Storytelling

Beyond the Academic Article: Using Fiction, Art and Literary Techniques to Communicate*

Nick Barter

Griffith University, Australia

Helen Tregidga

AUT University, New Zealand

In this guest editorial we have two aims. First, to outline the background to, and motivation for, this special issue, which called for contributions that went beyond the academic article and used fiction and other literary techniques to communicate; and second, to introduce the papers and briefly outline their contribution. We conclude the editorial with some reflections on the preparation of this issue and a call for academics to embrace the uncertainty associated with communicating their ideas in novel forms.

IT HAS BEEN ARGUED THAT narrative is a key device through which humans attempt 'to find meaning in an overwhelmingly crowded and disordered chronological reality' (Cronon, 1992, p. 1349). Or perhaps, more simply, storytelling (narrative) is key to how we understand the world around us (Weick, 1995). In turn narratives are important to how we understand organisations and are

enrolled to realise organisational strategies (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Fenton and Langley, 2011; Guber, 2007; Guerin, 2003). Narratives saturate our lives and as long as there is intent with human speech there will be narrative and rhetoric (Norreklit 2003). Thus in everything we do we have a protagonist in a context who, through time, moves towards an outcome. In these narratives, the

* Acknowledgements unfortunately also suffer with a rhetorical razor and as such are likely to leave out someone important; to that person we apologise. However, rhetorical razors aside we would like to thank Professor Malcolm McIntosh, the General Editor of the *Journal of Corporate Citizenship* for being open to and supporting this special issue. We would also like to thank the publishing team at Greenleaf, in particular Claire Jackson and Rebecca Macklin for their advice and guidance. In addition we thank those who supported this issue by acting as reviewers, the contributors for their papers and finally those who reviewed this editorial and provided valuable insights and suggestions.

outcome tends to be either enlightened or tragic, and as such the plotline leading to the outcome is either ascending or descending (Cronon, 1992), fearful or hopeful (Pesquex 2009, p. 231). As authors of our narratives, behind them all is the unavoidable understanding that they are a construction and thus suffer from an inevitable refraction whereby the author(s) of the narrative have, either knowingly or unknowingly, applied a 'rhetorical razor...that defines included and excluded, relevant and irrelevant, empowered and disempowered' (Cronon, 1992, p. 1349). This inescapable rhetorical razor inevitably silences some while giving voice to others. Indeed this editorial and the articles within this special issue, no matter what the author(s) intentions, suffer the fate of the rhetorical razor. Further, a reader always brings their context to a narrative, and in doing so, a raft of actors that may otherwise be unknown to the author(s) can make a claim regarding inclusion or exclusion. As such every story has innumerable interpretations.

An understanding that narratives saturate our world was a stimulus for the call for papers that has resulted in this special issue. There is a narrative about how the guest editors met, where and when, and how, through conversation, they serendipitously identified a mutual interest in communicating beyond the academic article; however that narrative is superfluous and silenced. In short, a key motivation behind this call for papers was an understanding that many academics have become locked to a particular style of narrative privileged by the academic system and that style, while useful, is perhaps limiting.

It has been claimed that the modern mind is 'haunted by the belief that the only meaningful concepts are those capable of mathematical elucidation' (Gladwin, Newburry and Reiskin, 1997, p. 248; see also, Cummings 2005; Boisot and McKelvey, 2010). Further this is a type of rationalism that 'supports the doctrine that facts

are separate from values...and that truth is a function of objective reality' (Gladwin *et al.*, 1997, pp. 248). Arguably academic articles and textbooks defer to this rationality via, for example, the metaphor of 'textbook operation'. This is a metaphor that implies operating to a set of agreed upon and regulated procedures (Crawford, 2003), that are conducted in a bubble of ahistorical, decontextualised truth (Cummings and Bridgman, 2011), where the individual and their values and understanding are removed from the sphere of concern. In removing the protagonist from the narrative, the narrative moves from being a story about a researcher and what they found to being an article and/or textbook that is simply a 'delivery system of facts' (Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991 p. 1; see also Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007)—an objective non-story. In short, the story and the non-story are separated (Cronon, 1992), as in a 'rational world' knowledge is not gained from a subjective story, rather it is gained from an objective non-story. However, while an objective, decontextualised, dehumanised research narrative may appeal to current truth claims, the difficulty is that another truth is lost; that of the researcher and their values. Thus the story is lost to the non-story and to cycle back to the beginning of this editorial, this may limit understanding (Weick, 1995).

Within this context, as guest editors we approached *The Journal of Corporate Citizenship* to establish whether they would be interested in our proposal of a special issue of 'academic' papers that embraced fiction, art and other literary techniques in order to communicate to an audience. *The Journal of Corporate Citizenship* has a history of embracing innovative submissions that might include photographs, poetry and paintings. Further, its remit is bringing ideas to practitioners and academics alike. Consequently moving beyond the standard academic article was, we found, consistent with the journal's aims and they accepted our proposal.

The original call for papers was issued in the final quarter of 2012. That call opened with a quote from Bateson (2002) that outlined how even a computer might think in terms of storytelling. In response to that call we received numerous enquiries and submissions. Thus our assumption, and hope, that our colleagues are creative and looking for alternatives in presenting their work was realised. The submissions received came from across the world and from a variety of disciplines, thus the interest in moving beyond the academic article appears not to be a localised phenomenon. Through the usual process of double blind peer review the articles that constitute this issue were identified. They are introduced in the next section of this editorial. As will be seen, the papers accepted reflect the diversity of submissions received. While we suspect each reader will interpret the papers in different ways, with some resonating positively and others not so, what is common to all the papers is a desire to engage the reader in a novel, interesting and memorable way. After introducing the articles we close with some comments on the challenges of editing this special issue, some opportunities for the future.

In this issue

There are seven papers in this issue; the first is a re-telling of a well-known fairy tale, the second discusses the use of art, the third, fourth and fifth use fictional stories to explain the consequences of theory and/or research findings, the sixth discusses how a napkin can help tackle institutional racism and the final paper offers a poem to problematise the move towards Open Access.

The first paper by Simons (2014) explores the role and power of sacred stories by re-telling a well-known fairy tale from an alternative perspective. In so

doing Simons (2014) seeks to highlight how, in societies and organisations, there are voices that are marginalised. In the paper Simons (2014) retells the *Little Red Riding Hood* fairy tale from the big bad wolf's perspective, a voice that has been silenced in the modern day version of the story. Through the re-telling of the story Simons (2014) attempts to make it possible to understand the actions of, and identify with, the wolf—something not easily done in the common and familiar telling of the story. As such, Simons (2014) uses the fairy tale to expose and question power relations. Using this platform, Simons (2014) argues that within the social sciences and organisations sacred stories are causes of exclusion and marginalisation. She posits that it is important to pay attention to silent voices, consider things from different perspectives, and look for meanings which are not necessarily those which we take for granted.

The second paper discusses individuals' commitment to sustainable outcomes and how it can be fostered via the use of art workshops and individuals painting their understandings of sustainability. This practice is termed by the authors, Ivanaj, Poldner and Shrivastava, as aesthetic practice pedagogy. They argue the practice deepens understandings of sustainability and sustainable enterprise by connecting our hands, heart and heads—our feelings, our practices and our cognition. Thus they argue that aesthetic practice pedagogy is able to 'evoke deep personal, emotional understanding and commitment to action'. The article discusses the art-based workshops and how these workshops aim to integrate art and science in a trans-disciplinary way to provide more holistic understandings of sustainability by participants. Through analysing structured feedback from workshop participants, the authors argue that aesthetic practice pedagogy has both value and power. In doing so, they provide a structure for a workshop which others may choose to utilise or develop.

The third paper in this issue was motivated by an observation that higher education students generally do not engage with academic material and in not doing so they hinder their ability to develop a critical understanding of theories. To counter this lack of critical engagement, Barter and Houghton present a fictional story set in a non-specific future. The story is informed by theories and is titled 'Is This OK?' The theories that inform the story include, but are not limited to, the concept of natural capitalism and how humans are a negotiation, a process. Specifically the story focuses on the temporal understanding of humanity, companies offering solutions rather than products or services, and the valuing (monetisation) of ecosystem services. Through presenting theories and concepts in a fictional story and by applying the theories and concepts to an extreme within it, a platform for exposition and discussion is provided. Reflecting on their own experiences and anecdotal observations when utilising the story within the classroom context, this paper provides insights, not only into how fictional stories grounded in theory can be used pedagogically, but also, as an exemplar which readers may choose to utilise themselves.

The fourth and fifth papers in this issue relate to the university context and more specifically academics and academic life. The fourth paper by Harris, Ravenswood and Myers has at its core a fictional story that is used to consolidate and present the results of a study, with academics, on the vagaries of the academic promotion process within a university. More specifically, Harris *et al.* examine the promotion process by paying particular attention to gender and the advancement of women. What makes the paper particularly novel is that the findings are presented under the title of the 'The Quest Games'. 'The Quest Games' brings forward shades of a gladiatorial contest and is written without reference to the academic context or

gender. This fiction enables the story to be relevant to a wider audience. This contribution by Harris *et al.* not only provides insight into the area of career advancement (in particular within the university setting) but also is an example of how narrative inquiry and fictional storytelling can be used to present findings in a novel and engaging way.

Similarly, the fifth paper creates a fictional story to present its findings from research with academics. In this paper, Ryan and Guthrie explore the increasing corporatisation of the university sector. Drawing on findings from a longitudinal study based on interviews with academics from Australian Graduate Business Schools, they develop 'The Story of Bill'—a hypothetical academic—to relay the changes that the university sector has undergone in recent years. Bill is used to represent the 'voice' of all the academics in the study. Using the story Ryan and Guthrie provide insight into the life of an academic in a period of significant institutional change. Thus, as with the previous paper, this paper highlights how storytelling can be used to communicate research findings in novel and insightful ways.

The sixth paper in this special issue documents how a researcher used a paper napkin to communicate and disseminate her findings regarding institutional racism to a non-academic audience. In this paper, Came and Humphries, two self-identified activist researchers, discuss institutional racism within the context of public health and health policy in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The paper discusses how to make the invisible visible and in so doing disseminate findings succinctly, hence the napkin. Came and Humphries argue that the napkin is a particularly powerful dissemination device because it is an everyday object which is often disposed of in an unthinking manner. While obviously important to an academic engaged in activism, Came and Humphries'

contribution addresses a topic which is important for many academics—how to communicate research to a non-academic audience.

The issue is completed with a paper from Mannay who utilises her own experiences and a poem to reflect on the changing requirements of research dissemination, specifically Open Access. The paper reflects on ways in which the move towards Open Access realises concerns regarding ethics, obligations and integrity. Through the poem and supporting commentary Mannay raises the complexity of the changing research dissemination landscape and argues for the need to ‘consider all stakeholders in the march towards progressive dissemination’ and Open Access.

Close

The seven papers in this special issue, we believe, offer the reader something different from that which they might typically expect. In particular through their use of fiction, art and poetry the papers are challenging what might typically be expected as the form of an academic article. Further, each of the papers has a message that is attempting to challenge convention and what is typically ‘acceptable’. These challenges include the identifying of silent voices, the linking of our hands, hearts and heads via art, a poem, a napkin to communicate, the life of an average academic, stories of gladiatorial combat for promotion or a man’s day in a non-specific future. This mix of challenge in both form and message contributes, in our view, to the ability of the papers to advance understanding. Further it reinforces how an innovative approach to conveying the message can advance debate; in short getting beyond the academic article is valuable.

Having made the call, had the papers reviewed and consolidated into this special issue, two key things we have learned as guest editors is to be bolder and to embrace the uncertainty. With regards to being bolder, on reflection we think we could have pushed for further creativity in the papers and would do so if asked to do another special issue. As can be seen the papers are a form of hybrid in that they mix their creativity with conventional academic writing. This was perhaps partly the result of our call for papers which included the requirement of a statement of the academic foundations for the submission as well as the use of the ‘traditional’ review process. Hence if we were to make this call again we would perhaps be bolder in moving away from a hybrid model and allowing contributors to fully embrace their creative potential: albeit the limits of a journal’s printing format and structure are still likely to put some boundaries around that creativity. In terms of embracing the uncertainty, this is more a lesson for us as editors. Perhaps like all special issue editors we had robust debate about advice for authors and which submissions to include and exclude. From our perspective these debates were more difficult because of the nature of the submissions—and, perhaps like many editors and guest editors, we relied on reviewer comments in informing our decisions. As discussed, the submissions embrace the story and as such move away from convention. This made us less sure of our ground as we found ourselves debating, in the broadest terms, the aesthetics of a submission. Thus as editors we felt more uncertain than we expected, as the difficulty of aesthetics is that beauty is always in the eye of the beholder. In summary, having learned what we have now learned from editing this special issue, I think in the future we would be not only bolder, but also more willing to embrace uncertainty—uncertainty itself being a result of a challenge to our conventions, our paradigms.

References

- Apple, M., and Christian-Smith, L. (1991) 'The politics of the textbook'. In M. Apple & L. Christian-Smith (Eds.), *The Politics of the Textbook*, (pp. 1-22), London: Routledge.
- Barry, D., and Elmes, M. (1997) 'Strategy Retold: Toward a Narrative View of Strategic Discourse' *Academy of Management Review*, 22(2), 429-452.
- Bateson, G. (2002) *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*, Hampton Press: Cresskill, NJ.
- Boisot, M. and McKelvey, B. (2010) 'Integrating Modernist and Postmodernist Perspectives on Organizations: A Complexity Science Bridge.' *Academy of Management Review*, 35(3), 415-433.
- Crawford, K. (2003) 'The role and purpose of textbooks', *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research*, 3(2), 5-11.
- Cronon, W. (1992) 'A place for stories: Nature, history and narrative', *The Journal of American History*, 78(4), 1347-1376.
- Cummings, S. (2005). *Recreating Strategy*. London: Sage.
- Cummings, S., and Bridgman, T. (2011) 'The relevant past: Why the history of management should be critical for our future', *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 10(1), 77-93.
- Fenton, C., and Langley, A. (2011) 'Strategy as Practice and the Narrative Turn', *Organization Studies*, 32(9): 1171-1196.
- Gladwin, T. N., Newbury, W. E., and Reiskin, E. D. (1997) 'Why is the northern elite mind biased against community, the environment and a sustainable future?' In M.H. Bazerman, D.M. Messick, A.E. Tenbrunsel and K.A. Wade-Benzoni (Eds.), *Environment, Ethics and Behavior: The Psychology of Environmental Valuation and Degradation*. San Francisco: The New Lexington Press.
- Guber, P. (2007) 'The four truths of the storyteller' *Harvard Business Review* 85 (12): 52-59.
- Guerin, B. (2003) 'Language use as social strategy: a review and an analytic framework for the social sciences' *Review of General Psychology* 7 (3): 251-98.
- Norreklit, H. (2003) 'The Balanced Scorecard: what is the score? A rhetorical analysis of the balanced scorecard' *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 28: 591-619.
- Pesquex, Y. (2009) 'Sustainable development: a vague and ambiguous theory' *Society and Business Review* 4 (3): 231-245.
- Pinnegar, S. and Daynes, J.G. (2007) 'Locating narrative inquiry historically: The-matics in the turn to narrative', In D.J. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Weick, K. (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Sage: USA.

Dr **Nick Barter** is a senior lecturer in strategy and sustainability and is the MBA director at Griffith. Prior to Griffith he spent 5 years at the University of St Andrews in the UK. His current research includes metaphors and conceptions of the environment.

✉ Griffith Business School, Griffith University, Room 4.26, Building 507, Southbank Campus, PO Box 3370, South Brisbane, QLD 4101, Australia

💻 n.barter@griffith.edu.au

Dr **Helen Tregidga** is a Senior Lecturer in Accounting in the Faculty of Business and Law at AUT University, New Zealand. Her research interests are primarily related to the interface of business, society and the natural environment.

✉ AUT University, Faculty of Business and Law, AUT City Campus, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, New Zealand

💻 helen.tregidga@aut.ac.nz