



## RESEARCH PAPER

# Digital Narratives, Social Connectivity and Disadvantaged Youth: Raising aspirations for rural and low socioeconomic young people

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This paper explores the role of digital narratives and social media in promoting social integration, enculturation and expressive self-reflection within an enabling tertiary preparation program designed to raise the aspirations and widen the participation of economically and geographically disadvantaged young people in higher education. The program combined Digital Storytelling assessment with the use of social networking site *Facebook* as a learning management system. Students from rural and low socioeconomic backgrounds with low secondary school results, low aspiration and little opportunity for matriculation to universities, benefited from intensive intervention strategies which focused not only on academic preparation but on the social and cultural obstacles underlying inequality in higher education participation. Combining face-to-face teaching, mentoring and pastoral care with integrated digital platforms may provide a non-traditional pathway which facilitates not only academic and technological competence but the opportunity for non-traditional students to become more connected, confident and visible in higher education.

*Keywords:* enabling education; tertiary preparation; digital narratives; youthful identities and aspirations; social capital

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## Introduction

The discussion of the role of digital narratives and social media within enabling education developed in this paper was drawn from the authors' experiences teaching within an Australian tertiary preparation or bridging program. The Tertiary Preparation Intensive Pathway (TPPIP) program targets 17-18 year old prospective domestic undergraduate students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the Darling Downs region of Queensland, Australia, including school leavers from rural communities such as Stanthorpe, Dalby, Goondiwindi, Pittsworth, Oakey, Tara, Clifton, Charleville and Cunnamulla. Funded through the Australian Government's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), the TPPIP is an enabling program currently offered by the Open Access College of the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) as an initiative to widen participation and raise the aspirations of rural and low socioeconomic youth.

The USQ TPPIP targets year 12 school leavers without the traditional prerequisites to enter university and provides them with both the knowledge and skills they require for tertiary study and guaranteed entry to a USQ undergraduate degree. Students identified as unlikely to graduate with the adequate OP (Overall Position) or tertiary entrance rank required for traditional selection into Australian universities are recruited through liaison with

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the school principals and guidance officers of targeted low socioeconomic status (SES) secondary schools and are offered a fast-tracked non-traditional pathway into university through the TPPIP. Participants in this program receive fee-free tertiary preparation tuition alongside fee-free transport, meals and accommodation in the university residential college with an opportunity to live on campus and participate in regular scheduled sports, field trips, community, social and cultural activities designed to assist them to successfully transition to university life. Essentially the program provides a 'second chance' opportunity for students whose secondary schooling has been interrupted or derailed by personal and family problems and constraints to catch up with their peers and potentially enrol in an undergraduate program in the first semester of the following year after successful completion of the TPPIP. Through intensive on campus teaching over the four weeks of the summer semester and the use of an online closed group page on the social media networking site *Facebook*, the 2012/2013 TPP Intensive School trial produced positive outcomes across both academic development and social integration for the target group. The outcome of the trial 2012/2013 TPPIP program was extremely positive with 18 out of the 20 students who completed it continuing on with tertiary study. In 2013 a digital story telling assessment was also designed and implemented to strengthen the career development learning component of the TPPIP, and to meet the program objective of raising not only academic preparedness but also raising the career aspirations and personal expectations of the students.

As part of their assessment the TPPIP students were required to produce a three to five minute short film or digital story employing moving and still images with voice over audio or narration to explore their identity and future aspirations, their school experiences to date, influences on their decisions, their skills, abilities, interests and long term goals. Several on campus iMac workshops were delivered to introduce the students to the Final Cut 10 editing software they were encouraged to use, including instruction on sourcing appropriate and open access or Creative Commons licensed images for their digital story visual collages. To protect their privacy and to further facilitate creative self-reflection, participants were instructed to use visual metaphors rather than literal representations of the self, presenting all moving and still images from the first-person point of view, as though the world was being seen through their eyes. Although the stories produced varied in their style, almost all participants used both a soundtrack and a personal self-recorded voice-over narrative which further added to the sense of marginalised young people giving voice to their worldview and their everyday real world experiences. Although they were not given explicit instruction to represent their career development that way, almost all participants represented their autobiographical stories as a difficult and challenging journey shaped by sources of inspiration and cultural connectivity – connections to family, home and place were particularly important for these rural and low socioeconomic youth.

In their creating, storing and sharing of life stories and emerging representations of self on both the TPPIP *Facebook* page and the TPPIP digital stories in both the iMac classroom and across their own ubiquitous iPhones, 'smart' phones and other mobile devices, a bigger picture was emerging of young people working through not just what they wanted to do (aspirations) but also who they are (self-expressions) and how they wanted to be seen (mediated identities). Through digital storytelling and the TPPIP *Facebook* closed group page, the TPPIP program provided an avenue for participants to explore new positive student identities and develop a sense of community while also engaging with academic content on visual digital platforms that 'speak their language' and allow them to 'think in pictures'. The outcome of adding Social Media networking and Digital Storytelling to the TPPIP teaching

toolkit has been mostly successful with increased opportunities for students from rural and low socioeconomic backgrounds to transition to university culture, to expand their social networks and develop necessary career management competencies and digital literacies. However the TPPIP team also encountered unanticipated difficulties and practical challenges trialling the program particularly when supplementing the traditional university learning management system with *Facebook* and traditional text-based assessment with more visual Digital Storytelling platforms. These challenges and learnings will also be discussed.

## **Method and theory**

In order to evaluate the TPPIP program and in particular its engagement of digital platforms and social networking technologies, the TPPIP team gathered both qualitative and quantitative data during the on campus residential school and at its conclusion. To gather data on student perceptions and experience a survey instrument, using a 5-point Likert scale gauging students' level of agreement with each evaluative statement, was administered to the twenty 17 to 18 year old participants of the 2012 TPPIP and to the forty-one 17 to 18 year old participants of the 2013 TPPIP program. These surveys also included open-ended questions to provide more in-depth insight into the students' experiences. The multimodal digital stories produced by 2013 TPPIP students were also analysed and common themes were identified.

In the tradition of critical participatory action research designed to empower practitioners to learn from their own experiences and improve their own everyday teaching practice (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon 2014; Kemmis 2010), the TPPIP program was researched by Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) teaching staff, drawing in part on their own observations and participation in the on campus TPPIP classroom and on the online social networking group page. This research is also, at the time of writing, informing the authors' planning and development of the 2014/2015 TPPIP summer school program and it is anticipated that reflecting on these results will continue to improve practice and provide the basis for further action. While drawing on our own everyday experience as enabling educators and the experiences of our students, the authors of this paper have identified themes related to learning identities, learning communities and social capital which may be particularly relevant to practitioners and policy makers concerned with the persistent social and cultural obstacles faced by first in family and economically disadvantaged school leavers with a history of low levels of educational achievement. Moreover our experience suggests digital narratives and social media, when combined with face to face intensive teaching and mentoring, are mostly effective tools for making a difference to the academic and life outcomes of these students.

Our work is also informed by a sociocultural approach to theory and practice which recognises that as teaching and learning is always a social process, whether it is on campus or online, effective enabling strategies must also be located on those terms and address the social and cultural obstacles to full participation. As Northedge (2003, p. 17) points out, sociocultural theories of learning offer an alternative to traditional models of teaching as transmitting information, positioning learning instead as the process of joining a conversation and joining a community. While it may take time for learners to pick up and share the language and conventions of their new community, the process supports the development of new student identities along the way as students struggle to make meaning out of what may be to them a strange and challenging environment: 'From this perspective, knowledge is not

pinned down to the pages of a book. We cannot chop it into pieces to feed to students. It arises out of a process of discoursing, situated within communities' (Northedge, 2003, p. 19).

The overlap between identity and community and the close relationship between students' social lives and their academic outcomes is a key insight of sociocultural theories of learning. This more sociological approach to research recognises that students are not necessarily rational individuals making informed choices, they are also social and emotional beings shaped and influenced by their social positioning and social relationships. Whether in the classroom or online a sense of classroom community develops a sense of emotional connectedness and investment which enables students to maximise their learning and successfully complete the program (Hung & Yuen, 2010, p.704). Drawing on these insights the TPP intensive and residential summer school, through the TPPIP Facebook site, through creating and sharing digital stories and through scheduled extracurricular activities, encourages students from isolated and disadvantaged areas to actively participate in a community and to expand and enrich their social network as they settle into university life. We believe our use of social networking technology not only facilitated solutions to practical administrative problems with establishing communication channels with school leavers over the summer semester but also enabled the TPPIP team to fast-track the process of introducing isolated students to a new learning community and culture with its own language and conventions. Moreover we believe that the digital storytelling of personal aspirations, goals and personal history communicates to students that we value and support both their worldview and their sociocultural identities (see, e.g. Valkanova & Watts, 2007; Erstad & Wertsh, 2008; Gauntlett, 2008; Hartley, 2008; Lundby, 2008; Hartley & McWilliam, 2009; Lowenthal, 2009).

### **The Network Society**

Twenty-first century teachers and learners are, as Castells (2004) suggests, living in the 'Network society' whose social structure and power relations are made up of networks connected and powered by communication technologies. It follows, if we accept that ours is a network society equity issues must also be understood in terms of connectivity and access to the 'right' networks. As Castells (2004, p. 4) points out: 'Networks work on a binary logic: inclusion/exclusion.' Within this Network model the accumulation of contacts, or 'friends' to use the language of online social networking, maybe just as important than the accumulation of educational credentials in determining life outcomes. Of course not all networks are equal. As Bourdieu (1984) pointed out some time ago, the reproduction of class based inequalities in society and in education is not only an economic process but also depends on one's access to social and cultural capital. An individual's life outcomes will be shaped by their social networks, contacts and connections to friends, family and peers who may (or may not) offer useful help, support, information and advice (Bourdieu 1984; Coleman 1990). This is how, in part, an unjust, stratified and hierarchically structured society repeats itself across the generations. Also colloquially and locally known as the 'old school tie' network, 'well connected' school leavers have the contacts (social capital) as well as the confidence and high expectations (cultural capital) which provide a position of competitive and relative advantage over lower socioeconomic groups. The exclusive school tie, as a symbol that the wearer has been to an elite Australian private school (or a British public school), communicates a sense of class status and belonging, working as a symbolic resource that may be translated into real economic assets.

While generations of critical sociologists and enabling educators, informed by emancipatory discourses and radical pedagogy, have of course attempted to intervene in this process of social selection and social reproduction, questions remain as to the empowering or oppressive potential of new communication and networking technologies. Castells (2004, p. 42) provides an answer of sorts: 'Studies on the uses of information and communication technologies demonstrate again what historians of technology established long since: that technology can only yield its promise in the framework of cultural, organisational and institutional transformations.' In other words, equal access to new technologies does not necessarily produce equal outcomes or equal benefits. Although most digital literacy interventions and digital equity initiatives aim to improve the quality of life of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups *relative to more advantaged groups*, there is little evidence that this has actually been achieved (Po-An Hsieh, Rai & Keil 2011, p. 248). As Po-An Hsieh, Rai & Keil (2011, p. 247) suggest, attempts to address digital inequality for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups must simultaneously develop both cultural capital (self-belief) and social capital (support from peers) as the two forms of capital reinforce each other. Isolated and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups may also need a form of online or network capital, which can operate independently of the limits of place and geography.

There is some debate among social theorists and cultural commentators as to whether new communication technologies actually hold the potential to facilitate real reciprocal supportive online communities within a 'cyberdemocracy' or whether the technology will ultimately simply serve the interests of the already advantaged by reproducing existing social inequality and undermining more traditional local community ties (Kroher & Weinstein, 2001). Rheingold (2001) observes that wherever communications technology becomes available people will build communities with it and these communities will contain their own language, norms and culture. Moreover the decentralised communication channels of the web foster democratic participation on a new scale in a new kind of public space which Poster (2001) refers to as a 'cyberdemocracy' (Poster, 2001; Rheingold, 2001).

Digital Storytelling may be a more recent manifestation of this ongoing democratising shift from one-way, top-down centralised broadcast media to more decentralised, participatory and interactive web-based communication. As Hartley (2008, p. 212) suggests, Digital Storytelling and other 'self-made' media are 'democratising both self-expression and expertise' by prioritising personal experience and allowing a 'direct voice.' In a similar way, social networking sites like *Facebook* which require participants to create, share and personalise profiles are blurring boundaries between the public (social) and the private (personal) in a postmodern network society. If as Kemmis (2010, p. 424) suggests, one of the goals of action research should be to create models of democratic dialogue in education, then digital narrative platforms such as social networking media and Digital Storytelling tools may also facilitate this process.

### **TPPIP Facebook**

Undoubtedly the success of web-based social networking sites such as *Facebook*, particularly among young people, raises questions for educators regarding the value of these technologies for building a sense of classroom community and democratising power relations between students and teachers. International research suggests *Facebook* is already part of the 'social glue' which assists undergraduate students in their transition to university life and culture (Clare, Meek, Wellens & Hooley, 2009). Moreover, research into the use of social

networking site *Ning* in higher education contexts found the social sharing features of *Ning* useful for enhancing student engagement, peer support and for ‘strengthening students’ emotional connectedness’ within a learning community (Hung & Yuen, 2010, p. 711). The TPPIP experience with *Facebook* supports previous research (Hung & Yuen, 2010) which suggests that by uploading photos and videos and sharing personal interests and hobbies, students on web-based classroom social networking pages are engaged in a different kind of interaction than that provided for by established university e-learning platforms and more traditional digital learning management systems like Blackboard or the Moodle StudyDesk. While online university learning management systems (LMS) tend to revolve around courses and delineated units of information, *Facebook* foregrounds the personal, the person and his/her connections and personal interests. Essentially with *Facebook* the true value is in the social network itself, not the information being exchanged. Although university lecturers and classroom teachers are frequently cautious in their approach to social media due to issues of privacy and security, effective enabling programs must move beyond the narrow information exchange model of education to refocus on social resources, social capital and the sense of belonging (or sense of isolation) which impacts student outcomes.

Certainly, the young participants of TPPIP found the TPPIP *Facebook* page a more natural, accessible and intuitive environment for interaction and learning than the mainstream online university learning management system or Moodle StudyDesk. In this respect the TPPIP experience contradicts previous recent research here at the University of Southern Queensland (Sankey, Myatt & Tynan, 2013) and in other Australian universities (Lodge, 2010) which indicates while the majority of tertiary students are using social media in their everyday personal lives outside study, they prefer email and established formal communication channels through online learning management systems (such as the USQ Study Desk) over *Facebook* when communicating with the university and when engaged in formal learning and teaching. One explanation for this apparent contradiction may be the degree of social and cultural variation between age groups as while the majority of USQ students (73%) are mature age, the students within our Intensive TPP segment are all 17-18 year olds. TPPIP participants have grown up texting, ‘friending’ and expecting instant on-demand information through internet enabled mobile communication devices. While we would avoid making simplistic generalizations and essentialist assumptions about the differences between teenagers and mature age students, our experience suggests mobile digital communication technologies and social networking sites are useful tools for fast-tracked pre-tertiary preparation programs designed for school leavers. Moreover during the four weeks of the Intensive residential school the students’ personal/social lives and their academic/learning experiences are merged to an extent which is different from that experienced by mature age distance education students as developing peer relationships and personal aspirations, facilitating socialisation and enculturation are explicit priorities of the specialised intensive TPP pathway. Within holistic enabling programs, which prioritise social inclusion to maximise student outcomes, social networking tools may be of particular significance.

As teachers within an intensive pre-tertiary bridging program our challenge was to teach not only the mathematical, academic communication, study management and career development skills rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged students would need to complete an undergraduate degree but also to provide a positive, holistic social and cultural experience which would help these targeted students settle into university life. To complicate matters further our TPPIP students could not become officially ‘program active’ until week

four of the summer semester and so did not initially have access to the mainstream online learning management or Moodle system known at USQ as StudyDesk. Also due to their fast tracked schedule and intensive experience they had different assessment dates and different needs to the mainstream and mostly mature aged USQ TPP student population. Our solution was to create the TPP Intensive closed ‘group’ within the social networking site *Facebook*.

Closed groups provide a secure space within *Facebook* for small groups (less than 100) to communicate and collaborate around their shared project and space. Unlike official *Facebook* pages, which need to be created by an official representative of a public figure, business or institution, groups can be created by anyone. Significantly, students do not need a university account or password to access a *Facebook* group which they are invited to join, only an active email account. Like any other online learning management system, *Facebook* allows the sharing of documents, images and relevant links to web content as well as appropriate privacy and security settings and options. For this small specialised group of teenagers and young adults, our use of *Facebook* within TPPIS proved a great success as it facilitated and fast tracked both learning management and social integration.

Initially an email was sent to all TPP students with a link to the TPP Intensive School *Facebook* site and students were added to the group by administration and teaching staff with group administration rights. There was immediate uptake and use of the site by the majority of the students who already had *Facebook* accounts and profiles. Notifications were placed on the site in relation to arrival at campus, orientation and planned social events. By the first day of teaching during the TPPIP trial, students had uploaded and shared photos of each other and their new environment. Informal peer learning and group work had also begun in response to teaching resources uploaded. Essentially we were talking to students in their own language with technology they already know, which overall made for a less stressful and less intimidating learning environment. As most were already familiar with the informal, personal and ‘friending’ discourses of *Facebook* in their everyday social lives, TPPIP students were very comfortable using it to facilitate their transition to higher education as they shared experiences, information, opinions, memes, anecdotes and jokes about the accommodation, meet-ups, meals, assessment and workshops. In keeping with the international experience of integrating *Facebook* in higher education settings (Hung & Yuen 2010; Clare et. al. 2009) the TPPIP *Facebook* site also provided an opportunity for the TPPIP teaching team to foreground digital literacy and to model good digital citizenship in our own postings, comments and newsfeed responses online. Despite their low socioeconomic backgrounds and low levels of educational attainment we found that the target group was already highly digital literate, required little direction in this regard and spontaneously, ‘naturally’ or intuitively did the important work of building and regulating the TPPIP community online.

In post-program surveys 67% of 2012 TPPIP respondents rated the *Facebook* TPPIP site as ‘Excellent’ while 33% rated it ‘Good’. Moreover, 87% of the 2013 TPPIP respondents listed the *Facebook* site as their preferred method of communication with University staff around teaching and learning matters. Even after accessing the official USQ online learning management system or StudyDesk, TPPIP students across both cohorts tended to check their *Facebook* profiles more regularly than StudyDesk through their ever-present ‘smart’ phones and other ‘always on’ mobile devices with *Facebook* applications. Students preferred the TPPIP *Facebook* site over StudyDesk both for communicating with other students and teachers and for accessing learning resources such as lecture power points and YouTube videos. It is also worth noting that 78% of 2013 respondents found that the TPPIP *Facebook*

site was useful for them to interact and communicate with other students *before* commencing the course and this social connectivity increased their confidence about starting university even though they were also frequently first in family, low attainment, low socioeconomic students.

In open-ended responses evaluating the TPPIP 2012/2013 *Facebook* group students commented on information sharing, social connectivity and enculturation:

*'Facebook site... Love it!'*

*'Simple. Reliable way to communicate with friends and teachers.'*

*'I never once used the Study Desk Social Forum so I preference it as 6<sup>th</sup> because I feel Facebook was much more beneficial as with face-to-face.'*

*'I prefer talking to people face to face or on Facebook because it's easier to talk to the person one on one. I don't really like the Study Desk because at times it can be very confusing.'*

*'Interacting with students via Facebook on the TPP page and chat was a great way to get to know everyone and to get help with anything you didn't understand'*

*'We were all on the same level - we made friendships before coming here.'*

*'We all got to know each other a little before the course and got to see similarities between them and ourselves.'*

*'We all posted pictures into the group which made everyone feel involved.'*

*'It was a common place where we could all be new and interact.'*

In post program evaluation surveys 80% of 2012 TPPIP respondents indicated that the TPPIP program had assisted them in realising their potential. Similarly all 2013 TPPIP respondents indicated that the overall experience of the TPP Intensive had either increased their desire to study a tertiary qualification or assisted them to feel more comfortable and prepared to complete one. TPPIP 2012/2013 students commented:

*'It has helped me structure essays and has made me realise how excited I am to start uni as I originally wasn't going to go.'*

*'Before going into this program I was so nurtured that I wondered how I would do by myself. It's become acceptable that I am capable and have the maths and English skills needed to complete assignments in TPP with great satisfaction and also with minimal help. Not something I was used to before doing this course. This course has made me more determined to prove to people I can survive alone with no-one guiding me or always being on guard to help.'*

*'Before TPP if I went to Uni I wouldn't have known anything. I wouldn't have been able to do the assignment or use the resources. Now I can because TPP showed me how.'*



*'It has shown me what to expect and how to handle things in University.'*

*'The TPPIP has made me more comfortable about undertaking a degree at University as I now have an idea of what to expect in regards to standards of assessment and I know how to access a lot of useful USQ material.'*

*'TPPIP has shown me what I am capable of.'*

*'It made me believe in myself.'*

*'It gave me an insight into the skills I would need and I feel confident that I can succeed.'*

*'I feel reassured that this is my career path.'*

*'It made me confident in myself.'*

*'I am more determined than ever to complete my studies and make a better future for myself.'*

*'I have my mind set on what I want to do in the future.'*

In part through the use of social networking technologies, the TPPIP pre-tertiary program has provided these students from rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds with a 'head start' on higher education across the areas of social, academic and personal development. The TPPIP web-based social networking tool has assisted in constructing learning communities and the social support networks which are an important factor determining career and study success, especially for young people. The *Facebook* site has also allowed us to chart the growth of our students as, even after completing the program, they continue to visit the site to support each other, arrange physical and virtual meet-ups and compare experiences of undergraduate study. Unlike more traditional online university learning management systems which expel students once they are no longer enrolled in the course, it is likely students will stay connected to social media to some degree. Moreover while students may finish with the university LMS once they graduate, students who enter the culture industries such as journalism or public relations may well find that engagement with social media is part of their job description. Similarly education must continue to adapt to the horizontal (rather than top-down) processes of information sharing and knowledge formation which are the new norm in culture and communication industries.

### **TPPIP Digital Storytelling**

In 2013 Digital Storytelling was also introduced to the TPPIP program to enhance the career development modules and to further address program objectives of raising the career aspirations, long term goals and future expectations of rural and low socioeconomic school leavers. While storytelling has always played an important part in teaching and learning throughout human history, contemporary digital stories developed out of community workshops in California, the United States, in the early 1990s and have since expanded exponentially around the developed and developing world (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009).

Developing alongside and intersecting with the explosion of self-authoring and user-generated content on web-based social networking through Web 2.0, digital stories are now also entering the mainstream in education and have been used in schools and universities in the United States for some time (Lowenthal, 2009; Hartley & McWilliam, 2009). Through the TPPIP Digital Storytelling task we aimed to make explicit that process which the students had already begun spontaneously on the TPPIP Facebook site, of students building community, establishing commonalities and connections, and presenting carefully constructed (and reconstructed) stories and images of who they are and who they wish to be.

Both *Facebook* and Digital Storytelling are driven by visual elements and facilitate the creative expression and sharing of visual self-narratives (Lowenthal, 2009; Hartley & McWilliam, 2009). Supplementing the more traditional components of the TPPIP course such as report and essay writing, Digital Storytelling provided an alternative to more text-based assessment and an opportunity to ‘think in pictures’ within a more visual medium. As Bedford (2008) suggests, visual learners in particular may benefit from the opportunity to carry out thinking and reflection tasks using pictures and symbols instead of words or text. As Gauntlett (2008) has pointed out, using visual metaphors to express abstract thoughts and feelings allows the brain to work in a different way and can ‘unlock’ different kinds of responses and insights. Moreover digital storytelling has been recognised as a medium which recognises the learner as an emotional as well as rational being, validating the emotional life of the student which is central to learning and teaching experiences (Lowenthal, 2009, p. 254).

Almost all the 2013 TPPIP digital stories included emotional content represented through images, artwork, symbols and metaphors and heightened with affective soundtracks (music and special effects) and voice-overs. A common, related and unanticipated theme in the TPPIP digital stories was the extent to which students represented their autobiographical story in terms of a journey of moral development. They saw themselves solving problems and making choices in part through the development of character traits such as ‘caring’ or ‘courage’ in the face of adversity. If digital storytelling is a tool for developing agency in students (Lowenthal, 2009) it may also apparently be a tool for developing moral agency.

We believe a socioculturally inclusive and effective enabling program should include such opportunities for students to reflect on their development, transitions, identity and aspiration through a variety of media which recognise a variety of learning styles and levels of preparedness. Digital stories provide an opportunity for students to make meaning out of their ‘journey’ and consider how they might overcome multiple obstacles and constraints through an exploratory, metaphorical and visual medium (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 267). From the students’ perspective the pedagogical benefits flow from their interest in and enjoyment of the task. Qualitative and quantitative data suggests the TPPIP digital storytelling trial was well received by TPPIP 2013 students overall: while 74% of 2013 TPPIP respondents indicated they had not completed a digital self-reflective task similar to this one before, 87% of TPPIP respondents indicated they enjoyed completing the digital narrative task and 70% of the students indicated they enjoyed the structured iMac workshops. Overwhelmingly, 74% of these students indicated their digital literacy skills had improved since commencing the Tertiary Preparation Program Intensive Pathway.

In open-ended responses evaluating the Digital Storytelling task 2013 TPPIP students commented:

*'I really enjoyed writing about myself and then putting together a movie about myself.'*

*'The writing of my story in digital narrative helped me understand where I want to go.'*

*'I am more of a creative writer than a formal writer and digital narrative sort of required creative writing, it was also fun participating in the iMac workshop.'*

Our experiences within the TPPIP concur with the observations of practitioners and researchers who have discussed the benefits of digital story telling which include reflexive self-definition, making meaning out of challenging or difficult life experiences, the democratization of power relations and the further development of digital literacy and technology skills (Erstad & Wertsh, 2008; Gauntlett, 2008; Hartley, 2008; Lundby, 2008; Valkanova & Watts, 2007; Hartley & McWilliam, 2009; Lowenthal, 2009). More importantly, for our rural and low socioeconomic students digital storytelling was a validation of their personal and emotional lives and perspectives, their struggles and aspirations. While reflecting on their previous schooling history TPPIP students commonly worked through the emotional content of experiences such as bullying, illness, family breakdown or disruption and dislocation. For 'us' as both practitioners and theorists, the Digital Storytelling experience highlighted the inevitable overlap between the personal and the political, the rational and the emotional and the public and the private for both learners and teachers. Through the Digital Stories TPPIP students were encouraged to articulate the links between prior experiences and knowledge and their future goals and aspirations. Moreover as TPPIP students mostly do not fit into the academic mould of the traditional university student, Digital Storytelling provides creative spaces for students to imagine, visualise, create and represent new learning identities:

*'I love to create a whole other world in story. I want to let others get lost in a story - something to forget about their issues while they're reading. My dream goal is to get a novel published. I want to study creative writing at university and reach my goal.'*

A common theme which emerged from the digital stories produced by 2013 TPPIP students was also a sense of alienation from school culture and a number of students suggested explicitly or implicitly through voice over scripts and visual metaphors that they had been bullied at school, which may have had a bearing on their secondary school academic performance and subsequently their preparedness for higher education:

*'Life as a high school student was some of the worst years of my life I have experienced. Though I was bullied it changed my mind for my future. It made me think long and hard about my future.'*

*'I had trouble being bullied at primary school by someone I thought was my friend... high school was a hard transition for me. I found it really hard to fit in.'*

*'I had always found it hard to feel comfortable at school. I've never had much confidence and I've never really been someone to socialise.'*

Furthermore, despite pervasive stereotypes about the supposedly narcissistic and nihilistic impulse of the postmodern iGeneration, the TPPIP participants commonly

developed digital narratives which linked their personal experiences to larger social, cultural and political-moral issues - they were very concerned not just with being someone but with making a difference in the wider social world. Indigenous participants for example represented career aspirations as the process of giving back to their family and community through work in the 'helping' professions such as teaching and nursing. Moreover, contrary to the popular misrepresentations of an emerging mobile, detached, 'free-floating' iGeneration, most participants in this study told digital stories of strong ties to family, home, farms, land, community and the physical local places where they live.

### **Challenges and Outcomes:**

Perhaps due to these strong family and community ties, a small minority of TPPIP students accommodated in the residential colleges experienced what they described as 'homesickness' and arranged to go home on weekends or in one case, leave early. This was not an entirely unanticipated outcome as some of these rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged students had never lived away from home for any length of time before. Coming straight to us from Year 12, these young people also did not have the same opportunity to mature over a long summer break which other Australian university students enjoy. As well as adapting to a fast-paced and fast-tracked academic schedule within a culture of independent learning, the students also needed to acclimate to sharing accommodation, social activities and meal times with their peers within the culture of the residential colleges. As a 2012 TPP Intensive pathway student reported in the post-program survey:

*'It was weird for the first couple of days as I was alone doing my own thing for once which was hard to get used to.'*

For students away from family, perhaps for the first time, the TPPIP provided hybrid support mechanisms mixing online social connectivity with face-to-face counselling and interaction to facilitate this emerging sense of independence and confidence.

Integrating instant picture sharing platforms like *Facebook* into the TPPIP program may have contributed to a spike in student 'pranking' in the residential colleges as a small minority of TPPIP students took advantage of the TPPIP site to upload and share evidence of their visual, (but mostly harmless) pranks outside of contact hours. However it could also be argued that sharing jokes, uploading comic pictures and 'selfies,' sharing memes, communicating with other students and teaching staff in 'natural', informal (rather than specialist or academic) language was part of the necessary and 'natural' or intuitive process of community building for this particular age group. Despite potential problems and challenges overall, the authors of this paper frequently reminded participants that TPPIP Facebook was *their* site as part of a conscious strategy of democratising and demystifying higher education and we maintain that the benefits of these digital platforms outweigh the potential pitfalls.

Introducing new Digital Story telling activities and assessment into the TPPIP also produced pedagogical challenges and practical difficulties. For the TPPIP students the Digital Storytelling task elicited a different level of engagement as students were generally much more immersed in the multimodal style, technological processes and personal content of the Digital Storytelling task than they were, for example, in writing their academic essays on the

topic of flexible learning. However peer evaluation of the TPPIP educational program and digital storytelling trial identified this level of student engagement as a potential problem, as some TPPIP students may have spent too much time on constructing their digital stories (in proportion to assessment weighting) and not enough time preparing their text-based essays or final reports. Similarly the students themselves identified a potential problem with *Facebook* being too engaging in the sense that once they were immersed in the social networking site they found it difficult to pull out of it to refocus on set and recommended readings (academic journal articles and book chapters) and face-to-face lectures. Of course this feedback may also suggest it is the rest of the traditional text-based course that may need to be revised and not the digital platforms component!

Predictably, the TPPIP participants recruited from non-OP or non-academic pathways during their secondary schooling found the bulk of printed text in academic course readings overwhelming and tedious. Similarly the young participants had little tolerance for long university lectures, which required responsive, sensitive teachers to act as coaches, mentors and facilitators rather than traditional lecturers. Hence, in the next phase of the action research cycle, the authors of this paper are working on delivering the academic communication components of the TPPIP course in a more dynamic and engaging manner while also trialling iMovie video editing software for Digital Storytelling which the next cohort of TPPIP students should be able to access on mobile iPhones and iPads. Where students provided negative feedback on their TPPIP experience it related in the main to the amount of assessment they were required to complete within the timeframe - in particular students requested more time to complete the Digital Storytelling assessment task, requiring 24 hour access to the iMac computer labs to complement structured workshops.

Time management was also a pressing issue for the authors of this report, as teaching and marking the large and mostly mature age cohort of tertiary preparation program students while simultaneously working within the intensive 'summer school' school leavers' program necessitates balancing competing demands of teaching, research, administration, counselling and pastoral care, especially in the context of wider economic rationalist imperatives which require doing more with less. While there is little doubt the TPPIP program produced successful outcomes, these came at the cost of dedicated staff who delivered one-on-one counselling sessions for every student and daily, intensive, personalised face-to-face teaching while simultaneously connected to the 'always on 24/7' networked communication channels of *Facebook*. Hence, busy practitioners may need to be prepared for the considerable time commitment a holistic intensive enabling program for non-traditional students requires. Moreover, if classroom practitioners are to follow Kemmis (2010, p. 242) in moving beyond instrumental survival to intertwine theory and practice and to truly 'live an ethics' of emancipatory education, then it will take adequate time, space and resources not just to explore new ways of doing things but to pause and reflect on challenges and outcomes (as the authors have attempted to do here).

As part of the Action Research process the authors of this paper will continue to progress in reflecting on and meeting these challenges as the program evolves. Avoiding the excesses of technological determinism the authors suggest the most effective approach to enabling education for the target group may be a blended mode of delivery which combines intensive face to face teaching with digital narratives and social networking technologies. While the integration of digital narratives has clearly facilitated the development of digital literacy skills within TPPIP, perhaps the most important outcome, although more difficult to

measure at this point, is the development of skills in reciprocal supportiveness – the skills of building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships within a sharing network. To put it simply, in postmodern times what we should be teaching (and modelling) to students is not how to have and hold information or expertise but rather how to give it away. In part through the integration of new communications and networking technologies, the TPPIP aims to provide a holistic enabling education which meets the needs of this specialised group within an environment which is connected, visual, creative and socially and emotionally rewarding.

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