

# Chapter One: Introduction

## *ORGANISATION OF CHAPTER 1*

- 1) Introducing the CELSE-HOU Project
- 2) Developing My Research Focus
- 3) Experiencing the Power of Narrative
- 4) Organising My Study

### **1) Introducing the CELSE-HOU Project**

#### **1.1) In the beginning ...**

In January 1994, I began work as language teacher educator at the Centre for English Language Studies in Education (CELSE) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manchester ('Manchester'). The team that I joined specialised in on-site and distance learning programmes for teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. This remains an active area of provision at Manchester but the CELSE name disappeared in 2001 during Faculty restructuring. However, since this name and associated working practices are closely linked with the project under review, I have retained the CELSE identity throughout this study.

Within weeks of starting work, I received a cold-calling letter from Xen<sup>1</sup>, a London-based Educational Agent of Greek background soon to return to Greece. In it, she proposed the franchising of CELSE's programmes by a Greek institution. A second version of the letter was sent to Raymond, the Professor of International Education who was also Dean of the Faculty of Education. Unbeknown to Raymond and myself, Xen directed a third letter to the Vice Chancellor who declined to pursue her proposal. However, prompted by Xen's letters, I had a meeting with Raymond and George, the Head of CELSE, where it was agreed that Xen would be invited to visit us to explore the possibilities involved. Xen's 'pitch' and the impression she created of being "*an agent of change*" (Chapter 8, GP2) suited CELSE's internationally-focused entrepreneurialism so the meeting went well and the relationship developed. Soon afterwards, Xen, with the active support of the Dean,

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this study, I make use of role-related identifiers (eg "Educational Broker") and what might be termed *noms-de-narrateur* (eg 'Xen') or *personas* - a term with its roots in the Latin for 'mask' and thus appropriate for the masks the participants have adopted, with my assistance, for the characters especially in the storytelling in Chapter 8. My rationale for this usage is discussed further in Chapter 3. The *Dramatis Personae* at the front of this work lists these identifying names.

became the Educational Broker for links between CELSE and potential Greek partners. Over the next two years, I worked with Xení to explore several possible links with Greek institutions. The poor match between CELSE's expectations and collaborative philosophy and those of the Greek institutions meant that no collaborative activity resulted but the exploratory process did strengthen the links and trust between CELSE and Xení as well as further developing CELSE's readiness for collaborative educational activities.

In late 1995, Xení proposed exploring possibilities with the *Elliniko Anoikto Panepistimio* (EAP) or, in English, the Hellenic Open University (HOU). This distance learning institution, the 19<sup>th</sup> public university in Greece, was legally incorporated in December 1997 after several years of planning (Lionarakis, 1996). In late 1996, Manchester and the HOU signed a contract (TWNW, 1997), and, at the same time, Xení's brokering role was recognised through a Memorandum of Understanding between CELSE and Xení's consultancy company. Collaborative activities began in June 1997 with the training workshops delivered by CELSE for the HOU. The first cohort of students on the programme began their studies in June 1998. At the time of writing (December 2003), the selection of the 6<sup>th</sup> cohort marks the final phase of the collaboration since the next cohort will follow a significantly revised version of the programme based on HOU-developed distance learning courseware.

This study is mainly concerned with what happened in the core years of the project between 1997 and 2002, but because the earlier and later years are also involved to some extent, this is a study based on ten years of Greek-focused activity by CELSE.

## **1.2) The collaboration**

### ***a) The practicalities***

The collaboration involved CELSE licensing its distance learning materials to the HOU as the main element in a package of support for the new institution. This support was funded by the monies ultimately deriving from the European Union's infrastructural aid to Greece. The CELSE materials became the core of the HOU's first full programme. Entitled *Metaptichiaki Eksidikefsi Kathigiton Agglikis Glossas* (or 'Postgraduate Specialisation for the Teachers of the English Language'), in HOU shorthand, this programme is referred to as the 'English' programme thereby confusing outsiders; for example, when profiling the HOU, Keegan (2000: 64) speaks of a certificate-level course in "*English as a Second Language*", thus incorrectly identifying both the level and the

content. Following the line of HOU colleagues when writing in English, the terms ‘MA TEFL’ and ‘English’ Programme are used throughout this study.

The licensed distance learning materials consist of the print, audio, video, and computer materials for six modules from the CELSE programme entitled the *MEd in English Language Teaching* (‘MEd ELT’). Other resources, such as Advanced Study Skills packs and video materials introducing the CELSE team have also been provided together with tutor-training for the HOU colleagues working with these materials. The collaboration was intentionally front-loaded with most training activity taking place in 1998-1999. The training objective was to enable the HOU’s ‘English’ team to effectively deliver the MA TEFL programme using CELSE-developed materials.

### ***b) The ideological underpinning***

Looking back at my own project discourse, I note that in discussions within CELSE and Manchester more widely as well as in discussion with HOU colleagues, I used the term “*collaboration*” intentionally and explicitly as a means of rejecting an understanding of CELSE as “*an educational supermarket*” involved in simply selling educational products with no concern for how these products would be used. To reinforce this point, I drew comparisons between CELSE’s own arrangements with the HOU and those between the HOU and other suppliers of distance learning courseware. My point of view was not always shared by colleagues in both institutions who were at a distance from the project.

Further, CELSE’s often implicit philosophy of technology transfer and appropriate methodology - a philosophy that I slowly came to understand through the years of the project (see Chapter 5) - was also evident in my discussions within Manchester and with the HOU. For example, my talk about the “*transplant*” of the materials to the HOU was accompanied by the need for “*localisation*” or “*customisation*”, and for the HOU to “*take ownership*” of the materials as part of their own programme and practices. HOU colleagues also used the term “*indigenisation*” suggesting perhaps a more radical change of ownership than our “*localisation*” implied.

Within Manchester, and more particularly within CELSE, I used the term “*light touch*” to characterise CELSE’s response to what I saw as the “*heavy-handed*” preferences of the central university authorities regarding contractually ensuring appropriate academic quality in this overseas collaborative arrangement. Finally, I described CELSE’s

collaborative approach as “*hands-on*” regarding involvement with the emerging HOU. I believe that this approach was dictated mainly by a concern for effective hand-over of the materials and explanation of their methodological basis but it was also seen within CELSE as a means of monitoring the developments and retaining some non-legalistic way of minimising the risks that the Manchester central authorities felt were involved.

These elements in my project discourse are also present in *My Project Co-ordinator's Story* (Chapter 7) and in my researcher story throughout this study. The issues involved appear in the narratives of other project participants (Chapter 8).

### **1.3) The HOU MA TEFL programme**

In 1997-98, the HOU programme was created in an institutional vacuum since the HOU's operating practices and regulations were not yet in place. As a result, the curriculum model adopted for the programme closely followed CELSE's MEd ELT regarding entry requirements, course structure, assessment procedures, and resources. However, there was also some localisation. For example, the HOU programme involves both telephone tutorials and four compulsory face-to-face Contact Sessions per module (whereas CELSE has neither of these elements), and students complete locally-developed mini-assignments and are assessed for the main assignment via a *viva voce* exam during a Contact Session (whereas CELSE simply has an end of module assignment).

The HOU programme is much larger than its CELSE equivalent: where Manchester has a total MEd ELT student community of approximately 200 EFL teachers, the HOU recruits 120 annually. As a result, the HOU's 'English' team is three times as large as CELSE. Each module is delivered by a team of tutors concurrently to several groups based on Contact Sessions held in the three main cities of Athens, Patras and Thessaloniki. The HOU tutors are drawn from the regular Greek universities, from the pool of School Advisors, and from those trainers working in the private sector. This team involves a mixture of ages and areas of professional expertise.

The HOU's 'English' programme is aimed at experienced teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) throughout Greece. These teachers typify the Greek EFL profession with women far outnumbering men (eg there was a ratio of 9:1 in Cohort 1 on the programme). Aged between twenty-five and forty-five, they work in both public and private sectors, in different contexts all over the country, with learners of different ages and different

motivations. They bring previous teacher-training experiences from different eras with particular methodological preoccupations and this creates varied professional development needs within the programme. Their main motivation is a personal desire to continue their professional development rather than any guaranteed promotional possibilities. These teachers have been, and continue to be, affected by the educational reforms introduced in recent times and strike action by teachers and student protests have occurred frequently during the lifetime of the project (see Smith, 1998 & 1999 in Appendix 2). From my discussions with these largely self-financing MA TEFL participants I note that the HOU programme is attractive because:

- a) it is cheap by comparison with overseas institutions;
- b) the study mode involves no loss of income and relatively little disruption to the home life in which these teachers tend to play a large role; and
- c) the award is officially recognised.

#### **1.4) A broadened collaborative brief**

Although the development of the HOU MA TEFL programme was the original objective, CELSE colleagues, and myself in particular, have fulfilled other roles. For example, we have mentored the HOU materials writers on the MA programme entitled *Metaptichiaki Eksidikefsi Kathigiton Gallikis Glossas* (or ‘Postgraduate Specialisation for the Teachers of the French Language’) which targets experienced teachers of French as a Foreign Language (eg Androulakis *et al.*, 2001). Further, when the HOU embarked on the major task of distance learning materials development, it identified roles for subject-specialist writers who would work with Critical Readers and be responsible to an Academic Responsible. The evaluation of the outputs carried out by the HOU internally was disappointing regarding distance learning methodology (see Chapter 8, *Vassillis’ Story*, VP12), and the mentoring role of distance learning methodologist was created (in the HOU, such distance learning methodology mentors are called *mea*). CELSE colleagues played a role in training these mentors. In this way, CELSE thinking about distance learning practices, especially materials writing, became influential in the HOU training of writers and mentors.

As noted above, my involvement with Greek project possibilities began almost as soon as I joined the CELSE team. Since then, I have been extensively involved in negotiating the collaboration, drafting contracts, maintaining financial records, overseeing the preparation

and transfer of the materials, advising on the customisation of the materials, interviewing tutor applicants for the 'English team' and then training the successful ones in the CELSE model of distance learning, interviewing the initial student applicants, arranging visits by colleagues in both directions, and writing reports and evaluations on the project. Further, through my involvement in the project, I have become an intercultural transient, spending many stays of between five and thirty days in Greece, a country I had not visited previously. As a result, not only have I had significant acculturative experiences and international project experience, but the HOU has become my second academic home where I am "*part of the family, part of the furniture*"<sup>2</sup>. By virtue of being 'on the ground', my role further extended as I began to train the HOU mentors of materials writers and to write materials for the HOU (Davis & Fay, 2000; Fay & Spinthourakis, 2000). Research activity with HOU colleagues (eg Fay & Hill, 2003; Sifakis & Fay, 2003) has further extended my involvement.

Overall, the project has enabled me to be part of the institutional, operational, educational, and methodological developments at the HOU whilst I was experiencing similar developments at CELSE and Manchester more widely. These professional experiences are situated within what I recognise to be a powerful set of personal and interpersonal relations which have influenced, as well as resulted from, my rich professional involvement in the project.

### **1.5) The hand of serendipity**

Although my CELSE work involves many other things, this project has developed into a substantial and engrossing part of my professional life. It did so unexpectedly, often the result of serendipity. Thus:

- if Xení's letter had not arrived on the desk I had only recently taken over from a seconded colleague ...;
- if the Vice Chancellor's response had not been overtaken by the Dean's ....;
- if Xení had not approached Manchester when CELSE's educational entrepreneurialism was still evident ...;
- if we had not kept faith with her as she changed location and role, and had not pursued each idea she presented (the pursuit of which acted as preparation for developing the CELSE-HOU project when it subsequently became a possibility)...

---

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with the HOU Vice President as recorded in my Project Journal in April 1998.

- if the CELSE management structure had not been so flat (a flatness which enabled me to become Project Co-ordinator despite my junior status) ...;
- if the willingness of some senior colleagues in Manchester to cautiously proceed with the project despite worries about the “*unseemly*” use of an Educational Broker<sup>3</sup> - and the Manchester’s involvement in a high-risk region such as Greece<sup>4</sup> ... ;
- if there had not been an unforeseen market for CELSE’s bottom-up model of distance learning training and development consultancy ...; and
- if it had not been for Xeni’s realisation (when working at the Greek Ministry of Education) that CELSE’s distance learning offerings matched a politically-desirable need at the HOU ...

... then the project would probably not have begun, and even if it had, I would probably not have been involved in it; either way, this study would not have been possible.

## **1.6) A large and significant undertaking**

### ***a) The scale of the project***

The project has generated very many professional experiences through which my distance learning and international collaboration competences have begun to develop. It is thus a highly significant part of my work and an important source of professional development. Further, it is a large undertaking in its own right which has:

- lasted over six years to date (at the time of writing in December, 2003);
- involved two very different institutions at different stages in their developments in two different countries and contexts of higher education;
- involved the development of several new programmes with their associated courseware, training, and systems;
- involved many students, tutors, administrative staff, materials writers, and mentors in both institutions;
- seen extended and regular visits to Greece by CELSE staff and shorter, less frequent visits to Manchester by HOU colleagues (because it was easier financially for the HOU to organise travel in the other direction);

---

<sup>3</sup> This was the view of one Manchester Pro Vice Chancellor as recorded in my Project Journal in 1999.

<sup>4</sup> For sample press coverage of this fear of overseas collaborations in Greece, see Hugill (1996) and Hodges (1997) in Appendix 2.

- encouraged reflections on, and innovations in, the distance learning practices at CELSE;
- required extensive contractual, financial, evaluative, and publicity documentation as well as numerous briefing email communications, faxes, and letters;
- seen significant amounts of observation and other data recorded and gathered by me and other colleagues within CELSE and the HOU;
- produced very many examples of HOU resources for the MA TEFL programme; and
- seen the production of masses of student work with related tutor feedback.

***b) The significance of the project***

The project's importance is not just a matter of size but also one of significance. First, the MA TEFL programme makes extensive use, under a permitted use contract, of the CELSE distance learning materials. The phrase "permitted use contract" intentionally avoids terms such as "franchise" or "licence" - which were internally problematic at Manchester - and it is not used in any strict legal sense. Given the quite low levels of critical scrutiny accompanying the increasing globalisation and internationalisation of educational arrangements, such contractual models in educational contexts merit closer examination.

Second, the transplant of materials from one programme context (with its own educational values and practices) to another (with its still-developing educational values and practices) raises appropriate distance learning methodology concerns<sup>5</sup>: for example, what happens in the HOU programme context to CELSE's implicit and explicit methodological assumptions (as embodied in the transferred materials) about Masters-level language teacher education, distance learning, and EFL?

Third, the MA TEFL was the first full programme offered by the HOU, an institution which is itself the first public institution in Greece to develop large-scale distance learning provision. Keegan (2000: 134-135) provides a national profile of distance learning in Greece which, in addition to the HOU, identifies only "*one small college*" in the category of Proprietary Distance Training Institution but finds no distance learning provision at all in the categories of Government Distance Training Institutions, and Distance Training Courses from Conventional Universities. Thus, the participants in the collaboration are critically positioned to comment on this innovatory phase in which distance learning

---

<sup>5</sup> For collaborative discussion of this concern in relation to the project, see Fay (2001), Fay and Hill (2003), Fay, Hill and Davcheva (2002) and (forthcoming, 2004), Fay and Sifakis (2003), Fay, Spinthourakis and Anastassiadi (2000), and Sifakis and Fay (2003).



provision has been, and continues to be, developed in Greek tertiary education. This Greek experience should offer insights of more general value about the introduction of non-traditional study modes which are rapidly developing in importance globally.

Fourth, the HOU is the product of the controversial (to judge by the ensuing strike actions) 1990s educational reforms in Greece which were intended, in the Greek Minister of Education's memorable phrase, to be "*a catalyst for change*"<sup>6</sup>. An example of this iconoclastic approach involves the conscious use of Greeks with extensive experience outside Greece to break down the educational conservatism seen to be endemic in the Greek system (OECD, 1995). In particular, both Xeni [the Educational Broker] and Eleftheria [the Academic Registrar] were recruited on special scholarships to the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs because of their extensive educational experience outside Greece. It is legitimate, therefore, to ask about the contribution of the HOU to the challenging of established university norms in Greece<sup>7</sup>.

Fifth, in November 2002, the first ever HOU graduation ceremony took place, for students completing the MA TEFL programme. This event<sup>8</sup> marked the 'coming of age' of a programme on which 15+ tutors are now supporting the 500+ teachers who have joined to date. Such extensive continuing professional development in the EFL community of a relatively small country like Greece has enormous impact potential<sup>9</sup>.

Sixth, born of CELSE's entrepreneurial, internationally-oriented project culture within educational studies in the 1990s, the project has had to justify its value during Manchester's increasingly 'research-led' and UK-focused agenda as made explicit in discussions within the Faculty of Education around the time of the 2000 Research Assessment Exercise. The outcome, somewhat curiously, is that the project is seen as something of a Cinderella activity at Manchester whilst being regarded, until recently at least, as a valued international collaboration at the HOU. Investigation of this odd situation might cast an interesting perspective on the current tensions within UK higher education regarding teaching and research, parochialism and internationalism, and the impact of government policy *vis-à-vis* educational globalisation and distance learning.

---

<sup>6</sup> Recorded in my Project Journal after the July 1996 meeting between the HOU and the Manchester negotiators, ie Raymond (the Dean) and myself.

<sup>7</sup> For illustrative press coverage of the innovatory status of the HOU, see Sarakakis (1999) in Appendix 2.

<sup>8</sup> For press coverage, see the photographs in Appendix 1 and the articles by Alevizou (2003) and TWNW (2002) in Appendix 2.

<sup>9</sup> For one account of the impact, see Lagou (1999) in Appendix 2.

For all or any of the above reasons, the project merits closer investigation. After I thus evaluated the significance of the project, I decided to base a large part of my research activity on it. However, this decision, although based on a sense of the possible lines of investigation, was not yet focused. The focusing process is discussed next.

## 2) Developing My Research Focus

### 2.1) Searching for a focus

#### *a) Searching for understanding ...*

I did not start out with any specific intention to research the project but as usual in the projects I am involved with, and particularly in the projects which I co-ordinate, I have kept an ongoing journal and have archived all relevant documents (including faxes and email messages) generated by the project or which I see as related to it in some way. Therefore, the project has generated many experiences and many and varied data, and as my level of involvement with it increased and my understandings of it continued to develop, I realised that the project merited some systematic study<sup>10</sup>. This realisation was given an increasingly sharper edge by my experience – as a fixed-term contract employee in a language teacher education sector more focused on practice than research - of the more explicit and fore-grounded research requirements of my employing institution. But from a research perspective, I found the project’s scale and significance to be daunting. The first research challenge was therefore one of finding my focus. Initially, I thought in terms of evaluating the project and its impact. The following email to my Supervisor captures my thinking at this stage in the focusing process:

#### **Project Characteristics and Related Focusing Questions**

The CELSE-HOU project is a) innovative, b) emergent, and c) intended to be catalytic.

##### ***a) Innovative***

The CELSE-HOU project is innovative on several levels. Within Greece, the creation from scratch of a new, public-sector university, pump-primed by EU regional development funding, is a major innovation in itself, the more so because of the distance-learning, ‘mega-university’ character of the HOU. The introduction of distance learning in Greece is also relatively innovatory, the more so because the HOU employs distance learning as the dominant mode of learning across all areas of Higher Education provision (ie distance learning is not restricted to vocational or specialised areas). Within the University of Manchester, the use of a Permitted Use arrangement based on distance learning courseware (as opposed to patented scientific discoveries) is innovatory, as is the “unseemly” use of an Educational Broker. The transplant of distance learning courseware to a new educational context can also be seen as innovatory.

<sup>10</sup> The archive of these documents forms the basis of *My Project Co-ordinator’s Story* in Chapter 7.

Given this innovatory background, two key questions have arisen as the project has developed since 1994:

Q1: What factors enable, permit, and encourage such innovations?

Q2: What factors frustrate, prevent and hinder such innovations?

**In the stories which follow in later chapters, certain aspects have been selected with these questions in mind rather than adopting a blow-by-blow account of the whole (ad)venture.**

***b) Emergent***

The CELSE-HOU project involves the emergent HOU with all that this entails and, within that, the emergent MA TEFL programme. It also involves emergent collaborations between the two universities and the members of them, between the University of Manchester and the Educational Broker, and between the University of Manchester and the QAA high-risk regions such as Greece. It also involves an emergent sense of what makes for appropriate distance learning methodology in Greece, within the HOU, and within the MA TEFL programme. From these observations, a further focusing question is derived:

Q3: What are the characteristics of these emergent educational and collaborative cultures?

***c) Catalytic***

The educational reforms within Greece, in part initiated by the Education Minister, were intended to be “a catalyst for change” (hence the conscious use of outsiders or insiders with extensive outside experience, as Trojan horses so to speak, to get beyond the walls of conservatism). Such changes might be seen in attitudes towards education in general and towards distance learning in particular within Greek Higher Education (and across disciplines within sector). They might also be seen in terms of those students influenced by the new provision. Although this was not the Education Minister’s stated intention, the collaboration may also have been a catalyst for change in the University of Manchester with regard to systems, relationships (eg with Educational Broker), understandings of distance learning and appropriate methodology and QAA-type concerns regarding project development. From these considerations, a final two focusing questions can be stated:

Q4: What evidence is there to date of change and to what extent can this be traced, at least in part, to the project’s activities?

Q5: Are the changes seen to be beneficial?

**Extract 1.1: *Email Communication with Supervisor* (November 2000)**

***b) ... rather than project evaluation***

However, the nature of the research opportunities afforded by my role in the CELSE-HOU project did not readily enable me to pursue the common research designs for project evaluation (Elley, 1989: 273ff; Brown, 1989: 224ff). For example, not only did my project role not easily enable the implementation of linked baseline and impact studies, but also the opportunity for carrying out such an initial baseline study had already passed. Further, whilst HOU tutors could perhaps have set up research projects involving experimental

group comparisons with matched control groups of the language teachers involved in the 'English' programme, my own role *vis-à-vis* the teachers taking the programme was contextually too distant, institutionally too external, geographically too remote, and linguistically too limited to make this a viable option.

Similarly, because the project rapidly broadened and because it developed in the vacuum of the HOU's emergent practices and identities, product-oriented evaluation (Brown, 1989: 224ff) based on the project objectives would have been of limited value. Further, static characteristic evaluation based on my professional judgements of the project (*ibid.*, pp.225-226) would have required my role to have been performed by someone less involved in the project and more experienced in this type of project. Process-oriented evaluation (*ibid.*, pp.226-227; Coleman, 1992) had more potential but my own role and opportunities for extending it could not provide me with an overview of the project and its development but rather with a series of localised, personalised, impressionistic and experiential accounts of this development. Finally, although I was Project Co-ordinator, my junior status and inexperience in post meant that I was insufficiently close to the decision-makers in either institution to pursue a decision facilitation approach (*ibid.*, pp.227-228).

In sum, I did not seem to be in the right position to undertake an evaluation of the project in terms of its curricular impact. Thus, if "*evaluation is the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of the curriculum, and assess its effectiveness and efficiency, as well as the participants' attitudes within the context of the particular institutions involved*" (*ibid.*, pp.225-223), then my role offered real opportunities for researching only that part of evaluation concerned with the participants' attitudes in the context of the institutions involved.

I realised that what I needed as well as wanted to do was understand what the project and its developing characteristics meant for the participants (myself included) and institutions involved in it as well as on the contexts in which it was located<sup>11</sup>. Just as my own role and experiences of the project gave me only a fragmentary sense of the whole, so too did the roles and experiences of my project colleagues, and yet all of us had to make decisions about what these project experiences meant and consequently how we should act within

---

<sup>11</sup> This desire is shared, to some extent, by my HOU colleagues. For example, see the Greek-medium tutor reflections on the programme: Agiakli (2001); Papaefthymiou-Lytra (2001); Papaefthymiou-Lytra, Sifakis and Hill (2003); Sifakis (1999); and Sifakis and Hill (2001).

the project. I realised that we did so on the basis of the holistic understanding of the project which we fashioned from our limited roles and experiences. My research focus thus became a desire to examine the sense-making of participants in large projects, who, in order to function within that project context, have to create holistic accounts of the project's meanings. It is a focus not dissimilar from the purpose of bringing "*teachers' ways of knowing into our professional conversations so as to transform our understandings of language teachers and language teaching*" (Johnson & Golombek, 2002: xi), the difference lying in my focus on understandings of educational projects rather than on language teaching practices.

## **2.2) Deciding how to explore the context of the project**

As *Extract 1.1* illustrates, my search for understanding was driven by the intercultural thinking about education which forms a major part of the conceptual basis for the main masters-level course unit which I teach at Manchester, MD531<sup>12</sup>. This teaching is concerned with the cultural understandings of language education and language teacher education (see Chapter 5). By linking my teaching and project work in this way, I had embarked upon a study of the cultural context of the project. I began doing so in what I now see was an important but ultimately naïve focus on the Greek context. Thus, schoolboy notions of the splendours of the ancient world remained unchallenged until I first visited Greece in early summer 1994. Then, disappointed, I encountered drivers' curses as the taxi crawled through traffic and the choking pollution (*'nefos'*) of Athens, surrounded by noise, heat, and the ugly urban sprawl, defaced by neon lights for Heineken, Pizza Hut, and British Home Stores (for press coverage in a similar vein, see Howard, 2000, in Appendix 2)<sup>13</sup>.

The 'real Greece', that ancient world conjured up in school-day reveries, this I struggled to find. Even the Parthenon, that icon of ancient Greece, was scarcely visible through the *nefos* and omni-present scaffolding, perched on its Acropolis plinth, denuded of its marbles. I went to Greece expecting to 'touch' the past but found only the "*ugly heat*" my Project Journal records. Unwittingly, I had fallen into a well-known trap:

---

<sup>12</sup> For more information about this course unit, see the following URL (as accessed in April 2004): <http://www.education.man.ac.uk/langlit/EdTech/MD531>

<sup>13</sup> I stayed in Kifissia about which Pettifer writes: "*The shops are a long row of foreign names ... it is difficult to avoid the feeling, even in a friend's house, of being culturally separate from most of Greece ...*" (1993: 96-97).

*The great romance of the British in the second decade of the [nineteenth] century was Greece. 'We are all Greeks' said Shelley in the Preface to his poem **Hellas** written shortly after the outbreak of the Greek revolt. Shelley had never set foot in Greece. The ones who did often remembered Chateaubriand's maxim: 'Never see Greece, Monsieur, except in Homer. It is the best way'. (Todorova, 1997: 94)*

My initial disappointment became an issue between Eleftheria (who at the time was a colleague and friend and who soon afterwards became the Academic Registrar for the HOU 'English' programme) and myself, a stimulus for her to show me the "real Greece". She kept her promise and my diary captures the precise time of my 'conversion':

[Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> June 1997, Kalamata]

*The sun is setting as we reach the outskirts of Kalamata where Eleftheria [ie The Academic Registrar] awaits. This visit to Greece (unlike the earlier ones ... ) has a different feel to it. Although you might think that the boutiques of Maroussi with their familiar logos and merchandise would feel comfortable for me, it is only now as I cross the Greek countryside ... that I am feeling positive, genuinely positive about what seems to be a deepening relationship with this country and society. Eleftheria will be glad to hear this. I think she was a bit upset when I used to teasingly say disparaging things about Greece. She promised that she would show me the "real Greece" next time I came .....*

#### **Extract 1.2: Project Journal**

Although this desire to understand generic Greekness has been personally rewarding, my professional self needed to understand Greek Higher Education, the Greek practice of distance learning, and Greek project teams. Further, although I have found some specific aspects of Greekness (see Chapters 5 and 6) to be useful in understanding the contextual backdrop against which the CELSE-HOU project action takes place, understandings of Greekness seemed much less helpful when I focused on understanding the project itself. Instead, my search for understanding focused on the cultures of the 'English' programme and the CELSE-HOU project. In this move from a focus on Greekness *per se* to a focus on the emergent cultures of the project, my thinking has been influenced by the work of Adrian Holliday (eg 1994 and 1999) which is discussed further in Chapter 5.

### **2.3) Recognising my diversity of roles ...**

In these emergent project cultures, my personal, professional and researcher identities have become intertwined in what has been a very fulfilling ten years of my life. During this time, I have played a variety of roles. Thus, I have been and remain:

- a project participant in both Manchester and Greece, within CELSE and the HOU;

- a project observer - forced by the project's momentum and internal logic to reflect on the established and emerging practices and values of the two institutions involved and on the behaviours of the various groups of colleagues involved in different combinations and locations on different occasions in activities related to the project's development;
- a sojourner - involved in both formalised and informal ethnographic activity;
- a researcher within the project - motivated by a desire to informally evaluate the project as it developed and thus be able to fine-tune it on an informed basis; and
- a researcher outside the project - standing apart from it in some ways as I worked on the study which is captured in this thesis.

As I search for understandings of the project cultures, I must accept, distinguish, and be sensitive to the influence of these varied roles on the understandings I have formed and which I am constructing here. Further, I must carefully distinguish my different roles and voices in this study (Holliday, 2002a; 2002b). These understandings are not only based on my own participation and reflective observation but also on the understandings I have gained from my collaboration colleagues. The colleagues involved are not only aware of my diversity of role but also of their own diverse roles. For example, Christos (whose narrative is re-storied in Chapter 8) is currently developing a Greek university career. To this end, his HOU experiences and his publications play an important role. The story he tells me is influenced both by what he knows about my roles and also by the imperatives of his own position<sup>14</sup>. Our mutually-influencing diversity of roles is captured in our joint research.

Although I have tried disentangling these complex, inter-related, and overlapping participant roles wherever possible, I nonetheless regard the understandings I present in this thesis as co-constructions in many ways (although I am largely responsible for the manner of their articulation), co-constructions resulting from intrapersonal interactions between my different project roles as well as from interpersonal interactions between myself and other colleagues and interactions between themselves. This is discussed further in Chapters 2 and 3.

---

<sup>14</sup> This example illustrates also the ways in which narratives are, of their very nature, positional, an issue discussed further in Chapter 2.

### 3) Experiencing the Power of Narrative

Since the project has involved my spending large stretches of time in Greece especially in the early years of the project, I began recording the experiences ethnographically. To this end, I made extensive participant-observation notes and kept a Project Journal. However, during one visit, an alternative approach suggested itself. The visit came after three years of occasional, exploratory visits to Greece. It marked the beginning of the ‘proper’ project. It is in Project Journal extracts of this period that my awareness of narrative power is first articulated.

#### 3.1) Beware Greeks telling stories ...

As my Project Journal records, the June 1997 visit was significant in many ways. The positive feelings which I felt towards Greece (see *Extract 1.2* above) were accompanied by an openness and reflectiveness towards my experiences:

[Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> June 1997, Athens]

*Mid-afternoon, I checked into ... the hotel organised for me by the HOU, its convenient location to the Ministry of Education ...being its main recommendation. Its name struck me: **Hotel Omiros** (or Hotel Homer in English). Finally I seem to have “touched” Homeric Greece. It feels like a critical moment, a superstitious omen perhaps.*

#### **Extract 1.3: Project Journal**

This openness accounts, I believe, for my awareness of the possibilities of narrative:

[Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> June 1997, lunchtime, at the HOU HQ in Patras]

*This morning, Stamatis [ie the HOU Vice-President] picked me up .. and we set off ... for the Corinth road and the way to the HOU in Patras. As we drive, Stamatis speeds up and slows down in time with his stories ... Seamlessly, we traverse the world of the gods, the ancient times of Pericles and the Peloponnesian war, the 1820s War of Independence, the Second World War and the Civil War which followed, the time of the Junta (1970s) and recent times (teachers' strikes). In this war-like saga, he seems to make no distinction between fact and fiction, between the 1820s hero Mavromihali and the goddess Athena: this hill is fabled for a visit by Athena as well as for the heroic struggles it saw between the partisans and the axis forces in 1943-44. The stories keep us occupied until we leave Corinth behind and strike out ... towards ... Patras. Homerically, an aside grows into its own tale, and ... we have stories inside stories, each told with as much pleasure in the telling as in the original stimulus for the telling ....*

#### **Extract 1.4: Project Journal**



### 3.2) Embrace Greeks telling stories ...

Later on the same day, I tried linking these new experiences with dim memories of theory:

[Saturday June 21<sup>st</sup> 1997, afternoon, on the bus to Kalamata]

*... now I am sitting on the old service bus from Patras to Kalamata. Stamatis insisted on buying my ticket and finding me a seat and we stood awkwardly by the door saying goodbyes without a clear script for doing so. Finally we shake hands and [he] bids me "enjoy the real Greece".*

*I am (blame the beer) trying to find my schooldays' knowledge of Aristotle's Poetics. The stimulus for this was the name of the beer, Mythos .... I have a notion (which I must check) that the Greek "mythos" actually means something like "plot" and that Aristotle contrasts this with "praxis" (? Action). So what we get is a contrast between isolated actions (eg the civil war battle on this hill) and a series of actions, or a plot (like Stamatis' seamless tales on the Corinth road). And in [his] storytelling we access this plot through his narrative re-enactment of the separate incidents. Through this representation of the plot, [he] creates anew the world of Athena, Mavromihali, and the rest. And with [his own personal] ... perspective, these tales will have their own [particular] hue ...*

#### **Extract 1.5: Project Journal**

This reflection began a process of methodological thinking that coincided with my realisation that although my ethnographic focus on the Greekness of the context was personally rewarding, professionally it was much less so. Alerted by Stamatis' performance to the power of narratives, I began noticing their presence throughout the project, in the stories colleagues were telling each other to explain why and how things were as they were. For example, new members of the HOU 'English' team were socialised into the team through the explanatory narratives of the original team members, and they shared their experiences of their first Contact Sessions, their first assignment marking experiences and so on through stories about particular incidents and student performances. Their accounts seemed to capture their understandings of what was happening but also their emotional responses to it (eg pride at the impressive commitment of students) and their developing practices.

Similarly, I realised my reports to CELSE colleagues after blocks of fieldwork very often took a narrative form and I used incidents to illustrate what was happening and to articulate my evaluation of the project. On a more personal level, when I now look back at the many occasions when Eleftheria and I mused over a glass of beer on our way home from the HOU office, I realise we were co-constructing our narrative reminiscences of the early days of the project. This unwinding process embodied our subconscious attempt to understand how we had reached such a point, how things had come to pass as they were.

In sum, I realised the extent of the narrative world of the project in comparison to my earlier concern for the experienced world of the project. I began to believe that I could access and construct understandings of the project through the stories told by some of the participants in it.

#### **4) Organising My Study**

##### **4.1) Specifying the Research Questions**

Pulling together the above strands, this study explores the following questions:

Q1: What understandings of the factors encouraging and discouraging the development of the CELSE-HOU project are to be found in the narratives of its participants?

Q2: What underpinnings for understanding the project are to be found in my narratives of conceptual development related to the project?

Q3: From the insights gathered in response to Questions 1 and 2, what can be learned about the characteristics of the project's emergent cultures of distance learning and collaboration?

When I began my research into the project as focused by the above questions, I had to develop my researcher competence in relation to narrative research. During the process of developing this competence, an additional focusing Research Question emerged. Although its presentation below disturbs the chronological flow of my research story, I want to present it here so that all four Research Questions are gathered clearly in one place:

Q4: What insights about narrative research methodology can be gained through examining the participants' project narratives?

I will return to these questions directly in my discussion in Chapter 9.

##### **4.2) Delineating the different storylines ...**

This study is based on the narratives associated with the project. Together these narratives form a rich tapestry of storylines which intersect and recur throughout the thesis. The following main storylines, as well as many others, have already made an appearance in this chapter and they reappear in the subsequent chapters as well:

- sojourner narratives - my fieldwork experiences (present here and there throughout the thesis);
- professional narratives - my development through the last ten years at CELSE (especially present in Chapters 1 and 9);
- methodological narratives - the development of my narrative approach to the study of this project (Chapters 2 and 3);
- conceptual narratives - the development of my conceptual understandings of distance learning (Chapter 4), interculturality and appropriate distance learning methodology (Chapter 5), and Greekness (Chapter 6);
- Project Co-ordination narratives - my six-phased overview of the project (Chapter 7);
- framing narratives - my Symposiarch's presentation of the Symposium (Chapter 8); and
- participant narratives - the eight Symposiasts' narratives of the project (Chapter 8).

The largely self-sufficient presence of these separate storylines provides a number of reading options. For example, it is possible to go immediately to the main stories, those of the participants as presented in the Symposium in Chapter 8. This provides an immediate experience of the project as mediated through these co-constructed accounts. This experience can then act as a backdrop whilst reading the conceptual and other narratives. Equally, it may make sense for some readers to begin with my *Project Co-ordinator's Story* in Chapter 7. The thesis can also be read conventionally, chapter-by-chapter.

Such reading options are intentionally provided as an invitation to the reader to engage with this study of the CELSE-HOU project in ways which, if I have done my job well, they will find enjoyable as well as insightful.

### **4.3) Structuring the thesis**

Chapters 2 and 3 are concerned with understandings of narrative and narrative approaches to research. In them, I explain how I have taken the ideas arising in the field, rooted them in the research literature, and, from this endeavour, fashioned my narrative approach for this study.

Three chapters then follow which describe how my understandings of key conceptual areas related to the project have developed through my involvement in it: Chapter 4 addresses distance learning; Chapter 5 considers interculturality and the need for

appropriate distance learning methodology; and Chapter 6 outlines those understandings of Greekness relevant to understanding the project.

The next two chapters re-tell participant narratives about the project: Chapter 7 presents my own account from a Project Co-ordinator's perspective; and Chapter 8 consists of a Symposium of eight restoryings of narratives from collaborating colleagues in Manchester and at the HOU. Chapter 9 explores the issues which I draw from these narratives by returning to the above Research Questions and discussing the extent to which the issues emerging from the narratives enable interpretations to be drawn.