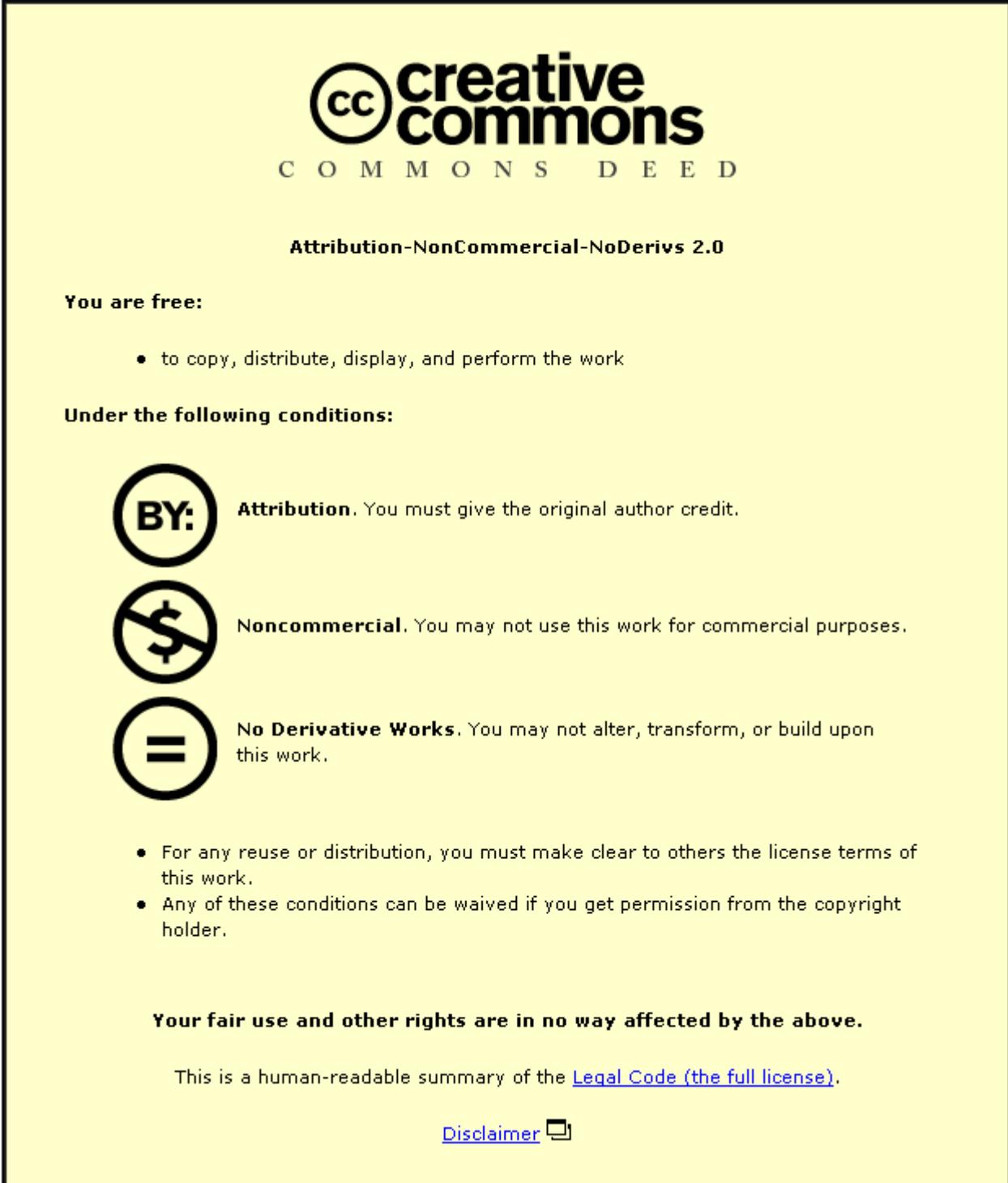


Simple but not Simplistic: the Art and Science of Story

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Simple but not Simplistic: the Art and Science of Story

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Story telling in the context of an organisation is an ambiguous term. For some it implies a lack of honesty; a selective remembrance designed to manipulate human behaviour for a purpose that may be good or bad; for others it is about entertainment, making a message compelling and leaving the audience with a warm sense of satisfaction. Cynical propaganda or naive enthusiasm, both are all too characteristic of much practice in organisational story telling: the latter is foolish and the former is immoral. Properly understood the organisational use of story is both a science and an art, it has a profound impact on human communities and deserves serious, and ethical treatment; employing a script writer, journalist, actor or whatever to improve communication is at best a lost opportunity and at worse results in a rejection of the desired message.

The Seven Characteristics of Story

As story telling has become yet one more management fad, we have seen much misrepresentation and trivialisation of a potentially powerful technique. A particular fault is to focus on story solely as message carrier, this misses the point; outwards communication is only one, and not necessarily the most important aspect of Story. Story is an old skill rediscovered for a new and increasingly complex age; yes, Story is about more effective communication, but it can also reveal culture, disrupt complacency and restore human value. It is important in the context of an organisation for many reasons, seven of which are worthy or particular note:

- Story delivers complex ideas in a simple, consistent, and memorable form.
- Properly constructed with an awareness of naturally occurring local forms, Story can convey a message in culturally diverse situations without loss of meaning or integrity.
- The traditional use of archetypes in story can assume a confessional character, which in turn permits the disclosure of failure and consequent stimulation of learning, without the need for direct criticism or admission of responsibility.
- The use of metaphor provides a mechanism to challenge and disrupt "received wisdom" or hide bound tradition, without excessive threat.
- A well-constructed story is multi layered; it's meaning unravels over time. A powerful story can be told and retold with new value revealed on each retelling, and in unforeseeable circumstance.
- The anecdotes that arise naturally in a community can reflect the underlying values, operating principles and beliefs that are the real culture of that community and which bear a fractal relationship to the organisation as a whole.
- If a community is aware of the nature and use of story techniques, then Story projects become ethically self-regulating, and pernicious use of story for character assassination and misrepresentation becomes more difficult.

In this article we will look at three classes of a fully developed approach to organisational story, each of which makes use of one or more of the features listed above. The three classes are Fable, Disruptive metaphor and the use of Archetypes as a confessional

device. These three form part of a wider set of seven developed within the Institute for Knowledge Management's research programme on Organisational Story Telling. The conclusion will then provide some guiding principles to a non-trivial approach to organisational story telling, and point to some of dangers of misguided use of story techniques that regrettably, are an inevitable consequence of their growing popularity.

The use of fables: managing the mission and values of an organisation

Fables are one of the oldest applications of stories with diverse uses. Storytellers use fables to propagate the values and beliefs of a whole society, both through the direct and stated message, or moral that is their conclusion and the underlying unstated messages and value transformations that arise from the interactions of the characters with themselves, with their environment and with the supernatural. In the context of organisational use of Story, fables are the means by which we can deliver a consistent message through the medium of a restricted number of storytellers, to cultural diverse audiences.

Many examples could be given of this, but the easiest way to illustrate use of this class of story project is to look at the hoary old problem of propagating the organisations mission and values. Most members of an organisation will have been through this experience on several occasions. A group of senior executives, possibly enabled by a firm of consultants lock themselves away in a mountain retreat and after an intense series of discussions descend with a well-crafted mission of immense value that will determine the well being of the organisation for the foreseeable future, motivate the staff through a common vision and generally inform all future decision making and branding. These days video clips, web casts and the like have replaced tablets of stone, but the principle is the same.

Unfortunately they fail to realise that their employees have been living in a different reality, they may event have reverted to false gods and idols. Critically, they have not lived through the experience of constructing the message, and as such the mission statement has less meaning, given the nature of these things it may even appear to be a set of pious platitudes, it may even be seen as hypocritical and will result in the rapid generation of propagation of anti-stories; the cynical myth form stories that self-generate and self-propagate within communities asked to believe that this time, things will be different. For the executives this is frustrating, for them the mission and values have real significance as they reflect the discourse from which they emerged. They may even believe that they have involved their staff in the their creation through workshops, consultant exercises and the like. However, no one who was not a part of that final meeting on the mountain can really extract the same level of meaning.

Fables can be of considerable use here; as stated earlier, it is about doing a few simple things early enough to have an impact. The stages outlined below are an idealised synthesis of several projects and more detailed explanation of the emergence of archetypes from anecdotes and associated work has been published elsewhere (Snowden 2000b & 2001) and will not be repeated here.

1. As a part of the final creation of the mission and value statements, the executives switch roles and look at those values from the most cynical perspective they can manage. This process is facilitated by the earlier construction of archetypes based on anecdotal material gathered within the organisation. By getting executives to assume the role of the archetype, possibly facilitated by actors a different perspective is gained and a collection of likely anti-stories is generated.
2. If necessary the mission statement is amended or modified to reduce the probability of anti-story, or to ensure that anti-stories that will arise can be predicted. The anti stories and earlier anecdotal material collected from the organisation, ideally anecdotes about previous corporate change initiatives, are then used as raw material to construct the story of why the new mission and values

are important. Such stories are typically seventeen plus acts long, and spend at least half of their lapsed time building context, the message is delivered at the end, by which time it is unarguable. Put up front as a proposition it is arguable, coming at the end of the story the message is unavoidable.

3. The construction of such a fable form story is relatively easy, provided only anecdotal material from the organisation is used; at all costs the temptation to invent material must be avoided. The fable can then be taught to the members of the executive who will be responsible for its propagation. Once they are word perfect, they are told they can never tell the story again; for some reason this always causes consternation! They are then taken through the structure of the story and re-populate the various elements with their own experience. We now have several executives all telling different stories, and telling them naturally as they are based on personal experience, but with all those stories communicating the same message, unarguable in the context of the story. To tell someone else's story requires considerable expertise, even professional storytellers find it difficult. Here we have people speaking from their own personal experience, but within a framework that can deliver precise, consistent and memorable messages far more effectively than traditional means of communication

There are several variations on the basic fable form. One follows a similar process to that described above, but uses a classic and universal fairy story form to construct the first or teaching fable. Research in this area is continuing, but it looks as though there are a limited, but powerful set of universal fairy stories. Beauty and the Beast, the story of innocence redeeming evil that was itself innocent but became corrupted by tragedy is one. *George and the Dragon* is *The Seven Samurai*, which in turn became *The Magnificent Seven*. Ordinary people succumb to the corrupt demands of evil for the sake of peace, but are awaked by a hero who transforms their perception of their capability; they defeat the oppressor. The basic message constructed in one culture using the form existent within that culture, is then told in another culture using a different form of the same story. The message is thus conveyed using channels already worn on the audience's brains through the stories of their childhood.

Disruptive Metaphor

Metaphors allow conversation about painful things; they enable disruptive and lateral thinking and prevent entrainment of attitudes and stagnant ways of doing things. Often the form of the metaphor can be a book. Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* are a rich source, as each story is a story of some aspect of the human condition. Science History is also a good way to disrupt entrained thinking. Take for example *Longitude* by Dava Sobel (Fourth Estate 1998). This brilliant book tells the story of the discovery of the means to measure Longitude in the eighteenth century, a discovery stimulated by a rich reward offered by the British Government. The means of measuring Latitude had long been known for centuries, but Longitude was a different problem, although the competition was announced the scientific community of day *knew* that the solution would be found in observation of the heavens, but this had major failings requiring clear skies, flat seas and high powered mathematics, but this would be resolved by future research. None of the scientists were prepared for the real solution; a furniture maker from the provinces made a clock that kept accurate time on shipboard. Time is the solution; Longitude is measured by the time difference from Greenwich Mean Time at midday. However this was not the solution the experts expected. For decades they attempted to ignore, denigrate and wear down the furniture maker and his son, until in the end, kicking and screaming they accepted the solution, but even then the prize was not paid in full. This metaphor can be used with great effect by asking a simple question: "Give me three incidences of where your staff have been treated in the same way as the Astronomer Royal and his cohorts treated that furniture maker". It always produces a useful answer. The alternative, "Give me three incidents where through pig headed

ignorance and blind stupidity you have ignored the creative skills and talents of your staff" is both less predictable in outcome and far more dangerous! The metaphor allows people to understand at a deeper and less personally threatening, but still disruptive level.

Use of commonly known historical situations, books written for children, a television series; all these represent fairly simple uses of metaphor. We can also draw on other traditions, for example the use of fetish stones by Native Americans. These stones, each carved in the shape of an animal, allow the holder to assume the characteristics of that animal while they hold the stone. Using the same device in a workshop, but taking scenarios or archetypes as the fetish device we can stimulate new thinking.

At it's most sophisticated; metaphor can encompass game playing and involve significant change. For example, the Grendel Game created within the Complexity and Learning Project of the Institute for Knowledge Management is an advanced form of disruptive metaphor, which combines anthropological study, complexity theory and managed war games to create an exciting and innovative learning event. Here, following a study of the organisation using anthropological techniques developed and proven within earlier research into anecdote collection, a fictional planet is populated by aliens selected to reflect the current culture and new scenarios. This is done with a leading scientist, who in his spare time designs consistent alien environments for use by Science Fiction and Fantasy writers. In one recent book a database of over six hundred, alien species was created to ensure that the ten species used in the book were consistent. Executives from the organisation then seek to colonise the planet in a managed war game. They will face their own organisation in a metaphorical setting that allows more profound and meaningful learning. In a managed war game random chance is introduced and pure rule based games are rejected. The metaphor of the aliens allows a new perspective to be taken. In this way newness can be simulated without threat, and executives habituated to perspective shift and uncertainty.

Archetypes as a measure and confessional device

The stories that are told reveal attitudes, beliefs, values and culture; in consequence the emergent properties of a collection of anecdotes from a socially cohesive community can form a radically new and very effective way to measure culture and staff attitude, or brand in the case of customers. This revealing aspect of story is also dangerous: to steal someone's story is to purloin their soul. Here we will look at one of the most versatile aspects of story: the archetype in the context of both measurement and confessional stories for pervasive learning.

Archetypes have a long and honourable tradition in story telling. The Greek and Norse Gods are all archetypes: they represent extreme aspects of human behaviour and stories about them collectively allow humans to reflect on their own condition. In the modern day the Dilbert cartoons appear on office notice boards, attached to e-mails and have even given birth to yet another set of management textbooks. By gathering anecdotal material from a community and stimulating high discourse levels in a workshop, archetypes that accurately reflect that community can be made to emerge, a process that is facilitated by the presence of a cartoonist (Snowden 2001). Archetypes that are extracted from the anecdotes told naturally in a community resonate: they have bite. Archetypes designed by a PR agency or on a brief from management have exactly the opposite effect, they jar, they are embarrassing, they fail to educate. Once we have them there are a variety of uses, for example:

- As a measure of culture or brand when used on employees or customers respectively. The archetype, an emergent property of a year plus of story telling is far more reflective of the thought processes of the community in question than an employee satisfaction survey or a traditional marketing measure of brand awareness. Looking at a collection of archetypes also is more educational for the

receiver than a set of statistics with 'expert' interpretation; it is also less threatening which is why the learning is increased.

- As a mechanism of introducing soap opera form stories into an e-Learning environment. In one time take to complete the e-learning modules was halved (Snowden 2000a) by a series of stories using Tom, Jason and Linda. E-mails were received after the first module had been sent saying things like "I've finished module one, here's the assessment, PLEASE send me module two, I've got to find out what happened to Jason". The desire to drive through the story was one factor in the improved timescale, the main one though was that each story had been constructed using a fable form to deliver a precise message, and in the sub-text of the story to prepare the ground for the learning that was to follow. Just as a good teacher provides context to support the content that will follow, so Story repopulates an e-learning environment with context to facilitate learning.
- As a confessional device, in Sufi stories of the *Mulla Nasrudin*, the admission of failure is possible without attribution by creating a story about the failure in which the Mulla is the initiator of failure. In this way learning can spread without pain, and failure the most valuable form of lessons learnt is available to the wider community, not hidden or sanitised. In a lessons learnt programme, project reviews produce formal review documents in which truth is generally sacrificed to the requirements of the present. Successful teams rarely refer to luck, Failed team attribute everything to chance. By encouraging teams to create stories about their archetypes, this problem can be partially overcome. Also stories about Archetypes are inherently more attractive than dry project reviews – they are read more readily and their reading is a voluntary act.
- Archetypes enhance system design. A traditional requirements specification is a static act and for designers there is no immediate interaction or dialogue with the users. Modern attempts to create typical users, often with developed personalities based on demographic or other data are too structured, too rational to be really effective. They are an expert's interpretation and suffer from restricted application in consequence. Archetypes on the other hand, taken as a set reflect the likely uses of a system. Pinned to the partition above each computer, the subject of discussion in design meetings, integrated to training material: the uses are legion

There are many other uses of archetypes, but they only really work if they really reflect the communities involved. As such they must arise from the anecdotal material of a community, not be the external imposition of an expert. This is of particular importance where archetypes are being used in a merger or acquisition; here the sensitivity of the measure requires a paranoid attention to not influencing or interpreting the material, but to facilitate the community itself to allow the emergence of the archetypes.

Conclusions

Story is a very powerful tool, it the natural and most sustainable of communication techniques developed by the human race. It is not just about communication, tell a good story; it is also about a sophisticated way of understanding the underlying culture of a community and a means of disrupting that community to the point where real learning and innovation take place. The following is an incomplete, but valid set of guidelines for organisational story telling.

1. Its as important to stimulate the natural telling of stories as it is to write them
2. Stories must always be rooted in anecdotal material obtained from the community in question – that material may be fact, fiction or 'faction', it doesn't matter; what matters is that it represents the community.

3. Telling stories of idealised behaviour in an attempt to induce imitation, or attempting to convey a message that will engender cries of hypocrisy is worse than doing nothing, it will just generate anti-story.
4. There should be no dependency on experts if the programme is to be sustainable, which is not to say that you should not use mentors when you learn to use it, or benefit from a well-researched method.
5. An organisational story is not about entertainment, but about achieving a purpose, using specialists such as actors, storytellers, scriptwriters and journalists will tend to bias towards entertainment and focus needs to be maintained. All of these skills are useful in context, but a method based on just one is inadequate.
6. Beware deducing the general for the particular. What has worked within one organisation will not necessarily work in another. In Story work we do not imitate supposed *best practice* but consistently apply a few basic and easily understood concepts to each new situation to create something unique.
7. Story work requires the highest ethical standards, and rules similar to those used for ethno-cultural work.

Selection of method and of mentors needs to be done with care. There are a few useful questions to ask. Firstly, how long has the individual or consultancy been working with Organisational Story? This is not the same thing as story itself. Since story became fashionable we have professionals such as actors and scriptwriters making a legitimate, but restricted sideways move into what can be a profitable space. We have also seen to more disreputable end of the consultancy market re-badge old methods as story, or employ specialists just to ride the wave. Any serious player in Organisational Story is likely to have been practicing since the mid nineties at least. Secondly, see to what degree the method relies on experts for its execution. If there is a high reliance you have not got a sustainable technique without massive cost, and you are also subject to the cultural bias of those experts. Finally check the richness of the offering. A sound story method will have several different forms of organisational use of story. It will separate the gathering of stories from their construction and interpretation, simple templates and one, two three standard step approaches only ever worked for the more mechanical aspects of Business Process re-Engineering, if then; they never work for Story.

Far too much research, and all too much story practice is both simplistic and trivial, or paradoxically over complicated in execution and in consequence simplistic in its impact; worse it can be abusive of its audience. Properly understood, Story is simple to execute, complex in its unwinding and powerful in its impact.

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