Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 22, 1995

ORGANIZATIONAL STORYTELLING: TELLING TALES IN THE BUSINESS CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling is a powerful tool that evokes visual images and heightened emotions. Business leaders who can tell a good story have tremendous impact. Teaching business students how to tell stories helps prepare them for future success. The paper presents a model and examples of organizational storytelling, discusses classroom use of stories, and outlines ways to overcome obstacles to using storytelling as a pedagogical technique.

INTRODUCTION

"Without air, our cells die.
Without stories, our selves die."
Neil Postman

When Ray Kroc was running McDonald's from its Oakbrook, Illinois headquarters, he often drove by Chicago area McDonald's restaurants. Usually he asked his driver to stop so he could check things out. One sunny July afternoon, they were about to pass a McDonald's; Kroc told the driver, "We need to stop at this one. "As they pulled into a parking space, he noticed that the flowering bushes were littered with shake cups, colorful Happy Meal boxes, messy napkins and other trash. Inside, Kroc asked for the manager. Only the assistant manager was there, so Kroc called the manager and waited for the anxious man to rush in after a speedy drive from his nearby home. "What can I do for you, sir?" the manager asked Kroc. Kroc led him to the parking lot, "Look. We don 't want trash around our sites. "So all three--driver, manager, and Ray Kroc--worked together to pick the trash out of the bushes. You'd better believe there was never again any trash in the parking lot of that location!

What images and feelings does this story evoke for you? Can you picture the manager when he heard Kroc's voice on his phone? Can you see them cleaning up the bushes together? Have you been to a McDonald's and been appalled when there was a mess around the trashcans or in the bathrooms? What have you learned from this story about your expectations of a McDonald's? About Kroc's management style? Could you retell the story to a friend and include the essential points?

Your answer to these questions helps illustrate the power of storytelling. The listener/reader is pulled into the scene and feels the emotions the characters feel. He or she is drawn back to a similar experience or setting that has personal meaning. Because a story evokes both visual image and emotion, it is likely to be remembered. Bell (1992) says, "A good story can touch something familiar in each of us and, yet, show us something new about out lives, our world, and ourselves" (p.53).

As business faculty we have harnessed the power of storytelling in our classrooms. In our session, we explain our objectives in teaching via storytelling, the actual classroom process, hints for successful use, possible obstacles and means for overcoming them. We also share a model of a "good story" and illustrate our conclusions with actual organizational stories gathered and told by our students. Storytelling has particular value in business classrooms as an integrative tool; a good story helps students understand the link between classroom theory and practical business outcomes.

Using Stories in the Business Classroom

While we have used stories to enhance learning in management, organizational behavior, organization development, and human resource management classes, the techniques detailed in this article are applicable in most types of classes from elementary school through graduate school. Our business school colleagues in marketing, strategy, accounting, finance and public administration are using stories to illustrate points and some have assigned students to gather and share stories from professionals and managers.

The limited research on storytelling as an educational medium has resulted in several conclusions (Zemke, 1990).

- A story told aloud, compared with the same story presented as a television program, resulted in better retention of vocabulary and concepts. The TV version showed superior results only in recall of specific story lines.

- Stories told with words of high visual imagery stimulate better long-term retention of content than do repetition or rate and drill.

- Students instructed to try to visualize the action and content of a story were better able to remember its key ideas and better able to tell it to others accurately than were students who were instructed to memorize sentences from the story.

- Humorous stories spurred recall of the content of both live lectures and video dramatizations. Specifically, when a key teaching point was followed by a related joke or humorous anecdote, retention and understanding were enhanced.

- When children were taught principles through storytelling rather than straight exposition, they were more creative in applying them.

- Adults learned a foreign language more quickly when they were taught through folk stories. The most effective stories were simple and direct, used colorful imagery and natural dialogue, and contained some redundant story elements. (p. 48)

WHAT IS AN ORGANIZATIONAL STORY?

The Ray Kroc anecdote is one good example of an organizational story. Another story, a classic about IBM's legendary chairman, Thomas Watson, Jr., follows:

At IBM, a young woman was hired to ensure that only authorized people were allowed to enter a sensitive area of the plant. With a group of men, Watson approached the area where the guard was stationed, but he wasn't wearing the proper badge for admission. Even though the guard recognized Watson, she refused him entry to the area because he lacked the appropriate identification.

The men with Watson were shocked. Someone challenged the guard's decision, but Watson quieted the group and patiently waited while the correct identification was obtained.

The story ends happily, with a positive moral. It says that IBM executives play by the same rules as other employees. (Pike, 1992, p.12)

The Power of Stories: Why Use Stories in Teaching

As mentioned earlier, stories prove to be persuasive and convincing. Trainers use stories to entertain, inspire and instruct (Bell, 1992). New employees "learn the ropes" via stories (Ritti, 1 994). Stories serve a variety of purposes: they entertain, evoke emotion, trigger visual memories and strengthen recall of the points illustrated.

Think about fairy tales--you can retell them without referring to any book or outline. And your family stories--for example, the time you and your cousins got caught eating the stolen custards in the pine tree-are alive in your mind, even when they happened to others in different generations.

Think of the learning advantage for students if they had vivid recall of the important concepts we emphasize in class. By harnessing the power of storytelling, this retained learning is more likely. Additionally, using stories in a class makes learning more meaningful and even fun for both students and instructor. Isn't that our goal for education--to capture the student's imagination and interest so that intrinsic motivation and the basic need for learning will take over.

Model of a Story

Most of us have developed our own framework or model for a story unconsciously, and these models vary little from person to person or culture to culture. When you hear a good story, its teller probably is stepping on the same stones as storytellers of old. If one analyzes several classic fairy tales and folktales, the framework becomes obvious. Parents tell bedtime stories instinctively weaving tales through a set of classic steps. These same steps provide a model, or framework, for students to use when gathering, and subsequently telling, organizational stories. Boje (1991) defines an organizational story as "a tale about a person caught in one situation unfolding from start to climax to resolution." The five sequential components, or steps, in a good story are: 1) setting, 2) one build-up ("trouble's coming"). 3) crisis or climax, 4) learning, and 5) new behavior or awareness. Essentially, the final steps ask and answer "What did you learn?" and "How did you change?" The traditional tale of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" provides one illustration of the steps of the model.

Setting: Time, place, players, context.

In describing the setting, a storyteller paints a picture the listener can step into. In "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," for example, the setting is the bears' empty house where Goldilocks arrives hungry and

tired. "She knocked on the door. No answer. She pushed the door open. No one inside. But the table was set for breakfast, with three chairs, three bowls of porridge..." is a descriptive paragraph from the Little Library version of "Goldilocks." Descriptive, active, precise words help transport the listener into the scene, ready for the action to begin.

Build-up: a sequence of events that warns the listener "trouble's coming."

For example, as we hear about Goldilocks trying out the different chairs and finding Baby Bear's perfect and testing the temperature of the porridge and eating Baby's bowlful, our minds already jump forward to the time when she'll be found out or caught red-handed (the "trouble").

Crisis: the climax or high point of the story.

This is the key event, which the plot lead up to--something happens! It may be the expected, but often it is a surprise if the story takes a twist or turn. Usually a new element is introduced into the action. For example, the bears come home and discover the results of Goldilocks' uninvited visit (porridge eaten, chair broken) and then they discover her. In a movie or radio play, this is when the music accelerates and dramatically finishes in a climax.

Learning: what the central character learned.

In this part of the story, we infer or explicitly share what the hero/heroine has learned from the episode. In the Goldilocks story, she learned two lessons that parents often wish to reinforce: don't touch things that aren't yours and don't go into strangers' houses.

How the World Changed: the central character's new behaviors and/or awareness as a result of the action, the moral of the story.

In this final step, the focus is on retained learning. Goldilocks' behavior is likely to change--she may be less adventuresome and be more cautious in her explorations, or, because of her ability to escape, she may crave and pursue it again. This familiar tale of Goldilocks provides a clear example of the five-storytelling steps.

The same model applies to student storytelling. It allows them to structure stories using similar frameworks with different content. Figure 1 is a student story illustrating the steps of the model.

FIGURE 1
THE REGISTRAR'S OFFICE

STEP 1 - Setting

A chaotic, just-before-closing scene at a university Registrar's Office on Friday during Registration. Long lines, harried staff. Sue finally gets to the head of the line...

STEP 2 - Build-up

Office staff attended customer service training and are trying to "delight the customer." The older woman greets Sue, "How can I help you?" Sue: "I have to get a transcript to give a company that wants to hire me." Employee, "Just fill out this form (handing Sue a Transcript Request Form), give me $2.00, and we'll mail if to you in 4 weeks." Sue: "Oh, no! I have to have it for a meeting on Tuesday."

Employee: "I'll see what I can do." She then goes off for several minutes and returns with an official copy of Sue's transcript. "I had to bend the rules to give this to you--good luck on the job interview." Sue, greatly relieved, departs with transcript in hand and the employee, pleased with her excellent customer service, tells several colleagues, and closes up for the day.

STEP 3 - Crisis/Climax

On Monday, the employee still feels pleased that she was able to put her customer service training into practice so, when she is called into her boss's office, she expects a commendation. However, the boss has a frown--"Why did you give that student a transcript on Friday? You know our procedure and you didn't follow it." The employee was taken aback, "But, but… .we are supposed to put the customer first." Boss: "You will receive demerit for not following procedure."

STEP 4 - Learning

Hidden messages tell the truth about rewards. The "old" behavior is rewarded.

STEP 5 - How World Changed

The employee never believed messages about change or doing things a new way but stuck to the traditional responses.

With this framework in mind from reading and the

instructors' modeling, a student is more comfortable doing both story gathering and telling. To develop storytelling skills, students must attend to stories they read, be aware of the model and its steps, and know the attributes of a good story.

Characteristics of a Good Story

What are the characteristics of stories that have powerful impact and are remembered? The four key characteristics are covered in detail by Wilkins (1984) and summarized by Zemke (1990). Of course, the storytelling literature provides a variety of models and components, but the Wilkins-Zemke approach works well in the business classroom. First, the organizational stories must be concrete and tell about real people, describe real events and actions, be set in a time and place which the listener can recognize and with which he can identify, and must be connected to the organization's philosophy and/or culture.

Second, stories must also be common knowledge in the organization or unit. To be effective in conveying culture, people must not only know the story, but know that others know it as well and follow its guidance.

Third, the story must be believed by the listeners. To have impact and make its point, a story must be believed to be true of the organization. The powerful organizational story describes a social contract, how things are done or not done in the organization. Stories allow the listener to learn about organization norms, rewards, and punishments without trial-and-error experience. Joanne Martin et al. (1983) claim that a "good" story must also be unique and demonstrate that the institution is unlike any other. Objectively, this is rarely true, but stories have the most power when organizational members feel their experience is unique.

To tell a story well, students need practice. Detailed guidelines on how to tell a story are beyond the scope of this article; however, Boje's (1991) article in the Journal of Management Education provides a skill focus for faculty beginning to use storytelling.
It provides exercises that are useful for teaching and performing storytelling.

Student Outcomes

Stories can be used to illustrate almost any key concept in the business classroom. Boje (1991) asserts, "the story's plot affords hooks on which to hang course content." (p.280) Stories can be about customer service, rewards, motivation, culture, norms, stereotyping, leadership, bureaucracy, power, diagnosis, teamwork, decision-making, job (dis)satisfaction, etc. Stories may be simple or complex and comprehensive. The registrar's office story (Figure 1) provides insight into interpersonal relationships, customer service, supervision, norms, rewards and culture.

When stories become a regular part of class discussions, students begin to think more integratively. They can't divorce motivation (learned in Chapter 3, for example) from culture (Chapter 9). The concepts are integrally related in "real life" as conveyed by stories. Students also learn to question and probe:
What did his desk look like? How did Mary act when he criticized her? Why didn't she talk back? By expanding their stories and helping others provide complete versions, students better understand interdependence and complexity of the workplace and workers.

How to Get Students Started in Storytelling

1. Listen and try yourself:

Go to storytelling performances, conferences, ask you aunt to tell a story, tell a story to a colleague. Ask people to help you clarify by using "who, what, when, where, why and how" questions.

2. Tell stories to the students:

Find stories in the press, books, novels, personal experience (Neuhauser's book Corporate Legends and Lore, has excellent examples). First read a story to build your comfort level, then tell a story that you've read. You may find telling you own story easier after practicing telling others' stories.

3. Let students tell personal stories in pairs:

Have them create stories from times when they were successful as a kid, about surprises they had, about interesting times and situations with relatives, about their pets, their first jobs, etc. Be sure to role model a few of you own stories in front of the class, so they can see the development, crisis, learning.

4. Field work:

Send students our to gather stories on or off campus, from family business members, from

someone in a career in which they are interested, and from managers (undergraduates could collect from MBA students).

5. Encourage journals: assign journal entries on a weekly basis telling a personal story that illustrates a concept from the assigned reading.

6. Postmodern focus: have students find different perspectives on the same story. They can retell the Registrar's story from at least four perspectives--the student, the employee, her co-workers, and the boss.

7. Practice, practice, practice.

Obstacles and Overcoming Them

Obstacles to employing storytelling in classes occur in four areas: in the students, in the classroom, in the instructor, and in ethical dimensions.

- **Students**

We have found resistance from shy students ("I can't possibly stand up in front of the class."), grade happy students who fear they may not do their traditional "A" work in this new medium ("Why can't I do a different assignment; I could do an extra case analysis."), insecure, hesitant students ("I don't think I can do this; I'm not good at storytelling."), lazy students ("How can I find time to go get stories?" "This assignment isn't fair--no one else's class requires it!"), and students who feel they have no contacts ("where can I find someone who will spend time talking to me?")

These resistances tend to disappear as the students work in small story groups sharing their own and others' stories. They get excited, feel more confident, and try out their skills in a supportive environment. The instructor can work individually with students who need links to managers or can brainstorm how to build networks with the class. Only the lazy student continues to be a problem, but some do get "turned on" and enjoy the storytelling.

- **Classroom**

Classroom obstacles include the extra time needed to tell stories (good stories can range from 2-1 5 minutes), the preparation and on-the-spot response needed to tie each student's story to course content, and, if stories are written assignments, the time needed to coach students in writing, and reading and evaluating the stories. These obstacles are easily overcome with planning, comfort level with course content, and a commitment to the value of storytelling. It is difficult for an instructor to drop material from class sessions, but watching the student level of conceptual understanding grow with stories confirms the decision to do less with higher quality. Students can be given time limits or ranges, and the role modeling from instructor also shows them expected story length. The storyteller and the class members join with (or substitute for) faculty integration and analysis, thereby creating an empowered and motivated class. After seeing several examples of well-written stories and critiquing each other's, students gain expertise and comfort. Many actually prefer writing stories because they seem "more real" and less formal than other types of written assignments (e.g., term papers, case analyses).

- **Instructors**

Teachers may have performance anxiety. No one wants to look silly or stupid in front of a group, especially a class of students. The suggestions in item number one should help. Exposure and practice in a non-threatening setting prepare faculty to tell stories. Also, most faculty realize they already tell stories in class and only need to expand, focus, and elaborate on their prior storytelling experience.

- **Ethics**

The major ethical issue in storytelling is whether it is acceptable to tell someone else's story. While this debate continues in the storytelling press, it should not be a deterrent in classroom use of stories because each student should make it clear he or she is gathering a story to share. Students need to be sensitive to disguising the organization or individual if necessary. We coach students to ask up front about confidentiality and also to check at the end of the interview session to see if names and the organization need to be changed before writing or retelling the story.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have provided a rationale for adopting organizational storytelling as one pedagogical technique to use in business classes to integrate theory and practice. We presented a story model and characteristics, guidelines and hints for using stories, and a discussion of overcoming some potential obstacles to using story gathering and telling in class. Using organizational storytelling presents new chal-

lenges to both faculty and students; however, the rewards are well worth the effort. Remember, excellent leaders are excellent storytellers and corporate culture is represented and passed on through stories. So, by teaching the art of storytelling in business classes, we help students acquire a vital skill for organizational life.

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