Narrative

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INTRODUCTION

Narrative or the use of stories is an ancient discipline. Our ancestors evolved the ability to see the world through a set of abstractions, and thereby enabled the development of sophisticated language and the ability to use stories as a primary mechanism for knowledge transfer. The oral-history tradition was the only method of knowledge transfer for many eons and persists into the current day despite the prevalence of the written word. First Nation elders in Canada passing on their wisdom to young people facing the conflicts of old and new, a Seanachie (the Irish word that means far more than storyteller) ensconced with an enraptured audience around a peat fire, the Liars bench of the Midwest in the USA where old timers sit to swap tall tales, and the ubiquitous watercooler conversations of the modern organisation: all evidence the persistence of story. The archetypal story form of the myths of the Greek gods and the trickster stories of Native Americans find modern expression and use in Dilbert cartoons, and the old fairy stories of Europe find new expression in Hollywood. Good teachers always tell stories to provide context and life to otherwise dull material. Anyone joining an organisation will take months or years to hear and reexpress the key stories of past success and failure that form a key part of the organisation's deep culture. Executives who abandon the tyranny of PowerPoint and instead tell a story rooted in their own experience nearly always discover the power of story to move people; to quote Steve Denning (2000), one of the early pioneers with his work in the World Bank—"Nothing else would do."

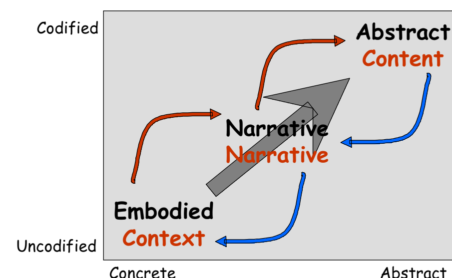
However, for a period at the end of the last century, business forgot about the value of stories; perhaps the form was too familiar or maybe too ambiguous for the process-driven focus on cost reduction and efficiency that dominated management thinking in the 1980s and '90s. Maybe with our newfound discovery and neo-fetishist use of technology, we simply lost the space that story had occupied in our lives: The television remote control that provides multiple choices and short attention spans simply muscled out the attention span necessary for a good story. However, story has persisted, and when J. K. Rowling had the courage to write a 766-page story of a boy wizard, children across the world queued up overnight and then sat down and read it from cover to cover within hours. The author's own 12-year-old son sat down with the full director's cut of *The Lord of the Rings* during Christmas 2004 and watched it from opening scene to closing scene with only brief interruptions for food and sleep.

Story is remarkably persistent and the narrative form surprisingly effective, if not efficient, in both communicating and storing knowledge. As such, it is not surprising that it was rediscovered rapidly by some knowledge management (KM) practitioners who had to deal with the postprocess reengineering need to manage uncodified and often unstructured human knowledge. Indeed, we have now reached the point where narrative may have outgrown knowledge management and become a management discipline in its own right.

WHAT IS NARRATIVE KNOWLEDGE?

Figure 1 is adapted from Boisot's (1998) I-Space, which looks at three aspects of knowledge-information flow, namely, abstraction, codification, and diffusion. At the bottom left-hand extreme of the model we have the uncodified and deeply concrete knowledge of the person who just knows: the Zen archer who is so in tune with his or her bow, the arrow, and the environment that he or she draws, shoots, and hits the target without opening his or her eyes; the modern equivalent is the London taxi driver whose two plus years of training involves driving the streets of London on a motor scooter until the patterns of navigation are so imprinted on the brain that a part of his or her hypothalamus is larger than that in other humans. The taxi driver, like the Zen archer, *just knows*. In contrast, at the top right we have the abstracted knowledge of the corporate database, or the novice reading the manual. The

Figure 1. The necessary ambiguity of narrative (adapted from Boisot's [1998] I-Space)



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knowledge exists and has value, but the user lacks direct experience.

One key insight from I-Space is that the more abstracted and codified the knowledge, the easier it is for that knowledge to diffuse to a large population: It is independent of the knowledge holder. This fact was the driving force behind much early KM effort supported by the emphasis on tacit to explicit knowledge conversion that followed the widespread adoption of Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) SECI model. The goal of knowledge management was to render an organisation's knowledge into as abstract and codified a form as possible: the corporate database of best practices, a yellow-pages directory of skills, or a community of practice confined to the input capabilities of a QWERTY keyboard. The argument was that knowledge was not an organisational asset until it existed independently of the knowledge owner.

In a world separated into tacit and explicit knowledge, it is obviously undesirable for key knowledge to be solely tacit or concrete. The sharing of knowledge, enabling rapid diffusion, and the deployment of knowledge are sensible goals, and the conversion of tacit to explicit, or concrete to abstract, knowledge has thus driven knowledge management for the past eight years. However, early practice in knowledge management started to identify the weaknesses of this bipolar view. While much knowledge could and was codified, much failed to survive the translation. Rather like taking a message in one language and translating it into another using software, something was always lost in the process; just as translating the translated text back to the original language using the same software produces nonsense, so the conversion of codified knowledge back to its tacit or concrete form proved problematic. To use an example, very few of us learned to ride a bicycle by reading a manual and looking up a best-practice database on bicycle riding. For most of us, our parents held on to the saddle and ran behind us until one day they let go and we discovered we knew how to ride a bike: Theory came later if ever. The most basic rule of knowledge management is that we always know more than we can say, and we can always say more than we can write down. The process of going from head to mouth to hands involves a loss of content and to a greater extent, loss of context.

That rule also points to the role of narrative, which represents a halfway house between concrete and abstract knowledge. The way that the Zen archer teaches is to tell stories. In fact, any master will normally provide rights of observation to their practice, and multiple stories of failure and success together with some direct coaching and training. As the apprentice experiments, he or she in turn creates his or her own stories that stabilise into new knowledge. As aspects of a discipline's knowledge become universal, then the knowledge can be codified: The book or the manual can be written. However, to translate that knowledge, it is not enough just to read the material. One must both hear the stories of others and create one's own stories if context is to be established and progress made. Narrative then sits between the two extremes of knowledge; it is experienced based and builds the context critical to knowledge creation and flow. As such, it has a necessary ambiguity of expression that allows translation into different contexts over time, wherein rests its resilience.

BACKGROUND

Most writers at some stage or other reference back to Aristotle's *Poetics* with its formulation of plot, character in the various forms of tragedy comedy, and so forth; the schools of rhetoric in the Greco-Roman tradition provided much of the formal method that informs modern practice. In the modern era, gathering stories and interpreting stories is a fundamental aspect of anthropology. Levi-Strauss used anthropology and linguistics to systematically analyze myth as a cultural artifact and a variety of academic disciplines, particularly in the postmodern tradition that emphasises the gathering and interpretation of narrative material. Boje (2001) and Gabriel (2000) are amongst the most frequently cited authors. There is also a strong artificial-intelligence tradition that seeks to use computing power to identify deep structures (following from Chomsky, 1975) in narrative. A common characteristic of what we can term the academic school is an emphasis on the expert analysis of naturally occurring stories to identify meaning and cultural signifiers.

The use of story in knowledge management can be traced to three early pioneers: Denning (2000) with the use of springboard stories in the World Bank, Ward (2000) in a variety of applications in Spark Knowledge, and Snowden (1997), then at IBM and now in the Cynefin Centre. Each represents a compatible but distinct approach to the use of story. Denning focuses on telling stories to convey a distinct message determined in advance and focused on a particular audience. Ward brings an academic tradition of interpretation and strong facilitation skills to gather meaning from people's stores. Snowden enters the field with a focus on narrative capture to enable more effective mapping of knowledge, but moves into narrative as a means of creating cultural indicators (utilising complexity science), creating narrative databases to store knowledge, and using metaphor and the social constructions of narrative and narrative interpretation.

The increasing acceptance of narrative produces a plethora of practitioners from the late 1990s mainly focused on the process of creating and telling stories. Some of these come from a vigorous background in film and

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