

A narrative approach to considering the role of the lecturer in developing autonomy in final year undergraduates

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Abstract

This paper reviews the process of adopting a collaborative approach to enabling final year students to develop autonomy through the use of a negotiated learning plan and co-constructed curriculum. The students undertake a collaborative project that models real-world working practices. The lecturer supports the students' objectives. This piece takes a narrative approach to reflecting on the experience of the lecturer.

The Approach

The intention of the chosen approach was to explore the possibilities of taking on a less traditional form for research and academic writing. The narrative approach to research involves documenting the "lived experiences of the interacting individual" (Cresswell, 2007). This could mean recording the stories of others or, as in this case, recording one's own story. The resulting material is then written in a narrative genre. The process was modelled on Cresswell's discussion of the 3D enquiry space of narrative form (Cresswell, 2007). In this model, my lived experience becomes the data. This data is expressed in the form of a treatment, which provides the outline of a story; it is an initial development tool for a film or television programme, setting out how the audience will experience the narrative. Dramatic conflict is provided through the use of a literary device adopted by Marlowe in *Doctor Faustus*: A good and a bad angel characterise the internal conflict in the protagonist's mind. The two chosen voices are: Graduate Attributes and Market Forces. They are not intended to be oppositional in terms of good and bad, but to characterise concerns lecturers need to address and the internal conflict this may cause. Graduate Attributes, the less critical voice, is a reflection of my purpose. Market Forces is a reflexive voice, reflexivity being a "continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness" (Callaway, 1992). Here, Market Forces is used as a questioning voice from the current political inclination for a market-led curriculum.

The Scenario

I'm sitting in the back of a small classroom, in which the tables are arranged in a rectangle with an open centre. There is a presentation console at the head of the room, in front of a window overlooking Greenwich Park. I'm sitting by a small stray table behind the door, watching two students presenting to a group of around ten peers sitting around the rectangle. They are having a discussion about the suitability of the work being presented for their project and considering alternatives and possible adaptations. I'm wondering about my role: I feel somewhat redundant; things haven't turned out quite as I've planned. I'm happy about this, but can't help feeling a tinge of guilt.

The Cast

I'm a Senior Lecturer in Digital Media, Film and TV Production and I'm running a final year course on Multiplatform Television Production. The students are from a cohort of fifteen, of whom roughly a third are highly motivated, another third poorly motivated (having failed a prerequisite course at level 5) and the remaining third somewhere in between.

The Setting

The majority of the course is spent undertaking a coursework project that provides the students with the opportunity to develop and publish a transmedia story campaign over a variety of internet and television platforms. This year, my intention has been for the students gradually to take over the course and manage the production stage for themselves. This includes: setting their own individual coursework deliverables and stating how they wish them to be graded; setting the agenda for the three-hour contact time; formulating the plan for completion of their project. Students can, therefore, decide what they are going to contribute to the overall project (such as camera operation or web design) and what balance of grade they would like between tasks (e.g. 40% camera operation, 60% script writing). The course is front-loaded with the traditional delivery of relevant skills and knowledge. This is followed by sessions to practise idea development and teamwork and to agree a schedule. Student-scheduled and -managed sessions run in term two. The idea is to develop confident, self-managing, industry-ready graduates with grounding in an area of employment growth.

The Conflict

Here we have the trope of conflicting voices:

On the one side, we have Graduate Attributes:

Graduate Attributes is looking for students who are developing their ability to propel themselves into the labour market.

On the other side, we have Market Forces:

Market Forces is looking for popularity and value for money.

Graduate Attributes views the scene:

The students are self-directed, confident, independent; their discussion is impervious to my presence. I have been dislodged from the 'teaching space' and taken up residence outside the group.

Market Forces views the scene:

It asks: "*Why so few students? Why aren't they all present? What is the lecturer doing? Is she not being paid to provide for the students? As they get only three hours with the lecturer anyway, isn't this a waste of resources?*"

The Interplay

I'm happy my students have taken over. For the two-hour sessions in the classroom, I initially set some taught elements, mostly to fulfil traditional expectations of course structure

and delivery. I also planned the time so that each session opened with a fifteen-minute progress meeting with me as their Executive Producer, followed by a group discussion suited to their schedule, and finished with a final fifteen-minute meeting with me to outline plans for the week ahead. Essentially, without this structure, I wasn't sure the sessions would be fully used.

Initially, they were a little shy: they described their work and were reluctant to take over the complex-looking 'teaching space' with the AV console and interactive screen. I encouraged them to use the computer and projection systems to show their work, on one occasion asking for formal presentations by each production area. This then became second nature; they came in, presented their progress and discussed it, along with any changes and plans for the following week, in one continuous flowing session without the need for prompting by me.

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES

So they demonstrated autonomy, analytical ability, curiosity and responsiveness?

MARKET FORCES

So you reneged on your deal? Stepped back and didn't deliver as promised?

A tinge of guilt led me to point out that I had scheduled taught sessions and to ask: *Did they feel they were missing out on the delivery of knowledge?* The answer was: *No, they were happy using the time to develop their ideas and manage their work.* At times, I did feel a bit of guilt about my passive position. Why, I felt, interrupt their highly-productive session to establish my importance as an audience? I decided to forget the formalities as they were unnecessary and could have been counter-productive.

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES

So why the guilt?

On a few occasions, I provided a process for them to follow and spent half an hour or so watching them ignore the process and run into a cul-de-sac. (Should I intervene and bring them back? Should I leave them to run the wrong way?)

I waited... guilt.

MARKET FORCES

So this is their time to get your support and advice; why watch them fail? Why not bring them straight back?

Well, if I interrupted their flow, constantly controlled them and insisted that they follow the process I had set out for them, how would they attain confidence or autonomy? I felt I needed to provide the space for them to experiment and develop for themselves. Once a natural break occurred in the activity, I would point out the process again and how they'd missed it. They would now understand its purpose, rather than just be following instructions, and be motivated to use it. I would reassure them that the time wasn't wasted and that they could keep hold of ideas generated in that activity for a different occasion. I did feel uncomfortable as I watched them take the wrong tack, but I didn't view my feelings to be

paramount as long as I held the conviction that this was the most fruitful approach in the long term.

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES

So the end result is a group of students with an informed understanding of their practice, who think independently, analytically and creatively, are responsive to challenges, demonstrate resilience and initiative, communicate effectively, develop creative solutions, respond to unfamiliar situations, make use of information and communication technologies and engage effectively in groups whose members are from diverse backgrounds?

MARKET FORCES

But isn't it a failing course? There are half the students necessary to run an efficient and sustainable model and, even then, they don't all show up. This is a luxury we can't afford, isn't it? There is very little demand for this subject.

The Resolution

About the demand: Multiplatform Television, which utilises transmedia storytelling techniques, is a new and developing concept; skills and knowledge in this area are highly desirable in the broadcast industry. Students, however, tend to stick more to traditional subjects because they feel more certain about them and understand the career possibilities even if they are confined due to saturation of the market. Popularity rests on familiarity and the certainty of what they already understand. Popularity itself doesn't guarantee that the needs of industry are being met. Investment in an effective marketing strategy could resolve this.

Sustainability? To an extent, all final year specialist courses will attract smaller numbers. A potential way forward is to investigate the practicality of merging this course with a similar one in Games Production and another in Animation, to create a single course formed around a studio model, with production teams led by a subject-appropriate lecturer.

The Discussion

Resolution is a site of the discussion of validity in ethnographic studies. Cresswell (2007) proposes that a narrative study should be open-ended, continuously open to interpretation and re-interpretation. LeCompte and Preissle (1982) question the whole notion of validity being based on generalisation and re-applicability, suggesting that this urge leads to simplistic resolutions and the poverty of standardisation. Here, I have presented a clearly personal experience with a resolution that fits my understanding of my broader experience. Presented within a narrative methodology, the documented experience exists as a useful source of information. This experience does not constitute or represent a model of the projected experience of others undertaking the same project. You are, therefore, invited to draw your own conclusions from your own interpretation of my story.

The Outcome

The resulting coursework was outstanding. All the students passed with a mean grade of 69%. Course satisfaction was 100%. Since this paper was written, the course has had a second instance: the students operated quite differently and the dynamics, process and product were very different; however, the results were the same, with outstanding coursework, a 70% mean grade and 100% satisfaction.

References

Owing to the narrative approach, there are few citations; I have therefore included the key sources that directly informed the methodology, the writing practice and the characterisation of Graduate Attributes and Market Forces.

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