

Storytelling

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Definition

Storytelling is commonly defined using criterion initially developed by the Greek philosopher Aristotle. By such a definition, narratively “*proper*” stories must be: (a) linear plot sequence, (b) whole coherence of beginning, middle, and ending, and (c) recited by a solitary narrator. Conversely, however, it is also possible to consider such narrative wholes as a minor subset of “*improper*” storytelling, in all of its variety and complexity. This suggests that it is more common for stories to be non-linear, fragmented, distributed, and collective partial tellings. It is a discussion of this second, more inclusive and anti-aristotelian conception of storytelling that will be discussed in this entry.

Conceptual Overview

There are four ways storytelling is not the same as “proper” narrative. These are described below:

Non-linear

Storytelling can be highly non-linear, a telling can begin in the middle, leave out the beginning or the ending; start at the ending, leaving listeners to reconstruct the beginning, to find the middle in their own imagination and experience. Discussions of this can be seen in the recent work of Barbara Czarniawska.

Fragmented

Storytelling, in contrast to narrative, can be highly terse and fragmented among social participants. This is illustrated by 1991 an ethnographic study of storytelling in organizations by David Boje. Each teller told a fragment of a story, whose wholeness had yet to be realized, or articulated by any solitary narrator. A rather shallow reductionism takes place when fragmentation is ignored. In terms of research, it is common for narrative interviewers to demand that tellers recite coherent narrative, hence prompting storytellers to collapse enough fragments together to satisfy the interrogator’s lust for

coherence. Such practice clearly forces distortions in the way that stories naturally occur. Naturally occurring stories can thus be located in the situated complexity dynamics of storytelling's fragmented being.

Distributed

Storytelling can be highly distributed across simultaneous times and places. Whereas narrative interrogation demands an account constructed (concocted) in the artifice of the interview situation, storytelling studied ethnographically *in situ* finds them to be socially distributed, fragmented across many sites and temporalities. A 1995 study by Boje examined simultaneous storytelling performances in Disney film archives. This study approached storytelling as a distributive and non-coherent framework of fragments. While the management of Disney tried to shape a “proper” whole narrative of its executive’s storytelling the study showed that this was but one part of the overall network of story fragments. This shows how the non-linear processes dominated the organizations story telling system as the counter-tellers and audience fragmented and enacted multiple counterstories. Organizationally, this meant that storytelling was distributed across a storytelling landscape where official storytelling was countered by captured by dynamics of the simultaneous, distributed, on-going tellings being networked.

Collective

Storytelling can be regarded as non-linear, fragmented, and socially distributed. It , constitutes the collective systemicity of what can be defined as the “storytelling organizations”. As defined by Boje, a storytelling organization is a collective system in which the performance of stories is a key part of members' sensemaking and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory. Such an approach is also reflected in the work of Bob Gephart and Mary Boyce who study distributed sensemaking in storytelling organizations.

Critical Commentary and Future Directions

The systemicity of the storytelling organization (unlike mechanical, open, or organic system-wholeness) is never quite accomplished, rather riddled with partial tellings, story-starting and stopping behaviors, referencing intertextual in-betweenness, gaps, pauses,

and assumed agreements about story-wholeness rarely get checked out. If narrative is a subdomain of storytelling, then storytelling is one of the domains of discourse, along with metaphor and trope. As such, several critical research implications can be unpacked.

Research in storytelling can be divided into managerial and polyphonic approaches. Managerial approaches can be defined in terms of narrations that privileges the managers', owners', or more generally, the capitalist worldview. Ideologies, such as free market capitalism and its cousin, neo-liberalism are managerial, promoting and demanding a storytelling that heroizes managers, while leaving labor without voice. For example, in stakeholder theory, the manager merely thinks through the vantage points of labor and other stakeholders, without directly engaging them in face-to-face dialogue (i.e. stakeholders of the mind). The research problem addressed by Ellen O'Conner is how to set managerialist storytelling (managers narrating for others) into intertextual relationship with the embodied voices of other stakeholders: labor, community, environment, and so forth. Three storytelling research approaches are worth noting here: dialectic, heteroglossic, and dialogic.

Storytelling that is nonlinear, fragmented, distributed, and collective can also be dialectic. A direction for future research is how storytelling in complex organizations interacts (or is intertextual) with environment of discourses. For example, the official storytelling discourse can present some linear, tidy, and coherent legitimating narrative which is opposed dialectically by counter-storytelling that is more fragmenting, non-linear, decentered, and collectively distributed. Official stories often present coherent, positive, appreciative sides of the story, while depreciating inquiry into stories of oppression, exploitation, and questionable corporate behaviors.

Storytelling can be researched as heteroglossic. This is inquiry into stories embodied by diversity of participants, not just tales told by executives or managers. Mikhail Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as the opposing forces of a multiplicity of languages, the centripetal (deviation-countering) and centrifugal (deviation-amplifying) forces. This heteroglossia has yet to be researched in storytelling. For example, some stories are promulgated in organizations by the executive class to counter and control, to be centripetal. Other storytelling emerges as counter-stories, as emergent variation that

shatters by deviation-amplification, such as, tellings that change with each audience, that get rehistoricized or contemporalized. There are coherence-seeking narratives Czarniawska terms “petrified” – that is they become more coherent, less subject to variability, over time, across many tellings. This force of petrification can be seen to be , opposed by forces of deviation.

Using Bakhtin’s terms’ polyphonic dialogism’ (the multiplicity of simultaneous voices) is important since it can move storytelling research beyond a penchant for managerialism. Yet, there are several other dialogism that Bakhtin also identifies: stylistic, chronotopic, and architectonic – these are all under-researched and theorized in organization studies which are in need of research. Stylistic dialogism is the intermingled juxtaposition of diverse styles of telling, ranging from science telling with statistics and charts, authoritative speeches by authorities, stories from the public relations or marketers, to *skaz* (defined as everyday speech acts appropriated by corporations, such as Nike’s “Just Do It” and McDonald’s “I’m Lovin It!). Chronotopic dialogisms are collectively distributed. Bakhtin defines chronotope as the relativity of time and space in the novel. David Barry and Michael Elmes collapsed two of Bakhtin’s chronotopes (Greek Romance Adventure and Chivalric Adventure) into an “epic” hybrid as one of several types of “story strategies”; this epic one being the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) telling that one finds in strategy writing, in the stories of the executive who overcomes threats and weaknesses while exploiting strengths and opportunities, doing battle with competitors and forces in the marketplace; a kind of hero’s journey. Another chronotope of a “story strategy” is the more polyphonic (multi-voiced) approach to storytelling, one that Bakhtin called the “castle room” definable as multi-layering of histories, an expectation of what a stereotypic castle is like, and another meaning, the meeting of place of people of great diversity in age, experience, ideology, and we can add, with diverse gender, race, and ethnicity. The polyphonic dialogism of voices intersect with this particular chronotope of the castle room. In Bakhtin’s *Art and Answerability*, he defined architectonic dialogism as the interanimation of cognitive, ethic, and aesthetic discourses. If storytelling is a domain of discourses, the research implication is to look at how a cognitive theme in storytelling is intertextual to the ethical and aesthetic elements of the telling (and vice versa).

The work with Boje, Enríquez, González and Macías looked at the architectonics of a mural in a McDonald's fast food outlet situated inside a Super Wal-Mart located in New Mexico. The aesthetics of the story being told in the art work resonated with an ethnocentric ethics, and a cognitive hailing, that somehow the McDonald's story was quite sensitive to diversity, even celebrating it in the mural. The type of ethics Bakhtin has in mind is "answerability"; who is answerable for this story being told. The aesthetic is not the "beauty" criteria of Aristotle, but instead a focus on "consummation": how is the systemicity of this storytelling being consummated, and by whom? Polyphonic, stylistic, chronotopic, and architectonic dialogism open up research possibilities.

The most daunting challenge is how to study the dialogism of these dialogisms, what I call "*polypi*." The polypi of a multiplicity of interactive dialogisms (polyphonic, stylistic, chronotopic, and architectonic) call the field to a new type of storytelling research. The days of collecting stories by interview or survey are passé. It is time to study storytelling in all its complexity, with emergence, dialectic, and heteroglossic tellings and counter-tellings. If there is coherence seeking narrative, there is also amplification-seeking storytelling.

Another direction for storytelling research concerns 'antenarrative'. In 2001 I defined *antenarrative* as "before" or "prestory" and a "bet" or "ante" that a nonlinear, fragmented, distributed, and collective telling can transform an storytelling organization. An emerging direction of research is *in situ* socially grounded, distributed performance of in-the-moment storytelling obtained ethnographically (as opposed to what is elicited by interview methods). Antenarrative inquiry allows us to explore the processes of antenarration. The direction of that transformation can be towards managerialist hegemony or can oppose more official tellings in ways that are dialectic and deviation-amplifying. It takes longitudinal storytelling methods to trace the emergence of antenarratives, with sensitivity to the variations in storytelling across the landscape. A number of antenarrative storytelling research projects have commenced by researchers such as Grace Ann Rosile, Rita Duant, John Luhman, David Collins, and Carolyn Gardner.

In storytelling consulting considerable attention has been placed on using storytelling to capture *tacit knowledge* and transfer it into *systemitized explicit knowledge*.

This managerialist appropriation of storytelling is also researchable. This includes studies about knowledge engineers, who collect (so-called) tacit knowledge in stories elicited in focus groups (story circles) in order to make said stories retrievable in the computer databanks. Critical inquiry can link story interrogation with the managerial payoff : to downsize the older employees, since it is assumed their wisdom is conveyed in the stories that are now stored in computers. Is tacit-story collection accompanied by downsizing less experienced, less educated, or hiring younger workers for less? There are researchable assumptions about downsizing and deskilling are rampant in the knowledge worker, knowledge/learning organization, knowledge economy storytelling. Claims are also made by organizations such as, NASA, that 30% or more of their knowledge has disappeared. Does all the outsourcing, downsizing, and deskilling result in for lucrative story consulting contracts? Can storytelling (tacit) knowledge be commodified and transferred to computer storage? Is such story-storage utilized? What are the implications for knowledge reengineering if there is not a computer database with enough gigabytes to store all the storytelling rehistoricizing, in-betweenness, and contextualizing.

Another approach to story, is to look for it in-between teller and listener. In what ways is story socially distributed, fragmented, collectively enacted, and so tersely told in ways that most of it remains unstated, inside the head? Gertrude Stein's work argues against development narrative, seeking to explore the unfolding present, and the variety of ways of telling that occur simultaneous to one another. These ways of telling in complex organizations can be a topic of research. If storytelling knowledge is contextual, in-between the performance and the situation, then inquiry can also focus on varying story with performances to various audiences, and varying across to landscape. Is storytelling knowledge being constantly rehistoricized with each antenarration? Does each telling redistribute collective memory? Does antenarrative, for example, contemporize new elements with old ones, jettisoning elements, grafting new meaning.

Story is said to be inextricably intertwined with organization complexity. Can the less linear, more invariant forms of storying be studied in relations to complexity? Which stories are invariant, and which are constantly changing and rearranging? Is antenarration and emergent storytelling that is more fragmented, distributed, collective enactment as

compared to petrified narrative forms? How does antenarrative emergent interact with petrified narrative? Is it heteroglossic force and counterforce?

There is one last and most important area for storytelling research: living storytelling. It is the kind of storytelling research one finds in the detective novel, in narrative therapy, or in the courtroom. The detective challenges the first story heard, digs below the surface, follows leads, and traces a story that is unfolding moment-to-moment. It is the not developmental narrative, but a storytelling that is unfolding, as yet, unfinalized, with elements unmerged. In Michael White and David Epston' *narrative therapy*, the dominant story that is the prison of the individual, scripting their life, is a hegemonic force, one that cries out for deconstruction, a way to liberate the person from an oppressive story. In the courtroom, the defense and prosecuting attorneys challenge the veracity of the storytelling; challenge the jury to hear many sides and nuances to stories told on the stand. In the process, a living story gets torn asunder. Living storytelling is the intersection of each person's life story, with family history, with work organization storytelling demands, and with societal stories. The living story is a jungle, a maze that forms its own complex systemicity. One cannot change their living story without confronting family stories, work storytelling, and societal storytelling; all are prisons to the living story of each one of us.

David M. Boje

See also: Narrative

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