

Exploring How Stories Facilitate Learning in Work-Related Mentoring Interactions

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Abstract

Mentoring is a concept with applications in education, psychology, and management. It has been shown to benefit not only the mentee, but also the mentor and the sponsoring organization. To provide learning, career, and psychosocial support, mentors often encourage, teach, and coach their mentees – sometimes providing direction, acting as a role model, or socializing the mentee to the industry/field. Despite all that is known about mentoring, the functions it serves, and the benefits it brings, not as much is known about what exactly occurs in the mentoring interaction. Researchers have put out a call for research that examines exactly *how* mentors help their mentees learn. This exploratory, qualitative study focuses on storytelling as a potential tool in mentoring interactions. Employing textual analysis in the form of hermeneutics, we analyzed interview data from 39 individuals across a wide variety of industries. Coding the resulting 48 mentoring stories against a published model of mentoring functions demonstrated that storytelling is indeed a powerful tool in mentoring – allowing mentors to calm their mentees, encourage them, help them solve problems, build their confidence, teach them, give them direction, and provide numerous other functions.

Introduction

The American classic, *Bull Durham*, is a baseball movie. Many don't realize this, but it is also a film about mentoring. Crash Davis, a 12-year veteran of the minor leagues is brought in to educate and teach a hotshot rookie pitcher, named Ebby LaLoosh. Crash mentors Nuke on how to control his chaotic pitching, acclimates him to the pressure facing major league hitters, and “teaches him the ropes” of a baseball career. At many points in the film, Crash uses stories to explain how to behave and succeed in the majors. While entertaining, this film also sheds light on a much under-researched area of the mentoring literature. Researchers have built a large body of knowledge about mentoring, but there continues to be a lack of understanding of exactly *how* mentors help their mentees learn. This exploratory study focuses on storytelling as a potential tool in mentoring interactions and seeks to understand if stories help mentors fulfill mentoring functions.

Theoretical Background on Mentoring

Mentoring is often described as “a relationship between a young adult and an older, more experienced adult that helps the younger individual learn to navigate in the adult world” (Kram, 1985, p.2). When focusing on career or workplace mentoring, the term usually refers to “a

senior, experienced employee who serves as a role model, provides support, direction, and feedback to the younger, more junior level employee regarding career plans and interpersonal development” (Noe, 1988, p.458). In essence, the mentor is usually focused on giving the mentee learning, career development, and/or emotional support through a variety of behaviors such as coaching, goal setting, role modeling, encouraging, and socializing or orienting the mentee to the company or industry (D’Abate, Eddy, & Tannenbaum, 2003; Jacobi, 1991; Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

The concept of mentoring is interdisciplinary as it has been studied (and found applications) in a variety of disciplines including education, psychology, and management, (Barker & Pitts, 1997; Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Jacobi, 1991; Sanchez, Bauer, & Paronto, 2006). Across these disciplines, mentoring tends to serve a number of career-related and psychosocial functions (Kram, 1985). Career functions support the “mentee’s advancement in the organization and include[s] the mentor functions of coaching, protection, sponsorship, and challenging assignments” (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004, p.128), while psychosocial functions refer to parts of the mentoring relationship that “enhance an individual’s sense of competence, identity, and effectiveness in a professional role” (Kram, 1985, p.32) through role modeling, affirmation, counseling, friendship, and confidence. Jacobi (1991) offered another approach to mentoring functions. Identifying 15 functions/behaviors of mentoring that fall into career, psychosocial, and role modeling categories, Jacobi’s work brought attention to the separate behaviors of a mentor (e.g., acceptance/support, encouragement, advice and guidance, challenging and providing opportunities, clarifying goals and values, coaching, providing information, offering protection, being a role model, socializing, training, and stimulating knowledge). Similarly, D’Abate et al. (2003) separated mentoring functions into three high-level functions (e.g., learning, career progression, and emotional or psychosocial support) with a list of 23 behaviors that support these three functions (e.g., teaching, directing, advising, problem solving, socializing, affirming, confidence building, and befriending).

While mentoring can enhance skills, self-confidence, perspective, understanding, and knowledge that can help mentees succeed within a learning or work environment (D’Abate, forthcoming; Mullen, 1994), research has also demonstrated that mentoring is tied to a variety of objective and subjective career-related outcomes (e.g., improved job performance, higher compensation, more promotions, greater job satisfaction, enhanced organizational commitment; (Allen et al., 2004; Dreher & Ash, 1990; Koberg, Boss, & Goodman, 1998; Noe, 1988; Scandura, 1992). Mentoring also benefits the mentor in a variety of ways (e.g., motivation, organizational recognition, skill building, expanded networks; Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Domeyer, 1999; Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Hezlett & Gibson, 2007; Kram, 1985), and the benefits of mentoring far exceed the mentor or the mentee – the organization can benefit as well. Mentoring has been shown to benefit firms with the knowledge transfer that occurs, improved productivity, greater employee loyalty to the company, increased motivation among employees, and higher employee retention rates (Crosby, 1999; Domeyer, 1999; Egan & Song, 2008; Ragins, 1999).

Despite all that is known about mentoring, the functions it serves, and the benefits it brings, not as much is known about what exactly occurs in the developmental interaction itself. We do know that the location of the interaction and the mode of communication affects the interaction between the mentor and the mentee (i.e., face-to-face versus distance; Rutter, 1987;

Sullivan, 1995). We also know that the duration of the relationship and the frequency with which the mentor and mentee interact can affect the outcomes of the mentorship (Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Geiger-DuMond & Boyle, 1995). Yet with all that we know about mentoring interactions, researchers still do not know enough about *how* the mentee learns.

Some exploratory research suggests that mentees tend to learn through observation and explanations from their mentors – observing the mentor’s behaviors and the way s/he interacts with others (Hezlett, 2005; Zagumny, 1993). Mentees also learn from their interactions with their mentors (Hale, 2000), by “gaining insights from the impact their mentors’ behavior had on them” (Hezlett, 2005, p.518). Despite the role that observation and explanation may play in how mentees learn, more research is needed to examine this process – in other words, what occurs in the mentoring interaction that helps the mentee learn, grow, and develop.

Storytelling as a mentoring tool

One possible way that mentees may learn is through stories told by their mentor. Since stories tend to illustrate points better than simply stating the point themselves (Schank, 1990), a story can be defined as a narrative account of an event or events that weaves the relational aspects of detail, character, and values into one big picture (Denning, 2005; Gabriel, 1991; Simmons, 2001). Stories are comprised of layers; the external layer focuses on the aspects of the story that is analyzed and dissected into parts, while a story’s internal layer focuses more on the actual experience and how that experience conveys an image and/or message (Denning, 2005). Stories can enhance one’s perspective, change perceptions, or motivate the listener as they transmit knowledge and understanding.

Storytelling has been used as a tool for learning in a multitude of disciplines including history, English, and business. In business, the concept has been seen as both a management development tool as well as a career development tool that allows employees to see themselves and their situation from a different perspective (Denning, 2001). It enables people to connect to what is important and helps them make sense of their current situation within society, business, an organization, or their own careers. Therefore, based on this understanding, it is plausible that storytelling is *one way* that mentees learn during a mentoring interaction.

Method

To examine the utility of storytelling in mentoring, the current research utilized a qualitative and exploratory method. Qualitative research methods help provide rich descriptions of phenomena and enhance understanding of the context of events as well as the event themselves (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The approach was used in this study to examine whether stories are an effective or ineffective tool in a mentoring relationship, as well as to identify what mentees are learning from their mentors’ stories.

Sample

This study utilized convenience sampling methods combined with purposive and snowball techniques to identify participants. Convenience sampling relies on collecting data from a population of people the researcher knows or can find available (Stone, 1978). For this study, the participants were personal contacts or acquaintances of one of the researchers. Purposive techniques were used to assist in hand-picking those contacts who met the needs of the

study (Stone, 1978). In other words, the criterion for inclusion in this purposive sample required that individuals were currently serving as someone's mentor or had been a mentor or a mentee. They also had to be able to speak to the experience of storytelling as part of the mentoring relationship or interaction. After identifying prospective participants using purposive techniques, additional participants were identified using a snowball technique. This was done by asking interviewees to offer one or two names of other individuals who might also meet the needs of the study (Welch, 1975). Such sampling procedures produced a variety of willing and interested participants.

The resulting sample consisted of 39 individuals varying in age from 26 years to over 60 years old, with most (48.7%) between 51 and 60 years. Of the sample, 54% were male and 46% were female. They represented a wide array of industries including law, medicine, marketing, finance, religion, food and beverage, consumer products, telecommunications, and sales, many holding high-level positions in their respective fields (e.g., Chief Financial Officer, CEO and President, Clinical Psychologist, Executive Director of Compliance, Executive Vice President of Sales, and Sr. Vice President of Marketing).

Data collection, coding, and analysis

Interviews were held face-to-face and followed a semi-structured interview protocol. They were comprised of open-ended questions pertaining to mentoring relationships the participants had been in or were in at the time. Participants were first shown a definition of mentoring to ensure that the interviewer and the interviewee agreed on the topic of discussion. Participants were then asked open-ended questions about their experiences as a mentor and a mentee, if applicable. They were asked to share a story (or stories) that they had told to their mentees or had been told by their mentors. Participants were asked to specifically describe what they learned from the stories and how they applied the lessons to their careers, or (from the mentor's perspective) what they thought mentees learned from the stories. The interviews were recorded with permission and then transcribed.

After transcribing, the interviews were analyzed by the researchers using textual analysis, in the form of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics encompasses the issues of text and interpretation and discovering the authentic message hidden within the text (Gabriel, 1991; Prasad, 2002; Prasad, 2005). In other words, hermeneutics allows researchers and interpreters to see how symbolic texts are, and how they refer to something beyond their literal meaning and beyond the author's intended meaning (Phillips & Brown, 1993; Prasad, 2002). Hermeneutics is extremely useful in organizations because as Prasad emphasizes, "in both the meetings and the storytelling practices, [hermeneutics] is helpful in getting to the kernel of events and activities by understanding the relationship between the obvious features of a text and the driving forces behind them" (2005, p. 40). Through hermeneutics, we examined not only the story itself, but also the context of each story. By using hermeneutics, we were able to go beyond each participant's story (or stories) at face value and discern the functions of mentoring each story provided.

One of the gathered stories illustrates his method. This interviewee reported telling a story to his mentee regarding when he first started his career and made a significant error by deleting a mail system on the organization's server:

"When I was starting, my very first year, and, I blew it. I blew it bad. My boss told me to delete a system. It was an email system where it was located. So he said, 'Delete the mail system'. So

I went and found a directory that said ‘mail’ and I deleted it. And then about a half an hour later, 4:30 in the afternoon, the phone started ringing. People couldn’t print, and I didn’t think anything of it, and everyone said we will deal with it in the morning. When I got in at 7:30 the next morning, people couldn’t log onto the system because that directory that said ‘mail’ on it held all of the information for people to get on: passwords, print passwords, everything else. And there was a group of about 200 to 250 people ... that couldn’t work. It was bad. It took a while to bring everything back up” (Technology Director).

While the appearance of this story seems like just a tale of making a mistake early in one’s career, the authentic meaning, however, is much more. Hermeneutics pushed us to not analyze the story by the words or sentences, but by the larger message. Being forced to think about the story as a whole, to understand the context, helped us see that the mentor, in telling this story to his mentee, is saying that everyone makes mistakes – that it is okay to fail.

For each story we collected, we compared its content to the 23 mentoring functions described in D’Abate et al.’s (2003) taxonomy. That literature-based model (based on 227 descriptions/definitions of mentoring resulting in a list of 23 mentoring functions) was used as the basis for our hermeneutical analysis – coding the overall message of the story for the functions it was serving. Doing so, with the above example, we saw that this story serves the emotional support function of “affirmation” by offering the mentee support in the form of acceptance and confirmation. This story also provides the function of “teaching” by helping the mentee learn new skills and knowledge. In this example, the story was teaching the mentee about failure. As the interviewee states, *“I was trying to teach [my mentee] that it’s not failing that is the issue here. It’s [how] you deal with the failure [and] what you learned from the failure”* (Technology Director).

It should be noted that of the model’s 23 functions, we recognized that some (e.g., observation, practicing skills for learning) could not be met by storytelling. They involved activities that a mentor and mentee would actually *do* together (e.g., a mentor observing a mentee, a mentor providing a mentee with an opportunity to practice a skill), rather than functions that could be served by a story (e.g., a mentor encouraging a mentee with his/her story). So, we focused our efforts on 12 mentoring functions from D’Abate et al.’s (2003) taxonomy that could be served by storytelling. These appear in Table 1. To summarize, what occurred in the analytical process was quite iterative – we moved back and forth between the stories and the literature on mentoring. In doing so, we were able to identify the power of storytelling in mentoring interactions because we could see that storytelling was a method for serving the functions of mentoring.

Table 1. *Mentoring Functions Potentially Served by Storytelling*

Function	Description – The story...
Learning functions	Mentor behaviors that enable the mentee to learn.
Directing	Provides direction to help the mentee learn.
Goal setting	Helps the mentee set goals in order to help the mentee learn.
Role modeling	Role models appropriate (or inappropriate) behaviors to help mentee learn (i.e., from positive or negative example of what to do/not do).
Problem solving	Helps the mentee examine or resolve a problem to help them learn.
Providing feedback	Provides some degree of feedback or constructive criticism to help the mentee learn.

Teaching	Helps the mentee learn expertise, skills, or knowledge.
Emotional support functions	Mentor behaviors that provide emotional support to the mentee.
Affirming	Offers the mentee support in the form of affirmation, acceptance, or confirmation.
Calming	Calms the mentee by reducing his/her anxiety or stress.
Confidence building	Enhances the confidence or self-esteem of the mentee.
Encouraging	Encourages or motivates the mentee.
Supporting	Provides the mentee with social, emotional, or personal (i.e., psychosocial) support.
Career progression functions	Mentor behaviors that support the mentee's career progression.
Socializing	Socializes/orients the mentee to the organization, industry, or field.

Notes. These functions were derived from D'Abate et al. (2003)'s framework of mentoring and developmental interaction functions.

Results

The 39 interviewees provided 48 stories for the researchers to analyze – some lengthy and rich in detail, others succinct and to the point. The researchers independently coded each story's meaning for the functions provided and agreed on 95 out of 112 codings, for an 85% coding agreement rate. What follows is the pattern of results that emerged from this analysis and a sampling of these stories.

Mentoring functions served

As previously mentioned, the functions of mentoring fall into three categories: learning, emotional/psychosocial support, and career progression (D'Abate et al., 2003). The interview data were analyzed to identify the key mentoring functions served, and we found that some of the stories told by the interviewees served one function while others served several. For example, an investment analyst reported telling her mentees a story of the challenge she had in trying to sell her company's product to a big financial company.

"I was selling into Boston for years and years, and [Company Z] bought every product from every other vendor but me....I was trying to figure out how I can get into [Company Z]. So I would visit them consistently, build relationships, and I kept calling and calling on them....And what happened, just in conversations, is they said that they get financial data from many different sources and there's a lot of time they have to maintain that data for the quality. And the data actually is the basis for compensation for the portfolio managers. So [Company Z's] portfolio manager, say he has ten million dollars in client portfolios, and so this data is used to determine the performance of these portfolios. So it's very critical data. And so, they're getting it from all of these different sources and it's very expensive data management. Well, I knew from knowing my product that we did the same thing for our own system. So...I arranged for us to do what is called a feed of data, a data feed to [Company Z]. Now this goes back over ten years ago when this was not popular. Now this is a very big thing. So this was a new product for our company. We made gobs of money....So, it really was figuring out their need and being persistent....And now it's big business, but in those years, it wasn't. The story is talking about persistence, about not giving up because they didn't close the door in my face. They always said, 'We have no need for your product', but I kept the conversation going." (Investment Analyst)

Textual analysis showed that multiple mentoring functions were served by this story including teaching, role modeling, encouraging/motivating, problem solving, and socialization to the sales industry. For example, teaching was provided by helping the mentees learn how to be consultants

and how to gain the trust of the client, encouraging was demonstrated in the story's references to persistence and not giving up, and role modeling came from her lessons about how mentees need to determine client needs and meet them – as she did. Finally, socialization was provided as the story teaches the mentee about the sales industry and the challenges s/he may face when working in this field.

Including examples of stories for each mentoring function is beyond the scope of this brief paper; however, a summary follows. Twenty-three (48%) of the stories taught the mentee, 21 (44%) offered role modeling, 13 (27%) socialized the mentee to the field/industry, and 10 (21%) granted affirmation to the mentee (e.g., *“I think it just helped him in the same way my mentor's story helped me by saying this is just part of the process. You run into problems. You just have to roll up your sleeves and deal with it.”* (Development Executive)). Nine (19%) of the stories calmed the mentee (e.g., *“When I told him the story, he was cringing...and said, ‘How could you do that?’ and I said it was 20 years ago. It was a different environment and...he was kind of laughing and it relaxed him...”* (Technology Director)), 8 (17%) provided encouragement, 7 (15%) helped the mentee solve problems, 7 (15%) built the mentee's confidence, 4 (8%) gave direction to the mentee, 4 (8%) supplied personal/emotional support, 3 (6%) helped the mentee set goals (e.g., *“I think what he got out of [the story] was if you aim high, you might not get what you want, but you will come pretty close”* (Portfolio Manager)), and 2 (4%) offered feedback (e.g., *“Part of the story is developmental to her in terms of me giving her feedback which I think a mentor should do...”* (Sales Executive)).

Most prevalent functions

From those frequencies, it's clear that the most common mentoring functions served by the stories were teaching and role modeling, with 48% and 44% stories exhibiting these functions respectively. Socialization was also prevalent in the stories with 27% of the stories demonstrating this function. Also notable was affirmation; it was the most frequent emotional support function, served by 21% of the stories. The following is an example of a story providing such affirmation:

“I had this patient that was 15 or 16 years old and he walked into my office. All I knew about him prior to walking into my office was that he had been in the foster care system for probably about a decade, so virtually for all of his life, that he had committed arson, has been convicted of arson, and had been in juvenile hall. He had a record and he was probably in gangs....He was living at a halfway house at that point since no foster family wanted him. What I shared with her [the mentee] was...this 15 or 16 year old boy walked into my office and he closed the door and I was sitting in a chair which was in the middle of my office and he proceeded in a very menacing way of walking 360 degrees around my chair. He was trying to set his territory. He was trying to let me know that he was a dangerous fellow. And then he pulled out his knife, it was about six or eight inches knife and said ‘I'll just use this’ and started flicking at his fingernails. I, then, shared with her that after he had finished walking around me...I told him that...in this room everybody stays safe so I would appreciate it if you would take your knife and put it outside and then come back in, which he did. I think he was a little disarmed by the fact that I wasn't freaking out. I didn't show him fear. This whole moment happened in about 6 or 7 or 8 seconds. He then came back in and he wasn't going to talk and he was just doing this because he was mandated by the court as part of his probation and I said, ‘Fine do whatever you want. Have you ever done this before?’ He said ‘Oh yeah. They always drag me to this or that or

whatever but this is stupid and blah, blah, blah. No one is going to analyze me' and whatever words that he would use....I opened up a cabinet and said 'Got a lot of stuff in here. Anything interest you?' To which this 16 year old thug pulls out Candy Land. And, again, it is a story to show her how, one, that there is hope, that you will be meeting a lot of brick walls or what feels like brick walls in this particular field, most obvious ones being defiant teenagers, but...it doesn't have to be that way. There are ways around it, ways to soothe those walls, create holes in those walls, and then talk to him about how he needs those walls when he is outside of this office." (Clinical Psychologist)

Through this story, the mentee was able to realize that she wasn't alone; indeed, many psychologists have also experienced a situation with a difficult patient.

Conclusion

The current study demonstrated the utility of storytelling in mentoring interactions. It has been said that "we value stories because they are like reports of research projects, only easier to understand, remember, and use" (Klein, 1998, p.182). The data demonstrated that we can value stories for their applications to mentoring, as well, given their ability to fulfill a variety of mentoring functions.

Another outcome of this research, though not the focus of this paper, was that mentors use different story "types" to make a point. Some stories were personal and others were second-hand, some were historical and others were analogies. It is possible that different story types are employed in different phases of the mentoring relationship (e.g., initiation, cultivation, separation, redefinition; Kram, 1983). Therefore, future efforts could be directed at understanding more about different story types and their efficacy in different phases of mentoring. In addition, future efforts might also vary the interview protocol. We found that of the 39 interviews, 9 (23%) could not be used because the interviewee talked about *when* they were mentoring or being mentored, rather than the *story* they or their mentor used. To avoid this problem, future research might prompt the interviewee in this way: "Pretend I [the interviewer] am your mentee. What's an example of a story you would tell me to make a point?" By placing the interviewee in a hypothetical situation, the interviewee may be better able to recall a story they told to their actual mentee(s).

Despite these limitations and suggestions for future research, the current research offers a perspective on mentoring that has not been offered before. It suggests that mentees learn from their mentors through mentoring interactions, specifically through the stories that mentors tell their mentees. As Hezlett (2005) wrote, "...the literature offers only limited insights on how protégés learn from their mentors..." (p.512), so there is still a need to examine what and how mentees learn from their mentors. This study satisfies at least part of that need. It suggests that stories are one way that mentees learn with the stories serving learning, emotional support, and/or career progression functions of mentoring.

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