Technology-Mediated Narrative Environments for Learning
(Book Review)

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Technology-Mediated Narrative Environments for Learning
Giuliana Dettori, Tania Giannetti, Ana Paiva and Ana Vaz (Eds.)
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How it all began

Sitting at my desk as visiting professor at the University of Bergen, Norway I received an email from Kinshuk asking if I would review a book for Educational Technology and Society. Of course I agreed, and within a week the book was delivered by courier. It was called Technology-Mediated Narrative Environments for Learning. From the introduction by the four editors, Giuliana Dettori, Tania Giannetti, Ana Paiva and Ana Vaz, I learnt that technology-mediated narrative environments were digital spaces in which learners could relate their own stories. The book was the product of a workshop arranged by the Special Interest Group Narrative and Learning Environments (SIG NLE) of the Kaleidoscope Network of Excellence. The merits of narrative in teaching and learning are obvious. Teachers have always been tellers of stories. However, following the work of Bruner (1990) we have been getting more and more aware of the fact that learners also have stories to tell. So this book, the introduction said, was about digital technologies that allow learners to tell their stories, much in the same way as “show-and-tell” sessions, puppet shows, etc have always been used for this purpose. So the book became my companion and reading materials as I spent six weeks attending three conferences in Europe.

The book at first glance

As can be expected of the product of a workshop, the book is an exploration of a concept rather than an explanation. The topics therefore are divergent, rather than convergent, and spiral out from the central theme of technology-mediated environments. Some chapters describe commercially available tools, others describe tools under construction. Some are case studies involving the use of such tools, and even others describe the use of existing narrative tools, such as video cameras and video editing suites, as elements of narrative environments. The book has thirteen chapters including the introduction.

The chapters, from two to twelve

Chapter 2 by Ruth Aylett, “And they both lived happily ever after” is an excellent theoretical foundation for stories and learning, identifying three uses of narrative, that of telling, authoring and role playing. The chapter also looks at the role of narrative and interactivity, and considers the issue of what makes a story believable. Chapter three, “Narrative-oriented software for the learning of a foreign language” by Jeffrey Earp and Tania Giannetti describes a number of programmes, such as Story Maker 2, Kar2ouche composer. They argue that these tools can only be used effectively if teachers ensure that their learners keep on track, based on the types of learners involved and the learning goals.
Bregje de Vries changes the focus in Chapter 4 to “Reflective narration with e-mail” when she describes a design experiment in which they considered how children wrote personal and reflective stories about their experiences. They worked from three perspectives, act, statement and story, and suggested that the theoretical underpinnings for this type of research needs to be strengthened, and that Design-Based Research formed a useful methodology.

In sharp contrast Chapter 5 contains Patricia Valinho and Nuno Correia’s description of “oTTomer” – an blend of physical space and interactive tools that allow children to immerse in role-play with a number of real and virtual characters. The next chapter is a single-subject case study called “Speak for yourself” that tells the story of a twelve-year old grade 7 special needs student who used multimedia authoring software to tell stories that, owing to learning difficulties, he would not have been able to tell through conventional text. Author Fern Faux calls for a less prescriptive curriculum and relaxed assessment methods that will allow us to credit students for their achievements in environments other than the ones traditionally used in schools.

In Chapter 7 Ana Vaz and Ana Paiva ask “Can character perspective induce reflection?” They describe a FearNot! application about bullying at school. They argue that for a learner to develop empathy with a character, the learner needs to identify with a particular character, rather than to be an outside observer. The aim of the project was to reduce bullying behaviour by encouraging bullies to develop empathy with their victims. Further plans will involve not only allowing learners to take various roles, but also to assess their changes in attitude, and later even to assess the coping strategies of children who are bullied.

Chapter 8, by Chronis Kynigos, Nicholas Kazazis and Katerina Makri, “On narrative perception and creativity” considers what happens when children aged from 10 to 13 engage in recording and producing their own video material. They identify two ways in which their subjects used the technology, the first group, called the “tellers” simply told the story with minimum use of video devices. The second group, called the “directors” exploited the various possibilities offered by the video editing programme to give expression to their own creativity.

Kevin Walker describes a really interesting project that blends real and digital environments in Chapter 9: “Story structures”. The premise is that people walking through a museum often only remember what they had seen years later, when prompted by another stimulus. Debriefing people directly after a museum visit is of little help, as they are usually physically and mentally tired. He then suggests the use of digital devices such as the iPod to record people’s experiences during the visit, thus creating a “learning trail”.

In Chapter 10, “Narrative for Motivation and Meaning Making”, Olga Timcenko describes an innovative use of narrative to augment or replace the traditional manual in teaching programming and application use in a Lego™ environment for children. Her argument is that people hardly ever read manuals, yet they like stories. Therefore an approach whereby a developer tells the story of how a certain solution was developed will motivate others to use the same procedures. Likewise, asking children to tell the stories of how they came to develop certain solutions creates readable project documentation, and gives us an understanding of what meaning was created and how.

Jarmo Laaksolathi, presents us in Chapter 11 with two “Methods for Evaluating a Dramatic Game”. The first is a Sensual Evaluation Instrument that captures players’ immediate non-verbal response to a game. The second is an existing method, Repertory Grid Technique that is used after the game to determine players’ subjective experience.

In Chapter 12 Giuliana Dettori and Tania Giannetti analyze the extent to which a multimedia authoring tool is able to support “Narrative Creation and Self-Regulated Learning”. They evaluate Story Maker 2 and that self-regulation not so much about being free to regulate one’s own learning, but more about being able to do so. Self-regulated learning is a skill that has to be developed.

**Chapter 13 – the summary**

In the last chapter Carola Conle pulls the whole lot together with an analysis of the narrative and educational qualities of some of the programs discussed in the previous chapters. The really nice thing about her chapter called “Considerations on Technology-Mediated Narrative Learning Environments” is that, of all the authors in the whole book, she is the only one who actually uses narrative as a vehicle for her chapter – putting her money where her mouth is. She tells the story of how she made sense of the workshop that led to this book. She then, effectively
presents a review of the book by presenting five “selections”. The first four selections consider aspects concerning students creating multimedia narratives. These selections concentrate on creativity and skill development. Selection five is about the way in which students experience professionally created multimedia narratives. Finally she relates “How an experience becomes a story and how stories become experience” (p. 154). Finally she presents some themes, questions and personal episodes.

What I thought

So that then is my blend of story and summary. I read the book on plains, trains and automobiles (with other people driving). Sometimes I had to leave it for a week or two because of other pressing matters. But eventually I had to sit down and work through it in one single session asking, “Who should buy this book, and why?”

The book is for researchers, teachers and developers with a genuine interest in enhancing the creative quality of education by incorporating the oldest form of teaching – narrative. The great strength of the book is that it provides the theoretical underpinnings required to analyse narrative learning environments and shows where theory is lacking. Then it presents a selection of excellent empirical studies that cover a wide range of applications. In this way the book forms an excellent resource for a student about to embark on masters’ or doctoral studies, who needs a good overview of the chosen field.

It is a pity then that a book that is all about the use of narrative, uses hardly any narrative in its style of reporting. All these authors do all this excellent work eliciting creativity in their learners – and then thy put it across in such a dry, academic style!
Nevertheless I found it a really useful resource. It opened my eyes to a whole lot of research questions. It is the sort of thing that a professor of computers and education should keep on the shelf.