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Story as a tool to capitalize on knowledge assets

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'You could argue that capitalism in many ways is pure story: when you buy an equity, for example, you buy what you believe you understand as the history, present and future story of the issuing company.'

Abstract

Discusses the concept of story as a way of studying shifting cultural patterns and knowledge exchange in organizations and gathers together the experience gained in using story/storytelling as a research approach to the study of organizational communication in 20–30 assignments, having an explicit story element, over six years. Highlights the aspects of story which seem to be directly related to the capitalization of experience and describes in some detail one intervention where story was explicitly used at an event to capitalize experiences happening at the edges of a development agency so that they would become useful assets for the wider organization. Reveals that large organizations frequently use narrative or story when they seek to create a culture of counterpoint, harmonizing the embodied knowledge and values of individuals with the abstracted knowledge and ethic of the organization. Concludes that working with stories is one of the best ways to: get people talking; help create connections between people and ideas; inspire the imagination and action; render abstract concepts meaningful; permit pause and slowness and allow multiple perspectives to emerge; create sense, coherence and meaning; develop valuable descriptions of the situations in which knowledge is applied and solutions are found; examine corporate values and culture; communicate complex messages in a simple meaningful way; operate effectively in networks; and inspire people towards change.

Keywords: capitalization, exploitation, knowledge asset, knowledge management, organizational culture, story telling

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capitalize vb. 1. (intr. foll. by on) to take advantage (of); profit (by). 2. to write or print (text) in capital letters or with the first letter of (a word or words) in capital letters. 3. to convert (debt into retained earnings) into capital stock. 4. to provide with capital. 4. to compute the present value of (a business) from actual or potential earnings.

asset n. anything valuable or useful. See also assets.

assets pl. n. . . . 3. any property owned by a person or firm

[via Anglo-French from Old French asez enough, from Vulgar Latin ad satis (unattested), from Latin ad up to + satis enough]

(Collins English Dictionary)

Introduction

Around five years ago, we did a small piece of work for an international aid agency. This was early on in our exploration of story as a way of shifting cultural patterns and knowledge exchange in organizations. The agency had developed a strong brand campaign for itself, which sought to convey the cumulative impact of each tiny act of philanthropy on individuals in need. It was a powerful story set at the level of individual to individual to convey a whole global story of poverty and wealth. We felt that here, perhaps for the first time, our proposal that story is a key way to created shared knowledge resources, a tool of knowledge custodianship and exchange, would be welcomed as a consistent internal extension of the external positioning of the brand.

We could not have been more wrong. When we got to the part in the two-day workshop that considered story as a key tool to surface and communicate key knowledge and insight, the whole climate became agitated, angry, confrontational. We could not talk about it openly at the time; we managed it, moved on and overall made a productive contribution to the development of their knowledge strategy. Later, when we reflected on this surprise, it seemed there were two separate things going on.

At first we had not been sensitive to the fact that much aid work sets out to counteract the damage of centuries of established archetypes and controls passed on through story, for example in gender perceptions. Even more unexpected was the contention that 'you are taking us backwards: we left story when we left our villages and joined an international aid

agency'. In trying to understand this, we started to consider whether story was threatening because it felt too simple?

Three years later, we were at the Knowledge Management Europe conference in Den Haag. In among a sea of laminations, screensavers and glossy brochures about technology, we ran a couple of workshops on story. In a ceilingless pen with no previous personality we transformed the space. We strung up washing lines, and pegged to them objects and assets which we had developed through our story work; we invited a traditional storyteller who works with us to perform a story we had commissioned from her a couple of years previously about our first knowledge management project. She sang and performed in this space so that she filled the whole exhibition hall with sound and music. People came to find us from all over the conference.

We had figured out how to create environments in which people could tell and listen to stories. We had learned how to entertain people with story. We had learned how to used objects as a way to create explicit assets which were a way into uncovering and signposting tacit experiences. But what was the business benefit? And what was the real potential of taking this medium seriously without undermining its power by turning it into a process?

The rest of this article is in three main sections. The first summarizes some of the things we have learned over six years from around 20 to 30 assignments with an explicit story element (although in fact all of our assignments probably include story). Then we have tried to highlight the aspects of story which seem to us to be directly related to the capitalization of experience (the title of this article). In the final section, before drawing a conclusion, we describe in more detail one intervention where story was explicitly used at an event to capitalize experiences happening at the edges of a development agency so that they would become useful assets for the wider organization.

Story in the context of organization

Story and narrative work within organizations is about creating environments in which the knowledge and experience of individuals is first valued, translated into a shared resource and then capitalized on. Stories have

a unique ability to both evoke and contain knowledge and experience.

Let us start with some general points about why story can work so well. Essentially, working with stories is about recognizing the value gained by shifting from:

general	to	specific, a unique moment
abstract	to	concrete or real
complex	to	simple
theory	to	practice
models	to	meaningful experiences, illustrations, examples

Here is an indication of the kinds of work we have done where some story elements have been explicit components:

- knowledge management programmes – for the effective identification and exchange of learning episodes

- organizational culture and change – for the exploration of values and inspiring people towards the possibility of change

- communications – for balancing out quantitative information with qualitative evidence, illustrations and real examples

- teams, networks and communities – for the creation of deep connections and shared purpose

- risk management – for the management of uncertainty and developing anticipatory awareness among staff

It is also important to make clear that both the founders of Sparknow come from a background of exchange traded transactions, investment banking and structured finance. This means that while we have embraced the notion of art and elegance, and explored containers such as story as a vehicle for organizational insight and shared resources, we have always done so against a background of measurement, rigour and effective portfolio management strategies. That is to say, we have viewed community (guardian cultures, organized round stories and ritual) and exchange (trader cultures, organized to transact and negotiate) as a continuum, rather than as two cultures which would necessarily be in conflict with each other (Jane Jacobs, *Systems of Survival*

1992). In fact, you could argue that capitalism in many ways is pure story: when you buy an equity, for example, you buy what you believe you understand as the history, present and future story of the issuing company.

Jeremy Rifkin, in his book *The Age of Access* (2000), neatly encapsulates the premise that we are in an age of networks and connections, where meaning is discovered between people in social activities, and where access signifies more than ownership:

> The changing character of capitalism is reflected in the phenomenal growth of franchising over the past thirty years. Franchising combines virtually every new element of the new network way of doing business . . . The relationship is not one of seller-buyer, but rather supplier-user. It is the negotiation of access, not the transfer of ownership that is the core of the franchising agreement. This is a new kind of capitalism.

If this is so, then these are ideal times to support a shift away from knowledge as property, something to be trapped and stored away, and towards a reconnection of the known with the knower which may contribute towards the repair of the connection between the individual and the organization. This is a new kind of authenticity, where stories and experiences can be valued as key strategic knowledge assets, and can be used as organizational glue in an era where organizational structures have become fluid, and where the relationship between individual and organization has become much more transactional and temporary (Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, 2000).

The post-industrial view of knowledge is often complemented by a reverence for objective analysis as the highest function. We argue against analysis as a permanent way of work and think that it is necessary to strike the right balance between analytical left brain processing functions and appreciative right brain functions when one develops methodologies for the effective capitalization of knowledge and experience. If you are willing to accept that knowledge derived from direct experience is of equal value to knowledge gained through professional qualification, then it is necessary to pay equal attention to both, and to the balance of reification (creation of objects with a life separate to that of the knower) and heuristics (rules which can only be derived from observing and quizzing the knower in action). This creates an interesting dilemma for story/knowledge assets: it implies that although they can be written down, this is likely to diminish

their deep value, at least in part. So story/knowledge assets need to be both performed, or enacted, as well as written, in order to stay fresh and meaningful. In fact, it is probably only by enacting them that you can rediscover the meaning.

This creates some interesting valuation and portfolio management challenges, if you pursue the metaphor of portfolio management. Do stories which lie dormant, and are not performed, decay in value? Is there some kind of expiry built in, as there might be with an option or a futures contract? And how is it possible to manage a portfolio of old stories which might have new meaning as knowledge assets? In the reinsurance industry, asbestosis was a good example of this. It was an old hidden story, suddenly triggered into new meaning and a level of value quite different to that which people had imagined, and with huge knock-on impact for risk management and costs in the reinsurance industry. Another example could be in nuclear safety. Given the age of plant, and the age of those who know how plant was commissioned, and might need to be decommissioned, important stories might be 30 or 40 years old. How can they be found, refreshed and applied in a new context as knowledge assets?

So can story/knowledge approaches handle the importance of both old and new stories as strategic knowledge assets? Can they value what is in the head of the knower, as well as what is in the domain of the officially known? It is still easy to back into analytical modes, rather than take on the challenge that anything written is only half the story. We have found that an exploration of different kinds of story techniques can help balance the logical and the emotional. Our starting point is the idea that exchanging stories – as concrete containers of real life experience – can help us to appreciate, understand and draw meaning from our working lives. Because storytelling – like any good dialogue – demands reciprocity, a healthy balance of give and take, it is apparently very well suited to the purpose of helping build and develop the networks and partnerships operating at the heart of all modern businesses. The survival of these networks is dependent on the creation of a sense of shared purpose, meaning and respect between individuals.

Stories – against the norms of organizational culture

The way stories are constructed and conveyed runs against the norms of organizational culture in two specific ways:

Firstly, stories challenge the accepted power relations in an organization. A story can be used as a vehicle to surface ambiguities, paradoxes and inconsistencies, allowing you to say 'on balance what I think is' and present multiple points of view. Storytelling slows things down, creating space to consider these different perspectives, retaining them in the context of particular experiences, so that their relevance to the new context can be accurately assessed. A story is not more important because someone senior tells it (although in abuses of story this may be so, and is a serious risk.) In fact much story work needs to start out by setting new conditions of equality of contribution, where rank is irrelevant, and where personal experience has as much to offer in finding the meaning in a situation as professional experience.

The knowledge assets of an organization are more usually generated and regenerated through its contact with the outside world, as it enacts its purpose day to day – for example simultaneously every day, call centre employees may be learning directly how to engage customers and manage their product experience, or frontline health workers may be forming direct insights into what it takes to make an effective integrated healthcare team. These tiny fragments of experience can accumulate into a strong coherent insight of how to develop strong customer relations, or effective services for vulnerable people, and they come from the least powerful people in the organization. Story can provide a vehicle by which these frontline experiences can be organized in ways which directly affect the future direction of the organization and what it does.

Secondly, the way a story is conveyed is counter cultural. Generally its greatest value is in its spoken rather than written form. And headlines and bullet-points are of less importance than the 'how' and the 'why' behind the 'what'. A story permits complexity, emotion and ambiguity, and many points of view to exist side by side. It allows the person and the context to continue to exist in relation to the act.

Predating the written word, oral storytelling developed alongside the development of speech within every known culture. We all tell stories naturally in

conversation to express ourselves in a compelling way. As a cognitive function storytelling helps us make sense of new experience, package it up and pass it on to others. According to cognitive psychologists, the human mind has evolved a narrative sensemaking faculty that allows us to perceive and experience the chaos of reality in such a way that the brain then reassembles the various bits of experience into a story in the effort to understand and remember. Where we might very easily forget a headline or a list, we remember stories.

The fact that stories focus on the unusual is critical to understanding the purpose of our innate storytelling ability. They are intimately connected with human cognitive function that is the deep psychological processes of perception, sense-making, learning and memory. Stories are usually about how we deal with the new or unusual in our lives. When we learn something new this knowledge must be put in context, hence as we weave a story around this moment we set the scene and then give our account in a series of linked happenings which lead ultimately to the resolution of the problem or conflict. Stories are stored as a sequence of linked images and hence become easier to recall when the images are vivid. Where good storytelling is concerned meaning is more important than accuracy. While stories come in all shapes and sizes – anecdotes and testimonials, case histories and novels – they nearly all follow the same basic structure, with a beginning, middle and end (see figure on p. 177).

Oral stories now have a key role to play in organizations as we move from the dominant literal forces of the past 500 years, brought about by the invention of the printing press, and reinforced by the invention of the company and its associated structures. Our premise is that the fluid forces of enterprise structures, partnerships and actions of the 21st century are only partly helped by a notion of knowledge which is one of 'capturing, codifying, controlling, managing and owning'. We need to understand that we are moving back towards an oral society, where written behaviours and collaboration (for example on the internet and through email) are mimicking the qualities of oral societies. Research shows that the writing styles of those using internet chat rooms, for instance is increasingly informal and retains the quality of spoken encounters where the emphasis is not on accuracy but on meaning, and knowledge is a common asset, performed and embedded in the language, culture and people involved.
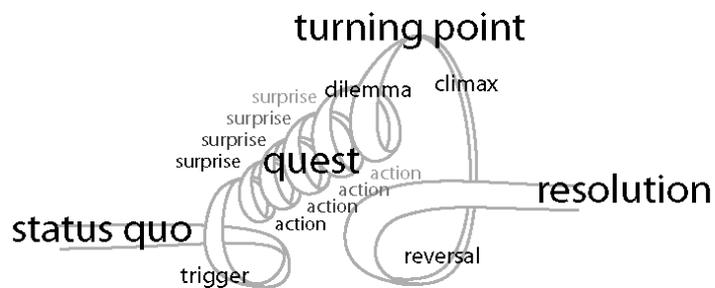
What all this might mean in practice

One of the people who approached us at Den Haag was the lead in knowledge management for a development agency [1]. He had immediately been struck by the expressive qualities of the workshop, and the potential of this medium to engage people right across the geographic and hierarchical spread of the agency, and reach out to local development partners in helping the extended enterprise to recognize, reorganize and communicate important insights and experiences at the local level which might have a direct bearing on other localities or on the whole policy and strategy of the organization. If only this could be done systematically, he thought, what might the impact be on the richness of the resources available to the whole organization, and how might this affect the sustainability of the projects in which it invested, and so enhance their impact on alleviating poverty?

To give you an idea of the challenge, the organization is around 3000 people geographically dispersed with complex local partnerships. There are a variety of different specialisms, knowledge bases and locations. The typical individual who works in this environment is highly professional, self-sufficient but very open to learning from others, committed proudly and passionately to the cause, has no time, is willing to take high risks, enjoys discovery and wants to discover for themselves, rather than being told how things are. The active work of the organization is done by these individuals working extensively with people outside the official boundaries of the organization. Because of the urgency of frontline work, and its remoteness from head office, head office initiatives often have limited impact, simply because they are from head office. Equally, because people are so immersed in the immediate environment, this is their priority, and flow of knowledge and insight from the frontline to the centre is patchy.

The length of time of the project lifecycle also needs noting. These are projects whose aim is sustainability and where partnerships and activities will continue long after the agency has withdrawn. They are quite slow, taking place in several phases over long periods of time, and often have to deal with resistance and power struggles at many levels before becoming established and effective.

the story line

turning point

surprise dilemma climax

surprise

surprise

surprise quest action

status quo action

action

action

reversal

resolution

trigger

The challenge then is to consider whether story, used explicitly as a tool, can overcome this and unlock a flow or dynamic which will replenish and nurture the knowledge assets of the organization as a whole?

Over two years of working in partnership, we have tested a portfolio of approaches together to find out whether story is a good way of capturing insight and experience from the front line of the organization. The main components of our work have been:

- Using story techniques to audit and report on the organization and establish the cultural patterns which need attention, and which have been affected by components of the knowledge strategy.

- Auditing the narrative quality of the reports and evaluations written by the organization to see whether the written materials have maximum impact.

- Story techniques to facilitate a large scale conference of a geographically dispersed practice and catalyse its development as a community of practice.

- Using fictionalised story in performance as a way to tell some difficult truths to a large gathering.

- Training moderators and facilitators in story techniques to support the development of skills, approaches and assets organization-wide.

- Developing systematic approaches to learn lessons and deepen the quality of insights during reviews and evaluations.

- Story competition to create a flow of usable knowledge assets from the front line of the organization.

By way example we have chosen to focus on the use of storytelling to facilitate the development of a new 'knowledge community' at a large inaugural conference.

The situation

In the summer of 2003 we were invited to contribute to the design of an inaugural gathering of 60-plus gender specialists from across the world. This group had never been assembled in this way before and they had much to learn from each other. The challenge could be broken down into:

- exploiting the opportunity to capitalize on and transfer valuable insights, learning and practical experiences mainstreaming gender in projects

- making spaces for exchange and connection between experts working in different cultural, economic and political settings

- supporting the development of an embryonic network or 'knowledge community'

Given the large number of languages spoken by delegates it was felt that storytelling would help facilitate cross-cultural communication.

Intervention

We ran four separate sessions over the course of the three days all of which were premised on oral storytelling:

- Pre-conference warm up – performance of a specially commissioned story written for the purposes of creating warmth and a sense of shared significance for the inaugural gathering.

- Jump-start storytelling – facilitation and orchestration of a session based on the model conceived by Seth Weaver-Khan at the World Bank. Delegates told the story of why they do the job they do to two separate groups of 11 people. Three most inspiring stories told in plenary.

- Postcard Stories – story sharing to capitalize and consolidate small moments of private spoken experience and the creation of a visible *bricolage* to provide insight into themes that are otherwise hard to detect.

- Future Stories – imagining the future for the gender network, based on Madeleine Blair from Perelei's idea of shifting the date and looking back as if your stories have happened. In practice it helped to create four separate credible visions of the future.

The design of all our interventions sought to hold to the principle that more abstract or strategic themes should emerge directly from individual experiences and informal words, and stay connected to these, not cut adrift from them in the destructive generalization of the written language of most organizations.

Our approach to all sessions were guided by:

- the principles of effective dialogue (which in turn leads to good storytelling and good understanding)

- appreciative inquiry – a model that accentuates the positive

- every voice should be heard

- time for reflection

In every intervention we highlighted the value of distillation. Small stories were heard then synthesized into a larger story that encapsulated the most memorable and important aspects of the individual stories. Retaining the life and meaning of the original accounts, this larger story is representative of multiple perspectives and then becomes valuable input to strategy documents and so on. Related to this is the notion of reincorporation. For example at each stage of the Postcard Stories exercise elements of the last part of the exercise were reincorporated in some way. This generates an unbroken thread of narrative that gets strengthened with each repetition, new voice and adaptation. And the emotions, insights, feelings and

experiences that emerged from the exercise were intended to help towards the Future Story exercise. Drawing on all this experience for the Future Story exercise at the end of the conference, delegates created visions of the future that were based on the collective voice of all those present.

Following the event, we wove the materials which had emerged and our observations into a document which could be used as a founding asset for the community.

Impact

From the discussions that took place during and after the event, it became clear that the storytelling element of the conference had played a vital part in opening the channels of communication between people from different regions. It also helped validate a way of communicating that was in contrast to the other more traditional methods of presentation and Q&A sessions being used. Although a scribe was appointed to ensure some of the stories were recorded for inclusion in a future 'Capitalization Report' the value was located in the meaning created between individuals in a given moment. The shared vision for the future of the network was then based on real experiences of the people that constitute it, rather than abstract perceptions.

Through the sharing of stories at the beginning of the conference, people changed the way they communicated their project experiences. For example – one consultant changed her presentation and wrote a story called Nadija, written from the point of view of a woman (an amalgamation of seven women touched by micro-financing scheme in rural Ukraine) affected by her project. Another presenting team from a UK university chose to promote the service they offer by telling the story of the process of creating one of their information packs. What this indicated was that stories had more resonance with people than more traditional presentation formats.

Conclusion

We have tried to explain here some of the reasons why large organizations are using narrative or story. Often they seek to create a culture of counterpoint, in which the embodied knowledge and values of individuals, and the abstracted knowledge and ethic of the organization

harmonize. This seems to be a culture that counters the historic *modus operandi* of corporate life, premised on argument, competition and enclosure.

Working with stories is one of the best ways to:

● get people talking

● help create connections between people and ideas

● inspire the imagination and action

● render abstract concepts meaningful

● permit pause and slowness and allow multiple perspectives to emerge

● create sense, coherence and meaning

● develop valuable descriptions of the situations in which knowledge is applied and solutions are found

● examine corporate values and culture

● communicate complex messages in a simple meaningful way – captivating audiences in a relevant and credible way

● operate effectively in networks -empathy/ connection, meaning, exchange, shared outcome, disclosure, ownership

● inspire people towards change, leading by example – capturing the imagination not persuading with rhetoric – 'what if' rather than 'that's why'

As a language of emergence storytelling is about effective meaningful communication. As a social activity it creates a space for exchange – a safe space in which we can forge new connections by sharing experiences which we feel may be of interest or practical value to others.

Some of the circumstance in which you might wish to use story explicitly include:

● enabling organizations to value, capture and translate individual experiences into a shared resource (lessons learned)

● developing a culture which values rich, effective and meaningful dialogue both in conversation and in records

- capitalizing on project team experiences

- exploring casting, roles and relationships

- using tangible objects to evoke and contain stories and provide meaningful 'hooks' stimulating the creation of new languages, meanings, communities and memories

- generating, and regenerating the 'cultural glue', identity and purpose for communities and networks

- exploring the risks and opportunities presented by an episode in the past, present or future

It should be clear by now that none of this is particularly easy. By taking away the paraphernalia and props by which we make progress, indeed argue our case for progress, through an organization, story in some way threatens the normal individual and collective assumptions of what makes power, control and career ladders operate in that organization. It allows play to have meaning in the context of work, when we are supposed to have put aside childlike things. And there is a strong attachment between knowledge and power. The written word is established as a controlling way to constrain and contain knowledge and make commodification possible. To move away from the written word, and from layers of analysis, is a kind of freedom but at the same time is a relinquishing of control that often releases latent fears and vulnerabilities which are not accommodated in the majority of modern business settings.

As the anthropologist Mary Douglas says, culture is not a static 'thing', but '... something which individuals, teams and organizations are all constantly creating, affirming and expressing' (Douglas, 1985). This culture is then expressed both through what people make in their world – tangible objects or things produced by individuals or groups – and what people make of their world – the conversations they have, and they stories they tell. To the heart of organizational culture, working at the level of narrative or stories can give voice to otherwise silent perspectives. Gathering and understanding stories about practical working realities brings forth the multiplicity of individual and group values, beliefs, motivations and assumptions behind organizational behaviours which may be frustrating transformation efforts.

When a community naturally shares stories this creates, beneath the surface, a sense of togetherness. Stories are often referred to as the 'cultural glue' of communities and networks. Binding people together with past, present and future in one, these shared narratives provide connective threads, a sense of order and coherence and meaning. We would like to end by quoting Phillip Pullman, the author, from an interview on TV on the South Bank Show, 2003

'We don't need lists of rights and wrongs, tables of do's and don'ts: we need books, time, and silence. Thou shalt not is soon forgotten, but Once upon a time lasts forever.'

Note

[1] In the interests of confidentiality, this section is an amalgam description of several clients in comparable situations, rather than a description of one individual client.

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