



The Videonarratives project

Carol Taylor, an ESCalate grant holder, shares her experiences of using video to record the key events on students' doctoral journeys and considers ways in which these videonarratives can be used to develop their researcher identities.

In early 2004 I decided to return to full-time education to do my doctorate. Although this had been my goal for many years, exciting projects such as developing higher education provision had kept me busy in my full-time job as a further education lecturer as had doing two part-time MAs in the subjects I loved to teach. I finally enrolled as a full-time DPhil student at Sussex University and was fortunate that Sussex gave me the opportunity to work as a Graduate Teaching Assistant during my DPhil, teaching a few hours a week and taking on administrative tasks such as organising some departmental seminars and looking after a course Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

The reason for relaying 'my-DPhil story' is that the narrative, and my reflections on how and why we construct narratives about our doctoral journeys, became a key part of the project which has evolved from the student grant I received from ESCalate in September 2008 – The Videonarratives project.

The project had three linked aims:

- to enable participating doctoral students to gain a range of practical skills in the use and editing of digital video in order to produce individual videonarratives;
- to use the videonarratives to promote doctoral students' reflexivity on their doctoral journeys;



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- to use the videonarratives to enhance participants' research biographies and personal and professional development, for example, by using the videonarrative as a basis for a digital CV or in a blog or wiki.

In various ways, the videonarratives project aimed to develop doctoral students' academic identities through reflection on the doctoral journey.

The project itself ran from February – June 2009 by which time I was working full-time at Sheffield Hallam University and my thesis was nearing completion. These events became woven into the videonarrative I produced as a

project participant as well as project lead. The project participants were five doctoral students (including me) and we were all at different stages of the doctoral journey: two were undertaking 'traditional' full-time research-based PhDs; two were full-time lecturers doing an EdD part-time and I was in the final throes of my DPhil. In addition, the participants' backgrounds varied immensely. For example, one student had come to the UK for his doctorate as part of a long-term plan after studying in Spain and Cuba at Masters level. He had had to leave his home country of Zimbabwe where his wife and children still lived in ▶

order to pursue his doctoral goals. His journey contrasted with a second participant who had moved into further education lecturing after a long career in the engineering industry and had only very recently acquired the doctoral itch. So, although it was a small-scale project, it included both types of doctorate, participants from a 'research-intensive' and a post-1992 university, and individuals with very varied life histories. The project design was deliberately open-ended and collaborative in order to make the most of these aspects, and to allow adequate time for reflection on the doctoral research journey.

The project had two stages. First there was a one-day workshop which focused on critical incidents in the participants' doctoral journeys and the acquisition of skills in using video. The focus on critical incidents helped participants to identify the events and experiences which were uniquely meaningful in their particular journey and it was these critical incidents which gave a narrative 'line' or focus for the production of the videonarratives in the second part of the workshop. The workshop was followed up a few weeks later with in-depth one-to-one interviews which used the videonarrative as a basis for reflexive discussion of the doctoral journey in the context of the longer biography of the individual. The discussions included career choice, family support and relationships, academic and institutional contexts, relations with supervisors, and the

ontological, methodological and ethical issues of particular relevance to doctoral level study.

The project enabled participants to produce their own richly detailed videonarrative, each of which varied in visual style as much as the journeys themselves. In addition, the participants have used them as a digital academic CV to develop their researcher identities. However, spin-offs beyond the reflexive aims of the project have also been significant with one participant describing how his newly-found skills with video were used as a tool to make his teaching more interactive for his young BTEC students. In my own case, the student grant from ESCalate helped me to run my first externally-funded project and, small as the budget was, the skills I gained were invaluable.

The videonarratives project became part of the transition process from doctoral student to established educational researcher. The project has generated a diverse range of outputs, including a project website provided by ESCalate which includes narrative accounts by the project participants (<http://escalate.ac.uk/5214>), a number of conference papers and a joint article for possible future publication. It has been an exciting ride, and significant for me is that the videonarratives, as visual narratives, contribute to the interdisciplinary nature of education as a field of practice.



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Dr Carol Taylor is a Senior Lecturer and Course Leader for BA Education Studies and Sociology in the Faculty of Development and Society, Sheffield Hallam University. Her research interests are 16-19 education, gender, power and spatiality, student voice, feminist and post-structuralist theory and method, and visual research methods. She was awarded her doctorate in June 2009. The title of her doctoral thesis was 'All Manner of Becomings: Identity, Power and the Spaces of Knowledge Production in A Level Student Research' which she completed at the University of Sussex. Before doing her DPhil, Carol worked as a lecturer in various further education colleges, in a sixth form college and as a part-time tutor with The Open University. The HEA ESCalate videonarratives project was her first externally-funded research project.