Chapter 6

Narrative Reasoning

ABSTRACT

A large proportion of our knowledge and indeed our reasoning is not received or communicated as formal reasoning or informal reasoning but, in fact, as stories. When we focus on this as a reality, it demands that we consider what can be said about reasoning that is conveyed and represented in stories and how it relates to other forms of representing and communicating reasoning. Given that stories are so commonly used, is it possible that they are a form of coalesced reasoning that a community can use, or do they confuse and detract from the main concerns and aspirations of reasoning communities?

The paradigmatic mode of human decision making and communication is “good reasons” which vary in form among communication situations, genres, and media (Fisher, 1995).

INTRODUCTION

There are two main approaches that people use to organize and make sense out of their experiences: logical thinking and stories or narrative thinking. Both of these approaches have a long history of providing useful structures for organizing experiences and being able to make sense of them. Narrative reasoning can provide a valuable approach to complex reasoning involved in problem solving and decision-making. Often, there are areas that require clear practical reasoning that may be poorly understood and even less clearly available for learning by some form of logical analysis and representation.

Much of our attempt to understand our world has taken the form of stories and narrative myths. These myths and stories have often passed on, in a compressed form, reasoning that has been important practically as well as in a literary sense. McCloskey (1990) describes stories and metaphors as the two ways of understanding
things and suggests that they can work together to provide answers. Narrative reasoning addresses situations that find difficulty in being addressed with the sequential form of verbal reasoning. The situations often involve multiple causes and multiple effects. Many social phenomena are like this and it would be fair to say that the great body of our accumulated social wisdom is expressed as narrative. Narrative reasoning could be viewed as an efficient way of dealing with complexity. Whereas verbal reasoning relies on long chains of logical steps, each small enough to be considered proven, narrative reasoning addresses situations that cannot be addressed in this way. For example, we could analyse the social information in the movie Jurassic Park as the verbal representations: the amazing world of the dinosaurs recreated as a theme park; the fallacy of man trying to control the development of biological species. There are many other interpretations and lines of reasoning that are captured.

In both logical reasoning and narrative reasoning, cause and effect relations are established between factors and used in sequential patterns. Both aim to organize and make sense of human experience in a way that can guide problem solving and decision-making. Whilst we recognize the product of logical or analytical reasoning as laws or rules, which are largely context-free and testable, the product of narrative reasoning is a story, which is highly contextual and testable mainly through personal and interpersonal experience.

In this chapter, we briefly review models of stories and narrative. From this, we extract a simple story model and some of the important aspects of narrative models. These are combined with a model of reasoning (the Generic/Actual Argument Model) to produce a way of generating stories from reasoning that convey the reasoning.

The literature has suggested that human beings process information in two ways: analytically and narratively. People in areas such as law and the sciences are more familiar and aware of analytic argument, but legal discourse can also take the form of narrative. Some of the differences between what might be called analytic reasoning and narrative can be gleaned. Arguments and more formal reasoning tend to convince others by being grounded in the facts and sound deductive reasoning from the facts. They try to appeal to a notion of truth and rules. However often this is achieved through norms that are abstracted from life experiences. Narratives are convincing because of their plausibility or likeliness. A narrative’s likeliness arises out of reasoning based upon common, shared or well understood experience and knowledge of how things really are in the world. There is a strong connection to the specifics of a situation and its credibility.

Conventional, analytical reasoning and argument tends to deconstruct experience, narrative attempts to reconstruct it. For example, in constructing an argument we might collect a number of propositions that could be regarded as facts and then map out abstract propositions that are rules or abstract propositions of the domain (for example, the law) that can be put together to reach the desired conclusion. However, if we were trying to weave a convincing story to persuade others on action to a desired conclusion, then this will look very different from an analytical argument. Narrative sequence treats narrative facts as they are found in life, embedding them in particular context-rich settings. The narrative’s concrete details are not connected through abstract propositions but through natural associations that ‘ring true.’ Events and facts that are linked in these associations resonate and have effect because they are familiar and reflect the world of another individual—the reader or listener. Their world is a situated world of cultural norms, values, and conventions and they will interpret and test the narrative’s authenticity, credibility, and point against their own experience of the world. A narrative presentation of a case requires the reader’s involvement by asking them to draw upon their personal experience and normal expectation when reading and interpreting the text.

In this chapter, it is argued that stories are an important way in which some members of a