

Lessons on Lessons: A Rhetorical Analysis of Wildland Fire Learning Documents

Bailey D. Thrasher

Dept. of Communication Studies, Texas State University
San Marcos, TX USA

Dr. Rebekah Fox

Dept. of Communication Studies, Texas State University
San Marcos, TX USA

Abstract: This study focuses on how to improve organizational learning from unintended outcomes, specifically through the analysis of “lessons learned” documents. We conduct a rhetorical genre analysis of over 80 learning documents housed in the United States Forest Service (USFS) Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center database, to inductively identify the current genre of lessons learned. Our findings reveal common “watch-out situations” in lesson construction, and we offer ways to improve lessons so that they are clear, compelling, and transferrable.

Keywords — Lessons learned, genre analysis, rhetoric, USFS, wildland fire

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INTRODUCTION

To cultivate resilience in organizations, researchers have demonstrated the need to prioritize learning, not just during onboarding and training, but specifically after “unintended outcomes.” Organizational learning literature often still uses the word “failure” to refer to “unintended outcomes,” but this language choice is significant because failure is a totalizing term that limits the possibility for people to see the worth in learning in these moments. “Failure” also invites the reader/listener to try to identify who or what failed, which is a hallmark of “blame culture” rather than learning culture. Moreover, organizations must find ways to unlearn attitudes, values, and behaviors that inhibit an organization’s resilience [1], which are often associated with blaming individuals. One such attitude is reflected in the common (but highly erroneous) phrase “experience is the only real teacher”. In high-reliability work environments, the importance of learning from the experiences of others is magnified, as gaining firsthand experience for some lessons could be deadly. Effective learning messages must explain information as well as find ways for learners to internalize the content and motivate them toward specific action [3]. To achieve this multifaceted goal of explanation, internalization, and motivation, we agree that organizations should employ rhetorical tools for more resonant messages [4]. To better understand how organizations can use rhetorical tools to increase the likelihood that their learning documents will be effective, we’ve analyzed a selection of learning products from the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center (LLC) database (<https://lessons.fs2c.usda.gov/>) [7]. This database is public facing, searchable, and houses over 900 fire-related documents.

THE USFS LEARNING JOURNEY

Following tragic wildland fires in the 1990s and early 2000s, the USFS began to prioritize the need to focus directly on safety, and more specifically, to create the infrastructure to support robust learning efforts [5]. Consequently, the Forest Service set a goal to become a learning organization by using both unintended outcomes and successful practices for systemic improvement. To help meet this goal, the USFS created the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center (LLC), which encourages individuals connected to incidents to share their experiences to enhance understanding and foster a culture of safety and improvement. The LCC serves as a repository for a variety of learning products- some generated by LCC staff, but many more generated by first-hand experiences in the field and submitted to the LCC for publication. Twice a year, the

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National Advanced Fire and Resource Institute (<https://www.nafri.gov>) conducts the “Learning From Unintended Outcomes” workshops to train hundreds of participants in how to produce RLSs and FLAs including how to conduct interviews, site visits, etc., and how to weave those materials into a composite story [2]. Although the full week course covers everything from just culture, organizational learning, and systems thinking to how to maintain a chain of custody when collecting burned or damaged personal protective equipment. What is currently not in the curriculum is instruction on how to create lessons from the stories that have a better chance of resonating with different audiences.

The word “lesson” seems like it would be universally understood, but this concept has yet to be fully explored as a unique form of discourse by organizational communication scholars. As such, what appears in learning documents as “lessons learned” can range widely in substance, style, and potential persuasive effectiveness. The goal of this project is both theoretical and practical. Specifically, we seek to (a) articulate a genre of “lessons learned” and theorize about improving the production and uptake of lessons in organizations, and (b) support the United States Forest Service wildland firefighting learning initiatives by shaping training curriculum.

METHODS

Each year, the USFS Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center provides “Incident Review Summaries” that feature particularly salient learning opportunities produced that year. Primarily, the learning documents featured in the reports are referred to as “Rapid Lessons Shared” (RLS) or “Facilitated Learning Analyses” (FLA). The learning documents featured in the reports were selected by the editorial staff at the LLC for their likelihood to impact the learning community in important ways. RLSs and FLAs may differ in layout and presentation, especially considering new technologies, but almost every RLS or FLA includes some type of composite story of an incident, woven together from multiple interviews, and some set of “lessons learned.”

By conducting a rhetorical genre description analysis [6], we inductively analyze the content that is currently categorized as “lessons learned” with the goal of articulating commonalities in substance and style across the lessons learned. The descriptive analysis (what is it?) is followed by a rhetorical analysis, which allows us to make recommendations for integrating more effective rhetorical tools to create higher quality and more memorable lessons (how can we improve it?). This analysis and subsequent recommendations will contribute to a gap in the academic literature in organizational learning, as well as translate into better learning products for the USFS.

DATA COLLECTION

In order to create a manageable dataset from the several hundred documents on the website, we opted to focus on the last five years of “Incident Review Summaries” (similar to “end of year reports”) on the Lessons Learned Center website. The Incident Review Summaries feature salient content from the year, as determined by the editors at the Lessons Learned Center. These summaries include coverage of fatalities, common accidents (UTV injuries, burn injuries, vehicle accidents, entrapments, etc.), and data analysis of trends among other items. The Incident Review Summaries make good material for refresher courses and other learning opportunities because the curated nature of the summaries means that the editors brought together a large amount of data and presented it in one, user-friendly format. The Incident Review Summaries typically include primary hyperlinks to specific RLSs and FLAs, but those documents also contain secondary hyperlinks to other learning documents. For this analysis, we examined primary hyperlinks, and secondary hyperlinks of five years of Incident Review Summaries, which included 80 documents or approximately 660 pages of text, that yielded approximately 817 “lessons.” Once all of the primary and secondary documents had been compiled, the data set was printed (one copy per researcher), and the lessons were read and analyzed.

ANALYSIS

The substance or content of the lessons we analyzed fell into 18 different categories including such topics as vehicles, communication, incident-within-an-incident (IWI) response, entrapments, personal protective equipment, unplanned event coordination, training, post-incident response, investigations, mental health, and felling operations/chainsaw work, to name a few. Taken together, the substance of the lessons tends to be almost always event driven but ranged from lessons on isolated tactics to systems-level policy strategy. Interestingly, one other common substantive item that appeared in these “lessons” was the consistent offering of an explanation or defense of the learning process itself.

Stylistically, the lessons vary in tone/voice, visual presentation, organization, and rhetorical resources like tropes, metaphors, etc. This variety is illustrated in the ten different ways authors attempted to name this section of the document (“Lessons learned,” “Lessons Shared,” “Lessons learned by those involved,” “Why does this matter?” “Lessons learned by affected employees,” etc.). Some common stylistic choices were to a) offer a lesson in the form of a discussion prompt aimed directly at the reader (ex. “How often do your escape routes rely on a vehicle?”), b) include personal quotes from participants, c) provide links to other learning documents, and d) present lessons in bulleted lists.

DISCUSSION

In the USFS, we use the phrase “watch-outs” to describe common hazards or typical, known points of failure for different situations. Our analysis revealed watch-outs around a) lesson types (undigested lessons, overly broad observations, idealistic or “always true” lessons, risky enthymemes, etc.), b) hindsight bias and passing judgement, and d) assigning intent to mistakes. Our rhetorical analysis also points us to ways to improve the quality of lessons learned, not just for the USFS but for other organizations, as well. We recommend focusing on creating lessons that are clear, compelling, and transferable and we provide instruction on how to achieve that in the full paper.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to advance research in organizational learning through rhetorical genre analysis to provide better understanding of what a lesson learned is as well as how to create better lessons. We analyzed 817 lessons from the last five years of Incident Review Summaries produced by the USFS Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center. Within the findings, the ways in which lessons can and should be shared to contribute to the resilience created by organizational members were highlighted. Ultimately, we provide theoretical and practical implications for organizations to create better lessons through the use of rhetorical devices.

Author Biography

B. D. Thrasher. Thrasher earned her BA in Communication Studies from Texas State University and is currently enrolled in the graduate program and serves as the Basic Course Administrator in the Department of Communication Studies at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas, bdt70@txstate.edu.

R. Fox. Fox earned her Ph.D. in Communication from Purdue University and is currently a Professor at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas, rf24@txstate.edu. Special thanks go out to the USDA/USFS Rocky Mountain Research Station for providing funding for this research.

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