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How does storytelling unlock the potentialities of communities; the designer-client relationship?

David Parkinson¹

ABSTRACT

When looking at research that explores approaches to designing, it is apparent that some people believe adopting a storytelling perspective can be fruitful in garnering new knowledge. This paper adopts a storytelling perspective when analysing design pitches, with the intent of understanding how an approach to storytelling can unlock potentialities in the audience. More specifically, these potentialities include: an appreciation of the concept's value; an ability to discuss a concept critically; and to be able to think more holistically around the concept territory. This context is particularly important in understanding the relationship between designer and client.

To devise a theoretical framework to illustrate the relationship between storytelling approach and these potentialities, twenty-five design pitches were observed and semi-structured interviews were conducted with their audiences. This paper focuses on a design pitch delivered by designers from Northumbria University to employees of The Traffic Penalty Tribunal, presenting a concept for a new parking appeals service. This example acts as a tool for illustrating the findings communicated in the theoretical framework devised after the analysis of the interviews.

It is proposed that acknowledging a user's perspective and cultural beliefs, being diverse and different, detailing concept development, and using imagery (in particular analogy), are all approaches to storytelling that can play a role in unlocking the potentialities highlighted. However, it is important to state that the framework serves as a tool to encourage the consideration of the impact on the client when approaching storytelling at the design pitch. It is not claiming that taking one of the approaches mentioned would guarantee the unlocking of a related potentiality.

TAGS

STORYTELLING, DESIGN PITCH

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What's in a story?

McDonnell, Lloyd and Valkenburg {, 2004, Developing design expertise through the construction of video stories}{, 2004, Developing design expertise through the construction of video stories}(2004: 509) propose that storytelling is a useful perspective to adopt when examining collaborative processes as stories represent 'a powerful and an accessible means of sharing knowledge and their value and pervasiveness in conveying knowledge is well-recognised' (Nonaka and Takeushi, 1995, Davenport and Prusak, 1998, Collison and Mackenzie, 1999). Consequently, it stands to reason that during a collaborative process, such as those that occur between designers and clients, storytelling will occur in some form during the conveyance of knowledge from one party to another (Leonardi and Bailey, 2008). One such conveyance of knowledge is the design pitch, where designers present concepts to clients in a formal setting at the end of the conceptual design process.

Storytelling occurs in many different contexts, and thus there are many different definitions applied to story. Perhaps the most widely recognised context for storytelling is the storybook, as many look to literature and the written word in order to assemble philosophies for story (Jones, 2006, Ochoa and Osier, 1993). Perhaps a more relevant perspective to the storytelling that occurs at a design pitch is that of psychologist Jerome Bruner (1990) who looks at societal interactions to define story. Bruner (1990) provides the following set of criteria for an occurrence of storytelling:

- Action directed towards goal
- Order established between events and states
- Sensitivity towards what is canonical in human interaction
- The revealing of a narrator's perspective

If we relate these criteria to a design pitch, the relevance becomes apparent. The goal of the story at the design pitch could be the purpose of a concept. For example, if we take a concept for a new road bike, the goal of a story about it could be getting from A to B. An order established between events and states could become the maintenance required such as putting air in the tyres (events), and the various locations on the journey between A and B (states). Sensitivity towards what is canonical in human interaction is central to design as all concepts are created with a user in mind, and the concept itself could be considered the perspective of the designer.

The relationship between storytelling and design has been studied from a wide variety of viewpoints. For example, design researcher Peter Lloyd (2000) examines dialogue between members of design teams in order to extrapolate the stories that they tell. In doing this, he has established the following criteria for what he believes constitutes a story:

- It can be interpreted or read
- Different narrative viewpoints can be included

- There is a sense of closure; a definite ending
- A name can be invented that references the complex of action

However, a verbal exchange during the process of designing is a very different context to a more formal presentation at a design pitch. Therefore, these constituents have to be viewed critically. The first criterion suggests that a story is interpreted or read. With respect to a design pitch, a story is also heard or watched, both of which also require interpretation. Therefore relating this to a design pitch the criterion might be adapted to state simply that 'it can be interpreted'. The third criterion suggests a sense of closure is required; however, a concept, which by all intentions may require further development, can be told using an open-ended story to stimulate further discussion. Therefore, it is not necessary to fulfil this criterion. Finally, the last criterion suggests that after storytelling, a name is established by an audience to reference the story. When pitching a design concept, it is likely that the name for the story is the name of the concept, and that the storytelling occurring during the design pitch becomes attached to the name, which now acts as a recall for the design pitch.

Important Potentialities

Now that the context and parameters for storytelling at the design pitch have been explored, it is important to establish the potentialities this storytelling attempts to unlock.

With respect to the development of a concept, a number of potentialities can be deemed important. In essence, storytelling at the design pitch will communicate an understanding of a concept to the audience, but more importantly an appreciation of its value. Marketing theorist and practitioner Smith

(2007) proposes that when developing concepts, the creation of value is a critical task. If the client sees a value in the concept after understanding what it is and what it does, this may motivate them to take action in terms of developing that concept. Therefore, the first potentiality can be described as 'appreciating value'.

As well as giving someone the motivation to do something through appreciating its potential value, it is also important to consider how they must do it. In terms of concept development this constitutes being able to critically discuss a concept. When developing a concept critical discussion is used to negotiate necessary changes in order for the concept to become fit for purpose. Therefore, the second potentiality that is desirable to unlock in the audience of a design pitch is 'a capacity for critical discussion'. Schön and Wiggins (2006) promote the importance of critical discussion for concept development and believe that observing a series of artefacts, such as iterative sketches and prototypes, can introduce the critical discussions exchanged between designers that occurred during a design process.

Finally, it is arguable that when developing a concept in a territory that is well understood by the client, it is important to present an alternative way of thinking. For example, framing a concept for a vacuum cleaner as a dirt extraction system may introduce an alternative perspective that allows the client to think more holistically around the project's territory. Adamson et al. (2006) describes an instance of storytelling that likened the job roles of employees at a medical centre to characters in a well-known film. This alternative perspective allowed employees to take a more holistic view of their job roles in relation to the overall operations of the medical centre. The adoption of this alternative way of thinking led to improved internal relations. Therefore the final potentiality that is desirable to unlock is 'more holistic thinking', and

this can be achieved through a story that presents alternative perspectives.

A Storytelling Framework for the Design Pitch

To unlock a client's potential to develop a concept, it has been rationalised that the storytelling occurring during a design pitch needs to demonstrate value, stimulate critique, and encourage more holistic thinking. To uncover how approaching storytelling at the design pitch can achieve this a research study was carried out by the author.

In brief, the methodology of the research study involved the conduct of approximately twenty five semi-structure interviews with design pitch observers, including various clients from global organisations such as Unilever and Accenture. They were asked about the impacts observed after the delivery of design pitches, and the relationships that these impacts had with the approaches that designers took whilst storytelling. In total, approximately fifty design pitches were discussed. Transcriptions of these interviews were synthesised using a thematic analysis to establish a framework of relationships between approach and impact. This framework acts as a prompt for designers to philosophise ways of presenting concepts, with the impact on the client in mind. An overview of the relevant findings is presented here, along with pertinent examples from a design pitch belonging to a project entitled 'Parking Appeals'. This project required designers to present new products and services to stimulate behavioural changes in the general public of the United Kingdom with respect to car parking. Their client was The Traffic Penalty Tribunal.

Concerning the demonstration of value during a design pitch, two storytelling approaches proved to indicate value to employees across all of the

organisations involved in the study. The first approach was acknowledging a user's perspective or cultural belief during the telling of a story. It transpired that the contextualisation provided in doing this emphasised the value of the concept. The second approach was being diverse and different in the telling of a story. This diversity or difference was achieved in various ways. In some instances, it was achieved through storytelling mode (such as using stop-frame animation rather than a PowerPoint presentation); in other instances it was achieved through storytelling content (such as presenting an idea with a metaphor, rather than a literal explanation). However, in spite of the way that diversity or difference was achieved, interview participants agreed that judging the story as diverse or different attributed a quality of rarity to the concept, which in turn was perceived as valuable.

An example of diversity and difference in the pitch belonging to the Parking Appeals project was encompassed by a story told using the medium of Twitter. Essentially, snippets from a fictional Civil Enforcement Officer's (those charged with ticketing illegally parked cars) Twitter account were shown, which documented his humorous accounts and images of the observations made on his daily routine. This alternative platform for the communication of a Civil Enforcement Officers experience was perceived as a valuable piece of communication which became widely known amongst employees of The Traffic Penalty Tribunal.

Concerning the stimulation of critique, a further two storytelling approaches proved to open critical discussions about design concepts amongst employees across all of the organisations involved in the study. The first was revealing concept developments during the telling of a story. It proved that a familiarity with the design process gave employees more confidence in having critical discussions about them. The second approach was including imagery, in particular analogy, in the story. As an

analogy proposes an idea in an abstracted way, this awoken a curiosity in the clients. They were compelled to uncover the apparent relevance of the analogy in order to understand why it had been used. This prompted them to question its appropriateness and thus, critical discussion ensued.

An example where an analogy was made that stimulated critical discussion during the pitch belonging to the Parking Appeals project was when designers referred to Civil Enforcement Officers as Parking Gurus. This stimulated The Traffic Penalty Tribunal to question the job role of a Civil Enforcement Officers, considering whether it should be to provide guidance on appropriate parking, rather than to punish those who broke the law.

Finally, concerning the encouragement of more holistic thinking, another two approaches to storytelling proved effective across all the organisations involved in the study. The first approach, similarly to demonstrating value, was being diverse or different in the telling of a story. However, this specifically related to storytelling content, not mode. It became apparent that the novelty of telling a story

with diverse or different content often triggered the adoption of an alternative perspective about a particular aspect of a project. The second approach, similarly to stimulating critique, was including imagery, in particular analogy, in the story. As well as awakening a curiosity, prompting alternative thinking in the client, analogies also proved to manifest a different or diverse perspective, presenting a novel idea triggering the adoption of an alternative viewpoint on an often overlooked aspect of a project.

Revisiting the analogy made in the Parking Appeals project's design pitch, by referring to Civil Enforcement Officers as Parking Gurus, it can be seen that this also encouraged more holistic thinking in The Traffic Penalty Tribunal. After establishing a new name, a character was created (Gary the Guru)¹ and a story was told about him that was likened to stories told about characters such as Postman Pat and Bob the Builder. As these characters are well respected, well liked members of their communities, The Traffic Penalty Tribunal adopted the opinion that the perception of Civil Enforcement Officers needed to change.



1 Figure 1: Gary the Guru

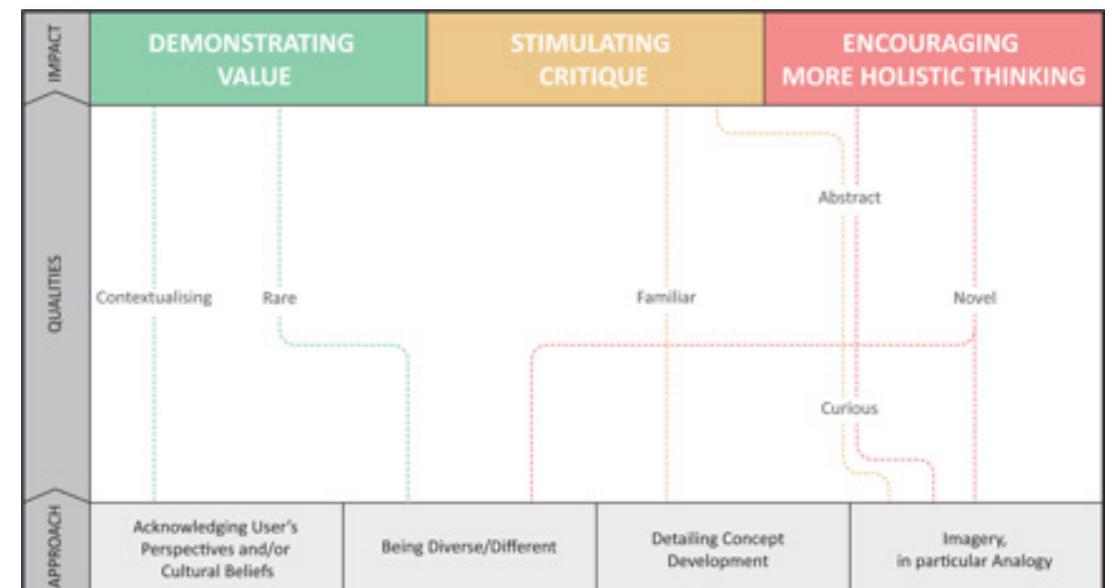
Summary

The relevant findings of the research study discussed in the previous section are presented in figure 2²

It is important to point out that this framework serves as a tool to encourage the consideration of the impact on the client when approaching storytelling at the design pitch. It is not claiming that taking one of the approaches mentioned will guarantee the related impact. As change management strategist Steven Denning (2007: xxi) points out, 'storytelling is not a panacea for eliciting change. It can only be as good as the underlying idea being conveyed'. The same is true for concept development, if a client is of the opinion that a concept is flawed due to their own inherent experiences of the world, a story will not change this. However, in spite of this, should a concept be worthy of development storytelling should be viewed as a vehicle to drive it forward. Therefore, it is always important to tell the right story.

About the Author

David's experience within the design industry predominantly consists of the management of service and product development projects within the health sector (NHS) and FMCG industry (Unilever). His research focuses on understanding the relationship between design and storytelling. In particular, he relates storytelling approaches designers take during a design pitch to their impact on a client's ability to: understand, value, and think more critically and holistically about a concept.



2 Figure 2: Storytelling at the Design Pitch, relating Approach to Impact

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