12-31-2020

STORIES FOUND WITHIN THE LEARNINGS OF TEACHING IN COVID-19

Kathryn Coleman
Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne, Kathryn.coleman@unimelb.edu.au

Melissa Cain
Australian Catholic University, melissa.cain@acu.edu.au

Chris Campbell
Learning Futures, Griffith University, chris.campbell@griffith.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: https://aisel.aisnet.org/siged2020

STORIES FOUND WITHIN THE LEARNINGS OF TEACHING IN COVID-19

Kathryn Coleman,
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
The University of Melbourne
Kathryn.coleman@unimelb.edu.au

Melissa Cain,
Australian Catholic University.
melissa.cain@acu.edu.au

Chris Campbell,
Learning Futures, Griffith University
chris.campbell@griffith.edu.au

Abstract:

COVID-19 has disrupted the educational landscape around the world, putting new pressures on schools, colleges and universities, and more specifically on teaching, learning and assessment. Educators feel fragmented, as their identities as well as their roles pivoted when the pandemic directed them home to teach. This paper explores a global story-based educational research project that sought to capture the pressures, stress and self-efficacy of educators across the world. Our digital ethnographic study sought to explore what educators were experiencing; to archive the worries, hopes, concerns and issues encountered by teachers in new spaces and sites as remote emergency practice began. What has emerged from the 635-educator participant study that includes 105 respondents in the higher education/tertiary sector that we have chosen to focus on here, is an attentiveness to the place of learning and teaching. More importantly, the relations between people and place, and the teachers and their students. This paper explores four stories from the higher education data that have been re-storied as an opening to this pandemic and the effects of the pivot on teaching practice to indicate the times and provide voice to our participants.

Keywords: teaching, learning, online, education, students, higher education, COVID-19.

I. INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic. In turn, educators the world over felt the impact immediately as we went home to work and teach online. To limit the spread of the virus, we began teaching using Zoom and our Learning Management Spaces that were often used more to share uploaded content, became living classrooms of activity and experience. To capture this moment in time for education this study was co-designed to listen, interpret, see what emerges and illuminate the stories through archiving the shifts and pivots, as educators across all sectors needed to significantly reconfigure their teaching and assessment practices at very short notice. These considerable changes in education are global, urgent and look to alter education practices from this point onwards.

During 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education has seen many shifts and turns. Educators have responded to these shifts with resilience, some have thrived, and other have just survived (Phillips & Cain, 2020) as they learned to learn, and teach online. This inter/ national pandemic related research: 'Teaching & Learning in COVID-19 Times' continues to explore the practices and pedagogies found within the pivots we have felt in education. The project is led by nine educators, keen to capture and archive this time in, and for teacher and higher education. Using multiple lenses, we listen to the digital stories we have been gifted, looking for language that tells us something about the moment that highlights the complexity of teaching, learning, researching and living during this pandemic as an educator. With these stories as data (Bleakley, 2005), we move through a process of storying the stories (McCormack, 2004); thinking about how we move in and out of stories, across people, contexts and continents (Phillips & Bunda, 2018).

The Qualtrics survey includes 16 open-ended questions about how COVID has impacted teaching and learning. The participants are cross sectoral and include Early Childhood to Higher Education (HE) contexts. This paper explores the 105 stories found within the learnings of teaching in COVID-19 across 19 countries including Australia (n=40), USA (n=42), Singapore (n=3) and Japan (n=3).

The data set holds significant expertise with 85% participants with over ten years teaching experience. Within this educational expertise, our first important story is that only 10% of these HE faculty were teaching online before COVID. This is a significant item in our narrative to tell as we had expected this to be proportionally higher given the digital transformation that has occurred for over a decade in our own work in (Rourke & Coleman, 2010; Campbell, 2009).

II. METHODOLOGY

As a digital ethnography (Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis & Tacchi, 2015), we have used digital principles, methods and practices to recruit, collect, curate and publish the data (Campbell & Coleman, 2020). 'Teaching & Learning in COVID-19 Times' is a cross sectoral study that explores education across social and cultural spaces that began collecting data in mid-2020. Our co-designed digital ethnography design (Wang, Vaux & Xu, 2014) is underpinned by a survey that continues to capture demographic data, as well as the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning through 16 questions that invites storying the impact of this encounter on learning, pedagogy and educational systems. As Connelly and Clandinin (1988) agree, "there is no better way to study curriculum than to study ourselves" (p. 31).

As a digital storied ethnography that includes storying as method and narrative inquiry we continue to connect, collaborate, capture and curate our research across a range of spaces in our digital ecology model. From the survey that collected our short responses and long form stories to our OMEKA teaching-and-learning-in-a-pandemic data gallery, we are committed to building this digital project for education communities to recognize what has been achieved by our colleagues.

> *At the end of the Spring semester, my students were very vocal about how they felt: they just wanted it to be over. Some had been confined for weeks to very small dorm rooms with 1-2 roommates. Some were far from home and missed parents and family. They were dispirited, unhappy, and eager to end the semester. I have no idea what, if any, big ideas about humanity they learned, but I doubt that any would say it had been a positive learning experience.*

Storying as method

Storytelling opens a path for others to follow in, see themselves and their experience with, and offers space to feel the effect of the encounters we find ourselves in during COVID-19. At this moment in time across the world, capturing the stories and feltness of learning and teaching in COVID-19 is an imperative, because "stories are both history and prophecy, stories for a time yet to come" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 207).

The uncertainties we find ourselves in captured through story, and re-storying has been an important aspect of our data collection and method. Pre-COVID it was suggested that "precarity is the condition of our time" and that "our time is ripe for sensing precarity" (Tsing, 2015, p. 20). This precarity has affected us during 2020; through the shifts required to teaching, learning and assessment needed for remote emergency practices, but also through job insecurities as higher education feels the impact of this crisis. The precarity of teaching across our sector has been felt for some time as casualization becomes more apparent and research funding has dried up. But this was a rapid, immediate, and in many cases unsupported shift to online that many of us had not encountered before. In this assemblage of precarities the methods of storying data through the collection of told stories has allowed us to capture these times. The research design was developed to be transformative for the participant, the research team and the audience as an event assemblage to offer some respite and care, as you see yourself as well as see others in

your own stories of surviving and/or thriving. We share four of the stories here to indicate the time and place we find ourselves in, and give voice to the unrecognized, unheard, and for some marginalized in the academy (Phillips & Bunda, 2018).

Story 1

I'm "talking to an empty computer screen, as the students do not turn on their camera[s], while reading chat messages" states an older person who has now "shifted from face-to-face teaching in the middle of the trimester". I work in Humanities and Social Sciences, and have been "PLANNING, planning, planning…"

This is something many of those teaching in higher education will relate to, as we shifted our teaching from face-to-face to fully online.

I have been conducting discussions online as well as organised experiential exercises online and assessed online via open book exams and take-home exams. One of the things that has changed for me is that I now have "too much writing" because I "must prepare slides for every step of an experiential process".

I have felt that the need to assist students in negotiating and "managing competition and cooperation concurrently". This is because I believe in context:

> *an online environment supports competitive behaviour but does not support cooperative behaviour in a mix-motive situation, as trust and open communication are fundamental to cooperation in a mix-motive situation and this is more difficult to achieve online. The online experience diminishes learning about strategy and strategic actions.*

Pre-COVID my "students always ask about assessment but in an online world they [ask] about technology". They have told me that the "internet connectivity is critical for experiential learning". Most days I find myself worried about online learning:

> *A group of four engaged in an exercise and one of the four has a flawed microphone - So [they] can use the chat function but clearly cannot participate fully. The learning of all four students is diminished by technology problems. Poor internet connectivity is a more serious problem, as student[s] cannot even get online or if they get online and then are assigned to an experiential group they drift in-and-out and again it diminishes the learning for all members of that group.*

My "university offers a lot of support but in the end the lecturer has to deliver on their own" as this is a comment that many staff have made over the months. It means staff need to be comfortable solving any problems they have while teaching and with some technologies this can be challenging. I have been able to solve most technical problems in a unique way because I "actually used my own external research funding (that allowed teaching buyout) to hire a sessional staff not to teach but to provide technical support".

The biggest surprise is that "students still value my teaching although online." The "student summary evaluation of my course in an online environment was 4.5/5 in an undergraduate course (36% response) and 4.8/5 in a graduate course (61% response)".

Story 2

I'm an Australian post-grad educator in HASS and I've been in higher education for a decade. I think I'm doing some things well and I'm really worried about others. The things that concern me most is engagement, and what that now means.

> *Everything is now online, and I really miss the interaction with students. I feel like I am less motivated and enjoy my teaching less. I have become a curator and creator of learning resources rather than an educator.*

I think what I have felt through this process is a change in who I am as an educator, and what my role is in the subject and in the sector. I've really tried to change a lot about what I do as an educator. The biggest takeaway for me is that binge watching has become a learning strategy for students. For me, my teaching strategies are now trial and error.

My professional learning community and Twitter have been really important to my easing off a little bit on myself and what I'm learning how to do. I can see on Twitter, that there are colleagues across higher education also encountering similar issues, and I feel less alone, and less exposed by reading these short little stories from my colleagues.

I feel like I've been able to innovate and experiment with new ideas, thinking with new strategies that include embedding surveys and online assessment, particularly thinking about ways that I can extend and expand on learning activities, and learning experiences in lieu of formal lectures. I don't have any evidence or data to say that what I have done this is working. I really hope what I'm doing is working for my students, but I just really don't know.

> *I am proud of some of the learning resources and opportunities I have created but fear that many students don't have the time or capacity to engage with them, and really only have the bandwidth to focus on bare minimum for assessment. The focus is less on learning and more on getting through so, I guess if most can get over that line this will be a successful outcome.*

I've actually learned a lot about myself and about teaching. My teaching practice relies heavily on spontaneous storytelling, and I link this to critical discussion. But I am very aware that I am being recorded. And, I'm being careful about not wasting time in my video lectures, this is a shift in my teaching. I hope that students have learnt about these changes that help us understand education differently particularly I hope they now see their lecturers and tutors as people who experience similar problems to them. I hope they can now recognize what good practice well, hopefully, the good intent of practice, looks like, feels like, and how they come to know the experience of that practice. My hopes include a generosity and generative philosophy in education post-COVID.

Story 3

I pride myself on teaching excellence and have been awarded a Distinguished Faculty Teaching Award. I have a lot of experience in language and literacy particularly focused on teaching emerging bilinguals and multilingual students. The greatest impact on me has been leaving the profession because of COVID.

> *With COVID, we moved to teaching remoting for the second half of the Spring, 2020 semester. I sadly and reluctantly resigned at the end of the semester because I found my online teaching to be artificial, ineffective, and very unsatisfying.*

Everything about my teaching has been different the delivery completely changed my teaching style is incredibly active I don't really lecture, and I pride myself on a student-centered, highly interactive experiential classroom but I found it really difficult to engage my students during Zoom and Moodle classes. It was as if something changed in them overnight. Their enthusiasm and preparedness changed into a disengaged sadness. Some of them seemed bored and tired, many disinterested.

> *It was very sad and disheartening to see, despite my best efforts to engage them. And my confidence was shaken as never before when we had to go online with a week's preparation. I tried to teach online as I'd always taught, and it just didn't work. It was frustrating for the students and demoralizing for me.*

To ensure that I retained diverse learning needs and approaches, cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness in my classroom I set up individual conferencing with Zoom. I ensured that students could contact me via phone or email. I've even had international students contact me because I wanted to provide individual help that I couldn't over zoom. I just really couldn't ensure

they were getting it. I could barely see one (sat in dark room; far from screen), and none participated as they had before quarantine, even in the frequent break-out room activities.

I have struggled because we were provided with very little training and within one week I had to prepare for the change and how to use Zoom. "I've taught for 50+ years but had no idea how to make online teaching as effective as my face-to-face teaching. For this fall, if I had continued, I would have really liked some help with how to effectively engage students in interacting with each other. I would have made more use of Padlet. But it's not about computer programs as much as it is about how to provide interaction and collaboration opportunities within online teaching".

Story 4

I've seen a lot of changes in my time teaching. The implementation of the Australian Curriculum, NAPLAN, data walls, PISA testing, increased ICT in classrooms, new pedagogies focusing on student-centred teaching and learning, and many more. Not all have been positive, but my colleagues and I know we must be flexible and respond to changes by gaining new skills, reflecting on our teaching, and keeping up with research on our teaching areas. Things change in the Arts as much as any teaching area, but still remain an essential outlet for creativity, imagination, and the development of empathy and compassion. It's amazing to see how relationships develop and how the students gain confidence and a sense of self from embodying the Arts even when they come to the space with reservations about engaging in our activities. Through the arts we engage all our senses. Our activities are aural, visual, kinaesthetic and tactual. Maybe not all students prefer to learn that way, but I know I do.

2020 been a rough ride for us. Although our university does a lot of online teaching and our department scores very highly in student evaluations for online teaching, this sudden shift online due to COVID-19 has been like a roller coaster where you can't see what's ahead. Normally I spend a lot of time getting to know my students and creating an environment that they are comfortable sharing and taking a risk with our activities. I felt like I just got to know my students and we had a good rhythm going before (literally overnight) we were no longer coming to campus but would be continuing online. This meant a quick race to develop online lecture and tutorial materials. We weren't even sure what platform to use. Zoom was preferred, but from the first day of week 5, there were problems with connectivity. I guess Zoom couldn't handle the sudden increase in users. Additionally, my home internet struggled with a full family online at the same time. There was confusion and some panic from students. I had difficulty answering questions about how the semester would proceed. Would this be a temporary thing? Would we be back to normal in a couple of weeks? I recorded my synchronous tutorials to meet accessibility standards, but now there were questions about security and privacy, so we were asked to stop. Students that were easy to engage with in the classroom were not coming forth online. We could not request for students to turn on their video cameras. Apparently, this was a privacy issue as well.

This sudden shift resulted in many changes to the way I teach a unit online that designed to be taught in person. Essentially it was considerably more time consuming. Trying to maintain the personal connections with students resulted in a lot more writing of emails and calls to students who need to 'talk'. I know the students who normally need to chat with me after class to make sure they understand what is required. I haven't been able to do this, and they are reluctant to ask in our new virtual classroom. I have provided my mobile number to students and some reach out to talk. Students would tell me that they miss the personal relationships and rich conversation that goes on in classrooms the most. I soon worried that engagement levels had dropped off. I have a limited number of tools to use online and are familiar with these on Adobe Connect but not Zoom. I know I could do great things with programs like 'Voice Thread' but my institution doesn't subscribe to tools like this. In the end I reverted to a way of being that I am most comfortable with-that the students and I are co-learners and we are all educators with the skills to teach and learn.

So, I put it back on the students to solve this puzzle. I asked them to consider how we can make this situation work the best for all of us. They had lots of good suggestions and this meant that I

didn't have to solve everything myself. We decided to turn the in-person miro-teaching assessment into a multimodal presentation in groups of three. As such, the students learnt to make and embed videos, and add sound files narrating the specifics. New skills that may not have been learnt had we continued in our regular tutorial room. I am not sure how they arranged meetings and the sharing of content as this would normally be done in tutorials, but they worked it out. The resulting submissions were amazing and thoroughly attended to the learning outcomes. That was a win for sure.

I thought I was isolated, but I wasn't. I developed stronger connections with peers in two Communities of Practice I am involved in. We also had a session lead by lecturers who do most of their teaching online and who are very successful. Their tips for success and what to watch out for were very helpful.

What have I learnt about myself? I've learnt that I'm competent and I'm adaptable, but I thrive on personal relationships. I've learnt to appreciate breaks from the screen; just getting outside to stand in the sun or water the plants. I've learnt to give more choices to my students to make the learning more relevant to them, and that as educators young and old, we may not have all the answers (especially when there is so much uncertainty) but we can do more than tread water. We can make purposeful and creative changes to keep learning and moving forward.

III. DISCUSSION

As educational researchers working in this study, we have felt the *affect* of these stories upon our own lived experiences in higher education during the pandemic. As with the participants, we have all faced a daunting task that often requires teams of people to support this learning design, and educational technology shift. We have not only taught, but many of us have continued our research, and attempted to balance our work and home lives as these things became more slippery to separate. This discussion section opens a space to present emergent findings, but they are yet to be theorised and troubled. This is an ongoing piece of slow scholarship (Mountz, Bonds, Mansfield, Loyd, Hyndman, Walton-Roberts, Basu, Whitson, Hawkins, Hamilton & Curran, 2015) and will be done as a team in an ongoing process of reflection to ensure we listen, and give the stories and storying the time they need to be heard and recognized.

Our data indicates that educators, many with little experience, have innovated using 'low tech' tools such as Padlet or breakout rooms in tools that engage and provide collaboration. COVID-19 forced educators to explore new ways of learning and engaging their students; this was challenging and stressful and led to increased workload and increased anxiety for many. Our data tells us that educators have developed new realizations about teaching and learning, and the development of a 'growth mindset'. More experienced educators have extended their knowledge by learning new applications such as Nearpod, Screencast-o-matic, Google Meets, Voice Thread, Camtasia, Snagit, WebEx, Flipgrid, Mentimeter and Dotstorming. Many participants shared their strategies of community to help them through the transition. These included colleagues, social media support groups, free teacher websites, notable experts in the field, Twitter, YouTube, and Ted talks.

Some commented, that beyond the practices and pedagogies they also learnt a great deal about themselves:

•   I can adapt and overcome under extreme pressure

•   I can meet the challenges that arise

•   I am more flexible and adaptive than I thought

•   I can make the best of things and learn regardless of the obstacles

•   Planning to teach a course online has improved my in-person teaching.

> *Teaching through an online interface has encouraged me to deeply examine my underlying theoretical understandings regarding teaching and learning. I teach through a*

relational lens, and so have explored ways to build relationships with students in online environments.

IV. CONCLUSION

We have 105 stories of failure and success, motivations and hesitations. The four stories we have chosen to share we resonate strongly with; feeling their joy, their frustrations and concern for student well-being, the worry about equity, access and safety for themselves, colleagues and their students. We have learned from our participants: colleagues in higher education that this is a truly global precarity we find ourselves. These times have been difficult for many of us, possibly the most difficult times in our lives as educators, as well as being parents, children, friends and care givers. When we tell our stories of the times, we open ourselves to scrutiny, we open ourselves to judgement, but we do so in service to our field in these moments when education and educators have much to learn from the generative nature of our stories of hope and despair.

What emerges from these stories is a focus on learning and teaching, but more importantly the impact on the people–teachers and students in higher education. Like other COVID-19 studies (Ferdig, Baumgartner, Hartshorne, Kaplan-Rakowski & Mouza, 2020; Naylor & Nyanjom, 2020) we have stories of teachers thriving during remote teaching. We also highlight the role that educators in higher education has played in supporting the wellbeing of students. We have many stories of teachers with genuine concern and empathy for their students who were struggling financially, emotionally and academically. Many learning a lot about themselves and about teaching and for some who have just, survived struggling with little training and time to prepare for the change and educational technology integrations such as Zoom. On the whole, educators have realized they are resilient, resourceful, creative, and empathetic and this research seeks to listen, recognise and showcase this tremendous shift in our field.

References

Bleakley, A. (2005). Stories as data, data as stories: Making sense of narrative inquiry in clinical education. *Medical Education 39*(5), 534-40. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2929.2005.02126.x.

Campbell, C. (2009). Learning in a different life: Pre-service education students using an online virtual world, *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, *2*(1), 1-15.

Campbell, C. & Coleman, K. (2020). Connecting the dots: Digital tools for doing educational research on COVID-19 during a pandemic. *ASCILITE Technology Enhanced Learning Blog,* 10 July 2020. https://blog.ascilite.org/connecting-the-dots-digital-tools-for-doing-educational-research-on-covid-19-during-a-pandemic/

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1988). *Teachers as curriculum planners: Narratives of experience.* Carnegie Cooperation.

Ferdig, R.E., Baumgartner, E., Hartshorne, R., Kaplan-Rakowski, R. & Mouza, C. (Eds). (2020). Teaching, Technology, and Teacher Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Stories from the field. *Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE).* https://www.learntechlib.org/p/216903/

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants* (First edition.). Milkweed Editions.

McCormack, C. (2004). Storying stories: A narrative approach to in-depth interview conversations, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *7*(3), 219-236. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570210166382

Mountz, A., Bonds, A., Mansfield, B., Loyd, J., Hyndman, J., Walton-Roberts, M., Basu, R., Whitson, R., Hawkins, R., Hamilton, T., & Curran, W. (2015). For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University. ACME: An International *Journal for Critical Geographies*, *14*(4), 1235-1259.

Naylor, D. & Nyanjom, J. (2020) Educators' emotions involved in the transition to online teaching in higher education, *Higher Education Research & Development.* doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1811645

Phillips, L.G. & Bunda, T. (2018). *Research through, with and as storying.* London, United Kingdom: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315109190

Phillips, L. & Cain, M. (2020). Learning in a different life: Pre-service education students using an online   virtual world. *The Conversation*. August 4, 2020. https://theconversation.com/exhausted- beyond-measure-what-teachers-are-saying-about-covid-19-and-the-disruption-to-education- 143601

Pink, S., Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T. and Tacchi, J. (2015). *Digital Ethnography: Principles and   Practice*. Sage Publications.

Rourke, A. J. & Coleman, K. S. (2010). Knowledge building in 21st century: Learners, learning and   educational practice. In C. H. Steel, M. J. Keppell, P. Gerbic & S. Housego (Eds.), *Curriculum,   technology & transformation for an unknown future.* Proceedings Ascilite Sydney 2010 (pp. 821-828).

Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*.   Princeton University Press.

Wang, D., Vaux D. & Xu, M. (2014). Better Bowling: 'doing with' for design studio instruction and public scholarship. *Journal of Interior Design*, *39*(1), 33-45. https://doi.org/10.1111/joid.12023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Melissa Cain is a lecturer in education at the Australian Catholic University and Assistant Head of Discipline (Secondary Education). Her research covers inclusive education and creative arts education with a current focus on supporting students with vision impairment in mainstream schools. Melissa was a teacher for 22 years, has received several higher education teaching awards, and the Callaway Doctoral Award.

Dr Chris Campbell is a Senior Lecturer in Learning Innovation in the Centre for Learning Futures at Griffith University, Queensland. As an emerging research leader, she has been involved in numerous grants and projects around digital technologies and emerging educational technologies. Chris' skills in implementing and trialling new technologies are documented in over 80 publications where she has conducted research in online tools in educational settings, including LAMS, Second Life and Assistive eXtra Learning Environments as well as research in technology integration, mobile learning and augmented reality. Chris has previously taught first year pre-service teachers and trialled interactive and emerging technologies in lectures and currently teaches academics enrolled in the Graduate Certificate in University Learning and Teaching. In 2016, Chris was a Queensland-Smithsonian Fellowship holder where she investigated the Smithsonian Learning Lab and implications for teachers.

Dr Kathryn Coleman is a Senior Lecturer and arts-based researcher in Visual Arts & Design at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. She is interested in the intersection of art, digital spaces, portfolios as placemaking sites, practice and culture, and teaches this through art and design. Kate's research into practice includes teacher practices, creative practices, practices of identity, knowledge as practice and digital practices. Kate is the Co-Director of Melbourne, UNESCO Observatory of Arts Education, InSEA World Councillor and member of the Art Education Australia council. In 2020, Kathryn was awarded the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, Teaching Excellence Award.