

The Effectiveness of Narrative in Facilitating Online Relationship Development

Summary and Invitation to the PhD Research Project

Aim

The research project aims to investigate how story and narrative can be used to facilitate relationship development between participants in an online group.

Focus

The focus is the use of narrative (also referred to as story) because it potentially offers a useful catalyst in developing online relationships. It provides an accessible form for developing inclusiveness, deepening rapport and for people to present aspects of themselves in an environment lacking in human presence. The overall goal of the project is to develop some practical processes and techniques that are useful in building and maintaining relationships between members in online groups. The study group will also explore other areas of online facilitation throughout the research process including areas of trust, power, conflict, inclusion, community, motivation, best practice, metaphor, learning, process and system design, conferencing, tools and culture.

Method

The method of co-operative inquiry will be used within a participative approach. Co-operative inquiry produces data that has a strong grounding in participant experience and multiple perspectives of phenomena. Co-operative inquiry also aligns strongly with facilitator values of equality, shared decision-making, equal opportunity, power sharing and personal responsibility.

Plan

The research will happen in two stages. An initial 6-week pilot will begin with investigating agreed themes of interest within the area of the research question. This pilot stage will have a particular focus on how we might research cooperatively together and we will try a few things out to see if they are useful ways to research. At the end of this pilot stage, we will likely have a major evaluation to see what has worked well for us and where our energy is for investigating further in more depth.

The second stage of the research will see us follow through several cycles of planning, action and reflection. The planning will involve discussion about our choice of focus or topic and what type of inquiry we wish to apply. In the action phase we will explore, in experience and action, aspects of the inquiry. The reflection phase reviews what has been experienced and we may decide to modify our topic in light of making new sense of the data we have collected. At the end of the cycles we will complete a major reflection phase for pulling the threads together, clarifying outcomes and deciding on dissemination of what we have learnt.

The initial 6-week pilot will commence from 12 September 2005.

Benefits

- This research will forward our profession by contributing in-depth research into the emerging area of online group work.
- We will generate and test some practical approaches, methods and techniques to facilitate online relationships.
- We will explore the usefulness of several research methods for investigating our individual and group experience online (such as cooperative inquiry, narrative inquiry, sociometric processing, others brought by individuals in the research group and those that emerge from our group process).
- Through fully immersing ourselves in the research topic we are likely to tap into the collective wisdom and synergies of our research group.
- Through conscious attention to the differing perspectives of our experience we are likely to better understand many of the difficulties faced in online groups.
- We will all learn from one another and potentially build stronger peer networks.

Invitation

So if you are involved in the facilitation of online groups, researching online facilitation, using facilitative techniques in online education, or something similar you may be interested in joining this study. Feel free to contact me should you have further questions.

To join the research project, please email your contact details to Stephen Thorpe (sthorpe@aut.ac.nz) and I will send you an information pack containing the Project Brief, Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form. An international mix is desired for the study, please be aware there are limited numbers.

Researcher Contact Details: Stephen Thorpe, PhD Student, School of Computing and Information Sciences, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand. Phone: +649 921-9999 extension 8953, sthorpe@aut.ac.nz

Project Supervisor Contact Details: Dr. Philip Carter, Senior Lecturer, School of Computing and Information Sciences, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand. Phone: +64 9 921-9999 extension 5300, philip.carter@aut.ac.nz

Stephen Thorpe Researcher Biography



Stephen Thorpe

Stephen Thorpe is a PhD student at the [Auckland University of Technology \(AUT\)](#). He is an IT consultant and has been researching online facilitation over the last 4 years.

Stephen is responsible for the IT functional area for [Zenergy](#), a New Zealand based group of facilitators, mediators and transformational coaches. Working with [Zenergy](#), Stephen is researching ways to enhance the effectiveness of online groups. His PhD explores facilitation as a vital domain in assisting online groups with a focus on the benefit of story and narrative in online relationship development.

Stephen holds a Bachelor of Business with first class honours from AUT where he has a background researching computer-assisted group work as part of a team who researched, developed and commercialised a multi-site interactive digital whiteboard. Stephen has also co-developed a CD-ROM based tutorial for online training and has been a part-time lecturer teaching Computing, Globalisation and Business Information Management on the Bachelor of Business Degree.

Stephen is a member of the [International Association of Facilitators \(IAF\)](#) and [Global Facilitators Service Corps \(GFSC\)](#) and has recently co-written a chapter on *Facilitator Values and Ethics* in the [IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation](#) with [Dr. Dale Hunter](#). Stephen has recently accepted to be an Associate Editor of the IAF's [Group Facilitation Journal](#).