

Truth or Story? The Human Capacity for Knowledge



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Tell me a story.

In this century, and moment, of mania,

Tell me a story.

Make it a story of great distances, and starlight.

The name of the story will be Time,

But you must not pronounce its name.

Tell me a story of deep delight.

(from the poem [Tell Me a Story](#), by Robert Penn Warren)

I'm perpetually pondering the fact that I don't know very much about very much. Trust me, I didn't figure this out on my own! My hunch was affirmed while reading *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone*, by Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach. Sloman and Fernbach decipher topics such as the communal nature of intelligence, ignorance and comprehension, and storytelling as a learning experience.

Three of my personal 'ah ha' lessons and insights from the book include:

1. **Familiarity and recognition are too often confused with actual understanding.** The authors offer examples of amusing, alternative versions of the all-too-familiar Pledge of Allegiance, including "One nation, under God, invisible," (instead of "One nation, under God, *indivisible*" to "And to the republic, for witches stand" (instead of "the republic for *which it stands*"). These errors of familiarity remind the reader that true comprehension requires deliberate thought, processing information with care, and even reflecting on an author or artist's intention. Rote memorization is an example of how our learning is too-often superficial. At NRMCM we see something similar in the quest for a framework or 'process' that should be applicable and ready for download at a nonprofit. We frequently remind clients that there is no well-fitting, one-size-fits-all risk management solution. Nonprofit leaders should quest to comprehend and customize everything from individual risk policies, to the structures of their risk management functions.
2. **True intelligence resides in the collective—not individual—brain.** What a relief! Sloman and

Fernbach explain that humans actually store “very little detailed information about the world in their heads.” Although I’m a glutton for learning, learning sometimes feels like a harsh reminder of how little I know. The authors of *The Knowledge Illusion* explain that true knowledge resides in our communities; the key to applying knowledge to whatever you are striving to accomplish, is to rely on the knowledge that is stored outside—in the environment and “especially in other people.” On the topic of learning, they also explain that the highest, most meaningful forms of learning occur in a community. The authors describe something I’ve witnessed countless times during staff meetings at NRM: “we learn best when we’re thinking with others.” A related insight is that the success of a team is mostly determined by how well it works together, and not the intelligence of individual members. We must also remember that intelligence is present in every corner of our community or social network—not just within the apparent subject matter experts or individuals in positions of authority.

On the subject of shared knowledge, I was reminded of Leonard Mlodinow’s book, *Subliminal: How Your Subconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior*. Mlodinow reminds his readers that although our unconscious minds are “active, purposeful, and independent,” we too often get things terribly wrong. Examples in *Subliminal* include inaccurate ‘first-hand’ witness accounts. Like Sloman and Fernbach, Mlodinow also emphasizes the role and relationship of social networks to knowledge.

3. **Storytelling inspires action because it helps make ‘causal’ sense of the world.** When members of my family come together, we love telling and retelling stories from our shared history, as well as new stories from recent, personal experience. When reminiscing about ‘ancient’ family history, we always have a laugh about how we remember events differently. Invariably, my dad will make me the protagonist in an incident that starred one of my sisters. When recounting recent events without family witnesses, each of us relishes the opportunity to embellish our stories just a bit... to make them more memorable. Over many years of service at NRM I’ve accumulated a truckload of stories about risk in the nonprofit world. Sloman and Fernbach have helped me connect the dots between risk and storytelling: “A good story goes beyond just describing what actually happened. It tells us about how the world works more broadly, in ways that pertain to things that didn’t actually happen or at least haven’t happened yet.” Storytelling—something that seems so distant from the world of risk management—actually inspires reflection of alternative courses of action. This type of thinking enables nonprofit teams to develop contingency plans and an adaptive capacity. And as well-crafted stories are memorable and meaningful, storytelling in the workplace might also improve a team’s institutional memory.

According to journalist Walter Lippmann who created the modern meaning of the word ‘stereotype,’ “...the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance.” With the barrage of data and stressors that make noise around us and stimulate our minds each day, it’s no wonder that an individual has such limited capacity to recall and comprehend information and experiences. Recognizing our own limitations, relying on the talents of our team members, and using proven techniques like storytelling can help us learn and make decisions effectively.

Perhaps the first step to deconstructing the ‘*Knowledge Illusion*’ is to unlearn what we think we know. We’ve all heard mish mashes of the Socratic Paradox: “I know that I know nothing,” or “The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.” Socrates once professed that wisdom comes first from recognizing one’s own ignorance. Some people attribute these phrases directly to Socrates, while others believe these phrases were never recorded directly from Socrates but are represented in other forms in Plato’s accounts of Socrates. Having just read [this Wikipedia page](#), I now doubt my original understanding that Socrates said the exact words “I know that I know nothing.” Wikipedia—a collective knowledge source—represents one of Sloman and Fernbach’s golden nuggets of advice. I know that none of us know anything for sure, but we know a great deal more together.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Melanie tries to practice what she preaches so the NRM team often writes RISK eNews articles—including this one—as a group. Our four heads are always better than one! Melanie invites you to share your thoughts on learning at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.