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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Students' Identity as a Reflective Project: Reflectivity as Individual and Social Competence

*Elżbieta Wołodźko
University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn (Poland)*

Abstract

The article presents narrative and reflective research about the reflective ways in which students construct their subjectivity and identity. During the educational and research process students participated in many pedagogical activities and events (workshops, dramas, discussions and debates, psychological games, interactive lectures) which help them experience reflective self-cognition, self-understanding, using reflectivity as an instrument of conscious constructing their identity. The main question students searched for an answer was "who I am?". It was also a theme of reflective essays analyzed by the author trying to discover various ways young adults build their identity as complex, "multiple choice" construct.

The contemporary world creates very special contexts of social life. It is a world of axiological chaos (Wnuk – Lipiński 2004, p.18), a world of ontological risk (Beck, 2002), a world of many contradictions and changes as permanent state (Bauman, 2000, p. 6). Such a situation generates great pressures for an individual who is obliged – trying to be an active member of the society – to become a subject and accept a position of a man whose life, with no choice, "must" be autonomous, "must" be self-creative and self-responsible (Bauman, 2007, p. 33-34). An individual is "under siege" (Bauman, 2007, p. 27-63) within complex social contexts, full of various ideas, offers, beliefs, presented by many cultures being in dynamic and dialectical relations, creating a multicultural, "liquid" world, deprived - an individual lost in this chaos - of feelings of safety, but inducing his/her to self-dependent inquires, thoughts, conscious decisions. An individual then experiences a necessity to search for internal potential, for reflectivity as a tool of both self-cognition and personal generation of knowledge based on individual and social experience and reflection.

Reflectivity understood as a critical subjectivity is a conscious experiencing of the self (Lincoln, Guba, 200, p. 183), which allows an individual to perceive his/her world not only in his/her own perspective but also in the perspective of partner(s) of the interaction, dialog, social communication or inquiry. The reflective individual (researcher) experiences multiple identities of a person whose self (Ives) is/are determined by his/her historical, social, personal position, by the undertaken activity and the situation in which it takes place (Lincoln, Guba, 2000, p. 183). Reflectivity, then, is an ability to consider the individual's personal and structural circumstances and to make attempts to understand and interpret them. Such deep personal self-search determines the efforts to (re)construct the individual's personality and his/her living space (Wołodźko, 2007, p.181). Reflectivity also means "reflective monitoring of activity" (Giddens, 2003, p. 43), giving any active subject an opportunity for an insight in their internal thoughts,

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beliefs and motives. In this way, reflectivity is a significant part of an individual's critical self-creation, who becomes more and more aware of his/her personal potential.

Thanks to reflectivity, a subject can develop his/her openness and courage to formulate their own worldview, often in contradiction to the dominant culture. Reflectivity is then an individual/autobiographical and social competence (Dróżka, 2003, Sztompka, 2002) enabling a subject to doubt, to resist socially "obliged" beliefs, to analyze critically socially internalized knowledge and overcome social stereotypes and prejudices. In such understanding, reflectivity determines the way in which individuals participate to social reality by being oriented not only to their introspective search for a sense of an existence, but also to social aspects of life, a membership in a "polyphony of voices", a social discourse and an intellectual exchange.

Reflection, demanding a moment to stop and think over living history, to make endeavors to understand it, is an essential element of human experience, embracing it with introspective insight, leading to a search for answers for existentially important questions. This existential kind of reflection (Feldman, 2002) considers an individual's thoughts about the sense of life, about searching for self-understanding and building a personal system of values. Reflection is a source of internal strength which liberates an individual's desire to overcome the constraints and barriers experienced in a process of creation of his/her life-world according to independently chosen aims. Reflection relates to (re)discovering an individual's meaning of humanity and meaning of life experience through internal dialog, considering the rightness of personally-made decisions and choices, mistakes and conclusions deduced from them. Reflection enables an individual to define a sense and a direction of changes considered necessary to meet the demands of contemporary world and find one's place in it.

Reflectivity is "a modern mechanism of self-correction" (Sztompka, 2002, p. 573) which, on the one hand, enables one to rid oneself of a conviction that knowledge has to be based on absolutely certain foundations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2000, p. 28), and on the other hand, allows one to perceive the consequences of the presence of knowledge, produced by social scientists, in the experience of participants of social life ("double hermeneutics"), subjected to discursive practices of exercising power and a discursive process of constructing subjectivity (Szkudlarek, 1997, p. 182).

Reflective experiencing of time ("every moment") by an individual means "increased awareness of one's own thoughts, feelings and sensory impressions" (Giddens, 2001a, p. 99). Such awareness is a result of an individual's self-cognition, it creates intrapersonal context of personal and social development (Brzezińska, 2000, p.209). But active participation in social life causes also a growth of critical awareness expressed in critical thinking about reasons and solutions of many social problems and moral dilemmas, in creating an ability to construct individual's critical understanding of the world, social processes and phenomena. It is this awareness that "creates conditions for change and actually constitutes and brings about change" (Giddens, 2001a, p. 99). Owing to it, an individual makes an effort to build a self-identity as a reflective project, created thanks to the reflective attitude of an observer who looks for sense in the events that surround him and in his own actions (Giddens, 2001a, p. 105). The effort means "more than just *better self-cognition*", its purpose is "creating and re-creating a coherent and satisfying

feeling of identity” (Giddens, 2001a, p. 105) gained by an individual aimed at an autonomously “developed” life project.

Reflectivity and its role in higher education

The necessity of reflective participation in social life, experienced by individuals making attempts to create their identity in a reflective way, becomes a challenge for higher education, which is more and more expected to be a reflective, dialogical space for a personal and professional development, for both students and scientists. The advocates of a reflective turn in the social sciences (Hammersley, Atkinson, 2000, Giddens, 2001a, 2001b, 2003, Bourdieu, 2001, Gołębnik, 2001, Roth, 2002, Krzychała, 2004, Fals Borda, 2005, Dróżka, 2006) underline the role of reflectivity in the process of knowledge generation and in the process of gaining competences of reflective practitioners, open and ready for changes, for reflective and conscious self-creation and a construction of one's life world. Reflectivity becomes a highly appreciated competence by academics, aware of the impossibility of creating adequate qualifications to meet the dynamically changing labor market's demands by giving young people guarantee for a success and a professional progress. So, some of them, observing educational barriers and negative bureaucratic tendencies (Śliwerski, 2006, 2007, Kwieciński, 2007) postulate the higher education has the role to enable young people to readiness for constant growth, to develop their ability to „learn how to learn” through the lifespan, to experience autonomy of learning/studying and to reflectively and independently construct their subjectivity and identity.

Such understanding of higher education relates to an idea of reflective education which promotes significant role of reflectivity in the process of „the transformation of an objective man into a subjective one” (Augustyniak – Kopka, see: Woronowicz, 2000, p. 69). The aim of this education is to organize an educational space for students in order to become reflective individuals capable to construct their own meanings, to choose and fulfill moral values defined during consideration, deep reflection, analysis and estimation (Woronowicz, 2000, p. 97). Reflective education makes it possible to experience reflective participation in many educational events, tasks, activities which are accompanied by autobiographical, communal and cooperative reflection (Rearick, Feldman, 1999). Such kind of experience is present in educational dialog understood as a subjective communication and a reflective participation in the educational process characterized by mutual respect for the individual's freedom, independence, self-dependent thinking and acting. Freedom experienced by the participants of reflective education is related to an opportunity of making common decisions about the way educational process is organized, curriculum and educational resources and methods are negotiated and reflectively estimated and discussed. It relates also to students' needs to express their voices, reflections, narrations, to search for their own understanding and meanings and experience a partnership in the process of knowledge generation. Freedom means also authenticity of self-experience, self-reflection, faithfulness to personal beliefs and values and an openness to present them. Such understanding of “educational” freedom includes teachers' and students' responsibility as a shared experience of searching for the truth done by cooperating with each other, commonly defining and realizing educational aims.

Research

These theoretical assignments were a basis of a reflective education and narrative, reflective research made with students of University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland. The educational and research process took place during the realisation of the subject "The development of subjectivity", included in the curriculum of the final year of the master program of the pedagogical specialization "Professional counseling". Through many reflective activities and events, various pedagogical methods (workshops, dramas, discussions and debates, psychological games, interactive lectures, self-dependent search and estimation of educational texts), students could experience reflective cognition, self-cognition, self-understanding, using reflectivity as an instrument of conscious construction of their identity.

The main question of both research and educational processes was: "who am I?" It was also a theme of reflective essays written by students making reflective endeavours to define themselves. The article presents results of the research gathered with one students' group, in the academic year 2007/2008.

The essays written by students were a kind of "reflective journey", reflective search, for this "existential question". Most authors stated that answering it is a difficult task, demanding a deep self-inquiry of a person becoming ready for openness and honesty. They were very glad then with having the opportunity to write anonymously which gave them more comfort to present their personal, covered thoughts and reflections. This way of gathering empirical data allowed me for a phenomenographical analyze of the way students conceptualize their understanding of identity. My attention was paid not to individual cases but to the way young adults, being "on the border of adulthood" defined their identity.

The students tried to define the essence of the difficulties experienced through their endeavors to accomplish this task. Some of them wrote:

"Looking for an answer to who we are is very complicated and varied (...), but if a man doesn't think about him/herself, doesn't put in front of him/herself such question, he/she – as I think – experiences much more difficulties to find him/herself in the contemporary world oriented on consumptionism and a quick career."

"It is a challenge to answer a question who I am. The question is difficult and not everyone is able - honestly, in front of him/herself - to respond it. It demands honesty and self-criticism." "Who I am? - we ask this questions many times, being in different situations, on different stages of our life. But is it possible to answer this question? And if yes, are we satisfied with it? Are we really like we want or would like to be?"

"Who I am? It is one of the most difficult questions because it is hard to answer questions concerning ourselves. I don't like defining myself, it is like closing myself in a box with a label. I try not to do it and constantly overcome, open new nooks of my subjectivity."

Some students discovered a complex and difficult to define nature of identity. They paid attention on multiplicity of the possibilities to experience their identity and many contexts which shape this construct. They indicated a dynamic character of the identity and a problematic possibility for the cognition of the construct being permanently “in statu nascendi”.

These students wrote as follows:

“There is no correct answer. Because we perceive ourselves variously and define ourselves in many ways. (...) It is connected with an ability to reflectively analyze our lives and the context we are living in.” (...) It is a search for the sense of our existence and a better self-understanding.”

“Furthermore, it is a question nobody has the full answer to and never will have it. The reason is very simple – there is no one answer, it can always be another one.”

“The question of who I am is asked all along one's life. The truth is that in various moments of our life, we are various persons. Our experiences change our humanity.”

“Each day I try to recognize myself better, develop my talents and abilities, learn new things but yet I still don't know what I am and who I am. How will I behave in new situations, what kind of choice will I make? Will I be able to act according to my own principles, will I make conclusions based on my mistakes and will I be free from my self-perception through the prism of the other persons' opinions?”

Presenting their reflections students described their identity using such categories , like “humanity, “subjectivity”, “individuality”, “authenticity”.

Those who perceived their identity as humanity indicated many aspects of their understanding of this category. Some of them expressed their pride of “being free, thinking, loving, emphatic creature”, of “the achievements gained so far”, “of a dignity belonging to each human since their moment of birth”. Others connected humanity with a “given gift which is wonderful experience of moments of joy but also sorrow and suffering”, “a gift given by God”, “a gift which can't be lost but should be developed by an individual becoming every day a new person analyzing prior experiences, not always happy but educative and valuable ones”. Humanity was also understood as “a feeling of freedom, an internal one”, thanks to which “each human being is free in his/her thoughts and acts” and which “is connected with a subjectivity” of a person who “respects freedom of another subject”. Such – I would say loftily and pathetically - understanding of humanity prevailed in these narrations. Only two students reflected more critically and perceived also difficulties or even negative sides of humanity. One of them identified him/herself as “a creature who knows what is important in life, knows his/her value, is independent, is able to love and be loved, but is also weak and makes a lot of mistakes”.

Another statement was the following:

“One can tell about him/herself in superlatives but it is also important to notice some lacks and deficiencies in our personalities. It is a sign of a capacity for self-knowledge thanks to which a human being has an opportunity for a constant growth and personal development”.

Some authors who perceived their identity in reference to humanity underlined the importance of social relations creating social context of identity development. They presented such reflections:

“As a human being I try – first of all - to be human to another person. I am not able to live without others. It is just people and living with them what makes me someone who I want to be. I do not want to live just for living. I would like to give something more from myself, not just to exist. (...) I am a part of a larger social group. But I try to present my separateness in the social background.”

“Asking myself the question of who I am, I can with no doubts answer that I am a human being. As a human creature, I live together with others in the society, playing certain social roles”.

Social role occurred as an important category to connect with emphasizing the students' understanding of their identity. They indicated many roles they play in their lives: a member (daughter, son, granddaughter, grandson, sister, brother, wife, husband, mother, father) in a family, a colleague, a friend, a fiancé/ fiancée, a student, a neighbor, an employee, a citizen of the world. Some of them also defined a way they accomplished their roles:

“I am a scrupulous employee and a good student”;

“I am a beloved and loving daughter of my dear parents. Thanks to them I know what is good, what is wisdom, honesty, respect and love. They made me sensitive to other persons' needs, suffering, harm. My parents are very wise persons and I thank them very much for the way they educated me, for showing me the right way, which deserves to be followed in my life”.

“Now I am first of all a wife – it is a new role I have started to play. It becomes the biggest challenge for me, one of the biggest tests to pass whose result will show who I am, whether I can retain my subjectivity, independence and self-dependence and, at the same time, accept compromise and be lenient?”.

For some authors identity meant subjectivity. This way of identity interpretation underlined independence, self- confidence, self-responsibility and dignity, indicated by young persons aware of their value, ready to experiment life, thanks to their openness to social relations and readiness to new experiences.

Their reflections were presented in such sentences:

“Certainly, I can answer I am a human being, a woman, a daughter, a sister. But these are typical answers describing me in various roles. Much more important and a more complete notion defining me is >a subject<, which includes almost all the features I have, playing these roles. These features could be developed thanks to other persons' help and now I can say I am a responsible, self-dependent person. But it doesn't mean that I am not able to change myself. Changes take place every day”.

“When a difficult moment in our life comes, we start considering who I am, where I make for, whether my life has a sense. (...) Such situations make us to organize our deeds, become someone better, become more perfect subject. A subject - independent from other persons' opinions, thinking about the others, emphatic, internally rich, able to defend his/her arguments and not to surrender to the people having power.”

There was also another manifestation of subjectivity:

“I am a child of >Y generation<. I am a child of the free market; being convinced that I deserve comfort and conveniences. (...) I want to have a high salary and a prestigious post. I demand a lot of free time for my private life. I am dynamic, educated and sophisticated in the world. I speak languages, pay with plastic money, can afford whims and exotic holidays. (...) I am a man of the 21st century.”

Other categories, important for the students reflecting about their identity, were individuality and authenticity. Some of the students underlined very much the fact that they are exceptional persons, aware of the right to be as they are, accepting and appreciating themselves and the way they live. These students expressed their reflections this way:

“In each situation I experience I am myself. An individual person having certain features, appearance, behavior, a style of living, emotions, thoughts, a way of perceiving the world. In each of these situations, I am different, I play various roles but I remain myself after all.”

“I think we become human beings through our entire life. Who I am then? For many persons I am a friend, for others, an enemy. So, who I am for myself? For me, I am and remain myself.”

“I am a person like any another one, but how different from the others.... I am....., just who I am.”

For some students, a very important part of their individuality was the fact that they are Catholic. These students wrote that their religion has a vital role in the way they identify themselves and the way they exist. They declared:

“I am a Catholic in my life. I was born in a Catholic family and I try to live according to the commandments even if I have failed sometimes.”

”I am a Catholic and that's why I try to comply with the commandments. In my life, I behave according to the professing values, I not only believe in them”.

“I am a God's child, I am not ashamed who I am and I do not pretend someone else”.

Many essays presented reflective characteristics of young, sensitive, romantic persons who – making an attempt to answer the question “who I am” - used some metaphors, comparing themselves to “a voyager”, “a pilgrim”, “a learner of the world”, “a dreamer”. Their narrations included such statements:

“I am a traveler discovering new corners of life, looking at the world with no prejudices.”

“I am a dreamer (...), dreams give me strength, faith and the hope that maybe at least some of them will come true.”

“Since I was born I was a learner of life (...) I am a voyager who recognizes constantly new learning materials, about myself, about others. Each moment is different, there are no two identical events. Education lasts a whole life (...). Every new situation brings new experiences and changes previous thoughts.”

“I am a pilgrim who makes his way of life, carrying from day to day heavier luggage of experiences”.

“I am a tender, tragic romantic with sensitive feelings and emotions....”

The authors of these essays described themselves as optimistic, full of hope young people who are aware of the fact that they are “at the crucial moment of their life” and have positive expectations or even dreams about reality waiting for them outside the university. But despite strongly presented determination to cross the border between maturity and adulthood, some students also revealed their uncertainty and fears.

Reflecting about their future they wrote:

“I am a cheerful and open person. (...) seeing the world through pink-coloured spectacles. Although failures are inevitable, I believe in successes and never give up.(...) I want to derive benefits from life, enjoy and visit the world.. I want to gain knowledge and to learn permanently. I want to be a good man and to gain wisdom.”

“ Today I have finished my studies and I am at the crossroads, whether I will find a job, which gives me satisfaction, whether I will start a family, whether I will realize these and other plans? I answer these questions every day and try to take my life into my hands.”

“I am a young woman entering with a fear an adult life...”

“I am an optimistic person seeing the world through pink-coloured spectacles. There is no impasse, one should fight till the end – it is my motto. (...) Who am I ? I wonder what I will write about it in 30 years... will the dreams get fulfilled? We will see.....”

Discussion

Higher education understood and practiced as a space for reflective construction of students' identity creates conducive conditions to students' conscious experiencing personal and professional development. An essential aspect of such education is an existential reflection (“who I am”) being - for the students - a reflective attempt of self-cognition, self-understanding and critical analysis of themselves. The students participating in the research - although they made such attempt - defined it as a difficult task in view of multiplicity of selves experienced by the individual in various situations and stages of personal development.

They discovered a complex and difficult to define nature of identity. They indicated discursive and dynamic character of identity and a problematic possibility for a cognition of this construct being permanently “in statu nascendi”.

Trying to identify themselves, the students presented mostly ideal self-characteristics encompassing a list of self-compliments. They did not take a risk to consider themselves critically. Few endeavors of more critical self-penetration (actually I called them “half-critical” ones) were more a reflection referred to a value of a deep and honest self-cognition than searching for truth about themselves (rather autobiographical and existential reflection than critical one). They presented often dreamy (“pink spectacles”) and wishful way of perceiving themselves done by persons stating how good is to be authentic but seldom presenting experiences of making efforts to define and achieve their identity. It is problematic then to name their reflections an experience of a construction of a critical subjectivity and identity. This process is being developed through other reflective activities during reflective education especially through debates, inspiring the students to a meta-reflection about the meaning of reflectivity in their education and life.

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