Transformational Leadership Through Storytelling

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Abstract

People often think of fiction when they think of the term storytelling, but storytelling can be a powerful leadership tool. Consider that not all storytelling is fiction, and not all leaders who use storytelling are untruthful politicians. Often transformational leaders are considered charismatic simply because they have a way of connecting with their audience (Northouse, 2022). While Northouse (2022) may describe charisma with terms like “divine,” it may not only be the leader’s personality or charismatic nature that innately connects with followers—it could actually be the power of story. Humans are wired to attune to story: it is woven into their DNA and the way their brain works (Schank & Abelson, 1995). Two historical leaders who successfully used storytelling in

their endeavors were Martin Luther King, Jr., and Steve Jobs. Both were highly influential and successful leaders. This paper describes how storytelling and leadership are not such disparate concepts. Using Northouse's text as a guide, I examine transformational leadership through the lens of storytelling based on examples from King and Jobs.

Overview

Storytelling as a learning methodology goes back to the earliest civilizations as knowledge was passed from one human to another (Kromka & Goodboy, 2019). Schank and Abelson (1995) posit that all knowledge is stored in human brains as stories—and people are only reminded of what they actually know when they hear another story that triggers the indexed story component in their mind to bring back the memory: through the story of their own experience—which they then tell.

The old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words suggests more meaning can be derived from within a scene, or context. So a visionary must paint a picture—or describe a scene—of their vision of the future for followers to understand, buy into, and push forward toward that goal. A Christian scripture says, "Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it" (*New King James Version Bible*, 1982, Habakkuk 2:2). This verse suggests a clearly defined vision garners buy-in from followers and provides them the ability to take action. One way to accomplish this is to tell a relatable story with which people can connect. That connection is made on a neural level because human brains contain mirror neurons which allow the brain to simulate an experience as it is being narrated by someone else (Kromka & Goodboy, 2019; Greene, 2020; Keysers & Gazzola, 2010). This unique brain component allows

people to connect to one another through shared experiences, and occurs most readily through story. When a person connects old information (past experiences) to new information (received through narration) the result is understanding (Schank & Abelson, 1995).

Schank and Abelson (1995) suggest that not only are humans wired for communicating through stories from the dawn of human existence, but everything humanity knows is packaged in the brain in story format—so if one was going to retrieve information to share with someone else, the memory would come back in story form and they would share the information to the next person as a story as well. Every piece of new information that comes to a learner is filtered through their previous experiences, connected to something they already know, and filed away as a connected piece. As Schank and Abelson (1995) identify, “new experiences are interpreted in terms of old stories.”

Beyond the idea that all the knowledge contained in a person’s head is in story format, the construction of perceived reality and who they think they are is built piece by piece through the telling of stories to others. Memories become stories when told to others and construct a person’s perception of themselves as well as the listener’s interpretation of them. Thus, a person’s perceived reality is a social construct—Merriam said, “...that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (Yazan, 2015, p. 137). Butcher (2006) suggests people construct their reality like a clothesline in their mind—if a person trips over a rock, dumps their coffee, and feels sorry for themselves, they think ‘poor me.’ If they string together enough of these similar situations like laundry hung up on a clothesline, they will begin to live out a reality where

they have a negative attitude toward life. Butcher elaborates that there is much work being done in the area and science of personal narrative and how it affects a person's outlook on life. Echo (2022) suggests that people create a narrative as they learn something new—touching a hot stove, for example, becomes a story one recounts later when one encounters a similar situation.

> "....Stories help us make sense of the world and give structure and order to our everyday lives. They tell us what is important, and what is not, and give us a way to connect people's individual experiences to those of others, as well as to universal truths. Indeed, stories are yet another way we put a human face on the world, which is something we have always needed and valued, whether we admit it or not" (Butcher, 2006, p. 199).

Just as a person's reality is constructed socially, leadership is a social construct (GuramatunhuCooper & Headrick, 2022). GuramatunhuCooper and Headrick (2022) demonstrated, during a course on leadership education, as learners engaged in communal meaning-making, that topics emerged naturally as participants shared their experiences related to the topic. No two classes were the same because there were different stories shared, and different knowledge gained by the group from those stories. This is how people connect and learn from each other: they form a perceived sense of reality socially by the stories shared with each other (Yazan, 2015). People believe things—perhaps *absorb* is a better word—and align with shared beliefs when connections are made between their own stories and the story they are being told (Schank & Abelson, 1995).

Storytelling and Leadership

Knowing the value of storytelling, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Steve Jobs both utilized these tactics to describe their vision of the future. Most people can quote a few lines from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s revolutionary 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech. While some may not be old enough to remember experiencing King's speech at that pivotal moment in history, its impact was so significant that it set off a wildfire of civic and social change—to the point that it is still talked about today. While Steve Jobs' 2007 speech may not be socially revolutionary in the same context, he certainly began a technology revolution when he unveiled the first Apple iPhone—which Jobs deemed a "revolutionary mobile phone" (Protectstar Inc., 2013). It should be noted that Jobs potentially sparked a social revolution in the sense of providing the technological foundation upon which social media in its current state is now built—but it is not the same as suggesting the social and civil context in which King sparked his revolution. Jobs' keynote is memorable because people had only imagined holding a computer in their hands as a work of science fiction, previously relegated to the likes of Star Trek. Surely some may remember watching that pivotal keynote speech. Jobs in his signature black turtleneck and jeans, describing a future where anything—any information—would literally be at one's fingertips.

As Duarte points out in her 2011 TedTalk, the format of both King's and Job's seminal speeches are very similar in how they oscillate between describing the current scenario and proclaiming "what could be" or a vision for the future (see figure 1).

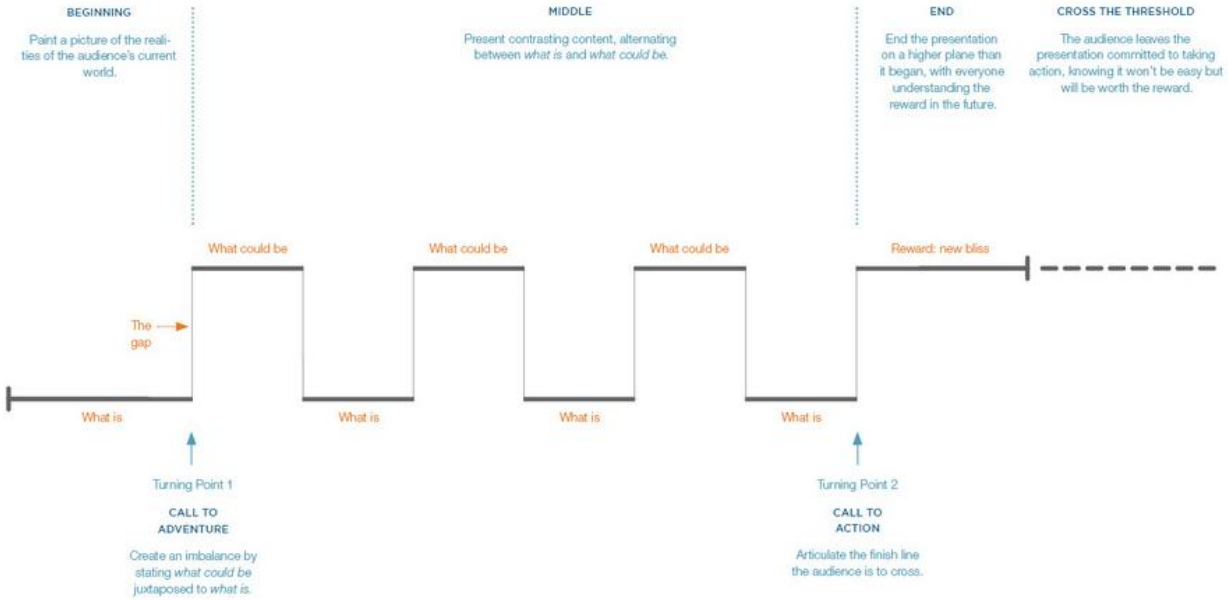

Fig. 1: Nancy Duarte's Story Structure, 2011 (Via, 2012).

Storytelling and Theory

Using this story structure as a strategy connects to constructivism, social constructivism, and narrative theory. The story structure aligns with constructivism in that when the speech describes the current state of affairs, it is connecting to the listener's current experience or connecting to what the audience already knows to be true in order to build upon that foundation. When a leader tells a story that paints the picture of what a future *could* look like if their ideas take hold, they are connecting the existing experience to the new information. The story structure also takes alternating turns coming back to the present to compare and contrast to the future vision before ending on the high note of that transformed future. While this simple structure may resemble a castle battlement, it does a great deal to not only connect to a listener's existing knowledge, but also reinforce the concepts (a learning tactic) by returning to

both the current and future states multiple times. This story structure aligns with narrative learning theory in that humans learn through stories—Clark and Rossiter even go as far as to call humans *homo narrans*, which translates to *storytelling human* (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). Additionally, the theory of social constructivism suggests, similar to constructivism, states that knowledge is built upon existing knowledge but takes place within the social context (Abderrahim & Gutiérrez-Colón Plana, 2021). Abderrahim and Gutiérrez-Colón Plana note that “cognition is a collaborative process” (2021, p. 39).

Transformational Leaders as Storytellers

Both King and Jobs would be considered transformational style leaders. Both led the charge for change—one in the social arena and the other in technology. Northouse (2022) defines transformational leadership as a leadership style that focuses on the transformation of followers from one state into another through the vision of the leader—inspiring the followers to be more or do more than that which they would normally be expected.

Not only was Jobs a leader ahead of his time when he introduced the iPhone to the world, but he also led his workforce in unconventional ways, challenging the status quo, while bringing the Apple computer to market. In one documentary, Jobs is shown flying a pirate flag over his project offices to inspire his team to think differently than the traditional corporate culture (MIND, 2015). In fact, Apple’s marketing slogan was actually, “Think different” and the tagline was birthed in a marketing campaign during the launch of the Apple computer in 1997 in response to IBM’s “Think” campaign (OnMarketing, 2011).

Jobs as a transformational leader, according to Northouse (2022), would most align with the factor of intellectual stimulation. Flying the pirate flag was symbolic of his stance to challenge his followers to push boundaries, be creative, and innovate. He encouraged his team to develop collaboratively and challenge each other (MIND, 2015).

Northouse (2022) offers King's speech as a proof explanation for charisma, but given Duarte's story map described in Fig. 1, his speech instead demonstrates the power of storytelling. Not that King was any less charismatic, because while it is true it takes that special characteristic to accomplish such a powerful speech, his speech also had compelling story elements that connected with his audience's experience and hope for a different future.

Martin Luther King Jr. embodied the transformational leadership factors of idealized influence and inspirational motivation. According to Northouse (2022), idealized influence speaks to King's high moral standards, his trustworthiness, and ability to gain followers through vision and a sense of mission. One cannot deny King's impact on the civil history of America. Additionally, King aligned with the factor of inspirational motivation in that he could motivate his followers through the sense of having a greater purpose, something bigger than themselves (Northouse, 2022).

Northouse (2022) points out that transformational leadership may not be as effective on the millennial generation. This leads to the question of whether transformational leadership will survive as a style of leadership for future leaders, or if one will only look back with fondness on the transformational heroes like MLK Jr. and Steve Jobs. This shift is caused by the fact that millennials put a lot of emphasis on

individuality and it might be more difficult to get them collectively aligned for any singular mass effort required to create a transformation (Northouse, 2022).

Bringing it Together: Storytelling, Leadership, and Educational Technology

While one can see the clear importance of storytelling in the context of transformational leadership, it may be less clear how storytelling can impact the realm of educational technology. Because adults learn from the shared experiences of other adults (adult learning theory), and humans have mirror neurons, adults should be able to connect to learning content provided through multimedia technology. This would be best served through digital storytelling (DS) because the DS format combines visuals, audio, storytelling, and usually an emotional connection of some sort. Multimedia theory of learning purports the effectiveness of multimedia delivery is due to the dual coding theory on which it is based—having both aural and visual input allows for two ways the information gets encoded within the brain, providing double the chance the information will be recalled (Hew et al., 2019). By combining humanity's oldest form of pedagogy (storytelling) with modern technology (video based digital storytelling), instructors would be able to bring the power of learning through storytelling to a wide audience. Where ancient storytelling was limited to how far one's voice could be heard, through modern technology, there is now no limit to how many people can hear a single message. Balaman (2018) claims digital storytelling could be a superior method for conveying instruction simply because it's multimodal, the story connects with learners seamlessly, and provides many benefits to the learner.

Leaders in Ed Tech would do well to emphasize storytelling as a practical strategy in their overall instructional design roadmap. This could be integrated from a

leadership perspective by sharing the vision with staff on the importance of storytelling—starting with the why, as Simon Sinek (2009) suggests—and providing practical training to instructors and instructional designers on storycraft, digital storytelling, multimedia tools, video editing, animation software, and the like. The instructors receiving training could then implement storytelling through multimedia into their training projects which ultimately positively impacts participants.

Additionally, the instructor-created videos could easily be incorporated not only into elearning and digital courses, but also virtual instructor-led training (VILT), or in-person training by utilizing screens or technology available in the room. The videos could be used to convey learning content, scenario-based training, or even just an exciting promotional video to pique learner interest. These digital or blended trainings are simply a modality that could be tailored to any age group or audience, so the implications are truly limitless, or only limited to the imagination of the instructor.

Conclusion

It will be interesting to see where transformational leadership lands in the future, given Northouse's stance on its effectiveness for reaching millennials, but for now one can be thankful for those who embodied this style to create lasting change leaving an exemplary legacy to follow. Utilizing storytelling can be a powerful tool not only to convey a leader's vision, but also to connect with the audience to inspire change. When transformational leaders have a clear vision for the future and are able to inspire and motivate followers to take action, society benefits—of course, assuming the future vision they impose is for the good of all.

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