

The Online Academic: Case Study Narratives of Change and Resistance

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Abstract

By telling stories, we make identity claims (Ronai, 1997). This paper presents a case study exploring the stories (or narratives) of one university lecturer who teaches using a combination of face-to-face and online modes. The case study has been drawn from the pilot phase of research I am undertaking into how experienced lecturers perceive their teaching selves in live and online teaching contexts and how their teaching identities are being transformed through the experience of online teaching. In conversations with me, the lecturer participants are encouraged to articulate and reflect on their teaching selves as represented in website material, computer-mediated communication and face-to-face teaching/learning contexts. The case study reveals some of the emergent themes in my research and it enables a demonstration of the 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' discourse analysis procedures which I am developing to explore academics' stories and identities. I present the identity claims and themes which have emerged in the material collected for one experienced Information Technology lecturer. I then undertake a closer narrative analysis of one extract to illustrate the interpretative procedures. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the research issues.

Keywords

Academics, Online, Case study, Narrative analysis

Introduction

Academics' work is changing. The reorganisation of higher education policy, structures and practices during the 1990s has impacted on the professional roles, identities, well-being and productivity of those who teach in universities (Broadbent, 1998; Nixon, 1996). New technologies are contributing to that change. The research I am conducting seeks to illuminate the human responses and consequences of this for academics who are 'making the move' (Taylor, Lopez & Quadrelli, 1996) to online (web-based) teaching.

Turkle (1995) suggests that any technology changes us as people; it changes our relationships and sense of ourselves. My research is focussed on how the experience of teaching online changes university teachers. There is a paucity of research into academics' experiences of teaching identity, role and practices in online learning environments. Indeed Lewis (1999) identifies a need for inquiry into the experiences of teachers who use technology, and he recommends qualitative studies (including case studies) that are classroom-based and that extend over meaningful periods of time.

I'm assuming that university teachers can and do change and that new teaching practices can act as catalysts for that change, through the experience of critical incidents, moments of awakening and periods of reflection about self as teacher. To explore this area of teacher identity and online teaching, I have been interviewing lecturers who teach face-to-face and online classes in one Victorian university. In these conversations the lecturer participants are encouraged to articulate and reflect on their teaching selves as represented in website material, computer-mediated communication and face-to-face teaching/learning contexts.

There are three major research foci: academics' identities as teachers, their beliefs about teaching in face-to-face and web-based (or online) teaching contexts, and their perceptions of how their teaching identity and beliefs might be changing as a result of engagement in online teaching.

The research design has been shaped by my desire to elicit meaning in context, and for this reason the interpretative material includes case studies. The relevance and legitimacy of case study methodology is well documented in qualitative research literature (see for example: Ball, 1990; Kemmis, 1980; Simons, 1980). In this paper, I present one case study analysis to demonstrate the methodological procedures which I have developed, and I discuss some early findings and some implications for the next phase of my research.

Themes in the Literature

The focus in my research is on understanding how lecturers who engage on web-based teaching may adapt to the changed circumstances it entails. How are lecturers defining themselves and their teaching in the restructuring, changing university?

The current theorising of the self would suggest that we can no longer identify the lecturer as a fixed and singular character. The (Western) rationalist individual - autonomous, self-sufficient, self-contained, self-controlled - is being replaced by the post-modern subject: decentred, fragmented, culturally inscribed and constructed, contradictory, relational (Barglow, 1994; Castells, 1997; Lather, 1991). Identity is 'who we perceive ourselves to be in any given situation, moment, or scene, relative to others (Ronai, 1997: 125)'. The self is thus composed of a plurality of identities which are fluid, inconsistent and decentred; these identities are influenced and shaped by cultural and social contexts.

Of particular relevance to my research is Barglow's (1994) assertion that technology is contributing to a process of identity dissolution and fragmentation. He contends that the human self both shapes and submits to information technologies, and that information processing concepts and practices are playing an important role in subverting the unity and coherence of the modernist world. That is, modernist social tenets of boundary, centred subjectivity, ethics, recognition and identification are being undermined by the many ways we manipulate (and are manipulated by) information technologies (Barglow, 1994). My broad interest is in how the individual - in this instance, the university lecturer - is responding to these challenges when she or he engages in web-based teaching.

Methodology

The case study to be discussed in this paper has been developed as part of the pilot phase of a larger project. During this phase I have been working with five academic colleagues who have used various web-based teaching methods for at least two semesters. I have collected three forms of material for analysis and interpretation: subject web pages, extracts of online teaching exchanges (selected by the participants), and transcriptions of taped conversational interviews between myself and each participant.

In conducting the conversations I have been using elicitation techniques (Kohler-Riessman, 1993; Mischler, 1991; Tannen, 1989) which foster story telling, listening and dialogue. This provides the lecturers with the opportunity to tell stories (narratives) about their teaching, as enacted in website material, computer-mediated communication and face-to-face teaching/learning contexts. In this way I am able to draw out their retrospective insights and current reflections on their teaching identities and practices.

The decision to adopt narrative elicitation and analysis in this study is supported by Goodson's (1992) observation that educational research which is purely focussed on classroom practice often exposes the most vulnerable and problematic aspect of the teacher's world. Much collaborative and democratic educational research (such as action research), assumes that the teacher *is* her or his practice (Goodson's emphasis). He argues that educational research needs to take account of teachers' personal, biographical perspectives (1992). Story-telling would appear to facilitate this.

For in telling stories, Ronai says, we make identity claims (1997). Telling stories is a significant way for individuals to give meaning to and express their understandings of their experiences (Mischler, 1991). Shotter (in MacLure, 1993) maintains that our concepts of ourselves are revealed to us in how we talk about ourselves in all the different ways that we do. MacLure (1993) argues that the analysis of this talk can illuminate the ways in which issues such as morale, commitment and personal values are articulated as matters of concern by and for the person giving the account.

My approach to the conversational transcripts, and to particular narrative extracts within them, is a two-step process involving both global ('top-down') and specific ('bottom-up') analyses. That is, I begin by analysing each conversation for themes which respond to my 3 research foci. Then I select particular passages which contain stories that exemplify or amplify one or more of these themes. In the next section I will demonstrate with one pilot phase case study how I am currently approaching this analysis process.

A Case Study : Sebastian (Seb)

Seb (a pseudonym) is an experienced teacher of Computer Science subjects who has taught undergraduates and postgraduates about computers and with computers for 22 years. His students are from

regional Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne and more recently he has started teaching overseas students who are in Singapore and Malaysia. Apart from e-mail (which serves as another means for students to access Seb), his online teaching components are all one-way modes for delivering subject content and information. Seb is an expert computer user and teacher, but he chooses not to use interactive, discursive online teaching/learning environments such as discussion lists or chat rooms in his teaching. The students' use of e-mail and the online subject material is not directly assessed in his subject design or teaching.

Seb enjoys his face-to-face teaching and the stories he tells suggests he has a firm, friendly relationship with his students. In fact he often describes his teaching self from the point of view of his students. When I ask him what would be the best thing about his teaching, he refers to formal student evaluation feedback and he follows this up with a story about a student petition:

...and I can remember being in class with a load of kerfuffle going around, I think I've still got it if I can find it, but at the end, this petition was put up, about Seb not being their lecturer for the second half of the year, and "We want Seb" and "It's not fair!" and all this kind of stuff, and I thought well, I can't be doing too bad a job [Seb1: 3].

Seb likes being liked - indeed wanted - by his students, and lecturing is like performing. Face-to-face teaching engages the senses. He mentions hearing students' 'Oohs' and 'Aaahs' in class, smelling the coffee during breaks, and he says that 'body language is so much easier to get messages across (Seb1: 13)'. Seb says he particularly values face-to-face teaching for the social contact and interaction it enables. He goes on to reveal an underlying concern that, without face-to-face contact with his students, he may become 'an entity', 'not necessarily human', 'something out there on the internet - ethereal and non-contactable (Seb1: 13)'. This fear of becoming 'ethereal', clearly contrasts with the physical interaction that he values in face-to-face teaching.

However, Seb's recent experience of teaching students in Singapore and Malaysia, via a similar combination of online materials and intensive face-to-face teaching block, has caused him to make some changes to his websites and his e-mail communication with his overseas students. He tells me that these students accord him more respect as a teacher.

I mean the Singapore students find me totally different, I mean they're very prim and proper and they usually don't.... Yes, they're very rigid and strict in their deference to sort of, adults and people they consider senior... (Seb1: 4).

I say to them, "Call me Seb. You don't have to call me Mr.[Baxter]." (Seb1: 13).

Seb has been able to personalise his website material for his distant, overseas student groups, because of his certainty about their respect for his authority as teacher. He has noticed, too, that his online materials and his e-mail exchanges with his Asian students are more frank and friendly than is the case with his local students.

Yeah, certainly my web pages have changed. Initially they were just completely, I wouldn't say sterile.... umm, they, initially they were very sort of content related, they were almost like the contents of a book. Now, I tend to make them more....myself speaking, OK? I'll talk in first person and I say "Gee, it'll be great when I come to see you in so and so, but in the meantime, have a look at these problems, you don't have to do them all.." Y'know, I tend to write as I speak, whereas before it was done more as I did for my home students, who don't need that because they see me (Seb1: 13).

This is particularly interesting, given that Seb has deliberately chosen to limit his local web-based teaching to: a. the delivery of lecture notes and tutorial solutions, and b. selective e-mail communication with his students. The local website material has not been personalised to the same extent he says, 'because they see me' (Seb1: 14). Of course, Seb sees them in lectures, tutorials and consultations. Physical proximity may also be an important element for Seb in maintaining his sense of authority as teacher with local students.

Seb resists developing his online teaching further. In his view, other more discursive forms of online teaching (such as chat and threaded discussion lists) are artificial and inadequate, and face-to-face teaching is irreplaceable:

There's not much you can't do face-to-face. Really. And you can give so much better explanations, that's where I find face-to-face good. Explaining and demonstrating. Very difficult to give a demonstration in an online situation (Seb1: 15).

In the course of our conversation, Seb reveals an awareness of authority and, in particular, of his authority as a teacher. He accepts that the content of some of the subjects he teaches is rule-based, fixed and not open to debate. He recognises the respect that his overseas students accord him as lecturer. He releases lecture notes and the solutions to tutorial problems on his subject website in particular time periods. Seb is able to control his students' learning, as well as their access to him, the teacher, in both face-to-face and online teaching-related contexts. His students' access to him during his office hours is carefully managed and he likes e-mail because it enables him to access his students 'anytime, anywhere'.

Depending on the student group, Seb maintains his authority as a teacher through a careful balance of face-to-face and online teaching. With his overseas students, who evidently defer to his authority, his website material and his use of e-mail are noticeably more frank and friendly. With his local students, he resists making his local website material more informal and he also resists expanding his local online teaching to include more interactive modes. With his local students, Seb values the proximity and immediacy of face-to-face teaching. These global themes are supported by a closer analysis of one passage extracted from the same conversation. This will be presented in the next section.

Analysis of Seb's Narrative

One conversational 'lead' I am using to access participants' perceptions about changed teaching practices as a result of online teaching is *How have you conceptualised what you do face-to-face and what you do online in a subject?* Seb's response to my query is set out in Appendix A. Direct quotes from the extract (Appendix A) are formatted in italics throughout this section.

The extract in Appendix A has been formatted along the lines of the narrative analysis layouts of Kohler-Riessman (1993) and Gee (1996). Line breaks are identified by listening to the phrasing and intonation patterns of the speakers. The resultant material resembles poetry, and it lays open stories like Seb's for closer linguistic analysis.

Kohler-Riessman, an exponent of narrative analysis, recommends beginning with an analysis of the structure of the narrative (1993). In this passage, Seb offers two canonically structured narratives to exemplify his two reasons for having online lecture notes and readings. Story

boundaries are clearly marked and his discourse also contains the structural features of more formal narrative (Mishler, 1991). My original query (lines 00 - 06) provides the framing abstract for the two stories he relates.

The Narrative Structure of Seb's Stories

In Narrative 1 Seb cues his stories (*I've had it there for two reasons*) and he sets the scene for the first story (*One, it's been a delivery mode for me*). He then introduces the characters and their actions (students who can't get to lectures), and he articulates a conflict (students won't come to boring lectures if the notes are on the web). He identifies its resolution (*So I still want them to feel that they're missing out on something by not coming to a lecture*). The narrative concludes with the point of the story (*I expect them to have read the lecture and the textbook before they even come along*). Narrative 2 demonstrates a similar narrative structure: story cue, conflict and resolution (repeated), and the point of the story. The points of conflict and resolution in each story reveal tensions for Seb in his teaching role.

In Narrative 1, conflict centres on the scenario of students not coming to lectures when online lecture notes are available. At this point Seb makes a noticeable shift (lines 16 - 18) from first person 'I' to the impersonal pronoun 'you', (perhaps to distance himself from the possibility of this happening to him?). Seb prides himself on giving interesting lectures and his resolution (line: 21: *So I still want them to feel that they're missing out on something by not coming to a lecture*) emphasises sub-themes identified in the global analysis of Seb's teaching: Seb's love of lecturing, and his desire to be liked by his students.

In Narrative 2, the points of conflict focus on student behaviours (undergraduates who never read lecture notes before coming to his lectures; students pleading for online access to lecture notes after they have been removed from the website). By alternating his and his students' utterances, Seb makes skilled use of 'constructed dialogue' (Tannen, 1989) in two conflict statements here. The rhetorical effect of this is to engage and involve the listener - me. Seb's statements of resolution in response to the conflicts in Narrative 2 draw attention to his sense of authority as a teacher:

42-44 "No, I there's gonna be a sliding four week period, and lectures are going to disappear on one end and come at the other."

51-54 And I said "No, I'm not going to. You've had an
opportunity to get them." I said, "This is an attempt to make you get
the notes as you go."
56 Y'know, the way kids are.

The first two resolutions appear as dialogue reconstituting his responses to the students' pleas. By resisting their requests, Seb is attempting to manage their learning behaviour and he is asserting his authority as lecturer. The fact that the notes are online facilitates Seb's control of the situation. The final resolution statement is Seb's comment on one student's persistent excuse (line 55: "*Oh yeah, I know, but I'm...*"), and he appears to be seeking collegial support from me for his resolute stance.

At the start of Narrative 1 (line 8) Seb signalled that he had two reasons for putting lecture notes and readings online. These reasons emerge clearly as the concluding points to both stories (lines 29-31, 57-58). The online notes are pre-reading for students, and they augment existing resources.

This initial examination of the text structure demonstrates the effectiveness of a narrative analysis approach for enabling me to organise transcript material and locate emphases, tensions, and shifts in the discourse. Breaking the text down into meaningful units also helps me to search for smaller – but arguably no less significant – linguistic clues and patterns.

A Closer Analysis

Viewed as unformatted transcript data, the conversations appear as a mass of words. By reformatting the material into narrative units, the resultant lines and stanzas reveal rich patterns of language ripe for interpretation. The time, aspect and mood of verbs become significant. Poetic features appear: rhyme, lexical repetition, imagery. (For a discussion of poetic properties in conversational discourse, see Gee, 1996; Tannen, 1989).

There are examples of these elements in this extract from my conversation with Seb. The first broad theme I identified was Seb's desire to maintain face-to-face lectures with his local students. In line 15 of the formatted extract, Seb expresses the hope that students will *want to come* to his lectures. Six lines later he balances this with the proposition that students might think they don't *need to come*. That Seb 'wants' and 'needs' his students to come to his lectures is evident at the macro- and micro-levels of his discourse. Other examples of rhyming repetition occur in lines 31

and 35 (*before they [even] come along*), and lines 49 (*...a week ago*) and 54 (*...as you go*).

The occurrence and placement of the time adjunct *still* in Narrative 1 merit attention. Seb says:

13-15: I hope I've made my lecturing interesting enough that
they'll still want to come
21: So I still want them to feel that they're missing out on
something by not coming to a lecture.

In the first two cases *still* emphasises the continuance of Seb's desire for students to attend his face-to-face lectures. There is a tone of determination in these lines, as if Seb is resisting some pressure (to give up lectures? to put more of his teaching online?). He says 'No' firmly to his students in several constructed dialogues in Narrative 2 (lines 42, 51).

Seb's recent experience with the Singaporean and Malaysian students has shown him that he can personalise his subject websites and interact online more frankly or freely than he had assumed. Yet, he is not making any further changes of this kind with his local students. He wants and needs his students to attend face-to-face lectures where he can explain, demonstrate and perform. Seb recently e-mailed me the following comment about this:

I feel rewarded coming away from a lecture where the students appear to have learnt something that would have been difficult to grasp simply by reading and trying themselves. (Perhaps all I've done is speeded up the process for them.) As with a good theatrical performance, you have to hold their attention so they're at least listening to what you have to say and this is where being a good 'performer' comes in [Seb: e-mail communication, 04.05.00].

The second global theme centres on Seb's sense of authority as a teacher. We find linguistic evidence to underline his authority in several features of the text. The third time Seb utters *still* he is expressing surprise, and possibly annoyance, at the students' on-going requests for the online notes:

46-47 I still have them say "[Seb], would you please put the notes back on again?..."

The intention of the full line appears to be 'The students say to me', but note how Seb maintains control of them: he has them still asking and

saying. Other examples containing a similar coercive intent include: *I expect them to have read the lecture* (line 29); *So I still want them to feel that they're missing out on something...* (line 21); *This is an attempt to make you get the notes as you go* (line 54).

Lexical repetition in this passage focusses around *lectures/lecturing* (8), (lecture) *notes* (5), *textbook* (3). Seb describes how the learning resources of the subject 'augment' each other: the online notes *augment the textbook* (line 23), *the lecture augments the notes and the textbook* (line 25), the online notes are *an augmentation of a resource* (lines 57-58). We can speculate on where Seb locates himself in this pattern. It is interesting to note that the final resolution statement of Narrative 1 and the final point of Narrative 2 include references to 'augmentation'.

A close linguistic analysis (framed by the narrative structure) reveals patterns and word choices to support the global themes identified in a broader discourse analysis. Seb wants to maintain his face-to-face lectures with his local students, even though he has discovered that some social contact and interaction can be developed through e-mail. His sense of authority as a teacher is grounded in face-to-face lecturing, and that authority is emphasised in his resolutions to the conflicts of the two narratives. He resists, he says 'No'.

Discussion

To return to the literature, Barglow (1994) claims that just as we humans shape technology, so it also shapes us. Seb, an expert computer user and teacher is aware of a range of web-based electronic technologies which facilitate human contact and interaction (including threaded discussion, chat, collaborative workspaces), but he is selective about the forms he employs in his teaching.

Thinking of the 2-way communication in on-line teaching (email, chat rooms, etc.) I think it's hard for the lecturer's personality to really come across [Seb: e-mail communication, 04.05.00].

Seb is resisting being shaped by the two-way, interactive technologies. He fears that without face-to-face contact he will become 'ethereal'. He is resolutely standing his ground, by keeping his face-to-face lectures; these are teaching events where he feels centred - by being the centre of attention. There is no threat of dissolution or fragmentation to his

teaching self. He controls his students and the subject resources, and the online materials augment (or expand) the range of learning resources for his students. Seb states confidently elsewhere that 'the email teacher Sebastian, and the person that's there in the website, and the person who's the face to face lecturer' are the same person (Seb1: 17). Seb, the autonomous, fixed, centred and self-controlled lecturer, is resisting the potential destabilisation of his identity through any augmentation of online interaction with his students.

The curious reader will find other evidence in the passage to support the global themes I first identified. The richness of the transcript data is not restricted to this passage or this lecturer, Seb. The narrative analysis format can be applied to any segments of the conversational data to disclose fresh layers of language and meaning. One of the strengths of case study research is that offers authentic insights into lived experience, and the case study presented in this paper demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach for exploring contemporary issues of teacher identity.

There are on-going issues in this research around my role as researcher: my ultimate 'ownership' of the research, the manner and extent to which I direct participants, my role in the creation of the conversations, and the selectivity I bring to bear in the analytical and interpretative phrases. Certainly I follow-up ambiguities and insights with the participants, and I share transcripts and thematic summaries with them for (optional) comment. I maintain a research journal which serves many functions, and written into its pages are reflections on the decisions I make, the frustrations or problems I encounter, the feedback I receive. My intention is to work openly, honestly and reflexively.

Closing Comments

The 'top-down, bottom-up' approach to transcript analysis developed in this paper, represents a new direction for me, arising from the work I have been conducting in the pilot phase. I am feeling comfortable with this approach, and it is likely that I will adopt a similar procedure for my main study. The methodology seems appropriate to my topic, particularly so given that a. identity claims are expressed through narratives, and b. the 'top-down', bottom-up' analyses seemed to harmonise and yet offer different perspectives on the same themes.

Since commencing the pilot phase analysis and interpretation I find that I am listening with 'new ears' to my colleagues as they express desire and authority in statements like Seb's: *I still want them to feel...* and *This is an attempt to make you get the notes....* These key themes are also emerging in the other case studies with which I have been working. Perhaps you will recognise colleagues and/or similar issues in this case study in your teaching context. The work is intimate and the analysis detailed, but like all case study research, I aim to discover and illuminate issues which might be relevant to other contexts.

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Appendix A: Extract from Seb's Narrative

K: Kim (researcher)

S: 'Seb' (participant pseudonym)

Underlined text indicates emphatic stress.

00	K:	How do you,	
01		how have you conceptualised)
02		what you do face to face)
03		and what you do online?) ABSTRACT
04		Or, email ..or...)
05		what's done through the web?)
06		and what's done face to face?)
07	S:	Basically, the web has always been a....	NARRATIVE 1:
08		I've I've had it there for two reasons.	• STORY CUE
09		One, it's been a delivery mode for me.	• ORIENTATION
10		I don't use Powerpoint,	(ie. scene setting)
11		Forget forget Powerpoint.	
12		I've used it as a support for students	
13		who <u>can't</u> get to lectures and I hope I've made my lecturing	
14		interesting enough	
15		that they'll still want to come,	
16		because if you <u>didn't</u> ,	• CONFLICT
17		if your lectures were boring	
18		<u>and</u> you had notes on the web	
19		they'd they'd say	
20		"Oh I don't need to come."	
21		So I still want them to feel that they're missing out on something by	• RESOLUTION
22		not coming to a lecture,	
23		because, when...	
24		The notes augment the textbook, ok,	
25		and the notes are on the web,	
26		and the lecture augments <u>both</u> of those,	
27		because I neither talk directly from the notes	
28		or to the textbook	
29		when I'm giving a lecture.	
30		I expect them to have <u>read</u> the lecture	• POINT OF THE
31		<u>and</u> the textbook	STORY
32		before they even come along.	
33		That's lovely with the Grad Dips.	
34		They always have.	NARRATIVE 2:
35		It's almost the opposite with the undergrads.	• STORY CUE
36		They've <u>never</u> read it before they come along.	• CONFLICT
37		So many of them...	
38	K:	Perennial problem!	
39	S:	They want to print everything out at the end of the semester	
40		and this is where FlexiComm	
41		umm..and that, that small time we <u>had</u> ,	
42		umm.. made me think about,	
43		"No, I there's gonna be a sliding four week period,	• RESOLUTION
44		and lectures are going to disappear on one end	
45		and and come at the other".	
46		And that's what I did for the first time this semester	
47		and I <u>still</u> have them say	• CONFLICT
48		"[Seb], would you please put the notes back on again?	
49		I want to print them all off",	
		and this was a week ago.	

50		And I said	• RESOLUTION
51		"No, I'm not going to.	
52		You've had an opportunity	
53		to get them."	
54		I said "This is an attempt to make you get the notes <u>as you go</u> ." "Oh	
55		yeah, I know, but I'm...."	• CONFLICT
56		Y'know, the way kids are.	• RESOLUTION
57		Umm.. so... yeah, it's always been....	(?)
58		an augmentation of of a resource, really.	• POINT OF THE STORY

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