

Narrative Matters

Paper Title: That Reminds Me of a Story: The importance of narrative in creating context and connectedness in organisational learning

Name of author: Dr. Dawn Langley

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This paper was first developed for the Narrative Matters Conference, 2011. This shorter version focuses on the key theoretical concepts that evolved from research into three publicly funded arts organisations. They are not featured directly here to preserve their anonymity.

That Reminds Me of a Story: The importance of narrative in creating context and connectedness during organisational crisis

Abstract

Much of the existing literature sees organisational learning as rational, planned and cognitive with little acknowledgement of its social and contextual nature. In this paper I argue that, based on my organisational development experience and research work, story and narrative has an important role to play in the understanding of connectedness and context and that this has implications for organisational learning. In taking this approach I challenge the view of man/woman as action scientist and move away from intentionality and “purposive consciousness” (Bateson, 2000: 440) in terms of organisational learning. In doing so I propose that as human beings we could be regarded as nodes in a vast network of storylines and as such learning might be seen more in terms of stories that trigger other stories.

The notion of context

Context: /kon'tekst/n The parts of a piece of writing or speech which precede and follow a particular word or passage and may fix, or help to fix, its true meaning; associated surroundings, setting. [L. *contextus*, *contexere*, from *con-* and *texere*, *textum* to weave] The Chambers Dictionary

Context is a term which is widely used across a range of disciplines yet it appears to remain an ill-defined concept. In their research Bazire and Brezillon (2005) developed a database of over 150 definitions and found that generally, context is taken to refer to “the set of circumstances that frame an event or an object.” (Bazire & Brezillon, 2005) Its use abounds in psychology, organizational and management studies and different forms of qualitative research. In recognising the complex social embeddedness of case studies Stake refers to eight potential forms of context: historical, cultural, physical social, economic, political, ethical, and aesthetic. (Stake, 2005)

Context, or more likely the perceived absence of, sometimes features in critiques of different forms of research which are highlighted as having taken experience, action or discourse out of context. Some argue that sensitivity to context is one of the central mechanisms or criteria for evaluating qualitative research. (Yardley, 2000)

My use of context in this paper is closely related to organisational learning, aesthetics and embodiment, a focus which has emerged through my research, “we may regard context as a “collective” term for all those events that tell the organism among what set of alternatives he [she] must make his [her] next choice.” (Bateson, 2000: 289) On this basis context is taken beyond being a set of circumstances to something that has a direct dialogue with how people behave and understand those circumstances.

As individuals or groups we may consider if this is a context we have experienced before and as such an automated response may be appropriate or whether this is something new which requires a novel or changed approach, choices between alternatives. I therefore propose that learning and context are inextricably linked.

Gregory Bateson (1904-1980) talks of working with a group of art students in the 1960s and asking them what he later describes as an aesthetic question. Taking an object out of a brown paper bag he placed before the students a large, cooked crab.

He then asked “How are you related to this creature? What pattern connects you to it?” (Bateson, 1979) Initially, the students offered up the fact the crab was symmetrical, but then someone pointed that out one claw was considerably bigger than the other.

“Going back to symmetry, somebody said that, ‘yes, one claw is bigger than the other, but both claws are made of the same parts.’

Ah, what a beautiful and noble statement that is, how the speaker politely flung into the trash can the idea that size could be of primary or profound importance and went after the *pattern which connects*. He discarded asymmetry in favour of a deeper symmetry in formal relations.” (Bateson, 1979: 8)

In much of my research and consultancy work I see organisations struggling with the notion of changing contexts, often unable to recognise the pattern that may connect.

From Action Scientist to Story

The literature on organisational learning tends to focus on the metaphor of the individual as action scientist. This is particularly strongly expressed through the literature on the ‘Learning Organization’, where becoming a Learning Organisation has been widely promoted as a worthy ambition for any organisation wishing to improve and gain some form of competitive advantage. This approach has been primarily adopted by practitioners and tends to focus on applied models and action research. It is also underpinned by the notions of single and double loop learning. (Argyris & Schon, 1978)

Single loop learning is said to occur when there is a match between intended outcomes and action taken, or adjustments are made on route to achieve the intended outcome. Double loop learning, however, requires an organisation and its members to take a more reflective approach and consider different possibilities and outcomes before action is taken. On this basis double loop learning is generally regarded as superior to single loop learning. This model of organisational learning implies that learning is discontinuous, cognitive and primarily conscious which makes it amenable to steering and organising. It is also directed at individual or organisational improvement.

It has been argued, however, that double loop learning neglects adaptive behaviours, contexts and relationships. (Visser, 2007) This suggests a different view of learning, one in which it is seen as continuous, behavioural-communicative and largely unconscious. It is also not a given that such learning is responsive to direct management or organising. There is also no guarantee that it will lead to any form of improvement, especially in its pathological, double binding form. (Visser, 2007)

The learning organisation approach suggests that organisational actors can directly reflect on and address their context in order to achieve new learning and that as a result there is a high degree of intentionality possible in terms of learning and action. Much of our consciousness is driven by purpose but some are sceptical about how much insight this actually provides, “purpose is a short-cut device to enable you to get quickly at what you want; not to act with maximum wisdom in order to live, but to follow the shortest logical or causal path to get what you next want, which may be dinner; it may be a Beethoven sonata; it may be sex. Above all, it may be money or power.” (Bateson, 2000: 439-440)

And what of those aspects that occur outside of our awareness, our emotions, our physical responses and so on, what of tacit knowledge? (Polanyi, 1967) In my research on organisational learning examples of purposeful action research were rare and this has led me to explore an alternative metaphor that of man/woman as story.

On this basis story becomes an important mechanism that connects and gives news of context. We are storied beings, “man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal.” (MacIntyre, 1981: 201) and as such it could be said that we are nodes in a vast array of storylines. (Nunn, 2005) These storylines, much like the Songlines of Australia are interconnected, mostly these stories are taken on and remain relatively unchanged, sometimes a storyline will be altered and occasionally an individual may be the originator of a new story.

“It was during his time as a school teacher that Arkady learned of the labyrinth of invisible pathways which meander all over Australia and are known to Europeans as ‘Dreaming-tracks’ or ‘Songlines’; to the Aboriginals as the ‘Footprints of the Ancestors’ or the ‘Way of the Law’. Aboriginal Creation myths tell of the legendary totemic beings who had wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path – birds, animals, plants, rocks, water-holes – and so singing the world into existence.” (Chatwin, 1987: 2)

As in the notion of the Songlines most of these stories with which we interconnect do not derive from our own personal histories but are originated in the societies which we inhabit, “we must view ourselves as a collection of stories embedded in memory, not as de la Mettrie machines.” (Nunn, 2005: 188)

Discussion

“A man wanted to know about mind, not in nature, but in his private large computer. He asked it ‘Do you compute that you will ever think like a human being?’ The machine set to work to analyze its own computational habits. Finally the machine printed its answer on a piece of paper as such machines do.

The man ran to get the answer and found, neatly typed, the words: THAT REMINDS ME OF A STORY.’ (Bateson, 1979: 22)

Where in many cases the participants in my research were unable to speak directly of their learning they were able to tell stories of the organisation as it went through some form of transformation. Many of these stories highlighted the tacit nature of knowledge and the dominance of informal learning. These stories connected the organisational members, they were used to make sense of their contexts as well as appearing to form that context, following Bateson’s notion of context as pattern through time. It seems to be the case that sometimes individuals and organisations are influenced by their circumstances and other times individuals and organisations determine events, what appears to be constant are the story lines that are embedded in both the people involved and their circumstances. (Nunn, 2005)

One organisation I studied struggled to recognise the change in context denoted by a merger and as such their story lines remained rooted in the past organisations even though those surrounding the organisation had changed, this created a disconnect which appears to have impacted their capacity to learn, “break the pattern which connects the items of learning and you necessarily destroy all quality.” (Bateson, 1979: 7)

Another organisation emerged out the occurrence of a new story line. It was created in 2000 by a group of opportunistic artists who saw the potential in a disused building as an alternative gallery space, their original place in the ecology was one of being cutting edge. They soon recognised that running an organisation required them to connect with other, sometimes unfamiliar, stories that created their context and were able to respond without losing their own identity.

A third organisation appeared to be a site where the new Chief Executive was able to pick up existing storylines and alter them thereby creating a strong sense of pride and connectedness that manifest itself in a dominant metaphor of ‘family’.

Concluding Comments

I often struggle in my research to make sense of the complexity involved in understanding organisational learning, something about which there is little consensus and much appears to happen under the surface despite what some of the literature suggests.

In many of the organisations I work with their mechanism for making connections seems to be story whereby “a story is a little knot or complex of that species of connectedness which we call relevance.” (Bateson, 1979: 12) This notion of relevance occurs not only between the elements of the story itself but also between the people involved in the story line “in that all think in terms of stories.” (Bateson, 1979: 12) Reconnecting with these story lines might help us move beyond intentionality and conscious attention to regain some of the systemic wisdom we may have lost.

“[Bateson’s] central insight was that active engagement within the aesthetic process can enable us to see beyond the ‘purposive consciousness’ which has led us to ecological peril. Our conscious awareness is largely limited to the satisfaction of immediate desires by the most direct ways available. We have lost access to the wisdom accrued in evolution and even to the greater part of the fruits of our personal experience. We have absorbed the societal beliefs and constructs which foster our illusions of supremacy, dominance, separation from the ‘natural’ world...We have come to believe that ‘mind’ is a ‘substance’ divorced from the physical world and we perplex ourselves with the question of how it can interact even with our own physical bodies.” (Charlton, 2003:225-226)

Organisational learning is in part about explicit learning but it is also about the fact that learning can take different forms not all of which can be expressed – the implicit and the tacit forms of learning. It is about uniting the individual, the social and the event. In terms of thinking of learning as a response to context and therefore a change it seems that learning could be seen as a story that triggers another story.

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