Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory

Charlotte Linde
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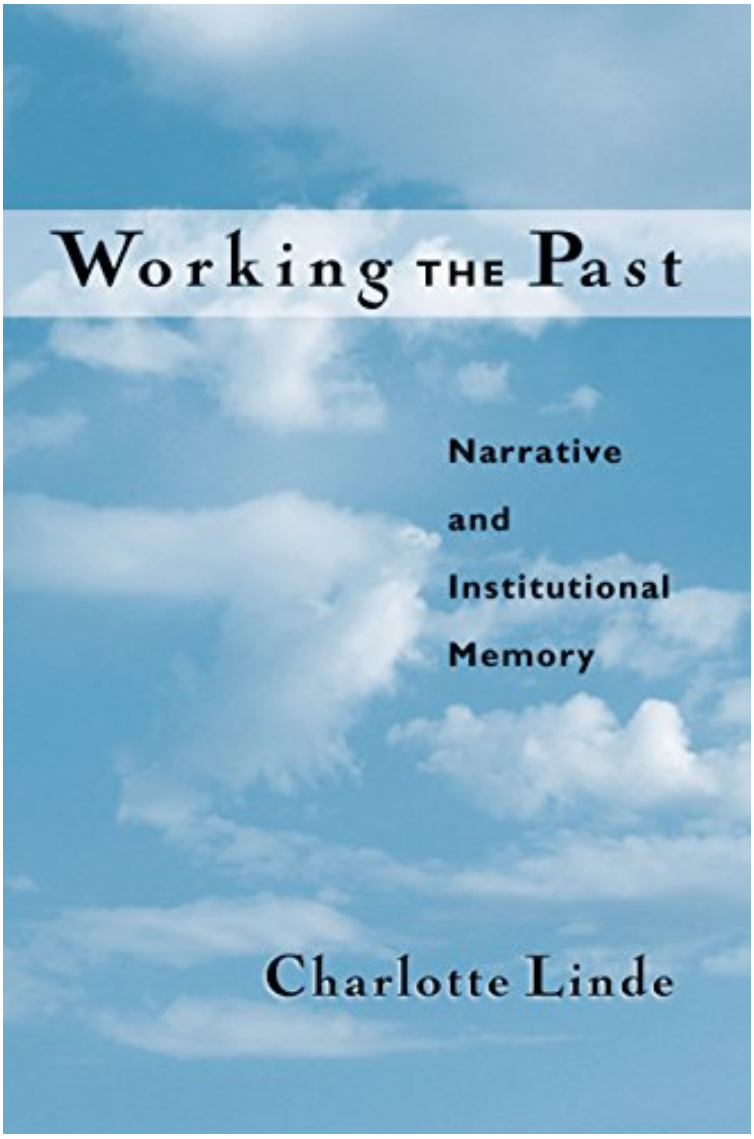

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Charlotte Linde : Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory:

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Working the past works for meBy John D. SmithA key story in Charlotte Linde's Working the Past; Narrative and Institutional Memory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) is about an insurance company that was having trouble getting its agents to sell certain policies. The company's management wanted to know whether the problem was a learning problem (e.g., so you'd "solve it" by having the training department ramp it up) or a motivation problem (e.g., so you'd solve it by changing the compensation plan or contract between the company and the agents?). It turned out that the new sales strategy didn't really fit in Bob's

story:"He started from scratch, worked nights and weekends, did thousands of cold calls to build up his book of business. And you've seen him now. His efforts were so successful that now he's driving a BMW, and takes every Wednesday off to play golf."Bob's story didn't include selling the new policies or making big changes when the company's management decided to change direction: it was a story about arriving. Bob's story was invisible because it was never told as such: it only existed in snippets, as an unspoken but potent reference point in people's minds that shaped career expectations and choices. It came into explicit existence when the ethnographers from the Institute for Research on Learning constructed it as part of a massive ethnographic project in the 1990's and presented it to the company's management.I recommended it to a rather bookish consultant friend who wrote back that he couldn't see what was actionable or practical about it. I've been wondering about that comment for a while, even as the book continues to influence how I think about storytelling in organizations and communities. Why, exactly, do I think this book is so practical and relevant?At this particular point in history, if you doubt that it's important to understand what's on the minds of people who sell financial instruments, why sales agents sell (or don't sell) something, I would suspect you've been living a very sheltered life. Misreading or misunderstanding organizational culture brings systemic risks.One reason this book is not hugely popular with the storytelling or organization development communities is suggested by the fact that the story about Bob is not in the index under "Bob." You can find it under "discourse unit, paradigmatic narratives as, 148-49". So the book is a long hard slog unless you like that kind of stuff. For better or worse I read it twice. After I finished it the first time, I left it on a plane. When I started over, with the idea of skimming it to re-construct my notes, I found that it was worth reading slowly a second time. The book is chock full of big and small insights.A fundamental point is that "remembering" is a human activity that's situated in time and space. Talking about "memory" as a disembodied and abstract entity is problematic and misleading. Remembering (most frequently through storytelling) is something we can observe and therefore influence if we understand what's happening:"A story not having a proper occasion on which it can or must be told exists in an archive if it exists at all.... If there is any place where the process of institutional remembering can be deliberately altered, it is the creation, maintenance, or abandonment of narrative occasions." p. 222.You have to be listening at the right time and place. In fact Linde has a scheme for classifying narrative occasions on p 47: "Table 3.1. Occasions for Narrative Remembering"Whether this is the frame you want to use or not (where exactly would you place my story of reading Linde's book twice?), it seems to me that having some frame or other is really useful. The situation matters: where a story is told, when, with what purpose, to whom, and how it is varied to fit the situation are fundamental to making sense of it. A frame like hers does a lot of work, like helping you detect repeated stories, commonplace stories that anybody can tell (e.g., you can tell it in some situations even its about events you yourself did not witness), or even detect stories that are not told (I think detecting meaningful silence is a big deal: "Just listen for it" says Linde).Linde's emphasis on the situated nature of storytelling connects with another fundamental with practical implications: stories are social, jointly produced by teller and listener. Telling stories that make sense is a social obligation:"This creation [of narrative coherence] is not a light matter; it is in fact a social obligation which must be fulfilled in order for the participants to appear as competent members of their culture." p 4.If we live in times of change, then this should be a good time for telling stories and for understanding what we're doing when we're telling them:"Times of change are rich in occasions when the past is invoked. The past is used to reaffirm a sense of identity, to provide a ground form which to assess the effect and meaning of changes, and to provide a basis for critique of changes. It is at times of change that a particular way of being is constructed as the past." p. 43When you think about how many books on storytelling come down to endless bullet lists and instructional bromides, it makes you appreciate what a huge accomplishment it is that Linde's Working the Past is actually a good yarn about storytelling.4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Don't miss this one!By JAKSo you think that stories about day-to-day life in a large insurance company would be mind-numbing? Think again. Charlotte Linde has written a scholarly book in a lively style--often with tongue-in-cheek humor--on how company members evoke stories about the company's past in order to shape its future. This ethnography of MidWest Insurance (a pseudonym) takes place during a period of change in the company, thus lending opportunities for remembering and evaluating the past. `Core' stories are told and re-told about the company's founder, its growth and expansion, and difficulties that have been overcome. `Paradigmatic' stories are told to prospective members about exemplary agents to demonstrate what it might mean to be part of the company. Individual members' stories are also told in relation to the institution's stories. In ten elegantly written and engaging chapters, Linde analyzes the structure of these narratives and the occasions for their use, showing how these tales serve to build and maintain both institutional and individual identity. In effect, Linde tells a good story about stories, one that will appeal to a broad audience, including academics in the fields of linguistics and anthropology and professionals in the insurance business and other commercial enterprises.

Stories told within institutions play a powerful role, helping to define not only the institution itself, but also its individual members. How do institutions use stories? How do those stories both preserve the past and shape the future? To what extent does narrative construct both collective and individual identity?Charlotte Linde's unique and far-reaching study addresses these questions by looking at the interplay of narratives, memory, and identity in a large

insurance company. Her detailed ethnography looks at the role of stories within the institution and how they are employed by its members in both private and group settings. Analyzing the re-telling of certain key stories, she shows how the formation of "core" stories and their multiple re-tellings and modifications provide a means of formulating and promoting a cohesive group identity -- which in turn shapes the stories and identities of the individuals within the collective. Linde also looks at silences, and how stories not told also convey their version of the past.Working the Past shows how stories that might otherwise be seen as part of mundane daily life are in fact utterly essential to the formation and maintenance of individual and group identity. Her original research will appeal to those interested in narrative studies, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and institutional memory.

About the AuthorCharlotte Linde is a Research Scientist at the NASA Ames Research Center, and has also taught at Stanford University, University of California, Berkeley, and the City University of New York. She is the author of Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence.