

Corporate social responsibility learning through collaborative storytelling

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Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a very popular teaching subject in management and tourism education. There is a wide stream of literature on pedagogical techniques that can be used to promote CSR learning (McWilliams and Nahavandi, 2006). One of these techniques is storytelling (e.g. King and Down, 2001; Sims, 2004; Watson, 2003). For example, the telling of stories through movies, news-paper articles, guest speakers, educators, and the participation in field trips. Stories about people acting ethically and responsibly are viewed as suitable means for encouraging students to act ethically and to behave in admirable ways (Watson 2003). From this perspective, stories are seen as a way to show students what ideals and moral values look like in practice. While these scholars recognize the potential of storytelling in promoting CSR learning, they tend to focus on the telling of stories. By assuming that students learn from listening to the stories, this approach to storytelling assumes that student's learning is cognitivist in nature, based on their own experience, perceptions and conversations related to a particular historical event (Morgan and Dennehy, 2004; Weick, 1995). This cognitive approach is highly individualistic and therefore overlooks the value of stories as effective means of sharing knowledge, critically questioning assumptions, engaging in discursive practices, testing moral boundaries and making sense of perplexing situations (Gabriel and Connell, 2010; Gold et al., 2002).

The aim of this paper is to explore the possibilities and challenges of using stories as vehicles for critically evaluating contemporary business practices and testing the moral and political boundaries of CSR. In so doing, I argue that storytelling approaches to CSR learning should also recognize the role that the socially situated and discursive nature of stories as well as the collaborative practices and personal relations through which these stories are constructed may play in helping students in contesting, negotiating and (de-)constructing notions of responsibility (see Cunliffe, 2002). Drawing upon the relational social-constructionist orientation to business education (Cunliffe, 2002; Ramsey, 2005) and a collaborative storytelling approach to management learning (Gabriel and Connell, 2010), I discuss the co-construction of CSR stories by students as vehicles for critical reflexivity to unveil and question basic assumptions about the role of business in society.

Instead of viewing stories in terms of something to be communicated, I approach storytelling as a reflexive collaborative practice through which students and instructors receive the opportunity to (re)define their social identities, social worlds and social relations (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002). Although “critical thinking” is a term commonly used in relation to storytelling in CSR education to mean the ability to adopt a disciplined approach to problem solving, “critical reflexivity” refers to the social process of questioning assumptions embodied in both theory and professional practice (see Cunliffe, 2002). Critical reflexivity is particularly needed, if CSR educators really intend to promote intellectual pluralism that help recognize and discuss the taken-for-granted assumptions about the notion of responsibility.

The collaborative storytelling approach to CSR learning is illustrated by presenting findings from a study conducted at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Lapland, Finland. The empirical data used in the study consist primarily of 12 CSR-stories co-constructed by students attending a Masters-level CSR course between the years 2011 and 2015. The CSR stories account for a total of 28 pages. Between 20 and 25 students representing different business fields (incl. tourism management) and nationalities attended the CSR course every year. The age of the students ranged from 23 to 35, and both genders were equally represented. 70% of the students have attended a course related to sustainability or business ethics before taking the CSR course used in this study. The co-creation of the stories occurred in groups of five or six students. The instructions given to the students for jointly writing the CSR stories were based on collaborative storytelling mechanism suggest by Gabriel and Connell (2010, p. 511).

The CSR-stories were analysed as social texts that are produced, shared and used in culturally specific and socially organized ways (see Moisander and Valtonen 2006, p. 68). To interpret the social texts constructed and deconstructed in the collaborative storytelling exercises, the study draws upon discourse analysis (Phillips and Jorgensen 2002). By analysing what students take for granted, what sorts of meanings they reinforce/contest and what they do not talk about in their CSR stories (Moisander and Valtonen 2006), discourse analysis helps identify the discursive practices that students may use to construct CSR meanings within a business educational context, giving them the opportunity to redefine or reinforce their managerial identity. From this perspective, the analysis does not focus simply on determining what the stories tell about social responsibility but rather how they socially represent CSR in a fictional narrative.

By focusing on the discursive nature of storytelling, it was possible to identify tensions and omissions in the CSR stories. Indeed, the stories did not represent texts that were shared

by a group of students but rather shared items that were used as a starting point for a negotiated narrative whose diverse meanings and silences could be challenged, contested and criticized (Gabriel and Connell 2010). Nevertheless, the critical evaluation of the stories is not possible by simply reading or listening to them. It is the actual engagement with the narratives and their deconstruction that are essential for consolidating reflexive practices in the classroom (Gherardi and Poggio 2007). To that end, unresolved tensions and taken-for-granted issues contained in the stories can be used as catalysts to engage students and instructors in reflexive dialogues.

In this study, these dialogues focused particularly on how managerialism, neo-colonialism and orientalism were used in the stories. They sought not only to make students aware of these discourses but also to enable them to critically evaluate the role of discourses in framing sensitive social and environmental issues (see Abma 2003). Indeed, the reflexive dialogues encourage students to dig for underlying assumptions and relate the stories and their characters to their own experiences (Gabriel and Connell 2010). The findings of this study suggest that the collaborative storytelling exercise lends itself to recognizing the discursive nature of stories as a collective and interactive venture of narrative construction and deconstruction (Gabriel and Connell 2010).

It was through the process of jointly constructing and deconstructing the stories that the students not only realized the role of social discourses in shaping CSR meanings but also had the opportunity to begin to examine CSR taboos, such as the amorality of business, continuous growth and the political nature of CSR (Kallio 2007). Nevertheless, as this study showed, the mere construction and reading of the co-created stories would not have been enough to promote critical reflexivity. Social discourses, such as managerialism, neo-colonialism and orientalism, which prevailed in the social context of the study, not only shaped the CSR stories but also constrained alternative ways of understanding them. Whereas the hegemony of these discourses in the CSR-stories could be viewed as a direct failure of the collaborative storytelling exercise, they were used by the instructor as a valuable resource for deconstructing the stories and thus promoting critical reflexivity (see Gabriel and Connell 2010).

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