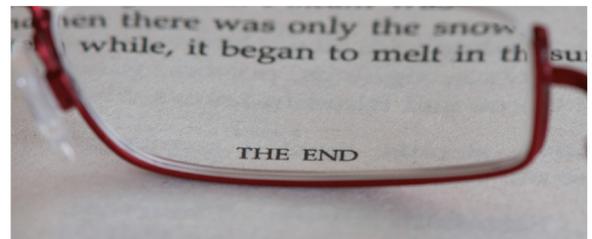


Narrative and Narrativium in Life Science Research

On the phantasy world “Discworld”, home of Terry Pratchett’s famous novels, the most common element is Narrativium, co-existing peacefully with other elements like earth, fire, water and surprise. Narrativium ensures that stories run properly as they are supposed to run. A swineherd marries the princess, a dragon breathes fire, a million-in-one chance will always work and so on. This is Narrativium in action, the power of the story controls the course of events and the ending.



No trace of Narrativium has been found in our universe but stories are powerful nonetheless. Narratives influence many aspects of life, science included. Some of them we got rid off some time ago (“combustible bodies contain phlogiston”) but others are still persistent as for example published by Ioannidis et al under the headline “What Happens When Underperforming Big Ideas in Research Become Entrenched”.

The authors postulate that the biomedical research community has pursued a narrative suggesting that a combination of ever-deeper knowledge of subcellular biology coupled with information technology will lead to transformative improvements in health care – and that this story has largely failed.

Seen from a Discworld point of view, narrative has been confused with Narrativium. The powerful story – “understanding DNA will explain diseases and this will lead to improved diagnosis and preventive medicine” – strongly influenced the course of events and was expected to produce a happy ending. So far it did not, since the formidable genetic complexity of most diseases was not part of the initial story. Discworlds Narrativium would have worked, our worlds narrative did not.

Hoping for Narrativium

Powerful stories capture our attention and influence our actions. Powerful stories suggest that they will indeed run properly, happy ending included. Quite a few of us have claimed that “Some day my lottery numbers will win!” – even so statistics and years of evidence demonstrate that this is quite unlikely. Intellectually we operate with the narrative, emotionally we hope for Narrativium to kick in.

When pursuing powerful stories in science and drug discovery, narratives should never be confused with Narrativium. Projects running focused, fast and smoothly along a project plan towards success is a powerful narrative, told at numerous strategy meetings. The firm expectation that each and every finished work package will contribute to project success as initially planned is Narrativium – the story is expected to ensure a

The Power of Stories

„What Happens When Underperforming Big Ideas in Research Become Entrenched.“

1

PERMANENTS

Narrative and Narrativium in Life Science Research

proper ending.

“Quality regulations kill scientific creativity and success” is another narrative, frequently told by drug discovery scientists and the instant mental picture of a suffering scientist filling pointless forms with needless data shows that this story is indeed a powerful one. Frequently it influences reality by keeping quality rules strictly out of drug discovery, relying at the same time on Narrativium to ensure quality in a world free of rules.

“Big Data has to be good for something” or “Biotech Spirit makes external innovation always better” (also known as the “grass-is-greener- outside hypothesis”) – powerful stories are quite common in Life Science R&D, yet quite a lot of them seem to require a bit of Narrativium to reach a proper ending.

Happy Ending

Narrativium doesn't exist in our universe but narrative imperative – the power of the story – does and we should keep that in mind when pursuing a compelling scientific story, running a scientific project or trying to discover new drugs. Until we find a reliable source for Narrativium, scientific stories do not come along with a built-in proper ending.

*„Never confuse
Narrative and
Narrativium when
pursuing
Scientific Stories.“*