Many Narratives:
Storytelling as Epistemological Bridge

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling bridges a key epistemological divide in our field between socially constructed humanism of children's story time and implicit positivist orientation of computational systems. Centering story and storytelling as fundamental to LIS calls for a richer variety of stories, tellers, and audiences for a future of greater inclusion.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Information ethics; research methods; children's services; critical librarianship; social justice

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Storytelling; youth services; LIS history; innovation; DIKW

INTRODUCTION

Library and information science (LIS) has a rich focus on humanistic concerns in practice, but the underlying theories of information from which we operate are almost all inflected with "an atavistic positivist perspective" (Rayward, 1994; Hjørland, 2005). We typically separate the humanist realm of story and storytelling from the empirical realm of information. Drawing on over 130 years of storytelling wisdom in youth services librarianship, this paper will define storytelling and story, describe the epistemological divide between story and information, and argue for storytelling as an epistemological bridge with implications for inclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Storytelling, which has a long tradition in LIS, has yet to inform information theory or professional practice beyond qualitative data collection methods (such as oral history). After more than a century of practice, LIS storytelling has been largely overlooked, "neglected as a source for new ways of thinking and knowing" (McDowell, 2020). Despite its long history, relatively few studies engage storytelling in LIS, with youth or otherwise. One study demonstrated the educational and social/emotional benefits of oral storytelling (Agosto, 2013).

Exploring why storytelling matters, an analysis of children's responses to oral storytelling revealed benefits in visualization, cognitive engagement, critical thinking, story sequencing abilities (Agosto, 2016). Storytelling can entrance listeners, with shared states of trance-like attention among audience members (Sturm, 1999). Similarly, neurological research finds that neural story processing involves "mirroring process of embodied subjectivity" or experiences of "narrative emotions" predicated upon story's "ability to intertwine our experience of time" (Armstrong, 2020). Specialized "mirror neurons" in the brain contribute to experiencing empathy through story (Rizzolatti, 2008), and contextual empathy cues increase the potential for empathetic experience through story (Roshanaei et al., 2019).

A few qualitative studies have explored librarians' perceptions and uses of storytelling. In libraries, youth services librarians value storytelling for its uses in motivating reading, encouraging imagination through vicarious experience, sharing culture and history, building personal relationships and emotional engagement, and more (Sturm & Nelson, 2016).

Organizational storytelling among academic reference librarians conveys rich tacit knowledge, including explaining work conditions, providing warning systems, affording shared preparation for work challenges, and more (Colón-Aguirre, 2015). Qualitative studies like these draw from Elfreda Chatman's work that explored the lived experiences of information, revealing boundaries between "life-worlds" that and are critical to understanding how people are informed and, ultimately, what they know as individuals within groups (Chatman, 1996).

However, definitions of "information" typically rely on an empiricist epistemology that excludes social complexities like "opinions, intentions, desires," and "cultural forms and social practices" (Ma, 2021). Further, cultural and social exclusions in LIS abound, ranging from microaggressions to epistemicide, so that some social complexities are more likely to be studied while others are ignored. "It is hard work teaching about racism, social justice, and other topics, especially in LIS, which is characteristically known as a white and female field, and it is even harder to teach these topics when I am typically the only person of color in the classroom" (Cooke, 2016). Counter-storytelling in LIS is necessary to disrupt patterns of exclusion and bias, and it requires professionals who have heard stories in classrooms that have previously been excluded. For example, it is imperative to teach social justice stories so that students can tell those stories accurately and persuasively (McDowell & Cooke, in press).

When stories are ignored, silenced, stolen, or their cultural context is betrayed, they may vanish along with the information and knowledge they contain. "Epistemicide is the killing, silencing, annihilation, or devaluing of a knowledge system," and the harms of being told that some stories "do not count" have intergenerational impacts that information professionals must engage in "handling knowledge from every field" (Patin et al., 2021). When many stories are overwritten by only a few stories that "count," and when information professionals are accustomed to these epistemicides as everday injustices, it may help to turn conceptually to storytelling as a way of understanding the epistemological divides by which some human activities are considered information while others are dismissed as mere stories.

DEFINING STORYTELLING AND STORY

Storytelling as a practice in youth services librarianship emerged in the 1890s, when libraries began offering "a regular hour for storytelling" (Dousman, 1896). The goal was "to be

able to create a story, to make it live during the moment of the telling, to arouse emotions—wonder, laughter, joy, amazement" (Sawyer, 1942). Augusta Baker, the first to hold the position of Storytelling Specialist at the New York Public Library, directed new storytellers to emphasize "the story rather than upon the storyteller, who is, for the time being, simply a vehicle through which the beauty and wisdom and humor of the story comes to the listeners" (Baker & Greene, 1977). The definitions given here are also based on 15 years of teaching an LIS Storytelling course at the graduate level and 5 years of co-teaching a new Data Storytelling course that instructs students in well-evidenced and honest communication practices at the intersection of data and story.

Storytelling is defined as telling a story within the dynamic triangle of teller, audience, and story. LIS storytelling is a process that co-creates a particular telling of a story. "Storytelling at its best is mutual creation" (Baker & Greene, 1977). The librarian learns the basic character, setting, and plot of the story in advance but does not memorize every word, instead committing the events to memory so that the story's specific version (adaptation, instantiation, performance, etc.) emerges in the dynamic interchange of the storytelling triangle (Agosto, 2013; Agosto, 2016; Del Negro, 2017; MacDonald, 1993; Pellowski, 1977).

The three relationships of this storytelling triangle inform each other. For example, the audience's relationship to the teller depends on how they understand the teller's relationship to the story as well as the story itself (McDowell, 2020). For storytelling to occur, there must be a relationship of trust between the teller and the audience. This trust is contextual and depends on demonstrating that the teller wants this audience to know this story. The teller has a relationship to the story, whether as creator or reteller. The storyteller is not neutral as they inevitably bring a point of view. The most obvious example is that of a personal story, in which the person who lived the story is telling it. The audience has an interpretive relationship to the story informed by everything the teller says (gestures, performs, writes, records, etc.) which is not entirely controlled by the teller.

Story is both narratively patterned information and the content shared through the narrative experience of storytelling. To be a story as narratively patterned information, language must be structured by the chronology of narrative (beginning, middle, and end) and the logic of narrative (character, setting, and plot). Folklorist and acclaimed storyteller Betsy Hearne lauds the aesthetics of folkloric stories, with their "fast-moving, highly structured elemental plots" and "clearly delineated archetypal characters," for allowing each listener "to glean different emotional, socio-cultural, intellectual, spiritual, and physical connections with a tale" (Hearne, 2011). Crossing both aesthetics and categorization, LIS storytelling ethics require respecting cultural story origins in retellings (Hearne, 1993a, 1993b).

Story is also the content shared in the collective narrative experience of storytelling. Some kinds of reception can be viscerally sensed through live audience responses—laughter, applause, boos, hisses, gasps, sighs—which storytellers have categorized (Holt & Mooney, 1994). Embodiment in the "ritual storytelling situation" of story hours indicates that collective narrative experience includes "corporeal aspects," even among pre-literate children (Hedemark & Lindberg, 2018). Most definitions of information center the individual and do not seriously consider groups, group reception, group interpretation, and other collective phenomena that shape exchanges on social media and other fast-paced "live" or "present" experiences. In short, story is both an empirical form and a socially constructed narrative experience. Story and the

dynamics of storytelling constitute not merely a subset of information or of information behavior, but a fundamental information form (McDowell, 2021).

EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIVIDE

Most definitions of information presume that audiences are individual. Because stories are constituted through narrative experience, and audiences are partly constitutive of the stories told to and with them, storytelling offers a framework for bridging a fundamental epistemological divide in our field, between social constructionism and positivism. Figure one illustrates how story and information have constituted distinct categories in LIS, without overlap.

Figure 1
Epistemological Divide between Stories and Information

Stories	Information
-Collective (playful) meaning-making	-Individual meaning-making
-Allowing each listener "to glean different emotional, socio-cultural, intellectual, spiritual, and physical connections with a tale" (Hearne, 2011)	-"things fed into a computer" (Ma, 2021) -"atavistic positivist perspective" (Rayward in Hjørland, 2005)
-Social constructionism	-Positivism

Because stories are simultaneously empirical and socially constructed, they bridge this epistemological divide. Storytelling is a way of understanding collective information processes as meaning-making, as story can convey information and storytelling centers collective audience interpretations. Social constructionism is implicit in much human-centered research within information studies (Holland, 2006). "Social constructionism" refers to understanding reality as socially constructed, rooted in American pragmatism and symbolic interactionism. Its emphasis on the "construction metaphor" allows researchers to study things "which do not have material substance," such as stories (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2012). "Positivism" here refers to understandings of information and knowledge as empiricist, rationalist, and informed by the scientific method (Hjørland 2005). This way of knowing typically underlies computational information systems, presuming information to be fixed and static.

In one sense, a story is static. Stories persist and the same story is retold over time, in different ways. Stories often convey information with consistency. At the same time, storytelling is a dynamic process that includes variation so that one story can become many narratives. Storytelling communicates to and with collective, social, and interpretive audiences, and audiences reshape stories when they retell them, individually and collectively.

Despite a service-focused history, the power of audiences to interpret (and retell stories in their own ways) has been overlooked in LIS too frequently, eschewing humanistic perspectives for a focus on computational systems. A story can be empirically valid and variable, and this room for re-interpretation is a feature of story and storytelling. "We expect ambiguity in narrative, that is, words and events will not mean what at first they seem to" (Polletta, 2006). In

other words, stories are both amenable to (empirical) structural analysis and socially constructed in the narrative experience of the audience. The epistemological implications of bridging social constructionism and positivism include opening "doors, windows, and sliding glass doors" (Sims Bishop 2003) to more narratives and, most importantly, more narrators.

STORYTELLING AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL BRIDGE

Stories that last can be created with audiences, not just presented to them. LIS must make room for counter-storytelling that amplifies voices of those who have been unheard or silenced. The many narratives that would result from an LIS epistemology based on storytelling would include counternarratives, collective meaning making, and collaboration. Centering story and storytelling challenges LIS to include richer varieties of stories, tellers, and audiences whose stories are yet to be heard. This could enable practitioners and scholars alike to identify storytelling dynamics and emergent stories in action and to understand audiences as co-creators of story.

Storytelling dynamics and emergent stories

A story that is retold, spontaneously, by those who have heard it signals a very different kind of power than an official story. If wisdom is carried by stories and accumulates in them as they are retold, then wisdom could be defined as an emergent quality of the storytelling dynamic between teller and audience. Wisdom and storytelling have long been associated, perhaps in part because story allows for accumulating wisdom, with the audience acting as editor. Being a storyteller is an action in context, not a characteristic, and many narrators are needed to enrich LIS. Just as knowledge need not be the attribute of one individual knower, storytelling may be socially constructed and enacted situationally. In this time of multi-layered global crises, breaking free of epistemologies that have engendered epistemicide is a critical move toward wisdom. Storytelling can acknowledge audiences as those who hold the power of interpretation and retelling.

There is no telling without listening, and those who serve as listeners grant their attention to the teller. This cannot be forced without damaging the trust that constitutes the storytelling triangle. There is humility in the reminder that, in live oral storytelling, there is no direct line that the teller controls between the audience and the story. "The circumstance that forces you to be humble is also what makes it so miraculous when you succeed" (Lipman, 1999).

Audiences and tellers co-creating stories

Storytellers must become listeners, to empower audiences to take up telling. Audiences should be an acknowledged part of the story-making process, not afterthoughts, receptacles, or "markets." They should know that they are part of the story, giving reactions and feedback that change how it is told and, ultimately, what is told. Storytelling and a commitment to understanding knowledge as epistemologically diverse and comprised of many narratives would mean that, for example, indigenous knowledge takes an obvious and central place in the field (Roy, 2015).

And yet changing roles alone will not solve structural inequities, biases, or power differentials. For example, between young adults and adults, changing roles does not create

equality. "To disavow or deny such power differentials would rapidly erode trust" (McDowell, 2020). The triangle of teller, listener, and story is never static, and while storytelling with humility means looking for opportunities to listen, those opportunities are merely the starting point toward structural change and greater social equity.

Finally, storytelling concepts should not be used as a substitute for rigorous definitions and assessments of cultural competence, which has not yet translated into clear action or improved diversity, equity, and inclusion outcomes in the LIS field (Poole et al., 2021). Understanding of cultural competence as a spectrum—along which one can progress or regress—requires cultural humility in order to continually re-engage necessary learning (Cooke, 2017). Storytelling can serve as a complementary tool to these approaches by showing that positivism has served as an excuse for hidden biases, so that LIS has routinely failed to hear many important stories.

CONCLUSION

No matter how deeply we embrace humanism in library services, we routinely fall back to positivism in LIS concepts and theories. Storytelling bridges this longstanding divide between social constructionism and positivism and reveals exclusions of the latter. By framing story as information, our field could radically and inclusively transform where we seek information. By hearing people's stories as not only culturally and emotionally but also informationally relevant, LIS is challenged to make visible the places where more stories are needed. As a field, we must theorize practices like storytelling that have rich potential for challenging limited epistemologies so that many narratives inform and inspire future innovations. Centering story and storytelling as conceptually fundamental to LIS challenges the field to include the richer variety of stories, tellers, and audiences whose dynamic exchanges should inform a future of greater inclusion.

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