

## My Research Journey

I'm researching the effectiveness of narrative in facilitating online relationship development. What that means is that I'm looking at how stories can bring people together in an online world without any physical presence.

This article tells you a little bit about how I came to be researching this particular thing. And along the way I'm hoping it will spark and stimulate your thinking about an area of research that you are interested, in or could be interested in as a potential participant in the study.

On the one hand I'm a self confessed Internet junkie, I've always been addicted to computers ever since I was 5 and my older brother brought home a computer a [TRS80](#). On the other hand I've always been a bit of a social animal too. From a very early age I loved meeting new people. It's a trait I think I've gotten from my grandfather who was always leaning over someone's fence having a yarn.

So when these two worlds began to combine I was in there, first on AOL, ICQ, I used to have net meeting's with my brother's overseas, messenger and msn. And I was a chat rooms junkie. The best of which was L' Hotel Chat. I enjoyed it and met heaps of people online. If something happened in the news I'd go online and chat to someone there and make a new friend. If it seemed a big thing in the news here I always got a deeper understanding of the story from the people who were closer to it – it was impacting their lives.

So sharing stories seemed to me a really natural way of creating new relationships online. I was getting into it but I hadn't really seen the importance of it or even that it could be a thing to research or that people would even be interested.

### The Turning Point

The turning point for me was in 2001 when I facilitated a group of 38 students who were going to a conference in a few months time on the impact of an e-world on a Global Student Vision.

My role involved introducing the students to the conference requirements and outlining the conference initiatives, coordinating the students' passports, visas, accommodation, flights and their respective academic institution requirements. My goal was to enable all members to be fully at the conference and to remove all logistical pressures that arose before and during the conference.

My group consisted of students from Australia, Japan, Bolivia, Mexico, USA, Jamaica, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, France, Spain, Thailand, Brazil, Pakistan, India and South Africa. Many of these students did not have English as their first language. They weren't all IT students either. I collected over 600 e-mails pre-conference.

What I found with this group was that really strong relationships were developed online, across borders, across cultures, across religion and across languages and that it was the stories that we told and read that had somehow given us a human connection.

I remember there were 3 Indian guys who had a few troubles getting to the conference, and I can't remember what I'd said exactly but I'd heard their story and told them I was really feeling for them and I'd also CC'd it to someone who I thought may be able to actually do something to help them. When they arrived at the conference they had hunted me down to thank me for what I'd done for them and they said that my email was the only reason that they could have come.

And another guy from South Africa had said a very similar thing. It was big for him and the people he came with as it had only been for a few years that coloured people could attend university and coming to this conference was like a dream.

I thought wow! you know, there's something in this. I want to know more. I want others to see what might be possible. Imagine if everyone could work together for a better future.

Story seems to be a good way for people to really presence themselves in an online environment where they have no physical body to communicate with. Stories communicate peoples values, beliefs, challenges, desires and give a sense of who the person is and where they are coming from. They give others something to relate to and they put people on the map in an online group space.

### **Where do I start I asked myself?**

I could look at the communication channels and modes of communication. Audio, video, text. Synchronous, asynchronous. I could evaluate and critique the usability of differing systems. Explore the system's design, the use of online avatars, embodiment, personalisation and identity. Why do people chose different tools for what purpose, how could they be improved?

I could look at aspects of human interaction – are people happier, sadder, sexier or more intelligent online than they are offline. What are the effects of anonymity, trust, power, leadership, task vs social interactions, network analysis, sociometry, all this stuff that is going on in online systems and the groups of people that use them. I could explore the narrative and the breakdown of elements and compare stories, online and off.

Yeah I could study all that, but to me, and this is only my personal opinion, the juice lies in what do people do with it all. If I give you an analogy – it all seemed to be a bit like looking at poetry by studying the pencil and exploring the viscosity of the lead and the shapes and the colour style and quality of paper it writes on.

I'm fascinated by what people can achieve with collaborative technology. How they organise themselves, cooperate with each other, and enhance their relationships.

So I started doing some reading and I thought this has got to be easy, there's got to be a part that I can research, something that I'm good at, and maybe only something that I can see.

I knew intuitively from all the groups I'd been involved in that certain things worked for building relationships online. I joined an email group for online facilitators and e-moderators and group facilitation and started to explore the issues and thinking of others.

I knew that story was important, but you know that stuff's for kids aye, fairytales and all that – not serious adult IT. But then I found that there were some serious IT people who had looked at it, in fact there was an ACM Bulletin devoted to story and narrative in IS research.

### **Following My Tangents**

Then I thought I would work with the new migrants to my country (New Zealand) and refugees – They have many stories that could bring people together. So I began investigating and went to visit the refugees I knew through my mother's work as a community nurse. Then I visited the Auckland Refugee and Migrant Service, the Human Rights Commission, and I went to a conference on Migrants and Refugee research. I chatted to many people and it became clear to me that it was a nice idea – online cross-cultural storytelling, but it wasn't what they needed. They wanted education, jobs, training, English language and they were sick of research that didn't help them in a pragmatic way etc.

So then I thought well storytellers will be interested so I went off to the Clearwater Storytellers Festival and interviewed storytellers and discussed my ideas. I went to a workshop on cultural storytelling. But the thing I found out about storytellers is that they are performers first and foremost. They live off the stage and interaction with a live audience. Again – it was a nice idea, but they are performers and saw little value in an online stage.

### **Aha! Facilitators**

Then while I was at the Australasian Facilitators Network conference there was a workshop on storytelling in facilitation, and we had an evening of storytelling. And it seemed so obvious – facilitators not only see the value in it but some of them are into using it. So I hijacked the Key note speaker [Dr Gilbert Brenson-Lazan](#) the president of the [Global Facilitators Service Corps \(GFSC\)](#) and he was saying “yeah of course I use it all the time, we train people to be facilitators in online groups using story”. And it turns out there's not much research around to help facilitators build relationships online.

I took Gilbert on a 9-day tour of the South Island. He is an avid photographer and took some pretty stunning [photos](#). He had had a dream of photographing the South Island of New Zealand since he was 9 years old when his mother had given him a calendar with some of the stunning scenery. And here I was giving him a guided tour. While we took photos we talked about facilitation, my research ideas and his vision for the GFSC.

So as soon as I got home I put together the research proposal knowing that there was a community that would be interested in its focus. My deadline was well over due and was also very good motivation.

And now I'm enrolling facilitators from around the world in my study which is going to use a co-operative enquiry approach where we are going to work together to design the research, conduct the research in a series of action reflection and planning cycles. The approach is flexible and cooperative and aligns well with the way facilitators operate.

So this is the journey I've been on over the last two years. It's been a rather slow process at times with a few dead ends along the way. But I haven't let go of what I have known – that it is the stories that are told and read that somehow give a human connection. And being held by two very good supervisors has made a real difference.

So have a think when you're exploring this story about what aspects you could be researching, something that you're interested in or some element that sparks your imagination. There's a lot of scope in this research study. And maybe we may go with what you have always wanted to find out.

Warmly, Stephen Thorpe