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Learning from European Lives: An Introduction to the LEuLiv Project

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to introduce the Erasmus+ project Learning from European Lives (LEuLiv). This project is unique in its partnerships (Germany, Poland, Slovenia and Lithuania), the combination of diversity and synergy in the project's concept and the fact that it encompasses four dimensions of biographical learning: the personal, inter-personal, social/societal and transcultural. Students from a variety of different academic and professional backgrounds in the partnership countries will learn the theoretical basis of biographical exploration with a focus on autobiographical memories as a resource in the present and conduct an interview with an older person (aged 60 or older). Project results include the creation of teaching manuals and innovative learning programs as well as a multi-lingual, multicultural biographical databank with 80 plus interviews to be used by the participating partners for future research and course development.

Keywords: biographical learning, autobiographical memories, transformational learning, LEuLiv project.

Article received: 28.08.2025; accepted: 23.10.2025.

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https://doi.org/10.18778/2450-4491.21.11

Uczenie się z doświadczeń życiowych mieszkańców Europy. Wprowadzenie do projektu LEuLiv

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie projektu Erasmus+ „Learning from European Lives" (LEuLiv). Projekt ten jest wyjątkowy ze względu na partnerstwo obejmujące Niemcy, Polskę, Słowenię i Litwę, a także na połączenie różnych wymiarów uczenia się biograficznego: osobistego, interpersonalnego, społecznego oraz transkulturowego. Studenci z krajów partnerskich, reprezentujący zróżnicowane środowiska akademickie i doświadczenia zawodowe, w ramach projektu poznają teoretyczne podstawy badań biograficznych, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem pamięci autobiograficznej jako zasobu wykorzystywanego w teraźniejszości. Przeprowadzą także wywiady z osobami starszymi (w wieku 60 lat i więcej). Rezultaty projektu obejmują opracowanie podręczników dydaktycznych i innowacyjnych programów kształcenia, a także stworzenie wielojęzycznej, wielokulturowej bazy danych biografii zawierającej ponad 80 wywiadów, która będzie wykorzystywana przez instytucje partnerskie w przyszłych badaniach oraz przy projektowaniu programów nauczania.

Słowa kluczowe: uczenie biograficzne, pamięć autobiograficzna, uczenie transformacyjne, projekt LEuLiv.

Introduction – Learning from European Lives

Learning from European Lives (LEuLiv) is an EU program Erasmus+ funded project under the direction of the University of Education in Karlsruhe Germany in which four additional European universities are participating: University of Lodz, Poland; WSB University, Dabrowa Gornicza, Poland; Alma Mater Europaea University, Maribor, Slovenia and Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania. The main goal of the project is the promotion of biographical learning within Europe through the creation and implementation of innovative learning programs to train a broad range of students and professionals. Participating students in all four project countries will learn the theoretical basis of biographical exploration, conduct a narrative biographical interview with an older person aged 60 or older, be guided in the actual interview process and given the opportunity to reflect on their learning process. Project results include detailed learning manuals from each partner as well as a bilingual (original language and English) biographical data bank with 80+ interviews to be accessed by the participating partners for further research and course development.

The project supports the general objectives of the Erasmus+ program, to "support, through lifelong learning, the educational, professional and personal development of people in education, training youth and sport in Europe and beyond thereby contributing to sustainable growth, quality jobs and social cohesion, to driving innovation, and to strengthening European identity and active citizenship" (European Commission 2024: 6). The project is unique in its partnerships and learning potential.

It directly addresses the needs of an ageing Europe and could provide valuable information for program development in relation to the different contexts and target groups of all partners.

The project began in November 2024, and will run for three years. The implementation will be divided into four phases:

- Phase 1: Coordinated design of country and context specific approaches.

In the first phase of the project partners developed their own approaches based on the needs of their learners and target groups and presented their ideas at the group meeting near the end of this phase. The project´s mixed methodology not only allows for a more precise focus on specific target learners, but also allows to reflect on cultural diversity, relationality and the location-dependence (or independence) of science (Engel et.al. 2021, Ivanova, Aytekin, Epp 2021). Phase duration: November 1, 2024 – March 31, 2025.

- Phase 2: Implementation of learning programs, guiding interviews, interview transcription and initial analysis.

This phase is the longest of the project and includes several tasks: 1. Teaching students the theoretical basis of biographical exploration and guiding them in the actual interview process. Planned are at least 20 interviews per partner country (80 plus in total). 2. Monitoring learning – based on their preparation, what do students expect to learn by doing the interviews? How did they experience the actual interview process? What did they learn about the role of memories and the needs of their interview partners? 3. Transcription and initial analysis of interviews based on country and context specific design and goals. Although specific analytical approaches will be based on the country concepts developed in phase 1, analysis in general will relate to how autobiographical memories can be used as a resource in the present: for older people themselves as well as educators and professionals responsible for developing programs and interventions. The analysis will further aim to educate society in general, helping to raise awareness about the needs of older people. 4. Preparation and implementation of student exchange: a selection of students from the four countries will meet with team leaders, present their results, and share their learning process and experience. Phase duration: April 1, 2025 – October 31, 2026.

- Phase 3: Preparing the project results.

The specific objectives of this phase include: 1. Creation of four learning manuals on the designed teaching units including precise didactic instructions and accompanying materials. 2. A dissemination plan to make the project results accessible to scientists, professionals and the interested public. 3. Final team meeting in September 2027 in which the project partners present their results and make plans for further projects to ensure the sustainability of the results. Phase duration: November 1, 2026 – October 31, 2027.

- Phase 4: Creating the data bank.

  The main objective of this phase is the creation of a bilingual (original language and English translation) digital, biographical data bank of all interviews for continued research and educational purposes. Phase duration: July 1, 2026 – September 30, 2027.

A more detailed description of the participating partners and their programs will be presented after the following brief introduction to the theoretical foundation of the project.

The four dimensions of biographical learning

> Without biography, there is no learning;
> without learning, there is no biography.
> (Alheit, von Heiden 2009: 9)

All learning comes from human life experience, either one´s own or those of others. This fact is often overlooked today as non-human sources are increasingly viewed as definitive sources of knowledge. However, machines will never be able to replace the nuances of knowledge and meaning to be found in actual human experience. Biographical research is becoming increasingly important in both a connected and complex world as human lives no longer follow standardized trajectories and converge or merge in unexpected ways. Within this, there is enormous potential for learning about ourselves and others which can prove to be beneficial on many levels. For instance, potential for biographical learning can be found in four dimensions: the personal, the interpersonal, the social/societal and the transcultural. Although these learning potentials apply to the life experiences of people of all ages, they are perhaps particularly prominent in relation to the lives of older people who simply have more experience to reflect on and to share.

The personal benefit connected with reflecting on one's own life experience in later life has a long scientific history beginning with the seminal article published by Robert Butler in 1963. Since then, numerous studies have confirmed the wide-ranging personal benefits of autobiographical reflection including its role in increasing life satisfaction, stabilizing and expanding identity, finding meaning in life, supporting resilience and empowerment, enhancing coping (particularly during life transitions), and providing guidance for the future (Bubolz-Lutz et al. 2022; Haight 1991; Kirschner, Forstmeier, Strauß 2022; Lohmann 2013; Zhong, Chen, Chen 2023). Even painful life experiences can have important benefits in retrospect (Smith, Bryant 2019). Reviewing one's personal life experience can provide enormous support for older people as they come to terms with the challenges and benefits of growing older.

On an interpersonal level, the very act of sharing life experience with others can be beneficial for both the person sharing their experiences and the listener (Bubolz-Lutz et al. 2022; Fabiś, Wąsiński, Tomczyk 2017). This form of interpersonal communication opens our awareness to the experiences of others, helping us to understand people with experiences different from our own. Interpersonal biographical learning can also enhance intergenerational understanding as younger students learn about the current life situation and key biographical experiences of their older interview partners.

The interpersonal dimension naturally expands into the larger social realm as communication of life experience enhances understanding among people within a society. Older people often say they feel invisible in a society focused on the concerns of younger people. Biographical learning opens awareness to the unseen challenges and pleasures of later life, thus helping to integrate older people into the social fabric of society.

On a transcultural level, biographical accounts provide a human lens through which history, politics and cultural diversity can be viewed and better understood (Bubolz-Lutz et.al. 2022, Goodson, Gill 2011). Listening to the life experiences of people who have lived through significant events makes history and politics more accessible – they are no longer an abstraction, but a living experience.

Biographical learning has been described as holistic as it includes both formal and informal learning that connects emotional, existential and cognitive aspects uniting preconscious and conscious realms (Hallqvist 2014: 499). Three of the four dimensions of biographical learning involve communication between individuals or among groups of people within or across societies that can not only support understanding of one another but also be a catalyst for positive social change. Biographical exploration provides a human view on life, focusing on very personal aspects of experience which can support learning for a world in need.

The biographical information communicated in a narrative interview is a selection of life experience found meaningful to the interviewee at the time of the interview. Interestingly, the meaning of life experience is often discovered years after the actual experience – as all biography is memory.

Autobiographical memories: the foundation of biography and a resource for the present and future

> Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers
> and how one remembers it in order to recount it.
> (Gabriel García Márquez 2014: 6)

Life experiences live on in the form of autobiographical memories. The science of memory tells us that an autobiographical memory is not a photographic replica

of past experiences, but rather a current reconstruction created when the past is viewed in the light of the present (Casey 2000, Kandel 2006, Rosenthal 1995, Schacter 1996). In other words, it is not possible to know how things were, but rather, how they are viewed today. Edmund Sherman (1991: 137) uses the metaphor of a river to represent this process. The movement on the surface represents the here and now. Everything we do, see, learn or experience sinks to the bottom over time and settles there as "life sediment". The experiences and impressions that the "life sediment" contains come from the past. Nevertheless, it is the forces on the surface that loosen the sediment and bring it back to light in the form of memories. These "forces on the surface" which bring previous experience back into consciousness are manifold as memories can be triggered (and created) through a sensory impression, a thought, an emotion or a similar experience in the present. Most significantly, the memory is in some way meaningful to the person remembering it in the present. Understanding the meaning relationships existing between autobiographical memory and current experience is fundamental to all biographical research. An important question remains to be addressed: how can biographical experience in the form of autobiographical memories influence positive change in the present and future in relation to the four dimensions of biographical learning?

Biographical Learning – Transformative Learning

Jack Mezirow, a pioneer in the field of adult education, presented the concept of transformational learning almost 50 years ago (Mezirow 1978). Since then, the theory has inspired hundreds of scientific papers and dozens of professional conferences dedicated to the development and practical application of transformative learning.

> Transformative learning is defined as a process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives – sets of assumptions and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change. Such frames are better because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action (Mezirow 2006: 26).

More specifically, Mezirow defines four types of learning that reflect this process of transformation: elaborating existing forms of reference, learning new frames of reference, transforming habits of mind and transforming points of view (Mezirow 2000).

Biographical learning has great potential for learning transformation in all four dimensions. On a personal level, engaging with our own life experiences in memory can transform our present and help create the future, changing perceptions of ourselves, our relationships and what gives meaning to our lives (Lohmann 2013). Sharing life experiences through biographical narration can change our attitudes towards one

another, opening new views of understanding for both the person sharing their experiences and the listener (Fabiś, Wąsiński, Tomczyk 2017). On a societal level, biographical learning can raise awareness of the life experiences of those groups previously marginalized or unseen, promoting intergroup dialogue and action for the creation of a sane society. And finally, biographical learning can transform cross-cultural differences into transcultural understanding supporting democratic world citizenship (Horsdal 2012: 163–178).

The LEuLiv project addresses all four dimensions of biographical learning and taps into the multiple resources and potentials for transformational learning embedded in biographical experience as relived in autobiographical memory.

The LEuLiv Partners and Programs

The LEuLiv project is unique in both its partnerships and in the variety of participating students. The research collaboration among Western and Eastern European educators and experts will provide valuable new knowledge to promote biographical learning within Europe, while the enormous range of disciplines addressed will educate students from a broad range of professions to apply biographical exploration within their areas of expertise. All participating partners are contributing to the project´s aims through the development and implementation of their designed learning programs. The following is a brief introduction to the project concepts and target groups of the participating partners.

The University of Education Karlsruhe, Germany

Study participants at the University of Education in Karlsruhe are Master level students enrolled in a certificate of advanced science (CAS) program called *Learning and Biography*, a one semester course comprised of three seminars: *Intergenerational Learning, Life-long Learning,* and *Biographical Learning*. This course is also offered as an elective module in the master's program in adult education. The seminar *Biographical Learning* can also be taken separately as a micro credential and was designed specifically for the LEuLiv project. Course content includes critical reflection on the definition of a biography, theoretical background on autobiographical memories as a resource in the present, and also includes the basics of how to conduct a narrative biographical interview. The course further allows participants to experiment with a wide variety of methodological approaches to biographical exploration. Participating students are largely practicing professionals from a variety of different fields including education, nursing, social work, administration, development departments in companies etc. Some of the students have prior knowledge of gerontology and some do not, but all are interested in applying biographical methods in their areas of expertise.

The University of Lodz and WSB University Dąbrowa Górnicza, Poland

The Polish research team developed an e-learning course entitled *Biographical Research with Older Adults* for doctoral students. The course's primary aim is to introduce participants to the methodology of qualitative research, with particular attention to the context of biographical learning. Emphasis was also placed on designing, conducting, and analyzing biographical interviews. The course consists of four modules, progressing from general content to more specific issues. The first module focuses on selected topics related to old age and aging. The knowledge provided in this module aims to help participants identify factors influencing the research interaction, as well as the interpretation of empirical data collected from older individuals. The second module is designed to support doctoral students in understanding the specificity of qualitative research. It covers, among other aspects, research ethics, quality criteria, and various modes of reasoning – deductive, inductive, and abductive. The third module is dedicated to developing selected competencies and practical skills for conducting biographical research or working with biographical material. This module has a hands-on, workshop character and was intended to equip participants with practical skills needed in collecting and analyzing biographical empirical data. Therefore, the project invited expert researchers who have conducted long-term biographical research using a variety of approaches, methods, and techniques. This module held workshops with experts on grounded theory methodology, the biographical method, objective hermeneutics, the documentary method, and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. Only after acquiring this theoretical and practical foundation were participants prepared to proceed to the final module, which focused on developing a research project.

Alma Mater Europaea University

The Slovenian project partners have developed a course called *Biographical Work with Older Adults* which will be offered as an elective module to second-year Bachelor students in Social Gerontology. Course content includes: theoretical foundations of the biographical approach, the difference between life story, life path and biography, the role of storytelling in shaping and maintaining identity in old age, memory, selectivity and reconstruction of the past, ethics in relationship to biographical work, uses of biographies in social pedagogical work, biographical work in social settings (e.g. nursing homes), multicultural aspects of biographical work and practical work and reflection.

Mykolas Romeris University

The Lithuania project partners have developed a course called *Exploring Lives – The Biographical Method in Practice with Adults and Older Adults*. This interdisciplinary course will be embedded in several formal study subjects as well as being offered as a standalone micro credential for a broader range of learners. The overall aim is to introduce

students and external participants to the theoretical foundations and practical applications of the biographical method, with a specific focus on working with adults and older adults. Learners include students of social gerontology and adult education at the Bachelor and Master level, as well as Doctoral students in Educational Science. At the Bachelor level, it is part of the Social Work Methodology curriculum, focusing on how life stories can be used to better understand and support adult and older clients. In the Quantitative and Qualitative Research subject, students are introduced to biographical interviewing as part of the broader spectrum of qualitative research methodologies, with a focus on ethical data collection, narrative analysis, and reflective interpretation. In the Doctoral Programme in Education Sciences, it is included as an elective module on Biographical Research, allowing doctoral students to apply the method in their independent research. This structure allows the biographical method to reach both future professionals in social work and education as well as adult learners engaged in continuing education.

The project supports both new and current initiatives of all participating partners through the creation of new seminars and the development of practical approaches and interventions. The co-operation itself will further knowledge for all partners as different target groups are addressed and each partner can benefit from the outcomes of the others. And finally, the project creates direct synergies between the fields of education and training, as it combines theoretical knowledge and practical applications in different contexts.

Conclusion and future directions

The LEuLiv project promotes learning across borders and generations and supports the development of innovative context-specific biographically based learning programs in four countries. The project not only supports the further development of biographical learning in Eastern Europe and Germany but will provide ample data for empirical investigation both within and beyond the designated project period. A shared focus of all partners is to investigate how the project results support transformational learning on the personal, interpersonal, intergenerational, societal and transcultural levels and how innovative educational programs can be developed to this aim. More specific potential future research questions include:

- What are the greatest challenges and joys of our older interview partners? Are there cultural similarities and differences?
- What roles do life memories play in coping, resilience and moving into the future – particularly during periods of personal transition?
- How can we help students learn to conduct biographical interviews to help older people tap into the resources embedded in their life memories?
- What can younger people learn about marriage relationships from older people?
- How do adults and older adults make meaning of their experiences through narrative?
- What role does storytelling play in building empathy and understanding across generations

- How can biographical methods support professional development in social work and education?
- What ethical challenges arise in the use of personal narratives for learning and research?
- How does biographical reflection influence learners' personal and professional identities?

The implementation of the designed learning programs and the biographical interviews are currently underway. First results and an initial analysis of the interviews themselves can be expected in mid-2026.

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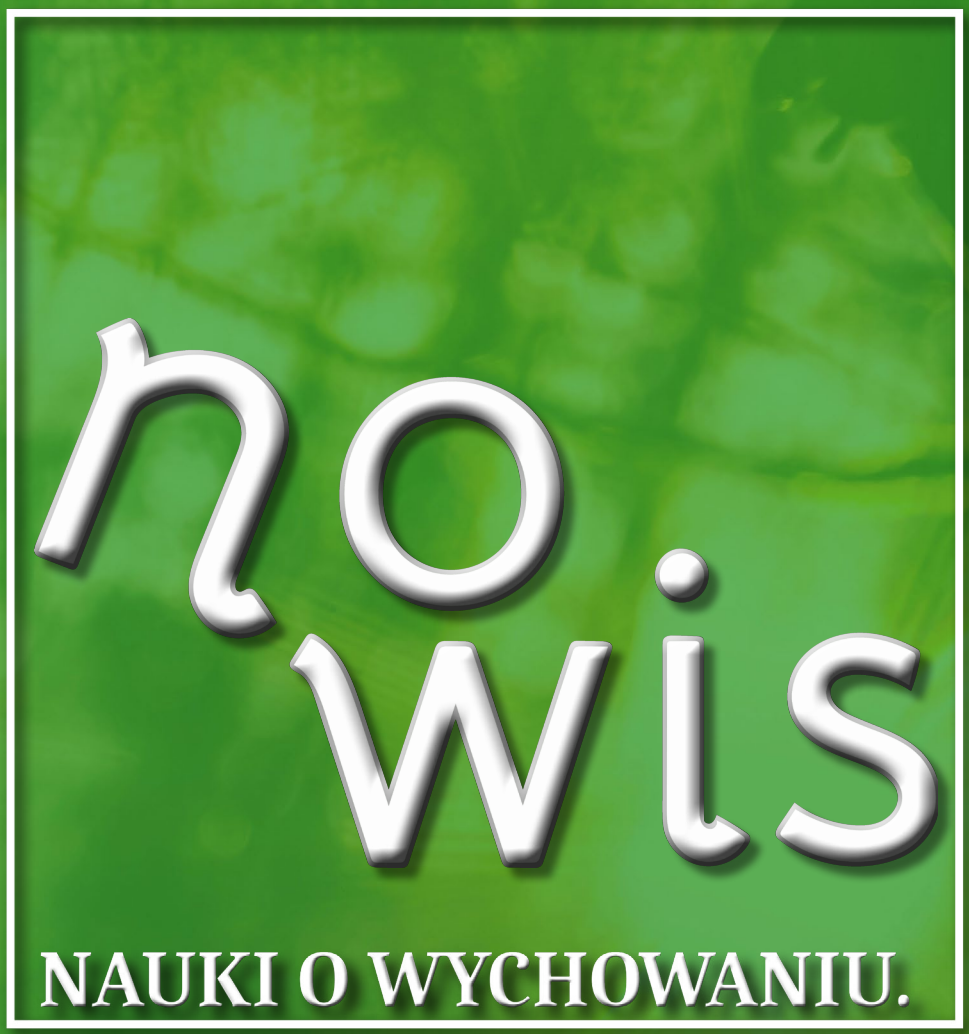
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Funded by the European Union. However, the views and opinions expressed are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the National Agency at the DAAD. Neither the European Union nor the National Agency at the DAAD can be held responsible for them.

Funded by the European Union

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NAUKI O WYCHOWANIU.
STUDIA INTERDYSCYPLINARNE

tom 21
numer 2/2025

WOKÓŁ KONCEPCJI CAŁOŻYCIOWEGO UCZENIA SIĘ

ON THE CONCEPT OF LIFELONG LEARNING



STUDIA
INTERDYSCYPLINARNE

tom 21
numer 2/2025

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NAUKI O WYCHOWANIU.
STUDIA INTERDYSCYPLINARNE (NOWIS)
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Publikacja finansowana przez:
Wydział Nauk o Wychowaniu Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego

Teksty wszystkich materiałów dostępne są na licencji:

Uznanie autorstwa 4.0

ISSN 2450-4491
Nakład: pierwotna wersja elektroniczna
http://czasopismo.naukiowychowaniu.uni.lodz.pl

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