

Using personal biographies to consider change and difference in academic practices: A dialogue

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In this chapter, we develop a dialogue around our experiences, illustrating how we each find greater insight into our own views by encountering the views of someone with a different academic heritage. In effect, we jointly engage in a process of ‘world travelling’ (Lugones, 1987) to understand our cultures better. Unable to roam the physical world as the global Covid pandemic necessitated social isolation and encouraged by the retirement of our friend and colleague, Karin Anna Petersen, to look back over our own careers, we set out to understand better how our academic and publishing traditions differ by considering our individual life paths within a changing scholarly environment. The dialogic exchange that follows sits firmly within the qualitative paradigm of life history and biographical narrative research, an area in which we have regularly worked together through our engagement in the ESREA LHBN¹ network.

Biographical-narrative research sets out to listen to the voice of the other, to hear the story that the other wants to tell. This narrative can be monologic but is more commonly dialogic, adopting a conversational style. Life stories are told in whatever way the teller sees fit. It is the researcher who does the work of establishing contextual links to create a life history after the event (Goodson, 2001). In our case, we are both researcher and participant seeking to create both story and history as we engage in this process together. We thereby take our work to a third level, collaboration, involvement in a joint project (Cowan and Arsenault, 2008), albeit on a small-scale. Regardless of level, dialogue is a bona fide style of academic writing. To work in this way, one needs an open mind rather than a strongly held theoretical position: life stories – and viewpoints, too – do not sit neatly within disciplinary boundaries. This process works to its own internal logic and is a methodological approach with a respected pedigree, used for topics that range from globalisation (Fernandez -Kelly and Wolf, 2001) and bilingual educators (Colomer et al., 2015) to self-harm (Stirling and Chandler, 2020), from audit (Pedersen and Phillips, 2019) and agency (Weber, 2015) to friendship (Shelton and McDermott, 2015). As a device this is used to discuss other research

¹ European Society for Research on the Education of Adults, Life History and Biography Network.

methods, too, Indigenous qualitative inquiry (Diversi and Denhawk, 2021), Participatory action research (Benish-Weisman and Torre, 2011), Autoethnography (Kracen and Baird, 2017) and Visual methodologies (Emmel and Clark, 2011). Indeed, in 2019 our colleagues, and leaders of the ESREA LHBN, Professors Linden West and Laura Formenti, won a prestigious American award² for their book, *Transforming Perspectives in Lifelong Learning and Adult Education: A Dialogue*, published by Palgrave Macmillan.

The dialogic device is particularly visible in the *International Review of Qualitative Research*. Its long serving Editor, Norman Denzin (co-editor of the *Sage Handbooks of Qualitative Research*) defended the innovative potential inherent to this paradigm when he proclaimed that “social science will hence forth be done differently” (Denzin, 2009:332). Gildersleeve and Kuntz (2011, 2013) do just this. They choose to explore aspects of human geography dialogically, welcoming this format’s capacity for disjuncture, tentativeness, connectivity, and fissure (2011):

“dialogue operates simultaneously as a means of inquiry, an engaging form of data, and an entwined means of analysis that disrupts normative formations of research as progressively linear. In this way, dialogue brings about the productive death of data-as-object for analysis”. (2013, p.266)

Others use it, as we do, as “a platform – a plaza or open space – for an exchange of ideas” (Abma et al., 2001, p.168), as a means to further understand ourselves and one another, for “dialogue encourages the participants to see things from the perspective of another and can be a resource for critical self-reflection of one’s own point of view” (Harrist and Gelflan, 2005, p.240). Ours is such a reciprocal process.

Most biographical researchers start their texts by exploring their own position. Here, we set out our ideas within a fundamentally but flexible chronological personal framework demarking significant episodes within our parallel life stories, bringing into the narrative account relevant aspects of our lives. At times, to accommodate our differing trajectories, we allow ourselves the authors’ privilege of looking backwards and forwards to better contextualise our ideas and explore them more fully rather than let time become a constraining factor.

² Cyril O. Houle Award presented annually by American Association for Adult and Continuing Education for a book in English that reflects the universal concerns of adult educators.

Our work together has frequently revealed to us our false assumptions about how each other's society functions. One way to see this is as a consequence of Social Democratic and Neoliberal belief systems but we leave such discourse to others (e.g., Fuller, 2018). However, we acknowledge that the incongruity in our educational (academic) practices – teaching, research, writing and publication – often derives from such broader embracing frameworks. On many occasions, we have found differences that challenged the act of working, and especially writing, across professional and cultural borders.

The dialogue unfolds

First encounters with the academy (undergraduate beginnings)

Marianne: Can you recall why you entered university? I can, and for me starting to study at Uni was a change. I started late – at the age of 33. I wanted to go when I left school, but in upper secondary my year group became the first to encounter substantial threshold university entrance restrictions. If your grades were not good enough, you could not enter specific programmes, and mine were not. I had to think of something else, and after a few years of working in different jobs, I simply chose from the possibilities open to me. In my case, it was Civil Engineering which – then – was not taught at a university. It was great fun, led to a well-paid job, and I had many brilliant experiences. However, some were not so good, so I started at the 'real' university when I had the chance. My parents were very proud. Both belonged to a generation and a social class where further education was not an option for everybody. Furthermore, both had wanted to study. Being an Engineer was fine, and to me, they fully accepted my first choice of career. However, the university was indeed a more noble possibility.

At Uni, I started studying Education. Very few, if any, of my fellow students came from an academic background. Many had spent a few years doing unskilled labour or doing something during their gap years, which in Denmark are popular prior to embarking on an Early Years' career. Another group had completed a shorter further education as a social worker or nurse. Karin Anna was one of those but belonged to an older group of students. I met her when I had studied for two years or so, and she was working on her PhD.

Somehow this was a stroke of luck. With my engineering background, I had a good grasp of numbers, statistics and IT. Education was placed in the Faculty of Arts, and numbers were definitely not welcomed. There were other students with similar backgrounds, but we kept our heads down. You did not advertise having a technical background. I remember

clearly a sense of disgust if in class I asked questions related to vocational education. Even using data as materials was not popular with most of the lecturers.

Most students in Education did not continue from the BA to the Master's programme. I started in a group of 60 students but just eight to ten finished. Just a very few – including me – continued to a PhD. But not immediately – we had to work for a couple of years to finance the degree before it was possible to start.

Due to my ability to deal with statistics, I joined a group of students working on their PhDs. In particular, I helped Karin Anna with data related to her research. I enjoyed that and learned a lot. Amongst other tasks, we were encouraged by our professor, Callewaert, to reach an understanding of our research perspective through a so-called socio-analysis, following a practice recommended by the group's primary scholar, Bourdieu, whose work we aimed to understand. He often wrote about making such an analysis in his recommendations on how to undertake research (Bourdieu, 1996). Interestingly, his own socio-analysis was partly well known to students partly hidden. He published a book on this close to his death in 2002 (Bourdieu, 2001).

In this group, there were students from several disciplines within the Faculty of Arts, and other people who were well-read and fluent in French. Callewaert, of course, spoke French due to his Belgian origins and studies in Paris (Petersen and Høyen, 2008). But there were also a few students who had actually worked as translators/interpreters of some of Bourdieu's books which were, of course, written in French. So we read their manuscripts and discussed nuances in the translations. Most of us could not contribute much to these debates, but we felt we were part of a bigger movement, pioneers — especially those students from a nursing background. We also worked with a group in Uppsala around Professor Donald Broady, whose comprehensive introduction to Bourdieu became a valuable source for many students (Broady, 1990).

I wrote my social-analysis as part of my PhD in 2005 (Høyen, 2005). It was invigorating in several ways, personally and academically. It helped me to define what should become my position in the academic world.

Hazel: Reading your story so clearly laid out, I grasped your delayed entry to University for the first time. And your history takes me back to *my* undergraduate years studying Geography in the industrial North, at a university founded as an institute to train clothworkers in the textile industry. In the 1970s, the few English students who went to university mostly did so

immediately after completing ‘A’ levels;³ except aspiring Oxbridge entrants – usually from fee-paying schools – who were coached for an additional term to pass a special entrance exam (an uncontested inequality in the system). Gap years were unheard of, mature entry uncommon. We did have a married woman (maybe in her forties?) enrol in our year, and I recall this ‘privilege’ was deemed ‘exceptional’. Her life experience gave her the confidence to contact the departmental head directly when something upset the student group. What it was escapes me, but I still remember my sense of outrage when this one powerful (but remote) individual patronisingly replied: “that possibly the problem was just a mature student issue”, disrupting my habitual belief that our lecturers cared about us, for the department was, otherwise, a friendly place.

I experienced the northern ‘redbrick’⁴ university where I took my Bachelor’s degree as a place of serious scholarship and felt privileged to be there, inspired by lecturers willing to engage students individually in academic debate. Geography spans the Sciences and Humanities, and it was this diversity of approach, unified through a sense of place that attracted me; even then I liked to make connections to see the bigger picture. The Institute’s original buildings were retained and serve as a permanent reminder of the status awarded to education in the rapidly growing industrial urban areas of Britain just over a century ago. Their imposing architectural style sent powerful messages to us that we students were privileged. The university social facilities were excellent, but we understood that we were there to learn and that success required us to read widely and critically and work independently. Many of the sources we needed were not loanable requiring us to spend study time in the libraries. These were quiet and ponderous, immense dimly lit spaces with drawers of index card catalogues; the books brought up on request from the ‘stacks’ by porters, overseen by librarians who frowned at the slightest noise. Even wearing squeaky shoes or scraping a chair when sitting down drew approbation and whisperers were ‘asked’ to leave! Libraries closed early to mid-evening, requiring students to plan ahead. In them, we were largely expected to navigate the book and journal collections for ourselves, to stand for ages checking one catalogue card after another.

³ Academic qualifications taken by many English 16-18 year olds in final phase of schooling.

⁴ A collective label, applied later, to traditional turn of the 19th century Universities due to the style of their major buildings. With some newer members these are now more commonly referred to as Russell Group, a label that also connotes status.

At that time, only about six per cent of school leavers went to university⁵ (a figure reaching 50% in 2017-18, 56.6% of them women⁶). Staff-to-student ratios were excellent. We were taught in small cohorts, no more than 30 in a year group, by academics who built our course around their different specialisms. This regular direct contact with well-read staff teaching topics they felt passionate about, imbued a sense that we were serious scholars and, I believe, this more than compensated for any imbalance in the curriculum. Our lectures (straight talking, maybe with a few slides for visual subjects) were supplemented with challenging academic discussions in small seminar groups of eight to ten students, tutorials of four to eight, making it very difficult not to learn, or at least appear to do so. Our tutors invited their groups into their own homes once or twice a year for drinks and/or a meal, a 70s version of pastoral care that would be unheard of now.

On my course the gender balance was roughly equal, but in the natural sciences women were few (four in the Chemistry cohort, for example). Although the Sex Discrimination Act was only passed in 1975, female students were encouraged, so this gender bias was more likely a reflection of values in schools and society. Regular fieldwork was important in Geography and these trips beyond the lecture theatre (many for entire days, some residential) brought our studies alive and enabled us to get to know our lecturers well, aware but unfazed by our different status. (Any remaining boundary was breached, when, on a trip abroad, a lecturer quietly asked me to repair his breeches⁷, torn digging soil samples. He couldn't sew and his wife was back in England – the Chemistry class was not the only gendered site! And I had to borrow a needle and thread from our 'mature' student). I loved university, I could reminisce forever!

Still more studying (the art of the possible)

Hazel: On getting my BA, I was invited to undertake postgraduate research in Latin American Geography at the University of Oxford. My lecturer met an Oxford lecturer at a conference, and they decided between them I would be a good research student, so I was simply invited to attend an interview without having to undergo a preliminary formal application process. As post-graduate researchers not tied to a laboratory, we were largely left to plan our own activities, provided that before we entered the hallowed Bodleian Library (as featured in Morse) we signed a document to only write in pencil (ink could be spilled) and

⁵ Hansard 1803-2005, 29 March 1976, University attendance rates, to 1975, Vol 908 c371W.

⁶ Kershaw, A. *The Independent*, 27 September 2019.

⁷ Knee-length trouser commonly worn by walkers for outdoor activities.

“never to kindle a naked flame”; a tradition harking back to an age without electricity. Regrettably, on signing I found that material on my topic was sparse, whether in English or Spanish. Socially we were treated as staff, invited to attend the daily afternoon tea break in the department – a place where both stimulating debate and sophisticated put-downs were commonplace – and ‘summonsed’ if we missed this too often. We were commonly asked to run seminars, even teach small undergraduate groups, by lecturers seeking more research time. This sense of having stepped across from student to academic significantly enhanced my sense of self-worth. And travelling to Mexico (alone) to carry out fieldwork gave me my first real taste of what it is like to live in another culture and find my social and working relationships restricted by my level of linguistic competence. Looking back, it was then that I became a flâneur (Elkin, 2017) but apply that label only retrospectively to my endless exploration of the places I visited. The data collection in archives was daunting, as I had only recently taught myself Spanish: I decided a life that would necessitate spanning two distant continents was not for me.

Once home, I sought a post in publishing, achieving a long-held aspiration. At 23, I confidently criticised the manuscripts of senior academics who submitted poorly written texts, something I would approach with extreme caution now that I work among them. Back then, I was astonished that people in eminent posts might lack fluency and make grammatical errors. I took my work seriously, studied most of the major copy-editing books, and vigorously applied the red pen to their texts, unfazed if they complained. I had progressed from marketing to production to managing editor, a role that made me responsible for all the processes needed to create a successful book, a ‘shaping’ skill I took into my own further academic studies (a teaching qualification, Masters in Education, PhD in Sociology and Humanities in a decade) and later into doctoral supervision where the ability to assist others to shape their work into the form that they – not I – desire, is very useful. I studied part-time while juggling parenting, casual teaching contracts and freelance editing, enjoying a challenging but varied lifestyle. From volunteering in my children’s community playgroups, I built an academic career in step with the extension of the field of Early Years Education⁸, applying my skills and knowledge laterally in an embryonic field to teach – sometimes create – courses that enabled younger women to acquire professional qualifications that I did not hold myself as previously non-existent. Seeking an academic niche, I tried schools (very

⁸ No adequate summary exists, but Clyde Chitty’s chapter 10 in *Education Policy in Britain*, 3/e (2014) at least outlines some of the key changes.

restrictive) and a stint in Further Education (post-compulsory vocational teaching), there establishing a Foundation Degree⁹ that entitled me to enrol as a doctoral student.

Marianne: Like you I found my niche through trial and error. Once in Education, my progression was far from seamless, punctuated at each stage by one or two years in temporary and part-time work while I pursued the next job or scholarship. But I made plans and learned (much against my nature) to contact people who could open doors for me. Like the social workers Muel-Dreyfus (2001) describes – finding a niche was, if not pure coincidence, due to a lucky interplay of changes at university level. I really, really wanted a PhD scholarship. That was actually the reason I first enrolled at university. But at my university, opportunities were very limited. Education received funding for only one student every second or third year, and the places went to people with faculty support. Maybe I had some support, but I was never the first choice, and no one else had a chance. Students with nursing background encountered similar problems.

I persisted, applying for every PhD place that was remotely relevant at every university in Denmark in the years after completing my Master's programme, nine times in total. I had made a promise to myself that if I did not find a PhD position within two years, I would return to engineering. However, I succeeded: one of my many in-between jobs was to evaluate something (I can't even remember what) for the Royal Veterinarian and Agricultural University in Copenhagen. There I met a lecturer, working within the Philosophy of Science, who encouraged me to apply for a PhD with them. To be frank, I think he wanted to be less isolated in disciplinary terms. Ironically, at the same time, I acquired a public foundation award to be used at *my* university. Having had so little support previously, I felt the need to break free, so transferred the scholarship to the Agricultural University.

This was a very different working environment. Not only were all my new colleagues Natural Scientists, but the academic approach was very different. Like all their PhD students, I was encouraged from the outset to take courses in literature searching as writing a literature review was an absolute necessity. Privately I found this odd, coming as I did from an area of Education where we habitually re-interpreted the ideas of other scholars. That way of thinking was irrelevant in the Natural Sciences, only new discoveries were acceptable. Nevertheless, I dutifully completed the few courses that were mandatory for new PhD

⁹ A 'short' degree equivalent to the first two years of a Bachelor's that blended the theory and practice necessary for vocational competence. Established as government initiative to upskill the workforce in careers not requiring graduate entry.

students. A new world opened up for me. Library staff were very humble, saying that they did not know my area but helpfully contacted library colleagues at other institutions. I learned new techniques for finding sources; but also saw that other educational perspectives existed. I sort of knew that already, but during my undergraduate studies, there was little encouragement to pursue new avenues. Moreover, I was free to explore areas that were technological and vocational, unpopular subjects previously deemed to lack validity. Perhaps a bit naïvely, I felt that I was on my own and could pursue anything I wanted, so I did. As nobody knew what I was studying, no-one questioned me about my research in depth. It took me years to address this lack of focus, later in my studies.

The atmosphere was another matter. I worked within a group of fifteen people, one of whom came from Sri Lanka, and hence we communicated in English, not Danish. Several times I heard my colleagues thank him for the chance to practise their English language skills. Also, our group socialised together – parties, a beer on Fridays, all-day and department-wide events. Any occasion was an opportunity to celebrate, a new experience for me as laughter was not common at my former university. Besides, as an agricultural college they were well-connected, so we ate well when we celebrated. In their homes, a gun hanging on the wall was a symbol of their specialist knowledge and skills. Whereas with my background, I was used to books being the cultural currency.

The majority of the lecturers, and the students, too, published their research in articles in English. “Why don't you?” they asked, a bit surprised when I insisted on writing in Danish. I considered doing this for a short while, but to be frank, my English was not good enough. Furthermore, I came from a tradition where almost everybody wrote in Danish, publishing elaborate monographs rather than articles (which we regarded as less academic). Articles were for publishing results, so acceptable within Natural Science and Technology but not within the Arts where space was needed to develop academic arguments and perspectives. There was also the question of where to publish? At that time, I had no contact with academic networks outside of Scandinavia nor societies with their own journal. I, like my contemporaries, wrote our PhD dissertations as books, but lacked the financial support to get them published. This was possible for only a very few. This was one of the reasons we – a small group of people interested in Bourdieu – later set up as publishers ourselves, as Hexis Forlag.

My PhD supervisor was quite clear about language as he mainly published in English and had learned the consequences: “If you want people in Denmark to read your work, write your PhD in Danish. If you want to discuss your stuff internationally, write in English, but do

not expect Danish researchers to pay it any attention.” I was torn – and also a bit jealous of fellow PhD students, who seemed to churn out articles in English at will. I could not and dared not do that!

Hazel: So for both of us, getting where we wanted to be was dependent on connections and our usefulness to them. My offer from Oxford was a version of the very British ‘old boys’ network’ where it is ‘who you know’ that matters more than ‘what you know’, although in my case the network was once removed: it was the academics who knew each other, not me. In your case, it was the lack of faculty support that stopped you getting a doctoral place within Education, but the patronage of the agricultural college lecturer that made a difference.

Becoming academics (doctoracy, lectureships and publication records)

Marianne: After finishing my PhD, I again took on part time jobs in various institutions; at my University and at IBM, teaching office clerks from various companies how to work with Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. Classes at evening schools, too. It was okay but there was absolutely no future in it. Again, I applied my ‘rule’: if nothing decent shows up within a year, I will go back to Engineering. But something did show up: a three-year job at the lowest entry level at another university, I became an Assistant Professor (AP) in Education. After three years an AP role is often made permanent so I was happy and hoped everything would be fine.

But – it wasn’t. Firstly, I apparently wasn’t the candidate they had hoped for (whoever ‘they’ were, as someone must have taken the decision to hire me instead of one of the others). As a result, no one talked to me or paid any interest to what I was doing. Secondly, I was not invited or even informed about team meetings or similar events so felt excluded from what, admittedly, seemed a very tense and hostile working environment. This was totally different from where I came from although academic battles over positions were certainly well-known there, too. However, I found a workspace in an office with a young woman from another discipline within the department, and we got on well.

At the University, a new centre for parallel language use was established across all Arts disciplines. I joined some English courses there as, in my mind, the decision whether to write in Danish or English was still not settled. Colleagues in Education had a much starker understanding of what was at stake – you simply halve your thinking capacity if you cannot communicate in your own language – and that resonated with my experiences. I became increasingly aware that it was not just a matter of language and translation but also a matter

of the cultural understanding the language is embedded in. Danish has lots in common with German and many concepts cannot be translated. For example, the English dichotomy teaching/learning simply did not exist in Danish ('learning' has since been adopted but many still do not make the distinction). Also, Danish has two expressions for experience, one more immediate than the other, and the German word 'Fingerspitzengefühl' appears to me, untranslatable.¹⁰

When my three-year position ended, I was not offered a continuation. University cuts meant a two-year embargo on employing young academics so this may not just have been a consequence of the, apparently, poor fit of my profile. But I left the university disheartened and since then have rarely gone back. And I still had to look for yet another position. Fortunately, a new programme was due to begin at the School of Education of Aarhus University, and I was employed as a teaching assistant to further support students after their 'real' lectures. On several occasions, my academic standard was higher than the lecturers, but hey – they had a permanent position, and I hadn't. That is life, and it does not bother me much. Academic pride is not my style, and I have seen friends and colleagues have breakdowns because of that. Maybe it is my Engineering background? I have always felt secure that this offered a way out – if I needed one.

After three years, I was offered a position in the School of Education. Coming from a university working environment where we were at most fifteen people, there were suddenly more than a hundred. What a relief and what a joy! Now I had colleagues working in various areas of Education, mostly Danish but from abroad, too, especially Germany.

The matter of publishing in English emerged again. I was now tied to new, specific demands for frequent publishing, and preferably internationally. Is that expectation more common now than before? Yes, indeed. I make a distinction between public communication, which is not necessarily valued in academia and tends to be in Danish, and research in English. I love communication, and I put significant effort into mastering this area, lately also through social media. However, as researchers in Denmark we must publish in English and I still do not speak English well enough. My university, like other Danish universities, has a small army of professional linguists to support academics but they are never sufficient.

¹⁰ Hazel: Untranslatable, I checked! Our nearest idiom is to 'have it at your fingertips' as (oversimplifying) the word refers to natural flair. English sources deem it a loanword written more often than spoken, usually in specialist Economics and Business documents. Perhaps to actually say it, risks being considered pretentious. Without a Fingerspitzengefühl for languages, pronunciation, alone, could be challenging.

Even now when I write an article in English, I find citation challenging. English writers seem to draw their support from a range of authors rather than focussing on the works of one or a few key individuals; choose breadth over depth. Peer reviewers for English-language journals commonly ask colleagues to add significantly to their literature reviews. This can be quite an imposition as we have to meticulously read through a pile of recommended literature to find points of relevance when what we want to write about is our own research using the literature that we have studied in depth. This dissonance can seriously inhibit our ability to communicate with the broader academic world, especially as most of our preferred literature may be in languages other than English. We are challenged, too, to write succinctly. Native English speakers like yourself can directly express ideas that colleagues and I may have to spell out carefully to avoid misunderstanding.

Hazel: From my more limited experience of writing official letters (in French) I understand the problem of brevity and think that heavy citation requirements can act as an exclusionary device. It is not a custom that I like. When a subjective interpretation is important, as in our disciplines, this overemphasis on citation suggests distrust of our expertise, forcing us like undergraduates to corroborate every step in our arguments. I suspect the practice has been exacerbated by neoliberal pressures to publish fast and to demonstrate impact, and specifically the Labour party mantras of the later 1990s. Their slogans ‘What works and why’ and ‘What counts is what works’ heralded a turn to ‘evidence-based’ research, particularly in the fields of Health (and Nursing) in a pro-vocational move to raise standards of practice, as is clearly discussed by Wells (2007).

I accept that the settlement of large swathes of the globe as English-speaking nations has given the language a prominence that makes publication easier for native speakers. But it also allows England to remain monolingualistic and I see this as a disadvantage for it contributes to our insularity. But the difficulties in communicating do cut both ways, albeit very unevenly. When I write in English it is not sufficient just to say what I want to say. I have to be aware that the English of global communication is not my native tongue but English as a Lingua Franca, ELF (Ur, 2010). I have to explain the ‘obvious’, to consciously unpack terms that carry multiple meanings, to consider whether concepts travel. Also, simple words can conceal complex ideas from those working between cultures. Remember how I had to explain terms like ‘Further Education’ and ‘working class’ but, conversely, my difficulty with the Danish appendage ‘tøj’ and German ‘zeug’ as (I don’t think) English uses generic suffixes like that. Think, too, when writing this article, the instances where you asked me to clarify matters that to an English ear were already clear. And, also, how our role as co-

editors of the book on discourses¹¹ was a three-year stint, as we worked cooperatively to enable the ideas of our many-langued authors to ‘travel’ across borders.

Turning back to my academic journey, I recognise that here again my trajectory differs from yours as I did my Doctorate part-time, partly when teaching in Further, partly in Higher Education. Developing the Foundation Degree (mentioned previously) presented an opportunity to choose my former adult students as research participants and engage them in open conversational (biographical!) interviews to explore their experiences of education and Childcare work. At last, I had chance to move away from Action Research – the customary methodology on taught Educational courses at that time. I took the notion of knowing the field really seriously – in a way that my current supervisees find difficult when neoliberal practices constantly require them to maintain pace and progress. I claimed the time to think and read in depth and found building my studies into a busy timetable preferable to a full-time studentship – wielding my pencil in the library in isolation had not been my ‘thing’.

As the PhD neared completion, I was able to transfer to the University that validated the Foundation Degree I taught (not easy as the competition for academic posts is high). There, many of the Education lecturers were employed for their teaching or social work experience so my research background gave me some advantage – but also a course leadership that significantly increased workload, reducing my time to research and write. It often seemed that, like the doctoral students, we spent more time applying to do things and reporting on what we did than we actually spent on doing it, a sign of a performative culture according to the eminent critical educator, Stephen Ball (2016). So different to the lecturers of my undergraduate days who taught a few courses in busy semesters; free to pursue individual academic goals the rest of the year.

Once the PhD was mine, I was determined to publish my thesis as a book, as at Oxford I had heard that publishing was the best way to demonstrate the quality of your thesis. Working as an editor, I had read authors’ proposals, seen and worked on their manuscripts, but not published on my own account. I ignored publishers’ guidance to submit material online and instead, identified three or so possibly appropriate Houses and the names and telephone numbers of editor(s). I drafted a generic proposal (publishers’ proformas require very similar information), then telephoned until I made direct contact and could put my case verbally. This paid off, a small but specialised educational publisher agreed to look at my

¹¹ Wright, H.R. & Høyen, M. (2020). (Eds). *Discourses We Live By: Narratives of Social and Educational Endeavour*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

manuscript, provided I re-ordered and partly rewrote my doctoral material. She was very clear that if I wanted to be published, I must be willing to reverse the narrative flow: a thesis presents a doctoral journey, a book requires the findings and important theorisation to come first. How the conclusions were reached comes later, there for those interested enough to carry on reading.

Marianne: That sounds resourceful, but what *are* the possibilities for finding a publisher in England? And do you have anything like our Hexis to turn to instead?

Hazel: London was (and is) a significant publishing centre, but there were always a small number of regional University Presses supporting specialist output. However, for several decades now firms have consolidated, large commercial enterprises buying smaller Houses, reducing historic names to ‘imprint’ status – and this makes actual numbers hard to establish. Profits are key for such commercial firms, so proposals need to be written persuasively and clearly indicate a book’s potential market. However, reacting to this trend and to calls for Open Access, many Universities¹² are now developing their own Presses seeking to better balance worth and profitability.

Marianne: Commercial publishing is limited, here – just two key publishers and maybe two or three smaller ones. And we have to find funding for our work to be considered.

Hazel: In England, funding opportunities are limited as not customarily needed. At least you have funders that you can apply to, surely a benefit as Open Access gains ground for books – and articles, too, and I turn to these now.

Once the book appeared, and the whole complex narrative was in the public domain, I considered how I could select and develop aspects of the overall text and data not yet used, to write a series of articles. I identified several themes and targeted relevant journals, extending the material to achieve a set of five articles and a book chapter. Unlike biographical writing, within Education – and particularly Early Years – many journals are quite traditional (perhaps because this is field still seeking disciplinary status) and want an IMRD (Introduction–Method–Results–Discussion) format (Dahl, 2004). To avoid self-plagiarism,

¹² <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/09/20/taking-back-control-the-new-university-and-academic-presses-that-are-re-envisioning-scholarly-publishing/>.

especially when describing methods which are already fixed, I made myself write the text entirely anew for each publication, a practice I would recommend.

For me, a key advantage of being in a university was the opportunity to attend conferences and meet other academics. I found that as a vocationally orientated department, mine lacked a vibrant core of experienced researchers and writers whose help I could draw upon, so my publishing experience was vital in enabling me to publish without help – and this lack of peer support was a barrier to applying for research funding, too. Only later in my career was there a central support facility but this tended to work with the established professors, thus opportunity remained with those who already possessed it. I found going beyond the University a good way to find colleagues at my own level but frequently found senior academics dismissive toward mature ‘newcomers’ at conferences. Younger doctoral students and ECRs¹³ were encouraged, if sometimes patronised, but we older new PhDs were often disregarded – not part of the natural order! Adult educators were more welcoming, so I preferred their networks to the bigger society conferences. I attended the latter to be seen but did not expect to be heard outside of whatever session I presented in. Nevertheless, within my University I was often chastised for being “too outward-looking” as I engaged with external groups, so to me there is an irony that, in Denmark, the official promotion of English language usage actually encourages you to be outward-looking.

Academia now (reflecting together on change)

Hazel: Visiting Copenhagen continually reminds me of the differences in our current academic worlds. You have a room to yourself, a literal and figurative space in which to be an academic. It is spacious, with a large desk, a notice board, an easy chair, walls of shelving on which to house your numerous books. Most importantly, you have a door you can shut. Such a room signifies that academic work is taken seriously, that it needs peace and quiet and space to read and think, access to valued seminal texts as well as the plethora of recent journal articles easily accessed online. Contrast this with the situation I experience in England (and not just at my own institution) where many Universities, forced to be financially viable without the security of student funding that shored them up in the past, are referred to as corporations and model their practices on contemporary businesses, “subordinated to a society’s ‘economic strategy’”.¹⁴ Academic staff increasingly occupy

¹³ Early Career Researchers.

¹⁴ Collini, S. (2016) Who are the spongers now? *London Review of Books*, 38(2), 21 January. Available @<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n02>.

large open-plan offices; entire, even multiple, departments are housed in a single room in “unnecessary and poorly designed new buildings” (Beynon, 2016), sometimes, ironically, on the faulty premise that this encourages collegiality, the fostering of a ‘we’ mentality. Some lecturers, the lucky ones, are allocated a workstation, that is: a surface on which to place a phone and computer, a swivel chair on which to perch and a short shelf on which to house a few books or papers plus a small cupboard in which to lock away valuables. The unlucky may work in institutions where they are expected to hot desk, as most of their time is to be spent in the classroom.

In the media, it is often stated that in “less than a decade” UK universities have become “some of the biggest businesses in the UK” through the government introduction of a market mentality that is “changing their context most profoundly”¹⁵ as they are “reshaped as centers of applied expertise and vocational training”.¹³ This may be disputed but they certainly adopt the language of the marketplace and employ managerial practices (top-down control in the name of efficiency) and performativity (reduction of quality judgements to measurable outcomes) (Ball, 2003). At my university, the Education lecturers found their working conditions changed partly because they were moved in with the nurses, who (it is said) would find workstations acceptable as on hospital wards their personal workspace would be even more limited. We education staff, too, were viewed as imparters of vocational knowledge (that needed to later enter teaching or other work with children), trainers rather than educators despite our preference to be considered otherwise.

I did not find such trends to my liking, nor our office arrangements conducive to working (maybe because of my earlier university experiences); they were places of distraction rather than ones enabling collaboration and communication. And libraries offer no sanctuary when geared to undergraduates who like to socialise; when they rid themselves of the out-of-date (historic sources!) and rarely read (specialist!) books that I find useful to create space for banks of computers (important, yes); when they swap desk space for soft seating where students can discuss their ideas (or doze, day or night when libraries remain open to reduce the chance of late starters missing deadlines). I know of university libraries, elsewhere, that even incorporate coffee areas – as many major book chains do (and I like the opportunities *that* brings, so am inconsistent!).

¹⁵ Corver, M. (2019) Higher Education is Big Business, *WONKHE*, 11 November. Available @ <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/higher-education-is-big-business/>.

Nor did I find teaching undergraduates rewarding once fees rose to £9,000 p.a. as students expected to call the shots. Once, on meeting a class for the first time, a disgruntled student responded to my greeting with the challenge: “It is costing me £100 to sit here and listen to you today, are you going to be worth it?” This was an extreme example but made very real the notion of students as consumers (Tomlinson, 2017). Recognising that promotion was unlikely in the time frame left to me, I asked for a Visiting Fellowship, to have more time to research, write and collaborate with colleagues at home and abroad, continuing to supervise doctoral students (which I really enjoy and am good at), making a contribution that my colleagues respect (and freeing up space for younger lecturers). My support was particularly valued during the Covid epidemic when I was able to absorb some of the pressures on my co-supervisors.

Marianne: Actually, your experience of publishing – from both internal and external perspectives – is one of the reasons my university has supported your co-teaching of postgraduates in Denmark as learning more about English practices is useful for our students when globalisation makes it necessary to move beyond our customary practices.

In Denmark too, and possibly in universities everywhere, education has become an area of public economic concern. This business ethos, however, takes different forms. For us, it manifests in constraints on duration of studies. Previously, students could choose how long they took to complete, now they are restricted to five years from start to MA.

Some of the initiatives are intended to standardise Higher Education to enable the free movement of the labour force, one of the pillars of the EU. For example, we now teach both BA and MA when before we only had a Master’s level degree that incorporated an equivalent Bachelor’s stage. But the uniformity is somehow superficial: it does not impinge heavily on our beliefs about knowledge and learning traditions.

Hazel: We are all under pressures to keep abreast of changes. Moves to Open Access publishing add a new complication, and I approach with caution. We academics are continually contacted by ‘predatory’¹⁶ publishers seeking fees to ‘publish’ in their journals. I never follow up such contacts, for, in addition to ‘respectable’ publishers acting with integrity, there are many others requesting fees to do very little. ‘Self-’, or more negatively

¹⁶ Predatory journals are scams sending phishing emails to request fees upfront for work that will never be done.

‘vanity’ publishing has been around for longer but is also risky. It can be little more than paying someone to produce copies of your book for you to sell or give away yourself. Such books, if neither peer-reviewed nor professionally edited, will do little to further an academic career, whereas an open access article in a *reputable* journal, not hidden behind a pay wall, could be widely read.

And still reflecting...

Hazel: Is this – the dialogue we have had – a socio-analysis in the Bourdieusian sense?

Marianne: Yes, to me it is. It encompasses the development of academia or Education within the Academy from our points of view, and the journey of our generation and gender inside the universities’ walls through our individual stories. It also covers the development of the University and Publishing. In Denmark, I see a national perspective turning to English for a voice in the international conversation. Your story suggests that this may not be as international as I thought but sometimes quite inward-looking. What we haven’t touched upon is matters of the Economy, the Market, and the State.

Hazel: This interpretation interests me, and our dialogue must continue, but time and space rip the fabric here leaving the threads to dangle. We halt – rather than end – with a quotation that captures the difficulties in seeking closure:

“There is the tendency to want to end this article with a satisfying conclusion, a few paragraphs of space that ‘wraps up’ or otherwise frames our dialogue. Yet dialogue, as process, is never neatly packaged and is often incomplete”.

(Gildersleeve and Kuntz, 2011)

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Published as Høyen, M. & Wright, H. R. (2021) [*Using personal biographies to consider change and difference in academic practices: A dialogue.*](#) In: Praxeologiske perspektiver: Professorens habitus og kampen for sykepleievitenskap som autonomt fag. Forlaget Hexis, Oslo, Norway.