

## The Story as a Cultural Transmitter: Applications for Business Education



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### Abstract

Stories assist in transmitting cultural wisdom, including wisdom about the business community. The role of stories in various contexts such as education (including international management), management, and marketing, as well as the job search is explained. The article concludes by presenting instructional activities for business education that develop cultural competence through stories.

### Introduction

Intercultural competence is developed through global business education. To really know a culture, one must know the stories of the culture. Stories contain embedded cultural wisdom about all aspects of a culture, including the business community. The oral tradition of using stories to transmit or pass down history and cultural values has long been noted. Further, family histories have also been recounted in this fashion. As Estes (1993) asserted,

the ultimate gift of story is twofold; that at least one soul remains who can tell the story, and that by the recounting of the tale, the greater forces of love, mercy, generosity, and strength are continuously called into being in the world (p. 3).

In the popular children's culture, stories often began with the words, "Once upon a time," developed with numerous details often prefaced with the words "and then," and closed with the statement, "and they lived happily ever after." In that storytelling process, important cultural values and life lessons are transmitted from one generation to the next in a palatable and meaningful form.

### *Stories and Their Benefits*

The story format is a powerful one because stories are memorable. Relating the story allows the storyteller to form a bond with the audience. Halsey (2011) wrote, "Stories touch the emotional center

of the brain and cause the switch to go on that releases chemicals that not only cement learning but say, 'Hey, this is important. Pay attention' " (p. 86). Baker (2013) asserted that telling a story sometimes can be an effective strategy for solving misunderstandings that may occur during conversations.

While there are many forms of stories, including parables, folklore, fairy tales, songs, presentations, plays, and poems, they fall into two essential types: inspirational tales and cautionary (instructional) tales (Meyers & Nix, 2011). Inspirational tales help people to overcome challenges. Cautionary tales provide cultural wisdom and values and may end with the statement, "and the moral of the story is" followed by the moral itself.

### ***Stories and Cultural Dimensions***

The purpose of stories, regardless of their form, is to transmit cultural values and important lessons. Analyzing stories through the cultural dimensions they reveal assists in developing the cultural understanding needed in international business. These cultural dimensions include high or low context, individualism or collectivism, short-term or long-term orientation, and monochronic or polychronic time orientation.

High or low context cultures. Davis, Ward, and Woodland (2010) asserted that, "One of the first concepts to facilitate an understanding of culture and cross-cultural communication is the concept of high-context and low-context cultures" (p. 9). Simply put, high context cultures communicate indirectly and value nonverbal communication over verbal communication, while low context cultures are known for brevity and a direct verbal communication style (Reynolds & Valentine, 2011).

Individualistic or collectivistic cultures. The focus is on a single person in a culture that prizes individualism and is outcome oriented, while the good of the team or organization (relationship orientation) is revered by cultures in which collectivism is valued (Reynolds & Valentine, 2011).

Short-term or long-term orientation. Cultures that make decisions based on what is best for the short-term may clash with cultures that are characterized by a long-term view. In fact, some cultures, including certain Native American tribes, ask what the influence of the decision will be on the seventh generation of ancestors (Wikipedia, 2013).

Monochronic or polychronic time orientation. Cultures may be classified by how they experience or relate to time. For example, monochronic cultures view time as linear and focus upon completing one task. Polychronic cultures have a more flexible relationship with time; they may not arrive at meetings on time and may undertake multiple projects at the same time (Reynolds & Valentine, 2011).

Stories allow listeners to identify and understand cultural dimensions. The wide influence of stories around the world to inspire and instruct cultures about cultural wisdom and values has been discussed. The following sections address these research questions:

1. What strategies can be used to tell a story?
2. How are stories related to various disciplines such as education, international management, and marketing?
3. How can stories be used strategically in the job search?

### ***How to Tell a Story***

Telling a story that captivates and instructs an audience is an art (Buchanan, 2013). Meyers and Nix (2011) asserted that good stories contain elements identifying where, who, when, what, and why. The emphasis of the story is on the first three elements: where, who, and when. Buchanan (2013) summarized how to tell a story, comparing a story to taking a journey. "But instead of choosing the most efficient or scenic route, you choose a route that will bring you and your audience to the destination changed. Simple or profound, the change must have meaning" (p. 45). Well-told stories have the potential to transform the listener or receiver of the story; in other words, the stories help individuals become different and perhaps better people in the end.

Stories can build intimacy between the storyteller and the audience (Sinclair, 2005), thus stories can assist in developing better relationships. While both oral and written stories are high in social presence, spoken stories are higher in medium richness since they deliver cues through the storyteller's body language. As a result, stories delivered face-to-face are more effective than stories in written form. Further, feedback may occur with spoken stories, which does not occur with written stories (Sinclair, 2005).

### ***Stories in Various Contexts***

Stories in Education. Stories are experiencing a resurgence in educational circles. Flottemesch (2013) examined digital storytelling in intergenerational relationships. The research results indicated that digital storytelling enhanced relationships across the generations. Storytelling may now be delivered through a digital format such as movie-door-2-door.com (MD2D). For example, this platform has been used to reinforce concepts in an accounting course to create multiple episodes of a story about a business startup of recent business school graduates (Suwandy, Pan, & Seow, 2013).

Case studies, frequently used in education, may be considered a story form. Grosse (2012) commented on the benefits of using case studies in international management courses. "The story format is familiar to both student and professor, adding to the appeal of cases for teaching about global leaders and how they manage people from diverse cultures" (p. 81). Further, "intercultural management cases often make reference to the cultural competence and communication skills of the leader and others in the

company” (p. 81). Moreover, such case studies typically contain an international management dilemma, which can engage students in conversation and reflection about understanding and managing differences in culture (Grosse, 2012).

Grosse (2012) identified Aristotelian elements of stories that help students analyze and learn from international management cases. Peripeteia refers to the turning point in a story and was first used by Aristotle to describe a sudden course of events or of a reversal of circumstances such as moving from wealth to poverty or moving from poverty to wealth. Anagnorisis refers to moving from unknowing to knowing, which may accompany the turning point or peripeteia. Aristotle coined the term to refer to a moment in a drama when a character recognizes her or his true identity or nature of the identity or nature of another. Table 1 presents these terms and examples from case studies that illustrate these elements.

Table 1

*Prominent Story Concepts<sup>a</sup>*

Concept	Example
Peripeteia	An expatriate manager loses his or her temper and insults the local Chief Executive Officer (CEO) by hanging up the phone when the CEO calls at home on a weekend morning to discuss a matter that the manager deems insignificant.
Anagnorisis	The expatriate manager realizes that he or she needs to cultivate a better working relationship with the local CEO to carry out his or her job. As a result of this anagnorisis, the manager attempts to develop mutual understanding and to bridge differences with the manager.

<sup>a</sup>Adapted from Gertsen and Soderberg (2011, p. 804).

**Stories and Management.** Storytelling has been in vogue in management for the past 20 years with a plethora of conferences, workshops, books, and TED (Technology, Education, and Design) speeches about the topic (Buchanan, 2013). More specifically, the role of effective storytelling in leadership has been examined by several researchers (Auvinen, Lamsa, Sintonen, & Takala, 2013; Cayla & Arnold, 2013; Denning, 2011; Muir, 2007; Weischer, Weibler, & Petersen, 2013; & Yang, 2013). Denning (2011) emphasized using stories to lead others: (a) to ignite interest and action, (b) to work cohesively to attain goals, and (c) to navigate the changes necessary to advance into the future.

**Stories and Marketing.** With an emphasis on branding in the marketing function, stories are evident during retail sales encounters (Gilliam & Zablah, 2013). Most people are entranced by a good story (Buchanan, 2013; Knight, 2013) and are eager to learn how the story ends. Understanding the role of storytelling in effective branding assists students in creating an effective job search campaign since telling their story clearly and powerfully through pre-employment documents, such as electronic portfolios or eportfolios and in the employment interview process, is a vital skill that enhances employability.

**Stories and the Job Search.** Good storytelling techniques are important during the job search. Two aspects of the job search that require powerful storytelling skills are eportfolios and employment interviewing.

Brammer (2013) recommended using eportfolios to tell personal stories that could provide evidence of accomplishments for the job search process. Typically, eportfolios include artifacts of a student's work such as assignments or projects. In addition, a current resume and recommendation letters or letters of commendation may be added.

Baker (2013) recommended the use of stories during the opening stage of a presentation to engage the audience, commenting, "Select short stories that capture attention and emotion and that clearly drive home your key point. Stories hold our attention because we want to know how the story ends" (p. 187). Interviews may be considered a type of presentation that requires the communicating of one's best self.

Job candidates are often instructed to tell their story during employee interviews to increase their chances of obtaining a job offer. For example, Baker (2013) advised using the PAR (Problem, Action, and Results) strategy to present stories about prized attributes during employment interviews.

Consider developing a story for all the areas that might be covered in a job interview, such as your ability to work in a group, your presentation skills, your computer skills, your greatest achievement in life, your greatest challenge in life . . . Begin with the problem or situation, tell what action you took, and tell the results (p. 88).

The PAR stories should be carefully thought through, cohesively and succinctly organized, and practiced so that they are delivered confidently and effectively in a conversational manner so they sound natural. Creating an outline of the key points will help to avoid sounding stilted.

### **Instructional Activities for Understanding the Role of Stories in Culture**

The following activities may be used in business courses to encourage the understanding and application of cultural knowledge as presented through stories available in different genres.

1. Ask students to select a story from a culture assigned by the instructor. Stories representative of many cultures may be located at [www.wordoftales.com](http://www.wordoftales.com), or students can be encouraged to locate their own stories. (Be cautious about selecting stories. While the stories are representative of the culture and its wisdom, some of the stories are not politically correct and may contain stereotypes.) Ask students to identify the type of story (parable, fairy tale, folklore, and so on), the origin of the story and its history, and the cultural wisdom transmitted by the story. Then ask students to retell the story using modern business language. Being able to identify the cultural wisdom communicated by the story assists students in developing cultural competence. The retelling of the story using modern business language aids in processing the story and develops the ability to summarize, paraphrase, and communicate to a different audience.

In addition to receiving feedback from the instructor about the use of modern business language, an instructor developed rubric could be used to evaluate the identification of the type of story, the origin of the story, and the moral or cultural wisdom transmitted through the story.

A variation of this activity could involve using the story selected for Activity No. 1 to reinforce knowledge of cultural dimensions. Ask students to classify the cultural dimensions revealed through the story such as high or low context, individualism or collectivism, short-term or long-term orientation, formality or informality, and monochronic or polychronic time orientation. The correctness of student classifications of the cultural dimensions can be used to evaluate the activity.

2. Select a free international management case (refer to the Case Centre at <http://www.thecasecentre.com> for select cases, some of which may require a fee) and ask students to identify the concepts of peripeteia (story turning point) and anagnorisis (knowledge learned) revealed in the story. Refer students to Table 1 for examples. If time permits, request that students engage in role plays, assuming the role of the expatriate manager and the CEO to illustrate both peripeteia and anagnorisis. The examples in Table 1 may also be used to address workplace readiness skills such as being able to resolve conflict with others, use of time, and diversity awareness.
3. Relate the following scenario to students. "You are being interviewed for a position that requires knowledge of various cultures. Prepare a short story that you could tell during the interview to provide evidence of your intercultural competence." Ask students to record the story using software such as YouSeeU or on a smartphone. The recorded story could become part of an eportfolio since it emphasizes intercultural competence and experiences. The story

could be evaluated by peers to determine its effectiveness not only in content but also in terms of delivery aspects such as volume, rate of speech, use of vocal variety, and absence of verbal fillers such as “uh,” “er,” “um,” “you know,” “okay,” and “you guys”.

4. Ask students to read the Chief Executive Officer’s (CEO’s) letter of an international firm that is a preamble to an organization’s annual report. In a team, have students identify the cultural story that is being presented. How is that story reflected on the organization’s website? Also, students can analyze the letter to determine the specific cultural dimensions revealed in the message. The correctness of the identified cultural dimensions can be used to evaluate the activity.
5. Ask students to form groups of three to discuss how traditional stories of a culture might be used to market products. For example, the products associated with the Wizard of Oz story are known to sell well. In particular, products celebrating a memorable event, such as the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Wizard of Oz movie, are bestsellers. Students might evaluate product ads to determine the type of story used as well as its effectiveness.
6. Request that students investigate how stories are often used in organizations to recount history. As such, these stories may be thought of as part of the institutional memory. Ask students to share stories that they remember from organizations for which they have worked. Then have students analyze the influence of those stories on employees and how and to what extent the stories reflect(ed) the organization’s culture. This activity assists students in distinguishing between the aspirational or desired culture of the organization and the actual organizational culture. Ideally, these two cultures would be the same; however, in actuality they may differ. The identification of the aspirational and desired culture can be analyzed to evaluate the effectiveness of the activity.
7. Request that students create a six-word memoir. The six-word memoir was begun by the storytelling magazine, *Smith Magazine*, and is used by instructors, especially in writing intensive courses such as business communication, to assist students in writing directly (Grossman, 2010). The memoirs are described as “a simple creative way to get to the essence of anything—from breaking the news of the day to your own life and the way you live it” (SixWords, 2013, n.p.). Examples of six-word memoirs include “Today I can make a difference,” and “Graduating soon, need a job abroad.” The purpose of this activity is twofold: first, to practice writing concisely, and second, to use the created memoir as the theme of a story they create. A variation of this assignment could ask students to write a six-word memoir that describes a particular culture. Then the created six-word memoir can be used as the basis for a longer description of the selected culture.

8. Ask students to create a PAR story in anticipation of a job interview. The PAR story should illustrate the greatest accomplishment or the most difficult intercultural obstacle or challenge the student has overcome. Once the PAR story has been outlined, students should practice telling their individual stories until their delivery is natural and poised. Then students may present their stories to the class. This activity encourages students to use a structured approach to presenting stories during interviews. This structured approach can be used to relate stories in other situations. A variation of this activity could require students to use YouSeeU or a smartphone to record the PAR story, which could then be evaluated by members of the international business advisory board using an instructor-developed rubric.

Most of these activities can be evaluated by an instructor-developed rubric. Some of the activities lend themselves to both peer and instructor evaluation. For example, the recordings described in Activities 3 and 8 could be uploaded to a learning management system such as Moodle for peer evaluation using a rubric.

### **Summary**

Stories are powerful in their ability to inspire and instruct. Cultural values and history have been distributed through the oral tradition since beginning times. Mastering the art of telling a story is a critical skill for business students to develop their ability to compete in the global job market. Further, being able to analyze stories from various cultures based upon cultural dimensions assists students in adding to their intercultural and international business acumen. Engaging in the instructional activities presented in this article will encourage students to develop intercultural competence skills.

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