

Storytelling and Organizations: Introduction to the Special Issue

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In the year 2000, I got itchy feet. Surreptitiously, I went for a job interview. I spent a whole morning answering questions about my strengths and weaknesses. I humored people by telling them what kind of car I would be (a taxi), and what kind of animal I would be (a dragonfly). I took them on a retrospective adventure from my first job (fruit packer) to my current role (vice president).

Finally, in the afternoon, there is a question that interests me. It comes from the hiring manager.

"Jo, you're the head of Organization and Management Development for a Fortune 500 company. How do you interpret your job?"

I feel ready for this question, as ready as if I had been willing them to ask it. "I'm a storyteller."

There is a moment when my response hangs in the air, like words in a cartoon bubble. But then, the hiring manager smiles. He exhales slightly, leans back and blows the words away with an invitation.

"How so?"

It is an invitation to tell a story, or two.

I tell him the of the safety classes where a lad severed by an escalator, permanently crippled, shares his story so that others will understand the practicality of the safety procedures. I tell him how the story of the dancing garbage man helped people on the line to find the art in their work. I tell him about the skilled, well-liked lesbian who, passed over for promotion by a homophobic production supervisor, offers her story as the starting point of a dialogue on company values by senior managers who had no idea how personnel decisions were being made on the shop floor.

The hiring manager leans forward. "Boy," he says, "have I got a story for you."

Now, it is my turn to sit back, to listen. I hear a story so amazing that I am moved to thank him for it. And when they offer me the job, I know from the story that I do not want to take it.

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In my 22 years as a “corporate insider,” I came to love my work the most when I began to ground it in story—in a holy trinity of listening to stories, telling them and connecting the stories of others in ways that fostered co-created offspring of new stories and new ideas. Whenever I was at my most proficient, whenever I was able to do “good,” to find the best path, the credit belonged, always, to the stories.

I became smartest about organizations when I could really hear the stories of those who did the work and saw what that work meant, close up. It is because of the stories I heard, because of what they taught me, that I was able to make “good” decisions—those that balanced the interest of profits and people. It was because of the stories that I could “trust my gut” in complex situations where no single straightforward solution was forthcoming.

And it was by sculpting and sharing authentic stories—and by keeping my relationship to those stories clear—that I was able to help people ask questions that were reflective and important. The stories were thresholds opening up to different ways of thinking about the world—ways that were at the same time exciting and scary. When people crossed over those thresholds, they found rooms of shadow and light, filled with challenges to their assumptions, tables on which to unpack them, and, yes, more stories.

The most powerful stories, I found, are the stories shared in community, stories told by brave tellers with open hearts who are not afraid to send their stories “out to play” with those of others. Once at play, these stories throw up the sashes on new vistas: alternate realities, unexpected dilemmas and creative possibilities. My most joyous memories as an organizational practitioner are connected to storytelling in open, liberating spaces—both formal and informal, planned and spontaneous—where one story, squawking like a nesting goose, awakened another, which in turn roused a third and so on until there was a of flurry of stories rising up, and up, moving from apparent chaos into an emerging direction: a V-formation with a mystical sense of which ley lines to follow.

When I was invited to be guest editor of this special issue of *Storytelling, Self, Society*, I was delighted. My own research on the use of story in for-profit settings as an element of learning and knowledge transfer strategies (Tyler, 2004) helped me to understand why interpreting my role as a storyteller had been a good bet. So I was excited at the prospect of helping to bring together “under one roof” a collection of work by colleagues in the field whose discoveries about storytelling in organizations matter.

And these works matter indeed. It is another good bet that regardless of your orientation to storytelling in organizations, you will find something of interest here. The issue opens with Monika Kostera

introducing us to her process of narrative collage. A creative qualitative research method, narrative collage builds understanding of the complexity of ideas and collective imaginings in organizational settings. Kostera delineates her process for the reader with rich stories that serve as excellent examples, and she makes clear distinctions between its purposeful application by both researchers and field practitioners.

David Boje follows this piece with an article suggesting just exactly how and why it is that stories in open, liberating spaces can and do “play” with each other. Boje challenges us to think broadly about the way we define stories, positioning them as distinct from narrative. He shows us how story includes not just the tales but the tellers—tellers who live, tell and reference story in ways that many traditional storytellers and narratologists would consider messy, nonlinear and incomplete with regard to time, space and plot. In a field that often uses the terms *story* and *narrative* loosely and interchangeably, Boje shows us a way of situating them in both theory and practice.

Boje, having shaken up our thinking about the nature of story, paves the way for a piece that integrates economic theory and the concept of trust, establishing story as the bridge between them. Annette Simmons applies a lens of experimental economics and the notion of fairness as the basis for a construct for reversing the potential of story to manipulate, using it instead as a means of building cooperation and compliance, and as the basis for a process that helps practitioners to seize opportunity inside and across organizations.

Richard Stone peers into a system in which many have lost trust—the healthcare system in the United States—in his piece on the relationship between stories and patient safety. Considering both the system and the individual—patients and caregivers—Stone has provided us with a platform from which we can reflect on the practical role of story in the development of a healing culture through reciprocal storytelling between medical professionals and their patients.

While Stone looks at the implications of story in the healthcare organizations, Steven Evans enlarges our lens, encouraging us to consider the role of story in an expansive system, in this case the entire country of Bhutan and its goal of achieving gross national happiness. Evans draws a compelling portrait of the role that storytelling of all kinds, but especially oral storytelling, can play in the building, shifting and integrating of Bhutanese world-views in the development of a national cultural philosophy based on gross national happiness.

Finally, as a prelude to the book review that close the journal, Karen Norum provides us with a selected view of the theories and literature connected with social construction and positive organizational scholarship that position story as central to the development of organizational culture. She suggests the use of positive stories as

powerful and intentional memetic codes and raises questions about the role of challenging stories in a context that privileges positive capacity-building over deficit problem-solving.

All these interpretations of storytelling in organizations are significant scratches in the surface of this rich area of study and practice. Judging from the work we received for consideration for this issue, there is much more fine work being done. And judging from the questions these pieces raise for their readers, there is much more fine work yet to do. Organizations matter. They matter in large measure because of the stories that create them, and the stories they produce. Stories are ancient, but story scholarship is still a young field. Its ley lines are still mysterious. Read widely, tell and listen. Conduct your own research, develop new practice, and write about it. We need to follow the magnetic tug of those ley lines—to let them lead us into the world of story and its power to create, explicate and illuminate the organizations and systems that continue to shape our world. I am grateful for your work with storytelling and organizations, and for your support of this journal, a new channel for a great dialogue. Let the stories fly

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Works Cited

- Tyler, J. A. (2004). Strategic storytelling: The development of a guidebook for HRD practitioners using storytelling as a business strategy for learning and knowledge transfer. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 2004). UMI Dissertation Abstracts.