

Finding the Individual in Collaborative Online Learning Environments

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Abstract

Collaborative learning is well suited to online learning environments built around threaded discussion. Research frameworks have developed around these practices providing methodological guidance for examining learning as a collective endeavor within the boundaries of a course. These frameworks may not adequately represent the individual as an active agent within these socially-constructed environments. The aim of this paper is to explore how narrative analysis provides a method for examining expressions of individual identity construction within an online environment. Analysis of a personal story written by a student in her weblog within an online graduate course suggests that individual identity is expressed as the integration of course concepts within practice settings and that the personal discursive space afforded by the weblog supports this integration.

Background

This study is concerned with how social software tools (i.e., weblogs and RSS) are used by graduate students in education to establish and develop their academic identities within the context of their program. Of particular interest is how these tools might support those students who either study at a distance or work full-time or, both. Studies of place-based graduate student success identify a strong relationship between participation in collaborative research projects with faculty and other graduate students and timely completion resulting from academic preparation for independent research (Anderson, 1996; de Valero, 2001; Lovitts, 2001). Students whose contact with the academic community is limited to coursework and supervisory relations are challenged to find opportunities to participate in the disciplinary practice of education research. Even where graduate study is conceptualized as professional development, participation within a community of others with different experiences is key to improving and broadening practice (Lieberman, 1995; Scribner, 1999). By limiting graduate experience to coursework, opportunities for participation are contextually constrained by the boundaries of the individual course and students are left with little to provide them with a cohesive sense of their own progress (Lemke, 2000).

A principle design goal of this project was to explore how a technologically-mediated environment might bridge student participation within the academy across their course experiences, throughout their program of study. Weblog technology was adopted

because it afforded an individualized writing environment that could be used by students for the duration of the program in which to write about and keep track of their experiences and interests. At the same time, as a publicly viewable space, students could connect with and perhaps learn from each other's experiences by reading each others' entries. With an emphasis on experience in context, the weblogs were thought to hold potential as site in which the written trail of personal growth and development might become a community resource. As such the weblogs offered the potential for both supporting the development of academic identity by offering a single, public location for reflection over time and providing models of growth for other students to observe.

Technically, weblogs are websites with reverse chronological presentation of entries. While weblogs are frequently conceptualized as online journals implying a private, reflective and personal form of writing (Blood, 2004; Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005; Mortensen & Walker, 2002; Oravec, 2003; Stiler & Philleo, 2003) they are publicly available and are used as shared resources. This personal yet public nature of weblogs is recognized as creating the opportunity for writers to work through ideas with input from others. Mortensen and Walker (2002) suggest that "in some manner, the writer is putting his or her daily experiences into a larger context, discussing micro events in relation to the wider universe of events. The weblog connects the public arena with that of individuals" (p. 258). Really Simple Syndication (RSS) is a separate technology that makes it possible for users to subscribe to and monitor updates from a large number of weblogs on one webpage. The individual nature of the weblog coupled with the community-building potential of RSS provides the basic platform upon which this research project was based.

Conceptual Framework

Much of the research concerning the design of online learning environments investigates how technological and pedagogical elements support learning within course boundaries (McCombs & Vakili, 2005). Within the bounded online course setting, design elements that foster collaboration and community are found to be key in promoting learning and the development of a socially supportive environment (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, & Dunlap, 2004). The role of community is to support and facilitate collaboration directed at socially-constructed knowledge construction (Job-Sluder &

Barab, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Wilson et al., 2004). As Garrison (2006) notes, an increased sense of community supports “collaborative learning and discourse associated with higher levels of learning” (1st page) and reduces potential disconnectedness felt by students in asynchronous learning environments. However, this type of community, described as bounded by (Wilson et al., 2004) is transitory and short-term, designed to meet specific pedagogical and didactic outcomes. The individual participates in the service of the community and their interests and goals are constructed collectively. Each course is a discrete event, but individual development is ongoing.

Whether conceptualizing graduate study as professional development or apprenticeship, ongoing participation within a community of practice figures centrally as a requirement for student learning. Graduate study is more than the acquisition of skills and knowledge. It is about becoming a critically informed practitioner and, particularly for doctoral students, a participant in a scholarly community (Conrad, Duren, & Haworth, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that “activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities” (p. 53). By focusing on collaborative online learning as it occurs within courses, the range of experiences that inform an individual’s understanding may become decontextualized and limited to the discrete and bounded course environment. The weblog environment under investigation in this study was considered to be an individual online space in which the students could make sense of and connect their academic and practice experiences.

In our attempt to understand the potential of the weblog as an online space in which the individual can find expression, analytic frameworks that privilege the collective provided little guidance. Sfard and Prusak (2005) suggest that conceptually, identity “figures prominently whenever one addresses the question of how collective discourses shape personal worlds and how individual voices combine into a voice of a community” (p. 15). They argue that *identifying* (italics in original) is an activity “in which one uses common resources to create a unique, individually tailored combination” (p. 15). The act of becoming is therefore neither wholly individual nor is it the

reproduced outcome of collective action. As Bruner (2001) suggests, an anomaly of Western ideology concerning identity is that “while Self is regarded as the most ‘private’ aspect of our being, it turns out on close inspection to be highly negotiable” (p. 34). It is in fact, intersubjective.

Recent conceptualizations of identity (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Wenger, 1998) call attention to its contextual and constructed nature—an individual’s identity is constituted in their participative experiences (actions, communities, interpretations). Sfard and Prusak (2005) suggest that it is in the *telling* of these experiences that identity is constructed. Experiences, re-told are the telling of identity.

The weblog entries of the participants in this study contain many instances of these stories or narrativizations. The narratives are situated in the lives of the students and reveal much about their individual interpretations of their own experiences. Because weblogs are publicly shared, these trajectories represent the selective presentation of the individual for an audience. This paper explores how individual identity can be expressed within the weblogs as stories that provide students with an opportunity to connect their disparate experiences of practice. The study is exploratory and uses narrative analysis (Cortazzi, 1993; Reissman, 1993) to examine a student-generated story as an expression of agency and action. In doing so, this paper contributes to our understanding of how weblogs can be used by graduate students during a program of study to understand their own unique trajectories within an academically-oriented online environment that has the potential to span course boundaries. In the following section the study and research methods are described.

Method and Data Sources

This exploratory study employs a design-based research methodology to understand what potential weblogs hold as a technology to support program wide engagement for graduate students in Education who cannot participate in full-time on-campus studies. Design-based research emerged as a response to traditional experimental or laboratory research in which a discrete variable was manipulated in carefully controlled experimental conditions (Collins, Joseph, & Bielaczyc, 2004) and is useful for the progressive examination of learning environment design within a naturalistic setting.

Design research methods involve the systematic identification and manipulation of elements of the learning environment considered to affect the design under investigation. (Collins et al., 2004) refer to these successive manipulations as progressive refinements or phases of a design, the goal of which is to develop an understanding of what works, what does not work, and why.

This study examines a weblog environment used during two iterations of an online graduate course called Constructive Learning and the Design of Online Environments (CTL1608). In both iterations of CTL1608, students used an online threaded discussion environment as their primary method of communication. The course was structured around a series of weekly readings and discussions. Application of educational technology was a primary focus of the course and therefore students were encouraged to use a range of technologies. In the first phase of the study, students used the weblogs, a web-based video-conferencing system, and a chat tool. In the second phase, students used all of the above technologies as well as a wiki (a collaborative internet-based writing space).

The weblog environment was built using a weblog application called Movable Type (<http://movabletype.org>) and the students, the instructor, and the TAs each received their own individual weblog. The primary aspect of the environment that was manipulated between phases of the study was the way in which the weblogs were displayed to the students. In the first phase, delivered in the winter semester of 2005 (CTL1608W05), the weblogs were displayed in a single webpage as a series of links which required that the students click on each weblog link to read each others weblog entries. In the second phase, delivered in the fall semester of 2005 (CTL1608F05) an RSS aggregator was available that displayed excerpts of all the weblogs in a single webpage. This design modification was implemented so that the weblogs which were written individually were displayed in a communal environment.

The weblogs were an integrated part of the course and a self-assessed mark, worth 25 percent of the final grade was given for their completion. Students were provided with regular prompts to guide their writing and they were encouraged to experiment with the technology. To give the weblog environment a broader context, members of a research group outside the course environment were encouraged to maintain weblogs.

Upon completion of each course, students were asked for permission to use their weblogs as data for this study. In phase one, 19 out of 20 students agreed to participate in the study. Of those students who agreed to participate, only one student was registered full-time (a PhD student), one was an EdD student, and the rest were registered as part-time masters of Education students. In phase two, 12 of 15 students agreed to participate. Of those students agreeing to participate in phase two, there were two full-time students (both PhD) and the remaining students were registered as part-time MEd students.

The weblogs were copied from the server and entered verbatim into NVivo, a computer-based qualitative analysis tool. All names were changed to pseudonyms to protect participant anonymity. Initially, weblog entries were separated according to whether they were written in response to a researcher provided prompt. Open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to identify categories within the unprompted weblog entries and through this process; the fully-formed narratives under consideration in this paper were uncovered. As Riessman (1993) suggests, these narratives were noteworthy because they could not be broken up in a way that allowed their component pieces to make sense. Twelve narratives were identified (three in phase one and nine in phase two).

In this paper, one narrative is selected for analysis. Lianne is a doctoral student who was a secondary school teacher in her home country. She was in her first year of study when enrolled in CTL1608F05. Lianne wrote eight weblog entries in total during the course ($M=9.18$ for CTL1608F05). This narrative was selected because it is representative of the stories within the weblogs of both courses. As background for the analysis of Lianne's story, narrative analysis methodology will be considered with a focus on how it contributes to a better understanding of weblog use as an individual discursive space.

Narrative Analysis

Reissman (2001) suggests that narrative analysis “allows for the systematic study of personal experience and meaning” (p. 707). Of importance for this study, she asserts that “Narratives are a particularly significant genre for representing and analyzing identity in its multiple guises in different contexts” (p. 707). As first-person accounts of experience, narratives are used by individuals to “construct past events and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and construct lives” (Reissman, 1993, p. 2).

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) distinguish between narrative as a literary form used to collect data and the identification of narratives within textual qualitative data. In this paper, narrative analysis is concerned with the latter, that is, with the identification and interpretation of the personal narratives that emerged through data collection within the course weblogs (Cortazzi, 1993; Reissman, 1993). Narrative analysis provides a systematic means for interpreting the interpretations of the storyteller (Reissman, 1993), “Because the approach gives prominence to human agency and imagination, it is well suited to studies of subjectivity and identity” (p. 5).

Personal narrative is described as referring to “talk organized around consequential events. A teller in a conversation takes a listener into a past time or “world” and recapitulates what happened then to make a point, often a moral one” (Reissman, 1993, p. 3). Coffey and Atkinson (1996) identify two defining characteristics of narrative form. Narratives are temporal, in that they describe an event that occurred in a particular time; and they are sequential. Events within a narrative occur in a required order.

Formal narrative analysis is primarily concerned with the identification of the structural elements comprised within a narrative. The Evaluation Model (Labov & Fanshel, 1977) is an example of an analytic model developed to identify the structural properties of a narrative. The model derives from a sociolinguistic approach and identifies six structural elements that are thought to occur in an invariant order within a narrative. There may be multiple occurrences of these sequences embedded throughout (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Cortazzi, 1993). Cortazzi (1993) states that the model is useful for identifying the structural properties of a narrative and as a “*functional* analysis which puts forward two social functions of narrative, ‘referential’ and ‘evaluative’” (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 44, italics in original). Where the referential function of a narrative is to give the audience information about a sequence of events, the evaluative function is “to communicate to the audience the meaning of the narrative by establishing some point of personal involvement” (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 44).

Table 1: The Structure of Narrative in the Evaluation Model

Structure	Question
Abstract (optional)	What was this about?
Orientation	Who? What? When? Where?

Complication	Then what happened?
Evaluation	So what?
Result	What finally happened?
Coda (optional)	Return to beginning

(Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 58; Cortazzi, 1993, p. 45)

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) are careful to emphasize that the Evaluation Model is one of many ways that analysts have used to identify the structural units within narrative. Further, they assert that the point is not to stop with the identification of a narrative's structural elements. Cortazzi (1993) suggests that the Evaluation Model is useful for analyzing teacher's narratives because the structural elements provide a clear indication of where a story begins and ends and it emphasizes the embedded, social function of the narrative. Analyzing the structure of a narrative provides a useful starting place with which identify the primary elements of a narrative (Riessman, 1993). A further level of analysis leads to a consideration of the social and functional meaning of narrative beyond its structural construction.

Patton (2002) asserts that narrative "honors people's stories as data that can stand on their own as pure description of experience, worthy as narrative documentary of *experience* or analyzed for connections between the psychological, sociological, cultural, political, and dramatic dimensions of human experience" (p. 116, italics in original). However, Atkinson (2005) cautions against taking narrative accounts at face value as offering a real depiction of events suggesting that "we need to regard such accounts as social performances, or forms of social action, embedded within organizational context, and socially shared undertakings" (paragraph 12).

Riessman (1993) describes narrative as an act concerned with telling. As such the narrator is tailoring their story with the aim of communicating with a particular audience or listener. The audience (or perceived audience) plays a part in determining how the narrative takes shape. The choice of language used to detail the events, the elements included (and not included) and conclusions drawn by the narrator are constructed with the aim of communicating to a particular individual or group of individuals. Therefore, narratives are at once individual, reflecting the personal meanings associated with an experience and social, reflecting by their choices, the cultural assumptions of the teller about the listener. As Cortazzi (1993) states "The teller is not the only person telling the tale. The listener also shapes the story" (p. 21).

Reissman (2001) describes three approaches to narrative analysis that are distinguished by their methodological and disciplinary traditions. In an anthropological tradition, narrative is considered as an entire life story that is assembled as an amalgam of stories recounted by informants. Reissman (2001) suggests that in the writing, the analyst's interpretations can become indistinguishable from the informant's stories. In a structural approach, narrative analysis pays attention to the use of and meaning conveyed by the structural elements used by the narrator to construct the story. In this tradition, personal narrative is conceptualized as "brief, topically specific stories organized around characters, setting, and plot" (p. 697). Reissman (2001) identifies a third approach that builds on the structural analysis of discrete stories and uses longer sections of interviews in which narrative is interwoven within conversation as a naturally occurring discursive act. The unit of analysis is the distinct story, but the evolving whole of interlinked stories provide context. With this approach, the analyst considers the role of the interviewer and adopts a "comparative orientation to interpreting similarities and contrasts among participants' life stories" (p. 698). With these structural and functional considerations in mind, we proceed with an analysis of one narrative identified within the weblogs of CTL1608F05.

Narrative Analysis of Lianne's Story

The Evaluation Model will be used in the following analysis for two purposes. The narratives that appeared within the weblogs in this study were discrete stories that were written by participants in an attempt to explicate a particular event of importance, therefore the structural approach provides a relevant frame for analysis (Cortazzi, 1993). As well, concentrating on structure reveals how the writer employs elements of narrative to construct the story and conveys the narrator's own interpretation of the importance of the event. What follows is a weblog entry posted by Lianne, a doctoral student in her first year of study. The entry was posted in the seventh week of the course. The structural element, according to the evaluation model (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Cortazzi, 1993; Labov & Fanshel, 1977) is identified to the left of the appropriate clauses. A detailed discussion follows.

Abstract

when i started teaching, a few years ago, i really thought i knew what authentic learning and situated learning was about. i thought it was

the absolute way to go.

Orientation i tried to include authentic and real problem all my physics topics. i started my own collection of lesson designs and ideas that was useful for me to do so. i shared with my colleagues and i was praised for my ingenuity and resourcefulness. i was on cloud nine.

Complication after the first year, i was brought back to reality. my class did not perform as well as my colleague's class in their national exam. my class scored 91% pass and an average median score of 3.2 (1 being highest) while the other class scored 100% pass and an average median score of 2.4. i was told by my department head to observe my colleague's class, i did, and it was all teacher-centered teaching. the students were very quiet and they just sat there and copied notes profusely. at the end of the lesson, my colleague was tired but very satisfied because she has covered everything listed in her lesson objectives. i went back to my class, we were suppose to visit a nearby supermarket to learn about food nutrition and make a healthy lunch for fellow classmates for under \$3 and see who make the highest profit, balancing nutrition and taste.

Result the class was bustling with noise and i just sat there to think about what i just saw.

Evaluation this was an experience that was etched in my mind, i felt victimised by the system, then. however, as i read the articles and posts last week, i began to reflect and recall my experiences, not that i agree with traditional mode of teaching, never, but maybe that was a good lesson for me to learn that no one single learning theory is perfect and we have to continue to revisit our ideas, change it, add on it, trim it, to deliver a lesson that best fit our children.

Note: Case, grammar and spelling are original.

The Abstract is an optional part of the story and its function is to provide a “statement of a general proposition which the narrative will exemplify” (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 44). Told in the past tense, the abstract is used to let the listener know something about the main point of the upcoming story. In the Abstract, Lianne lets the audience know that

she will be telling a story about her teaching and the theoretical positions that were being discussed in class at that point in time (authentic learning and situated learning).

Lianne goes on to orient the listener (or reader in this case) by establishing the background of the story. She sets the scene, describing the relevant setting and her place within it. She indicates in the orientation she was an enthusiastic physics teacher using innovative practices and getting positive feedback from her peers.

The Complication gives the narrative its importance. It is why the narrator decided to tell this story. Cortazzi (1993) indicates that “Usually, the Complication shows a turning-point, a crisis or problem, or a series of these” (p. 46). For Lianne, the complication occurs as a request by her department head to observe a colleague’s teaching when her students receive a low average median score on a national exam. Lianne describes the stark contrast between the quiet teacher-centred classroom that she visits and the authentic task she has planned for her students.

The Result element “describes the result or resolution to the conflict” (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 47), and can either follow the Complication or the Evaluation. In Lianne’s narrative, it follows the Complication. As a result of the complication described by Lianne, she is forced to confront the dissonance between her beliefs about teaching and what has been presented to her as a model for successful teaching.

Labov and Fanshel (1977) suggest that the Evaluation is a rhetorical device used by the narrator to “delay forward movement of the narrative at a certain point by the use of many non-narrative clauses, which hold the listener suspended at that point in time” (p. 108). The Evaluation is used by the narrator to explicate the relevance and importance of the Complication for the teller. Bruner (2001) describes the Evaluation element of a narrative as “the task of placing those sequential elements in terms of a meaningful context” (p. 29). Or as Cortazzi (1993) states “It avoids the withering rejoinder from listeners of ‘So what?’” (p. 46). Bringing the narrative back to the present, Lianne points out that in the class discussion of different theories, she recognizes that perhaps there is no **one** way of teaching that is perfect and that improvement requires adaptation.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest that in analyzing how the elements in a narrative are used by the narrator to construct a story, it is also useful to consider what the teller has left out. This is useful for analyzing Lianne’s narrative. Lianne does not go into

detail about the lesson she had planned for that day, or if, in the end, she changed her teaching practices. Instead the narrative ends with her thinking about what she witnessed in her colleagues classroom.

Lianne's narrative has five of the six elements described in the Evaluation Model (Labov & Fanshel, 1977). The final element, not used by Lianne, is the Coda which is optional and is used to bring the narration to a close. However, there is structural symmetry in Lianne's story. The initial enthusiasm and energy present in the orientation to her story is replaced with her immobility as she withdraws from the *bustling* activity of her classroom. Lianne is left questioning how she should proceed in her teaching when her methods have not met standardized measures of success.

While a formal structural analysis provides insight into how the narrator conveys their story by employing the traditional elements of narrative, analysis extending to a consideration of the functions of the story can "focus on the social action implied in the text...this emphasizes that individual narratives are situated within particular interactions and within specific social, cultural, and institutional discourses" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 62).

Lianne's way of describing her actions indicates how she *was*, that is, Lianne's actions are an expression of her beliefs about what she valued as good teaching. Therefore by being asked to observe a colleague's classroom, one who is deemed successful according to institutional standards, Lianne is forced to question her personal beliefs her identity within the teaching profession. Lianne's story is an exemplar of the conflict between an institutional or out-of-the-classroom professional stance and personal practical knowledge that Lianne had developed within her classroom (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). In this regard, Lianne's narrative provides evidence of the dual functions of autobiographical narrative as stated by Bruner (Bruner, 2001).

Bruner (2001) suggests that on the one hand in telling a story about ourselves, we choose to

represent ourselves to others (and to ourselves) as typical or characteristic or 'culture confirming' in some way. That is to say, our intentional states and actions are comprehensible in the light of the 'folk psychology' that is intrinsic in our culture (p. 29-30).

Lianne was doing well in her teaching. In her account of that first year, she describes her understanding of how she was *being* a good teacher (i.e., starting a collection of lesson designs, sharing with colleagues, being ingenious and resourceful). However, to assure individuality, Bruner (2001) asserts that the story must then focus on an experience that demonstrates an event that is exceptional within the context of that culture. It is the telling of this event that makes the story worthwhile and justified. Although her actions are propelling her forward in her efforts to be an innovative teacher, she learns that institutionally, it is not enough to engage in innovative teaching. Institutional and systemic measures are ultimately what count. “The object of narrative, then is to demystify deviations. Narrative solves no problems. It simply locates them in such a way as to make them comprehensible” (p. 30-1). Lianne’s narrative provides a cautionary tale. It is not enough to choose one theoretical path or another, ultimately, Lianne states, “we have to continue to revisit our ideas, change it, add on it, trim it, to deliver a lesson that best fit our children”.

Discussion

In pedagogical and theoretical models of online learning, the role of community is dominant (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Henri & Pudelko, 2003; Rourke et al., 2001; Rovai, 2000). Interaction around course topics through online discussion leads to deeper understanding and community formation (Fischer & Ostwald, 2003; Hmelo-Silver, 2003). Since the primary form of communication is through asynchronous threaded discussion, collective forms of discourse are encouraged. Within this design paradigm, focus is placed on course content and formal displays of learning and understanding. This has the effect of maintaining student engagement for the duration of the course, however, as Cameron and Anderson (2006) note, “Learners do not own or occupy one specific area of the system” (p. 6 of 13) and upon completion of the course, the online discussion ceases.

As Lianne’s narrative illustrates, the weblog provided her with an individualized space within the academic context in which to document her own progress; progress that intimately related to her professional experiences. It is difficult within an online collaborative environment structured using threaded discussions to make space for this kind of individualized writing (Cameron & Anderson, 2006). Cameron and Anderson

(2006) argue that the weblog occupies a discursive space that is at once connected to the collectively-constituted institutional and formal learning environment of the course and at a remove by being individually owned.

Lave and Wenger (1991) assert that learning arises out of active participation in the legitimate practices of a community. For traditional on-campus, full-time graduate students, practice is constructed in terms of participation within the academic community. Participation in research and in scholarly practices such as conference presentations and writing for publication are the primary tasks associated with this community (Eisenhart & DeHaan, 2005; Lee & Boud, 2003; Lovitts, 2001). However doctoral students studying at a distance and MEd students not pursuing an academic career participate in communities of practice that may not be research-based. Wenger (1998) contends that “identity exists—not as an object in and of itself—but in the constant work of negotiating the self” (p. 151) that arises out of participation in practice. But, for graduate students who work full-time that negotiation of identity occurs primarily within the communities in which they participate outside the academy. The weblog is a writing space which sits on the boundary between the course and the practical world, and is connected through the individual. Lianne situates her story within her practice community emphasizing the social construction of her identity as a teacher. That Lianne made the effort to tell a story about her learning within the weblog can be construed as an indicator of the value she placed on having the opportunity afforded by the individual writing space of the weblog to connect her personal, practice, and academic knowledge.

Freeman (2001) suggests that the self can be conceptualized as being constituted as a “sequence of unique, unrepeatable events” (p. 284) in which transformations are contextualized, within the plots and structures of narrative. Narrative analysis proves useful for examining how central the individual and their broader experiences are as a context for learning. The weblog is well suited as a technology that supports the individualized orientation to writing that leads to narrative accounts of experience. In their study of public weblogs, Herring, et. al., (2005) observe that the weblogs “share a common purpose: to express the author’s subjective, often intimate perspective on matters of interest to him or her. In the case of most blogs, the matters of interest concern the authors and their daily lives” (p. 152). Cameron and Anderson (2006) agree that the

individualized nature of the weblog can lead to a sense of ownership for students. As an individualized writing space, the weblog has potential to help students track their progress over time, across an entire program of study.

The structure of the weblog is such that it encourages personal posting without the expectation of response. Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz (2004) suggest that writing without the expectation of a conversation creates a sense of autonomy for a weblog writer and this sense of autonomy supports the writing of posts that are perceived to be personally relevant. While writing her story to contextualize her learning, Lianne indicates that she is communicating to an audience. Within the orientation element of her story, she takes care to ensure that the reader understands the setting and the importance of her place within that setting. The informal style in which she tells her story is personal without being private. It is not an academic form of communication, but it is related to academic issues.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore the use of narrative as an example of how the individual is expressed within an online learning environment. Identity provides a useful concept for considering the trajectory of graduate students as they progress through a program of study. By considering identity as narrativization, Sfard and Prusak (2005) contend that “human agency and the dynamic nature of identity are brought to the fore” (p. 17). It is not possible to make any claims, based on the data collected within only two courses that the weblogs *are* a site in which professional development and graduate academic apprenticeship are occurring. To do so would require longer-term data collection procedures that extend across an entire program of study. However, the presence of narratives are thought to provide evidence for the claim that the weblog environment, as it was designed for these two courses, holds potential as a site in which students studying at a distance can express their individual professional and academic trajectories.

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