

The use of narrative to understand and respond to complexity

A comparative analysis of the Cynefin and Weickian models

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Abstract

This article compares two prominent managerial models – those of Snowden and Weick – that use narrative as a sensemaking response to complexity. After presenting an overview to their approach to narrative and complexity, we then analyze their stylistic differences as a precursor to identifying eight features of the more substantial likeness of their models. In the conclusion we distill the essential features of narrative and complexity that their concepts entail and show that individual behavior, interpersonal communication, participation, and management by exception are their hallmarks.

Introduction

This special issue is based on the premises that a good narrative is a complex one and that complexity is best understood with a narrative. Consistent with these premises, we define ‘narratives’ as a type of communication that happens in conversation, is composed of discourse, appears in a sequence, and is interpreted retrospectively (Boje, 2002; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001; Czarniawska, 1998; Weick, 1979; Barthes, 1977). ‘Complexity’ can be defined as nonlinear relations, driven by small forces that result in the emergence of sudden changes that produce unexpected outcomes (Morowitz, 2002; Taylor, 2001). Our question is: How do these two ideas come together? The subject of this article is the work of the two authors, Snowden and Weick (and their research teams), and how they both addresses the communicative implications of complexity and narrative.

The differences between Snowden and Weick

The two most well-known and comprehensively developed models using narrative analysis for responding to complexity in organizations are that of Weick and his associates, at the University of Michigan (Weick, *et al*, 2005; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001), and that of Snowden and his work with Kurtz (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003) at the Cynefin Centre for Organizational Complexity. Remarkably, these two authors virtually ignore each other’s work despite the major overlap between their premises and practices. The sole written cross-reference between the two is Snowden’s criticism of Weick’s use of High Reliability Organizations (HROs), that is, organizations such as aircraft carriers and nuclear power plants that require acute mindfulness if they are to avoid situations in which small errors build upon one another to precipitate a catastrophic breakdown. Snowden believes that HROs are too anomalous to be useful as a comparison for mainstream organizational practice (Snowden, 2003).

These two authors also differ in that whereas Weick, a university scholar, developed his theory before focusing on its applications, Snowden, who originally developed his work within IBM, constructed applied methods including tools and practices for analyzing narrative complexity, e.g., ‘Story Circles’ and ‘Knowledge Disclosure Points’ (KDPs) – in concert with his research program.

These authors’ ideas also differ in origins. Snowden’s Cynefin group anchors its program in literary and science-fiction references (Snowden, 2000a), as seen in its very name, ‘Cynefin’ (pronounced *cyn-ev-in*), a Welsh term that, as a noun, roughly means ‘habitat’ and as an adjective roughly means ‘acquainted’ or ‘familiar’. The term more specifically means one’s environment, or place of comfort or birth (Snowden, 2003a). The theme of the Cynefin model is that the ability to respond to complexity requires a *sense of place*, which enables one to advance diverse views and to imagine narratives about what happened, what could have happened, and how to act differently in the future.

Weick’s theories, on the other hand, reflect his education as a social psychologist and include such topics as threat-rigidity, commitment-de-commitment, doubt-self-fulfilling prophecies, and dissonance-assurance. In his recent works Weick (1995, 2001) uses these ideas to develop the concept of ‘sensemaking’.

Weick and Snowden also differ on the grammar of the central theme of both their ideas about sensemaking. 'Sensemaking', as Weick fuses the term, is a neologism (invented word) meant to convey the idea that the term is so all-encompassing that it deserves being distinguished as a new usage about a new concept. Snowden, meanwhile, uses the compound term 'sense-making' to represent the same family of ideas. Snowden's more conventional term aims to describe a whole set of processes that have brand names, such as the previously mentioned Story Circles and KDPs and to use narrative theory to understand the complexity of organizational environments.

Another significant difference is the type of evidence they use for their respective programs. Snowden presents his ideas to workshop participants, and then uses an interpretation of their responses as evidence for his concepts in his articles about narrative and complexity. Weick's evidence comes from his field studies of jazz orchestras, firefighters, and the aforementioned aircraft carriers and power plants. This work is amplified, in an applied version, in his co-authored 2001 book with Katherine Sutcliffe on managing the unexpected in an age of complexity (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001).

These differences between Weick and Snowden's ideas are differences in style – that is, they differ in their historical, cultural, and pedagogical approaches to complexity. Yet our reading of Weick and Snowden's treatment of complexity and narrative shows that there is considerable overlap on the substance of their thinking. The purpose of this article is to list and interpret these points of likeness. To set up this listing, we will review their common approach to narrative and complexity.

The similarities between Snowden and Weick

Weick and Snowden commonly assert that the complexity and ambiguity of the environments that individuals face are best understood when language, including the richness of metaphor and the flexibility of the story, is invoked as a sensemaking device (Weick & Browning, 1986; Snowden, 1999). For Weick, 'sensemaking' defines organizational action as an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs (e.g., Weick, *et al*, 2005). Accordingly, organizations become interpretation systems of participants who, through the back and forth of their own understandings, provide meanings for each other via their everyday interactions.

The exercises Snowden uses in the Cynefin project emphasize contextualizing to generate collective 'sense-making' as a consequence of discourse. These workshop discussions emphasize diversity and concreteness by using narrative methods that allow specific patterns to emerge in understanding the story of a project or event. A consistent theme of Weick's theory development from the very beginning is that complex environments must be matched with equally complex processing mechanisms. The capacity of the narrative to vary in *punctuation* (when they begin and end), *pace* (what is the speed and variation between sequences), and *participant composition* (casts can range from one person, to few, to ensembles) means the narrative is a communicative form that is frequently consistent with organizational complexity (Luhman & Boje, 2001; Polster, 1987).

Snowden's strategy for sense-making is to lay out an understanding of language depending on the specificity of the environment. Snowden, like the narratologist Walter Fisher (1984) before him, worries that experts' language is so restricted and abstract that it too easily remains *about* the problem, but far *above* it. Weick and Snowden jointly emphasize the role of language in sensemaking about complexity and especially the role of the communicator to create meaningful messages that are informative, comprehensive, and not oversimplified (Snowden, 1999). Stories can complexify meanings in a way that linguistic statements cannot (Snowden, 1999). For Weick, interpersonal processes play out as actors know who they are by what they say to others and how others respond to them. He observes, "People verbalize their interpretations and the processes they use to generate them" (Weick, 1995: 8). A distinctive feature of sensemaking, and one that also distinguishes it from interpretation, is the way action and organization collaborate to make up the structure. Weick sees communication as a type of action because generating discourse is an act of performance and production. "Sensemaking is about authoring as well as reading" (Weick, 1995: 7).

This view of narrative as a special answer to complexity is further laid out in the writings by Snowden, Weick, and associates. In common, they propose a set of conditions, a set of useful practices, including the kinds of structures necessary to adapt to complexity successfully. We have identified eight major statements that capture these commonalities:

Acknowledging and accepting complexity is better than placating it with planning models Snowden contends that the physics on which Fredrick Taylor based the rational theory of scientific management is no match for the contemporary environment. There are simply too many situations where the standard tools and techniques of policy-making and decision-making do not apply (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). This position is consistent with Snowden's general emphasis on learning. Because most environments are turbulent, individuals experience considerable change; hence, the best thing we can do is to learn from it. Weick parallels this idea with the concept of 'threat rigidity', which refers to the tightening of categories that occur when peoples' understandings are threatened. In their book on managing the unexpected, Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) promote a mix of action and stability – a mix of structure and change – that is akin to the complexity concept of 'far from equilibrium'. They contend that the best response to complexity is diversity and an information consciousness that enables a person to become a mindful observer and actor, a vigilant and attentive actor, rather than one dependent on mindless control systems.

Snowden reaches much the same conclusion from a different route. He believes that the traditional organization, with its emphasis on planning, policy, procedures, and controls, leads to a *training* culture of obedience rather than a *learning* culture of understanding and action. Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) share the preference for moving away from planning recipes toward a focus on individual mindfulness and anticipation.

2. *It is important to acknowledge failure and learn from instances of it* While this concept has been most extensively developed by Sitkin (1992), it exists both directly and indirectly in Weick and Snowden's work, and it appears in several different forms. In his workshops, Snowden has his participants review past projects to identify a fateful moment when their project might have failed, which enables them to see how close they came to failure and how they might avoid it in the future.

Both Snowden and Weick tie failure to learning – seeing things in a new way – such that the surprise becomes a communicable story, even if it is 'near miss'. Narrators are able to say, "This might have happened." Snowden sometimes asks the following question in his seminars: "What spreads fastest in your organization – stories of failure or stories of success?" He says the usual answer is "failure" because we realize that stories of failure are more valuable than success stories (Snowden, 2003). Because people tend to agree more on what is going wrong than what is going right, what are called 'best practice' efforts in fact rely on the ability to identify *both* past successes and past failures (Snowden, 2003). Given Weick and Sutcliffe's (2001) premise that HROs must focus on potential catastrophic failure, such organizations constantly complete reviews and exercises that gauge their preparedness – without a fear of punishment from reporting a failure. Focusing on failure is so important because its opposite, success, is such an emotional and fulfilling rush that it leads to hubris (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). A major component of sensemaking for Weick and Sutcliffe is a "preoccupation with failures rather than successes" (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, in their executive summary).

3. *Self-organization is an order that has no hierarchical designer or director.* Snowden contends, "there is a fascinating kind of order in which no director or designer is in control but which emerges through the interaction of many entities" (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 464). In his approach to self-organization he reaffirms Peter Drucker's idea that "in the Knowledge Economy everyone is a volunteer" (Snowden, 2000c: 3). A key feature of narrative is that characters are most interesting when they make, or struggle with, independent choices. Snowden says that organizing business on the Web creates a community of volunteers who operate in an open and free system. This change shifts organizations away from hierarchical forms to ones where they become networks of communities directed toward a purpose (Snowden, 2000b).

For Snowden, when an environment is ambiguous, the proper scope for interpretation and action is at the individual rather than the hierarchical level (Snowden, 2000a). This view is commensurate with Weick and Sutcliffe's fostering individually distinctive interpretations of what is going on and accepting diverse inputs in responding to complexity. They encourage managers to act with an anticipation that counteracts oversimplification and easy confirmation by structuring differences in personal background and experience into the organization. Weick and Sutcliffe also reflect the move away from hierarchy toward self-organization in this recommendation: "Create a set of operating dynamics that shifts leadership to the person who currently has the answer to the problem at hand. This means people put a premium on *expertise over* and decisions migrate both downward and upward as conditions warrant" (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001: 49, italics added).

4. *Narratives are valuable for showing role differentiation and polyvocality.* Weick's most prominent example of problem-recognition resulting from role difference appears in his story on how child abuse came to be a medical diagnosis in American medicine. The story of the development of the battered child syndrome (BCS) in Weick's (1995) sensemaking book beautifully illustrates the features of labeling and institutional resistance. Weick's analysis also illustrates how individual reputation becomes implicated in 'seeing' a problem. Before BCS became well-enough known to become an institutional label, child injuries that appeared in X-rays or other parts of a medical report were treated as anomalies. The first report of BCS appeared in a radiology journal rather than a pediatric journal, which illustrates how