Application for Confirmation of Candidature in an AUT Doctoral Programme - Research Proposal

APPLICANT DETAILS

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PROPOSAL SUMMARY:

The development of relationships between group members is recognised as an important factor in enhancing the effectiveness of online groups. However, little has been written on how to facilitate and develop these online relationships. There is little established practice for the facilitation of online relationship development. Certainly this area has not been described, theorised or guidelines developed to support online facilitators.

Facilitators have found that facilitating online groups is far more challenging than face-to-face groups. Due to a lack of physical communication cues it is harder to build a team online, harder to follow meeting processes, tougher to sort out multiple communication channels and harder to converge.

The use of narrative (also referred to as storytelling) in the facilitation of online groups potentially offers a useful catalyst in developing online relationships. It provides an accessible form for developing inclusiveness, deepening rapport and for people to present aspects of themselves in an environment lacking in information richness.

The proposed research investigates how narrative can be beneficial in online relationship development and how relationships can be facilitated. In addition, the research will focus on developing practical processes and techniques.

The involvement of facilitators interested in this research is critical. They will offer a specific expertise in group dynamics, process development and are best suited to critique their own practice. Therefore a method of co-operative inquiry will be used within a participative approach to investigate narrative in an online group. Co-operative inquiry produces data that has a strong grounding in participant experience and multiple perspectives of phenomena. Co-operative inquiry also aligns strongly with facilitator values of equality, shared decision-making, equal opportunity, power sharing and personal responsibility.

The thesis question is: *How is narrative beneficial in building relationships in a facilitated online group?*

The proposed research makes an original contribution to the knowledge of online facilitation by investigating the potential effectiveness of narrative in online relationship development.

It makes an original contribution to the field of facilitation by investigating the potential of narrative to address some of the difficulties faced by facilitators of online groups.

Practical outputs for the field of online facilitation are the formation and investigation of processes and techniques that can be applied in online relationship building and maintenance.

RESEARCH PROPOSAL

- **PROPOSED THESIS TITLE:**

The effectiveness of narrative in facilitating online relationship development

- **RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

  Why is the facilitation of relationship development in online groups important?

The link between group effectiveness and member relationships is an important area of study in online groups. In this proposal, *online groups* is used as an umbrella term to encompass the many new types of internet-enabled groups that facilitators are called upon to facilitate. The term covers global virtual teams, virtual communities, egroups, discussion forums, chat rooms and web conferencing. These new forms of groups communicate collaboratively across time and distance through the use of information technology.

Stronger relationships lead to improved group effectiveness. Warkentin & Beranek (1999) found that training virtual team members in interpersonal communication dynamics led to improved perceptions of the interaction process over time, specifically with regard to trust, commitment, and frank expression between team members. Lau et al. (2000) found professional teams (ranked high in task focus and low in social dimension), extremely vulnerable to “breakdown” due to a lack of social glue (p. 49) and were unable to recover from a lapse in trust due to a lack of strong social bonding (p. 51). Warkentin et al. (1997) found that the strength of relational links was positively associated with the effectiveness of information exchange (p. 986). Walther & Burgoon (1992) found strong relational links lead to enhanced creativity, motivation, increased morale, better decisions and fewer process losses.

In face-to-face groups the building of relationships has been dealt with in the field of facilitation (see Schwarz 2002; Bens 2000; Justice et al. 1999; Hunter et al. 1994, 1997; Kaner et al. 1996). A proven range of processes

and techniques have been developed to support relationship development. Facilitators have a whole toolbox of processes and techniques that may be applied to improve group functioning including those that emerge from group interaction and warm-up (Thorpe 2005). For example, Bens (2005) presents specific tools and techniques to master difficult situations. Wilkinson (2004) provides specific techniques effective facilitators use to produce consistent, repeatable results with groups and includes 90+ group processes. Harrington-MacKin (1993) has written a team building tool kit with tips, tactics and rules for effective workplace teams. Simmerman's (1993) book has a compendium of four other toolkits containing information on facilitation skills and how to generate participative involvement. *The Art of Facilitation* (Hunter et al. 1994) has, as a feature, a toolkit of facilitative designs and processes. *Co-operacy: A New way of Being at Work*, also by Hunter et al. (1997) includes sixty-one exercises, processes and tools for the development of peer and group relationships.

These processes and techniques rely strongly on the ability for both the facilitator and group members to read many aspects of group interaction (such as body language, posture, tone of voice, warm-up, energy levels, seeing what's missing and so forth) and apply interventions as needed. In online groups many of these aspects of interaction, vital to the facilitator, are no longer available or as easy to read. This means that proven face-to-face processes and techniques are either less effective or simply cannot be applied in an online group.

Facilitators also have found that facilitating online groups is far more challenging than face-to-face groups. Group interaction is different online. Differences identified in the literature are the lack of physical the cues of body language and voice (Boetcher et al. 1999), the different perceptions of time (asynchronicity) which may lead to feelings of being ignored, the anonymous and disembodied nature of the medium, different perceptions of private versus public spaces and perceptions, and limitations in people's reading and writing skills. Also, the anonymous nature of online groups may lead to behaviour outside normal social limits (White 2000).

These dynamics are sometimes referred to as disembodiment (Hunter 2003). Others have found it harder to build a team online, harder to follow meeting processes, tougher to sort out multiple communication channels, harder to converge and a lack of physical communication cues (Mittleman et al. 2000).

Research has shown that it is easier to facilitate relationship development activities in a face-to-face context than in a strictly virtual one (Warkentin et al. 1997).

> "Face-to-face groups have a higher degree of cohesion, are more satisfied with decision processes and are more satisfied with group outcomes" (p. 986).

Warkentin's (1997) study, comparing face-to-face and online groups, found that face-to-face groups exchanged more unique information in one meeting than asynchronous groups did in three weeks of online communication. Chidambaram (1996) found that because online groups communicate less effectively and the exchange of information is more difficult, they are more task orientated and exchange less social-emotional information, slowing the development of relational links. McGrath (1990) suggests that in the absence of an initial face-to-face meeting, other avenues for developing strong relationships are advised to ensure the cohesiveness and effectiveness of group interaction.

Many options are presented for investigating relationship development in online groups. Mittleman et al. (2000) suggests development of meeting guidelines; Zack (1993) suggests improving group interactivity; Warkentin et al. (1997) propose psychological profiles and personality characteristics of specific team members, investigating McGraths (1991) Time-Interaction-Performance theory and exploring online subculture; Rice & Love (1987) and Walther & Burgoon (1992) suggest video conferencing to improve online social cues.

Facilitators have identified the need for new protocols and processes to help with relationship development in online team work and to address aspects of disembodiment (Hunter 2003). While the building of online relationships is of fundamental importance to online facilitators there is very little offered in the form of systematic, empirical research to guide facilitators (Pauleen & Yoong 2001). This is particularly true when group facilitators are the main focus of the study (Pauleen & Yoong 2001, p. 190).

How is narrative potentially useful in online relationship development?

There are differing arguments as to what does, and does not, constitute a narrative (Reissman 1993). Narratives are the retelling of a particular person's experience or an account of a particular event. Narratives can generally be identified as having four main elements. A sequence of events, actors or players, a perspective the story is told from, and a particular audience the story is told to (Bruner 1990, p. 77).

Narratives are beneficial as an effective way of sharing, making emotional connections, deepening rapport and are an accessible way for people to present themselves. Narratives are a useful for speaking from the heart and making emotional connections between people (Senehi 2000). Narrative further enables the social construction of meaning for a group. As each person presents something new it builds on what is already presented and thus moves the group theme forward (Senehi 2000). Through the retelling of a particular person's experience or a particular account, connections are made and relational links develop between members.

While narrative is established as an area of inquiry in computer mediated communication systems research (Pentland 1999) the focus has been on narrative as a mode of sensemaking and interpreting the world. Emphasis is placed on the construction of narrative, sequence of events, narrative voice, media and genres used. The narrative data is investigated, themes are established and particular points are supported (p. 4).

Narrative potentially offers support to several areas in the development of relationships in online groups. This study begins with five specific phenomenon/areas as an initial focus.

- Inclusiveness
- Embodiment
- Fluidity
- Place
- Depth

The list is built on the researcher's experience and what has been identified in literature on narrative, online facilitation and online groups.

Perceptions of group *inclusiveness* change as a narrative is told. The story teller may feel more included and members may be more able to speak up in the group, or they may feel more isolated and different from other members.

Narrative may impact on the *embodiment* of group members. Is the narrative taking participants into their head; is it predominantly thoughts, ideas and concepts. Is the story taking them into their hearts; is it predominantly emotive, and feeling. Is the narrative taking them into their belly; is it predominantly intuitive, instinctual, a gut feeling?

Narrative will impact on the *fluidity* of movement within the group and individuals. There are likely to be changes in perceptions of movement within the group as narratives are told, heard and their impact explored. The group will feel itself at times coming closer together, further apart, closer to particular individuals, further apart from others.

Narrative will have an impact on the perceptions of the group *place* and the positioning of members within that group place. Place is perceived in groups as a space for action.

Through narrative the *depth* of relationship will change. People become acquainted; they gather glimpses into attitudes, values, aspects of personality and concerns that the other person has.

Research Question

The research question that the proposed study will investigate is: How is narrative beneficial in building relationships in a facilitated online group?

The proposed research makes an original contribution to the knowledge of online facilitation by investigating the potential effectiveness of narrative in online relationship development.

It makes an original contribution to the field of facilitation by investigating the potential of narrative to address some of the difficulties faced by facilitators of online groups.

Practical outputs for the field of online facilitation are the formation and investigation of processes and techniques that can be applied in online relationship building and maintenance.

Research Approach

The method of co-operative inquiry will be used within a participative approach to investigate narrative in an online group. Co-operative inquiry produces data that has a strong grounding in participant experience and multiple perspectives of phenomena. Co-operative inquiry also aligns strongly with facilitator values of equality, shared decision-making, equal opportunity, power sharing and personal responsibility.

Co-operative Inquiry

The cooperative inquiry method (Heron 1996, 1998; Reason 1994, 1988; Reason and Bradbury 2000) is a form of research where participants are

viewed as co-researchers who participate in decision making at all stages of the project. Cooperative inquiry involves two or more people researching their own experience of something in alternating cycles of reflection and action. Co-operative inquiry is traditionally a face-to-face collaborative method. It is however, gaining increasing application as an inquiry method in online groups (Dale 1999).

Co-operative inquiry is an appropriate method for facilitators to investigate their own practice in a collective way. It is used as a research method by some facilitators in exploring their own experience, practice or area of inquiry (Hunter et al. 1999; Heron 1999; Hunter 2003).

Facilitators will be included in the proposed study as co-researchers. They have unique expertise with both group behaviour and group processes. As the research explores facilitation itself, a research process that is aligned with the underpinning values and beliefs of facilitators is sought. A research approach is desired that allows all those involved to be self-directed, and in a position to contribute both to the research design, formulation of hypothesis, associated action, reflection and analysis.

- **LITERATURE/PAST RESEARCH REVIEW:**

New Internet Groups

A range of factors now impact the ways in which people communicate such as common use of the Internet, email, cheaper computers, new tools, chat, online forums, conferencing, document sharing, news groups, wireless and broadband. On a global level these online groups are becoming increasingly important in peoples work, education and living. These changes have enabled people to communicate in ways that were impossible 15-20 years ago.

There as been a birth of new types of groups using the power of the internet and computing. We have seen the emergence of the virtual organisation where different parts of the organisational work are now done in different parts of the world at differing times. We have seen the emergence of global virtual teams where companies are managing and leveraging their intellectual capital by coordinating and collaborating globally. Online communities have emerged as communities of practice or interest. Areas of e-ducation, the virtual classroom, distance learning and online training have embraced the internet in their online management and delivery. Online events have emerged such as IBM's world jam. Online conferences, seminars and trade shows have become popular venues for people networking and conducting business.

What these new types of groups have in common is that they work collaboratively across time and distance through information technology. What this also means for individuals, organisations and communities is that people from different social groups and backgrounds can develop relationships that may not otherwise occur. It means that new ways of communicating allow for new functioning and dynamics not seen in our traditional face-to-face environments.

These new types of groups have many benefits, they allow for the sharing and storing of peoples knowledge. They save people time, as there is

quick access to large networks of distributed people. People can participate in ways that better suit their work and lifestyle. Online groups overcome space and time constraints that burden face-to-face meetings, to increase the range and depth of information access, and to improve task performance effectiveness (McGrath & Hollingshead 1993, 1994). Online groups increase the range, capacity, and speed of managerial communications (Culnan & Markus 1987).

However, these new types of groups do come with their disadvantages. Online experience and interaction is not as rich as meeting face-to-face (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Interaction is disembodied, time variances occur between messages, group boundaries are less clear, sense of place is different, messages are misinterpreted, there is a strong reliance on text and working within the constraints of technological tools can be challenging.

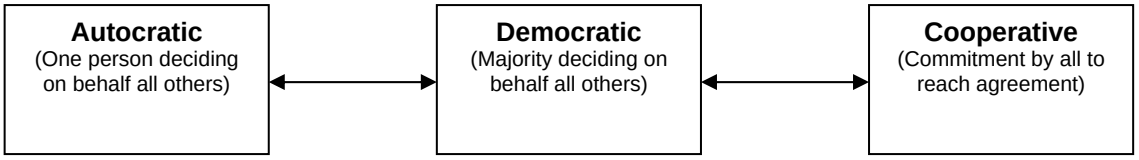
New roles have emerged to manage and improve group cohesion and effectiveness in these new types of group environments. Roles of moderation and online facilitator have emerged, of online instructor, of technology mediator, of domain experts, discussion leaders, listserv owner and administrator. Of these new roles the role of facilitator is one that has potentially the greatest impact on a group's effectiveness.

Facilitation

The group facilitator is a particular person who is skilled at providing a particular form of leadership in a group; that of process guide. A facilitator intervenes to protect the group process and keep the group on track to fulfil its purpose. The facilitator promotes participation, manages group conflict and makes interventions to keep a group working towards the agreed purpose (Schwarz 2002; Hunter et al. 1994, 1999).

Beliefs underpinning group facilitation

There are differing ways that groups manage their processes. Some approaches focus on using hierarchy and autocracy, some on democratic approaches, and others on participative cooperation.



The main belief behind group facilitation is that *full cooperation* between all people is both possible and desirable – values of equality, shared decision-making, equal opportunity, power sharing and personal responsibility are basic to full cooperation (Hunter et al. 1997). Many of the group facilitation skills and techniques have come from cooperative movements, feminism, community development, peace movements, non-violent movements and indigenous traditions based on ensuring that everyone in a group can fully participate in all the decisions that affect them. Thus group facilitation has a strong background in participative ways of working and a cooperative approach.

The benefit of a cooperative approach when working with groups is that it is useful to bring about stronger commitment to group decisions, it taps into the collective consciousness and potential of the group, and provides access to group synergy (Hunter et al. 1997). However, drawbacks of a cooperative approach are that it can often be hard work, can raise conflict around decision points and processes and it can often take longer to reach agreement.

On one hand it can be argued that group facilitation in face-to-face settings is essentially the same as in an online group. A group of people is still a group of people even if they are linked through technology. The role of a facilitator is still to guide the group process; to help a group generate its purpose, its culture, dealing with any conflict and make interventions to keep the group working towards its purpose. However, what facilitators

are experiencing online is very different to what they encounter face-to-face. Next is a deeper look at facilitation in an online context.

Online Facilitation

Facilitation online is an evolving area and presents an expanding opportunity for empowering groups to work collaboratively across time and distance through technology. Facilitators are more and more being called upon to facilitate in virtual meetings and online groups of various kinds. Facilitators are hungry for knowledge on how to best facilitate online and with technology in their work.

At the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) conferences there has been a steady increase in the number of workshops focused on the use of technology in group facilitation. The IAF 2004 global conference in June had 12 of the 46 workshops with a focus on technology in group facilitation. The IAF Journal of Group Facilitation has dedicated an issue to research on online facilitation and is currently calling for chapters for a handbook on collaboration.

Online facilitation has many unique differences and challenges to those in face-to-face groups. These differences require both different applications of offline facilitation techniques along with some additional unique approaches. For example, there is often a need for facilitators to act as technology guides as well as facilitators and knowledge of technology and familiarity with an online set up are imperative (White 2000).

In face-to-face settings facilitators operate within the emergence of group interaction (Hunter et al. 1997). An experienced facilitator has a whole toolkit of processes that can be used to allow a group to access and foster this emergence. The success of many facilitated process rely on strong levels of group and facilitator awareness. In online contexts, the aspects of intuition, reliance on body language, tone of voice, posture, energetic, spiritual, psychic and the creative are essentially absent, making it difficult for a facilitator to gauge the group and its current theme.

Existing research indicates that communication itself is less effective online, therefore, effective facilitation may be of more importance to the success and effectiveness of online groups. While the need for specialised facilitation techniques has been called for by researchers (Rangarajan & Rohrbaugh 2003; Mittleman et al. 2001; Beise et al. 1999; Hayne 1999) there has been little empirical evidence providing knowledge for facilitators. It is also unknown whether the use of many face-to-face techniques can be as effective online (White 2001).

Facilitating in online groups has many new challenges. Although online groups have similarities to face-to-face groups, there are several aspects that make for very unique interaction. Many-to-many conversations are one example. Many-to-many communication is one of the medium's strengths and most differentiating capabilities. The online medium enables many people to communicate with many other people in the same context at the same time, allowing people across the world to collaborate and cooperate in ways never before possible. With asynchronous communication, everyone can see what everyone else is saying and respond as they choose to. Multiple conversations often occur in the thread of the group discussion. For facilitators, effectively managing multiple sub-conversations and sub-groups within a discussion whilst holding the group towards its purpose can be extremely difficult.

> Imagine co-ordinating a large musical concert where everyone in the audience also came with their own voice and instruments with the intention of contributing to the concert.
>
> Co-ordinating the musical performance may then become more difficult as you are then tasked with also teaching participants how to use their instruments, and more difficult again as the participants come from different cultures and speak differing languages.

The benefits however are there, as people are becoming more confident using online technology and are developing new ways to work together. Worldwide inclusiveness is achieved, international cultural experience is

expanded, and using the internet is a much cheaper form of meeting and sharing with others.

Face-to-face processes are being tested online for their effectiveness and suitability. In the same way that early websites were based on print equivalents and very early films were based on stage and theatre performances; new group processes are emerging and developing from what is effective in face-to-face group settings.

Being online offers special opportunities and challenges that give online groups a unique flavour. The Internet erases boundaries created by time and distance, and makes it dramatically easier for people to maintain connections, deepen relationships, and meet like-minded people that they may otherwise never meet. Being online also offers a combination of anonymity and intimacy that brings out differing aspects of people's behaviour. Thus it may be difficult to impose consequences on group members, and yet relatively easy to track an individual's behaviour and patterns, contributing to making online groups notoriously challenging to facilitate and manage. To complicate matters further, legal issues involving privacy, liability, transparent reporting and intellectual property on the Internet are just beginning to be addressed, and will continue to evolve over the next few years (Hunter & Thorpe 2005).

One approach to addressing some online difficulties is to look for ways, such as storytelling, that members of a group can use to build relationships. Stronger relationships mean that people work more effectively together, have less conflict, feel more included, and have a stronger sense of belonging.

Storytelling

Storytelling has been around as long as there have been people to tell them. Throughout the world, storytellers use stories in intentional ways to bring about transformation and change with individuals, in organisations, in community and in public spaces. The ideas of storytellers are an

important perspective on cultural production and on shaping our society (Senehi 2000, p. 40).

Much research on storytelling focuses on the function of stories to establish identity, to share and re-interpret knowledge of history and values, to teach, to entertain, to educate and move emotionally. Stories enable people to create and pass down our culture from generation to generation, to share our values, to question our assumptions, and to see our individual and collective futures (NZ Guild of Storytellers 2004).

Storytelling's accessible and flexible form allows it to be used for as many purposes as language and voice offer. Storytelling draws on past cultural knowledge, and is infused with the intentions and creativity of the speaker. Stories are a means through which groups articulate and perpetuate cultural knowledge (Cruikshank 1998). When personal stories are shared in a social context, an individual experience may come to represent a group's shared experience. This occurs in social space where members are warmed up to exploring their social situation. As personal stories begin to shape the group narrative, each individual story builds on that of the previous. The new group narrative becomes new framework for thought and a blueprint for action (Senehi 2000, p. 26).

There has been a strong focus on narratives throughout many disciplines including sociology (Maines 1993; Chase 1995; Plummer 1995), anthropology (Wadley 1994), law (Brooks & Gewirtz 1996), theology (Ricoeur 1995) psychology (Monk 1997, Madigan & Law 1998) economics (McCloskey 1990), and education (McLaughlin & Tierney 1993, Biklen 1995). In the field of cultural studies, there has been a continuing trend toward seeing cultural meaning as placed both in the expressive work and in the dynamic interaction between reader and text.

Storytelling in IS

The Information Systems (IS) and the related Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) research communities have generated a lot of

interest in individual, group and organisational phenomena in computer-based environments and the impact and effects of collaborative technologies. Among the mechanisms fuelling this interest, storytelling seems to stand out as one of the important ingredients, without which organisational culture and creativity is hardly imaginable (Cohen & Prusak 2001).

The Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) Special Interest Group on Supporting Group Work (SIGGROUP) has produced a bulletin issue on the topic of narrative and storytelling in computer-supported cooperative work (Schäfer 2002). The bulletin focused on requirements, generation, and effects of storytelling and collaborative activities in virtual environments. The bulletin was inspired from workshops on storytelling and collaboration at the ACM Collaborative Virtual Environments 2002 and ACM Computer-Supported Collaborative Work 2002 conferences. Narrative inquiry also has risen as a research method within information systems research (see Tan & Hunter 2003; Pentland 1999).

Whilst the role of storytelling in support of organisational identity and communication is well recognised (Czarniawska 1997, Denning 2001) and storytelling is well established as a form of entertainment, there are relatively few empirical studies of the use of storytelling in IS research. The use of storytelling is an evolving area, particularly in the online group work arena.

A predominant theme of the research available is a strong feature and system function focus entitled a *tool* focus by Orlikowski & Lacono (2001, p. 123). Many attempts at combining the power of computing and story seem to miss the description, illustration or understanding of the storytelling process and its impact on group functioning. In particular the impact on relationships between the storyteller and audience. If IS designers are to utilise the power of narrative and storytelling within systems design, a better description and understanding of process and audience relationship may be needed (Thorpe 2004).

While narrative can be a useful tool for groups and organisations it can have its challenges also. Stories can raise complex issues with respect to online groups and to the design of the systems that support their use. Stories become short-handed and highly telegraphic, stories of everyday work do not necessarily travel well beyond the particular situations that raise them, and they may be considered mundane if it is about daily routine (Karasti et al. 2002). Lutters (2002) argues further that the stories most valuable for re-contextualisation are possibly the most problematic to preserve. This is particularly so when the central story line comes closer to sensitive topics and that any capture may comprise a legal or organisational audit trail (p. 22).

In the context of online cooperation, storytelling may currently provide many untapped opportunities for collaborative virtual environments and offer new methods for computer-supported cooperative work (Thorpe 2004). For example, opportunities lie in capturing more aspects of group interaction to help solve complex problems (Pekkola 2002) and the dramatisation of virtual environments as place (Nitsche et al. 2002).

Where storytelling has been used, it has shown strength in capturing tacit knowledge (Marshall et al. 2002), contextual understanding (Nitsche et al. 2002), active communication (Kanjo and Astheimer 2002) and capturing lived experience (Freidus and Hlubinka 2002).

Narrative and relationship-building

Narrative is useful in online relationship-building as it provides an assessable form for both representing oneself and making connection with others.

> "When I tell a story, an introduction of myself, I get in touch with my personal culture. In a sense I lay down a carpet so that others can come and sit on it. When I hear someone else's story, I pickup something of their values, their beliefs, and the many wonderful things about them". (Margaret Copland, 2004)

> "It is by telling our stories that we come to know ourselves and whenever we hear another's story we understand them. We come to appreciate their strengths and vulnerabilities, their joys and sorrows. Storytelling teaches us to listen and enables us to find our voice. It entertains us and sometimes challenges our thinking. Story continues to enhance our lives and bring us closer together" (NZ Guild of Storytellers 2004).

Narrative potentially offers support to several areas in the development of relationships in online groups. It can be used to impact group inclusiveness, embodiment, fluidity, sense of place and depth of relationship.

The impact of narrative on *inclusiveness* within the group can be explored as an indicator. Perceptions of group inclusiveness will change as a narrative is told. The story teller may feel more included and members can develop new understanding of a particular person through their story. The story teller may be aware of being more individuated and able to hold themselves and participate in the wider group. Individuals may have new perceptions of choice around their own voice. They may be more able to speak up in the group, or they may feel more isolated and different from other members.

Narrative may impact on the *embodiment* of group members. Stories offer a form that sometimes has a direct emotional impact on an audience. Focus can be placed on understanding where the focus is in the body when participants are communicating. Is the narrative taking them into their head – is it predominantly thoughts, ideas and concepts. Is the story taking them into their hearts – is it predominantly emotive, and feeling. Is the narrative taking them into their belly – is it predominantly intuitive, instinctual, a gut feeling?

Narrative will impact on the *fluidity* of movement within the group and self. Participants are likely to have different experiences of people moving inwards for a period and then outwards. There are likely to be changes in

perceptions of movement within the group as narratives are told, heard and their impact explored. The group will feel itself at times coming closer together, further apart, closer to particular individuals, further apart from others.

Narrative will have an impact on the perceptions of the group *place* and the positioning of members within that group place. Place is perceived in groups as a space for action. Place is perceived in a subjective way. In online groups the meaning given to the group place is likely to be attributed differently by each member of the group. What are the contextual perceptions of the group space? What are the group boundaries? What cultural connotations are visible?

Depth is the level of perceived strength or resilience in a relationship. When initially meeting someone there will be a particular perception of that person, as each is new to each other. There is no shared history or understanding of others. Over time, through interaction and dialogue relationships with others develop and the understanding of others changes. People become acquainted; they gather glimpses into attitudes, values, aspects of personality and concerns that the other person has. A start can be made on overcoming possible feelings of loneliness and allowing others to get on board with ones own attitudes, values and concerns.

Summary

The development of relationships between group members is an important factor in enhancing the effectiveness of online groups. The facilitation of online groups is different than face-to-face presenting new challenges. As yet there is little empirical research to help facilitators. Narrative potentially offers a useful catalyst for the facilitation of online relationship development. It provides an accessible form for developing inclusiveness, deepening rapport and for people to present aspects of themselves in an environment lacking in richness.

By knowing in finer detail how narrative can be beneficial in building relationships, processes can then be developed, tested and enhanced for better facilitation practice and thus improve the effectiveness of online groups. Investigating narrative potentially may address some of the difficulties faced in inline group interaction. Investigating narrative also makes a contribution to knowledge of online group development and the practical facilitation of online team building.

- **DESIGN OF THE STUDY:**

  How is Narrative beneficial in building relationships in a facilitated online group?

The proposed research looks at one of the key questions facing facilitators of online groups – how to effectively facilitate and maintain relationship development online.

It is important to have facilitators in this enquiry as a subject group. They have unique expertise with both group behaviour and group processes. It is also important to have facilitators in this enquiry as co-researchers. As the research explores facilitation itself, a research process that is aligned with the underpinning values and beliefs of facilitators is sought. A research approach is desired that allows all those involved to be self-directed, and in a position to contribute to the research design and associated action.

As perceptions of group interaction and phenomena can have multiple perspectives a research method that can represent multiple perspectives is desired to improve the validity and rigour of research findings.

To achieve this, a participative research framework is proposed that can incorporate multiple perspectives and aligns with the values that underpin the facilitation field.

In this section the participative research paradigm, epistemology and axiology underlying the research design are introduced. Following this the design of the proposed research project is outlined.

The Participative Paradigm

In alignment with the cooperative beliefs underpinning group facilitation the proposed research falls within the context of a participative paradigm. A participatory approach is preferred as it is based on an objective-

subjective ontology, incorporating co-researchers' cooperative methodology and a broad range of ways of knowing.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) have made a very useful contribution to articulating and differentiating competing paradigms of research inquiry. They identified and described positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism as the major paradigms that frame research. In 1997 John Heron and Peter Reason extend Guba and Lincoln's framework to articulate a participatory paradigm. They argue that the constructivist views described by Guba and Lincoln tend to be deficient in any acknowledgment of experiential knowing; that is, knowing by acquaintance, by meeting, and by felt participation in the presence of what is there (Heron & Reason 1997).

Heron and Reason also introduced the aspect of Axiology as a defining characteristic of an inquiry paradigm, alongside ontology, epistemology, and methodology. The axiological question asks what is intrinsically valuable in human life, in particular what sort of knowledge, if any, is intrinsically valuable (p. x).

In the participative worldview the primary purpose of human inquiry is practical: our inquiry is our action in the service of human flourishing. Our knowing of the world is consummated as our action in the world, and participatory research is thus essentially transformative (Heron 1996).

The paradigm holds at its essence the basic right of people to have a say in forms of decision making, in every social context, which affect their flourishing in any way. Most importantly, this includes the right to be involved in the knowledge creation processes that affect their lives.

Epistemology

The epistemic wing of a participative paradigm is about participative knowing. Participative knowing is participation through empathic communion with the mode of awareness or affectivity of a being; and

participation through imaging, in sensory ways and extrasensory ways, its form of appearing (Heron 1996).

The first premise of participative knowing is that knowers can only be knowers when knowen by others. Knowing is mutual awakening, mutual participative awareness (Buber 1937; Habermas 1978; Wilber 1995).

The second premise is the distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge. To participate in anything explicitly is to participate in everything tacitly. The whole is thus implicit in the part. Govinda (1960), Stcherbatsky (1962), Teilhard de Chardin (1961) and Skolimowski (1985) also assert the notion of mutual participation of the parts in each other and the whole.

The third premise is the distinction between participative knowing and non-participative knowing in which the knower conceptually splits subject from object. The distinction between immediate or intuitive knowing and conceptual knowing (Heron 1996, pp. 14-15).

The fourth premise is the idea of stages of integration. From the child in its undifferentiated participative world where it is over-participative and under-individuated, through ego development where the person is over-individuated and under participative to the transpersonal state where there is a mature integration of individuating and participative ways of being (Barfield 1957; Kremner 1992; Reason 1994; Wilber 1995; Heron 1996).

The fifth premise is holism of inquiry, in that the researcher's conclusions and applications are grounded in their own participative knowing (Dewey 1938; Lewin 1952; Kolb 1984).

Axiological Theory

The political wing of the participative paradigm is based on axiological theory about the intuitive value of human flourishing in individual and social life in terms of enabling balance of autonomy, co-operation and

hierarchy; and about participative decision-making in every social context as a means to this end (Heron 1996).

The first axiological premise is the interdependence between thought and action. Thought supports and validates action. Valid action pre-supposes a reflective grasp of standards and rules of practice. Action consummates and fulfils thought, completes it through manifestation. Action in the form of shaping our worlds is the end point of thought. Thought however is not the end point of action. So action includes thought but not the other way around, and thought is for the action that consummates it (MacMurray 1957).

The second premise is that of universal political rights. An extension of the widely accepted human right of any person to the political membership of their community. To participate in the framing and working of political institutions. The extension of this human right to the universal right is that it goes further to include every social situation of decision-making as political.

A third premise is that action manifests personal values or the suppression of them. Every choice, decision to do something, stems from a personal preference or a pseudo-preference when suppressed or unidentified. Every preference involves an explicit or implicit vision of a way of life or some aspect of it. Action as the expression of preference manifests personal values.

Parsons (1957) suggests that action includes “an agent with goals and alternate means who is in partial control of a situation, who is governed by values for the goals, by norms for the means and beliefs about the situation.

The fourth premise is that autonomous preference precedes authentic cooperative choice.

The fifth premise is about research subject's political rights. Every human subject in a piece of social science research has a right to participate actively, directly or through representation, in decisions about the research design. This is so that each subject can have the opportunity to identify, own and manifest his or her personal values in and through the design; can therefore be present as a fully human person in the study, and can avoid being misrepresented by the researcher's implicit value system (Heron 1996).

Cooperative Inquiry

Based within the participative paradigm, the co-operative inquiry method (Heron 1996, 1998; Reason 1988, 1994; Reason & Bradbury 2000) was developed as a research method for the investigation of human experience for two or more people.

The cooperative inquiry method is a form of research where participants are viewed as co-researchers who participate in decision making at all stages of the project. Cooperative inquiry involves two or more people researching their own experience of something in alternating cycles of reflection and action. Co-operative inquiry is traditionally a face-to-face collaborative method that allows for group synergies to develop. This method adds richness, depth and the likelihood of new knowledge emerging through the cyclic, reflective process of the inquiry. This cooperative method appears appropriate for facilitators to investigate their own practice in a collective way.

Heron (1996) considers that orthodox research methods are inadequate for a science of persons, because they undermine the self-determination of their 'subjects'. He proposes that it is possible to conceive of a research approach where all those involved are self-directed, and in a position to contribute both to creative thinking and to the research and associated action. Co-operative inquiry was developed to provide such a framework for integrating both personal autonomy and group collaboration.

Cooperative inquiry rests on two participatory principles described above: epistemic participation and political participation. The first means that any propositional knowledge that is the outcome of the research is grounded by the researcher's own experiential knowledge. The second means that research subjects have a basic human right to participate fully in designing the research that intends to gather knowledge about them. It follows from the first principle that the researchers are also the subjects; and from the second principle that the subjects are also the researchers. The co-researchers are also the co-subjects. The research is done by people with each other, not by researchers on other people or about them.

In mainline qualitative research, done within the aegis of constructivism, neither of these two principles applies. Such research, using multiple methodologies, is about other people studied in their own social setting and understood in terms of the meanings those people themselves bring to their situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 2). The researchers are not also subjects. They ground their propositional findings not on their own experiential knowing but on that of other people, the researched subjects, as reflected in the subjects' dialogue with the researchers. The researchers' own experiential knowing as occasional participant observations within the subjects' culture tend to be secondary and subordinate.

Research Design

Group selection will be an extremely important factor in the success of the research project. They will be co-researchers, and involved in the decision making aspects of the research including the research design, its guidance and development.

Table one below outlines the structural design of the proposed study (adapted from the outline of inquiry stages, Heron 1996, p. 49).

Table 1

Research Phase	**Process**
Contact	Contact and informal discussion Invitation and ethics compliance
Initial Phase	Introduction – participants, tools Sharing expectations Aligning on our group purpose and culture
Phase 1 - First reflection phase on topic	Choice of the focus or topic and type of inquiry Launching statement of the enquiry Plan of action for the first action phase to explore Choice for method of recording experiences during first action phase
Phase 2 – First action phase on topic	Exploring in experience and action aspects of the inquiry Applying an integrated range of inquiry skills Keeping records of the experiential data generated
Phase 3 – Full immersion in Phase 2	Break through into new awareness Lose their way Transcend the inquiry format
Phase 4 – Second reflection phase	Share data from phase 3 Review and modify topic in light of making sense of data about the explored aspect Choose a plan for the next action phase to explore the same or different aspect of the inquiry topic Review the method for recording data used in the first action phase and amend it for use in the second.
Subsequent Phases will:	Continue the inquiry in cyclic fashion Involve from five to eight full cycles of reflection-action-reflection with varying patterns of divergence and convergence, over several aspects of the inquiry topic. Include a variety of intentional procedures for enhancing the validity of the process End with a major reflection phase for pulling the threads together, clarifying outcomes and deciding on dissemination

Initial Phase

The overall approach is establishing a cooperative working relationship with co-researchers. This is critical in the initial phase in which participants will be becoming familiar with each other and the process of co-operative inquiry.

The cooperative inquiry method is introduced with explorative discussion and a short pilot run through with a focus on learning the cooperative inquiry method. Sociometric scaling may be useful to measure participant's perceived levels of understanding of the cooperative inquiry method.

Aligning on our group purpose and culture is the final part of the initial phase. It is likely this will come out of, and be informed by, a dialogue exploring our shared expectations from the research process. It is envisaged that the group culture may have a particular emphasis on how we will operate together to ensure useful research outputs. Particular emphasis will also be placed on developing strategies for keeping the group on a common path of enquiry to ensure consistency with the doctoral thesis and university requirements for the research.

Particular outputs will include sociometric diagramming and mapping of participant's warmup, their perceptions of self in relation to others, their perceptions of other's reasoning and relationships, changes in perceptions before, during and after events, measuring participant nearness and distance, discussing differences between perceived and actual relationships, and charting group issues. A focus group approach may be useful at the conclusion of the initial phase to collect precise descriptions from participants describing potential areas for process and tool improvement.

Phase One

The first phase of the method explores some initially identified factors of inclusiveness, embodiment, fluidity, place and depth. These aspects will be suggested as a starting point of inquiry for the research group. The outputs from this initial phase are identification of potential significant factors and also more precise and observable variables in the terms of inclusiveness, embodiment, fluidity, place and depth. Within this phase, differing techniques, tools and methods will be used to investigate them. They will be employed based on the need that emerges. It is anticipated that some of the tools to be used will include personal and group sociograms, diamond of opposites, the sociometric cycle and participant profiling.

Next potential areas of inquiry are discussed. Participants are likely to have a particular warmup to sharing their narratives or areas of inquiry that they wish to explore. These will be shared in the group and questions may be used by the group leader for clarification. Sociometric scales and diamond of opposites may be useful here to capture and discuss participant's attraction/rejection and warmup to particular stories. Consensus will be used to decide on which particular story or inquiry will best forward the group.

The next step is to develop an inquiry plan. Discussion, involving all in the process, will be held to formalise what will be done by whom, what will be gained from the inquiry and how the outputs are to be analysed and evaluated.

This is followed by individual and group discussion and reflection on the aspects of inquiry undertaken. At the conclusion of the 1st phase, and as part of the reflection step, discussion will be held to collect feedback on the process and any recommendations the research process.

Phase Two

Phase two is the first action phase where participants begin to explore their experience and action aspects of the inquiry. They will applying an integrated range of inquiry skills, such as being present with frameworks, generating and holding other frameworks, identifying behaviours and applying planned action frameworks. Records are kept of the experiential data generated.

Phase Three

In phase three participants are immersed in the action and are fully engaged with the relevant experience or practice. It is likely that some will experience a break through into new awareness about the particular aspects of inquiry. Others may find they experience unknown or new aspects within the inquiry domain.

Phase Four

In phase four participants begin to make sense of the data generated in the third action phase. There is likely to be interplay between presentational and propositional processes, now having reference to and grounded in the experience and practice. This phase will lead into planning the subsequent phase of action.

Subsequent Phases

As outlined in table one, these steps of planning, action and reflection are then repeated through phases 2-4 for several full cycles. At the end of the phases of reflection-action-reflection, the group then ties together the findings from each of the inquiries undertaken. Discussion will be on how the findings are to be presented and to whom they will be of most benefit.

The overall research process is then reflected on and evaluated. Participants will have particular concerns and ideas for the method that

will be captured through discussion and interviewing. The research project is then completed.

Research focus

Narratives will appear in the group process in two distinct ways. Some will emerge throughout the natural group process. They are likely to occur in the introduction, sharing of expectations and orientation to tools. The second way narratives will occur will be as specific interventions within the phases of cooperative inquiry. Particular stories will be introduced with specific goals in mind rather than emerging through natural group process. Thus methods are likely to be carried out in parallel with results feeding both into the group's process and into each other.

Precise factors will come up in group processes that indicate perceptions and differing versions of experience. These will contribute to the validity and strength of the research findings.

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- **ETHICAL APPROVAL**

Ethics approval was received from the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEC) on 14 April 2005, application number 05/53.

- **TIMETABLE FOR COMPLETION**

Research Plan						
What	**When**	**Focus / Phenomenon**	**Method / Approach**	**Output / Results**	**Framework / Analysis**	**Audience Benefit**
Initial contact	15 Jul -15 Aug	Scoping suitable and interested participants	Informal Interviews and conference attendance	Contact list of interested online facilitators		
Informal discussion	12 Sept-12 Oct	Who are online facilitators? What are they interested in?	Informal Interviews discussion, profiling	Initial online facilitator profiles		
Letter of invitation and Ethics compliance	15 Jun-12 Sept	Warmup to the research Acceptance and commitment to the research project	Mail, telephone and email	Ethics compliance, agreement and commitment to proposed research and researchers		
Initial Phase						
e-group setup	16 Oct	Initiation	Yahoo groups AUT Online other systems to be used	Online group setup		
Introduction stories	16-22 Oct	1st steps in the group, initial connections made between participants, sharing of stories	Interviewing, focus group, sociometric, observation	Profiles, description of story impact, pre and post diagrams of relationships, summarisation	Grounded theory and Interpretative analysis?	Profiles useful for participant group by increasing awareness Story impact diagrams benefit participants by providing direct feedback
Introduction and orientation to tools	15 Oct - Ongoing	Tools learning, sharing past experiences, participant capability levels	Interviewing, focus group, sociometric, observation, usability	Group map of capability, process description, scale of participant efficacy, usability log	Grounded theory and Interpretative analysis?	Direction for design of online tools

Sharing of expectations	22-28 Oct	Group theme and warmup, stories	Sociometric, observation	Description of participant expectations	Grounded theory and Interpretative analysis?	Expectation descriptions useful for participant group awareness
Group purpose and culture	1-7 Nov	Alignment on group purpose and culture	Observation, sociometric, focus group	Statement of purpose and culture	Grounded theory and Interpretative analysis? Map to Zenergy facilitation model?	Statement of purpose and culture benefits participant group
Reflection	7-14 Nov	Focus group discussion on process and experience so far	Focus group	Description of process and initial recommendations for system design Process description And suggestions for facilitating practice		Precise descriptions for system designers Process description benefits facilitators by providing an example and potential guidelines for developing group purpose and culture online.
Phase 1						
Re-introduction to method & discussion	14-31 Nov	Levels of understanding, questions, stories	Co-operative inquiry, focus group, observation, sociometric	Process description and feedback, scale of understanding		Process description benefits researchers by describing the introduction and direct feedback of a novel method for online research
Group warmup to 1st story and inquiry	1-7 Dec	Story warmup, group theme	Co-operative inquiry, interviewing, focus group, sociometric	Transcript, sociometric illustrations of warmup to differing inquiry	Group/inquiry designed	
Plan 1st story and inquiry	7-14 Dec	Discussion, developing story and inquiry plan	Co-operative inquiry,		Group/inquiry designed	
Story 1 and inquiry	14-30 Dec	Structured story and inquiry	Co-operative inquiry,		Group/inquiry designed	

Reflection	1-7 Jan	Post event description of experiences	Co-operative inquiry, Interviewing, focus group		Group/inquiry designed	
Phase 2						
Group warmup to 2nd story and inquiry	14-21 Jan	Story warmup, group theme	Co-operative inquiry, interviewing, focus group, sociometric		Group/inquiry designed	
Plan 2nd story and inquiry	22-28 Jan	Developing story and inquiry plan	Co-operative inquiry,		Group/inquiry designed	
Story 2 and inquiry	29 Jan-14 Feb	Structured story and inquiry	Co-operative inquiry,		Group/inquiry designed	
Reflection	15-21 Feb	Post event description of experiences	Co-operative inquiry, Interviewing, focus group		Group/inquiry designed	
Phase 3						
Group warmup to 3rd story and inquiry	22-28 Feb	Story warmup, group theme	Co-operative inquiry, interviewing, focus group, sociometric		Group/inquiry designed	
Plan 3rd story and inquiry	29 Feb-5 Mar	Developing story and inquiry plan	Co-operative inquiry,		Group/inquiry designed	
Story 3 and inquiry	6-19 Mar	Structured story and inquiry	Co-operative inquiry,		Group/inquiry designed	
Reflection	20-26 Mar	Post event description of experiences	Co-operative inquiry, Interviewing, focus group		Group/inquiry designed	
Phase 4						
Group warmup to 4th story and inquiry	27 Mar-2 Apr	Story warmup, group theme	Co-operative inquiry, interviewing, focus group, sociometric		Group/inquiry designed	

Plan 4th story and inquiry	3-9 Apr	Developing story and inquiry plan	Co-operative inquiry,		Group/inquiry designed	
Story 4 and inquiry	10-23 Apr	Structured story and inquiry	Co-operative inquiry,		Group/inquiry designed	
Reflection	24-30 Apr	Post event description of experiences	Co-operative inquiry, Interviewing, focus group		Group/inquiry designed	
Phase 5						
Group warmup to 5th story and inquiry	31 Apr-6 May	Story warmup, group theme	Co-operative inquiry, interviewing, focus group, sociometric		Group/inquiry designed	
Plan 5th story and inquiry	7-13 May	Developing story and inquiry plan	Co-operative inquiry,		Group/inquiry designed	
Story 5 and inquiry	14-27 May	Structured story and inquiry	Co-operative inquiry,		Group/inquiry designed	
Reflection	28 May-4 Jun	Post event description of experiences	Co-operative inquiry, Interviewing, focus group		Group/inquiry designed	
Discussion of findings	5 Jun-15 Jun	Discussion, convergence and alignment on findings				
Evaluation	16-29 Jun	Reflection on research process				
Completion	30 Jun-13 Jul	Completion				

- **RESEARCH OUTPUTS**

Thorpe, S. 2004. Online Storytelling in IS Research. Chapter 2. (ed) Cusack, B. *The Proceedings of the 2004 NACCQ Post-Graduate Symposium*. Auckland, Trumps.

This proposal has been discussed between my supervisors and myself and I submit it for confirmation of my candidature.

Candidate Signature: _____ Date: 25/01/2005