fuelled by the emergence of ICT's. The learning capital attained in this domain was more important than and sometimes (when 'passions' were at stake) even a compensation for the attained level of education (the diploma) when they succeed in cashing this capital in a heterogeneous, informal network. The latter point is missed completely in this discourse with its emphases on formal 'communities of practice'. Finally, planning and strictly future focused action were not part of the learning strategies.

The youth and life course sociology discourse is off target too in some respects. We do not witness a radical individualization of life courses, at least not up to the higher education ages. Institutional forces and logic are traditionally powerful in the paths taken in primary and secondary school and in the leisure domain leaving clear and sometimes subtle milieux and gender traces behind. Geographical disembeddedness as a result of ICT's is a myth too. Reallife networks in a cosmopolitan setting are a key factor in trendsetting learning biographies (a point missed by both discourses). The life courses in total have a destandardized character, but as far as schooling trajectories go there is hardly any strong evidence for this. There is more variation in higher education trajectories, but this seems related to the pragmatic, perhaps even utilitarian use trendsetters make of the institution: it is part of their lives as long as it is biographically relevant. Also: age is not an issue in the relationships trendsetters build, lifestyle is. They

furthermore do learn from adults and not just from peers, just as long either adults or peers show they have a passion and relate to them as equals and informally.

What both discourses miss and what at the same time relates to the main difficulties in addressing trendsetting learning biographies is the crucial importance of networks in a cosmopolitan environment. Especially how they manage to navigate through life using their networks to not just survive in a 'risk society', but also to construct tangible creative products with which they aim to make a positive contribution to this society, is something that is absolutely missed in both discourses. Network and social capital theory as well as urban studies and contemporary work career studies were found to be most useful in interpreting trendsetting learning biographies. With the convergence of learning and life itself in trendsetting learning biographies, building theory becomes more and more complicated (see motto at the begin). Concepts and expectations, but also findings and established myths from an increasingly large number of disciplinary domains of science have to be included in order to understand these biographies.

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Scheme 1

Ideal type of the 'late modern learner' in the education innovation discourse of the knowledge-based society	
Concepts	Expectations
<i>Trajectory</i>	
School career: total of school trajectories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long
Learning career: total of school and outer-school learning trajectories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varied and individualised • Lifelong • Life-'broad': connecting and stacking of formal, non-formal and, to a lesser extent, informal learning capital; interdependency instead of compensation is regarded more plausible
<i>Learning outcomes</i>	
Educational level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High
Type of competences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally typified as 'soft skills' that relate to personal rather than to subject specific competences • Learning becomes more synonym to identity and lifecourse
<i>Learning activities / behaviour</i>	
Information collection strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying varied, situation-specific strategies: learning by doing, reading sources, talking to others, combining previously acquired information • In 'authentic' learning contexts functioning as learning communities with co-construction and master-pupil arrangements • ICT yields learning by browsing/zapping, exploring, and combining (bricolage)
Information processing strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-regulated approach and processing aimed at understanding and attributing meaning, • Reflection on own learning concept and learning behaviour
<i>Opinions on learning</i>	
Learning conception: integrated opinions on different aspects of learning (which aspects varies in each study)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constructivist: perceiving learning as understanding, seeing things differently, changing as a person: perceiving learning as the development of the competence to build and attribute meaning to knowledge by one's self as a part of one's self-concept • Perceiving learning as a lifelong and life-'broad' process
It is argued that the above dimensions in learning are influenced by the next features	
<i>Personal characteristics</i>	
'Big Five' personality traits: extraversion, conscientiousness, emotional stability, agreeableness, autonomy / openness to experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomy and extraversion are both most mentioned as contributing to the desired learning opinions, behaviours and/or results • The relationship between personality traits, learning opinions and behaviours probably varies for learning domains
In social interaction developed (and to develop) behavioural control mechanisms: motivation, self-image and self-evaluation, action strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A learning oriented perspective / intrinsic motivation, sufficient self-esteem, attributing success to one's own capacities and failure to controllable factors; applying an adequate coping strategy when obstacles are met • Success guaranteed when ideas are reframed into concrete plans that are executed consistently and amended when necessary
<i>Social characteristics</i>	
Social origin and gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social characteristics lose determining power for school success • Relatively low attention in theoretical discourses

Scheme 2

Ideal type of the 'biographical self-determinator' in the youth and life course sociological discourse of the individualisation thesis	
Concepts	Exceptions
<p><i>Biographical trajectory:</i> Interplay of learning experiences: learning capital sampled in institutionalised contexts and self-organised social networks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Destandardised and riskful trajectory • Formal learning capital developed within school system no longer sufficient • Informal, youth cultural learning capital becomes more relevant both biographically and socially • Increasing tension between formal learning context and young people's self-organised learning contexts and network outside school (informal contexts) • Discussion: foremostly peer or both peer and intergenerational networks?
<p><i>Biographical orientations:</i> Orientations on school, learning, social relationships, work, leisure, future and adulthood</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living = learning = self-organised authentic identity project • Life domains school, learning, work, leisure and social relationships all framed from the perspective of conscious self-development or 'discovering one's inner core' • Hardly any separation of life phases: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth and adulthood have a diffuse, non-age-related meaning • Future life plans perceived as open, reversible and no reference to standard biography
<p><i>Biographical evaluation:</i> Extent of biographical success according to personal experience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive self-evaluation (also when failing) • Sense of self-determination • Absence of comparisons with dominant transition model • Feeling of being socially integrated
<p>It is argued that the above mentioned three biographical facets result from the interaction of 'agency' and 'structure'</p>	
<p><i>Agency</i> Personal competences to be developed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biographicity: competence of biographical reflection, remaining open to change, monitoring explication of one's 'inner core' • 'Coping': being able to respond to change, making the most of given opportunities, creating new opportunities, transforming ideas into actions and having the courage to take risks, recognizing the importance of networks and being able to build and maintain these networks • Reflexive and flexible identity: continuous re-interpretation of one's own life story that is lived through a specific lifestyle
<p><i>Structure</i> Cultural script Institutions Social categorisations Endogeneous structuring Interdependency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Societal potentially successful learning biography according to a late modern script • 'Disembedding' from institutional logic of the transition regime of education and labour market • Discussion: 'disembedding' from social and local contexts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More among men, now also among women? • More from capital rich, now also from less rich social origins? • Negotiation household characteristic for all social origins? • Declining interest of prescribed local surroundings? • Trajectory increasingly dependent on previous steps (path dependency)? • Trajectory more strongly influenced by self chosen (weak?) ties?