The call to adventure: creating a new story for the library strategy

ABSTRACT

Introduction

A university-wide transformational restructure in 2014 provided a rare opportunity to change the organisational structure of La Trobe University Library, as well as the services offered and the way in which we worked. By mid-2015, the new structure was in place, but the library did not have a documented strategy to provide a clear direction for library staff or to articulate how the library contributes to the university's strategy and goals. We needed to communicate the positive impact of the changes, and what the library could now achieve, to the university community. Therefore the strategy had to be meaningful, tell a compelling story and be easily understood by all stakeholders, particularly library staff.

Methods

A storytelling method was used to elicit stories from a range of library staff that illustrated real examples of both why a change had been needed and the positive outcomes that had eventuated. A narrative framework using these new stories helped the library staff envision a new future for the library. Library stakeholders were asked for their stories of the library: what was meaningful and important for them now, and where the library should focus to provide value, enhance the work they do and actively contribute to the University strategy. The conversations that we had highlighted positive support for the library but also key issues of communication and understanding that posed a real risk for the library. The outcomes of these conversations informed and helped to identify key initiatives and focus areas for the library for the coming years.

Results

The end result was a strategy – but not just a strategy. We now have a vehicle for telling a story that others can understand, that library staff and stakeholders can engage with and see themselves as part of. Our strategy provides a starting point for communicating the work of the library in words that others (and not just library staff) can understand. It provides clear measures of success for the library and a coherent basis for annual operational plans. It is a living document which will be reviewed annually to ensure that our story is still relevant.

Conclusion

Collecting and telling stories through a storytelling/narrative approach can create a strategy which is meaningful for all stakeholders and which they can relate to. The strategy itself can become a storytelling tool as it anchors the stories and the communication about the library; it provides a simple, focused, repeatable and very effective base for communication. Storytelling has also had the added advantage of identifying words which personalise our values and make them more meaningful; we can continue to collect stories to demonstrate how we embody our values.

Relevance (to conference theme: data, information, knowledge)

Storytelling moves a step beyond data, information and knowledge by giving these aspects meaning and making them accessible to more people; storytelling allows libraries to tell stories that reflect the value of the library.

Introduction

In a dynamic and rapidly-evolving environment, a strategic plan is vital to guiding and focusing an organisation. A well-thought through and 'balanced strategic planning process and plan tailored to a specific library can be an invaluable instrument that helps a library to chart and navigate these turbulent times' (Wayne, 2011). Libraries have joined the ranks of those organisations who have strategic plans to guide their development and their services. Strategic plans set the scene and provide direction, and are ideally aligned with the strategy of the parent organisations. However, strategic plans have sometimes suffered from being too inward looking and too broad, describing a strategy and direction which means little to those outside, or indeed within, the library. As Rickard and Martin note, strategic plans can be a waste of time 'if there is no buy-in at the grassroots level of an organization, or if the resulting document is so lengthy that it sits on a shelf collecting dust' (Rickard and Harding, 2000). Rather than being an 'internal writing exercise' (Birdsall, 1997), a strategic plan can be a way of garnering support for the organisation and can be used to manage change in a systematic fashion. While the typical format for a strategic plan of vision, mission, goals and objectives can lay out the direction for an organisation, it is most powerful when telling a story to those reading the plan. To be effective, a strategic plan must make sense to those reading it and inspire those who are implementing it, allowing them to see themselves in the plan and motivating them to act. As Monarth (2015) states: 'Data can persuade people, but it doesn't inspire them to act; to do that, you need to wrap your vision in a story that fires the imagination and stirs the soul'.

Major changes were implemented at La Trobe University in 2014 to refocus the University on research and improve the quality of learning and teaching, with an emphasis on online and blended learning. These changes were reflected in a new organisational structure for La Trobe University Library, organised around research, learning and teaching, and the review and redevelopment of library services to provide more seamless support for students and academics. The Library refocused structure and services to align with the University's *Future Ready* strategy (2016) and take on new roles and projects which would directly contribute to the achievement of the University's goals. These changes, the rationale for the changes, and the new direction for the library, were communicated both within the library and across the university, however it was clear several months after the changes that these were not clearly known or understood. The need for a new Library strategy to outline the library's vision became clear and work began to develop a strategic plan which would articulate the library's direction, goals and actions. It was important for us to develop a strategy which 'spoke' to a wide audience; it had to be understood by our partners within the university, university leaders, students and staff - and in particular, library staff who were responsible for implementing the strategy.

Storytelling and strategy

To develop a strategic plan which would resonate with stakeholders and staff, we needed to tell a simple and understandable story which would engage those who read it. To do this, we turned to storytelling as a method to develop our strategy, taking the approach that strategic planning is 'telling a happy story about the future' (Martin, 2010). We wanted avoid the 'construction' approach described by Martin

(2010) which analyses and then builds a strategy that 'fits together in a logical and airtight way'; instead we took a holistic approach by telling stories about the future and then addressing the question – what would we have to do to make this come true?

Storytelling as an effective communication tool has come to prominence over the last ten years in the corporate world. Coleman (2015) documents the impact of storytelling on the staff and customers of organisations and the power that storytelling has, noting that it creates a purpose and culture that others can share. A story is a recounting of events, real or imagined, typically about one or more people in a particular time and place (McMillan, 2015). Humans developed the capability for storytelling around 70,000 years ago, around the same time as the capability for complex language (Harari, 2011). Storytelling is embedded in the way humans think and communicate; humans constantly create narratives involving past, present and future from what we perceive around us. (Pinker, 2002, Wilson, 2002).

Storytelling has many applications in organisations, including communicating messages, understanding others' perspectives, making sense of experiences, creating identity, and envisioning the future. Stories are a highly effective tool for communicating messages. When a listener hears a story, their brain responds almost as if they were experiencing the events themselves. Many more parts of the brain are engaged than when a listening to a non-story statement, including centres for emotion and sensory perception (Huth, 2016). This makes the communication memorable and meaningful. Because emotions are critical for decision-making

(Damasio, 2010, Kahneman, 2011), a story's influence on the listener's emotions also influences their decisions and actions.

In the same way, stories are a useful tool for understanding others' perspectives, such as customers or colleagues. Listening to other people recount their experiences—events that have happened to them and what they felt at the time—is similar to experiencing those events ourselves. Hearing these stories creates empathy and insights. Kotter (2002) notes the impact that hearing an angry customer recount his story had on changing a service team.

Stories are also a tool for making sense of one's own experiences and creating one's own personal or group identity. Who we are—the way we see ourselves—is the sum of our stories. Developing an awareness of what these stories are can form a strong sense of identity and values. It also opens the door to shape identity by changing the stories we tell about ourselves. For example, companies such as Nordstrom and Zappos use their customer service stories to create their identities as outstanding customer service organisations.

Finally, stories are effective in navigating change and creating a vision of and strategy for the future. For this purpose, a story pattern known as a quest, or hero's journey, or monomyth is particularly useful. This story pattern was codified by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). It is a pattern that is found in the myths and stories from all known cultures. It is now widely used by film makers and novelists to make their stories more effective and engaging because of its universal appeal (Coyne, 2015, Vogler 2007). Campbell posited that this story

pattern is so pervasive because it serves as a map to guide humans through key challenges and changes in life. In this story pattern, a hero (the person who will undergo the change) experiences a call to adventure—something that disrupts their comfortable, ordinary world. In order to put their world back into balance, they must choose to undertake a quest, where they and their allies will face a series of increasingly difficult and frightening challenges that arise from both internal and external sources. The hero finds help from mentors and friends, and discovers inner strengths and characteristics, that allow them to overcome these challenges and succeed in the quest. The end result is that they are able to bring back a gift that puts their world back into balance (at least for a time). At the end of the story, the hero is a different person than they were at the beginning, having been transformed by the quest. By viewing themselves as the hero in this story pattern, individuals and groups can better understand the experience of change: the choices that confront them, the challenges they face, what resources they will need for the journey, how to seek and find help, and what the outcome will be for themselves and others if they succeed.

Beginning in 2015, La Trobe University Library engaged Patricia McMillan to work with us on a multi-stage storytelling process. The first stage involved workshops with Library staff following the University's restructure to enable staff to share common stories: where they had come from, what they had experienced and where we were going following the reorganisation of the library. This storytelling approach documented our stories but also encouraged us to engage across the university to hear, and really listen to, the stories of others - in particular, users of the library. We used those stories to explore how other people in the university viewed the library,

their needs and their pain points; this then provided an opportunity for library staff to identify the key areas of focus which would make a difference to these users.

The second stage of the process involved beginning to envision a new story, To further explore how we could approach the issues and challenges identified in our and our stakeholders' stories, we used the analogy of a quest, identifying the challenge or problem to be addressed, a desired future state, the barriers that stand in the way of this (the 'dragon'), the expertise, attitudes and attributes that library staff (the 'hero') can bring to overcome the barriers and a 'call to adventure' which outlines why a change is needed and what we will do to reach the desired state (McMillan, 2015). A narrative framework using these new stories helped the library staff envision a new future for the library. Storytelling opened up broader opportunities than we had originally anticipated; as well as identifying the challenges, the end goal and how best to get there – our desired future state - it also enabled us to identify the values we wished to exhibit as an organisation and as individuals: the behaviours, attributes and attitudes of the hero on the quest.

The effectiveness of storytelling in galvanising people around key strategies and actions convinced us that it would be an effective way of developing a new strategy. Gill (2009) identified a link between using stories to engage more deeply with staff in order to strengthen internal loyalty and effect a stronger external reputation; storytelling can engender an emotional engagement (Howard, 2016) and make the strategy more meaningful and personal.

Developing a strategy: stakeholder engagement

The third and fourth stages of the storytelling process involved collecting stakeholder stories and creating a strategy document using everything from the first three stages. Many strategies follow the process of identifying a vision, mission, goals and objectives. However, as Martin (2014) notes, 'True strategy is about placing bets and making hard choices', focusing on the where the most impact can be achieved with the resources available. Developing a document which articulated the potential impact and outcomes of the key strategies, and the importance of these to each client group and to library staff, was going to have more impact on, and meaning for, our stakeholders. To develop a new strategy, La Trobe University Library staff worked with Patricia Macmillan develop a framework using a storytelling process for identifying and articulating our strategy. The framework included a series of interviews with stakeholders across the university to gather specific information from them: what was most important for them now; where could the library provide value, enhance the work they do, and actively contribute to the University strategy. We deliberately used a third party to collect stories so that they could be objective and not influence or interpret the stories. The stories which were collected from our stakeholders were illuminating. Some stakeholder stories were very positive about the library, library services and staff; some were positive but required further investigation; when a stakeholder states 'I love the library', what do they mean by that? How is the library meeting their needs and what is it that they find so appealing? Some stories uncovered a lack of understanding about the library that surprised (and dismayed) us; one respondent could not see any way in which the Library could contribute to the University's strategy or how the library could play a role in student engagement. The outcomes of these conversations informed the identification of key initiatives and focus areas for the library for the coming years.

The initiatives which were identified through the storytelling process with library staff and stakeholders were considered and filtered according to how they linked to university strategy and responded to the changing environment and needs. Establishing a clear connection to the university strategy was critical and this connection flows through and informs our strategy. It was also important to group our key initiatives around what our stakeholders and library staff see as our key strengths: digital expertise, access to a world of ideas through our collections, and the immersive spaces that we provide. Each initiative allows us to tell a story about our strengths and how those strengths directly relate to benefits for the university.

The draft strategy was workshopped with staff before being released to the broader university for consultation and comment. Staff comments on the strategy were positive: 'I can see myself supporting these focus areas through the initiatives outlined'; 'I can see my role contributing to several initiatives within this document'; and 'the 2017 library goals allow me to understand in more tangible terms what will be done to achieve those focus areas'. Library staff had been involved in the 'quest' from the beginning and were now seeing themselves as the heroes in this quest by delivering the initiatives outlined in the strategy. The feedback from stakeholders across the university was also generally positive; some areas of the university specifically asked to be noted as partners in the library strategy as they could see synergies with their own strategies and goals. Comments from stakeholders received through the consultation process were workshopped and reflected in the strategy. This process provided an opportunity to directly engage with those stakeholders who

responded and to discuss their feedback, creating another opportunity for us to tell and refine our story to ensure that it is meaningful to others.

The outcome: a strategy which tells our story

The library strategy we have now differs from a traditional strategic plan, both in format and language. It reflects the stories of our staff and stakeholders, and because of this, is accessible to them. It is in itself a story which we can tell, a starting point for communicating the work of the library in words that others - and not just library staff - can understand. The structure of the plan allows stakeholders to see the 'Plan at a glance' as a visual of the plan, or to delve into more detail; the key initiatives reflect the needs that were communicated by our stakeholders, identified through the university strategic plan and through our knowledge of the changing library and higher education environments. These initiatives then flow into clear goals for 2017, providing measures of success for the library and a coherent basis for annual operational plans.

The importance of our strategy as a communication tool, as well as a roadmap, is clearly stated within the document. The strategy starts with the question 'Why a library strategy?' followed by a clear outline of purpose: the strategy will be used 'to consult and communicate with our partners across the University, and to help Library staff to understand how their work contributes directly to La Trobe priorities'. This statement, and the language used within the document, is designed to speak to a broad audience; the use of first person active voice throughout the document provides a personal approach and demonstrates that all library staff are working together to deliver the initiatives outlined in the document. The final, and potentially

most important, part of the strategy overtly addresses a question which was voiced during the interview and consultation process: what does this mean for me? In response to this question, we communicate what stakeholders can expect to see as an outcome of the implementation of the strategy. This is not just the achievement of the goals but the interpretation of these into specific improvements which relate directly to our stakeholders and their work.

Conclusion

Storytelling has underpinned the development of the La Trobe University Library strategy for 2016-2017. The process started with gathering stories and brings those stories together in a document which tells the library's story; the strategy has itself become a storytelling tool, as it anchors the stories and communication about the library and provides a simple, focused, repeatable and very effective base for communication. Using a storytelling framework in the development of the library strategy had other benefits. All library staff had an opportunity to engage in the storytelling method and, through the process of working together on a quest, identified not only the 'quests' that the library needed to undertake in the coming years, but the values, attributes, attitudes and behaviours that the heroes – the library staff – have identified we will need if we are to achieve the goals in our strategy. The use of storytelling to develop a strategy has had the benefit of engaging stakeholders and staff and delivering a short, focused strategy that it is meaningful and actionable.

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