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A SHARE PROJECT HANDBOOK



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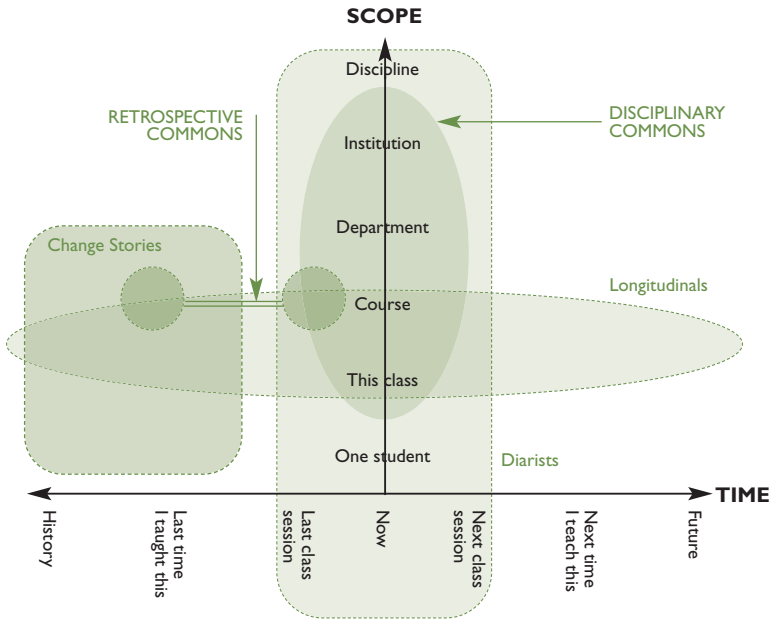
USING NARRATIVE METHODOLOGY

SALLY FINCHER



Using Narrative Methodology

Sally Fincher



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The cover illustration pays homage to the design of Penguin books from the 1930s and 1940s, a design reference that the Share Project used throughout its work deliberately to evoke that period when the “ordinary man” became a focus of enquiry, as we took the “ordinary academic” to be ours.

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Introduction to the Share Project

The Share project ran from 2008–2012 and aimed to gain insight into how educators in Higher Education share teaching practice; how they represent it; how they use representations in turn, and how, when and with what evidence they change their teaching practice. The project comprised several separate, although inter-related, investigations and used narrative both as a *medium* with regard to representing practice and as a *methodology* in research studies. As Olson observes:

... narratives are key components in the authentic study of teaching, for until we understand the context and appreciate the perspectives of those involved, any understanding of what it means to teach and learn will remain fragmented and disconnected from the real world of teaching (Olson, 1997)

In investigating teachers’ practice, we undertook four narrative enquiries. In the body of this handbook we consider each, in both theoretical and pragmatic reflection, in the hope that it may be of use to other researchers embarking on this sort of enquiry. We preface this with a short examination of the use of narrative as a medium and follow with the presentation of an analytic framework that emerged from the combination of narrative methodologies we employed.

A STORY TO START WITH

A colleague once told me a story. “When I first started teaching – it was in one-week blocks – I went the first week and paid close attention to the lecturer. I watched everything they did, and took careful notes. The next week, I did exactly the same as they did: it was a disaster.” There is a story in my family (not in my memory) of a Christmas when I was about 3 or 4. My uncle demonstrated a magic trick, which I carefully watched, then announced “I can do that”. Solemnly and seriously I did exactly

the same as he had done, folded the handkerchief, waved my hands: it did not work.

Captivated by the finished product, both of us were, of course, looking at the wrong things. The skilled practice, the work – of teaching, of magic – is not evident in the act. It is rather like a gimmick that several of us employ when we first stand up in a lecture to teach computer programmingⁱ. We talk about how you can only learn programming by doing it, not by listening to people talking about it or watching other people do it. To emphasise our point, we briefly juggle three balls then hand them to a student in the front row and say “OK, I’ve showed you how, now you do it”.

NARRATIVE AS MEDIUM

Despite the opening fable (cautionary tale, perhaps) we believe that there are ways that the crucial elements of skilled practice – looking at the right things – can be made apparent. The “trick” of it is to involve educators in a deliberate act of externalisation; reflective, aural or textual. That externalisation exposes what is important and significant for their teaching, allows others to see it and in turn, and with practice, to internalise it for themselves.

Throughout the Share Project we experimented with various forms of deliberate narrative externalisation: the structured, collegial reflection opportunities afforded by a *Disciplinary Commons* (Fincher & Tenenberg, 2007) or a *Bundle Story Process* (Finlay, 2012). Additionally we explored specific textual forms for capturing and representing teaching practice: patterns, bundles, portfolios (Falconer, Finlay, & Fincher, 2011). Throughout this, we were repeatedly struck by how powerful a vehicle narrative is for this kind of exchange.

Others, too, have recognised this power and collected stories to exemplify and to illustrate practice with real experience. Cynthia Kurtz describes using stories to create useful (and usable)

manuals within her work at IBM “One benefit seemed to be that people found the ‘real user’ stories so interesting and motivating that they explored information they might have passed by when it was merely reference material” (Kurtz, 2010, p. 72). The Howard Hughes Medical Institute at the University of Delaware collects “TA Tales”, real stories from the experiences of graduate teaching assistants (TAs) that can be used for helping students new to teaching “make good decisions in situations they have not encountered before” (H. White, 2012, p. 2). In the early 2000’s John Wakeford published a series of books aimed at “presenting insiders’ views and experiences of university life”. They were known as the “How I ...” series, as many titles in the series started with that phraseⁱⁱ. He chose the form for this series because “[I] just noticed how boring *How to Study* books were and recalled some books on public schools called *Marlborough by the Boys* etc., which were much more interesting and enlightening than those written by the headmasters.” (Wakeford, 2010)

Part of the strength of these collections is that the narratives are conducive to the teller; they represent real experience told from the narrator’s point of view, so are easy to relate. And such narratives are equally conducive to the listener, unlike a “how to” story, a “how I” a story makes no demands that the listener “do as I do”, they are rather, in Goodson and Walker’s phrase, authoritative but not authoritarian (1995). A listener can judge what is significant and useful in a story, and take just that. The nature of exchange in a narrative representation means that you can draw from other’s experiences, and that they then become your own. This is familiar to teachers:

“We’re not in a position” he was saying “we don’t have the resources to invent – it takes a lot of money to develop curriculum from scratch ... we just can’t do that. But we’re great at implementing the good things that we find. We might have to beg, borrow or steal it, but we can apply a good idea.” (Rose, 1995, p. 94)

And narrative may also be a very appropriate mechanism by which the structure and organisation of educational knowledge develops, progresses and strengthens. Richard Feynman was a great scientist. He said of teaching:

... my own personal experience – as you will realize, there is an awful lot of studying of the methods of education going on, particularly of the teaching of arithmetic – but if you try to find out what is really known about what is the better way to teach arithmetic than some other way, you will discover that there is an enormous number of studies and a great deal of statistics, but they are all disconnected from one another and they are mixtures of anecdotes, uncontrolled experiments, and very poorly controlled experiments, so there is very little information as a result. (Feynman & Robbins, 1999, p. 106)

Recognising the boundary of method, he proceeds:

Now whether the scientific method would work in those fields if we knew how to do it, I don't know. It's particularly weak in this way. There may be some other method. For example, to listen to the ideas of the past and the experience of people for a long time might be a good idea. It's only a good idea not to pay attention to the past when you have another independent source of information that you've decided to follow. (Feynman & Robbins, 1999, p. 243)

William H Schubert – a more conventional source of educational scholarship – concurs:

Teachers are often good storytellers: they relate the essence of their experience, their best teacher lore, through anecdote rather than by trying to explain the essence directly (Schubert & Ayers, 1992, p. 142)

Narrative as Methodology

When using narrative as an investigative tool, rather than as a representational form, there are a number of issues that we, as researchers, have to negotiate. Some of these are obvious (or quickly become so). Others are more obscure, and yet if unconsidered can compromise results. The four Share Project studies that we undertook, and their associated methodologies, were: Change Stories, participatory narrative enquiry; Day Surveys, diaries; a *Commons* Retrospective, scaffolded creation of digital narratives; Longitudinal Study, biographical interviews. Before describing each of these, in this section we explore some of the general issues that underlie narrative work that we found to be particularly significant.

STALKING THE WILY NARRATIVE

Narrative is a particularly important way in which teachers convey information about their practice. Judith Warren Little observes

Practitioners continually make use of 'personal data' (i.e., information drawn from personal experience) to make sense of things. ... Accounts of teaching experience punctuate teachers' talk with one another in a range of workplace contexts: in staffroom or hallway encounters, regularly scheduled meetings of one sort or another, professional development events, and increasingly, activities focused on reviews of school assessment data or samples of student work. Such accounts, whether in the form of passing references or extended narratives, form a pervasive feature of professional interaction. (Little, 2007)

And although she is speaking of school teachers, rather than tertiary educators, the same is surely true in that milieu also. However, as useful and as meaning-laden as it is, narrative poses several problems for the researcher using it as an investigative methodology. There is no shortage of stories, but they are hard to

locate in the habitat, hard to trap, and hard to index. We have to learn where to look, how to capture and represent them, and then how to interrogate and classify them.

WHY DO PEOPLE TELL STORIES?

A first problem in using narrative methods is that whilst it is trivial to recognise a story, it is hard to compel their emergence. They naturally arise in response to a situation, either our own or someone else's.

Our own stories arise from a first person narrative based on real experience. Whilst the term "war story" is often used in a rather loose fashion, Jane J White provides a sharper definition and purpose in respect of teacher practice and teacher's reflection:

War stories are about problems, issues, difficulties and triumphs. They have a need to be told: "Let me tell you what happened to me today ..." and they solicit sympathy and advice: interpretations, counter-narratives, "amen" encouragement. (J.J. White, 1991, p. 251)

It is difficult (if not impossible) to recreate the *need* to tell a story. Unless it is "present" somehow for the teller, then the response will be awkward and contrived. So all the methods we used have a preliminary step, sometimes short (a quick prompt) sometimes prolonged (an extended personal interaction), which provide stimulus to engage and to provoke narrative responses.

WHY DO WE LISTEN?

We respond to others' experience with a story when we recognise a point of salience between their experience and our own. Gregory Bateson (1979) neatly characterised the "naturalness" of the narrative response in human thought:

There is a story which I have used before and shall use again: A man wanted to know about mind, not in nature, but in his private large computer. He asked it (no doubt in his best Fortran), 'Do you compute that you will ever think like a

human being?' The machine then set to work to analyze its own computational habits. Finally, the machine printed its answer on a piece of paper, as such machines do. The man ran to get the answer and found, neatly typed, the words:

THAT REMINDS ME OF A STORY

Bateson concludes his anecdote "For surely the computer was right. This is indeed how people think." In the same vein Gary Klein, in his work on naturalistic decision-making observes "Causal mental models typically take the form of a story" (Klein & Baxter, 2006) and some theorists claim that narrative is fundamental to human thought. The psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986) has argued that human beings have two modes of thought: *paradigmatic* or *logico-scientific* cognition, characterised by positivist enquiry and relating to the discovery and application of universals; and *narrative* cognition which focuses on the situated and particular, in temporal and causal relationⁱⁱⁱ.

As listeners, we understand that stories are meaningful and that they can have a meaning for us, although that meaning may not always be the same for everyone who hears it. Sometimes meaning is private, cautionary; sometimes meaning is public and shared with particular salience for certain sorts of listener. An example of this is the quasi-ritualised story-telling in Alcoholics Anonymous where a central practice in meetings is the telling of "second stories" (Arminen, 2004), that is a story that is purposefully meant to share common features with those stories that have been told before (in Alcoholics Anonymous terms, *I drank, I was a drunk, now I'm sober*). These stories are both less commonly told in other forums, and less meaningful within those forums, where the listeners are not themselves recovering alcoholics.

Sometimes meaning grows and changes as we grow and change through different contextual and developmental circumstances. "Another important principle of learning through storytelling is that since stories can be heard again and again, the meanings that one makes or doesn't make from them can happen

at any time. One does not have to give a meaning right after hearing a story, as with the question-and-answer pedagogical approach” (Archibald, 2008, p. 24). We may not be “ready” for a story, or we may lay a story down for future understanding. We may wish we had listened to a story at an earlier time (or listened to it differently or better); we may live with stories for a long time – and they may live with us.

We found that the currency of narrative was good in our investigations. Participants were willing, even eager, to hear the stories that others were telling. In our investigations this happened in different ways: face-to-face in “story circles”, where one person’s story would prompt a response from others; directly, in participant-to-participant interviews and vicariously, in diary extracts reported anonymously in a monthly “newsletter”. In each case, there was a ready audience.

WHAT IS THE “TRUTH” OF STORIES?

This leads to a second problem of using narrative methods: their situated and particular nature. This irreducibly individualistic quality makes narrative an awkward tool for generating generalisable claims; their meaning cannot be aggregated and abstracted to a universal principle. That does not mean that narratives cannot be about the same thing, of course. As human rights “truth commissions” demonstrate, gathering multiple personal narratives can establish a more truthful picture of events than that described by the dominant voice. And at the same time they acknowledge the validity of each individual story by soliciting them, and being audience for them. As Shea says of the South African “truth and reconciliation” hearings:

Opened with prayers and accompanied by hymn singing, the human rights violations hearings represented the commission’s and the country’s attempt to restore honor and dignity to victims and survivors, by giving them a platform from which to tell their highly emotive stories. (Shea, 2000, p. 4)

The strength (and compass) of narrative truth is experiential authenticity. The central weakness of narrative as a singular subjective representation is balanced by an intense qualitative richness. As Amabile and Kramer say of their extensive diary study “Fascinating stories lie within the ... daily surveys ... No numerical results, no matter how significant, can tell those tales” (2011, p. 7). And whilst stories cannot possibly fulfil a positivistic role as data at the same time their systematic collection may, methodologically, be thought of as contributing to a different sort of endeavour, a different sort of understanding. Tom Harrisson (of Mass-Observation) emphasises the primacy of the particular in human research concerning everyday experience, rather than generalising intentions of the statistician “The obsession for the typical, the representative, the ‘statistical sample’, has exercised a serious limitation on the British approach to human problems ... (Mass-Observation & Harrisson, 1943, p. 10). And a similar plea for methodological development and trajectory is related by Peter Fensham:

My own nurturing for research in the social sciences was by Oliver Zangwill in Cambridge, who held another in-between position with respect to theory. He believed the social sciences had to live through a much longer adolescence of careful observation (as natural sciences like chemistry and biology have done) before they could begin to have significant theories (Fensham, 2004, p. 80)

The overwhelming value in narrative research is that stories are true for the teller^{iv}. And whilst a story I hear told might not be “true” for me, that does not make it false for someone else. If we can respect this quality of narrative truth we can apprehend circumstances from other positions, may come to understand how things appear differently in different contexts, and, perhaps, why. Thus a collection of stories contains the “validity of multiple perspectives” (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003, p. 7) and may more “truly” describe a situation than an aggregation of scaled-response questions, although, as researchers, we have to have the wit to recognise and describe it.

WHO CAN SPEAK?

“Stories come into their own when a community has been fattened up, rendered ripe and willing to hear such stories” (Plummer, 2011)

Ken Plummer speaks of there being times when stories can be heard and when they can't. In part of his own work he has focussed on sexual stories; of rape, or sexual suffering, of gay and lesbian “coming out”. These are example of stories which may not be told – may not even be formulated – in a society that (for example) neither recognises nor represents homosexuality. In this way, stories can *only* be told when they can be heard (Plummer, 1994). He describes this as being a condition of “interpretive communities”, for example when stories of people with HIV infection are differently heard in caring communities than in others for which fear is the interpretive frame.

This leads to a third key problem of narrative research, which concerns the intended audience of a story. When we solicit responses in interviews, be they structured, semi-structured, overtly biographical or constrained to an event or place, as researchers we bring our attitudes and interpretations to bear even in the choice of our questions. We shape what is allowable, what may be said and what is permitted to stay hidden (let alone what is unseen and overlooked). We talk to “subjects” or “participants” and (for the most part) unquestioningly accept their responses as truthful and code them for similarities, for “themes” that illustrate our thesis.

Bill Bytheway suggests in his life-course interviews that the exchange of stories might be a more equal endeavour. “Arguably all research about people’s lives is participative. And it inevitably follows that researchers will talk about ‘them’ and what ‘we’ have learnt from having interviewed or observed them. Recently there have been efforts to overcome this clumsy and restrictive relationship” (Bytheway, 2011, p. 21). This has been a prominent theme in investigations of indigenous and aboriginal story telling for some time (Archibald, 2008; Klapproth, 2004). Other

researchers (especially life history researchers) may regard such texts as “co-constructions” indeed the series of books collectively known as the *Narrative Study of Lives* (edited by Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich) explicitly encourage this practice and rhetorical stance.

Across our studies, we encountered this issue in several different ways. We most keenly felt the “co-construction” pull in our “standard” biographical interviewing (longitudinal studies). Even if participants weren't known to us initially, because we visited several times over several years, inevitably a personal relationship developed which informed the interviews. Other methods we employed had far greater “researcher-distance”, some where we simply set up the initial story-prompt and then had participants submit their narratives electronically (change stories) never meeting or interacting with them further, to more complex relationships of author and audience where participants' could glimpse each other's voices (day surveys), or where they were reflecting on their own past voice (digital narratives). For each method, these choices were important with regard to the different qualities of the data collected.

ARE THEY NARRATIVES OR ARE THEY STORIES?

All terms in this arena are problematic in some way.

Story can imply both “literary” and “fabrication”, the idea that stories are both the preserve of the particularly talented and are, essentially, untrue: they are fabricated, “made up” and not honest reporting.

Narrative has little everyday meaning, and can be heard as technical and pompous.

Anecdote implies that the event described is slight, hardly worthy of report, and its meaning is often pejorative.

Although we have used all terms in the course of the Share project, we favour the more neutral “narrative”, particularly in regard to naturalistic, fragmentary, texts. In certain places we

distinguish this even more strongly with the term *non-storied narrative* to describe examples that explicitly rule out the devices of fiction such as plot and character etc., in (Fincher, 2012), for example.

The Four Share Project Studies

The four Share Project studies and their associated methodologies were:

- Change Stories, participatory narrative enquiry;
- Day Surveys, diaries;
- *Commons* Retrospective, scaffolded creation of digital narratives;
- Longitudinal Study, biographical interviews.

Participatory Narrative Enquiry: Change Stories

BACKGROUND

This piece of our research was prompted by two desiderata. The first was that if we were interested in change in practice, then we should enquire directly about it. The second was to practice “researcher–distance”, that is to put as much space between the projections, biases and assumptions of us as researchers and the analysis as possible. Even the act of questioning, or seeking biographical reflection through interview, are researcher–invasive and researcher–interpretative. In this section of our work we sought the depth of insight that is revealed by stories:

Storytelling and story analysis can facilitate a kind of reflecting that is often difficult to do, a consideration of those ordinarily tacit constructs that guide practice. Stories point towards deep beliefs and assumptions that people often cannot tell in propositional ways or denotive form, the “personal theories” and deeply held images that guide their actions (Mattingly, 1991, p. 236)

Our investigation of “Change Stories” followed a pragmatic methodology of Participatory Narrative Enquiry (PNE) which originated in the IBM Institute of Knowledge Management in the commercial context of “knowledge transfer”, and utilised a proprietary software suite for analysis^v. It turns out that neither the prescribed methodology nor the specific software were *necessary* to PNE but for us they were a time–efficient and convenient “way in” to this method of working. The underlying premise is that “sense–making” methods which seek insights from multiple perspectives throughout an organisation work more effectively to reveal issues (and potential solutions) in “real world” organisations than traditional statistical and survey techniques.

Within PNE the “data” gathered (and the basic unit for analysis) is a narrative fragment, or anecdote. Although often

referred to as “stories” this term can be misleading, and sometimes daunting, to contributors. “Story” is overlaid with, on the one hand, literary expectations (of fables, novels, “bed-time” stories) and on the other the experience of listening to a skilled raconteur, the enjoyable after-dinner speaker. Both of these hold the expectation of story as a performance, to influence an audience (Goodman, 2008). That sort of crafting, of adhering to expected and shared forms, is not what is sought in PNE (although sometimes emerges, nevertheless).

What PNE methods seek is material as close to unconsidered “natural” exchange of stories as possible. They do this by crafting a “prompt” which is presented to contributors in the hope that it will elicit a resonant reaction, the recognition of relevance, of salience, that promotes the Bateson-esque response “that reminds me of a story”. *How* the “prompt” is presented varies. Sometimes it is done online, sometimes face-to-face in a “story circle” where interaction is facilitated, and stories captured as they occur. Often, although not invariably, these are audio-recorded (Callahan, Rixon, & Schenk, 2006). Face-to-face is a frequently preferred method, as listening to others’ contributions often stimulates further responses; in this way the ultimate story collection is made both larger and more diverse. However, in many situations it is physically not possible to gather contributors together.

When the prompt is presented remotely, online, there are broadly two schools of thought as to how it should be crafted. One (characterised by Dave Snowden) is elaborate:

- Prompts should be about the whole of the experience and should be designed to elicit narrative material rather than a simple statement.
- The question should be asked in such a way as to elicit a meaningful context in the imagination of the subject.
- The question should not privilege positive or negative experiences but should seek both.

- The contributor should be allowed to answer in the third person.

An example of this kind of prompt is

“Imagine you are in a bar on a Friday night and your best friend comes in and says they have been offered a job with your company. What stories from you, or your colleagues’ experience would you tell them to encourage them to join? What stories from your or your friends’ experience would you tell them to discourage them from joining?”

The other takes the view that this sort of prompt is too nested, too conditional, and that it can be too difficult for people to follow the logic of the question. In this view, the focus is on the quality of elicitation, on making it straightforward for contributors to respond. The simplest procedure here is to ask the question you are interested in and add the phrase “what happened?” or “what happened then?” (Kurtz, 2010). In either case, “the purpose of a prompting question is to elicit narrative not to gather interpretation or meaning” (Snowden, 2010, p. 10)

Howsoever the narratives are collected, the next step in the PNE process is sense-making. In this phase contributors respond to a series of pre-defined questions (a “sensemaking framework”) that expose the meaning the story has *for them*. It is important in this methodology that the person who provides the story decides what it means (rather than the researcher interpreting it) in a process of “self-signification”. In the tradition of the company we were working with, and whose software we were using, this process took the twin forms of a) scaled responses to questions, and b) “triads” a graphical technique which required contributors to make a mark on a of triangle that “best represented the meaning of their story” where each of the points of the triangle had a different semantic label. For example, in regard to the question *To what extent was the work environment open to new initiatives* the three points might be labelled “Encouraged use of learning”; “Risk adverse” and “Too much else was going on”.

CHANGE STORIES INSTANTIATED

In the context of the Share Project, Change Stories were a relatively late addition, gathered in March 2011. The primary collection was online (the site was open from the end of January to the second week in March), but additional stories were gathered face-to-face individually and via a “story-circle” (Callahan et al., 2006) held at a conference for teachers of computer science (the ACM SIGCSE Symposium, 9th-12th March 2011).

The story prompt was: *Can you think of a time when something—an event, an article, a conversation, a reflection, an idea, a meeting, a plan—caused you to make a change in your teaching? What was it? What happened?*

We gathered 99 usable stories, and analysed them in the PNE framework with the Sensemaker® software, as reported in (Fincher, Finlay, Sharp, Falconer, & Richards, 2012).

REFLECTION ON CHANGE STORIES

With regard to our intention to practice “researcher distance”, we certainly achieved our aim. The stories were freely offered, with only the story teller’s interpretation of our prompt to guide them. However, this investigation was ultimately less successful than we hoped partly because we were inexperienced in designing projects like this and partly because we gathered insufficient data. The guiding heuristic for this sort of work is that a corpus needs to be of about 200 stories to fully reveal issues, and we had only half of that. Also, the “metadata” self-signification questions that we asked *about* the stories, where participants indicated additional meaning that the story had for them, were too “thin”, and yielded insufficient additional axes of analysis.

In its most powerful form PNE analysis is led by quantitative enquiry. So responses to the scale-rated questions are statistically grouped, combined and examined. Only *after* clusters emerge (for example “people over 50 are more likely to say that the change in

practice in their story is of interest to educators beyond their department”) is the text of stories considered at all. In a quite real sense, the words of the story, their expressive capture, is unimportant to the analysis and used only as illustration. To examine the stories as texts would be to re-instate the researcher as a distinguished interpreter/audience and so turn it into narrative enquiry, not participatory narrative enquiry: “Any project that is only or mostly what I think about stories people told would not be worth having” (Kurtz, 2012).

This proved to be a difficult stance to maintain: to allow only the ostensible meaning to stand, instead of grouping stories on their internal features (changes initiated by meetings with people as opposed to changes initiated by reading papers, for example) was too alien an approach, and the rewards too slight for us to sustain the enquiry, and we extended the analysis with more tradition qualitative methods (Fincher, Richards, Finlay, Sharp, & Falconer, 2012).

Nevertheless, in the context of the whole of the Share Project data collection, Change Stories played a valuable role. Because our solicitation was unbounded (in time, or scope) we uncovered stories of significance. Participants contributed material that they had remembered (sometimes over many decades) which was especially important in shaping their practice.

Keeping a Diary: Day Surveys

BACKGROUND

With this investigation, we asked academics to keep a diary for one day per month for a year, which, taken together would form an overview of academic life (a “day survey”). We were seeking fine-grained detail of what (and how much) work educators do with regard to their teaching. We wanted to capture this in context, in regard to other types of work they might do (research, administration). We were also keen to find out how and when, how often and how much, they made changes to their teaching practice. We expected all this to emerge.

Day Surveys were inspired by the methods of Mass Observation. Mass Observation was a project (later an organisation) started in 1937 by Charles Madge (a poet and sociologist), Humphrey Jennings (a filmmaker) and Tom Harrison (an expeditionary and ornithologist). Mass Observation characterised itself as a project to create an “anthropology of ourselves” and sought the everyday opinions of “ordinary” people, rather than established views from journalists and politicians or analysis from academia^{vi}. Mass Observation recruited volunteers and utilised several kinds of enquiry at various points over its life. Among the most common were: a series of questions sent out each month, called “directives”; a panel of contributors who kept a diary on the 12th of each month; and participant observation of everyday situations, by both paid researchers and volunteer observers.

In its first incarnation it was an iconoclastic, often troubled, project. There were problems of funding and of powerful personalities pulling in different directions. Over time, it remade itself into a market survey organisation and quietly declined into the 1950’s. It was renewed in 1981 and continues to this day. The Mass Observation archives are housed at The University of Sussex.

Mass Observation materials are decidedly idiosyncratic.

Firstly, they are idiosyncratic in the nature of questions they asked, which ranged from the direct “Would you shake hands with a Nazi in uniform?” (June 1939) through the reflective “Do you consider you have any *aims in life* clearly enough formulated to put in writing? If so, please say what they are and indicate their relative importance to you. If you haven’t, do you think it matters, or not?” (July 1944) to the prosaic “list all the objects on your mantelpiece” (June 1937).

Secondly they are idiosyncratic, in the immediately engaging nature of the responses, which often have a strong voice and give a genuine insight into the detail of daily life. Here are four extracts all written in response to one of the dullest directives (September 1950), which asked contributors what they thoughts of the type of questions that MO asked them:

The type of question I least enjoy is that which asks for an inventory of things, such as the one last year which asked us to describe our furniture, household goods, painting and papering. While these may be of great value to you, they are none-the-less to me a little tedious. [MO1921]

I can’t work up passions about certain comparative questions sometimes asked at regular intervals e.g. my feelings about the Australians or what I think of Mr Morrison, I realise they may be useful, but they’re dull as well! [MO732]

Another item which interests me is the frightful price of men’s haircutting. Is it not folly that all girls are not taught this necessary skill? It is as necessary an accomplishment as cooking or mending. [MO 4041]

I hate questions about how I paint my house, and how many things of this or that kind I have in this or that room. It takes simply ages and I haven’t time to waste! Anyway it bores me to tears ... I absolutely abominate those awful charts, and shall never answer them in future. Life is too short, too full of anxiety and too hurried to do what one hates if one isn’t absolutely obliged to! [MO115]

It was this sort of idiosyncrasy, the compelling detail and texture of “ordinary” academic worklife – of teaching and research, of institutions, students and colleagues – that we hoped to find in the Share Project diaries.

DAY SURVEYS INSTANTIATED

We advertised for contributors to complete a diary for the 15th of every month, from September 2010 to August 2011^{vi}. The specific solicitation was:

Day Surveys ask that you keep a diary for the 15th day of the month detailing what you do (especially with regard to teaching) and what you think and feel about it.

The purpose of Day Surveys is to discover what is significant in academics’ lives — not what someone else thinks should be significant. We want you to tell us what you really do. We’re interested in detail and nuance, in the gaps between what is supposed to happen and what does happen, between staff and student, between institution and individual.

Thinking, planning, preparation, lecturing, assessment, graduate student supervision, undergraduate project-work, marking, examination. Anything that you do on a survey day — anything you care about on that day — is important and interesting to us. Survey days follow the rhythm of the teaching year and patterns of work across the days of the week.

Entries were completed online, and diarists were anonymous (although some demographic information was collected). Eventually, 389 diarists registered with the project.

Although not planned at the time of the funding proposal, it became apparent that there would have to be some sort of feedback to the Share Project participants. They could not be expected to maintain their commitment to contribute in the face of a vacuum. The 1930s MO had provided its respondents with

“bulletins” which consisted of two or three printed sides providing informal feedback on responses to the previous month’s “directive” with a flavour of half-way analysis.

For example, the newsletter of May 1939 contained responses to a series of questions on men’s clothes. It included some direct quotes, for example: “I would not be seen dead in a bowler” and “A bowler hat must be worn in London” and “When I say I’m not conservative about clothes, I don’t mean that I wear the wrong things together, for example, a bowler hat with flannel trousers”. It also included some “facts and figures”, such as “of those who spend £4 and under on a suit, 27% would spend more if they could” and some interpretation “One of the original functions of dress, apart from protection from the weather, was self-display or, in Freudian language, exhibitionism. Yet in our society men, (as voiced by Observers) want their clothes to make them inconspicuous. So one can deduce the exhibitionism is repressed; and some Observers report that on entering a tailor’s shop they feel guilty and anxious”.

In SP there was no time to undertake even preliminary analysis, so our newsletter (called *The Day Survey Reporter*) was compiled exclusively from extracts from participants’ diaries, their own words chosen by me (Fincher) to reflect common themes and concerns. The *Reporter* was sent to all registered participants as a response and “thank you” every month; additionally copies were sent to the Times *Higher* (THE) and Mass Observation. On six occasions, the THE extracted material from the newsletter and published it (24 February 2011, 19 May 2011, 17 July 2011, 28 July 2011, 22 September 2011, 4 November 2011).

Not all 389 diarists participated from the start, and there were notable “waves” of new registrants after publication of extracts in THE. Not only were the diarists not all present from the start, but not all wrote every month. Indeed, 140 (36%) registered on the website, but wrote no entries at all. 29 (7%) were “completists” submitting an entry for every month.

In total, the corpus comprises 1,454 diary entries from the 249 registrants who submitted at least one entry. However, the entries are as unevenly distributed as contributors. The “completists” account for the largest number of entries (348) and the largest proportion (24%) of entries, emphasising their voices and their concerns.

| No. of Entries | Diarists | | Entries | |
|----------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage |
| None | 140 | 36% | 0 | 0% |
| One | 51 | 13% | 51 | 4% |
| Two | 25 | 6% | 50 | 3% |
| Three | 29 | 7% | 87 | 6% |
| Four | 16 | 4% | 64 | 4% |
| Five | 17 | 4% | 85 | 6% |
| Six | 4 | 1% | 24 | 2% |
| Seven | 9 | 2% | 63 | 4% |
| Eight | 13 | 3% | 104 | 7% |
| Nine | 12 | 3% | 108 | 7% |
| Ten | 14 | 4% | 140 | 10% |
| Eleven | 30 | 8% | 330 | 23% |
| Twelve | 29 | 7% | 348 | 24% |
| Total | 389 | 100% | 1454 | 100% |

The mechanics of the diary-keeping was that the day was “opened” on the project webpage on the 15th of each month and left writable for a week, so contributors could only submit the current month’s entry. (And although unconscious at the time, I am retrospectively convinced that this, too, was a MO influence. The experience of reading through boxes of responses in the MO archive, hand- or type- written, each isolated from their authors and from each other, instilled the impression that that is what is produced as the result of mass diary-gathering, although clearly their methods of collation and preservation of responses were

principally technological constraints and not desired effects or products of explicit research design. The process by which SP diaries were gathered puts them much closer to the authentic practice of diary-writing than the MO responses which were, in nature and in fact, more like letters.)

As well as incorporating researcher-distance, as data day-survey diaries had a welcome emphasis on the quotidian, the ordinary, the matter-of-fact. This had two corollaries for us as researchers: one was that if a diarist mentioned something, then it was likely to be important (in their life, at least); the other was that the diaries may be interrogated for any aspect of academic life that we found to be of interest.

REFLECTION ON DAY SURVEY DIARIES

This was a highly successful intervention. It was successful in its own terms in providing rich, individual, situated narratives of academic day-to-day life. There were also less expected benefits. One was the profile of the diary study lent profile to the Share Project as a whole, which in turn helped us to recruit to other parts of the project (for example, Change Stories). Less expectedly (but no less successfully) the distribution of the newsletters created a community of the diary-writers, see (Fincher, 2012).

There is no doubt however, that the Day Surveys were an extremely heavyweight intervention. They required technical infrastructure for submission (both to set up and maintain); they required a dedicated, on-going, time commitment on the part of the diarists to complete their monthly entries; the newsletter required dedicated time on the part of the researcher to read all the diary entries each month and make an illustrative compilation of common themes. Additionally, although electronically gathered, and so trivially searchable, analysis of such a large quantity of material will always be lengthy.

Digital Narratives: Commons Retrospective

BACKGROUND

One of the activities that the Share Project undertook was to run some *Disciplinary Commons* (see <http://www.disciplinarycommons.org>). A *Disciplinary Commons* brings together people from different institutions who are teaching the same subject matter (sometimes the same module – *Computer Programming*, or *Introduction to Shakespeare*, perhaps) to reflect on, and share, their teaching practice^{viii}. A *Commons* structures reflective opportunities for educators to examine their own teaching practice and document it in a course portfolio. They run in monthly sessions, alongside teaching, over the course of an academic year. The “work” of a *Commons* is to provide a place where the everyday, situated work of teaching can be critically examined. This moves narrative from its naturalistic role in teacher conversation to a more purposeful investigation. Mark Guzdial describes this change of emphasis in his blog:

Teachers tell themselves stories about what happens in their classrooms all the time. I know that I do. I explain to myself why students fail my classes, or why graduate students choose not to work with me, or why a paper or proposal gets rejected. We all do. I’m sure that I, like the ... teachers in the *Disciplinary Commons for Computing Education*, make assumptions and ignore possible explanations that are more likely than the ones I’ve chosen. A problem, though, is that the stories I tell myself about my classes influence more than just myself — my response to those stories changes how I teach the next time, and thus influences the next group of students. (<http://computinged.wordpress.com/> 15 June 2009)

And Jane J White describes why challenge is an important element when working with teachers’ narratives in a structured way:

... the problem is not the elicitation of the stories. The problem is challenging both the storytellers and the listeners to use the stories to create new insights. Merely telling and re-telling the same old stories can self-servingly be used for self-justification and/or to display membership in a group mindset (J.J. White, 1991, p. 251)

The structure of the *Disciplinary Commons* takes educators out of their home institution, with associated “group mindset”, and puts them into contact with a set of knowledgeable peers providing an unusual view, and a new context in which to talk about their own practice. There are features built into a *Commons* that are especially useful in facilitating *Commoners’* examination of their own practice in new ways: the use of boundary objects and the artifactual literacy they afford.

Boundary objects

In each session of a *Commons*, participants bring in a specified artefact, a concrete thing – a module description, a textbook, an assessment, some graded student work – from their own classroom. In this way, discussions are anchored, materials can be compared, and the individual pieces of “home” practice are represented in a “foreign” context. This allows teachers to talk about their practices, to see them in a disciplinary rather than institutional light. Underlying assumptions (about design and deployment) can be exposed, alternatives considered and different approached compared.

Teachers’ practice is captured in many, many representations, created for different purposes and for different audiences. Representations “in the wild” are always part of a larger system that involves not only teachers, but students, colleagues and administrators. Because these are “naturally occurring” artefacts that are the by-product of the practice of teaching, they are very familiar. Teachers are used to “reading” these representations, in assessing the unspoken conditions they must rely on: the judgement “I’d like to try that” (or equally “that wouldn’t work for me”) is a very swift response, much too fast to be based only

on the information content meagrely presented in a syllabus or an assessment description. It is the embodiment of practice in boundary objects that facilitates *Commons* discussions: “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours” encourages questioning that elicits (and illuminates) important features of the originating context. And everyone’s practice is similarly present in the room.

In this way the material artefacts mediate communities. As originally observed in the identification of the “boundary object” phenomenon (where fur trappers traded animal skins with museum curators) meanings are made clear as they are embodied in the object that is shared, that has meaning for both communities (Star & Griesemer, 1989). In the *Commons*, objects (e.g. syllabi, student assessments) cross the boundaries of one community (my department) into another (that of my *Commons* colleagues) and in their journey institutional constraints are made apparent (class sizes, QA and other documentary conventions etc.), disciplinary interpretation (e. g. “objects-first”) and pedagogic understanding (e.g. “pair-programming”) may be read. In this way, all is open for discussion and negotiation.

Artifactual literacy

Within a *Commons* part of the “work” of a boundary object is to afford “artifactual literacy”. This is a concept developed by Pahl and Roswell in the context of schoolchildren and immigrant families, where the telling of important narratives (of family, home, tradition) is facilitated by being associated with a physical object (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). So, in their terms, “within everyday lives [a meaningful object] symbolises and represents relationships and events that matter”. People can tell a story *about* an object that they may not have been able to express without it. Artefacts afford the expression of complex realities of a world not present. Children who may be inarticulate in a “school” context can tell a powerful story when it is anchored by a meaningful artefact, the object liberates their literacy. In similar fashion, disciplinary academics who may be daunted by the language of educational development and professional reflection (often disparagingly

referred to as “eduspeak”) may yet talk fluently and compellingly about their teaching (and its rationale, aims and framing) when the discussion is associated with an object that arises from their practice. It is not so much a case of “every picture tells a story” but “every object allows a story to emerge”.

Within the Share Project we ran “ordinary” *Disciplinary Commons*. However, in 2010, we also devised and ran a unique extension to the model, a *Commons Retrospective* in which we brought back people who had previously gone through a *Commons*. In this case, we invited educators from two separate *Commons*, one in Introductory Programming (run 2005/6) and one in Human-Computer Interaction (run 2007/8). So some teachers were looking back on an experience five years in the past, others only two.

We were concerned to draw on familiar *Commons* practices within our Retrospective, to capitalise on their shared repertoire^{ix} of experience and at the same time to extend our exploration of narrative in the representation of teaching. So in the design of the Retrospective, we focussed on the use of boundary objects (as a familiar practice) and to capture the literacy the objects facilitated in the creation of digital narratives (new to the Retrospective).

DIGITAL NARRATIVES INSTANTIATED

The Retrospective *Commons* ran from lunchtime on 18th February 2010 to lunchtime the following day.

Before arriving, we asked participants to find/collect/bring three artefacts that represented their current teaching practice. We did not solicit these in a particular category (as had been the case with the original *Commons*) nor did we require them to be related to each other. The sole criterion was to bring materials that demonstrated the character of their current practice. There was a great variety in their choice of artefacts, from physical objects (a pen, a robot, a book token used for a competition prize) to “naturally occurring” teaching materials (programming questions and associated lab preparation instructions, assessment sheets, “a

little exercise on icons”) to “meta” materials, generated around, or because of, teaching (a paper published which was based on student work, but not about teaching).

We structured our Retrospective around an adaptation of McDrury and Alterio’s (2003) method of “four stage storytelling”, a formalised process in which educators interview each other, then review the interview transcripts and revisit the original material in a process that “maximise[s] learning through reflective dialogue”. McDrury and Alterio put between two and four weeks between the original interview and the revisiting, which we were not able to do, but we otherwise adopted several features of their process, augmented by our use of artefacts and the narratives they support.

In the first session, we asked participants to work in pairs to “tell the story” of the artefacts they brought. The participant who was “listener” was charged with the brief of asking non-judgemental, facilitative questions to promote reflection and surface underlying issues: *Why did they choose a particular artefact? Why is it important to them, to their practice, now?* Each pair took it in turns to tell their story and to listen to their partners’. The discussions were audio recorded, and subsequently transcribed and returned to both parties.

In the second session we asked participants to look back at the portfolio they had constructed in their original *Commons* experience. We then asked them to tell another story, this time entitled “Then and Now”. Once again, these were recorded and later transcribed; copies of the audio and the transcriptions were sent to both teller and listener.

We then told participants that, the following day, we wanted them to create a short (two or three minute) digital narrative that captured their “Then and Now” story which we would preserve as an addendum to their earlier work. This was, largely, unfamiliar territory to the participants. We scaffolded their work with “script templates” and storyboarding materials. Most participants scripted and recorded the audio track for their narrative that night.

The following morning (session three) participants structured, created and recorded their narratives. We provided laptops with appropriate software, and had two assistants with technical expertise on hand to assist where necessary. For most participants creating a digital narrative was a new experience, and few had worked with the particular software suite we were using before. We finished the event by sharing everyone’s narrative, projected onto a “big screen”^x.

REFLECTION ON COMMONS RETROSPECTIVES

For a time-limited intervention, this was successful and productive. Barring technical difficulties, every participant produced a narrative. Many were unfamiliar with the production technologies, and became engaged in the process: they were pleased to be introduced to “something new” in a scaffolded environment.

However, the resultant narratives were uneven. This could have been ameliorated in a number of ways. We could have adhered to the McDrury and Alterio process more closely, allowing time between the interviews and production for participants to reflect on their transcripts (an unlikely luxury). We could have “set up” the idea of producing digital narratives further in advance, thus allowing participants to bring in images and other supporting artefacts from their home environment, facilitating and enriching the production of the narratives (this would have produced a marked improvement). We could have been much more specific about the kind of narrative we were seeking: some reflected on the process of going through a *Commons*, some on a specific aspect of their practice that had changed, some on changes in their circumstances and their approaches to teaching. This meant that, as with the original *Commons* portfolios, the audience was not apparent to the author. Were they telling these stories for us? For each other? Or for some distant “ideal reader”? There is no clear answer.

Biographical Interviews: Longitudinal Study

BACKGROUND

A very early Share Project decision was to undertake a small-scale, longitudinal study, following a few teachers intensively. We wanted to map change as it occurred and observe how educators sought, evaluated and incorporated new practices into their teaching. In this, we used a “standard” qualitative methodology, a series of one-to-one semi-structured interviews.

Over the life of the project we visited these academics six times, requesting different information at different points. The instruments were:

“BASELINE” INTERVIEW^{XI}

This included questions concerning their own teaching history and approach, “anchored” in the context of a specific module (or module instantiation). The sort of module we sought was one in which the interviewee’s decision making (or other cognitive skill) had a direct impact on the outcome. The first sweep of the interview was to pinpoint a specific module to talk about, and participants were prompted with the question: “We’re looking for a module that best displays your “teacherly instincts”, a module where your skill made a difference.”

In the context of that module, we then asked questions concerning the degrees of freedom, control and constraint the participant had to change things; questions about the sort (and degree) of adaptation and change they made; and questions concerning their orientation – how students learned the material, how they failed to learn etc.

We also offered participants the opportunity to draw a “timeline” for change in the module we were discussing, to act as an external reference.

TWO SHORT EXERCISES

Our second intervention was to ask participants to undertake two short exercises. These were designed to be completed without a researcher present (although some chose to do them face to face)

- *In how many ways, and in how many places is there some representation of your teaching practice?*
 - Quite rightly, we think of teaching as centred on ourselves. But it sits inside larger systems that involve not only ourselves and our departmental colleagues, but students, administrators, timetablers, external examiners and so on.
 - What we’d like you to do is collect all the all the places that some representation of your module occurs None of them will be the “whole picture”, all of them will be a partial view, created for a particular purpose and particular audience. Think about institutional requirements (programme approval?), and departmental requirements (entries in handbooks? module evaluation? archive of material?) as well as your own lecture notes etc., and materials generated by (or with) students – podcasts, slides, assessments etc.
 - Present it to us as a diagram, a list, a map, a catalogue – what ever you feel most comfortable with.
- *Who do you talk to about teaching?*
 - We’re curious both as to the quantity of people you talk to about teaching, and the quality of those conversations.
 - So, we’d like to ask you to tell us who you talk to about teaching – and their connection to you – whether they’re a friend, colleague, family member how often you talk to them and the sort of thing you talk about – details of the material you cover? General issues of style and approach? Problems and issues? Or maybe good ideas you’ve seen or good ideas you’ve had?

The first exercise was inspired by the observation that “representations of practice” are frequently neither entirely individual nor entirely stand-alone. The second by a similar exercise conducted by Roxå & Mårtensson (2009).

“FOLLOW THAT CHANGE”

This was the most substantial intervention, as it consisted of several parts, following participants over time. First, we solicited the identification of a piece of practice that was specific and time-bounded (that is not an “approach” or a fundamental piece of subject matter that wove through the whole course). We suggested it could be a participant’s favourite lecture, or a topic that proved problematic in the past, or something that had surprised them by working unexpectedly well. We then asked them to characterise the intervention in the following way:

- Name it.
- What place does it occupy in the module: (thematically, structurally etc.)
- What are your thoughts on it right now – that is, what is its history, what is its trajectory with you. Why is it in your mind, why have you chosen to focus on it, how do you feel about it?
- When does this intervention next occur? Please be as precise as possible – both logically (“about two thirds of the way through the module”) and chronologically (“14th December 2009 in the 10.00 am slot”)

One week before the intervention was scheduled, a researcher contacted the participant and asked:

- What have you done with it?
- How have you changed it (if at all)?
- What do you expect from it, when it is realised next week

As close to the time of deployment as possible (ideally, as an observer) the researcher conducted a “de-briefing” interview:

- What happened, did it go as you expected? What was different? Do you wish you’d done something else? What would you change for next time?
- If you could get advice on this intervention, if you could ask anyone you wanted, who would it be (what kind of person)?
- What would be the ideal resource that would help you “fix”/improve this?

Finally, at (or after) the end of the module, we asked them to reflect on the experience. The questions were less specific, but retrospective and prospective reflection were encouraged:

- Reflection on the end of this cycle of teaching, and what happened to this thing in the context of the module
- Looking forwards (Is this OK now? Will they alter it again? What other things are they looking at to change next? Is that as a knock-on effect from this sequence? Or something they’ve had in mind for a while?)
- Very long term (that is over more than one cycle) will this change impact other modules? (And if so, is it because they do similar things in other modules? Or has making this change catalysed something else for them?)

“WHAT ARE YOU READING?”

To complement the data gathered in the “who do you talk to?” intervention, we were interested in what reading material participants were engaging with. For the fourth intervention (which, for most participants, ran concurrently with the previous one) we sent each of them five stamped, self-addressed postcards and asked them:

“Please note the next five things you read that relate to and/or influence your teaching, or your thinking about your teaching.

For each one please note:

- a. The date & time you read it.
- b. Bibliographic/URL/retrieval details.
- e. How/where you found it.
- d. What you did with it. (Did you use anything from it? Did you follow up any of the references? Did you pass it on to someone else? If so, who?)

The participants were given the opportunity to respond by email if they preferred.

FINAL INTERVIEW

We closed this sequence of investigation with a final interview that started with a retrospective on the immediate past and then asked two more imaginative exercises. The first used an approach standard to “life course” research (derived from *The Stories We Live By*, D.P. McAdams, 1993)

I’d like you to think about your teaching career, your teaching “life”, as if it were a book. Each part of your teaching composes a chapter in the book. Certainly the book is unfinished at this point: still, it probably contains a few interesting and well-defined chapters. Please divide your teaching “life” into its major chapters and briefly describe each chapter. You may have as many or as few as you like, but I’d suggest at least 2 or 3 and at most 7 or 8. Think of this as a general table of contents for your book. Please give each chapter a name and describe its overall contents.

When the participant had completed that, the researcher asked: “Looking back over your teaching career, with chapters, episodes and characters, can you discern a central theme, or message or idea that runs through the text?”

The second (and final) exercise was one not infrequently used in Mass Observation, that of an “imagined future”:

You in July 2012

I’d like you to picture yourself in one year’s time – around the middle of summer 2012.

I’d like you to think about your academic life and especially your teaching, but there may be other sorts of things that will change for you – changing job, retiring, health changes, moving house, household and family changes or refurbishment and so on.

- Where do you think you will be?

- What will you be doing?

- What do you already know will have changed for you?

Can you speculate about your wider community – changes in your department, in your institution or in your neighbourhood. How will they be in a year’s time do you think?

LONGITUDINAL STUDY INSTANTIATED

Six researchers undertook interviews. Some followed only one academic, one researcher followed seven. Eighteen academics are represented in the first intervention, however, due to a combination of sabbatical leave, sick leave, maternity leave, retirement and change of job, there are no “complete sets” of data – that is, no academic is represented in every intervention, although all completed at least two. This (we believe) simply reflects the problems of gathering longitudinal data.

Mapping Change: An Emergent Analytic Framework

The four studies described here were not planned together, “in one go”. Nevertheless, we took them to be examining the same thing, situated teaching practice and (our particular focus) change in teaching practice. As the project progressed, however, we were frustrated that we were not seeing what we had expected. Perhaps naïvely, we had located change at the point of action, in the professional practice of a teacher in the classroom responding to the vicissitudes of the subject matter and student understanding in front of them, the embodiment of Schön’s “distinctive structure of reflection-in-action” (1983, p. ix). And indeed, in one sense, this was not naïve, because that is where much teaching change happens and where its success is evaluated. But at the same time we were seeing effectively nothing of that in our data. Nor were we seeing the same *sort* of change from one set of data to the next. As we became more troubled by this, we looked more closely:

With the Change Stories we had stories of *significant* change (although not always large change). Because we had asked people “Can you think of a time when you made a change ...” and had stipulated no other constraints, what was recalled was change of a certain character – memorable, likely infrequent, and unbounded by space or time. Notably the change stories reported change (or impetus for change) that was often decades old and frequently located in another institution, culture or place. Even the form of words we (unconsciously) chose echoed the formulaic “Once upon a time ...” suggesting something out of the ordinary.

Nevertheless, educators *had* these sorts of stories, and could bring them to mind. Individuals may not have had very many of them (how often does significant change come about?) but they recognised them, and contributed them, when asked.

With the Day Surveys we had the polar opposite. Daily diaries (if they report change or the impetus for change at all) mostly tell stories of individual, small-scale, local-impact, immediately-effected change. (For example “...in helping the students I realized that several people are struggling with one particular detail that we didn’t cover in class, so I intend to add that to the list of material for tomorrow’s lecture”, SP312, November). Any such stories are interspersed with descriptions of other tasks and quotidian details of both academic and personal life. Classroom change (or thoughts of it) may well *not* be the most significant thing to happen on any one day: indeed, may not be remembered beyond it.

With the Retrospective Commons Digital Narratives we did not directly ask about change at all. What we asked for was a reflection between two points in time: “then and now”. What we got as a result of that form of question was a catalogue of the changes that had happened in between those points in time (often departmental, or institutional in scale). By providing two personally-relevant (and personally-documented) end points, the most noticeable thing to participants was the differences between them.

With the Longitudinal “5 postcards” intervention, we captured potential seeds of change, the other end of the timeline from the Change Stories. The readings our participants reported may grow into significant practices or they may get discarded along the way, that we cannot know, but we do know that these ideas have captured attention and been worth consideration beyond the ordinary, at least for a moment.

As we continued to explore this, we came to understand that the narratives we had solicited were not after all talking about different sorts of change, but were considering the same phenomenon from different vantage points. And in coming to this understanding at the same time we came to realise that change in teaching is rather oddly quantised. That is to say, the only time I can make a change to my teaching is either the very next class I teach (likely soon) or the next time I teach this subject/course, which at the earliest will be the next academic semester, more

often the next academic year, sometimes not for much longer. Teaching change is not a smooth, continuous process: teachers are used to carrying ideas and materials over long periods of time before they can put them to use in their practice.

Together with our new view of *time* in change, we realised that we had to account for *scope*, as well. Although some change was in the hands of individuals, some was instigated from much larger processes – perhaps curricula initiatives, requirements of accrediting bodies, or institutional mission. We devised a simple map of the change space^{xiii}:



We used the map to plot our data sets (see inside front cover) and in this way, it became visibly apparent that like the proverbial blind men trying to understand an elephant, the things that had appeared to be so different were actually part of the same beast^{xiii}.

Change stories described change initiated in the past, and its enduring effect; diarists were necessarily located in the ever-moving now; our longitudinal interviews covered a broad sweep of time but kept focussed on the individual and their context; the retrospective commons were firmly set at two points.

As well as describing the space of our investigations, the map was also useful as an exploratory and analytic tool as we realised that it allowed us to articulate the space that teacher-change inhabits (see inside back cover):

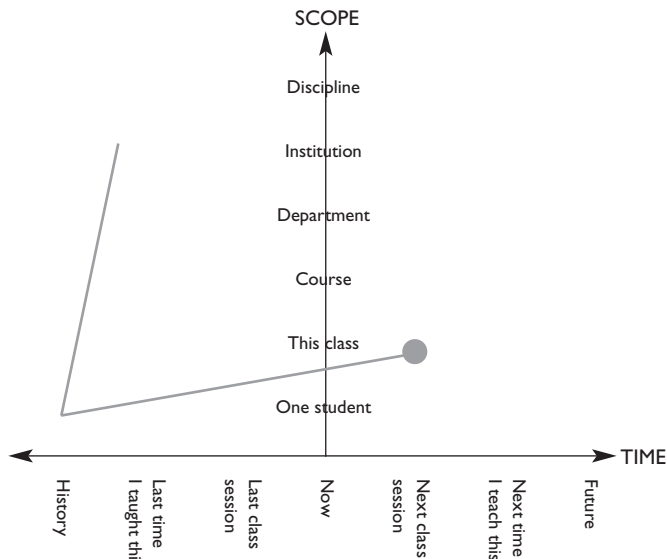
- The only place that teaching change can be enacted is in the lower right-hand quadrant, in the immediate or planned future.
- However, the source of change – the rationale for it, the evidence for it – is almost always in the past (although not necessarily a very long time in the past) and this is located in the lower left-hand quadrant.
- Culture (departmental, institutional or disciplinary), which is often an impetus of change in its own right, is located in the upper left-hand quadrant. It is here, too, that evidence of systemic change of trends in teaching and learning (such as fashion in initial languages for teaching programming, or the uptake of new pedagogic approaches, such as problem-based learning) may be observed, even if they are not apparent at the time.
- The upper right hand quadrant locates what we have called “grand narratives”, those projections of what “should be” that are embodied in documents such as curriculum guidelines, blue ribbon reports and individual institutional mission statements and their associated committees.

As well as locating types of change, the map allowed us to observe that how that wherever a “change” appeared on the map it was not isolated, but inevitably stood in relation to all the other parts, even though they may not be directly implicated in the specific event. To illustrate this, figure x models change story 77:

... initially in my lectures I used OHP slides with no handouts. Much of the time students were merely copying from the screen. This reflected my experience as a student: I often perceived the lecturer as a hindrance – s/he was making it hard for me to concentrate on slide copying

In this a cultural norm (top left) was personally experienced (bottom left) and which continues to effect change in their teaching today (bottom right).

The model also allows us to view, and express, the influences of working within a particular environment, or with particular influences, realising Randall’s insight that “Our life, it turns out, is not one story, but many, a plethora of stories in fact, both stories within us and stories we are, in turn, within” (Randall, 1995, p. 185) and echoing MacFarlane’s observation “I had long realized that alongside individual factors, the institutional setting makes an enormous difference to what we do with our lives”. (Macfarlane, 2009, p. xii)



In Closing

In one sense, the Share Project is finished: the funding period is over and no more data will be gathered under its aegis. Yet it is noticeable that this account is partial, some of our data has been well-analysed (change stories) some partially so (digital narratives, day surveys) some hardly at all (longitudinal studies).

Yet “it sometimes seems” as Bill Bytheway says, “that it is only the middle third of any project that is adequately funded and resourced. Prior to the start there is all the work entailed in preparing and submitting applications for funding, and then, after completion, publications and other dissemination work follow over several years thereafter. (Bytheway, 2011, p. 17)

Analysis, publication and “other dissemination work” will certainly continue into the future. However, we have taken the opportunity to write this handbook now, for several reasons. The first is that it is a simple place to draw together all the instruments used within the project, collating a useful repository of reference. Secondly, the four interventions we undertook, although all solicited narrative, yielded sharply different data. Our various choice of method meant we gathered different stories, and these afforded us different lenses on the phenomenon we were investigation. This is not always obvious from methodological literature, where methods are presented one-by-one as a matter of selection for specific use, or from papers which report the results obtained by using a single method of enquiry. By placing all the pieces of our project together, we more clearly expose our choice of method and the consequences of choice. “Narrative” is certainly not a unitary construct, and we hope this account will help others in their methodological selection.

Finally, as individuals and smaller groups continue to work on separate parts of the corpus, our perception of the coherence of the project data will increasingly dissipate: we will never see it more sharply than we do now.

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Notes

- i To my knowledge, David Barnes & Ian Utting (both University of Kent), Tony Jenkins (Huddersfield University) and Eric Roberts (Stanford University)
- ii For example *How I got my postgraduate degree part time* and *How I got my First Class degree*
- iii For our purposes, we take this early formulation of Bruner's to be the most useful. He later developed and extended his ideas concerning narrative to include considerations of literary theory and structure in his 1991 *Critical Inquiry* article "The Narrative Construction of Reality" and his 2004 *Social Research* article "Life as Narrative".
- iv Although there may be many layers and levels, we are not normally bound to "tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth"
- v The Sensemaker™ suite, licensed from Cognitive Edge:
<http://www.cognitive-edge.com>
- vi Although there was considerable overlap with established academics, see: Liz Stanley, *The Archaeology of a 1930s Mass-Observation Project*, University of Manchester, Department of Sociology Occasional Paper 27, 1990. Also, it should be noted that many of the MO contributors were drawn from the professional classes. Journalists, politicians and academics are well-represented in MO contributors.
- vii We would have liked to have chosen the 12th as an historical tip-of-the-hat to MO, but too few days of the week were represented. With the 15th, every day (Saturday and Sunday as well as the days of the "working" week) was included over the course of the year.
- viii For those interested in the details, see the companion handbook in this series *A Commons Leader's Vade Mecum: How to Instantiate a Disciplinary Commons*
- ix Drawing on the ideas of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, we posited that their previous experience of going through a *Disciplinary Commons* had brought these teachers together into a community of practice.
- x These can be found on the individual *Disciplinary Commons* pages, associated with the original portfolios.
- xi This protocol was influenced by the approach described in *Working Minds: A Practitioner's Guide to Cognitive Task Analysis* by Beth Crandall, Gary Klein and Robert R. Hoffman, 2006 MIT Press
- xii The map is itself an example of a long-gestated idea. It was first doodled in 2007 with Jennifer Turns, Yi-Min Huang, Jessica Yellin (all of the University of Washington, Seattle) and Susan Ambrose (of

Carnegie Mellon University). At that time, we were working on an (unrealised) paper regarding teacher decision-making and it had only "grain-size" on the y axis and "immediacy" (i.e. future time) on the x axis. I think this is an improved version and one better fit-for-purpose in its description of a change space. Nevertheless it remains indebted to, and gratefully acknowledges, the input of those early discussions.

- xiii Once upon a time, there lived six blind men in a village. One day the villagers told them, "Hey, there is an elephant in the village today." They had no idea what an elephant is. They decided, "Even though we would not be able to see it, let us go and feel it anyway." All of them went where the elephant was. Everyone of them touched the elephant.
"Hey, the elephant is a pillar," said the first man who touched his leg.
"Oh, no! it is like a rope," said the second man who touched the tail.
"Oh, no! it is like a thick branch of a tree," said the third man who touched the trunk of the elephant.
"It is like a big hand fan" said the fourth man who touched the ear of the elephant.
"It is like a huge wall," said the fifth man who touched the belly of the elephant.
"It is like a solid pipe," Said the sixth man who touched the tusk of the elephant.
They began to argue about the elephant and everyone of them insisted that he was right. It looked like they were getting agitated. A wise man was passing by and he saw this. He stopped and asked them, "What is the matter?" They said, "We cannot agree to what the elephant is like." Each one of them told what he thought the elephant was like. The wise man calmly explained to them, "All of you are right. The reason every one of you is telling it differently because each one of you touched the different part of the elephant. So, actually the elephant has all those features what you all said!"
"Oh!" everyone said. There was no more fight. They felt happy that they were all right
<http://www.jainworld.com/literature/story25.htm>

