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LIFE-WORLD FACTORS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON LEARNING ACHIEVEMENT

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Introduction

Every human being has an individual demand for specific (further) development of competence, depending on his or her personal life phase. On the grounds of its history, development, experiences, and the structure of its modularized study programmes, the FernUniversität in Hagen as a lifelong learning university in the German-speaking world helps to satisfy this demand (Vogt, 2012). The seamless learning approach supports flexibility of "distance" studies in terms of place, time and content (see for example Krey et al., 2014), which attracts above all non-traditional students (Alheit et al., 2008) who have completed a first degree and are now working, in the age group 25 to 38 (59%) and 39 to over 60 (FernUniversität in Hagen, 2014).

Analyses of the studies or learning achievements of distance education students take into account in particular the motivation for studying (Kaiser, 1997; Baacke, 1978), the particular socio-economic situation of female distance education students (Prümmer, 1997), or study materials (Richardson et al., 1999).

This paper focuses on the influence of life-world factors on the learning achievement of students, looking at the example of the Bachelor degree course in Education Science at FernUniversität in Hagen (life-world study).

The paper starts by considering avenues of access to the term life-world based on theory (2) and describes the status of research (3). It then describes the methodology of the life-world study (4). The life-worlds of the students and the concept of learning achievement are then presented in summary form with initial, preliminary results (5).The paper ends with a summarising conclusion (6).

Avenues of access to life-worlds based on theory

The term life-world goes back to Jürgen Habermas (1987) and Alfred Schütz (1982). According to Habermas, the life-world is the context-creating background. Mollenhauer (1974, p.35) constitutes the life-world of the individual by linking the individual's biography

with others. The capacity for cognition and action is generated from the life-world circumstances. According to Jäger and Matys (2008), access to the life-world is opened by participating in social interactions. It is the everyday location of social action. Life-worlds are structured in culturally pre-formed sense worlds with historically shaped perceptions and experiences (ibid., p. 32). Human beings gain experiences, whether processed or unprocessed, comprehended or un-comprehended, reflected or un-reflected, by acting and pursuing a purpose (Ortmann, 1977, p.87). Thus the life-world can be designated as a "total sum of all circumstances" (Schütz, 1982, p.181) that correspond to the autobiographical situation.

Comprehensive consideration of the life-world with all the socialising conditions includes the individual personality in its distinctiveness (Hurrelmann, 2002, p.16) and uniqueness, as well as the processes of social reality.

Bourdieu (1974) identifies class-specific mechanisms at this point. Growing up within a specific milieu in certain living conditions allows a certain habitus to develop automatically and largely unconsciously. Daily action in a social environment influences thinking processes and interactions. For Bourdieu, individuality (the self) and collectiveness (the environment) are accordingly not opposites. The collective in the form of culture and education is integrated into and present in each individual project (ibid., p.132).

In order to register all the life-world conditions of distance education students in their entirety, their private (socio-economic) conditions, their professional situation and their everyday student life must be determined. All environmental factors are determined by social circumstances and leave significant traces.

Studies of the student life-world

Perusal of the studies dealing with the life-world of (distance) students is a manageable task.

Alheit et al. (2008) are among those who have examined the study perspective of non-traditional students, to whom distance education students also belong. The differences by comparison with traditional students include concrete factors such as the following.

- The majority of qualifications for matriculation are acquired by alternative means.
- Studies are not commenced directly after obtaining the upper secondary school leaving certificate (Abitur).
- The students are older.
- The students have completed occupational or professional training and are in the work process.
- Many students study part-time parallel with their work.
- Students have family and children.

The authors ascertain that the special socio-biographical backgrounds of this study group have so far only been examined rudimentarily (Alheit et al., 2008, p.579).

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The first life-world analysis of students at FernUniversität in Hagen was carried out by Baacke (1978). The study focuses on examining the motivation to study and the learning situation of the distance education students. Using qualitative-narrative interviews, the author asks what influence the everyday world of the distance education students has on their study situation. These data serve to analyse what individual biographies and life-worlds lead to what study behaviour. It becomes evident that starting a distance study course by no means alters the students' entire lives, but it does change certain elements, and difficulties increase.

The question about the motivation for starting a (distance) study course after completing professional or vocational training or a first degree course is answered by Kaiser (1997). The authors only asked older students and two primary motives for studying emerge.

On the one hand persons particularly interested in education, for whom learning assumes a high value, begin to study (ibid., p.91). Here there is a need to catch up on academic (further) education. Reasons for this are the loss of missing out on education opportunities in the course of these students' lives. On the other hand individuals study because they are searching for a meaningful activity as they become older, wanting to spend free time they acquire usefully (ibid., p.108). The decision to start a degree course is, however, by no means seen as a leisure activity, but instead definitely as a commitment to be taken seriously, in which work and time are invested in order to experience the studies as a meaningful activity. Kaiser sees the life-world reference of the students as an essential condition for the effectiveness of education (ibid., p.252). For this reason, especially among older students, the arts and social science disciplines are the preferred subjects because these are characterised by proximity to life.

At FernUniversität in Hagen, Prümmer (1997) conducted a study of women in distance studies. This concentrates on female distance education students from the working class and examines the permeability of the social structure and opportunities of social advancement (ibid., p. 11). The distance study course is used as a means to continue the process of social advancement already begun (ibid., p.210). Statements concerning the education and employment biography and the students' personal situation display very high educational backgrounds (ibid., p.195), but do not supply any information about the competencies possessed by the distance education students.

To summarise, it is possible to agree with Ortmann, who believes that the concepts of the universities generally separate academic knowledge from the knowledge acquired in everyday or occupational socialisation processes (Ortmann, 1977). Singular experience and hence subjective empirical knowledge remain concealed in everyday knowledge which is not scientifically/academically authorised. Only the examination rules that are applicable for all together serve as an orientation aid. Ultimately, competition mechanisms and mutual uncertainties become manifest and impede learning together in solidarity (Ortmann, 1977, p.56).

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Teaching at FernUniversität in Hagen does not pursue a conventional knowledge transfer perspective from the teacher to the learner, but instead is oriented in the adult education discourse to the principle of acquisition by individual input. According to Kade and Seitter (1999, p.34), this acquisition process is shaped by life-worlds and steered by the biographical second programming. That is why it is queried whether the study material designed at traditional universities must display a similar validity as that for students at distance universities (Richardson et al., 1999), or whether it must instead be characterised by specific differences. The private and occupational context of the students is channelled into the (distance) study course and integrates knowledge already acquired consciously or sub-consciously. The life-world influences the preference for certain study contents, the selection of subjects, and presumably also the form of learning and the academic achievement of the study course.

Methodology

Against this background, the Life-World Study (commencement March 2014) examines the question:

> *What influence do life-world factors have on the learning achievement of students in the Bachelor course at FernUniversität in Hagen?*

The task of the study is to record the life-world connex explicitly in order to obtain a specific insight into the conditions and challenges as well as already existing potentials of the students. Due to the high number of students in working life who are starting their first university course, it is suspected that the students possess a pool of knowledge and educational background. Completion of vocational or professional training provides orientation and capacities for action (Georg, 2008, p.90). It packages personal capabilities and standardises certain behaviour patterns (ibid., p.91). However, not only people in the work process possess institutionalised culture capital that integrates capabilities and competencies, but also university graduates.

It is to be assumed that we have an extremely heterogeneous field of students with specific skills, capabilities and concrete experiences (practice and theory). It is interesting to know to what extent these already existing competencies from the different life-worlds co-determine learning achievement in the study course. The life-world factors are sub-divided into three categories – private, professional and student life-worlds. Students of Education Science are questioned about these three life-worlds using narrative interviews (Küsters, 2006)[1].

In the private context, the family situation with all its challenges and duties is of interest. As regards the professional background, details of previous education, vocational training or (special) college training, specific capabilities and requirements are surveyed. The

[1] So far 15 explorative interviews with students of the Bachelor degree course Educational Science at FernUniversität in Hagen have been conducted within the framework of face-to-face events of Module 2A "Empirical Education Research – Qualitative Methods" by Karin Krey (in the period May-June 2014).

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competencies possessed by the students and the nature and scope of their educational background are significant. All the above factors are set against the student life-world. Here it is interesting to know how the students manage to cope with their studies, how they organise matters, what learning materials and what forms of learning are helpful or less helpful.

The narrative interview method refrains from theory-based and empirical preliminary assumptions in order to be able to slip into the life-worlds of the students quite openly without any prejudices (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998). The MAXQDA software serves to evaluate the contents of the interviews (Mayring, 2008). The inductive category formation in the course of summarising the quality substantive analysis is used (ibid., p.74) in order to record a naturalist and object-oriented image of the material.

After studying and analysing the first interviews (June-July 2014), a preliminary system of categories is developing. The code tree runs along the interview structure addressing private, professional and student life-worlds. The private life-world takes up the family structure and challenges, as well as existing competencies. The working life-world addresses the corresponding educational and training background, the career to date and the competencies acquired at work. The student life-world addresses the motivation for studying Education Science and the degree project. The study is compiling data on the progress of studies as well as the use of preferred teaching materials and forms and the wish for further learning options. A further category is examining the different facets of learning achievement and hence where the focus of the student's own life-world lies.

As a preliminary result, a few summarising statements on the **life-world** of distance education students and on the category of **learning achievement** are set out below.

Results

The **life-world** of the students is chiefly determined by private factors. Family situations take first place. The study achievements of the students are largely dependent on the private component in the life-world. The challenges of family life or partnership relations influence the organisation, planning and rhythms of the student routine. "Many things revolve around organisation, around the family, around the family that determines zones of freedom" (IP3[2]). The work process takes second place. On the one hand many students channel their existing competencies into their studies. "[I went] to the Oxford Academy of English and gained a few diplomas there" (IP2[3]). On the other hand students deal intensively with those subject areas of their course that are particularly interesting to them or that can subsequently be used

[2] Legend: IP=Interview person.
IP3: Male, age 30-40, living with partner, two children, trained as a clerk in the publishing industry, started a degree course in Journalism and Communications but broke it off, works in advertising on a freelance basis, as a producer in the film industry, freelance director and concept developer, in his 6th semester of the B.A. in Education Science course.

[3] **IP2:** Female, age 60-70, living alone, no children, abandoned university course in English and Romance Studies, qualified Marketing Expert, lecturer on advertising design, client consultant in an advertising agency, coach for Statistics, 5th semester of the B.A. in Education Science course.

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profitably in their work. "[I] looked at the module, […], what is available, and then it is possible [...] to select a module oriented to my work" (IP1[4]). Students have generally already been predisposed by existing practical know-how so that certain modules can be used to mainstream theory aspects.

The internal platform Moodle is available to students for processing the study contents of their course. The students appreciate the varied information and good contributions that Moodle provides for addressing this content. Prümmer and Rossie (1988) show that male students find handling computer-supported learning easier than female students. This cannot (yet) be confirmed at the present stage of analysis by the life-world study undertaken here. The platform Moodle is only used when a number of students work at the same speed and make progress. "Moodle is great if you can keep up" (IP5[5]). However, as of the moment when the students are unable to keep up with the working speed and information diversity of the others, they withdraw into anonymous learning and studying. "I am so slow. And I learn directly in a quite different way" (IP5).

The distance education students interviewed define the term **learning achievement** via a number of sub-categories[6].

The increase in knowledge ranks high. The students are not only interested in acquiring knowledge quantitatively, but also in particular in understanding what they have learned. Understanding knowledge means acquiring knowledge sustainably. Only the knowledge that they have internalised remains in their memory and has a long-term effect. "Simply learning by heart and then reproducing it quickly or spitting it out and off you go – I personally gain nothing from this" (IP3). Learning achievement means drawing benefit from what has been learned, for example by comprehending scientific theories, making connections between them, and being able to demarcate them from each other in terms of theory.

The subjective preferences of the students are significant. If the interest of the students is aroused with a certain theme, then they obtain additional information by researching teaching materials and reading. The subject is then tackled in depth and explored, which has a positive influence on the learning achievement. "If I notice that a topic interests me, then I would like to understand it somehow and I notice unconsciously myself that I do not stick to the course materials but instead read a lot of external literature on the topic that I seek out myself. If I then have the feeling that I understand what the authors are writing, then that is [...] the learning achievement for me" (IP3).

Learning achievement does not necessarily correlate with good examination grades in the form of scores. Having passed is sufficient for many students. The distance education students

[4] **IP1**: Female, age 20-30, living with partner, no children, trained as technical draughtswoman, works as desk officer (order processing), 6th semester of the B.A. in Education Science course.
[5] **IP5**: Female, age 20-30, single parent, one child, abandoned university course in Economics, trained as European communications assistant and advertising clerk, works as freelancer in marketing, student research assistant, speaks five languages, 6th semester of the B.A. in Education Science course.
[6] The various sub-categories are shown *in italics*.

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interviewed do not allow themselves to be pressurised for a good mark. "If I get a good mark, then of course I am pleased, but if I [...] only just pass, then that's OK too (IP1)". A good mark is only important for personal learning achievement in individual cases. "A super learning achievement [would be] a good mark" (IP4[7]).

At this point *recognition* enters into play. Learning achievement in a study course is on the one hand a personal success for distance education students. "I simply want a [recognised] qualification. I find this [...] appropriate" (IP3). In some cases students had unfavourable learning conditions and correspondingly few success experiences in their former school life. Success in a distance study course therefore sues them with pride and gives them a portion of self-confidence. "In my schooldays [...] I never had to repeat a class. But I wasn't really on top of things. [...] Now [I have] results that suit me" (IP2). On the other hand, learning achievement in a degree course also involves recognition by others. The students harvest recognition from their families and from fellow students.

Most distance education students are integrated in *study groups* of approx. two to eight persons. Study groups are both static and dynamic units. While (just) a few members study together right through to the end of their course, other group members change constantly. This is because each learner is a specific learning type with his or her own learning and working speed and is integrated in different family or professional contexts. All the interviewees to date prefer joint learning in face-to-face exchange. Kirkup and Prümmer (1990) identify this as a typically female behaviour pattern. Groups seek and find and then discuss a certain topic together. Each individual has already processed this theme alone, and exchanges only take place after this. The joint exploration is fruitful for all participants. It increases the feeling of self-esteem because it involves one's own positive contribution and is useful for all. "[For me this means] satisfaction and to a certain extent recognition too. If I have helped someone in the study group, then I am happy about this too" (IP1).

Conclusion

At the present stage of evaluation, the research question in the life-world study on what influence life-world factors have on the learning achievement of students in the Bachelor degree course on Education Science at FernUniversität in Hagen has currently produced three core statements.

1. Students in the Bachelor degree course on Educational Science at FernUniversität in Hagen are characterised as a heterogeneous group involved in a large number of life-world areas. The concentration on this target group implies diverse individual learning and acquisition processes.

[7] **IP4**: Female, age 50-60, living with partner, no children, trained as children's nurse and naturopath, teacher for nursing occupations, 4th semester of the B.A. in Education Science course.

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2. Despite the emerging diversity, it is clear that the singular empirical knowledge is in no way accompanied by competitive mechanisms among students (Ortmann, 1977), but instead it creates learning in solidarity in different learning settings.
3. Studying together improves the learning achievement. The learning form of direct social exchange preferred by all interviewees indicates a certain isolatedness of the students, however. Autonomous action strategies in the individual acquisition of knowledge arises from the individual diversity of life-world contexts, as is confirmed by the life-world shaping according to Kade and Seitter (1999). This results in individual learning speeds. It is possible that this difference in processing time is what impedes studying together.

In metaphorical terms, the different life-worlds of the students in the Bachelor degree course on Educational Science at FernUniversität in Hagen can be compared with musicians who all play different instruments in an orchestra together. Harmony in the piece of music only succeeds in the temporary harmony of melody and rhythm. If this does not happen, we have dissonance. The different learning and processing speeds of the students is the main reason for low activity in Moodle and for the dissolution of study groups. Presumably it is the time flexibility of distance studies, which is viewed as so advantageous, that is responsible for students not being able to study jointly together over relatively long periods.

Neither the conducting of the interviews nor the evaluation of the life-world study have been completed. At present it can be assumed that the analysis process will result in type formation. Currently the types are concentrating on the one hand on fulfilling life's dreams and on the other on realising career prospects.

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