



## A Good Story: The Missing Dimension of a Great Online Course

**Dawn Duncan**

Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

This paper outlines a model for the incorporation of storytelling techniques into the design of online courses. There is considerable research in to the power of digital storytelling to transform, engage and educate, yet few of the courses on the Unitec LMS incorporate storytelling techniques into their design. This model is being developed to provide a stepping-stone for lecturers to move from traditional models of content delivery to digital storytelling.

Keywords: Storytelling, Online Course Design

### From Textbook Index to Tale of Intrigue: A Model for Transition

There is a considerable and expanding body of research in to the power of storytelling to enhance learning, either in a face-to-face or digital context (McDrury & Alterio, 2003, Malita & Martin, 2010, Lindgren & McDaniel, 2012, Clark, 2010, Alexander, 2011). Despite the growing evidence of the effectiveness of 'storytelling' in higher education, a review of business courses in the Unitec LMS showed very little adoption of narrative techniques of engagement in their design. While some courses contain fragments of storytelling, such as role-play, case study or short video, the vast majority of courses were organised topically, with a series of descriptive headings and a list of links to information on that content. What the student sees of this course is much like a textbook index. This similarity is not surprising given many of the courses are designed around textbooks and this structure has been transported into face-to-face teaching and then the online environment.

The model set out below is the first stage of a research project exploring the effectiveness of 'storied' courses to engage students and enhance learning. The project is based on the hypothesis that the conscious incorporation of storytelling techniques into the design of online courses will improve engagement and learning. The model has been developed following a review of the literature in to the relationship between narrative and learning, and the adaptation of storytelling techniques used in fields such as literature, filmmaking and video gaming. The purpose of the model is to provide lecturers with a starting point for the incorporation of storytelling techniques into their online course design. It is intended to provide a stepping-stone for understanding the relationship between story and learning and moving from a textbook index approach to digital story.

### Recognising the Power of Story to Engage and Educate

“[W]e dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.” (McDrury & Alterio, 2003, p. 31). Narrative, or story, is the primary 'sense-making' operation of the human mind (Lodge, 1990, p.41). We make coherent and meaningful the many thousands of events, ideas and occurrences we experience by unconsciously telling a story about them, drawing events together to form a plot, identifying characters and assigning causality, intention and motive to those character's actions. Anthropologists and psychologists have identified narrative as the fundamental and culturally universal mode by which humans understand themselves and the world around

them (Miller & Moore, 2009). Narrative is linked to the psychological development of 'self' as it is simultaneously born out of experience and gives shape to it (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p.19). The ability to use narrative is an important milestone in child cognitive development (Bird & Reese, 2008) and interfaces society and self, creating a crucial resource for socialising emotions, attitudes and identities, developing interpersonal relationships, and constituting membership of a community (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p.19). Storytelling and learning are inextricably intertwined because the process of composing a story is also the process of meaning-making (Malita & Martin, 2010). Clark and Rossiter (2008) set out that "[e]xperience itself is pre-linguistic; it exists prior to and apart from language. We access it, reflect on it, make sense of it through languaging it, which is to say, through narrating it" (p.5). The human concept of self and experience of life is a narrative one, or as Fisher (1984) puts it to be human is to tell stories.

The literary Darwinist point of view suggests that this 'sense-making' type of storytelling evolved as a defense reaction to the expansion of human intelligence that began about 40,000 years ago (Caroll, 2005). It posits that as humans began to realise the immense complexity of the world around them, stories were used to process information and make sense of it. "By taking imaginative and orderly voyages within our minds, we gained confidence to interpret this new, vastly denser reality" (Max, 2005, p.78). Myths, legends, parables, and religious accounts from all human civilisations in time take the form of narrative. Just like today, early human beings made sense of a complicated world by creating stories to explain it, drawing together events and implying causal links between them to comprehend the often incomprehensible, cruel, uncertain or painful reality which their lives occupied. Digital storytelling can be seen as the logical progression in a long tradition, incorporating emerging technologies in to the sense-making process. Online learning occurs in an information dense environment and so it is story that, as it always has done, gives students the psychological resources to make 'meaning' out of facts and events.

### **Reimagining Course as Story**

The story of the course will depend on its purpose and content. As Riessman (2008) reminds us, a story is always "strategic, functional, and purposeful" (p.8). The course's story could be a quest to answer a question or solve a problem, a slice of life account or a journey of discovery through foreign ideas or lands, a story of conflict between groups, internal philosophical or moral conflict or a historical or biographical account. Ideally, the transition from 'lecturer' to storyteller should not be a great conceptual leap. As story is the primary mode of human understanding it is likely that, either consciously or unconsciously, the lecturer has already created for themselves the 'story' of that content. Narrative theorists talk about the inherent mental tendency of humans to put the events in their lives together in story form as 'enplotment' (Goldie, 2012). A lecturer, over the course of their scholarship, will have experienced literally hundreds of thousands of events, interactions and occurrences which they must first remember and then make sense of. Few academics, if any, recall all information in their discipline in accurate lists of facts, dates and complete scholarly works. No matter how scientific an academic's approach, as humans, we unconsciously select plot elements and string ideas and events together, creating the connections and relationships between them, or as Ricouer (1984) puts it we extract "a configuration from a succession" (p.66). As Kundera reminds us: "We immediately transform the present moment in to its abstraction. We need only to recount an episode we experienced a few hours ago: the dialogue contracts to a brief summary, the setting to a few general features...Remembering is not the negative of forgetting. Remembering is a form of forgetting" (p.128). What a lecturer will experience of their discipline as 'meaningful' or important depends as much on their subjective story of self and their lived experiences. The lecturer's sense-making story of the content they teach informs the course they design and the information they choose to present. The primacy of 'scientific' modes of understanding and communication over the subjective or narrative is a fictional product of the enlightenment era. Storytelling is not a lesser form of understanding or communicating knowledge to students, only a more conscious one. The first stage of this model is to help the lecturer become conscious of their role as storyteller in their course and to want to employ more sophisticated techniques of doing so.

Although there are many definitions of what a story can be, Simmons (2007) sets out a working definition that "[a] story is a reimagined experience narrated with enough detail and feeling to cause your listeners imaginations to experience it as real" (p.19). The classical story structure was identified in the 1800s by German novelist Gustav Freytag. A story contains an 'exposition' or starting point where the characters, setting, plot and key conflict is introduced, then moves in to 'a rising action' where suspense is built before it reaches a climax such as a turning point or main conflict. Following this, the story ties up loose ends in 'the falling action' before reaching final resolution. This model is deeply engrained in the psyche through movies, television, books and songs. New Zealand child psychologists have shown that by school-age, children are telling personal narratives using this classic high-point structure (Miller & Moore, 2009, p.436). This is because it is through this pattern of

narrative that parents and teachers teach children about themselves and the world around them. Lecturers live in what Sarbin (1993) refers to as a “story- shaped world” populated by folklore, myth, popular culture, social scripts, religious traditions and parables, discourses, history and literature (p. 63). There are a great many resources on which a lecturer can draw to create a story.

## Characters and Plot

The characters and plot points will be determined by the content and the purpose of the course. In deciding on the ‘characters’ for the story, the starting point is to consider the experience the students will have of the story. It is a well-worn cliché that ‘experience is the best teacher.’ As highlighted by the research, the most meaningful learning is through a student telling the story of their own lived experience (McDrury & Alterio, 2003). This is not, however always feasible or appropriate for some disciplines. “The best we can do [then] is bring the experience to them through a story that is so vivid, it feels as if they are actually there.” (Simmons, 2007, p. 20). Where students cannot play an active role as the lead character of their own story, consider setting the story from a particular ‘real’ character’s perspective so the students are able to ‘experience’ the events in the context of that character. In a practical, vocational or skills acquisition course consider creating a character who is in the role the students would occupy following the course. For example, in an accounting course the character may be the junior accountant starting their first job. The details of the course are learnt through the simulated interactions a student then has with others (e.g. the tax department, professional bodies, senior accountants etc) through the experience of being that character. There may be different characters which students can relate to, analyse and consider the perspectives of. The way the ‘characters’ experience the core plot points can also inform meaningful assessments designed to give the student the ability to advance the story.

## A Captivating Opening Line

“Engagement can be understood as a kind of mystery; a story, in whatever medium it exists, elicits an audience’s curiosity and makes us want to experience more of it.” (Alexander, 2012, p.9). In the same way that the opening scenes of a novel or movie do, an online course should draw the student in to the question, problem or mystery at the heart of the course. The designer of an online course needs to be conscious of the student’s first experience of that course and consider the impact of its ‘opening line’ be it through text, video or image. Consider for example, the following great opening lines:

- “The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door.” (Frederick Brown, *Knock* 1948)
- “It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.” (George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949).

The audience is immediately presented with a mystery they want to see the resolution of.

## Building the Story

Once a course has the student’s attention it is necessary to hold it. As set out by Alexander (2012) “some kind of struggle or problem, some source of friction, is usually required to generate both engagement and meaning.” (p.13). Much like a bad movie fails to engage when the plot becomes dull, so to, an online course without any mental exercise will struggle to retain the attention of students. The mystery or conflict at the heart of the course does not have to be of Hollywood blockbuster proportions, but should be enough to engage the interest. A ‘conflict’ could be internal or external to the characters, for example a conflict of self (e.g. thought or morals), a conflict between different groups of people (e.g. groups in society or groups of theorists), it could be a conflict of a person against society (e.g. for government reform, justice, or improving public awareness), technology or nature (e.g. the quest to solve a technical or environmental problem). The events in the story go to answering the key question or resolving the mystery posed at the start of the course.

A brief review of the e-learning literature reveals numerous electronic resources, images, applications, videos, forums, games, case studies and role-plays that can be employed in the creation of the story of the course. However, one of the temptations for lecturers given the abundance of such resources is to “overstuff” their Moodle sites with excessive web links, unrelated videos and other distractions. Too much content creates an information swamp the students must wade around in to find a plot. Having a clear story for the course requires lecturers to be selective in the resources provided and to think about how these resources build the story in the student’s mind. It may be helpful to use the ‘storyboarding technique’ employed by screenwriters to plan out what the student will do/see/hear/read at each stage of the story, making decisions about what should be revealed and when. Although it may sound contrary to the information sharing principles of Web 2.0, when designing an online course consider concealing part of the story, or revealing it slowly in stages, so the students

want to find out the details, or better yet, need to contribute the details themselves.

Lindgren and McDaniel (2012) did a research project incorporating the elements of a platform computer game, where students had to perform certain tasks to attain the required knowledge to open the next level. This 'finding the key' approach may also lend itself to designing assessments required to advance a story. Simmons (2007) reminds us that in storytelling "[m]eaning is more important than facts" (p.16). Rather than be swamped by an excess of factual information, students grow to care about the limited facts presented because those details matter to the story unfolding. By marshalling the content in this way, facts have greater meaning and significance, and the students need to 'finish' the course to get their question answered and achieve a sense of resolution.

## The Ending

The designer of an online course must be conscious of how the student experiences the end of the course. The course designer may want to leave the students with a sense of resolution and achievement, tying up all loose ends, or by posing a further question or a call to action in response to a problem. The lecturer does not need to be the sole author of the story in the course. The students can play a role in the creation of the story, how it progresses and how it ends. It may be possible to create multiple endings that student's choices influence.

## Next Steps: Implementing and Evaluating the Model

The first stage of this project was to review the literature on the relationship between narrative and learning and identify transferable storytelling techniques. From that review a model to help lecturers move from the 'textbook index' approach to course design to a digital storytelling approach was developed. The next steps are to 'trial the method' and prepare case studies of how this model can be applied to online courses (mid to late 2013). Following on from this, the model will be used with a group of Unitec lecturing staff who will be creating online courses and making the transition from face-to-face/blended learning to the online delivery of courses (early 2014). During this process, the experiences of staff in implementing the model and students in engaging with storied courses will be evaluated.

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**Author contact details:** Dawn Duncan, [dduncan@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:dduncan@unitec.ac.nz)

**Please cite as:** Duncan, D. (2013). A Good Story: The Missing Dimension of a Great Online Course. In H. Carter, M. Gosper and J. Hedberg (Eds.), *Electric Dreams. Proceedings ascilite 2013 Sydney*. (pp.257-261)

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