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Creating Stories of Learning, for Learning: Exploring the Potential of Self-Narrative in Education with 'Our Journey'

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Participatory research led us to identify that students lacked means to represent their individual journeys through study and that their diverse goals, challenges and personal contexts were not easily understood. Prompted by this, we created 'Our Journey' to support them and harness the value of these narratives as a means for reflection and communication. This paper explores self-narrative processes and how they can be beneficial, describes the design of Our Journey, and introduces examples of collaboratively-developed pilots, where different activities using the platform are being devised and trialled. We reflect here on how new opportunities for self-narrative creativity can be supported in simple and engaging ways, and how flexibility in the design means the same underlying structure can be used online and in a physical form, for one-off retrospective narratives and ongoing journal activities, and with prompts for individual and shared reflection as appropriate.

CCS CONCEPTS • Applied Computing → E-learning • Human-Centered Computing –→ Interaction Design → *Empirical studies in interaction design*

Additional Keywords and Phrases: student journey, autobiography, reflection, higher education, self-narrative, wellbeing, little-c creativity

1 Introduction

Creating and reflecting on narratives about ourselves and our experiences can promote metacognition, personal development and wellbeing [10,22,30]. Yet opportunities for this in educational contexts are known to have challenges; for example, reflective journaling activities are argued to be beneficial but can be difficult for students to engage with [12,27]. This research focuses on supporting students' self-narrative storytelling as a form of 'little-C' or 'Everyday' creativity that anyone can take part in [2,8,13,19]. We are exploring this through the

participatory design of a platform and analysis of the diverse ways in which students and educators make use of it. The gap this work seeks to address was identified from research with disabled students who highlighted difficulties communicating complex challenges that impacted on their study [6,7]. Through further exploration, wider potential was identified, and the goal became a flexible platform for the representation of narratives from any student's perspective.

The result of this is 'Our Journey', which has been implemented in both physical and online forms. Here we focus on the ways this research reflects the concepts and potential of supporting self-narrative creativity in education. We describe the principles and design of Our Journey and briefly summarise two pilots from our ongoing work.

2   Related work

Our Journey relates to previous research across a range of themes. Here we focus specifically on literature concerning the creation of self-narratives and the educational benefits of this.

2.1 Telling stories about our experiences

Rather than a straightforward process of recording events, [3] argues that creating narratives of our lives should be 'viewed as a set of procedures for "life-making"' which are constructed, reflexive, and where 'we become the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives'. Autobiography is creative, selective, even potentially inaccurate, and the act of creating these self-narratives affects who we are and how we view ourselves. Themes in self-narratives combine individual autonomy with the influences of other people and contextual factors. When representing our own story, we strive for coherence to establish a sense of self and reflect on what this could mean for our future [4].

Research has identified more general characteristics of stories that we may implicitly understand but should explicitly consider as we look to support storytelling processes. Stories combine 'action' (events that occur) and 'consciousness' (cognitive elements such as emotion and intent). Stories can be valuable to us because of their capacity to reflect possibilities, uncertainty and the unexpected. By focusing on change over time, self-narratives can prompt reflections on personal growth [4, 17,28].

The nature and prompting of self-narratives has been explored using life-story interview methods. This includes the examination of 'rehearsal' - repeatedly talking about the same events – which can increase the presence of affective themes through which we explain these, such as 'redemption', where a negative experience is reinterpreted as having a positive outcome, a 'silver lining' or unexpected benefit, or the recognition of missed opportunities leading to a resolution to change [1,17,18].

Considering the potential for digital tools to support storytelling, researchers have found that interface design, look and feel, and surrounding processes, can impact on how experiences are described and affect those describing them [9, 11, 26]. Therefore, it is valuable to explore with audiences the design of tools that best support their goals.

2.2 Self-narrative and reflection in education

Self-narratives can provide insights and feedback for educators and institutions [5,6,25,30], but the argument for 'life-making' [3] highlights how self-narrative activities also prompt students' own creativity, sensemaking, identity-building and reflective thinking, which have educational value but are not easy to support.

Recognising that reflection plays a central role in professional practices (e.g. [24]), [29] argue that reflecting on events is essential for experiential learning, particularly where there are situational complexities that learners must process. [27] highlight the benefits of reflecting on experiences such as work placements to make tacit knowledge explicit. While reflection is often assumed to be natural or instinctive, [12] argues that it is a specific creative skill that needs to be taught. While students report benefits such as contextualising academic understanding, they also find reflection difficult (as it required distancing themselves from the events) or

unenjoyable (because it is introspective rather than practical.) [21] argue that software tools to scaffold learning should prompt articulation and reflection, because otherwise students often neglect to plan, monitor and make sense of what they are learning.

Because stories focus not only on action but on elements of consciousness such as emotion and intent [4], they have the potential to highlight affective aspects of study, such as motivation and confidence, which are vital but often poorly considered [15,20]. Research also shows that thematic differences between the content of individuals' self-narratives are strongly associated with their wellbeing [17], and that creative storytelling and reflection can benefit wellbeing by strengthening coping skills and increasing social support connections [10,19]. [16] highlights important links between narrative and an individual's sense of identity, saying that 'the experience of, reflection on, and resolution of past difficult experiences appears to be a powerful process in identity development and psychological well-being more broadly'. This aligns well with the argument that in creating self-narratives we strive to present a coherent self and to recognise our autonomy [4].

An initial trial of the Our Journey platform described here also evidences the potential of self-narrative to achieve these ends. In this, 54 students used the platform to tell their study journeys and completed a post-survey on the experience. 91% reported that this prompted them to think about their study achievements, 74% reported thinking about the skills they developed or demonstrated through their studies, and 66% reported thinking about their wellbeing [5].

3   Design of Our Journey

This section summarises the process that has led to Our Journey and key principles and features of the platform. This is explained in more detail in [5,6]. The project has aimed for an ongoing commitment to engage students and relevant staff in co-design [23], from the initial concept, through to pilots where ways of using the platform are being devised with stakeholders.

3.1 Design approach

The design was inspired by participatory research activities in 2016-2017 with disabled students, who explained how multiple challenges in their study journeys could have a compounding negative effect over time [6,7]. For example, a chain of events including delays and paperwork, experiences of an inaccessible activity, and conversations about support needs, could have emotional, academic, and financial impacts on the person [7]. Students reported difficulty communicating these kinds of challenges, and staff found it difficult to understand and respond effectively.

A first participatory design workshop with disabled students and other stakeholders (e.g. student support advisors) was then held in 2018 to explore structures to represent study journeys from the student's perspectives. Activities included working in groups to represent challenging aspects of study journeys using paper and pen, exploring uses of journeys, and generating ideas with a graphic designer.

After this workshop, we asked a small group of disabled students to provide detailed written narratives of their study journeys and reviewed examples of institutional student journey representations [14]. These helped to develop ideas for a general structure, components, and styles of presentation. Working with a graphic designer, we developed a design where a 'board' populated with 'cards' could represent the types of events seen in student's narratives. This was first developed as physical materials with an example journey poster, set of printed cards, and empty poster board (figures 1 and 3). These were used in three further workshops with students and other stakeholders over the next 18 months, to explore the potential of the approach, gather feedback, and allow students to iteratively inform the development of an online platform. These workshops highlighted that while Our Journey was inspired by disabled students' experiences, the tool held potential value for *all* students. Therefore, later activities and the current pilots are broader in remit, devised with students with and without disabilities and the staff who teach or support them in a variety of education contexts.

Figure 1: Part of the original example journey poster

3.2 Principles derived from participatory activities

A series of themes raised in the participatory design workshops are pivotal to the design:

Participants made references to game-related concepts when talking about their study experiences. While they had a sense of their goals, the experience could feel beyond their control due to elements of chance and the unexpected.

They also emphasised the need to create value for the student using the platform, for example by offering a cathartic activity or aid to decision-making. While our original focus was on representing challenges, positive elements such as achievements and goals were needed for motivation and balance. The activity should feel qualitatively different to familiar learning activities or assignments.

Institutional representations of student journeys tend to idealise a consistent journey and students found these too rigid. For example, they did not want their journey to begin with registration. They emphasised elements that broke these standard narratives, such as failed attempts to start or complete modules. They suggested the need to allow flexibility in the way that time and sequence were represented, with events which were ongoing throughout a period, or were many years apart.

Participants wanted to represent events that were important to them, whether formally connected with study or not. They noted how moving home, taking a job or family issues could significantly impact on them and their study.

Participants raised both benefits and concerns around sharing their journeys. For example they envisaged a design where presenting consistent negative emotions would trigger contact from student support. This could be appropriate but could lead to students avoiding honest portrayal of their feelings. Alternatively, a student might have negative experiences with a tutor but would not include these if that person could see it. Neither should students feel that their presentation of themselves would impact on their grades. Reflecting this, the design gives the student control over sharing of their journey, so they can feel comfortable expressing themselves, knowing if and who can see it.

Finally, ensuring that the platform is accessible has been a primary concern from the beginning. It is essential that disabled students can use it, but it was agreed that the concept had broad potential so is intended for all students.

3.3 Design features

Our Journey is based around creating 'cards' that represent events in a journey. Each card has four components:
- An event type (e.g. 'assessment' or 'moving home').
- An emotion / emoji that represents how the person felt (e.g. 'confident', 'surprised', 'guilty').
- A text description to describe the event and experience of it.
- An optional date or timeframe, which can be free text or a specific date.

In the online platform, users are guided to create cards using the interface shown in Figure 2, while in the physical version, they are provided a set of cards of each event type with space to write descriptions and separate emoji cards to place with these onto their board (see Figure 3). Users can create any number of cards which can be ordered as desired to create the narrative.

Figure 2: Online card creation interface

Features added to the online platform include user-controlled options to share journeys, either by consenting to join groups where they share with named 'hosts' (e.g. a teacher or advisor), or through exporting their journey to a file. Hosts can also access summary data about the members of their groups and can prompt members to add cards on particular themes or events to their journey, such as to describe an instance where they exhibited a particular skill, or how they felt about a course activity.

Figure 3: A journey being created with the physical cards and board

4 Example case studies of using Our Journey

To further understand the potential of self-narrative activities and support tools, we are devising and supporting pilots of Our Journey with students and educators. The flexibility of the platform and wide potential of self-narrative allows for a variety of ways of using it. Together, we are exploring how self-narrative can play important, innovative roles in study by devising activities according to the motivations of those leading the pilots. Here we highlight two examples:

In the 'Med Students' pilot, a group of medical students in a campus-based university, supported by their programme director, used the platform for three months. They had two aims: first, they wanted to explore whether Our Journey could support them to capture their experiences in a simple journal-style narrative. Second, they were in an exceptionally busy point of their studies, and they wanted to prompt regular reflection on their circumstances, experiences and wellbeing, and to then review their stories individually at the end of the period.

After three months the participants were positive about the experience, but the busy nature of their studies, despite being a reason for the activity, had limited their engagement. They also commented on a perceived negativity bias, where they felt more likely to use the platform to 'vent' about bad experiences than to record positive ones. They emphasised the cathartic benefits of venting, but looking back over their journeys they perceived they had been more negative than the reality. Interestingly, the aggregated data shows a fairly even distribution of positive and negative emotions in their journey cards.

The ongoing 'Foundation Reflection' pilot is based in online 'Access' courses that prepare students for undergraduate study. The pilot aims to encourage reflection on goals, wellbeing, and responding to challenges faced in study. The activity is delivered once students are most of the way through the course and should be making choices about next steps. They therefore had several months of study experience to draw on and were encouraged to represent this alongside previous events that had motivated or challenged them. They are given guided reflection questions to review their challenges and achievements, including a focus on positive experiences and celebrating success, and on identifying challenges they have overcome and how they may tackle other challenges in future.

The activity also includes a community learning approach, where students can either share their whole journey, or just a summary and reflections, in an online forum with their peers. A staff member managing the

activity stated that 'students have found it helped them to reflect on their previous and current studies and to see the positives in their experience more clearly'. Sharing journeys and reflections was also popular and 'helped develop a supportive environment'.

5   Discussion

Participatory approaches recognise the potential for everyone to be creative [23], and notions of little-c or everyday creativity [2,8,13] are particularly appropriate to self-narrative, both because of the potential for anyone to tell their own stories, but also to highlight the potential to create various kinds of activities around these narratives. However, when working with disabled students we identified a lack of support to express narratives of their studies. This was later found to be potentially a relevant issue for all students and an area where staff saw a wide range of possibilities.

Key features of improving support should be that students control their narratives, find benefit in the activities, and can provide their own perspectives on events which they decide matter to them. Recognised elements of storytelling, such as the representation of both action and emotion [4], are foregrounded in the Our Journey interface to prompt users to include these elements and create an effective narrative. The digital and tangible versions share the same principles but present different means to elicit creative responses, suited to use at scale, or by small co-located groups.

Literature suggests that self-narratives lead us to feel differently about ourselves, to reflect on our potential and the ways we respond to challenges [3,10]. Recognising achievements has also been found to be beneficial for students' mental health [15]. Pilots using Our Journey in different activities and contexts are developing our understanding of why self-narrative is valuable and how we can design to better facilitate it. Non-trivial issues such as making space for self-narrative in the busy lives of students and balancing the value of private opportunities for storytelling with the potential of shared reflection, are being raised and explored through this process.

6   Conclusion

Our Journey has developed through participatory design as a flexible means to explore the multiple roles self-narratives of student journeys can play, and what different stakeholders would like to achieve with them. In this paper we have described how the design relates to concepts and potential benefits connected with self-narrative. The project contributes to knowledge of how simple and engaging structures for storytelling can be designed. While stories are essential to human experience, it highlights overlooked opportunities to facilitate self-narrative as a form of everyday creativity.

In future work, we will further explore elements of both process (such as experiences and impacts of using the platform, and the potential for control and sharing) and product (such as patterns in the content of narratives). We are using case studies and concepts from literature to develop new guidance on how the platform can be used, while preserving the flexibility to find new ways to use it. The platform is available at https://ourjourney.ac.uk/ and we welcome conversations to explore further uses.

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