

Archetypes as an instrument of narrative patterning

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Abstract

I have previously argued both in this journal (Snowden 2001) and elsewhere that the value of story rests less in story telling per se, than it does in the patterns revealed by the natural flow of narrative within organizations. In practice I would go further and argue that having stories written, or performed within organizations by professionals has only a limited impact, will not of itself generate a open story telling culture and in many cases may militate against it. While we relate anecdotes naturally and without thinking about, we have a reaction against being told a story in a work context. At best, we may find it entertaining and it may have a temporary effect on our motivation and understanding; at worst, it may provoke the cynical, and mostly covert anti-story as a reaction to perceived Machiavellian propaganda or the naïve antics of the trendy.

The issue with narrative – and I will use this word purposefully to distinguish the approach from story telling – is to make it a pervasive element of the organizations life. To do this we need to create channels and patterns within which people can tell their own stories in a natural way as part of the day- to-day progress of their work environment. Professional performance by storytellers, actors and the like can be a useful short-term innovation, but it is a performance and its impact is short term. Executives reading a script prepared by a journalist or scriptwriter are less effective than when they speak from the heart; although there is a place for the staged presentation, but it is precisely that, it is staged, expected and the long term impact is low. Pervasive use of narrative involves the creation of sustainable capability across the entire organization. This paper provides a summary of one of the most useful narrative techniques in this domain: the use of archetypes.

Archetypes as emergent properties of discourse

We are all familiar with archetypes from the stories of our childhood: the myths and legends of the Greek and Norse Gods, the animal stories of the Aborigine people of Australia, the Corbai myths (and many others) of Native America. All of these stories use archetypes. As people tell and retell stories about their environment, their beliefs and values as expressed through the characters within those stories gradually become more and more extreme, until each character individually represents one aspect of that culture, and collectively the characters and the stories that reveal those characters provide a profound set of cultural indicators. In the modern age, we can see some archetype characters emerge in the forms of cartoons such as the Dilbert series, in which the carious characters are instantly recognizable in a modern corporate environment.

It is important to distinguish an archetype from a stereotype, in the former case each member of the community will identify in some part with each archetype, in the later case the stereotype is a place where no one wants to go. Some readers may now wish to move directly to the various descriptions of the use of archetypes before completing this section with a description of how they emerge from the narrative discourse of an organization.

The process by which archetypes naturally emerge in these traditional stories can be reproduced in a shorter timescale within an organizational environment. The technique has been under development within the Narrative Group in IKM for some years now. In the early years, the techniques were effective, but highly dependent on skilled facilitation. A body of anecdotes was discussed within a workshop comprising a representative sample of the organization. As that discussion increased in intensity, a cartoonist would be introduced with no prior briefing of the ultimate purpose, other than the need to identify the principal characters evidenced by the discourse between the participants. Those characters would then be drawn with

the cartoonist's generic skill to exaggerate salient features. Once complete the group would discuss and amend the characterization and go through a series of steps to prevent the characters being identified with a recognizable individual, or a stereotype. Much success was achieved with this technique, for example halving the time for individuals to go through eLearning material (Snowden 2000). However, the initial run through, and many of the subsequent ones tended to be caricatures rather than real archetypes, and were often maintained as stereotypes if the facilitation was not severe.

While successful the process required delicate facilitation and it was all too easy to influence or direct the group: sinners in this respect included the cartoonist who had too much of an interpretative role. Subsequent research and experimentation has allowed these barriers to be overcome, and in turn paved the way for the development of situational archetypes in policy-making, a subject that will be referenced in the conclusion. The process, recently subject to patent registration, involves two key differences from previous practice:

1. Rather than talking about stories and studying transcripts of supporting anecdotes, which resulted in a tendency to analytical rather than emergent thinking, a story form, Fable is used to integrate the anecdotal material. This allows a large amount of material to be integrated quickly into the group's consciousness. In a recent project anecdotes from several story circles and a number of non-directive interviews was digitized and distributed at random amongst participants in the archetype workshop. Each anecdote was heard by at least three people, and all participants prepared by watching or listening to three hours of anecdotes. The first part of the workshop then comprised a series of fable form stories, using templates developed within the IKM Narrative Project. A fable form story requires participants to synthesize a minimum of seven anecdotes into a single purposeful story. To select seven, at least three times that number are discussed, for each anecdote discussed at least two, more often three are considered. Only anecdotes seen during the various three hours of viewing can be used. With five small groups, telling and retelling stories to each other, across five subject areas, three to four hours sees well over a thousand anecdotes utilized by the workshop in one form or another. This is far more effective than analytical work, and is also more efficient removing in the region of sixty percent of the cost of such exercises.
2. Instead of trying to remove the natural tendency of the group to produce caricatures or stereotypes, this is encouraged, but as an intermediate step. Once the fables have been told and retold, each group in turn is asked to identify characters that exist within the story. In the above case five groups, each produced between five and ten caricatures with little difficulty. These were then clustered, utilizing hexagon shaped post it notes, to create common characters that were then drawn by the cartoonist, based on the written descriptions of the participants. In this way twenty five to fifty characters are clustered into say seven characters. Once this process is complete, each group in turn reviews the drawings, which are an abstract representation of their earlier thinking. They then brainstorm the qualities of each of the character as a series of one word descriptors: arrogant, humble etc. As each group completes its set of qualities, one per hexagon these are taken and randomized in a large work area. Once each group has completed we now have five sets of qualities, maybe 250 hexagons in total, stimulated by characters drawn from the anecdotes naturally told within the group. These are then in turn clustered to distill the various qualities into a set of archetypes – each of which through the process described has been distilled from many sources and which collectively represent the culture revealed by those anecdotes.

Depending on the subject about which anecdotes are captured, archetypes can be produced at different levels. If anecdotes are captured about the company, then the archetypes represent the culture of the company as perceived by those who told the anecdotes and those who engaged in the emergent process that produced them. By mixing the subject matter of the anecdotes, and the membership of the anecdote workshop, different archetypes can be produced for different purpose, and examples of these are given below.

What is critical to realize, is that this neither a quantitative technique, nor is it qualitative. Archetypes are a high abstraction representation that emerges from the discourse of the community. It is very different from the tables and data that we see in the work of people such as Hofstede, and is in no way dependent on the interpretation of data, or for that matter narrative within some analytical framework. Meaning emerges as a systems level effect; the archetypes are, to use the language of complex adaptive systems, emergent

properties of the Discourse. Within IKM's narrative project these are seen as just the first of many emergent measures in a range that will come to equal the more traditional quantitative and qualitative techniques, not replace, but equal, although they are more effective in soft measurement areas such as culture, values and motivation. Most importantly of all the high abstraction, realized in a cartoon can be understood, recognized and used at all levels within the organization without the need for expert interpretation and detailed training. Just as a Dilbert cartoon resonates with its audience, so an archetype or archetypal story has immediate resonance with the unarticulated collective understandings of the organization's members no matter where they sit in the hierarchy.

Uses of Archetypes

At their simplest level, the archetypes can help a group articulate understandings that have previously remained beneath the surface. At their most sophisticated, they can form part of a complex network of culture integration in, for example a merger. The examples that follow are all drawn from experience, but are not exhaustive; they represent varying levels of sophistication both in implementation and use. Archetypes offer a valuable tool in any issue involving culture, or human understanding. One of the reasons they do this is that they allow us to understand differences, without having to directly confess or confront direct truth; as such, they provide an easier and more sustainable learning environment. Walk around any organization and count the Dilbert cartoons pinned to walls and notice boards, or distributed in e-mails to see the point.

As a representation of culture

Considered as a group, the archetypes provide a representation of the culture of an organization that is more effective than an employee satisfaction survey or much marketing research. Archetypes emerge from the anecdotes that are naturally told around water coolers, in the staff canteen and other natural settings. A survey is a point measure in time during the completion of which the participant is conscious of the purpose, and can position their response to satisfy that purpose, or is forced into multi-choice questions that do not formulate the problem in a commonly understood format, and which are highly context sensitive.

As such, the archetypes can both increase effectiveness and reduce cost over techniques that are more "traditional". In our work, we have used an archetypal character set to largely replace user requirement document in a corporate intranet. The designers are allowed to build, or in a less risk taking environment, prototype any feature into the system, so long as a coherent story can be told about how each of the archetypes will use that feature. The representation, to quote one user means "it's like having the whole company in the room with us when we need to ask a question.

Managers set targets to change an archetype set, have to change their behavior over many months to change the naturally told stories, whereas its is fairly easy to influence most if not all quantitative techniques.

In another case, run in parallel with a employee satisfaction survey, it wasn't until the CEO say the emergent archetypes that he realized that many of the problems in the organization stemmed from his intellectual arrogance and lack of any ability to tolerate any failure. Various survey techniques and the advise of more courageous, and now departed advisors, had failed to make the point, but the simple high abstraction representation allowed the message to be internalized without being seen as direct or personal criticism.

As a means of understanding customers

What works with one culture will also work with the interface between two cultures. To take one example, anecdotes were captured from various set of customers about their experiences with staff in an out of town retail store using story circles, not focus groups or structured interviews. From that material a set of archetypes of Store Staff from the customer's perspective were allowed to emerge. At the same time, anecdotes from staff about customers were gathered, not in a structured setting, but during social breaks, in casual conversation using techniques derived from anthropology and in anonymous environments. Archetypes of customers were the allowed to emerge from those stories and the two sets of archetypes compared. The moment with senior managers in which both sets of archetypes were show for the first time was a revelation.

While any amount of consultancy processes and market research had produced useful results, but none had the same impact as the emergent measure; the high level of abstraction allowing multiple levels of understanding to unravel in the minds of the audience. The unstructured and indirect processes used to

extract the anecdotes, avoided any revelation of the purpose, and as such, participants were unguarded and in consequence more open. Also the archetypes represented a wide spread phenomena extracted from multiple layers of anecdotes, their characters and the properties of the characters, as such they could not be connected to an individual or group. The influence of the archetypes can also continue beyond this initial point, with their incorporation into training programmes, role plays, lessons learnt programmes and the like, often in conjunction with more traditional communication.

As a means of bringing together two cultures, including merger & acquisition

The above example is not constrained to customers and customer facing staff. The same techniques apply to two departments, for example marketing and research, who have little understanding of each other's values, and little concern to have such understanding in other than an artificial environment. Archetypes can provide a new language in which differences can be understood and interpreted often with humor which is a great diffuser of tension, more importantly they create an understanding of "us" and "them" that does not require artificial sessions designed to create openness, honest and trust which have little sustainable impact.

In a variation of this, archetypes and archetypal stories can provide a powerful intervention in a merger or acquisition. Either over a few weeks or in a series of one-day sessions with managers from the two organizations, archetypes of our own organization, and our immediate views of the other organizations can be obtained. This then allows each organization to create two sets of archetypes, those they have of themselves, and those they have of the other party. This is easier in the event of a merger as the event concentrates the stories that sum up the essence of a culture undergoing change.

Over the course of the next few years, stories will integrate as people work together, but this takes time, and in that time productivity will be hit, key staff will leave and much money will be wasted in retention and cultural integration programmes based solely on analytical techniques. To return to our workshop, we have two sets of anecdotes and four sets of archetypes. We can now run exercises in which managers from company A, use their own anecdotes, but with the archetypes of company B as characters in new stories reflecting on what would have happened in the past if the merger had happened earlier. They then tell stories using their own archetypes on the anecdotal material of B. The archetypes each has of the others provides a vital tool in flushing out fears, misunderstandings and apprehensions before they become an issue.

Commonly confused approaches using archetypes

There are three common uses understandings of archetypes with which the approach in this article may be confused. These are:

3. There is a huge difference between an Archetype and a Stereotype. If we look at a set of archetypes within our own culture then we recognize a part of ourselves in each of the archetypes, and we do so without extreme negativity. A Stereotype in contrast is a way of labeling or classifying an individual in such a way as to limit or proscribe their capability and response. A Stereotype represents an individual or a prejudice; the family of archetypes represents a community.
4. I am dubious about claims of universal archetypes. In several years of this work I have seen similar archetypes emerge from a variety of companies, but that very similarity is dangerous, there are subtle differences in the nature of their character and their derivation that would make the use of a universal dangerous. Campbell, building on Jungian concepts drew out a set of archetypal characters in respect of the hero and his journey that were in turn used in the Star Wars trilogy. My view is that these are universal approximations or abstractions from the archetypes of many story forms. In the context of a blockbuster film, these are not only adequate, but in many ways ideal, not to mention idealized. However, in a corporate environment an approximation is not unique and could be dangerous
5. In a variation of the above there appears to be an increasing tendency to create what I will call "categorization archetypes". Here a group of consultants or academics using of a multi-client summary or literature search create a set of categories into which individual and collective behavior can be categorized. Some of these can be stereotypes: witch, mother, blue stocking etc. Aside from a general dislike of categorization models, I see these as limiting rather than enabling human behavior. Such approaches impose an externally constructed and closed model onto an organization, rather than allowing an open set of archetypes to emerge from a natural and pre-existent set of anecdotes.

Conclusions

This article is only a partial view of what is currently possible with archetypes. It has not summarized prior work using archetypes to put the context back into eLearning with massive reductions in learning time through increased motivation and the elicitation of human curiosity (Snowden 2000). Neither have we looked at the use of anonymous web facilities to create four box cartoon strips about the archetypes that act both as a safety valve, and as an early warning device for dissatisfaction.

Future uses already involve a radically new approach to branding, both internal and external, that not only indicates brand value, but also seamlessly integrates into re-branding and brand-value communication exercises. Major developments are creating situation archetypes designed to represent multiple situations for strategy planning in the same way as the cartoons represent culture. This and related projects look to radically transform the decision making environment of organizations. Archetypes allow us to index oral history databases and provide rapid access not the stories of people across the company both past and present without confining employees to their own social networks.

Overall, archetypes are one of the most powerful of narrative techniques in that they create a language for people to tell their own stories to themselves, their colleagues and the new people they encounter. Such stories do not have to be written for them, but emerge from their day-to-day experiences and concerns. Unlike Story Telling, narrative both reveals the patterns and creates tools through which we can pattern the organization.

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