

## The Socially Structured Possibility to Pilot One's Transition

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Transitions, either professional or personal, are understood here as heuristic moments enabling us to seize meanings of different recourse to active learning practices. Indeed, when one's life course reaches suddenly a vocational or intimate cross-road, this new situation confronts us and necessarily provokes reactions and adjustments. Some people experience these transitions powerlessly; they will tend to go through them on a passive and dependant mode. Others, confronted with similar discontinuities in their life-course, will tend to use this opportunity actively and develop new capacity for action in order to pilot this uncertain phase of their biography.

### 1. Transition: an intensive moment of either formal or informal adult learning

We have observed, through data provided by the WALL 2003 survey, that life transitions tend to be associated with more intensive participation in active learning either formal or informal (see Table 1). The data shows that biographical transitions tend to be more intensive moments for formal adult learning, as well as, yet at a lesser degree, for non-traditional adult learning, particularly for professional and socio-geographic transitions. However, informal learning does not show any significant increase in such context.

**Table 1: Participation to formal activities and expression of informal learning initiatives in relation to professional transition (WALL, 2003)**

	<b>With professional transition</b>	<b>Without professional transition</b>	<b>Total</b>
Participation to formal learning	33,6	54,4	42,4 <sup>1</sup>
Expression of informal learning	74,4	74,8	74,6
N	5 173	3 808	8 981

<sup>1</sup> Chi square significant

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1. La réalisation de ce texte a été rendue possible grâce à une recherche collective subventionnée par le Conseil de recherche en Sciences Humaines du Canada (CRSH).

Why do people tend to resort to intensive learning in such transitory context? Why some people do not? And how might we understand such correlation? In order to answer these questions about the relation between adult learning participation and transition, we have interviewed, within the WALL sample, some 87 individuals, both in Montreal and in Toronto, who went through either professional or personal (migration, retirement) transition during the years preceding the survey.<sup>2</sup>

In the first instance, we wanted to look at the different ways the subjects are going through these changes and are positioning themselves.

## **2. Active vs. passive transition**

Indeed, by looking at how people do experience these transitions, we were able to distinguish two different orientations: these transitions are either lived as an inner directed and active process or as an other-directed and passive one.

Then we observed the fact that the more people seek to pilot their transition in an active way, the more they tend to participate actively in either formal or informal learning activities. In fact, the interviews show that participants do so in order to enhance their capacity to acquire new professional or linguistic skills required, or to find, in their retirement, new opportunities for self-development. In other words, adult learning, then, because of new knowledge or skill requirements, becomes a resource enabling the subject to pilot her or his transition.

However, our data concerning professional or retirement and migration transitions show that this association between active and passive transition and between active transition and adult learning are socially structured. And this is so especially through initial inequality produced in formal education at the early stages of one's educational biography. To explain this association, we need to look at the informal decision-making process leading a subject to undertake learning activities. More concretely, knowing that processes of learning demands are largely socially conditioned, we need to look at how such processes are expressed.

## **3. Demand for new capacity of action**

The inclination or tendency to resort to active formal or active informal learning in a period of changes is to be understood, upstream, in what goes on in the mind of an individual

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2. Three papers based on this study have been prepared and will be presented at this conference:  
- *L'éducation des adultes et les travailleurs âgés face à la retraite*, by Elaine Biron, Pierre Doray, Paul Bélanger, Simon Cloutier, Olivier Meyer.  
- *Immigration, apprentissage et intégration sociale*, by Olivier Meyer, Elaine Biron, Pierre Doray, Paul Bélanger, Simon Cloutier.  
- *Transition professionnelle et formation des adultes*, by Simon Cloutier, Elaine Biron, Olivier Meyer, Pierre Doray, Paul Bélanger.

when he decides or not to mobilize learning resources to master new knowledge or skills. Such decision is heavily dependant on the subjective perception of active learning as a resource to manage a situation. Two dimensions are involved in such internal process: first, the real sense that such learning will be useful to the subject in the involved context and, second, the perception by the subject that he or she is able to succeed in the foreseen learning exercise, a sense of educational efficiency. The power of the perceived value of an educational activity (the valence) and of the probability of being able to participate in and/or benefit from it (expectancy) determines the force of the motivation to participate.

However, as demonstrated by Rubenson,<sup>3</sup> both these motivational factors are in large part socially conditioned. In other words, the formation of a demand for a new capacity to act in order to pilot important shift in one's life course is socially constructed, and, more importantly, it is constructed through the accumulation of either positive or negative learning experiences throughout people's life.

In any participation survey like WALL 2003, when asked if people wanted to participate to any form of structured learning but could not for any reasons, the frequency of positive answers was always lower among older adults and among individuals with lower initial education. And this was also exactly what our qualitative inquiry had found. Confronted by a new situation and the necessity to change, people will only formulate a learning project or express a learning demand if they have had a positive learning experience before. Otherwise, they may tend to adjust passively and dependently to the transition. Why is this so? Because only then could they perceived any value of an educational activity and only then could they see any possibility of a positive and successful experience.

#### **4. A prevailing factor: prior education biography**

Active learning, formal or informal, is an important strategy for managing autonomously a shift in one's life. Yet the likelihood of such self-directed transition driving a learning project is heavily related to the subject' prior educational biography (qualitatively and quantitatively). One the one hand, as shown in Table 2, if people in period of transition tend to participate more in formal learning activities, this participation is very significantly related to the level of initial education. The probability to participate in formal learning activities is one to five according to the degree of initial education.

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<sup>3</sup> Rubenson, K. (1977). *Participation in recurrent education*. Paris: CERI/OECD.

Rubenson, K. (1988). Paradigms and ideology in participation research—a comparative analysis. In M. Zukas (Ed.), *Papers from the Transatlantic Dialogue, University of Leeds, July 11-13, 1988*. Leeds, England: School of Continuing Education, University of Leeds.

On the other hand, the relation between informal learning and transition is much weaker. First, among people with lower initial education levels, only individuals with less than 8 years of schooling indicate their professional and socio-geographical transition as a more intensive period of informal learning when compared to their transition-free educational peer group. Negative experiences in formal initial education tend to lead some participants to pursue their educational needs through informal means. For participants having higher level of initial education, we observe no difference: whether they are in a period of transition or not, they undertake their learning project in a mix of formal and informal learning activities. Among people in transition with university degree, the rate participation in both formal and informal adult learning has reached comparable level, at more than 67%.

**Table 2: Participation to formal learning activities, initial education and transition (WALL, 2003)**

	Formal Learning			Informal Learning		
	Without Professional Transition	With Professional Transition	Total	Without Professional Transition	With Professional Transition	Total
Primary Educ.	8,5	13,3	9,0	63,3**	79,7**	64,9**
Secondary Education Incomplete	24,7***	40,0***	29,6**	74,4	76,7	75,2
Secondary Completed	27,3***	44,8***	34,5**	79,0	77,2	78,3
College Incomplete	41,2***	61,1***	51,4**	78,7	72,6	75,6
College Completed	44,4***	57,5***	51,0**	78,7	76,2	77,5
University Incomplete	43,2***	55,7***	49,1*	74,4	68,0	71,3
University Under-graduate	56,2***	67,1***	62,2**	72,2	73,1	72,7
University Post-graduate	53,0	68,5	61,0*	73,5	70,2	71,8
Total	33,6***	54,4***	42,4**	74,4	74,8	74,6

\*\*\* =.001; \*\*=.01; \*=.05

## 5. Conclusion

The different life-shift experiences are key to a critical understanding of the diverse recourses to active learning and of the conditions and meanings of various transition related learning practices.

What comes out of our observations?

- People who tend to go actively through migration or work-related transitions are those who have already experienced the use and exchange value of education.
- In contrast, those who are more remote from the school and formal education culture, or have been deprived of comprehensive initial education, will tend to adjust more passively to transition; unless they have access to social capital and are able to mobilize network to overcome social barriers to learning and thus better negotiate their life shift.
- Transitions or life crossroads, can offer a new space for a rupture in one's educational biography, space to overcome prior perception of education and of one's capacity. Yet such rupture, as we have observed among some of the participants, requires some kind of affirmative action, special peer support and new learning environment.
- In people's strategy to cope with risks associated with life transition, the active learning component seems critical. Thus it may very well be the socially constructed nature of adult learning that create discrimination between people in their attempt to manage actively their life course when it comes to a crossroad.

Although learning biographies puts us in contact with inspiring pathways, original combinations and great achievements, the active piloting of biographies is still closely associated to the general economy of lifelong learning which, in our society, tends to distribute learning resources and opportunities, throughout life course, in a very unequal manner.