

## Storytelling in Management Research

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September 2005

To appear in SAGE DICTIONARY

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The *storytelling turn* in management research occurred over the last thirty years. It began by treating story in 1980s as static text, turned in 1990s to *in situ* dynamics of co-producing stories, and in 2000s to systemic complexity of *storytelling organization*. There numerous ways to define storytelling each takes research in a different direction. Definition is important to management researchers; to decide to privilege narrative or story, sample terse or coherent text, look at text with or without context, and if in context to sample only managerialist story or include marginal counter-stories of less powerful stakeholders.

Narrativists marginalize story. Czarniawska (1997, 1998) defines stories as must-have plots, but later (1999) discounts story to plotless narrative: “A story consists of a plot comprising causally related episodes that culminate in a solution to a problem” (Czarniawska, 1997: 78). Then, discounts story to “texts that present events developing in time according to (impersonal) causes or (human) intentions” (Czarniawska, 1998: vii). And back to plot: “For them to become a narrative, they require a plot, that is, some way to bring them into a meaningful whole” (Czarniawska, 1999: 2).<sup>1</sup>

Gabriel marginalizes narrative, and debates what is story. For Gabriel (2000:20) a *proper* story does more than recount facts or describe experience; it must have emotion, poetic embellishment, and be cohesive, plotted with beginning, middle, and end: “I shall argue not all narratives are stories; in particular, factual or descriptive accounts of events that aspire at objectivity rather than emotional effect must not be treated as stories” (Gabriel, 2000: 5). Gabriel’s definition is opposite to Czarniawska’s (1999). “*Stories are narratives with plots and characters, generating emotion in narrator and audience, through a poetic elaboration of symbolic material*” (Gabriel, 2000: 239, italics in original).

An early story definition, “an oral or written performance involving two or more people interpreting past or anticipated experience” (Boje, 1991:111) is not so restrictive as Gabriel’s or Czarniawska’s. This approach is to include stories that are terse, fragmented, disputed with counter-stories to dominant ones, and *antenarrative* (Boje, 1991, 1995, 2001). *Antenarrative* is defined as a pre-story, and a bet that you can create a story that will change organizations (Boje, 2001: 1), and can be theatrically performed to “enroll stakeholders in ‘intertextual’ ways transforming the world of action into theatrics” (Boje, Rosile, Durant, & Luhman (2004: 756). This research has led to systemics of *storytelling*

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<sup>1</sup> Her definition recalls Polkinghorne’s (1988:36): story “serves as lens through which the apparently independent and disconnected elements of existence are seen as related parts of a whole.”

*organization* (Boje, 1991, 1995; Gephart, 1991; Boyce, 1995; Kaye, 1996; Boje, Baack & Luhman, 1999).

I propose a way out of Czarniawska, Gabriel, and Boje debates by looking at how story ***and*** narrative interact in complex organizations. Why not treat improper stories (& antenarrative) that are pre-plotted, terse, and even emergently-incoherent in their *in situ* interrelationship to proper stories and narratives that are plotted and coherent? The advantage is looking more precisely at the relationship between storytellers and listeners. An *inclusive* storytelling turn invites management research to recognize the story listeners are no longer static story-consumers, but producers of story space, defined as systemic interactivity of stories, narratives, and antenarratives co-produced, co-shared, co-remembered, and otherwise co-organized in *storytelling organizations*. One type of storytelling organization is the *Tamara*. *Tamara organizing* is defined as the plurality of simultaneous, performative story spaces and the networking of co-producers in complex organizations (Boje, 1995). Instead of seated spectators statically watching the theatre on stage, consumers of Krizanc's (1989) *Tamara*, become co-producers, by moving around a mansion with ten rooms, deciding which simultaneous action to join into; the audience fragments, small groups running from room to room, chasing storylines, and becoming actor and spectator (spect-actor).

### **Storytelling Research Trends**

The first trend looks at stories-out-of-context. Stories in laboratory, interview, and survey research generally have been wrenched from their natural performance contexts and treated as objectified social facts, mere texts, with little empirical attention given to the natural linguistic context in which stories are being performed. Management researchers must decide if they are looking at the relationship between story and *in situ* performance context or just at story text as an in-place metering device to measure some other phenomena such as culture, tacit knowledge, or sensemaking.

A second stream of research looks at stories in their performance context, but from a functionalist point of view. O'Connor (2002), for example identifies studies that analyzed storytelling in functionalist managerialist studies (especially, the organizational culture work of the 1980s). This would include stories elicited in researcher-led interviews (e.g., Martin et al., 1983) to demonstrate functional uses of storytelling such as socialization (Knowledge Socialization Project at IBM Research)<sup>1</sup>, control (Wilkins, 1983), change (Denning, 2005), typologies of strategy-stories (Barry & Elmes, 1997), entrepreneurship (O'Connor, 2000), and story-leadership ethnography (Boje, 1991).

A third stream is managerialist, but restricts story to status of a "tool" (Denning, 2001; Gargiulo, 2002; & Parkin, 2004). Denning ignores context, and coaches CEOs to construct tool stories that are explicitly familiar to listeners, single-protagonist, and positive with happy-ending; the "springboard" story is defined as "a story that enables a leap in understanding by the audience so as to grasp how an organization or community or complex system may change" (2001: xviii). Gargiulo (2001: 35-36) includes the negative story; he cautions stories can be weapons, propaganda, and what con artists do;

he coaches CEOs (& HR trainers) to create tool box of many stories. For CEOs that find crafting a springboard story or an entire box of them, Parkin (2004) just assembles 50 folktales and spiritual stories. Left unanswered in management research is the effectiveness of tool stories, and differences between ones built in context, and those imported from some foreign context.

The fourth stream steers clear of functionalist/managerialist story study. This includes studies in critical theory (Mumby, 1987) and postmodern (Boje, 1995; Boje & Rhodes, 2005), poststructuralist/deconstruction (Martin, 1990), intertextuality studies (O'Connor, 2002), and feminism studies (Calas & Smircich, 1991). The focus is on pluralism of narrative-form, multiple ways of interpreting stories, and uncovering suppressed, marginalized, or hidden stories as a counter-narrative to the conventional storyline of a particular organization and its spokespersons.

In terms of knowledge and networking, the four streams approach story quite differently. The managerialist/functionalist researchers focus on how storytelling is used to transfer knowledge from network participants (individuals) to the system (institution). A critical theory study sets out to find ways to liberate individuals (classes, or gender/race) from exploitative knowledge transfer. Critical postmodern, poststructuralist, feminist, and intertextual studies look at a plurality of knowledge constituted by a variety of storytellers, some more powerful than others, and at counter-story. Finally, future management research can benefit from looking at the emergent system complexity aspects of storytelling organization. This includes the interaction of antenarrative and narrative as well as proper and improper story forms, in acts of co-production, co-consumption, and co-distribution in storied systems.

In sum, the storytelling turn is from static story consumers, or story treated as in-place device to meter some other construct, to story co-production and story hegemony that is what complexity and organizing is all about.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.research.ibm.com/knowsoc/index.html>