

LINKING STORIES WITH ON-LINE THREADED DISCUSSIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING IN MANAGEMENT CURRICULUM

Thomas G. Drape
United States Air Force Academy
Thomas.Drape@usafa.edu

David A. Levy
United States Air Force Academy
David.Levy@usafa.edu

Fred R. Blass
Florida State University
RBlass@cob.fsu.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses two school's integrated attempt at increasing student learning, critical thinking, and participation through the use of on-line threaded discussion stories in the classroom for management courses. Every week the students were required to read a story posted by the instructors on an on-line site and post a comment to the story itself or to a comment by another student from either of the two universities. The stories varied depending on the course material and yielded some powerful comments by the students. This paper highlights some of the sample stories and student comments. In addition, it identifies and explains the outcome for using storytelling through on-line threaded discussions in the classroom and the implication for the future.

INTRODUCTION

Investigating tools to increase critical thinking and reflection on course material in and out of the classroom, two schools integrated the use of stories (Swap, Leonard, Shields & Abrams, 2001) throughout the semester in a Power and Influence management class. One school is a small Western undergraduate school and the other a large Southeastern university. The stories were posted on an external website and new stories were posted every week for reflection and discussion by the students at both universities. Past studies have focused on the use of threaded discussions as useful tools to increase collaborative learning environments and critical thinking (Cox & Cox, 2008; Jeong, 2003). The purpose for this paper is to offer the specific approach of using stories with reflective questions in an on-line discussion format as a useful tool for other courses to increase critical thinking, student learning and participation.

COURSE OVERVIEW

The content and overarching goals for the Power and Influence course at both universities were very similar. The course deals with power, its creation and its use as is epitomized by two quotes found on the course web page:

Man's flight through life is sustained by the power of his knowledge

Austin Dusty Miller.

Man's flight through life is sustained by the knowledge of his power

Our ancillary view.

The overall theme of the course revolves around the concepts of sensemaking and ambiguity as it applies to empowering student thinking (Weick, 1991). Rather than helping students learn how to "cope" with ambiguity, students come to realize through a discussion-based format that it is in the space of ambiguity where they can thrive because of loosely defined expectations. For example, rather than a typical discussion on organizational culture that describes various symbols and norms, students are shown that culture is something that they co-create with other organizational members.

Another theme of the course involves a focus on the transition from life as a college student to that of a professional in the workforce. We tell our students that we will act as their boss, and that they should act as a subordinate. Looking at the classroom experience through the lens of a supervisor/subordinate relationship yields many opportunities for classroom discussions. For example, when students give us strong nonverbal signals showing their disinterest with a particular topic, we ask them how this behavior would play out upon graduation in their careers.

One of the challenges for the course is transferring the difficult tacit knowledge of knowing how to use power and influence to affect change within organizations. The observation

by Michael Polanyi (1966) that ‘we can know more than we can tell’ was used to distinguish between two types of knowledge: explicit and tacit. Explicit knowledge usually refers to a definable portion of codified knowledge in language and numbers such as hard data, codified procedures or manuals and transferred through written or verbal communication. On the other hand, tacit knowledge refers to knowledge associated with personal experience that is not easily communicable or visible and is sometimes only revealed through its application. Many times explicit knowledge is referred to as ‘knowing what’, where tacit knowledge is referred to as ‘knowing how’.

In describing the different approaches for the transfer of tacit and explicit knowledge, Nonaka (1995) argues that the most difficult knowledge to transfer is tacit because there needs to be a common context to transfer the knowledge. In an effort to transfer “know how” of power and influence within organizations, effort is put into the lessons to put them into context as a frame of reference for the students. As an example, when we discuss the theatrical elements of organizational life (Bolman and Deal, 2003), we have students meet in a conference room and have a meeting to discuss issues that have been going on in the classroom throughout the semester. In effect, we stage a theatrical event to put it into context and discuss the meeting during the second half of the class.

In addition to trying to provide this context during class, the instructors also developed stories for students to read and reflect on using an on-line threaded discussion format. As highlighted in the literature, stories are an extremely powerful means to provide a common context and to transfer knowledge rich in tacit dimensions (Swap, Leonard, Shields & Abrams, 2001). The stories provided the means for students to share their comments and experiences in relation to the story and others to learn from these experiences, all while outside of the class. As highlighted in the literature, stories are an extremely powerful means to provide a common context and to transfer knowledge rich in tacit dimensions (Swap, Leonard, Shields & Abrams, 2001).

Along with the challenge of transferring tacit knowledge, the course aims to develop critical thinking in the students at Bateson’s (2000) levels two and three of learning. As an upper level course and, in some cases, a capstone, this course aims to

go beyond level 1 learning where models such as those from accounting, finance, and human resources are applied in a discipline-specific context. Instead, through the stories posted in the on-line threaded discussion, students are encouraged to apply models outside of its normal context (level two) and to create new models (level 3).

STORY USAGE AND INTEGRATION INTO CLASS

Every week a set of two to three stories excerpted from *The 52nd Floor: Thinking Deeply About Leadership* (Levy, Parco, & Blass, In-press) were posted to the external website for the students at both universities to read and post a comment. The requirement was for each student to choose to comment on at least one of the stories, although several students posted comments on all of the stories. Highlighted in the next section is a sample of the stories, but overall they ranged from three sentences to a full page. In addition to the stories, there were also several leading reflection questions to generate thought and discussion by the students and to focus their efforts. In addition, the students were informed the evaluation of their posted comments not only depended on their participation, but also on integrating course content into their analysis.

In order to promote candidness, all students at both universities were required to choose an alias for their postings. All students chose an alias in their first couple lessons of the semester and sent it only to their instructor. The anonymous nature of the alias was very powerful. With an alias such as “maverick” and “green chile chico”, it added a lighter side to the posted comments, but also generated a curiosity by the students on the background of the person as far as school, gender and qualifications.

In order to integrate the stories and comments into the classroom, all the instructors highlighted student comments as a review mechanism for the material and to generate discussion to lead into the next topic. In addition, approximately every third week, a class lesson was devoted for a more profound discussion on the stories from the previous week for further reflection and critical thinking by the students. As a final requirement, the

SAMPLE#1 : GROUNDHOG DAY

It happens every February:

The entire division sat around the large conference room table for the end of the year meeting. Each department got up and made a presentation to the group on how well his or her program fared that year. Strengths, weaknesses and suggested changes for the following year were presented, reviewed, discussed and debated. The room came alive again and again as people debated the potential outcomes of yet to be approved changes to programs. Notes were taken, assumptions were made, and nods were given. The division vice-president was pleased, almost overwhelmed, with the level of activity and concern her team had for the success of her department. At the end of the meeting, everyone was exhausted, yet energized. Another successful year completed and a new one anticipated.

New employees to the division are usually the most eager to get involved in the discussion. They have fresh eyes and know that their input is welcome. It’s also a chance for them to show everyone across the departments how bright and talented they are. Occasionally, after an end of the year review meeting, a new employee gets an idea about improving the overall effectiveness of the entire meeting.

It’s always the same idea. The idea is to hold the meeting two weeks later. By delaying the meeting by just three weeks, all of the annual financial statements would be available to help evaluate the programs. After all, it is good to have hard data to review and compare the veracity of the claims made by the program managers. Everyone agrees that it is a good idea.

The following year, the meeting is held on the exact same date.

students turned in a final two-page paper at the end of the semester highlighting what they learned from the stories. The assignment was kept somewhat open-ended to allow for different student reactions and some of these student reactions are shared in a later section.

SAMPLE ON-LINE STORIES AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Many students believe that a meeting is a waste of time unless it produces tangible results. This story helps students see that other factors might be important as well. See Sample #1.

Reflections:

- *Why doesn't the meeting time changed? (Hint: Does anyone want to be exposed by negative information in front of one's' peers, coworkers and bosses?)*
- *How do powerful people in your organization propose changes?*
- *By not waiting for meaningful data, how difficult would it be to not make agreed upon changes to programs when the data doesn't support those changes?*
- *What purpose does a meeting have if nothing "meaningful" is accomplished?*
- *What is actually accomplished in such meetings?*
- *How much of meetings you either hold or attend solidify the status quo rather than make the organization more effective?*
- *What are the props used in such meetings?*

During our discussion of impression management, students often bring up the following story. See Sample #2

Reflections:

- *How important are first impressions to you?*
- *How long does it take for someone to recover from a negative first impression?*
- *What do you think of the president's decision-making ability?*
- *Was the president wrong to base his decision on first impressions?*
- *How long does it take you to pass judgment on people?*

Since most of our students will soon find themselves in entry level positions, we discuss power without authority quite a bit in our courses. This story provides one approach to dealing with a lack of formal power in an organization. See Sample #3

Reflections:

- *Where does power come from?*
- *What kind of power do you have in your organization?*
- *Who are you dependent upon in your organization?*
- *Who depends upon you?*
- *What does dependency have to do with power?*
- *How do people "create" dependencies in organizations?*
- *To what extent does emotion affect someone's power?*
- *What could you do to gain more power and influence in your organization?*

STUDENT REACTIONS

As mentioned earlier, the students turned in a final two-page paper at the end of the semester highlighting lessons learned from the stories. The assignment was kept somewhat open-ended to allow for different student reactions and these reactions were as varied as the different stories.

We include several of the student's reactions in order to get a feel for the level of learning and critical thinking by the students. One student made a comment by the use of the stories as a whole:

SAMPLE #2: THE BLACK SUIT

The president of the large investment firm wasn't looking forward to the next interview. He'd conducted seven interviews in the last three days and was looking forward to making an offer and being done with the process. At least this would be the last interview. The firm was fortunate to be in a position to attract exceptional talent. It was important for the president to find the right person, but truth be told, all but one of the candidates would have been a great choice. It's pretty hard to pick the best of the best when they're all the best.

But some people just know how to present themselves well. It's not just a matter of spending a lot of money on designer clothing, it's about making a presentation, the parsley that accompanies a steak is important. Maurice knew how to present himself. He walked into the president's office wearing an immaculate black suit that just grabbed your attention. It was perfect. He had an overcoat (it was raining outside) draped over one arm and a Wall Street Journal under the other. He shook the president's hand and was asked to take a seat.

Maurice carefully rested his overcoat on one of the two empty seats, placed the Wall Street Journal on top of the coat then sat down. The president seriously considered giving him a job offer right then and there. His presentation was that good. For no other reason than not wanting to appear as if he wasn't properly scrutinizing the candidates, the president continued with the interview. It was just a formality. Maurice would be receiving a job offer that evening. Maurice took the job and eventually started his own investment firm. If you want to work for Maurice, you better have a good interview.

SAMPLE#3: DUNGEON MASTER

It was an amazing sight to see. Tony, the short-tempered, 240 pound ex-college football player, complete with a shaved head and a tattoo on his forearm was getting emotional as he told his story to the seminar group. He was a low-level manager in a large manufacturing plant and was having problems with his computer. The computer guys were swamped as their company was migrating over to a new server, but he needed help. In the past, he was always forced to drop off his laptop at the help desk and would get a call when it was fixed, often after a day or two. Once, desperately not wanting to wait two days to reinstall a program that was malfunctioning, he raised his voice and tried to intimidate the overweight and under-motivated support technician. A lot of good that did. That turned out to be a three-day job. It turned out they had to reformat his hard drive. Twice. Yeah, right. This time, Tony wasn't about to make the same mistake.

Being reflective man, Tony came up with a plan. In his own words, he decided "to just suck it up." And that is exactly what he did. He walked into the tech support office with hunched over shoulders and tried to be as unimposing as humanly possible for his enormous physique. He filled out the work order form and handed it to the guy.

"I told him that it would be great to get the computer back as soon as I could. I then told him that I was on break and was heading for the coffee shop. I asked him what he liked with his coffee. I brought him back a mocha and a couple of donuts. My computer was ready for pick-up an hour later."

The group members were smiling and nodding as Tony finished his story. But Tony apparently wasn't finished. He was getting a bit red in the face when he said, "You know, doing this was totally out of character for me. All I really wanted to do was reach over the counter and smash his face in, but he had more power than I did in that situation."

"I see that I can now make sense much differently. I am practicing retroactive sensemaking by taking these blogs and using what I now know to make sense of them."

Several of the students commented on the topics of the stories and the lessons learned from the course material:

"This idea is reminiscent of the concept of organizations as theaters ... our public persona could be taken as a prop in society's play. We want to project a certain image to people and we make choices concerning our behavior, speech, image, etc. that will make people see the persona that we want them to see."

"There are some that still follow these roles simply for the reason that they saw people ahead of them playing the part and it worked for them ... this isn't to say that no one is writing their own script, but these roles are easy to follow because we have seen past classes acting them out."

"Dependency is a large part of power. If you are dependent on someone, they have power over you and you need to word and work in such a way that you acknowledge your dependency and work to still get things done in your favor."

One student commented on the use of the on-line discussions in gaining confidence to share their ideas during class:

"I would sit in class and listen to all the discussions about the topics but was nervous to share my own thoughts. I was afraid I'd look stupid. After posting my comments to several stories, I realized that my ideas were quite good, so I started speaking out more in class. This is most I have ever participated in a class, and I credit the on-line discussions."

OUTCOMES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

As highlighted in the previous section, the overall student reactions were very positive and the on-line stories were a powerful tool in many different ways. By using the on-line threaded discussion, the students were involved with the course material outside of the class in a more thoughtful manner than just studying course material. The comments by the students displayed a high level of reflection and critical thinking applying models to a new or different context and at times creating new models for different experiences. The on-line threaded discussions were successful in moving many of the students up on Bateson's levels of learning and creating deeper reflection outside of the normal class period.

The on-line discussions also allowed for different learning and participatory styles to engage in a lower-threat environment. The anonymous nature of the individuals allowed some of the more quiet students in a discussion-based class the ability to participate away from the classroom in more comfortable surroundings. As instructors, it was gratifying to read some of the in-depth and well thought-out comments by students less vocal during class to reward them for their participation and to learn more about them.

Our goal was to have more than one university participate in order to create a larger network of students, so we chose an external site to host the on-line threaded discussions. We found this specific decision was beneficial because it allowed for two universities to participate and the opportunity for more diverse and divergent views. However, with the larger number of participants, we also faced the daunting task of managing a larger number of respondents. At times, it was hard to analyze all the comments and keep a threaded discussion environment.

For the future, we will select a more robust external host site with the ability to separate comments by different group identifiers. This will allow the opportunity to personalize the site more for specific classes at different times during the

semester. The instructor can highlight a specific comment from somebody within the section more easily.

In addition, we will continue to work on the reflective questions at the end of each of the stories to encourage conflicting viewpoints. Some of the best discussions and evidence of critical thinking with the stories were based on postings to different student's comments where one student took an alternative position. Findings show interactions involving these conflicting viewpoints promote greater discussion and critical thinking (Jeong, 2003). So for the future, we will continue to make these leading questions more two-sided in order to create an even-better threaded discussion environment.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We found this approach to be beneficial in several ways. First, the students felt as though they were a part of something bigger than just their classroom. The connectedness across sections and across universities seemed to make the topics seem larger and more relevant to the students. Second, the students were appreciative of the opportunity to voice their opinions without having to satisfy a specific instructional rubric. In other words, they could be completely creative and free-wheeling with their posts and not have to worry about "getting the right answer." Finally, the "shy" students were perhaps most appreciative of the technique. A common comment heard was that the on-line discussions allowed them to voice ideas that they were afraid to share during class. An unanticipated benefit of this was that several of the "shy" students testified that the on-line discussions actually gave them the confidence to become more active in the in-class discussions. Overall, this approach greatly enhanced our classroom learning experience, and while we still have improvements to make on the logistics of managing such an approach, the benefits are clearly worth the effort.

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