

Azumah Dennis

50 narratives @ 50

### Transcript

I'm Dr Carol Azumah Dennis. Everybody calls me Azumah. I'm currently the program lead for the EdD, which is a professional doctorate. The project is called 50 narratives @ 50. It was started in 2019. We wanted to celebrate 50 years of the OU and you know the aim was to collect 50 narratives and what we wanted to do is, because we know that whenever you hear about celebrations of these sorts of things, people tend to emphasise and to only focus on the highly successful students, we didn't want to do that because we really wanted to hear about the success of a student who'd had any experience of postgraduate study and what happened to them. So we prioritized interviewing students who had, for whatever reason, not completed their MA, to see what happened to them on the basis that actually even with an incomplete MA, there are things that students gain from it and so that's what the project was about.

I was working as a senior lecturer at the time, so I certainly involved the programme director. Together we cooked up the idea of it, so she was heavily involved and that's Dr Gill Clifton. We also worked with three research associates - Claire Elhaggagi, Claire Edwards and Clare Choak – the three Claires – and so those are the main people actively involved in the project itself.

The first thing we did was we sent an invite to, as I say, all the students who'd withdrawn from one of the three modules that make up the MA at some point and we asked them to send an image of something that they felt encapsulated their experience of study asked them to provide us a few sentences of why they would send us that image. We also invited some students to participate in a one-to-one interview which was set up between one of the three Claires and those were quite open structured interviews where they talked about their image but they also just talked in general terms about their experiences of study. We didn't just take the raw interviews but we translated those interviews into a series of narrative portraits and we kind of looked for three things you know: what was their starting point, what was the changing point for them, a pivotal point for them and what was the conclusion?

In terms of what I would say we found out, there was a really strong sense amidst nearly all of the students who we interviewed, they talked about how much they enjoyed their studies how much they gained from it. Some of them sort of boasted about kind of the language that they'd learned from doing this Masters and how much difference it had made to them in terms of the workplace and so on. And you know they also left saying, yes I'd love to return to the OU. Sometimes there were clear barriers why they couldn't - not least of all debt - but nonetheless there was a really strong sense of being part of something and when we tried to think what the implications of that were, I think it caused us to connect to other bits of literature that we'd read in the past that really made us want to rethink about how we count and calibrate success in terms of learning, but what's really clear from all of these narratives is that their sense of intellectual, emotional, academic engagement is not reduced. It changes but it's not substantially reduced by the virtue of it of it being online; they made connections with each other, with students, with tutor groups and really enjoyed the academic challenge of what of what they're doing. It was quite significant to see how many students wanted to return to study at some point and so I would hope that an impact of it would be

that that becomes part of how the postgraduate team work, that they make a point of maintaining those links with students.

So, it was really nice to get these intense moments of just being able to sit down and listen to students, talking about their learning and what they enjoyed about it, telling you about the divorce and the children, you know the shifting home, the changing jobs and just appreciating how you know studying for a qualification or a Masters fits into a person's life. I guess that's a bit sort of wishy-washy and maybe a bit romantic, but nonetheless it is something that I find really interesting and really appeals to me and reminds me about, you know, why I work in education rather than selling insurance or something like that!