Learning from the Capture and Exploration of Stories:

An Activity and Lessons Learned

ABSTRACT

Stories can be an effective management tool, as they are simple, timeless, an excellent means of training, memorable, and can be fun. Stories have been presented as a method for teaching about and exploring various management topics (cf. Peterson, et al. 2016. “Storytime for Business Students”). This session is focused on having participants capture and interpret stories about the experiences of others (in various circumstances and settings). An exploration of the strengths and limitations of this approach will be conducted as we develop and examine our own stories and discover how to use them in our classes.

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is part of a rich tradition of human interaction. Stories were used in ancient, pre-literate times to communicate history, impart knowledge, to share and shape values and culture, and to entertain (Tate, 2012). Boyd (2009) has noted that stories have been a part of oral and written tradition from Homer, to Dr. Seuss (Comer & Holbrook, 2005), and beyond.

An often significant part of management (and leadership) consists of the attempt to guide and direct the development of individuals, often without their direct recognition of that effort (Billsberry & Gilbert, 2008; Stevenson, 2016; Verbos, Kennedy, & Gladstone, 2011). But an understanding of what people are thinking and talking about can be important. Armstrong (1992) has noted that stories can be effective tools, as they are simple, timeless, an excellent means of training, empowering, memorable, and can be fun. Further, stories are often much richer and more engaging than communication based primarily on numbers and analytics (Denning, 2004). A story (both real and fictional) “increases the range of our vicarious experience and behavioral options” (Boyd, 2009, p. 192).

The capture and sharing of stories has become increasingly popular in recent years. For example, StoryCorps (www.storycorps.org), a non-profit organization whose mission is to collect stories of people in all walks of life from around the U.S., has permanent booths in New York’s Grand Central Station, San Francisco, Chicago, Atlanta, plus two mobile booths. Over 400,000 stories have been collected on personal topics and on focused themes, with several anthologies being produced and published. (Look for works by StoryCorps founder David Isay.) Allison and Gediman (2007) have developed and published a well-received collection of stories (cf. *This I Believe*) leading to several additional books.

Beyond the popular reading, stories are also being used for design and analysis. Mueller and Quednau (2016) report on how architecture and urban design projects evolve through narrative. Tim Dust, a partner at the design firm IDEO, has been discussing Design Dialogues of “well-crafted personal exchanges” (p. 46, *FastCompany*, Issue 222, Feb 2018) consisting of stories to aid in design to solve problems (Anzilotti, 2017). This fits within the concept of ‘narrative design,’ or design through storytelling.

One challenge is working in environments that tend to be rational and engineering-focused in design and approach. People perceive and interact with their environments in different ways, and stories provide an approach to recognize and understand those different types of interactions at a more personal, individual level. Capturing, evaluating, and understanding stories is part of the approach being used to design better organizations and more usable systems.

Specifically, stories have a narrative emphasis, focusing on experiences and implicit knowledge (of a technology, a situation, an event, etc.) that can be difficult to disclose or articulate. They can be used to be used to share knowledge or experiences that often cannot be easily conveyed through facts alone or to establish a shared meaning or understanding in an organization. Stories can create impressions, or evoke a vision. Stories can be sued to share and voice emotions.

Boyd (2009) has noted that “stories help train us to explore possibility as well as actuality, effortlessly and even playfully, and that capacity makes all the difference (p. 188). This session is focused on how to help our students capture, analyze, and use the stories obtained from others.

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

In many, and perhaps most, situations, the stories used for inquiry come from already-developed resources (e.g., case studies, news articles, etc.) and are mined for and applied to a topic or concept of current emphasis or inquiry. In this activity, participants will be asked to develop their own story for a particular management topic. (The topic will be provided at the session.) This is to simulate the story interrogation process students use when acquiring stories from other individuals. In addition to generating stories, time will be spent exploring the difficulty students often have in eliciting stories from others and exploring ways to assist with and guide this process. Opening and follow-up questions are provided (see Appendix A), and new questions will be developed and shared.

Details on the current activity and assignment structure (see Appendix B) being used will be provided.

Once stories have been generated and collected, we will explore how to apply and use the stories for diagnosis and learning, including how to translate this activity to a student-centered environment.

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**APPENDIX A – Opening Guidance and Questions**

* Capture the story … if possible, capture the story in detail, word-for-word
* Provide (at least a brief) description of the Context (of the story, and even where/when the story is captured).
* Be sure to capture and record follow-up questions as they occur.
* Note whether this is a work-related story, or something that is more personal.
* Be sure to observe and note the body language (including gestures, etc.) as the story is being told. Try to capture/describe these.
* Story prompts (i.e., initial questions) and follow-up questions might be :
* Tell me a story of your first experience(s) with (the topic under consideration)
* Tell me about your best experience with \_\_\_\_\_
* Tell me about your worst experience with \_\_\_\_\_
* Tell me about your most memorable experience with \_\_\_\_\_ (This may overlap w/ the questions immediately above.)
* What are stories you have heard (or been told) about experiences with or use of \_\_\_\_\_?
* When did this occur?
* Why do you think you remember this story?
* What, if anything, did you (i.e., the storyteller, or his /her audience) learn?

**APPENDIX B – Interview-Results Template**

Person / Position Description (name is not required) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

General (geographic) location \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Business / Industry / Activity \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Gender M F

Age <15 15-17 18-21 22-24 25-34 35-44 45-54 55-64 65-74 75+

The body of the story goes here …

The body of story, including questions and follow-up questions, can be single-spaced. Double space between questions (and try to clearly mark each question) and answers. Work to ask questions that require more than a yes/no answer or a single-sentence answer. Those types of questions may be a start, but they will not be sufficient.

[Be sure to include the questions that were asked and the answers that were given. Both pieces of information are important to understand what you capture and record/transcribe. Include follow-up questions and their answers.]