So, what did you learn?

I should be prepared for the most obvious question after a 2-month sabbatical at the world famous Centre of Applied Dementia Studies (CADS), but I am not. The question leaves me *with my mouth full of teeth*, as the Dutch saying goes. In my case my mouth is full of objects gathered over a 61 year life course, dentures mostly. I usually manage to say vague things like: *I met really nice and clever people at the centre and we may be collaborating in the future on such and such.* This reply is a bit embarrassing: Is this all I learned in these two months with all these really nice and clever people? It sounds like I was just gallivanting around. And I suppose I was. And yet these months were meaningful to me, but how about this learning?

Learning?

Being a psychologist and working at a university of applied sciences I should know a thing or two about learning. Most of what I know focuses on educational learning for students who will be nurses, gerontologists or social workers. They rely on university and workplace learning. Both are challenging and the integration (transfer) of these two is notoriously problematic. Universities offer students lots of content in a limited period of time and encourage them to reflect on it, but the results are often disappointing. The same is true for professional training as offered in various psycho-social educational courses such as in dementia care. Literature reviews and practice show how difficult it is to really change everyday care on the basis of what people learn in these courses.

So what is learning really about? Nowadays we know that learning goes far beyond education. Most of what we learn happens in practice, in daily life. This is often referred to as informal learning or high impact learning. Informal learning is poorly structured and has an interpersonal and contextual nature. We learn while we are not aware of it, and it mostly happens in the context of a problem or crisis, or in new environments. So that rings a bell: I was actually learning things by gallivanting around in a new environment: the Centre of Applied Dementia Studies in Bradford, Yorkshire. I was, however, not in a crisis, or was I? If anything, my learning was part of a life course of professional and personal learning. Perhaps this life course business made it feel a bit slow in comparison to my daily routine of a busy researcher whose mind is usually packed full 24 hours a day. So what learning concept matches my Yorkshire experiences?
Slow learning

Slow learning may not be such an appealing notion as nobody wants to be a slow learner. I'm not stupid! I am a professor! I do not know about any academic basis for slow learning, but its association with slow food and slow fashion is appealing to sustainable me. Slow learning is said to be inspired by a movement of ‘edupunks and other DIY educators’. I am more interested in post education learning, certainly when it comes to learning during a sabbatical. What I learned from the internet seems to match my experiences: Slow learning is thought to promote deep learning. It crosses genres and disciplines. It is grounded in the interests of the learner and therefore champions the pleasures of learning. It promotes inquiry and dialogue, supports and is supported by learning in community. Slow learning allows for authentic learning and seeks unmediated experiences. Finally, it is thought to last a lifetime. (https://shagdora.wordpress.com/what-is-slow-learning/).

Slow learning and a sabbatical

Of course the location of my sabbatical was grounded in my own experiences. My boss had been pushing me to take up my sabbatical leave for a number of years and I had never bothered: I was too busy with this mind packed full 24 hours a day. And I couldn’t think of a host or theme that was appealing enough. Until the CADS crossed my mind, almost accidentally when thinking of the INTERDEM network, with all its dementia researchers. Dementia research definitely is of interest to me. Of course it did help that I have a weak spot for the north of the UK, having spent two years as a student and junior researcher at the University of Edinburgh. So far for the lifetime embedding. These weak spot emotions may have led me to the notion that this sabbatical and its learning might be pleasurable, or even fun! Indeed, every visit to the CADS offered inquiry and dialogue and a learning in community. And did I experience any authentic learning and unmediated experiences? Two events come to mind, but there have been many more.

Meeting an old man on the middle of a road in the middle of nowhere. I was negotiating the hills on my way home from Hebden Bridge station when I saw him standing there, looking around, obviously lost. My dementia alarm bells were ringing immediately. And yes, he started a chat about being lost and I was preparing myself to explain the way to town to him. He told me he had been walking the hills and had been afraid to fall, with all these wet rocks and ferns overhanging the narrow paths. More alarm bells and I felt myself instantly becoming part of dementia friendly society. Having become hooked on hill walking over the summer, I commiserated with him. It was only when he told me how he had found his way back, that I had my learning experience. The man told me how he had shared a photo of his surroundings to his friends in a dedicated Facebook group, who could subsequently tell him exactly where he was and how to get back to civilisation. Not only did this man not live with dementia as I had assumed; he beat my stereotyping with his creative tech savvy problem solving.

The other event concerns meeting experts by experience a group facilitated by the CADS that meets regularly for the pleasure of meeting people and to support the quality of the research. The experts are people living with dementia or related disorders and family caregivers. The people I met are real, and shared the stories of their lives, not just the stories of their dementia lives. At first I was trying to figure out if the person I was talking to was living with dementia. Only a couple of days later I realised that this was totally irrelevant. They were full persons, – authentic if you like – and as much interested in my life as I was in theirs.
Slow learning and the senses

I made an effort to take it easy during my sabbatical. Usually this is difficult for me, as my job as a researcher never seems to finish; not at home, not during the weekend. It helped that I was already in a relaxed mood, having spent my summer holidays with my husband camping in Yorkshire. August 2019 was cold and wet, but the Yorkshire Dales, the Wolds and the East coast proved to be stunning to the senses, the sights, sounds and smells of nature. The low temperatures meant that we had to remain physically active until we found a warm place with tea and cakes. The Yorkshire towns we visited were showing off their history and Victorian infrastructure, including decay in the shape of buildings falling to ruin. It made us aware of time passing by while living in the here and now.

This awareness of taking in nature through the senses and of personal and historical time continued during my sabbatical: I spent hours walking from my residence to the station, up and down the hills, strengthening my stamina, cleaning my lungs. As the housing agencies did not provide for two months lets, I had to rely on the warm welcome of colleagues and their friends, and the occasional AirBnB. All these homes were different and I became familiarised with new homes, communities and travelling routines.

There was also the element of being on my own, as my husband went home after the holidays, leaving me to cater for myself. Being by myself meant that I had to make sure that I was doing things and seeing people during my time off. This does not come as a routine for me, being part of a long time couple. It also meant that strangers more readily spoke to me, and vice versa. I found that people in Yorkshire enjoy talking to foreigners, whether you meet them on the moors, on the street or in the pub. It resulted in feeling welcome and in reflections on belonging, home, community and ageing.

Slow sabbatical learning

My everyday routine at the CADS was in many ways similar to my work at Windesheim University in Zwolle: checking my e-mail, writing drafts, editing manuscripts. What was different was the people and the physical environment. All CADS researchers are clever and dedicated to the dementia cause, coming from all over the world. They were willing to share their ideas and work with me. I worked in a shared office, which was new to me, being used to my own office, and I had been a bit worried if that was going to be productive to me. It was quite the opposite. I felt part of a whole, and the office community had an organic way of interaction that was both sociable and productive. Meeting these colleagues outside of the office was even more important. Staying in their homes, walking with them on public footpaths, enjoying pub food, resulted in everyday small talk, but also deeper shared reflections on life, community and late stage careers. All these meetings linger in the mind,
but also in the body: If I think of them now, there is this image and sense of walking the Ilkley Moors, the paths in Hardcastle Craggs and the pubs in Hebden Bridge.

My sabbatical learning was slow, but the nice thing is that it is still ongoing. Although everyday work seems to have gained its old routine, every now and again my senses wake me up and open up my mind to new insights that may be helpful in my further career and personal life. All I have to do is go out and start walking...

Many thanks to all the people I met during my stay at the Centre of Applied Dementia Studies and to all people who gave me a warm welcome to Yorkshire.