

Adapting to the digital age: a narrative approach

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The project

‘We know the world through the stories that are told about it.’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.641)

What stories can be told about the fast-changing world of higher education, and what can we learn from them? Adapting to new situations, conquering fears and overcoming obstacles is a familiar storyline, with particular relevance for university lecturers having to introduce new technologies in their working practices. But this is not the only story, there are many others, all unique but all with the potential to move us and make us reflect on our own situation. This paper reports on a research project undertaken at London Metropolitan University with the aim of gathering and sharing personal accounts of successful adaptation to the digital age.

Like every other higher institution in the country, e-learning is high on the agenda at London Metropolitan University. Guidelines regarding the use of a learning management system were issued some years ago, and programmes of staff development organized by technical staff. However, it soon became clear that for lecturers to fully engage with the new tools, another kind of support was needed. Thus teams of ‘Blended Learning Champions’, later renamed ‘Blended Learning Consultants’ and subsequently ‘Blended Learning Advisers’, were created in each faculty, with the remit to encourage and support colleagues in making use of new technologies to enhance their teaching. This approach was in tune with Sappey and Relf’s (2010) emphasis on ‘capacity building at the teaching faculty level through training embodied in the academic identity’ (paragraph 6). In other words, the idea behind the champion movement was to effect change within horizontal rather than vertical structures, with a focus on individual tutors’ diverse needs, rather than through a blanket, one-size-fits-all strategy.

The Blended Learning Advisers at London Metropolitan University led a series of workshops and mentoring sessions, which on the whole received positive feedback from colleagues. But perhaps more than their informative content, it was their value as a platform for exchanging views and perceptions that was appreciated, a space where tutors’ voices could be heard. Following on from this, the idea was born to find a larger outlet for some of these voices and share some inspiring stories.

There is evidence that this approach is becoming increasingly widespread. Benson et al (2011), for example, consider factors that facilitate or stand in the way of adopting and developing learning and teaching with technology. They explore tutors’ willingness to accept new technologies, and analyse signs of scepticism and misunderstandings within staff teams. Their research is concerned with tutor perceptions, and points out that whilst some tutors are more willing to embrace

SECRETARIA TÉCNICA

VII CIDUI

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blended learning than others, many are 'overwhelmed by the variety of resources' (p.150), or state their need for more resources, including time and technological support. Benson et al conclude that tutors are generally willing to 'extend the range of pedagogical and technological approaches if barriers could be overcome' (p.153) and point to the need to build on positive staff attitudes.

Rolfe (2012), too, stresses the importance of identifying individual pioneers within institutions, to complement wider institutional support. With reference to tutor adaptation to open educational resources, Rolfe emphasises the need for 'understanding the motivations and characteristics of potential users' (p.16) in order to establish 'strong and sustainable practices' (*Ibid.*). Further, Rolfe underlines the importance of understanding staff attitudes and behaviours in order to build up secure and effective pedagogical practices. Kearney et al (2012) also emphasise the importance of attending to tutor perspectives. They suggest that, in order for blended learning approaches to become securely embedded in practice, account should be taken of 'the preferences and characteristics of teachers, including their epistemological beliefs.' (p.50). This research, too, rests comfortably with these empathetic positions, creating a space for tutors' own stories, and giving a voice to their individual perspectives and beliefs. It concurs with Skelton's (2012) analysis that 'the contemporary university accommodates an increasing variety of people and subjectivities' (p.37) and that any notion of a single 'teacher identity' is highly complex. Accordingly, it takes up the challenge set by Cook et al (2008) that 'issues of identity, affect and technology require further investigation' (p.15).

In line with the institutional approach outlined above, the research adopts a narrative methodology, listening to and presenting life stories, in the belief that dispositions and attitudes to change in the workplace are moulded by life experiences. In the words of Sikes (2009), 'auto/biographical approaches ... remind us of the significance of the individual, of the importance of the personal, without which the collective could not be.' (p.169) This research sheds light on individual stories, supporting Lewis' claim (2011) that people come to know about the world through the stories of others.

The approach

The aim of the project is to stimulate reflection on the practical and emotional conditions that can be conducive to the process of adapting to new technologies. The choice of methodological approach was therefore guided by the following imperative: no hypothesis would be made, no answer given, but stories would be told that could both inspire actions and raise questions. Such an approach follows on principles for writing advocated by Richardson (2008) or Jewitt and Kress (2003), who suggest that 'opening up questions is ... more useful ... than suggesting unsustainable certainties' (p.4).

SECRETARIA TÉCNICA

VII CIDUI

ISBN 978-84-695-4073-2



Given the resistance of some tutors to new technologies, it is indeed important for the project not to be seen to offer models to follow. Rather, as indicated above, the project should stimulate a process of self-reflection to help individuals gain a better understanding about their own attitudes towards the use of new technologies, so as to develop a personal strategy and determine what kind of training and support they need.

The project therefore adheres to a collaborative and constructive approach, whereby all people engaged, whether narrators, researchers or readers (listeners), construct narratives of past experiences to help shape future experiences. A narrative methodology imposes itself as most appropriate for the purpose, but also most likely to acknowledge the complexity of people's lives and honour what Clandinin & Rosiek (2007) call 'lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding.' (p.42)

As previously mentioned, the tutors' narratives would not serve to develop theories (see Grounded Theory for example) but rather reconstruct individual cases. The researchers would avoid the temptation to develop categories of elements that may be seen to contribute to successful adaptation to new technologies. The focus of the research, rather, is on the participants' own theories and interpretations, and the narratives in which they are presented. Our approach therefore follows Chase's (2005) description of the interpretive process as 'listening to the voices *within* the narratives rather than locating distinct themes *across* them' (p.663 – author's italics). These voices can be multiple and constitute stories within the story.

The project is grounded in the domain of biographical research. The analysis focuses solely on the narrative structure, therefore, and not on the discourse. It concentrates on the stories' *power of resonance* rather than on recurring themes or forms of expression. In so doing, it adheres to Sandelowski's (1994) claim that stories may provide us with 'visions of human nature more resonant with our own experiences than any psychological, sociological, or any conventionally scientific rendering of it' (p.52). Indeed, it is this resonance that this research seeks to evoke.

The participants

Ethical considerations were incorporated from the start of the research process. This is a study of people and the narratives they construct. As a result, such research 'has the potential to cause (usually unintentional) damage' (Wellington et al, 2005, p.106) An empathetic approach was therefore required whereby we would consider at each stage, 'whether or not [we] would be happy for [us or our own families] to be involved in any particular research, or to be re-presented in any particular way' (Sikes, p.172).

Ethical considerations were at the forefront when methodological choices were made. It was not necessary to collect data from large numbers of people since this would carry the danger of 'diminishing people to characteristics which failed to take account of personal biographies and

SECRETARIA TÉCNICA

VII CIDUI

ISBN 978-84-695-4073-2



circumstances' (Sikes, p.174). Sikes points out that so much research about teachers is concerned with improving standards and outcomes, rather than seeking to explore how particular teachers view their role. Accordingly, tutors' life stories were at the foreground of the research. With Sappey and Relf (2010) we believed that teaching is not something that most tutors simply do for a living, but that they bring who they are to their work. Like Skelton (2012), we wanted to explore 'the lived realities of participants' (p.28).

One of the potential difficulties to be considered carefully from the outset was our relationship to the participants. The participants, in this instance, were our colleagues. Morse (1994) warns that if researchers are already familiar with the setting and participants 'in a non-research capacity' (p.27), then special precautions need to be taken. Morse suggests that such situations invariably involve 'competing agendas' (*Ibid.*), and these may distract the researcher, interfere with the research and prevent the researcher from entering the scene as a "stranger". With these potential barriers in mind, participants were allocated to particular researchers according to criteria of familiarity and connections.

We also considered not to follow Denscombe's (2003) recommendation that researchers should 'go back to the field ... to check their validity against 'reality'' (p.272). This would be a diminishing act, fitting people's complex realities artificially conceived categories. In this way, we adopted a Foucaultian (1969) position and avoided creating any over-simplistic 'divisions' (p.25), since these are, by definition, forms of classification and frequently refer to 'institutional types' (*Ibid.*). People and their diverse, unique identities remain at the core of this research. As Sappey and Relf (2010) suggest, identities and personal narratives define 'who we are, what we do, how we behave, particularly in the face of continuous change' (paragraph 10).

There was an urgent need to tread carefully around any sensitive and personal features of people's lives. As Janks (2008) proposes, 'we bring who we are and where we come from to the process of production and reception of spoken ... texts.' (p.58). Accordingly, we did not want to skim over these essential story backdrops. A narrative methodology was the most suitable approach for eliciting these rich, personal and interwoven details about people's lives. One participant concluded at the end of her account: "... nobody ever told me: You can't do it." Her narrative thus evoked the encouragement and support she received from her family and community.

We were also aware that our own life experiences gave us a particular gaze and interpretation on the biographical narratives we were privileged to hear. Our own stories would inevitably filter our participants' stories and in the analysis create new stories, different to those originally conceived. This was not, however, a disadvantage, since, like Bagley & Castro-Salazar (2012), we were able to construct shared meanings with our participant-friends.

SECRETARIA TÉCNICA

VII CIDUI

ISBN 978-84-695-4073-2



The process

Eleven participants contributed to the project, all lecturers in the faculty of Humanities, Arts, Languages and Education. They volunteered to take part, in response to an invitation sent collectively by email. The purpose of the project was to gather stories with the potential to encourage and inspire, the invitation targeted those who considered themselves as 'having adapted successfully to digital change'.

For the stories to be 'credible' (see Tracy, 2010), their content would have to be selected by the participants themselves. However, a purely 'biographical' narrative (Flick, 2009) could have posed problems of length and relevance, as well as selective memory. An 'episodic' narrative (*Ibid.*), on the contrary, could have led to a loss of spontaneity. A combined type was therefore chosen, i.e. a 'situation-orientated' (*Ibid.*) narrative, as the most appropriate to elicit a response to our inquiry. A 'generative narrative question' (Riemann & Schütze, quoted in Flick, 2009, p.177) was formulated as a prompt for the narratives. Participants were asked to 'give an account of the events, features and people in their lives that [they] thought may have facilitated the process of adapting to new technologies in the context of higher education'.

Before collecting the narratives, pre-interview meetings were offered to explain the procedure. Drawing on Burnett (2010), participants were asked to prepare themselves, choosing from a range of methods, including lists, mind-maps or even a selection of objects to symbolise or stand for their relationship to different technologies that they perceived as significant in their lives. In addition, a focus-group meeting was organized to stimulate reflection on the topic. The interviews were conducted at a time and location to suit the participants. This was usually in our own or our participants' university offices. A maximum length of one hour was specified, but most interviews did not exceed half an hour.

For the transcriptions, an external provider was employed, less as a matter of preference, and more one of expedience, due to our heavy workloads. This, however, had the benefit of having more consistency than might have otherwise been achieved by two separate persons. The recordings were faithfully transcribed and not mediated by the researcher who experienced their telling. The narratives were transcribed verbatim and returned to participants, who were invited to make any changes necessary.

The next stage involved becoming familiarized with the content of the narratives so as to be able to extract the most significant parts. We read the stories several times, separately and to each other. We then compiled story frames for each narrative, which captured the main events, people and features (including objects), as well as the narrator's comments about them. The result offered a perspective – both of the individuals and the group – revealing common trends and impressions mixed with personal experiences. It occurred to us that these different stories could

SECRETARIA TÉCNICA

VII CIDUI

ISBN 978-84-695-4073-2



be merged into one single story which would speak for all of them and for all of our stories. However, much would be lost in the process, most crucially the individual voices and their potential to move and inspire. Stories were gathered, re-fashioned and re-presented as distinct and whole units of meaning.

The Stories

‘Language is the house with lamplight in its windows’

from *What the Light Teaches* by Anne Michaels, 2000, in Astley, 2002

The participants were self-selecting. There is no suggestion, therefore, that their stories are in any way typical. They are simply accounts gathered, considered and re-presented from tutors who declared themselves to have warmed to new technologies, embraced change and been willing to develop their pedagogical approaches through a range of new media and modes.

Each researcher heard the narratives of different participants before reading the corresponding transcripts several times over. The researchers then foregrounded particular transcripts according to the extent to which they resonated with them (Sandelowski, 1994, Conle & de Beyer, 2009, Snyder-Young, 2011). They then read the narratives to each other and made further reductions in accordance with feedback from their co-researcher. In these ways, the selection process became more of an echoing-resonating approach, whereby the first researcher responded to the oral telling, then the first reading and then the re-written version. The second researcher offered a further layer of responses. At the next echoing stage, delegates at a conference in the UK offered their responses to the distilled ‘vignettes’ (Benson et al, 2011). The conference was an opportunity to obtain ‘collegial feedback’ and ‘guidance’ (Knafl, 1994, p.369). The echoing-resonating process continues as the transcripts are scripted and read back to a re-gathering of the participants.

If a single, stereotypical, story had to emerge from the various personal narratives, it would be one of overcoming the difficulties that technologies present and feeling empowered as a result. Participants acknowledged that technology had brought about improvement and new possibilities both in their personal lives, and in their broader social and working contexts. Participants also emphasised the support they received from others in conquering their use. In this way, tutors’ stories mirrored students’ stories in Burnett’s (2010) study, in which students’ accounts suggested that ‘their online practices were embedded mainly in local activities and relationships located primarily in the physical world’ (*Ibid.* 2.1). In this study, as in Burnett’s, ‘induction to new practices was often mediated by friends or family’ (*Ibid.*) Our participants told stories in which they were supported to acquire digital skills from people close to them, such as family, friends or loved ones. “My husband was hugely important” and “My mum was hugely important too”, offered one participant.

SECRETARIA TÉCNICA

VII CIDUI

ISBN 978-84-695-4073-2



Beyond that, all that emerges from the research are individual stories, stories with details about significant life events, key people and changing technological objects. Woven throughout these important story landmarks are people's individual voices. The voices echo and resonate with the researchers who re-read them to themselves, then to each other and then to colleagues. These warm, echoing sounds, in turn, generate their own warmth onwards and outwards, within the faculty and beyond.

Four extracts

Rebecca's story

When I was about four or five, I was always interested in taking toys apart and finding out how they worked. The adults would say:

"Oh, look at that! Isn't that interesting!"

"She takes things apart and she is really good at putting them back together!"

"Look at how she can do it!"

I felt empowered. I'm sure I must have broken things, but I have no vivid recollection of ever being told off. Even if I did break the toaster or whatever, it wasn't the end of the world.

And so I think from a very early stage I lacked any fear in new experiences. That would have been early Sixties, as everything came in, so I can't remember getting a television, but my older sister can.

I can remember being allowed to change channels and pressing the buttons, and nobody actually stopping me. I probably grew up thinking I was someone who could do things.

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What shines through all this is that nobody ever told me: "You can't do it." All the time I'd been learning all these things just by watching others, having a go, being prepared to experiment and by just growing with the updates.

Liz's story

I can still to this day remember when I first typed an essay and I saw it being printed out and nearly crying. I was as proud of that as the fact that, you know, I've got a first class degree, I was as proud of the fact that I could use a computer, even though that in a sense was a secondary, you know, you didn't get a degree in computing with what I did. But I just

SECRETARIA TÉCNICA

VII CIDUI

ISBN 978-84-695-4073-2



remember that huge satisfaction in getting that, and a huge satisfaction when I first realised that I could send an Email, these kind of things, that I never ever thought I'd be able to do, that had scared the life out of me.

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I don't want anyone ever to feel as frightened as I felt. At university, I thought that everybody would be terribly confident and of course actually they weren't. And I think I tried so hard when I first went there that I ended up being the person that everybody used to come and ask. After a while people were asking me "How did you do that?" and "How did you develop this, that or the other?" And I thought it's just because I really tried. And that made me feel fairly good about myself. I thought "I can do this!"

Annabel's story

It was quite interesting to look back on my life and go back to being the first house on the street to have a TV, for example, [laughs], back in the Fifties. So I probably always lived with technology. And my dad was an aeronautical engineer in the RAF and stuff. He built the first TV we had. He built his own Hi Fi. We had one before anybody else. He loved technology. So I suppose it was something that I was always surrounded by from about the age of four or five. And as new kind of media technology came on stream, so my dad upgraded his stuff. And so I was just brought up with this kind of constant development of different kinds of media.

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To some extent it's possibly to do with my upbringing. ... with a father who was an early adopter. He died in 2002, but the saddest thing is that just before that he got a computer at home but he couldn't really use it. I think it's part of why he died, in a way. It was the first time that he couldn't get his head round something technological. He'd been using computers in this great big huge mainframe in his work. They were cutting edge of course. I'm sure that must have been a massive influence to be brought up in a family with a father who was like that.

Siobhan's story

I think my interest in ICT in particular started when I started teacher training, when I first trained to be a teacher myself, maybe about twelve years ago. And at the time I had a friend who was very much into computers and technology, and I would find it very frustrating to use the computer and not know how to access the programs, and what I tended to do was ignore everything I didn't need to know and only focus on the very small

SECRETARIA TÉCNICA

VII CIDUI

ISBN 978-84-695-4073-2



bits I needed to know. And he helped me a lot but he did what lots of people do and he sort of took the mouse and showed me what to do by doing it himself. And as a teacher I recognise the frustration of children when they don't know how to do something and somebody takes over. So that's again developed my interest and I knew that once I started using computers and got better that I would always make sure that I would never, you know, took over when children don't understand. And that's something I try to work with the students to understand not to do the tasks for the children [when they are on placement], or even for each other when they're demonstrating in the lectures.

In the opinion of the researchers and academic colleagues who heard some story extracts at a conference, the stories generate warmth about adapting to change and adopting new approaches to technology enhanced learning. They shed a glow and lingering lustre. Rebecca refers to undercurrent themes that shine through her narrative. She comments: "What shines through all this is that nobody ever told me: "You can't do it."" And it is this glistening 'I can do it!' belief and approach that sparkles through the stories. "I remember my moment of great joy!" and "It was great fun!" exclaims Annabel, as she describes her accommodation of new technologies in different decades in her career. The participants reveal a determination to succeed and overcome any obstacles in their way.

The narrative sessions not only provided opportunities for participants to share their glowing stories, they also encouraged them to reflect on them. "I probably grew up thinking I was someone who could do things," Rebecca reflected. This 'probably' appears to signify a reflective moment. Similarly, Liz laughs as she reflects on her elderly mother's technological pursuits. This laughter, too, seems to indicate a new understanding. Annabel laughs before she recalls that her father paid for her to do a typing course. "I think this is relevant," she reflects. "Not only do I think it's relevant, it is totally relevant, but I hadn't thought of it before!" The narrative sessions, then, served as dwelling posts, or opportunities for tutors to reflect on how their life stories contributed to their work as university tutors. These story-telling sessions do not provide answers but create warm and enlightening moments that echoed throughout the research process and may continue to resonate beyond.

The dénouement

The work that now remains is 'to build on positive staff attitudes' (Benson, 2011). The research process provided colleagues with an outlet for telling their stories, and this is something that could usefully be extended in the future. This forum for telling and sharing, it is proposed, might be more effective than broad-sweep, institutional policies and strategies. As Cappelli and Smithies (2009) articulate, 'a 'top-down' vision rarely works and instead it is the community who realise the vision and begin to set the agenda' (p.73). The suggestion here is that colleagues should attend to the teaching community before and during the imposition of inevitable strategies, if the global

SECRETARIA TÉCNICA

VII CIDUI

ISBN 978-84-695-4073-2



visions are to become a lived reality on the ground. As Skelton (2012) proposes, quality assurance and enhancement drives, reward schemes or national and institutional incentives, are not necessarily sufficient in themselves. Big-sweep strategies do not remove 'the fragility and riskiness of any human project' (Rorty, 1991, p.34). The view in this research is that any Foucauldian 'mechanisms for surveillance' (Skelton, 2012, p.27) are repressive, and quieten or suffocate the human spirit. This research makes time for individual colleagues to tell their delicate, unique, time-bound, human stories.

The stories gathered for this research merit reflection, deserve dwelling time (Walsh, 2012). The researchers were surprised to acknowledge that the content of the stories was less significant than their resonating power as a whole. As with Walsh (2012) there was a shift 'from thinking about experience as shaped in discourse to experiencing the world more directly, increasing awareness, attending to energy, intensities' (p.276). No discourse analysis is appropriate here.

In order to facilitate an immediate, live experience, and attain maximum resonance, an oral re-reading session was planned for a later stage. At this session, the stories are re-told out loud to an assembled group of participants. This re-telling becomes a momentary and sensory experience, an opportunity for participants to encounter the stories through their senses, bodily, in time and space (Conle & de Beyer, 2009). It was felt that the story sessions offered an opportunity for participants 'to dwell momentarily within those worlds' (Barone, 2001), those story-worlds. Most importantly, the re-telling sessions carried the possibility of generating further echoing ripples of warmth.

This remains a highly subjective and optimistic research project, with fluid, literary, creative leanings. The project is wholly limited by time and space. The university in which it originated underwent large-scale changes following the onset of the project, and the make-up of faculty clusters, groups and cohorts remains ever-shifting. This research does not arrive at closure, or reduce uncertainty in any way. It does not lead to theories either, since 'theories are about ideas, not personal stories.' (Ceglowski, 2005, p.16) A narrative methodology was adopted as the most appropriate one for understanding the human experience, especially because narrative is 'the way humans understand their own lives' (Richardson, 1990, p.65). Accordingly, we attended to our participants' stories with our whole beings.

There can be no final word to this paper, only words of encouragement. We encourage colleagues in other Higher Education institutions to create dwelling posts. These dwelling posts are times and spaces where tutors may rest awhile and tell or listen to warming, re-echoing stories about adapting to change and uncertainty, about adopting new technologies, whatever they are, and especially if they carry the potential to enhance tutors' pedagogical repertoires.

SECRETARIA TÉCNICA

VII CIDUI

ISBN 978-84-695-4073-2



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SECRETARIA TÉCNICA

VII CIDUI

ISBN 978-84-695-4073-2

