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Biographical work in a counselling situation

Biographies of people living in the era of postmodernism go beyond the established patterns and are no longer as predictable as before. A human being, unable to act on the basis of proven scenarios, is increasingly looking for professional help in dealing with everyday life and designing his/her biography. The counselling situation consists in helping a person in the search for their own identity, assuming that they are actively involved in the process of seeking advice. The aim of this article is to express my personal andragogical reflection on the biographical work performed by the person seeking advice in the counselling situation, with reference to the concept of the biographical work of Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, as well as the concept of the trajectory of Gerhard Riemann and Fritz Schütze.

Keywords: biography, biographical work, counselling situation, trajectory, learning

Since the second half of the last century, the Polish and international researchers have noted that, following the changes specific to postmodernism, human life patterns have diversified – biographies of people are no longer as predictable as before; they go beyond the existing patterns and do not allow acting on proven scenarios. “Biography is now increasingly seen as an identity project” (Dubas, 2017, p. 66), a choice of ad hoc, temporary identity, valid only for some time, available to the individual in pluralistic culture (Malewski, 2003). Choosing among alternative options to live one’s own life is the opportunity for a modern human being to learn and develop. At the same time, however, it brings uncertainty, confusion, a sense of fear and loss of security. Therefore, more and more people are looking for professional help in dealing with everyday life, when making important life decisions, when confronting biographical challenges and crises. Hence the

“process of «analyzing» biographical experience has become the norm in therapeutic culture in cooperation with professionals, and not in direct relationships in the contexts of natural support, in which almost everyone is involved” (Piorunek, 2010, p. 8).

This also explains why various counselling services have developed.

Today counselling is a form of assistance to both resourceful people who face alternative choices, difficult decisions, or experience some stressful life situations,

and to those who are helpless, experience crises or face the necessity of undertaking tasks that go beyond their capabilities (Kargulowa, 2010a, 2010b). The task of counselling is to accompany people at various stages of their biography and in its different aspects. Therefore, the term “biographical counselling” is being increasingly used, which seems to be the most adequate way “to reflect its holistic lifelong character” (Piorunek, 2009, p. 46; cf. Matthews, 2017). Marcin Szumigraj argues, however, that “the idea of biographical counselling is not homogeneous” (Szumigraj, 2010, p. 43; see also Kargulowa, 2010b), because it embraces not only the reconstructing of possible biographical patterns (Szumigraj, 2010), and searching for answers to the most important human questions posed at the time of late modernity: What to do? How to act? Who to be? (see Giddens, 2010), but also resolving identity crises that require solutions to the following questions: Who am I now? Who do I want to be? What identity should I choose? (Szumigraj, 2009). These questions are always asked in connection with the reflection on one’s own biography, which “is immanently connected to identity. Biography and identity form a complementary system: identity crisis evokes biography, self-reflection modernizes the identity” (Dubas, 2017, p. 66).

The article is the result of the andragogical reflection on the biographical work undertaken by the people seeking advice in the counselling situation. It draws on the concept of biographical work advanced by Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, as well as the concept of trajectory coined by Gerhard Riemann and Fritz Schütze. Although the assumptions of both theories derive from the experiences of chronic illness, they can also form the basis for reflection on other life problems that fall within the scope of counselling activities. In the counselling situation, the biography of the person seeking help is analysed, which in turn is a stimulus to take up the biographical work, sometimes superficial and shallow, and sometimes deeper, but not in the psychoanalytic, Freudian sense. Biographical work performed in cooperation with a counsellor can inspire the person to reconstruct the course of their life, enabling the complete exit from the trajectory or weakening the trajectory potential.

Biographical work and trajectory of suffering – theoretical assumptions

Theoretical decisions adopted on the basis of anthropology and sociology of illness provide interesting grounds for the analysis of various aspects of life experiences that are part of the biography of a human being and go beyond the vital processes that determine his/her somatic state. The concepts of dying trajectory (Glaser & Strauss, 1968) and illness trajectory (Corbin & Strauss, 1985), developed by Strauss and his colleagues, emphasize the active role of patients, their relatives and medical personnel in shaping the course of illness by not only controlling the emerging symptoms and taking actions aimed at staying alive, but also the use of

“normalization strategies”. These strategies are aimed at enabling the patient to function fairly satisfactorily (i.e. “normal” life) despite the restrictions resulting from the loss of health. “The main outline of the concept of chronic illness as a trajectory is that it places emphasis on the agency of the ill person and his/her social environment” (Skrzypek, 2011, p. 176), which consists in taking actions to overcome difficulties and limitations, as well as striving to maintain “normality” in everyday functioning. During the trajectory, the feeling of lack of control over the course of events clashes “with attempts to structure and order the existing situation by creating own project of illness trajectory” (Skrzypek, 2011, p. 177)¹.

The concept of chronic illness as a trajectory assumes the activity of people in the face of suffering. This assumption was particularly taken into account by Corbin and Strauss (1985, 1988), who described three types of psychological work undertaken by a chronically ill person and those from his/her immediate surroundings: illness work, everyday life work and biographical work (Corbin & Strauss, 1985, p. 224; cf. Giddens, 2005, p. 184). The first of them is closely related to the process of undergoing diagnostic tests and medical regimes associated with treatment, the second to fulfilment of daily tasks in new circumstances, and the third emphasizes the need for the patients to “include” the experience of illness in their entire biography, as it has “biographical consequences” (Corbin & Strauss, 1985, p. 231). To do this work, they make an effort to reconstruct their biography and try to give it a new shape, taking into account certain limitations and new circumstances. All the undertaken procedures require a lot of mental and emotional effort, as well as full mobilization of the body, and at the same time may prove to be a fragile structure in the face of unforeseeable events.

The difficult biographical work of “rebuilding life” (Corbin & Strauss, 1988, p. 68) is continued by launching four processes: contextualizing, coming to terms, reconstituting identity and biographical recasting (Corbin & Strauss, 1988; see also Skrzypek, 2011). Through contextualizing, the person includes illness in his/her life story and constantly determines which elements of his/her biography and/or identity have been lost due to illness, and which are present and can be developed despite the illness. This process in the biographical work allows us to maintain the continuity of the biography, i.e. the feeling that we are still the same person. The second of these processes is coming to terms with the illness, which means reaching a certain level of understanding and accepting the biographical consequences of the trajectory. In turn, identity reconstruction consists in reintegrating the identity and constructing a new concept of the self, while maintaining a sense of personal integrity despite the new circumstances. The last of the processes in the biographical work is the reformulation of the biography, consisting in determining its new direction. A chronic somatic illness is usually a long-term experience that is hardly

¹ A similar mental state can evoke a problem situation not caused by illness, but causing concern, uncertainty, loss of sense of agency, helplessness, suffering. It may result either in passive submission or in attempting to deal with it.

susceptible to change; it is an insoluble problem which, at the same time, provokes the search for strategies of dealing with it. Going through or solving life problems, which are the essence of counselling activities, may – although they do not have to – be similar to the work on a chronic illness.

Riemann and Schütze referred to the ideas of Strauss and colleagues and proposed a generalization of the concept of trajectory, which in their opinion, entailed “chaotic social processes and suffering processes” (Riemann & Schütze, 1992, p. 92). The authors assumed that in the course of human life there are both periods characterized by biographical order, as well as those marked by chaos and loss of control that are conditioned and externally controlled. Such a generalization of the concept of trajectory is already very close to counselling analyses of the course of life, both those proposed by Donald Super (1972), concerning the construction of a career, as well as those undertaken by modern researchers. They are not only related to human health, but also to other areas of life (e.g. education, professional work). The scholars assume that the biography may consist of four process structures:

- 1) biographical schemas of activity, characterized by intentional planning of the course of life and implementation of plans,
- 2) institutional patterns of the course of life, including actions aimed at fulfilling social expectations or institutional obligations,
- 3) metamorphoses of the biographical identity,
- 4) trajectories, characterized by the loss of control over one's own life, being influenced by external forces independent of one's intentions, as well as suffering (Riemann & Schütze, 1992; Schütze, 1997; see also Prawda, 1989; Rokuszewska-Pawełek, 1996; Kaźmierska & Waniek, 2020).

Referring to theoretical decisions of Strauss and his colleagues, Riemann and Schütze (1992) asked the question: does one begin working on the trajectory from the moment it emerges and continues the work at every stage of its duration? Ultimately, they decided that the trajectory applied to the situation in which a person feels that he/she is “pushed” or even controlled by external forces that remained beyond his ability to take control over them. In counselling terms, we can talk about a problem situation in which a person has found him/herself and has exhausted the available strategies to deal with it, and so the approach is very similar. It is then that he/she feels alienation, a sense of maladjustment to everyday reality, deepening loss of trust in other people, and even in him/herself. “The social and biographical process of the trajectory is characterized by the experience of increasing pain and increasing suffering deprived of a way out” (Schütze, 1997, p. 21). Paradoxically, however, although the trajectory of suffering is characteristically chaotic, its course maintains a structural order. The following stages can be distinguished: accumulation of the trajectory potential, crossing the borders between intentional and conditioned mental state, achieving a new, unstable balance of everyday life, collapse of self-orientation, attempts to rationalize and get over the trajectory, practical work

on the trajectory, and gaining control over it or escaping from it (Riemann & Schütze, 1992). Depending on the sources, the process of freeing ourselves from the feeling of being pushed by external forces can take various forms: freeing oneself from the trajectory by extinguishing it (e.g. successful treatment), deliberate elimination of the trajectory potential (e.g. decision to divorce), systematic ordering of the situation in which a person must live, and organizing his/her life anew (e.g. undertaking a new activity after unforeseen dismissal from work, developing mechanisms of functioning in the case of a chronic disease) (Kaźmierska & Waniek, 2020).

Both in the concept of the biographical work of Corbin and Strauss, as well as in the concept of the trajectory of suffering by Riemann and Schütze, human actions aimed at explaining, interpreting the processes of suffering, looking at them from a different perspective, including them in one's own biography and attempting to give it a new shape. However, the moment of starting such work is treated differently by the researchers. The former concept assumes that a person undertakes it along the whole trajectory. The authors of the latter one assume that defining the situation and redefining the biography in the context of trajectory are undertaken – if at all – only in the final phase of being overwhelmed by external forces, after experiencing breakdowns and making numerous attempts to achieve balance in everyday life (cf. Skrzypek, 2011). Riemann and Schütze claim that “the overwhelming and prolonged process of suffering opens up for the individual the chance of systematic reflection, (...) the opportunity to develop the biographical work and creativity (Riemann & Schütze, 1992, p. 99). Actions taken can take the form of work on the trajectory, i.e. “the individual initiates the biographical scheme of action aimed at controlling the dynamics of trajectory” (Riemann & Schütze, 1992, p. 106) or escaping from it. Elimination of the trajectory potential through complete reconstruction of the life situation includes “the biographical work on one's personal development” (Riemann & Schütze, 1992, p. 106). It is worth emphasizing that undertaking work on slowing down, inhibiting or stopping the dynamics of trajectory is fostered by adequate social support provided to a person struggling with the trajectory by professionals, people also burdened with the trajectory or (which may be surprising) random laymen (Riemann & Schütze, 1992; Kargulowa, 2010a). It is important here to create a new reality in which one has to live and to include oneself and one's biography in this reality. This happens, among others, by telling life stories, and thus (re)constructing an autobiographical narrative. “Narrative is thus the most elementary activity of the biographical work” (Kaźmierska & Waniek, 2020, p. 16) or “the first stage of the biographical work to restore identity” (Betts, Griffiths, Schütze, & Straus, 2008, p. 25). Biographical work, including the (re)construction of a biographical story, can occur in a relationship with a professional in a counselling situation (cf. Duarte, 2014). Referring to the concept of the biographical work of Corbin and Strauss in the context of counselling practice, it is worth noting that its highlighted aspects relate to solving various crises and life problems undertaken in the relationship with the counsellor. Therefore, it is worth

trying to apply this concept to the analysis of the counselling situation (see also Betts et al., 2008), similarly to Kargulowa (2010a), who used the concept of Schütze's trajectory of suffering to analyse the counselling aspects of the position in which the characters of the documentary film "Killer from the school bench" had found themselves.

Biographical work in a counselling situation

Alicja Kargulowa understands the counselling situation as the one,

"in which a person seeks the help of the counsellor, unable to deal with the problem he/she is experiencing. This situation may well be constructed in relation to a professional counsellor employed in a given clinic, as well as incidentally, in informal circumstances of everyday life" (Kargulowa, 2012, p. 141–142).

The counselling situation is based on a joint analysis of the problem described by the person seeking advice in the context of his/her biography from three perspectives: past, present and future. The modern counsellor is not identified with the omniscient expert who knows and gives solutions to all problems. In fact, the person seeking advice is a greater expert, because he/she has the status of a "biography holder" or a "carrier" of a story about his/her life (see Schütze, 2012, p. 153). This reduces the power imbalance between the counsellor/specialist and the person seeking advice (Barker, 2008). The counsellor's task is to create opportunities and conditions for the counselees to analyse their life experiences and use their own resources, empathically accompanying them in giving meanings to these experiences, creating space for their explanation and interpretation, and finally supporting them in opening to change (Kargulowa, 2012). In other words, their job is to help the counselees to find their own identity (Kargulowa, 2010b; see also Malewski, 2003).

"Analysis and self-analysis of the biography is not only to help the *homo consultants* understand that he is responsible for his life, that he should be a counsellor himself, but also to open him to the opportunity to make the necessary modifications in his life, suggest to him that he can achieve success, if he only «wanted to want»" (Kargulowa, 2019, p. 93).

Therefore, the counsellor is responsible for supporting the person seeking advice in performing his biographical work on the basis of his own resources and working methods available to the counsellor. The biographical work performed by the person seeking advice, which takes place as part of his/her use of the assistance offer, has three stages: before participating in the counselling situation, when disorientation and a sense of confusion build up, and then the decision to seek help is made; during the counselling process, i.e. by establishing the relationship with

the counsellor; and after using the help of the counsellor. Asking the counsellor for help when a person struggling with the crisis or trajectory should be considered an important moment. This person has already performed some biographical work alone or with the participation of significant people, and as a result decided to use the help of a professional. Therefore, he feels the need for change, and at the same time is aware that he does not have the resources himself to develop a solution and introduce this change (Kargulowa, 2012). Since he has performed some biographical work and is seeking advice, he may have two kinds of feelings. He may have the feeling of personal failure, helplessness, loss of self-confidence – after all, he was unable to face the problem himself. However, on the other hand, asking the counsellor for help may be a sign of a positive result of his biographical work, performed alone or with the participation of a non-professional counsellor. Asking for advice, he shows resourcefulness, agency and readiness to further work – he looks for help, realizing that he (alone or with his relatives) is not able to overcome the difficulties experienced or wants to consult the independently developed solutions with a professional. The attitude of the person seeking advice towards the counselling situation, the type of relationship established with the counsellor and involvement in the assistance process will affect the course and result of the biographical work he performs.

The contextualizing process, as one of the elements of the biographical work, which consists in the integration of the experienced problem with the entire biography, plays an important role in constructing the “architecture” of the counselling situation. The above authors list the following goals that should be achieved here: understanding that a given problem is an integral part of one’s life; determining what has still retained a value in relation to the crisis and what has lost it; defining one’s own limitations resulting from what happened; identifying possible alternative solutions and strategies for managing future life (Betts et al., 2008, p. 17; see also Kaja, 1980).

The second of the processes included in the biographical work is coming to terms with the problem, or rather accepting its biographical consequences, which, according to the authors, consists of: learning the facts and mechanisms related to the problem being experienced and accepting new living conditions, determining the impact of this event on people in the surroundings, in particular members of the immediate family (Betts et al., 2008, p. 18). Because personal life experiences are influenced by various cultural and social factors and mechanisms, and the meanings given to them are often related to the meanings assigned to them by other people or social groups, their resolving or coming to terms with them is so important. “Unsolved” problems, along with the spiral of their social consequences, may cause further difficulties, resulting in an increase in the impact of the trajectory on the entire personal biography, but also the family biography (see Kuryś-Szyncel, 2017), which has been described in literature as a “cumulative mess” (Betts

et al., 2008, p. 18)². That is why it is so important in the counselling situation not only to integrate the effects of new life circumstances with the entire biography, but also to determine their (possible) biographical consequences in many dimensions, to be able to plan optimal corrective actions and build motivation to take them.

Magdalena Piorunek points out that

“the individualization of life as a characteristic feature of postmodernism is expressed, among others, in the necessity to make decisions about the present and future, without being able to refer to traditional biographical patterns from their own functioning environment. Everyone must re-arrange their lives according to their own rules of the game, according to their individual choices” (Piorunek, 2009, p. 33).

This is a difficult task, burdened with the feeling of uncertainty, insecurity and risk. It seems even more difficult from the perspective of life problems or crises, which Anthony Giddens called “groundbreaking events” (Giddens, 2010, p. 249), for which a disruption of the sense of identity is characteristic. In assistance situations, of which counselling is part, the person in crisis can – thanks to the meeting with a mindful and empathic expert – transform his experience, reinterpret the trajectory of suffering and reconstruct his/her identity. Identity reconstruction undertaken in the biographical work, includes the redefinition of “damaged” personality traits, identity and/or body parts, change in value orientation, building a “new” identity while maintaining a sense of personal integrity, and changing the biographical orientation (Corbin & Strauss, 1988). Identity reconstruction will involve answering the following question: Who can I be in connection with the changes that have taken place in my life?³

The last of the biographical work processes according to Corbin and Strauss is the reformulation of the biography, and thus the work on the flexible, yet stable life story and identity. The reworked story of one’s life includes the final assessment of limitations, as well as the opportunities to plan one’s further course of life. In the narrative, the individual performs a processual reconstruction of life experiences (Hermanns, 1987, p. 50), although he/she is not always fully ready to face them. Therefore, there is a risk that a person who begins to tell the story of his/her life during the meeting with the counsellor will leave the counselling situation in a worse condition than when he/she came for counselling (Barker, 2008), and may even break up the counselling relationship (Egan, 2005). And this does not have to be the consequence of incompetent help, but precisely the result of the analysis

² For example, lack of work leads to a reduction or lack of financial resources, which in turn can be the basis for conflicts and emotional tensions in the family, and even lead to its breakup.

³ For example, after the acquisition of physical disability, a dancer may state that she will not be able to dance professionally, but will fulfill herself as a choreographer (Betts et al., 2008, p. 18); parting with a spouse who is addicted to alcohol while supporting the family may motivate a woman to undertake a professional and / or educational activity and strengthen her sense of agency.

of biographical experiences based on recalling crises, unpleasant events, trajectories and the attempt to confront them again, ending with the creation of an unpleasant, wounding autobiographical narrative. According to Giddens, “the autobiography is not a mere chronicle of past events, but the interference with the past to make corrections” (Giddens, 2010, p. 103). Metaphorically, it can be said that in the counselling situation, the door may open to certain memories that are difficult to close again, so that they can be opened and closed at will in the future. Therefore, the persons seeking advice can break the counselling contact, not counting for the positive effects of meetings with the counsellor (see Egan, 2005). Entrapment in the narrative, i.e. one way of perceiving oneself, the world and one’s own biography, may block getting out of the crisis. In contrast, “the flexibility of the narrative allows to construct alternative visions of oneself and one’s life” (Mazurek, 2019, p. 97). Learning is conducive to creating flexible narratives. Counselling understood as “removing difficulties, as well as undertaking supporting and pro-development activities, which optimize the functioning of the individuals and increase their resourcefulness” (Podgórný & Podgórna, 2015, p. 39), can be considered as the space for exploiting the potential and personality resources as part of learning processes launched in the counselling situation (see Minta, 2009; Kargulowa, 2012; Kławsuń-Zduńczyk, 2014).

Competencies useful in the biographical work in the counselling situation

“The meeting of the assisted person (s) and the assisting person (s) takes place at a specific time and place of their biographical experience, which sets a specific framework for interactions” (Piorunek, 2018, p. 49). Each party brings the wealth of biographical experience, but also certain competencies, personality traits and psycho-developmental features. Therefore, it is worth noting that the person asking for advice has some resources significant for his/her participation in the counselling situation. In the perspective adopted here, biographicity and biographical competence, reflectiveness and narrative competencies will be important. According to adult education researchers, the aforementioned resources form the basis for such adult learning, which is referred to as biographical learning, narrative learning, and existential learning.

The term “biographicity” has been popularized by Peter Alheit, who understands it as human competence enabling him/her to refer to “already formed biographical sense structures of further actions and interpretations” (Alheit, 2015, p. 30). Biographicity “means the mechanism of personal self-formation manifesting itself as the learning ability conducive to redefinitions and modifications of one’s own identity, undertaken by searching for the possibility of change inherent in one’s own biography (...) on the basis of the process of in-depth self-reflection, as well

as externally directed reflection (...) on life experiences extracted from autobiographical memory through the narrative”, explains Elżbieta Dubas (2017, p. 80–81). In the counselling situation, the counsellor can be a person initiating the self-reflection and autobiographical narrative of the person seeking advice, and thanks to his/her biographical resources he/she can be an active individual participating in the project of seeking and creating one’s own identity.

Biographicity is closely related to human reflexivity, broadly understood as the ability to reflect, the ability to think critically, the reflection on one’s own life experiences and autobiography, biographies of others, global events, etc. Reflection is also needed to create the autobiographical and identity narrative. Autobiographical reflexivity can be understood as

“the ability to learn from the experiences contained in one’s own biography, as well as in the biographies of other people. It is also the ability to learn from experiences when they are currently happening, which means seeing their importance for current and future life from the perspective of the present” (Dubas, 2017, p. 71).

The use of self-awareness and reflexivity, as well as developing these competencies is important in the counselling situation, because it favours independent viewing of one’s own life and seeking solutions to life problems. Limited reflexivity may constitute a barrier in this respect, and even result in becoming addicted to the help of a professional counsellor or other types of counselling assistance offered by popular culture, favouring the emergence of “a new type of *homo consultans* – counselling-addicted person” (Kargulowa, 2019, p. 93).

The last of the personal competencies I distinguished, conducive to the performance of the biographical work in the counselling situation, are the narrative competencies. Ivor Goodson and Scherto Gill (2011) emphasize that individual narrative capacity is deeply rooted in culture and social forces, including among others ethnicity, race, social class, profession, and at the same time is possible to develop in the course of life. Everyone has a life history and in some way relates it. Therefore, “(...) our life story is a lot more than just a story – it might hold a series of crucial clues as to how we act and live” (Goodson, 2013, p. 63). In the course of our lives, we accumulate experience and at the same time enrich the repertoire and content of the narratives. Narrative capital help people set the direction for further actions and development, allowing a flexible response to experienced transitions and critical events (Goodson, 2013, p. 63; see also Mazurek, 2018, p. 95). The low narrative capital combined with the low level of reflexivity makes it difficult to change the perspective and makes it impossible to modify the narrative in which a person explains and tries to understand the processes taking place in the world. This, in turn, can block adaptation to changing living conditions in certain circumstances. By undertaking to overcome these obstacles, the person seeking advice can – with the help of the counsellor – work out the view on a given problem from a new

perspective and create a new narrative. It will be a sign of the performance of the biographical work that is needed to integrate the experiences that are the subject of counselling assistance with one's entire biography and to develop a new project of oneself and one's life.

Summary

Due to the dynamic changes characteristic of postmodernism, more and more people experience difficulties in designing their own biographies and (re)constructing their identity. They seek help both in the immediate vicinity and with professional counsellors. In particular, this applies to persons who are confronted with critical events in their biography that have initiated the trajectory of existential suffering. Nowadays, contemporary counselling consists in supporting the persons seeking advice by accompanying them in analysing and interpreting their current biography, as well as helping them discover "unexperienced life" or "surplus content" (Minta, 2009, p. 230) and setting future courses of life.

Referring to the concept of Corbin and Strauss, it can be assumed that a person participating in counselling performs complex biographical work. Its goal is to develop a new story about one's life, a story containing the assessment of limitations associated with the crisis experienced, as well as outlining the future prospect. By performing the biographical work in contact with the counsellor, a person can not only cope with the problem experienced, develop a solution, obtain therapeutic benefit, but also develop their competencies necessary to deal with subsequent crises. In this context, the counselling situation also becomes the learning situation. A reflective and attentive counsellor can help the counselees develop competencies that are particularly relevant to biographical work. In this case, the result of biographical work will not only be a solution of a specific life problem, but also a development of narrative capital and an increase in the sense of agency, autonomy and responsibility.

The above considerations indicate the importance of preparing a person to perform biographical work. Learning in this field begins already in childhood and it is a lifelong process. Supporting this type of learning involves creating the conditions for storytelling, as well as analysing, interpreting and comparing life stories. It can take place as a part of formal and non-formal education, including biographical didactics (see Czerniawska, 2004). It can also occur in everyday life through informal and coincidental learning.

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