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Connecting Past and Present: A Rhetorical Analysis of How Forensics Programs Use Storytelling to Promote Team Legacy

Stephanie Orme

Rationale

Forensics programs are a unique organizational construct. While in any many ways they are like any other organization, their status as a university-affiliated, competitive organization lends itself to an interesting diversion from traditional organizational culture. While many organizations could arguably possess “competitive” aspects, in forensics competition is taken in its most literal sense. While one of the goals of the activity is educational outreach, the competitive nature of the activity can not ignored, as it plays a vital role in shaping many of the programs that are a part of the activity (Gaer, 2002; Hinck, 2003). In a competitive activity such as this, past achievements of a program tend to play a strong role in creating organizational identity. However, identifying with a program's history can be difficult, especially for programs with a long history in which many of the members no longer have direct connections to the organization, as is the case when competitors graduate and become less involved with the program. Yet, this identification with organizational history is essential to organizational culture. As Weick (1995) explains, organizational members rely upon the events of their organization's past to make sense of the present and the future. Hence, being able to share in the collective memory of one's forensics program is essential to its success and ultimately, its survival.

Bormann (1982) describes *collective memory* as the story of an organization's past achievements, as shared among organizational members. Organizations rely on a multitude of practices to promote collective memory. These “micropractices” are integral in helping members

form an organizational identity; small-scale rituals and activities shape the atmosphere and attitudes and of an organization, and are therefore worth further research (Tretheway, 2000). Narratives, for instance, serve as lenses through which organizational members view not only their organization, but the world surrounding it as well (Kramer, 2010). Narrative is one of the ways by which forensics programs establish a link between past and present, perpetuating team values and triumphs.

Given forensics programs' status as organizations at academic institutions, these teams experience changes in membership far more often than typical organizations. Each year, a team will graduate a class of seniors who, through their four years as a competitor, have helped shape the program's culture and legacy in numerous ways. Yet this void left by the graduating members is then filled by the incoming freshman or transfer student competitors who will now play a part in reshaping the team's culture. This constant change in organizational culture makes it vital that forensic programs go to extra lengths to ensure that their historic legacy survives the constant changes. Therefore, forensics programs present themselves as an interesting case in which to study the use of narrative in constructing organizational culture.

Literature Review

Organizational Culture

Organizations all have their own culture – a certain atmosphere, set of norms and values, and communication practices. Kramer (2010) argues that because every organization is different,

whenever an individual joins an organization, it requires them to learn how the organization they are now a part of functions and what their role in that organization will be. Martin (2002) argues that because organizational culture is socially constructed, the new members will also become integral in shaping the culture of the organization. Organizational culture is not only a product, but a process (Kelly, 1983). Members of an organization enact and embody the very values of the organization, making it essential that they are acclimated to the new culture (Carmack, 2008; Hill, 1997). Hence, new members undergo a socialization process, in which the organization's values, norms, and culture are taught to the newcomer (Jablin, 1982).

Jablin's (1987) linear model of organizational socialization details the process in which new organizational members become acclimated to an organizational environment. New members experience three phases of social integration to an organization: anticipatory socialization, organizational assimilation, and organizational exit. For the purpose of this study, I will be focusing on organizational assimilation, since this is the stage in which the fostering of organizational culture in new members occurs (Modaff, DeWine, & Butler, 2007).

Organizational assimilation. Jablin summarizes this assimilation stage of his organizational socialization model as “the process by which an individual becomes integrated into the “reality” or culture of an organization (Jablin, 1987, p. 163). This is when a member really starts to uncover the underlying culture of the organization. This phase consists of two sub-components: the *encounter period* and the *metamorphosis period*. Both are critical determinants of how the newcomer will fare in the new environment (Modaff, DeWine, & Butler, 2007).

Sometimes referred to as the “breaking in” period (Jablin, 1987, p., 694), the encounter period is the employee's first real introduction to the organization. In addition to learning what

the organization has to offer them, they also learn what the organization expects of them and what constitutes proper behavior for members of the organization (Jablin, 1987). This period of socialization occurs through a variety of ways: interactions with colleagues, organization training sessions, manuals, pamphlets, and other guidance materials (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003).

The second phase of the assimilation stage – the metamorphosis period – is when the new member attempts to truly become part of the organization, taking what they have learned about the organization's values and culture and enacting those behaviors. It can be a time of great change for the individual, depending upon the extent to which they make alterations to their own identity in order to fit in with the organization they are now part of (Jablin, 1987). By emulating the preferred behaviors and attitudes of the organization, the newcomer becomes part of the legacy and collective memory of the institution (Poulton, 1995). At the conclusion of the metamorphosis period, the member is assimilated into the culture (Jablin, 1987).

Storytelling in organizations

One of the ways in which socialization in organizations occurs is through storytelling. Throughout history, stories have served as an avenue for conveying attitudes and values. Stories are used to instill organizational values in members of a group (Kelly, 1985; Randall & Martin, 2003) or even control the behavior of organizational members (Wilkins, 1983). Stories are as essential to the initial encounter process (Brown, 1985) as they are to creating organizational change (Denning, 2001). Stories are the foundation of organizational sense-making. They are the culmination of past experiences connected to present experiences, allowing current members to relate to an organization's history and legacy, even though they may not have experienced it directly. Weick (1995) suggests that we make sense of the present by connecting it to similar

past events, giving them meaning. Hence, Weick (1995) would argue that stories are the very vocabulary of organizational identity and sense-making.

Functions of organizational storytelling. Brown (1984) outlines five functions of stories in an organizational setting. First, they are used to inform members about the rules of the organization. Second, stories sharpen the collective memory of an organization – how the organization's values and beliefs shapes members' understanding of past events. Third, stories reinforce member loyalty. Fourth, storytelling is integral to upholding traditions and customs; by reflecting upon the past, stories tell how tradition played a role in defining the organization today. Finally, they serve as a chronicle of the organization's history, linking the past to the present in an effort to establish the organization as a timeless entity.

Genesis narratives. One of the most common and powerful forms of storytelling employed by organizations is that of the *genesis narrative*. While metaphor can be a powerful narrative form for extolling an organization's culture in a condensed form, the genesis narrative is “the frame for interpreting cues to add meaning to the purpose of the organization, relations within the organization, and individual location within the organization” (Poulton, 2005, p.7). A genesis narrative is the overarching story of the organization – somewhat mythical or epic in nature. It typically encompasses such notions as discovery, breaking new ground, fate, and other fantastical elements that are meant to create a sense of wonder when told to present members and instill them a sense of pride in the organization (Poulton, 2005).

The true rhetorical wonder of the genesis narrative stems from its ability to cultivate in listeners such a strong sense of organizational identification. As these stories are told repeatedly, they become so ingrained in individuals that they become convinced that they are linked to the organization's past, able to accomplish the same things as those who came before them. As

Poulton (1995) explains, when these stories are told and retold, organizational members start to “relive” the organization's collective memory.

Fantasy themes

The rhetorical power that organizational storytelling has on its audience is evident in its ability to create such a strong sense of identification between the members and the organization, in some cases even allowing them to identify with a past that they could not experience themselves. There are certain types of stories that will resurface again and again – the hero from humble beginnings, the same “boy meets girl” love story, or the story about the underdog who, through perseverance and determination, achieved greatness. While the stories themselves might be different from a similar one you have heard before, they essentially have the same plot and themes. Bormann refers to these stories as *fantasy types* (Bormann, 1985a). Fantasy types become widely accepted because groups of people can identify with the common themes on a very personal level (Bormann, 1985b).

Symbolic convergence theory. Bormann’s theory of symbolic convergence was inspired by the work of Harvard professor Robert Bales, who did extensive research on small group communication in the 1950s. Bales discovered that group members would sometimes become excited and use “dramatic communication” to share their excitement with each other. He also noted that individuals occasionally comment on people not physically present in the group or about past or future events. Bales called these comments *fantasies* (Hirokawa & Poole, 1996).

Further research revealed that group members would often become energized by the comments made by others and that they would attempt to contribute their own comments regarding the topic of discussion (Bales, 1950). From this, Bormann and his students developed symbolic convergence theory. Keeping Bales’ foundation of how fantasies emerge, Bormann

fleshed out the concept of a *fantasy theme*. A fantasy theme is not to be confused with a myth or story, but rather, it is a “creative and imaginative interpretation of events” that attempts to fulfill some type of rhetorical need (Bormann, 1990 p.122). Fantasy themes are created when one member makes an initial comment about a person or event that excites the other group members, compelling them to contribute their own relevant information about their own experiences with the situation (Courtright et. al, 2004).

Rhetors will often utilize various *fantasy types*, an archetype of a specific incident or person that allows the community members to generalize about it. For instance, the fantasy type “hero” has a set of qualities that are associated with that label. By having a set of well-known attributes associated with that incident or person, fantasy types allow the group to talk in somewhat specific terms about an event or person not physically present (Bormann, 1985a).

Fantasy themes allow people to relate to each other through a shared experience and find meaning. When individuals share the fantasy, they go beyond a mere understanding of the message, by becoming highly involved in it, contributing their own details to expand upon the initial fantasy. This whole process of group members rallying around a central theme and meshing together their own experiences is known as *symbolic convergence* (Courtright et. al, 2004). Once group members share enough fantasies, they can be combined to form a worldview for the whole group, or *rhetorical vision*. A rhetorical vision is a “composite drama constructed from fantasy themes and types that have recurred through the history of a group” and may be shared with the larger public through the media, published works, or other formats (Ball, 2001).

Organizations and fantasy themes. Organizations make use of fantasy themes in their storytelling, relying upon the creation of a shared rhetorical vision to amplify the values conveyed in the stories. The stories provide members with a frame for understanding the

organization's purpose, core beliefs, and how to act when part of that organization (Papa, Daniels, & Spiker, 2007). Through fantasy themes, organizational life is presented as a drama, with action taking place on a metaphorical stage, and the organizational members as actors “performing” various scenes (Bormann, 1985b). The messages that an organization passes on to its membership in the form of stories identify heroes, heroines, villains, and goals – of all of which, based on how they are cast in the story, promote a certain vision that the organization holds and hopes to instill in its members (Papa, Daniels, & Spiker, 2007).

Forensics, culture, and legacy

Like any organization or team, individual forensics programs all have their own norms, values, and other underpinnings that hold the team together (Derryberry, 1994). Each team has its own storied past, its own paradigm regarding competition, educational value of the activity, and approaches to the activity itself. This organizational knowledge is conveyed through myths or stories, often centering on the organization's past competitors or coaches, those who defined the organization in the past and have made it what it is today (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001). These stories unite team members together around fantasy themes and create a dramatic sense of community (Croucher, Thornton, & Eckstein, 2006). Doty (2008) captures the feeling of shared history on a forensics team that he felt as a competitor looking at team trophies, which also function as symbols of team legacy: “I could see with my own eyes the progress made by the organization as it is symbolized through the hardware; yet the people, processes, and organizational structures helping to achieve the progress were long gone” (Doty, 2008, p. 16).

Being familiar with a forensic team's history and legacy is not just about creating a competitive drive in its current members. It goes beyond that, extending to an individual's sense of belonging, the feeling that they “mean something” to the organization. An organization's

collective memory assures members that they can contribute to the organization in profound ways (Doty, 2008), thus stories become a vital instrument for keeping a team's legacy “alive” by making it known in the present. It is crucial that forensic programs promote collective memory. Talyor (2007) suggests that teams that lose touch with their historic legacy lose out on the ability to truly experience the triumphs and excitement that came before them, resulting in a sense of detachment from the organization. Thus, stories are the torch that keep the flame of forensic legacy burning for the current members of the team.

Summary and Research Questions

Organizational culture is in constant flux, being continually redefined by its members (Kelly, 1983). Forensics programs perhaps experience this cultural shift more often than most organizations, since a program's membership changes each year, as former members graduate and make room for new members, who will both assimilate into the program's culture, and play a role in the reshaping of it. Even with these changes, most programs will still retain some of their “roots,” what makes the program different from others (Croucher, Thornton, & Eckstein, 2006). Hence, teams rely on stories of the team's past to ground the present team in its legacy. The stories a team tells reveal much about the core values of the team itself, which are imparted upon its members who both enact and redefine the them. The story archetypes used by teams to induce certain feelings in its members are well worth examining to better understand the how teams utilize this rhetorical device to create and maintain organizational culture. Thus, the following research question is asked:

RQ: How do forensic programs use storytelling to convey team legacy?

Methods

Participants

Participants from this pilot study were current members of a collegiate forensics program. For this pilot study, two team members were recruited through personal relationships with the team, and on a volunteer basis. The program has a rich history, with the organization dating back to the year the university was founded. The program boasts a competitively successful past, accumulating dozens of individual national champions, as well as several team national championship titles. The team remains nationally competitive today.

Procedure

Due to geographical barriers, phone interviews were conducted with the participants. Carr & Worth (2001) note that studies have shown that telephone interviewing tends to produce results comparable in quality to that of face-to-face interviewing. The participants were first asked a set of preliminary questions regarding their general attitude toward their forensics program, in order to establish a sense of the individual's organizational identification. They were then asked to share one or two stories that the team sometimes tells. The collected stories were analyzed using a rhetorical approach to narrative analysis (Feldman, Sköldberg, Brown, & Horner, 2004).

A rhetorical analysis of narratives. While the average person is relatively capable of interpreting stories, this rhetorical approach provides an exceptional tool for this type of study because it gets at the rhetorical underpinnings of stories. Feldman et al. (2004) developed a three-step model for narrative analysis. The first step was to define the story line by developing a one or two sentence summary of the story in order to reveal the basic argument being made in

the story. The next two steps involve two classical rhetorical concepts: *opposition* and *enthymeme*.

Step two focuses on the use of opposition. Stories incorporating elements of opposition – juxtaposing one concept with an opposite concept – can be used to define what an organization *is*, based on what it *is not* (Feldman, 1995). By identifying instances of opposition, a researcher can uncover what the organization is based on how the opposition is framed. According to Feldman et al. (2004), stories can be assumed to contain at least element of opposition.

The third level of analysis involves reproducing the story in terms of an enthymeme. Enthymemes are commonly described as “incomplete” syllogisms or lines of argument because they leave part of the conclusion up to the audience. Allowing others to “fill in” in the supposed logical gaps is a rhetorical strategy that gives storytellers the illusion of being more “hands off,” empowering the audience. Feldman et al. (2004) explain that enthymemes are frequently used in stories because people can avoid starting the obvious or raising a controversial issue in a story by letting others piece together the argument themselves.

Results

Through the interviews with members of the forensics program, two different stories were collected, each revolving around aspects of team legacy that are explored below. Each was then analyzed through Feldman et al.'s model (2004). From each story emerges a strong theme. In the first story, the theme is one of *work ethic*, while the second story focuses on *community*. I will first analyze the story pertaining to the work ethic theme, before discussing the community-themed story.

Story #1 – “The makings of a champion” – Both participants recalled the story of a particular squad from several years prior that reached paramount competitive success. In

summary, the story revolves around the individuals who comprised the team that year, a team that the forensics circuit had dubbed underdogs regarding competitive success. Yet through a season of extremely hard work and dedication, the squad won the national championship title that year.

In this story, there is a clear value placed on positive work ethic and perseverance, since these were values that factored into the team's competitive success at the end of the year. This logical link is made via the use of enthymeme – it is understood that the team members' hard work contributed to their achievements. This simultaneously casts values like laziness or procrastination – things that would have not have led to the team's same competitive outcome – in opposition, as values that the organization does not hold in high regard.

In the preliminary interview about the team culture and participants' attitudes toward the team, one participant affirmed that hard work is something the program strives for, showing that the story echoes team values. She also stated that this particular story is very familiar to team members:

“No one thought they would [win], but they worked hard and accomplished everything they wanted. That story's told pretty often and is always told to show the team that everyone can get what they want out of [the national tournament].”

The fact that the story is told often suggests that the organization views it as helpful for teaching current members about the team's past and giving them tools for future success. Through the repeated telling of this genesis story, today's members are able to relate to their program's past successes, and are taught to believe that they can achieve the same success as their predecessors by following in their footsteps (Poulton, 2005).

Another way this story becomes highly relatable to today's members is its use of the “underdog” archetype. As Bormann (1985a) explains, archetypes are useful storytelling devices because people have a certain generalized understanding of their meaning, allowing people to identify with characters or events somewhat universally. In this case, the underdog archetype is attributed to this squad that no one expected to be successful, making them a sympathetic figure. But this sympathy is transformed into pride and emotional overwhelming when the underdog group rises above everyone's expectations. Thus, the story capitalizes on the transformation of the team into national champions, something that all competitors strive for and can thus relate to, resulting in the shared rhetorical vision of rising above the odds through hard work.

Story #2 – “A family affair” – The second participant recounted a story that the team sometimes tells about how one former member was able to make light of a bad situation. On the way home from a tournament, there was a car accident on the highway and the team was stuck in non-moving traffic for over two hours. Naturally, the overall mood of the travelers was gloomy. Suddenly, one team member pulled out a harmonica and started improvising a “bluesy” song about the team's predicament. The sheer unexpected behavior and humorous song immediately had everyone laughing and in much better spirits for the rest of the night.

This story does not focus on the competitive nature of the program, but instead, emphasizes ideas like friendship and team bonding. As one participant explained, “When you travel with each other almost every weekend of the season and share a bed with a teammate, getting along is so important. We're all pretty much best friends, able to make the most of any situation when we're together.” This comment exemplifies the team members' overall commitment to each other as going beyond just competition. He elaborated on the story:

“You almost had to know this guy [the team member from the story] to fully appreciate the hilarity of it all, but even if you didn't know him, just the idea of some kid popping up like a cartoon character on a bus with a harmonica and singing the blues... How can anyone not find that awesome?”

Here again, the participant touches on the idea of a rhetorical vision. While current or future competitors may not know the individual from the story, it still provides them with some sort of referent, drawing upon human emotions like laughter and notions of absurdity that are highly relatable (Bormann, 1985a). Listeners find themselves wanting to experience this same camaraderie, making them part of the rhetorical vision.

Discussion

In response to the research question, this pilot study suggests that forensics programs use storytelling to promote team legacy among current members in a variety of ways. One way this is achieved is through the telling of genesis stories, which allow current members to feel like they are part of something bigger than themselves and can contribute positively to their program's legacy (Poulton, 2005). This sense of belonging and cohesion is clearly essential to the success of the organization. Both students expressed having a sense of connectedness to their program by being a part of the storytelling, initially as someone who listened to the story being told by another member, and later sharing becoming the storyteller themselves, in terms of passing the story on to other students, as well as sharing their stories for this research.

Second, reliance on story archetypes is also helpful in helping members identify with past members who they have never met, but can get a sense of through the meaning surrounding certain archetypes like “the underdog” (Bormann, 1985a). This is evident in the case of the first story about the team that no expected to succeed winning a national championship. The student

sharing the story was not present for the event itself, nor had they met most of the individuals who were part of the national championship team. Yet, through the constant retelling of the story among current team members, this student felt a sense of connectedness to those former team members. Moreover, the student was instilled with a sense that they, too, could achieve the same feats as that previous group of individuals if they embodied the same work ethic as the champion team.

Limitations

This pilot study has several limitations. First, only two participants were able to take part in this study. While they both provided insightful interviews and shared interesting stories, having a larger sample would have useful for seeing if other members brought up the same stories, which could suggest that the elements of legacy featured in those stories are particularly revered among the program. It is worth noting that both participants who *did* participate in the story both shared one of the same stories (Story #1). This implies that the values promoted in that particular story of seen as important to the team, hence its apparent prominence. However, since these results are based on interviews with two individuals, it cannot be concluded that was more than mere coincidence. The collection of additional stories would naturally offer a more complete picture of the organization's values and legacy promotion in general. Second, it should be taken into consideration that participants are members of a highly competitive team, which could affect the way stories are used in organizational socialization and the promotion of legacy.

Seeing as this study focused on the perspectives of the competitors, future research could benefit from examining how coaches view storytelling as promoting legacy, given they are often the storytellers and even the gatekeepers of which stories remain part of the team's collective memory. Futhermore, a circuit-wide study of teams from all different backgrounds – old/new,

highly competitive/somewhat competitive, etc. – could explore how this phenomenon occurs among teams with varying dynamics.

Conclusion

Forensics programs undergo a constant evolution in terms of organizational identity and culture. Yet for an organization that is rooted in competition, the balance between change and staying true to its historic legacy is one worth pursuing. One of the many ways in which programs try to achieve this balance is through storytelling. By using rhetorical devices such as opposition, enthymeme, and story archetypes, programs create a rhetorical vision in an attempt to unite the current generation of forensicators with those who came before them. Round by round, today's competitors try to defend their team's legacy – a legacy appropriately conveyed through the art of words themselves – the art of storytelling.

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