

Capturing virtual voices: using online reflective journals to explore the lived experiences of part-time adult learners

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Abstract: The opportunities for discovering students' lived experiences and perspectives on online learning are often limited. Embarking upon an undergraduate programme marks a period of transition which, for some adults, can be disorientating and challenging especially as an individual's lifeworld becomes increasingly entangled with the decision to participate in learning. Educational interactions take place within prescribed and structured virtual fora, each with a clear delineated purpose set out by the university, whether that be social or academic, task-based or informative. Further insights may be gleaned from end-of-module questionnaires, internal surveys or the National Student Survey (NSS), but there is little opportunity for informal engagements, insights or snapshots without it being captured in a discussion forum or recorded in the learner management system. This study set out to employ a co-created online reflective journal as a space through which to better understand the experiences of adult learners as they begin online study in order to explore how they forge their identities, progress emotionally and socially between the stages of their learning, and navigate the complex interrelationship between the personal, circumstantial and emotional domains.

Key words: reflective journals; blogs; online learning; widening participation; adult learners; part-time study; transitions; narrative inquiry

The challenge

A striking feature of some of the research in the field with adult online learners has been a tendency to isolate and explore the correlation of such variables of motivation, satisfaction and persistence, but not to scratch beneath the surface to consider the lived experiences of this group of participants (Fraser *et al.*, 2018; Kuo *et al.*, 2013; Hartnett, St. George and Dron, 2011). The challenges faced by adults returning to study can be identified as situational, multi-faceted and complex but often studies with online learners are designed to collect data through survey tools. Capturing these experiences at 'arm's length', at a specific point in time, is to overlook their entangled nature which

is shaped by the intersectionality and temporality with students' life experiences.

This study set out to explore the experiences of 15 adults as they negotiated their identities as online learners during the first module on a part-time, undergraduate degree. However, the focus of this paper is on the design and methods employed in the study which aimed to capture insights into this period of transition and to listen to student voices on their individual capacity for agency and action.

The approach

The study was designed to foreground the first-hand experiences of these online adult learners using a narrative approach. Participants' stories were collected and their views retold by combining the researcher's experience with those of the participants to produce a collaborative narrative (Creswell, 2014). This approach is particularly suited to this study as Field, Merrill and West (2012) highlight,

'If we wish to see learning as a fundamental and pervasive human activity, then we need to see it as integral to people's lives and the stories that they tell about their lives in their attempts to understand and shape situations.'

Field, Merrill and West (2012: p. 80)

Fontana and Frey (2008) explain how narratives are vehicles that can bring the words and stories of the participants alive, enabling them to tell the stories of the context of their experience as a part-time, adult, online learner, describing and exploring the interplay of their learning and lifeworld. In this study, a narrative approach would also capture the temporal nature of the participants' experience as they progressed through their first credit-bearing module on their undergraduate degree while recognising that such insights are framed within a continuity of online and offline episodes, which are interconnected. However, this presents a clear challenge in designing an effective method for such data collection.

The concept

The preceding decade has seen an increase in the integration of technology into academic and practitioner research (Biberman-Shalev, 2018). Online reflective journals align with the fundamental philosophy of the study by offering a means to comprehensively capture the dynamic nature of participants' experiences, thoughts and emotions. Online journals have the potential to function as a versatile tool, acting as an interactive space between their online and offline lives and therefore providing an opportunity to investigate the interplay of these contextual domains. The use of online reflective journals for online learners was therefore conducive to the experience being explored while providing congruence with the environment being studied (Burton and Goldsmith, 2002).

Pragmatically, Wilson, Kenny and Dickson-Swift (2015) show how online reflective journals and blogs can enable participant voices to be captured and disseminated close to their vernacular intent with the added advantage of anonymity for those wishing it. In this study, the asynchronous nature of the online reflective journal negated issues around the equality of participation, distance and time while providing a platform on which to recruit specific groups as part of the sampling process. A further advantage in the use of reflective journals in this study is that they enable the generation of substantial amounts of instant text without the resource intensiveness of tape recording and transcription (Hookway, 2008).

Online reflective journals also have the potential to enable more participant control over when, and in what form, they provide data and how much data they wish to provide. In this study, the participants also had the power to review and edit their entries which allowed each to immediately validate his/her own data. The asynchronous nature of the journal also provided displacement of space and time to allow for thought and reflection, offering the participants a chance to explore their own behaviour and decisions. The participants were not restricted to a linear progression and their entries were not archived, providing 'a record of an ever-changing present' (Elliott, 1997: p. 24) and keeping the momentum flowing.

There are obvious practical differences of using online reflective journals compared to interviews due to the lack of non-verbal cues. Chronemic insights in this asynchronous space may not be entirely absent as patterns in the spacing and timing of responses will be present. However, caution should be exercised with regard to judgements made around temporal cues as it may just be a reflection of connectivity issues or simply how participants organise the time and space of their engagement with the study.

The online journal space

Consideration was first given to the objectives of the study and whether those would be best served through private or public reflections. A thematic analysis of the data was planned in order to identify, analyse, organise and describe themes found within a data set (Braun and Clark, 2006). This approach had the advantage of being a flexible and accessible approach to give a rich and detailed account of complex data and the potential to generate unanticipated insights as well as key features. This decision was significant, recognising a return to the human world and embracing its inherent ambiguity and complexity.

Therefore, if analysis of the data was to be predominantly thematic, rather than interaction and discourse-based, then a private space would be best suited. The anonymity granted by such privacy also provided the potential to spur richer and deeper thought than face-to-face conversations, revealing personal voices and reflections while eliminating any pressure to be competitive (Biberman-Shalev, 2018).

The challenge in designing this study was therefore to define an online digital space which could deliver the functionality of a journal, to capture participant voices, whilst being conducive to their lived experience of becoming an online learner rather than being external to it. Additionally, the design aimed to seek out opportunities for participant collaboration. A narrative approach is, ultimately, underpinned by engagement and collaboration with the participants.

Many of the popular blogging platforms could deliver the technical features and be locked down for privacy but they have inherent barriers to participation, requiring participants to set up, register and verify an external account. There was also no facility

to work with a cohort since each participant would need to be prompted individually.

The university had recently configured the Office 365 suite for the use of staff and students which would site the reflective journal within the wider learning experience but provide an element of critical distance between the participant and their studies. This provided a further, quasi-liminal space providing opportunity beyond specific existing constraints whether temporal, spatial or circumstantial. This would further serve to provide a firewall between participant's learning in VLE while not decoupling their participation from the site where learning is taking place. Crucially, there would be no barrier to accessing the reflective journal either through separate account set up or log in.

Although not widely used in this setting, OneNote Class Notebook had a number of key features which would facilitate the reflective journals in the correct way including group communications, private notebooks, and a repository to provide participant information about the study and embed the Office 365 Forms for informed consent. Finally, OneNote also has a collaboration space which would enable the participants to build their own FAQ space based on this experience and to feedback on improvements for the next cycle of participation.

The functionality and taxonomy of the site was made bespoke and aligned to the demands of the research study, replacing the standard Microsoft features and terms with the taxonomy of the project.

Methodological insights

The use of online reflective journals was designed to provide an effective method for educator-researchers which was congruent with the online learning environment; captured the temporal flux and flow of participants' lived experiences and interplay between their online and offline worlds; and provided data in a format which was set for analysis. However, the value of this approach extended beyond its practical aims and impacted directly on the research environment, as experienced by my participants.

Across three, 12-week cycles of data collection, 195 participants were invited to contribute, and 39 agreed. This sample was given 5 reflective prompts by email across this period

and 20 of the participants made regular contributions generating 23,000 words of data which could be analysed immediately. The participants used their journal space in a non-linear format, moving backwards and then forwards between their entries where new reflections had come to light. It was also a space where they felt free to reflect candidly, narrating highly personal events and information, and describing how they were entangled with the process of learning and transition (Wilson, Kenny and Dickson-Swift, 2015).

Some of the early narratives reflected the nature of the power dynamics at play between myself as researcher, my participants and the purpose for which they were telling their stories. For example, a number of participants apologised for their long posts in their first journal entries, while others were keen to have performed in line with expectations. One participant asked, 'Does that capture what you're looking for?' at the end of a post.

However, over the course of the study the narratives indicated a shifting power balance as some participants effectively started to employ the reflective journalling as a further tool which enabled them to steady themselves in times of disorientation. One participant's final comment is how she enjoyed participating in the reflective journals. Another, in her last journal entry remarks:

'... [it] was like my ... diary helping me to pour into its pages at most needed times. I would be [sic] so elated to give my responses'.

Another participant, in his final post, also evaluated how taking part in the journal has helped him on his path:

'I would never have put my thoughts about the course down on paper but it has helped me to clear my head at times when there was a lot of information to take in as well as remind [sic] of the long term benefits of attaining a degree.'

The space provided by the online journals was a point for reflection and making sense of the dilemmas presented by the challenge of forging studenthood in the online domain. The journal was also used as a space of 'positive self-talk' as three of the participants used it as a reminder of why they had decided to study for a degree and why it was important to persist.

There was a further limitation of the approach to be considered, namely that the purposeful nature of the sampling for this study was attractive to those students who already had a confident level of internet self-efficacy and for whom, participation in an online reflective journal was unproblematic. Tanner, Noser and Totaro (2009) identified that some adult learners may not be sufficiently and suitably prepared for online study in terms of their readiness, skills and capability to access resources. It is therefore conceivable that this approach would not capture the experiences of those students.

However, the duality and mutuality of this online space, intermeshing data collection with personal reflection the two constituents emerging distinctively yet at once, created something new (Cohen, Nørgård and Mor, 2020). Such an approach through online journaling afforded a valuable space in an unfamiliar landscape within which agency and a degree of ownership could be exercised, permitting honest and profound exposure, genuine reflective writing and the possibility of self-exploration (Biberman-Shalev, 2018).

Conclusion

A key driver for the study was to employ online methodological creativity to better understand the complex experiences of adult learners as the start of online study – a period of transition and transformation which, for some, may be characterised by disorientation and liminality. This was achieved through the construction of a private online space for reflective journaling which was barrier-free, immersed within the learning environment and was therefore congruent with it. This exploratory approach provided both temporality and 'situatedness' to capture states of flux, change and adaptation as adult learners negotiated the dilemmas of part-time online undergraduate study. Participant perspectives on how they employed the reflective journals as a tool in developing their own thinking and awareness suggest that this method may also go some way to mitigate the power dynamics inherent in other narrative data collection methods, but inevitably will impact on the research setting.

Collecting data through online reflective journalling can provide practitioners with insights into periods of transition and change by capturing the temporal and often non-linear nature of this experience. It can provide opportunities for frank and honest reflection in close to real time, which may not be achievable by other methods and can bring to life how participants invoke their individual agency in navigating change. The method also enables the participants and researchers to co-create in designing, constructing and enhancing the digital journal space.

In addition, it is hoped that these insights make a useful contribution in enriching our empirical base as educator-researchers, in better understanding the complex and entangled relationship between the personal, circumstantial and institutional dimensions of being an adult learner.

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