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the perils and possibilities of using story in organisations

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Narrative Patterns
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Organisations are finally waking up to the power of stories. As managers and executives experience the opportunities revealed through the use of stories within their organisations they have become more open to moving from the use of story telling in the context of communication, to the wider opportunities provided by narrative techniques in the fields of organisational change, knowledge management and strategy. Stories in organisations reveal patterns of culture, behaviour and understanding in a different and, frequently more effective way than interviews and questionnaire based approaches. The stories told in an organisation, formally in presentations, around the water cooler, in project reviews, indeed in all aspects of organisation life, reveal the ideation patterns of that organisation. Narrative techniques both reveal the patterns of an organisation and are in turn the means by which it can be patterned. Narrative is a powerful tool within organisations, but is not susceptible to the engineering approaches that have dominated management practice in the last few decades. As we will see managers need to create an environment in which the patterns of narrative meaning and the patterning capability of narrative interventions are managed in the way a gardener manages a garden, not the way an engineer designs a machine.

Narrative is an art and a science, an over emphasis on either aspect is wrong. Neither is narrative a silver bullet that can solve all the problems that an organisation faces. One temptation to which many an organisation has succumbed is to use stories to propagate ideal behaviour. This can result in "Janet and John" stories. Janet and John are the two central characters of a series of books used to teach reading to British four and five year olds (in the U.S., their counterparts are "Dick and Jane", in Canada "Bob and Betsy, in Wales Sion a Sian, all cultures seem to have an equivalent). The trouble with Janet and John are that they are just too good; they make any self-respecting and intelligent child sick. All Janet and John stories end happily as any naughty behaviour receives inevitable punishment and moral or noble actions receive reward and recognition. Most "official" communication in organisations takes a Janet and John approach; attempting to tell things in some idealised vision of co-operative behaviour and sacrifice to achieve corporate goals. Stories of best practice hold up a team or division as a role model for others to copy, as they are portrayed fulfilling the Chairman or CEO's vision, embodying the organisations core values of customer satisfaction, hard work, etc. Within the context of senior management, they may even be seen to have been successful, partly because senior managers are often only told the stories they want to hear, are insulated from negativity or they simply succumb to the very human tendency to hear what we want to hear.

The field of narrative is not best served by the naivety represented by the Jane and John story or by the attempt to transfer skills developed for another context without substantial amendment and augmentation. It requires greater sophistication and realism by senior management. The field of narrative in organisations is a new discipline that draws on many traditions and sources, but is neither confined nor represented by those traditions.

This brief chapter aims to provide some cautionary comments and a high level overview of some of the newly developing areas of narrative work.

It reflects the experience of the Institute for Knowledge Management and, more recently, the Cynefin Centre for Organisational Complexity in developing and patenting methods tools and techniques for narrative work in organisations.

Dangers and limitations of just telling stories

All organisations have messages that they wish to convey both internally and externally, however there are a number of issues that organisations must be aware of before they begin to use storytelling as a way to convey these messages. Conventional communication is often stale and the stories created predictable, effective communication needs a story to be told in a convincing and attention grabbing/retaining way. Consequently, it is not surprising that the novelty of an Irish Seanachie at a company event, or a group of actors using techniques such as the forms of medieval morality plays, can have a considerable impact on audiences jaded by a surfeit of corporate videos, tightly scripted messages, and idealised examples of "best practice." However, novelty is, by definition, short lived in its impact, and companies adopting such techniques often end up pursuing novelty for its own sake.

As a result it is not infrequent for employees to dismiss storytelling as just another consulting or management fad and regrettably there is an element of truth in this belief. Organisations must be aware that it is not enough to just employ a journalist, scriptwriter, actor, or even a traditional storyteller. All these people have valuable traditional skills within the context for which they were developed: newspapers, films, the theatre, and the campfire. However, their skills do not necessarily transfer into the organisational context intact. All too frequently, there may be resistance in the audience to being "told a story." A fictional or allegorical story may just engender cynicism or dismissal: "so now they are telling us fiction," or "that was very entertaining, but why can't they just say what they mean," A factual story is even more fraught with peril: to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth requires both a prestigious feat of memory and a suspension of the normal human tendency to reinvent history to conform with the requirements of the present. More importantly, the bare facts are often boring and do not make for a compelling story.

We refer to this approach of directly retelling events to others as "anecdote enhancement" and it includes much of what is known as "story telling" within organisations. While it can be useful, particularly in training, it presents problems in sustainability and impact. Practitioners who focus on anecdote enhancement select the most compelling of the facts and provide appropriate emphasis: create tension, introduce clear protagonists, build a proper context, and spell out the message. The danger here is that the story creator's emphasis and selection may not correspond with the experiences of other people in the organisation. It only takes one person to say "but that's not what really happened," or "but that's not the complete story," and the whole process is undermined. This is particularly true when organisations have just spent large sums of money on a communications or cultural change program. Several years of using anthropological techniques to capture water cooler stories after some official communication shows a near universal occurrence of anti-story: the cynical and naturally occurring counter-reaction to an official story of goodness that fails to reflect the reality of the audience's experiences. Narrative patterning is about the creation of sustainable interventions for cultural change, knowledge management, communication and a host of other organisational objectives. The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of the depth of narrative; as such it includes aspects of story telling but is not limited to anecdote enhancement

Creating and managing the flow of narrative within an organisation

A common scenario, the creation of a new organisational mission or set of values, can illustrate the way in which narrative is much wider in its application than anecdote enhancement.

The process of developing value statements usually begins when a group of executives spend many weeks or months gathering and interpreting the results of consultative exercises, garnering the expertise of external consultants, identifying and resolving differences, clarifying the precise meaning of language, and sharing and merging experiences. At the end of this process a freshly minted set of corporate values is produced that the executives believe reflects the priorities, culture, and strengths of the organisation, for example, "Putting customers first." Slides sets and briefing packs are created, workshops held for employees, cards are printed with the new values for employees to carry around in their top pocket, articles are published in internal journals and web sites, posters are tacked onto notice boards. However, rather than embracing the vision statement, an anti-story begins to develop among the employees. In response to the values statement above, anti-stories arise: "They've just spent all that money to decide we need to be nice to customers. I could have told them that for nothing and a decent pay rise would have been more welcome."

The main reason for anti-story is that, while the "vision statement" has profound significance for the executives who lived the journey of its creation, it has little resonance (other than negative) with the employees who have not yet undertaken that journey. For the executives, the value statement is replete with the significance of the many conversations and discussions and the stories in which they engaged. The employees have yet to engage at such a level. In fact it may be worse, as the language used may trigger memories of past initiatives that failed to deliver on expectations, or be perceived as being hypocritical when measured against the past perceived behaviour of those executives. For staff to buy into to such initiatives with more than token compliance, they have to relive the journey of the executives. This reliving of others experience is the historic role of storytelling in society in providing context for human action. To help individuals build this shared context, there are three narrative methods that can be used, either together or in combination: Fable, myth management and the story virus. These methods are the foundations of organisational storytelling as well.

Fable Form story

Fable form stories are moral tales designed to create a context in which a message can be delivered. They are long, complex stories that are difficult to repeat verbatim, but which have a memorable message or moral. All cultures have such stories that are told by each generation to their children to inculcate common values. Like all good stories they do not attempt to deliver the message until the story itself has provided the context that will make the message acceptable. The building of context is fundamental to the effectiveness of the story, whether an elaborate story told by traditional storytellers or a picture book that provides the first bedtime stories for children. The message of Beauty and the Beast is that innocence can be corrupted by evil but redeemed by innocence. The message is not stated up front, but the story gradually builds to the point where the message is inevitable, understood and incorporated into the underlying value system of the audience.

Fable is rooted in ancient practices of Story. The Celtic bards who were welcomed in any household for their ability to hold audiences spellbound with stories of Pwyll, Branwen, Math and the Dream of Rhonabwy did not memorise every word, but the overall structure and rhythm such that they could extemporise in the context of their particular audience. The non-repeatability of the story is not accidental; a good storyteller will weave variation into each retelling of the story so that they maintain power over the story and its telling, and thereby maintain control over the delivery of the message. Exactly the same skill is required of the modern executive. The range and complexity of corporate stories is not as great as in the Mabinogion (an ancient collection of Welsh stories referenced above) and the process of their creation in an

organisational setting can be achieved through a process of telling and retelling which is described below.

As stated, in fable, the message is delivered at the end of the story, by which time the story had created a context in which the message is inescapable or at least unarguable. We like to learn in this way; how many stories state the ending at be beginning? How many endings make sense only when you have heard the whole story? This contrasts with most corporate communications, where the message is delivered at the start and then explained/justified. The fable structure prevents the problems created by starting a communication with the message; the audience makes up their mind early in the process and decides upfront whether they will accept the message.

Unlike anecdote enhancement, a fable can contain elements from multiple anecdotes from the organisation and is not dependent on a single original story to deliver its message. This makes the approach far less susceptible to the problems of selection and enhancement. The story emerges in a workshop through a process of telling and retelling which replicated the natural conditions in which powerful stories generate individually and collectively. The intention is to get to a position where, without slides sets or scripts, executives can communicate the message through a naturally told story.

The process is fairly simple and does not require skilled facilitation, which is another significant difference to the consultant dependency of anecdote enhancement. The executives begin by familiarizing themselves with a fable template, an example of which can be found below in Exhibit 12.1. This example has seven sections assembled in a non-linear sequence (the numbers in the right hand column indicate the assembly sequence). The familiarisation is achieved by being told a story and then having the template explained in the context of that story.

The executives then populate the fable form using anecdotes from their own experience, or that of their fellow workshop attendees section-by-section, in the order signified in Exhibit 12.1. At each telling the story is refined through the telling and the response of the audience. This imitates the process by which stories are naturally developed by individuals, through telling and retelling with different audiences. Favourite dinnertime stories, the stories told to new members of an organisation all evolve in this way. The personalization of the form is very important, for while it takes a very gifted storyteller to tell someone else's story, an individual can easily be guided on how to tell a story with credibility and ease if it is based on his or her own experience. The ease of this process enables a large number of people to learn and internalize their own fable. This is practical, achievable and sustainable; training executives to be a skilled storyteller, journalist or scriptwriter in a two day course is not. It also contrasts favourably with the staged delivery of a written speech or a standard slide set using someone else's language.

In one case, thirty executives were trained over two half-day workshops to construct fables based around a new corporate mission statement. As a result, the organisation had thirty people telling different stories based on their own experience and using anecdotes already gathered from the organisation, but each delivering precisely the same message. The multiple elements of the fable form can effectively recreate the context in which the values or mission statement were formulated so that they are not pious platitudes, but the natural and accepted consequence of hearing the story. The story can also adapt itself with different anecdotes used for different audiences and with changing circumstance. It is a natural story that has evolved, albeit a forced evolution, through telling, retelling and example.

Exhibit 12.1

Context	The storyteller creates a relationship with the audience and sets up the message without revealing it. Self-deprecation can help here, as the storyteller must not appear to preach or to be too arrogant. A mistake or act of commonplace foolishness that has relevance to the story would serve. Irony and cynicism, if not carried too far can also be very effective.	7
Context Three	Three anecdotes are assembled in ascending sequence of impact, drawn from the organisations history. They do not reveal the message in any way, but which draw the audience into the context of the story to prepare them for the message. It is very important that the anecdotes do not deliver the message or provide a clue as to that message. Threes are also common to stories, three goals, three princes etc. etc. We expect three, two disappoints and a fourth is not heard. The children's story of the three Billy Goats Gruff has three goats encountering a troll at a bridge, we start with the smallest, continue to the middle sized one and then to the largest after which the story can be resolved. Each anecdote (or the case of the goats troll encounters) builds experience and increases the anticipation of the audience.	2
Turning Point	The story turns, a clear incident signals to the audience that the story is moving from context to message. This can be done with tone of voice, the use of another anecdote that turns from humour to seriousness: there has to be a transition.	4
Message Three	Three anecdotes are assembled in ascending sequence of impact, which deliver the message through successive revelation without revealing the message itself. Delivering the message too quickly is a mistake, by gradually building the message through a series of revelations the point is driven home with far greater effectiveness.	3
Message	The underlying message which permeates the story itself and which does not always have to be precise. The message itself is never formally stated and there is no need to get a precise statement identified in the workshop as that will refine during the process of telling and retelling.	1
Slogan	A simple phrase such as "social context, social obligation" which is easily memorised. This phrase should be seeded in the earlier parts of the story including the context three anecdotes so that it has become familiar to the audience and will suddenly make sense as it is revealed in the context of the message.	6
Reverse & Resolution	An old story trick, the message is thrown into sharp relief when the resolution appears to be achieved but is suddenly cast into doubt before being restored. This reminds the audience of the core message. It's a common trick in films, think of Fatal Attraction, just when we think the villain of the piece is drowned and the hero is safe, she rises out of the bath in one last mad attempt to kill him. Without this reversal the story would not have bite, the reverse acts to remind us of the start of the story, it builds the message back into the context.	5

A final point that involves fable creation needs to be addressed. While happy endings may seem to be a good idea more often than not they generate anti-story. Most people, however loyal, react against a Janet and John message no matter how well intentioned. The best form of fable has an ironic end, in which the audience realises without the need for articulation how a happy ending could have come about.

For example a story designed to encourage knowledge sharing might be illustrated by three anecdotes of foolish wasted effort reinventing the wheel, to set the context, followed by three *understated* anecdotes of success that could only be achieved by the desired behaviour. The final anecdote could show an example of where copying past success was the wrong thing to do as it prevented a new idea being generated. This is an ironic end, it is much more effective. The audience are not being preached to; they can fill in the gaps and make the correct judgements for themselves.

Myth Management

Myths are timeless and in all societies, national, tribal and organisational, stories are told and retold, creating and reinforcing themes. Characters often emerge from those stories, or generate them in the first place. In IBM stories about Thomas J Watson Junior are still told many years after he left the company, "Richard" stories abound in the Virgin Group. This is the same phenomenon that, over longer periods of time and with larger populations, produced the mythologies of the ancient society and which continues today. Think of the wartime myths of Britain and compare them with those of the former Soviet Union. Examine the stories of the American Civil War that still provide evidence of a cultural divide between the descendents of the two sides.

Although myths in organisations do not have the same longevity as myths in society as a whole, their impact on people's lives can be as strong. In the context of an organisation, myths consist of self-similar stories that are told and retold around certain common themes within an organisation. Sometimes these themes can be so strong and clear that they achieve the status of an organising or governing principle. Just as the myth structure of society permits acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, so the myth structure of an organisation can bound its capabilities and perception.

The myth stories that are told in an organisation bear an interpretative relationship to facts; which facts are told, and the aspects that are emphasised, exaggerated or satirised can tell us much about the organisation and enable an understanding of the myth structure that pervades it. The myth-stories create an unconscious perspective lens, a filter through which reality is both perceived and created. Managers must therefore keep in mind as they attempt to initiate, change or rewrite the myths of the organisation that the organisation is not a blank slate; there will often be an existing group of myths in place at an organisational (and frequently sub-organisational level) that are powerfully entrenched and therefore provide the interpretive framework through which any new messages will be perceived.

This is a part of the pattern entrainment that forms a key part of human intelligence. Decisions are not made on the basis of a rational evaluation of carefully considered alternatives, but through a first fit pattern matching with past experience, much of which is the indirect experience we receive through stories. Pattern entrainment allows humans individually and collectively to make rapid decisions under conditions of uncertainty. That is the upside; the downside is that whole communities fit what they see to match their pre-existing patterns.

A new set of values or a mission statement is an attempt to refocus or redirect the organisation to achieve goals encapsulated in those values, but any communication will be filtered through the current mythology of that community. Understanding the mythology of a particular community is therefore critical to success. The way in which facts from the past have been interpreted can tell us how the values will be interpreted, both in the present as well as in the future. It can also indicate the degree to which the message, supported by action, will have to be radical if it is to break an ingrained pattern of interpretation that dominates that organisation. If the new values conflict with the value system reinforced by the myths, then their implementation is more likely to engender anti-stories. However, if the values build on, or seek to modify, existing corporate myths, adoption of the new values or mission is more likely.

Myth management offers the opportunity to evolve and disrupt negative patterns as well as reinforce weak but positive patterns. It is one of the newest and at the same time one of the oldest methods for cultural change, organisational alignment, innovation and many other apparently intractable problems. In this case we are looking at one aspect of myth management, namely the installation of a new value system. Most organisations have finely tuned hypocrisy triggers in their informal networks that produce anti-stories that can trap the innocent as well as the guilty.

One of the simplest methods of myth management is to research the anti-stories that are likely to be triggered by this shift in values. For example, in one organisation executives were asked to nominate members of their staff with high potential who were often considered to be cynical or negative. These individuals were then taken on a weekend leadership development programme. While a good programme was delivered, the real purpose was to test different corporate messages on a naturally cynical audience, to flush out potential anti-stories in advance, and understand what triggered these stories. This simple exercise was used in two ways. Firstly to inform a conventional communication campaign by providing a series of check points against which written material, posters and briefing notes for senior managers could be tested. Secondly, in a fable construction workshop for senior managers who tested their stories against the range of anti-stories, and revised those stories to ensure that the worse anti-stories were not generated. These two examples are avoidance techniques. Story virus techniques (described later) can also be used to prevent the generation of anti-stories.

More advanced techniques involve gathering large volumes of anecdotal material from the organisation, and then using statistically selected groups of staff in a workshop process to allow the underlying themes of the organisation to emerge. This process might be carried out with one group who have been selected to represent the demographic characteristics of the organisation as a whole. Alternately different groups such as senior managers, middle managers, sales people etc might be selected so that contrasting themes could be identified. Emergence is an interesting new technique in organisational change that is neither qualitative nor quantitative in nature. Emergence is an aspect of complex systems in which the interactions between agents in the system produces patterns such as the formation of a snowflake or the flocking behaviour of birds. In both cases complex patterns emerge from large group inter-actions.

Emergence relies on groups of people with tacit knowledge of the organisation identifying subject areas (typically several hundred) from a large body of anecdotal material. The subject areas are then clustered and for each cluster positive and negative attributes are brainstormed and then clustered to identify themes. This is a non-analytic two stage, lightly facilitated process, which reduces the potential impact of the researcher.

Two different examples, one related to the emergent process above and one to the early described anti-story elicitation technique will serve to summarise this section...

1. In one large organisation, a dominant theme that emerged from eight different sample groups was "don't buck the process". The large body of anecdotes comprised stories of stupidity arising from a slavish adherence to standard process, with amusing stories about how each new member of staff had learnt the lesson the hard way. In this organisation, a particular form of formal process had come to mean, "the organisation takes this seriously" and the absence of such a process led to dismissal of initiatives designed to reduce bureaucracy and cost. Despite the intent, the myth structure of the organisation prevented change. In this case, the clear strength of the myth would require a highly disruptive technique to achieve change. This was a step too far for the organisation concerned as the dependency on process control was pervasive across all levels of management. This type of theme, if negative is a pervert theme, self-reinforcing and extremely dangerous, but regrettably common. It is one of the reasons why large companies fail to adapt to radically changing markets.

2. In another case, the anti-story elicitation approach described above identified that an executive was about to, in all innocence, use a form of words in a corporate wide announcement that had been used by another CEO in a recently acquired subsidiary some years ago. These words had been delivered immediately prior to a massive downsizing operation. There was no way that he could be aware of this, and the form of words seemed innocent, even motivational, but they triggered a resonant meaning within a part of the organisation which quickly infected the rest. The existence of myth monitoring meant that the impact was recognised far earlier than normal channels and permitted a tightly targeted intervention.

Organisations need to realise that all communication takes place in the context of multiple pasts of which we can never be fully aware. Myths exist in organisations and have the same impact as myths on society as whole: they define what we are, and how we view things.

Story Virus

If an anti-story has become dominant in an organisation, factual rebuttal will rarely dislodge it. There are a number of techniques that can begin to counter the effects of an anti-story. These are referred to as "story viruses." Readers should understand that this is a specialised form of narrative work and needs to be approached with care, but it's one of the most useful and can people can be trained to the point where it becomes a natural process. Among the types of story virus techniques that can be used are:

1. **Socratic Dialogue**. In this situation, the anti-story or the anti-story teller is questioned to the point where they destroy their own story. The storyteller does not have to be tacked directly (and it would be rare to know who was spreading the rumour in the first place) but can be challenged through rhetorical questions. This is a form of dialectic reasoning in which the intention is not to win the argument, but to inject a question in order that the anti-story moves on to a safe place. Mark Anthony does this in famous funeral oration ending each statement with "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him" this posing a question to the crowd that turns it to his favour. An executive can do the same, posing a question that s/he does not

answer, but through answering the employees will come to answer in a favourable manner.

2. ***Reductio ad absurdum***, to reduce to the absurd. Here the anti-story is managed by picking on various aspects of the anti-story and through a process of logical argument showing that the premises of the story lead to absurdity. At the heart of this technique is picking on one vulnerable aspect of the anti-story, elevating its importance before progressively making the statement ridiculous. Examples of this type of virus are long and drawn out, and may involve careful communication and "myth monitoring" over a period of weeks or months.

3. ***Metaphor*** is an established way of getting people to see things in a different way. We generally understand new things by metaphorical reference to something that is already understood. By creating an association with another well-known story we can demonstrate how the errors in the metaphor are similar to the errors in the anti-story. This is an old technique from popular speakers for dealing with hecklers. You associate the concept of criticism with a ridiculous image. One, admittedly unfair, example was used by the author facing an attack from an over enthusiastic supporter of Appreciate Enquiry, a tool which has some use in narrative but which focuses on positive stories and tries to reduce negativity. The Cynefin narrative techniques encourage negative story telling, and use the capturing and distributing stories of mistakes to develop a worst practice system, which is seen as more valuable than an idealised "best practice" system. Rather than engage in a detailed debate which would have lost the audience, appreciate enquiry was handled as follows: "appreciate enquiry, that's the technique that focuses on positive stories? It always reminds me of the final scene Monty Python film "Life of Brian" where they are all swing backwards and forwards on the crosses singing *always look on the bight side of life"*. Now that was unfair, and took place in the context of a warm audience, who shared cultural roots with the speaker, but it illustrates the technique which need not be culturally specific.

4. ***The killer fact*** can be effective, but often an anti-story is made worse by arguing with the facts. This is often evident in scientific communities, whose arguments would convince other scientists but have the opposite effect on others. For example, scientists had proved the River Thames in London was clean and quoted low levels of cadmium levels to prove it. However, all this statement did was create new fears. However, when a salmon was later caught in the river, everyone believed the river was clean. The presence of a salmon turned out to be the killer fact; the detailed scientific proof was not.

5. ***Exaggeration*** of a key element or aspect of the story to make it laughable, ideally in a good-humoured way. In one case in IBM, a urban myth (a specialised form of myth story that arises to explain or excuse) within one of the sales teams was about the terrible consequences to clients of not buying an IBM solution. This myth was destroyed for over three years through a different story that gradually transformed from a hero story in which IBM knowing best did result in client failure, but the level of failure and the clients rectification of their sin was so ridiculous as to be laughable. Anyone attempting to use the Urban Myth as an excuse was made ridiculous by association. The key here is to take the strength of the undesired story and exaggerate that until it becomes ridiculous – no direct contradiction.

6. ***Direct Contradiction*** has value but often makes things worse not better as it may take the anti-story seriously and increase its credibility and

pervasiveness. In general the advice is that if you do not have a killer fact that will be understood and which will gain resonance with the audience, this approach should not used.

The need to use story virus can be reduced by gaining a proper understanding of how anti-story arises within the context of a particular organisational. By using fables and myth management earlier in the process, the need for story viruses can be minimized.

A wider perspective on narrative

A combination of fable, myth and story virus complements more traditional communication methods and represents a more sophisticated approach to managing the flow of communication and understanding within an organisation. However, it should be understood that while story telling is an important aspect of narrative, it is not the whole of it. The many forms of narrative can also act as a source of understanding, disrupt entrained thinking, provide a repository of learning, replace user requirement specifications, and enable confession of failure without attribution of blame. It seems as though determining the pattern language of the organisation is about gathering information, which can be as much a form of communication as disseminating ideas is about disseminating information. Narrative does this by making clear the patterns that exist, shifting perspectives about those patterns, and when necessary, disrupting or challenging those patterns within the organisation.

Pattern Perspectives – revealing meaning and enabling understanding

Human knowledge is deeply contextual and requires stimulation if it is to be revealed. Telling stories, both fact and fiction, is a powerful way of achieving that stimulation.   A theme in the story is an emergent property of anecdotes captured within an organisation.   Identifying the pattern of themes that underpin water cooler stories provides valuable insights to the reality of an organisational culture.

Another valuable source of pattern identification and understanding comes from the development of archetypes. Archetypal characters are common to all story telling. As people tell stories about their situation, characters emerge from those stories. As stories are told about the characters, they become more extreme until each represents one aspect of that society, and collectively they represent the culture as a whole. Archetypes used in organisations are not universal, but are unique to the context of each organisation and therein rests their value. Like themes, they emerge indirectly from the workshop process described earlier. The same effect can also be achieved through virtual facilitation, but it does require interaction, i.e. emergence, not an analytical approach that will be polluted by the analyst in terms of meaning. Using large volumes of anecdotes from the organisation, and starting with characters or stereotypes, clustering the many positive and negative attributes of those characters creates archetypes.

Archetypes have been used to provide measures of employee and customer satisfaction and in the latter case also provide an interesting new perspective on brand. To take an example, school students were used to collect anecdotes from customers as they left an out of town hypermarket. Those stories were used with a sample of customers to create a set of stereotypes and archetypes that were created by a political cartoonist. The same process was repeated with store staff using informal capture methods not involving direct questioning, to get their stereotypes and archetypes of their customers. The two sets were then shown to senior management who could see instantly what was going wrong, and had the means of rectification to hand.

Both sets of cartoons were put up in every staff room with a banner that said, "this is what they think of you and this is what you think of them". This technique is descriptive self awareness where the consultant does not analyse or prescribe, but creates the conditions for descriptive self-awareness; a mirror is held up to the soul of the participant. Archetypes that emerge as patterns from stories told naturally can be a more valuable measure of reality than quantitative or qualitative techniques that inevitably only see what they have been designed to see, are less open to new discovery and too dependent on expert analysis. The identification of organisational archetypes becomes an even more valuable tool when combined with demographic data to create "villages of persona", which have provided a radical and more creative alternative to developing user requirement specifications for intranet design.

The same techniques along with disruptive metaphors and other knowledge management techniques such as social network stimulation can be used when two companies merge or this is an acquisition. Although both firms may use the same language, the parties have different histories, and these past experiences profoundly influence the use of language. The same phrase may be positive in one company, but trigger anti-story in the other. The coming together of two organisations will increase the number of strong frequently told stories (sometimes known as identity stories) told by each party and, if anything, differences will be exaggerated. Over time, though often far too late, the language and the stories will merge. Narrative techniques such as fable construction, archetypes and myth management allow us to accelerate this natural process by creating new common stories, mixing anecdotal material, archetypes and values to communicate a new common culture by changing the myth structure that underpins it. Narrative allows us to accelerate the creation of common understanding and purpose in a non-directive, and thereby, more sustainable form.

Pattern Disruption

Organisations (and societies for that matter) develop "scripts", or controlling stories that punish deviation. These develop and are reinforced by ordinary people; they are rarely imposed from the top and as a result cannot be changed by dictate. While scripts increase the predictability of human interactions, they stifle innovation and prevent both insight and descriptive self-awareness. However as in most aspects of human behaviour, ingrained behaviour is difficult to change by direct challenge.

Departure from a script is not an easy thing for an individual or a community. For example, a dominant script in many organisations is the need for continued success and the avoidance of failure. This means that in many knowledge management efforts, getting people to tell stories of failure is difficult, if not impossible. In this situation, exhortations that this is a "no blame" culture are more likely to generate anti-story than genuine sharing. Trust enables sharing of failure, but trust is won over years and lost in seconds. Some trust is contextual, as a fire fighting crew will trust each other during a fire, but that same level of trust cannot be induced in an office environment and will not sustain itself within the fire crews in a different context. Historically, many cultures have developed archetypal story forms that are used as a confessional device or as a means of criticism without the pain of direct contradiction. This is already commonplace in most organisations in the form of Dilbert cartoons pinned to a wall. The Sufi tradition has an archetypal character that is used as a substitute for "I" in telling stories of failure. Once a set of archetypes has emerged from the anecdotes of a community, they can be used as confessional devices to allow stories of failure to be told without attribution of blame. In knowledge management initiatives,

stories of failure are more valuable that those of success. The indirect nature of an archetype allows us, through these archetypes, to tell stories about ourselves without the pain of public confession.

Metaphors are not only a useful form of story virus but can be used as a way for reframing problems. For example, a major problem in the eighteenth century was to discover a way to measure longitude while on a ship, which is well documented in Dava Sobel's popular book, Longitude. The eventual solution was a clock that kept accurate time on shipboard. However it took the experts of the day several decades to acknowledge this solution, and their treatment of the clockmaker who came up with this novel approach was nothing short of shameful. He wasn't a scientist in their sense of the word and his ideas did not conform to the dominant science of the day, namely astronomy. Most innovators in history, and in organisations today, suffer from the same neglect.

Asking a group of research scientists or managers to read that Sobel's book prior to an innovation workshop allows a metaphorical question to be asked: "Give me an example of how you have treated your staff in the way that the scientists treated that clockmaker. " This is a question that can be answered because the metaphor creates a safe space in which the question can be addressed. Asking the same group for examples of where they had ignored the radical thinking of organisational mavericks would not achieve the same result.   This use of metaphor is a powerful way of breaking up scripts.   Films, children's books common to the culture of day, cultural icons such as Shakespeare or Cervantes all provide source material that can be used to generate discussions. By having a conversation in a metaphorical setting, much of the pain of abandoning cherished beliefs or unarticulated prejudice can be more easily handled. Pattern disruption techniques are of particular use when we have two cultures merging, or an old culture that needs to, but is resisting change. This includes, but is not limited to merger and acquisition work.

Storing and revealing patterns – Narrative Databases

The stories that people tell are a wonderful source of material for understanding culture and discovering examples of knowledge and learning.   Storytelling originated in the need to recreate the circumstances of knowledge use, thus creating an early knowledge asset register and map. Today, any member of staff coming off a project can easily record in an hour, or even ten minutes, what it might otherwise take three weeks to get around to spending half a day writing up (if it is ever done). Both the written record, which is reflective, and the spoken record, which is immediate, can provide different sources of value.   However most current KM practice focuses on written material only.   This is time consuming and often results in lost experiential knowledge. Narrative databases allow us not only to capture large volumes of oral material at little cost, but also critically allow us to index those records on a single screen to give current and future staff access to "the wisdom of the elders".

Narrative databases work on the basis of serendipitous encounter. Given a choice between drawing down best practice from an intellectual capital management system and hearing the stories of eight or nine people with relevant experience, the natural choice is the stories. Narrative databases work in the same way by allowing abstract searches by archetypes, themes, intention, emotional level and perspective in such a way that multiple stories are encountered from which the listener can synthesis their own meaning.   The more traditional Intellectual Capital Management system still has value, but linked to a narrative database is far more effective.   The additional value of narrative is that it can create a supporting "worse cases system" in which encountering stories of failure are more likely to foster success in the future.

For organisations undergoing downsizing, or experiencing high levels of turnover, oral history databases provide a radical, comparatively cheap, quick and effective solution to creating knowledge and learning repositories. Oral history databases also provide a means by which we can look at an issue from many perspectives. Their use in advanced decision support systems, as an alternative to scenario planning, is a current subject of research within the Cynefin Centre.

Conclusion

Narrative is both a science and an art, and to neglect one at the expense of the other is not only foolish it is also dangerous. In playing with people's stories you are playing with their souls and that requires a high level of responsibility. A Seanachie, the Irish word that means far more than "Storyteller" will spend many years as an apprentice; organisational work on story and narrative requires a similar level of personal commitment. The danger is that in attempting to enter the field, a practitioner will either trivialise it (any one can tell a story) or assume a false commonality with the entertainment and journalism. Narrative, at its best, is a simple way to convey complex ideas and to create an understanding of culture and learning within communities. It will not do to confuse something that is simple but which requires profound understanding with something that it just easy to do and provides a quick hit. Storytelling is simple but not simplistic, an art not a science, but above all a profoundly human technique that rejects the mechanical and authoritarian practice of too many management scientists and consultants.