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Ancient Myths and Modern SMEs

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Abstract

The myths of the ancient world still resonate in modern minds; mythic figures and the stories that describe them still speak to us, often at an implicit, even subconscious, level. That valence, this paper argues, indicates that ancient myth stories and their characters have significant value for other modern, everyday activities, including not only the more obvious areas of popular film and writing or propaganda and PR, but also more everyday business processes and organisational planning. This study demonstrates how this might be achieved by describing the research activities and findings of a project run by the authors, which employed ancient myths to support organisational development, enabling different kinds of companies and organisations to craft their own business stories, and pro-actively employ story-telling to think about their futures. This paper explores how the insights generated by this project i) contribute an innovative addition to existing business tools; and ii) reveal the relevance to the modern business environment of a humanities training. They also iii) demonstrate how the practice of story-telling—and its aesthetics—*becomes* a technology of the plausible, crucial for deliberation and decision making, in a context in which that practice is entrained.

Keywords: Myths, planning, business processes, humanities, aesthetics, ideation

Ancient Myths and Modern SMEs

The stories of Greek myth play a fundamental role in contemporary understandings of the ancient world. Instrumental in religious and political matters of their own time, their popularity extended beyond the Greek world into Roman, Medieval and Renaissance cultures; and it continues today in a number of different ways. This is demonstrated in the reception of Greek myth in contemporary popular culture: sometimes in fairly straightforward accounts, in films about the fall of the mythical city of Troy, or the voyage of Jason and the Argonauts; sometimes retold from a variety of different perspectives, such as in Miller's *Circe* (2018) or Barker's (2018) exploration of the women of Troy. Moreover, the uses of myths resonate over time, in for example, the mythic strongman Hercules when employed as a cypher for the Russian leader, Putin (Luhn, 2014), recalling the propaganda of the sixth century BCE tyrant, Peisistratus; and the company name Nike or "Victory" evoking that goddess's ancient appearances on coins, pottery and, especially, buildings in the fifth century BCE.

The myths of the ancient world still resonate in contemporary minds; mythic figures and the stories that describe them still speak to us, often at an implicit, even subconscious, level. That valence, this paper argues, indicates that ancient myth stories and their characters have significant value for other mundane contemporary activities, including not only the more obvious areas of popular film and writing or propaganda and PR, but also more everyday business processes and organisational planning. Indeed, this paper describes the approach to, and research findings from, a project run by the authors, who are both scholars of ancient cultures (Eidinow researches ancient Greek history with a particular focus on religion and magic, Lorenz studies storytelling in ancient visual art and interaction technologies in contemporary museum settings).

The project employed ancient myths to support organisational development, enabling different kinds of companies and organisations to craft their own business stories, and employ storytelling to think about their futures. This paper explores how the insights generated by this project i) contribute an innovative addition to existing business tools; and ii) reveal the relevance to the modern business environment of a humanities training. They also iii) demonstrate how the practice of storytelling and its aesthetics *becomes* a technology of the plausible, crucial for deliberation and decision making, in a context in which that practice is entrained.

Humanities and Business

As this suggests, we set our paper in the context of a larger issue: the place of the Humanities in contemporary life, especially the world of business. Certainly in the UK, media reports indicate a widespread perception that the Arts and Humanities are seen as "poor value for money", in the competitive, expensive world of Higher Education (Waltz, 2014; O'Leary, 2018). Worryingly, these trends are reflected in a recent UK government report: the *Augar Review of Post-18 Education and Funding* (2019), while insisting that (p. 82) "[w]e make no judgments about the merits or demerits of [the arts and humanities]", nevertheless, questions the value of the current fee structure that supports them and whether it is "strategically desirable". In contrast, it describes the "high-cost subjects—Engineering, Science, Technology, Medicine and health-related subjects" as "central to the government's Industrial Strategy". It concludes (p. 84): "We judge that the current method of university funding has resulted in an accidental over-investment in some subjects and an under-investment in others that is at odds with the government's Industrial Strategy and with taxpayers' interests". Taken at face value, this analysis, apparently based on a serious misunderstanding of the contribution of the Arts and Humanities to the UK's economy (and

of the ways in which university funding is organised), poses a serious danger to the future of Arts and Humanities research and education.

Why is this happening? Some berate those academics who study the Arts and Humanities, for not doing enough to popularise their subjects. This is a criticism that reveals a striking lack of understanding both of the huge variety of ways in which academics engage with their local, regional and national communities—not only because they must do so in order to fulfil the government’s demand for “Impact”, but also because they believe in the relevance of their discipline—and of the broader popular attitudes towards the Arts and Humanities in society. Bagehot (2019), for example, frames his attack with the oddly naive question of why not all academics have had the success of specific TV personalities (a question that does a disservice to the media industry as much as to academics). His attack on university academics is corrected by Will Hutton (2019) in a follow-up column in the *Guardian*, who points out:

It is not blinkered university humanities lecturers who are to blame for this intensifying bias—as suggested in a recent article in *The Economist*. They are committed scholars ready to do whatever they can to make their subjects relevant and accessible. But students will only value the humanities if society values them.

Nevertheless, Bagehot’s arguments, and others like them, find a ready audience in those who continue to be seduced by the “ivory tower” image of research-intensive universities, or those who question any subject that does not prioritize obviously commercial and practical applications.

Yet, even as these, albeit narrowly focused, accounts of the Arts and Humanities are casting doubt on their value, other organisations with, perhaps, a broader, more long-term perspective, are arguing for the crucial contribution to the world of work, of Arts and Humanities training. As well as the economic benefits they bring in and of themselves (Centre for Economics and Business Research 2019), the Arts and Humanities also contribute significantly to organisational and workplace skills in other sectors. Research has surfaced the growth benefits for businesses which bring together and capitalise on multi-disciplinary skills sets: for example, *The Brighton Fuse Report* (2013) and the *CIHE The Fuse* (2010) highlight the competitive advantage enjoyed by businesses that “combine creative art and design skills with technology expertise” (Doherty, 2010).

The need for such skills is likely to endure in the face of increasing automation: the *World Economic Forum* report on the *Future of Jobs Report 2018* identified an increasing need for these skills in the workplace (World Economic Forum 2019). The skills are 1. Thinking and innovation; 2. Complex problem solving; 3. Critical thinking and analysis; 4. Active learning and learning strategies; 5. Creativity, originality and initiative; 6. Attention to detail, trustworthiness; 7. Emotional intelligence; 8. Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation; 9. Leadership and social influence; 10. Coordination and time management. Moreover, these benefits are not simply limited to those who master creative arts: as Cecilie Meltzer (2015, p. 48) has observed the “deep learning” that can emerge from creative experience and expression:

Providing non-artists with the opportunity to become involved in creative expression and process work can therefore allow them to experience new ways to collaborate, communicate and reflect on their own learning and to find new ways to discover themselves, their inborn talents of playfulness and creativity, their resources, knowledge and skills.

Storytelling and Business

A crucial tool of human creativity is the capacity for storytelling. Storylines help to keep an audience's attention and concentration, and increase retention of the information shared. They do that better than other forms of information delivery because human beings are hard-wired to identify the trajectory or fill the gaps of a narrative, to empathize with the characters of a story, and to relate to the mediality of a story's delivery, its mimics and gestures, for example (Armstrong, 2013). In scholarship, the use of narrative as a heuristic tool has emerged in the context of an interrogation of positivist approaches to social research, allowing for a greater analysis of ideas (and their representations) of self, other, and society, social interactions, and the interplay of all these discourses with the investigation of historical dynamics and social phenomena (Goodson & Gill, 2011, p. 18). This so-called "narrative turn" (Polkinghorne, 1988; Czarniawska, 2004; Herman, Jahn, & Ryan, 2005) in scholarship has been evenly matched by an increasing understanding, in business sectors, of the power of storytelling for a range of business purposes, ranging from presenting data (Nussbaumer Knaflic, 2015) to leadership skills (Denning, 2011) to selling products and services (Smith, 2016).

The idea that storytelling is a useful skill for businesses to acquire, as a way to engage their audiences and sell their brand is gaining ground, but there are few practical and effective tools to support these activities. Much of the advice found on consultancy websites is very general, involving vague exhortations to "be authentic", while at the same time, instructing companies to focus on challenging/exciting/reassuring the client; and there is seldom any reflection on the differences in communication across different cultures. In particular, story structures are discussed as if one-size fits all. In contemporary business management, the hero's story narrative structure (popularised by the writing of Joseph Campbell, 2012) is particularly well known (Fraser, 2018; Child, 2019) and has become the fundamental model for creating an organisation's "business story". Myriad business guides suggest it offers a way of showcasing a company's unique strengths and business acumen (Guber, 2011; Dolan & Naidu, 2013; Duss, 2016).

While it may provide a neat vehicle for describing the past achievements and future goals of a company, however, the hero's story is also a limited, and limiting, paradigm. The range of characteristics it describes is narrow, and those characteristics are highly generalisable ("strength" and "perseverance", for example). They may not fit all organisations or enable them to highlight the kinds of qualities or values they believe distinguish them in the marketplace, or which they want to emphasise to their customers. Moreover, the "hero's story" can seem particularly suited to stereotypically male values and not appeal to entrepreneurs who want to highlight different qualities or features of their organisation. The power of this story may also harm entrepreneurial endeavours in another way: when it appears repeatedly as the structure of the business story of the 21st century, it suggests that there is only one way to run a business, or to be an entrepreneur (Smil, 2011). This, in turn, inevitably shapes the marketplace, creating an environment in which particular values like individual activity, ambition, even predatory behaviours (Villette & Vuillermot, 2009), are pushed to the forefront, while others (communication skills, or creative thinking, care for the consumer, ethical production, or long-term thinking, for example) are regarded as less important. Nevertheless, across the business sector, little, if any emphasis, is brought to bear on the ways in which a variety of mythic stories can convey a strong sense of values and meaning for a range of different social groups.

Myth and Business

In Classical research, while there is ample work on the reception of myth, there is, in contrast, little research regarding the many different ways in which Classical myths may occupy the public imagination, intersecting with, and actively shaping current business practices. This is a significant omission, since business stories inform advertising, which not only saturates daily life, but also, importantly, shapes public storytelling cultures (Fowles, 1996), and the values and meaning they communicate. Indeed, current research on practical applications of Classical mythologems or mythic narrative structures is found in diverse and diffuse areas (see, for example Deacy, 2019; and the Freiburg German Research Foundation Collaborative Research Centre *Heroes–Heroization–Heroism*, SFB 948), but there is currently little interaction between these groups.

The project described in this paper aimed to draw out the nuances of ancient myth narratives and characters, so as to provide a range of different qualities for business leaders and entrepreneurs to think with. By translating our research on textual and visual delivery and engagement with traditional stories and myths in antiquity (Eidinow 2016; Lorenz, 2016), the project scaffolded a context in which the creative skill of storytelling was carefully developed by participants, enabling them to explore and craft their own ideas, surfacing and employing their own tacit capacities, while drawing on the resources, knowledge and skills of the project's facilitators.

The project was structured in two parts, first a set of workshops that explored company values and representation, based on mythic characters; then, building on this approach, a set of workshops on future planning. The workshops were delivered while the authors were both working at the University of Nottingham, and were offered as part of the Ingenuity Network, the University of Nottingham's gateway to local businesses. This network provides a platform for University of Nottingham academics to make external contacts, refine how they communicate their research to a commercial audience and engage in knowledge exchange with small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The Ingenuity Network was established in 2003 and since 2013 has been part-funded by European Regional Development Fund programmes, most recently the Enabling Innovation programme, a 3-year collaboration between the University of Nottingham, Nottingham Trent University and the University of Derby. Some 600 delegates per year attend the network's business networking events and over 1500 external contacts subscribe to its monthly newsletter.¹

Supported by the Ingenuity Network, our clients were kept informed about the different workshop offerings; significant numbers attended both themes, enacting their business stories as an iterative design project over a 12-month period. At the then PraxisUnico's 2017 Impact Awards for Knowledge Exchange and Commercialisation our work was awarded Project of the Year 2017 as part of Nottingham's Arts Business Initiative (Praxisauril, 2017).

Mythic Character Workshops

For three workshops held in 2014–2016 we devised a draft set of cards based on Classical myth characters ("Mythic Character Cards"), such as the "Gatekeeper", modelled on the Greek goddess Hera, or the "Trickster", reflecting traits of the god Hermes. Each card presented both positive and, importantly, negative attributes of each character: for example, the Gatekeeper was depicted as good at networking, but also controlling; the Trickster as excelling at communication, but also as in danger of moving too fast. In this

¹ The authors take this opportunity to thank the organisers of the network, Gemma Morgan-Jones, Jo Murphy, and Steve Upcraft, for their continuous support and good humour.

way, the cards provided the players with useful information about individual personas in summary form, gave prompts for behaviours such personas might demonstrate, and, equally, implemented constraints for such behaviours. Our objective for the Mythic Character Cards was to reflect a range of behaviours beyond the stereotypical heroic behaviours usually highlighted in business literature.

This approach was developed in order to inspire more critical thinking by businesses about the values they brought to their companies, and which they intended them to represent. We adopted the simplicity, flexibility, tangibility and physical shareability of table-top ideation cards, used by Lorenz in other interdisciplinary research settings (Visitorbox, 2020). They are used in many different contexts where iterative design protocols are employed to generate guided walkthroughs and so facilitate structured creativity. Roy and Warren (2018, pp. 1075–1077) give an overview of the history of these design card decks and their applications (see also Borneo, Bruun, & Stage, 2016, p. 453). Such cards are particularly good at condensing complex information into a format that players can digest easily and emulate for their individual design processes; the physical nature of the cards allows for straightforward substantiation and quick modification of thought processes and gives groups of users the opportunity to engage with differing viewpoints and develop shared solutions (Tudor, Muller, & Dayton, 1993; Wölfel & Merritt, 2013).

The workshops were intended to help participants to i) understand the power of stories, and how they work; ii) reflect on their company's goals and values; and iii) identify the current stories that were shaping how they approach their business. Representatives of over 80 SMEs from the region of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire attended these workshops, overall around 120 people, and commented favourably on the practical approach and the applicability of the content. It appeared from these workshops that, at the most fundamental level, engagement with humanities thinking in new and unexpected ways helped attendees to understand their own business better. The Character Cards and related exercises helped participants to take a step away from their current business situation and reflect upon it. In the workshops, we used the cards, alongside a suite of storyboarding exercises, to help participants to explore the characters of their companies—both the values that they felt actually shaped them, and the ways in which the participants more or less successfully communicated those values.

A number of learnings emerged from the workshops. The first concerned storytelling, and how, with little encouragement needed, the participants eagerly exercised their storytelling skills. The workshops helped participants not only to better understand the power of stories and how they work, but also to become aware of storytelling as a specific skill that they possessed and could use productively. Related to this, our second learning concerned the presence of Classical myth in the contemporary world: the participants needed little prompting to recognise the identity and activities of characters from Classical myth, and to use these ideas to think about their companies. Even if they did not know the details of particular myths, with the help of the cards they quickly remembered and/or acquired sufficient grasp of the key dimensions of the individual myth characters to use them effectively in thinking about the values that their own companies represented. Indeed, the use of these Mythic Character Cards seemed to provide participants with a succinct but profound means of summarising sets of ideas, which they could then share with each other. We found that the Mythic Characters provided a common language for discussing traits and activities that the workshop participants recognised, aspired to, or wanted to avoid with regard to the ways their companies actually behaved or might be thought by their customers to behave. It has been suggested to us that the participants' apparent familiarity with the Mythic Characters was in fact based on some similarity between the Character Cards and Jungian archetypes; we were not able to examine this aspect during the project,

but flag it as a possible route of further research. Thirdly, we noted how the participants appreciated their experience with these physical cards, apparently finding this as an intuitive, easy-to-use resource for designing narratives.

Future Planning Workshops

Because of the questions that participants had asked at the first round of workshops, we developed a second offering on storytelling as a technology for thinking about the future. This drew on the previous experience of Eidinow, who, before becoming an academic, had worked as a writer in the field of scenario planning (a form of strategic planning in which participants craft a set of stories about their surrounding environment and its development over a particular timeframe, in order to explore their possible strategic choices); it also drew on her ongoing academic research into divination and futures thinking (Eidinow, 2013).

For the Mythic Character Cards, we harnessed the capabilities of such card decks in considering needs, wishes and requirements of users to support human-centred design; for this next stage we exploited the benefits of ideation cards for future planning (Roy & Warren, 2018, p. 1079). We devised a draft set of "Mythic Challenge Cards" illustrating challenges that were relevant to the business world, highlighting actions that might bring costs or benefits. These cards retained our previous link to Classical myth narratives: thus, "business" actions were illustrated with mythic events. For example, "Diversification", which may help a company to gain flexibility but risks a loss of brand identity, was illustrated by the shape-shifting abilities of the god Zeus; "Experience" was illustrated by the hero Odysseus travelling to the underworld, a trip that helped him learn from his past while at the same time threatening to distract him from his quest. We used this new set of cards, along with the Mythic Character Cards, as a design game in two stages: a user game and a scenario game (Brandt & Messeter, 2004, pp. 123–129). This helped participants to use their storytelling skills to i) think in a structured way about the possible future(s) of their business; ii) reflect on individual challenges they may face; and iii) apply basic principles of storytelling to shape engaging trajectories for their business in response to future challenges. Again, the feedback from the participants was very positive.

The workshops also led to interest in tailored interactions from individual companies. We designed a suite of two Mythic Card workshops for one company that had recently lost its founder and was in the process of restructuring the three strands of its business. The myth-based storytelling helped that company's new leaders to identify more clearly how to communicate with existing and new clients; it supported them in generating a strong brief for their website designers and so impacted positively on their current public representation. An unanticipated outcome was the influence that the storytelling activities had on improving communication within the company and across its different business activities: negotiating characters and storylines helped the team members to develop a sense of shared purpose and strengthened their buy-in to the business aims and objectives. For the executive team of another company that had recently revised their company mission statement we devised a suite of two workshops that used a combination of exercises with Mythic Character and Challenge Cards. These helped them to scope how the different personas that made up their client base might perceive the company's new goals, and how they might make the most of the impact of their business story on their clients, as they moved their business into the future.

The feedback discussions with our clients and the written evaluations collected after each workshop emphasized that these activities helped participants to develop a clearer understanding of the trajectory along which they wanted to develop their business, and to devise relevant milestones accordingly. This demonstrates that the value of storytelling

applied to business planning in a constrained-creativity framework as facilitated by the Mythic Character and Challenge Cards is not (or not only) in developing messages that might be used in marketing. This might be a by-product, as a number of workshop participants felt that the exercises did help them to communicate about their marketing needs more effectively, but this tended to occur because they now had a better understanding of the key values and messages, and potential directions of their companies, and a better sense of how to share those messages, internally and externally.

In sum, the project succeeded in:

- Helping companies and organisations to use stories not just to take stock of the present, but also to shape the futures of their businesses.
- Supporting companies and organisations to i) understand the power of stories, and how they work; ii) identify the current stories that are shaping how they approach their business, and iii) empower them to explore some new stories, and thus, new futures for their organisations.
- Focusing and channelling the inherent creativity of people in leadership positions within their organisations; providing them with a reliable and stable process, offering a robust system for active reflection on, and communication of, the values and meaning of their brand, without constraining their intuitions and ideas.
- Exploring and developing the ways in which ancient concepts and insights found in mythologems and mythic narratives continue to have relevance for practical thinking by giving meaning to experiences and succinctly evoking values.
- Harnessing discipline-specific techniques regarding structured thinking and problem-solving to help businesses initiate and follow through processes of intellectual “disruptive creativity” to facilitate innovation.
- Challenging current approaches to storytelling for businesses, which tend to focus on the so-called “hero narrative”, and instead enable entrepreneurs and companies to find more nuanced narratives that better convey their unique offering in a competitive marketplace.

Thus, as argued above, the insights generated by this project i) contribute an innovative addition to existing business tools; and ii) reveal the relevance to the business environment of a humanities training.

The Practice of Plausibility

In addition, this project generates insights that iii) demonstrate how the practice of storytelling and its aesthetics *becomes* a technology of the plausible, crucial for deliberation and decision making, in a context in which that practice is entrained.

It builds on research by Eidinow and Ramírez (2016, p. 43) which argued:

That which philosophers consider as being included in the domain of the aesthetic is a crucial aspect determining the plausibility of a narrative; that plausibility actually plays a more significant role than probability in many cognitive processes of deliberation and decision making; and that the aesthetics of storytelling is a technology of the plausible.

This was based on the idea that “technologies encapsulate human action, freeze it, and make it available in contexts other than the one in which it arose”. As noted there, it is clear that narrative is a crucial tool for crafting strategies using narrative and thinking through futures in these terms (Eidinow & Ramírez, 2016, pp. 43, & 45, citing Latour, 1990).

That article stressed both the co-creative process of storytelling and built on this idea to argue that how we develop a sense that:

A narrative possesses plausibility (i.e., how we determine that a story is itself plausible), depends not only on our intellectual capabilities, but also on the aesthetic each of us, individually or in groups, has developed, which is a result of our cultural frames and sense of relationality (Eidinow & Ramírez, 2016, p. 46).

It invoked the sense of what feels “right” as another kind of knowledge, apart from factuality, in judging the strength of a story’s plausibility and whether or not it is a “good” story (Eidinow & Ramírez, 2016, p. 48); and explored the role of shared aesthetic judgments as a crucial criterion in developing a powerful shared story, one that “holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, plausibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens, and engagingly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interest of sensemaking” (Weick, 1995, pp. 60–61, cited in Eidinow & Ramírez, 2016, p. 44).

This project demonstrated that in groups or communities where either a shared aesthetic, or a shared story is lacking, the structures of ancient mythemes can offer those working with narrative a relevant scaffold for developing a new shared narrative. Such a scaffold can create not only a shared “agenda” for strategic planning, but also, or perhaps primarily, engender a profound sense of connection around the implied values, and their appeal, which underpin narratives.

Summary

Our aim with this paper is to generate an innovative business process through knowledge exchange between scholars of myth and businesses. On the one hand, we aim to support the Classics research community, strengthening a budding area of the Classics research community, and developing a field of “Practical Classics’: a new, practice-based pathway for research into Classical reception. On the other hand, we also consider that this project will have broader significance; informing a more knowledgeable and critical perspective on the narratives used in current business practice that will not only help to reshape that practice, but will also provide crucial insights into the appeal and dissemination of contemporary storytelling cultures. While there is ample opportunity in such a project for research into business interactions and the aesthetics of storytelling, this project is just one example of the potential of the Arts and Humanities to engage with the business sector and with the wider economy.

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