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# Compassionate inquiry: digital storytelling and the ethics of care

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we identify the use of Digital Storytelling (DS) as a mode of pedagogy aligned with an ethics of care. We consider how DS, as summative assessment, may foreground care ethics such as attentiveness, responsiveness, and trust. Our interest in this topic stems from our concern over the impact on staff and students of the massification of higher education, which includes low attendance, social isolation, and educator burnout. This paper presents an empirical study of students' summative work and educators' views on the use of DS in the classroom in the context of a large, international cohort of first year undergraduates on an Education Studies programme. We conclude that DS may help students overcome some of the negative issues of massification and the legacy of Covid-19 identified in this paper, and that educators may also derive benefits from its use.

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Digital storytelling; education studies; ethics of care; massification of higher education; summative assessment

## Introduction

This paper reports on the use of Digital Storytelling (DS) as a mode of pedagogy in a year one Education Studies undergraduate module. Building on Bozalek et al.'s (2016) research into how an ethics of care may be used to analyse the dialogic aspects of feedback, we consider how DS, as summative assessment, may foreground care ethics such as 'attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness and trust' (826). Our interest in this topic stems from concerns shared by the authors over the impact on staff and students of the massification of higher education, defined as the rapid increase in student enrolment from the end of the twentieth century onwards (Hornsby and Osman 2014). For example, between 1992 and 2016, the number of UK undergraduate students almost doubled (Office for National Statistics 2016). It is widely believed that higher education 'promotes the advancement of human capital and the modernisation of societies' (Chankseliani and McCowan 2021, 2), and the expansion of higher education (HE) has been broadly welcomed (see for example, UNESCO's (2023) Sustainable Development

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Goal 4.3). Research indicates that HE delivers personal and social benefits (Schofer, Ramirez, and Meyer 2021), and that those who are least likely to attend HE derive the most benefit from it (Elhage, Laosebikan, and Black-Parker 2022). Internationally, widening participation in HE ‘has emerged as a major policy concern’ (Burke 2020), and policies designed to create more diverse constituencies of learners are fully supported by the authors of this paper. However, international research on the massification of HE has also noted numerous concerns including changes to the content and delivery of courses that negatively affect course outcomes (Monks and Schmidt 2011); the diminishment of interaction between staff and students (Wang and Calvano 2022); a reduction in the variety of teaching and assessment methods (Msiza, Ndhlovu, and Raseroka 2020), and an increase in ‘work-related stress, burnout, and mental health difficulties’ amongst staff (Brewster et al. 2022, 549). Research indicates that overworked staff often provide generic and superficial feedback to students who are ‘fixated on grades’ (Jones et al. 2021, 446) and who sometimes resort to plagiarism ‘to find the shortest and least stressful way to complete their coursework or program requirements’ (Fatima et al. 2020, 35). Thus, while this paper acknowledges the importance of widening participation in HE, it explores how DS might be used to mitigate some of the effects of increased class sizes.

Massification presents several challenges to the ethics of care. First, exponents of the ethics of care reject the utilitarian tendency to think of the ‘moral good in terms of acts that produce the greatest good for the greatest number’ (Noddings 2013, 154). Although the discussion of utilitarianism is beyond the scope of this paper, we note that utilitarianism informs the socio-economic theory that fuelled the global expansion of HE (see for example, Chao 2014; Ward 2016), making the philosophy and practice of massification oppositional to the ethics of care. Second, exponents of the ethics of care reject traditional theories about ethics that place justice as the foundation of morality (Gilligan 1982), arguing instead that care should be the foundation of ethics, with justice as the superstructure (Noddings 2013). This approach requires us to establish a ‘sensible, receptive, and responsive’ relationship with individuals (Noddings 2013, 42) rather than ‘abstract away from the concrete situation those elements that allow a formulation of deductive argument’ (42) about the optimal way to interact with them. Under massification, ‘engrossment, or “feeling with”’ (Diller 2018, 327) students is often difficult for staff, as it is seemingly impossible for a large cohort of students to fill our ‘field of attention’ (327) in the same way that a smaller group might. Arguably, the widespread use of student satisfaction surveys exemplifies the shift towards the formulation of deductive arguments about the optimisation of staff-student interactions under massification (see for example, Klemenčič and Chirikov 2015; Stewart 2015; Winstone et al. 2022). Third, if diligent teaching staff attempt to implement an ethics of care on massified programmes they may compound their ‘work-related stress, burnout, and mental health difficulties’ (Brewster et al. 2022, 549) by going ‘above and beyond’ already unrealistic performance expectations (Ball 2012).

Whilst there is literature that focuses on the ethics of DS, including specifically the ethics of care for DS (Livingston and Gachago 2020; Sykes and Gachago 2018), there is less literature that considers more broadly DS as an ethics of care in HE. This gap in the literature is perhaps surprising, given the synergy between DS and the ethics of care in HE that is evident in the theoretical foundation of DS in narrative inquiry and the ethics of care, and the dialogic relationship between the instructor and the

creators of DS, both of which are explored in this paper. This paper asks, therefore, if DS has the potential to offer an ethics of care in the context of a massified, international cohort of first year undergraduate students. To answer this question, we draw on (i) qualitative data from students' personal narratives as part of their summative assessment on a year one module and (ii) a focus group held with the teaching team after the end of that year's cohort on the module. The module explores the doctrines of some of the major theorists who have helped shape educational research and practice internationally. By locating philosophies of education in their historical context, the module aims to help students explore how ideas evolve over time, and to understand the source of some of their own beliefs about teaching and learning. The title of this paper, 'Compassionate Inquiry', is inspired by Sykes and Gachago's (2018, 95) observation that we are always 'entangled in each other and in the world' and reflects our belief that DS may enable both students and educators to respond to this entanglement with compassion. This paper is the first of two which explore our approach to DS as a part of the summative assessment on a massified UG module. A second paper will provide a more detailed analysis of the impact of DS in terms of students' learning gains.

## Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling (DS) is an educational practice informed by the belief that 'narrative is one of the fundamental sense-making operations of the mind' (Lodge 1990, 4). For DS, this sense-making has two salient dimensions: (i) by telling stories about our lives, we become more aware of the dynamic forces that shape our values, behaviours, and motivations (Ward, Mazzoli Smith, and Dragas 2023); (ii) by combining these stories with digital media such as images, audio, and video (Cersosimo 2019), we create multimodal vignettes that help other people 'walk in our shoes' (Hardy and Sumner 2018). The capacity of DS to help learners become both self-aware and empathetic through dialogical interaction with other people (Niemi and Multisilta 2016) has led to its adoption in areas such as values education (Ayten and Polater 2021), moral instruction (Abiola 2014), education for social cohesion (Gardner, Maierhofer, and Penz 2018) and education to prevent radicalisation (De Leener 2019).

Since its inception in the USA in the 1980s (Rossiter and Garcia 2010), DS has been applied in primary, secondary, and higher educational settings in countries throughout North America, Asia, and Europe, either as a stand-alone pedagogy or in combination with other pedagogies (Wu and Chen 2020). The focus of this present paper is the use of DS in HE, where it has been applied, for example, to develop students' research skills (Schrum and Bogdewiecz 2022); to facilitate students' reflection on their study abroad experience (Hamilton et al. 2019), and to enhance students' 'career decision-making self-efficacy' (Pordelan, Hosseinian, and Baei Lashaki 2021, 3445). DS's ability to foster self-discovery and give voice to people's lived experience has also made DS attractive as a participatory action research method in diverse fields such as gender studies, anthropology, health, and teacher education (Flicker and MacEntee 2020; Livingston and Gachago 2020). It is no exaggeration to say that DS has found its way 'into every corner of higher education' (Lambert 2017, vi).

## The theoretical foundation of DS in narrative inquiry and the ethics of care

In the 1980s, feminist researchers and educators used consciousness raising (CR) activities to confront patriarchal systems, and the ‘basic method’ they employed was narrative, or ‘the telling of stories’ (Damarin 1994, 35). Exponents of CR storytelling were interested in ‘The honoring of concrete stories over abstract principles’ (35), and ‘the receiving of the other’ (35). There is an obvious overlap between CR storytelling and the ethics of care, in that both reject ‘masculine’ abstract reasoning in favour of ‘feminine’ embodied responsiveness (for a detailed account of this feminine ethic, see Gilligan 1982). CR storytelling is one of several narrative approaches associated with this ethics of care, which include for example ‘I poems’ (Koelsch 2015), reflective journaling (Guajardo 2023), and autobiography (Cotterill and Letherby 1993). What unites these narrative approaches is the belief that personal stories ‘inhabit both social science and artistic spaces’ (Blumenfeld-Jones 1995, 25) and thus provide both “fidelity” and aesthetics’ (25). Fidelity refers to the requirement for the narrator to be truthful when telling their story and for the receiver of the story to be respectful (25), while aesthetics refers to ‘forms of experience that possess an emotional quality that is both feelingful and satisfying’ (Eisner and Powell 2002, 135). Not all narrative data conform to cultural understandings of a ‘story’, as they are comprised of ‘snippets of talk that have no pre-defined narrative structure’ (Barkhuizen 2019, 191). Whether or not digital stories utilise the traditional story structure of ‘staging, plot progression, and cognitive tension’ (Boyd, Blackburn, and Pennebaker 2020, 1), their fidelity and aesthetics enable both storytellers and their audience to inhabit and celebrate ‘a world comprised of relationships rather than of people standing alone’, as Carol Gilligan (1982, 27) puts it in her seminal work on the ethics of care.

## The dialogical relationship between the instructor and the creators of DS

The dialogical interaction of DS is not limited to the speaker-listener dyad: storytellers need guidance – usually referred to as facilitation – on how to create multimodal digital stories, and through this facilitation they become ‘first person producers nurtured by serious play, innovation, collaboration and honest feedback’ (Bickel et al. 2017, 386). This nurturing often takes place through a ‘workshop-based teaching method’ (Riberio 2017, 215) that ‘couples cognition and affection, and links the self to others’ (221). Under an ethics of care, instructors and participants must ‘open up to the other, imagining the world through the other’s being’ to ‘become a witness to the other and to ourselves’ (Ellis 2017, 439). In so doing, both parties ‘must try to negotiate and resolve misunderstandings and disagreements that might result in moment-to-moment interactions’ (438). As educators, we are responsible for creating a ‘safe space’ (Sykes and Gachago 2018, 91) for storytelling, but recognise that safety is not something that can be bestowed by educators from a position of authority, but instead ‘needs to be negotiated and created in community’ (91). This task requires educators to be mindful of their own ‘gendered, classed and raced subjectivities and how they play out in the classroom’ (83). In DS, as in all aspects of education, there is no ‘perfect’ workshop that guarantees everyone’s safety, but DS workshops are underpinned by the desire to create a site

of trust, empathy, and solidarity for instructors and participants alike. The story circle is the heart of the traditional digital storytelling approach as developed by Lambert (2017) and this space has been found to confer to participants precisely the qualities of a space apart that can foster dialogue and an ethics of care. In a recent study by Mazzoli Smith et al. (2024), interviews with participants of DS workshops were analysed and the themes that were found to describe the story circle were connection, space, safety, time, voice, containment and ownership. Of note was the finding that the relational and dialogical qualities of this space, which supported the formation of the stories, were central to participant experiences.

## Methods

The study described here was conducted in the academic year 2022–2023. It explores (i) the Digital Stories and Reflections of a cohort of 114 first year undergraduate students on an Education Studies module at a UK university and (ii) the findings of a focus group with the teaching team, which consisted of four permanent staff members and one Teaching Assistant (TA) who is enrolled as a PhD student at the university. Ethical approval was obtained from the departmental ethics committee.

## Data collection

At the end of the module, students attended three lectures on the purpose and method of DS and two seminars in which they (i) viewed and discussed examples of DS; (ii) shared their stories about a learning experience that was of value to them. There was not sufficient time in the context of the module's teaching timetable to take the students through a full DS workshop, which can often span 2–3 days, but as two members of the teaching team had themselves attended workshops and one was a trained DS facilitator, an optimal model that could be incorporated into the module was reached. This included the five timetabled hours of tuition over three weeks to introduce digital storytelling, run small story circles and guide the students in the creation of their final digital stories. There was also self-study time each week in which the students could reflect on the development of their story and then create it.

As part of their summative assessment, the students were asked to (i) combine their narrative about themselves as a learner with images and music to create a DS that could be played on a computer and uploaded to the online assessment portal; (ii) write a 500–1000 word Reflection on their DS, exploring connections between their personal experience and theories/theorists encountered on the module, e.g. Confucius, Rousseau, Wollstonecraft. Our assessment of the students' work was informed by Noddings' (2013, 186) rejection of the deification of abstract goals such as "critical thinking", and "critical reading," and "critical reasoning", which often feature as intended learning outcomes on undergraduate modules. In asking students to create a DS and reflect on it, our aim was to help them think deeply about educational theory, and to care about it, through dialogue that enabled them to 'come into contact with ideas and to understand, to meet the other and to care' (Noddings 2013, 186). To this end, we decided not to grade the stories themselves, but these were rather a pre-requisite to the reflective writing and academic essay that were graded. This approach required us to

acknowledge that whenever we describe ourselves or our actions to others, we are creating a story about ourselves (Parry 1997). A reflection on how we came to create a DS is, then, a story about a story, so instead of asking if the students' Reflections were authentic accounts of their storytelling process, we assessed their ability to articulate how a real-world experience (e.g. exam anxiety) finds expression in/is explained by educational theory, and why we should care about this.

After the students had completed their summative assignments for the module, a focus group was held with the module teaching team. The aims of the focus group were to: (i) discover how the classroom helped facilitate, or hinder, students' analysis of any synergy between their lived experience and the module content; (ii) share our experiences of working with the students as they developed their personal narratives.

### ***Data analysis***

When considering how to analyse the students' DS and reflective writing, we were mindful that researchers have employed a diverse range of methods to analyse narrative data (Franzosi 1998), such as postmodern deconstruction (Boje 1995) and the multimodal analytic framework (Kim, Yatsu, and Li 2021). Our chosen approach was informed by Alan Parry's (1997) theory that the storyteller's use of metaphor enables us to discover how they are configuring their world. This approach is particularly helpful when exploring any uniformity of expression that might arise in storytelling about global phenomena, such as standardised assessment. We therefore asked how the students explained their lived experience through the conscious or unconscious use of metaphor in their DS. We acknowledge that there are many other ways that the stories could be analysed, but we suggest that this approach is particularly effective at distilling key themes that are present both in the textual and visual aspects of the stories, without the need to reduce analysis of either aspects in a separable way.

Our analysis of the focus group is based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, which we found to be compatible with our data analysis of the students' work (Parry 1997), as both approaches acknowledge the researchers' reflections as a component of meaning-making. We read the focus group transcript, and descriptive codes were assigned to the data that were broadened to an interpretive level from which overarching themes were identified (Braun and Clarke 2006).

## **Findings**

### ***Students' digital stories and reflections***

The students' DS explored diverse topics such as family ties, mental health, and the impact of Covid-19. Around 80% of the cohort were Chinese students, and their stories were more homogeneous than the home students', with many using the DS as an opportunity to express dismay over the Gaokao (the Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges). While many students used stock images from the internet to illustrate their stories, some created their own artwork or used personal photographs. The images used in the DS ranged from bleak to humorous: some students created animations or still images to convey their emotions, and many of



the students used their Reflection to articulate alignment between their DS's audio-visual content and the module content. Where music was incorporated, it was usually selected from the options available in tools such as Adobe Express, although one student used their own musical composition. The stories typically followed a narrative arc of 'problem – intervention – resolution', as is often advocated in the introduction to the DS form, and most of the students' stories centred on academic problems they had experienced in secondary school. Although the particulars of every story were unique to the individual storyteller, many stories shared the following features: The storyteller recalls being distressed over something, e.g. academic failure, boredom, or loneliness. Then, someone (e.g. a teacher) or something (e.g. playing a musical instrument) helps them find a solution for their dilemma, which they then overcome. They express gratitude to the person/process that helped them and say that they would like to help other people in a similar situation. In their Reflection, the storytellers relate their personal experience to various themes and theorists encountered on the module: popular themes were creativity, positive psychology, and progressive education, all of which fit well with the narrative hero or quest archetypes identified above. To view examples of the students' DS, please see: About – Digital Storytelling Durham.

Using an approach based on Parry (1997), we identified two metaphors that emerged from viewing and reading the students' work: the 'machine' and the 'veil', discussed below.

### *The 'machine'*

According to Parry (1997, 118), the 'dominant root metaphor' shaping personal narratives today is that of a 'machine' governing existence through 'impersonal forces' (118). In education, this machine is often likened to a 'sausage factory' that processes learners into an oven-ready product for employers (see for example, Msiza, Ndhlovu, and Raseroka 2020, 40). The machine metaphor was evident in the majority (approx. 90%) of the students' digital stories, often as follows: The storyteller is constrained by something, e.g. rote learning; the pressure to excel at STEM subjects; exam anxiety. They are liberated from this constraint by someone (e.g. a teacher) or something (e.g. a sport) that acts as a 'permission giver' to reject the mechanical process and exit the 'conveyor belt'. Now in command of their own destiny, they express gratitude to their liberator and hope to provide similar release to others. As noted by Parry (1997), the machine metaphor is aligned with a mechanistic worldview that searches for scientific cause and effect, and in their Reflection many students expressed dissatisfaction with the 'factory' model of education (explored in this module with reference to the Bell-Lancaster method and utilitarianism), which positions academic attainment as the 'product' of education and forces students to endure rote learning and constant assessment to maximise 'output'.

In the following example, a home student expresses gratitude to her teachers who saw her as a human being, rather than a cog in the machine:

There was a time when I went to secondary school where I felt that the teachers cared more about my grades and performances than my wellbeing and character. This made me feel that my value was decided by a letter or percentage and led to me withdrawing from participating in lessons in fear of being wrong or judged. So, this is a thank you to all the teachers who believed in me and took an interest in me, [X], the girl before the grades and gave me the



confidence to grow as a person ... You have changed my life and I'll never forget you.  
(Student A)

In her Reflection, the student says:

I can relate to Ball's claim (2016) that neoliberalism in education lowers people's self-worth and strips students of their humanity by viewing them as data ... I recognise now the pressure that teachers are under to get good exam results and I believe that my memory of these teachers is so positive because, subconsciously as a child and before embarking on this reflection process, I knew that these individuals had 'gone the extra mile' and had not taken the easy route, instead investing time in me as a person and helping me grow emotionally, socially and academically. (Student A)

In the next example, an international student describes her experience of an assessment-driven curriculum, and how she was liberated from this model of education by her parents:

The three years of junior high school was the most unhappy time for me. From the moment I stepped into the classroom, I started working towards my high school entrance exams. In these three years, I have felt more pressure and depression than ever before ... I also gave up my hobbies because of my studies ... I knew that this type of education was not for me and that my parents didn't approve of it, so I chose an international high school ... I have more free time to redevelop my hobbies. I am grateful that my parents are open-minded and supportive of my choices. (Student B)

In her Reflection, the student says 'My digital story is closely related to the idea of Foucault. In my video story, I denounce the feudalistic education that some teachers as well as schools transmit to their students' (Student B).

### *The 'veil'*

A rival metaphor seemed to inform around 10% of the students' digital stories, which we have called the 'veil' after Percy Bysshe Shelley's use of this term in his poem 'Mutability', published in 1816. According to Shelley, there are two modes of being: 'the ideal and the actual' (Wayne Marjarum 1937, 913), with the former largely concealed by the latter, meaning that we are trapped in our mundane world of sensory perception with heaven 'unascended' (Callaghan 2015, 93). Personal narratives shaped by the veil metaphor acknowledge that our attempts to control external forces (the 'machine') often obfuscate or 'veil', rather than clarify, the meaning and purpose of our ever-changing experiences. The veil metaphor is typically presented as follows: The storyteller faces a personal dilemma (e.g. What career should I pursue? Why am I working so hard but not getting good results?) The storyteller fails to find satisfactory answers to these questions through conventional means, but then obtains enlightenment through their belief in God, the contemplation of love, or through meditation. These stories often feature a person (e.g. a family member) or an experience (e.g. visiting a Forest School) that opens the storyteller to this new perspective on life. In their Reflection, students using the veil metaphor often identify a connection between their personal story and Romanticism, Confucianism, or liberal education.

In the following example, a home student describes the illusion of belonging and self-actualisation offered by the machine model of education, and the protagonist's realisation that personal fulfilment through compliance with this model is not possible:

Mine is a story of finding belonging ... I am safe within a system providing me with endless wisdom ... I will follow no one's rules, my destiny is mine to choose ... Trying to climb he only fell ... a desert dry as ancient bone, this surely could not be his home? Lost, unable to belong, a pitiful life he had become. Until, at last, a seeker came and loved that wretch all the same. At last, he wept in humble state as God almighty chose his fate. (Student C)

In his Reflection, Student C considers how his DS relates to various philosophies of education encountered on the module and compares the appeal of utilitarian and liberal education. Reflecting on his DS, he says 'The poem goes on to show that all human philosophy is ultimately flawed and will fall through and change ... the boy finally finds rest in a divine truth not created by fallible human minds' (Student C).

### **Focus group**

We developed three themes from our focus group: 'social cohesion'; 'scaffolding'; 'conscientization'.

#### **Social cohesion**

We began our focus group discussion with our most pressing concern, which was the lack of continuity with seminar attendance that made it difficult for seminar leaders and students to build rapport. Students were assigned to one of seven seminar groups that met every other week, but many chose to attend whatever group was convenient:

I would never have the same group twice, they never gelled. They never became increasingly comfortable with each other as a group. (Participant 2)

... they sat with people they knew but they still didn't know each other, and it was the end of the module. It felt like they didn't know each other as well as they might, which reflects something about the group dynamic. (Participant 5)

#### **Scaffolding**

Despite the lack of 'gelling' identified under our first theme, we agreed that the students had engaged with the DS seminars. We felt that this was due in part to the way in which the DS sessions had been designed and delivered:

I had scaffolded it in the lecture. The actual seminar was also scaffolded ... by the end they all had ideas they didn't feel stressed about it. (Participant 5)

Because there was a pre-seminar before the sharing of the stories, this went really well. They were able to generally talk about their lives, didn't feel the need to come up with something really dramatic ... Being able to talk about something without being led sort of opened up those avenues for conversation that enabled them to prepare something for the following week. (Participant 1)

Perhaps because of this scaffolding, the DS seminars felt different from our previous interactions with our students, in that they were more student-led:

I think the students felt more comfortable sharing their stories with other group members, getting feedback from other group members. (Participant 4)

We discussed why students were willing to listen and respond to each other:

I think it's partly the relationship that you build with them but also the relationships to each other and to themselves in the world – where is it [the DS] going? Is it a safe space? Is it just [shared] within that group? I think that now, in the digital age, there's a lot of tension around space, of sharing personal things. So, I think it's quite complex actually. (Participant 5)

### Conscientization

We agreed that the development of students' insight into the theory and practice of education – however uncomfortable – was of paramount importance and this conscientization was our next theme:

Learning is key – it's ultimately about learning. (Participant 3)

It's the links that the students are able to make with other elements outside the module, and starting to see how that relates to other elements of their learning. DS does open up to them the idea that they can look at other elements. It pushes them out of their comfort zone a little bit. (Participant 1)

### Discussion

Narrative activity 'provides tellers with an opportunity to impose order on otherwise disconnected events, and to create continuity between past, present and imagined worlds' (Ochs and Capps 1996, 19). Our DS assignment invited students to create continuity between their lived experience and educational theory, not through critical analysis but instead through a form of narrative interpretation and representation, aligned with the 'notion of the dreamwork' (Walsh 2010, 143), defined as a creative process based on our ability to think in images without the need for stimulus-response (143). Analysis of the students' DS and Reflections indicates that they engaged strongly with this assessment activity and demonstrated a high level of critical analysis of educational theories. In our focus group, it was agreed that DS 'pushes [students] out of their comfort zone a little bit' (Participant 1) by encouraging them to make links between the module content, and that this activity informed their critical analysis of educational theory. Fiddian-Green et al. (2019, 505) argue that the iterative process of 'listening, dialogue, and action/praxis' in digital storytelling workshops leads to 'conscientization (i.e. critical consciousness or insight) at the individual level that results from engaging in these steps as a group' (505). This iterative process was evident on our module and conscientization was a theme in our focus groups: in the seminars, the students discussed how their stories needed to 'tie in with elements' (Participant 1) of module content but were often hesitant over proposing a link. In contrast, much of the subsequent assessed work was 'very polished' (Participant 2). This finding is partly explained by Elbow's (2011, 16) analysis of 'careful expository writing', which is 'more deliberately organized and planned than speech' (16–17). However, it is also possible that this 'polish' is indicative of the development of students' 'critical consciousness' (Fiddian-Green et al. 2019, 505) through the creation of their DS and Reflections.

The aim of this paper is not, however, to ask if DS is the optimal means for teaching the history and philosophy of education, but to ask if DS has the potential to foster an ethics of care. Care ethics include 'attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness and trust' (Bozalek et al. 2016, 826), all of which were evident to a greater or lesser

extent in the students' DS and Reflections. Whether employing the 'machine' or 'veil' metaphor, students acknowledged that their personal experience is nested within an education system that, while often mechanistic in its assessment practices, is nevertheless comprised of person-to-person interactions. For example:

... during the storytelling process, I kept returning to think about the teachers who had a positive impact on my life – for me this shows how central relationships are to education and how they can change learners' lives. (Student A)

The students' DS recall Nodding's (1993, 6) observation that 'all dialogue is, in the deepest sense, moral because it is an acknowledgement of our existential longing to hear and be heard'. In our focus group, we discussed the DS seminars as a site of hearing and being heard. We agreed that these seminars had provided a safe space for students to share their stories of entanglement (cf. Sykes and Gachago 2018). In the focus group, it was noted that scaffolding meant that the purpose of DS 'is really clear and quite bounded, and that does afford some safety to the students' (Teaching-team Participant 3) and that scaffolding had fostered the care ethics of attentiveness, responsiveness, and trust (Bozalek et al. 2016).

The care ethics of attentiveness, responsiveness, and trust that we observed in the story circle were even more pleasing, given the students' prior lack of engagement with their designated seminar groups. We agreed that this lack of engagement was unusual for a first-year cohort and is perhaps explained by the impact of Covid-19 on the students' final years of secondary education. As noted by Kareem et al. (2023, 1595), 'Social distancing led to the lack of ample interactions, affecting cognitive development at all stages of growth'. As a result, 'Students' mental health suffered drastically due to a lack of peer and social interactions' (1595). Some of these issues may have undermined the students' ability to commit to a particular seminar group, but it is also possible that students' random attendance was influenced by the size of the cohort. According to Mulryan-Kyne (2010, 177), 'Low participation levels' and 'social isolation' are common on massified programmes. This tendency for social isolation, coupled with the profound impact of social distancing prior to coming to university, may account for some students' inability to engage consistently with their designated seminar group. Despite the lack of 'gelling' prior to the storytelling sessions, the students engaged with the DS seminars and were willing to act as a 'witness to the other' (Ellis 2017, 439) by listening and responding to each other's stories.

## Conclusion

HE has been so fully massified that our current era is defined as 'post-massification' (Shin and Teichler 2013, 1). Research indicates that massified programmes are prone to low levels of student participation (Mulryan-Kyne 2010), and that students' social isolation (Mulryan-Kyne 2010) is compounded by educators' sense of dislocation from their students (Diller 2018). While this may seem unpromising terrain for the cultivation of an ethics of care, Noddings (2013, 206) rejects the idea that care ethics can only be 'usefully applied in families and small communities' and she urges us to always and everywhere 'maintain a caring relation – that is, to keep communication alive and remained prepared to care' (207). In this paper, we hope to have demonstrated the potential of DS to

facilitate students' exploration of educational theory and practice grounded in the ethics of care, irrespective of cohort size in its relational aspects, both in terms of the storylines and metaphors the students drew on. In addition, we hope to have demonstrated the potential of DS to help teaching staff promote social cohesion and conscientization by scaffolding the story circles and linking the stories through to academic essays via the process of reflective writing.

Although some of our students seemed unable or reluctant to engage consistently with their designated seminar group, they were willing to 'become a witness to the other' and to themselves (Ellis 2017, 439) in their DS seminars, which their investment in the creation of these personal – yet deeply relational – stories attests to. Personal storytelling seems, therefore, to help overcome some of the issues around massification and the legacy of Covid-19 identified in this paper through specific scaffolding, which necessitates a form of learning depending on social cohesion. As DS seminar leaders, we might be tempted to credit ourselves for this transformation in student engagement, but literature suggests that it is the process of storytelling that reveals our 'capacity for attention' (Bozalek et al. 2016, 829), rather than the way in which these stories are elicited (Tan 2022). This does not mean, however, that the facilitation of DS is not important: the carefully structured, iterative process of 'listening, dialogue, and action/praxis' (Fiddian-Green et al. 2019, 505) in the DS lectures and seminars, particularly the story circles, helped cultivate students' conscientization, that is 'critical consciousness or insight' (505) into educational theory and practice, which they later shared through their DS and Reflections. Two members of the teaching team had experience of DS as facilitated by StoryCentre and Patient Voices, two of the leading global digital storytelling organisations, which helped considerably in this respect (see Mazzoli Smith et al. 2024).

Many of the students' personal narratives invoked experiences of constraint and release, and collectively the DS and Reflections tell a story of oppressive educational practices that young people are subjected to internationally, but also their limited opportunity to reflect on and convey feelings about these practices. It is, however, important not to be naïve about the students' storytelling: as noted by Gabriel (2004, 19), stories 'can be vehicles to enlightenment and understanding but also to dissimulation and lying'. We did not, therefore, attempt to evaluate the reliability of students' alignment of their lived experience with the module content, but instead took the three elements of the assessment at face value, asking if the students' storying of the self (Parry 1997) was couched in a manner that articulated how real-world experience (whether their own or not) relates to theories of education. This precaution was probably unnecessary: as commented upon in our focus group, the scaffolding of the DS activities meant that students understood that their DS could be about a learning experience that is 'quite minor, it could be impersonal potentially, but it's your experience' (Participant 3). There was no need for students to fabricate an experience and indeed it was our impression that the students' storytelling was heartfelt and often deeply moving, conveying significant and sometimes difficult challenges. As noted by Sykes and Gachago (2018, 95), we are always 'entangled in each other and in the world', and the students also notably used their storytelling to respond to this entanglement with compassion, often thanking people who had helped them and promising to help others. The DS opportunity was one that we therefore found was taken up with considerable zeal and engagement by the students, significant we feel as the storytelling component was itself unassessed.

Educators who attempt to care for many students risk becoming exhausted (Brewster et al. 2022), and the wellbeing of our teaching team on this module is an important consideration. However, in our focus group we agreed that the use of DS was not onerous, and that it afforded us pleasure to view and read the students' work. As noted by Li, Zhang, and Gamble (2022), job satisfaction is negatively associated with burnout among instructors in HE, which gives us cause for optimism over the ongoing use of DS in our module. We did, however, find ourselves deeply moved by some of our students' personal stories. The widening participation aspect of massification is creating more diverse communities of learners, and in their digital stories, some of our students chose to share their experiences of having a disability, being a carer or experiencing economic hardship. In England, the people most likely to be underrepresented in higher education are also the most vulnerable members of society (Pickering 2021). According to the Office for Students (OfS 2023):

Even if they reach higher education, some people find they don't do as well as others even when their prior academic performance is the same. Or, they discover that they have fewer chances to experience all aspects of higher education for reasons beyond their control. (OfS 2023)

DS is a form that is particularly well suited to eliciting and enabling stories of progression to HE for students in WP cohorts (Mazzoli Smith 2020). This preliminary study of DS in a large first year HE module does suggest that the ethics of care that underpins the DS methodology can help to mitigate the effects of being in a large cohort, and it is our hope that this form of relational pedagogy may also help ease the disengagement and/or academic underperformance that are associated with unequal life opportunities (OfS 2023).

We end this paper with a line by Shelley (1819) that arguably encapsulates the message of care ethics and the spirit of digital storytelling that underpin our study: 'Nothing in the world is single'. Arguably, the DS and Reflections helped our students to discover how their lived experiences fuse with educational theory, and it is our hope that these activities also helped them to find community in their expression of singularity.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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