

Canning Workplace Stories

Purnima Valiathan
Knowledge Platform
Creative Specialist - Instructional Design
May 2004

Summary

By reviewing this paper some of the key things that will become obvious are, that by canning workplace stories you:

- *Record valuable workplace experiences which may otherwise be lost*
- *Create an organizational repository of experiences and anecdotes*

A Case for Stories

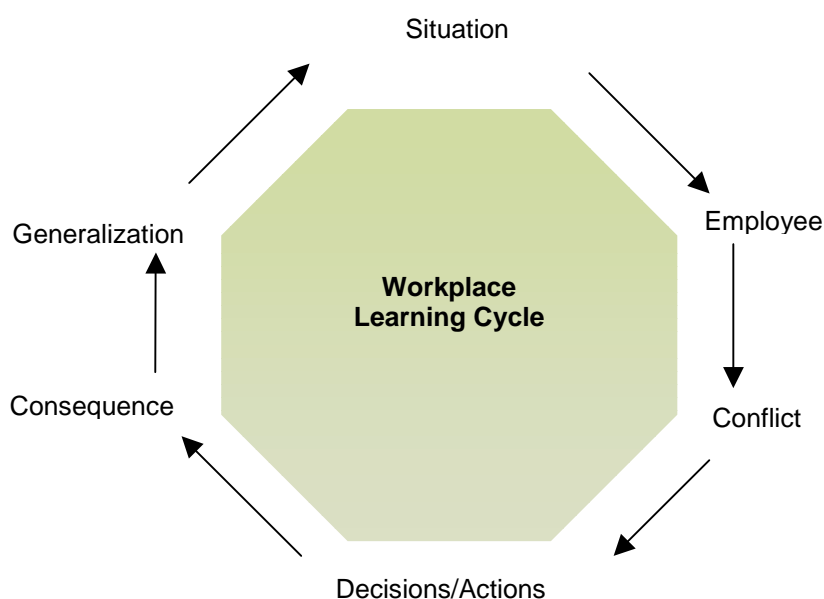
Can you think of a story that you read, saw or heard and from which you did not learn anything at all? A little difficult, isn't it? Regardless of the objective with which a story is created or told, it does help us all to learn something. When the purpose is not education, we learn about people, places, cultures and traditions, and morals and beliefs. When it is designed to impart knowledge and understanding, it helps us to learn about best practices, and appropriate and inappropriate actions and behaviors in a specific context.

The art of teaching through stories transcends time and place. It is also probably one of the most effective methods of disseminating knowledge to any age group, be it children or adults. Stories are used to teach children; stories are also used for workplace training. In fact, regardless of the audience profile, stories attract people instantly and keep them hooked on till the end.

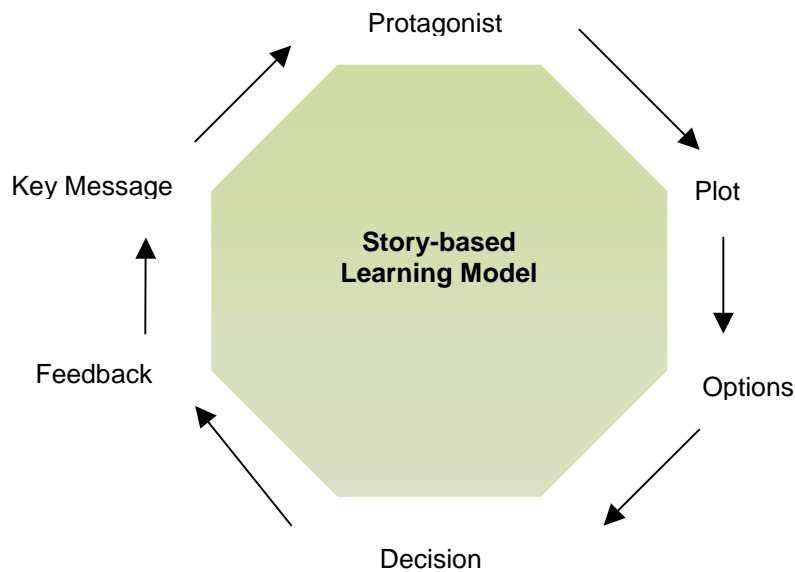
Stories make you think, reflect and introspect. They inspire you to change your behavior. They gently persuade you to shed old inappropriate behaviors and adopt new appropriate ones. In short, they contain elements that appeal both to an individual's heart and head---probably the reason for their popularity.

Workplace Stories - gems waiting to be mined

Most learning in the workplace occurs in the context of its people and the situation that they find themselves in at different points in time. It is the response to these situations and the impact of those responses (correct or incorrect), that result in generalizations and learning. It must be noted however that different people may respond differently to the same situation and this adds to the organization's repository of learning, which if captured can really impact the organization.



Using the typical workplace learning cycle mentioned above, Knowledge Platform has created the story-based learning model depicted below. Notice that it maps to the workplace learning cycle described above.



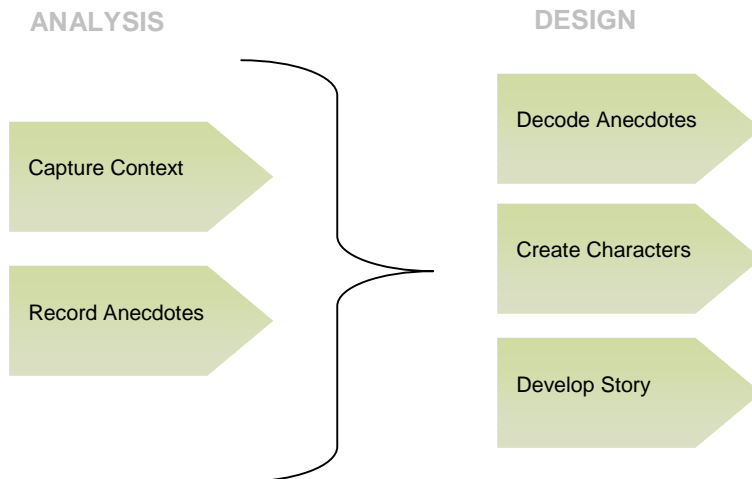
Easier said than done!

Given that stories have so many acknowledged benefits, why is it used so minimally in designing workplace training and e-learning? Why isn't this strategy the first choice for designing learning? Why aren't experiences and anecdotes in organizations canned for use by posterity? Probably because of the following reasons:

- It is not easy to design stories
- Not everyone can design a story
- It is time-consuming

The Story "Can"

In conjunction with the story-based learning model, we have a simple, replicable process (the **Story 'Can'**) to capture workplace events and incidents, and convert these into effective story-based learning material. This five-step process is supported with tools and templates that help even the non-story tellers to elicit the relevant information and use it to tell an engaging story.



Step 1 - Capturing the Context

*"A story's setting sharply defines and confines its possibilities - within any world - no matter how imaginary - only certain events are possible or probable. A story must obey its own internal laws of probability. The event choices of the writer, therefore, are limited to the possibilities and probabilities within the world he creates." --- Robert McKee Hollywood's master story teller in the book, **Story***

A part of the Analysis phase, this forms the first step in the story development process. The make-believe world that is created through a story must match the settings and surroundings within which the employees work. Also, since the story is designed with the objective of conveying a message, it is important to get a clear picture of the outcomes and goals that the organization wants to meet. Therefore, in this phase, we use the Context Capturing template to gather the following inputs:

- the organizational/departmental structure
- key roles and employee profiles within the company
- key issues/problems faced by the company/employees
- the context in which the problems are faced
- key messages that need to conveyed

Once this information is captured, it is used to specify the learning objectives and design the overall theme or backdrop against which the story will be set.

Step 2 - Recording Anecdotes

*"Plot doesn't mean **ham-handed twists and turns**, or **high-pressure suspense** and **shocking surprise**. Rather events must be selected and their partnering displayed through time." --- Robert McKee, Hollywood's master of story writing - in the book, **Story**.*

This is the second and final stage in the two-step Analysis phase. In this stage, we interview a few key people and record incidents, events, experiences and anecdotes. These anecdotes form the basis for designing the plot and creating conflicting situations within the story. For this activity too, we use the Anecdote Recording template to elicit the most relevant and crucial information in the least time. These anecdotes help us to design appropriate and real-world situations.

Step 3 - Decoding Anecdotes

After capturing the context and recording the anecdotes, the Design Phase begins. This phase is further divided into three stages. In the first stage of this phase, the anecdotes are decoded to identify the main components that will form the story. These are:

- situation/plot
- issue/conflict
- decision/consequence
- correct action/mistake
- rationale for the mistake

Step 4 - Creating Characters

*"Beneath the surface of characterization, regardless of appearances, who is this person? At the heart of his humanity, what will we find? Is he loving or cruel? Generous or selfish? Strong or weak? Truthful or a liar? Courageous or cowardly? The only way to know the truth is to witness him make choices under pressure to take one action or another in the pursuit of his desire. As he chooses, he is." --- Robert McKee, Hollywood's master of story writing - in the book, **Story**.*

People, by and large, can be categorized into a few personality types in the real world. Similarly, in the workplace too, you can categorize employees on the basis of their personality traits, their approach to work and how they react to specific situations. For instance, an employee could be very meticulous, careful and organized all the time, while another could be a fire-fighter whose abilities come to fore under pressure or in a crisis situation. It is this personality in conjunction to the role within the organization that determines how an employee reacts to a specific situation.

The information derived from Steps 2 and 3 help us to identify protagonists and create their character sketches, which then forms the basis of characterization for the story being developed.

Step 5 - Developing the Story

"As a story develops, you must willingly entertain opposite, even repugnant ideas. The finest writers have dialectical, flexible minds that easily shift points of view. They see the positive, the negative, and all shades of irony, seeking the truth of these views honestly and convincingly."

Story development involves the design of a series of events over time that lead into a plot. The climax can be the conflicting situation, where the protagonist is faced with making a decision that will then lead to some sort of consequence--- positive or negative.

The information derived from Step 4 becomes the input for this final step. During this phase, the story is conceptualized completely and includes a description of the following:

- Protagonist
- Plot/Conflict
- Options
- Decision
- Feedback (for correct and incorrect actions)
- Key Message

Key Benefits

By canning workplace stories you:

- Record valuable workplace experiences which may otherwise be lost
- Create an organizational repository of experiences and anecdotes

As mentioned, every stage in the Analysis and Design phase is supported with templates specifically designed for gathering and deconstructing information. These templates offer the following benefits:

- Quickly capture relevant and critical information
- Design and present the information in an interesting and engaging way

About the author

Purnima is a Creative Specialist - Instructional Design with Knowledge Platform, India Ltd. Before joining Knowledge Platform, Purnima worked with Knowledge Solutions Business (KSB), NIIT as a Practice Leader. A post-graduate in Political Science and Education, she has designed and developed custom training programs (e-learning) for a varied client base, in diverse subject areas. In addition, she has conducted instructor-led training programs and workshops on Instructional Design using different methodologies. She has also authored papers and articles, which have been published/presented at/by leading international conferences and journals, such as ASTD and ISPI. Purnima has also served as a judge to evaluate e-learning best practices entries for the Brandon Hall 2003 awards.

pvaliathan@knowledgeplatform.com

Knowledge Platform is a leading provider of innovative knowledge solutions to help companies succeed in the knowledge economy. By providing services such as E-Learning content, instructional design, training solutions, and E-Learning technology consulting, Knowledge Platform helps its clients to increase their learning efficiency. To learn more about Knowledge Platform please visit www.knowledgeplatform.com

How do I make it happen?

As mentioned, every stage in the Analysis and Design phase is supported with templates specifically designed for gathering and deconstructing information. For the tools and templates and for any support to can your workplace stories, contact Knowledge Platform at info@knowledgeplatform.com

Knowledge Platform
19 China Street
03-02 Far East Square
Singapore 049561
Tel : 65-6236 7681
Fax: 65-6220 7031