

Education, Narrative and The Search for Meaning in a Digital Age:

An Interview with Ivor F. Goodson

Interview conducted by Elsa Estrela during
the ACT4WBeing Symposium, Lisbon

Abstract

The following interview with Professor Ivor Goodson took place during the ACT-4WBeing Symposium, an international event that gathered researchers, educators, and practitioners to reflect on education, professional autonomy, and teachers' well-being in the context of a rapidly digitising and globalised world. Within this symposium, Goodson's intervention — framed as a live conversation rather than a formal keynote — offered a profoundly humanistic and politically engaged perspective on what it means to educate, research, and live meaningfully today. Ivor F. Goodson is one of the most influential figures in the field of education. A British scholar with a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Sussex, he has taught and conducted research at universities in England, Canada, and the United States, and has been a visiting professor at institutions such as the Max Planck Institute, Sciences Po (Paris), and Stanford University. He was a Professor of International Research at Tallinn University in Estonia and a Senior Research Associate at the Guerrand-Hermès Peace Foundation in Brighton, UK. Previously, he was a Professor of Learning Theory at the University of Brighton's Education Research Center. Goodson has led major international research projects and authored an extensive and multifaceted body of work on curriculum studies, life history, narrative inquiry, and education policy. Among many distinctions, he received the John Nisbet Fellowship (BERA, 2018), the Michael Huberman Award (AERA), an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Gothenburg, and was elected Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences (UK).

Throughout his career, Goodson has sought to understand how educational policies and curriculum reforms intersect with the lived experiences of teachers and learners. His work defends education as a moral and democratic project, grounded in people's stories and aspirations rather than in bureaucratic or market imperatives. In this wide-ranging conversation, he reflects on his intellectual trajectory — from curriculum theory to narrative inquiry — and on the ethical, political, and existential challenges that education faces in the twenty-first century.

Educação, Narrativa e a Busca por Sentido na Era Digital: Uma Entrevista com Ivor F. Goodson: Entrevista conduzida por Elsa Estrela durante o Simpósio ACT4WBeing, em Lisboa

Resumo: A entrevista que se segue com o Professor Ivor Goodson teve lugar durante o Simpósio ACT4WBeing, um encontro internacional que reuniu investigadores, educadores e profissionais para refletir sobre a educação, a autonomia profissional e o bem-estar docente num contexto de crescente digitalização e globalização. Nesta ocasião, a intervenção de Goodson — apresentada em formato de conversa — ofereceu uma perspetiva profundamente humanista e politicamente comprometida sobre o significado de educar, investigar e viver com sentido hoje. Ivor F. Goodson é uma das figuras mais influentes no campo da educação. Investigador britânico, doutorado em Filosofia pela Universidade de Sussex, lecionou e desenvolveu investigação em universidades do Reino Unido, Canadá e Estados Unidos, e foi professor visitante em instituições como o Max Planck Institute, Sciences Po (Paris) e Universidade de Stanford. Foi professor de Investigação Internacional na Universidade de Tallinn, na Estónia, e investigador sénior associado na Fundação Guerrand-Hermès para a Paz, em Brighton, no Reino Unido. Anteriormente, foi professor de Teoria da Aprendizagem no Centro de Investigação Educacional da Universidade de Brighton. Liderou diversos projetos internacionais e é autor de uma vasta e multifacetada obra sobre estudos curriculares, histórias de vida, investigação narrativa e políticas educativas. Entre as suas distinções contam-se a John Nisbet Fellowship (BERA, 2018), o Michael Huberman Award (AERA), o Doutoramento Honoris Causa pela Universidade de Gotemburgo e o título de Fellow da Academy of Social Sciences (Reino Unido). Ao longo da sua carreira, Goodson procurou compreender como as políticas educativas e as reformas curriculares se cruzam com as experiências vividas por professores e estudantes. A sua obra defende a educação como um projeto moral e democrático, ancorado nas histórias e aspirações das pessoas e não em imperativos burocráticos ou de mercado. Nesta conversa, reflete sobre a sua trajetória intelectual — do estudo do currículo à investigação narrativa — e sobre os desafios éticos, políticos e existenciais que a educação enfrenta no século XXI.

Éducation, Récit et Sens à l'Ère Numérique : Entretien avec Ivor F. Goodson: Entretien réalisé par Elsa Estrela lors du Symposium ACT4WBeing, à Lisbonne

Résumé: L'entretien suivant avec le Professeur Ivor Goodson a eu lieu lors du Symposium ACT4WBeing, un événement international réunissant chercheurs, éducateurs et praticiens pour réfléchir sur l'éducation, l'autonomie professionnelle et le bien-être humain dans un monde de plus en plus numérisé et globalisé. Dans ce contexte, l'intervention de Goodson — présentée sous forme de dialogue — a offert une perspective profondément humaniste et politiquement engagée sur le sens d'enseigner, de rechercher et de vivre avec conscience aujourd'hui. Ivor F. Goodson est l'un des chercheurs les plus influents dans le domaine de l'éducation. Universitaire britannique, titulaire d'un doctorat en philosophie de l'Université du Sussex, il a enseigné et mené des recherches dans des universités au Royaume-Uni, au Canada et aux États-Unis, et a été professeur invité dans des institutions telles que le Max Planck Institute, Sciences Po (Paris) et l'Université de Stanford. Il a été professeur de recherche internationale à l'université de Tallinn en Estonie et chercheur associé principal à la Fondation Guerrand-Hermès pour la paix à Brighton, au Royaume-Uni. Auparavant, il était professeur de théorie de l'apprentissage au Centre de recherche en éducation de l'université de Brighton. Il a dirigé d'importants projets internationaux et est l'auteur d'une œuvre riche et variée sur les études curriculaires, les histoires de vie, la recherche narrative et les politiques éducatives. Parmi ses distinctions figurent la John Nisbet Fellowship (BERA, 2018), le Michael Huberman Award (AERA), le doctorat honorifique de l'Université de Göteborg et le titre de Fellow de l'Academy of Social Sciences (Royaume-Uni). Tout au long de sa carrière, Goodson a cherché à comprendre comment les politiques éducatives et les réformes curriculaires s'articulent avec les expériences vécues des enseignants et des apprenants. Son œuvre défend l'éducation comme un projet moral et démocratique, fondé sur les histoires et les aspirations humaines plutôt que sur des impératifs bureaucratiques ou marchands. Dans cette conversation, il revient sur sa trajectoire intellectuelle — de la théorie du curriculum à la recherche narrative — et sur les défis éthiques, politiques et existentiels que l'éducation doit relever au XXI^e siècle.

Educación, Narrativa y Sentido en la Era Digital: Una Entrevista con Ivor F. Goodson. Entrevista realizada por Elsa Estrela durante el Simposio ACT4WBeing, en Lisboa

Resumen: La siguiente entrevista con el Profesor Ivor Goodson tuvo lugar durante el Simposio ACT4WBeing, un evento internacional que reunió a investigadores, educadores y profesionales para reflexionar sobre la educación, la autonomía profesional y el bienestar humano en un mundo cada vez más digitalizado y globalizado. En este contexto, la intervención de Goodson — planteada como una conversación — ofreció una perspectiva profundamente humanista y políticamente comprometida sobre lo que significa educar, investigar y vivir con

sentido en la actualidad. Ivor F. Goodson es una de las figuras más influyentes en el campo de la educación. Académico británico con doctorado en Filosofía por la Universidad de Sussex, ha enseñado e investigado en universidades del Reino Unido, Canadá y Estados Unidos, y ha sido profesor visitante en instituciones como el Max Planck Institute, Sciences Po (París) y la Universidad de Stanford. Fue profesor de Investigación Internacional en la Universidad de Tallin, en Estonia, y investigador asociado sénior en la Fundación Guerrand-Hermès para la Paz, en Brighton, Reino Unido. Anteriormente, fue profesor de Teoría del Aprendizaje en el Centro de Investigación Educativa de la Universidad de Brighton. Ha dirigido importantes proyectos internacionales y es autor de una amplia y diversa obra sobre estudios curriculares, historias de vida, investigación narrativa y políticas educativas. Entre sus distinciones se incluyen la John Nisbet Fellowship (BERA, 2018), el Michael Huberman Award (AERA), el Doctorado Honoris Causa por la Universidad de Gotemburgo y el título de Fellow de la Academy of Social Sciences (Reino Unido). A lo largo de su carrera, Goodson ha buscado comprender cómo las políticas educativas y las reformas curriculares se entrelazan con las experiencias vividas de docentes y estudiantes. Su obra defiende la educación como un proyecto moral y democrático, basado en las historias y aspiraciones humanas más que en imperativos burocráticos o de mercado. En esta conversación, reflexiona sobre su trayectoria intelectual — desde la teoría curricular hasta la investigación narrativa — y sobre los desafíos éticos, políticos y existenciales que enfrenta la educación en el siglo XXI.

*EE: It is a huge pleasure having you here and I thank you for accepting our invitation. The book *Storying the Public Intellectual* brings together insights from scholars who have engaged with your work and examines your contributions to educational research and your role as a public intellectual. What is the central theme or purpose that connects all your research?*

IG: That's a difficult question to start with. I suppose what really connects it is an attempt to do work that helps people—teachers and ordinary citizens—understand the purpose of governments and government policy. Underpinning it is a commitment to democracy and to a population that understands what governments are trying to do for them.

To do that, you have to develop research styles that involve the people you're trying to help. Very often, research methods are constructed for the purposes of those in power, not to empower the population and counter-movements. I guess the theme in my work is trying to find ways to study policy and practice that allow people to engage with them in an informed way.

So, what drives me is an attempt to create a reasonable flow of information for ordinary people so they can interrogate government purposes seriously, rather than just accept what social media tells them. You look at what social media and others tell you, then interrogate it yourself and say, "Either this makes sense or it doesn't." But to do that you need information from researchers and others to help you. I guess that's the thing.

EE: Has your perspective on education and curriculum evolved over the years?

IG: That's a good question. I started out as a schoolteacher. Actually, I first started as a university professor, but I didn't like it, so I went back to become a schoolteacher. That was a very interesting move.

Since then, I became involved in trying to understand why the school curriculum was as it was when it didn't seem to work very well for the people I cared about most. I came from a very poor family; poor kids in general hated their curriculum. In England it was Latin, Greek—various things that just bored you to death.

It bored everyone, which I think was the point. We were all badly behaved at school. I hated school. I left school at 15 to work in a factory, and I realized the curriculum was constructed in a way to make that happen. So, I wanted to look at that “battle of the curriculum” and wrote a number of books.

I was telling my friend here: the first book looked at how Environmental Studies—a good subject that the kids were interested in—was squeezed out of the curriculum by the geographers and the biologists so it couldn't exist. I found that struggle fascinating to study. At that time, you could interrogate government policy in interesting ways.

You could get in, cross-question politicians (as I did), cross-question everyone. You could actually get inside the struggle over curriculum. But increasingly, governments took that possibility away. They simply pronounced the policy, teachers obeyed, and it became a straight transmission model from power down to the classroom.

So, the struggle over curriculum couldn't be interrogated in the way I wanted. I was left with a problem—this would be around 1990.

I had just left England because I hated what we had—Margaret Thatcher, whom you're all too young to remember. She was, in my view, an appalling human being doing terrible things to the country.

My wife said, “You don't like it, you're not happy, I'm not happy. Let's go somewhere else.” So, we went to Canada—which is very cold, I have to tell you—and worked there for 10 years.

During that time, I realized that kind of curriculum-policy study was essentially dead, because governments had cut out any chance of being interrogated. So, I started to think: what kind of work could bring teachers back in—engaged work that celebrates teachers' expertise—and allow us to interrogate policy from a different space?

At the time in Canada, the head of the teachers' union invited me to a two-week workshop. At the end, the head of the union asked me, “If there's one policy you'd suggest the union push the government for, what would it be?” I said, “Pressure the government to give teachers one day a week of preparation time—time to prepare

materials, reflect on why they're teachers, reconnect with their sense of mission. The result will be more motivation, better teacher retention, and improved grades.”

That's exactly what happened in Ontario. The unions threatened strike action to get preparation time, and teachers got one day a week—which they still have. I began to think more about that.

I realized teachers need time to think about their lives and why they came into teaching. By and large, teachers are a really good bunch of people. They're in it for good reasons, in my experience. So, if you study teachers' lives and work, you begin to see—from a very interesting vantage point—what government policies actually mean in the classroom.

By now, there's a life history of me in the middle of all this. My wife, who wanted to go to Canada, ended up hating it. The whole time we were there, she said, “Let's go home to England.” My son felt the same. So, in 1995 I got a job back in England.

I have to tell you this because it's part of the story. I had been offered a really prestigious professorship at the University of Rochester in New York State. I told Mary, “We're not going back to England; I've got this fabulous job in America.”

She didn't want to go to America and I said, “I think I've already dragged you to Canada, so you go home to England.” I had a sabbatical in England, and the University of East Anglia said, “Your wife doesn't want to go to America, you don't want to go to America—why not spend six months in America and six months in England? Mary can live in England, and you can pop over to New York State for six months.”

It was actually a stupid thing to do—two houses, two tax systems—an impossible situation. Anyway, I did that for ten years. While I was there, I realized they were putting through some very interesting reforms in America.

Clinton was president, and the program was called “Education 2000.” They were spending over two billion pounds on these reforms, and teachers weren't changing at all. They didn't like the reforms and simply resisted them. So, you pour out two billion pounds and nothing changes.

Americans are used to things changing when you pay money—what you might call a Trumpian view: you make a deal, you pay. But they weren't getting results. In desperation, they came to me and another scholar, Andy Hargreaves, and said, “We're spending all this money. If we gave you a couple of million dollars, what would you study?” What we decided to do was interrogate the existing reforms and curriculum changes the government wanted, set against teachers' life histories, practices, and responses to reform. We did a series of life histories with teachers. Crucially, in America the best teachers receive prizes, so you can identify who they are.

These are awards where the kids say, “These are good teachers.” So, we interviewed many prize-winning teachers about the reforms, and we wrote chapters on each. All of the best teachers hated the reforms. Half of the prize-winning teachers we interviewed were leaving teaching because of the reforms. That’s a powerful political message to take back to senators and others in Congress because they were under pressure from voters about deteriorating schools. Voters noticed the best teachers were leaving. That transformed the reform process. It shows that if you study teachers’ lives and how they respond to reforms, you can interrogate policies in a way that government has to listen to. So, to answer Elsa’s question from an hour ago: I moved from studying curriculum—where government had frozen us out of the possibility of challenging policy—to studying teachers’ lives and work, where you could actually change policy. I’ve stayed in that area pretty much ever since and broadened it into studies of narrative more generally. That’s the long answer to a short question.

EE: We have time, so don’t worry. Regarding the life-history and narrative methods you developed and just discussed, what unique insights do these approaches provide that more traditional research methods don’t?

IG: Life-history work focuses on people’s subjectivity—how they experience the world. No other method really does that in the same way. You can have surveys that capture numbers, psychological studies that infer what a person is thinking, or philosophical studies. But there’s no method I know that says, “I’m going to talk to you, and then I’m going to shut up and listen while you tell me how you experience the world and what you want from it.” I can’t think of any other method I’d rather use for that purpose. The whole point of being a researcher isn’t to polish my own theories. It’s to study other people talking about themselves, while I interrogate and probe so we can understand their subjectivities. This is very much the age of subjectivity. Social media is about people’s opinions and subjectivities. But the research methods preferred by governments and corporations focus only on objectivity. A method that focuses on and disentangles people’s subjectivities is, I think, the way to go.

EE: How do personal and collective stories shape how curriculum is designed and experienced? Can you give an example?

IG: It’s the same principle. If you get inside the school and talk—not just to teachers, by the way; I do a lot with headteachers—you’ll see there’s a big leadership agenda

at the moment. The idea has been that leaders tell teachers what to do. But when you talk to school leaders and see which ones are good—meaning they have the support of teachers, students, and parents—you find those leaders can create a compelling narrative of the school and share that story throughout.

So far from leadership being about power and control, I'd say we need to understand "narrative leadership": how a good headmistress or headmaster creates a story for the school that everyone buys into. Those are good schools—where people understand where the school is going, whose side they're on, and why things are done a certain way.

Bad schools are where people come in and say, "We will do this. This is the way. I am disciplined; everyone will obey." It looks good—military, efficient—but it's a disaster. We return to what happened with Clinton's reforms: the assumption that instruction and obedience are the path forward. That's fatal in education because people check out. Teachers check out; students check out; then parents get angry. That's why this method works—even for those who want to control the system. It helps you understand the motivations of teachers and students in different ways.

EE: How can this method work with those who want to be controlled, as you've described in your work on narrativity?

IG: That's the nub of the problem—look at Trump's America. The new digital age transforms how people can be controlled. Take American politics: Trump—who isn't all bad but has some bad ideas—pumps out fictions about immigrants and other matters we know aren't factual. But factual challenges don't seem to work.

If you say, "You haven't built a wall; you're never going to build a wall," it doesn't work because people want to believe he will. So, you're always looking for a place from which to interrogate what you disagree with.

I think the only place you can challenge the lies of many right-wing populists—Bolsonaro in Brazil is a classic example—is at the level of the narratives they promote. We need an education system that helps people understand that when something comes through on social media, your response isn't "Ah, this is true—we'll build a wall," but "Hang on—let me think." "Does that work? How do I interrogate the narrative being pushed at me?" That becomes very important in the world we live in now.

EE: Going back to leadership and teacher professionalism: what role does professional autonomy play in improving teachers' well-being, and how can school leaders foster it without undermining institutional goals? How is this balanced?

IG: There's a prior question you hinted at earlier. Part of this project is understanding professional autonomy—teachers' capacity to make their own decisions. The root problem is that many people in the world—and many teachers—prefer to be told what to do rather than exercise their own autonomy. That's the truth. More generally, many people who vote for populist leaders want a strong leader to obey. That's the moment we're in. It's not quite Hitler's Germany—where 90% wanted to be told what to do—but we are moving in that direction. Sponsoring autonomy and finding groups of teachers who want to control their professional world is itself part of the struggle for democracy. There will also be groups—teachers and citizens—who obediently follow strong leaders.

In Brazil, a large group followed Bolsonaro—about half the population. In England, there are people who follow figures like Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson. They're substantial groups, and they're not all stupid. It's not stupidity; it's something more profound: the competing desires human beings have—to obey and to decide for themselves. No democracy can work if the majority simply want to be told what to do in an uninformed way. If that's the majority, you've lost democracy.

So, we have to think hard about the autonomous group—which is large and often includes the best teachers. The best leaders will always sponsor the autonomy of their best teachers; they know that's how you motivate. And you know from school that the way to support a child's education is to appeal to their own autonomous desires—what they want to do—understand where they want to go and what they need.

It's not telling them to “shut up and listen.” That doesn't educate anyone. But it's a primeval struggle, and digitalization makes it harder. Always look behind the phenomenon to the intentions driving it.

If you read *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* by Shoshana Zuboff, you'll see what's behind the digitalization of the world: a twin desire to modify people's behaviour and to turn citizens into automatons that take instructions—your devices tell you what to do, even when you're driving. That automation erodes autonomy. To understand today's world, read Zuboff's book—it's fantastic.

She was a leading Harvard professor who left her post to study digitalization. We live in a moment where the nature of human beings—what it is to be human—is being transformed before our eyes. Digitalization, monetization, and marketization are transforming human beings.

The only way to study that transformation is by talking at length with people about how they respond to technology. One project I'm considering, even at this advanced stage, involves a large grant to study human "beingness." The question is: what methods would you use to see the transformation going on? Again, the only way is to talk to people about their technological use and how it is transforming them.

EE: As researchers, what do we need to do to "get inside"—to understand the motivations at work and see whether autonomous humans remain, or whether the human has disappeared?

IG: That's the big question. Yuval Noah Harari, in *Homo Deus*, argues that humans as such will disappear, leaving cyborgs—half human, half automaton. You can already see it starting.

I've just come from the United States. The last time I went through, I was stopped three times by security machines because the digital passport didn't "like" me. I had to go through facial recognition three times. Each time I thought, "Is this me?" How can you tell if it's you anymore? Do I just say, "I am me"?

We're becoming digitized humans. Figures like Trump and Bolsonaro—and Johnson and Farage in England—feed off that. They feed off the loss of autonomy, the loss of faith in human capacity, and the loss of faith in education. In England, attacks on universities are profound. The government doesn't want educated people; it wants docile ones.

A set of universities is being closed because they don't make enough money. Education isn't supposed to make money; it's supposed to transform the human being. But if the logic of monetization says, "You don't make money—you're gone," that's surveillance capitalism turning us into money-making units.

The interesting question becomes: where is the human resistance to that? That's what we should research. Study digitalization and monetization, yes—but also study the human resistance: people who say, "I'm not going to do that. I'll do something different."

Returning to your research question, it's not just about studying education. It's about studying the human condition under these pressures, and which people still resist. You're resisting, in a way—doing the work you're doing, thinking about education. The logic of marketization says you shouldn't be doing this; you should be out making money. But you're not—so there's huge resistance within education itself. Celebrate it, study it, and ask, "Why does that resistance persist?"

Life-history work does exactly that. It lets people talk about their resistances—how they see their lives, how they resist the digitalization of their world, and how they still find meaning. The key problem with digitalization is that it destroys meaning and replaces it with data: “I’ve got 500 likes; therefore, I exist.” No—you don’t exist because someone pressed a button. You exist because you have meaning and purpose, because you do things with others that make sense.

But that’s disappearing fast. Life-history and narrative work re-establish meaning in a meaningless world. That’s why this method is so important now. It’s not just a method for education—it’s a method for the survival of humanity. I don’t mean that to sound dramatic; I think it’s true.

In the 20th century, the biggest threats were nuclear weapons. In the 21st, it’s the destruction of meaning through digitalization and marketization—more insidious because it doesn’t kill you physically; it kills your soul. It kills your sense of who you are, what you believe, and what you stand for.

That’s why I’m passionate about this work. The stakes are high. It’s not a game; it’s deadly serious. I get irritated when people say, “Qualitative research isn’t proper science.” It’s the only kind of research dealing with the transformation of the human being in the 21st century. You can’t do that with quantitative data. You can’t understand what it means to be a human being automated through a questionnaire. You can only do it by talking to people—deeply, carefully, respectfully.

The wonderful thing about life-history work is that it restores dignity to the people you talk to. People are grateful when someone really listens; it’s rare. Sit with someone for an hour or two and listen to their life story—it’s extraordinary what they’ll tell you. It becomes not just data but something transformative for them. They begin to hear themselves thinking and making sense of their own life. That’s education. That’s what education should be: helping people make sense of their own lives.

So, I see this kind of research not as separate from education but as its essence. You educate people through the research process itself. I’ve never made a distinction between research and teaching; for me, they’re the same thing—learning together, co-constructing meaning. That’s a beautiful idea: education as a collective construction of meaning. And that’s what’s under attack. The idea that meaning is shared and built together is being replaced by the idea that meaning comes from the market, from data, or from authority. That’s a terrible loss. What you’re doing—in education, teaching, qualitative research—is profoundly important. You’re holding on to the idea that human beings and meaning matter, and that education is more than training efficient producers or consumers.

It's about what it means to be human—that's what's at stake this century. That's why I keep doing this work, even though I'm supposed to be retired. The stakes are too high to stop—and it's too interesting. You meet wonderful people doing this work. It keeps you human; it keeps you connected. That's the best thing you can say about any research or education: it keeps you connected to others. That's what I've tried to do for forty years, and I'll probably keep doing it until they take the microphone away.

EE: What advice would you give to future educators and researchers who wish to make a lasting impact on education, particularly in addressing the challenges of equity, diversity, and inclusion?

IG: Let me think about what all this means for education more directly, particularly for the work you're doing in Portugal. In a sense, Portugal is at a crossroads. You are part of Europe, but not quite part of the Anglo-American neoliberal model dominating education policy. You've still got some humanity left—and that's precious. What you decide to do with your education system over the next ten years matters—not just for Portugal but as an example to others.

You have to decide whether to go down the road of standardization, testing, surveillance, digitalization, and obedience—or to reinvent education as something genuinely human again. That's what's exciting about your work. It's not just research; it's political in the best sense—asking, “What kind of society do we want? What kind of human beings do we want to develop?” That's what education should be about. The danger is that we've forgotten this and turned education into a system of production rather than a process of becoming.

Education should be about becoming—helping people become themselves, understand who they are, and how they can contribute. You can only do that through dialogue, listening, and creating spaces where people can speak and be heard. That's what Paulo Freire meant by education as the practice of freedom: creating conditions for speaking, listening, and acting together.

That's what narrative work does—it gives people their voice back. It says, “You matter. Your experience matters. Your story matters.” That's radical in a world that tells people they don't matter unless they're profitable or visible online.

So, the work you're doing—researching teachers' lives, students' experiences, leadership as a narrative practice—is not just intellectually interesting; it's ethically vital. It's about restoring human dignity in a world trying to take it away. Education is a moral enterprise, not just a technical or political one—it's about values, relationships, and

humanity. If we lose that, it doesn't matter how efficient our schools are or how well students do on tests—we've lost the point.

The challenge is to keep that moral and human dimension alive in whatever we do—in research, teaching, leadership. That means building communities of resistance, care, and dialogue—not just individuals doing their own thing but networks of people who believe another way is possible. I've seen it worldwide—small groups of teachers, researchers, and students who refuse to give up on education's power to change things. It can, but only if we keep talking, listening, and building meaning together. My final word: don't give up. Don't let the system silence you. Don't let the data drown you. Keep telling stories. Keep listening. Keep caring. That's what makes us human. As long as people do that, there's hope—for education, democracy, and humanity itself.

EE: Alright. Now I'd like to open the conversation to the audience. If you have any questions for Professor Ivor Goodson, please feel free to come forward.

Audience: My question is this: societies are always built on fictions—religion and churches are good examples. What's different now, when it's not churches creating the fictions but social media?

IG: One difference is the monopolization of people's time. If you look at the figures, the hours spent are astonishing. You'd be surprised how many hours a day you're on it. It's a totalizing experience. Before, you had discrete bits—you might go to church on Sunday, and that was it. You did that and put it away. Social media and digitalization are totalizing, and that's alarming. I think it saturates consciousness in ways nothing has before. The total attention it demands is the historical difference.

Audience: - In certain religions, you must pray five times per day. That was also common in the Catholic/Occidental tradition.

IG - That's five times a day. How often do people look at their screens?

Audience: Yes—five to ten hours.

IG - That's thousands of glances a day. It's more total.

Audience: Second question: you say the automation of human beings is the ultimate goal of the digital revolution and cite Zuboff's Surveillance Capitalism. There are

criticisms of her thesis. Google's motto was "Don't be evil," now it's "Do the right thing." Couldn't this kind of automation also have happened with books, TV, and earlier media? Is this just characteristic of our times, or has automation been attempted for centuries?

IG: It's a good question. I think the degree of automation from reading a book is categorically different from what we have now with visual, interactive media. It's more invasive and intensive than what comes from reading a book—but I could be wrong.

Audience: *After reading books, there were wars—religious wars over things like the date of Easter. Since digitalization, we haven't had wars about, say, a "crazy guy" trying to buy Greenland. Why are we so afraid now?*

IG: We're afraid because of the evidence. There are wars everywhere at the moment, often fought digitally, which makes them easier to wage and easier to ignore—you don't see the collateral damage. That's why people are fearful.

Audience: My last comment is about transactional knowledge versus transformative knowledge. Why not think about transactional interactions whose goal is human empowerment, happiness, love, and collaboration? Can we use that word, too?

IG: "Transactional interrogation" could be a way forward—but it would still be transformative.

Audience: I was thinking about this transactional society. Is there a way back, or will it get worse?

IG: I don't think we can go back. It doesn't happen. We have to go forward, but we can learn from before. The real question is: which valued pre-market elements can we reinstate or reinvigorate in a market situation? We can go back for inspiration. People are aware of loss. They sense that many aspects of the world before this were nicer and warmer. I'm not giving a golden-age analysis—nothing was perfect—but, broadly, humanity was in a better place in the post-war period than it is now. That's evidentially true. One reason is that the world was blown up by 1945, and for 30 years societies rebuilt in more humane, social-democratic ways. We're coming to the end of that, and humanity is back in a Holocaust moment. There's genocide in various countries. We're back in 1933, if you want an analogy. How could we have avoided what happened then, when populist strongmen took over country after country? It's happening again. The League of Nations was ignored then; now the United Nations is ignored. Who's ignoring it? The Americans and the Israelis say they're not interested in the International Criminal Court. So, there's inspiration from before the market we

can draw on—but we can't go back. We must find new ways to fight fear and hatred. It's a tough ask. Many powers are promoting fear and hate. And, back to capitalism—why? Because wars are a multi-trillion-dollar business.

A fortune is made every time a country goes to war. In 1933, Germany's main companies met with Hitler to promote him and suppress unions. Armaments firms then made fortunes in WWII. It wasn't in people's interests. So, there's a dark story to engage with. One problem in pursuing well-being is that you need, alongside a theory of happiness, a theory of evil—an understanding that people can be led down bad paths by bad actors.

I recall an English playwright on David Letterman's show. He was expected to say how much he enjoyed America. He did—but he added, "The problem is you don't have a theory of evil." You don't understand people's bad side. We need to understand both. We need a theory of well-being and a theory of evil that recognizes people can go down dark paths—and to ask how we stop it.

Audience: Thank you, Ivor, for your very interesting talk. I'd like to go back to narratives—their power for us as human beings. We organize our lives and understanding of the world through narrative. Our brains organize time—yesterday, today, tomorrow—because narrative is deeply integrated into how our minds work. Until now, narratives were constructed by humans. That's no longer 100% true. Who is creating narratives now? And because our brains are so good at believing and following narratives, what will our future be when narratives aren't created by humans? How can we respond?

IG: It's a big question. First, the way you describe constructing your narrative isn't how many people do it. People have different narrative characters. Some of us try to create our own narrative and then live it. Others prefer to have a narrative given to them. And the times we live in tend to favour the second group because narratives are produced endlessly. Who's creating narratives for many people? Elon Musk is, for one. He's promoting a particular vision in country after country. He dislikes socio-democratic systems like the UK's and tries to destabilize governments. He has his own narrative to do that. If narrative control is largely digitalized, it hands control to five or six tech entrepreneurs in California. We can name them: Bezos, Musk, Zuckerberg. They control vast amounts of narrative capacity.

So, behind the fear of where narratives are going is the inequality of narrative control. That's deeply concerning. Your point, and the point of all this, is: how does an individual create their own narrative and live by it? Richard Sennett's *The Corrosion of*

Character argues that one thing this mode of control cannot fully kill off is the endless human search for the meaning of life.

Returning to religion, they haven't been able to extinguish that search. Everyone still tries to find an answer. Elon Musk doesn't have it. Donald Trump doesn't have it. They may offer fleeting answers, but in the deep crevices of our being, we still want to know the meaning of life. That's the hopeful part. Most of our lives are colonized by markets, but the internal landscape of our narratives isn't easily penetrated. It's like 1984: Winston Smith still has his own story, remembering the time before Big Brother. He's the last man with his own narrative—well, there's a woman, too. That's a bit like where we are. The search for meaning is, for now, beyond full capture. I think it will be for a long time. That's where the counter-reaction will come from. That's why narrative work is so important.

Audience: I'm building a methodology for narratives too, with teachers. Considering that our revolution for freedom was 50 years ago, teachers were used to being told what to do. Now we're starting to be told what to do again. How can we free ourselves?

IG: As I've been saying, the only way is to sponsor more autonomous professional groups—often the best teachers and leaders—and use them as a kind of shock troop to influence schools more generally. If those groups ran mentoring or professional-development courses focused on narratives and teachers' sense of mission, that would reclaim a lot. It's about designing PD and teacher-training that promotes what I call "narrative learning," where teachers reconnect with why they entered the profession, what they want to achieve, and which colleagues seem to have the most freedom and creativity.

One more example: I was in Shanghai. My wife and I were invited to dinner with the Chinese Minister of Entrepreneurship—a significant post. At these Chinese meals, you sit at a big round table. Mary sat on his left, I on his right. He spent the evening chatting to Mary, who enjoyed the food.

At the end, he turned to me. I still wasn't sure why I'd been invited. He said, "China has completed its first phase of building infrastructure around the world—railways, docks—including in Africa. But we can't continue to only profit from that. We need to move into a second stage: creativity. How do we make our population creative? We're planning to create many autonomous, creative curriculum initiatives that sponsor autonomy."

That's interesting—and hopeful. A country already outperforming America in many ways realizes that if you rely on dull conformity and obedience, you lose the creativity game. You get outcompeted. In American business—apart from the digital sector—there's not much happening. I think you'll see this unfold. We could go on at length, but, for me, that was hopeful for sponsoring autonomy more generally.

EE: We could continue for hours, but time is up. Thank you, Ivor, for this rich and inspiring conversation.

IG: Thank you. It's been a pleasure — and I hope a reminder that education is not only about policy or performance, but about what it means to remain human.

Editorial Note

This edited transcript is based on the live interview held at the ACT4WBeing Symposium (Lisbon, 2025), in the context of the Project “Times of change and changing times: a study of the relationship between curricular autonomy and teacher involvement and well-being”, funded by Seed Funding ILIND/2023 (COFAC/ILIND/CeiED/1/2023).

It preserves the conversational rhythm and audience participation of the original session while editing for clarity and coherence.