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Networked Narrative Accounts of Personal Learning Projects: an Instrument for Systemic Intervention Research in Higher Education

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Abstract

In the context of systemic intervention research on teaching and learning practices in higher education the reconfiguration of patterns of control and responsibility has turned out to be an essential lever for change. This paper presents how insights from previous work on adult's learning projects, the reflective use of negotiated learning contracts and journals, were digitally re-mediated through the use of open, web-publishing practices. We describe how this approach has been used to support participants externalising and "bootstrapping" of personal learning projects in the digital realm and briefly discuss the potential use of the resulting narrative accounts for the reconstruction and analysis of individual trajectories of development.

Keywords

personal learning projects; personal learning contracts; conversational learning; systemic intervention research; re-mediation and development of learning activity; higher education; personal web-publishing

INTRODUCTION

In recent years we have been mainly involved in systemic intervention research on the post-graduate level in higher education. Our work has predominantly focused on the intentional change of existing teaching and studying practices in general, and on the further development and digital re-mediation of learning activity within the constraints of higher education in particular. The rationale for this type of engagement is anchored in the emergence of digitisation and networking as the "leading medium" (Giesecke, 2002) and catalyser for fundamental transformations of a wide range of human activity, including practices of intentional learning (Erdmann & Rückriem, 2010). While research and development in educational technology often focuses on incremental, predictable improvements within the constraints of the existing activity system of teaching and studying, we hold the view that educational (technology) research should also engage in forms of inquiry that turn that very activity system into an object of (transitional or transformational) change (S. H. D. Fiedler, 2012).

In the context of our various systemic intervention research (Midgley, 2000) efforts the reconfiguration of patterns of control and responsibility within and around learning activity has turned out to be an essential lever for triggering its further de-

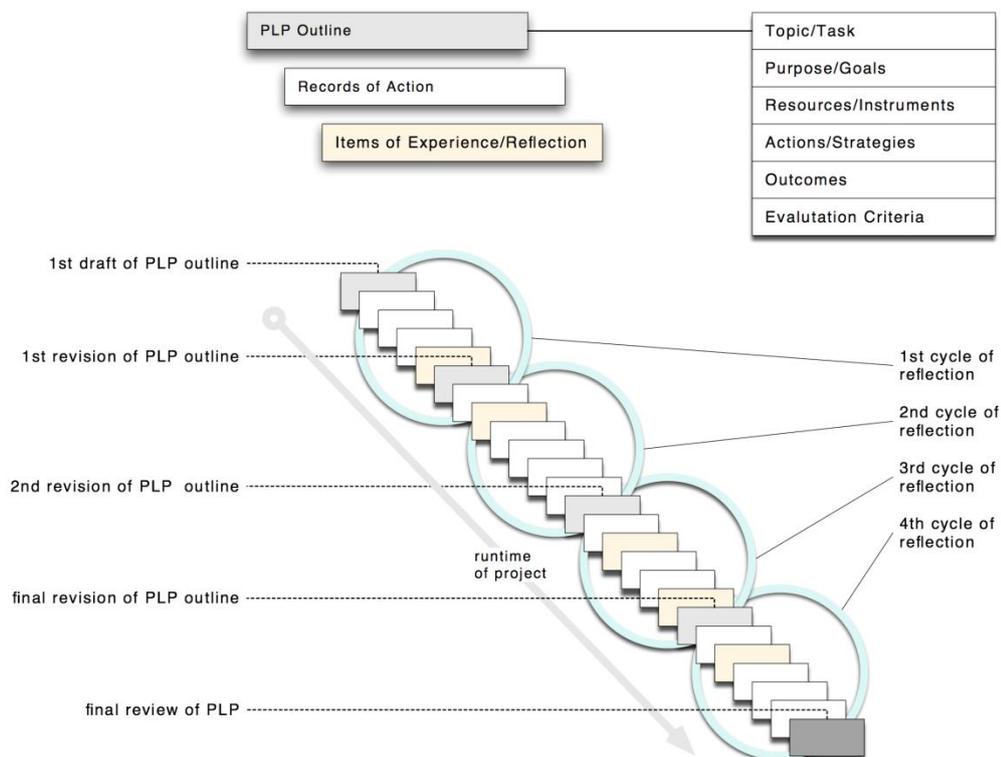
velopment and change (S. H. D. Fiedler, 2012). Over the years we have used and adapted a range of intermediate, conceptual and procedural instruments to support participants turning their own learning activity into an object of inquiry and development. In this paper we want to present how we combined a particular set of conceptual and procedural instruments from adult and higher education with the use of rather generic web-publishing tools and services to enable the “bootstrapping” of personal learning projects on one hand, and for the reconstruction and analysis of individual trajectories of development on the other. Due to the limitations of this conference paper format we focus on the general description of our approach and discuss the particular quality of the material that was elicited in the context of various intervention studies.

DIGITAL RE-MEDIATION OF CONCEPTUAL INSTRUMENTS FOR SUPPORTING PERSONAL LEARNING PROJECTS

In search for suitable instruments to support our intervention interests (of further developing and re-mediating learning activity in higher education) we combined aspects and insights from the literature on adult’s learning projects (see for example Tough, 1971), the reflective use of negotiated learning contracts (see for example Anderson, Boud, & Sampson, 1996; Boak, 1998; Harri-Augstein & Thomas, 1979), and learning journals (see for example Moon, 2006), and rather generic web-publishing tools and services such as Weblog authoring platforms and Webfeed readers.

The use of “learning contracts” to support personal learning projects (PLP) and the development of learning activity is a well documented and evaluated approach in adult education, workplace learning, and higher-education (see for example Anderson, et al., 1996; Anderson, Boud, & Sampson, 1998; Boak, 1998; Bochner, 2007; Harri-Augstein & Cameron-Webb, 1996; Jerrard & Jefsoutine, 2006; Stephenson & Laycock, 1993). In very general terms a learning contract is understood as a negotiated agreement about what and how the learner will learn and how that learning will be measured (Boak, 1998). Depending on the overall conceptual framework and underlying educational philosophy, learning contracts can be an effective instrument to help adult learners become self-determining subjects of their own learning activity and self-development. An outstanding example of such an orientation can be found in the work of Harri-Augstein & Thomas (1991). They have embedded the use of Personal Learning Contracts (PLCs) in an elaborate conversational, reflective, coaching framework that emphasises the need for refining the initial, structured description of a project in the light of its ongoing execution effort. To support the necessary reflective and evaluative processes Harri-Augstein & Thomas (1991) had promoted the integration of records of actions and items of experience (and reflection) as they can also be found in proposals for the use of learning journals in various contexts of application (Moon, 2006). They also pioneered the support of the overall process with a suit of dedicated software applications (see for example Harri-Augstein & Thomas, 1991). While the potential structure of learning contracts can differ, a minimal set of elements usually entails the description of a topic or a task; specific purpose(s) or goal(s) in relation to the topic or the task; a statement on actions or strategies explicating what activities one intends to carry out and what resources and instruments might be used for achieving the intended purposes/goals; the anticipated and actual outcome(s) together with evaluation criteria for determining if or how successful a project was. However, we agree with Knowles (1986) that the term “learning contract” carries some rather unfortunate, legalistic and bureaucratic connotations that create unnecessary barriers for communicating its conceptual and procedural aspects especially in international, cross-disciplinary settings. We have thus started to rather talk about Personal Learning Project (PLP) outlines, and their revisions, and an overall process of “bootstrapping” such projects through ongoing recording, reviewing, and revising practices.

In various intervention studies (Väljataga & Fiedler, 2009; Väljataga, Pata, & Tammets, 2010) we implemented the overall procedure by making use of dynamic web-publishing applications (such as Wordpress) that were originally designed to support the chronological authoring of individual weblogs. Our participants were owning and running such web-publishing outlets individually and realised their PLP outlines (including their revisions), records of action, and/or items of experience/reflection through publicly accessibly posts that are addressable via a unique permalink (URL). The following graphic provides a rough visualisation of the conceptual procedure that we realised through individual web-publishing practices.

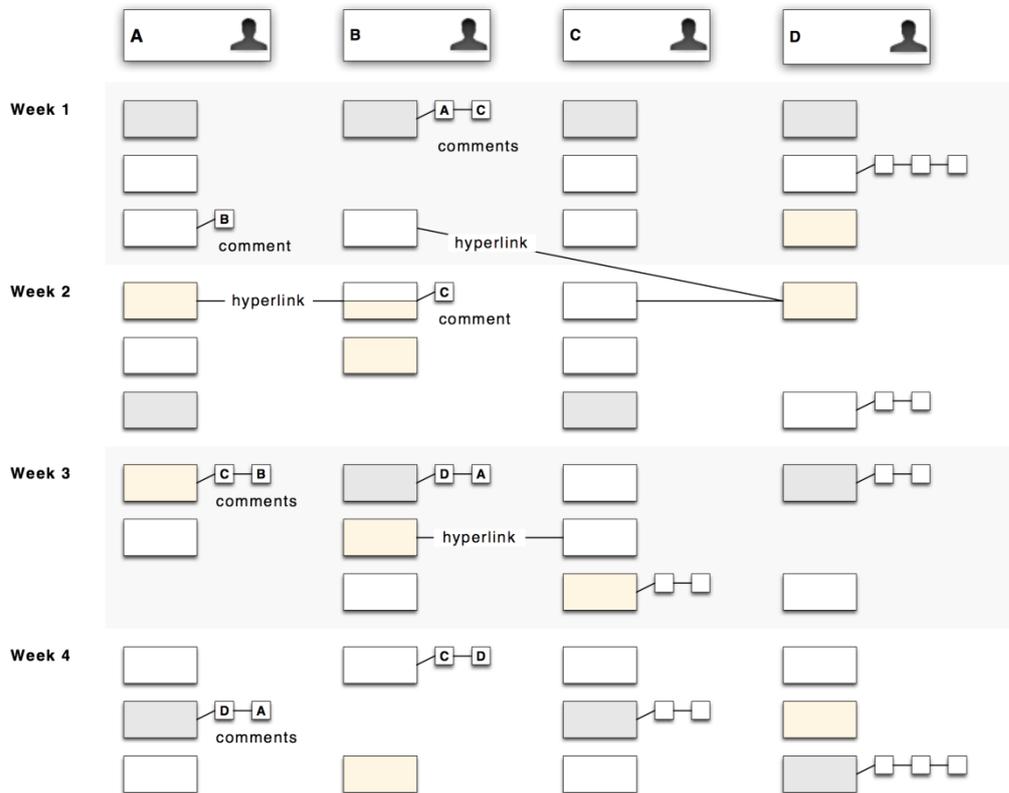


Graphic 1: Visualisation of the elements of the PLP externalisation and “bootstrapping” procedure

It should be noted that these PLP outlines remain open for revision and adaptation through the majority of the overall run-time of the project. What is actually carried out during the run-time is documented in records of action of various forms. The core statements on purpose, strategy, and outcome should be revised and adjusted while the project unfolds, since learning trajectories and paths can change in unpredictable ways, leading to significant shifts of needs and priorities (Väljataga, 2010). Reviewing PLP outlines systematically at various stages helps to see whether the original projections and intentions need to be re-negotiated and whether they require amendments or revisions (Anderson, et al., 1996). Through these cycles of reflection (see graphic 1 above) individuals get a chance to reflect upon their expectations and intentions on one hand, and the effectiveness of their actions and use of instruments on the other hand. The externalisation of a revised PLP outline marks the closure of a cycle of reflection and helps to orientate, or bootstrap, the next execution phase of the project.

By (re-)mediating this overall, conceptual procedure with open, generic, web-publishing instruments, we gain a whole set of new, interesting affordances (in the sense of perceived potentials for action) that influence the qualities of the type of material that participants elicit and externalise in such a setting. While we don't have the space here for a detailed and comprehensive discussion of the potential af-

fordances of open, dynamic web-publishing practices in general, we would like to highlight a few, selected characteristics that proved beneficial in the context of our educational intervention work. The following graphic depicts a number of participants externalising their PLPs in parallel through individual web-publishing practices over the period of six weeks.



Graphic 2: Interlinked, and commented, externalisations of the unfolding PLPs of four participants

What we want to highlight here is that the realisation of the externalisation of PLP outlines and their revisions, records of action, and items of experience and reflection, in an open, networkable format affords the mediation of numerous conversational, reflective exchanges. Individual items are universally addressable, can be commented on, (hyper-)linked to, and drawn into a wide range of additional tools and services that eventually make up a personal or distributed learning environment (S. Fiedler & Pata, 2009). In our experience these combined practices regularly result in the emergence of rich, networked, narrative descriptions of personal learning that offer unique opportunities for both, coaching and research.

THE EXTERNALISATION OF PERSONAL LEARNING PROJECTS AS NETWORKED NARRATIVE

The type of material that is elicited through the iterative, conversational use of web-published PLP outlines (consisting of records of action and items of experience and reflection) can be seen as a type of networked narrative that turns the learning activity of a subject into an object of (inter-)personal review and reflection. At the same time it can be an object of investigation of researchers who are trying to comprehend individuals' understanding of their learning projects and experiences. Through the review and analysis of such material we can gain deeper insights into the complexity of adult learners' self-development and personal growth within (and beyond) the boundaries and constraints of formal higher education.

According to Heikkinen et al. (2007) and Young (1984) the typical elements of a narrative are:

- individual experiences,
- chronologically reported experiences,
- temporal and consequential sequence (one event causes another) of events.

We would like to argue that these generic elements of narrative can be readily found within the type of accounts that are generally elicited through the iterative, conversational use of web-published PLP outlines. The conversational, reflective externalisation of PLPs, as we have described it above, emphasises individual agency and autonomy. The autonomy of learners is only restricted by the pre-structured elements of the PLP outline and its revised versions, thus leaving considerable degrees of freedom for them to capture and document records of action, items of experience and personal reflections in whatever format they find adequate. From the intervening researcher's perspective a predefined structural framework and procedure makes it more likely that learners address aspects in their narrative accounts, which are important for assisting, facilitating and researching learners in their efforts of gaining control over their own learning activity.

Narrative accounts have a temporal thread in which current events are understood as rising out from past happenings and pointing to future outcomes (Bell, 2002; Riley & Hawe, 2005) forming a chronological sequence of events. While formulating a PLP outline the past and the future co-exist with the present in the mind of the individual, through memories of previous experiences and expectations in relation to the intended learning project (Riley & Hawe, 2005). Colombo (2003) points out that within narrative accounts actors inscribe a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures and transform transitory events and actions into "stories" that can be re-examined and revisited.

As mentioned above one of the main points of the conversational, reflective externalisation of a PLP is to revisit and reflect on one's actions and to adjust the project accordingly. Such iterative reflection potentially results in the re-construction, improvement, and adjustment of these (potentially networked) narratives. Re-construction of experience and retelling the stories is the essence of growth and the criteria for judging the value of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Externalised and mediated PLPs are also inherently contextualised. According to Sarbin (1986) narrative accounts not only include the description of actions and events but also the actor's reasoning and motives for carrying out their specified projects.

Heikkinen et al. (2007) claim that the most important characteristic of a narrative is its structure: it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In every learning project a beginning, a middle part and an end can be distinguished, too. Formulating a PLP outline can be interpreted as the beginning phase of the narrative as it describes the conflict, contradiction or discrepancy an individual experiences regarding knowledge and skills within a particular area. The middle part of a learner's narrative is then made up of the records of actions, items of experience, reflections, and conversational exchanges with others (comments, and so forth). A final reflection at the end of the project can be considered as marking the end of a particular project of learning and change, although the overarching learning activity may continue. Here, strengths and weaknesses are highlighted and future studying needs are addressed.

Based on our field research experience (S. Fiedler & Väljataga, 2010; Väljataga & Fiedler, 2009) the narrative accounts created through the conversational bootstrapping of PLPs through dynamic web-publishing can be used at different stages within an intervention research process. These narrative structures provide insights into how people come to understand their studying process and self-development and the type of action, or in-action, they take as a result. They are elaborated constructions that can function as valuable instruments for coaching and facilitating on

one hand (Bell, 2002), and for research on human change, and personal learning on the other.

POTENTIALS AND LIMITATIONS OF USING NETWORKED NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF PERSONAL LEARNING

Supporting and investigating unfolding human change and development is a challenging call because of its complexity and general unpredictability. Narrative inquiry holds the potential to grasp its comprehensiveness and richness. Narrative accounts created through the conversational use of web-published PLP outlines helps researchers to understand and gain unique insights into students' learning experience and developmental moves. They allow researchers to carry out the analysis of how people, events, norms and values, organizations, histories and future possibilities were made sense of and incorporated into the participants' interpretations and subsequent actions. That is, our narrative analysis contextualised the sense making process by focusing on the participant, rather than a set of themes (Riley & Hawe, 2005).

Through the conversational, reflective externalisation of their PLP participants produced rich narrative material, which mirrored their intentions, beliefs, values, sometimes emotions, and their overall meaning making efforts. These narrative accounts generally expressed what practical knowledge individuals constructed while executing their learning projects. Regular reflection upon, and documentation of, actions and experiences meant that these evolving accounts were not only shaped by students, but in return they also shaped the participants' learning projects and trajectories (Dodge, Ospina, & Foldy, 2005).

Riley & Hawe (2005) rightfully point out that "the narrative analysis takes us much further into the private world of the practitioner and helps us (re)think what the intervention represents" (p. 233). Furthermore, the conversational, reflective use of web-published PLP outlines highlighted the temporal notion of experience. It ensured that the individuals' interpretation and understanding of events and actions were regularly challenged through the ongoing conversation with the facilitator, peers, and self. Thus, participants were encouraged to produce more elaborated and detailed narratives of various forms (Young, 1984).

Despite the obvious benefits, the use of narrative material and its analysis has also a number of limitations. Riley & Hawe (2005) point out that the primary weakness of narrative inquiry is its retrospective nature and Bochner (2007) adds that "making stories from one's lived history is a process by which ordinarily we revise the past retroactively, and when we do we are engaged in processes of languaging and describing that modify the past" (p. 203). Regarding the specific nature of the type of systemic intervention research we engaged in, we did not experience this limitation as particularly problematic. Our aim was to intervene directly into existing teaching and studying practices within higher education. Making use of the conversational, reflective externalisation of a PLP gave us the opportunity for establishing a continuous dialogue with our participants, encouraging them to revise and elaborate the narrative accounts of their unfolding learning projects over time. Since the conversational, reflective externalisation of a PLP supported the creation of smaller units of narration along the timeline, participants predominantly generated accounts covering relative short periods of (recently lived) time.

One of the biggest challenges for a researcher trying to incorporate elements of narrative inquiry and analysis is the temptation to readily attribute narrative accounts to particular intentions and meanings (Bochner, 2007), or to blur the interpretive boundaries between the researcher and the participants (Atkinson, 1997). In our intervention studies we considered this to be one of the main threats while we were searching for indicators and evidence for particular developmental moves (in relation to learning activity) within our participants' narrative accounts. According to Clandinin & Connelly (2000) researchers need to consider how to compose and interpret

narratives in ways that recognise and respect complexity, while being alert to the “stories” not told. We would like to argue that systemic intervention research reduces the threat of over-interpreting the contents of narrative accounts in general. Results of analysis and interpretation are usually fed back into the overall system of practice, or to particular subjects that “authored” the original accounts, for validation.

Another significant challenge is the fact that the contextual constraints of institutional settings influence the type of narrative accounts that people tend to produce. In formal higher education settings, for example, individuals construct narrative accounts that often exclude experiences and events that undermine the identities they currently claim in this specific context (Bell, 2002). Sfard & Prusak (2005) suggest that people tend to relate narrative accounts either to their “actual identities” or to “designated identities”. For many people, for example, being a student in formal education often activates a very strong set of assumptions and expectations regarding the distribution of control and responsibility between the various types of actors in such settings. Furthermore, publishing one’s PLP outline, records of action and reflections publicly on personal weblogs might restrict people to be very open and honest about their objectives, reflections and the progress of their personal development. This is an issue, which requires more thorough research to understand the constraints personal web-publishing practices pose.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have suggested that the conversational use of open, web-published, universally addressable outlines of personal learning projects (PLPs) (consisting of records of action, and items of experience and reflection) serves learners as a procedural support tool while outlining and executing their projects. It can also play an essential role for facilitators and researchers alike. The benefits for educational research lie mainly in the continuous conversations and iterative reflections that the procedure enables and supports. These produce a rather compartmentalised, but nevertheless inter-linked and versatile material that shows elements and characteristics of networked, narrative accounts reflecting individual meaning making efforts and indicators for unfolding developmental change.

In our systemic intervention studies into teaching and studying practices in formal higher education settings (Fiedler & Väljataga, 2010; Väljataga, 2010), these rich, digitally mediated, narrative accounts turned out to be a valuable instrument for gathering insights into how individuals come to understand their learning process, self-development and the type of action they take as a result. Within systemic intervention research in education the ongoing review and analysis of these evolving, narrative accounts provides an important instrument of inquiry that can inform the preparation of the next cycle of intervention and the further development of conceptual and technical instruments. As a concluding remark we want to emphasise that systemic intervention research does not focus on the development of law-like, theoretical knowledge. Instead, we are more interested in the formation of phronetic (see for example Flyvbjerg, 2005; Inouye, Merrill & Swan, 2005; Rourke & Friesen, 2006), orientation knowledge, the consequential validity (Patton, 2002) of our approach and instruments, and in its effectiveness in supporting the development of historically new forms of learning activity among (adult) learners in higher education as our object of intentional change.

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