

STORYTELLING AND CAREER NARRATIVES IN ORGANIZATIONS

Susan J. Kowalewski, D'Youville College
Lauren Waukau-Villagomez, D'Youville College

ABSTRACT

Storytelling has a history as old as Aristotle and many cultures today have an oral tradition. Children grow up with stories, golfers entertain with accounts of wins and losses on the course, parents use them to regale “the good old days”. The use of storytelling in organizations has experienced significant growth during the last decade assisting in change management, formulation of short and long term strategy formation, and rightsizing (to name a few functional areas). This paper presents a brief history of storytelling, the uses in organizations, as well as an explanation of career narratives and how they can be utilized by both individuals and organizations to “tell their story.”

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INTRODUCTION

The use of storytelling and career narratives in organizations are important skill sets for the 21st century. Storytelling is as old as time and we use it our everyday lives, but often the idea of telling stories is not a practice incorporated in organizations. According to many authors, it has a place and a part to play in organizations today. Parkin (2001) believes that “storytelling has always been an essential and universal human characteristic” (p. 7). Yolen (1979) a famous children’s author, notes the stories that touch us the most come from dreams that are the larger dreams that belong to all mankind. Storytelling comes from the oral tradition. The folktales and fairytales, the myths and legends, the tall tales and fables that children love today are shaped from this oral tradition (Savage, 2000). All cultures and societies had or have an oral tradition where culture, traditions, and history were passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In section one, we discuss the relevant literature. Section two discusses the relevance and outlines the uses of storytelling in organizations. Section three presents the storied approach to career narratives. The paper closes with a discussion of some organizational implications of this work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early studies related to organizational storytelling and narratives provided a social constructivist perspective in the research of Berger and Luckmann (1967), leading to integral concepts of the importance of the story in organizational culture. Wilkins and Martin (1979) identified specific functions that are integral for stories in organizations that includes making sense of the organization, control, and creating dedication being in the 1970s (Boyce, 1996). They contend that stories increase commitment, which in turn leads to a more trouble-free control function in the organization. Early research and papers related to storytelling set the stage for the future of storytelling as interest in the benefits to organizations increased and became stronger.

Denning (2000, 2005), Parkin (2001), Simmons (2001) and Simmons (2007) have written excellent books on storytelling in organizations. Parkin (2001) examined the resurgence of storytelling during the 1970s reporting that since this period there has been an upsurge in professional and semi-professional storytellers world-wide. Parkin (2001) notes that “there is obviously faith in storytelling as a means of communication otherwise simply would not have survived; people would have stopped using it” (p. 11). She continues by explaining that storytelling is a “means of taking in and making sense of information is an interactive and sharing process, and is therefore more powerful than a passive means such as the images one soaks up from television or computer” (p. 11). She believes that people are “now realizing the full potential and possible applications of this ancient and influential art in the modern world” (p. 12). This is an interesting phenomenon given the fact that there are so many books available over the last ten years alone extolling the power of storytelling in organizations and that when stories are incorporated in organizational settings, positive results are observed. Mary E. Boyce (1996) examined studies in organizational storytelling while ascertaining the multidisciplinary foundations and challenges faced in the utilization of stories in organizations.

McIlveen and Patton (2007) believe that there is no exact definition for narrative career counseling even though it has been around for the last 20 years. Constructivism can be considered an important force in vocational psychology and an example of the constructivist approach to career. Narrative career counseling encompasses subjectivity and meaning, which facilitates self-reflection and elaboration of self-concepts for better self-understanding. The holistic approach involves individuals creating an open-ended story about their lives and careers. Emotion and feelings are considered an important component. Individuals are supported in their stories by counselors. McIlveen and Patton (2007) outline and summarize the forms this approach can entail as follows: spoken and written forms; visual and spatial forms (life lines, life role circles, card sorts, goal maps, construct laddering, family constellation, guided fantasy, etc.); thematic Extrapolation Method (Super’s TEM); life theme career counseling; storied approach; career systems interview; and My Systems of Career Influences (p. 229-232)

There has been a shift career counseling in recent years from a logical positivism view of career counseling to a subjective perspectives view of career counseling (Brott, 2001). In the past career counseling was basically based on logical positivist worldview as a trait and factor approach. However, as the world has become more complicated and views on development altered, so did career and counseling views change.

A postmodern approach to career counseling has evolved. This postmodern perspective is really a constructivist perspective on career counseling which is more relevant to women and people from different cultures. Brown & Brooks (1996) believe that people cannot be separated from their environments and that there are no absolutes. In addition, human behavior can only be understood in the context in which it occurs, and individuals define themselves and their environments. This of course all fits in with assumptions of the constructivist career development model.

Brott (2001) summarizes the change career counseling as follows, “This approach is based on recognizing both continuity and change throughout an individual’s life by incorporating constructivist strategies in career counseling.” Brott (2001) notes “the storied approach explores the client’s world through story development as the client and counselor work together to co-construct, deconstruct and construct life stories. The story development encompasses life experiences in the family school, work and community” (P. 306).

The process involves the exploration of the client’s life stories through examining the clients past, present, and future experiences. Co-construction involves the process of revealing the client’s life through the examination of past and present life history. De-construction looks at the life experiences or stories from different perspectives or angles with the help of the counselor. Construction is basically planning for

the future by writing stories about the future. Questions are posed throughout the approach to help clarify and facilitate the process. Clark, Severy and Sawyer (2004) believe that differing themes/narratives can be explored in career counseling using the person's values and not a set group of criteria. They see this narrative approach to career counseling as being more sensitive to cultural diverse students in a multicultural world. The person is allowed to select the experiences from their lives to honor and celebrate in their narratives. Individual values and beliefs are recognized in this process.

This paper considers how storytelling and career narratives are utilized in relation to organizations in America. We examine storytelling and career narratives in organizations, the use of storytelling from a Native American perspective and the oral tradition in the modern world of organizations. The next section presents utilization of oral narratives, followed by the conclusion.

RELEVANCE AND STORYTELLING IN ORGANIZATIONS

In taking a closer look at storytelling in the Americas, Native Americans today still have a strong oral tradition that is alive and well. They believe there is power in the spoken word. Ambrose (1975) noted, "The white man writes everything down in a book so that it will not be forgotten; but our ancestors married the animals, learned all their ways and passed on the knowledge from one generation to another" (p. 40).

As we begin to examine storytelling more closely, it is important to realize that, in general, Western culture does not value the oral tradition to the extent that it should be within organizational structure. The traditional view of bedtime stories and an elementary teacher reading to a class are what individuals visualize when storytelling is introduced. Storytelling does not conjure images of CEOs around a boardroom table or a manager utilizing a story to introduce change. McCaleb (2003) contends that print literacy dominates orality in a bad way. Foley (2003) goes even further in saying that the non-textual verbal arts have been labeled "primitive, unsophisticated," or "simple" or "worse yet simply ignored."

Historically, Native American chiefs and elders used stories to teach the members of the Tribe important values or ideas. Throughout the Middle Ages, storytellers were powerful because they communicated important information and knowledge (Parkin, 2001). Storytellers were respected and admired. This is no different from the senior members in modern day organizations, who share their memories and educate new employees through their corporate stories. Parkin, (2001) calls them the "Tribal Elders" of the organization (p. 9).

Leslie Marmon Silko (1996), a Pueblo Indian woman and writer, in an oral presentation explained the following in relation to language and literature and the oral tradition:

Where I come from the words that are most highly valued are those which are spoken from the heart, unpremeditated and unrehearsed. Among Pueblo people, a written speech or statement is highly suspect because the true feelings of the speaker remain hidden as he reads words that are detached from the occasion and the audience... for those of you accustomed to a structure that moves from point A to point B to point C, this presentation may be somewhat difficult to follow because the structure of Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider's web – with many little threads radiating from the center, criss crossing each other. As with the web, the structure will emerge as it is made and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made (p 48-49).

In today's world, leaders are using stories to explain their point of view or to sway their members. Quong, Walker and Bodycott (1999) believe that the power and place of storytelling in organizations has been well established in relation to learning, communication and socialization. They think life

experiences, values, and beliefs are stored in the form of stories in our mind. Stories are important because they tell us all about the storyteller's, knowledge, values, influences and understandings from all aspects the person's life. Boyce (1996) suggests storytelling is critical in organizations to articulate experiences, confirmation and socialization of organizational culture and history, as well as creating vision and strategy.

Individuals in the field of business in areas such as finance, accounting, and strategy tend to be left brain thinkers (logical and analytical). The concepts related to storytelling may be difficult for these individuals to comprehend. Whereas, right brain thought processes center on creativity and influence (Simmons, 2006). According to Simmons (2006), "Story thinking is subjective and sensory; it follows strong emotions and is unpredictable" (p. 257). With individuals and organizations rediscovering storytelling and the benefits from utilizing stories, it's no wonder interest in the topic continues to increase. Storytelling has become an integral skill to possess in organizations in the 21st century. With this being the case, teaching storytelling in college and university (business) classes makes perfect sense (Rhodes, Pullen, & Clegg, 2010). There are approximately 30 institutions of higher education offering degrees in folklore in the United States, yet none of these are specific to business or organizational storytelling (storytelling institute website). So how can organizational storytelling be learned? The answer to this is from books on the subject, practicing, attending conferences, and possibly taking a class—tailoring the learning toward the organizational setting. One of the settings that utilize storytelling routinely is in religious settings; in sermons and homilies.

This was the case during the 56th National Prayer Service at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. Sharon W Watkins, General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), charged United States President and his administration with the following. "What you are entering now, Mr. President and Mr. Vice President, will tend to draw you away from your ethical center...But we, the nation that you serve, need you to hold the ground of your deepest values, of our deepest values. Beyond this moment of high hopes, we need you to stay focused on our shared hopes, so that we can continue to hope, too. We will follow your lead... Watkins said this administration especially has hard times to deal with – the economy and the nation's standing in the world' (Tapper, 2009). The following is the story Watkins told:

The Wolves Inside You

An elder Native American was teaching his grandchildren about life. He said to them, "A fight is going on inside me... it is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.

The other stands for joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith."

"This same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too", he added.

The Grandchildren thought about it for a minute and then one child asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old Cherokee simply replied..."The one you feed." (Native American Legend, [http://ww.firstpeople.us/FP-HTML-Legends/Two Wolves.Cherokee.html](http://ww.firstpeople.us/FP-HTML-Legends/Two%20Wolves.Cherokee.html))

Stories have been utilized to provide a "charge" to make a change or provide leadership. Quong, Walker and Bodycott (1999) believe that "to state a truism, however, organizational and leadership stories only become genuine vehicles for enlightenment and learning when people actually listen and seek to unearth

their meaning. For many people analyzing leadership stories is unfamiliar territory. When people listen to stories, they rarely question what the narratives convey about the person, the organization or the culture from which the story is derived – all of which can provide rich insights into how and why leadership is exercised” (p. 441-442).

Storytelling can be an effective method for developing leaders for organizations. According to Ready (2002), storytelling has emerged as a preferred approach for teaching leadership effectiveness in many organizations and companies today. Simmons (2007) believes stories can have power and impact on others in the corporate world. In fact, she comes from a business family who were natural storytellers. She defines story as “a re-imagined experience narrated with enough detail and feeling to cause your listeners imaginations to it as real” (p. 19). Parkin (2001) indicates that past research has demonstrated that personal storytelling to be the most notable and remarkable form of communication Rhodes, Pullen, & Clegg (2010, p. 6) point out that great leaders like Lincoln, Reagan, Churchill, MacArthur and Hannibal were communicators and thus storytellers. Daniel Pink in his recent book, *A Whole New Mind*, believes storytelling is critical to success in the business world. Although an organizational environment may seem like an impersonal environment, according to Maguire (1998), storytelling already exists under different names; mentor, training, gossiping, or schmoozing (p. 202).

One needs to learn to tell an effective story to realize benefits. Lisa Waukau (personal communication, July 15, 2010) as Tribal Chairwoman of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin in 2004 was asked to address the Grand Council in Wisconsin, which is a meeting of all the Indian Tribes in the state. As part of her speech she told a Menominee story about lacrosse and Awonako. Her sister and traditional storyteller, Leslie Teller, gave her this story to share. She used this story in particular to stress the importance of Native people being visionary.

The Awonako Story

It was the first spring storm when we were first here and the people called for the first lacrosse game in order to appease the powerful thunder gods. And who were these powerful Thunder gods who struck fear in all the people? They were the god’s of war and wherever they went they created a fearsome racket. They also brought the rains that brought us wild rice that brought us prosperity and life.

Maeqnapus, the teacher of all good things, paints a ball red because he thinks that will please the Thunder People. The sides are chosen and it is the land animals against the air creatures. He throws this red ball out in Sakakoh and the game begins.

And the animals battle all the way north through Milwaukee, along the cliffs of the dells, over to Green Bay, up the Wolf and north to Lac du Flambeau and over to Lac Courte Oreilles and beyond.

And it looks like Eagle, with his powerful wings is going to win the game on his own, but as he tires; the weakness of the winged creatures are exposed. He finds the Sparrow, even though they are many, they are too light and empty headed to be of any help. And the Crane, there were not enough of them, and besides they are all legs and not much help in this game we call “Little War”. Eagle is exhausted and he drops the ball.

And that is just what the land animals were waiting for. With their swift runners, the Deer People, with Bear alongside for protection, the land animals seemed unstoppable.

The winged creatures met in council with Maeqnapus to talk strategy-how can we to stop this force of nature? The sun had already set for the day and the Bat showed and wanted

to join the winged creature's team. The winged creatures told him, "go away, you have nothing to offer, you are too small." Maeqnapus said, "He is here, he wants to help. Let him play."

So that night, while the land animals were asleep, Bat swooped down and took the red ball away from them and with his night vision was able to navigate his way through the trees and the night spirits-he was Awonako-he carried the ball. And he carried the winged creatures to victory. And the Thunderers were appeased. And that brought the warm spring rain that brought the wild rice and that brought prosperity and life to the people.

This old story tells of the wisdom of our people and each of us takes something from these stories. The old people saw the Bat as a humble creature, not one generally honored among the winged creatures, but one who has medicine for survival, for reincarnation, one who forces us to see further than today and tomorrow and beyond that. For you see, the bat flies at night and in the night are born in our dreams and these are the dreams that build the future.

Lisa said that she received many positive comments from the elders who were in attendance at the meeting. They could relate to the storytelling because in the old days that was how lessons were taught and knowledge shared. Here is another story Lisa shared with a group of Native investors, who were working with the Menominee Tribe. The Menominee are a small tribe in comparison to other tribes and they are not wealthy. They have a casino, but it does bring in a great deal of money. Therefore, it is necessary for them to depend on the support of others. They had to meet with one of their benefactors about continuing their financial assistance in the quest for an off-reservation casino. The other tribe was beginning to have doubts about the benefits of continuing their support as the federal government was not very cooperative. They invited Lisa and other tribal members to meet with them. Lisa (personal communication, August 20, 2010) was asked to say a few words.

I want to tell you are a family story. You know Indians are not like other people – money doesn't always mean the same thing.

Shania is my niece who lives with her grandparents. She is very petite and tiny for her age. She started fancy shawl dancing when she was very young. She and her aunt Sofie would go to pow-wows all over the country where Shania would contest dance.

They were at a pow-wow in Kansas when Shania caught the eye of an older lady, who looked critically at Shania's dance regalia. The older lady told Sofie, I am going to make Shania some beadwork for her outfit and then she will be a champion dancer. She needs better beadwork.

Time passed. Pow-wows came and went. One day the older lady called Sofie on the telephone and told her, I have a yoke and arm guards for Shania's outfit. I want her to wear them to the next pow-wow.

The beadwork was stunning. It complemented Shania's dance style and her outfit. She started to place and to win money at the pow-wows she entered.

Shania's grandparents were stunned that someone out of the blue would take the time and effort to make such beautiful beadwork for someone they didn't know. John and Leslie decided that they had to do something in return for the older lady.

They had an old car that needed fixing up. Indians always need a good car so John started slowly repairing the car. He put new tires on it and he repaired the engine. He fixed it up good as new and he probably could have sold and made some money. It was better than a “Rez Runner.” But he didn’t.

The Teller family drove the car to Northern Minnesota to the older woman’s reservation. She lived in federal housing, where houses do not have garages or driveways or decks.

Shania’s grandparents told the woman and her family that they wanted to thank her for making Shania’s regalia so beautiful. We have a gift for you too. She tells them that they didn’t need to do this. They presented her with the car. She immediately took it for a ride and drove up and down the road honking and waving at her relatives. They had made a friend for all time.

The moral of this story in the Indian way - it is not so much the money as it is the friendship and sharing that makes the difference. We are not Coca Cola or GM. We know we are costing you money. Think of us as the old car in the story. You are helping to fix us up and we will be just like new. Indian people don’t think like white people. But we know as Indian people that everything cannot be measured by the white man’s cash register.

At the end of the story there was dead silence in the room. Some people had tears in their eyes. The investors did not give the Menominee Tribe the heave ho. They decided to continue funding their off reservation endeavor a while longer. This is an example of the power storytelling related to persuasion and change.

One of the reasons this story is so powerful is because of its connection to emotions or affect. Emotion can be an integral part of learning and cognition. Educators must utilize hot cognition in their teaching. Ormrod (2010) defines hot cognition “as learning or cognitive processing that is emotionally charged” (G-2). Furthermore, she indicates that learners pay more attention to emotionally charged information, they continue to think about the information and they will elaborate on the information. It is important for us to utilize the emotion in our stories because affect has an impact on motivation. In fact, Rhodes, Pullen, & Clegg (2010) think that storytelling is not passive for the listener, but triggers active thinking on their part. Simmons (2001) observes that good stories induce a trance in the listeners. It is like an altered state of awareness so that we connect to the listeners’ unconscious and imaginations. For example, Evans and Metzger (2000) say that as a stylistic element in telling a story, it is important to consider emotion. The storyteller must help the audience feel the emotion of the story.

In the business world this is a must so that workers are motivated and excited about what they are doing. Storytelling can be a nonthreatening coaching tool for personal development and or to enhance organizational performance (Parkin, 2001). Furthermore, she thinks stories and metaphors have an impact on learning and memory. A good story can relate management principles such as decision-making, leadership, group dynamics, power and politics in a way that captures the attention and enhances memory (Rhodes, 2010). People who tell the best stories “win” according to Simmons (2007, p. 38). She suggests that business people find stories that “win” for them and that is however they define winning. The idea of winning is of course emotion-packed. Everyone wants to win or be a winner.

CAREER NARRATIVES IN ORGANIZATIONS

Career narratives are a form of storytelling. Narratives are often used for a variety of reasons. Career narratives are often utilized for high school students applying for college, students applying to graduate school, or for individuals applying for jobs or making a career change. They may also be used for completing various club membership applications or scholarship applications. Career narratives are set in a “story form”, with the writer utilizing a less stringent format than a resume or curriculum vitae.

Career narratives involve the writing and revision of a sound, logical personal and professional narrative through exploration, experience, and reflection. Individuals are empowered to make amendments related to the situation the narrative would be utilized (Severy, 2008).

An example of a career narrative for a student interested in completing a degree in business may read like this:

I love working with people. It interests me to no end. With this in mind, I plan to obtain a bachelors degree in business-concentrating in human resources management. I have always enjoyed filling out forms and completing computations. This would assist me in working with employees in the hiring process, benefits and compensation, and training compliance. When I establish myself in the working world I want to be in an office, one that is mine alone. I am a person who is self motivated and in dealing with confidential employee issues, this would be imperative.

As of now I have taken steps that will help me obtain my goals. I have taken courses in general business, human resources management, business communications, psychology, and organizational behavior. I will be completing a three-month internship at LNM Bank in their Human Resources Department during the spring 2011 semester. This internship will provide the opportunity to utilize skills I have learned in the classroom into real world situations.

I have developed many skills over the years that I believe will help me achieve my goals. I am diligent, professional, and can obtain, apply and explain information to others. I have learned to be a team player and work well with others. I feel that my goals for the future are possible and that my goals will be achieved.

A career narrative should follow a descriptive structure. It is a way to show the reader something about the writer, present important information related to the writers experience and background related to the topic, as well as demonstrates writing ability. The author is telling a story in a form that is significantly more descriptive than would be found in submission of a resume or application. The concept is to garner the attention of the reader to tell ones’ own story.

Career narratives are many times utilized in human resources (HR) to determine current or future training for employees. HR managers can evaluate future goals and aspirations of employees in greater depth from a career narrative; making a determination as to management training.

CONCLUSION

Storytelling and career narratives are powerful tools or forces in today’s business world and important skill sets for the 21st century. Storytelling motivates, it touches peoples’ emotions, and it helps people remember the message. Organization leaders should not be afraid of using storytelling, instead it is a way to enhance their ideas. The transition from storytelling to career narratives is a natural evolution. A career narrative is a descriptive structure. The author is telling a story in a form that is significantly more descriptive than would be found in submission of a resume or application. Narratives provide self-

evaluation, understanding of one's career, and amplifying the power of a person's story (Rehfluss, 2009). The concept is to garner the attention of the reader to tell ones' own story. This process can help individuals assess where they are in their career and changes they can make in their lives, especially during these economic times.

A limitation of this paper is the amount of qualitative and/or quantitative research supporting the impact of storytelling in organizations. Future research should include an analysis of storytelling and career narratives in today's economic conditions. "The story is something that comes from outside. But the meaning is something that emerges from within. When a story reaches our hearts with deep meaning, it takes hold of us. Once it does so, we can let it go, and yet it remains with us (Denning, 2001, p. 195). Storytelling and career narratives are important tools in every organization and business person's skill set.

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Susan Kowalewski is an Assistant Professor at D'Youville College in Buffalo, New York. She earned her Ph.D. and EdM from the State University of New York at Buffalo and an MBA from Rivier College, Nashua, New Hampshire. She has worked in the health care field and higher education administration for over 25 years. Email: kowalews@dyc.edu

Dr. Waukau-Villagomez earned her B.S. in Child Development and Pre-School from the University of Wisconsin – Madison and her M.S. from the University of Wisconsin –Stout in Guidance and Counseling, and her Ed.D. from Penn State in Educational Administration. She has worked in the educational field as teacher, guidance counselor, and principal. She is currently an assistant professor in the School of Education at D'Youville College in Buffalo, New York. Email: villagom@dyc.edu