

Local folk tales exercise

An exercise addendum to *Working with Stories in Your Community or Organization: Participatory Narrative Inquiry* by Cynthia F. Kurtz. Last updated August 2018.

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Note: This is not a finished exercise; it's more of a prototype, in need of additional testing and refinement. Please send comments, suggestions, and questions to cfkurtz@cfkurtz.com.

Purpose

In this exercise, people share stories that explore what they (as a group) want, need, hope for, and fear. Together they build a collection of “local folk tales” they can draw on to explore their shared identity, context, and purpose. You could call it a “getting to know who we are” exercise. It might be useful for a group that is facing a new challenge, or celebrating a milestone, or wondering what its future might be like in the face of changes.

The exercise is particularly useful for people in a family, work group, community, or organization. It is not recommended for people who don't know each other at all.

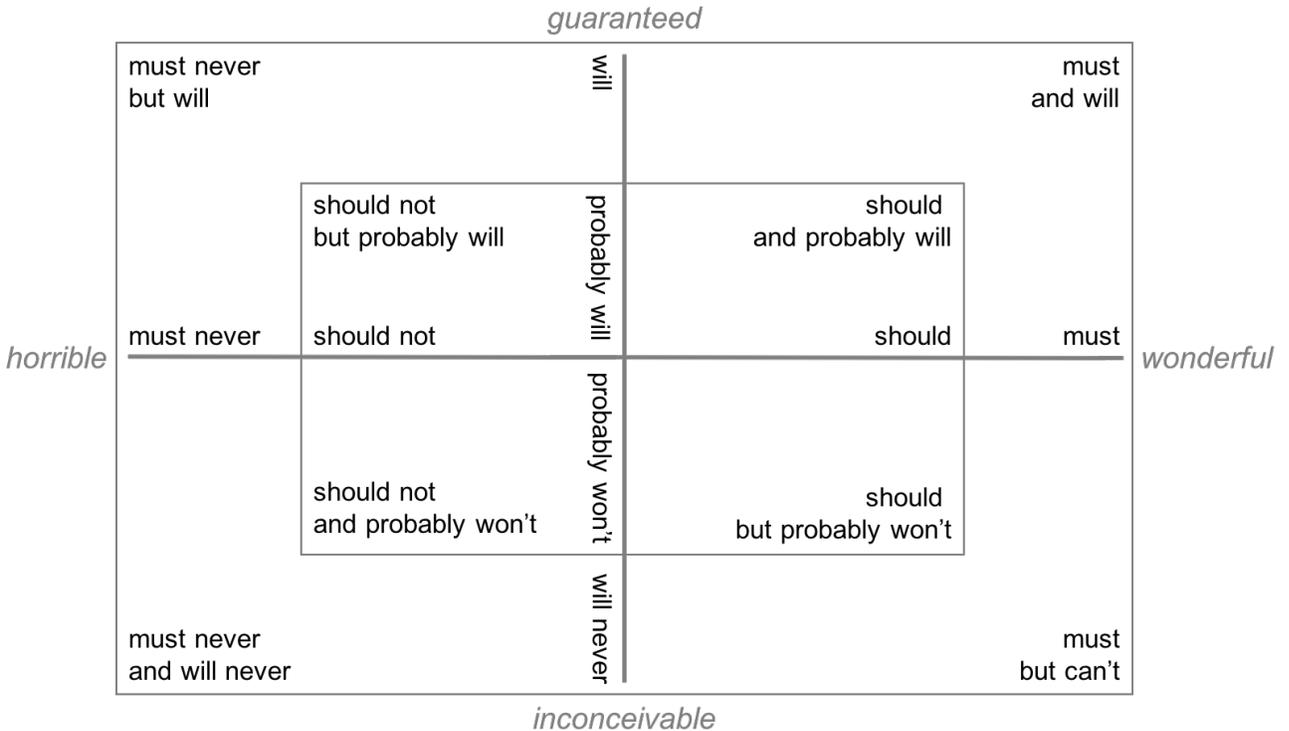
Requirements

At least **90 minutes**. At least **3 people**. Pens, paper, sticky notes.

Before you start

Print enough copies of the following diagram for each group of three people to have one. Alternatively, you can write the diagram's lines and labels on large sheets of paper.

Think about whether you want people to consider all of their experiences or only their experiences centered around one topic.



5 minutes – Introduce the exercise and form small groups

Show everyone the diagram. Explain that the vertical axis explores what *can* happen and the horizontal axis explores what people *want* to happen. If you chose a topic, introduce it now.

If you have more than three people, break up into small groups of three people each. Don't split up people who know each other well. You want shared experience to sit together.

5 minutes – Choose to explore the future or the past

Each group should choose one of these two questions to focus on together:

1. What ____ happen?
2. What ____ happen *again*?

They will be filling in the blank space in the question with each of the labels on the diagram, such as for example:

1. What *should not but probably will* happen?
2. What *should not but probably will* happen *again*?

Each of these questions is worth exploring. Each will appeal more to some people than others. Every group should decide which question they want to use. This time will also give groups the chance to absorb and understand the diagram as they look at it together.

Another option is to use both questions at once by telling whichever story comes to mind *first* for each label. (That's complicated, though, and most people will probably pick one question or the other to use.)

60 minutes – Share stories

Each group, working together, should:

Look at the diagram. Think of stories that fit the labels written on it (such as things that “should but probably won’t” happen). Share the stories with each other. Tell at least one story for each of the labels. If you do that, see if you can tell more than one story for each label.

After each story has been told, give it a name. Write the name on the diagram (directly or with a sticky note). Talk about each story. If a story seems particularly important to the group, circle it or underline it to show that it “sticks out” to you.

20 minutes – Discuss

If you have more than one group, show each other the story names you wrote on your diagrams. Retell some of the most important stories. Talk about similarities and differences. What happens if you try to combine your separate diagrams into one? Do they fit together?

Now talk about your local folk tale collection. What is it like? What surprised you? What didn't surprise you? What have you learned about your group?

Optional: Do it over again with the other question

If you want to, you can go back through the exercise again, but with each group considering the question they *didn't* use before. (They should write new story names on a second copy of the diagram.) How does that change the diagram? What can you learn from it?

After the exercise is over

I wouldn't do anything with the things people create in this exercise. Don't transcribe the stories or write up a report or disseminate the stories beyond the group. Local folk tales are meant to stay both local and oral. If people want copies of the diagrams they marked up, you can help them get those; but I wouldn't do more than that.

Tips on facilitating the exercise

These are some things that are likely to come up as you facilitate this exercise.

Don't use it for strangers

This exercise will not work well if the people in the group have no connections to each other. They should be part of a community or have some kind of shared experience. If a group of

complete strangers does this exercise, their landscapes of what can and can't and should and shouldn't happen will be all over the place, and the group won't be able to draw coherent meanings out of it.

If you ever do happen to end up in a situation where you have to use this exercise with a group of random strangers, see if you can *find* some groups of people with similar experiences. For example, you could ask all parents to come together, or all pet lovers, or all scientists, or all fitness enthusiasts. *Then ask them to confine their stories to that topic.* Something like that might work – a folk tale collection about cats – and it might even be interesting. But I wouldn't *plan* to use this exercise with a group of random people; there are better exercises for that situation.

Yes, make things up

People who are in a work setting might find this exercise especially difficult, because they aren't used to being asked to "make things up" at work. It might seem like they are being asked to lie. If you find people getting upset about that aspect of the thing, steer them toward the "What ___ happen *again*" question. The stories they will tell in that version of the exercise will be real.

In that case, see if you can repeat the exercise another time, maybe a week or two later when people have had a chance to reflect on the experience. See if they are willing to make the plunge into fiction then.

Make sure everyone is telling stories

This exercise is likely to appeal differently to different personalities. People who love to read folk tales will probably be enthused about creating their own, while others will not. Ask groups to make sure that everyone has a chance to tell at least a few of the stories on their diagram.

People might not agree on what should happen

Sometimes, even in a small group of three, people might tell stories that represent different perspectives on what should happen. That's fine; that's what you are exploring. Folk tale collections often present conflicting perspectives.

When this happens, ask people to *annotate* the story names they write on their diagrams to show the differing perspectives. For example, if a person tells a story that (they say) should happen, and another person says "No, that shouldn't happen," ask them to put the story name on the diagram *twice*, with "from the perspective of" or "according to" each person or perspective.

In other words, groups can *use the diagram to represent internal conflict* about the meanings of the stories they have told. Later on, they can use this to spur discussions about the conflicts and what they mean to the group.

People might have trouble fleshing out their folk tales

Sometimes when people are making up stories about impossible things, they can't get past a simple outline, like "nobody will ever commit a crime again." When you see people struggling with too-simple stories, try suggesting that they fill in Kenn Adams' story spine. It's a simple story-building exercise used in improv circles, and it goes like this:

- Once upon a time...
- Every day...
- But one day...
- Because of that...
- Because of that...
- Because of that...
- Until finally...
- And ever since that day...

Ask people to say those words out loud and see what comes to mind to say next. The simple structure might help people put together stories that work for them. I wouldn't give the structure to people who are not having trouble making up stories, because it might get in their way. But for people who are struggling, this will give them something to hold on to.

Where this exercise came from

This exercise began as a blog post on the PNI Institute blog (pni2.org). I wrote it because I was thinking about innovation and future planning using participatory narrative inquiry. Here is the blog post, in case you're curious about the thinking behind it.

My first thought on this topic [of innovation and future planning using PNI] was that innovation is the area in which I have had the least success in PNI projects. I think this is partly due to the fact that **exploring experiences is inherently a backward-looking process**. So PNI is an easier, simpler fit with goals like discovering unmet needs or making sense of how we got to where we are.

But there's another thing that makes it hard to support innovation with stories: I think **people have forgotten how to fantasize on purpose and in public**. Sure, we all daydream, but we don't take it seriously; we don't *use* it to our advantage. Sometimes we *think* we are imagining the future with stories, but we're really only halfway there, and we can't tell the difference.

The way we *used* to explore the future with stories was through folk tales. These came in many forms, and not just the ones that were preserved in printed compilations. **The best folk tales have always been local**, that is, meant for use within one family or community. Those are the stories that died out first, because nobody wanted to write down stories full of references few people could follow. Indeed, many of the people who recorded folk tales deliberately changed or removed references to local traditions and groups so they could reach wider audiences. Local folk tales once served an important function in communities and groups: they helped people

collectively explore **what could and couldn't and should and shouldn't happen**, in the past and in the future.

So I was thinking about this, and I thought: What if a group was to **deliberately build a set of local folk tales**? What if they took a space like this one and filled it with stories? [And then there was a picture of the diagram above.]

The two axes on this diagram cover the two things that matter most in folk tales: **desirability** (whether we want something to happen) **and possibility** (whether it could actually happen). If you think about some of your favorite folk tales, you can locate them in this space. Let's try a few:

- Cinderella: A poor girl never really gets a chance at happiness, but she *should!* That's a "should but probably won't" story.
- The Lion and the Mouse: Being nice really *does* pay off. That's a "should and probably will" story. (Note that possibility, when it comes to folk tales, refers to *meaningful* things like relationships and rules, not trivialities like whether lions and mice can talk. Everyone knows that such displacements are devices designed to enhance exploration, not *subjects* of exploration.)
- The whole Tinkerbell thing (clap if you believe) is a clear "can't but must" story.
- Any story involving the devil doing awful things to people is a "must never and will never" story.

Anyway (I could do this all day), I hope you can see how using such a diagram to support a **folk tale generating exercise** might be useful. I can see two ways to use it in a workshop setting:

1. For each label on the space, tell a story that ___ happen.
2. For each label on the space, tell a story that ___ happen *again*.

I think it would be best to fill in the diagram with both questions; but which to *start* with would depend on the group.

1. Those who think of themselves as **creative** people, or who are bored by the idea of recounting actual facts, or who want to push the envelope of innovation, should start with the first question. Afterward, they can fly back from the land of make-believe to check and ground their perspectives by reflecting on the actual past.
2. Those who think of themselves as **practical** people, or who are offended by the idea of "making things up," or who think they are not qualified to "craft" fictional stories, should start with the second question. They should choose a real experience, explain what happened, and then say why they chose that experience and what it might mean if it *did* happen again. Afterward, having tethered themselves to solid anchors in the past, they can venture out into exploring the same questions, but without the word "again."

By the way, the inner rectangle I've drawn on the diagram shows what I've noticed a lot of people do when they explore the future by listing factors and forces and problems and solutions. They *say* they're imagining the gamut of things that could and couldn't and should and shouldn't happen in the future, but they **stop at invisible borders around what is likely and**

preferred. What they *really* need to do is to **explore past those borders** and into the spaces of surprise, delight, and despair.

That's where folk tales live, and that's why we still need folk tales. They exist to reach past the deepest corners of desirability and possibility and into **the paradoxical regions** where the most impossible combinations are inevitable. Did you ever hear the story about the boy who was given a magic ball of yarn, and he could pull the thread of his life out -- just a bit -- every time he wanted to skip past something that was tedious or painful? Can you guess what he found out after he had pulled out so much yarn that he had missed most of his life?

People say that the age of folk tales is gone, but I disagree. I think **there are many new folk tales waiting to be told,** and most of them are local. I think the people in every group, every family, every community, and every organization can tell their own folk tales that help them explore who they are, what they want, and the strange lands they find themselves living in. Nobody needs to write these things down, but we still need to make them up and tell them and remember them.

That's why I think this could be a useful group exercise for a community or organization. It would be important, of course, to tell stories from a **diversity of perspectives.** If I was helping a group of people use this exercise, I'd suggest that they split up into small groups that covered some useful range of variation, like age or background or point of view or something. Then the juxtaposition of the different sets of folk tales could be enlightening. I can even imagine such a set of local folk tales blending into the culture of a community or organization, **becoming a touchstone** people use to talk about issues, to negotiate norms, and to prepare themselves for surprise.

And that, my friends, is the end of the story. So it was, and so it is.