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The role of performance and narration in translating professional standards into practice: four different analytical models. (0248)

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Outline

In 2013 academics across the globe seemed to settle down to tell each other the stories of higher education. Stories were everywhere in HE: The International Institute for SoTL scholars and mentors conference gathered to explore the influences and intricacies of narrative, and the HEA Arts and Humanities conference took place in a notional 'Storyville'.

So, what is special about stories? Can stories carry the truth of lived experience, 'lives as they are lived' in HE, which the models generated by educational theory struggle to tell? Can stories transform our practice as educators or does our practice simply determine our story?

In May and June 2013 three colleagues and I facilitated three workshops for those new to teaching in higher education. These workshops were designed to support attendees to make an individual application for professional recognition via HEA Fellowship, benchmarked by the national UK professional standards framework (UKPSF). Candidates are required to provide a narrative account of their own practice in order to evidence competencies across specified areas of activity, core knowledge and professional values. The workshops used various activities through which delegates began to narrate their academic practice – to tell the stories of their teaching.

This paper will analyse the artefacts produced by delegates within the workshop (rich pictures and other images) in order to consider the role of story in academic development.

In order to interrogate the role of story in academic development I take some premises from narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry champions the ability of story to articulate values, cultures and traditions which are rarely articulated – suggesting that story can reveal the structures and knowings of everyday life ordinarily hidden by their 'taken-for-grantedness'. Airing inherited assumptions and uncovering tacit pedagogies through narrative inquiry can stir participants to question critically their practice. Research into change stories has captured how catalysts to change are often set in relation to a *status quo*, assumptions or mindset (Fincher et al., 2012, p. 3). It perhaps follows then that the better one knows the territory that is one's own practice – the

landmarks, the histories, the legends – the more marked will be any incursion by dissonant pedagogic forces.

Sharing a story always invites the incursion. Stories are not only about the teller but also about the listener – who is empowered to disrupt the story by folding it into their own experience. Stories are not an inert vehicle for the transmission of knowledge, are always realised in interpretation, thus embodying a meeting of difference – through this dissonant encounter they offer the prospect of learning. Simply story brings together markers of time, people and place, it enables the teller/listener to realise how their experience is uniquely determined by context – and offers an antidote to evidence-based approaches to academic development which flattens practice to a ‘best practice’ list of quick fixes (ref).

But also if stories are a continuum, built by causality – this happened and then that happened (the king died and then the queen died), and by plot ‘this happened because that happened’ (the king died and then the queen died of grief) they at once show how things are going, how things have been and how things are likely to go (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000, pp. 5-7). The projection of an imagined future when the future is created by our understanding of a contested ‘now’ perhaps offers further scope for change.

So could narrative have the potential to affect personal and professional transformation by confronting assumptions and building a path to change? Could it be that by simply creating opportunities for HE practitioners to tell each other their stories we can make everyone better teachers?

But, what if those storytelling opportunities for dissonance don’t provide dissonance? What if our assumptions are simply replicated and reflected, like a hall of mirrors, endlessly showing us versions of ourself? What if those stories can only ever be expressed through the memes popularised by academic developers and the authority of the UKPSF?

This paper offers analysis of the images produced by workshop participants within the ‘Narrating’ workshops to uncover plots, characters, landscapes, and genres which populate their academic ‘storyworld’ and by so doing aims to locate the certainties which map our progress through higher education. I will recreate the structures which have found their way into the stories of participants, and through they make sense of the academic worlds they co-construct. I will then consider the patterns, continuities and interweaving storylines created by academic developers the UKPSF, and other tales of higher education.

In a call for authentic dissonance – a voice outside the academy I ask do we need to venture into unmapped territory – and can we ever find the place where the dragons be?

References

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