



ALIA 2006 Biennial Conference



Australian Library and  
Information Association

## **Workplace Practice**

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#### **Biography**

Childhood experiences form a rich part of the stories professional story-teller Andrew Wright tells to audiences around the world. "Alas!", the story-teller says "the two lazy pieces of ham in the story of the three little pigs just had to die. It lets people know that nasty things happen in life. Not everyone lives happily ever after". Andrew's professional story-telling career began as a children's librarian, and for over a decade he balanced two professional lives, as a story-teller, and as a library manager in various positions in New Zealand and Australia. Andrew performs 150-200 library performances annually, as well as performing at conferences and all levels of schooling. Andrew now works full time as a story-teller. "Anyway, story-telling has always been a part of our lives" he says, "from the guy who spins a good yarn in the pub, to the perennial office joker".

## **1001 Australian Nights: The importance of librarians telling their own stories**

### **Abstract**

The use of narrative story-telling as a tool for professional development has seen an upsurge in recent years across a number of professions. This is particularly noticeable in the fields of education and medicine. Despite this increase in the use of narrative as a professional development tool, libraries and librarians have been relatively slow in adopting the use of story-telling as a tool for staff development.

Although an important and well known element of story is the ability to explain our own unique place in the world, it can achieve much more than that. Story-telling has a growing reputation for the power to teach and develop in multiple ways. Sunwolf and Frey (2001) described the way interpersonal face-to-face story-telling helps both tellers and their audience construct self (Who am I?); weave community (Who are We?); order experiences; represent reality; make sense of lived-events; share knowledge; or influence the values, beliefs, and actions of one another.

It is these aspects of story-telling that have seen it used successfully as a tool in the human resource management portfolio. This paper will provide practical examples of how we can apply the principles and practices of story-telling in the library workplace to address: personnel issues, improve productivity, and create and sustain organizational culture, whilst celebrating our own uniqueness. This paper draws on the author's 17 years library management experience in New Zealand and Australia, as well as 15 years experience as a professional story-teller.

**Lessons learnt from famous librarians**

- Never be daunted, the library world has too many people who are daunted. *Sue Pharo (New Zealand)*
- Never smoke dope, and try shelving in the cooking section. *Peggy McConnell (New Zealand)*
- Never doubt your own ability. *Warren Horton (Australia)*
- Hard work, diligence and perseverance can overcome most problems. *Beryl Anderson (New Zealand)*
- You can have more fun with 3 bottles of red wine, than 3 volumes of the Library of Congress Subject Headings. *John Levett (Australia)*
- Even people you consider your friends, will betray you. *Pene Walsh and Sally Sleigh (New Zealand)*
- Help and support sometimes come from the most unexpected places. *Sandra Hughes and Helen Renwick (New Zealand)*
- Brown Crimpalene can still be a fashion statement. *Beryl Anderson (New Zealand)*
- A modest and timid exterior can hide a steely resolve. *Christine Cooling (United Kingdom)*
- The show must go on, particularly if it is your show. *Julie Rae (Australia)*
- Depending on your point of view, underarm bowling may not be cheating. *Earle Gow (Australia)*
- Bad things happen, to good people. *Bill Linklater (Australia)*
- A bottle of whiskey is essential library First Aid. *Margie MacKenzie (New Zealand)*

- Librarianship is a noble profession, in which our actions change lives. *Unknown Children's Librarian (New Zealand)*

**Stories for Successful Librarianship**

Like many professionals, most librarians will undergo some form of professional education before they begin work as a librarian. For many this formal part of their education will open the doors to a lengthy career, yet like most formal education the skills and theory we gain at library school are only the tip of the ice-berg for what we will require in a successful library career. The lessons listed above are all examples of lessons I didn't learn at library school, but all were important lessons in helping me to the relative success and enjoyment I achieved in my library career. They were lessons handed to me, not as single one line pithy statements, rather these were exemplified by the stories that these librarians lived, and the lives that these librarians told.

My personal experience of what is required in a successful librarian began when I was five years old. When I turned five years old, all I wanted to do was learn to read. The reasons I wanted to learn to read were simple. Firstly nearly everyone I knew could read, and secondly I loved visiting the Tairāwhiti Public Library. When I was 4 years old they began to build the brand new HB Williams Memorial Library, Gisborne. I couldn't wait to visit the new library. Unfortunately the day they opened the HB Williams Memorial Library, was also the day I turned five and began my formal schooling. My first day of school was at St Mary's Primary School, Gisborne. I arrived in a school uniform

three sizes to big, and was assigned to a new entrant class with Sister Roseanne. To my amazement one of the first things announced by Sister Roseanne was that as a special treat we would be going to the opening of the brand new HB Williams Memorial Library.

When we arrived at the library, the first thing I noticed was that the polished linoleum of the Tairawhiti Public Library had been replaced by custom made carpet. We all filed in and sat on this brand new, very plush, million dollar, carpet. The Children's Librarian began to tell us all about the new HB Williams Memorial Library. Five minutes into her discourse I really needed to go to the toilet. I was five years old, my first day of school and to scared to ask anyone. I tried holding my breath, counting to ten, counting backwards to zero, crossing my legs, none of it worked. Finally I just had to relieve the pressure, I went wee wees all over the brand new million dollar, custom made carpet. Later when that Children's Librarian found out what had happened, she didn't scold me or growl me, she simply took me to one side found me a dry pair of pants in the lost property, and phoned my father to collect me. Although I had dreamed of learning to read on my first day of school it didn't happen, but something much more important did. I was shown the kindness and dedication of a Children's Librarian.

### **Why Tell Stories?**

The previous narrative was a story about a librarian who connected with a young child, and changed a life. For many of us in libraries today the reality is not just 'information' it is 'personal'. Everyday we make connections with

people; our clients, our managers, our peers, and our employees, these interactions may in fact change their lives more deeply than any formal human resource process.

This paper is about developing library initiatives and programmes that meet the needs of real people. It is about people as biological entities with real cultures, real values, and real emotions. As an industry we spend vast amounts of time and money improving our digital capacity, writing plans and memos, and often relatively less time and money considering our responses and obligations to one another.

The use of narrative story-telling as a tool for professional development, building relationships, and explaining value, has seen an upsurge in recent years across a number of professions. Despite this increase in the use of narrative as a professional development tool, libraries and librarians have been relatively slow in adopting the use of story-telling as a tool for staff development. This might be considered unusual in an industry that has always had such a strong connection with the written story. Two professions that stand out in any literature review for their use of narrative story-telling as a professional tool are medicine and education, yet this burgeoning use is not limited to these professions.

Victoria Ward (1998) the CKO of UK investment bank NatWest, commissioned a story about the Green Book project. In the story, NatWest became the "Kingdom of Corporania," knowledge maps and organizational charts became "Treasure Maps," and a knowledge audit, "The Great Audit." Characters included "The Innovator"

and "The Great Skeptic." (Any relation between these characters and staff at your company is not a coincidence).

Stephen Denning (2006 p.42) Formerly the Program Director, Knowledge Management, at the World Bank, briefly describes the role and importance of story-telling: "As more and more firms grasp that narrative is central to addressing many of today's key leadership challenges – for example, articulating the risks and opportunities identified by strategic management tools like strategic plans, scenario analysis, and dilemma resolution – the question becomes: how is a CEO to make effective use of story-telling?"

In describing the next generation of information technology leaders Thornton May (2005 p.15) noted: "the truly insightful in the next generation are putting down their BlackBerry devices, pagers and cell phones and spending time fine-tuning their ability to tell compelling stories."

The list of business leaders and commentators who are now promoting the use of narrative story-telling, is growing, as are the applications that they perceive. Amongst this list are names such as; Michael Kaye, Annette Simmons, Margaret Parkin, Terrence L. Gargiulo, David M. Armstrong some of the main applications that they perceive are summarized below.

Librarians can gain the following benefits from telling and listening to stories:

- Imparting necessary skills and training to colleagues

- Knowledge and history that provide context for day to day decision making
- Understand the library's and organisation's strategy
- Learning patterns of power and succession within the library
- Understanding how successful the library is
- Learning expectations of new librarians
- Spark action, in a positive and affirmative way
- Taming the grapevine, and proactively working through gossip and innuendo
- Expressing a meaningful vision, creating future stories and scenarios
- Expressing the library experience of other employees
- Confirming shared experiences and the meaning of the library
- Preparing groups for planning, decision-making and implementing new initiatives
- Co-creating visions and strategy

### **Story-telling as Identity Maintenance**

The reasons that stories are seen as effective in the above applications are within the very nature of story-telling. Story-telling has always been used as a compelling method of teaching values, history, fact and cultural knowledge. Stories offer a way to explain various perspectives, that give events meaning and capture knowledge. Story-telling promotes improved listening skills, accuracy of recall, and better sense of sequencing, predicting and fluency in planning. Stories create the experience that lets strategy be understood at a personal level. In order to be effective,

strategy must not just inform, it must inspire. And people are never inspired by reason alone. A good example of the compelling nature of stories and how they build value comes from my own childhood.

Sitting on the old wicker settee, my older sister and I, joining my mothers voice in squealing “Not by the hair of my chinney chin chin!” or alternatively in the deepest voice we could muster “I’ll Huff! and I’ll Puff! and I’ll blow your house down!” These are my memories of childhood story time, an interactive, participatory and entertaining event in which a literary world of untold delights was opened to me. Of course the uncensored version of the three little pigs was always one of my favourite stories as a child; it wasn’t so much the understated violence that appealed to me, rather the resourcefulness and chicanery of the major protagonists.

My mother is blind, and as a child I didn’t have story-time with brightly illustrated picture books. Instead my sister and I had a wonderfully emotive experience of story, which explained our place in the world, as a family and as a culture descended from the Irish and the Scottish and now in the antipodean islands of New Zealand.

Although an important element of story is the ability to explain our own unique place in the world it achieves much more than that. Story-telling has a growing reputation for the power to feed or heal minds and souls in multiple ways. Sunwolf and Frey (2001) described the way interpersonal face-to-face story-telling helps both tellers and their audiences construct self (Who am I?); weave community (Who are We?);

order experiences; represent reality; make sense of lived-events; share knowledge; or influence the values, beliefs, and actions of one another. Telling and listening to stories may operate in a number of dynamic ways:

1. a way of connecting diverse people (personal or cultural narratives),
2. a way of learning (pedagogical and cultural narratives),
3. a way of remembering (historical and personal narratives), or
4. a way of foreshadowing the future (visionary narratives).

This explanation further invites us to acknowledge the permeable nature of these categories; since any told story may provide multiple overlapping functions for one or more listeners or tellers.

Although this paper is focused on the aspect of organizational story-telling, it is important that we recognize the important place of story-telling in community building, cultural identification, and personal development. In the western tradition we have a number of stories that in fact illustrate the tension between identity maintenance and fortune seeking. Stories like the numerous “Jack” stories, for example ‘Jack and the beanstalk’, ‘Jack and his two brothers’, which serve to remind us that wherever we find a person or a group of people who have a strong concern with identity we will find stories. However, balanced against this when a person or a community is more interested in fortune seeking than in identity maintenance, often stories are left behind.

In creating a story-telling organisation, one of the most important aspects is to be comfortable telling our own stories, and finding our own character so that we can understand other characters. This is also an important acknowledgement of our own value as well as the value of others: people are forever telling stories about themselves, powerful sharing bridges to other people. Witherell, Tran, and Othus (1995) suggest that oral story-telling allows the audience to engage in a leap of empathy that binds them to wider relationships that provide bridges across cultures. Scheibe (1986) has found that for some people, the stories they have constructed for their lives (and that they share with others) actually seem to come to an end before their biological lives do. People who cannot see more "story" in their lives stop living fully.

In beginning to tell our own stories, it is important to acknowledge that story-telling is still a part of our everyday lives. We often share a joke amongst friends, or recount the events of our day to our partners in the evening. We may also have experienced the negative aspect of story in our personal and professional lives: gossip, slander, or distorted rumours can have devastating effects. All of the above are aspects of story; good, bad, and humorous, all may in fact be part of the stories you develop in your library.

### **Story-telling in Business**

An example of extending the everyday story-telling of our lives into the business realm can be found in the experiences of senior managers and consultants at Accenture (formally Andersen Consulting). Whilst attending a management development course at

Oxford University, they soon discovered that rather than engage in small talk and undirected chit chat during their evening meals, they were instead to participate in active story-telling. Each senior manager or consultant was seated with a senior executive from one of *Accentures* venture partners. Topics for discussion were printed on the menus, many of these topics revolving around simulated business situations that had been debated earlier in the day. Participants told stories about these simulated business situations and the implications for *Accentures* partners.

Although this mode of story-telling may sound overtly stage managed, pretentious and false, Keith Ruddle the Director of this initiative has no doubts as to its effectiveness. According to Ruddle "business can force us to forget the art of conversation" (Accenture 2003 p.24). Ruddle believes that many managers in the world of business have lost the art of conversation; they have become reluctant to express personal comment in a business setting, or to tell a meaningful and contextual story.

Like Ruddle I could certainly say the same about some libraries in which I have worked. That although many of my colleagues and other librarians had great social skills, often the highly specialized nature of their particularly branch of librarianship has led to stilted conversations and one-way dialogue, an inability to bring other staff and librarians into the context of their story, or the implications and visions of their work. Librarians have often failed in their cross organizational story-telling, failing to convince other parts of the organization of their value. In addition, many librarians are less than

comfortable in the presence of a senior figure from another organization, and consequently become overly formal, almost robotic. Although at first story-telling in these situations may feel stage managed, pretentious and false, it offers the potential for a more relaxed atmosphere that builds context and relationship, helping librarians to learn to communicate effectively on every level.

### **Your Stories, My Stories, Our Stories**

Although there is undoubtedly a place for this stage-managed type of story-telling as used by Accenture, it should not blind us to the fact that the story-telling which occurs within a library is more complex than a simple set of Aesop's fables. It is perhaps more akin to Machiavelli than Aesop. It would be a serious pitfall to believe that library story-telling can be rendered down to a set of fifty practical stories for any library circumstance. As with the 'lessons learnt from famous librarians' the most useful stories are often the stories that come from our own experience, the experience of the library, or other librarians. As a young librarian working in public libraries one of the most read and useful news sheets was the "unabashed librarian", mostly a collection of stories about library experience, mostly humorous, but often showing much more insight than any scholarly paper. Stories should be told in context, the stories told in libraries will be different to the stories told in medicine or education, or business. We may learn from each others stories, yet we should also tell our own stories. These stories that librarians tell will not just be the stories with happy endings, some will be 'who I am stories' others the "why I am here"

stories which include the 'what's in it for me' stories. There will be many stories in your professional lives as librarians they may include stories about 'other librarians trying to sabotage your efforts' 'telling your superior when they are wrong', 'resistance to hierarchical power', or my personal favourite, stories of 'injustice'. Not all of these stories will be appropriate for all audiences, yet the telling of them will undoubtedly improve your own librarianship and the librarianship of your colleagues. I was lucky enough to attend the Aurora Leadership Institute in 2002, and one of the most powerful aspects was hearing library leaders telling their stories. Your stories can be as powerful as those of library leaders.

Story-telling is not difficult and many of us already regularly tell stories, for those of you who want to tell better stories the following are some simple methods. In making our own stories, many will revolve around important events. They will, like much literature, be plot centred, although we must be careful not to become focused on plot too early in the construction. This is not written literature, it is an oral experience. The central hinge of our story plot shall be crisis. However we must be careful not to define the word crisis too narrowly. For the sake of telling our own stories, the meaning of crisis shall be defined as anything that changes the status quo, forcing or encouraging us to adjust. Some of these crises will be voluntary, others will be involuntary. They may include such things as applying for and accepting a new position, undertaking extra study, learning to climb trees, being made redundant, buying a house, falling out with your employer, getting married,

winning Tattsлото. Always remember that although some of these events may sound simple and a part of many people's lives, they may have more than simple significance

In making our stories, we should not look for a complete plot, pre-hatched and ready to fly. Rather, we should look for the isolated events that can be strung together to create a complete story. Sports are a good example of this total story which is comprised of a series of stories. When a batsman comes to the crease, his conflict is with the bowler and then with the wicket keeper and the fielders. In making oral story, you can actively craft a story with climactic dramatic structure to specifically create, build, and eventually release tension, thus providing an audience with more joy. Like sports, the source of dramatic tension in a story comes through the expectation of trouble coming and crisis. Characters clash against the world and each other. The dramatic tension of the story builds as we struggle to find insight and affirmation.

To unpack isolated events that may become our stories it is best to use a series of fish-hooks or prompts that encourage our recall. Below are examples of such devices however there are many more that you can create for yourselves and others, not all will be about libraries or librarians.

### ***People Prompts***

- Remember a librarian you knew as a child, or whom you worked with early in your career.
- Tell us about a pet you once owned.
- Introduce us to your oldest librarian you ever knew.

- Tell us about the strangest library client you ever served.

### ***Place Prompts***

- Take us on a walk around your childhood library.
- Take us to the basement or stack-room of your library.
- Take us with you when you had to move house.
- Take us to the top of your favourite climbing tree.
- Take us on a tour through your reference department

### ***Happening Prompts***

- Remember a time when you disobeyed a direct order
- Remember a time when you tried to cook something and it didn't turn out
- Remember a time when you were embarrassed at a library meeting or function.
- Remember a time when you broke something (now tell us how you tried to cover it up).

### **Story-telling and change management**

Librarians telling stories should not be confused with another 'as long as we tell them everything will be okay' approach. As in most professions the pace of change within librarianship is now such that nearly all of us will see rapid change in our workplaces, and our profession. In preparing for change the 'Just Tell 'Em' approach has been popular amongst many libraries, and some managers have even called this a consultative approach. This approach is where all the top executives and managers leave their offices, and venture out into the workforce, armed

with cleverly crafted speeches, elaborately prepared memo's, funky PowerPoint presentations, all to ensure that we are all 'singing from the same hymn sheet', 'rowing in the same direction' or 'on the same page' supposedly to ensure that the new business model is understood, and that we all embrace the new vision. Following this, meetings are called, retreats or advances are planned, emails are sent, and newsletter articles are written. After all this carefully planned activity, the leaders return to their offices safe in the knowledge that they have effectively communicated with all their staff, and now they just need to await the harvest of all their careful planting and preparation. When the blossoms fail to appear the managers will scratch their heads and talk about how resistant librarians are to change.

Although the 'Just Tell 'Em' approach will work on occasion the unfortunate fact remains that people are complex entities, and that the carefully crafted speech or, elaborately prepared memo, and even the funky PowerPoint, do not always register with an individuals particular context. The 'Just Tell 'Em' approach rests on a number of assumptions.

- That librarians will already have the necessary context and background to understand the need for change and why we are changing.
- That librarians accept the decisions of their managers, as well thought out and practical, and always the best decision.
- That librarians can be forced to deal with the conclusions and actions of management; they will not draw their

own conclusions and act accordingly.

- That for librarians understanding change is basically an information issue and that if librarians just knew the reasons why it would be good to change, they'd change. Unfortunately, change is as much about relationships, emotions, and gut feel as it is about facts.

As librarians and library managers we need to find ways to deal with change at a personal and professional level, a way to meet the need for continuous learning throughout adult life. We need to find a way of learning that can also be seen as sense making, a way which is developed in a social and situated process. Moving away from a traditional focus on the cause and effect method of learning and explaining, to a focus that includes meanings, symbols and the values found in human interactions. These meaning values and symbols have traditionally and currently been expressed in stories, and how librarians construct their world through the lives they tell, and the stories they live. Stories can become a springboard that transform the uncertainty of work and change into something meaningful and comprehensible.

Finally in the words of Stephen Denning (2004 p.113) "That narratives are not mathematically precise, and in fact are full of fuzzy qualitative relationships, seems to be a key to their success in enabling us to cope with complexity." Story-telling does not offer a magical cure to the ills of the library work-place, but it does provide a vital medicine in helping to build a better work-place.

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