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Telling Stories In a Professional and Technical Writing Course

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2014 WRITING INSTRUCTION RESEARCH FELLOWSHIPS
Closing Report

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Title of Study: Telling Stories In a Professional and Technical Writing Course

Research Question(s):
Because students, arguably, entered this 400-level Professional and Technical Writing (PTW) course with some already established ideas and expectations, it was our best chance at addressing our overriding concern that students continue to approach PTW as a mere conduit for communicating knowledge made elsewhere. So if, in fact, our own assumptions about these students were legitimate, the course allowed us to begin exploring the impact storytelling research may have in an advanced PTW course. Consequently, we worked from these two guiding questions:

- What changes, if any, occur in the ways students approach Professional and Technical Writing (PTW) in terms of storytelling research?
- How might students connect (or not) PTW and the kinds of actions that storytelling entails?

Method(s):

The data reported and discussed here are drawn from an advanced PTW course for undergraduates, which we designed and taught in the spring of 2014. So that students could carve out a useable (and useful) piece of all that might fall under the umbrella of storytelling research, which includes big and contested concepts like story, anti-story, living-story, and narrative (Yolles, 2007), we foregrounded Boje's (2008) notion of *antenarrative* and its relationship to more common aspects of narrative and story.

For Boje, and other storytelling researchers, antenarrative is a kind of speculation about that which is not yet narrative, nor is it yet story. Antenarrative, as the prefix suggests, is the "beforehand" of any account of events (story) and also names the beforehand of any bounded methodological structure that carries an account of events (narrative). Antenarrative names and promotes speculation about the fragmented, nonlinear, incoherent, collective, and non-deterministic aspects of an organization (Yolles, 2007, p. 75). Antenarrative is difficult to get a hold of given that Labov (1976) influentially maintains that anything we might call narrative proper "begins with an orientation, proceeds to the complicating action, is suspended at the focus of evaluation before the resolution, concludes with the resolution and returns the listener to the present time with a coda" (p. 369). Antenarrative, then, allows us to investigate what is improper about narrative. Antenarrative opens storytelling up to more complexity. It is a way to study and experience acts of storytelling that are caught up in a given organization's changing and complex meaning-making practices. According to Boje (2007), antenarratives "are (or can be) collective co-construction of multiple participants, each with a fragment, none with the overarching conception of the story that is becoming, raveling and unravelling, picking up contextual elements in some quarters, dropping some in performances in other areas" (qtd in Yolles, p. 76). That is, storytelling researchers, and so the students in our course, learn to pay attention to these multiple, fragmented, contextual elements as they are performed in situ. They do so in order to speculate, gamble, or 'ante-up' about what elements may, or even ought to, temporarily stabilize as an organizational narrative.

Data Collection
At the start of the 10-week quarter, each student participated in an initial interview. Rachel, a graduate student who also participated in all the coursework, conducted these initial interviews. Each of her interviews varied slightly because she asked follow-up and clarification questions, and because she did her best to keep the interviews informal and open-ended. Her engagement with the course projects also gave her, as she explains, some guidance regarding the differing lines of injury she choose to closely trace during each interview. But she grounded each interview in two questions for each participating student:

- As a reader/user of information, what does technical communication mean *for* you?
- As a student writer, how do you approach your projects in a technical communication course?

    Along with interview data, we collected each students 'organizational story project' (the culminating project in the course). These projects were impossible to de-identify given that Cushman had been closely working with the students on the project throughout the quarter. Consequently, the data we gathered from the projects played less of a role in our analysis than the interview transcripts. The same is true for all the observations Cushman captured in his "field notes" as he watched and listened to students make sense of both their projects and the ways in which they experienced the course. That said, both the final projects and Cushman's observational notes shape, at least to some degree, our analysis and discoveries about the relationship between storytelling research and PTW. We consider such data, then, an important part of all that we collected.

Data Analysis
Analyzing this small data-set proved a long, iterative process that generated as many possibilities as it did results concerning the question of what changes, if any, occur in the way students approach PTC work in terms of storytelling research. Because we did not know what, in particular, we were looking to surface, we began with an open coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Following Beaufort (2000), we did not establish frameworks for understanding the data at the outset; instead, the frameworks we eventually employed emerged from the site and from the data. (p. 193). That is, our initial commitment to understanding what happens to students' approaches to PTC in a course focused on storytelling research was far too broad to capture with preexisting frameworks. Our first step, then, involved separately creating tentative labels for chunks of data that framed what we saw happening. The three of us refrained from discussing the interview transcripts and the final projects until we had all completed our own set of open codes. The three of us then collaborated, looking to identify relationships among our open codes. Here, we went through the process of articulating and challenging differing properties of the concepts that were emerging across most of our open codes.

    One of the early concepts to surface was "skill." Skill was easy enough to recognize given that many of the students repeatedly used the word in talking with Rachel. To give an example, during an interview that took place at the start of the course, a student explained that to create the kinds of documents common to PTW, one has to possess a "service level understanding of the skills you need to write well, to be concrete, to be succinct and proofread." A second, slightly more complex concept we surfaced across the initial open codes was what we decided to call "role." The properties of role include the ways in which students thought about themselves as technical communicators or, at very least, as makers of documents they would attribute to the field of PTW. What's more, and particularly in the responses given at the end of our storytelling course, we saw students discussing how they would like to position themselves (i.e. take on roles) in the field, either now or in their future.

    As we continued to work with the data, looking to further narrow our process, we began to see students simultaneously articulate the skills they might need to acquire and the roles available to them in differing contexts. In other words, when we once again separated to work through the data from our agreed upon framework of both "skill" and "role," we both noticed that the properties combining to make up what we called role frequently followed directly after what we would call skill. More often than not, the two concepts appeared intractable. To a quick example, one student explained that PTC is about taking "technical or professional documents and mak[ing] them usable for an audience beyond the people who created it." We coded that

sentence as an expression of "skill." But that same student went on to say that they "now see professional communication as someone who works alongside organizational creators to aid in adaptations, creations, or some type of coordination to transform, many times across different medias [sic]." Responses such as this, coupled with the compelling work in their final organizational story projects, allowed us to identify a core concept that cut across most the data: *usefulness*. Selecting out instances of usefulness captures, to varying degrees, the intractable relationship we saw between "skill" and "role."

Once we had constructed the concept of usefulness, three variants became visible, which we simply called U1, U2, and U3. U1 named usefulness in terms of an economic exchange. That is, we coded responses that clearly indicated PTW as a give-and-take enterprise (i.e. PTW allows the student to get something they want, such as job or credit for a job well done). What U2 allowed us to surface, apart from a lot of humming tunes form the band with the same name, were instances where students found it useful to take up the position or role of a professional and technical writing (i.e. PTW is a thing students can inhabit or do in a given context to both generate meaning or create change). And U3 names the instances where a combination of the first two variants showed up in the same response. These three variants of usefulness, finally, began to show us the complicated ways in which these 8 students were working to understand just what was possible with and within PTW in terms of storytelling research.

We used a few different means to try and triangulate the validity of what we found, which included comparing the interview data with both Cushman's classroom observations and the student's final projects.

Key Findings from Study:
The findings from this small study are varied to be sure, occasionally contradictorily. And they probably have the most impact in terms of approaching pedagogies rather than the positions assumptions students may hold regarding PTW. Here is a brief list of what we are discovering:

- **Storytelling is another technical tool that requires learning some technical skill**

Storytelling research itself is rather technical. Yolles (2007) for example articulates important distinctions between what gets called 'Living Story,' 'Anti-Story,' 'Narrative,' and 'Antenarrative' just to name a few. So perhaps it should not have come as a surprise that students often take to storytelling in ways they might take to learning HTML or the correct formatting of a memo. Storytelling, we discovered, is a skill students want to master. Arguably, for students working in the context of a PTW course, storytelling turns into little more than a tool they can use to get things done. That is, our technical writing course served as such a strong context for storytelling that students found it difficult to think about it as an art or a compelling rhetorical practice. They often approached it as technical skill.

- **Technical Writers are Storytellers**

At times, students did articulate professional and technical writers (more than the writing itself) as a practice of storytelling. They talked about feeling like they were storytellers and how that transformed their work into something "fun," "creative," and one time "inventive." These are phrases and ways of seeing the role of a technical writer that students seemed to not expect to arrive at. Rather than approaching technical writers as workers that only create by 'correctly' completing a given formula, they did show glimpses of recognizing the meaning-making work that we believe technical writing entails.

- **Different Stories Allow for Different organizational 'roles'**

As students began to really immerse themselves in their own projects, they seemed to understand how stories could work to frame and reframe what it means to belong to an organization. More than once, students articulated their own multiple roles for themselves regarding their final project, which depended on what story (or antenarraitve) they were working to surface. We believe this has deep pedagogical implications in that students can indeed take on new positions and see from fresh angles if they're asked to generate those positions and angles themselves rather than encounter them as a given, which is a more traditional pedagogical approach.

- ▪ **Storytelling moves from a Ready-to-Hand, Transparent Technology to a Present-to-Hand, opaque way in which meaning is made a changed.**

Without question, learning that this course helped students think about storytelling as a concrete way to affect organizational change is our most positive and, perhaps, productive finding. Rather than remaining invisible, as a hammer might when one is roofing or a overhead projector might when one is teaching, storytelling showed up for students as a powerful and unwieldy practice for meaning making. That is, we learned from our students that storytelling was not simply a means or a vehicle for making sense of or building meaning into an organization, but rather served as that 'sense' and 'meaning' itself. No story, no sense making. Storytelling is, for these students, an opaque object of study itself. They increasingly became unable to look through storytelling as if the meaning were on the other side, which we attribute to their own work as storytellers in this PTW course. For us that might mean that students will encounter PTW best by preforming it in ways that are unexpected and out-of-the-ordinary; they get a handle on meaning making when they have little to no template for their work, but have to rely on the practices available to them via the art of storytelling.

Implications for Teaching and Learning:
We are starting to see Storytelling Research as a possible pedagogical position. That is, while it certainly works well as a methodology for understanding organizations and while it does a decent job helping students participate in the construction of meaning, we are starting to approach Storytelling Research as a pedagogical mode for PTW. For example, in this course, Cushman often found himself offering students fragments of information for the simple reason that Storytelling Research, particular notions of antenarrative, pushes students to coordinate fragmentary information in such a way that in leads to a transformation of meaning. Put simply, Storytelling Research is about *coordination for transformation*. For us, that means we can understand the students in our classrooms as capable of much more than acquiring information, thinking about it, and then making something of it (e.g. the traditional cognitive model: Sense→Think→Act). What Storytelling Research makes available is an initial kind of action (the coordination of multiple bits and fragments) that generates possibility and reflection (the transformation of how we might approach fragmentary information).

What's more, approaching Storytelling Research as a pedagogical position or practice helps us better value Daniel Kahneman's (2011) assertion that we all (rather unconsciously) experience pleasure from the ease of too quickly identifying coherence. The associative functions of our mind tend to suppress both doubt and ambiguity, so without being completely conscious of it, we ignore the probability that evidence critical to our judgment will always be missing (p. 88-89), and that our means for arriving at judgments comprise those same judgments. Storytelling Research opens up space in the classroom to worry about and think through what we don't know, what we can't know without making a story to begin with. In that way, it allows for reflection that can happen *as we work* rather than after the work is done.

Gains/Challenges in Faculty-Student Collaboration:
The project has challenged Cushman (the faculty member) to articulate why he was asking certain kinds of questions or writing in particular ways, which has lead to a productive uncovering of assumptions and, so, quite a few possibilities for an authentic collaboration. For example, Cushman needed to explain why he thought it best that we work from grounded theory, but Kaity and Rachel (the students) did not know what grounded theory was. That meant that not only did he have to help them come to terms with the methodology, he had to articulate it in such a way that they could decide for themselves if it was, in fact, the right direction for our project. At the same time, Cushman learned how to ask new questions and see data in differing ways because of Kaity's take on the scholarship concerning creative nonfiction, which she connected to much of our findings. We see this kind as collaboration as inventive. It challenged us to surface and, so, re-see our own practices.

Implications for Further Study:
We would both like to see what Storytelling Research would look like in courses across differing disciples. We certainly see the benefits of this model for courses as varied as 1st writing, advanced geology, and education. But, of course, how the theoretical lens plays out in each course will vary, giving us new and deeper insights into the possibility of storytelling as a pedagogical position.