

USING VIRTUAL STORIES TO RESOLVE WORKPLACE
MISCOMMUNICATION

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Introduction

www.workstories.ac.nz is an Auckland University of Technology, Faculty of Arts Learning and Teaching initiative. The aim of the site is to provide an online learning tool that is a flexible, interactive textbook/teaching resource. The key differentiating feature of the site is that authentic student experiences of communication breakdown in the workplace are valued, collected and posted online to create a rich, unfolding source of core site content and an online venue for AUT Communication students to share, discuss and resolve these experiences. Threaded through these stories is support and advice from peers and teachers.

In semester 1, 2005 www.workstories.ac.nz has been piloted with level 4 students who are studying interpersonal communication as part of AUT's Diploma of Information Technology. These students are from a diverse range of backgrounds, ages and ethnicities. Some are part-time students who are working while studying, some are recent school leavers, some are older learners who have had a range of experiences in the working world, and some are international students. Many of the students are hoping to staircase to degree courses.

This paper describes the motivation, and pedagogical rationale, behind www.workstories.ac.nz. It examines the unique potential that the online medium offers for using true stories as the central tool for learning, and reports some of the feedback that has been collected from students in light of these claims.

The site has been piloted as a teaching tool in semester 1, 2005 and will be the subject of research and evaluation in semester 2, 2005. The research will be based on student and teacher feedback and analysis of the site discourse, and will ask the question: what, if any, demonstrable value does www.workstories.ac.nz offer to students learning about workplace miscommunication? Until this research has been completed the benefits of using this approach to teach workplace communication skills are unproven.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval has been granted to collect and post students' stories on the site, and to conduct a range of research about the site. This approval requires written permission to be obtained from each student before their story can be included on the site, and assurances that all recognizable details within the stories will be changed.

The design of www.workstories.ac.nz

www.workstories.ac.nz provides a vehicle for showcasing student experiences of workplace miscommunication. The stories used in semester 1, 2005 are a selection of stories collected from the previous semester's classes. Some of the stories are embellished and modified, with the approval and cooperation of the student concerned, to add - for example - non-verbal information and remove any inconsistencies.

While the contemporary look and feel of the site is important in terms of appealing to the student audience, it is secondary to the purpose of the site. Budgetary constraints meant that there was limited money for graphic effects in this pilot phase. A photography student kindly donated a number of interesting, relevant images.

The site is supported by a user-friendly Content Management System, which means that any authorised person - with a minimum of technical expertise - can add, remove and edit stories, change the links and adapt the content of the quiz.

In 2006 the site will include features such as video clips of authentic scenarios of communication breakdown, and support and comments from employers and industry experts will be included in the threaded discussion.

The ideal number and length of stories, issues of archiving, and the frequency with which the stories should be changed will be constantly reviewed as the site is trialed in semester 2, 2005.

Within each story the eye icon signals that threaded discussion is enabled at this point. The eyes are colour coded and the colour automatically changes depending on the number of comments at each point. In the next phase of site development it is planned to enable threaded discussion within threaded discussion. This was not included at the first phase due to budgetary constraints.

The site includes a quiz feature which has not yet been fully developed. During the next phase of the programme this feature will be changed to make the quiz format more flexible.

The pilot project

During the pilot phase (semester 1, 2005), www.workstories.ac.nz was incorporated into the assessment programme of the interpersonal communication component of AUT's Diploma in Information Technology as a learning support for an in-class assignment called Communication Processes. Traditionally this assignment required students to analyse and write about the interpersonal interaction that occurs in a case study written by the course teachers. In this pilot study, students were asked to read and contribute to the six authentic student stories posted online at www.workstories.ac.nz, knowing that one of these stories was going to be used as the case study in the assignment. For approximately two weeks prior to the assessment students were given the opportunity to write comments, advice, questions and analysis on www.workstories.ac.nz. On the day of the assessment a transcript copy of the selected story - or case study - was provided for each student with assessment questions attached.

During the pilot phase some student feedback has been collected via an optional online survey. 57 of 92 students completed the survey. This does not purport to be research but it does provide indicative feedback about the feasibility and shape of the project in semester 2. While there were some negative comments about the site functionality the feedback about the role of the stories was positive. A number of student responses have been incorporated into this paper to give an informal indication of student response, and are quoted at the end of this paper.

The pedagogical rationale behind www.workstories.ac.nz

During the 1970s and 1980s teaching was dominated by behaviourist pedagogy. Knowledge was perceived as a giant tree of facts or information, with categories and sub-categories comprising the branches and twigs. Good teaching involved deconstructing knowledge into small incremental blocks that were assessable through performance objectives and motivated by reinforcement. Students followed predetermined paths to arrive at predetermined solutions and progressed along established increments towards expertise. This didactic pedagogy fitted comfortably with the programmed, structured characteristics of information technology that was gaining popularity as a teaching tool.

Since then there had been a seismic redefinition of what it means to know and learn. While there is disagreement about the exact mechanisms by which we come to know, there is broad agreement that we construct knowledge by engaging in socio-cultural activity (Gergen, 1997; Hennessy, 1993; von Glasersfeld, 1995; Vygotsky in Kozulin, 2003) and the associated pedagogy sees teaching as a process of guiding participation in socio-cultural activity (Hennessy, 1993, p.7).

Within the field of interpersonal communication the constructivist paradigm is mirrored in the transactional model of communication. Just as the constructivist epistemology maintains that all knowing is a social activity, the transactional model of communication emphasises the socio-cultural aspects of the communication process as meaning is negotiated to develop, enhance and maintain effective relationships, and the shared meaning and the relationship itself are the unique creation of both participants within the interaction (DeVito, O'Rourke & O'Neill, 2003).

But although there has been a shift away from the mechanist pedagogy of behaviourism and new understandings about what it means to know, learn and communicate have emerged, anecdotal evidence tells us that students and academic managers increasingly expect information technology to be incorporated into teaching practice. Few would disagree that digital technologies are useful for disseminating information, and digitising course handouts: providing links to useful resources has practical benefits for both the teacher and learner. But, although web learning environments such as WebCT™ and Blackboard™ are equipped with facilities for online communication such as online discussion forums and chat rooms, studies reveal that technical possibility does not equate to rich and sustained dialogue among the participants and too often, within the educational context, students report that online communication is boring, artificial and laboured 'for the same reasons much traditional instruction is boring. It focuses on content presentation rather than the learning experience' (Allen, 2003, n.p).

In the face of relentless and accelerating pressure to use information technology in our teaching, many teachers of interpersonal communication express concern that we are in danger of losing the human dynamic that differentiates our subject from many more didactic subject areas. Nurturing this dynamic in the online environment presents a pedagogical challenge to these teachers who see their role as humanistic agents of personal and social advancement rather than conduits of predetermined information and theories. www.workstories.ac.nz represents an attempt to resolve this dilemma by weaving real life experiences, and authentic interaction, through an essentially didactic tool.

The advantages of using true stories online

There is a well established tradition of using stories as a tool for teaching. Many teachers use stories informally in their classrooms, particularly to illustrate theory. Others use stories formally. For example, stories are the basis of a number of recognized pedagogical approaches: Narrative Pedagogy involves sharing and interpreting the everyday lived experiences of students and clinicians as a

Aditya looked blankly at us. He shrugged his shoulders and turned away from us both and carried on completing some paperwork. He muttered (without looking at either of us) that I hadn't given him clear instructions and that I should have actually written the instructions for him. He said that he was a busy person and that, because he had so many things to remember, I needed to write instructions down for him.

I was shocked and angry. In my fury I yelled at him 'Stop talking crap. I told you twice that this computer had to be delivered by lunchtime. You led me to believe that you were going to do it!'

Jane (interrupting hastily): 'Maria, in future you need to write down instructions for Aditya. Please send him an email in future.'

Me: (angry and frustrated) turned and shouted at her 'I, I, I am not here to babysit anyone. Aditya should get his act together and do his job better. I am really sick of this place. I shouldn't have to work with morons like him!'. I pushed my index finger hard into his shoulder. Then I turned away, grabbed my jacket and stormed out of the building.

Excerpt from student story on www.workstories.ac.nz

My brother was furious with me!

Brother (yelling, slapping his forehead and looking at the ceiling): 'Get away from the counter! Just step away from the counter now you stupid girl!! Cant you do just one simple job?'

He continued to be enraged. In fact he was still angry with me many hours later. He went around muttering about me to everybody and rolling his eyes for the rest of the day.

I was quite upset about the fact he was so irate because I did exactly what he said: After all I deleted the box of tapes next to the counter on the floor, just as he had asked. If there was more than one box on the floor then he should have been more specific. I felt that it was unfair that he spoke to me in that manner and being related to me he was much harsher than he would have been to an employee outside the family.

Excerpt from student story on www.workstories.ac.nz

research-based, innovative means to reform nursing education (Diekelmann, 1999), Critical Incident theory takes a significant incident and, through structured dialogue and analysis of that incident, aims to empower participants to greater control of their lives (Tripp, 1992). Case Studies are detailed observations of incidents or scenarios which aim to give a holistic understanding of cultural systems of action (Tellis, 1997). Putting the life experience of the learner at the centre of the learning experience is an essential feature of good andragogical practice (Knowles, 1986). These pedagogies all recognize that deep learning can occur when we address the story behind a personal experience, and ask why the experience was so significant at the time and how it might help participants to move forward in their lives.

www.workstories.ac.nz uses true student stories to provide 'the problem' which John Dewey claims is at the heart of the process of learning. He says that 'only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first, seeking and finding his way out does [the student] think' (Dewey (1916) as cited in Bean, 2001, p. 2). The student experiences of communication breakdown in the New Zealand workplace, as shown on www.workstories.ac.nz, provide a wealth of varied, situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991) authentic problems that have had a significant impact on the life of the person concerned.

One traditional classroom method of encouraging students to learn from these experiences involves asking students to write reflectively about them. This technique, which can include some swapping of stories and using

some stories – with student permission - as a basis for class discussion, often provides no effective mechanism for students to give and receive feedback about each other’s stories. The stories are usually discarded at the end of each semester. www.workstories.ac.nz attempts to redress this wasted opportunity by creating a tool that uses the unique properties of the Internet to showcase, share and store student stories of workplace communication breakdown. The site arose from the desire to use the rich tapestry of stories that students bring to the interpersonal communication classroom in a more enduring and structured way.

The stories arise from a diverse array of authentic contexts: a petrol pump operator who misheard a customer, put in too much petrol and was forced to pay out of his own money; a checkout operator who was incorrectly accused of short changing a customer; a storeman who was blamed for an order not going out on time when it was the fault of the delivery company. The contexts vary and the backgrounds of the individuals involved are culturally diverse, but these stories all have one thing in common - they are all about something suddenly going wrong and the storyteller’s subsequent sense of injustice and powerlessness. Bruner describes this as a ‘peripeteia, a sudden reversal in circumstances’ (p. 5) or a ‘breach in the ordinariness’ (p. 89) and he claims that it is this that swiftly turns a ‘routine series of events into a story’ (p.5). According to Bruner, learning from the story involves ‘coming to terms with the breach and its consequences’ ‘leading to epistemic or moral insights into what is inherent in the quest for restoration’ (p. 89).

As a tool for coming to terms with the breach (Bruner, p.5), and achieving insights into the quest for restoration (Bruner, p.89), the online medium, in particular www.workstories.ac.nz, has a number of special advantages: it offers a wide range of stories, or problems, so the learner can choose the one that most closely matches their own experiences or needs; interaction between the teacher /expert and student, via the threaded discussion within the story, is flat and undifferentiated thereby giving equal status to the student’s views; and the stories are contemporary and situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the New Zealand workplace so they are relevant to students’ lives and needs.

www.workstories.ac.nz provides an array of stories to interact with

In the pilot phase www.workstories.ac.nz featured six stories. They included the stories of a dedicated warehouse worker who was suddenly fired for no apparent reason, a government employee who was pressured to sign false documents, and the computer worker who inappropriately exploded in anger at work. Offering a range of possibilities means that students can choose from a range of stories to find one that mirrors their own experience or need in some way. In the next phase of the project the number of stories will be increased because, unlike a traditional textbook, www.workstories.ac.nz can hold a limitless number of stories and these can be easily updated.

I agree that he was clueless to a certain extent but other factors play a role too. Like he could have been really proud of the fact that he got such a high status job within such a short time that it could’ve gone to his head and lead him astray. Also left him confused when he had to get a REAL job done without ANY professional training provided! He probably didn’t want to lose the status so he did what he thought was correct at the time. I believe that the environment played a big role (too noisy!).

Name: Mya

Date: 21-03-2005

Sample student comment from
www.workstories.ac.nz

The interactive aspect of the site provides an opportunity for students to actively engage with the story of their choice, discuss events and consequences that might closely parallel their own experience, or choose from a variety of paths or possibilities that have

been shaped by their own and other users' input into the story. The flexible nature of the online environment endorses the users' ability to choose a direction that best fits their learning needs by not dictating which story is most appropriate and enabling interaction within the stories.

www.workstories.ac.nz *respects knowledge that is derived from personal experience*

Online users are increasingly comfortable with the flat, undifferentiated, unregulated, cacophony of different options that are jumbled together in the online milieu. Online search mechanisms remove the traditional form and allocated status behind each 'hit', listing all hits without any regard for their position in the traditional knowledge hierarchy, accompanied by brief, abbreviated explanatory comments, all of apparently equal status. Blog and listserv participants are comfortable with bypassing predefined knowledge bases in favour of sharing their own insights.

I like this guys attitude, it wasn't anybodies fault and he didn't blame anybody. He decided not to cause hassles and resolve the situation. Nice

Name: reags
Date: 18-03-2005

Yeah nice, only thing is he says he still feels bad about it.

Name: Chris
Date: 19-03-2005

*Sample student comments from
www.workstories.ac.nz*

The online knowledge explorer is increasingly comfortable with navigating a range of options and choices to make his or her own decisions about which route to take through the rich, ever changing source of multiple perspective and parallel narratives (Turkle, 1995, p. 51) that the Internet provides. Implicit in this flat, unmoderated environment is the assumption that users can be trusted to choose the path that makes the most sense to them, to shape their own solutions and to meet their emotional needs. The underlying philosophy of Caveat Emptor, of 'buyer beware' affirms confidence in the users' ability to make appropriate choices. This means that they are making their own decisions about what is relevant or important.

Maria, this is exactly what happened to me. The thing is it all happens so suddenly and you have no control over your reactions.

Name: Ron
Date: 6-02-95

*Sample student comment from
www.workstories.ac.nz*

At www.workstories.ac.nz, subjective student stories are the proudly the core content of the site and the feedback threaded through the stories and the ideas/opinions of all contributors through the site is allocated equal status regardless of whether or not it is from a teacher or student. This is a reversal of many learning experiences where students are introduced to theory and expert opinions first, and the stories are used to illustrate the

theory. By placing the stories at the centre of the site, authentic student experience is given authority, and by placing all comments on an equal footing peer opinion is given status equal to professional expertise.

This elevation of the status of personal experience can give a powerful subconscious message: the message that personal opinions are valued as much as the opinions of experts or theorists. In this context all feedback (provided it isn't offensive) is seen as valid.

You gotta learn to breathe thru the nose mate. There are ****holes out there and they let you down just when you thought everything was sweet

Name: Chris
Date: 26-02-2005

*Sample student comment from
www.workstories.ac.nz*

A number of students have used the site flippantly with comments like, 'yeah, well he sounds like a dick to me'.

Other comments such as *'something like that happened to me and I still blush every time I think about it'* or *'bear in mind that your boss was clearly not trained to have that much responsibility on his shoulders. He clearly wasn't coping'* and *'when I am frustrated I tend to fly off the handle like you did'* indicate empathy and are offering another perspective. Gergen describes this process as democratization (Gergen, 1997) where the range of participating voices is increasing and this is, even on a subconscious level, making way for a broader, often multicultural approach that actively seeks to explore and understand other perspectives and acknowledge ambiguity, rather than the 'tyranny of the single story' (Bruner, 2002, p. 103).

www.workstories.ac.nz aims to contextualize learning

It is widely agreed that one of the most important requirements of professional training is that it bridges the gap between the realities of the working world and the university-based academic environment. Many teaching institutions – AUT, for example - pride themselves on their ability to teach skills directly applicable to the workplace. This presents a huge challenge for all institution-based teachers. Key theorists agree that knowing and doing are inseparable, that knowledge only finds meaning through social context (Dewey in Clancy, 1995; Lave in Clancy, 1995; Vygotsky in Clancy, 1995), that schools are always artificial environments that turn knowledge into something to be acquired (Hennessy, 1991), and that what we do now in schools assumes that competence can be decomposed into constituent parts and decontextualised for the purposes of instruction and evaluation without losing anything essential (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.64).

www.workstories.ac.nz aims to respond to the challenge to narrow the gap between the realities of the working world and the course curriculum by situating the student's individual communication behaviour within authentic, current, workplace contexts. Seen within the paradigm of situated learning, students are newcomers (Lave & Wenger, 1991) who are novices to workplace communication and who are emotionally ill equipped to cope with the conflicts, the frustrations and the unexpected.

www.workstories.ac.nz aims to provide a tool to help these novices remedy and learn from these distressing breaches of the ordinariness in their everyday communication and move towards expertise by using online stories to discuss and test a variety of options and attitudes or merely to commiserate.

We asked the students what they liked about www.workstories.ac.nz. They told us:

- *'I found the stories interesting to read and could use the mistakes or miscommunication that the people made and use them so I don't make the same mistakes.'*
- *'The best things I liked about the site is that it gives a taste of what our future job might become.'*
- *'I like to read the all stories and it was really helpful to get to know other people's problems. I had the opportunity to think 'if it was me on the 7 stories, what I will do?'*
- *'The best I thing I liked about this site is that the readers had a chance to convey their view(s) on the stories.'*
- *'The stories were good because they had a lot of meaning to me. Most probably because I have been in this kind of situation.'*
- *'Because we can see real stories from the students.'*
- *'It has real life stories there with others giving their own opinion and sharing their experience of what they have gone through. It could be a warning or guideline for others of what could happen out there in the real world.'*

- *'All the different personalities that show up through their experiences and what they are like.'*
- *'I could read lots of interesting work stories and found out what kind of problem can we have at work.'*
- *'The thing I like about work stories is that it tells us how to react with other people. By placing ourselves at the place of characters of work stories ,we can judge our behaviour. Are we submissive or aggressive ?'*
- *'I liked the fact that they were true stories, especially that they were about experiences at work that AUT students' had.'*
- *'It gave me a better view and made it seem more realistic and easy to understand.'*

Summary

www.workstories.ac.nz is a response to the challenge to use technology to illuminate a deepening and expanding understanding of interpersonal problems, particularly in the workplace. This paper has described the overall pedagogical rationale, and some of the design attributes and characteristics, behind the site and has incorporated some student feedback about the site.

The paper suggests that www.workstories.ac.nz has the potential to be a powerful tool for allowing students to choose and think about, either individually or collaboratively, stories of miscommunication that relate to their lives. It empowers them to think about what they would do in a similar situation and wrestle with and navigate towards their own solutions to problems to arrive at new understandings and perspectives about what happened in the story, why and what it might mean for their own communication within the New Zealand workplace.

Until research (scheduled for semester 2, 2005) establishes a picture of how students and teachers respond to the site, the full benefits to student learning are unproven.

At the time of writing this paper the site is password protected. The password is:

Login: **workstories**

Password: **Workstories01** (note the capital)

If readers are unable to access the site they should contact Pip Mules on 09 9179999 ext 7853 or pip.mules@aut.ac.nz

or Ann Skinner (AUT School of Communication Studies receptionist) on 09 9179999

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