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EDITORIAL

Technologies, 'content' and storytelling

We know the world through the stories that are told about it. (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 641)

Cousins and Bissar open the first paper of this issue with this resonant quote on the power and potency of narrative. As a point of departure for my first editorial for *Research in Learning Technology*, this seemed appropriate; a reflection on how – along with my fellow editors, our contributing authors and pool of reviewers – we have worked together to surface these six "stories" of research in this field. The notion of the research account (and indeed education itself) as a form of storytelling may be seen to run through the six apparently very different papers in the issue, as a range of authors from various contexts seek to make sense of complex practices, discourses and educational contexts surrounding technologies. The related theme of what constitutes "content," and how it is managed, curated, shared and engaged with also seems to be woven throughout this issue.

Cousins and Bissar's paper foregrounds the "storytelling" aspect of how we understand social practice and technology most explicitly in a paper which documents a narrative enquiry approach to informal learning, presenting several stories of adaptation to digital change. Referring to a UK higher education context, it "... foregrounds the small, every-day motivating moments" (P1) in these lecturers' lives, as they adapt to the fast-changing demands of learning technologies. Their study focused on bottom-up change in attitudes and practices lead by "pioneers" as opposed to being driven by management edicts. They emphasise the importance of local and individual contexts, needs and beliefs and rightly challenge notions of a monolithic and singular "teacher identity." In their methodology, they emphasise resonance and individual voice over generalisation and cross-sectional analysis, and in doing so they offer an unusually nuanced account of how life experiences may interact with decision-making and attitudes towards technologies in individual lecturers. They refuse to allow their discussion to collapse into superficial analytic categories, but instead urge us to create "dwelling posts" – "times and spaces where tutors may rest awhile and tell of listen to warming, re-echoing stories about adapting to change and uncertainty" (P11). In a sector characterised by increasing surveillance and a drive for ever faster-paced, homogenised change, I found this exhortation both valuable and thought provoking.

Reed also reports on a study of staff attitudes in a UK university, and in doing so approaches the issue of content from a different angle, in an investigation of lecturer's perceptions of "the open content movement" and Open Educational Resources (OER). He provides an overview of the drivers and potential advantages of this movement, and also the various barriers to its growth. By doing so, he points out findings from previous research, particularly the observation that sharing tends to take place in local contexts, but is much less widespread at a sector level. A range of reasons have been identified for this, such as the lack of an appropriate channel for sharing, confusion about intellectual ownership, unwillingness to give away valuable and possibly unique content and lack of sustainability in terms of the underlying economic model. A survey was administered to academic staff, and found a general willingness to share content, with the practice once again appearing to take place informally at a local level as opposed to on a large scale using OER repositories. Reed speculates that this may be due to lack of awareness of Creative Commons (CC) licensing. This finding does invite speculation as to whether perceived readership might also be important here, as providing materials to an unknown and distant potential readership is perhaps valued rather differently to sharing materials with known peers in a situated social context.

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These notions of familiarity and unfamiliarity seemed to form a link to the next paper in the issue, which shifts the focus onto students and away from the UK context. Kemp analyses the survey narratives of Business undergraduate students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in an investigation of their responses to blended learning. Their approach explicitly foregrounds the possible impact of culture on students' perceptions of learning environments and on their behaviour. Using the construct of Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) (e.g. Hofstede 1980), which has been claimed to be a dominant aspect of culture in the Middle East, it is argued that this may present a barrier to student engagement with online or blended learning, which is assumed to require greater initiative and responsibility on the part of the students. A survey was administered to students, asking for free-text responses relating to their experiences of using a Learning Management System (LMS). The author interprets the results as showing student resistance to uncertainty and preference for structure across several dimensions of their learning experiences. Kemp offers some pedagogic adaptations that can be made to anticipate this. This study was a thought-provoking one, raising questions around the extent to which as educators we should "manage out" troubling uncertainty for students, this urge perhaps existing in tension with the imperative to equip students to deal with the inherently unstable and uncertain nature of higher education, and also employment. Returning to the storytelling metaphor, this might be seen in terms of whether students see themselves as primarily audience members, as opposed to "co-authors" of their own learning.

The next paper also deals with tensions surrounding structure and agency in online learning, as Hill, Fresen and Geng explore the issues inherent in working with templates to create LMS courses in a US and a UK higher education context. They identify a useful range of dimensions that may influence course design, including logistical, practice-based and pedagogical aspects. Their template design was based on lecturers' expectations, which in turn were derived from the lecturers' experiences of courses they were currently teaching. Interestingly, they propose a "lattice" model (based on Cross 2012) to account for how various parameters might intersect with one another in complex interconnected ways in practice, and write of "rather a more intricate journey" (p. 14), emerging from local practice, as opposed to the type of predictive relationship described by an algorithm. In terms of a broad concept of narrative, the shape and resultant experience of a course may also be seen as a "journey" the student undertakes/makes through the temporal process of a course. The template has a shaping effect on that course as an educational artefact, and crucially also on how knowledge and engagement is structured, sequenced and therefore experienced by the student. In this regard, this study presents a nuanced and complex interpretation of the broad range of dimensions at work in online educational design.

In their exploration of the text-matching software Turnitin as a pedagogic resource in a UK university, Graham-Matheson and Starr also touch on how content is engaged with by students, and also how students construct their own "stories" via academic writing, though processes of (often transgressive) reassemblage of texts. They begin by providing an overview of existing research, which shows the sheer complexity of the phenomenon of "plagiarism," persuasively arguing that it cannot be simply reduced to "academic misconduct" and therefore considered as a straightforward disciplinary matter. Staff and students were surveyed about their perceptions and understandings of plagiarism and Turnitin, with follow-up emails and face-to-face interviews held to investigate the issue in more depth. The study yielded several interesting insights, such as the finding that staff had a stronger perception of the institutional strategy as "educative" than the students, and also that there was no appreciable difference in outcomes when engaging students with Turnitin at an introductory level compared with a more extended engagement via draft submission.

Finally, Voelkel's paper provides an account of how formative feedback was used in a "two-stage" process with UK-based face-to-face undergraduate Biological Sciences students, using online tests with feedback to guide and encourage students through a course. In this action research study, a formative online test was given to students, followed up by voluntary student evaluations of the intervention, which was applied over three rounds. It was found that

increasing time on a task alone did not improve outcomes, but improvements were observed when students engaged in "a meaningful interaction with the material" (p. 16) via prompt feedback, causing students to take greater responsibility for their learning. In this case, the feedback might be seen as forming part of a "narrative" of progress that has contributed to the experience of engaging with the content and progressing throughout the course.

Taken together, these six papers represent a rich set of "stories" of enquiry and practice, offering valuable insights for researchers and educationalists seeking to understand and enhance knowledge and practice in these various dimensions of learning technologies and educational process. Despite their disparate focus, a common theme can be discerned across them as they force us in various ways to reflect on how teachers and learners organise, distribute, sequence, synthesise and create "content" in digitally mediated formats and contexts, challenging preconceived ideas surrounding engagement with learning technologies.

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