

New European Learners? An analysis of the ‘trendsetter’ thesis

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Published in the *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2008

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Abstract

This paper draws on life history interviews with young adults in the UK to consider Manuela du Bois-Reymond’s claims about the increasing prevalence of ‘trendsetter learners’ across Europe. Du Bois-Reymond (2004) has argued that certain groups of young adults are at the forefront of developing new forms of learning in response to what they perceive to be the failings of formal education – namely the disjuncture between theory and practice within the education that they are offered and a lack of respect from many of the teachers with whom they come into contact. These young adults, she contends, are the ‘trendsetter learners’, creating youth cultural capital that helps them to realise self-determined ways of living and learning. In considering some of these claims, this paper draws on data from the ‘Young Graduates and Lifelong Learning’ project funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council.

Between September 2005 and January 2006, 90 in-depth life history interviews were conducted with graduates from six higher education institutions. Our findings suggest that the degree of autonomy, freedom and creativity in young people’s patterns of learning that underpin du Bois-Reymond’s analysis is over-stated. We argue that, while du Bois-Reymond’s work makes an important contribution to conceptualising the ways in which young Europeans engage with learning, her dichotomy between ‘trendsetter’ learners and their ‘disengaged’ counterparts overlooks: complexities inherent in this relationship, the social status attached to particular forms of more

traditional education and training, and the structuring nature of much workplace learning.

Introduction

This paper will explore the extent to which we can argue that there are now distinctive learning cultures emerging among young people across Europe. It will also provide a constructive critique of Manuela du Bois-Reymond's 'trendsetter learner' thesis, complexifying and adding nuance to her interesting contribution to contemporary debates over youth and education. The first part of this paper helps to contextualise some of du Bois Reymond's arguments by exploring current education and training policy in Europe. It then goes on to outline the trendsetter thesis, which du Bois-Reymond and colleagues have put forward in a few slightly adapted versions over the past nine years (du Bois Reymond 1998, 2000, 2004; Diepstraten et al. 2006). We then provide a brief summary of the ESRC-funded research project, 'Young Graduates and Lifelong Learning', which forms the basis of our critique of her work.

We argue that the trendsetter thesis is an interesting contribution to current debates about young people's learning cultures and makes some valuable observations about the ways in which young men and women take up different forms of learning in contemporary society. However, we go on to contend that the trendsetter thesis suffers from being over-generalised and lacking in necessary texturing and, contrary to du Bois Reymond's claims, young learners continue to be very influenced by the social status of formal educational institutions, in terms of the reputed quality of the education provided, and for more instrumental reasons (such as CV-building). Furthermore, we argue that much learning post-graduation is structured by the expectations of employers and the necessities of the workplace. Finally, we

suggest that some of the characteristics of the ‘trendsetter learners’ are perhaps explained more adequately in terms of theorists who provide a less upbeat account of recent changes to young people’s lives.

Background

European learning policy

One of the main drivers of du Bois Reymond’s work is her assertion that we currently lack an adequate theory that explains young people’s relationship to learning. While this may be contested by some youth researchers, it is certainly true that young people are frequently overlooked in theories of lifelong learning (which often concentrate on older adults), while theories of formal education, which obviously do place much more emphasis on younger learners, do not often engage with young people’s non-formal and informal learning (although Colley et al.’s (2003) recent work is a notable exception: it highlights effectively the non-formal learning that goes on within formal institutions). Certainly, at European level, a large amount of effort has been devoted, over recent years, to exploring the relationship between formal education, informal learning and lifelong learning (e.g. Chisholm et al., 2005).

Under the various European treaties, education policy has been explicitly reserved for national governments. While Article 128 of the Treaty of Rome limited the European Commission’s power to initiatives in the field of vocational training in support of economic policy measures, Article 235 ensured that member states remained responsible for education policy in line with the principle of subsidiarity – and this broad division of responsibility has been maintained in subsequent treaties. However, despite formal education remaining

outside the remit of European Union (EU) influence, some strong similarities are evident within the region, as nation states respond to similar global pressures. For example, in various European states, educational provision has been affected by: the weakening of the welfare state; de-regulation of markets; a shift towards market principles in service delivery; and an increasing emphasis upon individual responsibility for education and training (Hake, 1999; Tuschling and Engemann, 2006).

It is also the case that in the areas of vocational education and training, lifelong learning and higher education, the European Union has been able to take a much stronger lead as a result of the Lisbon Strategy (European Parliament, 2000) and the Bologna Process (Commission of the European Communities, 1999). The Lisbon Strategy aims to make the EU 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world' by 2010, through measures such as: encouraging the mobility (for both learning and working) of European citizens; creating an 'information society' for all; promoting employability through investment in citizens' knowledge and competences; and the adaptation of education and training to enable individuals to be offered tailored learning opportunities at all stages of life. The Bologna Process is an inter-governmental initiative which aims to create a European 'higher education area' by 2010, and to promote the European system of higher education worldwide. As a result of initiatives such as these, Martin Lawn has argued that a new 'European learning space' is being opened up, which stands 'in sharp contrast to the older, central roles played by organisations, statist jurisdictions, rigid borders and national sites' (2006: 272). In his analysis, this space is governed through a range of 'soft' devices such as networking, seminars, reviews and expert groups. Indeed, he argues that academics and experts, often through their associations, take on the mantle of new political actors.

Within this new space, high priority is given to non-formal and informal learning. Indeed, non-formal learning is seen by some European policymakers as an all round cure for the deficiencies of the formal education system in many states, which can: help young people to prepare for a knowledge society; lead to more equal opportunities; and develop citizenship (du Bois Reymond, 2004). The Lisbon Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, published in 2000, is explicit about some of these putative rewards, stating that: ‘Informal contexts provide an enormous learning reservoir and could be an important source of innovation for teaching and learning methods’ (Commission of the European Union 2003: 8). As Tuschling and Engemann have argued, within this policy discourse, ‘the centre of attention is no longer the curriculum that learners have to master, but their abilities to organise themselves and to perceive and use their circumstances as learning opportunities’ (2006: 458).

The ‘trendsetter learner’ thesis

Alongside this growing convergence in European learning policy are, some have argued, strong similarities in the ways in which young people across Europe are engaging with learning, and the ‘learning cultures’ that they are creating. For example: Brannen and Nilsen (2002) have explored the significant commonalities by gender and age in the educational careers of young people in the UK and Norway; Evans (2002) has suggested that ‘bounded agency’ characterises the ways in which young people from both Germany and the UK understand the educational and employment opportunities open to them; while Pohl and Walther (2007) have argued that young Europeans’ educational careers are, to a considerable extent, affected by the nature of welfare provision within their country. However, a key contributor to this debate - and one who has been widely cited across the disciplines of education, sociology and youth studies – is Manuela du Bois Reymond. Writing alone and in combination with a number of other youth researchers (e.g. du Bois Reymond 1998, 2000,

2004,; Diepstraten et al. 2006), she has been instrumental in developing new theoretical insights into how young Europeans are responding to the conditions of late modernity, and how they are approaching both education and learning. Her arguments draw on extensive empirical work in ten European regions: Denmark, east and west Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland, the UK, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Romania. On the basis of 280 biographical interviews with young people in these regions, she argues that strong commonalities are evident across most European countries.

Central to du Bois Reymond's thesis is her contention that educational institutions are no longer well-suited to the needs of the individuals who pass through them, nor the societies in which they are situated; as such, established educational institutions are losing their monopoly as providers of learning. She suggests that mass schooling has contributed to the destruction of productive learning and that education thus needs to be 'updated' in order to serve the needs of individuals and society. As one element of this updating, she argues that we are in need of a new theory of learning – one that puts more emphasis on relationships between different types of education and learning (formal, informal, non-formal and lifelong). Indeed, she maintains that current understandings of non-formal education, in particular, are often contradictory and somewhat paradoxical. The emphasis upon non-formal learning in the 1960s and 70s (related to the emancipatory aims of the adult education movement), together with the rise of neo-liberal theories of education in the 1980s, with their focus on economic competitiveness and the privatising of educational spaces, all mean, she argues, that discussions of new forms of learning are billed as empowering but, at the same time, signal the emergence of new forms of economic pressure and new obligations upon individuals to continue learning and retraining, in order to compete in contemporary labour markets.

A particularly important aspect of du Bois Reymond's theory is its emphasis on learning 'success stories' and the experiences of more privileged young people who, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Power et al., 2003; Proweller, 1998; Roker, 1993), rarely come under the youth researcher's gaze. Indeed, she maintains that much research has already focussed upon the under-privileged in contemporary society, and that we need now to pay attention to the 'new winners', those young people who have reacted to the crisis in formal education and the emergence of new sets of opportunities and pressures by developing what she calls 'new learning and life strategies' (2004: 194). Two ideal-types are suggested to illustrate this point. Firstly, she describes the 'disengaged learners' who engage with learning only when and because they have to, drifting through education and training with no strategic plan, and generally in a manner that is not to their own advantage. Considerably more attention is, however, paid to their counterparts, the 'trendsetter learners'. Trendsetter learners, du Bois Reymond argues, are characterised by the high degree of personal agency that they exhibit. They do not rely upon the formal education systems through which they must pass, although they make well make use of aspects of them. Rather they seek to mix their own blends from all available learning opportunities; they 'learn with intrinsic motivation and provide themselves with *flow learning* experiences', that is, experiences that are intrinsically rewarding and so provide their own motivation (2004: 193-4). Non-formal and informal learning contexts assume particular importance here. Trendsetter learners are also at the forefront of blending different aspects of their lives: understanding both work and leisure contexts as sites for learning, as well as blurring the boundaries between work and leisure. For these young people, the actual possession of knowledge, it is said, is becoming less important than creativity, talent and attitude, which form the basis of the ability to absorb and integrate whatever knowledge is necessary, as and when it is necessary (Diepstraten et al. 2006: 179).

In this analysis, one consequence of the new ways in which these ‘trendsetter learners’ engage with learning is a shift in the way that cultural capital is reproduced and passed on between generations. Indeed, du Bois Reymond argues that this increase in young people’s engagement with informal learning and independent knowledge acquisition increases the rate of turnover of cultural capital. She goes on to suggest that, for trendsetter learners, inherited cultural capital becomes increasingly devalued, while their blurring of work, leisure and learning in creative ways allows them to ‘realize self-determined ways of learning and living’ and, more importantly, develop ‘youth cultural capital’ (2004: 194-5). In this way, trendsetter learners are held to be breaking down and assuming control of their own life-course and realising what Beck (1992) and others have called ‘choice’ biographies. Moreover, du Bois Reymond argues that opportunities for young trendsetter learners from lower socio-economic classes are becoming greater than ever due to their positive engagement with strategic learning and the production of youth cultural capital which follows from this (du Bois Reymond 1998, 2000; Diepstraten et al. 2006).

This depiction of a ‘winner’s story’ is an important contribution to contemporary education discourse, which shifts the focus of youth researchers onto an often-neglected group: privileged young people with relatively successful ‘learning careers’. Du Bois Reymond’s series of hypotheses about the relationship between youth and learning in contemporary society also provides a useful theoretical framework to guide future work in this area. However, on the basis of our own research with young adults in the UK, we argue that her work fails to capture some of the ongoing inequalities evident even amongst generally privileged young people, and that her binary distinction between ‘disengaged’ and ‘trendsetter’ learners ignores some of the complexities inherent in young people’s engagement with different forms of learning. We shall next outline our own research project,

before drawing on this data to explore some of the strengths and weaknesses of du Bois Reymond's model.

The Young Graduates and Lifelong Learning Project

Between September 2005 and January 2006, 90 in-depth life story interviews were conducted with young adults who had graduated from six contrasting types of UK higher education institution (HEI) five years previously. The places of study were chosen for their position within a commonly perceived hierarchy of HEIs corresponding to their respective ages as independent institutions (an Oxbridge college, a college of the University of London, a 'redbrick' university, a 1960s campus university, a post-1992 university and a college of HE)ⁱ. To recruit graduates from these institutions, alumni databases were used to select a sample of 600 graduates (100 from each institution) who were of a similar age (mid-twenties) and who had passed through higher education at the same time (in most cases, graduating in 2000). The sample was selected to include individuals with a range of different characteristics (in terms of gender, ethnicity, geographical area of residence and subject studied at university). Direct mailings were sent to the graduates, asking them if they would be willing to take part in the research. The success of this method differed from institution to institution and, in cases where it was less successful, the sample was augmented through adverts posted on the Friends Reunited websiteⁱⁱ. In total, 15 graduates from each of the HEIs were interviewed.

The vast majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face – but 17 respondents (those living outside the UK or geographically very distant within the UK from our base, and those who were unable to attend an interview due to work constraints or disability) were interviewed by telephone using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) softwareⁱⁱⁱ. The

interviews were largely unstructured – to allow the young adults to tell their own stories in their own words – but were informed by a broad ‘topic guide’. Most interviews focused, at least to some extent, on the young adults’ experiences of higher education, employment and any education, training or other form of learning undertaken since leaving university. The interviews were also concerned to explore: the meanings that young adults attached to work, learning and leisure; the extent to which such pursuits overlapped; and the relative importance of these activities in their lives.

Although the sample was reasonably diverse in terms of the types of jobs respondents were employed in, their geographical location and social class background, it is likely that the methods used to recruit respondents – particularly the emphasis on self-selection – had some impact on the characteristics of the sample as a whole and thus the type of ‘life stories’ we were told. For example, it is likely that the sample over-represents those who considered themselves to have had reasonably successful careers to date, and under-represents those who had experienced more difficult trajectories into work. In the following discussion, respondents are all referred to using pseudonyms, and the institutions that they attended are only referred to by type.

Points of agreement: ‘blurring’ and ‘fishing’

One of du Bois Reymond’s most important contributions to debate in this area is her analysis of the ways in which some European young people, at least, innovatively ‘blur’ different parts of their lives (particularly with respect to work and leisure) and, in doing so, create new learning opportunities for themselves. For example, she argues that trendsetter learners ‘are not only marked by working to earn money, but also, if possible, by marketing their hobbies...these young people have created an intrinsic learning motivation for themselves

and make it fruitful for their leisure time and their future life course' (2004: 196). Amongst those who took part in the 'Young Graduates' project, a number did engage in forms of learning that did clearly blur boundaries between work and leisure. For some, such as Charles, leisure pursuits had generated more professionally-oriented opportunities such as management training:

I guess there's outside work and inside work, because, I'm also an Army Cadet Force (ACF) Instructor, and I'm in the Territorial Army. So I mean, through the ACF, one of the courses allowed you to, it was a senior instructor's course, but it allowed you to get an NVQ Level 3 in Introductory Management, which led to membership of the Institute of Learning and Management and that sort of stuff. (Charles, human resources manager, College of HE)

However, within our sample, the majority of the learning that blurred the boundaries between work and leisure was related to language acquisition – often motivated by a family or personal relationship as well as a professional interest in a country in which the language was used, as illustrated by this quotation from Daphne:

I'm now thinking of changing tack again and becoming a patent attorney ... But I have to, my second language has to be fluent so I'm actually looking for jobs in Germany at the moment, because my family's German, so I'm looking for jobs in Germany, somewhere I can get my German good and then train to be a patent attorney. (Daphne, PhD student, Redbrick)

It is possible that this tendency toward blurring could be seen as an inevitable outcome of the trendsetter learners' blending of all available opportunities and production of one's own 'flow' learning experiences, in line with du Bois Reymond's theory. However, it is important

to note that, within our sample, blurring tended to occur mainly with the acquisition of practical skills such as learning to drive and taking up new languages, which would seem to fit within a fairly traditional ‘active learner’ path, rather than that of a subset of groundbreaking learners.

A second related point of agreement arose in observing that nearly a quarter of our respondents referred to ‘fishing for’ or deliberately seeking out and taking all available opportunities for education or training (often with current or previous employers). This is another tendency that would be strongly associated with trendsetters, in their urge to maximise their learning opportunities. This section of our sample expressed a clear drive to engage with the competition in the labour marketplace, undertaking further education and training in order to improve their employability, as illustrated in the quotation from Leah, below:

...[my employer] didn’t require me to have [the qualification], they didn’t need me to have it, but if I wanted it then they were prepared to support me in it, but it was my choice, me fishing for it. I had to request it and I had to do the work, and pass, obviously, for them to keep to paying for it. (Leah, marketing manager, Campus)

In Cora’s case (HR manager, Campus), we see that the desire for further learning could be expressed both as part of a personal desire for self-improvement, pursued through engaging with the challenge of learning, and (much more directly) as an instrumental form of ‘fishing’ for CV points:

I’m about to start a Masters because I’ve been craving, yeah, I’m going to find some time from somewhere, because I’ve been craving going back to some formal learning with industry experts that I can admire.

I really went after doing learning that would give me a qualification, because it's currency, you know, when you go into the external market, not only are those courses more expensive but because they're recognised everywhere, you're immediately more attractive, so it was very calculated on my behalf.

However, as we will argue further below, it may be an over-statement to describe such 'fishing' as indicative of a new form of trendsetter learner. Instead, we would suggest that it may simply demonstrate a contemporary mode of engagement with the labour market in which employment is viewed as a contract, the rewards of which are taken to include opportunities for further learning and training (see also Lewis et al., 2002), while pursuing all available learning opportunities is seen primarily as a means of maintaining one's employability in a competitive marketplace.

Educational institutions and cultural capital

As indicated above, central to du Bois Reymond's conceptualisation of the learning done by young people in contemporary Europe is the assertion that formal educational institutions are losing their monopoly. She also argues that, as a result of the new forms of learning that are emerging in place of formal education, the cultural capital passed down through generations is losing its relevance; trendsetter learners from all social backgrounds now experience more open paths for the future. However, from our data on the types of learning our young adults were taking up on completion of their first degree, there was scant evidence of formal educational institutions losing their appeal. Indeed, as we have argued elsewhere (Brooks and Everett, 2008), many of our respondents went on to postgraduate study, maintaining a strong belief in the importance of certified qualifications from formal institutions. While some respondents did talk in very positive terms about the non-formal learning they had

undertaken since graduation – often from learning from colleagues within their place of work – considerable weight was placed on the importance of being able to document learning and thus include it on one’s CV (thus reflecting the UK government’s own emphasis on certificated learning (Wolf et al., 2006)). For this reason, learning through formal educational establishments was often preferred. As Caroline (personal assistant, Oxbridge), one of our respondents noted: ‘while I don’t go around collecting certificates, there’s a lot to be said for a piece of paper that says “I can do this”’.

It was also the case that the status of the institution was of considerable importance to a significant number of our young graduates. While this has been well-documented in relation to first degree study in both the UK (Reay et al., 2005; Pugsley, 2004) and France (Hartmann, 2007), our work with young adults has shown that the reputation of higher education institutions (and other providers of learning) continues to have considerable impact on choices about learning even after a first degree has been completed (Brooks, 2006). Almost a third of our sample explicitly stated that, in their decision-making processes about which institutions to attend for post-first degree learning, issues of status had been important. This was explained in terms of: gaining what was perceived to be a ‘better’ education; enhancing one’s self-esteem by attending a highly ranked institution; and improving one’s employability. Sue was typical of this group in her comments:

There aren’t a huge amount of places that do librarianship ... this might sound really snobbish, there are only about four places which are old universities which did it, and I had no intention of going to somewhere that wasn’t an old university. (Sue, Librarian, Oxbridge)

Alongside evidence of the enduring importance of formal institutions – among this sample, at least – was equally strong evidence of the impact of cultural capital on learning decisions. A large number of UK-based studies have demonstrated the ways in which family resources are brought into play in relation to compulsory education (Gewirtz et al., 1995), higher education (Reay et al, 2005) and even pre-school learning (Vincent and Ball, 2006), and these findings have been replicated in some wider comparative research within Europe (e.g. Rosado and David, 2006). In these studies, cultural capital has a clear bearing on the choices made by young people and, perhaps more importantly, their parents. For example, knowledge of the workings of educational markets has been shown to differ markedly by social position, as has confidence in dealing with educational professionals (Reay, 1998). Indeed, Pugsley makes a useful distinction between: ‘thrusting’ choosers, typically from families familiar with the HE field, with significant social capital to deploy; ‘trusting’ choosers – first generation university entrants with little knowledge of the HE market; and ‘trying’ choosers, who are located between these two extremes, having some level of awareness of the educational market. Furthermore, the degree of ‘social fit’ between a young person’s socio-economic background and the culture of a specific educational institution also has a bearing on decisions about learning. Archer (2006), for example, has shown how, for working class young women, decisions to stay on in post-compulsory education are often imbued with feelings of discomfort in relation to what is perceived to be the middle class nature of many universities and colleges. Such social differences were evident in our research, as well. Graduates from the two highest status institutions in our study, Oxbridge and London, were more likely than other respondents to: come from families of higher socio-economic status and higher parental educational attainment; have attended private secondary schools; and have gone on to academic postgraduate study. This suggests that social and cultural capital still plays a large role in decision-making processes – about formal education, at least – and that, even amongst

a sample of graduates (typically considered a privileged group), social background continues to affect future learning pathways. Thus, in contrast to some of the implications of du Bois Reymond's work, our findings support those who have pointed to the differing ways in which forms of capital are used within the graduate labour market and some of the risks associated with middle class careers. For example, Power et al. (2003) have shown how, amongst their middle class sample, transitions from university into work were not always straightforward. Moreover, Brown and Hesketh's (2004) analysis of the practices of graduate recruiters has demonstrated clearly the importance of 'personal capital' (defined as the combination of 'hard currencies' including credentials and work experience with 'soft currencies' such as charisma and appearance) in securing a place on a high status graduate training scheme. Our study indicates that differential access to resources can have a similar impact on young people's access to and take up of learning opportunities.

Restrictions on choice

Although the status of formal educational institutions was important for a considerable number of the young adults in our sample, for the majority of respondents reputation was not a key consideration in deciding what type of learning to pursue, or where to pursue it. However, this was not because of any disposition for 'biographical self-regulation' (Diepstraten et al. 2006: 180) and the desire to acquire knowledge independently of the formal education system (du Bois Reymond 2004: 198). Rather, for these young people, it was because they faced significantly restricted choices, because of their domestic circumstances (particularly commitments to partners, wider family and/or friends), the impact of their work context and/or, in a few cases, the cost of different learning options. For

example, several of our respondents described how they had limited their choice of education and training to opportunities available within close proximity to their home because of this kind of restriction, illustrated in this quotation from Derek:

I chose the College of Law in London simply because I was, my parents live in west London, I didn't have enough money to move out to elsewhere. I had toyed with the idea of going to the Oxford Institute ... just to see another part of the UK, but I just didn't have enough money so I thought I'll just commute from home. (Derek, solicitor, London)

While domestic circumstances often acted to restrict learning choices for a considerable number of the young people in our sample, so too, in many cases, did the circumstances of their work. Nearly all of our young graduates had undertaken some kind of work-related training since graduating. Around three quarters of the sample saw some further learning as having been required in the short to medium-term in order to establish or advance their career. Firstly, a quarter of the sample spoke directly of having undertaken further learning so as to specialise after gaining their first degree, in order to demonstrate more specific skills in an area in which they wished to enter employment. For example:

... after I'd been there nearly a year I thought, you know, I've had enough of this, I need to move on to the next stage, and I'd applied for curator jobs and I wasn't getting one so I, it was suggested to me what I needed to do was do an MA, and I did an MA in Medieval Studies at Bristol. (Francis, museum curator, London)

Secondly, a significant number studied for a postgraduate qualification in order to gain an edge in the graduate market (with some, but not total, overlap between the two groups). In some cases, in contrast to Francis's postgraduate study that was directed towards a particular career goal, the purpose of undertaking a postgraduate degree was expressed as being more generally that of securing distinction in an age of higher education massification:

...there are so many good people out there with degrees, who are all the same, and if you only have one degree, then employers would say, ah, this person has two, or this person has two and he's done this thing as well, which makes him stand out. And I feel there is so much pressure now for people to actually do that. (Carlton, solicitor and underwriter, Redbrick)

Finally, for a few of the young people, further education post-graduation was undertaken in order to compensate for feelings of inadequacy in relation to their first degree, again driven, to some extent, by an awareness of the competitiveness of the labour market:

Anyway, I'd also done a Masters in the meantime, in fact, an MSc in Health Psychology ... because I had a 2:2, I knew that, I had to go on and prove that I could do Higher Education. It was an awful, awful course, I hated every minute of it, it was, I knew I didn't actually need it for anything except to prove that I was capable of getting a 2:1 in my first degree. (Charles, human resources manager, College of HE)

Such responses as those given here are more evocative of Brown and Hesketh's (2004) 'wealth of talent' argument than of any sense of a new group of learners who are rejecting traditional paths of education and training in favour of their own blends of freely-chosen

learning. Brown and Hesketh contend that young people are facing increasing pressure to 'perform' their abilities, due to stiffer competition in the graduate labour market brought about by the massification of higher education. They feel compelled to maintain and improve their qualifications and skills bases and, more generally, to enhance their employability by continuing training and learning post-graduation, as well as building a portfolio of other skills and experiences, so as to round out their 'employable persona'. The data suggest that the young graduates in our study felt very similar pressures.

Furthermore, frequently the choice of the type of learning to pursue and the place of study were not in fact choices made by empowered graduates shaping their own learning careers, but were instead decisions taken by their employers (because they were funding the course and/or had prescribed what learning was necessary). In some cases this was very apparent to the respondent, as Raquel (research scientist, Campus) indicates, below.

The MSc was part of the NHS [graduate training scheme]. When you take the job they say you will be trained and you will do your MSc ... it's part and parcel, they pick the course.

In other cases, however, some respondents seemed to have internalised the notion that their employer would make all decisions about formal education and training for them. Derek, for example, had had no expectation that he would have any input into the type of work-related learning he pursued, or the training provider:

Derek: The chartered tax advisor course ... It's being provided by BPP, which is a professional education provider.

Interviewer: Is that your employer's choice, to do it with them, or was it yours?

Derek: That's a good question, actually. I think it's just that everybody else who has done it in the past has done it with BPP. (Derek, solicitor, London)

Even with graduates who stated having 'fished' for support for further learning (in terms of funding and time allowed off work in order to study), any success in this endeavour depended upon finding a supportive working environment. It was only in a very small number of cases that we found graduates who stated having changed employer because of a lack of such support.

This analysis of the ways in which our respondents were engaging with learning within the workplace, as well during full-time postgraduate degrees, provides further evidence to suggest that du Bois Reymond's theory overstates the degree to which young adults are able to exercise choice in relation to the education, training and other forms of learning they take up. As Furlong has argued, many young people do not in fact experience an abundance of choice in constructing their own 'learning biographies'; rather, their movement between jobs and areas of specialism represents an attempt to stay afloat in a world that offers little in the way of security and satisfaction (Furlong 2000: 133). Moreover, where the status of formal educational providers was declared not to be an issue by our young graduates, this was not because our learners has transcended the hierarchical structures of educational provision and decided to set their own trend, but rather because they had other priorities, in terms of family, friends, or very particular learning needs that curtailed their spectrum of choice.

Some scholars have argued that, within contemporary society, elite groups are able to operate more agency and choice and face fewer constraints than their less privileged peers. Indeed,

this assumption pervades much of du Bois Reymond's work. While the young adults involved in our research are not necessarily an 'elite' group (given that over a third of each cohort now goes on to higher education within the UK), they are certainly still among the more privileged within British society. Our data suggests, then, that even those in possession of a first degree face considerable restrictions on the decisions they make about further learning; graduates' 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson et al., 1996) may not necessarily be any wider than those of other young adults.

Rethinking the 'Trendsetters'

The young adults involved in our study are obviously not typical of their cohort in the UK, let alone young people across Europe more generally: all were in possession of at least a first degree (compared to around 30 per cent of 25-29 year-olds in the UK as a whole) and two-thirds had gone on to formal postgraduate study. Their relatively successful learning careers, to date, clearly do not fit the profile of the 'disengaged learner' as provided by du Bois Reymond. They do, however, constitute a useful group with which to test her hypotheses in relation to their counterparts, the 'trendsetter learners', particularly as they came from a range of different social backgrounds, grew up in different parts of the UK, attended different types of HEI and, even by the time they were interviewed (only five years after graduation), had different employment histories.

While we have argued that du Bois Reymond's work and that of her colleagues provides an important first step in starting to theorise the ways in which young Europeans are engaging with the 'new educational order'^{iv} (Field, 2006), on the basis of our interviews with British young adults, we suggest that the complex ways in which our respondents made their

decisions about future learning are not adequately explained by du Bois Reymond's two-fold distinction between 'disengaged' and 'trendsetter' learners. In explaining the 'trendsetter learner' thesis, she does point out that trendsetters and the disengaged are but ideal-types, with significant 'overlap' and 'all blends in between' also requiring the attention of youth researchers (2004: 194-5). However, apart from a few small asides to this end, her work focuses entirely upon the former ideal-type to the exclusion of any proper consideration of the blends, the disengaged, and the reasons for differences between these groups. Indeed, we suggest that the trendsetter/disengaged typology could usefully be developed in order to allow fuller consideration of its utility. This might be done by adding a temporal dimension to the question of learners' engagement; we might thereby speak of: the 'non-engaged', those who have never been keen on education, but have either fallen so far or else undertaken education instrumentally; the 'dis-engaged', those who have been turned off formal education by their experiences within it; the 're-engaged', those who had previously been put off formal education by their experiences but have subsequently rediscovered the value and/or the pleasures of education through subsequent experiences; and the 'ever-engaged', those who have always been keen on pursuing some forms of education, whatever their experiences with formal or informal education, and have managed to weave a learning path through the opportunities with which they have been presented. It is this latter group that would fall most comfortably within the 'trendsetter' bracket. This temporal dimension would then articulate more fully with other work on young people's educational decisions, which has pointed to the potential for considerable change over time in relation to learning (Reay, 2002). For example, Hodkinson et al. (1996) have highlighted different types of 'turning point' that can affect a young person's attitude towards education. Moreover, they argue that emphasis should be put on young people's learning *careers*, to account more adequately for changes over time. Similarly, Scanlon (2006) has pointed to the ways in which learner identities are often

renegotiated when young adults (who had negative school experiences) return to formal education.

Alongside greater recognition of the temporal dimension to learning careers, we suggest that it may be useful to consider the extent to which the characteristics displayed by trendsetter learners are consonant with other theories of late modern society. Here, we argue that both Rose (1999) and Brown and Hesketh (2004) may provide alternative – and less positive – interpretations of this group of young people. Rose has argued that in contemporary, neo-liberal governmental frameworks citizens come to be ‘governed through their freedom to choose’, as the conditions under which such freedoms are experienced are structured through the exercise of a variety of governmental discursive practices. We would suggest that du Bois Reymond intimates something of notion of ‘responsibilisation’ in speaking of the pressure to learn in a knowledge society and how trendsetter learners, in particular, take up this mantle with a pleasure in controlling their own biography. Secondly, and as discussed above, practices such as fishing and blurring relate strongly to Brown and Hesketh’s (2004, 152-156) understanding of the increasing pressures to maintain, and to perform through a particular narrative of self, employability in an era of a wealth of talent; demonstrating get-up-and-go and spinning extra-curricular activities into a narrative that acts as currency in an ‘economy of experience’ where formal qualifications are no longer always enough to compete effectively in the labour market. The individual in this setting becomes effectively an entrepreneur of the self, engaging ‘in a ceaseless work of training and retraining, skilling and reskilling’ within a life that becomes ‘a continuous economic capitalization of the self’ (Rose 1999: 160-1). Thus, by drawing on these wider bodies of work, we argue that the trendsetter learner could be understood as an ideal-type of the citizen reproduced as a ‘responsibilised’ entrepreneur, insofar as they adopt an optimal mindset by which to survive

in a competitive contemporary economy. They would, therefore, perhaps better be viewed as a product of a contemporary neoliberal mode of governmentality within knowledge economies rather than an ingredient of a more liberating and creative learning society.

Conclusion

This article has drawn on data from a UK-based study of young adults in their mid-20s to explore some of the claims made by du Bois Reymond and her colleagues in their influential work on young people's engagement with learning in late modern society. In particular, we have been concerned to assess the extent to which the concept of a 'trendsetter learner' can help explain the ways in which more privileged groups of young adults, often with relatively successful labour market positions, make decisions about the type of learning to pursue.

While data from our 90 young adults do show some support for aspects of du Bois Reymond's theory (such as the increasingly blurred nature of boundaries between learning, work and leisure), we have shown how, amongst our sample at least, formal educational institutions continued to have considerable hold even amongst those already in possession of a first degree. We have also shown how differences in familial cultural capital continued to be played out in decisions about further learning (even amongst our all-graduate sample), and that choices about learning were restricted in significant ways by: personal commitments, a desire to obtain a competitive edge in a congested labour market, and the priorities and preferences of one's employers. More specifically, we have suggested that some of the characteristics associated with the trendsetter learner are congruent with less up-beat assessments of change in contemporary society. Indeed, Rose's 'responsibilised citizens' and Brown and Hesketh's 'Players' (those young adults who understand employability as a positional game and take steps to maximise their advantage relative to others) both offer

alternative readings of young people's engagement with learning in early adulthood. Clearly our data is drawn exclusively from young people in the UK and, as such, may not be representative of learners across Europe. However, as Roberts (2003) and Walker (2007) have both shown, there are important commonalities between young people in Eastern and Western Europe as they make the transition to adulthood. We suggest that further development of the trendsetter learner thesis may be a worthy enterprise for youth researchers across the continent.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the ESRC for funding the research (award number: RES-000-22-0662) and the young graduates who generously gave up their time to be interviewed.

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ⁱ Although this hierarchy of types can be argued to be less and less representative of the actual quality of education received as institutions develop differing strengths in research and teaching in various disciplines, it is one which is still widely accepted as being representative of social and educational status in UK public discourse.

ⁱⁱ 'Friends Reunited' is a UK-based website that allows registered members to post information about themselves, which then is grouped by institutions (school, college and university) attended. Fee-paying subscribers can then access stored details so as to make contact with other registered members.

ⁱⁱⁱ VoIP software (in this case, Skype) allows calls to be made from computer to computer, or computer to phone, using the internet. The compatible recording software (in this case, Skylook) allowed the interviews to be stored as MP3 files for transcription.

^{iv} By this, Field means the various ways in which education and training has had to be reconfigured to respond to new challenges such as: globalisation, the impact of ICTs, the increased social and economic importance of knowledge and the transformation of work in modern society.