

New narratives to learn to discuss teaching in a faculty community of practice. Four case studies

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand narratives generated as part of a faculty training experience which involved a community for professional development. The methodology used included four case studies that composed of narrative biographical research techniques. Using the results, we built a report about the main problems of the community, the role of teachers and the way teachers learned to talk about their teaching. Bio-narratives and community of practice are creative methods to enhance teaching. Teachers can offer new perspectives concerning topics such as diversity, overcoming difficulties, openness, how they view others, curiosity, reflection, and inclusion.

Keywords: Narratives, change, professional development, community of practice, case study.

Theoretical background

Higher education (HE) professional development is a relatively new field (Barnett, 2000; Schroeder, et al., 2010; Saroyan & Frenay, 2012). Although there have been technical approaches to solve this problem of lack of training, such as simple workshops, teaching in itself is a complex, varied and uncertain profession, even in higher education institutions (Herrán & Paredes, 2012), and one which requires even more training.

Towards the end of the '90s, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) were included in policies aimed at changing HE institutions (Salinas, 1998) and was subsequently included in teacher training activities. Soon after, new ICT-based teaching methods, such as Learning Management Systems (LMS) and portfolios, appeared (Correa, Jiménez & Gutiérrez, 2010). Some researchers worked with these ICT solutions to enhance communities of practice (Lieberman & Miller, 1999) as a form of teacher training. Other tools included forums and social networks, as well as narratives which serve to enhance knowledge (Rymin, Lallimo & Hakkarainen, 2007; Davis & Morrow, 2010).

Literacy has emerged as a new frontier in which to apply these tools at universities. The latest literacy studies focus on how to use the arts and ICT to change curricula.

New ideas included in education are subjectivity, politics, ethical issues, participation, collaboration, art- based activities (Barone and Eisner, 2006), and creativity (Kincheloe, 1993; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

Narratives by means of ICT are tools which can be included in higher education curricula, with which participants are able to gain knowledge. Teachers can use these tools to reflect on their own teaching, and engage in intersubjective reflections (Paredes, 2011), in order to better know themselves, as well as to plan, participate in trainings and work with other teachers, each sharing their individual concerns.

The aim of the study presented here is to understand narratives generated in a community of practice for faculty professional development. Furthermore, to explore how faculty have learned to express their own concerns regarding their teaching experiences by means of bio-narrative techniques, including ICT, and how these tools have aided them in planning their classes. In order to do so, we analyze case studies of four, HE teachers; 3 women and 1 man.

Methods. Data collection and method of analysis

The methodology has been twofold, utilizing both narrative analysis and bio-narrative techniques (Barone & Eisner, 2006). We analyze an experience in a faculty community of practice, relating it to teacher's concerns, as well as what they have learned about themselves. Some techniques were used to elicit (bio-narrative) and others for the analysis of what happened within the social network (ethnographic) (Henry, 2006; Clandinin, et al., 2007; Correa, Jiménez & Gutiérrez, 2011). Afterwards, we built 4 case studies using different pieces of information. The community also served as a place to comment, reflect and share.

The specific techniques included Creativity in our memory, Evaluation (of life, of critical incidents to become teachers), Timeline (figure 1), Photodialogue (figure 3), Critical situations in a comic, Metaphors, Mental images, and Psycho-geography (figure 2) (Paredes, Herrán & Velázquez, 2013). Many of these are creative writing techniques based on Paulo Freire's ideas, used to discuss hopes, reflect, participate, share, and make a participant conscious of his/her place in his/her community. Participation in these bio-techniques was posted.

The training consisted in a weeklong, eight hour per day course aimed at starting a community of practice. Afterwards teachers participated in an action-research process in which they could talk about themselves, plan and share their concerns with fellow teachers. During and after the course, we met in a LMS, to share activities and continue working in a community of practice.

During the week, training was related to discussing certain activities. Activities used bio-narrative techniques to talk about a specific topic, the participant's own life experiences. It was autobiographical as well as emotional. They were asked to assess their own life by recalling memories and places where they had lived and worked. Additionally, they created metaphors that explained their point of view. During the week, they shared with others and also explored their future.

The authors of this paper served as the community facilitators. The space shared by the community was an LMS forum and a social network. The community explored how to plan, produce and assess that activities.

The participants were 30 Mexican lecturers from different institutions, with an equal gender distribution with the majority from the Social Sciences area. 75% reported that they had had previous pedagogical training, 10 participated in the community of practice, and 4 of them intended to find a way to modify their teaching. Case studies are related to 4 successful HE teachers: 3 women and 1 man, because we have a whole record of reflection about themselves (starting training), participation in a community of practice and plan to change their own classes.

The analysis of the results was artistic but we also used labeling and systematization. Triangulation was achieved by using various techniques (virtual community space, bio-techniques), interpreters (the teachers, their colleagues and the facilitators) and types of evidence (with multiple codes). After a thorough comparison, various ideas emerged, allowing us to write different reports.

In order to manage issues related to research ethics, such as confidentiality, we have shared the reports and used fictional names.

Results

Teachers joined an action-research project that began with ICT and new teaching techniques training to provide support for the community. We started a community of practice where faculty could find support with their teaching. In that community, there are some ideas about change. A teacher says that teaching is about control, perhaps recalling his own experience as a student. Among the participants, a female teacher hoped to introduce a sense of caring and build rapport with her students. Many were excited about ICT and the new techniques they could include in their class plans. Teachers were open to sharing with others. The high level of diversity among teachers (area, HE institution, age, gender) was a valuable asset. In the starting community there were not strong ties, although this changed during the first process of diagnosis-plan-action-evaluation, in which all participants shared their experiences with the community.

Teachers of all different ages and genders, with different levels of knowledge and prior experience were skeptical about technology and the narrative biographical approach. Whereas some teachers loved ICT, others feared it. Jorge, an engineer, talked about future teaching as a teacher in a technically advanced HE institution. Esther told us about her present job where ICT is charming:

Because we do not have the technology and tools in the classroom, as teachers we have to use creativity to engage (...) our students to approach the use of new technologies as a tool and as a means to share knowledge (Esther forum contributor).

As facilitators of that project, we were very concerned about our network, if it would generate participation. And besides participation, we also wanted teachers to reflect on their own experiences in the classroom. As researchers, we hoped that participation would emerge from the activities in which the teachers participated. But as action-researchers we understood that this doesn't occur without a work group. Additionally we were faced with the obstacle of having the facilitators in Spain and the participants in Mexico. After being provided with some examples and guidance, participants were asked for some examples of class plans. Finally, the teachers didn't have enough time to work and reflect.

The community offered horizontal and friendly form of communication as evidenced by the dialogue which emerged between several participants, and the friendly manner in which they responded to one another:

“Maestra” Betty, I liked your reflection. Truthfully, we rarely are aware of how important our mission is, the impact of our actions, words, attitudes, ways of transmitting knowledge and how our students work. Indeed, it is motivating to meet colleagues like you. (Esther forum contributor)

“Maestra” Esther, thank you for your comment. You're right; we learn from peers in this forum, I do not know many things about ICT, and online courses like this. For example, I saw that Jorge, the engineer, posted a link to Google docs, and since I didn't understand how to post links here, I entered a Google tutorial and learned how to create a link... then I see exercises (...) it is a stressful experience, albeit interesting, and even fun when you understand how to do the job, lol. (Betty forum contributor)

“Maestro” and “Maestra”, the official term used to refer to professional men or women who have obtained a degree, is used among teachers in Mexico when addressing a colleague in a friendly manner. In the same way, other posts used diminutives, such as “Vicentita” and “Betsy”, further adding to the friendly atmosphere in the forum.

Participants were skeptical about the possibilities of ICT writing, and face to face activities were the preferred means of communication:

I agree with Mónica, suddenly I also have some resistance towards overusing (...) ICT. Personally, I prefer to give priority to critical analysis and reflection and the topics covered in class relate to everyday life and the problems experienced in the world today. (...) The school and the way we educate must be changed, but new technologies should not be used above all other methods. In my opinion, we should keep in mind that they are one of many tools. (Esther forum contributor)

The perception of ICT changed during the following months. The narratives generated utilized critical and sincere language. They concerned problem solving and how to improve teaching: how to better teach, care for students, and respond to the student's needs and interests.

There were teachers who were willing to share their own experiences and techniques. One participant said:

Thank you for your comment Jorge. The diagnostic evaluation at UNAM requires the participation of a broad group of academics (...). The results that you share are equally important and enriching as they allow us to become familiar with another approach (Esther forum contributor)

There was excitement surrounding the discovery of solutions, particularly those related to the usefulness of tools:

Hello Monica, I find the material you present to be really interesting, especially in the blog, in my blog I placed a page with the names of the assignments to be submitted by the students. (Jorge forum participation)
How thoughtful! Thanks for the suggestions, [the facilitator] and I will consider what the video says, and I will review the tutorial. (Mónica forum contributor)

Within the network there was sincere and valuable participant feedback, such as when Vicenta thanked Jorge for turning in activities on the platform it helped understand what to do.

Vicenta: "First, I would like to express my admiration for your promptness in submitting your activities. Also, I read your document and I think you present relevant activities (...) Thanks for sharing."
Jorge: "Thanks Vicentita, I took your idea and included it in the document (...)"

Jorge: "Hello Beatriz. Thanks for your comment, your previous work impressed me and it looked very professional and well executed."

Far from complacency there were also critical comments:

Hi Jorge: I read your work and I find it really interesting. However, I do not understand when you present the main idea. (Mónica forum contributor)

The changes can be challenging. For example, a teacher with 30 years of experience admitted to the difficulty of making changes in her institution.

My work for the University is to carry out the objectives that are embodied in the curriculum, through different activities such as questionnaires, critical readings, and student PowerPoint presentations, attending conferences, trying to get students to participate actively and reflectively, in terms of respect and in a horizontal and dialectical fashion (...), they almost never get full marks. Most of them, like me, receive an 8. Now that I'm here, I'm taking the opportunity to participate, by analyzing the curriculum in a more critical and conscious way, the method of evaluating students, alternatives that ICT offer us, all because I am convinced that the commitment I have to the university is a commitment to social change, which is needed throughout the country. (Mónica forum contributor)

Only a small group developed a new class plan. Some teachers presented technical approaches or "findings". Vicenta says: "I found the topic while surfing the web (...) and found an example ad hoc (to use an application, but was thinking of a class): I welcome your insight." Some participants noted: "that's nice", "how did you do it?", "looks very professional."

How has this change been received among their students? How can these new proposals be taken to their classes? Teachers had positive stories about their student's reactions. There were no explicit evaluations or testimonies of students, although we read their blogs that serve as student portfolios and reflections raised by their class groups. There was a certain level of contentment among all of the students. Another finding was that certain contextual elements which were encountered within this community had not been previously considered by facilitators (for example, the professional role of Mexican teachers) as well as the lack of motivation for change involving ICT. However, the narratives which were generated suggest new opportunities. Participants learned to talk about themselves and they awoke to the idea of community. Horizontality in communications was seen and lecturers used clear, critical and sincere language. Teachers sought solutions to everyday problems, some being technical while others were more critical. There were surprises, "findings", and discoveries, which were all inspired by the community interactions. Participants diversified methodologies and involved students in their own learning.

It was a journey where transformation began with bio-narratives techniques that were shared with peers. This transformation occurred with four teachers: Jorge, Esther, Betty and Vicenta.

Jorge has been an engineering and geology lecturer for 25 years. His approach to education, both in the classroom and in the community, appears to be a technical one. He perceives education to be associated with formalization of teaching activities. For example, when talking about his experience as a teacher, Jorge provides an outline of a class and technical concerns:

Facilitator: "Could you explain briefly who you are, your motivations, what you expect of it: what goals you want to achieve with the changes you plan to introduce."

Jorge: "during my studies I had an online course in web 2.0 which led me to use ICT as a way to foster meaningful learning in students, here in Mexico (...) I completed a diploma in ICT in education, about Moodle platform (...), I have been fascinated by these technologies. Understanding how to use it has taken many hours (...). My hope is that students become familiar with these technologies (...)"

Jorge takes a technical approach. For example, in the network he is the most enthusiastic, with double the number of interactions and proposals as the other community participants.

Esther is a Journalism professor. She teaches writing, and has 10 years of experience. Quite reluctant to ICT, she is immersed in the emotional bio-narrative techniques, and discusses with peers how to integrate them in her classes.

Vicenta is a lecturer with five years of experience teaching History of Ideas in an International Relations degree program. She is a young teacher.

Beatriz has been a Design professor for 20 years. She is new to ICT, albeit committed, and playful with technology (for example, she introduces colors and emoticons in all postings in the community).

We asked, as facilitators: What contributes to exploring my own subjectivity, through creativity and ICT? It was not easy to answer.

All activities were a challenge, as they asked teachers to explore their own lives. "I want to learn: I feel that there are some critical incidents in my life that came to light during this exploration", expressed Esther, remembering herself as future teacher and mom. Using timelines (Figure 1), the group was able to learn a lot about their peer's lives, only seeing one another's graphic summaries. Full of emotions, some critical incidents in their lives were expressed.

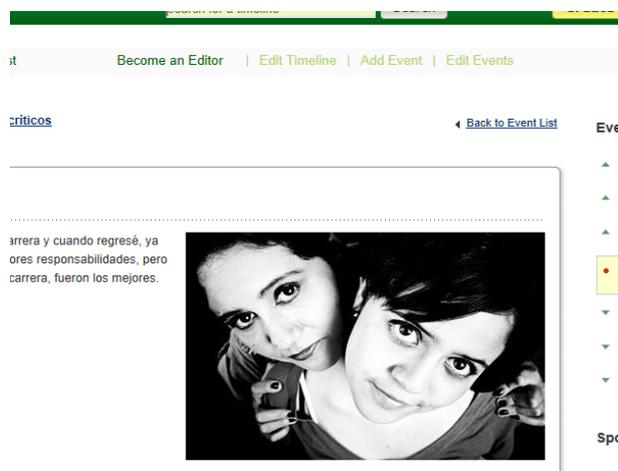


Figure 1. Timeline of a teacher participant.

When facilitator proposed bio-narratives, participants looked forward to receiving feedback. For example, participants were asked to reflect on the desire to learn and apply it to a tool for making an online multimedia poster called Glogster. They only tested the tool.

Some results of these exploratory processes of bio-narrative offered discoveries: psychogeography was a nice excuse to write about the schedule of an ordinary day, yet from a positive perspective.. In a memory map on Googlemaps (Figure 2) we read:

At the end of the day, I go back to Rancho Seco. In the bus I can't stop thinking about the day. Although I am tired, I reflect on the goals accomplished and how I can make changes and improvements. (Esther psychogeography)

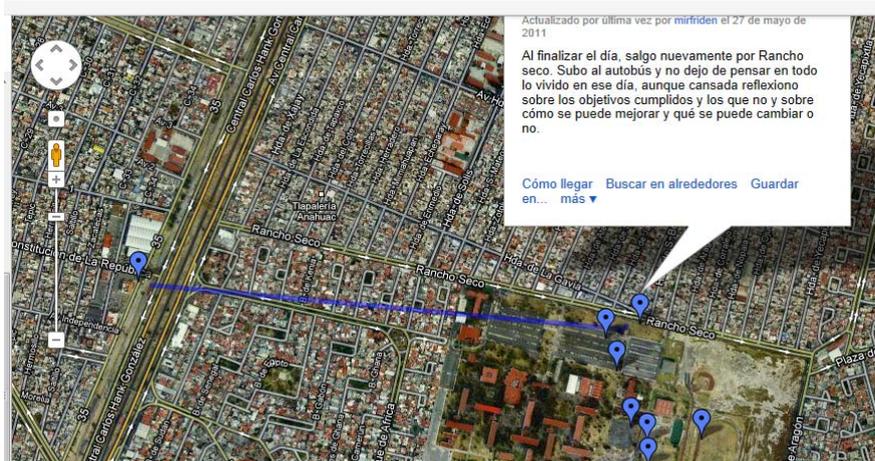


Figure 2. A psychogeography using Googlemaps.

However, this tour can also be humorous and emotional. Vicenta's journey included positive gastronomic memories: "I visited a place to give joy to my mouth" she said.

Sometimes some ideas arise, which can be debated with participants, such as their worldviews.. One instance can be seen in the photodialogue created by Jorge, which explores the role of women (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Photodialogue: my story of the life of a woman.

We, as facilitators, didn't agree with that worldview. In another photodialogue, teachers could see a professional model of women.

Discussion

Our 4 teachers learned to talk about themselves and their experiences, as part of a community. They had the opportunity to share their feelings, discoveries and plans, and learn about themselves and their teaching, first in a course where facilitators introduced activities which were later discussed, and later among one another, as part of a community where they could share plans and perspectives. In their

narratives, they were at times conventional, sharing an account of their experience and teaching methods. Other times they were disruptive, and generally skeptical about their own narratives.

It is possible that the beginning of the course was the first time where they could talk about themselves. The experience could be improved by allowing for more such opportunities. Confidence and trust within the community needed in order to talk freely and openly. That process was helpful to get them involved in the community. Our 4 teachers were able to share together throughout the course and then in the community. They were first worried about what they shared, but later became excited.

Participants evolved in terms of the way they perceived their approach to teaching. For example, they expressed obstacles which included their workload and the fact that they lived in a country where teachers frequently work in various, often distant, places. They also commented on new projects, such as engaging students in, and carrying out, student productions.

New schedules and class plans are needed. Participation is essential for engaging students and increasing their knowledge. Teachers could use blogs, wikis, or social networks to create an experience similar to that of our community.

It is a bad idea to assume that students are “digital natives”, as they are not usually proficient in ICT skills. When the 4 teachers introduced the new technologies, they encountered difficulties. These were the same difficulties these teachers had when they began the training.

These type of tools appear to allow teachers to build a new sense of rapport with students, and teachers and students alike expand upon their knowledge base. Teachers need more training in this area, and a place where they can consult with other experts, such as their colleagues. Community could be a place to do this in the future.

Bio-narratives and community of practice are creative ways to solve these problems. Teachers can learn to talk about themselves. They introduce new perspectives regarding topics such as diversity, overcoming difficulties, openness, learning to see others, curiosity, reflection and inclusion.

Diversity was found among the participants, but they overcame difficulties by learning from the distinct perspectives of one another. Academics from the distinct fields of Engineering, Design, Writing and Law studies, came together to share their concerns with one another. They had different points of view about teaching, ICT support and the role of women, but they found a way to share their own experiences with each other. Through this experience, teachers learned to survive together, to finish the projects and to resolve their problems. Difficulties faced included: time, work load. Teachers learned to see new aspects of their colleagues’ personalities. They learned to be open and curious. We mainly observed this in the male teacher. They opened their minds. Some teachers included bio-narrative techniques in their class plans. They also involved their colleagues and students in their teaching.

We learned as facilitators that strong ties among teachers helped in overcoming difficulties. Additionally, the way we talked with each other and the students was surprisingly positive, as during our final meetings joy and encouragement was present. We hope to encounter new opportunities in our community of practice during the upcoming years.

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