

The Method of Empathy-Based Stories (MEBS)

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What is MEBS?

How and why to conduct MEBS
research?

What possibilities can MEBS bring to
studies on professional learning and
development?

A top-down view of a desk with a dark wood grain. In the top left, a portion of a white keyboard is visible. To its right is a white Rapoo computer mouse. Further right is a brown pencil. In the top right corner is a blue cup and saucer containing dark coffee. The background is a dark, textured surface.

MEBS?

A qualitative data collection method

Short stories written according to a frame story designed by the researcher

Variation – at least two frame story versions that differ in one element



From Thriving Developers to Stagnant Self-Doubters: An Identity-Centered Approach to Exploring the Relationship Between Digitalization and Professional Development

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Abstract

This article reports a study illustrating the relationship between digitalization and professional development from an identity-centered perspective. Drawing on a unique data set of 101 empathy-based stories from 81 Finnish government workers, the findings show how workers might experience and respond to work-identity alignments and misalignments in a digitalized working life and how this might influence their professional development. We identify four typifications—the thriving developer, the loyal transformer, the stagnant self-doubter, and the career crafter—and illustrate how digitalization can either support or hinder professional development by inducing work-identity (mis)alignments and how workers may respond to these in different ways by engaging in identity work and job crafting. In particular, our findings emphasize the role professional identity and agency play in professional development and highlight the importance of recognizing how digitalization of work can threaten or support workers' professional identities to build a supportive working environment where the workers feel like they are valued and able to develop in a meaningful way.

Keywords Professional identity · Professional development · Identity work · Job crafting · Digitalization · The method of empathy-based stories



Government Workers' Stories about Professional Development in a Digitalized Working Life

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Abstract

In this article, we explore workers' stories about digitalization of work and professional development. The data (101 stories) were collected from 81 Finnish government workers through the method of empathy-based stories (MEBS). MEBS is a qualitative data collection method in which participants write short imaginary texts based on an introductory script (frame story) designed by the researcher. In this study, participants were presented with two frame stories in which they were asked to imagine why digitalization had either supported or hindered professional development. The stories were analyzed inductively using qualitative thematic analysis. The findings illustrate the double-edged nature of digitalization, as it may both support and hinder professional development and learning by changing work tasks, work practices and knowledge development and management. Overall, the stories revealed that the participants perceived that digitalization may support professional development and learning, especially by providing opportunities for job control in terms of flexibility, and new ways for knowledge development and management.

Keywords Professional development · Professional learning · Workplace learning · Digitalization · The method of empathy-based stories

(1) Imagine that the year is 2025. Charlie is thinking about his career and notices that digitalization has supported his professional development. Imagine yourself in his situation and describe why he believes that digitalization has had a positive influence on his professional development.

(2) Imagine that the year is 2025. Charlie is thinking about his career and notices that digitalization has hindered his professional development. Imagine yourself in his situation and describe why he believes that digitalization has had a negative influence on his professional development.

Mail, e-mail, e-surveys,
Facebook

15-20 answers
/ frame story

Lecture, class,
meetings, other
social gatherings

How to collect empathy-based stories?

One respondent
answers to one
frame story

Average response
time 15-30 min.

Why MEBS?

“This method made it possible to the participants to have a look at their work from a distance and reveal their perceptions in an open manner that might not have been necessarily reached, for example, in a personal interview.” (Usiautti et.al. 2014, 179)

- Study of perceptions, assumptions, social representations and reasoning processes
- To recognize new perspectives, map out a research area, explore future visions and invent propositions
- Study of sensitive topics

Practical implications

As a teaching method that encourages discussion and stimulates students to think differently

Organizational contexts (e.g., strategy planning processes or organizational transformations)

Limitations

Researchers need to be careful not to draw too far-reaching conclusions between the empathy-based stories and the “reality” (i.e., people’s actions and behaviors)

Designing functional frame stories might be time-consuming

Lack of interaction limits the researchers’ possibilities to ask follow-up questions and avoid “thin data”

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A person with long dark hair, wearing a grey knit sweater, is holding a lit sparkler. The sparkler is bright and glowing, with sparks flying out. The background is dark and out of focus.

Thank you !