

# Structure of a Story for the Knowledge Management Practitioner

Abdul Halim Abdul Karim

KMPro Kmentor Faculty  
Tel: 94594857  
E-mail: ahalim@pacific.net.sg

## ABSTRACT

*More and more Knowledge Managers are now realising the importance of story telling in the dissemination of knowledge. Indeed, storytelling is a key feature of a Knowledge Culture. It turns knowledge sharing into a social activity (or rather, it is a social activity where knowledge is shared). As such, storytelling is crucial for the integration of Knowledge Management into the business process and the organisation as a whole. There is thus a need to “capture” such stories and such efforts are well underway. Although story-telling could be the most efficient way of disseminating Knowledge, Knowledge does not always come in the form of a story. The effectiveness of stories in KM suggests to us a need to recast whatever knowledge the worker has into the form of a story wherever possible. To encourage story-telling, to capture stories and to formulate stories out of workers’ experiences require Knowledge about the nature of stories. Thus Knowledge Managers need to understand the structure of stories in order to understand better how stories work in a Knowledge Organisation. This paper attempts to make clear to the Knowledge Manager the structure of a story while emphasizing how a good structure not only helps in the dissemination of knowledge but also enables Knowledge workers to appreciate the Knowledge shared. The paper presentation will include a short analysis and discussion of an example of a “Knowledge Story”.*

## Key words

*Knowledge Stories, Tacit Knowledge, Knowledge Sharing, Knowledge Transmission, Knowledge Capture, Communities of Practice*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION: IMPORTANCE OF STORIES IN KM

Knowledge Managers grappling with understanding how tacit knowledge is to be captured are now increasingly fascinated with storytelling. This is not surprising given the focus on Communities of Practice in KM. After all, it is in these communities where story

telling thrives. What a person experiences include tacit knowledge which is not readily made available to another in written form. Tacit knowledge is “transferred” via relationships that are nurtured in social communities. What happens in any Community of Practice is a lively verbal exchange of ideas and experiences. Tacit knowledge is communicated through such exchanges. We relate our experiences in many ways. One way which comes naturally for us is by recounting what happened to us or to somebody else i.e. recounting an experience first, second, third hand and so on. What we are actually doing is telling a story. In fact, the urge to share a personal anecdote or story can be quite compelling among friends and associates. Importantly, tacit knowledge is communicated through such stories. This is why it is important for Knowledge Managers to understand how stories work. As Reamy succinctly puts it, “If we don’t understand the activity and nature of storytelling and if we don’t understand what stories are being told in our enterprise, then we run the risk of creating a corporate environment that not only doesn’t support knowledge transmission through stories, but could stifle or distort the use of stories in our environment” (Reamy, 2002). There is thus a real need for Knowledge Managers to understand how stories are structured and what are its components.

The effectiveness of story telling first in Education and then in KM is no longer a well kept secret. Story telling is knowledge sharing<sup>1</sup>. But how to be a good story teller is arguably still a trade-secret. One cannot deny that story telling is an art acquired through the mastery of facial expression, voice intonation, body language, high language proficiency, a deep appreciation of the nuances of culture, a keen sense of timing, a great sensitivity towards the audience, and even humour. The rarity of a person who masters and could harmonise so many aspects of communication makes story-telling qualify as a “black art”.

A story does not have to be explicit to be successful in relaying a message. Indeed, the power of a story lies in it being just implicit enough for your imagination to take over. In fact, stories are often crafted to be in the

---

<sup>1</sup> In fact, as Lipman (1999) shows, storytelling is a “transfer of imagery”. See pg.1.

grey area between the explicit and the implicit - some things are stated and others left for the individual to arrive at in his/her own way. Thus, the message is made more personal and so, more powerful by the very nature of the story. The beauty which results from the harmonisation of content and delivery confirms the status of the story-teller as an "artist".

An article of this length would not do justice to exploring in depth the art of story telling. Nevertheless it is clear that Knowledge Managers need to appreciate the art of story telling and so appreciate the story-teller of an organisation for his/her role as a conduit of Knowledge. Indeed, the story-teller is an integral member of any Community of Practice – and more ideally, every member of the COP should have a story to tell. However, Knowledge Managers need to also know something about the "Science" of a story. By Science, I mean the more linguistic aspect of a story, the aspect which can be analysed more readily and when understood well, help greatly in the understanding of how a story works and how it is formulated. One such aspect is the overall syntax or structure of a story. Importantly, the structure of a story can be studied, analysed and replicated.

## **2.0 MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE STORY IN KM**

Some Knowledge Managers do not understand what stories are and how they can be used in KM. Knowledge Managers are by and large neither linguists nor language experts. It is not surprising then that some Knowledge Managers, for example, cannot differentiate between a case study, a story and an anecdote.

A case is "a real, semi-fictional or fictional depiction of a situation which requires some type of decision making."<sup>2</sup> Usually a case is an objective description that may contain facts and figures; graphs and charts, about the said situation. A case is also usually designed to be incomplete. This is because it is usually used as an educational tool to make new learning possible. This is done when one studies the case. A case study is thus an analysis of the case whereby through considering the variables and facts of the case, we arrive at a decision. We may arrive at different decisions on the same case. We can then discuss the merits of the different decisions. In Knowledge Management, we may learn from cases of successful or failed Knowledge Initiatives of other organisations to guide us. Undoubtedly, case studies have an important

role in Knowledge Management but it must not be confused with the "Knowledge Story".

There are also subtle but significant differences between a story and an anecdote. An anecdote is a brief account of a funny or interesting incident. Usually, it is a telling of a personal experience sometimes in intimate circumstances. A pure anecdote does not need any interpretation of the experience. It might not even have a proper conclusion or a proper introduction. Anecdotes begin with a particular incident or experience and works towards a general conclusion. The reader/listener discovers the meaning of the experience at the end. On the other hand, while such a "discovery" can also happen in a story, a story is typically longer and is usually more structured. Stories invariably follow a certain structure and have set elements or parts while an anecdote is more to the point and does not rely on structure as much as the story.

No matter how grand a story is, it cannot capture everything nor is it designed to do so. Stories may also need to be complemented with more thorough logical analysis. Stories are open to interpretation which can be good or bad as it could solicit an unintended consequence if misinterpreted. A story can degenerate into a rumour. It would then have a life of its own. These limitations of the story format in delivering knowledge, however, does not detract from the advantages of stories as a tool the Knowledge Manager can and should use. Importantly, stories need to inspire action, without which there would not be any outcome to speak of.

## **3.0 CAPTURING A STORY**

Capturing or codifying knowledge has been a pre-occupation of Knowledge Managers for sometime now. Indeed since the Sumerians invented writing (circa. 3300 B.C.), we can and have been for a long time, capturing stories. However, there is much that is tacit in a story that eludes codification. This becomes clear once we distinguish between oral and written languages. Stories are more often told than written. In fact, stories are born in the telling. Lipman (1999) notes that there are significant differences between the written and the oral languages. The written language uses letters that form words; punctuations; various typographical devices such as typefaces, font sizes, italics, indentations etc. The written form can also use pictures and graphical elements such as diagrams. However, the only thing the oral language has in common with the written form is the use of words.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://fpb.cwru.edu/courses/NURS346/csguide.html>

That too, the oral language does not use letters to convey words but sounds.

The oral language which is the original language of stories rely on things like tone of voice, gestures, posture, facial expression and even eye behaviour to convey meaning. Lipman points out that one can say the word “yes” joyfully, sadly, resignedly, seductively, hesitantly or nervously. We can even say “yes” in a way that means “maybe” – or in a way that means “no” (Lipman, 1999). The meaning of “yes” thus can be context dependent and constitutes information which when we contemplate, becomes our knowledge. Clearly, fully capturing context dependent meanings into the written form would be challenging because such meanings often defy codification. Thus such meaning constitutes tacit knowledge. However, as evidenced by the popularity of story books like J.F.Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, much of such tacit knowledge can be “captured”. Thus, while it is a given that not everything can be captured, care needs to be taken to capture as much of these nuances as possible. This is because, KM regards stories especially those told by the workers and experts in their respective Communities of Practice as laden with Knowledge.

The power of a story is that it paints a picture with words. And since the picture is in the mind, whether the story-teller’s or the listener’s, it is never completely accessible. But, however tacit that picture is, it is “transferred” from the story teller to the listener/reader when he/she understands the story. Knowledge transfer that happens in story telling can be understood in terms of what Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) described as Socialisation and Internalisation. This is because of the social nature of story-telling and that when one understands a story, one internalises it making it his/her own. Such transfer of tacit knowledge through story-telling may not be characterized as “captured” in the usual sense at all. Rather, the process may be more accurately described as a “piece-ing together” or that meaning is “constructed” in the minds of the listener/reader. It is the listener/reader who “arrives”<sup>3</sup> at the tacit meaning. This explains how we may misinterpret a story i.e. when the message is not pieced together as intended by the storyteller. Thus the congruence between the intended meaning and the received meaning needs to be preserved to avoid misunderstandings

Not all knowledge or experiences come in the form of a story. And, not all knowledge should or even can be recast as a story. But personal and even organizational experiences can be weaved into a story. Considering

---

<sup>3</sup> The idea that Knowledge is the arrival of meaning is succinctly described by Syed Naquib al-Attas (1984).

the effectiveness of stories, should these experiences or knowledge be recast as a story wherever possible? Can we capture these experiences and formulate a story around them to be presented to the workers? If the job of the Knowledge Manager is to somehow capture knowledge and disseminate it or integrate it into the business processes, then he/she must find ways to capture stories and to encourage story telling in order to facilitate knowledge sharing.

It should not be difficult for the average knowledge worker to share his/her experiences. The challenge is to relay that same experience in the form of an effective story. Another challenge is to accurately codify knowledge stories for documentation and storage into a database. These are the two main challenges we face with regards to stories in KM. Knowing the structure of a story would go a long way in helping us to face these challenges. In addition, knowing the structure and different types of stories would also facilitate Knowledge Managers in deciding on the ontology and/or taxonomy when designing database repositories for knowledge stories.

#### 4.0 THE STORY FORMULA

There are many reasons why a listener/reader fails to understand a story. Poor language competence and cultural differences can obviously hinder understanding. Such factors need to be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, even with sound language competence of both the storyteller and the listener/reader, failure is guaranteed if the story is poorly structured. As many good English language teachers know, there is a set structure of a typical story much like a schema or formula.

Do we need to follow a set formula when formulating a story? Yes, and No. The structure, by way of what comes first and what comes next in a story is open to variation. But the elements of a story are rather formulaic and fixed despite of the fact that there are many types of stories<sup>4</sup>. Paradoxically a story can start with a scene depicting the end of the story. It can start with the protagonist recalling what had happened, for example, in a dream sequence and so on. Sometimes

---

<sup>4</sup> See Annette, S. (June, 2002). *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling*. pg 4. According to Simmons there are 6 types of stories. These are 1. the “Who I am” stories 2. “Why I am here” stories, 3. “Vision” stories 4. “Teaching” stories, 5. “Values in action” stories and 6. the “I know what you are thinking” stories .

the story-teller starts in the middle of a story and uses flashbacks. Used properly, flashbacks could make a story more interesting and builds suspense. This is particularly effective if the story-teller wishes to invoke uncertainty or anxiety in the reader/listener about what will happen next. Such variations show that there is more than one way to tell a story – no one formula. However, the story is made up of important elements which are characteristic of and unique to a story. For the beginner at least, it is important to follow a set formula to ensure that each element is taken into consideration when formulating or relating a story even when such a formula merely acts essentially as a guide. However as mentioned, the ordering of these elements varies.

Importantly, these elements need to be presented together as a whole as well as in a structure that makes sense – like pieces of a puzzle. A listener/reader would not understand a story if he/she fails to see the logic in the sequence of events in it. This is because each element of a story must mean something to him/her. Leaving out a basic element or if these elements are not arranged and linked meaningfully would blur one's understanding of the story. As such, stories need to be structured. The bare structure is akin to the skeleton upon which you create a fully fleshed-out tale. The structure serves as a guideline to ensure that the reader/listener could follow the story. When a reader/listener draws a blank, you can be certain that it is because a proper structure is missing.

## 5.0. THE PARTS OF A STORY

There are three main parts that work together to make up story. These are:

- **CHARACTERS:** These are the individuals or group of persons involved in the story. There are usually one or two main characters. Obviously, interesting characters hold the listener's interest. It is important to have characters the listener can identify with.
- **SETTING:** This is where your story takes place. The setting is a time - the future, the past, or now. The setting also includes the place or any relevant situation.
- **PLOT:** The plot of a story is the sequence of actions and events that take place in the story. The plot should have a beginning, the middle and an end. Care should be taken to ensure that the events of the story are in a logical order.

It is important that the setting and at least some of the actions and events are "eerily familiar" to the

reader/listener<sup>5</sup>. Such familiarity would enable the listener to find relevance in the story to his/her own actual situation in his/her own organisation. It is such relevance that would enable the listener/reader to appreciate the story. Indeed, you would appreciate the story better when you find value in it in your own life.

## 6.0. HOW A STORY IS TOLD

In the formulation of a story, it is important to think of the plot. As mentioned, the plot is the sequence of events that gives the story structure and direction. It is also referred to as the story line. The story line is made up of the following elements which form a basic sequence of a typical story:

6.1. **Introduction:** This part sets the stage or gives the setting. The context or the "where and when" of the story is made plain. The situation of the characters in the story is explained and it leads up to the further development of the plot. The setting also suggests the point of view of the narrator.

6.2. **Conflict:** The setting is invariably suddenly disturbed with an event that leads to a series of actions in the story line. In this part of the story, tension builds and the story works its way up to the climax.

6.3. **Climax:** The high point in the story. This is the turning point where the conflict comes to a head. This is usually the most exciting part of the story.

6.4. **Anti-Climax:** These are events that happen after the climax. This usually wraps up the story leading to the conclusion. The anti-climax is optional as sometimes the conclusion occurs immediately after the climax.

6.5. **Conflict Resolution:** This is the conclusion, the point of closure of the story. It is also called the denouement when the conflict is worked out in the end.

## 7.0 GENRE: THE KM THEME

The different elements or parts of a story are held together by one main idea. This main idea is the theme of the story. The theme of a story is a very important aspect of a story. In fact in some stories, it is crucial. The theme is the story's central concept, or the controlling idea. It gives some idea about the very

---

<sup>5</sup> This point about familiarity is well noted by Denning (2000).

purpose of the story. Sometimes it is a statement about life, or a statement based on the personal or even the political views of the author (as in the case of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*). However, some stories do not seem to have any specific theme at all. For example, mysteries usually do not make any significant statement. They merely serve to entertain by giving the reader an intricate, mind boggling puzzle which is solved at the end of the story.

Focusing on the KM theme is important. This is to ensure that stories emphasised and captured are relevant to the Knowledge Management Initiative. For the Knowledge Manager, the central theme of a valuable story is KM itself. In fact the definition of a Knowledge Story is a story with a Knowledge Theme. A typical theme of a KM story would centre around how workers struggle to overcome what appears to be an insurmountable problem or adversity or simply produce better results and find the much sought after solution by leveraging on Knowledge. The Knowledge Manager must ensure that the stories captured or formulated fit into the overall purpose of Knowledge Management. The focus on the KM theme thus becomes crucial.

## **8.0. CONCLUSION: HAPPILY EVER AFTER?**

Knowledge Managers must realise that story telling, however powerful a tool for knowledge dissemination, is just that, a tool. Proper structure and focus on the KM theme are crucial in managing knowledge stories. But how these stories fit into the overall Knowledge Management Initiative requires more thinking. Reamy for instance, speaks of building a "Knowledge Architecture" where there is an integration of Knowledge Management, education and training to support face-to-face storytelling<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, building such a Knowledge Architecture would require an understanding of the structure of the story discussed in this very paper. Furthermore, employees need to "graduate" from using other people's stories to using their own stories, from their own experiences to enhance communication in the context of that particular organisation or work environment. Also, analogous to issues about Returns on Investment of a Knowledge Management Initiative, one may think about how do we "measure" the success of a story. How do we determine whether a story is successful in relaying the intended message? This is undoubtedly difficult to quantify. Obviously, getting immediate

feedback from listeners/readers on whether he/she understands the message of the story helps. However, one good indicator would be whether the story inspires action that leads to work improvement. Telling a story which has a clear structure with a meaningful KM theme invariably has an impact which would inspire the right action towards organisational objectives. Stories can and do change people.

### *References:*

- al-Attas, Syed Naquib. (1984) *Islam, Secularism and the Philosophy of the Future*. Mansell Publishing Limited. London.
- Annette, Simmons (June, 2002). *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling*. Perseus Publishing; 1st edition.
- Denning, Steve. (2000). *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*. Butterworth-Heinemann, Boston.
- Green, Melanie C. Strange, J. Jeffrey. Brock C. Timothy (Editors). (July 2002). *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations*. Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc.
- Lipman, Doug. (June 1999). *Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond the Basics for All Who Tell Stories in Work or Play* (American Storytelling Paper) August House Publications.
- Mooney, William. Holt, David (Editor), Mooney, Bill. (October 1996). *The Storyteller's Guide: Storytellers Share Advice for the Classroom, Boardroom, Showroom, Podium, Pulpit and Central Stage* (American Storytelling Paper). August House Publications.
- Nonaka, I. Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The Knowledge Creating Company: How Japanese Companies create the Dynamics of Innovation*. Oxford University Press.
- Reamy, Tom. (2002). "Knowledge Architecture" parts 1 and 2 in *KMWorld Magazine* June, July/August Vol.11, Issues 6 and 7.
- Reamy, Tom. (2001). "From Information Architecture to Knowledge Architecture" in *Intranet Professional*, September/October.

---

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller discussion of Knowledge Architecture, see Reamy (September/October 2001).