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# 'Mirror, mirror on the wall': reflecting on, and refracting through, academic development in a pandemic year

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## ABSTRACT

Using a creative and playful fairy-tale storyboard approach this paper explores the impact of the pandemic, the move to online and blended learning, and the role academic development can have in the future of learning and teaching. We refract academic staff experiences of teaching during the pandemic through our own experiences as academic developers during this time. We conclude that a balancing act is required to sustain the influence gained in the pandemic whilst retaining the signature pedagogy of playfulness that underpins our work.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

This paper reflects on the experiences of academic staff teaching through the pandemic, refracts these through our experiences as academic developers during this time, and then discusses the implications of these experiences for the future role and scope of academic development. Using a creative and playful fairy-tale storyboard approach we explore the impact of the pandemic, the move to online and blended learning, and the role academic development can have in and for the future of learning and teaching.

We have elsewhere (Cunningham & Cunningham, [in press](#)) explored the findings of a creative research project following academic staff teaching during the Autumn of 2020. This research suggested a journey for staff: from initial enthusiasm for online teaching, to frustration with student engagement, through to exhaustion (tinged with relief) by the end of semester. Here we want to develop our creative, playful, approach further still. We seek to reflect on the findings of the staff experiences, and then refract these findings through our experiences as academic developers during this period. Such playfulness in higher education is increasingly used as an approach to teaching as well as to research (James & Nerantzi, 2019; Whitton & Moseley, 2019). Playfulness is also arguably an important aspect of our signature pedagogy as academic developers, unearthing the stories we tell ourselves both as teachers and as academic developers working on the following assumption:

The development and articulation of teaching identities and teaching philosophies is enshrined and accredited by the reflective narrative, an autobiographical presentation of a teaching self, which is, like all autobiography a work of auto-fiction. (Carr et al., 2021, pp. 66–67)

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In what follows we will briefly summarise the methodology and findings of our research project [2], play with the stories of teacher identity and experience we heard in this process [3], then refract these stories through our experience as a means of ‘auto-fiction’ to tell our story too [4]. We end [5] with considerations about what this means for academic developers: highlighting the balancing act that is required if we are to sustain the influence gained in the pandemic whilst retaining the signature pedagogy of playfulness that underpins our work.

## Our research project

We designed a longitudinal study to follow the experiences of academic staff through the Autumn 2020 semester. This included a series of three one-to-one interviews between participants and a member of the research team: one before the start of semester, one at mid-semester, and one at the very end. We used a storyboarding technique based on the ‘story spine’ by the playwright Kenn Adams (adapted by Hanesworth, 2016; see [Appendix A](#)). We asked staff to complete this storyboard in the first interview, as a means of framing the discussion. We referred to the storyboard again at subsequent interviews, asking participants in the third interview if, and how, they would now re-write the final three sections. Further details on our approach can be found in Cunningham and Cunningham ([in press](#)).

We used this storyboard approach for three reasons. First, it enabled staff to create a vision for what their teaching will look like in Autumn 2020 and to help them anticipate explicit challenges and identify clear benefits. Second, we wanted to open new imaginary possibilities for learning and teaching, like the ‘feasible utopias’ (developed by Cheeseman & Guccione, 2018) to unlock writing methods. Third, we hoped that the fairy-tale language evoked by the storyboard would provoke participants to draw on imagery and metaphor, pushing into a fictional and even playful domain. By adopting this storyboarding methodology, we wanted to open the possibility of our colleagues in learning and teaching finding empowerment in sharing their story. We believe that the act of storytelling offers this possibility:

Stories project possible futures, and those projections affect what comes to be, although this will rarely be the future projected by the story. Stories do not just have plots. Stories work to emplot lives: they offer a plot that makes some particular future not only plausible but also compelling [...]. Not least among human freedoms is the ability to tell the story differently and to begin to live according to that different story. (Frank, 2010, p. 10)

Furthermore, in the words of Angela Carter, storyteller extraordinaire, “When we hear the formula ‘Once upon a time’, or any of its variants, we know in advance that what we are about to hear isn't going to pretend to be true (Carter, 1990, p. xiv). This is important. Through the storyboarding technique, we were encouraging participants to immerse themselves in another world. By telling our stories and the stories of our participants, we are highlighting the multiplicity of those experiences. By weaving together different interpretations and versions of ‘Once upon a time’, we can begin to plot a story. Indeed, for Carter, in the words of her obituarist Marina Warner:

Fairy tales also offered here a means of flying – of finding and telling an alternative story, *of shifting something in the mind*, just as so many fairy tale characters shift something in their shape. (Carter, 1990, p. 447, our emphasis)

This quotation gets to the heart of what we wanted for our project from this approach – to enable our colleagues to see how their own teaching selves had shapeshifted and despite the challenges they faced along the way – that this might actually help them fly . . .

The academic staff colleagues we followed through Autumn 2020 started with clear excitement, enthusiasm, and energy for the semester ahead. As we returned to them at mid and then end of semester it was clear that – for some – this excitement had ebbed away, replaced by frustration, the need to change their practice, and latterly exhaustion from teaching online. These findings are discussed in more detail elsewhere (Cunningham & Cunningham, [in press](#)).

### Reflections on the staff experience

We wanted to get deeper into these findings, to explore further the experiences of staff during this period. In line with our desire to be playful, we each took the storyboards written by staff and drew out relevant themes and key quotations that struck us. Using the ‘story spine’ template we wrote a new story, passing the narrative back between each other as authors, editing and crafting down to a coherent single, albeit fictional, voice to bring together the different voices of our participants, as well as the emerging themes. In this case we are showing rather than telling what was said. This fictionalization approach (Phillips & Kara, 2021) aligned with our desire to use stories to ‘emplot’ (or at the very least imagine) what the future may hold for academic developers after their very visible and much lauded support for the sector during the pandemic (Cunningham et al., 2021). It also fits with the playfulness of our approach, as a way of engaging differently with our data.

#### Staff fictionalised storyboard

*Once upon a time there was a place called a University.*

*Everyday, pre-pandemic, most students didn’t attend lectures. Seminars could be valuable, but there were huge disparities in student participation. With so many students it was hard to maintain genuine connections with them – particularly in the early stages of their degree.*

*But one day a terrible plague happened, we were all lonely, confused, and felt helpless. We had to grasp new technology quickly, make changes to assessment and change the way we communicated with students. We learnt fast, passed on tips to others, but it was a struggle. Sometimes we couldn’t work out what we were doing, sometimes we thought we were doing okay. We worried about teaching in this way – whether we could be as ‘good’ online as in the classroom, whether that connection would be there, and whether we could still inspire their learning. It sometimes felt like we were speaking into the void.*

*We discovered we had* amazingly supportive colleagues throughout the university. We had ideas about using the technology and we wanted to learn more about it to help our students. Indeed, we discovered that best magic comes from selecting the right interaction for the right content and pedagogy. It is very much about researching, decision-making and, we hoped, looking ahead and using trial and error.

*And help came from* learning technicians, academic development, and our immediate colleagues. We learned to ask for help, to share ideas, and that such sharing helped enormously. But the sheer volume of need meant that previously easily accessible contacts, like our village IT blacksmith, were now only accessible through a central system. We had to keep in mind they could not simply appear when we clicked our fingers or clicked our ruby slippers together.

*But suddenly,* we were overwhelmed by the messages from different sources and the complexities of our roles. Priorities became less clear. Different demands of the job came into conflict. Research fell by the wayside, and we started to feel guilty. Technology was sometimes too complicated, and we started to lose confidence. We were short staffed and having to create online learning sessions on subjects we had never taught before. Some colleagues were not interested – indeed some complained we had done more than the asked for ‘your best is good enough’. We were unsure how to overcome these challenges.

*Because of that,* we chose not to include some ‘extras’ that we might have in case there was criticism from others. Were these people not looking over my shoulder. It was much harder to ‘hide’ teaching in the online environment. We wondered, though, if the materials provided were enough and if students were supported well enough. We also worried about ourselves: whether we were working too hard, whether our ability to engage online was good, whether students would enjoy the experience. We missed the classroom. But we recognized the need to remain agile and responsive – as an institution we were involved in a huge experiment.

*Until then* and the pandemic is under control, online and blended teaching will suffice. More resources will have to be put into teaching. Thereafter, students will return to university and (hopefully) better appreciate the importance of the education they receive and the opportunities available to them. We might learn to like this way of structuring content – even if we go back to classroom teaching there will be the need good quality online information that was not there before. We also suspect that we will have to decide how comfortable we are in striking the right balance.

*And ever since then* we should be as kind and supportive as possible, to recognise that we are all learning to do this together, and to make sure the students feel the same way and are never afraid to come to us for help. A decision will need to be made by the University as to whether it wishes to become an online provider and move to that different marketplace or continue to offer a more personal experience to students, making use of the knowledge and experience of its teaching staff. With teachers being individuals, there can be no future-proofing but there will need to be increased conversations and communities about pedagogy in universities. These conversations are the catalyst for change. We will be prepared for all eventualities . . . fff

Three aspects of this story struck us as we reflected on this story as academic developers:

- (1) The overwhelming sense of risk that colleagues are taking, and their willingness to embark on a new way of working, seeing positives where they can and being so acutely aware of the duty of care they have to their students despite their own fear and exhaustion.
- (2) Kindness as a theme – both to colleagues, students, and themselves. A recurring theme in the sector during the pandemic, it was often difficult to pinpoint what this meant in practice against the pressures of continuing to function as a university.
- (3) The notion of the ‘catalyst for change’ - which leads us into our own refraction process.

### **Refractions through our experience as academic developers**

After taking time to reflect, pause, and re-examine the fictionalised story there was one comment that stood out for us both – a year on from our initial research. Recalling the empty black boxes on the screens behind which their students remained with no camera or audio on felt for one participant like ‘speaking into the void’. This comment resonated with us and shifted something powerful in our own minds. By fictionalising the diverse storyboards into one plural storyboard as a way of highlighting the common themes and trying to identify the implications for academic developers, we wondered too if we were ‘speaking into the void’. We were seeking to look beyond the surface and find hooks we could harness in our roles as academic developers to create an approach to learning and teaching that could offer us some hope and sustainable future. Descending into the void, had made it harder to identify those ‘hooks’. Yes, we had captured a plural story of the staff journey but the tensions within and between individual stories made it difficult – literally but also ethically – to offer applicable or transferable findings to others, or to identify the sustainability of these emerging practices.

We realised that we needed to look differently at our data. We decided to explore the idea of refraction rather than reflection. Pagano and Roselle (2009, p. 223) describe the process, drawing on the metaphor of refraction of light:

In refraction we look for how the experience has affected us and also how the ‘light,’ the experience, has affected us in meaningful ways and how those reactions can contribute to our context and others. The experience is re-framed as in refraction.

Understood like this, refraction should help us shed a different light on the stories, and how they applied to our work (see also Pryce, 2002). We read through and across the voices of our participants to find our own ones as academic developers. We decided that to achieve this we would apply the storyboarding methodology on ourselves, sharing and weaving this into one account. What follows is that story.

#### ***Academic developers’ fictionalised storyboard***

*Once upon a time there were two academic developers.*

*Everyday*, during the pandemic, they had been called on by their institution to lead changes to learning and teaching. Their challenge had been leading colleagues to use and teach in a new language, cross thresholds, and embrace new technologies. These academic developers were lucky with their allies, some of whom became friends along the way. They were also supported by a learning and teaching team of colleagues comprising digital experts, learning experts, and senior colleagues who had a place at the High Table of the institution.

**But one day**, they realised that some had stopped listening. Their learning community was divided with some wanting to return to their pre-pandemic ways of working, others determined to use the online experience as a catalyst for more change. Their senior leader wanted to please everyone; their digital leader wanted to buy all the shiny new tools possible. Even their allies seemed to have been shut out.

Our academic developers pondered this impasse. They wondered: ‘What do our research findings tell us about the role of academic developers in a brave new post-pandemic world?’ ‘How should we adapt and change our approaches for the undiscovered country that lies ahead?’ ‘What powers and skills have we gained that can help us?’

Our academic developers realised that many of the seeds planted through the pandemic, the alliances formed, and the battlements scaled, could provide strength to draw on. Like **magic beans**, these achievements had grown newfound credibility across the institution for their work. Their voice had been heard at the High Table and the King had noticed the results of their efforts. Might this translate to some influence they wondered (they dared to wonder) over the future? Was there even a newly found respect for Learning & Teaching?

**But suddenly** a fear struck them. What if all this was just a temporary mirage or glimmer? What if the behemoth of university administration swamped them again, the battlements were rebuilt, and the alliances dissipate into thin air? They were already feeling the structures around them, which were so open during the great pandemic, close in and reform. Their budget was tight, the day job hard enough to manage as it was, and the leviathan of research was surfacing once again. The metrics-driven narrative of the sector was pushing colleagues at the High Table in ways that threatened to reverse the progress made.

**Because of that** we are at a pivotal moment for academic development. What becomes of our two academic developers now? Are they heroes of the pandemic who quietly and graciously return to their dwellings, continue their old work until another crisis strikes? Or does this change the nature of who they are and their role at the Institution – are they now not merely change agents, but leaders?

Our two academic developers therefore decided to focus on sustaining relationships with all their allies and thinking of the value this work can bring to them all. Much academic development work is based on goodwill and desire to enhance the student learning experience. Our academic developers must continue to recognise and reward this work either at institutional or at sector level, through scholarship or fellowship. This will mean evaluating the impact of their practices and disseminating this work at institutional level so that they can influence the narrative appearing at the High Table. Through

*this, though, our academic developers must maintain their passion and joy. If the academic development space is to continue to be a 'safe, brave space' (Arao & Clemens, 2013) it must be a place people want to come and a community to which they want to belong.*

*Until then, our academic developers must strive to forge a place in shaping the future of Learning & Teaching. This will not be easy. But when all this comes to pass, colleagues will regularly cross thresholds, will be keen to learn new languages and to translate them to others. Our learners will thrive, certain of expectations and secure in their knowledge and who they want to be as global graduates. The ivory towers will always exist, but their shape will shift, and their height and strength be visible as an accessible place which is open to all.*

*And ever since then, will be a world where the remit, role and relevance of academic development is fully recognised. It will join up the tribes of pedagogy, technology, and policy and our learning community will be fulfilled, open, and curious to whatever the future may hold.*

## **So what?**

The act of creating an academic development storyboard forged by interweaving both of our stories and both of our voices has helped us refract through the storyboards of our project participants. In many ways, our storyboard mirrors the stages they went through. We too experienced that clear sense of energy and passion related to the early stages of responding to the move online. The relevance and visibility of our work was clearly something we enjoyed – despite the horrors of a global pandemic – and there is a sense of pride in what we achieved in partnership with others. But those positives, in both our storyboards, are now tinged with frustration with a perceived lack of progress and potential challenges ahead. We too are tired from the year past. Our refraction through the storyboards of our participants though have also helped us identify what those hooks can be that we were searching for in the opening paragraphs of this paper. We argue that in fact this process has identified three important points that we would like to develop here.

## **New alliances forged**

Many participants in the original storyboards drew on the 'helpers' and the 'magic beans' to talk to the ways in which colleagues in academic development and learning technology, as well as their peers and colleagues, worked together to learn new digital teaching approaches. Indeed, it is the language of the storyboard that pushes new images and metaphors for how those other colleagues were perceived. In the example from the first plural storyboard above, we see the learning technologist referred to as the 'village IT blacksmith', an image that at once encapsulates the essential importance of this role as well as the feeling of a community where everyone has their role and part. The 'village' evokes a time in the distant past before such trades were lost but also of collaboration and a respect, too.



In both plural storyboards, for academic staff and academic developers, there is a strong sense of new alliances forming. For the academic development one, this was about their strengthening partnership with colleagues, including senior academics and institutional leaders. This is a ‘village’ partnership creating a strong sense of increased connectivity and collaboration. The increased opportunity for, and value of, partnership working as such positive aspect of the storyboard is not new to academic development (for diverse examples, see Baume & Popovic, 2016) but the (albeit fleeting) visibility and power of this agency is striking. These are new alliances that could serve us well in the learning and teaching challenges of the future. Towards the end of the fictionalised accounts comes a sense of fear about what lies ahead in this great ‘university experiment’ but also a sense that in the village, decisions about their future were happening elsewhere at this ‘High Table’. However, the structure of the storyboard itself forces us to imagine the future and what might happen to these tensions emerging amidst an uncertain future. The possible dystopian future threatens the storyboards but we are forced to go into a more positive vision, a happy ever after, a ‘feasible utopia’ (Cheeseman & Guccione, 2018) by the storyboarding prompts. Whatever battles lie ahead, our refractions suggest that we can find our own hope for this future. And, so, we returned to the question posed by McGowan and Felten (2021, p. 3) to seek our own ‘liberatory academic development’.

### **Leadership and academic development**

Our refraction offers an image of leadership that is built on collaboration and shared respect. Our storyboard is tinged with a sense of worry that we have lost some of the initial energy and influence we had at the start of the pandemic and the increased reach and scope for the work of academic development through the pandemic. This is expressed as enhanced credibility and connection with broader groups of staff than ever before, with some engaging with academic development for the first time. We speak of the top table of the university and the increased respect and possible influence academic development has had on policy. As above, there is something in the language of the storyboard, the ‘High Table’, a term repeatedly used. There is also an earnestness, a desire to be the ‘goodie’ that echoes the work of academic developers generally and leads to tensions in their role. Our refractions make us wonder whether there is a danger of smugness or of cowardice in this view? Are we unwilling to make difficult decisions and be the ‘baddies’? This romantic reading of the role of academic developers corresponds to the tone and musings of the ‘danger of a single story’ (Adichie, 2009) of educational development explored recently by Hoon et al. (2019).

The specific fairy-tale storyboard template we used prompts the writer to reach an ending of the narrative, and imagine what happens next. As with the staff we followed, this tends towards the production of a ‘happy ending’. We are at a pivotal moment for academic development: for individuals, for institutions, but also for the field in general. We have been called upon like never before to work with a wider range of colleagues, to support fast-paced and wide-reaching pedagogical change. As ‘superheroes’ during the pandemic (Cunningham et al., 2021) we have seen our influence, scope, and credibility grow with our academic colleagues. This offers the vision of academic developers as genuine ‘partners in arms’ (Debowski, 2014) and truly critical ‘critical friends’ (Sequeira, 2021) with the academics we work with. Our

story ends with the happy ending of the academic developer set free (Cunningham & Mills, 2020), with confidence, gladly leading discussions that are bringing together pedagogy, technology, and policy. This is an academic developer using their new-found alliances and influence, grasping the opportunity to take on the leadership of learning and teaching.

### **Playing in the academy**

Eringfeld (2021) in her work on the ‘post-colonial world’ uses a narrative approach to draw out the ‘utopian hopes and dystopian fears’ as a way of ‘re-imagining education’. We would argue that the storyboarding technique is taking us further into articulating not only our hopes and fears but also articulating what we want this ending to be. The playful technique of the storyboard liberates from the daily lived realities and experiences through the fairy-tale language invited by the structure.

From the beginning of the plural storyboard we created from our participants, we are thrown into a ‘[t]errible plague’. Immediately then we are taken into darkness, horror, and fear. This non-traditionally academic and playful language continues in the image of these academic colleagues getting on with it: ‘we kicked our ruby slippers together’. For those of us from the Western world, we are transported into the Wizard of Oz, where imaginary characters take us along the yellow brick road to help us get back home, only to find that the only magic and power that will help, is what we have inside.

Similarly, the idea of ‘The High Table’ that appears in our storyboard evokes medieval times with the clear indication that this is a closed and exclusive space, from which most of the ‘village’ is excluded. Of course, as with the potential smugness suggested above, there is a danger that we are caricaturing our senior leaders through such language but we would argue that the playfulness of the overall approach and tone is that this is ‘serious play’. We have to identify perceived ‘opponents’ if we are to work out how to make our roles sustainable and meaningful and help us effect change beyond the metrics. For example, reference to ‘The King’, despite its playfulness, can be read as a clear critique of our university patriarchal structure. Envisioning the future, the ivory tower has become ‘ivory towers’ perhaps mocking the attempts universities are making to create more plural and diverse spaces. Indeed, it is this aspect of our stories that offer ‘hope’ for us (McGowan & Felten, 2021). By creating storyboards, we don’t just offer a curated and created plural ‘story’, we are also inviting multiple interpretations. Our aim was to unearth different experiences of learning and teaching in the pandemic as way of exploring the role of academic developers to create spaces where those different stories can interact.

### **Conclusion: happily ever after?**

The refraction of the staff experience of teaching during the pandemic through our own experiences as academic developers during this time has helped us shed light on the challenges and possibilities for the future. We hope, too, that it has demonstrated the value of playful and creative methodologies in action. The outcomes suggest a challenging balance for academic development. On the one hand, our narrative has the academic developer as a networked leader, sitting at the centre of learning and

teaching discussions, confident in their position and influence. On the other hand, we have argued for (and shown) playfulness as a signature pedagogy of the academic developer; one who is subversive, challenging, and working in the margins. We think that the adept shapeshifting nature of the academic development role suits such a balancing act. We can be both the networked leader and the playful provocateur.

Academic development has always been a shapeshifting field. Unwilling to be defined as a singular discipline nor by singular ways of being and knowing, it is perhaps unsurprising that we, as academic developers, see influences pushing and pulling us in different directions. By refracting our own stories through the stories we listened to, we are beginning to 'emplot' the future of learning and teaching. Amidst the shapeshifting and the uncertainty of the time ahead, there are two key aspects of our work that have remained constant. One, is the commitment of those of us who work in learning and teaching in universities whether as academic developers or in the disciplines: we really care, and this has been unwavering. Second, is the acknowledgement that whatever happens, we always want to learn. No matter the circumstances, the desire to learn and to teach and to belong to a learning community persists. Those two certainties may well present their own dangers to the teaching individuals, but they also offer hope to weather whatever lies ahead.

## Disclosure statement

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

## Notes on contributors

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## Appendix A

Board adapted from the 'Story Spine' by K. Adams (adapted by Hanesworth, 2016)

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<p><b>Once upon a time</b> Set the stage, introduce the context and introduce the characters What is the issue that you are attempting to address? On whom does this issue impact?</p>	<p><b>Everyday</b> Establish the norm, so people can achieve a sense of change from what has gone before. What is current practice?</p>	<p><b>But one day</b> The catalyst. The reason for telling the story. What practices are you planning to change? What are the challenges?</p>
<p><b>I discovered I had</b> The magic beans. The items that will help you achieve your quest. What are the activities, resources, processes etc. that will help you address your issue?</p>	<p><b>And help came from</b> The helpers. The people that will support you in your quest. Who are the individuals, groups and departments that will support your initiative? How will you engage that support?</p>	<p><b>But suddenly</b> The opponents. The people that will attempt to stop you in your quest. Who are the individuals, groups, departments that might oppose or be reluctant to engage with your initiative? How will you overcome them/persuade them otherwise?</p>
<p><b>Because of that</b> The heart of the story. The consequences that ensue from the catalyst. What will be the everyday consequences of these changes to practice?</p>	<p><b>Until then</b> The climax. What will be the impact of these changes to practice?</p>	<p><b>And ever since then</b> The resolution and conclusion How will this impact be 'future proofed'?</p>

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