



SUSAN GARY WALTERS

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1. Introduction

As the sun rose early in the morning, a group of guests came to Dagoni village. The guests were very dirty and did not wear shoes. First, they went to where the animals stay for the night. The guests played with the animals, having a good time getting dirtier and dirtier. At breakfast time, the guests went into the house and did not wash their hands. The family of the house served tea with breakfast, and the guests were very happy because they liked tea a lot. They drank from all the glasses and ate the little pieces of sugar that fell on the floor. After breakfast, the children of the house went out to play, and the guests followed them. One little boy squatted in the grass to go to the toilet on the ground. The guests liked this dirty place and were happy to play in it. And there was lots of trash to investigate, too. At lunchtime, the dirty guests went back to the house and found the family eating couscous. “Oh, we love couscous,” the guests said, and they promptly ate from every place in the couscous dish with their hands, which they had not washed. Some of the guests even tried to eat the couscous that stuck to the faces of the small children. The family of the house did not do much to stop the dirty guests. And so, the dirty guests stayed in the village all day, leaving when the sun went down. At night, many in the family were sick; the parents had stomachaches, the baby had red, sore eyes, and one child had diarrhea. (Phillips 2020, 1–2)

This story, told by health workers in Morocco, communicated more powerfully than presenting scientific or analytical information about the health problems related to flies. As a narrative, it elicited deep emotional responses among the Moroccan women who heard it. “Telling the dirty guest story brings reactions of horror and disgust, along with eagerness to discover who the guests are, and finally humor (and relief) in learning that the guests are not actually human” (Phillips 2020, 22). What is it about a story that is engaging and compelling, often staying in the minds of listeners long after the time it is told or read?

1.1 What I mean by stories

My use of “story” in this article refers to the form of communication that uses narrative rather than propositions. I use the terms “story” and “narrative” interchangeably. In other contexts, the term “story” has been used in other ways.

One different meaning for “story” or the verb “storying” refers to communication that is oral rather than written. Scholarly interest in orality began to emerge in the latter half of the twentieth century. The 1980s saw an increasing number of studies in orality and the establishment of journals focused on orality both in secular and faith-based arenas. The International Orality Network (ION), growing out of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism in 2004, has become a global network of over 2,000 organizations. New terms such as “oral

preference” were coined to describe people who prefer to receive and process information in oral format rather than print. This oral sense of “story” contrasts with written literacy.

A second use of the term “story” refers to epistemology, a way of knowing and structuring thought. Bruner (1987; 1990) early posited a narrative mode of thought different in form from logical reasoning. This sense of “story” contrasts with modernism’s focus on objective, empirical truth. It aligns with a postmodern, constructivist paradigm in which “what is known depends wholly on the perspective of the knower and the contexts of the knowing” (Bradt 1997, 234). In this sense, story does not attempt to represent reality but rather to explore its possible meanings and find significance by co-constructing understandings. Similarly, Fisher (1985) proposed a “narrative paradigm” as a broad ontological construct including all forms of human communication.

Neither of these meanings above match exactly what I am describing in this article. What I mean by “story” is a narrative presenting a coherent series of events situated at a particular time and including at least minimal discussion of the environment in which the experience takes place. Stories weave together multiple elements: characters, plot, setting, dialogue, and rhetorical devices (e.g., similes, metaphors, images, signs and symbols, motifs, repetition). A significant power of narrative is that the teller can choose the lens through which to look, thereby showing a particular point of view with associated values. Narrators can adjust the lens within a story, to show different points of view. Narrative—both fiction and nonfiction—unlike expository text, creates an imagined world that reflects our realm of experience (Mar 2004).

It is this sort of story—either written or oral—whose benefits I explore as a means of communicating beyond what can be conveyed in propositional points or abstractions. C. S. Lewis ([1966] 2002) wrote that stories take us further than theorems because they present us with images of a deeper and truer reality than what we can see on the surface. Stories, in the sense I intend here, include both off-the-cuff narrations of events in our daily lives and carefully crafted literary forms deemed literature or works of art.¹

1.2 The artistic form of stories

Like other artforms, stories are special, heightened forms of communication set apart from everyday communication patterns. Even an informal story has a beginning and ending and uses language with marked forms for its junctures, twists, and stops along the way. Between a story’s beginning and ending, the form of language is manipulated in particular ways—for example, using repetition, formulaic openings, or climax markers. At prescribed points, the information conveyed in a story may be expanded or contracted compared to everyday communication.

Beyond these linguistic features, stories can be told in artistic ways using facial expressions, gestures, and body movements, as well as with auditory features such as expression, voice qualities, and particular rhythms. Stories can also be artfully crafted with literary devices such as metaphors, imagery, and foreshadowing. Moreover, each language and culture has its own patterns for storytelling that convey meaning in specific ways (Schrag 2013; Walters 2021).

¹ Narrative, broadly defined, extends beyond verbal arts to include other modalities such as movies, pictures, and mime. In this article, terms such as story “teller” and “reader” are not meant to be limited but may be construed to include producers and recipients of stories, regardless of the media in which the narrative is presented and consumed.

In addition to having their own artistic features, stories are often layered with other artforms: drama, music, dance, and visual arts. For example, stories are an integral part of movies, TV shows, and dramas. Stories are used in songs, such as ballads that may tell a long story, or country songs that tell kernels of stories or mini stories. Some dances enact stories. Visual art can use images that reference or evoke known stories or tell new ones (Alexander 2022). Because other artistic genres so often build on narrative, stories might be thought of as a cornerstone artform. The kinds of stories we tell are so many and varied that most cultures have specific names for multiple genres: epics, fables, origin narratives, hero stories, trickster tales, folktales, and fairy tales, to name some possibilities.

Stories can be misused and cause harm. They have sometimes been told to deceive, stir up division, manipulate others, or enforce a single narrative of those in power (Osler 2015; Mckee 2009). The story itself does not determine the message it carries. This article focuses on the positive characteristics inherent in stories and their potential for enlivening and enhancing communication.

2. Characteristics of stories

Experts in fields as diverse as philosophy, management, psychology, counseling, communications, education, the arts, and biblical studies have written extensively about the value and power of stories. Stories can be harnessed for good by individuals and organizations. Stories can be part of organizations' lives at many levels: communicating complex ideas and persuading people to change; getting people working together; sharing knowledge; taming the grapevine and dealing with rumors; communicating who you are; transmitting values; and leading people into the future (Brown et al. 2005, 177).

We [consultants and management in big companies] all worked in environments where storytelling was widely seen as something frivolous and ephemeral, something relevant mainly to entertainment, or something that only children and primitive societies engage in. Yet each of us became convinced that narrative and storytelling played an enormous role in the modern economy and in organizations in the public and private sector—the serious aspects of 21st century life. In fact, we have come to see that narrative has a hand in practically everything that happens of any significance in human affairs (Brown et al. 2005, X).

How is it that something as common as a story can have such significant impact on human affairs? In the following section, I list twenty-one characteristics of stories, organized into eight categories: being human, attracting notice, connecting people, resonating with reality, shaping thinking and memory, engaging the senses, simplifying communication, and envisioning the future (see Figure 1). Each of these characteristics is followed by examples of different contexts in which stories are effectively used.

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Being human | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a human touch • Communicate confidence in the source |
| Attracting notice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capture attention • Invite readers and hearers into the experience |
| Connecting people | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster relationships • Help build bridges • Strengthen teamwork |
| Resonating with reality | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place meaning in context • Can match the complexities of life |
| Shaping thinking and memory | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change attitudes and beliefs • Cultivate thinking skills • Aid memory |
| Engaging the senses | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve the emotions • More fun than propositions • Concrete |
| Simplifying communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple to use • Inexpensive technology • Can be less confrontational |
| Envisioning the future | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can lead to solutions and change • Can spark hope and healing • Useful in many contexts |

Figure 1. Characteristics of stories that make them powerful means of communication.

2.1 Being human

Stories are central to the human experience. The personal, human connection can be especially important in traditional societies where work is often done through a network of relationships and where decisions are based more on “Who” than on “What.”

2.1.1. Stories provide a human touch



Narrative is “a primary structure of human meaning” (Rossiter 2002, 5). We relate to stories because they involve characters like us—speaking, deciding, feeling, reacting beings. Even stories about animals or nonliving things clothe them with human characteristics. Because stories deal with human or human-like experience, we tend to think of them as authentic and believable. “Narrative is deeply appealing and richly satisfying to the human soul” (Rossiter 2002, 2).

2.1.2. Stories communicate confidence in the source



An orally told story comes from a particular person. Listeners can measure their confidence in the story from their knowledge of the speaker. The story is anchored to a specific person in the universe; it doesn’t float untethered. “In the written word, there is often a disconnect between the speaker and the spoken. Often the reader is not quite sure who is saying the words. So the words tend to lack authenticity” (Brown et al. 2005, 118). In contrast, a written story with a known source can inspire trust.

Stories provide a human touch. We tell or read bedtime stories to our children. It comforts them as they wait in the dark for sleep to come. When my children were small, my husband and I sometimes recorded our bedtime story readings to them onto cassette tapes: *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Father and I Were Ranchers*, and *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. Our children listened to those tapes over and over. Before the tapes were completely worn out, we transferred the audio to digital formats. In her twenties, away from home, our daughter would often still go to sleep listening to our voices reading those familiar stories, long sections of which she could quote verbatim.

2.2 Attracting notice

Stories, especially those that depict settings and characters the listeners identify with, draw people in. Listeners and readers are involved in the process as they compare and relate a story to their own experiences.

2.2.1 Stories capture attention



Well-told stories hook us through their content and the way they unfold. They keep our interest because we relate to characters and events, and they invite our imagination to engage, tapping into our own store of life experience. Good stories have a “surprise quality” in the way their action unfolds in successive episodes. “This mystery of development constantly entices us to linger around to see what happens next. It forms in us an irresistible urge to guess at how the story’s tension will be resolved” (Anderson 2000, 12). Even when we know the ending, we can enjoy a well-crafted story over and over.

2.2.2 Stories invite the reader and hearer into the experience



Listeners and readers are drawn to stories. Beyond presentation of ideas, generalizations, or cognitive information, “with a story, listeners get inside the idea. They live the idea” (Brown et al. 2005, 111). Stories are an invitation to share an experience: “The power of story as a literary form is its uncanny ability to involve us in what is happening” (Ryken 1984, 34). Getting lost or absorbed in a story is a mental process referred to as narrative transportation, a mechanism that melds imagery, feelings, and attentional focus (Green and Brock 2000).² Certain video games can provide even deeper engagement because the story receiver is also participating in the story creation by constructing the playable character and making choices throughout the narrative that lead to or limit future outcomes (Gee 2007).

Stories attract notice. In 1989 I was teaching English to first-year students at a college in a small city in China. Because my conversation class was considered less important than classes such as “Intensive [English] Reading”—a subject that would be tested on standard exams—students treated the class lightly and often arrived late. To encourage timeliness, I started telling my parents’ love story in short episodes. It is a very romantic tale, and the Chinese young people were eager to hear it. I would tell that day’s “chapter” for the first five minutes of each class. No one wanted to miss it. So they came.

Marketers know that stories are catchy, and the use of story as a customer engagement strategy is on the rise (van Laer, Feiereisen, and Visconti 2019). Many advertisements tell stories, and companies use them to entice people to buy a product, switch to their brand, or make a lifestyle change. My friend who is not an early adopter of new technology recently installed a password manager app. In an attempt to educate herself about how the app works and find out what it could do for her, she browsed a PDF of their user manual on her computer. Tucked into the expected technical headings, one section of the table of contents was titled “A List of Stories.” Intrigued, she clicked the first story on the list. It turned out to be a humorous animal fable about a cat and a dog who work in a company where someone is trying to steal their information. My friend read every story on the list. Later, she

² Narrative transportation is explored further in Walters 2023.

laughingly acknowledged that the stories were rather silly. Nevertheless, the simple scenarios interested her enough to sustain her as she learned a technical and somewhat complicated new tool.

2.3 Connecting people

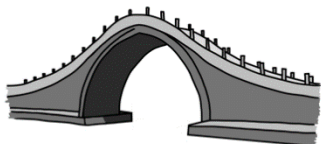
A story can link people together, helping them share experiences and see each other with new eyes. Because of their ability to adjust people's points of view, stories can be used for team building—even among virtual teams that lack cues traditionally present with in-person interactions (body language, tactile interaction, and auditory, visual, and social cues). After completing a task together, a team is drawn together by collecting first-person accounts of each person's actions and then switching to a third-person vantage point. This gives each person a better understanding of their teammates and an idea of how each one's isolated experience fits into the coordinated effort. Capturing success stories of past projects and sharing them can build a compelling record that contributes to a team's collective memory and a stronger foundation of team understanding, coordination, and productivity.

2.3.1 Stories foster relationships



Stories can bring people together in many ways. Storytelling establishes relationships. “We rehearse or retell significant stories at family gatherings to reestablish our bonds” (Stahl 2017, 2). Sharing personal stories often builds intimacy. Because stories come from lived experience and invoke emotions from these experiences, the sharing of each other's stories contains the potential to connect people deeply and can contribute to building ties of friendship.

2.3.2 Stories help build bridges



Telling and hearing a story can be a bridge between lives. The narrator might weave scenarios that portray aspects in common with the lives of the listeners or readers and bring to mind ways in which people are similar, building relevance. “The power of human imagination is one of the storyteller's greatest allies. A well-told story creates its own world in the mind of every listener. This helps the listener to own the story and take it to heart” (Leung 2010, 111). Stories let us walk in someone else's shoes and imagine life from their perspective. Building this sort of understanding helps people get along.

2.3.3 Stories strengthen teamwork



The sharing of stories sometimes draws tellers and listeners together. “The joy comes not just from the story but also from connecting with others while sharing that story. ... It is like going to a sports activity at which everyone supports the same team and everybody wins. Better than that, we are all on the same team” (Spaulding 2011, 13). In the corporate world (and outside it), stories can be told to set group objectives, foster collaboration, enhance group learning, and affirm a team’s value (Denning 2005). Stories can also strengthen distributed teams working toward a common goal via interactive media technologies (Fiore and McDaniel 2006).

Stories connect people. A staff care debriefer with an international organization conducted a forty-five-minute debrief for three teenaged siblings. As they began, the debriefer gave each of them a colored pen and asked the siblings to mark “gains” above and “losses” below a timeline. Then each one was given the chance to tell their own story, describing the events they had listed. When the youngest began telling the story of a particular event he had marked as a loss that his two older siblings had put down as a “gain,” the older siblings interjected corrections. The debriefer stopped them, allowing the youngest to go on. He described why his experience of it was a loss. As they listened to his story, they understood in a new way how the event had affected him. The debriefer noted a “light bulb” moment on their faces and saw their compassion stirred toward him. When the debrief time was over, all three were disappointed that they could not keep going. Listening to each other’s stories in which thoughts, emotions, events, and sensory details were included, allowed them to bond. They walked away a little closer to each other than before (M. Lester, personal communication, November 1, 2022).

An effective mandate gives specifics about the objective while allowing a team to exercise creativity in how they go about the work. Stories can illustrate a goal without imposing excessive detail. One of my friends who works with a minority language community in Asia heard from them a desire for songs in their own language and musical style. She decided to gather a few people together to try to compose new songs. On the appointed day, seven ladies came to my friend’s home. Having never written songs before, they had no idea how to go about it. As a way of instructing them, she shared the story of how years earlier she herself—not a trained musician—had written her first song. That story gave the ladies an example of a process they could try to follow. By the end of the day, to their amazement, each of the seven ladies had composed at least one song, and some had composed two! A few of the ladies went on to write more songs after that, improvising their own methods now that they’d had some success.

2.4 Resonating with reality

Stories can dwell comfortably with mystery, paradox, conflict, or ambiguity—complexities inherent in reality. Ideas presented in stories are given a context.

2.4.1 Stories place meaning in context



Stories give a textured setting in which propositions can live. “Truth unmoored from context and relationship becomes a commodity: cold, impersonal, dead, absolute” (Bradt 1997, 33). Unlike scattered dissections, stories can convey knowledge embedded in real lived experience, affirming cultural values. Stories make sense in forms that are recognized and familiar.

2.4.2 Stories can match the complexities of life



Another advantage of using stories for communicating or teaching is that they allow for the reality of life’s complexities and mysteries. Stories can “embrace and tolerate . . . ambiguity, wonder, paradox, pain, grief, and surprise” (Bradt 1997, 132). Because stories have few strict parameters and recount and describe real people, what they do and what happens to them, stories have the potential “to do justice to the complexity and multiplicity of human life as we actually experience it” (Ryken 1984, 23).

Stories resonate with reality. Two researchers concerned with preserving American Indian culture, language, and knowledge that is at risk of being lost to the next generation intentionally defied dominant conventions of academic discourse. Instead of using the mainstream model with conclusions, argumentations and evidence presented in a linear fashion, they chose to report on the findings of their study of teachers of American Indian students in a book of stories, *Collected Wisdom: American Indian Education*. By doing this, they hoped to close the gap between the reporting of research findings and implementation into classroom practice. They explain that reporting research findings from an Ojibwe epistemological standpoint, “which is rich in stories and metaphor, runs counter to the linear reporting of data, facts and finding” (Cleary and Peacock 1997, 10). Narrative could more adequately reflect the complexity and showcase the collected wisdom that would speak into the problems of American Indian education.

2.5 Shaping thinking and memory

Particular brain structures are activated when people process stories. Studies have shown that these brain areas are unique to narrative-processing, different from those identified for word and even sentence-level operations (Mar 2004).

Stories engage and sharpen our reason. “Stories are very basic to the human thinking process” (Schank 1990, 219). They are also the ways we encode, remember, and retrieve information. Our memory must contain both specific experiences and labels by which we can trace those memories.

The more information we are provided with about a situation, the more places we can attach it to in memory and the more ways it can be compared with other cases in memory. Thus, a story is useful because it comes with many indices. These indices may be locations, attitudes, quandaries, decisions, conclusions, or whatever. The more indices we have for a story that is being told, the more places it can reside in memory. Consequently, we are more likely to remember a story and to relate it to experiences already in memory. (Schank 1990, 11)

As well as the added memory power in the stories we hear, the process of creating a story, which we might tell to someone else, creates a memory structure that will contain the gist of the experience or idea in our own memory.

2.5.1 Stories change attitudes and beliefs



Stories have the power to affect attitudes and beliefs. People return from the experience of narrative transportation—the vivid absorption into the story world involving imagery, emotions and attention—changed by the experience (Green and Brock 2000, 702). Narrative is particularly effective at lowering resistance to change, a person’s intentional effort to hold onto existing attitudes. This characteristic of narrative was the basis for Entertainment-Education, a communication strategy that uses engaging narrative to alleviate a social issue such as a public health concern by increasing a community’s knowledge, creating more favorable attitudes, and changing overt behaviors (Singhal and Rogers 2012).³

2.5.2 Stories cultivate thinking skills



Stories serve epistemic functions. “Narrative is a fundamental structure of human meaning making” (Rossiter 2002, 2). As an artform, stories play a significant role in developing thinking skills and enlarging our understanding (Eisner 1991, 16). Our imagination is vital in making sense of the world and our experience of it. With their details and settings in particular timeframes, stories feed our imaginations and help us position ourselves in the world and understand our relation to it.

³ For a fuller discussion of narrative transportation and its relevance to narrative persuasion, see Walters 2023.

2.5.3 Stories aid memory



Stories give ideas a home to live in, with neighbors and streets connecting them. This context makes remembering easier. “We forget the abstractions we hear because they don’t touch us. We remember what is in a story because our feelings are reached and because the listener becomes personally involved with the story” (Brown et al. 2005, 170). Schank (1990), former director of the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at Yale University, says that “Human memory is story-based. . . . Not every experience makes a good story, but, if it does, the experience will be easier to remember” (2) and “the major processes of memory are the creation, storage, and retrieval of stories” (16).

Stories develop our thinking and memory. While homeschooling my children, I would read aloud from a math story book titled *How Deep Is the Water?* (Willoughby et al. 1985). The book combined mathematical concepts with storytelling elements in a way that encouraged readers to think critically about math. The main characters in these stories had peculiarities my children came to know and expect: Mr. Breezy always gave extra, unnecessary information; Ferdie jumped to conclusions; Mr. Sleeby forgot things; Mark, his son, often asked questions that cleared up a problem. At various points throughout the unfolding of each story, the book would prompt me to ask a question. Not all the questions had a single, definitive answer. Discussing the possibilities and working through reasons for answering a certain way contributed to the learning process.

Because I was reading a story with surprises and amusing incidents from the lives of these characters rather than a contrived math problem written in words, my children had practice in thinking rather than merely carrying out arithmetical operations mechanically. Not every part of the story could be turned into numbers. The real foibles of the characters elicited empathy; characters’ choices fueled my children’s imaginations; and the holistic scenario painted by the story encouraged my children to think carefully and not just come up with a quick, mechanical answer. They tracked with the story and grew in their capacity to think, compare, reason, and relate, deepening their understanding of how mathematical skills intersect with their lives.

Years later, a professor in one of my PhD classes required us to write a story to demonstrate our understanding of complex readings. This assignment was different from the typical analysis paper we were accustomed to producing, where we outlined the main points and then dissected them. I worked hard on my story, picking a context and giving details to my characters. I enjoyed the creative task. Moreover, in the process of trying to produce an engaging story, I soaked myself in the ideas the professor wanted us to wrestle with. Because I had to give the ideas concrete form in my story, I saw how they might apply in specific contexts. Creating a narrative turned out to be an especially effective learning task.

2.6 Engaging the senses

By describing experiences, stories present or evoke sensory information. They also touch our emotions. We can be moved to pity, anger, sorrow, or delight.

2.6.1 Stories involve the emotions



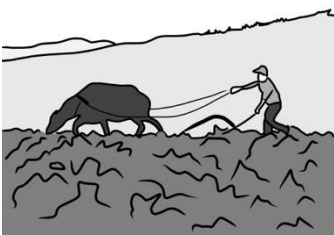
“Literature . . . is affective, not cool and detached” (Ryken 1984, 15). When we hear or read a story, we identify with the characters in it. We feel sad when they experience loss; we feel pleasure, accomplishment, and satisfaction with the characters’ success or good fortune. This identification goes beyond mental acknowledgment of the realities (whether fictional or real) in the story. In some ways, we are experiencing their story for ourselves. This kind of experience “gets us to respond with our imagination and emotions to a real-life experience” (Ryken 1984, 15). Emotions feed into a person’s appreciative system, which is how we evaluate what we “like” and what is “good.”

2.6.2 Stories are more fun than propositions



Communicating through stories rather than abstract propositions or generalities can be enlivening. “To say, ‘Let me tell you a story’ is like saying ‘Let’s go play’” (Boomershine 1988, 18). This form of play attracts people. “Abstract communications are dull and dry because they are not populated with people but with lifeless things. As living beings we are attracted to what is living and tend to be repelled by inert things such as concepts. Stories enliven and entertain” (Brown et al. 2005, 169). There can be delight in the sharing of a story—both for the teller and the ones who listen.

2.6.3 Stories are concrete



“It is the particularity of the story—the specific situation, the small details, the vivid images of human experience—that evokes a fuller response than does a simple statement of fact” (Rossiter 2002, 3). Propositions are intentionally whittled down to their core; stories aim to “recreate an experience or situation in sufficient detail and concreteness to enable the reader to relive it” (Ryken 1984, 18). Stories are full of images that engage the imagination (our image-making ability). “When you think, you must think about something in some way. You are never just thinking ‘in general,’ not thinking about anything in particular” (Gee 2007, 5). The tangible images and scenarios of stories involve our senses.

Stories engage our senses. They can help people work through emotions. When people live with multiple stressors, they need a way to tell their story. Debriefs decrease premature attrition in the workforce of expatriates—diplomats, businesspeople, and NGO workers. As a result of the telling, people can make changes based on things they see more clearly and patterns that emerge. Toward the end of a married couple’s debrief after their evacuation from a Central American country, the husband commented that being able to tell their story,

including events, thoughts, feelings, and sensory information, helped him find equilibrium. During and since the evacuation, they had felt very scattered in their thinking, processing, and decision-making. The process of telling his story put all the scattered pieces into a framework, giving his brain a sense of release and enabling him to function better (M. Lester, personal communication, November 1, 2022).

2.7 Simplifying communication

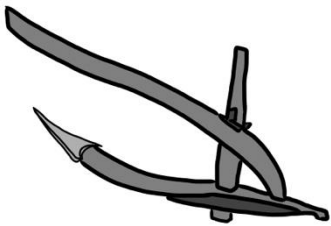
Stories do not depend on expensive, complicated resources. Everyone can use them.

2.7.1 Stories are simple to use



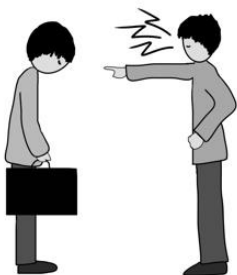
Telling and hearing stories do not require years of education. We tell stories to the very young, and children themselves tell stories. “Storytelling is our native language. To use it is refreshing and energizing. Abstract language by contrast is something that we learn at the age of 8 or later and becomes a kind of foreign language that we rarely feel as comfortable in as our native language, storytelling” (Brown et al. 2005, 168). Literacy and years of education are not required for the telling of stories.

2.7.2 Stories are inexpensive technology



To build a sense of teamwork and repair damage from conflict or problems, organizations spend a lot of money on apparatuses, coaches and consultants, and new structures. At times, however, the simple sharing of stories with each other—funny stories, sad stories, ones with happy endings and some that have no ending yet—results in even better knowledge sharing, new ideas, and solutions. “Storytelling is the ultimate low-cost, high-return technology” (Brown et al. 2005, 167).

2.7.3 Stories can be less confrontational



Stories can be a friendly, humble way of teaching: “by letting go of control, by being open to the other person’s story as well as sharing your own, you are giving the power away” (Brown et al. 2005, 163). The wealthy or powerful can tell stories without commanding or imposing their ways. Stories can be received in less threatening ways than other forms of communication. In their humble offering of a particular reality (whether fictional or real), stories do not demand an answer. Rather, they come as gifts. “In abstract discussions, ideas come at us like missiles, . . . with all the baggage of yes-no winner-loser confrontations. Narrative by contrast comes at us collaboratively inviting us gently to follow the story arm-in-arm with the listener. It is more like a dance than

a battle” (Brown et al. 2005, 168). This sense of invitation can open a willingness to consider new ideas and adopt potential innovations.

Stories are a simple form of communication. A study done by a health worker in rural Morocco found that information presented through stories, such as that of the dirty guests told in the introduction to this article, resulted in genuine health literacy for women with limited education (Phillips 2020). Because the art of storytelling is a valued cultural tradition of Morocco, it is a culturally relevant way for oral learners to construct meaning. It is also a reproducible method for communicating a message without requiring many outside resources.

2.8 Envisioning the future

Stories open doors and light paths into what lies ahead. They can lead to solutions, spark hope, and suggest a future.

2.8.1 Stories can lead to solutions and change



“Because stories lead from the familiar to the unfamiliar, they provide an entryway into personal growth and change” (Rossiter 2002, 3). A story engages listeners to imagine something similar in their own settings. What starts as the storyteller’s voice draws the listeners into a closer relationship that allows them to invent a parallel story in their own environment. “The story so co-created becomes the listener’s own, and something the listener loves and is prepared to fight for. Storytelling can thus galvanize action” (Brown et al. 2005, 168). Change is much more readily accepted when its need and structure come from within.

2.8.2 Stories can spark hope and healing



Stories can help with the public processing of pain (Bradt 1997; Stahl 2017). For individual victims of trauma, telling their story is part of the therapeutic process toward healing. Both the teller and the receiver of the story are enriched (Mollica 2009). Stories can help fashion an alternative reality (Bradt 1997). As we, through stories, accompany other people who are overcoming obstacles in real or imagined worlds, new possibilities are birthed. “We read literature not primarily to acquire information but to contemplate experience and reality as a way of understanding them better. . . . Our own experiences and beliefs are given shape and expression” (Ryken 1984, 22).

2.8.3 Stories are useful in many contexts



Stories can contribute to multiple goals. Brown et al. (2005, 11) wrote that beyond generating organizational change, storytelling was effective in a multiplicity of contexts for the purposes of “transferring knowledge, nurturing community, stimulating innovation, crafting communications, in education and training, and in preserving values” (11). As new technologies are developed, new potential spaces for stories emerge.

Stories can be leveraged toward a better future. Narratives have made a significant contribution to struggles for justice across the world. One example is the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. To mobilize support at home and internationally, the movement deployed stories of the lives and personal sacrifices of individual leaders such as Nelson Mandela, who, in the struggle for his people’s freedom, was arrested and imprisoned from 1962 to 1990. We tell stories of past heroes, leaders, and reformers in our history to inspire similar spirit in the next generation and spark changes for a better future.

3. Conclusion

As research from diverse fields of study shows, stories have an array of characteristics that make them powerful means of communication. Stories are central to the human experience. Well-told narratives attract our notice and interest. They can bring people together. Stories resonate with reality because they have room for the complexities and contradictions that reflect real life. Stories can change our beliefs, develop our thinking, and serve as aids for memory. Stories often engage our senses and stir our emotions. They are a simple, accessible-to-all form of communication. Finally, stories can suggest alternate possibilities and solutions. Understanding these characteristics inherent in the art of narrative enables people to harness stories to enhance, enliven, and strengthen the ways in which they communicate.

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