

AARE-NZARE 1999 Conference

Paper code: MCS99609

Academics Online: A Study of Academics Adapting to Web-Based Teaching

Kim McShane

La Trobe University

Tel.: 03-9479 1944 Fax.: 03-9479 2996

E-mail: k.mcshane@latrobe.edu.au

Abstract

This paper describes research-in-progress which is focussed on exploring the stories of university teachers 'making the move' (Taylor, Lopez and Quadrelli, 1996) to online teaching. This work falls under the conference sub-theme 'Local Developments: Global Effects' and the specific subject 'Technology and Education'. Following a brief outline of my research design, I present an early analysis of narrative transcript data collected during a pilot phase conversation with an experienced (face-to-face and online) university lecturer. The analysis and interpretation of the transcript suggest the viability of narrative analysis and cause me to reflect on issues in my methodology, including my role in the design and conduct of the conversations.

1. Introduction

Turkle has suggested that any technology 'changes us as people, changes our relationships and sense of ourselves (1995: 232).' My research is focussed on how technology 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: 5) 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 am just beginning to elicit the stories of academic colleagues who are engaged in online teaching at La Trobe University. There are three major components to the question: academics' identities as teachers, their beliefs about teaching in face-to-face and web-based (or online) teaching contexts, and how their teaching identity and beliefs might change over time as a result of engagement in online teaching.

2. Themes in the Literature

My literature review remains incomplete, but to date I have identified various themes running through in two types of literature in the field. I have come to recognise a large body of literature about teaching with computers which is more descriptive and prescriptive (in that it extols the virtues of the 'technologised' educator over the perceived short-comings of the 'information transmitter' non-technologised teacher). This kind of literature does not arise out

of planned research and the analysis and interpretation of data, but instead tends to describe computer-based teaching practices and projects with the intention of encouraging teachers to change their practices.

Until recently I have been largely drawn towards research into computer-mediated communication (CMC) (see for example Dyson, 1997; Harasim, 1990, 1994; Harasim, Hiltz, Teles & Turoff, 1995; Haughey & Anderson, 1998; Hiltz, 1994; Warschauer and Lepeintre (1997). Here I have uncovered richer themes which deal with teacher and learner roles in CMC-mediated environments: 'Teachers as Learners, Learners as Teachers'; 'Online Networks and Collaborative Learning: Teacher and Students as Peers', and 'Online Learning Relationships'.

I am continuing to seek out well-researched studies of university teachers adapting to web-based CMC-oriented teaching. My reading to date reflects the origins of my interest in the topic, but I am seeking now to extend my reading into the broad area of identity, and specifically teacher identity and life history.

3. Methodology

I have set out to work with lecturers who are embarking on online CMC-based teaching and to follow them over a period of time as they adapt to online teaching. For the main study I intend involving 10 female and male lecturers from two Faculties and based on several campuses of

La Trobe University. This balance of gender, discipline and location offers scope for comparison and contrast. Participants will be experienced face-to-face teachers (with a minimum of 3 years university teaching) but novices in terms of interactive online learning practices. The subjects which include the online CMC component are subjects that the lecturers have previously taught in face-to-face mode only.

There are 4 phases to the methodology.

Phase 1: Pilot study (retrospective conversations with experienced online lecturers)

Phase 2: Pre-online teaching conversation

Phase 3: Transcript analysis

Phase 4: Post-online teaching conversation.

The taped conversations and electronic records of online teacher-student exchanges will be transcribed and shared with participants for further discussion and interpretation. Conversations are designed to be dialogic rather than interrogative and participants will be invited to become involved in the interpretative analysis of material they have shared. While there is scope within this process for participants to develop critical 'reflection-in-action' (Smyth, 1986), I am not going to force that change and so this work is not an action research project. I am developing elicitation procedures which facilitate story telling, listening and dialogue and the pilot phase conversations which I have conducted to date have been particularly instructive in this regard.

4. A Pilot Study Conversation: one extract

The pilot phase interviews are already proving instructive in terms of my research design. I have held initial conversations with four experienced online academics, eliciting their beliefs about teaching in general, their experience of computers in teaching and online learning, their current practices in online teaching and their perceptions about changing teaching roles and practices - both face-to-face and online. These expressions of beliefs and values are supported by their stories and anecdotes which are being analysed from within a framework of narrative analysis.

According to Mishler, telling stories is a significant way for individuals to give meaning to and express their understandings of their experiences (1991: 75). Shotter (in MacLure, 1993: 377) 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: 381) 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.

For the purposes of this 'work-in-progress' paper, I will present here one analysed account from my pilot study. The extract represents one person's experiences in university-based online teaching and learning. The piece was selected so as to explore a) my first two research questions related to academic teaching identity/identities and beliefs about teaching in face-to-face and web-based (or online) teaching contexts, and b) the nature and viability of narrative analysis.

'Paul' has been teaching Nursing since 1978. He actively pursues CMC in his teaching and integrates it into the learning objectives and assessment practices of his subjects. He expresses a commitment to fostering interactive (online) learning practices as suggested in the following unanalysed piece:

P: ...'Ahm, but a lot o' learning comes from sharing with each other. So it's 'bout sort of facilitating that sort of interaction. And that's probably why I was a little bit disappointed with the ah the bulletin board part of [the subject] this year, is that I didn't feel there was enough of that sideways interaction as was the sort of shouting-out type interaction. (Unanalysed transcript; 'Paul': October, 1999.)

In the following extract (Table 1) however, he describes how online material has improved his students' preparation for his face-to-face lectures. He is referring to a 3rd year group of students who are studying a subject focussed on health and new information technologies. The subject was taught in a mixed-mode fashion in face-to-face and online contexts (using WebCT: discussion list, announcements, e-mail, content and resources including hyperlinks to web sites).

Table 1: Extract from Paul's Narrative

K: Kim (researcher)

P: 'Paul' (participant pseudonym)

00	K:	I'm gonna turn the question around	
----	----	------------------------------------	--

01		and say, what about ...	
02		are there things that you think you can do online	
03	P:	that you can't <u>do</u> otherwise?	
04		[long pause & expiration]... online that I can't do otherwise...	
05		[K: hmm]..	
06		Ahm... I think if	
07		I think I've actually	
08		I've.. I've <u>done otherwise</u> .) ABSTRACT
09		But I think I've encouraged students) for the two
10		to research) narratives that
11		in preparation more) follow in this
12		since I've been using online) extract.
13	K:	than I did before. [K: hmm]	
14	P:	Ahm and and the reason I say I think...	
15		Is that you or the technology sorry?	
16		I think it's	
17		I think it's directing them	
18			<u>NARRATIVE 1:</u>
19		using the technology,	• STORY CUE
20		but I think it's the technology that's facilitated some of it.	• ORIENTATION
21		'Cause I think back	(ie. scene setting)
22		and I think y'know	
23		to a s- to a subject that I've had in the past,	
24		and Nursing Research is the is the one,	• CONFLICT
25		where.. we've put readings in the library and things like that a'know on short-term	

26	loan.	
27	And you get the short-term loan figures back at the end of the semester	
28		
29	and you think	
30	"Aarrghhh, where've they been?!" [P: hand clap] Y'know?	• RESOLUTION
31	Hardly anything's been accessed [K: Yes]	
32	or something like that.	
33	They've obviously looked at their textbook	
34	and they've not gone more broadly than that.	
35	And then, y'know you you compare it	
36	and you look at the	
37	you look at the	
38	the fact that they've been using the links	-
39	and they've actually <u>gone</u> to something	• POINT OF THE STORY
40	like the NH&MRC site. Y'know.	<u>NARRATIVE 2:</u>
41	Most of 'em,	• STORY CUE
42	previously,	• ORIENTATION
43	we would have mentioned it in a lecture	
44	and that's about as far as they would have got to it.	
45		• CONFLICT
46	But to have actually gone there [K: Yep]	
47	and looked at what's there. [K: mmm]	• RESOLUTION & POINT OF THE STORY
48	Ahm.. When we've talked about evidence-based practice,	
49	Ahm ... and and we've talked about things like the Joanna Briggs Centre for Evidence-Based Nursing in Australia.	
50	Ahm, y'know we'll have t-	

		<p>we'll have talked to them</p> <p>but I don't think any of them will have ever looked at any of the documents.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">But I <u>know</u> ...</p> <p style="text-align: center;">I know that they <u>have</u> done it</p> <p>since I've put them online.</p>	
--	--	--	--

5. Analysis and Interpretation

This extract is the basis for my first attempt at reading and interpreting the conversational, narrative material I have been collecting as part of my pilot phase. Kohler-Riessman, an exponent of narrative analysis, recommends beginning with an analysis of the structure of the narrative (1993: 61).

In this passage, Paul offers two canonically structured narratives to exemplify his contention that an online component can encourage students to research more in preparation for his lectures. Story boundaries are clearly marked and his discourse also contains the features of more formal narrative (Mishler, 1991: 74). We find an initial framing abstract for the two stories he relates in lines 8 - 12 (the fact that he has encouraged students to research in preparation more since he's 'been using online'). This is then supported by the narrative structure: opening cue and scene setting (thinking back to a subject he's taught in the past), the introduction of characters and their actions (Nursing Research students), events over time (readings put loan in library), the explication of a significant conflict and its resolution (students had only read their textbooks), and finally, the point of the story (they will access online links to Health sites).

5.1 Who is the teacher?

To return to my research questions, I am interrogating the text here for insights into Paul's teaching identity and beliefs, and his perceptions of how online teaching has changed his face-to-face teaching practices. Paul responds to my initial question by asserting that anything he has taught otherwise, he has done online (line 7). When I interrupt him to ask who (or what) is encouraging the students to research more (line 14), he avoids explicitly asserting himself as the teacher, responding with 'I think it's directing them using the technology'. Ambiguity emerges here. Has 'I' (the teacher) become 'it' (the technology)? Or perhaps 'it's [all about] directing them using the technology'. There is no hint in the phrasing to suggest either interpretation. The following line (18), '...it's the technology that's facilitated some of it', complicates the interpretative options. We are left to ponder whether the technology has facilitated the preparatory research, him the teacher, or both.

The use of personal pronouns reveals another structure underlying the extract. Paul starts his response to my query by referring to himself as 'I'. He shifts to 'we' in telling his stories, without specifying whom the other(s) with him are. At a critical moment in Narrative 1 (lines 31 - 33: 'resolution' phase) he switches to the impersonal 'you'. In closing and resolving the second narrative, he reverts to a very confident 'I' (line 48: 'But I know'). These shifts in identification draw attention to how Paul expresses himself in his teaching role in this extract.

The use of 'we' could include (an)other teaching colleague(s), or perhaps it is a way of expressing some kind of solidified or multiple teaching persona. I can only speculate as to why he makes an apparent resort to strength in numbers. In any case, as the face-to-face teacher, he says 'we put readings in the library', 'we mentioned' a link and 'we talked' about evidence-based practice in lectures (lines 28, 39, 43, 44, 46).

Paul also distinguishes himself from his students by his use of the 'us/them'. The frustration with the short-term loan figures which culminates in his handclap and exclamation, 'Aarrgghh, where've they been?!' is followed by a resigned assessment of what 'they' have and haven't done. It is at this point (lines 31 - 36) that Paul makes a halting switch from 'I/we' to the impersonal pronoun 'you':

31 And then, y'know you compare it

32 and you look at the

33 you look at the

34 the fact that they've been using the links

35 and they've actually gone to something

36 like the NH & MRC site. Y'know.

The assumption underlying this short sequence is that Paul has been monitoring his students' preparation. It remains unclear whether he has been able to establish their increased preparation by means of the electronic monitoring function inside the online learning management software he has been using, or by noting student response and checking student preparation in the face-to-face lectures. The hesitation expressed in these lines and the switch to the impersonal pronoun 'you', underscore an uneasiness on the part of Paul to admit to monitoring his students - whether by electronic means or in face-to-face contexts. Paul also knows that I, as listener/researcher and as an (online) teacher, would understand how either monitoring process occurs.

In this extract we learn that Paul's students go (to the library and to online sites) and they look at print or electronic text in preparation for lectures during which Paul talks. The online technology directs and facilitates his students' learning (and him?). He also monitors his students' preparation for lectures. The underlying proposition of Paul's complete response to my opening question is that the electronic online component facilitates the research preparation of his students more effectively than he can do in face-to-face teaching alone.

48 But I know ...

49 I know that they have done it

50 since I've put them online.

In closing his second example with this assertion, Paul is emphasising his ability to monitor his students. He is certain that 'they' prepare better for his lectures when they go to the online documents. Irrespective of his method for determining this, Paul is still in control of at least the preparatory aspect of his students' learning. Even though the technology can facilitate this aspect of student learning, he remains in charge of the teaching-learning situation. In effect, he has put both the documents and his students online (line 50: 'them').

To return to my original research questions, the technology hasn't changed how Paul teaches, but it has changed how his students learn. The technology may also facilitate his ability as teacher to direct and monitor his students. The extent to which Paul sees these activities as part of his teaching role is not clear.

6. Discussion

This passage of conversation with Paul represents my first foray into deconstructive analysis. In reflecting on the reading I believe that the process has thrown up methodological issues which relate directly to a) my role as researcher, conversant and interpreter, and b) the appropriacy of narrative analysis for organising and interpreting the data.

6.1 Preparing and Creating the Conversations

In interrogating the 'who' in this extract I cannot overlook my role in the creation of the text. I have tried to be as transparent as possible in arranging the pilot phase conversations, in that I have discussed my research with the participants and provided them with a list of the issues we could canvas prior to our meetings. This strategy has fostered trust and intrinsic interest in the themes and it has also given us the opportunity to reflect in advance on some of the areas we might explore. I will continue with this open approach.

Knowing my tendency to talk a lot on topics about which I am passionate, I was alert to the need to listen during these conversations and I am satisfied with my level of verbal intervention. Yet in conducting the interviews I became aware that I was frequently using non-verbal language and sub-vocalisations (eg. 'hmmm', 'yep') to encourage Paul and the other interactants, and to show my interest in their stories and opinions. While I acknowledge that this may have influenced their responses, I would argue that unresponsiveness on my part might have been more influential - indeed disconcerting - for my interactants. A close reading of the transcript reveals that Paul makes certain assumptions about what I know and understand in online and face-to-face teaching. With teaching identity as the focus of my research, I must become more alert to issues of 'who' in the discourse, and ready to identify and probe shared assumptions.

6.2 Reporting and interpreting the conversations

The passage I have transcribed and discussed here relates to mixed-mode, non-CMC online teaching. I deliberately preceded the transcript extract with Paul's later claims to be an active proponent of sharing, interactive learning, for I felt compelled to represent his other student-centred beliefs, lest readers attempt to pigeon-hole his teaching identity and beliefs too prematurely. My selectivity, in choosing this extract, concerned me.

And yet, as much I might admit and rue the selectiveness I have to exercise as researcher, Paul is being equally selective. MacLure comments that for participants too, self-description and personal story-telling ('mundane autobiography') is a risky business.

What gets remembered in any given situation is an occasioned matter - done in the service of our particular projects and harnessed to the textual conventions for constructing stories that will have the requisite appearance of truth, persuasiveness, accuracy, etc. (MacLure, 1993: 377)

Perhaps my research design will have to become more reflexive and allow increased, shared interpretation. Issues of feasibility, scope and depth will have to be played off against each other as I select material which sheds light on my research questions.

MacLure (1993: 382) reminds us that there can be a lot of variability in the identities that people fashion for themselves than we are always willing to recognise for research purposes. This variability can be expressed both across different contexts and within a single situation. Further analysis of the entire conversation with Paul will enable the development of a more complex account of his self-description as a face-to-face and online lecturer. Narrative analysis appears to respect and preserve this complexity.

6.3 Why narrative analysis?

I have had some doubts about the utility of narrative analysis for eliciting material which offers insights into my research questions. This early attempt suggests that narrative analysis is useful for enabling me to organise discourse and to reveal narrative structure. The framework offers a structured way for locating shifts in the discourse. Breaking the text down into meaningful units has helped me to search for repetitions, disfluencies, and patterns. The pilot phase also gives me the opportunity to experiment with other narrative arrangements; for example, the text could be trimmed further in the manner of Kohler Riessman's poetry-like approach (1993: 63).

7. A Work-in-progress

In terms of what is progressing in my research, I am feeling comfortable with my broad research questions and the general design and conduct of the pilot phase conversations. I am reassured by the warm response and interest in the research which this pilot group of experienced practitioners has shown. The work of data analysis and interpretation is just beginning and I need to keep experimenting with the format, as well as focussing on extending my understanding of narrative and discourse analysis practices.

What is not progressing and how do I respond? It is hard to encourage lecturers to talk about themselves as teachers. Paul and the other conversants tend to switch easily into observations about their students. When I am engaged in the actual conversations with participants I might be more alert to identifying the 'who' and to verbally exposing our shared assumptions and ambiguities. But then this may be a naive resolution and perhaps, ultimately, I must accept my role in the discourse and take more responsibility for unpacking meaning in the interpretative phase.

On another matter, I am a little concerned about locating appropriate numbers and types (gender, Faculty, teaching experience) of participants who also engage in CMC in teaching for my study. It may be that I will have to broaden my search to include CMC users in other universities or expand my research to include those online teachers who use non-CMC practices. Certainly Paul's stories about non-CMC teaching indicate the continued relevance of narrative elicitation, should my scope broaden to include other online teaching practices.

My tentative analysis in this paper offers an early indication of the viability of narrative elicitation and analysis for gaining insights into academics' face-to-face and online teaching identities and roles.

8. Bibliography

Dyson, E. (1997) *Release 2.0: A design for living in the Digital Age*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.

Harasim, L. (ed) (1990) *Online Education: Perspectives on a New Environment*. New York: Praeger Publishers.

Harasim, L. (ed) (1993) *Global Networks: Computers and International Communication*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Harasim, L., Hiltz, R. S, Teles, L. & Turoff, M. (1995) *Learning Networks: A Field Guide to Teaching and Learning Online*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Haughey, M. & Anderson, T. (1998) *Networked Learning: The Pedagogy of the Internet*. Montreal: Cheneliere/McGraw Hill.

Kohler Riessman, C. (1993) *Narrative Analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Lewis, T. (1999) Research in Technology Education - Some Areas of Need. *Journal of Technology Education*, 10 (2):<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JTE/v10n2/> (downloaded 27.07.99).

MacLure, M. (1993) Mundane Autobiography: some thoughts on self-talk in research contexts. *British Journal of Sociology in Education*, 14 (4), 373 - 384.

Mishler, E. G. (1991) *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Smyth, W. J. (1986) *Reflection-in Action*. Burwood, Vic: Deakin University Press

Taylor, P. G., Lopez, L. & Quadrelli, C. (1996) *Flexibility, Technology and Academics' practices: Tantalising Tales and Muddy Maps*. Canberra, ACT: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Turkle, S. (1995) *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. London: Phoenix (Orion Books).

Warschauer, M. & Lepeintre, S. (1997) Freire's dream or Foucault's nightmare? Teacher-student relations on an international computer network. *Language Learning Through Social Computing*, Occasional Papers No. 16, The University of Melbourne, Parkville, Vic.: Applied Linguistics Association of Australia & The Horwood Language Centre.