# Free Stories!

David M. Boje[1] and Rita A. Durant[2]

[1]New Mexico State University

[2]University of South Florida St. Petersburg

### Abstract

Stories as sensemaking opportunities both support and are supported by interpersonal relationships. Deconstructing the traditional views of stories as necessarily constrained to a linear form with transparent and fixed beginning, middle, and end, we extend the metaphor of free stories to include the emergent and improvisational freedom to both express ourselves and to respect one another.

## Introduction

### Is the art of storytelling dying?

Is it time to free stories from narrative prisons, that obsession with the coherence of beginning, middle, and end (BME).

Walter Benjamin's (1936: 83) classic reflections on the works of Nikolai Leskov, "teaches us that the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly."

Storytelling was once "the securest among our possessions" this "ability to exchange experiences' (Benjamin, 1936: 83) has been taken from us. Like Gertrude Stein (1935), Benjamin does not see newspapers demonstrating the traditional practices of storytelling. Both find nothing remarkable in the narrative style of newspaper writing or with novels. It is clear that Benjamin, like Walter Ong (1984) and Ivan Illich (1993) is lamenting the passage of mouth to mouth storytelling, and sees few instances of it replicated in written narrative versions: "Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn" (Benjamin, 1936: 84). This supports Gabriel's (2000) claim that proper storytelling is not prevalent in organizations. It supports our friend Terrence Gargiulo's premise that we need to get serious about story competencies. The point

we make is that stories are not just texts, something we read to children, stories are part of our social fabric, and stories are quite socially performed. One of the skills that Stein (1935) and Benjamin (1936) agree that has been lost is the ability to practice stories in community, and the ability to understand the layers of stories we hear. And this is where narrative comes in, providing all that explication, so people don't have to think about how to interpret a story, how to read between the lines and understand the nothingness, and what that means. As one stories, the listener, is also storying, filling in the blanks with their own symbols, experiences, and reflexivity. At least that is the premise of some of the definitions of story and narrative (see Appendix), those that look at something beyond just the ability to retrospect, to retell an experience of the senses.

### If we forget how to story, then what will happen to identity?

We are partial to seeing identities as closed and prestructured systems. Maybe it's because we need to turn our back on pure process in order to create meaning (Schutz, 1967) or maybe because it's part of our "human nature" Lacan (2002):

the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic - and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an

alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development" ( p. 4).

Identity in Western Contemporary Modernist thought relies on structured dualities. Leach (1976), a structuralist anthropologist, explained that meanings depend upon contrasts, upon the boundary between itself and what it is not. That is, to have meaning in a structural sense is to be *either* one thing, *or* another (*either/or* relation). Further, one of those things is declared to be superior, and the other inferior. Any attempt at differentiation, then, is accompanied by a ranking. In this way, in order to have meaning, dualism "closes off" the "thing" under consideration from others, and evaluation simultaneously judges one or the other of the pair to be of lesser value.

To Buber (1970), identity is always in relation. Seeing another's identity as closed reflects the word pair, I-It;, and so whoever says "It" is in the world of "goal-directed verbs," having something, perceiving something, imagining something, thinking something, etc. On the other hand, where "You" is said there is no something. "You" has no borders. Whoever says "You" does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation. (p. 55),

Several definitions of story posit that they are ways to solve problems, to find solutions, to tap into 'tacit knowledge.' Such definitions suit managerialism, seeing more instrumental uses of stories, calling them '*tools for sensemaking*.' Students of organization will recognize the phrase "goal-directed behavior" that describes I-It relations. Buber's fundamental insight is that in a social context, certainly a characteristic of virtually all organizations to date, two basic orientations can be distinguished: that between oneself and a bounded "thing" and that between oneself and a unbounded "You." For George Herbert Mead (1934), the concern was to work out the reflexive pattern of the "I' and the many internalized "Wes" (parents, nation, school, work, political party, etc). The

benefits of having nothing in a setting populated by the likes of the Economic man (the ultimate I-We conundrum), with an unlimited desire for "things," is likely to seem quite farfetched. Stories reflect social judgments of the many groups (Wes) we are apart of. Thus, the structuralist (logocentric) linking of either/or, here something vs. nothing, with evaluation, good vs. bad, has yielded the assumption that boundaries are good, because they create things, and unboundedness is bad, because it yields nothing.

Stories, and story researchers, therefore, as socio-politico-economic-systemic participants, have often defined stories as most legitimate when they have boundaries: beginnings and endings containing and constraining middles. We are taught in school that proper stories must have them. Such stories can be known as BMEs, or those with a beginning, middle, and end. BMEs both depict and reinscribe the possibility of a coherency state, of a status quo, of the legitimacy of containment, of the feasibility of ranking. BMEs allow us to come up with reasons, plot a linear course of action. They are fundamental to our contemporary sense of rationality, with its causal arrows and error terms that can be measured and discarded. Yet, we think that they are not the most often enacted story, just the ones we are tught to recognize.

BME sensemaking stories are the most dominant of the many kinds of sensemaking stories. In the appendix we sort through popular definitions of story-sensemaking.

1. **Emergent Story Sensemaking** - In the here and now, in the once-occurent moment of being. Benjamin (1936) calls it what is passed mouth to mouth; for Illich (1982) and Ong (1982) it the oral storytelling, done in the moment; and for Stein (1936) its sort of all about improvisation, being in the moment. Bakhtin (1991) is also sure that the kind of in-the-moment of being, is its own kind of

sensemaking.

2. **Retrospective Whole BME Sensemaking** - Popular since Aristotle (350 BCE), is the idea that proper stories have narrative beginning, middle, and ending, that create a coherent whole; It has been reiterated by Malinowski (1954), Czarniawska, 1997 1998), Gabriel (200) and Martin (1982; Martin et al, 1983). It is most popular now with Weick's (1995: 127-129) retrospective sensemaking, which also has BME and wholeness to accomplish social control as its core concepts. In latest work, Weick has recanted on story-sensemaking only being retrospective, he wants possibility of a prospective sensemaking, even an emotion sensemaking.

3. **Retrospective Parts Sense-making Narrative** Boje (1991) joins Ricoeur (1984) in looking at retrospective or anticipated experience, but thinks that stories are highly fragmented and rarely reach some kind of conclusion; Czarniawska (2004 agrees) but prefers to look at more petrified stories that have achieved coherence (see # 2 above); Barry & Elmes (1997) see stories conveying meaning from strategy authors to implied readers.

4. **Reflexivity Whole Sense-making Narrative** - Kant (1781/1900) argues that in addition to sensory intuition there is a mode of a priori sensemaking he calls pure reason; Boyce looks at reflexivity of story as sympolic forms; for Polkinghorne (1988) a story is a lens to make parts into a whole; It is similar for Selznick (1957).

5. **Reflexive Parts Sensemaking Narratives & Antenarratives** - Bakhtin (1973, 1981) holds out for a more dialogic story, but thinks narrabe keeps imprisoning them in monologic frameworks and finalized wholeness; Boje (2001) looks at antenarratives as the bet and the before, the bet out of the fragments sometimes proper story is possible; Collins and Rainwater (2005) take a sideways look at antenarrative seeing it as vital to organizing. From here it appears that antenarratives emerge (so see # 1 above).

Our point in showing you these definitions is to assert our proposition: there is a variety of story sensemaking modalities, of which BME is the most acknowledged. Boje (2007) has come up with eight story sensemaking modalities (the above plus Tamara, horsesense, & emotive-ethical, which we will introduce as we proceed). There are certainly others. We think that it is possible to begin to look at ways in which various approaches to sensemaking stories (& narratives), be they fragments, antenarratives, aspiring or well petrified wholes --- do interact, and that is where the cutting edge for research will be found. As BME is the most dominant one in narrative studies, let us linger for a while to explore its profile.

BMEs are tools of traditional rhetoric, whose goal is to convince others to come to our side, to our way of thinking. The US justice system relies on BMEs, so as to parcel out blame and compensation. BMEs are bounded; alternative stories receive the same consideration as error terms in our organizational models. BMEs allow us a measure of security, as they describe a plausible description of what happened and thereby allow us the hope of causing and/or controlling subsequent instances. BMEs assuage our emotional disturbance when what we predicted does not come to pass: An orderly story depicting linear causality and bounded temporality

allows us to account for an event and provides us with the perception of "a more ordered social reality by reducing equivocality" (Weick, Sutcliff, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 417). Insofar as the "beginning" of the story contains factors describing the Other, and not ourselves, then the implication is that "it can't happen here." We have contained the unexpected and so we can continue to live with the expectation of met expectations.

However, such expectations are often (shall we hazard a *usually*?!) inadequate; our mental models are based on presumptions that are continually updated as we try and account for discrepant information, or "when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world," (Weick et al., 2005: 414).

The question for BME stories, therefore, is how to "construct a plausible sense of what is happening, and this sense of plausibility normalizes the breach, restores the expectation, and enables projects to continue" (Weick et al, 2005: 414-415).

BMEs, designed to support and reinforce expectations and predictability, are themselves constrained. According to Aristotle (350 BCE), proper narrative stories must be
1. Coherent; all the pieces fit together in cause-effect relationships.
2. Linear, depicting a chronology of causally related beginning, middle, and end.
3. Spoken with and by authority.
4. Fixed in time and place.
5. Final, accounting for everything in the *whole* totality.
6. Correct.
7. Objective, abstract, asynchronic rendering of synchronic events (Pondy & Boje, 1980).

**Stories are not the only sensemaking ways**

Metaphors, like our experience of time itself, are slippery. Attempts, such as that of structuralism, to identify sets of contrasting identities (and horribly further to set one of the pair as inferior to the other), ignore time, and the both/and experiences that it engenders. Therefore, assigning identity to states and ignoring processes leads to an incomplete picture. Story and metaphor are rarely far apart.

BME stories reflect the predominant metaphor of meaning, and closely related of identity, as being "closed, exclusive" In term of formal logic, derived from Aristotle's system of reason and thinking (Ichazo, 1982, cited in Ford & Ford, 1994), a thing cannot be itself and something else; it is always separate, unique, bounded from everything else. Additionally, according to the axiom of identity, that thing, represented exactly by the word for it, is stable or permanent; it either *is* or *is not*--there is no middle ground. In grammar, one represents a bounded construct by a noun. In the words of Popeye the Sailor Man, "I am what I am and that's all that I am." The logic of the noun holds that an entity, even a person, is separate, bounded, stable, and not what she is not. Further, in order to have an identity, it is necessary to exclude (a very structuralist argument, granted, but a metaphor that prevails):

> The dominant view [of current psychological and social science] ascribes human action to an initiating factor or a combination of such factors. Action is traced back to such matters as motives, attitudes, need-dispositions, unconscious complexes, stimuli configurations, status demands, role requirements, and situational demand. To link the action to one or more of such initiating agents is regarded as fulfilling the scientific task. (Blumer, 1969, p. 169)

What the "closed" metaphor of meaning supports is "the state": predictability, routines, influence, distinction, and identity. What it excludes is "contingency": processes of change, interaction, equi-vocality, perspective, adaptation, innovation, creation,

and synchronicity. In order to understand phenomena as both/and-state and process-it is necessary to use stories.

Since Aristotle (350 BCE), BMEs depict *finalized narrative retrospection* and seek to place boundaries around identities, and therefore to stories, in order to render them static and predictable. They are closed system thinking tools, tools that seek to imprison and control our interpretations, our actions, and our potential for active engagement. As narrative prisons, closed thinking stories also close us off from one another. To the extent that f*inalized retrospective narrative* considers only the past, and considers it to be over and done, it privileges Thanatos over Eros, the tendency toward love, unity, and relationship. The question at hand is what kind of stories can de-construct the rational (see *ratio*, that which is divided into numerator and denominator) with its division between Self and Other, while avoiding the monolithic tendencies of BMEs. Because stories are social, they have such a potential. In what ways can we "open" stories to support a Buberesque relational view of identity and meaning? What kinds of stories support complexity and emergence, honor difference while supporting collaboration, and respect autonomy while remaining committed to belongingness? What kind of stories diminish our fears so that, "no longer terrified, we will discover we are free to delight in life's paradox, mystery, and awe" (Al-Anon 1994, p. 269).

**STORY EMERGENCE SENSEMAKING**

An interesting alternative to finalized narrative retrospection is that provided by Gertrude Stein (1931, 1935, 1938), who looked for narrative in the here-and-now, and the unfolding present. She focuses on ways of telling in the moment, in the midst of "an undifferentiated flux of fleeting sense-impressions" (Chia, 2000, p. 517). Stein (1938) notes, "There are many ways to tell what we tell" (p. 340). She asks, "What is the use of telling a story since there are so many

and everybody knows and tells so many… So naturally what I wanted to do in my plays was what everybody did not always know or always tell" (Stein, 1931: 40). Stein wrote over 70 plays developed her move away from what she called lust for cohesion. Perhaps its time to break story free of the narrative prision (Boje, 2007), so cleverly crafted since Aristotle.

The *narrative prison*, therefore, is not only about allowing stories to more freely express our own fractured and partial experience of ourselves and our situations, but also to de-construct the barriers that keep us apart. Story liberation allows us to self-organize as we include an acknowledged mere sampling of the systems that converge in our lives. Such stories both bemoan and celebrate storytelling complexity and emergence. In complexity stories, we admit we are always already both partial and whole, and neither partial nor whole. We select a moment to describe in detail not only to express ourselves but also to invite others to help us make sense of our collective experience. Such complex restrospective tellings can be quite terse, providing the hearer with blanks and silences, fragments and discontinuities, leaving openings as invitations for dialogue. It is what Bakhtin (1981) refers to as polyphonic dialogicality (which we abbreviated to dialogism). In *storytelling organization*, stories and narratives are offered, interpreted, shared, and changed, as are its participants, both stories and interlocutors unfold in conversations. *Storytelling organization* constitutes tellers and listeners who become co-tellers and co-listeners, supplementing individual memories with institutional memory retrospection and categories antecedent to experience, such as internalized transcendental conceptions of space and time.

**Tamara sensemaking**

Story intelligibility results from pre-narrative shared definitions of symbols and language (Ricoeur, 1984). Such shared definitions have emerged from our interaction with one

another and with our beloved and obdurate world. Boje (2007) has elaborated some of the pre-narrative experiences that shape our ability to collaborate in sensemaking. Tamara sensemaking is the landscape of our multiplicity, of our occupying different places on our world stage. Weick et al. (2005) similarly referred to "distributed sensemaking" (pp. 417-418) as they noted,

> When information is distributed among numerous parties, each with a different impression of what is happening, … discrepancies and ambiguities in outlook persist. Thus, multiple theories develop about what is happening and what needs to be done, people learn to work interdependently despite couplings loosened by the pursuit of diverse theories, and inductions may be more clearly associated with effectiveness when they provide equivalent rather than shared meanings. (p. 418)

There is a billion dollar story consulting industry. Most of it privileges managerialist monologues, silencing polyphonic multi-voice story consulting work, here-and-now inquiry into the unfolding present, or multi-discursive intertextuality of the multiple-dialogisms that eschew system wholeness, finalizedness, or merged parts in favor of holism, complex interdependence, and emergence. A story does not tell all, is never finished, and changes with each performance. A story keeps changing and rearranging the context, chiming different listener stories. The story I tell is not a duplicate of the ones you tell yourself. Consensus is suspect. "The plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness and the genuine polyphony of full-valued voices… plurality of equal consciousness and their world" (Bakhtin, 1973: 4). Uncertainty is inevitable. Allowing uncertainty is an exercise in tolerance and is valuable for relationships, and therefore for meaning and for productivity.

Stories are about identity. Birth and death, childhood and aging, past and future-our own stories seem both stable and ever-changing. Any attempt to make meaning, to assign identity, has to reconcile the tension between the obdurate present and our inability to hold it still. Stories, or narratives, cross boundaries and so serve as a communicative device uniquely capable of characterizing the both/and identity of today's organizational actors. Stories mirror the metaphorical drive that underlies human enterprise in our experience of time. It is the duality, or even plurality-the difference-that allows for the *inter-action* that gives rise to learning, innovation, and relationships.

> Human action extends itself through inference and relationship by constructive use of multiple viewpoints. . . . The ability to recognize different perspectives lies at the root of social and personal relationships. *Relationship* implies a viewing mind that constructs a connection between things over and above the perception of the single items that are perceived. (pp. 18-19)

In other words, metaphor and relationship can usefully be seen as both/and, rather than either/or, constructive processes. Where you see sameness, look for difference; where you see difference, look for what is shared.

**Horse-sense** Boje's sensemaking types elaborate some of the phenomena we share. In addition to sharing experiences of partiality and complexity, as in Tamara Sensemaking, we also share embodiment of ourselves and other beings on our planet. Call it Horse-sense. It's not just what horses do, but rather is a way to see ourselves in respectful interaction with materiality, Gaia, ourselves as sharing ecosystems. It is also about the shifting play of ecology: You eat me; I eat you. And it is about the futility of setting ourselves as subject, "Lords" over creation. We co-create, ourselves as living beings. Horse-sense helps us see ourselves in relation to and therefore interdependent with one another. Horse sense tempers courage with sense; shows us the benefits of trust and gentleness; and allows us greater freedom of movement as long as we allow ourselves to submit to the responsibility to

care for one another.

**Emotions and Ethics.** We also share emotions. With stories we create enough of a boundary around our emotions (see Mumby & Putnam, 1992) to make them safe to express and share. Stories are built around the non-cannonical (Bruner, 1990), and the very breaches in the expected that give rise to the sensemaking stories also give rise to negative emotions when projects are interrupted or when expectations are violated. Weick et al. (2005) tell the story of a nurse whose worry over a newborn's worsening pallor led her to speak with numerous other hospital staff until someone took her seriously and provided the necessary medical treatment. Insecurities trigger sensemaking. Love, fear, passion, jealousy, desire, grief-these are the stuff of stories, yet they are little understood and perhaps even less considered in organizational sensemaking (Magala, 1997). Emotions occur at the blurred boundary between body and mind. They cause us to move, while they limit our understanding of possible alternatives and consequences. Emotions bind us together and can tear us apart. Compassion is an ethical stance. Ways to honor emotional responses while not succumbing to blind fear and rage largely include feeling support from one another, support provided by our willingness to listen to one another's stories about life not going as planned.

Another blurred boundary site of emotions is that between self and others. As Weick et al. (2005) noted, expectations about one another provide powerful opportunities for violations and emotional reactions: "When an important expectancy is violated, the partner becomes less familiar, less safe, and more of a stranger" (p. 418). It is our expectations that let us down. It has been claimed that expectations are premeditated resentments! Rejection of the other, blaming him or her for our negative emotions, we lose the very source of sensemaking as a social act. Dealing with our own negative emotions at violations of our own expectations is a principled and ethical response. Downs and

Durant (2006) articulated 10 ethical responses to others during encounters at those blurred boundaries, including play, humor, listening, seeing oneself in the other, and managing one's own emotions.

**Communication styles.** Communication styles, too, including proxemics, chronemics, teleologies, archetypes, and rhythms affect our sensemaking. Each of us is shaped and sculpted by the hammering and chiseling of others' responses to our attempts to communicate. Communication styles reminds us that we cannot not communicate. Everything is interpreted; everything is contextual. Our systems of meaning-making take this awareness of change into account, largely through metaphor. As Duck (1994) puts it,

The human enterprise . . . is restlessly inferential and perpetually full of motion. Everything points somewhere else as well as having an intrinsic content. . . to some other realm of meaning not inherent in itself. . . Every context points somewhere else and relentlessly leads us on to new ground, new implications, new extensions of meaning. Thus context does not merely embed another concept, word, gesture, person, attitude, idea, or relationship; it also pushes forward . . . . No human symbol is inert, no word without implied action, no behavior without descendants. (p. 5)

Neither are people inert. One complicating fact of real life experience is that human beings change, develop, and learn. Thus any process of comprehending someone else will be an essentially unfinished task as we, and they, change. (p. 7)

In this way, in both relationship and meaning there is an extension from one realm of meaning to another in order to "recast our understanding" (Duck, p. 21), learn, and create a new and shared identity that influences the behavior, thoughts, and emotions of the individuals. "The complex of relations interdependencies arises, in part, thorough the transaction of shared meanings based on the two original sets of mental

foundations provided by the two individual minds" (Duck, p. 21). Communication styles as sensemaking reminds us that meaning is a product of interactions, not a sum of states. It reminds us that how we interact makes a difference. It reminds us that content is dependent on style: the Medium Is the Massage! It reminds us that respectful interaction is not mere window dressing; it is the source of meaning and relatedness.

**Dialectic/Hermeneutic sensemaking.** This is what we called reflexivity type of story definitions above and in the Appendix. Dialectic sensemaking might also be considered hermeneutic sensemaking. Each "level of analysis," such as an individual, a team, an organization, an organization whose key competencies include the customer, an alliance, an industry, etc., is always understandable in the context of the greater whole, a whole created by the relationships among the individual members of the aggregations. It is a whole that is a hole, empty of meaning and full of possibility. Each person's
ontological vocation is to be a "subject" who acts upon and transforms his (*sic*) world, and in so doing moves toward ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively. This *world* to which he relates is not a static and closed order, a *given* reality which man must accept and to which he must adjust; rather, it is a problem to be worked on and solved. "I work, and in working I transform the world." (Paulo Friere (1970/1993), p. 15)

Admitting voices, co-naming reality, creates communication--the key morpheme of which is *uni*. That is, co-naming reality creates a unity; it relocates individuals into a higher level of complexity--a system, a cooperative group, a subculture, a community. The three basic premises of symbolic interactionism are that humans *act* according to what things mean to them, that meaning is derived from *inter-action* with others, and that meaning changes in the interpretative process of dealing with the things they encountered. Symbolic interactionism, thus, "sees meanings as social

products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact" (Blumer, 1969, p. 5), and so posits the unit of analysis as social interaction or group meanings. In this way, symbolic interaction attempts to bridge the *micro* and the *macro* levels of human meaning and human behavior.

At the heart of complex systems thinking are two premises about every phenomana (including each individual person): (a) each is *both* a unique individual (even if only uniquely situated in the intersection of multiple associations), *and* a vital and essential part of the greater unity. While open to the "super-system," complex systems need to expend energy in both boundary maintenance and boundary-spanning activities (Scott, 1992). For it is in the interaction among systems that the supersystem is created. In this sense, complexity thinking is both hierarchical and improvisational, always enacting and shifting. Identity is held lightly. Any social system (including a self, a social group, an organization, a culture, a nation, etc.), is a trinity: (a) an entity unto itself with a purpose of its own, (b) composed by yet greater than the process/product of the purposeful interaction of its "sub-systems" or members, and (c) only understood in the shifting context in which it stories itself.

That is, any social phenomenon can be placed centrally. Argyris and Schon (1996) describe the many layers within an organizational system as a ladder of aggregation:
that proceeds from individuals to small groups, to departments made up of many small groups, to divisions that are clusters of departments, to the organization as a whole, to the larger field in which the organization interacts with other organizations. These organizational layers exist not only as abstractions but as living entities each of which may be described as having interests, intentions, values, and theories-in-use of its own. From the point of view of each such entity, the

rest of the organization is environment. An organization may be said to act, interact, inquire, and learn; so may the groups, departments, and divisions at different levels of aggregation within it. (p. 26)

Each of us is embedded in multiple contexts, and we find ourselves simultaneously being subsystems of larger associations, systems of meaning interacting with other systems, and the context for the actions of others. The number and nature of the contexts in which these multiple interactions occur means that relying on a single perspective is not only impossible, but also foolish. Contingency means the intrusion of things we do not expect and cannot control, and given the interaction of open and complex systems, there will always be contingency (Hyde, 1998).

At the heart of systems thinking are two premises about every system (including each individual person): (a) each is *both* a unique individual (even if only uniquely situated in the intersection of multiple associations), *and* a vital and essential part of the greater unity, and (b) any system is uniquely purposeful. Systems, while open to the "super-system," do have boundaries, and they need to expend energy in boundary maintenance (Scott, 1992). But it is just as important for any system to engage in the boundary-spanning activities (Scott, 1992) that create and enact our shared context. Any social system (including a self, a social group, an organization, a culture, a nation, etc.), is a trinity: (a) an entity unto itself with a purpose of its own, (b) composed by yet greater than the process/product of the purposeful interaction of its "sub-systems" or members, and (c) only understood in the context of the larger system or systems in which it finds itself. Argyris and Schon (1996) describe the many layers within an organizational system as a ladder of aggregation that proceeds from individuals to small groups, to departments made up of many small groups, to divisions that are clusters of departments, to the organization as a whole, to the larger field in

which the organization interacts with other organizations. These organizational layers exist not only as abstractions but as living entities each of which may be described as having interests, intentions, values, and theories-in-use of its own. From the point of view of each such entity, the rest of the organization is environment. An organization may be said to act, interact, inquire, and learn; so may the groups, departments, and divisions at different levels of aggregation within it. (p. 26)

Subsystems, systems, and supersystems are therefore not preset; rather, designation of any level is dependent on the use to which its inter-actors will put it. Each of us is embedded in multiple contexts, and we find ourselves simultaneously being subsystems of larger associations, systems of meaning interacting with other systems, and the context for the actions of others. The number and nature of the contexts in which these multiple interactions occur means that relying on a single perspective is not only impossible, but also foolish. Contingency means the intrusion of things we do not expect and cannot control, and given the interaction of open and complex systems, there will always be contingency (Hyde, 1998).

Given that systems, and their "openness" versus "closedness," are "simultaneously properties of systems and our conceptualizations of them" (Ackoff, 1971, p. 663), then meaning (in this metaphor) itself is an attitudinal, relational process, including relationships of power. That is, meaning, relationships, and power are closely interrelated.

The attempt to impose meaning on others through refusal to take their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations into account is a form of colonization (Purdy, 1991). Unilateral, unidirectional forms of influence attempts are acts of violence, and reification of meaning as being extraneous to the relationships that give rise to that meaning reinscribes these power processes. A guiding assumption in contemporary dynamics

of domination is the enclave notion of meaning: that categories have singular "ideal" referents--that truth is singular, and that the function of definitions is to isolate, to close off the true from the false. Such an assumption, though designed to elicit conformity, leads to dispute, given that (from the symbolic interactionist/pragmatist perspective) there are infinitely many associations, experiences, and intentions influencing any individual meaning. Instead, dialogism admits plurivocality, and therefore equivocality. The ground of meaning shifts from the relationship between signifier and signified to the relationship among interlocutors and the quality of their interactions.

**Retrospective & Prospective Fragments.** Admitting that our own reality is partial is a way to invite others to participate. We admit that we are open to suggestions, that we are willing to change our mind and our actions to improve the quality of our interactions, while we preserve our own integrity. Admitting that we are partial, we open ourselves to improvisation. Stories that reflect such an admission of partiality and incompleteness provide important opportunities for collaboration in sensemaking. Antenarratives are not merely immature narratives. Antenarratives, are emergent, are part of prospective for possibilities of what could be (prospective sensemaking). They are invitations to the other to play at making sense of, and therefore at creating and enacting, our shared world.

**Answerability**. Answerability ethics reminds us that we are answerable for stories we are given rights to retell-stories of oppression as well as of celebration. Answerability refers to the praxis inherent in stories. Stories implicate the whole complex system while admitting the necessity of differing perspectives, "one's side of the story." Stories reflect back the incident and allow it, and the storyteller, to be placed in the larger context; thus, they build three kinds of powerful connections: (a) between oneself and one's world: personal meaning-making; (b) between oneself and others: social integration; and (c) between what is and what might be: imagination and innovation. For Bakhtin (1991) to look at ethics means to not omit emotion, for to look at something from all the emotion angles is to understand its more subterranean depths.

Stories empower individuals by making the events in their life meaningful, "It puts a thread of connectedness through what had previously seemed accidental" (Huberman, 1995). Stories assume change and, thus, provide an opportunity to learn by mentally replaying the event and one's place in it, including the consequences of one's actions (Tappan & Brown, 1991). Constructing the story is not simply an individual process, however. The choice of what details to include depends on the storyteller's relationship with the listener; stories that help build shared meaning rely on equality of status and trust (Huberman, 1995). Some even go so far as to claim that stories underlie all meaning and that to refuse narrative is to refuse meaning itself (Fisher, 1984).

**Between Oneself and Others: Social Integration**

Telling the story of one's experiences both generates uniqueness and creates belongingness (Myrsiades, 1987). Stories assist others' learning by describing events in a way that listeners can more easily remember (Bolman & Deal, 1991; Bruner, 1990; Martin & Powers, 1983); thus, they remake personal memories into social ones (Bruner). Listening to another's story requires one to suspend disbelief; it is considered impolite to challenge the speaker (Wisely & Lynn, 1994); in turn, the listeners are allowed their own interpretation of the story (Narayan, 1991). In fact, the mark of a good story is that it is somewhat uncertain, open to variant meanings; in this way it is easier for the listener to enter into or identify with the narrative (Bruner). "Stories, then, are especially viable instruments for social negotiation . . . it is easier to live with

alternative versions of a story than of a 'factual' account because we are prepared to accept differences in versions as 'only human'" (Bruner, p. 54). The story and its teller allow people to make connections with their experiences, individually and collectively, and with one another.

Contributing one's story is an important form of participation, one that can change a person from being an "outsider" to an insider (Barley, 1991) or "member, and a definition of the situation consistent with that identity" (Cohen, 1991).

In all communications some commonality of meaning is assumed, a social world of taken for granted meanings is shared. Someone listening to a personal narrative projects this assumed meaning onto the storyteller and basks in the resultant sense of community, of *shared tradition*. (p. 273)

This shared tradition implicit in the act of storytelling is, therefore, a principle characteristic of social interaction and social identification--of commonality, community, and in-groups--and the associated relational characteristic--frequent interaction, trust, commitment, decisions about resource allocation, etc. (Graen & Cashman, 1975).

The teller of a story and the story itself generate a certain authority and legitimacy by virtue of the bond that is established between teller and listener (Mumby, 1988). The storyteller is granted authority, and its accompanying symbolic status, to power to mediate reality through discursive practices (Mumby). Stories "store" the surplus, or multiplicity of possible meanings (Mumby, citing Ricoeur, 1976), that discourse embodies. Stories, therefore, play with multiple identities, create the opportunity for new bonds and associations, and grant status on those who may not have it in another context. Stories help create "reality" itself and indicate possibilities for its change. In this way, stories provide a strategic link between what is and what might be.

## Between What Is and What Might Be: Imagination and Innovation

The first two connections created by narratives implicated two different levels of learning, individuals with their experiences and collectivities with the individuals. The third connection leads from learning at the group level to organizational innovation. Stories do this through the power of imagination. "Our capacity to render experience in terms of narrative is not just child's play, but an instrument for making meaning that dominates much of life in culture" (Bruner, 1990, p. 97). Personal accounts of human frailty or failure are especially successful as a means of encouraging a sense of connection or common humanity (Wisely & Lynn, 1994). Thus, reflecting on our personal experiences, having the courage to tell stories about the gaps between our intentions and the actual results, and having our stories listened to by organizational leaders helps organizations function optimally by creating a sense of shared values and goals (Mumby, 1988). Because stories are accepted as one or more person's "take" on the event, multiple interpretations are invited--each view on what might have been is equally valid.

Each comment offers a picture from a different vantage point in an effort to tell the whole story. The whole picture in soft focus brings better understanding than detailed pictures of fragmented parts. Each person adds to the common pool of ideas; [the organization is] challenged to find a coherent interpretation of their multiple perspectives. (Corey & Underwood, 1995, p. 177)

Stories are useful "if the purpose is to learn, to grow past our present limitations, to expand our vision to include more and more of the whole" (Corey & Underwood, p. 131). The power of stories seems to depend on their ability to point beyond themselves, to imply meaning beyond the original circumstance. Stories have the power to expand the horizon of possibilities between the exceptional and the ordinary. In two ways, therefore, stories encourage moving beyond what is.

Stories help to expand problem-solving abilities by providing a relatively safe "practice field" for imagining different and novel meanings, including the implicated action of the various meanings. By allowing multiple points of view and imagination--one's story is assumed to be from one's own vantage point and is allowed to be embellished for effect--stories lead to creativity and new ways of looking at things (Hausman, 1984, p. 109). In this way, the multiple perspectives encouraged by narratives serves to encourage organizational innovations, which are likely necessary to solve the initial problem. As a recovery group likes to say in irony, "It was our best thinking that got us here." Stories help generate new insights and approaches to current issues. Additionally, stories are tools of the imagination, a renewable resource that fuels creativity (Von Franz, 1992) and underpins human organizational performance outcomes.

The narrative model of cognition is based on "social constructionist images in which words gain sense only through actual use in a community, meanings are symbolic and inherently ambiguous, and the power of social processes, storytelling, and conversation is emphasized" (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995, p. 353). A narrative shows how events or features in the world are sensible and interact over time. Mumby (1988) noted that storytelling does more than simply convey information efficiently and effectively, or even support creative problem solving:
Discourse in general, and storytelling in particular, provides a medium for understanding which plays a constitutive role in the creation of organizational reality . . . Organizations are viewed as functioning optimally when there is a shared sense of values and goals, and stories help to expedite this process. (p. 103)

Seeing something as a story can ease up the injunction to judge it long enough for a new and creative outlook to have a chance. Seeing discrepancies as problems, or "symptomatic deviations from a desired normalcy of 'what things should be like,' caused by some wrongness" (Whitmont, 1969, p. 20), we see only one story, and so our only option is to react by trying to return to an "old" way. On the other hand, when we listen for multiple stories about the known facts, we look at how they may attempt to point further and deeper, to a development still called for and a meaningfulness so far unrealized. Only then do we think or live not merely symptomatically but also symbolically. The realization of that meaning which has so far been missed might then point toward a cure. (Whitmont, 1969, p. 20)

What may seem to be a funny coincidence may turn out to be a pivotal life event. What seems like a success may turn out to be a failure, and a crisis may turn out to open up a fabulous opportunity. Being open to multiple meanings, seeing things both for what they seem to be and for what they might mean, is a valuable tool for social change (Senge, 1990).

**Storytelling supports relationships and collaboration in several ways**

1. Stories have a different requirement regarding "truth" than do reports. Therefore, the categories of reference are not as strict, and therefore more easily cross the boundaries between differences.
2. Stories include elements of the context, chosen by the storyteller. This allows the listener to better understand what is important, or of sufficient value to be worth noting, to the speaker.
3. Stories are more easily remembered; therefore they are a way for organizations to "store" important learning incidents.
4. Stories invite the listener to participate in a "virtual" shared experience, which leads to shared meaning.
5. The vivid imagery and language of

stories make it easier to repeat; shared language builds shared culture.

6.  Stories are a way to address the recommendation of Schein (1995): to "let people discover that they use language differently, that they operate from different mental models, and that the categories we employ are ultimately learned social constructions of reality" (p. 4); therefore, they help facilitate organizational coordination, integration, learning, and effectiveness.

## Conclusion

Seeking to move beyond limits is an emancipatory move-both for stories and for people. One of those moves is to explore kinds of story and narrative sensemaking beyond BMEs. Communicating across boundaries is a unique capability of stories, especially fragmented, partial, antenarrative stories, which thereby contribute to relationships, understanding, ethical interactions, collaboration, and ethical communities. When limits to current capacities are experienced, individuals who admit their own limitations set the stage for both organizational learning and emancipatory processes.

We see the exploration of the interplay of multiple ways of sensemaking stories and narratives, as well as antenarratives as full of research opportunities.

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**APPPENDIX: POPULAR SOURCES FOR STORY/NARRATIVE/ANTENARRATIVE DEFINITIONS**
**Definition Sources   EMERGENT STORY SENSEMAKING - HERE & NOW**

Benjamin, 1936: 83-85, 91.     Says, "the art of storytelling is coming to an end" (83) because "the moral world… overnight has undergone changes which were never thought possible" (84). "Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn" (84). "If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university" (85). "It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they [stories] are being listened to" (91, bracketed addition, mine). "The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work-the rural, the maritime, and the urban-is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were" (91).

Illich, 1993:     Illich writes a social history of the alphabet (116), how alphabetization affects the popular mind, how we read, write, listen, speak, and think. We've gone from Homer's orality to text-dominated-orality. The transition occurred in the 12th and 13th centuries (94). With textalizing technologies, we no longer read by tongue and ear (95). "Both Plato … suggest the analogy between the alphabetic analysis of speech and the philosophical analysis of being which came into existence hand-in-hand" (40).

Ong, 1982:     "The illusion that logic is a closed system has been encouraged by writing and even more by print. Oral cultures hardly had this kind of illusion, though they had others" (169). Stories were once constructed for oral delivery, to be read aloud. In the "orality-literacy shift" our minds are "text-bound" and in need of liberation (156). "Even after print, textuality only gradually achieved the place it has today in cultures where most reading is silent" (p. 157). Rabelais wrote his texts on carnival, as if read to an audience (158). Families rarely read aloud to one another since the electronic culture adopted TV (157). Various kinds of residual orality (160) remain, but orality had become dominated by new ways of telling in electronic age (160).

Stein, 1931: 33; 1935:     Asks "what is a story?" and replies, a story is "wild and while", in the continuous present, with many ways of telling that are very telling (1931: 33). "Narration is what anybody has to say about anything that can happen, that has happened or will happen in any way" (1935: 31). Stein, like Benjamin, Illich and Ong, perceives a typographical bias


**Definition Sources   RETROSPECTION BME WHOLE SENSEMAKING NARRATIVE Definitions**

Aristotle, 350 BCE 1450b: 25: 233     Narrative requires story to be a *proper* "imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude... Now a whole is that which has beginning, middle, and end" the definition of coherent narrative (233).

Czarniawska, 1997: 78, 1998: vii, 2, 63     "A story consists of a plot comprising causally related episodes that culminate in a solution to a problem" (1997: 78); "[Stories are] texts that present events developing in time according to (impersonal) causes or (human) intentions." (1998: vii); "For them to become a narrative, they [stories] require a plot, that is, some way to bring them into a meaningful whole" (1998: 2, addition mine); "data that is merely chronologically ordered can be said to constitute… 'a story without a plot'" (1998: 63)

Gabriel, 2000: 5, 239, 19-21   "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" (5); "Stories are narratives with plots and characters, generating emotion in narrator and audience, through a poetic elaboration of symbolic material" (239, italics in original); Boje's tersely told "you know the story" is a "narrative deskilling," not a "proper" story, with plot, preventing full collections being built in management, as they are in his version of "organization folklore" (19-21)

Martin, 1982: 255; Martin, Feldman, Hatch & Sitkin, 1983: 439     [Organization] "Stories recount incidents that appear to be drawn accurately from an oral history of the

organization's past"; "An organizational story focuses on a single, unified sequence of events, apparently drawn from the institution's history."

Malinowski, 1954: 102 "Myth, as a statement of primeval reality still lives in present day life and as a justification *by precedent*, supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief" (102).

Weick, 1995: 127-129 "People think narratively rather than argumentatively or paradigmatically" and "organizational realties are based on narration", "the experience is filtered" by "hindsight" (127); "typically searching for a causal chain", "the plot follows - either the sequence beginning-middle-end or the sequence situation-transformation-situation. But sequence is the source of sense" (128); "sequencing is a powerful heuristic for sensemaking" (129)

**Definition Sources   RETRO PARTS SENSEMAKING NARATIVE definitions that are varietymaking**

Barry & Elmes, 1997: 431      "[Stories are] thematic, sequenced accounts that convey meaning from implied author to implied reader."

Boje, 1991: 111; Czarniawska, 2004: 38      "[A story is] an oral or written performance involving two or more people interpreting past or anticipated experience" (Boje, 111);

 "Boje" found "storytelling in contemporary organizations hardly follows the traditional pattern of a narrator telling a story from the beginning to end in front of an enchanted and attentive audience" (Czarniawska , 2004: 38)

Ricoeur, 1984: 150      "A story describes a sequence of actions and experiences done or undergone by a certain number of people, whether real or imaginary. These people are presented either in situations that change or act as reacting to such change. In turn, these changes reveal hidden aspects of the situation and the people involved, and engender a new predicament which calls for thought, action, or both. This response to the new situation leads the story towards its conclusion."

**Deifnition Sources   RELEXIVITY WHOLE SENSEMAKING NARRATIVE definitions that are unitymaking**

Boyce, 1995: 107      "[S]torytelling (..) [is] a symbolic form by which groups and organizational members construct shared meaning and collectively centre on that meaning."

Kant, 1781/1900: 4, 15, 466   *Transcendental* knowledge is a "supersensible sphere, where experience affords us neither instruction nor guidance" (p. 4); "Transcendental" as "all knowledge which is not so much occupied with objects as with the mode of our cognition of these objects, so far as this mode of cognition is *a priori*"(15); Kant limits architectonic to "Pure Reason", defines "*Architectonic*" as "the art of constructing a system", which he specifies as a "systematic unity of knowledge" (466)

Polkinghorne, 1988: 36        "[A story] serves as lens through which the apparently independent and disconnected elements of existence are seen as related parts of a whole."

Selznick, 1957: 151   Institutional stories are about competences, "efforts to state, in the language of uplift and idealism, what is distinctive about the aims and methods of the enterprise."

**Definition Sources   REFLEXIVITY PARTS SENSEMAKING NARRATIVE & ANTENARRATIVE definitions that are varietymaking**

Bakhtin, 1981: 60; 1973: 13, 26, 4     "Dialogic manner of the story" (1981: 60); "Narrative genres are always enclosed in a solid an unshakable monological framework" (1973: 13); In dialogism there is a move beyond "*systematic monological philosophical* finalizedness" (1973: 26); The plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness and the genuine polyphony of full-valued voices… plurality of equal consciousness and their world" (1973: 4).

Boje, 2001: 1-4     "Antenarrative" is defined as "the fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted and pre-narrative speculation, a bet" (1), a very improper story can be transformative (4).

Collins & Rainwater, 2005: 16-31     Takes a "sideways look" at antenarrative, the local and fragmented understandings of Sears' transformation. Storytelling is not viewed as reflection of organizational reality, but as organic and vital constituents of organizing (p. 20).