

'Sous l'arbre à palabre' or 'Under the palaver tree' The story of an ongoing partnership with the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC)

Summary

In 2002 Sparknow and the knowledge management directorate of the Swiss Foreign Ministry's international development co-operation and humanitarian aid agency – DEZA (Direktion für Entwicklung und Zusammenarbeit) (in English, the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation, or the SDC) entered into partnership. Over two years we tested the potential for using story and narrative techniques to assist in the capture and dissemination of pertinent experiences from their work at home and abroad. The “pilot” projects created enduring warmth around the technique by allowing people to engage with it in a number of different contexts, at their own volition. Deemed a success by the client, the projects spawned a new programme of work commencing in early 2004 comprising: i) the creation of a tailor-made story toolkit based on their experiences applying story in the development and co-operation context; ii) the design and delivery of a community-building event for members and partners delivering cultural programmes and; iii) an exposition – part installation, part ‘happening’ – at the forthcoming “Dare to Share Fair” and its sister conference “Learning across Borders” in April 2004. This case study focuses on the first part of our engagement with SDC because owing to the quality of insight around each “pilot” project these experiences will be documented separately and published as a series later in 2004.

Prologue

Three years ago Sparknow attended the Knowledge Management Europe conference in Den Haag. In among a sea of laminations, screensavers and glossy brochures about technology, we ran a couple of workshops on story¹. Transforming a previously neutral space - a ceiling-free pen in an aircraft hanger-style conference centre - we strung up washing lines, pegging to them objects and assets developed through our story work. To open our session one of our associates - a traditional storyteller - performed a story we had commissioned from her a couple of years previously about our first knowledge management project. Performing in this space she filled the whole exhibition hall with sound and music. People came to find us from all over the conference.

At that point in time we had several years' worth of experience using story – both explicitly and implicitly – to help our clients achieve their knowledge management and communication objectives. Beyond entertainment, we had witnessed the power of story

1 - Story works with the personal and human dimensions of experience - the stuff that cannot be quantified into bare facts and statistical data. As exponents of narrative inquiry – a new technique within qualitative research rapidly gaining credibility – we act under the premise that experience is made up of stories lived and told. More traditional knowledge managers might have focused on creating mechanisms to help capture and control the tacitly-held personal knowledge of individuals – an approach centred on the idea of ownership. By contrast, we are more interested in access – in encouraging people to develop new networks, regulated by actors giving others access to those private experiences they feel others might learn valuable lessons from. We have tried to explain here some of the reasons why large organisations are using narrative or story. Often they seek to create a culture of counterpoint, in which the embodied knowledge and values of individuals, and the abstracted knowledge and ethic of the organisation harmonise. This seems to be a culture that counters the historic *modus operandi* of corporate life, premised on argument, competition and enclosure.

to release tacit experiences and had learned to create supportive environments in which people could comfortably listen to and share their own stories– but how could organizations really capitalize on their stories as key strategic assets? What was the business benefit? And what was the real potential of taking this medium seriously without undermining its power by turning it into a process?

Situation

One of the people who approached us at Den Haag was the lead in knowledge management for the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC), charged with developing a framework to facilitate the sharing of knowledge across his organisation and with partners. He had immediately been struck by the expressive qualities of the workshop, and the potential of this medium to engage people right across the geographic and hierarchical spread of the agency. He felt that story might be uniquely able to create the warmth necessary to encourage their development partners to join the extended enterprise in more effective recognition and communication of important insights that in turn might have a direct bearing on other localities or on the whole policy and strategy of the organisation. If only this could be done systematically, he thought, what might the impact be on the richness of the resources available to the whole organisation, and how might this affect the sustainability of the projects in which it invested, and so enhance their impact on alleviating poverty? With these thoughts in mind we began a dialogue that was to lead to an ongoing programme of activities inside the SDC, testing storytelling's ability to complement and enhance existing practices in framing and communicating key learning episodes.

Situated within the Swiss Foreign Ministry, the SDC employs a staff of 500 people to carry out Switzerland's international cooperation work in Switzerland and abroad - including coordinating development activities, cooperation with Eastern Europe and humanitarian aid. The SDC works in a decentralised manner, involved in some 800 projects around the globe, always working towards the twin goals of sustainable development and poverty reduction, while concentrating on its five priorities of conflict prevention and management, good governance, income-generating projects, social justice and sustainable use of natural resources. An excerpt from their website told us just how important their knowledge is to them:

"Past experiences are part of the SDC learning process which it combines with up-to-date specialized knowledge in its projects. The SDC's Thematic and Technical Resources Department has been charged with the acquisition, dissemination, interconnection and safeguarding of this knowledge."

From www.deza.ch

Right from the start it was clear they were ambitious about using story as a tool for both improving knowledge flows and enhancing connectivity and communication across their decentralised organisation. The partnership that has developed between Sparknow and the SDC, through a series of interventions and pilot projects, conferred significant and unexpected benefits on both sides.

A geographically-dispersed organisation with complex local partnerships, SDC employs highly trained professionals whose technical skills are often accompanied by in-depth knowledge of specific topics or regions. The culture is extremely hard-working with staff committed proudly to the cause. Importantly the organizational pace is slow-moving, partially because project lifecycles are broken into long phases broken up by careful monitoring and evaluation to ensure that the benefits of intervention are sustained. Often projects and programmes have to deal with local resistance and power struggles before becoming established and effective. Hence with regard to the organization itself, any change is bound to happen gradually, from within and as a result of individuals taking some risks and discovering for themselves rather than having changes imposed on them from outside. As a learning organization the SDC is always ready to share with and learn from others, and holds regular conferences and seminars for this purpose. Much of the organisation's work is done by individuals working in local partnerships in places as far apart as Benin and Macedonia, Bhutan and Peru. Because of the urgency of frontline work, and its remoteness from head office, head office initiatives have limited impact, simply because they are from head office. Equally, because people must necessarily be immersed in their immediate environment - it is their priority – the flow of knowledge and insight from the frontline to the centre is patchy and a great deal of risk is assumed by programme co-ordinators, more than they realise as we were to discover. The challenge then was to consider whether story - used explicitly as a tool - can help overcome this and unblock channels to create new dynamics that can replenish the knowledge bases of the organisation as a whole.

Given this climate it was apparent that we should not add burden to an already over-burdened staff, and that engagements should be enjoyable, highly participatory, thought provoking and seek to forge stronger connections between any given individual and their organization.

Intervention

In July 2002 Sparknow² were invited to facilitate a working session enabling us to evaluate jointly how storytelling could help the organisation capitalise on its experience. Present were five key stakeholders including two members of the internal Evaluation and Controlling division one of whom was an ex-anthropology teacher who had used storytelling to engage her pupils in the subject and who was now using storytelling to establish contact with African people on sensitive issues such as asymmetry in gender relations. Having just written an important paper on sustainability in development and co-operation and one partnership she and her colleague were exploring the potential for stories to help convey complex or difficult messages. Our client from the Knowledge Management team and a geographer who had worked in Kenya in the 1980s, his assistant and one of SDC's partners from the LBL agriculture extension centre who said he often used stories in training sessions to both entertain and explain the content of the training being delivered. Key to all this was a profound curiosity to see how storytelling might fit strategically with their KM demands and help them communicate more effectively.

² The Sparknow team consisted of an anthropologist, traditional storyteller, organisational analyst and an information specialist who all had previous experience using storytelling in the context of Knowledge Management programmes.

The objective of this initial session was to get a fuller picture of the work they do, using storytelling about real project experiences to map areas already rich in narrative and those which could benefit from narrative tools and techniques as a route to improving knowledge transfer, connectivity and learning. We chose to theme the discussions, framing them within two of their key concepts – ‘partnership’ and ‘sustainability’. To give readers a more concrete sense of what emerged, here is an example of a story told during the partnerships exercise:

EXERCISE: Partnerships – (‘and the moral is...’)

In pairs people were asked to think of two separate stories, one about a functional partnership, one about a dysfunctional partnership, identifying their own personal turning point and any significant factors. No writing was allowed, to help deter people from rationalizing their experiences too early.

‘Reality counts more than preconceptions’

“Some years ago, I was assisting one of the co-ordination offices (COOF) assessing the degree to which gender was being integrated into their programmes. This work was done in conjunction with an association of women lawyers. The problem was that although conceptually these women were strong and brilliant they lacked contact with realities on the ground, with the lives of the people on the ground. The turning point came one day when the COOF recruited someone who was not a conceptual, academic person, but somebody who really felt people’s realities and could work with them on the ground, using all sorts of methods like drama to engage people on a level. It made a huge difference.”

And the moral is...

“We have to change the focus and move from valuing only academics working on a conceptual level to valuing those who really ‘feel the ground’. The starting point should always be reality, not our abstract thoughts or preconceptions.”

The brevity demanded by the postcard containers in many ways enabled tellers to distil their experiences down, leaving only the most pertinent elements. We were all surprised at the high quality of insights gleaned from such an apparently simple exercise, and continue to use this approach in all manner of contexts with clients.

In the afternoon, the mapping exercise revealed the exceptional depth and breadth of knowledge created, capitalised on (or not) during each of the four formal phases of their projects. Here is one example:

EXERCISE: ‘Mainstreaming sustainability’ – mapping story in the project narrative

‘Mainstreaming sustainability’ for the SDC is about sustaining the benefits or effects of a project, not the project itself. To guarantee this workers need to take into account the point and view and perspectives of different stakeholders and beneficiaries involved, including the ‘destinateurs’ and ideally have them participate in each of the phases and any ‘moment forts’ (milestones). Another title for this is ‘managing for sustainability’ which demonstrates the importance of managing all four phases of a project, for example to plan realistically, define indicators of sustainability, do the work and then use the indicators during the monitoring.

To explore how better knowledge management and storytelling could help achieve this, we created templates like this



People broke into groups to prepare illustrative project narratives, describing what they already do and recording what activities go on both formally/ officially (above the line) and informally/ unofficially (below the line). We then asked them to annotate this narrative at the points at which richer storytelling would be beneficial. When the groups shared their findings the results were impressive. People were incredibly thoughtful about both the difference between and value of informal and formal processes and identifying places that were storytelling rich or impoverished. One example of this:

Case study: A programme in Burkina Faso to support medium sized cities balancing out rural and urban development in the North East (1980s -). Using infrastructure as an entry-point the SDC set up and financed the Burkina Organisation to build a marketplace, generating a return on investment for SDC over a defined period. The Burkina Organisation charges rent to merchants plus a 'social surplus' of funds to be invested in the city's schools and hospitals.

Location: Workshop in early 2002 to hear the findings of an important external evaluation and plan the new phase of the programme.

Beginning at the end of 1980s this programme supported three cities in the North East of Burkina Faso. At this time there was no political decentralization therefore no elected political authorities in these cities. The idea was to use infrastructure as an entry point, e.g. starting with something concrete by building a market (NOTE: markets are very important places, attracting people from surrounding locales to a focal point, promoting all forms of exchange) which would hopefully over time deliver a return on their investment. To achieve this SDC set up the Burkina Organisation. The central idea was that the Burkina Organisation would charge rent to merchants plus a social surplus in order to generate funds to invest in the cities such as schools and hospitals. This implementing body was financed by the SDC. A highly complex programme with whole host of stakeholders including SDC, ministries (especially territory management), political authorities, merchant organisations, entrepreneurs and trainers the programme ran into difficulties once new political authorities were elected and there were soon tensions about who should steer the programme. In early 2002 the findings of an important external evaluation showed that while the return on their investment had been effective, the social aspects had been too weak, that is, not really dealing effectively with the deeper issues of increasing poverty, changing gender relations and the upping the level of participation by the local populations.

Sequence of events: In early 2002, the SDC was involved in a new phase planning workshop, including the communication of key findings from an important external evaluation. A mediator was brought in because the project was in the middle of a political crisis. The merchants had exerted their influence and begun to diminish the return on investment for SDC. This outsider was someone impartial to communicate with all stakeholders on equal terms. The process was roughly this:

Before the workshop the Mediator held private debriefings with key stakeholders. This purpose of this discussion was to arrive at a common understanding about the main findings of the evaluation, and to help the Mediator enter with a clear picture of what was going on. For example, the SDC needed to have a discussion about how the crisis would affect the rate for renting.

The first session was a presentation by the Mediator who used storytelling to report back the key findings from the external evaluation and this proved extremely effective. After some discussion the first phase of active planning began with a group visioning and storytelling exercise, asking 'what would you like to see in your city in 25 years?' The 40 attendees included representatives from all key groups associations including water authorities, women, SDC, local political authorities and merchants. Despite all the informal power struggles and heated discussions between the stakeholders (which still continue and belong to the life of the project), something about the exercise made the visioning quite free, in fact participants felt the need to deepen their visions further but owing to a lack of time they could not. The most important findings were then elicited from these visions and the new key strategic orientations for the programme were shaped: two were based on infrastructure and three were new. It was a real success to have imagined a way forward together.

The second half of the workshop was a formal planning process – a more bureaucratic translation. The programme coordinators and the COOF took 3 hours to translate these visions and narratives into five strands of action. The shift to 'action planning' led to a complete loss of narrative. That was how the workshop ended.

Action: The strategising part of any programme or project is often rich in storytelling and imagery, but once formal planning begins the imperative of administrative language can take over, because it serves our needs. To counteract the potential loss of '*narratif*' we should try to adopt the language of practice and reality as well as the language of policies and abstractions.

This group chose to illustrate this narrative with two images: a butterfly and what they called '*l'arbre à palabre*' – or 'the parley tree'. We hadn't planned for these, but in when shared they had great resonance. We continue to refer to these symbols with our client, as a short hand for the ideas they represent.

The butterfly

The group drew a butterfly, showing a broad swathe of storytelling at the start of the process which by the end of the day had narrowed to nothing. A second wing was then drawn to show how in future they believe that storytelling and imagery will be adopted once more when monitoring progress and reporting back on subsequent phases.

L'arbre à palabre

In parts of central Africa people refer to talking '*sous l'arbre à palabre*' – meaning 'under the palaver tree', the tree for idle chatter. These big trees are used as conference or meeting spaces, casting enough shade for a whole group to gather beneath their thick branches and talk at leisure, sheltered from the heat of the midday sun. The conclusion drawn was that the SDC needs '*l'arbre à palabre*' to extend its branches into the evaluation process, with the organisation actively seeking and gathering up '*histoires de vie*' or 'life stories' that document what has happened to people as a result of their work. This '*arbre à palabre*' conveys both an idea about storytelling and message about sustaining the benefits of their projects and programmes.

These two days in July unearthed a host of critical insights about their organisational culture. This new knowledge was used to orient our approach moving forward. Some of the pertinent matters were:

- ✍ as an organization, the SDC operates in German, French, English, Spanish, Russian and Italian although those working in local partnerships worldwide operate in other languages and dialects. An organisation like this must, almost by definition, promote a multi-lingual culture; it confers all manner of strengths, not least to its role promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding. The staff members are uncommonly thoughtful about language, and hence used to finding the most vivid way of communicating their messages to their audience.
- ✍ they are very comfortable writing and speaking in abstract language and in generalizing, for example when reporting lessons learned. There is a gap between the specificity of field projects - full of very rich experiences - and the reported results that are always vaguer. Many feel that central discussions, especially strategy and policy conversations, need to move away from using purely conceptual language.
- ✍ people generally don't pay enough attention to what's important or significant in their own experience
- ✍ the organisation exhibits a tension between uniqueness and replication. Currently there are incentives to produce more unique project and disincentives for mainstreaming and replication of lessons learned. For example the core mission of the SDC is poverty reduction. To achieve positive changes in this area they will need to replicate what works, a possibility that internal incentives currently constrain.

The organization uses the term '*moments forts*' - a narrative term which describes both milestones and turning points in projects. People admitted to finding it easier to access and appreciate specific peak moments of change than recalling general or abstract dynamics. It was clear from outset that our work with story would help them think about how to put specific experiences to wider use, working to support the new knowledge management incentives encouraging reproduction and not invention. Recognition and continued ownership of the experience in some way was a real incentive we knew people would respond to. For example the story competition SDC ran in the summer of 2003, helped to ensure these insights remained tied to the person who had them rather than being generalised away.

Everything we have done since sought to help the organization develop their own language around their work with stories, based on their own experiences learning from doing it.

The discussions generated sufficient warmth of interest to bring us to the point where we designed and delivered an ambitious programme of work together, starting with two kick-off workshops in October 2002. Over two years of working in partnership, we have tested a portfolio of approaches together to find out whether story as an approach can enable effective capitalisation of knowledge in a global aid agency, including the role it can play in developing global communities and practices. The main components of our work have been:

- ✍ exploring the current use of story and narrative inside each phase of the existing project lifecycle;
- ✍ designing and acting as external adviser to a story competition that invited local partners across the world to submit experiences working with the concept of “sustainable development”;
- ✍ developing a systematic approach to drawing out deep insights from independent evaluations and advising on the use of stories (as evidence or examples) to ensure written reports have maximum impact;
- ✍ using story techniques to facilitate a large scale inaugural gathering of geographically-dispersed gender practitioners and catalyse its development as a community of practice;
- ✍ training moderators and facilitators in story techniques to support the development of skills, approaches and assets organisation-wide.

The programme of activities was controlled through a jointly developed framework agreement crafted to ensure each event and intervention contributed towards an overarching and reusable manifestation of the programme. Over two years we have engaged hundreds of people from a variety of organisations and with very different cultural and operational backgrounds.

Impact

We can identify a number of indications that our interventions made a positive impact. These include:

- ✍ a high, spontaneous interest among individual collaborators to get acquainted with story work
- ✍ a number who attended the inaugural events have demonstrated a willingness to use story and “pass the message” to colleagues and partners
- ✍ all events aimed at providing group leaders with sufficient knowledge to develop storytelling in their regions were oversubscribed
- ✍ feedback from one large open global event where story was used to lay the foundations for communities of interest was particularly positive
- ✍ the competition to elicit experiences from partners working at the local level yielded such high quality results that a repeat of the project is under active consideration

In 2004 the outputs from all the interventions are being consolidated to form the basis of a “story guide” which will contain practical tools and techniques for eliciting insight,



experience and best practice. The impact of this ongoing programme of work is best summed up by our client:

"Story work and narrative approaches mirror reality from a particular perspective, they "talk" about the context. They represent other realities than the one captured by the classic reports, they have the potential to highlight hidden unspoken issues. They respond to particular patterns of human perception and are particularly suited to share and transfer insights, to common learning."

We are pleased to continue working in partnership with the SDC. By all accounts it seems we have done some groundbreaking work as well as making important mistakes along the way. Arising from the need to collect these experiences together and review what has been learned the planned activities for 2004 – including participation in the forthcoming "Dare to Share Fair" this year, and the compilation of a tailor-made practical guide on using narrative in international co-operation work – allow for more consolidation and digestion than innovation. We do not feel the need to forge ahead without a clear mission and hence this we are entering a transition period, a deliberate slowing down to allow time for a way forward to reveal itself. We have built a strong road, with strong foundations, but although we can see many varied landscapes before us we have no idea where the road will end... and that makes the journey all the more exciting.