

Organisational Storytelling

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INTRODUCTION

In this article we consider some of the ways in which narrative approaches might contribute towards a better understanding of organisational knowledge management. The telling of stories has a long, rich, and varied tradition, stretching back hundreds of years. In the study of organisations, storytelling can be seen as part of a wider field of enquiry, Organisational Discourse, which seeks to ascribe meaning to social exchanges within organisations (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004; Grant & Hardy, 2003). Narratives have been explicitly identified (Wensley, 1998; Denning, 2000; Ward & Sbarcea, 2001) as one of the ways in which knowledge might be exchanged in organisational settings, but only limited consideration has been given to the ways in which storytelling approaches can increase our understanding of the creation and dissemination of knowledge in organisations. In this article we reflect on what we might learn from the application of narrative processes, particularly organisational storytelling, and from narrative content, particularly organisational narrative knowledge, to assess the place of such storytelling in KM.

WHAT IS AN ORGANISATIONAL STORY?

Many of us are actors, and sometimes narrators, in organisational stories that are potentially rich in knowledge. We all think we can recognise a story when we see one, perhaps by recognising the story's content, or by recognising the process by which certain knowledge is being exchanged. In this section we consider definitions surrounding the relationship between what we see as "organisational storytelling" and organisational knowledge.

The first broad issue to consider is the distinction between *narrative* and *story*. This article will treat both terms synonymously within the context of KM, but the reader should be aware that some authors' definitions offer subtle and interesting distinctions (for example, Polkinhorne, 1988; Czarniawska, 1998; Boje, 2001; Gabriel, 2004).

Stories can be seen as one of the ways in which we can encode data about our environment, both personal and

organisational. A particular strength of storytelling for KM lies in its capacity not only to represent such sets of data, but also to offer some insights into the complex interrelationships between such data elements. In an organisational context, these interrelationships might help us to *make sense* of the organisation (e.g., Weick, 1995).

We may define these stories according to the form that they take (content definitions), or the way in which we recognise their use (process definitions).

Narrative Defined by Content

If we define stories (including organisational stories) according to their content, we can recognise that they have certain characteristics (Pentland, 1999):

- **a plot** (for example, the employee who has made a mistake, but is forgiven by the boss, who praises and rewards her honesty)
- **actors** in the story (the employee, her boss, an important client, etc.)
- **a sequence of events** (the mistake, her discovery of the mistake, how she attempts to rectify the situation, her boss's discovery of the mistake, etc.)
- **an outcome or closure** (the boss rewards her honesty rather than firing her)—which is often embedded within some sort of "moral context" (for example, honest behaviour is rewarded)
- **a wider recognisable context** within which the story operates (for example, a multinational company with a fierce reputation).

The balance of these properties is not always equal, but might shift as the circumstances (either of the narrative or its purpose) might demand.

Narrative Defined by Process

In process definitions, the situational characteristics of the performance of the story are considered by some authors (e.g., Boje, 1991) to be as insightful as its content. From a KM perspective, such performances might be rich in tacit knowledge, only some of which will be evident from a story's transcript. Boje's operational definition of a story performance—"an exchange between two or more persons during which past or anticipated experi-

ence was being referenced, recounted, interpreted, or challenged” (p. 111)—is typical of such definitions. A more general definition might view stories, within an organisational context, as the socially constructed accounts of past events that are considered important or significant to members of an organisation (Feldman, 1990). Within such a definition, stories need not be factual; some argue that they are seldom so (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993), reflecting instead what those involved in the storytelling process believe *should* be true. Although some stories purport to convey “facts,” such facts are not always straightforward to identify or interpret (Gabriel, 2004).

Within both classes of definition, it is clear that organisational stories are often extraordinarily rich in tacit knowledge (see, for example, Orr, 1990; Hernandez-Serrano, Stefanou, Hood, & Zoumas, 2002; Hoopes & Postrel, 1999; Meyer, Connell, & Klein, 2003). Such knowledge has the potential to be stored (and perhaps through constant retelling, even archived) within the “package” of a story, and transferred in a succinct yet rich way. In this respect, a better understanding of organisational storytelling can contribute some useful insights into the ways in which knowledge exchange, in particular informal knowledge exchange, might be effected within organisations.

A number of authors have acknowledged this potential. In one of the earliest descriptions of the use of organisational storytelling and KM, Denning (2000) describes his experiences within the World Bank, illustrating the use of storytelling as an enabler of organisational change. Snowden (2002) has demonstrated ways in which knowledge might be exchanged, using examples drawn from a number of large organisations. Yet it is clear that many questions are not fully answered within this literature. What sort of knowledge particularly lends itself to being encoded and transferred in stories? Why use stories in preference to other media? What are the organisational processes that might be implemented to encourage the use of stories? In the following section we address these questions in the context of three significant aspects of organisational KM—the creation, storage, and transfer of knowledge.

KNOWLEDGE CREATION AND STORYTELLING

Much of the existing literature has concentrated on viewing stories primarily, sometimes even solely, as a way of storing existing knowledge. Can stories also be seen as a way of creating new knowledge? If so, where do such stories originate? Boje (2001) offers the view that stories begin as what he describes as “ante-narratives,” which

contain the fragments or seeds of a story that might then be used to create the story. Whilst such fragments might be based on organisational events, this need not necessarily be the case. Although an organisational story, in the context of KM, is rarely an invented story, in the sense of a work of pure fiction, we are not always looking at a precise telling (or retelling) of some aspects of “organisational history.” Instead, we are hearing a subjective interpretation.

This lack of objective accuracy in the creation of organisational “knowledge” makes the study and utility of stories interesting when considering knowledge creation in practice; most managers would probably consider accuracy to be a key desirable characteristic of organisational information, yet as we have seen above, some authors have questioned the importance of this aspect, whilst others have instead stressed the “performative” aspects of the storytelling. For such authors, the question of “an objective truth” appears secondary to the reader’s or listener’s appreciation of the narrative. In essence, the story is in some sense “well told,” in a way which evokes understanding and interpretation in the listener or reader, and as a consequence “*the ‘truth’ of these stories... is not the issue*” (Rayment-Pickard, 2000, p. 280). The knowledge we are creating is not necessarily a telling or reretelling of “what actually happened,” but is instead a structuralist interpretation. “Facts,” such as they are, will be woven into each story (by the teller) and interpreted (by both the teller and the listener), sometimes in a selective way to serve the purpose of the story.

This selectivity in the creation (and subsequent transfer) of knowledge is referred to as *glossing* (Weick, 1981; Boje, 1991) or “*colouring*” (Hansen & Khanweiler, 1993), and is often intended to emphasise or sell a particular point of view: “*A gloss is akin to marginal notes or digression that can exaggerate, simplify, or shift the meaning of the experience*” (Boje, 1991, p. 117). Although we have already noted that the “truth” of the story may be secondary to its intended use, we might reflect on whether this emphasis on, or deliberate exclusion of, particular aspects of the story is consistent with the typical organisational aspiration for the management of knowledge. Although the notion of “literary licence” appears to be a common feature of storytelling—such that we might reflect, for instance, that “we’re not getting the whole story here”—some might argue that such licence is not restricted to storytelling, and that it is ubiquitous across other knowledge-bearing media.

Lastly, a feature of storytelling that might help to explain its potential as a knowledge-creating medium is its receptiveness to casual or informal use in the organisation. Most organisational knowledge is created continuously, yet only stored and reported upon (or transferred) peri-

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