Reviewing experience and testimony as pedagogical resources in open learning

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Abstract

Accounts of experience and direct testimony are used extensively in health and social care education. In the sphere of open and distance learning (ODL) they both offer a richness and texture in the materials and form the focus for the use of a spectrum of 'human data', which are central to the health and social care professions. This article discusses some of the uses of experience and testimony in ODL relating to health and social care and examines ways in which testimony is transformed for pedagogic purposes in open and distance learning.

Accounts of experience and direct testimony are used extensively in health and social care education. In open and distance learning (ODL) they are a focus for the use of 'human data', which are central to the health and social care professions. In this article, the uses of experience and testimony in ODL, relating to health and social care, are explored.

For the past 20 to 30 years, adult educators have been interested in experience as a resource for education (Knowles 1978; Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985; Mezirow 1991). One way of engaging with distant learners in social sciences and professional education is to use case studies, vignettes and exemplars, where an experiential account of some kind is a resource for the examination of theory and practice. Indeed, in much ODL, the concept of personalized learning may be developed by exploring procedures through personal accounts (Northedge 1990).

This article focuses on writing in ODL in health and social care, an area that frequently uses personal experience as a resource for learning. The context is a faculty that specializes in health and social care education at prequalifying and postqualifying levels for nurses and social workers and which also offers general interest courses in health and social care. In this institution, the role and status of students, the use of directly recounted experience as a resource and the use of 'experience like text' have long been tenets that are thought to contribute to a good quality learning experience for students. More broadly, in professional work in health and social care, the interpretation of human experience is part of the territory of such professions. Experience is a legitimate source of data in the health and social care professions and this is reflected in professional and academic literature in those fields (for an example see Finlay 2004). This concern with experience is also currently evident in the context of UK governmental policy where there is an orientation to the lives of service users and frontline practitioners, which have become defining data in terms of the focus of professional work and accounts.

Testimony and experience as part of an ODL learning conversation

To construct ODL materials, authors wrestle not only with giving an account of some aspect of a

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subject discipline or practice, but are also required to find a pedagogic and learning structure which enables learners to engage with it. This involves finding a pedagogy consistent with the discipline in question. In health and social care, a highly academicised pedagogy would not be in the spirit of professional practice. On the other hand, 'conversation' is not only a communication tool that needs to be learned in a professional context but can also provide a pedagogic structure for materials.

People recognize experience as something that can be legitimately introduced into discussions; even small children use their experience as a resource for conversation (Nelson 2004). Thus, to offer experience through learning materials is to reproduce some of the features of a conversation, a very familiar genre to us all, in that is there is more than one voice, the procedure is orderly, turns are taken and there is an orientation to context in the development of topics, etc. (Heritage 1984; Nofsinger 1991).

In ODL, particularly that focused on the human sciences, there is an understanding that the learner has some say, some opportunity to shape the agenda of their education, whether at a micro level, through one learning activity, or at a more meta level in the total course or programme (see for example the notion of ODL as a 'tutorial in print' (Rowntree 1992), and as a conversation (Laurillard 2002). 'The other half of the conversation' is what learners contribute, including putting their experience up for examination, and, of course, the concept of conversations crops up in approaches to education more generally. For example, Harri-Augstein & Thomas (1991, p. 3) talk in their own research on reflective procedures in learning, which focuses on learning conversations where:

> Fundamentally this puts the learners in conversation with themselves, but also enables them to converse more effectively with their peers, their tutor, coach, trainer, instructor, therapist, manager, spouse or occasionally even their general practitioner, osteopath, lawyer, architect, clairvoyant or stockbroker!

Note that this quotation orients to the interactive notion of learning, even at an individual level, through the concept of a conversation with oneself. It also implicitly promotes this sort of learning as a rehearsal for communication with others, many of whom in this listing imply some kind of real world/professional interaction. Rowntree (1992, p. 135) observes that in addition to 'the tutorial in print' model there is also a 'reflection in action model', which he describes as real action taking place somewhere else than in the open learning package. Of course, as Harri-Augstein & Thomas (1991) imply, real action is often also a communicative event.

These debates about learning conversations have been heightened by the technological revolution, which has brought about e-learning, computer conferencing, etc. One of the upshots of that revolution is the tendency to see text-based ODL as primarily a one-way process and not to have a communicative component (see, for example, Sumner 2000) but perhaps that view does not pay enough attention to the possibilities, flawed as they are, in writing as a communicative event and in conversation even with oneself as a communicative event as well. While the ODL pedagogical conversation is not context renewing in the same way that real conversations are, there are very definitely conversational elements in it, because the learner's active input/response is required and expected.

Testimony is a very active component in simulating a conversation-like pedagogy in ODL. Testimony implies a listener, it implies a point of view and potentially it can elicit another point of view and in some contexts, may be taken to imply an invitation to respond to another (what Sacks 1995, has analysed as a conversational phenomenon of first and second stories where telling a first story very frequently elicits a second story from the listener). There is a rapprochement in ODL health and social care materials with equal measures of purposeful learning-type conversation and reflection in action. The fulcrum for this twofold approach is testimony, which both heightens the conversational aspect of the learning and illustrates and values experience of 'in the field'.

This article focuses not only the technical issues that unfold for the writer of ODL materials, but

also the possibilities of replicating and reflecting conversational-like activity through a turn to testimony.

Testimony, learning and ODL

The key feature of testimony in ODL is that it is presented and edited in conjunction with the instructional design required to manage learning. Testimony is usually understood to be heard or read as something which 'speaks for itself', and its power and authenticity is derived from its first-handedness. But in this case it is organized and presented so that learners can interrogate it in various ways. In other words, instructional design in ODL ensures that learners 'get an angle' on experience/testimony. This is mainly carried out through learning activities, which offer learners a structured way of engaging with the substantive areas under consideration. Learning activities are basically a set of instructions for some activity, which helps learners to engage with specific aspects of the materials. For example, they may sensitize or orientate learners to new areas, and offer opportunities for application tasks or rehearsal, analysis, comparison, evaluation, etc. In ODL, structured learning activities are the locus of instructional design, where the learning is managed; whereas in face-to-face settings, learning is managed by the teacher (Robinson & Shakespeare 1995).

Testimony adds authenticity to subject matter

Culturally, testimony is seen as 'empathic', as 'drawing people in', and this applies not only to learning materials but to all sorts of media, including newspapers, magazines, television and radio. Journalism and open learning manuals on 'how to write' routinely suggest including personal stories to improve the interest value. Testimony *is* human interest.

Testimony is often used in ODL in health and social care to demonstrate authenticity and real world concerns and thus draw in the learner. Which 'real world' is chosen is, of course, to some extent a political choice. For example, in the health and social care professions, the voices of service users and low status workers have historically been unvalued and unheard, so testimony from such categories of person is, by its very presentation, a way of redressing this balance. At the UK Open University a series of ODL courses since the 1970s have foregrounded accounts by health and social care service users, for example, *Patterns for Living* (Open University 1989), which focuses on the lives of people with learning difficulties, and *Working with Older People* (Open University 1990), which begins with lengthy audio interviews with six older people. Through a focus on service user groups, both courses implicitly support interprofessional work with its requirements for communication. The testimony begins with whole people rather than fragmented issues of concern to particular professional groups. Moreover, testimony is a way of increasing a variety of 'voices' in materials and if enough voices are included, a divergent approach to issues can be presented that challenges what may be taken for granted. Such testimony may be quite comprehensive, for example, a two-page diary of an informal carer's dilemma's over a working day, a 30-minute taped audio/CD interview, or short excerpts or quotations from a longer account or perhaps third-person descriptions of part of a testimony.

I want to extend the idea of testimony for the purposes of the present article, and add to it an examination of how learning devices can give people an opportunity to develop both their own testimony and also to think about their experience and practice as something that can be transformed. Learning devices can be constructed to mimic in some ways the often-used structure of a 'before' and 'after' story.

Testimony presents a problem through focusing on points of view

One common way that testimony is used in ODL is through a scenario, scenarios or several different first-hand accounts presented as data on which learners work through structured learning activities. *Assessing Practice in Nursing and Midwifery* (Open University 2000), a mentoring postqualifying course for nurses, uses a dozen or so scenarios as starting points for activities, asking people to explore their own point of view, rewrite the scenario as 'an outsider', propose 'solutions', etc. A more complex pedagogical process is built up in this same course where people who had featured in a national TV

documentary about being novice nurses some years ago were asked to watch excerpts from the programme of themselves being mentored as novices and to talk about how they how felt then and now. This learning activity is based on a mixture of documentary footage illustrating the mentoring of neophyte practice with later testimony, which highlights the transformation that experience has brought. There are considerable possibilities, as noted earlier, of building up through the testimony 'many voiced' simulated conversations, which introduce many diverse positions (as people do in ordinary conversations).

Clearly, testimony is a genre that can be used and modified in learning to enable learners to consider different points of view, and how these come about – not only the different implications people draw from what they have witnessed, but also the different testimonies that people produce from the same events through seeing them from different vantage points.

Testimony as a way of modelling practice

Experiential accounts are used in ODL as a way of modelling practice. An example in K350 (Scenario 6, p. 18) is the use of a mentoring scenario in which a charge nurse works with a student. Below, just one excerpt has been taken from a much longer scenario:

> The mentor notices the student's method of holding the injection equipment and realizes she is left-handed. He congratulates her, not just on her acquisition of the skill but on her ability to make the mental adjustment needed to adapt the right-handed approach he demonstrated to her own left-handed administration. The giving of the antibiotic Cefazolin via a patient's CVP line is similarly preceded by a discussion of technique and specific safety concerns; the mentor eliciting from the student what she knows about anaphylactic shock and its relevance.

The text for this scenario was generated from field observations and discussions with this mentor in a research project looking at how mentoring is actually performed (Phillips, Schostak & Tyler 2000). The quotation includes a number of words that may be considered key in the context of the skill of mentoring: 'notices', 'realises', 'congratulates', 'discussion', 'demonstrated', 'eliciting'. So, in this case, research, including testimony from interview transcripts and field observations, is used for key concepts that are fed back into the pedagogic process with a learning activity asking learners to look at the scenario in terms of the attitude of the mentor and the relationship between the strategies he uses and the beliefs he has.

Elicitation of testimony from the learner

A third major area where testimony is significant is in-text learning activities where experience or testimony is elicited from the learner and becomes available as a resource for use in their learning. This device is used extensively in ODL. Two examples are presented below, the second being from a course on managing roles and relationships in the context of health and social care (Open University 1996):

> Teams as a context for assessment
>
> Consider a typical or recent shift of the team you work in. What sorts of issues came up? What sorts of discussions took place about these issues?
>
> If students are involved in your team, how were they involved in those discussions? Were they merely observers?
>
> Now think about how the problems that came up in that shift were opportunities for talking about how problem solving is done.
>
> K350, Workbook 2, p. 41.
>
> In the next day or so take one task that you are going to be involved in and try out the maxim 'what you say on paper is what you

do in practice'. Before you begin the task write down in detail exactly what you are going to do and each action involved. Try to keep your paper with you as you do the task and tick off the elements you have included as you do them. After you have finished think about the task as a whole and consider whether there were aspects of that task that you did not include in your account.

K263, Workbook 4, p. 49.

Both activities address 'you' as the learner directly and invite 'you' to offer up some testimony – and – in asking questions and expecting answers they offer a conversational style of activity. The first activity encourages learners to examine and recount in detail an experience they have had and then to impose an 'action' framework on it. Thus, they are asked to re-look at the experience they have recounted with different eyes and find opportunities in it for the future. It is possible to see an underlying interrogation of the experience in the style, in this instance, of Kolb's experiential learning cycle where learners begin with concrete experiences, make observations about these, form generalizations and go on to test the implications of their concepts (Sutherland 1998, p. 85). The extremely influential work by Schön and others puts forward experiential learning models that are conversational in their interrogative style, requiring experience to be put up for examination, articulated and that this articulation itself is the subject of further interrogation. For example, in Schön's book *The Reflective Practitioner* (1991) Chapter 3 is entitled *Design as a Reflective Conversation with the Situation* and consists, in parts, literally of a dialogue represented by a sequence of utterances by the two participants.

The second activity is a 'testimony experiment' where the learner compares what is alleged to have happened in a specific set of circumstances with what actually did happen. In both cases, testimony becomes a platform on which to build learning and its form becomes something to explore and to work with in an innovative way.

Testimony and elicitation of testimony may be combined in learning activities. For example, in K350, the mentoring course, students are asked to look at a number of scenarios (drawn from the research project upon which the course is based) in the first sections of the course and later encouraged to develop their own scenarios. Thinking about scenarios and exploring their different facets replicates professional health and social care work. Scenarios represent selective accounts, which orientate learners to what is relevant in practice, so that learning how to develop such accounts facilitates the development of effective descriptions.

Another distinctive form of testimony, often elicited in ODL materials, is the 'testimony of learning'. Currently, in the UK, the key skills promoted by the government include 'learning how to learn'. A learning testimony documenting how one learns in a climate of evidence-based professional practice becomes a useful tool in the articulation of professional competence. Learners may be recommended to keep portfolios and diaries of learning and reflection. A portfolio is a structured account of work carried out by one individual in the unique professional circumstances in which they work. Such personal/professional testimony is key to many professional courses and often forms part of the summative assessment process.

Testimony supports active learning

If personal testimony represents a 'self' then structured learning activities in ODL may offer a set of categories through which to interrogate that self specifically for the learning in hand. Indeed, part of professional education is the shaping of self in such a way as to support professional conduct. A learning structure, which helps learners to pay attention and to describe what they see and hear in specific ways, mapping out the bases of professional observational and analytic skills, can be used in conjunction with testimonies of experience. In other words, learners are asked to 'get an angle on' someone else's experience, which is part of the job of being a professional. Thus:

> Listen to Audio 2, Programme 1 (tracks 1–3). You will hear three older women looking back over their long lives. Make notes about the situations they describe and the issues they raise.
>
> Try to get a sense of the kind of persons they are, and what seem to have been dominant concerns and themes of their lives. After listening to each, note down in a few words what you think are the distinctive features of each of their lives. And then after listening to all three, note down which features you think they have in common.
>
> KYN 275, Block 3, Unit 8, p. 12.

This learning activity approaches testimony through two separate ways of thinking. It asks learners to consider lives as unique but also to begin to find commonalities. Thus, it foreshadows different professional traditions of how to 'handle' lives. Compare this with another activity in a similar post-qualifying nursing package on a systematic approach to nursing (Open University 1997):

> Whether the concept of self-recording is new to you, or whether you are familiar with its use, this activity should help you to decide on its value in your area of work.
>
> Imagine you have been asked to take part in a debate on whether clients or patients in your practice area should self-record. Take one side in the debate ('Yes they should' or 'No they shouldn't') and spend about 15 min writing a few notes about what you would say in order to support your position. If you can, cite some instances from your own experience to support your case. When you have done this, spend about another 15 min thinking about how the opposition might support its case, and make a few notes about how you would counter their arguments.
>
> K508, Workbook 2 p. 32.

While this activity does not directly engage with testimony, it is a good example of how analysing one's own experience and life can be pedagogically structured. In order to come down on one side they need to look at both, making different judgements about a piece of practice, and they are encouraged to use their experience to construct their case. So, through the learning activity an account is elicited and learners are provided with ways of engaging their own experience to begin to think about specific issues. The underlying theme here, again, is that lives articulated are a source of data and that lives become articulated partly through a process of interrogation.

A third approach that builds on these is a conflation of these two approaches. The learner examines the testimony of others and compares it with their own experience or outlines their own experience and compares that with someone else's. Also, in a number of the courses I have cited there is an emphasis on a professional conversation in which learning activities interrogate experience through professional categories and thus model how talk about experience may become part of the work. Testimony is not a commentary on professional work, but becomes part of it.

Managing the presentation of testimony

It will be clear by now that the testimony which appears in ODL is not 'raw' but 'orchestrated' and fashioned to the requirements of the course. Experience and testimony can be presented in a range of ways in ODL, all of them having in common some artful repositioning of an account. The process is this:
• people are approached and asked to talk about their experience of some specific event in their lives;
• two or more accounts may be initially elicited from different people with the object of conflating or selecting bits or choosing 'the more relevant account';
• their account is often elicited through questions which the materials developer considers to be relevant to the learning course being developed;
• the account is subsequently negotiated between the interviewer and interviewee and permissions sought to use the resultant material;

• aspects of the chosen account are usually further edited or highlighted through the development of learning activities which require specific structured thinking about testimony.

There is always an agenda on choosing and fashioning direct testimony in ODL. Experience is artfully constructed. Direct personal testimony on the part of someone involved in health and social care (often on audio/CDs in ODL) can be presented as a transparent account to 'tell it how it is', so that the learner sees something of what it is like to be this particular person or to have had this particular experience. This approach tends to orientate to the real world 'warts and all'. However, although the learner may not know, the account will usually have been edited (if only for expediency, that is, it may need to be only 10 min long and the original interview is an hour) and 'the transparent account' will have been heightened in some way by cutting out duplication, or irrelevancies (as perceived by the author) or emphasizing things which are the reason for its inclusion, and the account may have been chosen over another account which did not make the 'rights sorts of points' clearly enough.

However, an opposition is not being set up here, and it is not being proposed that the final product is artificial or false. Experience, or at least articulated experience, is artfully constructed by everyone. By the time it becomes an account or a testimony, it has been worked up and some elements of what happened to someone have been dropped, while other elements have been foregrounded. As Michelson (1996, p. 439), observes, specifically about experience and reflection, although I think the point stands for any account:

> Experience is immediate but messy; it comes with all the human frailty still attached – subjectivity, interestedness, bias, materiality … Reflection is […] thus both ordered and ordering; it bestows meaning where there was none, or else greater clarity when there was lesser.

'Ordered' and 'ordering' seem to be key terms in this quote in terms of testimony. In an ODL educational context, the key utility of testimonies is their ability to focus on the transformation of experience. This is not unlike the function of certain sorts of testimony, which appears, for example, on the Internet. A search for 'testimony' on the Internet throws up a number of accounts, which present the writer (or the person or experiences they are writing about) as having reached some transformed state. The experience is not accounted for as raw, but is transformed in some way, often by wisdom, insight, revelation, etc. This is particularly noticeable in evangelical texts on the Internet (see for example Tillin 1998). Note also the testimonies of satisfied customers, transformed by a service of some kind (Ultimateconsole 2004). Inevitably, the testimonies used in ODL are structured; in this they are no different from other testimonies. However, in the ODL case the structure is for a pedagogical purpose (and is scaffolded by a further pedagogical framework) rather than an evangelical or commercial purpose.

One case of ordering, in pedagogic terms, is the use of sequence to make some specific point about content. Pedagogically, testimony can be set out in a 'before' and 'after' sequence, with 'after' essentially being better, and 'before' portrayed as up for correction, or 'raw' or capable of becoming richer through the devices of open learning. Usher, Bryant & Johnston (1997, p. 101), discussing Michelson's idea, point out:

> […] adult education has, throughout its history, tended to construct learning as a process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.
> Experience is raw material to be acted upon by the mind through the controlled and self-conscious use of the senses (observation) and the application of reason (reflection).

In terms of testimony and experience in health and social care learning, some accounts of experience/testimonies, particularly those that are said to model good practice, offer a different and 'better' way to 'do' experience. Another sequential option is to take practice or experience initially outlined as rich

rather than raw. This is more in line with the andragogical tradition (see Boud & Griffin 1987, etc.) where the valuing of experience orients to education for adults (who have experience that can be used as a resource). A middle position is that experience itself can be taken as rich or wise, while the notion of 'rawness' is transposed into concerns with its actual interpretation and articulation. That is to say, a whole tranche of reflective practice writing (a genre which appears frequently in ODL on health and social care, often because it reflects the competencies constructed within professions) builds on the notion that, while the experience is fine, it is the reflection, and more particularly the articulation of reflection, that is rather rough. So, a useful account of experience is deemed to be one that has been transformed using categories identifiable in a social/institutional/professional sense, rather than just a personal one. In other words, a good reflective model is the pedagogic tool that 'polishes the rough diamond' of experience. This is a continuing preoccupation of professional education (see, for example, Winter, Buck & Sobiechowska 1999). For professional purposes, 'experience' has to be transformed into 'reflection'. A pedagogy that reflects this reflects professional concerns.

Conclusion

It has been suggested, in this article, that there are two mainstreams of representation of testimony in health and social care ODL materials: case studies, vignettes, quotations; and elicitation of the testimony of learners.

The upshot of both approaches is the valuing of experience and testimony as a resource for thinking, and the use of a pedagogy, which in some ways replicates conversation (a central plank in health and social care work). The communication of testimony is central to everyday working life in the form of case histories, consultation, service user notes, and in such areas as mentorship of neophytes workers, performance management and, indeed, in complaints and litigation. Consequently, learning materials need to reflect testimony as part of the data that they ask learners to explore. Whereas in some areas of ODL, experience and testimony may merely be used

to make materials more palatable in health and social care, they are a direct link to the nature and experience of the professions themselves.

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