

JACA  
1(1995): 18-27

# Academic Narratives: What's the Story?

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## ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND NARRATIVES

**I**N recent years, management research has devoted a great deal of attention to the notion of "organizational culture." Management consultant Edgar Schein says that although a host of common definitions of culture (such as the perceived "climate" of an organization, or the organization's guiding philosophy, or the "rules of the game" associated with the organization) are *symptomatic* of an organization's culture, none capture its essence because:

...the term "culture" should be reserved for the deeper level of *basic assumptions* and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic "taken for granted" fashion an organization's view of itself (Schein, p. 9).

In his book *Images of Organization*, Gareth Morgan defines organizations as "socially constructed realities" (p. 112) and stresses that we should derive our understanding of organizational culture from the "processes that produce systems of shared meaning" (p. 131). One such "process" is the generation of organizational narratives, or stories, that although they hover about the "surface of organizational life...give clues to the existence of a much deeper and all-pervasive system of meaning" (p. 133).

Stories are a predominant feature of all established organizations. Narratives not only *reflect* significant developments in an organization, they often *generate* change, as well. Many organizational narratives represent what makes an organization "tick," trace meaningful stages in the evolution of the organization, and serve as potent catalysts for solidarity (or disintegration) of purpose in the organization. Narratives can enhance the work of an

organization; they can also damage an organization irreparably. According to Donald Polkinghorne (1988), organizational narratives fulfill a multitude of functions which include:

...reduction of tension, concealment of power plays, the mediation of contradictions between theory and practice and between group and individual needs, and building of bridges between the past and the present. (p. 122)

Because of their temporal nature, narratives embody fundamental assumptions regarding continuity and change in the organization, but both the narratives and the assumptions implicit in them may become dysfunctional with the passage of time. Consequently, a study of the reigning narratives of selected organizations can improve our understanding of what Burton Clark (1972) has called “the capacities of organizations to enhance or diminish the lives of participants” (p. 183 ).

### THREE PERSPECTIVES ON NARRATIVE

I have been both victim and beneficiary of organizational stories in the academic setting. For that reason, I have been anxious to investigate the relationship between narrative behavior and the conduct of academic programs. What follows is an examination of the characteristics (and impact) of selected narratives as they apply to the administration of fine arts programs (primarily theatre arts) at a small liberal arts college. I will begin with a review of narrative itself—its forms and functions, both general and specific. Next, I’ll consider the influence of organizational narratives in academic settings from three perspectives:

1. a *developmental* perspective: the transformative and transformable nature of organizational stories
2. a *comparative* perspective: the important distinction between what I’ll call macro-stories and micro-stories
3. a *rhetorical* perspective: the application of Kenneth Burke’s “dramatistic” method to academic narratives.

Finally, I’ll offer recommendations for further investigation of organizational narratives as they apply to the conduct of academic programs.

### FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF NARRATIVE

In everyday parlance, the term “narrative” assumes a wide range of meanings from the most all-embracing (i.e., any account that is either written or spoken) to the most singular (a richly embroidered story). My use of the term rests somewhere in between: nearly all organizational narratives adopt a recognizable (generally linear) structure but may be either generic or specific in content. In a nutshell, all human conduct is “storied.” Narrative informs the identity and behavior of individuals, institutions, and societies. In fact, narrative is the principal agency whereby individuals, institutions, and societies are *constituted* in the first place.

Scholarly interest in the subject of narrative has burgeoned in recent years, most predominantly but not exclusively in the embattled domain of literary theory. The problematics of narrative have been the subject of cross-disciplinary study in history, religion, law, and psychoanalysis among others. All treat narratives as self-authorizing worlds—“verbal

wagers” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 356) or contracts by which we negotiate reality. The broad-based field known as “narrative studies” is preoccupied not only with telling the facts but with “the facts that are telling.” (Smith and Morris, 1992, p. x) how we author our existence, and in what sense we are co-authored by others. Narrative is not merely a representation of reality, it virtually *creates* reality. Narrative is the primary means by which human experience is rendered meaningful. Facts do not speak for themselves, do not organize themselves. The same facts will admit to any number of formal arrangements each of which materially alter their meaning. With respect to narrative the realm of meaning is at least as crucial as the realm of fact. Psychologist Jerome Bruner (1990) contends that there are two predominant modes of thought—the paradigmatic mode and the narrative mode:

In the paradigmatic mode, we seek to comprehend our experience in terms of tightly reasoned analyses, logical proof, and empirical observation. In the second, “narrative mode” of thought, we are concerned with human wants, needs and goals. This is the mode of stories, wherein we deal with the “vicissitudes of human intention” organized in time. [...] masters of the paradigmatic mode try to “say no more than they mean” ...masters of the narrative mode are especially effective when, in Bruner’s words, they “mean more than they can say” (McAdams, 1993, pp. 29-30).

Narratives “mean more than they can say” in any number of ways. What narratives *do* is just as important as what they *say*. Among the several functions that narratives serve, we must include:

1. narrative as *therapeutic* (or as *physic*), as instruments of healing “old wounds” and the treatment of life’s “ills”
2. narrative as *noetic*, as a “way of knowing” or cognitive instrument (“map,” “lens,” “schema”) that allows us to translate experience (in this category is included narrative as *heuristic*—as a means of problem-solving—and narrative as *hermeneutic*—as a means of interpreting experience)
3. narrative as *rhetoric*, as a means of persuasion concerned with the effects it produces and with the generation of “good reasons”
4. narrative as *pragmatic*, as an instrument for achieving goals or accomplishing desired ends (and “endings!”)
5. narrative as *aesthetic*, as an activity that appeals to our sense of beauty and to which we ascribe intrinsic value
6. narrative as *ethic*, as representative of a moral position: there are “truths” that only narrative can reveal, and this is not just a matter of “suggestion” as with *allegoresis*, but of “identity” as with parable—wherein the story, in the manner of a poem, *is* itself what it is talking about
7. narrative as *critic*: as J. Hillis Miller (1990) asserts, narrative plays both an “affirmative, culture-making function [and a] critical or subversive function...narratives reinforce the dominant culture and

put it into question at the same time" (Miller, p. 70).

## A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Organizational narratives are as prevalent in academic settings as elsewhere. One such narrative is the sort that embraces (or at least implies) the organization's "life-story." Narrative is the principal mechanism by which we make sense of the world. In our effort to acquire a developmental perspective on our experience—"both our individual lives and our organizational lives—narrative has a central role" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 123) Just as with individuals, an organization's "life-story" has the potential to become maladaptive as circumstances change. When I assumed the administrative leadership of the theatre program at my institution, I inherited the disabling narrative of the program's short but turbulent life. Disabling narratives can severely undermine the objectives and long-term health of a program and demand serious attention. One way to address the problem is to follow the lead of the psychoanalytical community.

Scholarship devoted to the subject of narrative has virtually rewritten psychoanalytical practice in the last two decades, provoking a paradigm shift analogous to Thomas Kuhn's notion of "extraordinary science" (Kuhn, 1963, *passim*) in the traditional sciences. The contrast of the old and the new is elegantly summarized by Stanley Fish who registers the recent preponderance of "analysts who see the 'truth' of psychoanalysis as a narrative truth and invoke a standard not of correspondence with empirical facts but of coherence within a discursive structure" (1989, p. 592).

Attention to memory is a critical function of therapeutic analysis. In recent years, however, psychoanalysts have begun to abandon Freud's "archaeological" approach to mining the elusive "truth of the subconscious" (Freud, 1914, *passim*). Donald Spence (1982) and Roy Shafer (1992) have spearheaded the movement to adopt an alternative paradigm. Both have little faith in our capacity to retrieve unvarnished truth from the archives of the mind (or the past in general, for that matter) and agree with symbolist Philip Wheelwright (1968) when he declares that "the plain fact is that not all facts are plain" (p. 86). In union with the current practice of historiography and jurisprudence, Spence demonstrates the unfeasibility of achieving, in the analytic setting, the Rankean ideal of a faithful reconstruction of "what really happened" in the patient's past. Unlike Freud, Spence (1982) and Shafer (1992) believe that the psychoanalytic method must accommodate the constructivist viewpoint that what counts as "reality" in therapeutic practice is only and always a subjective fiction (which is to say a linguistic construct that adheres to the conventions of narrative fiction, not necessarily a lie, *per se*). In the words of George Steiner, "psychoanalytical interpretation does not define; it translates" (1989, p. 110). Therefore, "immaculate perception" is never possible. Whatever serves as "evidence" bears no necessary relationship to the past, but is rendered "true" by virtue of its contribution to the economy and integrity of the narrative. Narrative, in these terms, is not a poor substitute for reality; it is, invariably, the means by which reality is brought into being. By the agency of "successful fictions," we repeatedly reauthor ourselves. We aim not so much for chronicle, or a catalog of veridical statements, as for the apprehension of an aesthetic "fit" to the components that we select to comprise our story.

How does all of this apply to organizational narratives? Any identity, personal or organizational, is a story, and if the story changes, the identity changes. Narratives are evolving constructions that are subject to "enrichment" as well as "repair." Narrative is a form of conversation or "dialogue" with the past and the past is dynamic because the meaning of any discrete event is subject to radical revision by virtue of what happens later. In addition, stories are *social* constructions. This is of particular relevance because it means that narrative is a function of *relationship*. In the lives of individuals and organizations, identities are dependent on social definitions, are dialogue-dependent. Each of us is caught up in one

another's stories. Bruner (1990) notes that societies boast a "library" of cultural scripts that impose rhetorical and practical "demands" upon those who, cautiously or otherwise, subscribe to them.

In my case, it was possible to adopt a proactive strategy to counter the "fallout" associated with the disabling narrative identified with the theatre program at my college at the time of my arrival. The strategy evolved as a transaction between developmental theory and narrative theory. I call it "reframing," and it applies equally well to the life of an organization as it does to the life of an individual. The concept of reframing is predicated on the fact that identity is a story. An organization comes to know itself—acquires a narrative identity—by virtue of the story it tells (or that is told about it by others outside of the organization). Reframing is a strategy for organizing experience that imposes a new point of view on an outdated narrative. Because it determines how the "facts" of the story are to be characterized, the new frame (like the old one before it) becomes the story because it is responsible for the emplotment of the narrative. In other words, it is possible to recount the "same" story, but to reframe it: that is, without altering the facts (the "reality" of the past does not change in any material sense) we alter the disposition of the facts. The changes in the "identity" of the story from old to new can provoke dramatic alterations in the identity (and consequent conduct) of the organization whose story is at stake.

### MACRO-STORIES AND MICRO-STORIES

Another approach to organizational narratives is suggested by the distinction between (as I call them) "macro-stories" and "micro-stories." Macro-stories are the stuff of legend—the "epic myths of the organization," (Mitroff and Kilmann, 1975, p. 18) the "organizational sagas" (Clark, 1972, p. 178). Macro-stories are inclusive narratives that establish the basic "theme" of the organization, that coordinate otherwise isolated or seemingly random incidents into a "primary interpretive scheme," (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 122) and that permeate "all levels of policy and decision-making" (Mitroff and Kilmann, 1972, p. 19) In other words, an organization's macro-story is the principal narrative—the single, overriding narrative—that imposes a unity and coherence on the events of the organization. According to business professor and strategic-planning consultant Ian Mitroff (1972), what I am calling macro-stories:

...describe, in heroic terms, more dramatic than life itself, the difficult circumstances under which the organization was born, the tremendous struggle that was necessary to keep it alive in the early perilous years of its existence, how those involved made great personal sacrifices born out of intense dedication, how the organization slowly began to grow, and finally how in later years it achieved a success far greater than anyone had dared dream (Mitroff, p. 18).

Micro-stories, on the other hand, are more "local" or "topical." Although they, too, are normative and *reflect* the values inherent in the macro-story, they feature discrete events that only on rare occasions serve to symbolize the "big picture" of the organization. Despite their topicality, however, micro-stories are often variations on common storytypes to be found in a wide variety of organizational contexts. Joanne Martin has observed what she calls the "uniqueness paradox" (Martin, p. 438) at work in most organizations. In her words, an organization's "claim to uniqueness is expressed through cultural manifestations [such as stories] that are not in fact unique." (Martin, p. 439) Martin recommends the application of script theory (Schank and Abelson, 1977, *passim*) as a means to develop content-analysis categories by which to identify common story types. A "script" is the bare bones of a story,

stripped of inconsequential detail. Martin's content analysis scheme is designed to determine whether a given narrative adheres to a common story type.

For example, the story about how our technical director warned his students to exercise extreme caution with our brand new (and very expensive!) seamless scrim because, in his words, "they can tear very easily, and if it tears we'll have to replace it, and I don't think any of you will want to cough up the replacement cost"—only to tear it himself accidentally in a rare moment of distraction—conforms to Martin's "Is The Big Boss Human" (Martin, p. 442) schema. Or the story of the unassuming student who tried several times (without success) to be cast in a mainstage play—but, undaunted, launched our dramaturgy program, wrote a critically acclaimed play that was the season opener in her junior year, and who was just awarded the college's first Rhodes Scholarship—conforms to Martin's common story type: "Can The Little Person Rise To The Top?" (Martin, p. 442) The narrative that occurs most frequently, according to Martin, is the obstacle story: "How Will The Organization Deal With Obstacles?" (Martin, p. 442) We like to tell the story about the students who lugged a monstrous window (that had fallen out of its rotted frame directly into the auditorium during a rehearsal) to an open forum with the administration to graphically exhibit the ill-repair of the facility.

Although most of the common story types are self-enhancing, or as Martin calls them, "Self-Serving Rationalizations of the Past," (Martin, p. 449), they primarily serve as exemplars of behavior and are as much about the present and the future of the organization as they are about the past. They serve to indoctrinate newcomers, to encourage the group to face new challenges, and to regulate the organization's activities and internal relationships.

Scholars of organizational culture need to distinguish between macro-stories and micro-stories and to learn how best to interpret their manifold motives, meanings, and consequences. To do so will help them, in the words of management professor Danny Miller (1987), "to recognize the crucial orientation and assumptions that influence organizational culture, strategy and structure; an important step towards understanding, diagnosis and intervention." (Kets de Vries and Miller, p. 234).

## DRAMATISM AND THE PENTAD

An application of Kenneth Burke's (1963) now-classic "dramatistic" method is yet another productive strategy for analyzing organizational narratives. A recent investigation of my own is a case in point. I visited three so-called "appreciation" classes on campus to conduct some relatively pure "ethnographic" research with the hope of acquiring a bit of what anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) has called "local knowledge." At my college, students may choose one of three options Art, Music, or Theatre Appreciation—to fulfill their general education requirement in the fine arts. All three programs offer majors at my institution, but the appreciation classes are exclusively for non-majors. In fact, only 14 of 121 students surveyed (the three classes are reasonably uniform in size—approximately 40 students in each class) indicated their intention to major in one of the three fine arts disciplines. I asked the students to put into writing their best understanding of the "story" associated with each of the three programs, i.e., all three classes wrote about all three programs (I received a total of 363 narratives). I avoided any elaborate preliminaries, discouraged discussion of the task, and intentionally left it to the students to define "story" for themselves and to divine how to comply with my request.

It was not my intention, when I conceived the idea, to submit my "data" to a Burkean analysis. I began with the crude notion that the narratives I solicited could (perhaps) illuminate those factors, if any, that influence students to elect one course over another, or in some vague way to clarify what expectations, at the entry level, students may have about the course and in what sense those expectations are a function of their sense of a respective

department's story. I was also interested to determine how well the "internal" and "external" stories matched up; these students had been in the course for about a month and had no necessary "stake" in the departmental narrative. After they had written all three narratives, I asked the students two follow-up questions. First, I asked students to indicate whether the story of the program affiliated with the course in which they were enrolled had influenced (in any way) their decision to register for that course. Second, I asked whether their understanding of the story had altered in any meaningful way as a result of their exposure to the course (and, at least indirectly, to the program as a whole). The results of my informal investigation were startling. Nearly all of the students treated the request seriously and to my surprise nearly all of the stories (in one sense or another) were flattering depictions of the programs in question, but most students indicated the stories of the respective departments had little or no bearing upon which of the three courses they had elected and that, in fact, they had little knowledge of the story prior to matriculation in the course, and nearly all students expressed a keener "appreciation" (Yes, they used that word!) for the ideals expressed in the stories as a consequence of their exposure to the course. When I read the stories themselves, certain patterns began to emerge. The narratives that I received tended to cohere around specific "motifs," to wit, the story of a respective program was linked somehow:

- to the larger story of the artistic discipline itself
- to the larger story of the college itself
- to the physical facilities associated with the program
- to the perceived qualities of the "key players"—both students and faculty, past and present
- to a consideration of what factors have been instrumental in the success of a respective program
- to the principal product (in the performance or artifactual sense) of the program in question.

The discovery of these and other motifs in the student's stories induced me to reexamine the suitability of Burke's "dramatistic" method for an analysis of organizational narratives. In his landmark volume, *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke (1969) defines his system of textual analysis known as "dramatism." According to Burke, dramatism is designed to answer the question: "What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?" (p. xv). Dramatism grew out of Burke's effort to understand the origins of human motivation and conduct. It is predicated on Burke's belief that verbal behavior is symbolic action, a strategic response to a situation from which motives may be inferred. As Ron Pelias (1992) explains:

...thinking about life in dramatistic terms provides rich insights into the nature of human action...human action is motivated action. Humans have a capacity for making choices, decisions, and commitments. Such a capacity is fundamentally dramatic, since each choice, decision, or commitment is potentially in conflict with its alternatives. (p. 47)

The centerpiece of the dramatistic approach is a vocabulary of critical terms, borrowed from the language of the stage, that are required to conduct any comprehensive analysis of

motives. Known as “the pentad,” these five terms (Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose) are, according to Burke, the generating principle of rhetorical analysis and attempt to answer the questions: what was done (Act), where and when was it done (Scene), who did it (Agent), how was it done (Agency), and why was it done (Purpose). Every element of the pentad is a function of every other; they mutually define and influence one another. Every narrative act, in Burke’s judgment, is inspired by some feature of one or a combination of these terms, and the dominance of one term over all the others will condition our reading of a text. Well-formed stories, according to Jerome Bruner (1990), are comprised of all of the elements in Burke’s pentad—“plus Trouble. Trouble consists of an imbalance between any of the five elements” (p. 50). Trouble is the source of drama—drama is the result of an imbalance in what Burke calls the “ratios” of these constituents.

When I reexamined the student narratives in light of the pentad, I learned a great deal. The stories associated with each of the programs in turn (across all three classes surveyed) exhibited a clear predilection for the centrality of one of the terms. In the case of the Art program, the favored constituent was the Scene. In the case of Music, it was agency. In the case of Theatre, it was the Agent. It was uncanny how well the featured elements associated with each of the three programs that emerged from my analysis of the student narratives matched up with the story put forward by the faculties of the programs in question. When I asked the faculty in the Art Department to share the story of their program, it boiled down to: “It’s their [i.e., the students’] place, their spot; we’re just there to make them more visible (Scene)”. The Music Department wanted to be identified with the statement: “An emphasis on teamwork, self-discipline, and adherence to rigorous standards transcends alternative philosophies (Agency).” In the case of the Theatre Department, the overriding narrative was distilled to: “You are who you think and say you are (Agent).”

The apparent match (at least in “spirit”) between the student stories and the faculty stories would suggest that perhaps students are far more familiar with the “authorized” story of all three programs than they either realize or acknowledge. In one respect, the correspondence is comforting. The story favored by those in command of the three programs appears to be “getting through,” even to the relatively unindoctrinated “consumers” on the margins. On the other hand, the favored pentadic element in each case is also, if we are to believe Burke, potential “Trouble.” The Theatre program could become too self-absorbed (they frequently do), the Music program could get bogged down in the “how” (technique?!) and unwittingly ignore the “what” or the “who,” and the Art program could become so preoccupied with the contingencies of its environment that it loses sight of its fundamental purpose.

## PARTING THOUGHTS

All three of the approaches to understanding organizational narratives that I have discussed—developmental, comparative, and rhetorical—attest to the ubiquity and power of narratives in academic settings and demonstrate the importance of devoting scholarly attention to the symbolic life of academic programs. Academic organizations, like any other, can and should profit from the valuable information to be gleaned from an analysis of organizational narrative. Additional research could focus upon what role stories play in the success or failure of new initiatives, in the approach to damage control after a public relations disaster, or in the fortunes of selected personnel. Until recently, administrators have relied on traditional managerial approaches to address problems and to frame crucial decisions and have overlooked a critical source of data for the organization. Gareth Morgan (1986) reminds us that “the culture metaphor points towards another means of creating organized activity,” (p. 135) one in which administrators view themselves less as rational men and women who adhere to time-worn approaches and more as “symbolic actors whose primary function is to foster and develop desirable patterns of meaning” (p. 135). Those who make the effort to



phenomena—including narratives—will increase the odds that the patterns of meaning they foster are, in fact, desirable.

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