Narrating “I” and “We” Tales from Insurance and Aerospace

Charlotte Linde
NASA Ames Research Center
Charlotte.Linde@nasa.gov
Two Way Relation Between Personal and Institutional Narrative

- Becoming a member of a group involves a change of identity
  - Identity change must be learned, and performed
- Conversion narratives are a familiar performance of a major change of identity and allegiance
- They occur in the corporate world too
- Narrative induction: learning to tell one’s story of changed identity within a textual community
  - Intertextuality
- Institutional narratives also make use of the narratives of members
Performing Identity in Insurance and Aerospace

- This talk is based mainly on a 3 year ethnographic study of a large American insurance company
- I will also make some comparisons with NASA
  - Based on my 10 years of participant-observation
MidWest Insurance Study

• Study commissioned by MidWest Insurance
  – Done at the Institute for Research on Learning

• Three year team ethnography
  – 3 sites: Northern CA, Southern CA, Denver
  – Team ranging from 3 to 14 people

• Focus of study: Low level of life insurance sales
  – Ethnographic study of sales agents
  – Study and critique of training programs

• MidWest was a narrative-rich environment
  – They work their past intensely
“How I Became an Agent”

• Becoming an agent is a major career decision
  – Independent contractors must give up regular salary
  – Requires investment in premises, equipment and staff salaries
  – Not all job changes are narratable

• Story type that is frequently told within MW
  – It is something agents want to know about one another
  – Managers use it as a way of legitimizing their authority
    • “I too have been an agent and I know what it’s like
  – Managers tell the stories of exemplary agents
    • Model for possible career trajectories

• In contrast, explanations of why/how one came to work at NASA seem not be be required
Occasions for Personal Narratives

- Key question for any type of narrative: Is there an occasion within the institution on which telling such stories is permitted or required
  - Some religious organizations encourage them:
    - Witnessing
    - Mormon storytelling at services
  - MidWest Insurance has occasions for personal and institutional narratives to be told

- Stories without occasions are not regularly told
Founder’s Story in Institutional Narrative

• Founders’ stories are key in many (but not all) institutions
• MW uses story of founder as story of company
  – Authorized biography and history
  – Newsletter articles
  – Speeches and training
  – Video history
  – Photographic collections and slide shows
  – Artifact collections
  – Individual retellings or citations
  – (Few or no internet examples during the study)
• Founder’s story is a central narrative in the company’s intertextual field
• Founders at NASA
  – No single unambiguous hero-founder tale
  – Wernher von Braun at Marshall Space Center
  – Gene Kranz at JSC Mission Operations
  – Aeronautics pioneers at ARC: now street names
Founder’s Story: Authorized Biography

“What could a man with his background, with no training except as a farmer do? Well, he had always liked people, he was a “great talker” and he had discovered he had a knack of persuasion that should stand him in good stead in some kind of business. He let it be known that he was, as it were, available. And soon he was offered a job selling insurance policies for the Union Automobile Indemnity Association of Smallton.

Thomas McBee experienced no difficulty in selling insurance policies for the struggling young company. Inexperienced in salesmanship though he was, he is said to have made “as much as $1,500 a week.” Although this undoubtedly was an exaggeration, there is no question that he showed unusual aptitude for the business.

One thing about his new field of endeavor bothered him. Inexperienced as he was in insurance technicalities, he could not see eye to eye with his employers on details of their operations. Always outspoken, Thomas McBee one afternoon expatiated on how he thought the business should be run. Mr. Shepard laughed at him and said, “Well Tom, if you don’t like the way we run things, go and start your own company. You’ll find your ideas aren’t practical.” Soon thereafter he quit Union as a salesman. It was a friendly parting. He did not start his own company then, nor was he to do so for several years. But the seed had been well planted.”
Intertextual Relations Between Personal and Institutional Stories

• Citation
• Quotation
• Parallel Evaluation
• Critique and Irony
• Rejection
Citation and Quotation

• Citation – Reference to a story
  – “They had the same enthusiasm and the same
determination [as the founder]. And if you
said anything about MidWest, you know to a
MidWest agent, them was fighting words.
And I was the same way, still am.”

• Quotation – Direct use of part of a story
  – “the moral factor”
  – Agent described canceling a woman’s policy
because of "bad moral character.” He told her
“You and I both know that people who hang
out in bars do so for one reason...”
Parallel Evaluations: Strong Form of Intertextuality

- Risk
- Appropriate level of effort
- Entrepreneurialism
- Family
- Values
Critique, Irony and Rejection: Negative Intertextuality

• Critique
  – “Frankly, MidWest the company has made it very clear to me that they are going to take care of the company. My job out here is to take care of the customer using MidWest products. MidWest's trying to, again, the company has got it backwards. One person's opinion. There was a president that said that "The day we serve the company first and not the customer we’ll go out of business." That's the father of the father. Too bad [the president] doesn't imprint it on his forehead so he sees it every day when he's shaving.”

• Irony – not found
• Rejection – not found
  – Even critics take the past as a legitimate guide
Paradigmatic Narratives: Individual Stories in Institutional Use

- Paradigmatic narrative: story of ideal career trajectory within an institution
- Can be formalized: legally stages
- At MW, narratives of local heroes are used as examples of stages of a possible career
- Case of individuals’ stories feeding back into the institution’s stories
- For NASA, astronauts have been used as the public version of a career
  - Within NASA, there are many versions of a successful career
Conclusions

• One’s identity is not one’s own alone
  – Identity stories are told within a textual field of other stories
  – One’s story may become part of the institution’s story stock

• Much narrative work happens at identity boundaries
  – For employment which makes demands on identity, an account of change of identity is often required
  – “How did you become an agent?” is a key issue at MW

• Occasions for proper tellings support the existence of a textual field of institutional and individual stories