

Narrative Patterns

the perils and possibilities of using story in organisations

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Organisations are finally waking up to the power of Story and like all awakenings the possibilities are as yet dimly perceived through eyes fogged with sleep; light is starting to penetrate the windows, but the curtains are still drawn and the shape of objects is unfamiliar. With this awakening comes danger, too many consultants are geared up to rapidly exploit new fads and trends with minimal investment and there is much evidence of exploitation in the field. It is not enough just to employ a journalist, scriptwriter, actor or even a traditional storyteller. All have valuable skills within the context for which they were developed: newspapers, films, the theatre and the campfire. However the field of story telling in organisations is more complex in its requirement and wider in its application.

Most importantly narrative it is not just about telling, constructing or even eliciting stories, it is about allowing the patterns of culture, behaviour and understanding that are revealed by stories to emerge. Following facilitation of that emergence we need to create an overall ecology in which both the patterns of narrative and the patterning capability of narrative interventions is managed in the way a gardener manages a garden, not the way an Engineer designs a machine.

This brief article aims to provide some cautionary comments and a high level overview of some of the newly developing areas of narrative work. It reflects the experience of the Institute for Knowledge Management in developing and patenting methods tools and techniques for narrative work in organisations.

Dangers and limitations of just telling a story

Since story became fashionable an increasing volume of practice focuses on constructing a better or more meaningful stories. This is also once of the most fertile sources of revenue for those transferring the traditional skills of storytellers, script writers, journalists *et al* into an organisational setting. All organisations have messages that they wish to convey both internally and externally. Effective communication needs a story to be told, in a convincing and attention grabbing/retaining way. In consequence, it is not surprising that the novelty of a Irish Seanachie at a company event, or a group of actors using techniques of value transfer or reinforcement traceable to the forms of medieval morality plays can have a considerable impact on audiences jaded by a surfeit of corporate videos, tightly scripted messages and idealised examples of “best practice”.

There are several dangers with entering this field enthusiastically, but without understanding and a rich vein of story based experience within the context of an organisation. All too frequently there may be resistance in the audience to being “told a story”. A fictional or allegorical story may just engender cynicism or dismissal: “so now they are telling us fairy stories” or “that was very entertaining, but why can’t they just say what they mean” to take but two examples. A

factual story is even more fraught with peril: to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth requires both a prestigious feat of memory and a suspension of the normal human tendency to reinvent history to confirm with the requirements of the present; more importantly the bare facts are boring, they do not make for a compelling story. In order to achieve a story there is need to select the most compelling of the facts and provide appropriate emphasis: create tension, introduce clear protagonists, build a proper context, spell out the message; in other words all the tools and techniques of a script writer or journalist. The danger here is that your emphasis and selection, may not correspond with the experiences of other people in the organisation. Some of them may have been a part of the original story, or know people who were. It only takes one person to say “but that’s not what really happened”, or “but that’s not the complete story” and the whole process is undermined. The recent (at least in the UK) cynicism about Spin-Doctoring only makes this danger more extreme. Within the IKM approach to story this is termed “anecdote enhancement” and while it can be useful, particularly in training, it presents problems in sustainability

The label of propaganda once won is difficult to shake off, and it is an easy one for an organisation to make. One of the dangers here is the “Janet and John” Story. Janet and John are the two central characters of a series of books used to teach reading to British four and five year olds some years ago. The trouble with Janet and John are that they are just too good; it is enough to make any self-respecting and intelligent child sick. All Janet and John stories ended happily as any naughty behaviour received inevitable punishment and moral or noble actions received reward and recognition. The problem is that most centrally dictated communication in organisations takes a Janet and John approach, it tries to tell things as they should be in some idealised vision of co-operative behaviour and sacrifice to achieve corporate goals. Stories of best practice hold up a team or division as a role model for others to copy, they are portrayed as fulfilling the Chairman or CEO’s vision, embodying the organisations core values of customer satisfaction, hard work etc. Within the context of senior management they may even be seen to have been successful, partly because senior managers are all too often told the stories they want to hear and are insulated from negativity; partly because most human beings tend to see what they want to see, particularly when they have just spent large sums of money on a communications or cultural change programme. Several years of using techniques derived from anthropology to capture water cooler stories post some official act of story telling shows a near universal occurrence of *anti-story*: the cynical and naturally occurring counter reaction to a official story of goodness that does not reflect the reality of the audiences experiences or as importantly perception of those experiences. In organisational change and communication, perception is all.

Creating and managing the flow of narrative within an organisation

To illustrate the broader range of an approach based on narrative patterns rather than “just” story telling let us take a common scenario: an organisation decides it needs a new set of values; it could equally well be a mission statement, a new direction or strategic focus. A group of executives spend many weeks or months gathering and interpreting the results of consultative exercises, garnering the expertise of external consultants, identifying and resolving differences, clarifying the precise meaning of language, sharing and merging experiences. At the end of this process a freshly minted set of corporate values is produced, slides sets and briefing packs produced, articles are published in internal journals and web sites, posters are produced; then the whole thing falls flat. The vision and passion of the creators who have vested their common recent history in a clear articulation of the desired future values does not resonate with the audience, yes there is conformance, new key phrases are learnt by political players adept at using

the latest jargon to secure promotion and funding, but at best the values are dismissed as pious platitudes, at worst the values are so far away from the reality of day to day life that the level of anti-story reaches unmanageable proportions: “Our staff are our most important asset” normally precedes a downsizing exercise to ensure that “we will prioritise stakeholder return” and “customers are our main priority” as long as they only want standard products and don’t inconvenience underpaid and de-motivated service representatives.

There are three forms of narrative intervention that can be used here, in isolation or in combination. In no particular order they are:

1. Fable Form story

These are long complex stories, with many ramifications and are difficult to remember *per se*, but the audience always remembers the message or moral of the story. This is not accidental; a good storyteller will weave variation into each retelling of the story so that they maintain power over the story and it’s telling, and thereby maintain control over the delivery of the message. Unlike anecdotal enhancement a fable can contain elements from multiple anecdotes and is not dependent on a single original story to deliver its message; this makes it far less susceptible to the problems of selection and enhancement referenced earlier. In the scenario above a basic fable template is constructed using material from the organisations own history and the senior executives are familiarised with the structure and message. Most such fable templates with have a minimum of a dozen sections and it is more likely to be in excess of twenty. They then populate the fable form with their own experience, section by section. It takes a very gifted story teller to tell someone else’s story, which is one of the reasons that scripted stories for executives fail, but any half way competent human being can tell a story, with credibility and ease if it is based on their own experience.

In this case if we have trained say six executives, then we have six people telling apparently different stories from their own experience, but each is delivering precisely the same message; the multiple elements of the fable form can effectively recreate the history of the creation of the values for the audience, so that they are not platitudes, but the natural and accepted consequence of hearing the story. This approach is rooted in ancient practices of Story. The Celtic bards who were welcomed in any household for their ability to hold audiences spell bound with stories of Pwyll, Branwen, Math and the Dream of Rhonabwy did not memorise every word, but the overall structure and rhythm such that they could extemporise in the context of their particular audience; exactly the same skill is required of the modern executive. The range and complexity of corporate stories is not as great as in the Mabinogion so this is an eminently achievable goal.

2. Myth Management

In any organisation it is fairly easy to identify the circumstances, actions, beliefs or individuals that are myth-creating objects. Sometimes the myths are positive, sometimes negative; rarely is the “object” conscious of it’s myth making capability. By capturing the naturally told anecdotal material of an organisation it is possible to isolate the myth-creating objects, once understood, it then possible to influence the development of myth by managing the actions and presences of the myth-creating objects. Often Executives create negative myths, which are the exact opposite of their intent: anti-stories. In increasing the awareness of executives as to the origins of present myth in past action, it is possible to modify the

culture of an organisation by increasing self-awareness in its leaders and managers.. A specialised form of this work is to get an executive to act out of character, but in conformance with the new value systems being propagated. The contrast with previous behaviour can create a ripple effect as the story is told and retold without the need for any further intervention.

3. Story Virus

Never, ever argue against a story with fact, it never works. If an anti-story has become dominant in an organisation, no amount of factual statement will dislodge it. Urban myths in particular can grow up to excuse poor behaviour, creating a negative environment that will reject all new initiatives, enforce previous cultural mores and norms. The best way to destroy an anti-story is to retell it with incremental exaggeration until it becomes laughable. This is a specialised form of narrative work and needs to be approached with care, but it's one of the most useful. The need to use story virus can be reduced by gaining a proper understanding of how anti-story arises within the context of a particular organisational. There are various ways to do this, in one recent example Executives were asked to nominate members of their staff with high potential who were being held back by a cynical or negative attitude. Those executives were then taken on a weekend leadership development programme. Now while a good programme was delivered, the real purpose was to test different corporate messages on a naturally cynical audience, to flush out potential anti-stories in advance, and as importantly to understand their trigger mechanisms. Once this was done fable form stories and myth management programmes could be designed to reduce the probability of the more negative anti-story occurring; it is never possible to remove anti-story, in fact it is arguable that a certain level of anti-story is a sign of good health in an organisation, just as moderate consumption of red wine can reduce the possibility of a heart attack, while excessive consumption causes degeneration on a variety of fronts.

On their own, or in combination these techniques are more sophisticated and more sustainable, than just telling a story. One final point, happy endings may seem to be a good idea but more often than not they generate anti-story. Most people, however loyal react against a Janet and John message no matter how well intentioned. The best form of fable has an ironic end, in which the audience realises without the need for articulation how a happy ending could have come about; that way the learning is internalised by the audience.

A wider perspective on narrative

Telling stories, utilising the skills of story construction and enhancement are all valuable, but used in isolation are subject to the dangers identified above. Amongst experienced practitioners, telling stories is an important part of the wider field of narrative but not the only one. Narrative can also act a source of understanding, disrupt entrained thinking, provide a repository of learning, replace user requirement specifications, enable confession of failure without attribution of blame; the additional uses of narrative over and above that of managing its flow are many and growing, three are illustrated below:

1. Pattern Perspectives – revealing meaning and enabling understanding

The stories that people tell are a wonderful source of material for understanding culture and discovering examples of knowledge and learning. The narrative techniques developed within

the IKM originated from the need to recreate the circumstances of knowledge use in order to create a knowledge asset register and map. Knowledge mapping remains one of the mainstream uses of Narrative and has proved far more effective than interview based methods that fail to adequately stimulate the community being studied. It is a truism to say that *we only know what we know when we need to know it*, human knowledge is contextual and requires stimulation if it is to be revealed. Telling stories, both fact and fiction is a powerful way of achieving that stimulation.

In more recent applications the archetypal characters mentioned above are being used to provide measures of employee and customer satisfaction, and in the latter case also provide an interesting new dimension on brand value. Archetypes that emerge as patterns from stories told naturally are a more valuable measure of reality than quantitative or qualitative techniques that inevitably only see what they have been designed to see and are less open to new discovery and too dependent on expert analysis. More recently those same archetypes have been used to half the completion time on eLearning initiatives; combined with demographic data they have been used to create villages of persona who provide a radical and more creative alternative to a user requirement specification for intranet design. This area of narrative techniques is one of the fastest growing and has some of the highest value.

Related techniques apply when two companies merge, knowledge assets flee; when a new partnership is formed meaning is different even if the same language is used as both partners have previously lived different stories which inform their communication. Also when two organisations come together the common threat reinforces particular stories that are the heart of the old identify. Over time, and too frequently a long time and often too late, the language and the stories will merge. Narrative techniques allow us to accelerate this natural process by creating new common stories, mixing anecdotal material, archetypes and values to create a new common culture. From short, high impact workshops, to full blown cultural change programmes including the use of games; narrative allows us to accelerate the creation of common understanding and purpose in a non-directive and thereby more sustainable and pervasive form.

2. Pattern Disruption & stimulation

Organisations, and societies for that matter, develop scripts, controlling stories that punish deviation. To see an example of this just look at the acceptable range of mainstream political belief between Europe and America; within the former socialism is an acceptable creed, within the latter unacceptable; capital punishment is an unacceptable barbarity or a necessary act of justice dependent on the script of the society in which we live. Scripts develop and are reinforced by ordinary people; they are rarely imposed from on top. While scripts increase the predictability of human interactions, they stifle innovation and prevent both insight and descriptive self-awareness. However as in most aspects of human behaviour entrained behaviour is difficult to change by direct challenge. Three proven narrative techniques work in this domain:

Associating the current situation with a historical or fiction setting from which direct learning can be achieved. This is a use of metaphor. The history of science is a rich source of known examples of new ideas being ignored and derided by the dominant orthodoxy of the day. Films, children's books common to the culture of day, cultural icons such as Shakespeare or Cervantes all provide source material. By having a

conversation in a metaphorical setting much of the pain of abandoning cherished beliefs or unarticulated prejudice can be more easily handled.

Fable form stories can be used to create aspirational goals, or to legitimise through the moral or sub-text out of the box thinking. A well told fable can associate out of date thinking with unacceptable value systems and shift the culture in favour of new ideas.

Archetypal stories are an ancient device, from the Greek Gods, each an extreme aspect of the society that invented them, to the Dilbert cartoons pinned on walls, left on desks or e-mailed to make a point, humorously but with bite and without direct criticism. Advanced narrative techniques allow a “Dilbert” set of characters to be derived from the stories naturally told in a community. As their ancestors for over 5,000 years have done, people can then tell stories about the archetypes, either to confess failure without direct attribution or to criticise without confrontation. The confessional aspect of archetype stories is of particular relevance in lessons learnt programmes where it is more important, but also more difficult to capture and distribute stories of failure than of success.

The point is that story is direct, revealing and challenging but is also far less threatening than analysis and instruction. It allows learning to take place through the creation of new response patterns and increased understanding which are self activated, not imposed and as a result more sustainable.

3. Storing and revealing patterns – the next generation of Intellectual Capital management

Any member of staff coming off a project can easily record in an hour, or even ten minutes what it will otherwise take them three weeks to get round to spending half a day writing up, if they ever do. Both the written record, which is reflective and the spoken record, which is immediate have different and complimentary values. However most current KM practice focuses on the latter which is the most time consuming and much knowledge is lost in the process. Newly developed narrative techniques allow us not only to capture large volumes of oral material at little cost, but critically allow us to index those records on a single screen to give current and future staff access to “the wisdom of the elders”. For organisations undergoing downsizing, or experiencing immanent high levels of retirement of key staff or just high staff turn over: oral history databases provide a radical, comparatively cheap, quick and effective solution to creating a knowledge and learning repository. Oral history databases also provide a means by which we can look at an issue from many perspectives and their use in advanced decision support systems as an alternative to scenario planning is a current subject of research within the IKM.

Conclusions

The current field of people interested in the use of story in organisations has many origins. Some KM practitioners, such as Steve Denning at the World Bank and John Seely-Brown at Xerox simply found that, to quote Denning “Nothing else would do”. Others saw the organisation as a new market for skills otherwise developed for the press, theatre and the film industry. Many came from academic backgrounds in cognitive science, post modernism, anthropology and many others. A further approach, from the author’s perspective fundamentally mistaken although occasionally useful comes from artificial intelligence, seeking to get computers to write and interpret stories. Finally and again inappropriate in an organisational setting is the use of story as

therapy; revealing meaning through the intervention of the counsellor. These last two in practice fail to understand the full complexity and opportunity of narrative work at the collective level of interaction that exists within an organisation.

If story is not just to be yet another fad that blazes briefly and then fades, it is important to create as quickly as possible a wider understanding of the breadth and opportunities offered up by the patterns revealed by narrative and the patterning capability of narrative interventions. Trivialisation of such an important area is foolish, as is an over emphasis on either the emotional or intellectual aspects of narrative. Properly understood Story is both a science and an art, to neglect one at the expense of the other is not only foolish it is also dangerous, in playing with people's stories you are playing with their souls and that requires a high level of responsibility. A Seanachie, the Irish word that means far more than "Storyteller" will spend many years as an apprentice; organisational work on story and narrative requires a similar level of personal commitment. The danger is that in attempting to enter the field practitioner will either trivialise it (any one can tell a story) or assume a false commonality with the entertainment and journalism. Story at its best is a simple way of conveying complex ideas and understanding the complexity of culture and learning within communities. It will not do to confuse something with is simple, but requires profound understanding with something that it just easy to do and provides a quick hit. Simple but not simplistic, an art not a science but above all a profoundly human technique that rejects the mechanical and authoritarian practice of too many management scientists and consultants

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