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FIRST PERSON RESEARCH

From Purpose to Production in Crafting the Organizational Tale

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Stories pervade organization and its research, often spontaneously but sometimes deliberately. The latter, crafting an organizational story, can be a work of passion spurred on by a range of drivers, motives, and intent. And its product, the purpose-driven organizational tale, is one of the central features of first-person research. First-person research is also concerned with the confluence of the tale's purpose with the writer's intent, as well as the author's respective engagement with the effects of their tale on their own subjectivity. Such reflexivity often involves overt scrutiny of one's identity—specifically in terms of profession and positioning—that ultimately leads to the production of an effective tale. In what follows, we canvass the themes of purpose, profession, positioning and production, illustrating their dynamics through the two articles featured in this First Person Research section. In the first article, Kirrilly Thompson presents her experience with “staging” a humorous event with the purpose of renegotiating workplace roles and relations; in the second article, Margaret H. Vickers reflects on the production of a creative writing case study aimed at engaging employees in discussion and reflection on workplace bullying.

PURPOSE

Our creative works are often instigated by a teleological drive that maintains the writers' momentum in pursuing their tale. In a wide range of academic writing, the author's personal intent and the purpose of the written piece remain separate; rarely are they both entwined and brought into the reader's view. One of the generative possibilities of first-person writing, however, is that it enables the writer to blend both explicitly (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). We see this confluence in both articles here. Thompson analyzes a “strategy” (“intended to be

educational . . . and entertaining”) that combines humor with an ethnographic genre to offer our readers insight into workplace identity, humor (including satire), ethnography, and ambiguity. Simultaneously, she also engages with her personal aim of renegotiating perceptions of her role in the workplace through subversive genres, and uses this as the central spine to her story. In a similar vein, Vickers presents a case study she had written to enable considerations of organizational interventions into bullying. At the same time, she candidly discusses her experience with events that resonate with those in her case, and the resistance to such oppression that drives her pursuit of the empowering effects of creative writing. These are two tales with symmetrical intents: the former aimed at gaining trust, and the latter aimed at depicting the violation of trust when bullying is involved.

PROFESSION

In most organizational writing, the writer's profession is implicit, as the reader assumes the author is a researcher, usually an academic. This tradition automatically enables writers to present their work within this public persona. First-person research, however, often involves deliberate crafting of one's profession in the written piece (Richardson, 1997). Since the topics of research extend into one's “other” roles—for example, as parent or citizen—the first-person piece may depict the writer from that “other” space or in relation to it. The practice of crafting professions is well threaded into both articles here. Thompson's discussion of her primary profession as a cultural anthropologist (with field experiences in studying bullfighting) sets the scene in relation to which she gradually develops the identity of the organizational employee and trustworthy colleague. Vickers, on the other hand, presents the story of her creative-case writing experience against the backdrop of the organizational researcher with extensive publications who now has to test-drive her new case in real time during workshop facilitation. Crafting one's profession in a given tale also dovetails

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with one's positioning in that story (Raddon, 2003), the theme to which we turn.

POSITIONING

First-person writing entails crafting one's position in relation to the events mapped out in the story. While this usually involves contemplation on the writer's experience and learning, it often also involves consideration of how one is viewed—or positioned—by others. Crucially, such reflection on positioning is what often immerses the reader in the writer's sense of authorship, their authority on that topic, and their authenticity in the text. Both writers here are positioned and positioning within their respective tales. Thompson's ethnographically inspired uses of her organizational position as "initiate" and her maneuvers for repositioning as an "insider" offer remarkable insight into organizational practices of identification. Vickers, on the other hand, moves in the opposite direction, offering us an account of how she was positioned as an "international researcher and expert on bullying" but gradually positions herself as the vulnerable story-writer, keen on crafting an effective piece and concerned with the implications of its deployment.

PRODUCTION

We started off with consideration of a tale's purpose and now come to its production. Relevant here is that the former influences the choice of genre suited to a given production, and the elements engrained within it. At the center of each of our articles is a circumscribed narrative written in a specific genre and then each proceeds to bend it. Thompson presents us with her staged humorous event styled along the lines of a confessional ethnographic genre that she then satirically deploys. Vickers offers us an experience of bullying written in the case-study genre but that resorts to creative writing for its utility in navigating uncertainty. Both write about emotion in others, but also about emotions they harbor as writer-storyteller. Their two tales take us, respectively, from laughter and humor to stress and the struggles of coping. In doing so, they deploy imaginative

elements, a "sleep spy" (Thompson) and "creative nonfiction" (Vickers), and they engage with ambiguity—as one of the central factors in crafting the tale (Thompson) or as a factor inherent to the topic of analysis, bullying (Vickers).

Here we come to our final point. As we craft our academic writing, we are often well devolved from our readers (unless in conference or class/seminar situations). Yet tales are written for sharing and relating to others, and so ultimately rely on a readership. Some stories are orally delivered, staged, or analytically discussed. So good story writers/tellers have a well-developed sense of audience. This necessitates a departure from the traditional nexus of production and consumption; rather, the tale's pursuit is one of production in relation to reception, crafting a tale with tension-mingled suspense over how it will be received by others and their respective response. Both writers here went through the ordeal of presenting their respective tales directly to a primary audience (prior to our readers). This involved risk that necessitated courage as they potentially put their credibility (possibly even their reputation) on the line. Both tales illustrate that their writers are acutely aware of their audience's engagement and response (whether through laughter or intense debate). This is the anticipated dialogism that lends meaning to the creative product (Bakhtin, 1981). Our closing statement is positioned on this ethos of relatedness: We invite organization and management researchers to take the First Person writing trail from purpose to production and share their experience with us.

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