



STORYTELLING FOR INNOVATION

1. Introduction

Take any group of people and their response to phrases like ‘Once upon a time...’, ‘I want to tell you a story...’ or even just ‘Listen...’ is the same. We are programmed to respond to storytelling, an expectation of entertainment, information and shared experience linked to these cues. Psychologists recognize the key role which storytelling plays as a powerful and particular form of communication, linked to our emergence and survival as social animals. The image of the bard as a mixture of entertainer and informer, carrying important messages and broadcasting them across a population is well-established in history and although the media may have changed the underlying power of stories remains.

In the context of organizational life stories play a key role. They act as carriers of key messages, reinforcing cultural values and transmitting information in powerful and persuasive form. Organizations increasingly use stories in an active way – for example, by commissioning versions of their own history to act as reminders of their past and to carry key messages to both internal and external audiences (Graham, others). Organizational ‘biography’ is an important genre in both the popular and academic press, focusing on key individuals (Steve Jobs, xyz), institutions (Google, Amazon, Toyota) or activities. Case studies represent a rich seam of ‘short stories’ about organizations, often presenting them in the form of ‘cliff-hangers’ where the reader/student is invited to imagine themselves in the situation and think through their ‘ending’ before the real one is revealed. There are also some stories written in fictional form but designed to convey important messages about organizational life – for example *The Goal*.

Stories are important artefacts in the work of many organizations, helping represent the ‘product’ which the organization offers. Advertising relies on underlying storylines through which products are presented and framed whilst service design places strong emphasis on understanding the customer journey as a story. Developing new products often involves imagining specific ‘use cases’ and the elaborating these visions of the future into stories within which the new offering sits.

Storytelling plays a key role in knowledge transfer and sharing across organizations, linked to key cognitive issues of organizational cognition and memory. Bruner (1990) considers the narrative form as a non-neutral rhetorical account that aims at “illocutionary intentions,” or the desire to communicate meaning. Importantly he brings in a sense of time in this process; storytelling captures the emotion of the moment described, rendering the event active rather than passive, infused with the latent meaning being communicated by the teller. Knowledge can be held in stories which can be stored and retrieved, replayed later to bring back key meaning.

There is now a growing literature and the emergence of a training industry around mobilising storytelling skills in organizational life. It focuses on both the content (what makes a good story?) and the craft of



presentation (what makes for effective storytelling?), drawing on experiences in other fields like scriptwriting, screenplay editing and creative writing.

2. Storytelling in innovative management

In the context of innovation storytelling plays a key role, both in terms of developing shared understanding and experience and also as a valuable tool to enable the process of introducing change. For example, stories can act:

- as a carrier of messages – stories reinforce our models and understanding of how innovation works in a vivid way. Not for nothing do they form the staple diet of most conference presentations, and in a more restrained fashion form the core of our teaching. And it can be argued that the case method is built around storytelling - reading, interpreting and retelling.
- as educational aid – there is a long tradition of using stories to carry important messages about directions and desirability for change. The world's oldest soap opera is the UK radio series, 'The Archers' which is broadcast daily and draws over 5 million listeners. It originated in 1951 as a way of communicating important information about farming innovations with the other storylines wrapped around the core message. (The programme still has an 'Agricultural story editor'). Or consider 'The Goal' – Elihu Goldratt's story about a struggling factory owner and his gradual adoption of radical process innovations. Published in 1984 it became the top-selling business book and still has wide readership, now available in many different formats including a movie!
- as diffusion aid – in viral fashion ideas spread out from their source via the stories around them. Everett Rogers highlighted the key role which perceptions play in the adoption of innovation – and stories offer powerful ways of shaping those perceptions. Stories can help overcome anxieties and concerns about various attributes of innovations, and in doing so accelerate the take up of new ideas. Or they spread like wildfire, becoming amplified as they get retold and acting as a strong brake on diffusion. They can affect our perceptions of the person trying to persuade us to adopt something new - if they are good storytellers then we are more likely to believe in them and accept the new idea which they are promoting.
- as knowledge management tool Organizations need some kind of memory, some way of remembering what they did and how they dealt with past problems. Being able to retrieve these memories can be a powerful resource for dealing with today's innovation challenges. Stories act as powerful repositories of this learning – they are accessible and remind us of core lessons. Every large company today must have been a start-up once upon a time – and sometimes reflecting on the stories of how the organization handled the crises from that time helps. A growing number of organizations - Corning, 3M, Philips - are trying to capture their organizational history not as a vanity project but as a way of codifying key lessons from the past to make them available for the future. Stories from the past provide both a roadmap for what to do and the courage to know it can be done (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000; Garud, 2013; Strambach and Klement, 2012).
- as a 'change lubricant' – studies of change management suggest that simply imposing decisions is not an effective strategy. Instead use of various levels of engagement and participation can help reduce anxieties and generate commitment. Storytelling can help by creating a picture, a vision of how things are going to be but it can also be used to give an element of 'vice' to participants likely to be affected by the change. Using storytelling devices, it becomes possible to explore and modify



the planned change and to engage in a degree of co-creation with users in which they write themselves into the emerging script.

- as a framework for 'pitching' ideas – a significant element of the innovation process involves situations in which one group make proposals for change (new product, service, process) to resource owners and decision makers. Whether the situation involves pitching to venture capitalists or trying to put a new project into the development portfolio of an established organization there is an element of information transfer and discussion. Storytelling can play a key role here, offering not only a framework within which the information can be carried but also an emotional 'charge' to help energise discussion around it. The story can also be elaborated as the decision makers explore and 're-tell' it in their own terms. An example of this approach is Amazon's use of stories rather than PowerPoint presentations...
- as a road map for entrepreneurs – one way of looking at entrepreneurship is to focus on the 'hero' embarking on a journey to a far-off land, encountering strange people, slaying dragons, getting into tight situations and picking up surprising friends and resources which help him or her along the way. And much of the new thinking about how to manage this journey describes the importance of effectuation and bricolage, making the best use of whatever is to hand and muddling through towards a goal rather than planning each step in careful fashion. Stories capture this kind of approach and give others a 'hitch-hiker's guide' to help them in their own journeys...
- as co-ordinating mechanism - innovation requires the coordinated efforts of many organizational members to facilitate innovative ideas to generate novelty, real-time problems solving and linkages between present activities with past experiences and future expectations (Bartel and Garud, 2009; Van de Ven et al., 2008) Lawrence and Lorsch 1967). Storytelling can engage these different perspectives, offering a boundary object around which co-creation can take place. Ref to Procter and Gamble storytelling lofts and others
- as a way of exploring the future – science fiction is a branch of storytelling which creates pictures of the future which we can climb inside and explore safely and early. Its value in thinking about innovation comes particularly because unlike trend extrapolation or forecasting it presents a rich connected picture of possible futures. The narrative carries not just the core storyline but also a wealth of information about context. Organizations can use such stories to create new future worlds which they can then crawl inside and explore – where are the threats, how could we move to take these opportunities, etc.? And they can use this exploration to identify what they need to start doing now in order to build the capabilities for working effectively in these futures. At the heart of powerful futures methodologies like Shell's 'Game changer' approach is the ability to construct and share compelling stories....
- as vision statement – creating and sharing a compelling a vision is a key element in radical innovation, whether in the form of a start-up idea or a major shift in direction for an established business. Experience suggests, however, that many vision statements fail to energise or compel; what separates out the effective vision is the ability to embed it in a story, to allow people to identify the core elements, and then bring their own storytelling capabilities to it. Stories of innovation can generate common understanding and shared vision about innovation strategies and processes (Sarpong and Maclean, 2012)

3. Storytelling for social innovation



Here we have two different experiences of invention of stories in the realm of design for social innovation: one in Seraing, Belgium, where we employed traditional puppets to make visible the ideas emerged from our workshops with citizens about the future of the town; the second in Bovisa and Dergano, suburban areas in the north of Milan, Italy, where for three years we have conducted activities producing contents for a Web TV on social media, in collaboration with local associations, citizens, artisans and the public administration.

3.1 Tchantchè and the White Fairy

Seraing is a town near Liege, Belgium. After a glorious industrial past, now Seraing faces the closure of all the factories, a stellar unemployment and the lack of public spaces. (Figure 1) Invited by the local municipality, our group of designers had the objective to study, listen and observe the neighbourhood. We had to try to understand the problems and difficulties, build opportunities for interaction and dialogue between citizens, associations, local administrators. In a place often perceived as hopeless, we had to imagine possible futures.



Figure 1 - Images from the explorations in Seraing.

We soon discovered that the house of the local associations, where we prepared meetings and dinners, was also the place of a small but very active puppet theater.

Every Sunday the theater attracted around forty children and adults, in lively and noisy representations, where Tchantchè, a puppet dressed in blue and red as a factory worker, was fighting monsters and devils with his incredible strength (Figure 2).

In the region of Liege puppet theatre is still very popular. The puppets from Liege work in the same way of the Sicilian puppets; their characters are from different memories: from Charlemagne, to devils to factory workers. In that still very much alive tradition, the hero par excellence of is Tchantchè, an anarchist and brave worker. The character, invented more than a century ago to entertain the spectators during breaks, become very soon the most popular of the local theatre.



Our group, after working in co-design sessions with citizens and associations, decided to use the puppet theatre to represent the ideas about the future of Seraing that we collected and invented. We worked with Marc Crouvette, one of the local puppeteers, very active in local associations. We built a new puppet made only from wooden cubes, a sort of hero to be built, and a portable theatre, to allow performances in different places. Once the stories from co-design sessions were collected, (Figures 3) they have all been passed to Marc, who built independently a canovaccio for the performance (Figures 4).

At the first performance, Tchantché fought with the devil (representing corporations that have made disappear the local labor) and met a white fairy (we naive and out of place designers). The arrival of the white fairy scene freed all - citizens, activists, we designers - in a laughter that allowed us to recognize ourselves in our limitations and defects.

The puppet show inspired by stories from the future invented during the co-design sessions was repeated and evolved after time; other co-design sessions and workshops were led in Seraing, bringing there students and designers from outside, while the portable theater and its stories were performed in different places, also out of Seraing.

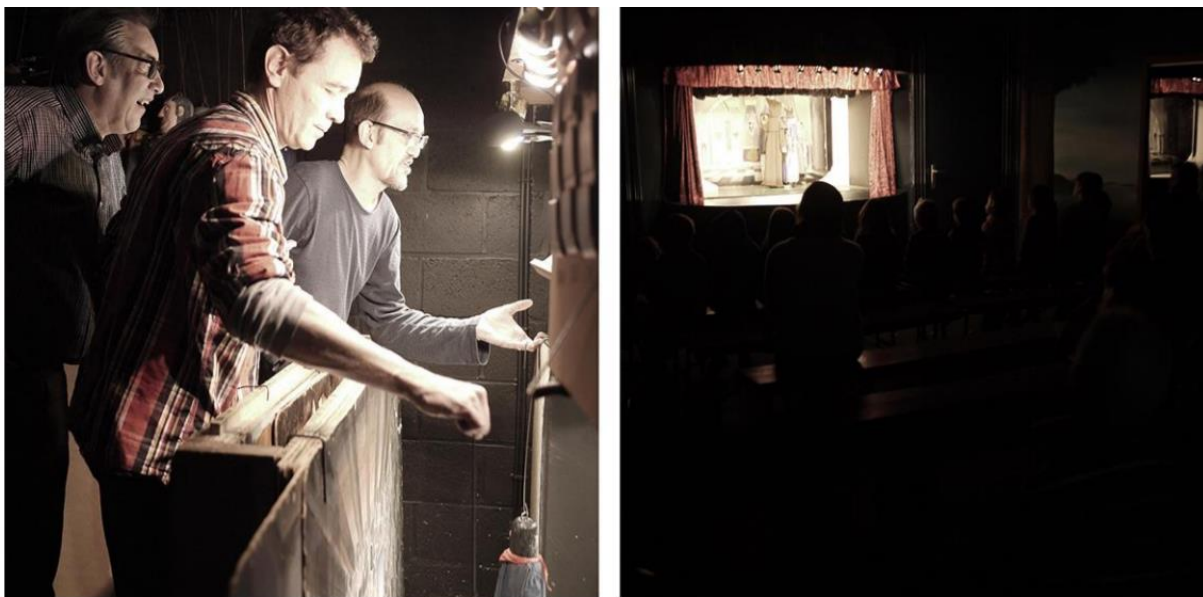


Figure 2 - Seraing, Jan 2015 / Marc and his friends playing with marionettes at the Maison des Jeunes in Ougrée, Seraing. Every Sunday morning they stage two stories with Tchantches, Charlemagne, Banane, Nanesse and other characters from the liegeoise puppet tradition for an audience of about 50 people, made up of children and their parents. The representations are very interactive: the audience is an active participant in the play, knowing all the songs by heart and cheering loudly at all of Tchantches' quests and battles.



Figure 3 - Seraing, May 2015 - Codesign sessions

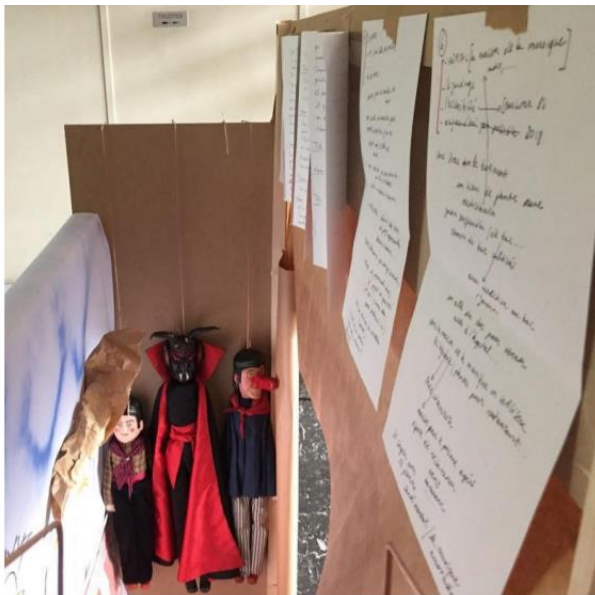


Figure 4 - Seraing, May 2015 - Images from the puppet play.

3.2 Plug Social TV

The project takes place in a suburban area of Milan, where the university campus is located. It has a strong identity, connected to its historical industrial background, and a new emerging character: former workers are now co-inhabitants of the area with first and second generations of foreign citizens, and the new community of out-of-town students. In this context, it is necessary to set up projects and activities that are able to reflect the new complex identity of the neighbourhoods, crossing cultural and generational boundaries, facilitating community relationships and driving reciprocal exchange dynamics. A lot of associations and citizens organize and promote social initiatives and we, as a group of design researchers and students, have got in relationship with them and have started to collaborate having workshops,



bringing people inside the university campus and going outside in the neighbourhood. Since 2013, we collected a lot of stories about citizens, places and activities: on one hand, the ones that took place there in the past (mostly when fabrication and manufacturing were the main activities employing people); but also the manifold experiences and actions taking place nowadays in order to face everyday life issues and share the public space together.

Over the years, Plug Social TV has developed an original transmedia storytelling approach based on design practice (Ciancia, 2016) in order to engage communities in a participative process. We refer to the word 'social' with a double meaning: social media (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter) are the main platforms through which contents of local interest are delivered to citizens. Moreover the social aspect of this project can be identified into the creation of a tool for self-expression and selfnarration (Collizzolli, 2010; White, 2003). The final output is a community TV, which fosters a feedback loop among stakeholders, helping people for sharing common visions about identities and values. People, who are already active in real life, become then the main characters in fictional worlds. Transmedia strategies design the collaboration between the actors to be involved, building and nurturing strong relations between the academics (professors and students), the citizens, the associations and the local institutions.

All the stories published on Plug Social TV are part of narrative worlds, designed by the groups of students on the base of the exploration activities (collecting stories and iconographic repertoires, interviews, etc.) they lead over the years, according to a practice-based approach. Our aim is S3489 Storytelling in design for social innovation and politics: a reading through the lenses of Hannah Arendt engaging the local community experimenting transmedia practices and prototyping social interactions both online and offline.

This case study mostly concerns the idea of "making things visible and tangible", "reconstructing local identities" (Manzini, 2015). What's more, we are experimenting ways for engaging non-experts in participatory video and storytelling processes developing specific tools for collecting and reframing stories, producing narratives and storytelling formats (Anzoise, Piredda, Venditti, 2015). The final result is the production of transmedia systems for Plug Social TV, including on one hand brand new contents for social media and digital storytelling (web series, video pills, graphic novels, serial novels, twitteratura, ecc.) and spin-offs that developed new story lines through pages and profiles. The narrative worlds depicted throughout manifold digital contents represent Secondary Worlds (Wolf, 2014), that means fictional worlds with fictional characters based on the real stories of the real people of the neighbourhood (Primary World). On the other hand, the transmedia system includes the Plug Social Workshops (Figure 5 and 6), which took place in specific locations of the neighbourhood in collaboration with the local partners, in order to enact the Secondary Worlds and prototype civic engagement through narratives. In fact, exhibitions, co-design workshops and creative experiences created actions in the districts and involved specific audience/targets/players sharing moments with the local community and collecting feedbacks. The designers played different roles in every single project: they were actors on the stage, interpreting fictional characters; they were the gatekeepers to the Secondary World; they provided co-design tools for envisioning and sharing a new idea of wellbeing for the neighbourhood; they facilitated new relationships between the stakeholders according to the narrative system they figured out. The fictional characters, inspired by real people from the local community, are conceived as everyday heroes, enacting the fictional and the real world.



Figure 5 – Plug Social Workshop “Bovisa 2115. Cartoline dal futuro” (Postcards from the Future), Milan, 30th January 2016.

4. Storytelling for business transformation

The demand for innovation within organizations is a worldwide concern. In order for innovation to occur, creativity must first be unleashed in the individual. Education is under heavy criticism for failure to produce the workforce needed to meet the innovation challenge. The solution lies in the human imagination.

Many have tried to ‘teach’ creativity, which results in a prescriptive focus on tools and process, but has limited, if any, emotional engagement. Emotion is a necessary component as the creative drive is intrinsic - it originates from within. In order to increase innovation capacity in our organizations, we need to first increase creative capacity in individuals. Further, creativity is personal; so the student dictates the context of reflection and explores the belief system that motivates exploration of the creative force. This is a constructivist approach to learning that seeks to transform the learning experience by having the student engage with their own story.

Creativity in Business is a developmental process designed to leverage personal and organizational performance. It is based on the premise that organizational success depends on the individual’s ability to create and sustain a positive corporate culture on a daily basis. This type of sustainable relationship building requires both character and skill and is the role of a “Change Agent” - the individual tasked with design-driven innovation. In order to move an organization away from the obsolete command-control environment, towards one of increased creativity and innovation, you must transform your organizational culture.



This involves shifting mindset, both from an individual and a organizational or team perspective. The emphasis is on the “why” of the reflective process – questioning current beliefs about creativity and innovation. Are those beliefs still valid under the current context?

The purpose of stories has always been to act as a bridge between the past and the future. It is the stories of old that carry the cultural value system into the present and on into the future, recontextualized to suit the time at hand. Why is this important now? Our mode of production has shifted to organizational knowledge creation. In this new economic environment, a traditional mode of production thinking is potentially counter-productive. A new paradigm is needed, one that recognizes that the future belongs to people who use their hearts as well as their heads. Awareness of this shift is the key to realizing a new paradigm (Grant 2005).

Educator Kieren Egan states that stories are unique narratives that in their basic form, provide ends that satisfy some tension generated by their beginnings (1999, p. 88). He suggests that we think of the content of curriculum as great stories to tell (1998, 2005). The question then becomes how to link that great story we tell to the individual student? We are constantly constructing our worldview and encourage students to develop their own (properly socialized by our educational standards of course). The challenge arises when the old paradigm is shifting or even collapsing and the new paradigm is not yet fully formed, still emergent. How do we link the cultural development of the past (expressed in our values) and the educational needs of the present?



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