



**ROBERT GORDON
UNIVERSITY•ABERDEEN**

OpenAIR@RGU

The Open Access Institutional Repository at Robert Gordon University

<http://openair.rgu.ac.uk>

This is an author produced version of a paper published in

Management Articles of the Year (ISBN 085946413X)

This version may not include final proof corrections and does not include published layout or pagination.

Citation Details

Citation for the version of the work held in 'OpenAIR@RGU':

SMITH, R. and JUWAH, C., 2012. Delivering practice based stories of small and medium enterprise. Available from *OpenAIR@RGU*. [online]. Available from: <http://openair.rgu.ac.uk>

Citation for the publisher's version:

SMITH, R. and JUWAH, C., 2012. Delivering practice based stories of small and medium enterprise. In: *Management Articles of the Year*. London: Chartered Management Institute. Pp. 29-34.

Copyright

Items in 'OpenAIR@RGU', Robert Gordon University Open Access Institutional Repository, are protected by copyright and intellectual property law. If you believe that any material held in 'OpenAIR@RGU' infringes copyright, please contact openair-help@rgu.ac.uk with details. The item will be removed from the repository while the claim is investigated.

Delivering practice based stories of small and medium enterprise

Robert Smith and Charles Juwah, The Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, AB10 7QE.

ABSTRACT

Traditionally delivering academic input to members of the small and medium enterprise community can be problematic because the material is often considered too theoretical or is skewed towards delivery to post graduate or paying corporate clients who dictate the curricula. This practice based article discusses an innovative, funded course “Going for Growth” delivered to small business people using complementary practice based stories.

INTRODUCTION

“Storytelling has particular value in business classrooms as an integrative tool; a good story helps students understand the link between classroom theory and practical business outcomes”.

Morgan and Dennehy (1995: 60)

This article examines practice based stories as a sub-genre of ‘Organizational Tales’¹. Boje (1991) defines an organizational story as “*a tale about a person caught in one situation unfolding from start to climax to resolution*”, thus small and family business stories can legitimately be regarded as organizational stories. As a field of study, organizational storytelling is well established in management studies – particularly the link between storytelling and success in corporate settings, for example see Myrsiades, 1987; Neuhauser, 1993; Hansen and Kahnweiler, 1993; and O’Connor, 2002. However, from an academic perspective, the study of ‘Organizational Stories’ (Boje, 1991) relating to small and family businesses is in its infancy albeit ‘a trickle of articles’, continue to appear in various journals across the broad spectrum of management studies. Relevant articles include those of Bell (1992); McCollum (1992); Morgan and Dennehy (1995); Stone (1998); Warren (2004); Barker, Rimler, Moreno and Kaplan (2004); Rae (2005); and Hamilton (2006). A recurrent theme in such studies is that of organizational learning. It is of note that from a practitioner perspective organizational storytelling is also used by consultants to teach business values and lessons (e.g. Narva, 2011) because it serves a practical purpose in business. Family-controlled enterprises communicate

¹ It is based upon an earlier conference presentation - see Smith and Juwah (2010).

their heritage across generations to create competitive advantage - thus families who tell and share stories are more likely to carry on their family's heritage (Narva, 2011). Nevertheless, Hamilton (2006) argues that narrative approaches remain under-utilised in family business research.

In particular, the article by Morgan and Dennehy (1995: 60) articulates how we as academics can harness the power of storytelling in the classroom. They (1995: 61-62) propose that first of all we listen and try yourself. They suggest we go to storytelling performances, conferences and practice by asking relatives, friends and colleagues to tell us stories to clarify the "who, what, when, where, why and how" questions. Thereafter we should tell stories to students from the press, books, novels, personal experience. They further advocate reading stories out loud to build confidence. Once we as instructors or narrators are confident ourselves the next step is to let students tell personal stories in pairs to create stories from past experience. They stipulate the importance of interjecting stories about role models. If time permits they suggest getting learners to gather stories themselves. However, how does one use stories in the classroom if the learner/classroom time is limited?

Consequentially, this article presents an overview of an innovative, purpose designed course for members of the small business community, delivered as part of the ESF funded "*Going for Growth*" seminar series at Aberdeen Business School, The Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland between 2009 and 2010². In particular, it considers material delivered during sessions on business growth delivered by the author Robert Smith. The course was designed around research which identified the stated needs of the small business community. A typical class comprised of approximately twenty, SME learners of mixed business experience and sometimes employees. This can be problematic from a pedagogical perspective because it means that there are mixed learning needs and educational attainment levels. One delegate may have a degree and another may not, making practice based material preferable. This article concentrates on learning issues in tailoring and delivering the material and in particular on developing practice based stories.

DEVELOPING PRACTICE BASED STORIES

In the Business School environment, the default teaching style is didactic and transmissive (Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall, 1981; Brown, 2004; Biggs and Tang, 2007). Although this suffices for under

² This event was part of an ESF (European Social Fund) funded 'Business Skills For Growth Project' at Aberdeen Business School, The Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen organised by Dr David Gibbons-Wood from the Centre for International Labour Market. The central objective was to develop and provide short courses to improve SME business skills in specific areas. The project focused on SMEs and business start ups. It was supported by Enterprise Trust North East, Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce and Learndirect. One of the sessions was independently evaluated by a member of staff not involved with the delivery of the programme. This evaluation forms the basis of the discussion around which the article is focused. For a fuller overview of the course see the article by Abdel-Wahab, Moore, Gibbons-Wood, Kearny and Pirie (2009).

graduate lectures it is not ideal for non academic adult learning scenarios. We were also mindful of the need to cater for individual learning needs (Kolb, 1981; Race, 2005). Race (2005) advises that the facilitator must make the material accessible to students with different learning styles. Initially, we decided to approach the challenge using the traditional approach to delivering learning by delivering a standard lecture, albeit tailored more towards the small business practitioners, using material from classic texts such as Burns and Dewhurst (1989), Cromie (1991), Storey (1994), Stokes (1995), Timmons (1999), Chaston (2000), Burns (2001/2007), and Katz (2008).

However, the existing literature on business growth is skewed towards the larger SME. This is important because from a pedagogical perspective, teaching issues surrounding growth in a small business context can be problematic in that many of the issues surrounding growth are industry and sector specific and the problems faced by a small business owner with one employee will differ from those of another owner with 150 employees. This was the case faced by the authors. The first session was skewed towards the theoretical and as a result of delegate feedback the sessions were redesigned to incorporate practice-based delivery through storytelling and by adding participative voices whilst self-generating learning context.

In redesigning the input to cover theory and a variety of practical exercises a major problem was to contextualise the input in order to make it relevant to the local context because many of the available teaching cases were North American in origin (such as Koehn, 2001; Kuratko and Welsch, 2004) and not suitable for the series of one off events. A variety of inputs based upon material and examples from existing textbooks were considered by dismissed as being too academic and too theoretical for business owners attending an evening event after a hard day at the office. It was essential to make the events interactive and stories appeared to have much to offer. However, from personal experience of using case studies we were aware that many of the more worthwhile cases are information rich and require pre-event reading. Even when engaged in full time education, many students do not conduct the reading and therefore often cannot participate in the case study tutorial experience. When there is limited time available a case study can be overwhelming and require much of the time. There is a danger that the planned activity can fall flat. The quest to meet learners' needs saw the traditional lecture-style, power point presentation replaced with learner orientated, interactive teaching in which practice based stories played a major part. The theoretical input was reduced to a twenty minute PowerPoint presentation and the use of practice based stories allowed the learners to work in groups to contextualise and consolidate their learning in terms of their own level of experience. To inject interactivity into the sessions the author penned a number of practice based stories. See appendix 1 for an illustrative example which relates to the positive strategies adopted by an Aberdeen based independent entrepreneur in the financial services industry. A decision was taken to concentrate upon the personal issues and choices faced by the business owners. Collectively, the authored stories also illustrate some of the more popular growth theories and were intended to

illustrate the human and emotional elements of working through the recession. They embed the theory in a localised [British] context which is important.

WORKING WITH PRACTICE BASED STORIES

Authoring the narratives helped develop theory into practice! The iterative process involved in developing the material demonstrated evidence of linking theory and practice whilst engaging with relevant literature to inform developing arguments linked to a ‘continuous quality improvement cycle’ of plan, do, assess and implement as advocated by Langley *et al* (1996). The practice based stories were presented to the small business owners who were asked to work in pairs with another class member from a different sector of small business to maximise the learning impact. They were asked to select a story and given time to read it. The learners were then asked to identify learning points from their reading such as identifying the strategies used to grow business out of recession. They were encouraged to list and discuss these in the context of their own business experience and consider whether these could work for them and what they would do if the telephone stopped ringing. Additionally, they were encouraged to comment on any ways in which they could improve post recession performance – and to improvise by adding their own stories. The purpose of such practice based stories is to demonstrate alternative strategies of diversification available to small businessmen.

REFLECTING ON DELIVERING AND LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

This section provides a reflection on practical aspects of using practice based stories in the classroom. A valuable lesson learned was that it was important to prepare the classroom correctly to encourage a storytelling environment because the students being a mixture of small business owners, their staff and third sector workers can be a difficult audience to please. It is best to avoid the appearance of the traditional classroom and hold sessions in a breakout room. Using stories is appropriate because it makes allowance for learners who are late and miss the theoretical underpinning embedded in the PowerPoint lecture and because stories allow us to be less theoretical and more engaging. Using stories in the classroom allows the lecturer and audience to co-author the script (Ellis and Bochner, 2006). The narrative based practical activity permits the learners to engage with the material and contribute using their collective experience by swapping stories. Stories and storytelling help us develop emotional literacy, make sense of our world and appreciate different points of view. Stories encourage social and thinking skills. From a pedagogical perspective, stories engender group cohesion and influence group dynamics making learning fun and reflexive (Fox-Eades, 2006). Stories also encourage the generation of inter-group activity. As a result, the learners all made links between the theoretical input and their practical experience. The activities created a genuine buzz and when the

groups were asked to feedback to each other in relation to the narratives they identified common themes across the practice based stories and suggested solutions based on experience. The groups all identified with the subjects of the stories and the issues resonated with them providing material for extended discussions. The storytelling worked well within the restricted time frame. The stories were evaluated as being an enjoyable and worthwhile activity in the course feedback forms. This is not surprising given that as lecturers we know that students prefer stories to theory³.

DEVELOPING STORYTELLING AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

Current formal contemporary education is predicated on the pedagogy of learning by design. This approach to learning presupposes the use of systematic instruction and often exclusively dominated by the transmission of information (usually theory laden) and text based technologies. This form of learning may not be suitable for individuals who have preference for an informal and practical (e.g. work based) approach to learning. Learning is a social activity which involves interaction through talk, discussion, negotiating and meaning making. Folklore or stories (storytelling and re-storying) as a form of pedagogy of teaching and learning is rooted in an educational framework. As Bruner (1996) posits, stories help make meaning out of experience and help make connections with prior knowledge and experience. The narrative aspect of storytelling involves sharing of a personal account or experience and relevant lesson learned. In learning, the stories are told with a purpose of helping others to: connect to the common experience through re-interpreting the story and to enable them make sense and meaning of the everyday activities of small business.

Stories empower learners to demonstrate their understanding of: principles, concepts and theories; to express ideas, thoughts, creativity and imagination; to explore phenomena; how theory links to practice; ability to reflect and be reflexive (Atherton 2010, Lowenthal 2008). Moreover, stories are memorable, multilayered, compelling and contextual (Atherton 2010). Through use of stories in the delivery of the course, participants became co-creators of the curriculum as their stories formed the content on which discussions, analysis and the building of theory was based. They engaged in a process of “*Knowing through narratives*” (Burnett, 2010). Practice based stories facilitate learning by making the complex simple. Learning is a complex process and is about how an individual comes to know (and becomes knowledgeable about things). This involves a range of actions – observing, experiencing, abstracting, application (doing), evaluating, reflecting, etc. There

³ As an extra curricular activity the learners were set the challenge of trying to author a case study based on the issues surrounding their business growth problems. This challenge engendered a very real and palpable sense of the worth of the activity and the majority of the business owners agreed that the writing up of a case study of their business would be a useful tool to help focus their minds on the lesson learned. In addition, the learners were provided with a reference list in relation to conducting self study on growth problems in small business.

are different ways of knowing and knowing may be acquired or achieved through formal or informal learning. The activities discussed herein work because they engage with the personal and emotional issues surrounding growth in the small business sector (Flamholtz and Randle, 2000). Practice based narrative activities can be used as teaching cases and are easy to write. This article provides direction to other academics and practitioners considering using practice based stories in a classroom setting.

REFERENCES

- Abdel-Wahab, M., Moore, D., Gibbons-Wood, D., Kearny, G., Pirie, T., (2009) *An Evaluation Framework for Training: A Case Study in the North-East of Scotland*, 25th Annual ARCOM Conference. <https://credoonline.rgu.ac.uk/> Conference Contribution.
- Atherton, J. S., (2010) *Learning and Teaching: Stories, tales and myths in teaching* [On-line] UK: Available: <http://www.learningandteaching.info/teaching/narrative.htm>
- Barker, R. T., Rimler, G. W., Moreno, E., Kaplan T. E., (2004) Family Businesses Members' Narrative Perceptions: Values, Succession and Commitment, *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, **34**(4), 291–320.
- Bell, C. R., (1992) The trainer as storyteller, *Training and Development*, (September), 53-56.
- Biggs, J., Tang, C., (2007) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, Open University Press.
- Boje, D. M. (1991) Learning storytelling: storytelling to learn management skills, *Journal of Management Education*, **5**(3), 279-294.
- Brown, G. (2004) *How Students Learn*, Routledge: Falmer.
- Bochner, A. P., Ellis, C. S., (2006) *Communication as Autoethnography*. in Perspectives on Theory, Eds. Gregory J. Sheperd, Jeffrey St. John, Ted Striphas. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage.
- Bruner, J., (1996) *The culture of education*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Burnett, S. M., (2010) *Knowing Through Narratives: The Role of Knowledge within The Technological Innovation Process in The UK Upstream Oil and Gas Industry*, Unpublished PhD, The Robert Gordon University.
- Burns P., Dewhurst J., (1989) *Small Business and Entrepreneurship*, MacMillan, London
- Chaston, I., (2000) *Entrepreneurial Marketing: Competing by challenging convention*, MacMillan Business.
- Cromie S., (1991) *The problems experienced by Small Firms*, *International Small Business Journal*, **9**(3).
- Flamholtz, E. G., Randle, Y., (2000) *Growing Pains: Transitioning from an Entrepreneurship to a Professionally Managed Firm*, New York: Jossey Bass.
- Fox-Eades, J. M., (2006) *Classroom Tales: Using Storytelling to build Emotional, Social and Academic Skills across the Primary Curriculum*, Gateshead: Athenaeum Press.
- Fry, H., Ketteridge, S., and Marshall, S., eds. 2008. *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Enhancing Academic Practice*. 3rd. ed. London: Routledge.
- Hamilton, E., (2006) Narratives of enterprise as epic tragedy, *Management Decision*, **44**(4), 536–550.
- Hansen C. D., Kahnweiler, W. M., (1993) Storytelling: An Instrument for Understanding the Dynamics of Corporate Relationships, *Human Relations*, **46**(2), 1391-1409.
- Katz, J., Green, R., (2008) *Entrepreneurial Small Business*, New York: McGraw-Hill.

- Koehn, N. F., (2001) *Brand new: How entrepreneurs earned consumers trust from Wedgewood to Dell*, Harvard Business Press.
- Kolb, D.A., (1981) *Learning styles and disciplinary differences*, in Chickering, A.W. (Ed) *The Modern American College: Responding to the New Realities of Diverse Students and a Changing Society*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.
- Kuratko, D. F., Welsch, H. P., (2004) *Strategic Entrepreneurial Growth*, Thomson, South Western.
- Langley, G. et al , (1996) *The Improvement Guide: A Practical Approach to Enhancing Organizational Performance*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Lowenthal, P. R., (2008) Online faculty development and storytelling: An unlikely solution to improving teacher quality, *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* **4**(3), Retrieved from http://jolt.merlot.org/vol4no3/lowenthal_0908.pdf.
- McCollum, M., (1992) Organizational Stories in a Family-Owned Business, *Family Business Review*, **5**(1), 3-24.
- Morgan, S., Dennehy, R. F., (1995) Organizational storytelling: Telling Tales in the Business Classroom, *Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises*, **22**, 160-165.
- Myrsiades, L. S., (1987) Corporate Stories as Cultural Communications in the Organizational Setting, *Management Communication Quarterly*, **1**(1), 184-120.
- Narva, R.L., (2011) *How Family-Controlled Enterprises Connect the Experience of their Past to the Promise of their Future*, <http://www.narvaandcompany.com/pdfs/Heritage-and-Tradition-in-Family-Business.pdf>
- Neuhauser, P. C., (1993) *Corporate Legends & Lore*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- O'Connor, E., (2002) Storied Business: Typology, Intertextuality, and Traffic in Entrepreneurial Narrative, *Journal of Business Communication*, **39**(1), 36-54.
- Race, P., (2005) 'Ripple on the Pond Seven Factors'. <http://phil-race.co.uk/?p=438>.
- Rae, D., (2005) Entrepreneurial learning: a narrative-based conceptual model, *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, **12**(3), 323 – 335.
- Smith, R., Juwah, C., (2010) *Developing and Narrating Practice Based Curriculum for Small and Medium Enterprises*, presented at 'The International Entrepreneurship Educators Conference'.
- Stokes D., (1995), *Small Business Management*, Letts Educational, London.
- Stone, E., (1988) *Stories Make Family*, New York: New York Times, www.henoikiens.com.
- Storey D.J., (1994) *Understanding the Small Business Sector*, Routledge, London.
- Timmons J.A., (1999) *New Venture Creation*, Irwin, USA.
- Warren, L. (2004) A systemic approach to entrepreneurial learning: an exploration using storytelling, *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, **21**(1), 3–16.

Appendix 1 - A planned strategy for growth - '*One day the telephone just stopped ringing*'

Adam is a self-employed financial advisor / consultant in his early forties. He is affiliated to a larger consultancy firm based in Aberdeen. Adam has been in this business for the past ten years and it has provided, Adam and his young family with a comfortable life style. He works from home and operates very much like an independent entrepreneur in that he is responsible for generating his own leads and developing these into sales for which he is paid commission. The finalisation of a deal is often dependent upon Adams communication skills. As a result, life for Adam was busy but good. The independence offered by his choice of business activity was a major deciding factor in his career choice. The flexibility of the hours worked was a positive factor. Adam could choose to work when it suited him. This allowed him quality time with his family and his children. The drawbacks were working evenings to see clients too busy to see him during the working day. Adam would often take care of paperwork and administration late into the night. Prior to the current recession hitting the North-east of Scotland in late 2008 – early 2009 most of Adams work was conducted in the property market and entailed mortgage and remortgaging work. Indeed, 80% of his work consisted of mortgage work. The remainder of his work related to advising clients on financial investments such as PEPS and ISA's. In effect Adam was positioned to service affluent middle class professionals. He also advises a number of small businessmen in the Aberdeen area on their personal financial portfolios. During the decade prior to the current recession work was steady and increased annually. This resulted in a predictable pattern of monthly commission payments from which he could plan his own finances.

The years 2005 to 2008 proved to be particularly lucrative because of the property boom in Aberdeen and parts of Aberdeenshire. It was not unusual for Adam to close 10-20 mortgage deals in a month. Also Adam could afford to be selective and pick the clients which would provide him with the best returns on his time. The telephone in his home office study was a constant but comfortable interruption to family life. During the first half of 2008 business was booming even during the traditionally quieter months of January and February. Activity peaked during the Summer and late Autumn but began to tail off as the Winter months came round. Adam noticed that the number of calls for advice received began to slow down the nearer it got to Christmas. It was during this time that the news of the recession and the American sub prime market problems were reported. The problem seemed a long way off but it was not because it coincided with a discernable lull in the Aberdeen property bubble. Houses and flats which once sold within a few weeks remained unsold and potential buyers were inclined to be cautious. Adam and his family enjoyed a well earned festive break and in the second week of January, 2009 he began to look forward to work again. Things were slow and by the end of the month Adam realised that one day '*the telephone in his office had stopped ringing*'. This had never happened before and the news was bleak as local builders stopped building projects and the banks stopped lending to first time buyers.

Things did not improve by February, in fact they worsened. The office phone remained silent. Adam checked with his peer group and established that he was not alone. In February 2008 Adam had closed over 20 mortgage applications but in February 2009 he only closed one. Adam took stock of the situation and decided to be proactive. He began to canvass clients from his data base and for the first time in many years had to cold call clients. Slowly this paid off because he listened to their financial needs and sold them appropriate financial products. He increased his networking activity and listened to the problems of other businessmen and financial consultants. This enabled him to pursue potential lines of new business. He has increased his 'golfing' commitments because these often result in networking opportunities with potential clients. In addition, he conducted an audit of his skills / knowledge base and as a result he decided to reposition his work load and effort. After researching the market he moved into advising on tax minimisation, the avoidance of inheritance tax and debt management. This line of work was more time consuming and demanding and it was a steep learning curve. Nevertheless, it paid the household bills and kept him afloat. Moreover, he took stock of his monthly commitments and reduced and streamlined unnecessary expenditure. He is more conscious of closing deals and receiving payment on time. Adam now uses his time more wisely and enjoys more family time. In his down time he also studied the stock market and was prepared to take a risk. He has self taught himself brokering skills and despite shouldering significant initial losses he is operating at a profit in his new hobby. Whilst Adam has not reached the level of activity he enjoyed prior to the recession he has succeeded in happy with his lot and has learned new skills and increased his stock of knowledge in respect of financial investment opportunities.