

***The***

# **Working with Stories**

***Miscellany***

**ESSAYS AND OTHER WRITINGS ON  
PARTICIPATORY NARRATIVE INQUIRY**



**Cynthia F. Kurtz**

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Essays and Other Writings  
on Participatory Narrative Inquiry

Cynthia F. Kurtz

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## Chapter 1

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# Introduction

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This book is a companion volume to *Working with Stories in Your Community or Organization: Participatory Narrative Inquiry*.

Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) is a form of Participatory Action Research in which groups of people participate in gathering and working with raw stories of personal experience to make sense of complex situations for better decision making. PNI focuses on the profound consideration of values, beliefs, feelings, and perspectives through the recounting and interpretation of lived experience. For more information on PNI, see the other books in this series.

This book contains:

- 11 sections I wrote for the third edition of *Working with Stories* but decided not to use
- 17 sections I removed from the fourth edition of *Working with Stories*
- 10 essays I wrote for my blog ([storycoloredglasses.com](http://storycoloredglasses.com))

I have assembled these 38 pieces of writing into categories based on why I think you might want to read them.

- I **Additional Explanations** contains descriptions and illustrations of PNI concepts and techniques that were too long for *Working with Stories*. Some of them never made it into the book, and some I took out of it between its third and fourth editions.
- II **Practical Advice** is a series of essays I wrote to help PNI practitioners learn how to improve their practices. Most of them came from *More Work with Stories*, my previous catchall book, which I started in 2014 and never finished.
- III **Conceptual Explorations** contains some essays from my blog about larger issues related to stories, story sharing, and story work.
- IV **Historical Records** includes a history of PNI, plus a few more pieces of writing in which I look back on my 25-year career in story work.

## About this book series

*Working with Stories* is a four-volume textbook series on Participatory Narrative Inquiry. The first three editions of *Working with Stories* were released in 2008, 2009, and 2014. In its fourth edition I expanded the book into a four-book series.

1. *Working with Stories in Your Community or Organization* is the fourth edition of my original 2008 textbook, updated with new ideas and advice.
2. *Working with Stories Simplified* covers the same concepts and techniques as *Working with Stories*, but in much less detail. It is for people who want a quick reference guide to PNI (or prefer shorter books).
3. *The Working with Stories Sourcebook* provides 50 question sets for use in your PNI projects, plus 50 descriptions of real-life PNI projects.
4. *The Working with Stories Miscellany* (this book) is a collection of essays and other writings about the theory and practice of PNI.

## Who this book is for

Why would you want to read the 38 sections and essays in this book?

- You've read *Working with Stories* and want to learn more about PNI.
- You've been doing PNI for a while and want some new ideas to improve your practice.
- You're a completionist. You can't rest until you have read everything I have ever written about stories or PNI.

This is *not* everything I have ever written about stories or PNI. I have put to rest an additional 25 (or so) sections and essays that I decided were too redundant, weak, poorly written, or insufficiently useful to be worth your time. (You might still be able to find them! But they're not here.)

## Beware of sudden shifts in tone

This is not a coherent book. The essays and other pieces of writing I have assembled in it were written over the course of 20 years for a variety of reasons and in a variety of contexts. Some are abstract; some are concrete. Some are advisory; some are exploratory. Some are serious; some are whimsical. I hope you will find a few favorites, but I must warn you that the ground here is uneven. Watch your step.

# Part I

## Additional Explanations

Each of the six chapters in this part of the book contains sections that describe or illustrate a PNI concept or technique. A few of these sections came from blog posts, but most were originally written for inclusion in *Working with Stories*.

Chapter	Page	Name
2	5	<a href="#">More on Story Collection</a>
3	59	<a href="#">More on Narrative Catalysis</a>
4	93	<a href="#">More on Sensemaking</a>
5	99	<a href="#">More on Intervention</a>
6	121	<a href="#">More on Conversational and Community Story Sharing</a>
7	159	<a href="#">Example Models and Templates for Group Exercises</a>



## Chapter 2

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# More on Story Collection

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Each of the sections in this chapter were (or could have been) parts of the Story Collection chapter of *Working with Stories*. I took them out (or didn't put them in) because they were too long to fit.

## How many stories to collect

The question of how many stories to collect comes up often when people are planning PNI projects. The answer is a bit complicated, but it depends on six things: issues, ambitions, abstractions, experiences, engagement, and people.

### Issues: One or many?

If you want to talk about one big, simple issue, you need one set of stories. However, if you want to talk about multiple issues, or one very complex issue with a lot of other issues embedded within it, you need more stories.

One way I like to use to figure out if an issue is complex is to keep asking "And what issues lie within that?" and then stop when the answer is "there aren't any issues within it."

For whatever number of stories you plan to collect, you must multiply it by the number of discrete issues you want to talk about. For example, if I wanted to help people talk about jobs and homelessness, I would gather two sets of stories (with some common questions to tie them together), so people can explore each issue with the depth it requires.

### Ambitions: Exploratory or in-depth?

If you want to prove without a doubt that something is happening (in a way that cannot be dismissed), represent the voices of people who have not been heard (in a way that cannot be ignored), help people think through an issue deeply enough to arrive at useful conclusions and plans (in a way that will not fall apart later on), then you need more stories than if you just want to explore a topic and see what happens.

Ambitious projects need 2-4 times as many stories as exploratory projects. In an ambitious project, the patterns in the stories must be obvious, plentiful, and complex enough to be explored in depth. In an exploratory project, it's okay if the patterns are just interesting hints at things people might want to explore more fully in the future.

### **Abstractions: Concrete or vague?**

If you want to explore abstract issues that are difficult to explain in ordinary words, you will need more stories than if you want to explore simple, concrete issues.

For example, say you want to know how people feel about the new traffic lights in your neighborhood. You can just ask people how they feel about the new traffic lights in your neighborhood. But if you want to explore how your community is building resilience for a 21st century future, or some other string of jargon that means a lot to some people and nothing to others, you might have trouble gathering enough relevant stories. Most likely, you'll get a lot of "scattershot" stories based on people's guesses as to what you might be asking them to talk about. That means you'll need more stories to hit your target.

A good test is to write down a question you would like to ask people, then translate it into simple, everyday language. Search for the "1000 most common words" in whatever language the question will be in, then remove all the words in the question that are not in that list. If you frame your question in common words, will the stories told in response adequately address the topic you want to address? If yes, just ask the question that way, and you're fine. You won't need extra stories.

But if rephrasing your question with common words will push it far away from the topic you want to address, then you will need to collect enough stories that some of the scattershot stories you collect will fall onto your target.

### **Experiences: With stories, or with stories and patterns?**

If you want people to meet in rooms, share stories, and do some sensemaking exercises together, you can gather as few as 20 stories per session. You might do that a few times within a project, but as long as it's people talking, you can see and work with patterns in a few dozen to several dozen stories.

On the other hand, if you want to do narrative catalysis (analysis without definitive conclusions), you need at least 100 stories to start finding statistical patterns in your data (answers to questions about stories). At 100 stories, most such patterns tend to be weak. At 150 or 200 stories, patterns tend to be stronger (and less likely to be considered fake or irrelevant). I get pretty nervous when I have do catalysis with only 100 stories to work with. At around 200 stories I start to feel more comfortable, because the patterns I find are easy to see and talk about (without worrying that people will say "there's nothing there").

This more-is-better trend continues until you reach about 600 stories, when you start running into diminishing returns. At that point you are better off using your time to collect stories on a different topic (unless, of course, some other aspect of your project means you need to push up the number for other reasons).

Catalysis is not important to, or even advisable for, every PNI project. Sometimes you do need to generate a lot of graphs and statistics, but sometimes you can get the same result with fewer stories by having people work with the stories directly, in sensemaking exercises. It all depends on what sorts of experiences you want people to have.

I always advise people to imagine the people they want to help or reach (whoever they are) responding to patterns in the stories and other data they plan to collect. If you can picture those people looking at graphs and statistical patterns and saying, "Oh, wow, now I get it," then you want those things to show those people, so you need catalysis.

But if you can picture the same people saying the same things because they are working with the stories directly (i.e., without any graphs and statistics), you don't need catalysis. In fact, it might be a bad idea. It might waste time you can use for other, more important things, like talking to more people, holding more workshops, covering more topics, getting more stories to more people, helping more people learn how to gather and work with stories, or iterating over the project more times.

In Chapter Three of this book (starting on page 75) are some excerpts from a catalysis report which a client allowed me to share. If you look at that, you can see what the patterns that come out of catalysis tend to look like. If that sort of thing seems like it would not be useful to your project, you don't need catalysis, so you don't need hundreds of stories to support it. On the other hand, if that sort of thing seems like just what you need, you will need more stories.

### **Engagement: Deep conversations, or messages in bottles?**

A lot of "what works" in story work has to do with facilitation and engagement. I once saw a project with 80 stories work far better (in the sense of generating more useful insights) than a project with 1600 stories.

- The stories in the first project came from a story-sharing session with 20 people that was carried out by an expert facilitator who helped the project participants feel welcome, safe, and heard. As a result, they really spoke to the issues, and their stories and answers to questions contained many striking insights.
- The second project used a web form that had embedded in it some constraining expectations about what participants ought to say. The 400 participants on that project told more surface-level stories. So even with 20 times more stories, fewer useful insights came out of the project. It was still a good project, but it did not explore its issues as deeply as the project with 80 stories did.

So there is a quality-quantity balance. The more quality you can get in your stories (in terms of how deeply and authentically people can explore the issues at hand), the fewer stories you will need. Conversely, if for some reason you *cannot* gather quality stories (maybe people are reluctant, or you can't talk to them in person), a greater quantity of stories can make up for it, to some extent.

On some projects, quality is the primary constraint, so you need more stories. On other projects, quantity is the primary constraint, so you need deeper engagement in the stories you can collect.

### **People: Small or large community? Small or large need?**

The more people you want to listen to, and the more the people in that group need to feel heard, the more stories you need to collect. Participatory story work never results in statistical sampling (because it's self-selecting), but you do need more stories to talk about issues in a community of 10,000 than in a community of 100. And you need more stories in a community with a strong need to be heard than in a community where people have already had plenty of chances to speak up.

My general rule is that if at least 20% of the people in any community have shared stories in a project, people tend to feel that the collected stories are representative of the community. In cases where people in a community feel especially unheard, that percent has to go up, maybe to 30% or 40%. The story collection also has to be balanced to represent all relevant viewpoints, but that is the *shape* of the collection, not its size.

Having said that, a rule of thumb based on percentage doesn't work very well if the population is huge. If, say, there are 50,000 people in a community, hearing from 20,000 of them might pose some difficult logistical problems. I have seen story projects collect 10,000 stories, but it's not the norm. Most projects have fewer than 1000 stories, just because the people doing the projects have limited time to gather and work with the stories.

In the case of a larger community, it's reasonable to say that 20-40% of the community should be *invited* to share stories, even if far fewer actually do. After all, it's more about who is *allowed* to speak than who actually speaks. For example, web-based surveys tend to get a 5-10% response rate, so if 20,000 people are invited to speak, you would get something like 1000-2000 stories, which is doable logistically, especially with a web form.

If you plan to collect your stories in person, in interviews or groups, it's hard to get 1000 stories, even if you invite 20,000 people. It takes more time and energy to come to a session or interview than to fill out a web form, so instead of a 5-10% response rate you will get more like 1%. On the other hand, stories gathered in interviews and sessions are so much deeper and richer than web-collected stories that smaller numbers of stories may not be a problem (see above).

If a project contains multiple sub-projects that explore different issues (see above), they can together add up to hearing from 20-40% of the population, even when the population is large. You can link sub-projects together by using some common questions. If you do that, you can get to huge numbers of stories, spread across sub-projects within a larger, overarching project that may span months or even years.



## Story collecting methods and storytelling types

In the section called “Notice what type of storyteller you are talking to” of the Story Collection chapter of *Working with Stories*, I talked about people who tell stories (or don’t) and know it (or don’t). Each of these types fits better into some methods of collecting stories than others.

### Collecting stories from natural storytellers

Natural storytellers tell story after story and are blissfully unaware of what they are doing. Overall, they are the best people to gather stories from—when you can find them.

- **Best: story-sharing session.** Natural storytellers make story-sharing sessions work. If there were a magical way to seed each storytelling session with one or two naturals, I would suggest it. Natural storytellers *model* natural storytelling, and other people pick it up. But since naturals don’t *think* they tell stories, they don’t take over or get competitive or possessive, and they are willing to let things flow. They may be enthusiastic, but they usually take hints and will let others talk, since they don’t *need* to tell stories.
- **Second-best: individual interview.** If you are interviewing people and you find a natural, see if you can get them to give you more time *without* telling them why you want it. If you let on that they tell good stories, they will turn into a performer and the great stories will stop coming. Every time I see one of these people, I think of that stereotypical line in crime shows where the policeman says, “Keep him talking so we can put a trace on him.” Keep natural storytellers talking, but don’t betray the trace.
- **Worst: survey.** Even though these people tell great stories, they don’t *know* that, so they may be intimidated and leave quickly, thinking the survey doesn’t apply to them, or they can’t fill it out. Naturals need encouragement to use written forms. They need to understand that you really *do* want to hear their real, natural stories, even if they are not “good” by Hollywood standards. They need *permission* to do what they do all the time, which is tell one story after another. They may have had a lifetime of people saying “there he goes again,” so they may need to know they are in a place where what they do naturally is a safe thing to do.

### Collecting stories from confident non-story tellers

Confident non-story tellers believe themselves to be telling stories while they are actually listing facts and spouting opinions. Overall, they can be difficult to work with, but with some patience and compassion, you can help them understand how they can contribute to your project.

- **Best: individual interview.** In an interview, you can keep tactfully leading confident non-story tellers back to narrative without embarrassing them by making the fact that they are not telling stories apparent to other people. Sometimes it’s better not to confront people about this, at least not beyond some gentle probing. Try for a while to get stories from them, then if you can’t get the message across, give up and move on.

- **Second-best: survey.** Their contributions will usually be misfires, but at least the damage will be confined. You can classify their entries as non-stories (but still possibly useful information) and look at them separately from the stories you collect.
- **Worst: story-sharing session.** They won't necessarily take over the session, but they will do something worse: lead other people to believe that the session is not really about telling stories. If you let them go on giving opinions or complaints or lectures, everyone else will start doing the same thing, and you'll end up with lots of words and no stories.

## Collecting stories from story performers

Story performers love to tell stories, do it well, and know it. Overall, they can be both helpful to PNI projects (because they tell a lot of stories) and harmful (because their stories might not get to the heart of the topic you want to explore).

- **Best: individual interview.** A good interviewer can separate the story from the performance. They can keep bringing the performer back to what *actually* happened and how *they* actually felt. Doing this may take some practice, but I've seen it done well. A good interviewer can also connect with a performer (eye contact is useful here) and communicate an intimacy and a casualness that removes the need for public performance and frees the performer to drop their facade and simply recount their experiences.
- **Second-best: survey.** In a survey you can explain what sort of stories you want, and you can design questions that lead people away from performance. And even if you can't stop people from going overboard, at least they won't infect others.
- **Worst: story-sharing session.** A story performer can single-handedly destroy a story-sharing session because:
  - They might end up taking it over, because, hey, we are telling stories and who tells stories better than me? (And sometimes the other people are happy to jump into the role of the good audience, because it gets them off the hook for contributing.)
  - Performers get other performers going, while at the same time shutting up non-performers with the belief that their stories are not "good enough" because they are not full of vivid drama. The worst is when you end up with two performers competing. A situation like that can suck the life energy out of a story-sharing session. If a performer appears in your session, do your best to communicate the purpose of the session, and if that doesn't work, quarantine the infection.

## Collecting stories from unaccustomed storytellers

Unaccustomed storytellers do not think in stories, and they are well aware of that fact. Overall, they can be very helpful in PNI projects, because they often have useful stories to tell. They just need a little extra help going through the storytelling process.

- **Best: story-sharing session—maybe.** It depends on who else is in the group.
  - If there are too many performers, unaccustomed storytellers will rush to claim the role of the good audience.
  - If there are too many confident non-story tellers, unaccustomed storytellers will help them turn the session into a debate or a series of lectures.

- But when unaccustomed storytellers can spend time around natural storytellers, two wonderful things will happen:
  - \* The natural storytellers will give the unaccustomed storytellers a *model* of how to do what you seem to want them to do.
  - \* The infectious energy of the natural storytellers will draw *response stories* out of the unaccustomed storytellers.
- **Second-best: individual interview.** I put this at second-best because it is especially reliant on the skill of the interviewer. Unaccustomed storytellers don't have to save face about storytelling, but they may lose patience with it. It may take some creativity to find ways to keep them engaged in what is an unfamiliar and possibly uncomfortable process, like learning to play a new sport or musical instrument in which one has no interest.
- **Worst: survey.** These are the first people to fall through the cracks in a survey, because there is nobody there to draw out the rest of the story. They write things like “It went fine” or “I liked it” or “My experience was pretty good” instead of telling a story. I've seen quite a few responses that imply the person *would* have had more to say if they had been asked more or better follow-up questions. One way to anticipate this type of response in a survey (and I've seen this done) is to ask a *series* of questions that prompt unaccustomed storytellers to tell the story in segments, much as if you were drawing the story out of them in person.

## Storytelling types and perceptions of story work

I have written elsewhere about four types of storytelling behaviors: natural storytellers, confident non-story tellers, story performers, and unaccustomed storytellers. I talked about how these storytelling “types” respond differently to being asked to share stories.

I have noticed a related pattern when it comes to how people feel about story work.

- People who tell a lot of stories (whether they know it or not) tend to understand stories and story sharing at an intuitive level.
- People who think they tell a lot of stories (whether or not it's true) tend to believe there is much you can achieve by working with stories.

Let's go through these dimensions—and as before, their combinations—one at a time.

### I see stories all around me

The degree to which people “get” story, the degree to which people see themselves as swimming in an ocean of stories—or don't—is hard to describe. You can see it best in the reactions you get when you say things like this:

From childhood on we build maps of the world we experience. The stories we tell to ourselves and others form part of those maps.

Some people hear that and say, “Yes, of course, go on.” Other people say, “What? I don't see that at all. Can you *prove* that?”

To be clear, I am not making a statement about what people *ought* to think about stories. I am simply making a statement about how people *differ* in their perceptions. I don't "get" football, and I hope you don't think that makes me morally or intellectually inferior.

Even some of the statements respected theorists have made about stories in human life show the same range of variation, though some of the theorists do not realize it. As Alisdair MacIntyre put it in his book *After Virtue*:

[The philosopher of history] Louis O. Mink, quarreling with [the literary theorist] Barbara Hardy's view, has asserted: "Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles, or ends; there are meetings, but the start of an affair belongs to the story we tell ourselves later, and there are partings, but final partings only in the story. There are hopes, plans, battles, and ideas; but only in retrospective stories are hopes unfulfilled, plans miscarried, battles decisive, and ideas seminal."

According to Mink (whose statements set off a firestorm of debate), stories are not a central part of the human experience. Life has no story. Stories are only things we create. They are artifacts, like water jugs or tent poles.

MacIntyre is clearly not in Mink's camp:

What are we to say to [Mink's statements]? Certainly we must agree that it is only retrospectively that hopes can be characterized as unfulfilled or battles as decisive and so on. But we so characterize them in life as much as in art. And to someone who says that in life there are no endings, or that final partings take place only in stories, one is tempted to reply, "But have you never heard of death?"

That was *exactly* my response. If there was ever *anything* that had a beginning, middle, and end, it would be a human life. *We are walking stories*. Couldn't Mink see that? No, he couldn't, because that was not the way he experienced stories. It all depends on whether, when you look at your life, you see stories, or you see things you can make stories *out of*.

When I look at my life, I see stories, as do many others. You probably do yourself, since you are reading this book. But you can't get far in story work without discovering that many people do not live in the wonderful world of stories. Whatever stories mean to you, they do not mean that to everyone. This is a fact many story workers love as much as they love a punch in the face; but there it is.

Walter Fisher comes closest (in what I have read) to my view on this type of variation:

The ultimate authority for the belief in the narrative nature of human beings, however, is experiential. Whatever form of communication a person may use, the result will always be an interpretation of some aspect of the world that is historically and culturally grounded and shaped by a fallible human being. There is, in other words, no form of human communication that presents uncontested truths, including this one.

Saying "the ultimate authority is experiential" is the same as saying people vary in the extent to which they see stories around them. When people see stories, they say that story sharing is essential. When they don't, they say that story sharing is an accessory, a

nice-to-have. This difference in experience can have a strong impact on whether and how people do story work.

In my experience, the I-see-stories axis correlates well with the axis of whether people tell stories. The more likely a person is to tell stories, the more likely they are to love a statement like “we are a storytelling species.” But the mapping is not as simple as that. Narrative intelligence doesn’t *always* manifest itself in storytelling. Some people excel in *noticing* stories, or finding patterns in stories, or helping *other* people tell stories, or creating pathways for stories to travel on.

I would like to see more people (especially young people) who love stories *expand* their perceptions of what careers in the narrative field can entail. If you love stories, you don’t have to *tell* stories. You don’t have to be a novelist or screenwriter. Narrative is a wide open landscape, and most narrative professionals are walking along a thin little path in the middle of it. The rest of that world is just sitting there waiting to be explored.

By the way, a person who doesn’t “get” stories can turn into one who does. It’s more of a choice than a gift. When anyone says to me “I don’t get this story stuff” I always respond with one word: “Yet.”

## **I see what stories can do**

My second dimension is *what people think story work can do*. As I said above, I’ve noticed that people who think they tell a lot of stories are more likely to think of lots of things story work can do for them. Since they see purpose at one level, they are likely to see purpose at the second level as well.

You can see the what-stories-can-do range of variation in people’s faces as you describe your PNI project plans. In the faces of some people, as they learn a bit about story work, you can see possibilities blossoming in the minds. They say things like:

- We could ask these three groups of people to share stories with us, then distribute the stories to all three groups!
- We could ask people who *else* might tell a story like the one they told!
- We could ask people to compare the past and the future!

In the faces of people at the other end of this spectrum, you can see blossoming obstructions. They say things like:

- Isn’t this just anecdotal evidence?
- How will you validate these results? How will you ensure inter-interviewer reliability?
- What good could possibly come out of showing people stories other people have told? What will they learn from it?

I don’t mean to put down nay-sayers; these are legitimate questions. My point is that some people don’t understand what story work is *good for*, and it doesn’t seem to matter how many times you try to explain it. They try to put it into one pigeonhole after another, never understanding that it is not a pigeon at all, but a storm, a dream, a journey.

What I have observed is that people respond in this way most often when they don’t use stories in their own lives to suit their own purposes. When people don’t think they tell stories, whether they actually do or not, the idea of asking *lots of people* to tell stories seems to them like nothing piled on top of nothing.

**Caricatures of story work collaborators**

If we again combine the extremes on these scales, as before, we can come up with four caricatures of perceptions about story work. In this case I am considering types from the point of view of you trying to get these people to help you (or let you) pursue a story project; so I will call these people “collaborators” rather than “storytellers.”

		Do they see stories?	
		Yes, they see stories.	No, they don’t see stories.
Do they see what story work can do?	Yes, they see what story work can do.	<i>Dramatic collaborators</i> (who are often story performers) see stories and see what story work can do.	<i>Off-track collaborators</i> (who are often confident non-story tellers) see what story work can do, but they don’t see stories.
	No, they don’t get story work.	<i>Naïve-but-open collaborators</i> (who are often natural storytellers) see stories, but they don’t see what story work can do.	<i>Unreachable collaborators</i> (who are often unaccustomed storytellers) don’t see stories, and they don’t see the point of story work either.

All the same caveats as before apply here: nobody is *really* like this, these are deliberately created extremes, and so on. And again, these are my observations, not scientific proof.

***The naïve-but-open collaborator***

The best collaborator you could possibly have on a PNI project is a person who has never really thought about using stories for anything, but intuitively understands everything you say to them about stories. These people have what the Zen Buddhists call “beginner’s mind” and are willing to experiment and learn. By working with them you may find many solutions that will work well for your project. They may not *realize* that their ideas are good ideas, but they will have them nonetheless.

The best way to convince a person like this to collaborate on your PNI project is to *tell them some great stories* about PNI project outcomes you have had in the past (or heard about from others). People who tell stories react to stories. When you can find a collaborator like this, get as much of their time as you can.

***The off-track collaborator***

A person who sees what can be done with stories but doesn't understand what stories are about is the worst possible collaborator. You are likely to be constantly stopping them from moving the project off into areas where the magic forces of story have no power.

You don't usually have to convince an off-track collaborator to participate in a PNI project, but you do have to spend some serious time explaining to them what you *can't* do with stories. Telling stories won't help, because they don't respond to that. They may do better with lists and tables that show them the concrete possibilities and returns on different investments in PNI projects.

You can work with these people, *if* they are willing to open their minds a crack to let in some new ideas. But people who think they know exactly what stories are and won't listen to you (and are wrong) are best avoided as collaborators. If you get stuck with one, you may have to spend a lot of time protecting your project from them.

***The dramatic collaborator***

These people get story. They *really* get story. But they see so many things you can do with stories that your work will be cut out reining them in.

This type of collaborator doesn't need to be convinced that stories can be useful. However, they are likely to load your project up with so much ambition and imagination that it will be impossible to fulfill all of their grand visions. With them you will need to mark out in advance which possibilities you are *not* willing to entertain and where the scope of your project will end. Some cautionary tales may be helpful.

It may also be helpful to discuss *future* projects with dramatic collaborators. That way you can give them somewhere to place their giant ambitions so they won't load up your current project until it drops dead from exhaustion.

And yes, you've guessed it, I am very much a dramatic collaborator. I get carried away, I'll admit it. It's all so *fascinating*! Somebody stop me!

***The unreachable collaborator***

People who don't get story and don't see what they can do with it are likely to refuse to collaborate on (or allow) story projects at all.

I'm not sure it is possible to convince a person with this set of perceptions to collaborate in a story project. It may be better to look elsewhere for help. If you end up in a situation where someone is forced to collaborate and combines these tendencies, you *may* be able to lead them along (as you do with an unaccustomed storyteller) to the point where they begin to see the point. If you can give them point-by-point instructions, they may be able to help. But you will usually have to put energy into the interaction all the way through the project. The minute you turn your back they will be likely to drop the project because it all seems so pointless.

### **Story work in Oz and Kansas**

Now if you will permit me (and skip this bit if you don't), I'll compare the world of story work to Oz and the world of everything else to Kansas.

- Naïve-but-open collaborators (and natural storytellers) live in Oz. They think it's Kansas, but it's Oz, and they can do the things people who live in Oz can do.
- To off-track collaborators (and confident non-story tellers), Oz is a good place to look for Tweedledum and Tweedledee. You know, through the looking glass.
- To dramatic collaborators (and story performers), all of Kansas is Oz. All the *world* is Oz—or it *could* be, if we all wish very hard.
- To unreachable collaborators (and unaccustomed storytellers), Oz is a word in a book. Get real. (But if you *call* Oz Kansas, they might be willing to go there.)

### **Story project perception measurement**

How can you tell what perceptions you are dealing with when you talk with potential collaborators about a potential story project?

1. Make a statement about how stories work in human society. Watch to see if people nod or grimace.
2. Tell a few stories about PNI projects, either projects you've done or projects you know about. See if people respond with animation or look at the clock.
3. Throw up a list of things you might want to do with PNI, then ask for more ideas.

Each type of collaborator will respond to these provocations in a different way.

- Naïve-but-open collaborators won't follow you at first, but as soon as you start telling stories, their faces will light up. They will not be likely to add to your list of ideas, but they will want to hear more stories about projects you've done or heard about.
- Off-track collaborators will understand what you're trying to accomplish, but their suggestions (like gathering facts or opinions) will show that they have no idea what you are talking about, even if they *think* they do.
- Dramatic collaborators will get very excited, *too* excited. They will make wonderfully imaginative suggestions, but they will make *too many* of them, and some of them might not be all that realistic.
- Unreachable collaborators will ignore your pitch, give you no ideas, and look at their phones while you are talking. Their faces will *not* light up, either at the stories you tell or at the great things you want to do. They might not even stick around until the end of your pitch.

After you assess your potential collaborators in this way, you will be in a better position to understand the opportunities and dangers of working with them.



# Follow-up questions that respect participant needs

As you prepare to ask people follow-up questions about their stories, you will sometimes encounter a tension between *what you want to know* and *what your participants want to say*. These are some situations where the tension is greatest.

If your participants feel that	Their first priority will be
They are dependent on you	Giving you what they think you want (which might not be what you actually want)
They are in conflict with you	Undermining the goal they think you have in mind and promoting their own goal
They don't trust you	Getting through their interaction with you without disclosing anything
They don't care about your project	Getting through the interaction as quickly as possible without having to think about it
Your questions tap into their identity	Keeping the image they present to you positive, coherent, and under their control

A good way to find out whether you are in any of these situations is to run some pilot story collections. Watch people as they finish telling a story, wrap up an interview, or come out of a story-sharing session. Ask people how they feel about what just happened. Then think about what they said and did.

If your participants feel	After they finish telling a story, they will say things like
Dependent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I think I did that right.</li><li>• I hope that was good enough.</li></ul>
In conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I guess I gave <i>them</i> a piece of my mind.</li><li>• <i>That</i> should shake them up.</li></ul>
Distrust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I'm not sure I should have said that.</li><li>• Let me see that privacy policy again.</li></ul>
Apathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Time for lunch!</li><li>• When will this be over? I've got two more meetings today.</li></ul>
A need to protect their identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I think I've explained what it's like to be a patient.</li><li>• It was interesting to think about my motivations in teaching.</li></ul>

If you gather enough reactions to interactions during your pilot story collection, you will get some hints as to whether, and how much, any of these tensions is present. If you can't run a pilot project, ask as many people as you can (of the groups involved) to tell you a story casually. Even as few as five reactions can be useful.

So let's say you have gathered some stories and you have surmised that one or more tensions will be involved in the story-sharing that you will be asking people to do. What should you do next?

## **Your view, their view**

As you build your follow-up questions, *tack back and forth* between meeting your needs and meeting the needs of your participants. Start with your needs first. Write the questions you would ask in an ideal world, if you could peek into the minds and hearts of your participants, if they had no inhibitions and were guaranteed to answer every question honestly and completely. Go ahead and write the questions that ask the things you wish you could ask. (Just don't *show* them to anyone yet!)

Now, tack to your participants' side. Here you need to do a bit of role playing. For each of the tensions you've discovered, look into your past and come up with a situation you remember well in which you were asked to disclose information and that tension was important. Here are some ideas.

### ***Dependence***

Think of a particularly tense job interview, one you forced yourself to get through. To ramp up the emotions, think of one where you really, *really* wanted or needed the job, but you didn't think your qualifications were perfect for it. (I think all of us can remember some times like that, when we were stretching our claims just a bit.)

Another memory that can work here is to think of a time when you were financially dependent on somebody (or some organization). Perhaps you received a gift from a relative, a recommendation from a co-worker, a scholarship from a foundation. It's okay to go all the way back to childhood, as long as you can get into the mindset you need. Remember asking a parent or grandparent for something and feeling their scrutinizing have-you-been-naughty eyes on you. That sort of memory.

### ***Identity***

Think of a time when you felt a great need to be who you said you were. One useful experience that comes up for me is when I've given talks at conferences: I feel on the spot, challenged to prove that I am who I say I am and that I know what I've said I know. Think of times when your position as a whatever-you-call-yourself was on display. Even non-professional titles can be useful: mother, sister, neighbor, grandchild. Tap into one of those times when that little voice in your head keeps saying, "Will they believe I am who I say I am?"

### ***Conflict***

Think of a time when you tried to tactfully get through a conversation with somebody you had to be nice to, but who said things you felt like screaming about. To ramp up the

emotions, look for a memory where the conflict was something you actually cared quite a lot about but couldn't say so without making a scene. I've had some useful experiences in sensemaking workshops with people cornering me and giving me lectures on whatever they think is wrong with the world (evidently I appear to invite this). Not-about-the-weather conversations with relatives and neighbors can also be useful in this regard.

### ***Distrust***

Think of a time when someone asked you something about yourself that you didn't think they needed to know, and that you didn't trust them to keep to themselves. Think of those little cards that come with products that ask you how often you wash your hair or read the newspaper. In the U.S., the census is a good thing to think of, at least if you were like me and got the "long form" the last time (why does the government need to know how much money I make and when I'm not at home?).

Look for memories when the distrust tension was not strongly associated with the dependence tension. For example, it's probably not good to think of a time when your boss or employer wanted to know something. Go for some more distant entity, like a big company or the government. I remember one time I did an interview for a radio show, and I knew they were going to splice and dice what I said with what other people said, and that made me nervous. You can also use memories of personal interactions, like a nosy neighbor who asks more questions than you'd like to answer.

### ***Disinterest***

Think of a time when you were bothered by somebody asking you questions you didn't care about. A perfect example is a telephone survey about an ordinary domestic thing, like toothpaste or Coke or telephone service. Or remember a time when you were walking through a shopping center, museum, or other public place and were accosted by a person with a clipboard. (You tried to avoid them but they were endearing or looked unhappy and you felt sorry for them.)

Bring to mind your reluctant participation in the event. Remember how you were about to hang up or walk away at every moment. Remember how you kept saying "does not apply" in a sullen, go-away sort of way. Or how you tried to make sport of the whole thing, as a diversion on a rainy day. Or how you tried to make the interviewer break from their script, just to see if you could. Get into that silly I-don't-care frame of mind.

## **Using the memory**

Now that you have chosen a bona fide memory—and it should be something that really happened to you; otherwise it won't be powerful enough—follow these steps.

1. Placing yourself into your memory, pretending to be in that time and place, read through your questions and pay attention to the emotions that surface. See which questions (and answers on your answer lists) jump out at you and flash messages. Some will flash red (danger, danger) and others will flash green (safe). *Both extremes are dangerous to your project's goals.* The dangerous questions and answers won't

collect any responses, even if they should. The too-safe questions and answers will collect too many responses, even responses that *should* be different.

2. Take yourself back out of the memory and tack back to your needs. If you took every red-or-green-flagged question and answer out of your question set, what would happen to your project? Would it still be able to meet its goals?
3. If you can drop a red-or-green-flagged question and not hurt your project, drop it. If you need it, tone it down. Ask it using words that come across as either less dangerous or less safe, whichever you need to remove the flag.
4. Now put yourself back into the memory again and react to your new question set, generating any new flags that come to mind.
5. Keep tacking back and forth like this. Keep finding new flags, and keep removing or editing your questions and answers until you get to a compromise you can live with.

At some point the pendulums you are swinging should come to rest somewhere along the spectrum between what you want and what they want, at a different place for each question. For some questions, you may have to face the fact that there is *no* way to get exactly what you want. For others you may decide to push for disclosure, even if some participants balk. But when you do that, provide a good non-response response (e.g., “I’d rather not say”) to divert the flow and keep the true responses pure.

## A worked example

Let’s work through an example of this process. Say I’m working on a project about work skills, and I want to ask a question about deadlines. Say I’ve written this follow-up question:

- What does this story say to you about coping with deadlines?
  - It would be better if we didn’t hire people who can’t handle deadlines.
  - Employees who lack this skill should receive training to bring them up to speed.
  - Some people are better at handling deadlines than others. That’s fine! We work in teams. We can help each other.
  - It’s not the coping that’s the problem; it’s the deadlines. They need to be more realistic.

Now let’s say that I’ve discerned, through some casual story elicitations, that dependence will be an issue for this group of participants. At this point I (personally) would drag out some of my memories from college, when my ability to keep attending school depended on keeping several jobs and a scholarship intact. Having placed myself into this memory, I would read this question *in my mindset as a dependent student*. My reactions would be:

- What does this story say to you about the work skill of coping with deadlines?
  - It would be best if we didn’t hire people who can’t handle deadlines. — Green flag — If I say this, I will seem to be placing myself into the group of people who *can* handle deadlines. That seems like a safe choice.
  - Employees who lack this skill should receive training to bring them up to speed. — Red flag — If I say this, it might be the same as admitting that I lack the skill.

- Some people are better at handling deadlines than others. That's all right. We work in teams. We can help each other. — Red flag — I had better not. It might seem like I am asking for accommodation.
- It's not the coping that's the problem; it's the deadlines. They need to be more realistic. — Red flag — Oh no, I'm not saying that.

This is not how I would respond *today*, mind you. Today, I'd just say that I'm horrible with deadlines and I absolutely must work in a team with people who can back me up when the going gets tough. I don't mind admitting that. Even when I *am* in a dependent situation, I'm comfortable enough and confident enough in my abilities that I don't mind saying I avoid deadlines by doing a lot of the work up front, because I know very well that I will fall apart when things get down to the wire. I would also be quite comfortable—today—choosing the last answer. (That's one of the benefits of age.)

I know that not all of my participants will respond as I did then; some will respond as I do now. But that's still a problem. If I don't address this tension, my project's story collection will become unbalanced and less useful in sensemaking. I want every one of my participants to feel safe and free to answer the questions I want to ask. I don't want to make my project work for one group and not another.

So now I know that I will need to make some changes to the question. My next step is to take myself back out of my college-days memory and return to my project-planning self. I need that question. I won't be able to support sensemaking without it. But maybe I could word it differently. How about this?

- Which of these things do you think would have helped the people in this story meet their deadlines better?
  - Hiring more people who can handle deadlines well.
  - Helping people learn how to handle deadlines better.
  - Helping people help each other handle deadlines.
  - Setting more realistic deadlines.

Now I go back to my college-days memory and react again:

- Which of these things do you think would have helped the people in this story meet their deadlines better?
  - Hiring more people who can handle deadlines well. — Yes, those people are amazing, I love working with them, they always back me up. Great!
  - Helping people learn how to handle deadlines better. — I wonder if I *could* get better at that? It might be worth a try.
  - Helping people help each other handle deadlines. — Yes, more teamwork would definitely help me meet my deadlines better.
  - Setting more realistic deadlines. — That would be a huge help.

Now my college-days self is reacting in a more thoughtful way that is less driven by fear. This seems like an improvement to my project-planning self. My next step would be to test

the question with some actual project participants. Play-acting with my memories can get me part of the way, but I will need to hear from real people to be sure I have the right approach.

## How not to ask too many questions about stories

I would like to address what I know to be a universally frustrating gap in PNI planning: that between how many questions you *want* to ask about stories and how many you can actually ask in practice. First I will explain why you can't ask as many questions as you want to. Then I will help you reduce your optimal list of questions to what will work.

### Why you can't ask a million questions

In the section of the story collection chapter of *Working with Stories* called "How many questions to ask about each story," I mentioned something I call the *cognitive budget* of your participants. This is the amount of time, attention, interest, and concentration people can contribute to your project.

What will happen if you don't stay within the cognitive budget of your participants?

1. Some people will straight-up lose interest in your project and check out of it. They might click on your survey or show up for a story-sharing session, but when they get there, they will tell fewer or different stories than they would have if you had not asked so many questions.
2. Even if people are willing to answer every one of your too-many questions, they might not be willing to answer them *thoughtfully*. They might barely pay attention to what they are doing, skipping over your question list like a stone skipping over a pond. You will get patterns in their responses, but the patterns will be weak and not meaningful.
3. Even if people are willing to answer every one of your too-many questions thoughtfully, they may simply not be *able* to keep up the effort you require. Nobody can answer 30 questions about a single story and have them all contain meaningful information. It's like drawing water from a well. The first bucket is refreshing, the fifth bucket is stale, and the hundredth bucket is more likely to contain mud and sand than clear water. Such a response will lead to even more muddled and useless patterns.

One of the worst possible outcomes of a story project is for it to produce a set of *false patterns*. This can happen when you collect a lot of answers but can't tell the difference between answers that mean "I thought hard about this and carefully picked the best choice" and answers that mean "I blindly stumbled through whatever would get me out of this task as quickly as possible." It doesn't matter if people blindly stumbled because they were angry, irritated, or just tired. The patterns you find will not just be useless; they will be *misleading*. The only thing you can do in a situation like that is to scrap the project and start over with more realistic ambitions.

When I help people develop questions to ask their participants, they sometimes say, "Why don't we just ask as many questions as we want to and let people answer as many as they

want to answer?” Sometimes they want to put statements at the top of their forms that say things like, “Only answer as many questions as you want to answer.”

That doesn’t work. Watch people and you will see why. They look at the *whole* form, or they scroll down the *whole* web page, or they page through every part of your multi-part form. If you are in an interview, they try to figure out how many pages are in your *whole* script. They do this because they want to *assess the scope of the task* you are asking them to do. Once they’ve figured that out, people go back and start answering your questions.

This means that the answer you get to the first question on a form with 30 questions on it is not the answer you will get to the first question on a form with five questions on it. The crushing feeling of this-is-too-much won’t just come in at the end. It will wash back to impact your whole set of questions.

You can see this in people’s faces, if you watch them. Try it. Build two forms: the one you *wish* you could use, and a shorter one you know you had better use. Give the two forms out randomly to different people. I guarantee that unless your participants are fantastically committed to your project, you will see faces pleasantly occupied in the first case and faces falling into disappointment and frustration in the second.

## **Reducing your question wish-list to fit reality**

What can you do if you *want* to ask 20 questions but know that you can only ask four? How should you choose? I have developed and regularly use four different methods of question reduction: backwards planning, question defense, variation detection, and pairwise comparison.

### ***Backwards planning***

Picture this: Your project is over, and you have succeeded in meeting your goals. The answers you asked about the stories you gathered generated wonderfully useful catalytic material, out of which many insights grew. Which questions were pivotal to that outcome? Which could have been left out? Does your story of success involve any questions you *don’t* have in your list? (Not to make it longer, but you might as well be comprehensive in your imagining.)

If you need an even more imaginative vision, picture yourself being borne around a public square in triumph, cheered on by enthusiastic crowds, on the shoulders of your capable team of well-asked questions. On the shoulders of which questions do you ride? You can’t be certain, of course. Questions you thought would bear you in triumph can slink away with royal spoons in their pockets. So I wouldn’t use this method in isolation. But it can be helpful in combination.

### ***Question defense***

Another imaginary method is to defend each question in front of a jeering crowd. Pretend you are standing before a great hall of nay-sayers (hurling rotten tomatoes if it helps) and justify the use of each question. If you are so lucky as to have some real hecklers in the form of friends or colleagues, ask them to attack your questions in reality. (Don’t give *them*

rotten tomatoes.) Ask your hecklers to give you an even harder time if the question is complicated, or if it will take a long time to answer, or if it probes sensitive areas.

If you cannot make a good case to a jeering crowd for why you need to ask a question, drop it. If your answer is “I don’t know, it seems appealing,” that won’t make the grade. Say why you need the question. *Prove* you need it. If you can’t prove it, chuck it.

### ***Variation detection***

If you ask a question and the answers you get are all the same, you have wasted the time you might have used to ask a different question. Finding low-variation questions up front is a good way to respect your participants’ cognitive budgets.

For example, on one project I can remember, we asked people about their religious affiliations. All but five percent of them said the exact same thing. It was a wasted question that we should not have asked. (It was a question about participants, but the same rule applies to both kinds of questions.)

This is one of the best reasons to do a pilot story collection: to take off your list any questions that aren’t going to result in useful variation. Maybe everybody loves dogs, or everybody plans to vote out the incumbent, or nobody cared about that old statue anyway. Don’t waste their time on it. If you can’t do a pilot story collection, do an informal survey to find low-variation questions you can drop out ahead of time.

### ***Pairwise comparison***

This method was first thought up by Benjamin Franklin, if the story I heard is true. Here’s how it works. Place your wish list of questions in a table, using the same list for the rows and columns of the table. Give each question a number or abbreviation. In each cell that represents a pair of questions, ask yourself: If I could have only one of this pair, which would I want more? Write the number of the question that won the contest in the cell.

As you consider each pair, also think about their proximity in conceptual space. Are these two questions similar? If so, why do you have them both? Were you trying to get at something slightly different in each of them? Can you merge them? Or do you want to move them further apart?

Similar questions are not *always* bad. Most of the time they result in wasted cognitive budget, irritated participants, and wasted sensemaking time. However, if you want to explore your topic in great depth, similar questions can help you probe deeply into the nuances of your stories. For example, I’ve occasionally asked these two similar questions:

1. How do you feel about this story?
2. How did this story turn out?

The answers to the two questions are usually identical. If someone feels good about a story, it usually turned out well. But there can also be stories about which the two sets of answers *don’t* match. The ability to find stories like that can lead to unexpected insights.

When you have got through all of the cells in your table (half of them really, since the order does not matter), count up how many times each question won the contest. This will give



you a ranked list of questions. Then use the top questions on the list and discard the rest. I have used this method on several projects and find it works well.

You can also combine this method with any of the other three. Picture the two questions in a pairwise cell elbowing each other aside as they defend their right to exist in front of a jeering crowd. Picture the two questions telling competing stories of success. Picture the two questions laying out their ranges of variation. All of these methods are ways of improving how well you listen to your own thoughts, singly or in a group, as you come to a decision.

One thing I've noticed about project planning is that clinging to long lists of questions is usually a sign of fear. If you have fears about your project, don't puff it up with too many questions. Improve your questions. How many questions people will answer meaningfully is a law of nature. Don't fight it. Respect it.

## On removing information from stories

A colleague recently sent me an excellent question about PNI in practice. It was:

In our story-sharing session yesterday, we had a discussion about removing data such as a telephone number and a name that someone mentioned in their story. Some people said they thought removing the information would hurt the integrity of the story. Others said it wouldn't. What is your opinion?

What belongs in a story and what doesn't depends entirely on context. In some groups and communities, at some times, about some topics, and in some circumstances of story collection and spread (meaning, who told the stories and who will see them), the inclusion of personal information can contribute to the integrity of a story. However, context can change in an instant.

When people are sharing stories in person, they constantly renegotiate what belongs in the story and what doesn't. For example:

- A person who is in the middle of telling a story might suddenly change tack and reduce the amount of personal information they reveal when a new person enters the group.
- On the other hand, if the new person shares telling rights and can corroborate what the storyteller has been saying, the storyteller may gain confidence and add more personal information (because they now have backup).
- If a person they are nervous about leaves the group, a storyteller might shift to telling the story more openly. Conversely, if that person was providing the storyteller with social support, the story might suddenly become more circumspect.
- Say a group is walking together and they pass from a quiet corner into a busy hallway. The story that is being told may suddenly shrink until the group gets back to a quieter place again, when it may expand.

In other words, from moment to moment, *stories shift their shapes* depending on the shifting contexts in which they are being told.

The problem with collecting stories is that once a story has been recorded or written down, it can no longer adapt to its environment. *It has been frozen* in one contextual state.

Thus when you collect stories among groups of people who are talking to each other, their stories might become frozen into contextual states that make less sense, or sound strange, or even pose dangers to the storytellers in other contexts.

It doesn't seem to me that people are aware of this. They don't notice that they are renegotiating the shapes of their stories as they talk, and they don't realize what freezing their story in one context and thawing it out in another is going to do.

Of course, sometimes there are no freezing-and-thawing problems. But when the topic is personal or emotional, freeze-thaw damage can be significant. And it's invisible. It's not like people are going to tell you that they regretted participating in your project once they saw their story in another context. They'll just avoid you the *next* time you ask them to tell a story. Or they'll tell you a safer, less meaningful story. *And you won't know why.*

As a facilitator, it is your responsibility to help people avoid falling into situations they would never be in without the artificial freezing of their stories. That's why I ask people to leave personal information out of the stories they tell, even if it supports the integrity or meaning of the story in the present context, because *what they say will be heard in other contexts* than the one in which they are telling it.

I have even gone so far as to remove personal information from stories to protect storytellers from contextual changes they didn't see coming when they told the stories. For example, in one project where stories were collected over the web, lots of people included their names and phone numbers, and the names and phone numbers of other people, even though we asked them not to. If that information had been kept with the stories and posted somewhere, say online, it could have led to embarrassment, or even harassment. I felt that it was important to take that information out of the stories, partly because *I myself didn't know* in what contexts the stories would end up being read.

For the same reason, I like to give people in story-sharing sessions the option to review the sessions transcripts afterwards and ask for changes. Hardly anybody ever asks for changes, or even asks to see the transcripts, but I think that knowing they *can* change what they say later on helps people to open up and trust the process.

Because story sharing is both powerful and dangerous, the power of stories to communicate and make sense of the world cannot be accessed until the danger inherent in telling stories is kept under control.

## Finding good story listeners

A colleague was running a PNI project and wanted to hire people who could collect stories well. They also wanted to hire people who could train other people to collect stories well. So they asked me, "What makes a good story listener?"

My first instinct was to say what I always say: Anyone can learn to do story work well with time and practice. I can attest to this myself. I'm a much better story listener than I was 25 years ago.

But at the same time, over the years I have reluctantly come to conclude that story listening does come more naturally to some people than to others. There does seem to be a non-universal affinity for it.

## Thinking in stories

If I wanted to hire some people to listen to stories, I would start by looking for people who *think* in stories. If you watch people as they tell and listen to stories, you can tell whether they think in stories or not.

- How many stories do they tell in a typical day? One? Twenty?
- When they explain things, how often do their explanations come out as stories?
- How often do they make comparisons by telling nested stories?
- When they ask other people questions, how often do their questions lead to stories being told? Rarely? Or all the time?
- When they are in a conversation and someone starts to tell a story, do they let it run its course? Or do they interrupt it?

Once I was writing a blog post inspired by a magazine advertisement. The advertisement was dominated (or so I thought) by two juxtaposed photographs. When I first saw it, my eyes went straight to the photos, which I got very excited about (because of the story they told). I brought this advertisement to my husband to show him its exciting photographic juxtaposition. To my surprise, he completely *ignored* the photos and went straight to some words in small print written below them. These were as interesting (in their own way) as the photographs, but I didn't even see them until he brought them to my attention.

If I was hiring somebody to notice photographs, I'd hire me. If I was hiring somebody to notice words in small print at the bottoms of pages, I'd hire my husband. If you want to find people who can help you gather stories, find people who notice stories the way I notice pictures and the way my husband notices small print. People who think in stories notice stories because stories matter to them.

## Watching and listening

Does story listening require curiosity? Yes. And no. Story listening is a *yin* skill, receptive, not creative. When you have a lot of yin curiosity, you are good at waiting and seeing what happens. When you have a lot of yang curiosity, you are good at building, making, leaping into action.

This is why some of the best storytellers are terrible story listeners. Yang curiosity scares stories away. I'd rather tell a story to somebody who seems to be plodding along with no evident curiosity at all than to somebody whose energetic curiosity might cause them to veer off to a different topic, leaving me and my story behind. Some of the best oral history interviewers are plodding, methodical people. Their arms are open but not reaching.

One of the things I often say to people is that, if they learn about how stories flow in conversations, then spend some time listening to the conversations that are going on around them, stories will start “jumping out” of conversations at them. Since I first wrote that, I have had a few people tell me, in some frustration, that they have done exactly what I said to do, and nothing jumped out to them. The only thing I could tell them was to *keep listening*, because I truly do not know how else to describe what it’s like to notice stories.

Stories “jump out” at me, I think, because I grew up watching and listening to animals in the woods. That’s a yin thing to do. You don’t get a turn when you’re listening to animals, so you can’t focus on what you’re going to say next. When you listen without the expectation of speaking, you notice things. My story listening practice got a lot better when I realized that I could listen to people the way I listen to animals.

Many similar backgrounds can make story listening easier. Maybe you grew up listening to your parents or grandparents share stories around the fire. Maybe you’ve spent decades watching the stars or the sea. Maybe you’ve spent a lot of time around horses. Maybe you love to sit in your garden and watch your plants grow. If you know what it’s like to watch waves—of anything—rise and fall and rise and fall, you can call on those experiences as you listen to stories.

Have you ever met a person who always seems to be told stories nobody else is told? I have met a few people like that. Everybody opens up to them. When you talk to these people, stories come spilling out of you because they know they will find safe places to rest. Stories flock to them, you could say.

That’s another way to find good story listeners. When you talk to someone, notice whether you find yourself telling them more stories than you usually tell to people. Every time you notice that, you’ve found a good story listener. If instead you find yourself censoring your story sharing, keeping your stories at a safe distance, that person is not going to be a good story listener. I don’t know about you, but I can think of a few people I know who fall on each side of that distinction in a matter of seconds.

In short, a good story listener has plenty of patience, an ability to keep quiet and listen, an ability to observe and notice, an ability to let trust build, and an ability to help people feel safe to speak freely. If I was looking at a pile of resumes, I would look for things people have done that show patience, attention, noticing, and a receptive sort of curiosity.

## **A story-listening interview**

If I was setting up an interview to find some good story listeners, I would ask people to do these things, over the course of 15-30 minutes:

1. tell a few stories while I listen
2. listen while I tell a few stories
3. elicit a few stories from a third person (and listen to them) while I watch
4. talk about what happened in the first three parts of the interview

In that fourth time period, a person who is good at story listening will be able to come up with some insightful observations about:

- their own stories
- my stories
- the stories they listened to
- the rising and falling waves of telling and listening

If you go through that whole process and the person doesn't *notice* anything, they aren't going to be able to listen to stories well. I have met people who would notice 20 useful things in an interview like that, and I have met people who would notice nothing at all.

After the interview, talk to the "third person" in the interview. Ask them if they felt heard and understood. Ask them if they would like to tell more stories to that person. Ask them whether they understood the story they told better after the interview than before it. Use their reaction to take a second measure of your interviewee's story-listening skills.

## Finding trainers for story listening

If you want to look for a person who can both listen to stories and *train* people to listen to stories, they need all of the things I listed above, plus a strong ability to introspect. They need to be used to thinking about what they do, why and how it works, how they can help other people learn how to do it, how they can tell whether or not people are doing it correctly, and how they can help people fix it when it isn't working.

To explain, let me tell you a story. Over the years I have taken three yoga classes.

My first teacher was a dancer. She seemed to assume that we could all bend our bodies into pretzels. I hurt my back trying to do what she did and had to quit the class. She probably didn't even notice.

My second teacher was just learning yoga herself, and she only knew one way to do it. Though she was enthusiastic and meant well, she didn't know why what worked for her worked, and she didn't know why what didn't work for some of us didn't work. Her class was fun, but it was not much better than a series of yoga videos.

My third yoga teacher was *amazing*. She knew yoga inside and out. She could glance at anybody in her class, or place her hand on your arm, and know instantly why what you were doing was working for you, or wasn't, and how to fix it or make it work better. Sometimes I would be struggling and failing, and she would come over and make one tiny adjustment, and suddenly everything would fall into place, *and then she would explain why it fell into place* so I could do yoga better at home.

So a good trainer for story listening will be good at story listening, and they will also be good at listening to story listening. At the end of the interview I described above, a good story-listening trainer will be able to explain what worked, what didn't, what they would do to fix what wasn't working, and how they would explain what they did. Just like my third yoga teacher did. Find people like that.

## What to expect when expecting stories

People often ask me to tell them more about the nuts and bolts of collecting stories in group sessions. Luckily for you and me, I'm an obsessive note-taker. So I decided to mine my records. I read over all of the notes I could find (covering 30-some story-sharing sessions) and pulled from them about 250 stories of "things that have happened" in real sessions. The notes included here are actual notes I wrote to myself during and after these sessions.

In each of the sections that follow, I consider one cluster of "things that happened" in group story-sharing sessions I ran or helped run or observed. In each section I start with some actual statements from my notes (cleaned up a bit to make more sense out of context), then provide some advice about what you can do if these things happen to you.

### People understand and accept the goals of the session, or they don't

The people you invite to a story-sharing session will show up with a variety of expectations about why they are there. No matter what you told them before the session, and no matter how many times you clearly repeated it, only some of these expectations will match *your* expectations. This is a natural law. It is useful to prepare yourself for some of the most common of these expectations.

Some example notes:

- One man was quite upset about the second exercise. He said he experienced "abject frustration" that the task didn't have more to do with what he came here to explore.
- People thought the session was supposed to be a lecture or training course, and they were disappointed that we wanted to hear from them.
- The professionals were wary and annoyed right up until we started just listening to them (and taping them, I think they liked that). It was funny, the secretary seemed to enjoy the small group a lot because she was learning things, but the professionals didn't feel there was anything they *could* learn, so they were happiest when we were basically receiving their wisdom.
- This person hijacked the session to find things out. He asked people lots of questions, both others around him and the facilitator. No stories were told; the whole thing turned into a support session for that one person.
- It looks like this person's view was, "Hey, I can say anything I want here." So he did.
- We asked all the groups to tell stories, but this group turned the session into a propaganda device for the story they wanted to tell.
- The two [professionals] put out a general aura of "I'm an expert in this area and you're wasting my time."
- A lot of the younger people kept quiet, but I think they were necessary to keep the older people talking. They were a great audience and very appreciative of the learning opportunity.

Following are some types of expectation I've seen in group story sessions, or ways people respond when asked to share stories in a group setting. I gave them character names as

though they were whole people, but really they are simplistic caricatures that describe motivations. Any real person would be a mix of these, and the same people might react in different ways in different contexts or when confronted by people behaving differently around them.

### ***Busy people***

Busy people don't have time to tell stories. They won't listen to a long introduction, won't participate in any exercises, and won't read anything. They constantly remind you that you are wasting their valuable time. They are the most likely to walk out of the session.

To get busy people to contribute, show them what *they* will get out of helping you by telling stories. Maybe they'll have an easier time doing something, or people will stop bothering them with questions, or an issue they care about will be improved. Busy people want to believe that their time is not being wasted, and they need to be sure of a return on investment for every minute they spend with you. Show them how their time is being used effectively.

### ***Backgrounders***

Backgrounders know enough about the issue to be good resources, but they don't want to participate. They might not trust you, or they might not want to talk in front of particular people, or they might consider the topic too private to talk about. They try to fade into the background and get through the session without saying anything. They are close to the busy people in their likelihood to drift out of the room and disappear.

To get backgrounders to contribute, make your privacy policy expressly clear, and communicate your need to hear a diverse range of experiences. Explain how you will use the resulting stories, and connect to goals the backgrounders might have. Ask for their help; reassure them; get them on your side; rouse them to action. If you can't get them to talk, ask if they might be willing to talk in another venue. Having an online story collection or a private, anonymous interview opportunity can help to give backgrounders another way to contribute, one they might like better.

### ***Gurus***

Gurus know so very much about the issues you are exploring—and (just as importantly) care so much about this fact—that they feel threatened by the session. They might feel it decreases their store of knowledge or spreads it around too much, or they might feel that you are trying to get something out of them for nothing. But while gurus feel threatened, they are also drawn to the session, since the issues it explores are things they feel they have authority over. Their stories are prepared and purposeful, with strong hints that they know a lot more than they can tell. They might view stories about mistakes or feelings to be trivial and inferior to what they have to offer, so they might inhibit others from talking.

To get gurus to contribute and tell useful stories, and to give others room to talk, make it clear that your purpose is not to *capture* what they (alone) know, but to understand the experiences of people of *all* levels of understanding and skill in the subject. Gurus need to know that their knowledge will be respected. Show them that you are not after what they

are guarding, and that what you need is something they can share freely without losing anything.

### **Questioners**

Questioners have heard that people are going to be exchanging experiences in the session, and they want to use the session to learn from others, perhaps even to gather some secrets that only the gurus and busy people (those in authority) know. So they ask a lot of questions.

I've seen people find the most knowledgeable or highest-status person they can and grill them about your topic, essentially ignoring your goals. Some questioners assume that you intend to teach them about the topic and start grilling you. They will become surprised, disappointed, or even angry that you don't know all that much about your topic.

Questioners don't tell stories, and they prevent other people from telling stories, since they are looking for facts and advice, not unimportant ramblings about mistakes and feelings. If questioners and gurus get together, it can ruin story sharing, because questioners can lead gurus into lecturing. (This is less true for busy people, because they don't have time for questioners and send them to other sources of information.)

To get questioners to tell stories (and leave the gurus alone), remind them that your goal is to learn about *diverse* experiences, including *theirs*, and that they can ask direct questions at another time. If your topic is one you think people will come wanting to learn about, have some resources on hand that questioners will find valuable. By giving questioners valuable answers, you can meet their goals first, then ask them to help with your project.

### **Old hands**

Old hands know a lot about the issues, but they aren't in a position to guard or value that knowledge. They understand what you are doing and are usually happy to help, and they actively come up with useful stories. However, old hands tend to step aside when gurus start to talk, because they have no interest in what the gurus want. Questioners don't ask old hands questions, because old hands don't publicize or prepare their knowledge. So even though the old hands know a lot about the issues, they may be the *least* likely to tell the useful stories they have to tell.

To get old hands to contribute, make room to let them talk. But do it without disparaging your gurus (who will shout out the old hands) or drawing the attention of your questioners (who will grill them). The best way to give old hands room to talk safely is to make sure *everyone* has room to talk. That way you are not seen as privileging anyone. Also, if you can quietly identify the old hands to yourself, see if you can follow up with them to gather more stories outside the session, for example in interviews.

### **Learners**

Both learners and questioners have a genuine interest in your topic and want to learn more about it. But unlike questioners, learners know how to listen respectfully. They do not attempt to control the conversation to suit their needs alone. Learners don't usually tell a lot of stories, nor do they think they have any useful stories to tell. But they are better



than the questioners at drawing more (and more useful) stories out of everyone else in the session. Because learners actively find out where your needs and theirs intersect, they are often willing, even sometimes *too* willing, to help you with little tasks (like noting down story names or copying sticky notes).

To get learners to tell stories, emphasize that you need to collect diverse experiences, including those of people who know little and want to learn more. And don't be tempted by their kind offers to pass up the opportunity to speak and help you instead. Come prepared with enough help that you can truthfully tell them what you would like most is to hear about their experiences.

### **Venters**

Venters come to the session with a list of problems or messages fixed in their minds that they have a great need to deliver. They might know about your goals, but they are more concerned with their own. Venters seem to appear in sessions most often when you have hit a vein of emotion (intentionally or not) about which people believe they have not been heard, or when your sessions have been noticeably *sponsored* by those in power and *attended* by those not in power. Venters come in thinking "I'll give *them* a piece of my mind!"

Venters pour out energy about the issues they are upset about, but they often aren't interested in telling stories, because it seems like a less direct and effective way of voicing their concerns. Venters sometimes buttonhole busy people or gurus because they think (rightly or wrongly) that those must be the people in charge. To venters, collecting stories might seem like a polite way of avoiding the issue, which they will not tolerate.

To get venters to tell stories, convince them that you *do* want to understand their perspectives and feelings, and that in fact is exactly why you are asking them to tell stories. Venters want to believe they can have an impact. Show them how they can do that by telling stories. If you expect a lot of venters in your session, come prepared with a special complaint line or other method by which venters can speak outside of the session. This will help them reach their goal so they can turn their attention to helping you reach yours.

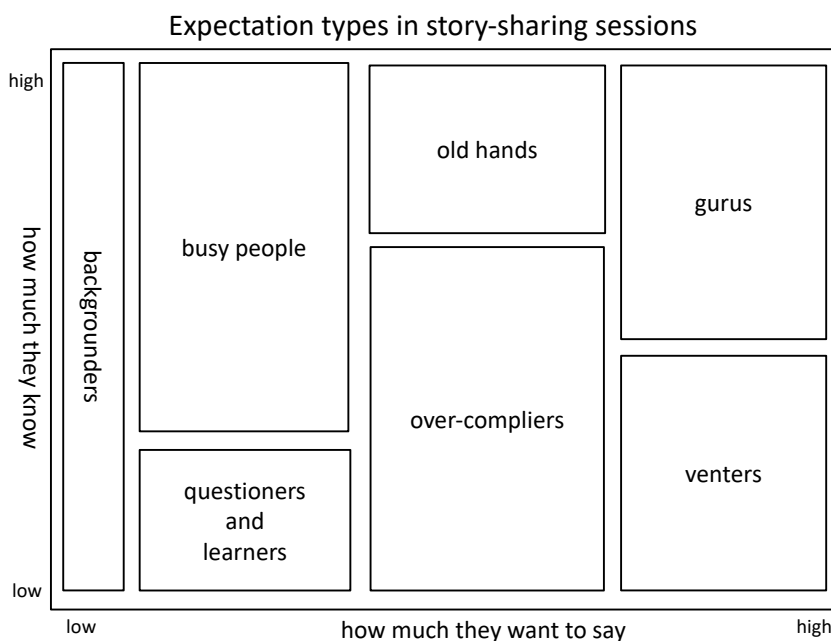
### **Over-compliers**

Over-compliers might know some valuable things, but they want to help too much and try too hard. They do *exactly* what you tell them, and they are worried about following the instructions perfectly. If you slip up and say the story should involve three people, all of their stories will involve exactly three people. Over-compliers don't bring out very much of their real experiences, because they don't believe you could actually *want* the boring facts of their humdrum existences. Their stories are even more purposeful and distorted than those of the gurus, because they see the session as a *test* they are desperately trying to pass.

To get over-compliers to contribute, help them understand that you really *do* want to know about the mundane details of their lives. Explain that what you want is just what everyone does naturally and that there is no need to perform; they can just talk about things that have happened. They want to do the session right. Show them how so they can.

People with all of these expectation types (and nobody has just one) can tell great stories. A story-sharing session can mix them all together and still succeed. They are not pathologies of storytelling as much as markers on the landscape. Knowing how to recognize them puts you in better control of getting where you want to go. They can help you detect signs of danger and opportunity and react to them quickly to nip a problem in the bud or capitalize on a potential.

This diagram shows where these expectation types fall on two dimensions: how much people know about the issue you are exploring, and how eager they are to tell you things about it (though not necessarily useful stories).

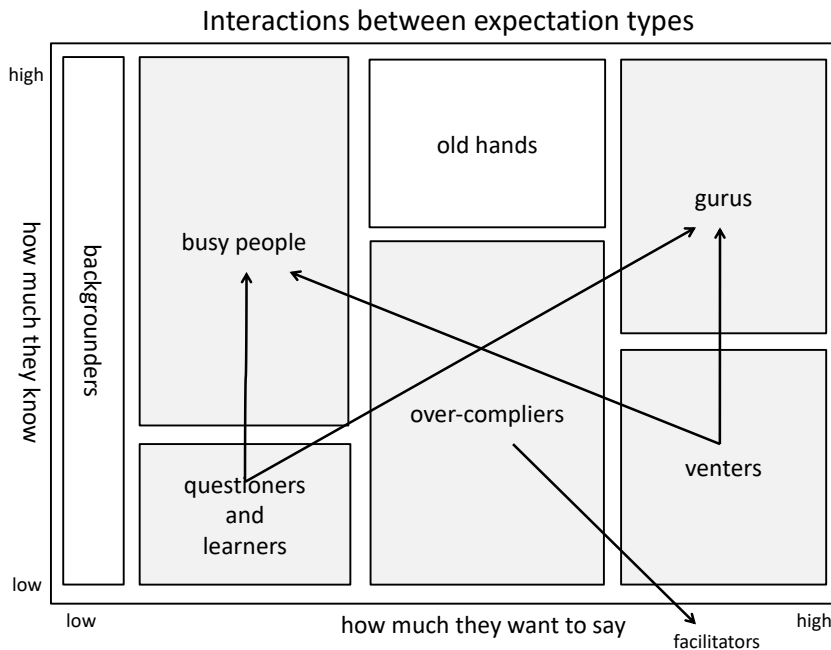


### ***Interacting expectations***

My next diagram shows the same thing, but with interactions between the types overlaid.

Old hands and backgrounders are in danger of falling out of the session and need to be kept in. Questioners and venters (and to a lesser extent learners) attach themselves to busy people and gurus, who don't mind being drawn attention to, thus giving energy to the interaction; but both participants in those interactions need to be guided out of them (or at least guided into story-sharing forms of them). Over-compliers fasten their tentacles on any available facilitators and need to be carefully disengaged.

If you find yourself overwhelmed with these interactions, look first at questioners, venters, and over-compliers (the types where the arrows start), because they are the most likely to start less-than-productive patterns. This will also encourage all-around participation, which will draw in the backgrounders, old hands, and learners. Those types are likely to need to be guided towards the sharing of stories.



You might think you can avoid these challenges by simply not inviting people you know will be questioners, venters, and over-compliers to your story-sharing sessions. Don't think that. While a session dominated by non-storytelling interactions among these people would yield poor results, no interactions at all would be even worse. You do want people with these different expectations to interact. You just want them to interact *by sharing stories*. A room full of diverse expectations is both a challenge and an opportunity.

## People understand and accept the tasks, or they don't

The previous section was about whether people understand *why* you are all in the session together. This section is about whether people understand *what* you want them to do and whether they are willing to go along with it, even if they understand and accept the goals of the session itself. This topic is about both understanding and compliance, which tend to walk hand in hand. If your project is participatory, the better people understand what you want them to do, the more they will want to do it.

Some example notes:

- This group felt unclear on what my expectations were. They were unsure they were "doing it right." They thought there was something they were not understanding, or not doing right, and got discouraged.
- One person offered some feedback on our methods. He said we need to explain in the beginning that it's okay to just talk and have it be conversational, that it doesn't mean the session is out of control, that it really is what we want to hear. He said people want to "do it right" and need reassurance that they are.

- Some people broke into groups and started to do the exercises, but some just ignored the instructions and talked.
- I said a few words about what we were going to do. I drew a simple picture on the whiteboard of mountains and valleys. I said that [the topic] is like a place, and we wanted to talk to them because *they'd been there*. They knew where the mountains were and the valleys, and they knew where the quicksand was. I drew each of these elements on the picture as I described them. (The quicksand reference brought out some laughter.) I said that we wanted to make a *map* that would help people find their way around [the topic]. I said we didn't need help with the details of the map, but we did need to know what the most important points were. They could help us with that. Everyone seemed to get this point well and liked the map analogy. It gave them a clear purpose for the session.

What I've found is that you have to develop a sort of “patter” at the start of any story-sharing session. You have to practice it and practice it until it seems natural. Don't read a script; speak from memory. Find a way to get across what you need people to do.

Here is a simple bit of patter I have developed. Modify it to something that feels comfortable for you. I'll go through it one part at a time.

Thanks for coming! My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am a \_\_\_\_\_, and I am working in collaboration with \_\_\_\_\_.

The three insertions here are all important. First you say your name—but they don't have to say theirs, so right away you start with an element of trust. Next you give them a bit of an idea of who you are, in a way that proves you are qualified to be running the session. Finally, if you are working with anyone who is important to them, especially if those people have any authority, this is the place to mention it. The message of this sentence is essentially “I come before you in sincerity. I claim a right to speak to you. I am worthy to make this request of you.” Whatever will convince people of those things, you should put it into this sentence. Maybe you need to say you have three dogs, or you once had cancer, or your family goes back three generations in the area. Whatever makes you “in” to this group, put it here. If you are not “in,” don't hide that; say it here, but make good use of the “in collaboration with” part.

We are working on a project about \_\_\_\_\_. Briefly, our goal is to \_\_\_\_\_. You can read a bit more about this on the handout you have, right *here* on the page, and there is more you can read *here*. Does anybody *not* have a handout? Okay.

This sentence explains very briefly why everyone is in the room. It tells people they can find out more about the project by looking at two places that include two additional levels of detail about the project. The purpose of this part of your presentation is twofold: to explain the project's goals, and *not* to explain the project's goals very fully. Why? Because

if you let people start asking questions in this part of the session, they will never get to sharing stories. Keep things moving or you will lose the room.

There is a lot of information out there about \_\_\_\_\_. What we want to explore today is what \_\_\_\_\_ is *really* like. What are your experiences about \_\_\_\_\_ in *real* life? What has actually *happened* to you and to people you know?

With this piece you move from abstract goal to concrete task, and you explain what it is that the session itself (not the project) is looking for. I find that putting a lot of emphasis on the words “real” and “really” and “happen” and “to you” are important here, but your message here may differ.

Usually when people get together in groups and talk, stories come up. People talk about things that happened to them. That’s what will happen today, except that today we want you to *notice* the stories as you tell them.

This is the self-fulfilling prophecy. Work on this until you can say it with perfect confidence (because it *is* true; stories *do* come up, most of the time). The “people talk about” part is a capsule definition of a naturally-occurring story. The “except today” part says that while storytelling is natural, you do want people to pay some extra attention to it. This is just the tiniest nudge towards asking people to tell stories, in a “don’t think of an elephant” way.

You might think, by the way, that I would not use the “s” word: story. I can’t seem to get around it. I can get around it in an interview, but not in a group session. I have tried lots of different words, but they don’t work. Asking about events or incidents or circumstances gets me lists of dates. Asking about perspectives or experiences gets me feelings, like “I experienced trauma related to that.” Only a story is a story. However, what I try to do is to introduce the word “story” in the context of natural conversation, as above.

For example, you might think of obstacles, successes, discoveries, confusions, that sort of thing.

This gives people a bit more information on what sorts of things you are looking for, though obviously your list of words would match your own project’s goals. I like to come up with just a few of these words, maybe three or four, and write them on a board, very large, so that everyone in the room can see them from afar and refer to them later. Don’t present these words as tests or goal posts, just as reminders and suggestions, memory triggers. If you chose your words well, you should see the energy level in the room go up a notch at this point. People have a goal, a plan, an expectation, and a resource. They should be ready to go.

There are just a few things I want to handle before we get started. First, these are my helpers: John over here and Maria here. You can ask them for help.

Saying “before we get started” signals a coming turning point between listening and acting. People tend to sit up in their chairs when you say that. This is the time to point out any

helpers you have as resources people can rely on—another signal that they are about to start doing something.

We will be recording the rest of the session. Do you see the number written at the top of the handout you got, right *here*? That is your participant number. Remember it, because it is the only way you will be identified. This session is completely anonymous. We have no idea who you are, and we don't want to know.

This is the time to mention whatever privacy policy you have decided on (though it should also be explained on the handouts people have). Don't make your plan sound insipid or timid. If you planned your project well and know your participants, nobody will be surprised or upset by what you say. If anyone interrupts you in this part, ask them to talk to you about it privately once the session has started.

Now here's how we are going to go about this.

This is a bridge into whatever story-sharing exercise you will ask people to do, or whether you will just ask them to break up into small groups and respond to your story-eliciting questions.

This whole spiel should take about three minutes. You should be able to give it in your sleep, and it should sound perfectly natural, even if you have never given it before. You may think this sounds too short to work, but believe me, I've tried (and seen other people try) giving longer introductions. More explanation doesn't produce better stories; it just wastes valuable time.

Note that the words "any questions?" are entirely absent. I've found that if you ask for questions, you get one of two things. You might get endless questions (often from one persistent person) that derail the group's energy and use up time, like "What is a story?" and "What are we supposed to do?" Or you get no questions, but the group's energy drops off anyway because everyone suddenly realizes nobody cares enough to ask any questions. Better not to go there. If people have questions, they will let you know as soon as your small groups start their tasks. Be ready to answer them, but be quiet about it.

The last thing I want to say about this issue of presenting the tasks of the session is that it helps to display your confidence in the session's participants up front. Here is a note from a real session that I saved to show you down here:

I started by thanking people for taking the time to come to the session, pointed out the cookies (which I remembered to bring), and gave each person a coupon for a free lunch. At this point two of the people laughed and said we should wait to give the coupons out until we saw how much information they gave us.

The joke made a useful point. Giving out the coupons up front was a good idea because it did two things.

1. It told people that we *believed in them*, that we believed what they were going to tell us was worth a lunch coupon, no matter what they said. This I think freed people up a little. It reduced the "why am I wasting my time with this" feeling.

2. It created a sort of feeling of indebtedness, in that people wanted to help us if we were that serious. I felt a sort of psychological lifting when I gave out the lunch coupons. People were pleasantly surprised. Not that we should trick people or anything, but I guess if you start out by saying “Thanks” *before* people have even told you anything, they feel good about what they are going to do.

That session was the time I first realized that giving people a pleasant surprise at the start of a session increases their willingness to participate in it. An unexpected gift is one way to do this, but it’s not the only way. There are many ways to please people. You might speak to people with an unexpected (perhaps unaccustomed) level of respectful attention. You might be dressed better than they expected. The room might be cleaner than usual. The chairs might be comfortable. There might be flowers. You might have nicer food than is the norm for “things like this.” Even little things like nice-looking handouts can make a difference.

Why does this matter? Starting out the session with a display of confidence—not just in yourself and in story sharing but in the session’s participants as well—helps people get over any concerns they have about the session being “not good enough” for them, for you, or for the project. If you convey the message that you see good things coming out of the session, people are more likely to do their part to make that vision a reality.

## **People understand story sharing, or they don’t**

When you ask people to tell stories, they often slide away into one of several other definitions of the word, none of which are what you mean by it. They think a story is a joke, a lie, a history, a performance, an opinion, or a lesson.

Some example notes:

- One guy said, “You want some sort of performance, right?”
- The joke, “That’s my story and I’m sticking to it” keeps coming up.
- Some of the people were very critical of what we were trying to do in the session. Some seemed mystified as to what we thought we were going to get from them. The words “experiences” and “stories” seemed to be meaningless. Obviously we were not getting our purpose across well enough to them.
- These people *thought* they were telling stories, but they weren’t. They were just lecturing.
- Some people went on too long. Other people got bored and weren’t learning anything from long listings of people’s experiences.
- They complained that they didn’t see how what they were doing had anything to do with stories. It was clear to me, but they were frustrated that they didn’t see the connection.

How can you help people understand what you mean? What I’ve found works best is to *balance* your attention to the three dimensions of stories.

Asking	Highlights	And pulls the story towards its use as
What happened?	Events	A cognitive tool
How did that seem to you?	Perspectives	An expressive message
How did you feel about it?	Emotions	A social connection

If you are asking about only one of these things, the stories you collect will reflect that imbalance. Creating balance communicates freedom from a single purpose. It also communicates an emphasis on *what actually happened*, not what makes a “good” story.

What should you do if you try to keep people balanced, but they veer off anyway, possibly because they have misunderstood what you said or brought narrow views of stories along with them? As you watch people share stories, pay attention to the meanings of the word they seem to be attracted to. Attractions will vary by individual personality and group culture. For example, engineers tend to be drawn to the use of stories as cognitive tools, while writers gravitate to connection and salespeople to messaging. The better you get at recognizing deviations from a balance of all three story dimensions, the easier you will find it to help people return to that balance.

What follows is some advice on countering each interpretation of the word “story.”

***Countering the perception that a story is a joke***

If this idea gets hold of your story-sharing session, to the point that everyone is telling stories only to entertain, the session will not produce many useful stories. Funny, yes, but not revealing.

Sometimes people jump to this definition of story because it gives them a hiding place to avoid talking about their real feelings. Once one participant creates a jokey hiding place, others may join them there. Of course *some* joking is a good thing; it keeps things lively. But if the joking spreads to the point that people aren’t disclosing their feelings or experiences (in which case it will come off as awkward and spastic rather than relaxed), you might need to make some subtle corrections.

One method of dealing with avoidance joking is to find a task you need the “life of the party” to do—away from the rest of the group. Maybe they alone know something you need to record, or they tell a specific story particularly well, or something. See if temporarily removing them can get everyone else back on track.

If that doesn’t work, or if the joking didn’t originate in one person, pull a few of the more senior or responsible-looking people aside and whisper something in their ears about the project’s goals and how wonderful it is that we are addressing them here today, in this very important session. See if they take the hint and guide the conversation into more serious topics. But whatever you do, don’t march into the group’s space with a sour face on and break up the party. It is better to let some jokes flow than it is to put a stop to the game.



Considering my caricatures of session participants from the previous section (busy people and backgrounders and so on), the people most likely to take stories as jokes are over-compliers (this might be the performance you want), backgrounders (joking is a way to get through the session without saying anything), and venters (they are so nervous about their overflowing emotions that some spill out as jokes). Busy people don't have time for jokes, and gurus find them beneath their dignity. Old hands don't need to hide anything; they may tell a few jokes, but those will be *genuinely* funny. Learners may indulge in a few jokes, but not for avoidance. Questioners will be too busy asking questions to think of any jokes to tell.

### ***Countering the perception that a story is a lie***

Sometimes participants in story-sharing sessions get the idea that you are asking them to *make things up* about the topic you are exploring, either for the sake of appearances (to hide the truth) or because the approach is one of those touchy-feely group-hug things meant for children and herbal tea drinkers (thus weak and useless). This can happen even after you say the word "real" ten times.

I have seen this happen mostly when participants see themselves as very serious or expert in the topic, or when the topic itself seems too serious or sensitive to tell stories about. I have seen important people get "all in a huff" about the idea that they, respectable members of their community, would tell *stories* about such an important topic.

This sort of reaction often surfaces in nervous jokes and laughter about the nature of stories as lies, such as:

- That's my story, and I'm sticking to it.
- That's a likely story.
- Are you people telling stories about me?
- That's no story, it's the truth.

When people send these signals (to each other, and to you if you are listening), they are negotiating what will be revealed and what will be concealed or distorted.

When I see an interaction like this taking place, I seek out a reason to slide into the conversation with a by-the-bye comment or suggestion that just *happens* to emphasize my expectation that stories will be serious revelations, not specious fabrications. I might say something like:

One thing I forgot to mention before [which is a lie] is that you should feel free to delve deep into both the positive *and* negative aspects of what you have experienced. Nothing is off the table. This is confidential, and the more we strike the critical issues, the better.

I might deliver a faux-naïf suggestion like this in a quiet, "we are the adults here" conspiratorial tone, full of gravitas and "heavy hitter" words like "essential" and "strike" and "crucial," all of which are meant to send a "word to the wise" message that we really *do* want the truth, and that you (the wisest among us) know it better than anyone.

Is this manipulative? Not one bit. It is the honest truth. Jokes about lies are veiled questions about the purpose of the session. Take them as such, and answer them. But answer them obliquely, as they were asked.

Considering my caricatures of session participants from the previous section, the most likely among them to take stories as lies are busy people (waste of their time), gurus (how dare you), venters (no one can understand their pains) and over-compliers (this might be the performance you want). Backgrounders will avoid lying as they avoid everything else; questioners will see no information value in it; and old hands and learners will have no problem with the unvarnished truth (they have nothing to fear).

### ***Countering the perception that a story is a history***

It is easy to notice when people veer into defining a story as a historical document, because they start *listing* things: dates, events, places.

As with the joke interpretation, this can be a protective retreat into “just the facts” of experience, leaving the dangerous ground of emotion aside. I find that people who are unused to talking about emotions—not necessarily in general, but in the context of the group you have convened (work, neighbors, family, officials)—are most likely to bottle up their stories in this way.

A good indicator of the history interpretation is when you find a group with one person droning on and on in a monotone, while everyone else in the group (who has enough status to distance themselves from the task) has suddenly found themselves very much in need of refreshment or a bathroom break. Or you may find two people having an intense technical discussion about some intricate detail of the question you posed and everyone else staring at the floor. (Unlike storytelling, listing is usually far more fascinating to the list-maker than to anyone else.)

If I see people’s gazes drifting around the room (or around their own rooms, if they are meeting online), I slide into a position where I can overhear what is being said. If I hear lists being drafted, I make an “idle” comment that brings the conversation back to events, like:

- Wow, you’ve seen a lot. When did *this* one happen?
- I’m interested in this one. Could you tell me about a time when that happened?
- I’m not clear on this one. Could you give me an example of a time when that happened?

In other words, I don’t *stop* people who are making lists. I help them turn their lists of items into lists of stories. I find that if I can make the hint well enough, they are glad to talk about “what happened” with regard to each list item.

List-makers are most likely to come from your populations of backgrounders (this is excellent camouflage), gurus (you may now benefit from my expertise), venters (my list of grievances is as follows), questioners (these are my information needs), and over-compliers (this might be the performance you want). Learners may do this as well, though with them a word to the wise may be sufficient. Old hands *may* be list-makers if they tend in that direction, but it will not be out of avoidance, just habit. Busy people do not make lists. Their secretaries

do that. (But watch out: busy list-makers may *dictate* lists to other people in their groups, who will become *de facto* secretaries simply because they are located nearby.)

### **Countering the perception that a story is a performance**

This reaction is probably the most common I have seen: a story is a performance, a play, a Hollywood picture show. It may not be a lie, but it is a *show*. There are two common subspecies of this perception: I am not worthy to give a show; and I *am* worthy to give a show. Each is dangerous. The unworthy shun the limelight and the worthy seize it, but you need them to *share* it.

A performance interpretation of stories looks like drama. It looks like people talking loudly, gaming things up, competing with each other for the best story, gesticulating wildly, using assumed voices, standing up, or striking poses as though they were on a stage.

It can also look like jokes about or mentions of story *quality*, and the presence or lack of it. The words “good story” should never escape your notice. I remember a group I overheard who started out their conversation by saying, “I suggest we call ourselves ‘the good group.’” That sort of joke usually means that people are gearing up to perform. Of course *some* degree of performance, like joking or lying or list-making, is well and good. Just make sure people understand that performance isn’t their *destination*. It’s just one way to get there. People can get so involved in one-upping each other that the goals of the *project* get left far behind.

What do I do when I see performances? I don’t say anything to the performer; I let them go on as they like. There is no point trying to stop a performer. It’s what they do. Like list-makers, they usually don’t know they are doing it. But I do watch the group they are telling their stories to, to make sure they stay on topic, and to make sure that non-performers get a chance to speak. For example, I may drop in and say something, “Keith, did that sort of thing ever happen to you?” or “Sarah, you’ve been to Iraq, did you see anything like that?”

If a performer (or pair of performers) is really taking over a group, I might find a critical task only they can complete. A bag full of critical tasks only troublemakers can complete is a useful thing. And it’s not a ruse; you really *can* get useful things out of troublemakers if you get them alone. They often have more energy than everyone else, if you can guide it. Don’t *fake* troublemaker tasks; make them real. You might ask a great storyteller, for example, for a private retelling of a story for later use in a communications campaign.

Now, which of my caricature-people are most likely to take stories as performances? Gurus (they have their patter down already), venters (same thing) and over-compliers (this might be the performance you want). Busy people are too busy to perform. To backgrounders, this is an opportunity to hide. Questioners want to be in the audience, not on the stage (but watch out; they may urge performers on). Old hands are too modest to perform.

### **Countering the perception that a story is an opinion**

Yet another interpretation of a story is as an opinion, a series of declamations about “the way things are” (usually deplorable or admirable).

Sometimes a person will start to tell a story, but their great need to “speak their piece” will overwhelm them, and they will seize the podium with fervor. I don’t think people usually mean to run off with the session when they do this. They just can’t help expanding when the conversation lands on a pet subject. You do this; I do this. Nobody is immune. Ask me about dog training or wildcrafting herbal teas and you’ll get an earful.

People standing at personal podiums are easy to detect. They speak loudly and expansively, and they use formulaic ways to announce their speeches. Look for these words:

- *people*, and its relatives *nobody* and *everybody*
- groups, like managers or employees or citizens
- *always* and its good friend *never*
- *should* and its family: *must*, *have to*, *shouldn’t*, *imperative*, *important*, *vital*, *crucial*, *key*
- problem and solution
- my-way statements like *in my view*, *it seems to me*, *in my opinion*, *what I see*
- evaluation statements like *good*, *excellent*, *best*, *bad*, *deplorable*, *worse*, *awful*

Another trick is to listen as people share stories and pick out verb tenses. If you hear no past-tense verbs, no stories are being told. If you hear people saying things like, “as a general rule I would agree, but there are exceptions to that, and you shouldn’t be dogmatic”—they are not talking about *things that have happened*. They are voicing their opinions.

The idea that a story is an opinion is not dangerous unless it grows out of proportion. Still, if people are doing nothing but trading opinions, a few faux-naïf questions may lead things back into the recounting of experiences.

- You can link opinions to experiences by asking about the history of an opinion:
  - What led you to take that position?
  - How did your views on that come about?
  - How has your opinion on this changed over the years?
- Or you can (obliquely) ask for experiences related to holding the opinion:
  - Can you recall a time when your position on this mattered a lot to you?
  - Has your opinion on this ever been challenged?
  - Did you ever run into anyone who disagreed on this point? What happened then?

But I have to admit, I have had less success in turning opinions into stories than any of the other interpretations I list here. When people have an opinion they feel a great need to express, it may simply be best to let them express it. The risk of insulting or upsetting people who feel they finally have a chance to set things right may be worse than the risk of cutting off stories, at least for a while. I tend to be more tolerant of opinionating than some other manifestations of not-quite-storytelling.

Who among my caricature-people takes stories as opinions? Busy people and gurus stand together on this interpretation, as figures of authority with strong positions to defend. Venters are going to be strong here as well. Backgrounders and questioners will stand back

and let others pontificate: the former because it gives them an excuse to keep quiet, and the latter because they might learn something useful. Old hands can get carried away with their opinions, but they are not hard to nudge into storytelling, being less likely to take your questions as attacks on their entrenched positions.

Over-compliers, surprisingly, are not likely to pontificate. If there was one thing they got out of whatever you said at the start, it was that you wanted some kind of performance, and having their say doesn't seem enough like a performance to them.

### ***Countering the perception that a story is a lesson***

Sometimes people interpret an invitation to tell a story as a request to receive a lecture. I remember a person starting a small-group task with the joke, "Gather round, children, and I'll tell you a tale." This was an indicator that they were entering into a teaching response. Other indicators are:

- people referring to their many years of experience, or degrees, or other proofs of advanced knowledge
- people saying things like "you have to understand" or "let me explain" or "a frequent misconception is"
- people stating facts in an encyclopedic manner (e.g., "there were over 3000 cases of \_\_\_\_ in the \_\_\_\_ area in 1992")

Lecturing is not a problem if it involves telling stories. Indeed, some of the greatest teachers in history have relied on storytelling as a teaching method. So I would rank this interpretation as the least damaging of the bunch.

But lectures don't always have stories in them, and even if they do, they take time away from other participants. So when I hear lecturing in a story-sharing session, I do two things:

1. Hint to lecturers that a story or two would make their lectures even better.
2. Make sure the people who have no lectures to deliver are also getting a chance to describe their experiences.

Who gives lectures? Gurus are lecturers *par excellence*, so you might have to ask them (before the session, if you can) to give other participants a chance to speak. Too many questioners can lead to too much lecturing—not because *they* lecture, but because they egg on the gurus. Busy people might or might not lecture, depending on how honored and generous they feel. Venters tend not to lecture. Their complaints generally don't form coherent systems of knowledge. Backgrounders hide, as always. Over-compliers are less likely to lecture than to perform.

Old hands may slide into lecturing if they meet up with a receptive audience, but that could be a good thing. They have had many experiences, and they can often be nudged into storytelling with a simple question, like:

- What was the best example of that you've ever seen?
- That sounds like great advice. Did you ever see anyone do anything like that? Or the opposite?

- What was it like to \_\_\_\_ back in the day? Do any moments from back then stand out?
- What happened the first time you \_\_\_\_?
- How did you get started \_\_\_\_?

And so on. With some encouragement, an old hand can turn a lecture-tending story-sharing session around. And they won't take it over, because they don't have a burning need to be heard, like gurus and venters do.

### **People feel the session is safe enough to tell stories in, or they don't.**

This topic is simple: people tell only stories when they feel it is safe to do so. Sometimes they do, and sometimes they don't.

Some example notes:

- Only the people in power told stories. The rest just watched and listened.
- People tried to start telling stories but others stopped them.
- People started to slip out of the task and started to discuss problems in the "old" ways, falling back on "safe" things they knew about.
- Maybe people don't *want* to remember things. We need some way to engage them in telling stories in a way that doesn't threaten them.
- People kept returning to their comfort zone.

Danger in telling a story can come from several sources: from the audience, from people in the story, from the story performance, from oneself, from technology, and from the community. Let's examine those one by one.

#### ***Audience danger***

Audience danger is the most obvious, and it's the one people usually think of first. It is what surrounds all speech: the danger that those listening to the story will find it not worth hearing. People wonder: *Will my story be well received?*

This danger, and the elaborate mechanisms people put into place to reduce it, is explained in the chapter of *Working with Stories* on conversational story sharing. As a facilitator, you should study explanations of those patterns (mine and others) and (more importantly) practice noticing and supporting the various safety valves in conversational narrative. I won't repeat myself by saying more about that here.

#### ***Character danger***

Danger from story characters seems like one of those "step into the screen" surrealist games, but what I mean here is the kind of danger that comes in when the story implicates particular people (or groups or roles) in blame, or just represents them in a way they might not like. People wonder: *Will they mind my story about them?*

This danger can be reduced by a well-designed and well-communicated privacy policy. I also find it useful to remind people in group story sessions that our goal is not to "name names" but to explore experiences free of pointing fingers. I like to do this in a way that

sets up rules of a game we are about to play. For example, I might explain the steps *I* will be taking as the project facilitator to ensure the anonymity of all participants. Once that has been done I can say something like:

Now for *your* part in ensuring privacy, I ask that you refrain from using anyone's *name* in your stories. If you need to refer to a person, please give them a pseudonym or refer to their role.

I find that people take *my* efforts to ensure privacy more seriously when they see I am asking *them* to play a part in the creation of safe story sharing. Another way to reduce character danger is to set up a rule whereby any participant in the project can ask to have any story told *by or about them* removed from the collection—no questions asked.

### **Performance danger**

Performance danger comes in when a participant is trying to meet a perceived expectation or requirement of their participation. People wonder: *Is this what I was supposed to do?*

To reduce performance danger, make sure your expectations in collecting stories are both clear and low. Why low? Because the more you pressure people to turn out useful stories, the less useful their stories will be.

I like to over-plan projects. If I think I need 100 stories, I try to collect 120 or 150, so the pressure on each participant is reduced. People can *feel* your need for their stories; so reduce that need. Give people permission to perform poorly so they can perform well. Even if you feel like the session will produce no useful stories, don't express that need. Remember the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Why *not* challenge people? Won't pressuring them spur them to succeed? Not in my experience. Sharing stories is not like running a race; it's more like growing a garden. It is a project full of serendipity and unexpected discovery. If you send out strong signals of high expectation, people will try to control their "messages" and "themes" without the confidence to simply let stories grow out of the soil of conversation. Ask any great gardener how they "succeed" at gardening, and you will hear not rules and recipes but profound respect for the mysteries of soil health and plant growth. It is only the novices who believe they know how to make a garden do what they want it to do.

Likewise, people are terrible judges of their own stories. I've seen people tell one meaningful and relevant story after another, then claim that they have had no meaningful or relevant experiences. I've also seen the reverse: people convinced they have dropped gems of valuable wisdom, when in fact they have done nothing but parrot official manuals.

My advice is to wait people out. Often *after* people believe they have finished performing to your expectations, they consider themselves free of obligation, thus ready to give you what you were really after in the first place. I've seen people tell several non-stories or half-stories, convinced they are doing what has been asked, then come out with a breathtaking story that turns the project around.

You can *reduce* the perception of performance danger, and you can work around it, but you can't eradicate it. So to get what you need, you have to take the good with the bad

(meaning the natural stories with the attempts to perform to expectation) and sort it out later. Setting low expectations helps you do this.

### ***Self-disclosure danger***

Danger from self-disclosure appears when people confront painful truths about themselves and their lives. People wonder: *Will dredging out this memory hurt?*

Like performance danger, this is a danger you can reduce but not remove. It is in the nature of inquiry to penetrate and expose, and it is human nature to resist this. A lot of the work in question design, specifically the elements of knowing your participants and avoiding leading or characterizing messages, involves meeting people at the level of self-disclosure danger they can handle. Note that I do not say the work involves *eliminating* self-disclosure danger, because without it there would be no inquiry.

Your participants will vary in:

- How much self-disclosure danger they are willing and able to take on
- How much danger your topic presents to them
- What sorts of resources they have on hand to cope with the danger of disclosure
- Their habits of disclosure: do they often confront their own limitations or do they avoid them?
- Whether they believe the danger of self-disclosure is a pathological disease best eradicated, a mixed blessing best balanced, or a refreshing purification best plunged into.

Because of this natural variation, instead of uniformly reducing the danger of self-disclosure, it is better to offer people an array of resources they can use to reduce it themselves. For example, giving people a diverse menu of questions to answer gives people the opportunity to choose a level of disclosure that matches their fears and ambitions.

The expectations you communicate to your participants will have a strong effect on the danger of self-disclosure. That is, the more you press people to “tell all,” the less they will reveal. They may *appear* to be telling more: their stories may multiply in number and length. But the depth of revelation will shrink.

As you plan to conduct an interview or facilitate a story-sharing session, prepare a few extra questions (or activities) you can use if you realize that you have misjudged the depth at which people are willing to consider their experiences. This is easy to do, because most project planners think up more questions than they actually get to use.

For example, say you have thought of eight questions you would like to ask people, and you order them from least to most penetrating. You have decided that you will use four questions in your story-sharing session, so you pick the middle four of the range. But you keep the other four bracketing questions in mind. When you get to the session:

- If you find that people are more alarmed by your questions than you expected, you pull out your two extra-tame questions.
- If you find that people are extremely motivated to dredge up the depths, you pull out your two extra-wild questions.



In story work it is always good advice to bring more than you show.

### **Technology danger**

Technology danger comes in when people worry that their story, perhaps told in the heat of emotion, could be spread far and wide without their control or consent. People wonder: *Will I see this on the internet?*

Oral historians have thought about this one a lot. If you read any set of advice about oral history interviews you will find practical tips on how to use technology with sensitivity in recording storytelling. One thing I'm sure you already know about technology is that there is an astounding variety of beliefs about its safety. People have all sorts of reactions to being recorded, from "Privacy? Who cares?" to "I'm not saying a word." And people can be set off by any number of technology triggers. People who will publish the most intimate details of their lives in writing might balk at being recorded in audio or video, and vice versa. Even with groups you thought would be uniform in their reactions, you will be surprised by differences that threaten to unbalance your story collection.

My own experience has taught me that three things work to reduce technology danger in story collection: simplicity, transparency, and provision.

- **Simplicity.** Never use technology that captures more information than you can justify. Why do you need audio recordings? Why do you need video? The more you ask for, the less you will get. Justify the additional extraction of information created by each step up in recording technology. If you do this *before* a story-sharing session, you will have less to explain during it.
- **Transparency.** Never hide what you are using technology to do, who is doing it, with whom, for whom, or why. Tell people about your technology plans at the start of each interview or session. But don't spend a lot of time on it. Just give people a quick overview of your privacy policy, then tell them that you are happy to share its details with anyone who wants to see them. This is an intermediate position between too little and too much information. Honest transparency does not need to put on a parade. It is when transparency is paraded with the most pomp that people begin to wonder if the emperor has no clothes.
- **Provision.** Be ready to negotiate new terms of safety with people who are not happy with the plan you have set up. If you have understood your participants well, you may not need the provisions you have put in place, but it is better to leave plans unused than to lose valuable stories because you have no other response than "I guess you can leave." For example, if you plan to rely on tape recorders in a story-sharing session, you can also ask one or two helpers to sit in as potential note-takers in case some small groups prefer not to be recorded.

### **Community danger**

Community danger comes in when people begin drawing out memories and facts the community has tucked away by implicit consensus. People wonder: *Will they say I was the one who told?*

I put this one last because it is the most important. In the majority of projects I have done in which a coherent community exists (i.e., the participants are not just scattered customers of a product), this has been the danger with the greatest potential to do long-lasting damage. I have developed a healthy respect for community danger. Like fire, it is easy to start and hard to stop. This is why PNI places such strong emphasis on knowing your participants and developing a sound win-win proposal and privacy policy. All of the other dangers I list here may reduce the number and quality of stories you collect. Community danger has the potential to turn empowerment into disempowerment.

How can you reduce community danger? Know your community, give people options, and trust your participants.

**Know your community.** I talk a lot in *Working with Stories* about “knowing your participants,” by which I mean knowing how the majority of people in each participant group can be expected to react to things you will be asking them to do (like share stories in a group session). But knowing your whole community is also important. The more you know about it, the less likely you will be to put its members in danger. For example, you can ask yourself:

- What is it like to live or work in this community?
- Where are the divisions in this community? What pulls it apart?
- Where are the connections in this community? What keeps it together?
- How do people share stories in this community? What is its story-sharing culture like? (The assessment tool on page [132](#) can help you answer this question.)

**Give people options.** Even after you learn as much as you can about your community, there will be undercurrents in it that are invisible to you. You might, for example, run into a group of participants who are so frustrated with the status quo that they are willing to take on some extra risk. Conversely, you could run into some people who are exceptionally wary because they have been recently laughed at or dismissed.

The best way to prepare to handle invisible undercurrents is to give people a multiplicity of choices. I know I've mentioned this point a few times already, but I'd like to tell you where it came from. It came from my own experiences as I asked people to share stories.

- When I used to prepare one question for everyone to answer, I could see in people's faces that some of them felt my question was too dangerous to answer—and that some of them wished I had asked an even more dangerous question. That's why I started to experiment with question menus. I saw that people wanted them.
- I saw the same thing happen with story-sharing methods. I can remember a particular story-sharing session in which one participant faded into the background, saying nothing at all. At the end of the session, we gave everyone a web link they could use to tell any additional stories they thought of later on. That person went to that web link and told ten stories. Their action, and especially the gratitude they expressed as they did it, stuck with me for a long time.

These experiences (and many more like them) convinced me that community danger is less of a threat to story sharing when people are able to choose how, when, and to whom they will share stories.

**Trust people.** Knowing your community and giving people options are excellent ways to reduce community danger. But you are not the only person who can reduce community danger. Your participants can do it too, and you can ask them to do it.

For many people a hint will suffice. I like to use a storytelling version of the golden rule. It goes like this.

Never tell a story about another person in a way that you wouldn't want them to tell a story about you. If you want people to keep an open mind about the things you have said and done, keep an open mind about the things other people have said and done. If you don't want people to spread nasty rumors about you, don't spread nasty rumors about other people.

This doesn't mean you are asking people to hide the truth. It just means you are asking them to be as fair in their story sharing as they would like everyone else to be.

Will this work? Can a hint like this remove community danger? Maybe. Maybe not. Participatory story work is a great adventure, full of promise and peril. It is not a task; it is a journey. It is a miracle more often than it is a disaster, but you can't get to the miracle until you accept that the disaster is possible.

The truth is that unless you are very well connected in your community, you will not be able to anticipate all possible causes of community danger. At some point you will need to accept your lack of control and trust your participants. Blindly? Of course not. Develop a healthy awareness of your trust—and its limits. How much do you trust your participants to protect each other as they share stories? Do you trust some of them more than others? Why is that? Is there anything you can do to increase your trust in your participants? Would you trust them more, for example, if you had a different project plan?

When I'm planning a project, I like to picture myself in a room with my project participants. I hand them all of my project plans, holding nothing back, then step back and wait quietly for their response.

- If I picture them ripping up my project plans and storming out of the room, I know that I need to do more to earn their trust. I need to align the project better with the things they want to do. I might need to talk to more people, bring more people into my planning or oversight group, or do some more pilot story collection.
- If I picture myself unable to step back quietly—if I see myself jumping forward to defend my plans or make sure that my intent is understood—I know that I have not shared “my” project with its participants as much as I should. It can be a challenge to trust other people to do their part in a project you have worked hard on. I know I find it hard, after I have spent days preparing to facilitate a story-sharing session, to simply let people talk, especially when they take the long way round to where I want them to go.

Once you have tested and verified your trust for your participants, *show it to them*. Show them that you understand and accept the fact that *they hold the project in their hands*. Don't assume that they know you trust them.

If I'm facilitating a session in which I think people might not understand the role I am asking them to play, I like to say:

This is *your* project, and this is *your* session. I will be telling you what to do today, but that's only because I know how to use the method you have chosen to use for your project. I am here to help, not to make decisions. You are the ones who will determine what will come out of this session and this project.

When I have given this little speech, I have often been surprised by how surprised people are by it. Many of us have been so poked and prodded by surveys and probes that we don't recognize participation when we see it. As a facilitator, it is your job to help your participants understand and make good use of their right to participate.

### **You understand your groups and topic well, or you don't**

People who belong to different groups, or who take on different roles in a community, or who just have different personalities, respond differently in a story-sharing session. Picture a roomful of corporate jet pilots talking next door to a roomful of taxi drivers and you'll get the picture. Now picture a roomful of corporate jet pilots *and* taxi drivers, and you can see how things can get complicated pretty quickly. Not only that, but different topics create different dynamics in group storytelling. A session about Sudden Infant Death Syndrome will be dramatically different than a session about Supply Chain Management.

These things mean that you can't just roll out one standard plan for every story-sharing session. You need to spend some time considering who will be coming and how you can expect them to respond to the tasks you plan to set out for them.

Some example notes:

- This was a disaster, especially with the two secretaries in the group. One of them was quite upset about it being "too technical." She kept saying, "I don't understand what any of this means! What do you want me to do? This doesn't make any sense!" We didn't put it in terms that made sense to her.
- We should try to remove all jargon from the exercises. Some people don't know what "features" are.
- Overall in this session, there was a palpable tension between the two groups of people. They were "talking past each other."
- This group was very hard-headed. We couldn't do any "ogre" or "princess" exercises!
- My overall feeling with this group was that the exercises flopped completely, but asking them to list things and give advice to a new user was quite fruitful.
- We must bear in mind that this group was all young people, students, and all researchers of some kind. Older people, and more concrete thinkers, might respond to this exercise very differently.

- Just when things looked really bad and I was shrinking down in my chair and drawing nothing but doodles, there was a big breakthrough. The person who kept complaining was saying, “There is this problem and it’s horrible!” and [my colleague] said, “That’s great, why don’t you make a list of all the things that are frustrating.” Aha. The answer to the concrete-thinker problem is lists. People who deal with many concrete details all day keep a lot of *lists*. I couldn’t see this, because I *never* keep lists of things. Asking *them* to make lists works for *them*.

Here are a few dimensions along which I have found variation that matters in telling stories. This is not related to whether people tell stories (and think they do), nor is it related to how people interact with others as they tell stories (the venters, etc). These are distinctions related to experience and thought.

### ***Short versus long experience***

People with vast experience in a topic tell different stories, and tell stories for different reasons, than people with little experience.

- People with long experience will often give you summaries of stories instead of the stories themselves. They are the most likely to respond with scenarios or opinions. You may need to give them special help recalling *specific* incidents to recall. But this is not hard to do. For example, if a fisherman said to you, “It was always a surprise when we brought the nets in,” you could say, “Was there any particular time that stands out?” And so on.
- People with little experience tell what they have to tell quickly, then run out of steam and cast around for something (anything) pertinent to add. But they don’t *have* to run out of things to say. You can help them recall additional details of their few experiences. Conveniently, they don’t usually mind doing this. If you ask an old fisherman to describe a specific event in detail, they might not be able to, and they might also feel that you are questioning their expertise by asking for details. But people who have been on a boat once in their lives don’t usually mind diving into the details of the experience.

### ***Younger versus older people***

In general, I have found younger people to be more willing to go along with strange requests. They tend to like doing role-playing skits and writing folk tales and so on. Older people are usually more skeptical and less willing to do strange things. You wouldn’t approach a group of sixty-year-old workers with a role-playing game, at least not if you knew nothing else about them. Nor would you ask a group of twenty-year-olds to fill out a ten-page form. I don’t think I need to say more about that.

### ***Volunteers versus committed members***

I bought a life insurance policy once by mistake. This was in my early twenties. It was dinner time, and I was hungry and getting a little silly as a result, and I was in a long line at the bank depositing my paycheck. A person sidled up to me, probably seeing an easy mark, and started engaging me in a long discussion about life insurance and how I was intellectually and morally inferior if I hadn’t taken care of that adult responsibility yet. In a haze of confused am-I-still-not-an-adult embarrassment, I signed something. A week later

I got a long set of forms in the mail. What did I do with those forms? You can guess. By then I had woken up and realized the terms they offered were not the best available.

What the insurance company *should* have done with me, if they had been smart, would have been to send me not the official forms but some glossy brochures about how wonderful life insurance was, and *how they didn't intend to hold me to anything I had signed*, but wanted to offer me the opportunity to follow up on my conversation. They acted as though my participation meant one thing, when I knew (and the person who button-holed me knew) that it meant something entirely different.

If you want to be smart about planning your story-sharing session, think about what participation might mean to the people who will be in it. You might, for example, have participants who are in the session because:

- They truly believe in your project and are ready to do their part to support it.
- Somebody asked them to come, and they will feel bad if they break their promise.
- Somebody told them to come, on pain of punishment.
- They heard there would be cookies.

Each of these groups will respond differently to anything you ask them to do. Treating one set of motivations as if it were another will result in disaster. If you know your participants well before your session starts, *you can meet them where they are*, not at some place they will never be.

If you know that some people came	You can tell them that
For the cookies	They can do more than show up. They can have an impact on the project and their community.
Because they were told to	Participation is power, and they can have it if they want it.
Because they felt an obligation to	An obligation can also be an opportunity.

In other words, if you want to fire people up to participate, it helps to know where to hold the match.

### ***Concrete versus abstract habits of thought***

Some people think in concrete terms: dogs, boats, trains. If you don't speak to them about tangible things, you might as well be speaking in tongues. Other people think in the abstract: cavorting, sailing, chuffing. If you speak to *them* about tangible things, they will lose interest and drift away.

I myself am an abstract thinker, which is why every other sentence I write or say contains a metaphor (and if you think I don't know this is annoying, you are mistaken). When I first

started asking people to share stories, every question I put to them had something to do with metaphorical or fictional exploration. I said things like:

- If this software was an animal, what animal would it be?
- If you could wave a wand and fix this problem, what would you make happen?
- If this community was a landmass, would it be a continent or an archipelago?
- Tell a story about a perfect day at work. What would happen? What would not happen?

I soon learned that to some people, questions like these were doors slammed in their faces. The message they got was not of exploration but of obfuscation. “What are you *getting* at?” They would say. “Why are you beating around the bush? *Why are you wasting my time?*” I heard this response many a time before I realized what it meant. They didn’t see what I saw. The same questions that opened up vistas for me erected barriers for them.

People who handle many little details with precision (like secretaries, quality assurance engineers, waitresses, and the people who maintain computer systems) tend to be concrete thinkers. When you ask these people what they plan to be doing next Saturday, they can give you an hour-by-hour plan. These are the people who keep our clockworks working, and we desperately need their abilities to keep things real. (The only job I was ever fired from was as a waitress. I dropped a lot of things and mixed up all the orders. I have immense respect for the abilities of those who think in this way, abilities I could never hope to have.)

If you know you will be speaking with a group composed entirely of concrete thinkers, stick closely to the real. Don’t beat around the bush. Make everything clear and relevant. Ask people “what happened.” Do not go into fiction. You will walk there alone.

Abstract thinkers are the connectors of the world: writers, researchers, game builders, musicians, entrepreneurs. These people don’t maintain clockworks; they grow gardens of ideas. When you ask them what they plan to be doing next Saturday, they say something like “I don’t know, breathe?”

I remember once going to a planning meeting and being asked to state my goal for the session, to be written on a white board. I said my goal was to “exist and respond.” The group leader gave me the evil eye, but he wrote down what I said. When our list was finished, my entry looked like a whangdoodle mixed in with a herd of “build a vision” and “define our objectives” cattle.

My point is: you can *ask* abstract thinkers about the facts of their experience, but you will get some fantasy mixed in. They can’t help it. So why not use what they have to offer? Ask them what sort of animal something would be, or ask them to build a fictional story. When you need them to recount factual events, be ready to give them some help to stick to what actually happened. You may have to keep drawing them back to the realm of the real.

These are extreme caricatures, of course. Some people think in both ways, and some groups contain both concrete and abstract thinkers. Sometimes people you thought you had figured out will surprise you. I like to put a little yin in every yang plan and a little yang in every yin plan. In other words, give concrete thinkers an invitation to speak metaphorically and see if they take it up. Give abstract thinkers an invitation to speak directly and see if

they take it up. Prepare for surprise by having some extra questions and activities you can use if you discover a need for them.

Should you push people out of their comfort zones? Should you *pressure* them to look at things differently? There is some merit in this approach, but there is risk as well. It takes a lot of facilitation skill, and it's not especially participatory. Better to invite than insist.

### ***Process versus place domains***

Some of the things you will be asking people to tell stories about are already stories, and some are not.

Let me explain what I mean. If you picture the domain, or land, of the topic people will be telling stories about, some domains have a clear central path running through them, an inherent *sequence* of events. You start here; you go there; you end up there. An example might be if you are asking people about their experiences buying a house. There is a fairly standard set of events through which people move in the common experience of house buying. Having a baby, starting a business, getting a divorce, having surgery, and many other common life experiences are like this.

For other topics, the map has no dominant paths. There may be little paths, little processes here and there, but overall the landscape does not describe any standard sequence of events. The topic is more like a *place* in which people find themselves than a sequence of events. An example of this might be if you are asking people about amateur photography. People might go through small processes within the general experience, like buying a camera, or learning how to regulate exposure. But the landscape of photography has no strong sequence. Other non-sequential topics might be cooking, gardening, cleaning a house, sending a letter: things people do many times and in many ways, but not in a fixed sequence.

What I have found is that when you ask about process domains, people don't need as much help coming up with stories to tell. The story of the process lends itself to the stories told in the session. You can ask people to "take us through" their best or worst time doing something.

What works in a place domain is to help people find mini-processes they can talk about. What do you do when you go out on a photo shoot? What do you do first, next, last? How does your garden unfold every year, from planning to planting to tending to harvesting? How do you go about cleaning your house, from start to finish? Giving people who are talking about place domains help finding sequences to talk about, either embedded in your questions or ready for use when needed, can help you to move story sharing along when otherwise it might stall as people try to put together sequences worth describing.

One more thing: different people may experience the same topic as a process or a place. A person who visits a grocery store may be only vaguely aware that they are going through a process as they choose their food and pay for it, seeing the whole experience as more of a place than a sequence. But for the cashier, hemmed in by rules and procedures, the purchasing process may have a strong and unchanging sequence to it. If you expect to hear from groups who have different experiences with the same topic, either separate them



into different sessions or give groups opportunities to respond to different questions and exercises.

***Know yourself***

The last part of being prepared to handle your groups and topic is to know how you yourself relate to them. Do you have short or long experience with your topic? Are you young or old? Are you committed to your project or fulfilling a light obligation to help out? Are you a concrete or abstract thinker? The places where you differ from your participants are places where you could potentially misjudge them, leading to frustration and unproductive effort. If you find that your differences are too great, get some help from people who can complement your background and skillset.



## Chapter 3

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# More on Narrative Catalysis

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The first two of the three sections in this chapter didn't make it into the third edition of *Working with Stories*. The last section was trimmed out of the book's fourth edition.

I also took out my previous explanation of how to generate graphs (on paper, using a spreadsheet, using a data visualization tool). Since there are so many more ways to do that today (and my explanation was very long), I left it out of the miscellany as well.

## More on verifying data integrity

Every data set has clear places in it, places where what people meant by what they said is obvious and irrefutable. And every data set has *muddles* in it, places where it's hard to guess what people meant by what they said. Muddles might be:

- questions people didn't understand
- answers that didn't fit what people wanted to say
- participants who didn't respond
- answers that don't mean the same thing to everyone

Muddles remind me of a conversation in *Winnie the Pooh*:

"Now then, said Christopher Robin, "Where's your boat?"

"I ought to say," explained Pooh as they walked down to the shore of the island, "that it isn't just an ordinary sort of boat. Sometimes it's a Boat, and sometimes it's more of an Accident. It all depends."

"Depends on what?"

"On whether I'm on the top of it or underneath it."

That's exactly what I mean by muddles: results that *sometimes* are things people meant to say (which, like boats, carry us to new lands of understanding) and *sometimes* are just misleading mixtures of misunderstandings (which, like accidents, take us nowhere and just

get us wet and messy). Muddles are misfires of collection, mists of uncertainty, dead ends, places where what you collected cannot address what you want to explore.

Here's a funny little story that shows where muddles come from. When I was in college, I used to sit in the library studying until late at night. Psychology students used to come to the library to conduct their surveys on fellow students, so I often found myself answering surveys just to break the monotony.

One evening, a student asked me to memorize a long list of words—foods, let's say. I saw the long list, knew there was no way I could memorize it, and had a sudden inspiration: I would memorize only the *first letter* of each word, and thus complete the task perfectly and amaze the student and his whole class! I carried out my plan with secret satisfaction.

After a minute or two, the student took the list away and asked me to reproduce it. With great enthusiasm I quickly filled in the first letter of each item. Then, to my embarrassment, I realized that I had no idea what the *rest* of the words were. I had to give the sheet back with only the first letter of each item filled in.

I've always wondered what that student did with my ridiculous response. They didn't ask me *why* I only wrote down the first letters of the words. They just took it and walked away.

My point is: people do things like that. When you give us a task to complete, we come up with all kinds of harebrained schemes to do what we think you want us to do (or what we want to do). We can't help it. When you bring storytelling into the picture it ramps up the performance instinct even more strongly. This has an impact on the data you collect and on how you need to work with it.

In an ideal world, every question would have a follow-up question after it that says, "What did your answer to the previous question actually *mean*?" It might have answers like this:

- I thought about my answer long and hard. It represents my considered reflection.
- I thought long and hard about the question, and I had an answer all ready, but my answer didn't match any of *your* answers. I couldn't find any way to write in my actual answer, so I picked the answer I thought was closest. But this isn't *really* what I think.
- I had *no idea* what this question meant. I picked the answer that sounded most reasonable. I didn't want to admit I had no idea what to say.
- I know which answer I would have *liked* to choose, but I wasn't going to get caught choosing it! So I chose the answer I had better choose, given the way things are. You know what I mean.
- How was I supposed to pick *one* of these? It could be any of them! So I picked this one.
- I *think* I chose the answer I was supposed to choose. Did I get the right one?
- I know how I want this project to come out, so I picked the answer I thought would nudge things the right way.
- I picked the least conspicuous answer. I don't want to stand out.
- I picked the answer that seems like it will rankle the people in power. Truth to power!

- I wasn't paying much attention, to tell the truth. I skimmed the answers and picked one that sounded cool.
- I picked the first answer on the list. I got the whole thing done in three minutes!
- What answer did I give?

But even if there *were* such follow-up questions, nobody would answer them honestly. They'd say they thought about the questions, because they were *supposed* to think about the questions. Then you'd need another follow-up question to ask people whether they were honest when they said they thought about the questions. Even if you didn't ask and just watched them, you still couldn't be sure. Maybe they would *look* thoughtful even if they were just thinking about lunch.

## Why muddles matter

If it's impossible to tell what people mean, why try to manage muddles at all? Because if you don't manage your muddles at the start of your catalysis work, you run the risk of wasting your time churning out results you didn't need to churn out (because they show nothing). Worse, you might churn out results and mistakenly think they are meaningful when they are not. You might even go so far as to interpret your observations before you realize that some of them don't hold up.

Let's say you are doing a PNI project, and you plunged right in to making beautiful graphs the moment you finished pulling together your data. You discovered the amazing pattern that people who said they were "very busy" in their work also said they hated the city's development plan. What an amazing pattern! You might go on to develop all sorts of interpretations (competing, of course) as to why the busiest people hated the plan most. They have the least time to deal with it, or it impacts them the most, or its style conflicts with their self-image as movers and shakers, or they think it's not ambitious enough, or they feel its mundane details are beneath them: you go on and on.

But if you had been more careful, you might have noticed that hating the plan was the first option in the list of answers to that question. You might also have noticed that most of the people who said they were "very busy" chose the first available option *on every single question*. Could this mean that instead of *actually* hating the plan, they just didn't pay much attention to your questions? Yes it could. *And it could also mean* that the busiest people hated the plan. That's what I mean by a muddle.

## Muddle management

What's the best way to handle muddles? I use four methods, all at the same time.

### ***Explore the contours of non-response***

When people don't answer your questions, you can sometimes find patterns in the ways they didn't answer. Say there was less variation in a scale question than you expected. Does that mean everyone agreed on that value, or does it mean everyone perceived a subtle social signal in the question? In other words, was the pattern in the interpretations of the *stories* or the interpretation of the *question*? You can sometimes find out if you examine your data more carefully.

In one project, for example, we gathered a strangely large number of “not sure” answers, enough to eliminate some questions from consideration. However, I wanted to explore why people chose that non-answer so often. So I looked at coincidences of “not sure” answers with other information. I found out a few things.

- People who told more stories marked “not sure” more often than people who told fewer stories.
- People who chose more emotional (and more taboo) answers were more likely not to answer the questions at all than they were to mark “not sure.”

Overall, these patterns painted a picture of a sensitive topic people were hesitant to talk about. The juxtaposition of responses, “not sure” responses, and non-responses helped me to map out a landscape of sensitivity.

In another project, I encountered several scales in which a large number of stories had values at (or very close to) the middle of the range. Scatterplots showed central clusters of dots. Did the clusters represent actual interpretations of stories? Or were they non-responses, in the form of beliefs that only mid-range values were acceptable? To find out, I compared the stories in the midpoint clusters to the stories outside them. The stories in the clusters were disproportionately rated as positive. If there had been a lack of response, I would have found a *random* assortment of stories in the clusters. But these were probably real interpretations of the stories.

### ***Get more information***

One way to get more information about a muddled question is to look at *how* people answered it. Not what they said, but how they said it.

- If you are using an online survey, you can often find out how long people spent on the survey. Someone who fills out a survey in 30 seconds speaks in a different voice than someone who takes 30 minutes to fill it out.
- In an interview, especially if you are working from a transcript, you can note how long it took each interviewee to answer your questions.
- In a story-sharing session, if you are meeting in-person, you can ask people to hand their completed forms to a helper, who can mark the time of receipt on them. If you are meeting online, you will probably be using an online survey.

There is a lot of contextual information you can collect around answers, if you look for it. You can count how many words people included in their stories, or how long they took to tell them. If you are using paper forms, you can note whether people marked up their forms with comments or scribbles and whether they made clear, precise marks or rapid slashes. Some online surveys even give you information on cursor movements. All of this additional information can help you make sense of what people said.

I remember a project in which we asked support staff (mostly secretaries) and managers to fill out the same forms about their stories. The support staff filled in every single question carefully, with precise, clean marks. They followed our instructions to the letter and took their time to consider every option. The managers rushed through the process, misunder-

stood the instructions, skipped over long answer lists, checked “not sure” often, made quick scribbly marks, and stopped answering the questions before they got to the end of them. The way in which these two groups answered our questions went some way in helping us understand the answers they gave.

Another project suffered from poor responses to the story elicitation and to the questions. We ended up gathering a lot of entries that were not stories. I read the entries and noted whether each one was:

- a recounting of events (this happened)
- a generalized scenario (this sort of thing usually happens)
- a fact (this is true)
- an opinion (we should do this)
- an argument in support of a position (this matters because of this)

Doing this helped me to pull out only the stories, which showed more meaningful patterns when considered alone. Dividing data into more and less useful portions can sometimes transform a shapeless mass into something more useful. The trick is in figuring out what is needed and when; but opportunities present themselves to those who listen to the data.

### ***Add more interpretations***

Another option is to add more layers of interpretation to your dataset. Say you asked people whether their story ended well or badly, and they *all* said their stories ended well. Did they *really* all believe their stories ended well? Or did they feel social pressure to say that, no matter how their stories ended?

One way to figure this out is to ask 2-4 helpers to read your stories and independently answer the same question as your participants did. The point is not to “correct” your participants; it’s to add another dimension of interpretation. If your independent readers agree that all the stories have happy endings, that tells you something. If only half of the stories seem positive to them, that tells you something else. *It cannot tell you that your participants were wrong.* It can only tell you that their answers differ from other possible answers. Every layer of interpretation you can add can help you (and help your participants) make sense of what a pattern means.

### ***Prune the dead wood***

Sometimes you can’t do anything at all with a question. If the previous methods don’t work (or don’t seem like they will help), it may be best to put the question aside quickly and move on. For example, I am often able to immediately discard demographic questions (like gender or income or age) that result in little variation. It’s hard to predict which of these questions will matter in advance, but usually a few of them end up not being useful. Letting dead-wood questions go sooner rather than later frees up more time to work with the patterns you do have.

## **A guide to common muddles**

This is a sort of catalogue of some types of muddles I have often come across.

### **Scale data: midpoint clusters**

The most common muddle with scale questions is what I like to call midpoint clusters—meaning, lots of people answer the question by placing their marker at the exact midpoint of the range. Sometimes this means they think the answer is at the midpoint, and sometimes it means they didn't want to answer the question, or didn't understand it, and couldn't see how to avoid answering it; so they chose a spot equally far from both meaningful ends of the scale.

If your scales aren't well explained or you don't make the opportunity to not answer the question obvious enough, people will *pretend* to answer the question and fill up your data with non-meaningful scale values in this way. The problem is that the exact midpoint of any range is a legitimate value. Short of finding the people and asking them why they put their marks there, it is impossible to tell meaningful from meaningless answers.

When I see such a cluster in the middles of scales, I look for patterns in the clusters that will tell me something. For example, it may be that one question in particular has many midpoint values while others are more normally distributed. Perhaps that particular question was confusing and needs to be dropped from consideration, or just considered as less full of meaning. (Calculating kurtosis, or peakedness of the distribution, is a good way to systematize your decision as to whether you see midpoint clusters or not.)

On the other hand, sometimes people avoid extremes they find insulting or taboo or depressing. So I check for emotional reactions driving people away from the scale extremes. I might compare some of the stories at the mid-point and at other points along the scale to see if there is a pattern. Are all the stories at the mid-point of one type? Are they all brief? Distant? Any pattern would mean something.

Also, when it is possible, I look for patterns within each participant's scale answers. If people told more than one story, you can look at all the stories they told to see if they always marked the middle spot. People who answered every scale in the same way for every story they told were simply pretending to respond to the questions, possibly because they felt they had to. When I find a pattern like that, if I can't find any explanation for it, I have to isolate those data from the meaningful-answer scale values. I have had projects where I had to throw away up to a quarter of the data because of systemic non-response patterns. Sometimes heavy pruning is the only way to save a data set.

Why would a person mark all the questions on an answer sheet without actually considering them? Maybe they were forced to participate and looked for ways to refuse while pretending to respond. Maybe some questions pushed too hard on sore spots, and people recoiled. Maybe some people were just too busy or distracted or angry or fearful to fully participate. For whatever reason, a person who answers every single question in the same way is sending you a message. The message is not their answers to your questions; it is their unwillingness to participate. It is up to you to find the message, understand it, and respond to it by removing the non-response data.



***Scale data: end-point clusters***

Sometimes you will find that people rush to one side or other of a set of scales as a way to avoid thinking about a question. Sometimes this represents a meaningful pattern, but sometimes it represents a belief that one side is the “correct” side. You can prepare for such a perception in the way you write your scale question. If you are surprised by a rush to one side of a scale, do the same sort of investigative work as when the clump is in the middle. Look for patterns that explain why people favored one side over the other. End-point clusters are more often meaningful than not, but still there can be muddles in them.

***Scale data: too many “does not apply” answers***

Sometimes people just don’t understand scale questions. I have done projects where the results came back with a large number of “does not apply” answers to scale questions, sometimes as many as twenty percent of responses. Usually this has happened in cases where the scales were not explained well on the survey or in the interview or group session, or when the educational backgrounds of the participants did not prepare them well for the task (and they needed more help than was given to understand it). It is usually impossible to tell whether this means “the scale does not apply to this story” or “I don’t understand the question” or “I am not paying attention to this task.”

When only some proportion of the people answered a question, it weakens the question, because you cannot know what the people who didn’t respond *would* have said had they responded. Sometimes such a question has to be dropped. But sometimes you can find associations that help you understand the pattern. For example, maybe the older the person, or the more rushed or busy or unhappy, the more likely they were to pass over scale questions without marks.

A pattern I see often is that the more thought it takes to place a value on a scale, the less people place values on it. I call this the “ugh” response. For example, this question would be likely to gather a large response:

Did this story turn out well?

But this question requires more thought, and so is more likely to be passed over:

To what extent do you think this story exemplifies responsible behavior in a leader?

The same goes for questions that approach taboo subjects, ask people to evaluate those in power, or are situated near the end of the survey.

***Choice data: lopsided answers***

Sometimes the answers you gather to choice questions favor one or two options to the near exclusion of others. Sometimes the answer that receives the lion’s share of the responses is the safest or most noncommittal answer. This is especially true if no “not sure” or “rather not say” choice has been provided.

However, such a pattern could also represent the true nature of the community or organization. For example, a common pattern is in response to the question about where stories came from: first hand, second hand, rumored, and so on. In some groups, answers to this

question will be well distributed, but in situations in which people either don't know each other, or are wary of "telling tales," almost all of the stories will be first-hand. Reading your stories can help you to determine whether answers like these represent your participants' intentions.

***Choice data: too-heavy emphasis on the first few choices***

Sometimes when a question has many possible answers, say 10-15, people choose the first answers disproportionately often. This sometimes means people rushed through the answer list and didn't carefully read it—though it doesn't *have* to mean that. It can actually mean that the first few answers were more relevant.

***Choice data: too many answers***

Sometimes people, given ten choices in response to a question, simply check them all. I've never been able to understand this behavior, myself. I would *never* check off every single box in answer to any question. If the answer is everything, it's nothing. But I have seen this happen often enough that I (now) add in some instructions to the effect of "Please choose *up to three* answers." When I find such pattern, I try to do is figure out who answered in that way and what they could have meant.

In one project I can remember, two consecutive questions asked people to choose "all that apply" from about a dozen possible answers. The first question was about the benefits of an official policy, and the second was about problems they faced in upholding the policy. Participants chose twice as many answers to the benefits question as to the problems question.

This led me to the speculation that people over-answered on the benefits question because they felt obligated to say as many good things about the policy as possible. Any patterns in those answers might be weak as a result. In contrast, since people seemed to feel less obligation to over-answer on the problems question, those answers might more fully represent their true feelings. And I did indeed find more patterns for the first question than for the second question.

***Choice data: answers spread too thin***

There is a relationship between how many answers are available for a question and how many answers are collected. Say you have a question about stories, and it has ten available answers. But you only collected fifty stories. If the answers come in distributed evenly across the ten options, you will only have an average of five answers per option. These are too small numbers to compare, and most statistical tests are inapplicable at that scale. You can correct such size mismatches either by offering fewer choices or by lumping answers afterward.

So, if you want to ask this question:

How do you feel about this story? [happy, sad, relieved, frustrated, peaceful, angry, hopeful, hopeless, amazed, bored, energized, disappointed, not sure]

But you know you will not gather enough responses, you could instead ask:

How do you feel about this story? [happy, sad, hopeful, hopeless, energized, disappointed, not sure]

Alternatively, you could ask the first question, then lump together the results afterward.

- Offering fewer choices (and not needing to lump answers) is better if:
  - You can some pretty good guesses as to the answers people will want to choose from
  - You will have very little of your participants' time
  - People will be able to write in their own answers (and you think they will)
- Offering more choices (and lumping afterward) is better if:
  - Your participants have lots of time and motivation to read long answer lists
  - You (and your participants) want to dive into the nuances of your topic
  - You think your participants would enjoy a longer answer list (with a greater implied permission to speak out)

Lumping answers does require some decisions to be made. For example, if I was lumping the answers to my long-form “how do you feel” question above into positive and negative, where should “bored” go? You can hedge your bets by trying out a few different lumping schemes. But eventually you have to make a choice and move on.

### ***Choice data: the no-man's-land answer***

Sometimes you will find that one particular answer to a question has been uniformly avoided. This is a particularly interesting variety of non-response, though because it is universal it generally cannot be explored further. If the non-response is *not quite* universal, though, it can be telling.

For example, in the benefits/problems example I cited above, the one answer to the benefits question that was never ever checked off, even by people who checked 11 of the 12 available answers, was “no benefits at all.” Clearly this answer represented a line in the sand people knew better than to cross. (Unless, of course, it could be accounted for by other reasons, such as its position in the list or its confusing relation to the question.)

### ***Choice data: too-similar answers***

Another pattern I often see in data is an apparent confusion between two similar choices. This is usually due to poor question design.

For example, for the question “How common is this story?” I used to offer several choices, among them “common” and “everyday.” I found that people couldn't distinguish between these two choices, so they seemed to flip a mental coin.

You can tell when people have done this because both answers show identical patterns. People who said their story was “common” tended to think it was memorable, and so did the people who said their story was “everyday.” You can sometimes see these answer teams walking along side by side like old friends.

To avoid this, I have developed a practice of asking myself whether any pair of answers might be hard to tell apart, and if so, whether I need them both. Do I need to know, for example, whether people felt *disappointed* or *discouraged*? That's a fine distinction people might not care to make. If I do need both answers, can I move them further apart? Maybe *frustrated* and *sad* would work better.

### **Choice data: answers that mean multiple things**

Say you asked your participants what someone in their story needed to succeed, and lots of them chose "help." But as you read your stories, you come to realize that people took "help" to mean four different things:

1. useful information
2. problem-solving
3. emotional support
4. intervention with decision-making officials

These four meanings of "help" are inextricably mixed together in your answers. When this happens, you have two options: put the question aside, or read the stories and guess how each participant interpreted the word. Sometimes you can tell, and sometimes you can't.

Another word that often causes problems is "understanding," which can mean *gaining* understanding or *being* understood. I have seen similar issues come up with words like care, support, success, and failure. It is best to use narrower answers than these. Instead of "success," for example, you might use "pride in a job well done" and "official recognition," two forms of success that do not always coincide.

Having said that, there have been a few times in my catalytic work when internally complex answers have provided some excellent—and unexpected—food for thought. On one project, I asked a question about whether someone in the story was ambitious. The patterns showed a bifurcation. Reading the stories, I found that participants had chosen the answer for two different reasons:

1. Some participants said, in effect, "No, they were not ambitious. They helped others rather than helping themselves."
2. Other participants said, in effect, "Yes, they were ambitious. They worked hard to help other people."

Both of these answers were valid interpretations of the word "ambition" from different points of view. The first I had anticipated; the second I had not. I did have to read the stories to find the pattern, but once I did, the distinction was clear, and I was able to show it in my catalytic material. However, if the difference had not been evident in the stories, the pattern would have been lost.

So I have mixed feelings about answers that invite multiple interpretations. They can reveal transformative insights, and they can waste everyone's time. I use them like spice: placed carefully here and there to draw out flavor, but surrounded by clarity.

For example, if you wanted to find out if people feel “disappointed” about the events of their story, you might want to distinguish what they feel disappointed *in*. Themselves? Those around them? Life in general? What difference would it make if you could see those distinctions? What would you lose if you were unable to distinguish between them?

Of course, it’s not always possible to think of multiple interpretations in advance. On almost every project people have surprised me with an interpretation of a word or phrase I hadn’t thought of. What does fairness mean to you? Balance? Equality? Responsibility? Any word you think you know means more than you think it does.

If you plan to offer your participants fixed answer lists, you will *always* need to prepare yourself to untangle multiple interpretations of some answers. You can avoid the problem by asking only open-ended questions, but then you’ll have the task of reading and counting many similar-but-not-identical answers. You can avoid counting answers at all, but then you’ll have no summary graphs to show to your participants.

The middle ground I find works best is to offer fixed (pre-tested) answer lists with write-in “other” options. Then, when I get the data, I read through the write-in answers.

- Some of the write-in answers I can simply add to my fixed-answer counts. You’d be amazed how many people write in answers that are already in the list.
- Sometimes enough participants write in the same (or very similar) answers that I can add a new answer count.
- The answers that remain I cluster into groups, so I can show my sensemaking participants an easy-to-read summary of what people said (with all of the answers available on request, of course).

## More on scoping catalytic exploration

Managing your own time should be easy, right? It should, but it isn’t. I have done catalysis work on dozens of projects ranging from 50 to 5000 stories and from 5 to 50 questions, and there has been one constant among all of these projects: *There is never enough time* to do catalysis. It seems to expand to fill, and spill over, *any* amount of time allocated to it. Every estimate is wrong; every project runs over; every inquiry is a surprise.

I have long pondered why this should be. Why do I and other project planners consistently underestimate the work involved in doing catalysis?

I have come to the conclusion that it has to do with our natural misperceptions of increase. As you add questions to a project, you create a linear progression: 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 questions. But catalysis is not linear; it is geometrical, exponential: 4, 16, 36, 64, 100 question combinations.

In catalysis we find patterns by putting things together. We ask questions like:

- How many stories featured mistakes and highways?
- How many combined memorability and despair?
- How many were ranked as both forgettable and conflicted?

- How many involved trust but not cooperation?

And the more questions you ask, the more ways there are to put them together.

Geometrical increase is not something that comes easily to mind. It often surprises even the most experienced planners. As the physicist Albert Bartlett famously said, "The greatest shortcoming of the human race is our inability to understand the exponential function."

The reason to do an inquiry project is to find things out, so naturally we want to find out as much as we can. The problem comes in when we (and I include myself in this) consistently underestimate how many combinations will be created by the questions we ask. No matter how careful your planning, you are almost certain to surprise yourself by creating a catalytic impossibility: too many combinations and too little time to cover them all.

Let me give you an example. Our project is small. We collected only 100 stories. About each story we asked only eight questions. Four were scalar questions and four were choice questions. About each participant we asked an additional four questions: one scale question and three choice questions. Since questions about participants will be considered for each story, that makes a total of five scalar questions and seven choice questions we will be considering. Like I said, our project is small.

Looking at only what the data provide, we could create these graphs.

- 7 bar charts of choice questions alone
- $7 \times 7 = 49$  plots of choice-by-choice combinations
- 5 histograms of scale questions alone
- $5 \times 5 = 25$  scatterplots of scale-by-scale combinations
- $5 \times 7 = 35$  histograms of scale-with-choice combinations
- $5 \times 5 \times 7 = 175$  scatterplots of scale-by-scale combinations, selected by choice

We are already up to 296 graphs! If we plan to use statistical analyses as well, we could calculate these additional tests.

- 25 correlation coefficients between scales
- 175 correlation coefficients between scales, selected by choice
- 245 t-tests of differences between mean scalar values, selected by choice
- 49 chi-squared tests of differences between choice counts

That's 494 statistical tests, making a sum total of 790 operations! How can we reduce this to something we can actually do? One of the principles of catalysis is to *explore exhaustively*, to remove any possibility of cherry-picking the data. But how can we be exhaustive when we cannot possibly do all of this work in the time we have? *What are we to do?*

## Generating graphs and test results

Whether you will run out of time to *generate* images and tests depends mainly on the technology you are using. If you are working on paper, you will have a hard time creating more than 20-50 images working alone. But if you can spread the work over several people,

you can accomplish much more than one person can alone. Ten people can quickly create 100 images.

If you are using a spreadsheet, your software can create each graph in seconds, but you will still have to correctly select the information you need, perhaps sort values, and choose the right commands to create your graphs. You can spread the effort across several people, assigning each person different ranges or types of comparison to cover. Perhaps one person will generate all the bar graphs, leaving the histograms for another, and so on. You can also create (or ask someone else to create) macros, tiny programs that tell the spreadsheet program to do the same thing many times.

If you are using a statistical or graphing package, you should be able to churn out a large number of graphs very quickly. In my work for clients I often generate tens of thousands of graphs. The issue here is not the time that is required to create each graph, which is often milliseconds. It's the time required to *learn* how to use the system and get it to do what you want it to do. You can't spread out *learning* as easily as you can spread out *creation*. Typically you either understand the whole system, which is capable of creating all of the graphs you need, or you don't. This is why, if your project is small and you don't intend to repeat it, you may be better off choosing a less learning-intensive method, so you can share the work in a group.

## Considering graphs and test results

Whether you will run out of time to *consider* your graphs and test results depends not on technology but on experience and time. Be careful not to use up too much of your time generating graphs only to discover that you cannot possibly *look* at them all. Considering graphs is the more important part of the work. If pressed for time I would rather generate half as many graphs and have enough time to fully explore them (and the stories).

As I begin work on any catalysis project, I put all of my energy into graph generation and test completion, avoiding any attention to consideration of what I have produced as yet. However, at some point—usually about one quarter of the way through the time I have available—I start to get anxious about the time I will have left to consider what I have generated. At some point I reach a sort of crisis where I know I had better stop *creating* material and start *consuming* it. At that point I typically find myself making some difficult triaging decisions about how to cap off my generation of results. You could use a similar one-quarter point, or you could do as I do and use your anxiety as a guide. When the graphs and results you are churning out stop seeming wonderful and start seeming overwhelming, it is time to change gears. Look for that shift and you'll know what to do.

Can you spread out the *consideration* of graphs as well as their generation? Yes, with care. One person can look at bar graphs while another looks at correlations and a third looks at t-tests. If you follow a uniform method of writing down observations, and if you follow the principle of exhaustive exploration (that is, nobody selects what is most interesting to them but uses an objective criterion of strength such as relative difference), you should be able to pull together all of what you found into something that works.

## Methods to reduce the catalysis crunch

When (not if) you find yourself unable to generate (or consider) all the graphs and tests you could possibly generate (or consider), try these options for reducing your task to fit into the time you have. These are all methods I have worked out while trying to fit my catalysis work into the time my clients were willing to pay me for. You are likely to confront the same conditions in your own projects.

Let me say first that scoping your exploration does take time. It might seem like something you can do without; but paradoxically it creates more time than it uses. I spend quite a bit of time early on in each project deciding what I will consider and what I will not consider. This pays off later on, when I am churning through results and don't have to stop and rethink my scoping decisions.

### ***Prune dead branches***

Sometimes scoping problems just go away. In some projects you can put aside as many as a quarter of your questions because they show little variation. For example, say you asked people what brand of soap they use, and 99% of them (and 44/100ths) said the same thing. It is not likely that you will see strong patterns in that question, so you can drop it. (Little joke there to liven things up, hope you enjoyed it.)

Depending on the questions you asked and the responses you got, some up-front pruning could save you a lot of time. The first thing I always do, once I get the data and verify it, is to look for questions I need not (because I cannot) explore. I have worked on some projects that seemed impossible, right up until the moment when I looked at the data, after which the work fit nicely into the time I had available. You can't *plan* on some questions falling flat, so don't ask extra questions expecting to use fewer; but things are not always as difficult as they seem at first.

### ***Lump together weak spots***

Sometimes you will see two or more answers to the same question whose counts are too small to use *but can be combined*. When the meanings of the answers are close enough together, some careful lumping can strengthen a dataset while reducing the time you need to work with it.

For example, say you asked people how they felt about their story, and you supplied them with the fixed-choice answers of happy, sad, angry, relieved, frustrated, inspired, and indifferent. Say out of 100 stories, happy and sad were marked 32 and 27 times, but angry and frustrated were marked only 9 and 14 times. In order to compare happy and sad with something, you could lump together angry and frustrated to produce a set of 23 markings.

I usually spend quite a bit of time at the start of projects lumping similar answers, both to reduce time requirements and to firm up weak response sets. To avoid losing important distinctions, I usually compare some graphs made with lumped and unlumped data, and with a few different lumping schemes, to see if anything important might be lost (or gained) by lumping.



### **Trim twigs**

If you think of your data like a tree, each level of the tree's structure you explore gets larger: one trunk, ten limbs, a hundred branches, a thousand twigs. By choosing to ignore the twigs, you can cut your work in half—without losing the strongest patterns in the data.

One easy way to trim the twigs is to use story counts as thresholds. Say you asked 10 questions about 100 stories, but you don't have time to generate and/or consider 100 question combinations. Say for each question pair you count how many stories have an answer for both questions. Maybe only half of your 100 question pairs will pass a story-count threshold of 50 stories per two-question graph. That's 50 graphs you don't need to generate or consider. Using a story-count threshold to ignore some graphs will not distort your data, but it will reduce the time you need to get through it.

I call these methods *letting the patterns select themselves*, because by using these methods *I don't make any decisions* beyond what thresholds to use. If you explain your thresholds well, people will be able to see how you fit your work into the time you had without distorting the results.

In contrast, an example of a twig-trimming method that *would* distort your data would be one that involved ignoring one answer to a question. Say you asked people how old they were, and to save time you decided to ignore all stories told by people over 60. That would be a bad idea. If using a story threshold is like putting on earmuffs, ignoring an answer to a question is like turning away from some sounds and toward others. It saves time, but it defeats the purpose of catalysis.

A second tree whose twigs you can trim is the tree of methods you use to work with your data. For example, I usually look for differences in histogram means. When there is time, I also like to compare measures of skew. That is, does each histogram lean to the left or right? This is a “nice-to-have” option that I drop when there isn't time for it. Because I have dropped out an entire *category* of calculations, I haven't cherry-picked the results; I have simply limited the depth of my exploration. I *might* find useful patterns in skew comparisons, but dropping them—all of them—removes the possibility of inserting my own bias.

### **Triage by pattern strength**

You can calculate a measure of pattern strength—a correlation coefficient, a t-test difference between means, a skew coefficient, a simple range or count—and sort your patterns by these measures, then consider only the strongest patterns. I often do this on projects with a lot of patterns and little time to consider them. When faced with 100 possible correlations, for example, I may consider only the 10-20 strongest ones, then see how much time I have left to look at the rest. This prevents me from inserting bias because the data themselves determine which patterns I will consider.

### **Create composites**

You can sometimes build composite graphs that can stand in for more detailed graphs. For example, if I have a lot of scale combinations to cover, I will generate a correlation matrix that shows which questions correlate with which others, only creating individual

scatterplots as the need arises. People who work on data visualization have come up with a lot of ways to pack the information found in multiple diagrams into one. Look around for ideas you can use to reduce your workload. If you need to generate 50 diagrams, for example, can you instead generate one diagram that summarizes them? Even if it takes you 10 times longer to create such a diagram, you will still save time in the end.

### ***Don't obsess over details***

If you had all the time in the world to do your catalytic work, you could produce an object of beauty and wonder. But beauty and wonder are not your goals. Use self-governing measures to keep obsessive attention to the style (rather than the substance) of your catalytic material in check.

For example, my problem is writing very long things (like these books). Knowing this, I only allow myself to compose my sets of catalysis material using slideshow presentation programs (like PowerPoint). This constraint forces me to write in a concise manner. My sets of catalytic material can still get pretty long, but that's because people usually hire me to work on projects with large numbers of stories, questions, and patterns. Still, you are likely to find yourself wasting time on similar prettifications. You will know best how to keep yourself focused.

### ***Be patient, yet tolerant of impatience***

In every piece of catalytic work I do, there is a point at which I find it absolutely necessary to clean my office or bake a pie or do some other suddenly important thing that really means I'm tired of what I've been doing. At times like this I am often tempted to abandon my well-thought-out thresholds in favor of getting through the doldrums of the work more quickly. This is almost always a mistake, because I set the thresholds for a reason.

My advice during these times is to be patient with yourself. When you feel tempted to cut corners, take a walk or bake a pie, then come back, remind yourself why you chose the plan you chose, and stick to it.

### ***Improve efficiency, but don't interrupt your work***

The faster you work, the more you can do in the same amount of time. This means that you should learn and improve on your catalytic process each time you do it. But you can't do this while you are using your process. I can't tell you how many times I've had to slap my own wrist because I was playing with a new kind of shiny graph while time was ticking away on a project deadline. Improve your catalytic process *between* projects, not during them. When it's time to use the machine, don't take it apart; just keep it running.

### ***Get help***

One way to reduce the catalysis crunch is to expand the time you have available by getting some help from people or computers or both. Just make sure every tool you add to your toolbox, and every member you add to your team, is added with a full understanding of the principles of catalysis. If you add capacity but turn explorations into conclusions, you will not have solved a problem; you will have created a new one.

### ***Plan backward***

This method doesn't take place when you are doing your catalysis work; it takes place when you are planning your project. If you plan to use catalysis in a project, think about it from the start. Calculate how many combinations of questions you are creating. If you won't be able to consider them all, think about what will do. You can ask fewer questions, provide fewer answer choices, or change the types of questions you ask.

For example, scale questions are easier and quicker to consider than choice questions, especially when choice questions have several possible answers. When a project is ambitious but we have little time for catalysis, I sometimes increase the ratio of scale to choice questions, because it reduces catalysis time without sacrificing meaning. Similarly, if a question has ten possible answers, it might be better to reduce the list to five than to run out of time to consider all ten answers.

### **In conclusion**

The less time you have to do your catalytic work, the more likely you will be to miss useful patterns, no matter how many time-saving techniques you use. Still, the techniques I have described here can help you minimize your workload without introducing bias.

## **A real-life catalysis example**

I wanted to show you what catalysis is like in practice, so I have included some records from a real PNI project. I carried out this project for a client who graciously allowed me to write about it here. I was not involved in setting up the project, but I looked at the data and prepared some catalytic material. Here I have included a description of some of the data integrity checks I did in the process as well as some excerpts from the material I prepared.

### **Checking my data integrity**

The project explored the topic of leadership in firefighting. In it my client collected 83 stories from 23 people. To ensure confidentiality I have changed the names of the stories (while attempting to retain their essential meanings). Also, no actual words from the stories are included here. The patterns, however, are exactly as I found them.

Each firefighter was asked these four questions, in this order.

1. Imagine you are sitting around with a group of your peers having coffee, and they start talking about some of the biggest mistakes they have ever seen made by someone in a leader's role in the workplace, both those which could have been avoided as well as those where there is no blame. Can you recall a recent event or a moment when you felt a mistake was made, perhaps unintentionally, by someone in a leadership role? Please describe it.
2. Thinking back over the past few years, what moment or situation have you observed or experienced that for you represented behavior that should be adopted by all leaders? What happened?

3. Imagine that you are helping to train a new employee. This new employee asks you a question about how leaders and managers interact between themselves or others and the difference in their roles. Share one experience that you or someone else observed of leaders and/or managers working really well together or where they noticeably did not work well together.
4. Thinking back through history, what leaders inspire you, and what one story from their lives typifies those qualities?

Each participant was asked these questions about each story they told.

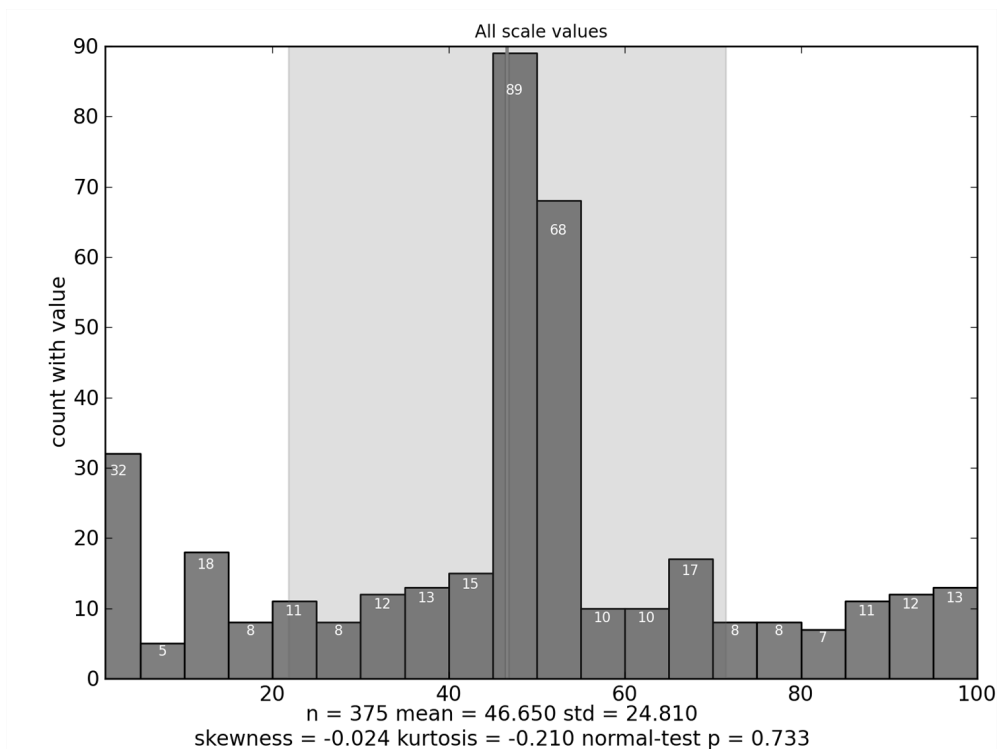
1. The leader in your story typically reacts to challenges by ... (a scale from) relying on their own knowledge, skills and abilities, and not listening to anyone else (to) taking no responsibility themselves and relying completely on input and knowledge from others.
2. The leader's self-confidence in this story was ... (a scale from) completely lacking to the point that no one trusted their abilities or decisions (to) so over the top that they caused safety and other risks by taking on challenges beyond their abilities.
3. In your story the leader's demonstrated level of self-control was ... (a scale from) unpredictable and emotional; responded and acted before thinking (to) overly calculated and mechanical; time to respond and act was way too slow.
4. In your story, the leaders developed the abilities of others by ... (a scale from) satisfying job description requirements or didn't give feedback or know what staff wanted (to) putting too much focus on future and not enough on present, didn't leave enough time to apply learning.
5. In your story, the leaders held other people accountable by ... (a scale from) never setting performance standards, just letting them do what they want (to) setting unrealistic expectations of performance or applying disciplinary action as a corrective measure.
6. The leaders in your story demonstrated leadership by ... (a scale from) being passive or providing no direction or team cohesiveness (to) blindly following corporate vision or being too narrowly focused on team.
7. How do you feel about this story? (choices of) happy, hopeful, enthused, relieved, confused, frustrated, disappointed, angry, indifferent.
8. How common do you think this story is? (choices of) not at all common, somewhat common, common, just the way things are around here.
9. What do you think this story is about? (choices including) managing resources, change management, leadership, teamwork and cooperation, planning, strategic thinking, etc.
10. What type of work is represented in this story? (choices including) fire line operations, aviation operations, field operations support, etc.
11. From what perspective is the story told? (choices including) fire crew member, management, etc.

In addition, each participant was asked their age, years of experience, and time in their current position.

### ***Giant graph of all values***

I usually start off catalysis by graphing *all* of the scale values in the entire project, taken together as one body of numbers. I look at the mean, median, and mode of the distribution. I look at its skewness and kurtosis. If the overall distribution is not as expected, it may signal an overall bias towards excessive conformity or avoidance of reflection.

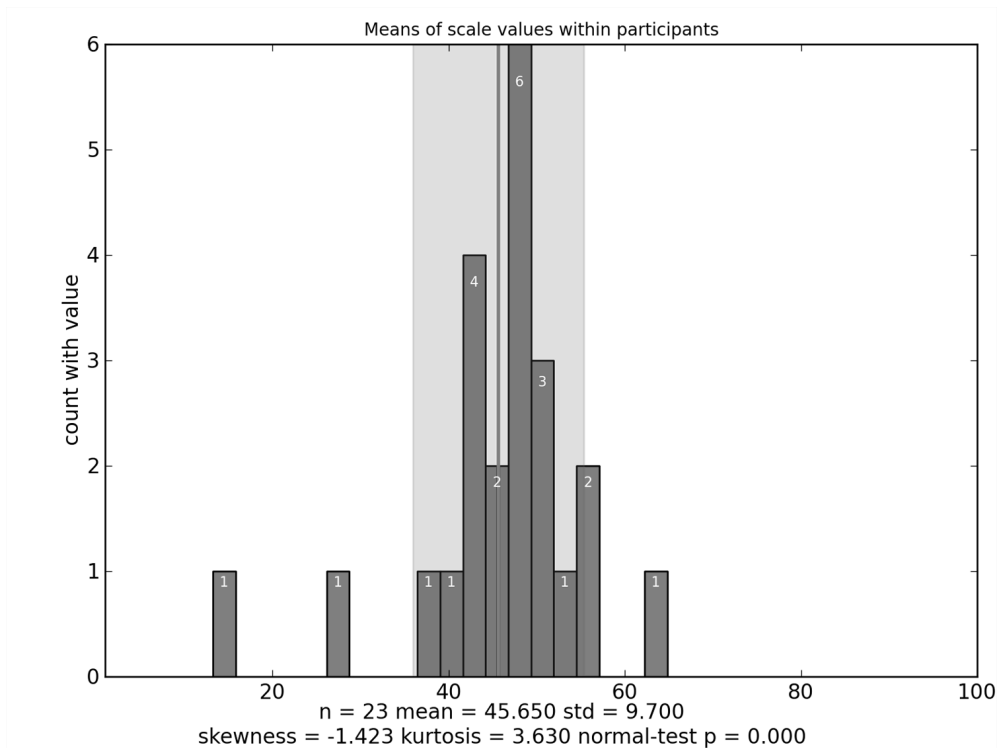
This is the graph of all scale values for the firefighting project. This particular peak, though strong, is not overwhelmingly so; I've seen much worse. It could indicate a lack of interest or a conformity to the accepted view, so I decided to look back on it later, after I looked at other patterns.



### ***Per-participant comparisons***

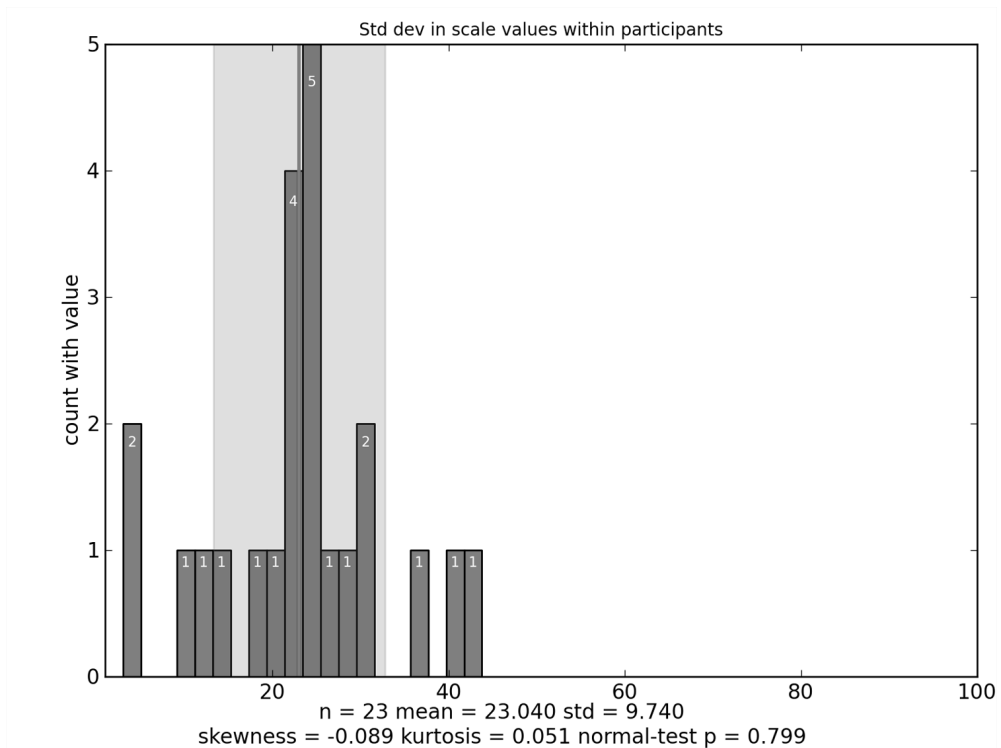
Next I look at how people behaved as they told stories and answered questions about them. I calculate the mean value of each participant's scale values, then graph all participant means. This can help me spot patterns such as people uniformly favoring one answer.

For the firefighting project, you can see that people did not uniformly favor one side or the other of the scales. Favoring one side can mean that people got the idea that one side or the other was inherently better or more acceptable. That didn't happen here.

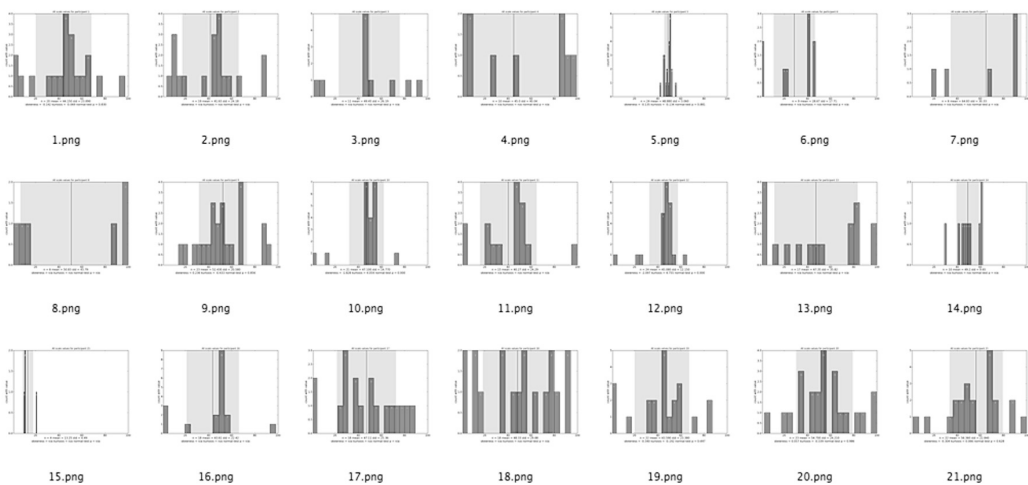


The standard deviation of each participant's scale values is a clue to how varied their answers were. Usually people who are telling a wide-ranging set of stories, and who are thinking deeply about each one, will mark a wide range of scale values. If the standard deviation graph has a low mean, each person chose very similar scale values for different questions. They means they probably didn't pay all that much attention to the questions.

The standard deviation graph for the firefighting project caused me some concern. Quite of few of these participants varied little in the markings they made on the different scales. I would have liked to have seen that peak higher, perhaps at thirty.



Next I make mini-histograms that show each participant's scale values taken separately, as if each person were the only one in the project. Comparing these helps me to see if some people answered in a very different way than others. Here you can see that participant 1 marked their scales with something closer to a normal distribution than participant 4, who answered (for the most part) on the extremes of the scales. What concerned me more was that some participants (like 5, 10, and 15) showed very little variation in their scale answers.



Wondering what this might mean, I looked at the data file.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Story title	Participant	Learn	Learn	Learn	Learn	Learn	Learn	Scale data quality	Number of scales marked
In front of others	1	7	61	31	0	97	1	normal	4 to 6
Full support	1	46	49	45	49	49	47	low	4 to 6
We had to defend our tac	1	16			37	65	75	normal	4 to 6
He took a chance	1	67			48	39	54	normal	4 to 6
Didn't see the value	2	4		10	12		13	low	4 to 6
Leadership is empowerm	2	45	53	46	47	47	47	low	4 to 6
Immature sarcasm	2	12		19		59	86	normal	4 to 6
Doing the right thing	2	38	67	46		90	50	normal	4 to 6
Off track meeting	3	11	85	2	70	95		normal	4 to 6
Honest and fair	3	48	49	45	45	47	47	low	4 to 6
Out of touch	4	0	99	25	45		3	normal	4 to 6
Respect and confidence	4							low	0 to 3
Paperwork versus results	4	5	88		6	89	90	normal	4 to 6
Standing by his team	4							low	0 to 3

It does not appear that very many *participants* marked all of their answers the same, but it does appear that quite a few *stories* showed little variation. Which stories were marked like this might hold some meaning, so I added a column to my data set called “scale data quality” and marked it as “low” when all the scale values for a story were within ten percentage points of each other.

I also noticed a difference in how many scales the participant marked per story, so I added a “number of scales marked” column to see if that would reveal any patterns.

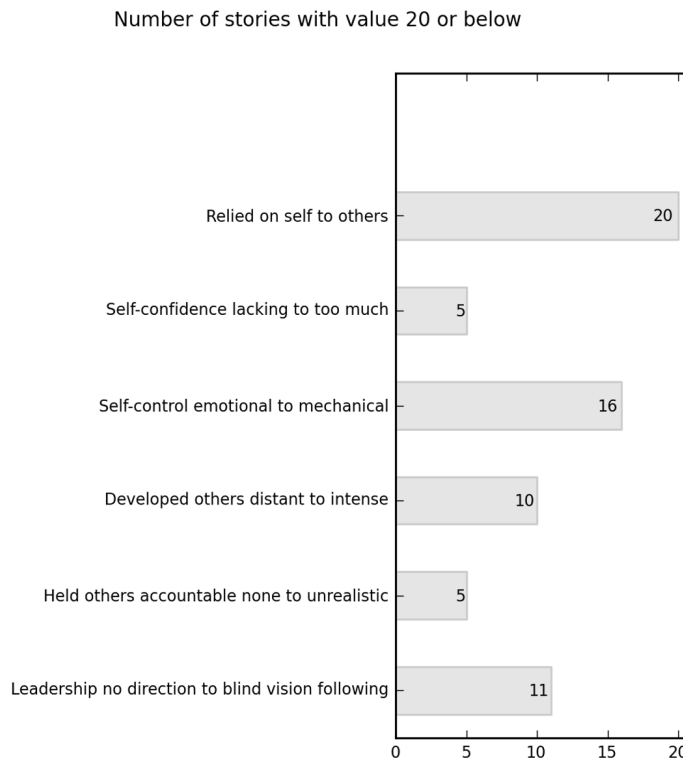
### Exploration of extremes

My next step is to write out the choice answer combinations with the highest and lowest frequencies. Sometimes these are as expected (no responses with feel about: positive and theme: mistake). But sometimes they are surprising and merit investigation (no responses with feel about: positive and theme: cooperation). I won't show this exploration for the firefighting project, since nothing stuck out from it as being particularly noteworthy.

I also graph patterns of extreme responses: very high and very low scale answers. This helps me to pick out scale questions for which the patterns of response are abnormal and might reflect an unwillingness to answer the question.

For the firefighting project, this graph shows the number of stories with the lowest markings. The scale with the most low-end markings is “relied on self.” So people often said the main characters of stories were self-reliant. Interesting.





Tied for most high-end markings (though I have not shown this graph) are self-confidence (too much) and holding others accountable (too much). Self-reliant, self-confident, with high standards. All reasonable, possibly meaningful, and probably not indicative of any data integrity problems.

### ***Exploration of volubility***

When people are given the option to tell any number of stories, there is sometimes useful information in how many stories each person chose to tell. In that case, I write out a spreadsheet that shows how the questions were answered by people who told each number of stories. If, say, people who told only one story were also likely to choose every possible noncommittal answer, it might mean they weren't very motivated to participate. That would change how I would look at their answers, because they would also have been less likely to reflect deeply on them.

For the firefighting project, this spreadsheet shows how many stories were told by each participant.

A	B	C
Question	Answer	Mean num stories
Age	20-29 years	3.44
Age	30-39 years	3.64
Age	40-49 years	4
Experience	Less than 5 years	4
Experience	5 to 10 years	3.5
Experience	10 to 15 years	3.43
Experience	15 to 20 years	4
Time in current position	Less than 5 years	3.71
Time in current position	5 to 7 years	3.8
Time in current position	7 to 10 years	3
Time in current position	Over 10 years	3

That's a confusing mix of patterns. I summarized them thus:

1. The older the participant, the more stories they told.
2. The most *and* least experienced participants told the most stories.
3. People who had been in their current positions the shortest time told the most stories.

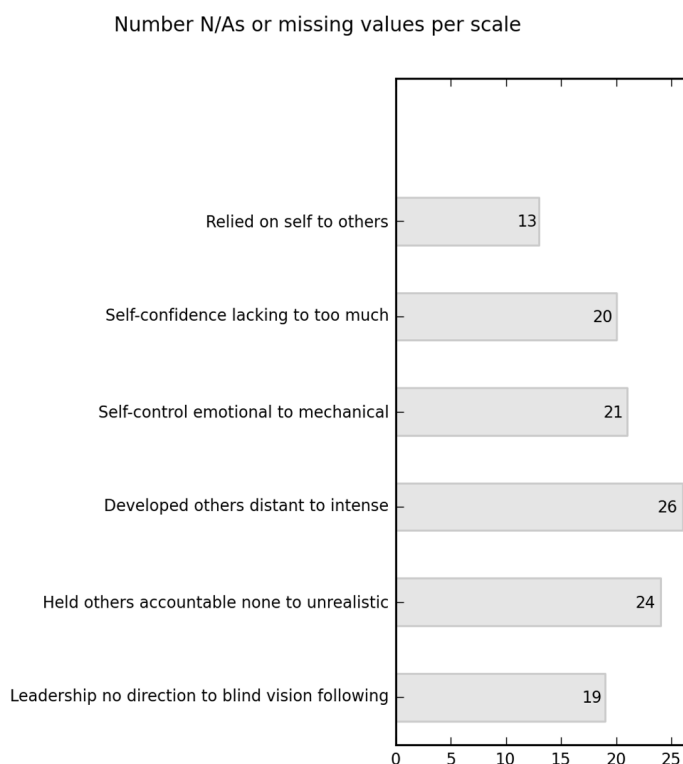
So a person who told more stories might be older, very experienced, but in a new position; or older, new to firefighting, and in a new position. It was not much to go on, and it was hard to say whether a difference of half a story, on average, was enough to matter. The strongest difference of the three was in the "time in current position" question; so maybe people whose positions were newest to them had the most stories to tell, or wanted to tell stories more eagerly. Worth thinking about, but too weak to support any observations.

### ***Exploration of reluctance***

Next I print out all write-in "other " answers to choice questions. Sometimes write-in answers clear up muddles in choice answer patterns. Sometimes they enlighten me as to misfires where the available answers did not match what people had to say. The firefighting project didn't have write-in choices, so I can't show you anything there.

Then I graph patterns of non-response: how many times each choice and scale question was *not* answered. Doing this can help point out questions people often avoided. Sometimes the number of non-responses increases as the survey goes on. Survey fatigue, I call it. Finding a pattern like that can help me make sense of what might or might not be meaningful patterns in answers.

This was the pattern of non-response for scales in the firefighting project.



Nothing jumps out as being wildly different, but the “developed others” scale might have been seen as difficult to answer, thus often skipped.

When I see a scale often left blank, I always check to see where it fell in the list of questions. If it is near the end, the lack of response may be survey fatigue. The last question is usually answered more, out of people checking to see where the end of the list lies; but the next-to-last question often gets by on table scraps.

Here I noticed that the “relied on self” scale was most often filled in, and this reminded me that the answer to the question was most often an extreme value. Could asking about self-reliance have hit a vein with these participants? Possibly.

All of these integrity checks help me quickly scan the data for problems before I begin producing any real output. They increase the likelihood that patterns will be useful, and they reduce time requirements by trimming out non-productive work. Sometimes they also (as in the case of the firefighting project) give me some hints of patterns I might want to explore later.

### Excerpts from the catalytic material

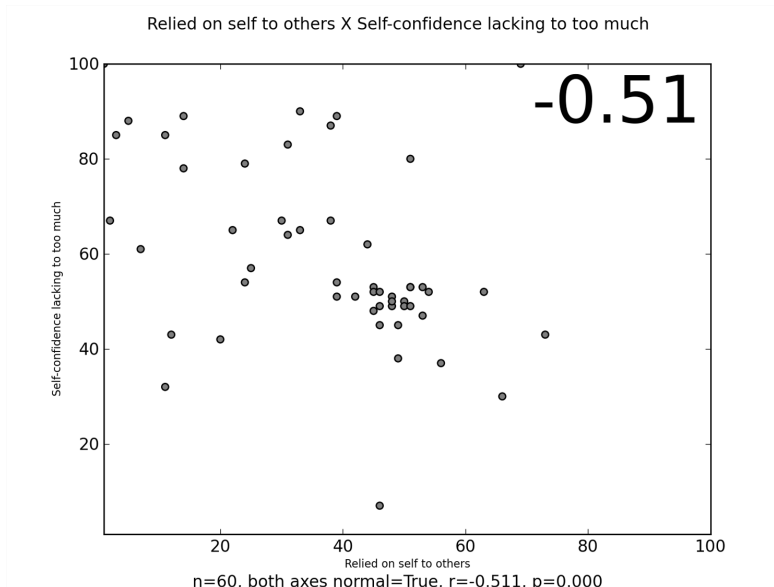
What follows are three examples of observations paired with interpretations and ideas taken from the catalytic material I prepared for the firefighting project. These should illustrate what sorts of observations, interpretations, and ideas you might see in your own catalytic work.

## Perfectionism? Or resourcefulness?

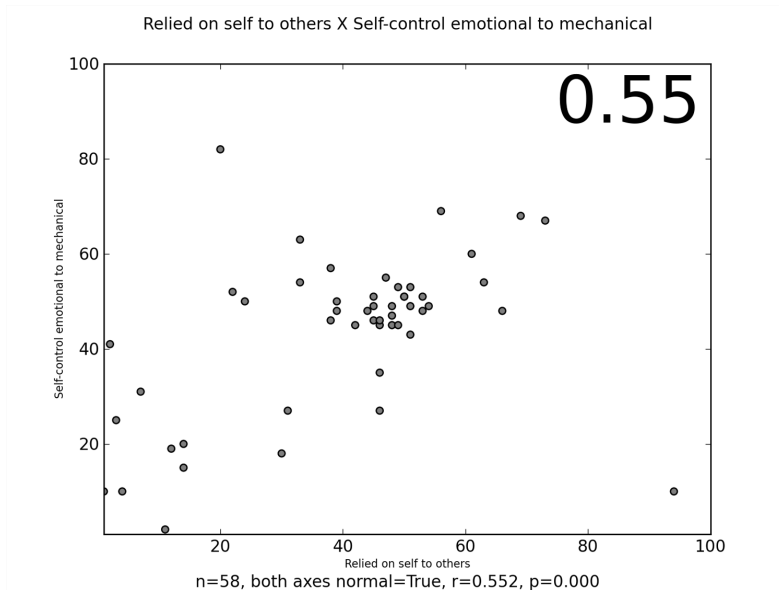
### Observation

Excessive self-reliance in leaders tended to coincide with over-confidence, lack of self-control, and unrealistic expectations of others.

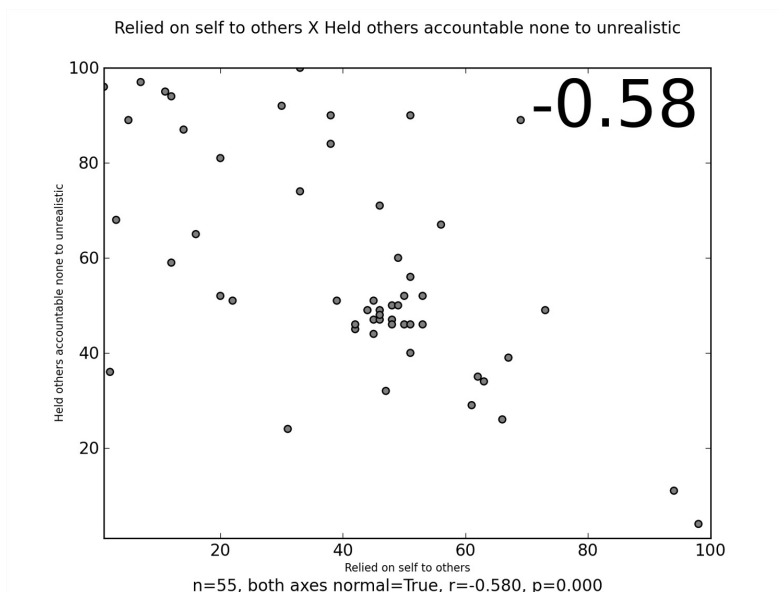
When a story was marked as showing strong self-reliance (towards the left side of the X axis) it was also more likely to be marked as showing excessive confidence (toward the top of the Y axis). (The correlation coefficient,  $r$ , is giant so I can see it when I'm comparing a lot of scatterplots.)



When a story was marked as showing strong self-reliance (towards the left side of the X axis) it was also more likely to be marked as showing “emotional” self control (towards the bottom of the Y axis). Recall that the “emotional” side of the self-control scale read, in full: “In the story the leader’s demonstrated level of self-control was unpredictable and emotional: they responded and acted before thinking.” So this result means that when a leader was portrayed as self-reliant, they were also portrayed as working from an emotional, not a rational, basis (whether that would be described as gut-feel or impulse would depend on perspective).



When a story was marked as showing strong self-reliance (towards the left side of the X axis) it was also more likely to be marked as showing unrealistically high expectations for the accountability of others (towards the top of the Y axis).



### Interpretations

The link between self-reliance and unrealistic standards of accountability is the most surprising of these three. It seems to say that some leaders have such high standards that no one can measure up to them, so they feel they have to do everything themselves. Perhaps perfectionists do not make good leaders? Perhaps being a good leader involves

developing a nuanced understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of your team so that you can balance expectations and delegations?

The fact that the most emotional people are the most self-reliant is also surprising. You could imagine it going the other way, where the most rule-bound people are the most self-reliant. Another interpretation of these patterns might be that rules tend to distribute responsibility, so people who rely more heavily on mechanical rules are less likely to either choose to rely on themselves, or to have to rely on themselves. This would imply that when rules are lacking, leaders are pushed into positions that *appear* perfectionist, but stem not from personal tendencies but from lack of required support.

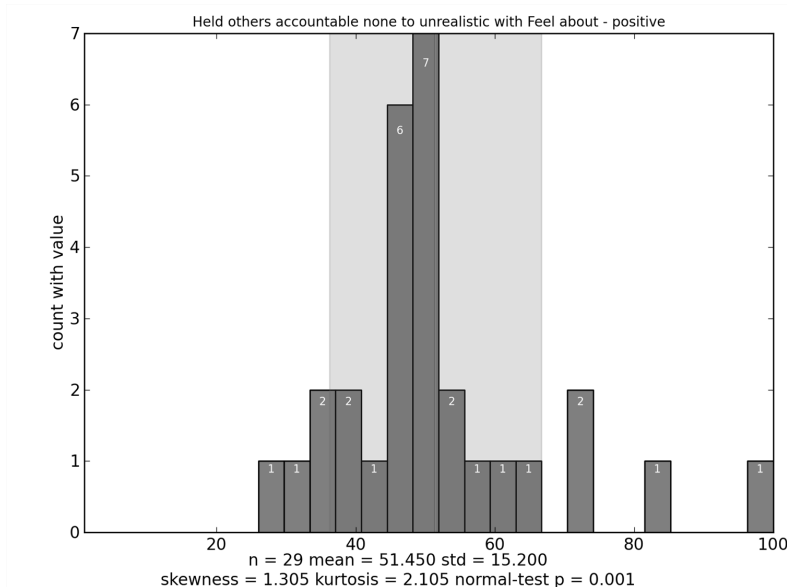
### ***Ideas***

Attention to perfectionism and its effects on team working might be useful. Another possible avenue for exploration would be exploring the varying official and unofficial rule structures teams put into place and how their use affects interdependence.

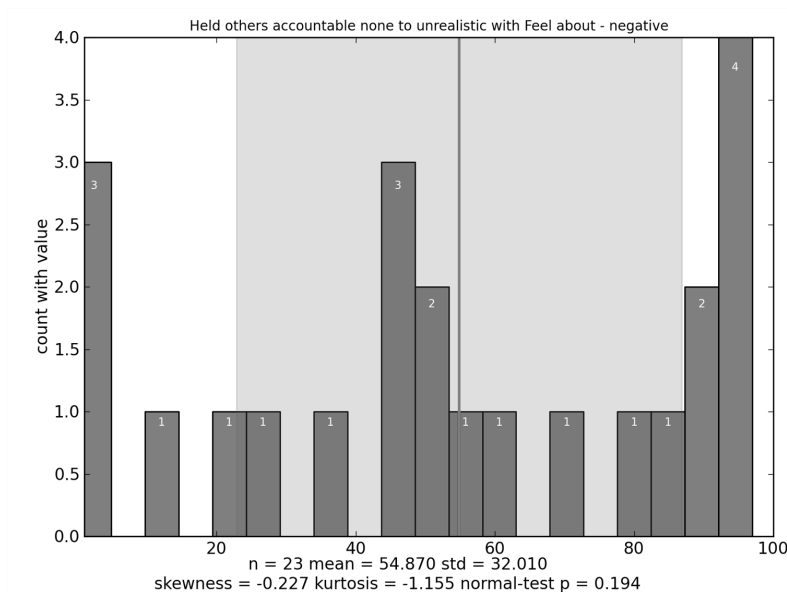
## **Empowerment? Or obstinacy?**

### ***Observation***

For the scale describing how leaders in stories held others accountable, stories marked with positive emotions or told in response to a positive question tended to be clustered around the mid-range, with a smaller number on the right-hand side of the range.



Negative-emotion stories covered the range with a fairly equal distribution. Note that negative stories did not show a gap in the center, but covered it as well, with even a small peak there.



The fact that positive stories tended toward the middle and right says that the most positively viewed behaviors showed an intermediate or intense set of expectations about performance standards. The question arises as to whether high expectations for behavior are viewed positively when they refer to the storytellers themselves or to others.

Themes in the seven stories marked as showing high accountability and positive emotions were as follows:

- Leader gives subordinates difficult challenges and they respond with great performances (3 stories)
- Subordinates speak out to leader, don't back down, and win the case by having a superior approach (2 stories)
- Leaders work to help each other and both benefit (1 story)
- Leader works for benefit to all without taking credit for it (1 story)

Themes in the nine stories marked as showing high accountability and *negative* emotions were as follows:

- Leader demands absolute control, "my way or the highway," even when it results in danger and failure (3 stories)
- Leader berates subordinate(s) in front of others, or is rude and condescending (3 stories)
- Two leaders compete in "immature" power struggles (3 stories)

In summary, positive stories of high accountability had mainly to do with power sharing, and negative stories had to do with power hoarding. Positive stories also included successful confrontations of power hoarding. In negative stories the lack-of-respect theme appears as well.

### ***Interpretations***

Sharing responsibilities for group goals and succeeding at difficult challenges together is something these participants view with pride and almost a sense of entitlement. One might say that they see themselves as capable independent actors, almost to the point of not *needing* supervision. The best leaders, in their view, are people who don't lead at all, but serve.

An alternative interpretation of this pattern might be that the participants are cantankerous malcontents unable to work with authority figures, "cowboys" who need to learn how to get along and "take direction" in order for the fire service to be effective.

### ***Ideas***

Interpretations of this pattern could vary so widely that reactions could range from giving firefighting groups far greater autonomy to requiring all employees to take manners classes. A follow-up question might be: is the current system fine-grained enough to allow employees to move up in responsibility without relying on a great leader to recognize their skills? If becoming empowered to succeed is critical to effective firefighting, perhaps it should be made more systemic and less personality-driven?

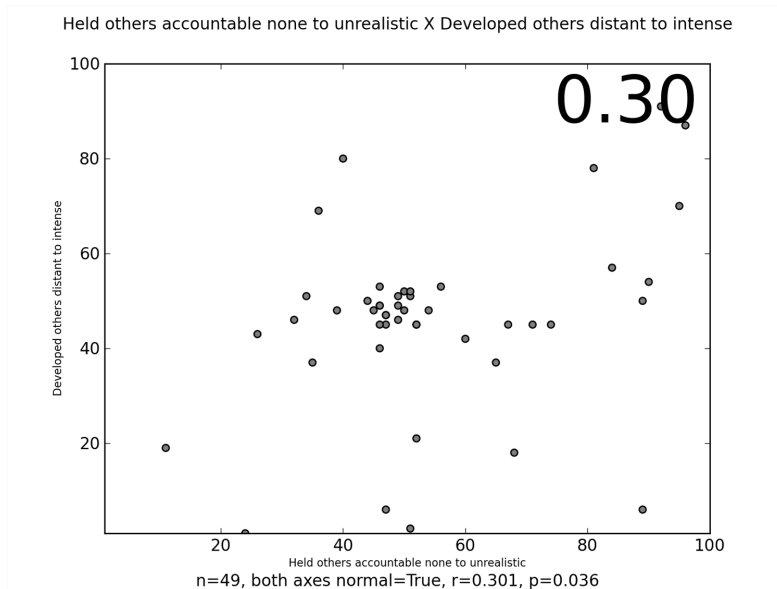
## **High standards? Or critical decisions?**

### ***Observation***

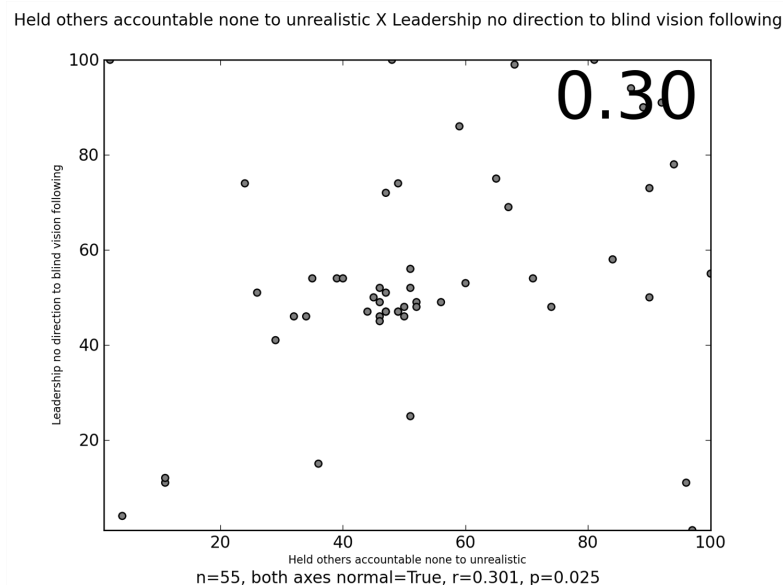
Unrealistic expectations (by leaders) were associated with over-intense skill development, blind vision following, and excessive self-reliance and self-confidence on the part of leaders.

When a story was marked as showing unrealistic expectations of accountability (towards the right side of the X axis) it was also more likely to be marked as showing "intense" development of others (towards the top of the Y axis). Recall that the full description of the "intense" side of the "Developed others" scale was this: "In the story the leader developed the abilities of others by putting too much focus on future and not enough on present; didn't leave enough time to apply learning." So, when a leader held people highly accountable, they also tended to push them to develop quickly, perhaps too quickly.

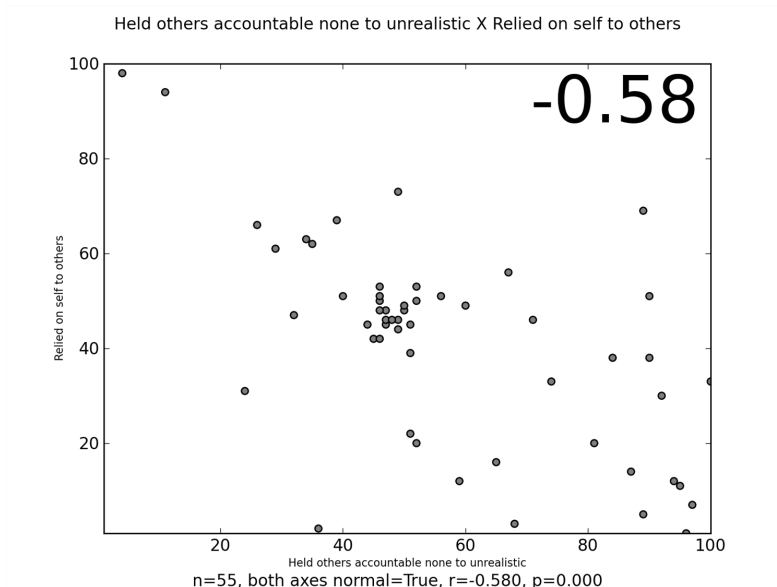




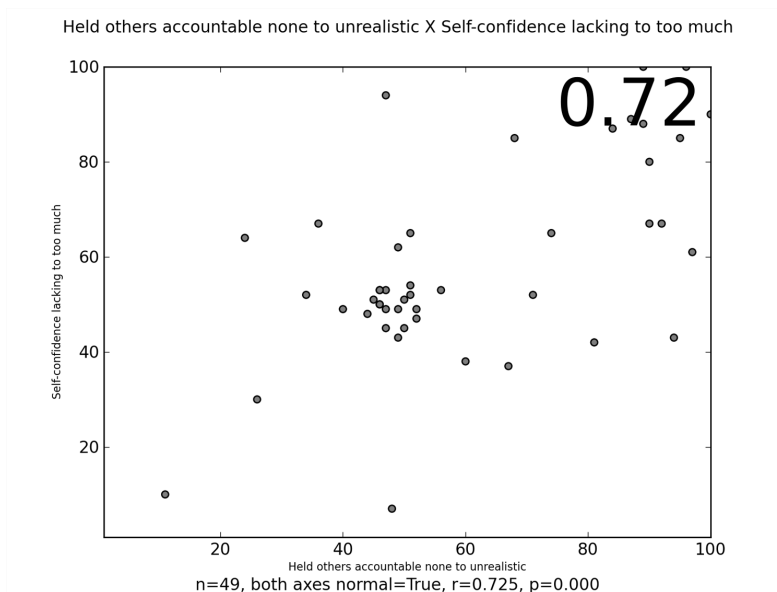
When a story was marked as showing unrealistic expectations of accountability (towards the right side of the X axis) it was also more likely to be marked as showing “blind” vision following (towards the top of the Y axis). Recall that the full description of the “blind” side of the “Demonstrated leadership” scale was this: “In the story the leader demonstrated leadership by blindly following corporate vision or being too narrowly focused on the team.” So, when a leader held people highly accountable they also tended to follow handed-down visions blindly.



When a story was marked as showing unrealistic expectations of accountability (towards the right side of the X axis) it was also more likely to be marked as showing strong self-reliance (towards the bottom of the Y axis).



When a story was marked as showing unrealistic expectations of accountability (towards the right side of the X axis) it was also more likely to be marked as showing excessive self-confidence (towards the top of the Y axis).



### Interpretations

The portrait of an ineffective leader described here is of someone who has high standards for their team, but prefers not to, or cannot, share the pursuit of those high standards with others. The more likely leaders are to have high standards, the more likely they are to take most of the responsibility on themselves. This leads back to the “perfectionism” pattern seen earlier, the “nobody can do it right, so I have to do it myself” belief.

However, the nay-sayer response to this “ineffective perfectionism” interpretation is that because the decisions made by leaders in this field are so critical, leaders cannot *afford* to have subordinates make mistakes, and so in a sense perfectionism is *thrust* upon them. Perhaps the culture also demands accountability, such that saying “I gave them a challenge and they blew it” is not an adequate response. Perhaps leaders in this field have such a heavy responsibility that they simply *dare not* share power as much as they would like to. The situations in which people are learning may be so intense and difficult that allowing “necessary mistakes” may not be possible. If so, those working beneath leaders should respect their dedication and accept their difficult choices.

### ***Ideas***

If the first interpretation is more correct, the problem is of training leaders to recognize skills, share power and get along. If what keeps people from making necessary mistakes is cultural and personality-driven, the issue can be addressed by leader training or other means of cultural change management.

If the second interpretation is more correct, the problem is of training people to be good *followers*. Certainly “followship” skills are as necessary to the efficient operation of a high-expectations team as are good leadership skills. Both of these competing interpretations link to the promise of “safe mistake” capability, in which responsibilities can be earned through proof of competence in a way that does not threaten high standards of performance.



## Chapter 4

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# More on Sensemaking

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This chapter contains two overly long sections I took out of the fourth edition of *Working with Stories*.

## An illustration of sensemaking

Sensemaking is what happens when people think and talk about situations and decisions in ways that are:

- Pertinent: focused on solutions and decisions that matter
- Practical: grounded in the concrete reality of lived experience
- Playful: experimental, improvisational, multi-perspective

To illustrate these aspects of sensemaking, let's pretend you need to buy a car. Maybe your old car is dying, or you've never had a car before but need one now. What sort of car do you want to buy? How much will you pay? Will it be new or used? What brand? What will it run on? Are you *sure* you need a car? All of these questions will need to be answered before you can make a final decision.

How will you go about preparing to make this decision? You might look at car reviews; compare safety ratings, maintenance costs, and customer satisfaction; test drive some cars; talk to your family and friends; and think about your needs.

After you have bought your car, what do you do afterward? How do you begin to use it? How do your perceptions change as you drive it? How do you tell the story to yourself, and to your family and friends, about your choice? Do you experience buyer's remorse? Do you discover unexpected benefits? If someone comes to you for advice, what do you say?

We might use the term sensemaking to describe all of the thoughts and actions that surround and pertain to your car-purchase decision.

- These thoughts and actions are *pertinent* because you would not be having and doing them if you did not plan to make a decision about a car.

- They are *practical* because you are not thinking about cars in the abstract; you are thinking about *your* car, *your* life, and *your* needs.
- They are *playful* because you play out possible scenarios that might result from different choices, both before and after the decision has been made.

Now for a contrast, let's say that I am the director of an organization that tests cars for safety. My team maintains a comprehensive web site listing our test results for each make and model of car being sold in the country. What sorts of things does my team do? We obtain representative cars of each make and model; carefully test them under conditions of consistency and transparency; and provide clear and useful information to consumers.

Is our data collection and preparation process sensemaking? No, it is not.

- It is not *pertinent* because it is not related to any decisions we *ourselves* are making. The information we provide to consumers pertains to *their* decisions, but it does not pertain to any decisions we are making about cars we are thinking about buying.
- Our work is not *practical*—to us—because it does not include every source of information we would consider if we were making a car purchase.
- Our work is not at all *playful*; it follows exact procedures we have created outside the activity itself.

If you want to find sensemaking in my activity as the director of the safety-testing organization, you can certainly find it; but you must look in the spaces that surround our testing procedures. For example, we must decide such things as: From what groups will we accept funding? Which safety features will we prioritize? How will we speak to consumers, manufacturers, lawmakers? Will we attempt to lobby for safer vehicular design? Will we attempt to influence consumer behavior? Making these decisions requires pertinent, practical, and playful work. That's sensemaking.

## An example of change in sensemaking

Sometimes people don't believe me when I tell them that sensemaking is about change. They think sensemaking is just a fancy word for discussion or analysis. They don't see change as important or worth trying to create. They think I'm going all New Age on them, or trying to sell them a religion, or advocating political agitation. I'm not doing any such thing. I'm just telling you that if you want to gain the advantages of sensemaking, you need to understand why change matters.

To explain why change matters, I would like to tell you a story about the most powerful change I have ever seen happen in a sensemaking workshop. On the evening of the tenth of September, 2001, I was on my way home from a sensemaking workshop in Washington, D.C. Thankfully I got home the night before the attacks in New York and Washington; some of my colleagues had a much longer trip home than I did.

The workshop was part of a three-year government-funded research project on sensemaking for decision support. Our next workshop, in which we had planned to experiment with

new sensemaking techniques with a group of experienced analysts and historians, was set for two weeks later.

The topic of the workshop, like the one before it, was asymmetric conflict, that is, conflict between two powers whose resources or tactics differ widely. In the two intervening weeks, the mindset of our workshop participants toward the topic of asymmetric conflict changed entirely.

## **Tough room**

As we entered the room on the first morning of our planned three-day workshop, it was easy to tell that the room was charged with feeling. People were sorrowful, angry, blaming, defensive, and certainly not ready to consider multiple perspectives on *anything*, let alone asymmetric conflict.

Our first scheduled exercise went horribly wrong. We had planned to start the workshop by asking people to create and tell two composite stories from different points of view. Each story was to be presented as if a teacher was explaining recent events to their students in class. One speaker was to be a non-Muslim U.S. teacher. The other was to be a moderate yet devout Muslim teacher in a Middle Eastern country, one who been told the U.S. was “the Great Satan” but now wasn’t sure what to think.

The first story, told from the point of view of the U.S. teacher, went reasonably well. Even though there was an edge of tension in the stories, they were complex and involved multiple perspectives on asymmetric conflict, sometimes drawing in historical parallels such as the American civil war.

The second story, however, was remarkably different. To our surprise, the participants did *not* tell stories from a moderate point of view, as asked. Instead, the stories were radicalized. They were short and simple, not complex, and they were fueled by powerfully emotional terms like “infidels” and “evil” and “Satan,” which took precedence over plot, setting, character, everything. They were not really stories at all, but diatribes, rants. The difference was striking.

Of course, the emotions people expressed in this exercise were perfectly understandable, and I don’t mean to imply that they weren’t. The validity of the emotions expressed is not the issue at hand. The issue is that these well-educated, open-minded, professional people were held back by circumstances in which they found themselves from formulating a complex, nuanced representation of the experiences of people with perspectives different from their own. That condition limited their ability to make sense of the situation in ways that would support effective decision making.

If you translate this condition to situations you know of in your own community or organization, it should not be difficult to think of people finding themselves in a similar state. I can certainly think of times when I’ve been in such a state, more than a few.

## **A new tack**

After some discussion, my colleagues and I decided that we had better back way off the here and now. We had plenty of time, so we asked people to choose asymmetric conflicts

reaching far back into the past. Being history buffs, our participants were able to offer up some magnificently useful conflicts. We asked them to create detailed timelines for each conflict, specifying aspects such as turning points, surprises, interventions, dilemmas, mysteries, miscommunications, and so on. For example, in one of the most resonant conflicts considered, the War of 1812 (the one between the U.S. and the U.K.), the U.S. played the role of the small, ragged aggressor attacking the world's sole superpower.

We also asked our participants to venture into the creation of what-if scenarios, and this they did with fervor. Eventually every wall of the two communicating rooms we had at our disposal was covered with aspects of factual and fictional events in the timelines of asymmetric conflicts going back for millennia.

Next we asked people to begin drawing together what they had created by clustering elements from all the timelines. We began to see common aspects such as power, belief, opinion, communication, strategy, technology, accelerators of change, and so on. The "clusters of clusters" that emerged gave us a set of "lenses" through which we could look at any asymmetric conflict in order to see it from all sides.

We reached this state on the third afternoon after the first morning's disastrous storytelling exercise. In all the time between we avoided any direct references to recent events.

We then finally felt it was time to begin to work directly with the events of 9/11. We asked our participants to create a new timeline, this time covering recent events, using the lenses we had developed as probes to help us connect events on the timeline to characteristics of similar events in the past.

## Fresh air

The change in the room since the last time we considered the same events was dramatic. This time the participants considered, juxtaposed, and made sense of *all* perspectives on recent events, whether they agreed with those perspectives or not. They didn't simplify other views. They took into full consideration the experiences, beliefs, values, and feelings of those whose actions and opinions they found abhorrent—not because they no longer found them abhorrent, but because they could consider them *even so* without feeling that their own views were in any way threatened. They spoke of power dynamics, public opinion, recruitment, networking, cultural divides, rules of engagement, expectations, options, strategies.

Sun Tzu's concept of the golden bridge, and Mao Tse-Tung's use of it, came up in discussion. The adage of the golden bridge is, "When you surround an army, leave an outlet free. Do not press a desperate foe too hard." From whatever side (or sides) you see the conflict embodied in the events of 9/11, this connection is undoubtedly relevant. As I recall it, the workshop participants applied the adage to *both* sides of the conflict, with insights deriving from each application.

The change in the way these participants thought about the topic under consideration, under difficult conditions, convinced me that sensemaking has the power to help people make better decisions together. You can translate the experience these participants had to *any* situation in which people begin by viewing a situation (legitimately and reasonably)



from one perspective only, and end by seeing the situation from many perspectives—critically, *without* feeling their own perspectives to be in danger.

I don't mean to imply, by the way, that these people became dispassionate or disinterested in the topic as a result of their sensemaking. Nor do I want to imply that the emotions they felt in the first part of the workshop were illegitimate. They didn't *discard* the intensity of their emotions as a result of sensemaking; they *transcended* them, which is something entirely different. The process of sensemaking increased their *ability* and *resources* to make sense of the situation *together with*, not in spite of, their own feelings about and opinions of it. This ability to transcend opinions and emotions is not *less* important in times when our emotions are running high; it is far *more* important.



## Chapter 5

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# More on Intervention

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This chapter contains five descriptions of narrative interventions that I removed from the fourth edition of *Working with Stories*: narrative learning resources, narrative presentations, sensemaking pyramids, Narrative Therapy, and Theatre of the Oppressed.

## Narrative learning resources

A narrative learning resource is a learning resource that blends how-to information with real-life stories. If you hear people saying things like this in your project, a narrative learning resource might be useful to you.

- I knew what I needed to do, but I wasn't sure how to put it all together.
- This topic is so overwhelming! There is information everywhere, but I haven't been able to figure out how to get started.
- If only I could sit next to somebody who has really *done* this, I'm sure I'd be able to pick it up. But it's hard starting from nothing but the facts.
- I know what I'm doing *now*, but at first I floundered around for a long time not knowing what to do.
- I thought I knew how to do this already, but I learned so much from this story session!

These kinds of statements imply an excess of information combined with an absence of understanding. That last example in particular, of people expressing gratitude for what they have learned during a story-sharing session or a sensemaking workshop, is a sure indicator that a narrative learning resource would be helpful. When you ask people to tell stories and they tell you how much they've learned from the *other* people in the session, you've found a need to learn.

I worked on a project like this once at IBM Research. We collected stories about the patent process from researchers who pursued patents for IBM. We used the stories to improve institutional support for the patent process and to enhance a learning resource about it. In the learning resource, each page of how-to information was linked to a number of real-life

stories that related to it, and each story was linked to several how-to pages. From what I heard, people using the resource found that the stories added depth to their understanding of the process. (This project is further described as “Incorporating narrative into e-learning” in *The Working with Stories Sourcebook*.)

Sometimes the stories you already collected will suffice to help people learn what they need to know, and sometimes a small extra collection is needed to bolster the collection in some areas. But the project itself often paves the way toward building such a learning collection.

One strategy is to keep a lookout for people in your story-sharing sessions and sensemaking workshops who have had a lot of first-hand experience with the topic. At the end of the session or workshop, ask them if they would be willing to help out with an additional interview or group session in which you focus on the lessons they’ve learned about the topic. Make sure you ask them about the mistakes they’ve made as well as their successes, because those will be just as important to the learning resource.

## Narrative presentations

Narrative presentations feature stories that surfaced during sensemaking as being particularly important to a project, because they:

- bring together important issues (pivot stories)
- highlight views people need to hear (voice stories)
- explain things about the community or organization (discovery stories)

Narrative presentations can vary widely in scope and complexity. For example:

- You might post some stories on a community bulletin board. Maybe you replace the stories with new ones from the collection every week or month, and people get into the habit of checking to see “what people have to say” lately.
- You might enlist local young people to work with an artist on a mural that incorporates excerpts from some of the most important stories into a “who we are” reminder that draws the community together.
- You might hire a documentary team to create “the people say” videos in which actors read out selected stories (exactly as they were told) against montages of contextually appropriate images while music sets the tone. The documentaries might be placed on a web site, shown at meetings, or referred to in discussion forums. (It might be better to have the original storytellers speak than to use actors, but if you have guaranteed anonymity, you won’t be able to find the original storytellers.)

These are just a few of many possible ways of telling stories from your collection. Telling stories is not my area, so I can’t offer you advice on how to do these things beyond saying that the original stories should be respected and not “cleaned up” or changed.

You’re in luck, though, because plenty of other people have written advice on how and why to tell stories in organizational and community settings. The field is called “organizational

storytelling.” If you look up those words you will find many books and other resources on how to tell stories for a variety of reasons.

I’m not going to recommend any books to start with in organizational storytelling, because I don’t feel I can. I have *started* to read a few books about telling stories, but I’ve never been able to *finish* any. Those books (and the books on narrative inquiry) sit mostly unread on my bookshelves.

I understand that there are good reasons to try to influence people, I really do. When telling stories is done with respect and care, it can work wonders. When you need to communicate something deep and complex, telling a story is the best way to do it. But the power of purposeful storytelling comes with a price, and that price is danger.

When you engage in purposeful organizational or community storytelling, the biggest dangers are manipulation and distrust. These two are like twin giants smashing their way through the land of purposeful storytelling hand in hand. When I see titles of books and blog posts like “How to use stories to get your audience right where you want them” and “How to hack cultures with stories,” I cringe because I know the twins are near.

Even though I can’t point you at specific resources, I can help you sort through the many options available based on what I have read.

- Look for resources that help you tell stories grounded in the reality of your community or organization. You don’t need to know how to write a blockbuster movie, but you do need to know how to communicate an important story to those who need to hear it. Look for resources centered on you and your needs, not abstract definitions of what a story should be like outside of any context. Look for sections about understanding your audience, finding your voice, and building a resonant connection.
- As you look at a resource, find its definition of story. (There is *always* a definition of story, even if it’s not explicit.) Considering the dimensions of story form, function, and phenomenon, where does the definition fall? Is it wide or narrow? How does that definition match what *you* feel a story to be? If the resource’s definition doesn’t feel right to you—for example, if it portrays stories as nothing but emotions, or nothing but machines, or nothing but power plays—look for a better resource.
- As you look at a resource, see if it has a section on listening to stories. All good storytellers are good story listeners. A resource that tells you how to tell stories should also cover listening to stories so that you know which stories to tell, how to tell them, and what impacts they might have. If the resource doesn’t mention listening, it’s not looking at the whole picture, and its advice will be flawed.
- Look for resources that give you things to do. You probably don’t need to be convinced that storytelling is useful, or that people remember stories well. Look for practical activities and ideas you can use.
- Look for resources that tell stories. You need to read about the experiences people have had telling stories. You need to find out what has happened to people who have done what you want to do. And look to see that there are some negative stories included,

because anyone who has had experience telling stories should be able to tell some tales of failure you can use.

Here are some things to avoid.

- Avoid resources with manipulative terms. Respect for stories and for audiences should radiate through the writing. The emphasis should be on the communication of perspectives, not the manipulation of beliefs. Remember the twin giants of manipulation and distrust, and plan your path to avoid them.
- Avoid resources that artificially narrow their scope of what qualifies to be a story. The little things we tell each other every day *are* stories, and nobody has the right to say they aren't. Don't let a resource draw you into the trap of thinking that only polished, prepared, professionally delivered stories are allowed to be called stories. Look for resources that respect all of the stories we tell, no matter how well-spoken they are.
- Avoid resources that present storytelling as a risk-free, fool-proof option. If there is no mention made of the dangers that come with telling stories, look for advice that comes from deeper experience. The last thing you need in the land of purposeful storytelling is a guide who doesn't know where the giants live.
- Avoid resources that say you will get magically abundant benefits from the use of storytelling. Some books say that by telling stories you can seize power, create motivation, change cultures, dissolve resistance, and get people to follow you anywhere. None of that is true. Telling stories doesn't make you into the Pied Piper. It just makes you human. Sometimes people need some help remembering how to be human, but they don't need people telling them that stories will get them anything they want. Patience, forgiveness, and the hard work of building trust are still more important than *any* story you can tell. Stories can help with that task, but they can't replace it.

### ***An example of narrative presentation: Material World***

To complete this section, I'd like to describe a narrative presentation that I think has much to tell us about presenting stories as a narrative intervention. It's a book called *Material World: A Global Family Portrait* by Peter Menzel.

Here's Menzel describing the impetus for his book in an interview with Philip Greenspun:

Freelancing in Somalia during their civil war and in Kuwait right after the first Bush War, I had some rather intense experiences that made life in the U.S. seem rather shallow and superfluous. . . . Sitting in my office early one morning, listening to NPR, which is the way I like to start every day, I heard an amazing piece on the marketing of Madonna's autobiographic book called *SEX*. The book was a sensation in the U.S. The radio report ended with Madonna singing, "I am living in a material world and I am just a material girl," or something close. I thought it was spot on. We live in an idiotic capitalist self-indulgent society where the sex life of a pop star is more important than impending starvation, land mines and child soldiers in Africa, or more interesting than the world's biggest man-made natural disaster in oil fields of the Middle East.

So Menzel decided to show people what the “material world” is *really* like. He says it took “about a minute” to come up with the idea that would make his project famous: he would go to the homes of “statistically average” families from 30 countries, rich and poor, and photograph their material possessions.

The resulting book is a masterpiece. Each family is represented by a large photo spread showing everything they own, taken out and arrayed in front of their house. Smaller photographs illustrate descriptions of the families’ daily lives, along with comparative information such as incomes, hours worked, schools attended, and typical meals. The differences in income are in some cases stark, but what is amazing is the sense of dignity on each page. These are real people, not caricatures of “the rich” and “the poor” we have heard so much about.

Has the book had an impact? Judging from the abundant comments on the internet, I’d say it has. I’ve been reading hundreds of these comments, and I’d say the reactions in them fall into these categories:

- I started leafing through the book, and suddenly it was hours later. (“I checked this out from the library thinking I’d get some enjoyment flipping through it over the next couple of weeks. Fast forward to me sitting on the couch ignoring everyone for about 5 hours straight so I could read this cover to cover.”)
- Soon after I read this book, I bought copies of it for all of my friends. (“I have given this book to about 10 friends as gifts and all of them always are amazed and love the book just as much as I do!”)
- I used this book to help my kids understand that we’re not “poor” just because they don’t have things their friends have. (“Within 10 minutes, my 9-year-old “material girl” zoomed in on the large, glossy cover, and asked about the book. . . . Were the darling kids in the picture the anonymous “poor people” they heard about so often at school? They don’t look unhappy in the photos. . . they look just like a regular family. *Yes! Connection!*”)
- I’ve been re-evaluating my needs and wants because I’ve found this book. (“This book has haunted me since my first encounter with it years ago. Even to flip quickly through its pages and witness the stark contrasts so powerfully and immediately revealed in images is heartbreaking, sobering, staggering. And life-changing, if one allows it to be.”)
- This book made me rethink what it means to be rich and poor. (“Though [some of] these families own little, many of them are smiling. Maybe what you own is not what makes you happy.”)
- These families are just like my family, and yet they are not. (“I especially like the photos of people cooking and eating. Meat, potatoes, bread and peppers are revealed as near-universal. Several shots had me salivating. But when I read about the sanitary conditions surrounding the shots I felt a confusion of emotions. Leaving in these and other contradictions is part of the book’s fascination and strength.”)

Aren’t those like reactions you’d like to hear following a narrative intervention you’ve carried out?

By considering the elements that made *Material World* an effective narrative intervention, we can think about how you can apply similar ideas to your own narrative presentations.

**Discovery.** One phrase that comes up often in comments on *Material World* is “eye-opening.” This is because the book brings information to people that they cannot get in any other way. Says Menzel in the book’s afterword:

We all have an understanding of what our own lives are like, but even as the countries of the world become more interconnected, we know very little about the lives of people in other societies.

As a photojournalist who had spent time in over 50 countries even before starting his book project, Menzel was in a unique position to know exactly what was waiting to be discovered by the people he knew back home. This understanding helped him build a book that focused only on what people were missing: not statistics about economies or news stories about famines and floods, but an understanding of what life is simply like for people in other places.

In your community or organization, you are a world traveler. You have listened to the stories of people from all over your world. What do you know that the people “back home” need to know? What information can you present to them that they cannot get in any other way? In what ways are their eyes closed, and how can you help to open them?

**Reality.** Quite a few of the comments on the book mention surprise at learning how “real” people live around the world. This makes me wonder—if people don’t know how real people live, what sort of people *do* they know about? People in movies? People in the news? People they made up based on the little information they had? Probably all of those.

In your community or organization, how do people build their assumptions about what is real around them? Do they have the information they need to understand reality, or do they cobble their understanding together from inadequate, even perhaps skewed, information? If you think about the stories you have collected, which of them would surprise people? Would learning about some of those stories help people put together better pictures of reality?

**Juxtaposition.** The fact that each family in *Material World* is treated in exactly the same way, with the same photos, the same answers to questions, and the same facts, makes the book a tool for comparison. It seems that many of the commenters used the book by “flipping” back and forth from one section to another. If the book had been formatted in a less structured fashion, for example as a story about the photographer’s visits (though “photographer notes” are included), the resource would not have been as useful a tool.

In your community or organization, what do people need to compare? If you were to create a narrative presentation that juxtaposed things, what would the things be and how would you juxtapose them? If you consider your collected stories, which do you think would help people most if you brought them together and presented them side by side? What impact do you think that might have?

**Immersion.** Many of the comments on the book mentioned the “couldn’t put it down” aspect of the presentation. One librarian even mentioned that his library had to buy a new



copy of the book because it had fallen apart from heavy use. The presentation of photos in the *Material World* book is personal and intimate, never clinical or detached. This is partly because the project was set up so that the photographers lived with each family for a week while taking pictures of them. If the photographers had just shown up, took their pictures, and left, the book would have been far less compelling. It was the immersion of the photographers, and the book's readers through them, that made the book so difficult to put down.

In your community or organization, who needs to be immersed, and in what? How can you bring about such an immersion? What will it take to get past the facts into the heart of the issues? Who needs to go where, live where, see what, do what, to make that happen?

## Sensemaking pyramids

Let's say you just finished the sensemaking phase of your project. You engaged a few dozen people in lively, productive sensemaking workshops. The sessions took a while to warm up, but by the end people were ready and willing to keep going. So why not *help* people keep going?

I've noticed a sort of bell curve of interest in sensemaking workshops. There are always a few people who barely tolerate the session from beginning to end. A large number of people are confused or reluctant at first, but get the point eventually and start enjoying the process by the time it's over. But there are always a few people who find the process fascinating and want to know more about it. That little glowing seed of fascination is an opportunity for your community or organization.

Here's what you can do to seize the opportunity.

1. As each sensemaking workshop winds down, ask if anyone in the room is interested in learning more about the process they've been using. If some say yes, tell them that if they give you some contact information you'll send them information about the process. (If the session is anonymous, make sure you explain that their contact information will not be connected to anything they said or did in the session.)
2. A few days later, contact the people who said they were interested. Give them the information you promised, which will be a brief explanation of the methods you used and why you used them, along with some pointers to resources on story work. Also ask the people if they would be willing to learn more about how to conduct sensemaking workshops like the one they participated in, so they can help the community or organization as you have done.
3. If anybody responds to your second level of inquiry, invite those people to an hour-long mini-course in which you explain to them in more detail what you know about narrative sensemaking and PNI in general. Give them copies of some resources to review.
4. At the end of the mini-course, tell the people that if they are interested in doing some small projects on their own, you would be glad to help them based on your own experiences.

5. If anybody does do a small project (and remember, a PNI project can fit into an hour-long meeting), support them by answering questions and making suggestions.
6. If anybody does more than one small project, or moves up to do a larger project, encourage them to seek out more people who might want to learn how to do narrative projects and pass on the knowledge again.

By spreading the word about sensemaking, you can amplify the impact of your original project and improve the sensemaking skills of your whole community or organization.

## Narrative therapy

In 1998 Erik Sween published a short paper called “The one-minute question: What is narrative therapy?” In the paper, he defines the term from seven different perspectives. I find the last definition the most useful. It goes like this:

A person’s life is criss-crossed by invisible story-lines. These unseen story-lines can have enormous power in shaping a person’s life. Narrative therapy involves the process of drawing out and amplifying these story-lines. Questions are used to focus on what has been most meaningful in a person’s life. Common areas of inquiry include intentions, influential relationships, turning-points, treasured memories, and how these areas connect with each other.

Drawing out and amplifying hidden story lines sounds a lot like sensemaking in PNI, doesn’t it? It is similar, but not identical. Narrative therapy is participatory, and it’s narrative, but it goes beyond inquiry. I said in the chapter on sensemaking that sensemaking encompasses change, but I was referring to change that flows from sensemaking. Change created by therapeutic story work is *deliberately* created by a therapist, and that puts it outside the bounds of PNI (at least as it stands right now).

In PNI there is no therapist, only a facilitator, someone like you. That’s deliberate. It’s to keep PNI as close to participation, and to participants, as possible. Having said that, during the intervention phase of the PNI cycle, the help of a skilled and experienced therapist may be useful. You could bring one in, or you could read enough about narrative therapy to bring some *elements* of it into your PNI work yourself. When should you consider bringing narrative therapy into your PNI project? When you have discovered an issue about which people need to start telling themselves new stories.

To give you more of a sense of what narrative therapy entails, I’ll describe a few of the techniques commonly used in the approach.

### ***Externalizing conversations***

When people have problems, they tend to associate the problems with some aspect of their identity, as being *situated* in themselves. He’s a drunk. She’s a control freak. He’s a workaholic. This makes the problems harder to approach because they are too closely intertwined with the people to consider separately.

Externalizing conversations change the way we talk about problems by giving them their own identities, almost as characters in stories. He is *burdened* with alcoholism. She has

*difficulty* with control issues. He *struggles* with a compulsion to overwork. A narrative therapist uses externalizing conversations to help people find better ways to talk and think about problems. Narrative therapists say that externalizing conversations help people see that “the problem is the *problem*, not the person.”

Says Michael White, one of the founders of narrative therapy, in his book *Maps of Narrative Practice*:

Externalizing conversations employ practices of objectification of the problem against cultural practices of objectification of people.

To give an example, a child who has a learning disability might be encouraged to speak about the disability as a mischievous imp that stands in the way of the child achieving goals. The child can then be asked questions about the imp: what it looks like, when it's awake and asleep, how it disrupts things, what its motivations might be, and what we might be able to do to reduce the imp's damage to the child's learning. This might help the child (and their parents and teachers) find new ways to improve the situation.

You can see how this sort of re-imagining of problems could work in a community setting. By engaging people in externalizing conversations, a narrative therapist could help people build new stories in which the embodiment of problems is shifted to the problems themselves. This could help people think more clearly and productively about the problems and the people.

You might have noticed a similarity between this practice of seeing a problem as a character and drawing character story elements out of stories. In fact, I believe—though I have not done this in practice—that you could bring a bit of narrative therapy into PNI by asking people to create characters that explicitly represent problems as distinct from people.

Let's make up an example to explore the possibility. Let's say that homelessness is a problem in your community. Let's say you have just finished the sensemaking phase of your PNI project. During sensemaking, you found out that different people talk about the problem differently, depending on the experiences they have had. Some see the homeless as lazy beggars, some as victims of an unjust society, some as free spirits whose rights of independence should be respected, some as dangerous misfits who should be institutionalized.

But those are all characterizations of *people*. What if you asked people to characterize homelessness *itself*? Let's say you hold some workshops advertised as additional sensemaking workshops (“to learn more”) but actually meant as interventions (because you want to include those who *don't* want to change the way they think). In those workshops, you ask people to draw characteristics of the behavior of homelessness (*not* the homeless) out of stories. How might the way people think about homelessness change after such a workshop has taken place?

As I said, I've never actually done this. But if you find this idea appealing in the context of a project you are planning, perhaps one where you know you have this sort of “people are the problem” perception in your community, you might want to follow this trail of opportunity and see where it leads.

### ***Re-authoring conversations***

This practice involves the construction of larger stories out of smaller stories. People do this every day as they piece together experiences to make sense of their lives, and communities do this as they piece together stories to create a narrative of the community.

Says Michael White, again in *Maps of Narrative Practice*:

When people consult therapists they tell stories; they speak about the history of the problems, predicaments, or dilemmas that have brought them to therapy, and they provide an account of what led to their decision to seek help. In doing this, people link the events of their lives in sequences that unfold through time according to a theme or plot. These themes often reflect loss, failure, incompetence, hopelessness, or futility.

There are often other stories people *could* be telling but are not: stories of strength, success, competence, and hope.

Michael White again:

Re-authoring conversations invite people to continue to develop and tell stories about their lives, but they also help people to include some of the more neglected but potentially significant events and experiences that are “out of phase” with their dominant storylines. These events and experiences can be considered “unique outcomes” or “exceptions.”

By discovering neglected stories and bringing them into greater prominence, re-authoring conversations invite people to compose new stories with new themes. Eventually this new composite story can replace the original composite, providing people with the strength to face problems.

Re-authoring conversations sounds a lot like building composite stories in a PNI sensemaking exercise, doesn't it? It's not as structured an activity, but a re-authoring conversation could be seen as a composite-story exercise with a template whose slots have people actively searching out stories that highlight strengths, successes, and hopes. You could imagine that this small change to PNI's composite-story exercise could constitute an intervention in the narrative life of your community or organization. You could imagine discovering the need for such an intervention during sensemaking, then planning new “action” workshops that incorporate the change.

I'm not saying that adding a new story template to a PNI exercise constitutes narrative therapy. Far from it. I've briefly mentioned only a few of the practices involved in narrative therapy here, and I'm sure any narrative therapist would tell you that tweaking an exercise is not the same as having a therapeutic conversation. But adding narrative therapy to PNI intervention does not have to be a binary choice. Learning more about narrative therapy can help you bring some of its ideas into your PNI practice, whether you enlist the help of (or become) a professional narrative therapist or not. I can see people adding just a few therapeutic elements to a PNI project, and I can see people using a PNI project to prepare for a therapist-supported narrative therapy project. It's all good.

A good source of information about narrative therapy is the Dulwich Center in Adelaide, Australia. Their comprehensive web site ([dulwichcentre.com.au](http://dulwichcentre.com.au)) contains many free and inexpensive resources for learning how to get started in narrative therapy.

***An example of narrative therapy (by another name): Fambul Tok***

As you begin to learn about narrative therapy, keep your eye out for approaches that build on the same therapeutic ideas but use other names.

One compelling example of such a differently-named approach is Fambul Tok, developed in Sierra Leone as a revival of age-old traditions after a devastatingly brutal 11-year civil war. During the war, many ordinary people, including child soldiers, were forced to perpetrate unspeakable crimes on their neighbors, friends, and family members.

Legal procedures in the aftermath of the war indicted only a handful of high-ranking offenders, issuing a blanket amnesty to all other combatants. There was a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but it was limited to relatively brief hearings held only in the major cities. The war devastated the whole country, but most ordinary Sierra Leoneans could not participate in the hearings. In many rural villages, life several years after the war found victims and perpetrators living near each other, unable to speak, wary of each other, unable to move on with their lives.

John Caulker was involved in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but he was frustrated at how few Sierra Leoneans were involved in the process. Not only could few people travel to the cities, but few perpetrators were willing to talk. So the whole story of the war could not be told, and people could not move on to rebuild the country.

Caulker remembered traditions from his rural childhood, called *fambul tok*, or “family talk” in the Sierra Leone Krio (creole) language. He remembered how people used to gather around bonfires at night to talk, gossip, joke, resolve disputes, and sometimes apologize and forgive. Caulker began to visit rural communities and ask them about these traditions and whether they might help people restore their communities. Thus the Fambul Tok approach grew where need met tradition.

From a 2008 interview in the *Christian Science Monitor*:

“It’s like they [the international community] have this postconflict checklist: Truth commission, tick. Military assistance, tick. Trials, tick. Next. Go on to the next country,” Caulker says. “But the people have answers. They have their cultural values.” Caulker wants to put those values on that checklist.

It’s a tradition with a long history—before the war; before, even, the white man—and a range of meanings. Villagers sat around nightly bonfires, telling jokes and recounting the day’s events. Sometimes, *fambul tok* resolved disputes, adjudicating everything from petty theft to matrimonial discord. The practice made villagers more than neighbors; it united them as a *fambul*.

So Fambul Tok began to help rural communities bring back their ancient traditions of restorative justice. Of course, such deep transformations of ravaged communities could not happen without preparation. Before anything happens in any community, Fambul Tok

staff negotiate, sometimes for months, with community leaders and members to prepare them for the process and agree to certain principles.

The day of ritual begins with community dances and religious observances unique to each community. At the heart of the Fambul Tok process is a storytelling session held around a huge bonfire. Surrounded by all members of the community, each victim and perpetrator tells the story of what happened to them during the war without interruption. Finally each perpetrator apologizes to the victims and the community and asks for forgiveness, and the victims and the whole community publicly forgive the perpetrators. After the bonfire there is a feast, and all celebrate the first step in making the community whole again.

The Fambul Tok process continues long after the bonfire. There may be religious ceremonies that cleanse and heal places where atrocities took place. Communal activities may be planned in which perpetrators contribute to the community through participating in new activities like football matches, the creation of community farms, the building of new community resources, and so on. So the Fambul Tok process starts with apology and forgiveness, but continues as the community heals. One follow-up activity is the designation of a peace tree, a place where people can gather to deal with any conflicts that take place in the future. Another activity is the creation of “peace mothers” groups who work together to continue the peaceful momentum started by the bonfire. All of these things can be seen as narrative interventions, because they create new stories that define the community.

The Fambul Tok approach has begun to spread outside Sierra Leone. It is being used by groups around the world to resolve longstanding problems. It is a therapeutic process, and it is a narrative process, and it’s one anyone can learn from and use in a situation of conflict.

Few people reading this book will have experienced the degree of devastation encountered by the people in Sierra Leone, but these methods can help people dealing with any kind of conflict that has created rifts in communities or organizations. If we think together about the factors that have made Fambul Tok a success, you might find ways in which you can use similar methods in your own community or organization.

**Local solutions.** Unlike the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Fambul Tok traveled directly to the remote villages that needed help. Because the Fambul Tok ceremonies took place in familiar, comfortable places, people were more willing to take chances than they would have been otherwise. Where are the familiar, comfortable places of *your* community or organization? In what locations do you think people would feel safe enough to take chances on reconciliation?

**Rootedness.** Fambul Tok didn’t bring a set of unknown methods into the communities they approached; they brought back a practice familiar to all of the community elders. If they had brought a foreign solution, it would probably have been rejected. Are there ways your community or organization has resolved conflicts in the past? Is there a local history you can call upon? If there isn’t a unified history of conflict resolution, think about how the methods of Fambul Tok, or the methods of *any* approach to therapeutic narrative, mesh with the culture of your community or organization. What do the words *justice*, *forgiveness*,

*reconciliation*, and *peace* mean in your community or organization? What will it take to make these things work for you?

**Equality.** Victims and perpetrators at Fambul Tok gatherings were given equal opportunities to tell their stories. Everyone around the bonfire was asked to listen with patience and respect to every story. If one group had been favored over the other, say if victims had been allowed to tell their stories but perpetrators had been shouted down, the approach would not have worked. What are the challenges to equal storytelling rights in *your* community or organization? Does everyone have a chance to speak? Is everyone listened to with patience and respect? What can you do to negotiate agreements about equality in storytelling as preparation for a Fambul-Tok-like gathering?

**Security.** One of the agreements insisted on by Fambul Tok staff before every ceremony was that everyone who spoke, victim or perpetrator, would be *safe*. “Do not be afraid,” was the message of the ceremony, “we will hear your story.” If perpetrators had been asked to tell their stories while being threatened with retribution, they would not have come forward and admitted their guilt. What barriers to security in storytelling exist in your community or organization? Who is afraid to tell their story? Why are they afraid? Are there community assets or traditions you can draw upon, or agreements you can create, to help everyone feel free to speak?

**Future orientation.** Several of the victims who forgave perpetrators during Fambul Tok ceremonies stressed the fact that they were not forgiving their attackers because they had forgotten what happened. They could never forget the horrors they lived through. But they forgave because they had *hope* that through forgiveness they could help their community move forward to a better, safer, more prosperous future. Their forgiveness was not a capitulation but a gift—a gift they gave to themselves and to their communities. If the victims of violence had not been able to find those common hopes for their communities, the reconciliation would have failed. What hopes for *your* community or organization might help people forgive each other and work together towards a better future?

**Narrative.** All of the perpetrators and victims at Fambul Tok ceremonies were encouraged not to just report the facts of their experiences, but to tell the stories of what happened to them from their own perspectives. If people had been told to “stick to the facts” the solution would have failed, because it was the *stories* that needed to be told. What stories need to be told in your community or organization? What would it take to get people telling and listening to those stories?

**Preparation.** Every Fambul Tok ceremony depends on months of preparatory consultation with village elders as to exactly how the ceremonial events should play out in the community. On the day of the bonfire, the gathering starts several hours before the bonfire is lit, with dances, meals, and other events of social significance. When the time has come to begin the storytelling, people have already been participating in a unique event for long enough to feel committed to the process. They know what is coming next, and the mood is expectant. If such a bonfire was entered into quickly, with no consultation and no preparation, people would not be ready to come forward with their stories. What sorts of preparations make sense for your community or organization? What sorts of social events are significant to

the people in your community? What will help bring participants in your gathering to the place where they are ready to speak and listen?

**Follow-through.** The bonfire is never the last thing that happens in a Fambul Tok process. For months afterward, Fambul Tok staff help the community plan activities people will participate in together. If there was nothing to do together after the ceremony of forgiveness, the spirit of change might die away and people might slide back into the old resentments. Instead, people lay down new layers of experience working together toward common goals. What sorts of follow-through activities make sense for your community or organization? What would lay down new layers of experience for your community members? What will keep the momentum for change going?

To learn more about Fambul Tok, its origins and methods, and how you can use these methods yourself, look at the Fambul Tok web site ([fambultok.org](http://fambultok.org)), movie, and book. This is only one example of story work that has therapeutic value; I'm sure you can find many more to inspire you in your own work.

## Theatre of the Oppressed

Theatre of the Oppressed (commonly abbreviated as TO) is a body of methods that use participatory theatre to help people work with stories to create social and political change. The approach was created by Augusto Boal, a Brazilian director, writer, and politician. Boal was himself inspired by the work of the educator Paulo Friere. Friere's best-known work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argues that educators should treat students as respected co-creators of knowledge rather than empty vessels to be filled. Boal brought Friere's ideas of co-creation into the realm of theatre.

If you're put off by the name, don't be. It's not necessary for anybody to be oppressed for these techniques to work. It's true that TO was originally created for use in situations where one group of people was oppressed by another, mainly during a time of harsh military repression in Brazil. But TO is now used in many situations in communities and organizations around the world.

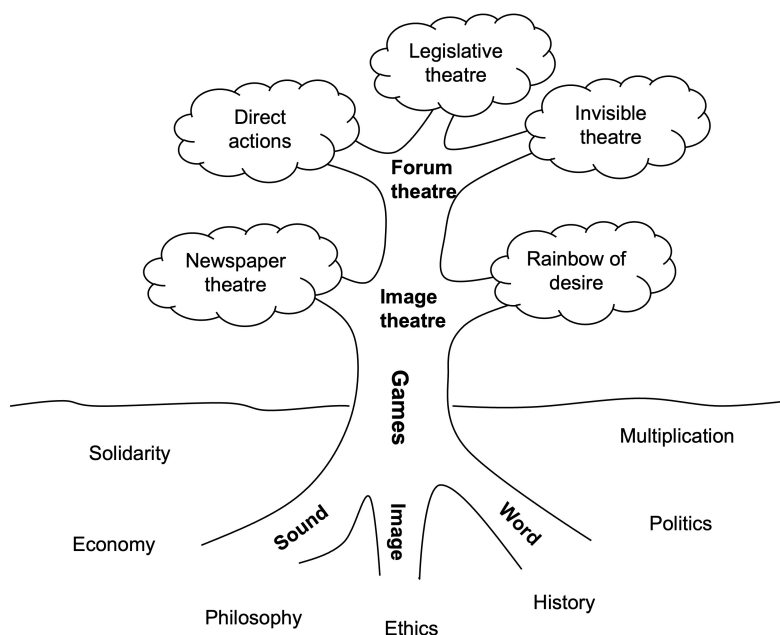
The general understanding of the name today is that we are *all* oppressed in some way, even if only by our own assumptions. Every person can be both oppressor and oppressed, and TO exists to help those who are oppressed in any situation find ways to alleviate their oppression. It does this by helping people participate in the creation and re-creation of stories in a theatrical setting.

TO makes a critical distinction between *spectators*, who remain isolated and confined in the audience of conventional theatrical performances, and *spect-actors*, who in TO events both observe *and* take action. According to Boal, this makes TO "a collective rehearsal for reality."

### **Some TO methods**

Theatre of the Oppressed places its categories of methods into a tree, thus.





Says Boal about the trunk of the tree (in *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*):

[Games] have rules, as does society, which are necessary in order for the *Games* to be enacted; but they also require creative freedom, so that the *Game*, or life, is not transformed into servile obedience. Without rules, there is no game, without freedom, there is no life.

That sounds like TO agrees with PNI, doesn't it?

**Image theatre.** In this category of game, people in a group consider a theme by using their bodies, and the bodies of others in the group, to create images. An “image” in this context means a person or persons holding a position as if frozen in time.

Images are created quickly, without time for thought, and in silence. People may work on their own or in pairs or larger groups to create the images. For example, a group considering the theme of homelessness might create the image of a man sleeping on a bench, of a woman knocking on a door, of a child looking through a window, and of a man shivering in the cold. The group might then discuss what these images mean to them, allowing for differing interpretations. Then they discuss what images they would like to see instead, or what images might present solutions to the problems represented by the initial images.

One method within the category of image theatre is *newspaper theatre*. People read articles out of a newspaper, with theatrical interpreted performances interspersed into the reading. For example:

- In *parallel action*, group members silently play out actions as the newspaper text is being read. Their pantomimed actions can either match what is being read or can be based on reactions to the text, or to what people believe it avoids saying or obscures.

- In *crossed reading*, two news items are read in an interleaved fashion so that each changes the way the other is read. The selection of the two items to read, and how and when to interleave them, is an interpretive event in itself, which can be discussed.
- In *text out of context*, the newspaper text is deliberately read in an acted-out context that doesn't match the one in which it was originally published. It might be historically displaced (read as if it was written hundreds of years ago), spatially displaced (read as if it was written in another country), socially displaced (read as if it was written by someone much richer or poorer), and so on. The choice of what context to displace the newspaper text into constitutes an interpretive performance, which can be negotiated and discussed.

That's only three of about ten suggested variations on the newspaper theatre exercise. (I thought these three were the most connected to PNI.) You can find the whole list in Boal's book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*.

**Forum theatre.** In this type of game, people in a group start by creating a short scripted play in which some kind of oppression plays out (and remember, the same people can be both oppressor and oppressed). Some of the people in the group act out the script while others watch.

After the play has been performed, there is a short period of discussion. Then the play begins all over again; but this time through, anyone watching the play can shout "stop" or "freeze," and the play has to stop. Then the person who stopped the play steps onto the stage and takes the place of one of the play's characters.

There is an important rule in this replacement: a character being replaced must *want* the situation to change. Participants may not replace actors who like things the way they are, because the solution of magically replacing people who are causing problems is not realistic. Violent solutions are also ruled out. The original actor is asked to step aside and observe the change created by their replacement, although they may support the new actor with advice (about the character's personality and so on).

Now the drama resumes, with the new "spect-actor" acting out their own solution to the problems and dilemmas faced by the character they have replaced.

In this way the play might start and restart several times as the group works through multiple solutions to the problems presented. By going through this process, groups rehearse the change they want to create.

A type of forum theatre that takes things one step further is called *legislative theatre*. This game starts out like forum theatre, with a play repeated and stopped by spect-actors who step into the roles of characters. However, in legislative theatre, the game continues as participants recommend laws that address problems explored in the play. Proposed laws are written down and clustered; the clusters are discussed; and some are chosen to become "bills." Spect-actors take positions for or against bills and debate their merits and demerits. Finally, the whole assembly votes on the bills.

Legislative theatre is most often used today either by an official decision-making body as a way to involve the public (but not to share decision-making power completely) or by an

opposition group as a way to protest policy. But there is no reason this method could not be used in a community or organization as a bona fide way of making binding decisions together, as long as everyone in the community or organization can participate in the game.

Boal's book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* describes well over 100 games people can play together, some under these categories and some under others.

### **When to use TO**

I think you might be able to guess by now that I like Theatre of the Oppressed. I like how its techniques empower people to bring about real change. Says Boal (in *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*):

Theatre of the Oppressed creates spaces of liberty where people can free their memories, emotions, imaginations, thinking of their past, in the present, and where they can invent their future instead of waiting for it.

What's not to like about that?

However, as you and I both know, the methods of TO won't fit into every PNI project. PNI's methods may be dull in comparison to the theatrics of TO, but PNI works in areas of low motivation, low interest, low trust, and high fear that TO may not be able to enter into, at least not without expert facilitation. I'd like to think that PNI and TO are complementary approaches, each working at a different band in a spectrum from low to high risk and low to high potential for transformation.

So when is it worth using TO as a narrative intervention in a PNI project? I could say the same thing I said about narrative therapy: when you have discovered an issue about which people need to start telling themselves new stories. But having said that, there are significant differences between the two methods in context.

Like narrative therapy, TO goes beyond inquiry into creating change. But unlike narrative therapy, TO does not require or even *allow* dependence on expert help. In fact, facilitators in TO are called "jokers" because the joker in a deck of playing cards does not belong to any suit. Jokers guide interactions from the side but remain neutral at all times. This is similar to the role of a PNI facilitator, who stays out of the way as much as possible during storytelling and sensemaking. Thus it will probably be *easier for you* to incorporate elements of TO into your PNI projects than it will be to incorporate elements of narrative therapy.

On the other hand, TO is *riskier to your participants* than narrative therapy, so even when it's useful it may not always be possible. Narrative therapy places a lot of the weight of the transformation on the expert therapist. The therapist shapes the interaction, asking the right questions, making the right nudges, guiding the conversations. Those who are being helped come to new realizations, but sometimes they don't realize how they were helped to get there. You could say that the narrative therapist works with stories more than the patient does. This is not necessarily a bad thing. It's safer to the participants, and that makes it a complementary option, useful when riskier methods will fail.

The methods used in Theatre of the Oppressed ask more of participants than either PNI or narrative therapy. TO won't work unless people step out of their comfortable places in

the audience and assert their rights to make change happen. There will always be some people who will not be ready to take that step. I've read some records of forum theatre sessions, and it seems that often there are a few people who refuse to participate or leave the session. TO methods accept a loss in the number of participants in order to give the people who remain greater power over their own work with stories. The question is, how many participants will remain?

If you think the people in your community or organization need to start telling themselves new stories, and you want to plan a narrative intervention to make that happen, the next question to ask yourself is: Would it be better to include everyone at a moderate level of intensity, or would you be willing to risk losing some people to engage those who remain in a more intense process that creates deeper change—for those people? The more inclusive you are, the less powerful the change will be; and the more powerful the change, the fewer people will be engaged in it. Which is more important to your community or organization?

### ***How to use it TO with PNI***

As you may have noticed, some of the TO techniques I described above resemble those used for sensemaking in PNI. As I said when I wrote about narrative therapy, I've never actually done this in practice, but I can think of some ways you might be able to incorporate aspects of the TO games listed above into narrative sensemaking workshops.

**Image theatre in PNI.** Instead of drawing images from open-ended reflection, people could derive images from stories they've encountered. The stories could be randomly selected or chosen based on answers to questions, such as the ten stories with the highest values of memorability and conflict. Grounding images in stories might surprise people with aspects of the theme they wouldn't have thought to consider otherwise.

For newspaper theatre, instead of reading from a newspaper, people could read stories from the collection. You can imagine the impact of interleaving two stories told from opposite points of view, or of acting out scenes from a story as it's being read, or of reading a story out of context.

**Forum theatre in PNI.** Instead of writing the original play from consideration of a theme, it could be based on stories from the collection. After all, writing the play in forum theatre is similar to a composite story exercise in PNI. Then, when people stop the action and insert themselves as characters, they could draw on other stories they've encountered to propose alternative endings. This would ground the performance in real stories people told, both in its original situation and in its solutions.

Legislative theatre might be a good way to finish up a PNI sensemaking workshop (or maybe a PNI-TO sensemaking-intervention session). Instead of writing up lists of suggestions, people could propose laws, choose bills, debate their merits, and vote on resolutions. If the community or organization is small and everyone is present, the resolutions could even be binding.

If you read more about Theatre of the Oppressed, you are likely to find even more connections between TO games and PNI exercises. You might come up with more ideas on how

to integrate these two bodies of work. You can find information on how to carry out TO games in Boal's books and in many places on the internet.

### ***Participatory theatre outside TO***

The last thing I want to say about Theatre of the Oppressed is that it is not the only way of bringing theatrical methods into narrative intervention. I chose to write about TO because it is more coherent, more widely used, and more thoroughly tested than any other approach to participatory theatre I've seen. However, there are other methods for helping people work with stories in theatrical settings.

I must admit to some confusion here. I've followed trails through terms like participatory theatre, development theatre (also called theatre for development), intervention theatre, interactive theatre—and I always get lost in the blurry line between performance, intervention, and just plain spectacle. Is a flash mob (in which hundreds of people descend on a space, do something nonsensical, then leave again) a form of sensemaking? Or is it just a fad, a joke? I don't know. But I do know that there is more in the space where narrative intervention and theatre come together than Theatre of the Oppressed. *The Applied Theatre Reader* (profiled in the "Further Reading" appendix of *Working with Stories*) is a good place to start your exploration; it gives you a sampling of approaches from all over.

### ***An example of participatory theatre: Matt Harding's dancing videos***

Here is an example of a theatrical intervention I found by accident on the internet. I would like to tell you this story at some length, because I think it explains a lot about the opportunities and uncertainties inherent in creating effective narrative interventions.

Matt Harding started out his work life building computer games. He liked some of the games he worked on, but some were less exciting to him. In 2003 he was told by his employers to abandon work on a family-friendly game he liked because customer tastes had "matured." In response, he came up with a fake pitch for an over-the-top killing game called "Destroy All Humans!" Surprisingly, his employers didn't get the joke and actually developed and sold the game. That was the last straw for Harding. He quit his job, gathered up his savings and began to travel.

Since he was a kid, Harding had danced the same silly little dance. He did it at work when it was time for lunch, to get his co-workers to put their work aside. A few months after he quit his job, while he was traveling in Vietnam, he asked a friend to videotape him standing on a street in Hanoi. The friend said, "Why don't you do that little dance you do?" Harding did, and it turned out funny. So he made a compilation video of himself dancing his silly dance at lots of famous places, in front of monuments and tourist spots. He made a web site in 2005 to show his friends where he'd been, and he called it [wherethehellismatt.com](http://wherethehellismatt.com). At this point in the story, Harding had no other intention but to record his travels.

Later that year, Harding discovered that a teenager had uploaded his dancing video to a new internet site called YouTube, and that 600,000 people had seen it. The video had turned into a "viral" sensation.

Soon after, the Cadbury-Adams company, which was launching a new chewing gum and looking to get in on the new viral marketing, asked Harding if they could sponsor him on

another tour of the world. So Harding made another video of himself dancing in many places and released it on the internet in 2006.

Halfway through his 2006 tour, something amazing happened. Harding didn't have many planned locations in Africa, so he stopped off to visit a friend who lived in Rwanda. He couldn't find any well-known landmarks to dance in front of there, so he just went to a little village and started dancing. There were lots of children in the village, and as soon as he started dancing, they started dancing with him. This had never happened before, and it gave Harding two fundamental insights: first, people are a lot more interesting than landmarks, and second, he might have something he'd like to say to the world about travel and about people.

Said Harding in an interview on the Australian television show *Enough Rope with Andrew Denton*:

I saw a bunch of kids playing and I just started dancing. I just did this and within seconds—you saw the footage—within seconds they were dancing as well. There was no explanation; there was nothing that needed to be understood; it just looked like fun. And they joined in, and when that was over I just thought—wow, I should have been doing that all along. I've been wasting my time, because it's so much more interesting to see other people and to see the joy on their faces and, honestly, watching *me* dancing really isn't that interesting after a while, or even at all.

So Harding went back to Cadbury-Adams and asked them to sponsor another video. Harding's 2008 video doesn't feature Harding dancing in front of landmarks. It features Harding dancing with people. Around the world, people in lots of different countries are doing Harding's funny little dance with him. Again, the video took the internet by storm, this time with a different message.

But Harding was not entirely happy with the 2008 video. His sponsors had asked him to avoid traveling to a number of countries they considered too dangerous (for example, those in which dancing is frowned upon). And he was unhappy with the dancing too. Even though his second sponsored video showed him with people, he wasn't dancing with *them*; they were dancing with *him*. That wasn't what he wanted to say about travel.

Then another amazing thing happened, and again it taught Harding something about what he was doing. Here he is in an interview with the magazine *GeekWire*.

I was in India and I got some Bollywood dancers to teach me how to dance. They showed me a couple of Bollywood moves, which at that point I figured I wasn't going to be able to actually do, but what the hell I'll try. I found it's a lot more representative of what travel is about, or should be about, which is talking to people and engaging with people, and learning from people in the places that you go to. I thought that was a whole lot more interesting than doing the same thing in the places I went to.

So, using his savings from the sponsorship, Harding decided to fund himself and make another video on his own. This one took him longer to complete (partly because he had a child) and he released it in 2012.

The 2012 video is different from the others. In it, Harding dances with a lot of people, but this time he's doing lots of different dances. He's dancing with the people, not the people with him. Some of the dances are based on ethnic traditions and some are made up on the spot, but in each case Harding asked people to help him find a way to dance with them, experimenting with moves until the people in the group liked what they were doing. (Groups were gathered through notices on the internet and through connections.)

In the 2012 video, Harding's message comes through loud and clear. Says David Pogue in the *New York Times*:

This time, it's not Harding just swinging his arms, stepping in place. This time, he actually learned to dance, often in the style of the country he was visiting. As a result, there's a feeling of collaboration, of immersion, that wasn't in the earlier video.

The kicker is the final shot. After all those joyous, wordless clips from 50 countries, the final scene is Harding, his baby son on his shoulders, dancing simply with his wife in their own back yard. It's perfection. And it's hard not to tear up.

Harding explains in an interview with the *Smithsonian* the significance of that final shot.

The last shot . . . is me, in one sentence, saying, "This is really important to me." A lot of people watch the video and they are sort of waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for a sponsor's logo to pop up in the end, to see who paid for this. I funded the video myself and I wanted people to know that there's not a corporate message here—this matters a lot to me. It's an expression of what I believe is important and what I want to pass on to my kid and my family—this is what I think *really* matters.

Speaking personally, I've watched the 2012 video several times, and I can't get through it without crying. A lot. The reason Matt Harding made that video is the reason I wrote this book. (These books.)

In the *GeekWire* interview, Harding says:

I think we all really want to feel a part of something and we feel really isolated as of now. I think there's this exuberance and enthusiasm that I experience when people come out to these big mobs in Slovakia or South Korea, and they're really excited to be part of this thing that connects them with people all over the world. I think that's a really powerful and really positive thing that we all have. It's great to find any way you can to cultivate that and make it into something worthwhile.

To see Harding's videos, go to his web site ([wherethehellismatt.com](http://wherethehellismatt.com)) and watch them. (If they aren't there anymore, they must be somewhere.) The best way to view the videos is to watch them in chronological order, because you can follow the progression in Harding's thinking. If you're watching for it, you'll see the clip from Rwanda—it's only a few seconds long, so keep your eyes peeled—and you'll see how it changed everything.

I wanted to tell you this story for a few reasons. First, it's an inspiring example of an effective narrative intervention. As of this writing, Harding's 2012 video has been watched

on YouTube 21 *million* times. In the video's comments on YouTube, Harding asks people to state their locations, and the comments show that people all over the world are watching.

The second reason to tell this story is that Harding's video project fits into the category of participatory theatre—all those people making stories happen together—but it falls outside the bounds of any defined approach. This doesn't surprise me! When it comes to participatory work, there are usually more examples outside the bounds of any defined approach than inside it.

Participatory work is, or ought to be, participatory in its methods as well as in its content. That's why I say that if you don't make PNI your own you are not doing PNI. The participatory part of PNI isn't just for the people you involve in your projects. It's for you too. Don't be afraid to start your own journey of discovery.

The third and most important reason I wanted to tell you this story was that Harding *himself* didn't know what he was doing when he started making videos. His approach, and his message, evolved through exploration, happenstance, and discovery. That doesn't make his project's impact any less powerful; in fact, I'd say it makes it even more compelling.

So in your own work with your community or organization, I suggest you do what Harding did. Start doing something, but don't plan it out too carefully. Harding describes himself in various interviews as "lazy" and "the opposite of a perfectionist," but I think he's being modest. What I think is essential in Harding's approach is that he didn't box himself in by doing things in a prescribed way. He let the work show him how to do it. Your work on narrative intervention should show you how to do it, no matter how much you learn from established approaches (including this book).



## Chapter 6

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# More on Conversational and Community Story Sharing

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Everything in this chapter was removed from the fourth edition of *Working with Stories*. The first two sections were taken out of Chapter 4 (How Do Stories Work?), and the rest were taken out of Chapter 14 (Narrative Return).

## Three conversational stories

*Please note that these examples will not make any sense to you until you have read “Stories in conversation” in Chapter 4 (How Do Stories Work?) of Working with Stories.*

In this section I will use the iceberg model of story sharing to examine three real conversational stories in some detail. All of these stories are from a story-sharing session I facilitated more than two decades ago. I do not know who these people were, but I’m fairly sure that they would not mind me using their stories, general as they were. Otherwise I would not tell the stories here.

### A story well told

Let’s start with a story that shows the parts of a told story exceptionally well. I will comment on each fragment as we go.

I don’t know what—I’ve got a good story. I don’t know where it fits in here either.

Here the speaker puts forth the story’s *abstract*. Note that the circumstance is contrived, since these people were asked to tell each other stories; but still the speaker started with a formulaic statement. Also notice the hesitation and reframing, and the negotiation of the “I don’t know” statement, and a direct reference to fitting in to the conversation.

The group apparently responded positively to this start, so the storyteller went on.

It just happened last week. My wife and I had our anniversary. And we went out to dinner.

This is the start of the story's *orientation*, with a time frame, a roster of characters, and a social setting.

And I ate a small lunch and a small breakfast. I wanted to make sure I was good and hungry when I went out because we were going to have a nice meal.

This statement, though still in the orientation, contains both evaluation (this meal was to be important, thus what follows will be important) and foreshadowing (to heighten suspense).

So we went to this rather new place, it's one of the oldest buildings in town, but they've converted it into a real nice restaurant. And we went there and looked at the menu, and I was hungry, and there was a sixteen-ounce porterhouse on the menu.

And I thought, well, I could do a sixteen-ounce porterhouse here tonight. I feel like I'm in a steak mood.

So I ordered the porterhouse.

Here is the end of the orientation. Note the repetition of "sixteen-ounce porterhouse"—this is evaluative, showing us that this particular porterhouse is going to be important and that we should pay attention to it.

And it took about an hour for the food to come—apparently there was a larger group that was in front of us—it was a small place—and the waitress comes out—and she was a pleasant enough person—

We begin the *complication* of the story with a tantalizing hint that things will soon be going downhill. Notice the reframings in this section, possibly indicating some mental adjustment of the story to the social context as the teller recalls the events and prepares his presentation.

She comes out, and she sets this *thing* in front of me, this *plate*. And it's got these little three-inch diameter, less than a quarter of an inch thick slabs of meat.

And I looked at her and I said, *that's a porterhouse?*

[laughter]

And she says, yes, that's how we do our porterhouse here.

I said, *that's a porterhouse?*

Yes, sir, that's how we do our porterhouse here.

I said, I've never *seen* anything like that.

This part of the complication is dramatic and sounds almost rehearsed. Probably this part of the story varies little from telling to telling. It contains no hesitation at all and is chock full of evaluation. First there is the waitress whose "coming out" is repeated twice, then *this thing, this plate, these slabs of meat*. Then "*That's a porterhouse?*" is repeated, and with such enthusiasm that this *might* be the central message of the story. However, it

is quickly outranked by the waitress' response, which contains not only word-for-word repetition of an entire sentence, but reported speech as well. The lie framed by "That's how we do our porterhouse here," we are meant to understand, is the point of the story.

So I just accepted that. So I sat down and I took a couple of bites, and I thought, this is, this is, I don't know *what* this is. And I didn't even really like it, but I had just about finished the meal, and I couldn't eat any more, I just didn't *like* it.

Here we have a bit of a quiet spot, but still there is repetition around "this is" and "I didn't like it." Something is brewing, we know.

And I said to her, I said, you know, could you—I'll bet you—I'll just bet you that this isn't porterhouse. Could you just go and *ask* somebody if this actually is porterhouse—there was some of it left on my plate—could you just *ask* somebody if this is porterhouse?

Okay, okay, sir, I'll do that for you.

Reported speech again, and repetitions of "I'll bet you" and "could you *ask* somebody" as the protagonist prepares to take action. This is a buildup of suspense, like watching the hero in achingly slow motion as he bounds toward the enemy to return the unjust blow.

So a little while later she comes back.

And meanwhile, I said to my wife, I said, I think this is pork medallions. It was the one below the porterhouse on the menu. I think this is pork medallions, that's not porterhouse steak, clearly. And I had a pretty good hint at this.

Here we have a common element of engagement in stories, and not just conversational ones. We the audience share with the storyteller some knowledge the antagonist of the story does not know. We audiences love that sort of thing, and this storyteller uses it well.

She comes back and she says, well, the person that *knows* is busy right now.

So now I'm getting a real clue. So I said, the person that knows is busy? Could you ask somebody else?

Well, no, that's really the only person that knows.

So I'm going, what is going on here?

Notice the last sentence: this is not something that really *happened* in the story, but an evaluative comment. The teller wants us to know he was mystified; thus there is a mystery; thus we should keep listening to find out how the mystery will be resolved.

So I said, Well, did you know that—I really think this is the pork medallions, and it's five dollars less, it's a meal that costs five dollars less than the porterhouse. So when I get my bill, I really kind of expect to see at least the *price* for the medallions, not the porterhouse.

Well, I don't know, sir.

Now the protagonist has made his full response to the complicating action. He has called out the waitress on her lie and stated his terms. We shall see what happens next.

So a little while later she comes back with the bill, and it's got—it's all scribbled out where the order was, and it's got written "porterhouse" there, and of course it's at the medallion price.

Here finally is the story's ironic and funny *resolution*. (I also think, having watched this story being told, that it was the crux of the story as well, though quietly spoken. The ironic twist carried all with it. As I recall, this sentence ended with the teller sitting abruptly back in his chair with a motion of "and there it is, folks" in his face and body language.)

And even *then* she denied that—

[laughter]

Note that this laughter is not, I think, indicative of the audience laughing *at* the sentence fragment "And even *then* she denied that." I think the resolution that came before it took a few seconds to sink in, during which time the storyteller began the story coda.

—that it wasn't porterhouse. To her it was still porterhouse.

And she was a pleasant enough waitress, and I kept—I felt sorry for her, because I thought there *has* to be something in the way they manage this business for her to take that stance, like if you make a mistake on the order, that you have to pay for it or something like that, because why else would she be so ridiculously—

You know, *that's a porterhouse!*

Now we have the story's *coda*, which contains quite an encyclopedia of evaluation.

1. It begins with a summary of the story: the waitress denied the facts.
2. Next there are two qualifying statements that attempt to control the reception and interpretation of the story. The teller prevents any possible interpretation of himself as unjust by making it clear that he does not place blame on the put-upon waitress herself.
3. He also explains what he thinks was the root cause of the problem, thus validating that the story is worthy of consideration when discussing the topic of organizational mismanagement (a topic on which several previous stories had been told).
4. Finally, he caps off the story with a stunning piece of repetitive evaluation: *That's a porterhouse!*

I would like to thank the anonymous person who told this story, because it has given me (and others) much food for thought over the past few decades.

## A story finds its footing

Here is another example that will give us a bit more practice understanding told stories.

Well—it's funny because—like I said—we have Dilbertsville—all cubes.

This is an interesting story *abstract* for a few reasons. The phrase “like I said” refers to a similar statement the speaker made a few minutes back in the conversation, a statement that started with, “See now—our place is Dilbertsville—cubes everywhere.” The full previous statement contained many more hesitations and restarts, and in fact sounds just like a story abstract.

It is likely that the earlier statement was *meant* to start a story but failed. The other speakers did not break their conversational rhythm until this line, with its “like I said,” was spoken, after which they took the hint and gave the story their full attention. I wonder if the speaker’s reference to a *setting*, though formulaic (Dilbertsville), rather than an event or memory, was too weak to sufficiently communicate a request to tell a story, and that only its repetition (as a sort of second application) succeeded in obtaining the group’s permission to speak.

And me and the person I sit next to—for years we were working on a lot of the same stuff—so we took out half of our partition between us, so—because otherwise we were constantly talking over the wall.

The speaker continues with what appears to be a complete, if brief, story. It has a complication (the wall divided workers) and a resolution (they took out the wall). But in fact this is just an introduction to a larger story, an *orientation* in the form of a story. Notice the three reframings, which show that the storyteller is working out how to tell the story in context.

And for a long time I had to walk past *her* cube to get to mine. So we just took out the wall and that was nice.

Here the storyteller repeats the same orientation story, but this time with no hesitations or reframings. His confidence, or his audience’s attention, seems to be growing.

We sat like that for like eight years.

The orientation ends with a sort of bridging statement, one that creates suspense (because surely *something* happened after those eight years). This is a signal that we are about to move into a new part of the story.

And just last year they remodeled the whole building, and we managed to keep together, but they put us in cubes.

Now the storyteller has moved into the *complication* of his larger story: they put us in cubes *again*. Now we can see why the previous embedded stories were necessary: so we could understand the importance of the second erection of dividing cubes. Notice how the word “cubes” ties back to the previous embedded stories, signifying that *this* is the main story the smaller stories were meant to lead up to.

And we said, eight, nine, ten, times to the people who were doing the planning, we said, we don’t want that wall in there. Once they were putting up the partitions we said, get that partition out of there. Three months later we couldn’t get *anybody* to take that wall down.

Finally the storyteller has leave to emphasize the points he wants to bring forth, and he takes advantage of it by adding evaluations. The phrase “eight, nine, ten, times” is formulaic.

The repetition of “we said” and “that wall” and “there” emphasizes the dilemma of the protagonist facing recalcitrance on the part of the planning people.

So one night I stayed late, brought in my wrenches, and it’s *down*.

Here is the protagonist’s response and the crux of the story. Note the complete lack of hesitation, dramatic word choices, and rehearsed quality of this sentence. (I also seem to recall the word “*down*” being accompanied by a triumphant arm movement.)

But we’re the only two people in that whole area that have bucked the system, broke the rules, and got our open space back. So we’ve got a nice open space, we—our square footage had shrunk, and we both felt real cramped after having an open space, so—now we’ve got an open space.

This is a lovely bit of evaluation. It is not necessary to explain that pulling down a wall will increase the enclosed square footage, so this stands outside the story events as commentary on the protagonist’s action. There is both formula *and* repetition in “bucked the system, broke the rules.” The term “open space” is repeated no less than *four* times. This cements the importance of its contrast to the earlier repetitions of the word “cubes.”

And everybody who walks in says, this is *nice*. But the system doesn’t want it and nobody else will do it for themselves.

Here is the *resolution* of the story: not that the wall is down, but that *other* people find this good but *will not do it for themselves*. If everyone in the office followed suit this would be a very different story, a story of a leader inspiring crowds. But this is not that story: it is the story of a lone voice crying in the wilderness.

It’s incredible.

And here is the very short *coda*, with a superlative statement of evaluation. Enough said.

## A collaborative story repair

Another fascinating element of conversational storytelling is the collaborative repair of stories that need some fine-tuning to fit the context of the conversation and meet the needs of speaker and audience. You saw how the tellers of the two previous stories adjusted their stories to fit the situation. Here is an example of a group making such a repair collaboratively.

The speaker Debbie begins to tell a story. (I’ve made up these names.)

Debbie: I’m in the middle of a development project, but the people putting it together are from the technical side, and they say [whispering] no, we’re not ready to show customers, we’re not ready to show customers.

[laughter]

Debbie: Meanwhile the market opportunity is slamming closed. And it takes time to get the sales and communications side of the—the mind share side of this thing going—so the pieces of this that we can actually start showing—

Debbie’s complication (“we’re not ready”) goes on past the laughter into an excessive additional explanation of the dilemma. Both Debbie and her audience seem to have perceived

this, and Debbie has communicated a need for feedback by pausing and restarting, perhaps unsure of how much detail to provide.

Karen: And how do you get the people then to wrap up?

Audience member Karen gives Debbie feedback in the form of a nudge in the direction of closure. (It's ironic that the repair of the story's excessive complication section parallels events in the story itself, with its perfectionism over software. It's almost as if Debbie is unconsciously demonstrating the events of her story in its delivery.)

Debbie: You basically—I mean, you can be polite about it—but you have to say enough is enough—or—you know—you have this version where—you're willing to go.

Debbie takes the hint and delivers the story's resolution, though with several pauses that show she is still open to negotiation over how the rest of the story should play out.

Debbie: It's a balance, there's no question about that.

After this (maybe in response to body language or looks from the others?) Debbie seems to come to a decision that no more detail is needed. She adds her coda (no hesitations there) which signals the end of the story events, along with some evaluation. In effect she is saying, "Okay, I've finished the story as requested, how is that?"

John: It seems that the same skills that make them great developers make them lousy at understanding deadlines.

Debbie: Yeah. The focus is a detriment.

Finally John, a different member of the group (not Karen, the original hint-giver), signals to Debbie that the story has been accepted (as improved) by participating in the coda with his own evaluative comment. Debbie responds with an additional evaluation to signal her agreement to close the story and move on.

## Variations in conversational story sharing

Now that I have laid out for you such a clear-cut key to how everyone tells stories to everyone (that is, the iceberg model), let me give you a warning. This is an idealized version of conversational storytelling. It *sometimes* works out this way, but not always, and variations on this form are enormous.

To quote Neal Norrick in *Conversational Narrative*:

In genuine conversation, stories often surge up and recede again in topical talk. They may consist of fragments produced by separate speakers among extraneous talk and random interruptions, so that it is often difficult to say just where they begin or end. Indeed, it is sometimes impossible to determine the legitimate teller, or even the main teller. Listeners must piece together narrative structures and reconstruct chronologies to make sense of the storytelling they experience.

Here is Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*:

I would like to conclude by mentioning two general strategies regarding tact with respect to tact. First, the performer must be sensitive to hints and ready to take them, for it is through hints that the audience can warn the performer that his show is unacceptable and that he had better modify it quickly if the situation is to be saved.

Secondly, if the performer is to misrepresent the facts in any way, he must do so in accordance with the etiquette for misrepresentation; he must not leave himself in a position from which even the lamest excuse and the most cooperative audience cannot extricate him. . . . Thus balding men who affect a hat indoors and out are more or less excused, since it is possible that they have a cold, that they merely forgot to take their hat off, or that rain can fall in unexpected places; a toupee, however, offers the wearer no excuse and the audience no excuse for excuse.

In fact there is a sense in which the category of impostor . . . can be defined as a person who makes it impossible for his audience to be tactful about observed misrepresentation.

At the level of a community or organization, such variations tend to gather together and form a local culture of storytelling. Members of any community or organization know how to tell stories and how to listen to them in a way that is socially acceptable in context. People who belong to more than one community learn how to switch from one context to another as they move between worlds.

Shirley Brice Heath gives an excellent example of local story sharing cultures in her work observing how people in two neighboring towns tell stories. She gives the towns the anonymous names of Trackton and Roadville. "People in both Trackton and Roadville spend a lot of time telling stories," she says, but "the patterns of interaction surrounding the actual telling of a story vary considerably."

Stories in Roadville seem pretty cut and dried:

Roadville story-tellers use formulaic openings. . . . Their stories maintain a strict chronicity, with direct discourse reported, and no explicit exposition of meaning or direct expression of evaluation of the behavior of the main character allowed. Stories end with a summary statement of a moral or a proverb, or a Biblical quotation.

But in Trackton things are more complex:

Trackton story-tellers use few formulaic openings, except the story-teller's own introduction of himself. . . . Stories maintain little chronicity; they move from event to event with numerous interspersions of evaluation of the behaviors of story characters and reiterations of the point of the story. Stories have no formulaic closing, but may have a reassertion of the strengths of the main character, which may be only the opening to yet another tale of adventure.



The two communities also differ in their opinions on what constitutes both a story and a true story:

The stories of Roadville are true to the facts of an event; they qualify exaggeration and hedge if they might seem to be veering from an accurate reporting of events. ... Roadville adults see their stories as didactic: the purpose of a story is to make a point—a point about the conventions of behavior.

But:

The content of Trackton's stories ... ranges widely, and there is "truth" only in the universals of human strength and persistence praised and illustrated in the tale. Fact is often hard to find, though it is usually the seed of the story. ... In Trackton, stories often have no point; they may go on as long as the audience enjoys the story-teller's entertainment. ... [Trackton] Stories do not teach lessons about proper behavior; they tell of individuals who excel by outwitting the rules of conventional behavior.

Brice Heath also found differences in telling rights:

In Roadville, a story must be invited or announced by someone other than the story-teller. Only certain community members are designated good story-tellers. .... Trackton story-tellers, from a young age, must be aggressive in inserting their stories into an on-going stream of discourse. Story-telling is highly competitive. Everyone in a conversation may want to tell a story, so only the most aggressive wins out.

Here is another example of local variations in story sharing cultures. Nigel Cross and Rhiannon Barker, in "The Sahel Oral History Project" (in *The Oral History Reader*), say of their work gathering stories:

Problems sometimes arose from men wanting to take over and disrupt interviews with women. Men would decide that they should act as mediators between their wives (or other female relatives) and the interviewer. In some cases it appeared that the woman was reassured by male encouragement; at other times the consequences were disastrous, with the woman feeling unable to talk about certain issues and the man asserting that he knew the woman's mind better than she.

And Hugo Slim (et al.) said (in "Ways of listening" in *The Oral History Reader*) of storytelling traditions:

Storytelling may also have a seasonal dimension. In Ladakh, for example, winter is the time for telling stories. It is considered an inappropriate activity during the busy summer months when the agricultural workload is at its peak, as a local saying makes clear: "As long as the earth is green, no tale should be told." It would be an ill-prepared and disappointed oral testimony project that set out to collect traditional stories in Ladakh during the summer!

These are all examples of local particularities in the way stories are told. The more you can learn about the way your community or organization shares stories, the better equipped you will be to help people within it share stories with each other.

## Ideas for supporting ongoing story sharing

In this section are some ideas for things I believe anyone can do to increase the strength and vitality of story sharing in their community or organization. I doubt all of these ideas will appeal to you, and some of them might seem like nothing but common sense; but I hope that at least one of the ideas will be useful to you.

Where do the ideas come from? Partly they come from my experiences observing story sharing in communities and organizations I have belonged to or consulted for. Partly they come from books and papers I've read in the area of organizational and community narrative. Partly they come from my experiences designing, building and using Rakontu, a research-prototype web application for online story sharing (of which more later).

### Why support story sharing?

Why does it matter if people in communities or organizations share stories? More importantly, why should *you* care about supporting story sharing in your community or organization? To put it simply, a community or organization with a strong tradition of story sharing is a better place to live and work. Now let me put forth some evidence to support that statement.

Alan Wilkins, in his seminal 1983 paper "Organizational Stories as Symbols that Control the Organization," spoke of two organizations he studied for his doctoral research. He called them Company A and Company Z. In Wilkins' phrasing:

- A Type A company features "highly specialized tasks, relatively high turnover, and contractual relations between employees."
- A Type Z company is characterized by "low task specialization, low turnover, and primary or wholistic relations between employees."

In other words, you and I would prefer to work at a Type Z company. The work would be interesting, people wouldn't flee the first chance they got, and we'd be treated like real people. Wilkins described the stories he collected:

I found significantly more "shared stories" (stories told by several people) in company Z than in company A.

This supports my claim that organizations in which sharing stories is customary and familiar are better places to work. I find his next finding problematical, however.

I also found that a significantly greater proportion (33%) of the stories told by participants in company Z were used to illustrate or legitimate the management philosophy than was the case at company A (14%). These stories were concrete symbols of how management applied their philosophy. Apparently, company Z executives . . . focus consistently on general themes which lower participants use as the theme for stories which they tell and pass on. The result at company Z is that stories are significant symbols of shared values and shared perspectives which participants must learn to function effectively.

That sounds a little *too* wonderful to match what I've seen.

Yiannis Gabriel also disagrees with Wilkins. In his book *Storytelling in Organizations*, he claims to have collected only a “tiny minority” of positive stories about management in the five companies in which he collected stories. He says, “The overwhelming majority are either neutral or oppositional.”

And while Gabriel agrees that story-sharing organizations are better places to work, he believes that condition is often achieved *despite* the best efforts of those in charge. Says he (again in *Storytelling in Organizations*):

We shall not be surprised if some of the richest narratives and ‘strongest’ cultures are found not in ‘excellent companies’ but in oppressive, exploitative, no-nonsense organizations. In such organizations, jokes, stories, and gossip are indispensable mechanisms of psychological survival. Having a laugh at the expense of an arrogant manager or an awkward customer is a standard way of defeating boredom, generating solidarity, and restoring justice, albeit in a symbolic way. . . .

Culture (including that part of culture that is expressed through stories) does not stand in a mechanical relation to these conditions [of hegemonic or egalitarian infrastructures], but, in different ways, it expresses them, opposes them, justifies them, and seeks to offer consolations and compensations for them.

What I think Gabriel is saying here—and I agree—is that a strong story-sharing culture does not magically create fairness and universally shared values. Instead, a strong story-sharing culture is *resilient* in the face of attempts to simplify its true nature, as a group of *people* with needs and ideas of their own, into something that can be easily controlled. Stories keep an organization or community *alive*—in all the messy, unpredictable, unmanageable, amazing ways *people* can be alive.

This still sounds pat, however. The scientist in me hates it when people trot out 30-year-old never-validated results to “prove” some truth “we all know.” Does greater story sharing lead to greater satisfaction and resilience? I’m not sure. I can’t find Wilkins’ original research paper (his doctoral dissertation), which might tell me how many stories he collected and how. So if you think this is flimsy evidence for such a claim, you’ll find me in agreement.

Also, correlation is not causation; maybe it works the other way around. Maybe if you live or work in a community or organization that’s a better place to be (for lots of reasons), you’re more likely to share stories. It’s hard to say.

Here’s something I *do* know. In the scores of PNI projects I’ve worked on, it has become a standard experience to see people getting excited about sharing more stories in their communities and organizations. If people want something, it must be something they see as worth having; so it must be something they believe will make their community or organization a better place to live and work. That’s the best evidence I can give you.

But don’t believe what I say either. Find out what things are like in *your* community or organization. (In the next section I give you an assessment test so you can do just that.)

Right now you might be saying to yourself: If all communities and organizations share stories, even when they are oppressed and controlled, maybe story sharing isn't something that needs fixing. Maybe it's fine the way it is. Why should I pay attention to it?

That's a valid question. My answer is to paraphrase George Orwell in *Animal Farm*. All communities and organizations share stories, but some share more stories than others, and some share stories in more healthy ways than others. Gabriel starts out his book *Storytelling in Organizations* by saying:

The argument that will emerge through the pages of this book is that storytelling is not dead in most organizations. Organizations do possess a living folklore, though this is not equally dense or equally vibrant in all of them.

Notice how Gabriel doesn't say that most organizations have dense and vibrant storytelling traditions. He says storytelling is "not dead." This must mean he expects a perception among his readers that storytelling *is* dead in most organizations.

My experiences helping people share stories have convinced me that in the majority of communities and organizations today people are hungry for greater and more healthy story sharing. Your community or organization might be the exception. You might already share stories as fully and vibrantly as you need to. But if you aren't sure of that, read on.

## A story-sharing assessment tool

In this section I've written up a little test you can use to assess the strength and vibrancy of story sharing in your community or organization. Here's how to use it.

1. Read over the test so you know what questions you are looking to answer.
2. Spend some time listening to people talk in regular conversations at various places in your community or organization. Sit in a café or lunchroom; walk around in the hallways of your town hall or lobby; hang around the edges of community events where people are coming and going. Sit in on some gatherings where people are working together on things: meetings, conferences, volunteer sessions, and so on. Listen to the stories people tell. Collect as many contextual details as you can about each story: who told it, when, where, how; how the audience responded; any negotiations between storyteller and audience; any evaluative comments; laughter, silence, scorn; and so on.
3. When you reach the point of saturation—that is, when what you hear becomes familiar and predictable—answer the questions in the test.
4. After you've done that, you can calculate your score.

If you are working in a team, do the same thing, only *do it separately*. Everyone should go out and listen to stories on their own. Don't talk about the stories you hear, and don't talk about your methods either. Keep your assessments independent so their variety will mean something when you assemble them later.

The 20 questions of this assessment test are in groups of five, under four headings: freedom, flow, knowledge, and unity.

## Narrative freedom: Are people free to tell stories?

A lack of narrative freedom means that people want to tell stories but can't. That doesn't necessarily mean the iron hand of authority is pressing them down; it could just mean that the culture itself is repressive or tight-lipped and prevents people from recounting their experiences freely. In any case, a lack of freedom to tell stories puts a damper on all the things story sharing can do for a community or organization.

### 1. Counter-stories

As you listened to people talk, how often did you hear a person respond to a story with another story that countered it in some way?

- a. Never. I never saw that.
- b. I saw it happen a few times.
- c. It happened sometimes, but not often.
- d. Most of the stories I heard either *had* counter-stories or *were* counter-stories.
- e. I'm not sure.

### 2. Authority

When someone who was obviously in authority was telling stories, how much time and attention did they get?

- a. Everyone practically took notes.
- b. People sat silently and listened.
- c. People were respectful, but *nobody* could derail the conversation for very long.
- d. I can't tell the difference between those storytellings and the others.
- e. I'm not sure.

### 3. Mistakes

How many times did you hear people tell stories about mistakes?

- a. Not even once.
- b. I heard a few.
- c. They came up now and then, but not often.
- d. I heard *lots* of mistake stories.
- e. I'm not sure.

### 4. Silencing

When somebody started telling a story and another person stopped them, *how* did they stop them? What sort of thing did they say?

- a. A warning, like "You could get in trouble for telling a story like that."
- b. A caution, like "I think it would be better if you stopped talking now."

- c. A request, like “Can we please not talk about that right now?”
- d. A joke or mild insult, like “Oh, they don’t want to hear about that old thing.”
- e. I’m not sure.

### **5. Conflict**

When somebody was telling a story and another person disagreed with the storyteller, *how* did they disagree? What sort of thing did they say?

- a. A demand, like “Nobody listen. This didn’t happen. Let’s leave.”
- b. A criticism, like “You should get your facts straight before you go around saying things like that.”
- c. A comment, like “That’s not what I heard.”
- d. A joke or mild insult, like “Yeah, right, you’re full of it.”
- e. I’m not sure.

### **Narrative flow: Do people tell stories?**

This assessment category is about whether people actually do tell stories when they are given the chance. It’s about whether story sharing is a comfortable and familiar habit, a part of daily life people participate in without noticing.

### **6. Reminders**

When you listened to people telling stories, did you ever hear people say “that reminds me of the time” and then tell a story in response? If they did, how many stories did you see getting told in a row?

- a. Nobody *ever* responded to a story by telling a story.
- b. I saw it happen several times.
- c. Quite often people swapped two or three stories before the exchange petered out.
- d. In just about every conversation, people kept swapping stories until the conversation ended or the subject of discussion changed.
- e. I’m not sure.

### **7. Retellings**

How often did you hear people pass on stories they heard from other people? What proportion of stories were told second-hand or third-hand?

- a. I never heard a story that was not first-hand.
- b. I heard second-hand stories a few times, but it was pretty rare.
- c. About a tenth of the stories were second-hand or third-hand.
- d. A quarter to half of the stories I heard were second-hand or third-hand.
- e. I’m not sure.

## 8. Folklore

In his book *Storytelling in Organizations*, Yiannis Gabriel says:

We shall refer to organizational folklore as a range of cultural practices and texts that fulfill three conditions: first, they are richly symbolic; secondly, they are not manufactured or legislated, but emerge spontaneously through informal interactions among participants; and, thirdly, they are not one-offs, but become part of traditions, emulated, reproduced, and re-enacted. Stories, proverbs, generalizations, nicknames, puns, jokes, rituals, slang, graffiti, cartoons, material objects of use or display, codes, gestures, uses of physical space, body language are among the many ingredients of organizational folklore.

Were the stories you heard richly symbolic? Were they informally spontaneous? Were they traditionally re-enacted? In other words, how much evidence did you find for narrative folklore in your community or organization?

- a. None. Nothing.
- b. Little and weak, but real.
- c. I definitely heard some stories that could be described as folklore. I wouldn't call it strong, but it was there.
- d. Based on this definition, I believe I can confidently describe the stories I heard as symbolic, emergent, and traditional folklore.
- e. I'm not sure.

## 9. Story types

Gabriel also lists five story types or "poetic modes" that describe stories he heard across five organizations: the comic story (about a fool), the tragic story (about an undeserving victim), the epic story (about a hero), the romantic story (about love or nostalgia), and the funny story (about a trickster or wizard). As you listened to people share stories in your community or organization, do you recall hearing any stories that resembled these types?

- a. I don't recall any stories that match those descriptions.
- b. I think I could list a few stories for one or two of those types.
- c. I'd say I could find one story for each type, if I look through my notes.
- d. I can give you three examples of each of those right now.
- e. I'm not sure.

## 10. Sensemaking

In your observations of people, you must have seen some people making *decisions* together, even if it was only about where to have lunch. Did you ever see people share stories as they prepared to make decisions?

- a. No. I never saw that happen.
- b. I saw one or two decisions in which stories were told.

- c. I saw this happen occasionally, but not often.
- d. When I saw people make a decision, they almost always told a few stories on the way to making it.
- e. I'm not sure.

## **Narrative knowledge: Do people know how to tell stories?**

This assessment category looks at your community or organization's collective knowledge about the way story sharing works in groups of people: what stories are for, how a story starts and ends, when stories can and can't be told, how to reframe a story to match an audience's expectations, and so on.

### **11. Habitation**

When people inhabit their stories, they talk about things that happened *to them*, and they talk about how *they themselves* felt about those things. They say things like:

Oh yes that was a good feeling. I woke up that Saturday morning, remembered what happened on Friday, and just smiled.

When people don't inhabit their stories, they talk about events in a distant way, as if the events had nothing to do with them. They say things like:

The stock price doubled that Friday. It was a big jump.

As you listened to people share stories in your community or organization, how often did it seem to you that people inhabited the stories they told?

- a. I don't think I heard a single story with anybody "in" it.
- b. I'd say people inhabited about a quarter of the stories I heard.
- c. Maybe about half the stories I heard were like that.
- d. You've just described every story I heard. Everyone was in their stories.
- e. I'm not sure.

### **12. Negotiation**

Look over the "Stories in conversation" section in Chapter 4 of *Working with Stories*. Then think about the stories you heard people tell. How lively were the negotiations you heard going on between storytellers and audiences? Were there reframings and adjustments? Did audiences participate in making these adjustments?

- a. I never saw *any* kind of negotiation take place between storyteller and audience.
- b. I saw a bit of negotiation a few times, but overall it was rare.
- c. People did negotiate over how stories should be told, but it was mild enough that I would never have noticed it happening if I hadn't read that section of the book.
- d. I heard no story told without ample and obvious negotiation by storyteller and audience.
- e. I'm not sure.



### 13. Co-telling

Did you ever see two or more people tell a story together, that is, share in its telling by contributing different parts or aspects to the story?

- a. No, I never saw that.
- b. I saw it happen a few times, but that was all.
- c. I'd say a tenth to a quarter of the stories were told in that way.
- d. At least half of the stories I heard were told by more than one person.
- e. I'm not sure.

### 14. Blunders

How many times did you hear story sharing blunders, in which someone started to tell the wrong story to the wrong people at the wrong time, and things got all awkward?

- a. Quite a few of the storytellings I observed turned out awkwardly because they were told in front of the wrong person or at the wrong time. People didn't seem to know when to tell about what and to whom.
- b. I saw this happen often enough to amount to a pattern, if a weak one.
- c. I saw it happen once or twice, but it was usually a person who was new or distracted or tired or something. It wasn't *systemic* or anything.
- d. I never saw that happen, not even once.
- e. I'm not sure.

### 15. Accounting

Alasdair MacIntyre (in *After Virtue*) speaks of stories providing *accountability*:

I am not only accountable, I am one who can always ask others for an account, who can put others to the question. I am part of their story, as they are part of mine. The narrative of any one life is part of an interlocking set of narratives. . . . Asking you what you did and why, saying what I did and why, pondering the differences between your account of what I did and my account of what I did, and *vice versa*, these are essential constituents of all but the very simplest and barest of narratives.

Did you see people account for their actions and choices by telling each other stories? Did you ever, for example, see someone tell a story whose message was essentially that the storyteller was a reasonable person who could be trusted? Or that someone else could or couldn't be trusted?

- a. No, I can't say that I *ever* saw anyone tell a story whose goal was to account for their actions or choices.
- b. I did see this happen once or twice.
- c. I'd say a quarter of the stories I heard had something to do with accounting for actions or choices.

- d. At least half of the stories I heard could be described as the “giving of accounts” of actions or choices.
- e. I’m not sure.

### **Narrative unity: Do people tell the same stories?**

The last assessment category has to do with whether stories are shared within the community or organization.

#### **16. Common stories**

If you were to create a list of stories that any randomly chosen member of your community or organization could be expected to know, stories that are common knowledge, how easy would your task be?

- a. I couldn’t possibly make such a list, because there isn’t one.
- b. Let me look through my notes. There might be a few stories like that.
- c. I’d have to double-check, but I think I could come up with some common stories.
- d. I can tell you the stories right now.
- e. I’m not sure.

#### **17. Sacred stories**

Now let’s pretend you are going to make another list, of stories any member would know and consider important to understanding the community or organization. Stephen Crites calls these *sacred* stories, and says of them (in his chapter “The Narrative Quality of Experience” in *Memory, Identity, Community*):

Such stories, and the symbolic worlds they project, are not like monuments that men behold, but like dwelling places. People live in them. ... People do not sit down on a cool afternoon and think themselves up a sacred story. They awaken to a sacred story, and their most significant mundane [everyday] stories are told in the effort, never fully successful, to articulate it. ... [A]ll a people’s mundane stories are implicit in its sacred story, and every mundane story takes soundings in the sacred story.

Based on what you’ve heard, how easy would it be to make a list of your community’s or organization’s sacred stories?

- a. I don’t think we have any sacred stories.
- b. I could probably find one or two, if I look carefully through what I’ve written down.
- c. Definitely there have been some stories I remember, but I’d have to skim through what I’ve written to be sure.
- d. I can tell you those stories right now.
- e. I’m not sure.

**18. Condensed stories**

One more time I'm going to ask you to (pretend to) make a list of commonly known stories. This time it's of compressed, condensed stories, in the form of proverbs and references, things people say that expand out to form detailed stories in the minds of their audience members. How easy would it be to make a list like that?

- a. I've got nothing.
- b. I may have heard a few of those. Let me check.
- c. Yes, some spring to mind. I'll see if they were repeated often enough to be considered common.
- d. Are you ready? Here they are.
- e. I'm not sure.

**19. Intermingled stories**

Here's Alasdair MacIntyre again, this time talking about intermingling:

[W]e are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please. In life, as both Aristotle and Engles noted, we are always under certain constraints. We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others. In my drama, perhaps, I am Hamlet or Iago or at least the swineherd who may yet become a prince, but to you I am only A Gentleman or at best Second Murderer, while you are my Polonius or my Gravedigger, but your own hero. Each of our dramas exerts constraints on each other's, making the whole different from the parts, but still dramatic. ... I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"

Did you hear stories in which you saw evidence of people playing subordinate parts in the dramas of others? Did you see people's dramas constrain the dramas of others? Were the stories people told intermingled?

- a. I have no idea what MacIntyre was talking about. The stories I heard were not connected to each other in any way.
- b. I can see where MacIntyre is coming from, but I didn't see much intermingling. Maybe a few times.
- c. Fifty-fifty. Some of the stories I heard were connected, but a lot weren't.
- d. MacIntyre describes what I heard perfectly. I don't think I ever heard a story that was not intermingled with other stories around it.
- e. I'm not sure.

## 20. *Storytelling culture*

Read about Shirley Brice Heath's groundbreaking study of local differences in the section that begins on page 127. Based on what you have heard in *your* community or organization, how easily could you write a description of its local storytelling culture like Brice Heath did for Trackton and Roadville?

- a. I couldn't begin to describe our "local storytelling culture" because there isn't one.
- b. I could write a paragraph or two about some things I've seen, but I haven't really seen anything coherent enough to describe in depth.
- c. Yes, I could write something. It would be only a few pages long, but I could describe the way we generally share stories.
- d. I could write a book on our local storytelling culture, *and* it would be a best-seller.
- e. I'm not sure.

## Scoring your test results

After you've answered all of these questions, you can calculate your story-sharing score. But first, count how many "e" answers you entered. If you have more than five (out of 20), go back and listen to some more stories, then reconsider the questions you answered "I'm not sure." Keep doing that until you have fewer than five questions with that answer. If you are working in a group, keep sending people out again until everyone has at least 15 not-unsure answers.

But remember, you are answering these questions based on your considered opinion(s). This is not a scientific measurement, and you can't prove anything by doing it. It's just an aid to thought. So before you go out and spend hours more listening to stories, look to see if you have an intuitive response to each question. That's all you need.

Once you have fewer than five "e" answers, start adding up numbers.

- For every "a" answer, add zero to your total.
- For every "b" answer, add one.
- For every "c" answer, add two.
- For every "d" answer, add three.
- Any remaining "e" answers should also get a zero.

The highest possible score should be three for each of the 20 questions, or 60.

- If your score is 0-20, your community or organization has an absent, weak, or dysfunctional story-sharing culture.
- If your score is 20-40, your community or organization has a moderately present and functional story sharing culture, but it could be better.
- If your score is 40-60, your community or organization has a strong and vital story sharing culture.

If you are working as a team, you have three options:

1. Calculate each person's total score separately, then compare them.
2. Tell each other how you answered each question, decide together on a single answer, then calculate a single total score.
3. Try it both ways and compare the results.

In addition to your total score, you can calculate scores for each of the four areas of the test (freedom, flow, knowledge, unity), then talk about whether and how you might want to invest some time and energy to improve different aspects of story sharing.

## Building your own skills

The last part of Terrence Garguilo's book *The Strategic Use of Stories in Organizational Communication and Learning* presents a comprehensive guide to improving your own story-sharing skills. Terrence's "Competency Map" can help you assess and improve your skills in the areas of story eliciting, listening, observing, indexing, synthesizing, reflecting, selecting, telling, and modeling. Improving your own skills is not the same thing as making your community or organization a more story-sharing place; but spreading more awareness and skills about story sharing can only be a good thing.

## Taking action

The next two sections will give you some ideas for helping your community or organization create and preserve a strong, vital culture of story sharing.

# Supporting in-person story sharing

Supporting story sharing differs quite a lot depending on whether people are speaking in person or through mediating words and images. When stories are told face to face, they exist entirely as events, verbs. After a storytelling event has ended, no trace of the story remains except in the memories of those who participated in the event.

When a story is told through mediating words and images, asynchronously (not at the same time), a story-as-noun comes into existence. This is both a benefit and a burden.

- It's a benefit because the original storyteller and audience, as well as others who did not participate in the event, can come back to noun-stories to explore and compare.
- It's a burden because anyone who creates a lot of noun-stories has the task of keeping them in order so that their utility remains intact over time. You could think of it as like the difference between talking to somebody and leaving them lots of little notes. You can look at the notes later, but you need somewhere to put them.

Because these ways of supporting story sharing are so different, I've written two different sections to cover them. This section covers ideas for supporting face-to-face story sharing, while the next considers story sharing through a mediating device.

## Create waves of story sharing

A PNI project is a wave that moves through a community or organization, creating temporary change for the sake of permanent improvement. You can follow up a PNI project with wavelets—mini-projects that fit within an hour or take place over weeks but at a very low intensity. Here are a few ideas for setting up low-key, ongoing wavelets of story sharing.

- Hold monthly or weekly gatherings where people share stories about topics important to them. Ask people to submit topics they'd like to explore. Make it like a book club, only instead of talking about a book, people talk about their experiences.
- Write a page of instructions for holding a mini-PNI project (choose a topic; share some stories; do a simple sensemaking task; discuss, reflect). Distribute the instructions in places where people gather. Put your contact information on the bottom of the sheet so interested people can ask for help.
- Write a page of instructions for setting up regular story sharing gatherings. Encourage people to contact you if they'd like help supporting story sharing in their group.
- Display some of the stories you collected in your project on a wall in a place where people gather. Change the stories once a week or month. Under the stories, post a telephone number people can call or a web link people can follow to add more stories to the collection. Make sure some newly submitted stories make it up onto the wall so people can see that somebody is listening.

Those are just a few ideas. There are many ways to create story sharing wavelets, at many levels of length and intensity, after the wave of a PNI project has run its course.

## Promote circular story sharing

Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, in their book *The Circle Way*, make the point that when people sit in a circle, physically or metaphorically, they can achieve more mutually agreeable solutions than when they are arranged in other configurations. Say Baldwin and Linnea:

Once upon a time, fire led our ancestors into the circle. It made sense to put the fire in the center and gather around it. A circle defined physical space by creating a rim with a common source of sustenance lighting up the center. These ancestors needed the circle for survival—food, warmth, defense—and they discovered that the circle could help design social order. . . .

It is the nature of circle to invite in, to provide both access and boundaries, to provide a participatory process, to set social expectations, and to absorb diverse, even opposing, views through the alchemy of a symbolic central “fire.”

When I read this part of Baldwin's and Linnea's book, I was struck by the fact that every one of these things—inviting in, providing access and boundaries, creating a participatory process, setting social expectations, absorbing diverse views—is also a function of story sharing. You couldn't ask for a better match. Clearly the circle and the story are related. (I'm sure Baldwin and Linnea know this, because at least Baldwin has other books specifically about story sharing, such as *Storycatcher*.)

## ***Circles and triangles***

Here's where the problem comes in. If you've just begun to learn about stories, a circle may not be the first shape that comes to mind. If I asked you to give me an archetypal image of someone telling a story, you might more readily think of a *stage* than a circle. After all, storytelling is a performance, isn't it? Baldwin and Linnea call a performance sort of arrangement a *triangle*: one person speaks while the others listen.

So which is it? Is storytelling a circle or a triangle? It's both, but which shape *dominates* depends on context. When professional storytellers speak to professional audiences, the triangular performance of storytelling anchors itself in the storyteller and sweeps round and round the circle like the hand of a clock, and the story flows uniformly outward. An expert storyteller watches the audience and is keen to pick up on reactions, but the audience generally does not initiate interactions. They know their place, and they keep it.

When people speak among themselves, however, especially if they know each other well, the storytelling triangle may be *connected* more to one person than to others, but it could never be seen as *anchored* to any one person. Sometimes it dances around the circle, appearing, disappearing, and reappearing in new configurations as storyteller and audience merge, separate, collaborate, and even switch places. In everyday storytelling, the triangle comes and goes, but the circle remains.

## ***The fading of the circle***

But everyday storytelling is not the same as it once was. Professional storytelling in the form of theatre has been with us for thousands of years, and novels for hundreds, but those forms of storytelling involved people speaking to people face to face. Early novels were usually read out loud to small groups of family and friends rather than alone.

The way stories come to us today, in television and in movies, is unprecedented. Now we interface directly with the stories, and the storytellers are pushed to the side, barely noticeable in the credits at the end of the show. The ubiquity and impersonality of this experience has a dampening effect on story sharing in many communities and organizations. Not only is our time and attention taken up by it, but our own story sharing seems boring and clumsy by contrast. Even the layout of our living rooms has changed from the circle of sharing to the triangle of performance.

If you want to support story sharing in your community or organization, you might think you should help people perfect their storytelling skills so they can create memorable impressions in the minds of their audiences. The problem with this approach is that *any* support for triangular storytelling drains energy away from circular story sharing.

Why does this happen? Because *we all live in the triangle already*. We are all professional audiences, and we know our places. Most of us live on a steady diet of commercially prepared, perfectly triangular stories. Things might have been different 100 years ago, but today you can't support circular story sharing without guarding *against* triangular storytelling.

### ***Bringing the circle back***

What can you do to revive the circle of story sharing in your community or organization? Watch the words you use, and watch what you say and do as you share stories. For example:

- Don't say "thank you" after someone tells a story. Why? Because people thank people for *things*. If you met someone on the street and said, "How are you today?" and they said, "I'm all right, can't complain," would you say "Thank you!" in response? Of course you wouldn't. That would be ridiculous, because they didn't give you anything. They *talked* to you. Don't say "thank you" when someone tells you a story either.
- Don't stand up when you tell a story. If you stand and everyone else sits, you've created a triangular story experience. Since you did that, everyone else will too, and the story sharing will shift in the direction of a performative triangle.
- Don't *rate* the stories you hear. Don't say, "That's the best story I've heard today." Instead, continue the conversation. Say something like, "So you *never* went back, huh? Did you ever regret that decision?" Or tell a story of your own in response. Put your shoulder to the wheel of story sharing and keep it rolling along.

Many little hints and nudges like these can add up to strengthen circular story sharing and weaken triangular storytelling.

### **Support permission for story sharing**

Permission works differently in communities and organizations. In a community, a person might or might not have permission to tell a specific story in a specific context, but people expect to be able to share stories *in general* with their friends, neighbors, and family members. It's a basic human right.

In organizations, the picture is different. Sharing stories is an activity many employees see as foreign to the work environment. You can see this when people share a story, then say something like, "Well, we'd better get back to work." The fact that people say this even when the story sharing has been obviously useful—has been more work than the work they have to get back to—shows that people in most organizations don't fully understand the benefits of story sharing.

People often story sharing "slack time" and try to reduce it so they can be more productive. But if you call it "peer learning and mutual support"—because that's what it is—its value becomes more apparent. If your organization is already willing to invest in such things as training, team-building, and collaborative learning, you will be surprised by the benefits you can achieve by simply giving people the time, space, and permission they need to share stories about their work.

Of course, even if people are *officially* permitted to share stories, they might not do it because they think it *looks* unproductive or unprofessional. One way to convince your managers, co-workers, or employees that sharing stories can count as work is by telling stories about the benefits of story sharing. You can develop a stock of stories about how story sharing has helped groups work smarter and faster. If you don't have any stories like



that to tell, ask around. Ask some friends if they've ever got a new idea or solved a tricky problem because of a story they heard. When you hear a good one, pass it on.

## Support safety in story sharing

Even though sharing stories has great power to make your community or organization a better place to live and work, it comes with its own dangers. Each community or organization arrives at its own complex set of unwritten rules for story sharing. The purpose of the rules is to mitigate the dangers of story sharing.

On page [127](#) I described Shirley Brice Heath's study of two story-sharing cultures and how what was acceptable in one place was taboo in the other. Your community or organization has its own story-sharing culture, and you can carry out your own study of it. Watch people as they tell stories until you can describe your culture as Brice Heath did for the cultures she studied. You are not likely to be able to *change* your story-sharing culture, but the more you know about it, the more you will be able to help people share stories within it.

# Supporting online story sharing

My ideas about online story sharing come primarily from my experiences building and using Rakontu, a prototype web application for story sharing and sensemaking in small groups. I got the idea for Rakontu in 1999, and I managed to build and test a first "ugly" prototype of it in 2009.

To give you an idea of why I wanted to build Rakontu ("tell me a story" in Esperanto), I'll show you the "elevator pitch" I wrote to explain it to people.

## The Rakontu elevator pitch

Since 1999, I have been consulting on narrative research projects for organizations and communities. I help people collect stories and use them to explore issues, fix problems, and make decisions. I get paid to do this. I'm good at it.

I have developed robust methods and useful tools that help my clients gain transformative insights from collected stories. I have been proud of my work helping people (who can pay for my help) make better decisions (that usually benefit everyone). But I am not satisfied.

If the true home of stories is in the conversations and memories of the people who told them, I have watched tens of thousands of stories leave home. I have seen hundreds of transformative insights leave home. *Rakontu is home*. I want to help those who tell the stories use their stories to build what they need.

Also, while I have been helping clients, I have been watching storytelling on the internet. And this is what I see. The stories in my projects for clients are connected in webs. They jump into patterns and reveal insights. But the stories I see people sharing online are piled in heaps. They lie still and obscure insights.

When stories lie in heaps, this happens	When stories form webs, this happens
<p>Hmm, which stories should I read?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Previous page.</li> <li>• You are now viewing stories 50-75 of 8334 stories.</li> <li>• Next page.</li> </ul>	<p>Hmm, which stories should I read?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who should tell them? A patient? Family member? Doctor?</li> <li>• What stages should they cover? Diagnosed? Coping? Worsening? Healing?</li> <li>• How common should they be? Everyday? Occasional? Rare?</li> <li>• Why should they have been told? To warn? Defend? Explain? Suggest? Reassure?</li> </ul>
<p>Thank you for your success story!</p> <p>(Later) Oh yeah, I think somebody mentioned an experience that might help you understand that. It was last year, maybe. If you search, you <i>might</i> find it—now who said it? Can't remember, sorry.</p>	<p>Now that you have read this story, what would you like to do next?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell your own version of what happened in it?</li> <li>• Tell a story it reminds you of?</li> <li>• Find stories it reminded other people of?</li> <li>• Answer some questions about how you see it?</li> <li>• Annotate it with a comment or thought?</li> <li>• Use it in a collage you are building?</li> <li>• See how it has been used by others?</li> </ul>
<p>I posted a story last week about my arthritis and it only got five hits. Somebody rated it "lame." I feel like nobody cares.</p>	<p>Today we will be talking about arthritis, so we need to find lots of stories we can work with to explore how we can help our older people as they get around the town. Let's pull this together and make it work for everybody.</p>

What does Rakontu do? It helps small groups share stories and work with their stories to achieve common goals. Let's go through those one at a time.

- *Rakontu helps*, not "allows" or "lets." Why? Because people tell stories already. Rakontu augments, not supplants, storytelling.
- *Small groups*, not everybody you ever met. Why? Because small groups need a better internet.

- *Share stories*, not perform or perfect. Why? Because there is already lots of software for that. (And we use it more than is good for us already.)
- *Working with stories* means using proven methods of collective narrative sensemaking to think better together. Why? Because it works.
- *Achieving common goals* means doing something together. Exploring an issue, fixing a problem, making a decision, building something. Why? Because people need to do things like that.

Why build story-sharing software? Isn't the fact that people spend so much time on the computer part of the problem? Why make it worse?

- To recover some of what we have lost. In many communities today, we don't spend enough unstructured time together to build connected webs of story and meaning the way we once did. You could say we need online story-sharing software because we are online, not because we share stories.
- To remember together. People have been recording stories in words and images for millennia. Today we use computers to augment memory at many scales, from personal to local to global. Communities can use Rakontu to understand the past in order to negotiate the present and plan for the future.
- To reskill society. The best tools don't just work for you; they teach you how to work. Tools for working with stories can embody knowledge about working with stories in the modern world. Groups who use Rakontu can improve their ability to work with their stories both with the computer and without it.
- To help mediate differences. Stories are ancient devices of ritualistic mediation. We say, "I am going to tell you a story. I am not going to tell you what you should believe. I am going to tell you what has happened to me." We use rituals to negotiate storytelling: special places and times, accepted means of asking for the safety to speak freely about our experiences. Well-designed software can support these rituals.

What is Rakontu about? What makes it unique? What is its approach to supporting online story sharing?

- Rakontu is about sharing over performing. The web is a grand marketplace for self-expression and self-promotion. That's fine. But I am interested in supporting story sharing that leads to conflict resolution, perspective-taking, mutual learning, and effective decision making for strong communities.
- Rakontu is about intertwined conversation and memory. Stories are both verbs and nouns. Conversation requires a café of lively discussion, where we ask: What is going on here? Memory requires a well-organized library, where we ask: What is in here? For the best story sharing, café and library should mix easily, often, and freely.
- Rakontu is about providing diverse motivations to contribute. [Here I had a diagram of user roles in Rakontu, whose explanation you will see below.]

At the end of the elevator pitch I included some screen mockups of what I wanted to build:

- A café screen, which showed a timeline of recent activity, with a vertical axis that spanned the things people could do on the site: create a topic for discussion, tell a story, answer questions about (or make a comment on) a story, create or answer a poll (about, or with, stories), tag a story, link stories together, and create story collages.
- A library screen, which people could use to browse through the stories based on answers to questions, links, tags, poll results, or searches.
- Special screens for people who take on roles in the community, such as a guide or curator or manager. (More on these later.)
- A pattern exploration screen, with graphs people could explore to discover patterns in the story collection.
- A workshop screen, which people could use to do real-time group sensemaking.

## Building and testing Rakontu

I had a budget of four half-time months to work on Rakontu. I decided to build an “ugly” text-based prototype so I could spend some time testing it. About 40 people volunteered to test Rakontu with me (thank you people!), and we kept it going for a few months before I had to close down the project and get back to paid consulting work.

What did I build? The café view, the question-answering system, the tagging and linking systems, and a limited amount of collage-building support. That wasn’t much, but even so, I learned a lot from building and testing it. I wrote a long lessons-learned document and a shorter summary, which I called “Steal These Ideas.” What follows is that summary, mostly as I wrote it then, but with some added reflections as I look back on it 16 years later.

## Steal these ideas

Recently I spent some time building an open-source web application for story sharing and sensemaking in small groups. It’s called Rakontu. This was a dream that began in 1999 and has been growing ever since. I used up years of savings to do it, and I was able to build far less than I would like to build, but I had a grand time and I’m glad I did it.

In my Rakontu lessons-learned document, I said that I’m more interested in the *ideas* from Rakontu moving on than the actual *software* surviving. Since then a few people have asked me to elaborate on that statement. So I’ve reviewed and thought, and I’ve come up with some advice to pass on to anyone who would like to incorporate ideas from Rakontu into their own efforts to support online story sharing.

### ***Support sharing over performing***

One of the biggest challenges in supporting online story sharing today is countering the performance problem. The web has developed into a grand marketplace for self-expression and self-promotion, and people shape their behavior on it accordingly.

There is nothing wrong with self-expression, and surely all storytelling contains an element of performance. But I’m interested in supporting the kind of storytelling that leads to conflict resolution, perspective-taking, mutual learning, strong communities, and effective decision

making. I call this story *sharing* to distinguish it from storytelling, in which performance is a larger force.

After spending some time observing storytelling and story sharing on the internet, I developed a kind of loose metric for story sharing. I look at the comments posted in response to told stories, and I divide the number of comments that express gratitude or support (thanks, helpful, sympathy), including those that ask respectfully curious follow-up questions, by the number of comments that express ratings or rankings of stories as performances (amazing, well put, ridiculous).

From this I get a sharing quotient, or how much story sharing is going on relative to performance.

$$\text{Sharing quotient} = \frac{\text{gratitude} + \text{support} + \text{respectful curiosity}}{\text{performance ranking}}$$

The highest sharing quotients I've seen on the web have not been in any of these sites:

- the “tell us your story” collection sites
- the “I’ve got a secret” confession sites
- the “budding novelist” self-expression sites
- the “I just had sushi for lunch” updating sites

They have been in the still, quiet pools where long-term, somewhat coherent social groups meet, and in which people help each other through difficult conditions and decisions.

The interactions in such high-sharing-quotient settings have a few consistent components.

- They are repeated many hundreds or thousands of times over periods of years as trust gradually accumulates.
- They are comparatively rich in content and context.
- They are goal-oriented.

Sites about everything or nothing, or about connecting for no reason except to connect, seem to lead to more story performing and less story sharing. The best story sharing seems to happen, at least on the web, *when people know why they are talking*.

How did Rakontu support this, and how well did it succeed? To begin with, I was not able to address this issue well enough to find out that much about it. Because of time constraints, I had to make an “ugly” version of Rakontu first. It had almost no hover-drag-type interactivity and no support for the near-conversational elements I think would work best, like facilitated story-sharing sessions using voice and chat, with story capture and question answering afterward. I was forced to use a standard web form, which was pretty much guaranteed to imply performance.

I could find no way around this, and the outcome was predictable: even I, the staunch advocate of natural story sharing, performed most horribly. I found myself perfecting my prose on a daily basis. So any future efforts in this direction should make at least some

attempt to get past the fill-in-a-box form of story sharing, in any way possible. In some ways I wish I had not even tried to build a share-your-story form but had helped people draw stories out of chat sessions. It might have been a better test of the ideas.

My other attempt to keep story sharing natural was to reduce performance rating by using a utility-based rating system. This failed miserably. The fact that I myself was the greatest failure at this is clear evidence that it could not work, because I was strongly motivated not to succumb to performance storytelling (and I knew it when I was doing it).

I've now realized that if you set up a rating scale, it doesn't matter what you call it. Your pitiful protests that it is all about utility, not popularity or quality, are simply lost in the massive explosion of instincts you have invoked. People evaluate everything, every minute of every day. It is what keeps us alive, and we can't stop doing it. It doesn't matter what you *say* about evaluating. It only matters if people *can* evaluate things and can see the evaluations of others.

So, if I were to try this again, I'd keep the evaluation for utility, but I would remove it from view. I'd pull it deep down into the plumbing of the system and place it only in the questions about stories, which provide the same utilitarian mining capability but without the visibility. If you want to use these ideas, my suggestion is to build in utility tagging (through questions) but build *out* visible ranking and popularity.

Even the reputation-building system I put into Rakontu didn't work out that well, because it became another system of ranking. People could see who posted the most stories and comments and so on, and that became another form of evaluation.

Don't get me wrong: for some online communities, doing some things, reputation and ranking are essential elements. They work well when people are sharing opinions and building encyclopedias. But for story sharing, ratings cause stories to compete. And when stories compete, the experiences in them do not accumulate into useful aggregations. Using a goal-oriented story-sharing site is more like *building* an Olympic stadium than using one. Everyone succeeds or fails together.

### ***Build a café in a library or a library in a café***

Story sharing involves both verbs (storytelling events) and nouns (stories). To share stories online, people need a café (where they can meet and recount their experiences) and a library (where they can browse through previously recounted experiences).

When I first started working on Rakontu, I had a hunch that it would be important to support both of these aspects of story sharing, but I didn't realize how important it would be to support transitions and connections between them. For example, I had originally thought of the two aspects as rooms with doors between them. But after a while I realized that *there should be no wall between them to have doors in*. The entire space should be multiple-use. The café tables should sit among the library shelves, and vice versa.

In fact, I'll be so bold as to say that any online story-sharing platform in which the telling and the keeping of stories are not intermingled will not succeed. How do I know this? I don't. Not for a fact. It's an intuition based on years of watching people tell stories in person, in email, on the web, and now (for a short time) in Rakontu.

When people are engaged in off-line (formerly called “normal”) conversation, they are the cafés and the libraries in which stories live, and stories move fluidly from telling to remembering to retelling. When an old woman remembers a story she heard in 1923 and tells it to her great-grandchild, she doesn't type search terms into a web form or traverse a taxonomy tree. The passage of the story from memory to event is effortless and natural.

But in the online world, the wall between event and memory is high and strong. It's between your starred and recent emails and the rest of your massive “inbox”; between the “latest activity” and other posts in your discussion groups; between the top of your social media “feed” and the stuff you forgot about last month; between the content and the context of Wikipedia articles. These walls reduce the capacity of the collective narrative ecology to churn its content, which is critical to useful story sharing.

I knew about this duality of event and memory before I created Rakontu. Indeed, addressing it was part of my design from the beginning. In my 1999 presentation on the topic, I included this quote from a 1993 paper by Larry Masinter and Erik Ostrom, which still applies.

The primary technology elements proposed for funding in the development of electronic libraries are in the areas of input (scanning, character recognition), retrieval, and presentation. The entire technology emphasis is on collecting material and making it available to individuals.

However, a library is more than just a pile of books. Libraries are also social spaces. Treating the ‘electronic library of the future’ as an information repository ignores many of the roles played by current institutions, where library users interact with their friends, colleagues, and professionals to [find] material that is relevant for them.

A story sharing site cannot be just a pile of stories, but that is what I see happening on most sites that say they are for story sharing. What I see on the internet is either stories entirely absorbed in events and never transferred to memory, or stories stacked up in memory and never returned to the world of events. This is one of the central ideas of Rakontu. It should be stolen as widely as possible.

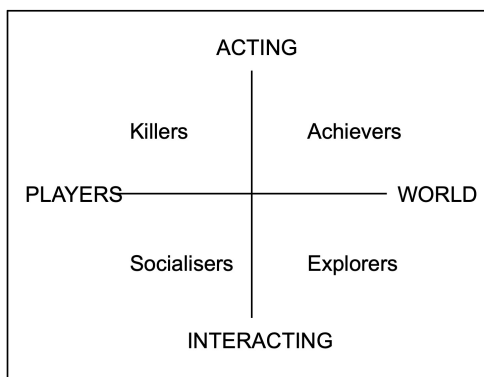
One of the ways I tried to support intermingled event and memory in Rakontu was in my creation of *roles* as packages of commitment.

I stole this idea from a famous 1996 paper by Richard Bartle (“Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades”). The paper was about what people do in multi-user dungeons (MUDs), and it presents a framework to explain motivations of MUD users.

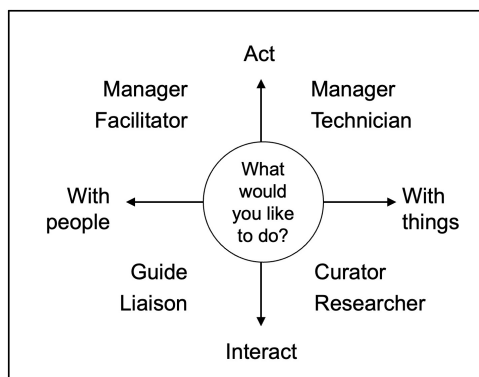
The vertical dimension of Bartle's diagram compares *acting* (changing something) with *interacting* (coming into contact with something without changing it). The horizontal dimension compares a social focus (players) with an environmental focus (the world).

When I first encountered this diagram in 1999, I got very excited about how it related to the roles people might take on in a story-sharing environment. MUDs and story-sharing sites have much in common, because people are both building something and living in it. (This also reminds me of my favorite quote from Stephen Crites, that people live *with*

mundane stories and *in* sacred stories.) So Bartle's framework has unique applicability for this purpose.



From Bartle's 1996 paper



Roles in Rakontu

The roles I designed for Rakontu deliberately populate Bartle's spaces.

- Facilitators are the—well, let's call them the social achievers—who run story-sharing sessions and sensemaking workshops, acting to shape story sharing among people.
- Technicians are achievers who keep the site running smoothly.
- Managers straddle both upper-quadrant roles, helping to shape the story exchange and configuring the story sharing environment.
- Guides are the socializers of Rakontu, answering questions, helping people get started, leading tours. Liaisons bridge online and physical worlds, interacting with people across the digital divide.
- Curators and researchers are the explorers of Rakontu, mining the collection for stories, finding patterns, fixing tags, keeping the story museum in order.

Even though I was the only one who used the roles in Rakontu (the other participants who took on roles didn't actually use them much), I did feel that they matched the activities I carried out while using the software—the hats I put on, if you will. They helped me set a frame for whatever I was doing in the system as I approached it each time, whether it was cleaning up tags, answering questions, adding collected stories in batches, or encouraging people to share stories. So I think this is an idea worth keeping and using.

Technologically, supporting a library and a café at the same time proved to be a challenge. One of my strongest technology lessons was that I spent way too much time reinventing wheels related to social media. I had to implement many things that already exist in many web platforms, such as groups, permissions, private messaging, notification, management control, removing offensive material and spam, and so on. It would have been better to start with a platform that already supported social media interactions.

However, that is only the café part of the equation. Few social media solutions provide much support for library functions. For that you need semantic indexing, taxonomy or



folksonomy, simple and advanced search, typed linking, and all the other things that make a library work.

I have yet to find a web platform that combines the café and the library in equal proportions. Everything I see favors one strongly over the other. Wikis and other collaborative creation software favor the library; social media favors the café. In any system you choose as a foundation you will most likely need to reinvent some of the wheels of the other system.

My advice is to think about your strengths: what do you know best? If a café is something you can build in your sleep, look around for pre-built library components. If your experience is in library building, see what you can find to complement it in café packages. I'm used to library building myself, which is probably why the café building parts were onerous for me.

### ***Embody knowledge about narrative***

One of my favorite discoveries about story sharing is that people vary in whether they tell stories and in whether they *think* they tell stories. Another dimension to the variation is whether people understand why (or that) story sharing matters. I learned before I started Rakontu not to explain any of that, or at least not to make explanations into barriers. Systems that force people to understand something before they can enter them are empty places. The better solution is to shape the experience itself so that it *embodies* knowledge about stories and story sharing. The best tools teach you how to use them.

Probably the best successes of Rakontu were in this area. For example, one thing that seemed to work well was Rakontu's system of typed, annotated links between stories. In Rakontu, when someone saw a topic, they could respond to it with a story, and that link, and their annotated reason for it, was kept and could be browsed and searched. When someone read a story, they could tell another version of the events it recounted, tell another story it reminded them of, or link it to another story for any (annotated) reason.

As we built a base of stories using Rakontu, I found these links an essential tool for "getting around" in the library we were building. I often found myself clicking through the web of connections among stories to follow a sort of thought-path around. I can see how this sort of web-building could be much more powerful as a story collection grows and its interlinkings intensify.

By the way, I got this web-building idea from Roger Schank's work on case-based expert knowledge databases. More specifically, I got it from an interesting essay by Jorn Barger, who worked on Schank's team and revealed in his essay how the story databases were constructed. When I read this sentence back in 1999:

All the links from story to story in the Ask-Tom casebase had to be 'hand-crafted' or hardwired, which ultimately meant looking at every possible pair of clips and asking whether either would make an interesting followup to the other, and which of the eight CAC-links it made most sense under.

I realized that the human creation of such typed links (which these researchers found a burdensome task and seemed embarrassed to admit was being done by clerical help) was a *perfect* sensemaking activity for people telling each other stories. Building a web of typed, annotated links helps people understand their stories as they tell them, *and it*

creates something they can use later to explore the same issues when they have a need for them. That idea is a definite “keeper” out of the Rakontu design.

### ***Support collective sensemaking***

Rakontu’s question-asking system also worked out very well. When anyone told a story in Rakontu, and when anyone read a story, they were presented with several questions that captured their interpretation of it. For example, they were asked:

- How do you feel about this story? (e.g., happy, sad, frustrated, relieved, interested, bored, hopeful, hopeless)
- Why do you think it was told? (e.g., to inform, education, explain, entertain)
- To whom did it happen? (e.g., first-hand, second-hand, rumor)
- How long will you remember it? (e.g., a few minutes, a while, the rest of my life)

Some stories only collected one set of answers, but stories could collect several sets of answers that represented varied interpretations. This question-answering mechanism had several benefits to the group. It gave people a way to voice their opinions about stories, and those opinions could accumulate into useful patterns. Thus offending stories did not require a power structure to remove (though Rakontu had one anyway) because they could be dragged down by the power of collective voice.

The reason I wanted to try this idea was because in natural story sharing, offensive stories can never be “deleted” from the memory of people in a community. Instead, they are weighed down with so many annotations that they sink into oblivion. If anyone attempts to dredge up an offensive story again, it is immediately loaded with more annotations and sinks again. This was a closer analogue to what should and does happen to damaging stories “in the wild,” and I think it was effective. Only a small number of people answered these questions in our test of Rakontu, but even in that tiny test, I did notice differences in answers between storytellers and story readers in ways that (I think) might have been useful if they had accumulated further.

### ***Build flexible connections***

One useful component of Rakontu’s question-asking system was its flexibility. Administrators of Rakontu sites could carefully modify existing answers to questions about stories. For example, if they saw that people had rarely chosen the answer “stymied” but often choose “frustrated,” they could lump the two similar answers together in the live data. I wanted to try out this idea because I thought it might be difficult for groups (or administrators) to anticipate how the answer sets they started out with would work in practice.

As the administrator of our test Rakontu, I merged some similar answers and added some new answers suggested by frequent fill-in texts. It did seem to me that it helped everyone “get around in the stories” better. I made these decisions on my own because it was my project (and nobody else wanted to do it). But in a real use of Rakontu, I imagine such changes would be announced, debated, and accepted by the community before being made. I would want to research the best ways to support such negotiations if I ever had a chance to work on these ideas again.

Tagging is another way to create a flexible annotation system. Rakontu had tagging. I loved that aspect of it, and I used it often. But I was also the only one who tagged stories. I was not the only one who answered the questions. It seemed to me that people saw tags as tasks and questions as conversations. That made them more useful, I thought.

### ***Build for commitment***

In the 1999 presentation in which I first explained the idea behind Rakontu, I said, “Stories thrive in groups of people in frequent and persistent contact in a shared culture.”

I know now that stories also thrive in other environments. They thrive in the vast market-places in which people promote and choose products and services. And they thrive in the shifting sands of coalition building as people engage in discussion and debate.

Looking back, I *should* have said, “*The types of stories I am most interested in supporting* thrive in groups of people in frequent and persistent contact in a shared culture.” I’m still interested in supporting those stories, and I still think they live in the places where small groups of people come together often. That’s why I built Rakontu for small groups of people who already know each other: because it’s where the stories I like best, the gear-turning, change-making, life-improving stories, thrive.

In my opinion, the internet has been wonderful for people who want to find and meet other people, and it has been wonderful for people who want to promote causes and build coalitions. But it has done a dismal job of helping people who already know each other do anything useful together. From what I’ve seen, Margaret Mead’s small groups of thoughtful, committed citizens trying to change the world are still waiting for their internet.

In its brief testing period, Rakontu worked best when it was being used by people who knew each other. The most rewarding interactions I had on it, for example, were with a colleague I already knew. The strangers among us didn’t interact as often, and when we did all interact, it was in a high-school-dance way in which most of us watched while a few of us danced. This wasn’t a surprise; it is only what happens in all groups. The same thing happens in online discussion groups, which may be quiet for months before the interesting conversations start to happen.

Still, from what I saw, I think it might be harder to ramp up online story sharing than it is to ramp up free-form discussions. If I ever worked on Rakontu again, I’d want to work on ways to help groups “seed” their Rakontu sites—initially, periodically, or both—with some stories they shared during facilitated real-time gatherings, in-person or online.

### ***Build roundabout paths***

People often say that supporting knowledge sharing means helping people find the right information at the right time. But it’s not always that way with story sharing. There are times when it is more important to surprise and even provoke people with stories than it is to get them exactly what they are looking for.

Here's a fictional example of a story collection that made that point brilliantly way back in 1857. It is from George Eliot's novelette *Janet's Repentance*.

Mrs. Linnet had become a reader of religious books since Mr. Tryan's advent, and as she was in the habit of confining her perusal to the purely secular portions, which bore a very small proportion to the whole, she could make rapid progress through a large number of volumes. On taking up the biography of a celebrated preacher, she immediately turned to the end to see what disease he died of; and if his legs swelled, as her own occasionally did, she felt a stronger interest in ascertaining any earlier facts in the history of the dropsical divine—whether he had ever fallen off a stage coach, whether he had married more than one wife, and, in general, any adventures or repartees recorded of him previous to the epoch of his conversion. She then glanced over the letters and diary, and whenever there was a predominance of Zion, the River of Life, and notes of exclamation, she turned over to the next page; but any passage in which she saw such promising nouns as “small-pox,” “pony,” or “boots and shoes,” at once arrested her.

Notice how Mrs. Linnet chooses stories by steps: first by message (the secular portions); then by the climax of the story (what the preacher died of); then by plot points (whether he had fallen off a stage coach, etc); and finally by environmental elements (boots and shoes). What is funny about this passage (and why Mrs. Linnet serves as the comic relief in the story) is that she thwarts the purpose of the religious books entirely: she goes straight for the elements she values most.

This little joke of a story says something to me about the way we build knowledge bases today: as if we know how people want to use them, as if people know (or want to admit) how they want to use them, and as if people want to use them for only one thing. I think we may be underestimating the value of serendipity, idiosyncrasy, and creativity in the things we build for people to use.

## **The role of specialized software in online story sharing**

Do you remember those emails we used to pass around where we would receive a page of plain-text questions, insert our answers, then send them on to the next person? Those were essentially semantic indexing sheets.

I was always amazed by how few mistakes people made when they did that. People whose eyes glazed over when you tried to explain things like “flexible semantic indexing” could paste their answers over Uncle Joe's and send the email on. Those email chains kept bubbling up in my mind while I was working on Rakontu.

Possibly the most important thing I learned from my time with Rakontu was that even though specialized story-sharing software can be useful, we don't need it. Motivated and informed groups can share stories effectively online without any specialized software. All they need to do is layer their own story-sharing norms and practices on top of general-purpose software.

For example, say you are the secretary of a group that volunteers to keep your local park clean. Say you send out an email to your group that goes like this:

Hey guys, I was thinking about that old coffee shop on the corner. You know, the Wander On In, the one that burned down last year. I miss it. It was so great about hosting community groups like ours. If you miss it too, tell me a story about it. Here's what I'm asking you to do:

1. Start an email (to me) by telling me about something you remember that happened at (or about) the Wander On In.
2. After you tell the story, copy and paste these questions into your email:
  - How does this story make you feel?
  - Did this happen to you, or did you hear about it from someone else?
  - How long ago did this happen?
  - If you had a chance to rebuild the Wander On In, what would you keep just as it was, and what would you change?
  - Where in our community is the next best thing to the Wander On In today?
3. After each question, write your answer. Then send the email to me.

I'll compile the responses and send them to everyone. Then let's get together, talk about what everyone said, and see if any new ideas come bubbling up.

Sure, that's not as complicated an interaction as I wanted to build with Rakontu. But it's more flexible, and maybe flexibility is more important than capability.

Specialized software can help people share stories online, but software is always going to be the smaller part of the story-sharing picture. The bigger part is the norms and practices groups create and negotiate as they share stories, whether it's in person or online. Yes, dedicated story-sharing software can definitely play a role in helping people learn how to create and negotiate story-sharing norms and practices. But there are other ways to learn those things.

In the end, that's why I never went back to Rakontu. I decided to put my time into helping people learn more about story sharing, and into helping people help their own communities and organizations build stronger, healthier, and more resilient story-sharing cultures. If I hadn't, there would have been no *Working with Stories* books. I think I made the right choice.



## Chapter 7

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# Example Models and Templates for Group Exercises

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In this chapter are 28 descriptions of published models for use with the timelines, landscapes, story elements, and composite stories exercises. They are primarily for use in sensemaking, but they can also be used in story collection. See Chapters Nine (Group Exercises for Story Collection) and Eleven (Group Exercises for Narrative Sensemaking) of *Working with Stories* for details on how to use models in each exercise.

## Timelines

Here are brief descriptions of six time-based models you might find useful in your timeline exercises. Note that I'm not saying these are the models you *should* use. These are just *examples* of the sorts of models that work well in the timeline exercise. If you look through these you should get an idea of what works.

For most of these models I list references you can find to learn more about them. Where I don't list explicit references, the models are so well established that you can find information about them on the internet or in standard reference works in any library.

### Bruce Tuckman's stages of group development

This model describes how groups of people come together and work on projects together. The model's five stages are:

1. **Forming:** The people in the group learn about each other and start thinking of how they will relate to each other.
2. **Storming:** Different ideas about how the group should work together arise and negotiate. This stage might be short or long, and it might involve many nuances of conflict and cooperation.
3. **Norming:** The group comes to an agreement on common goals and responsibilities. (In some groups this stage is never reached.)

4. **Performing:** The group does what it set out to do, working as a functioning team.
5. **Adjourning:** The group finishes its task and breaks up.

Tuckman's stages might be useful in a timeline exercise if your project involves looking back over a time (or planning a time) when groups of people came together (or will come together), say in forming a community or organization, dealing with a crisis, or planning a change.

## The Transtheoretical model of behavioral change

This model, developed by James O. Prochaska and colleagues, describes how individuals change their behavior. It is primarily used in the health care field and is called “transtheoretical” because it aims to bring together ideas from multiple theories about behavior.

1. **Precontemplation** (Not ready): The person knows that they ought to change something, and they think vaguely about doing it in the future, but they don't feel ready to take any concrete steps yet.
2. **Contemplation** (Getting ready): The person has started to think about why they should change and what the change might bring to them, but they have not actually started to *plan* the change yet.
3. **Preparation** (Ready): The person is actively planning the change, and may be taking small steps to prepare the way for larger steps later.
4. **Action:** The person has actively changed their behavior from what it was before. They have taken large steps and are doing new things.
5. **Maintenance:** The person continues to act in a new way while trying not to slide back into old ways.
6. **Termination:** The change has been made. The person doesn't need to make an effort to avoid backsliding anymore. Sometimes this stage slides into relapse, in which the person goes back to old ways, returning to an earlier stage of the process. From there they either advance again or remain stuck.

The transtheoretical model might be useful in a timeline exercise if your project involves examining a time in which people make a change to the way things have always been done, especially if the change involves tradition or culture, say in gender or class relations.

## The Kübler-Ross model of grief

This model describes how individuals deal with loss. The model was originally applied to the terminally ill, but it was later expanded to apply to other types of loss, such as bereavement, job loss, divorce, or incarceration.

1. **Denial:** The person doesn't want to face the reality of the situation.
2. **Anger:** The person concentrates on the unfairness of the situation.
3. **Bargaining:** The person attempts to negotiate with someone to change the situation.
4. **Depression:** The certainty of the situation sinks in and the person experiences sadness and regret.



5. **Acceptance:** The person comes to terms with the situation.

Note that Kübler-Ross was adamant that her model not be considered a complete or perfectly ordered description of the process of grief, which is unique to each person going through it.

Kübler-Ross' model might be useful in a timeline exercise if your project involves talking through the aftermath of some kind of catastrophe, like a natural disaster, or readiness for such contingencies in the future.

## Everett Rogers' theory of the diffusion of innovations

This model describes how new ideas are communicated through a culture. It describes successive waves of actors who play dominant roles as the innovation spreads.

1. **Innovators:** This tiny group of people, amounting to only about three percent of the population, adopt innovations the moment they are available. Innovators are tolerant of risk as they seek the benefits new ideas might bring. These are usually the youngest and most social of the groups.
2. **Early adopters:** These people (14%) adopt innovations after a short time has passed. They are somewhat tolerant of risk, but they choose more carefully from among the innovations they think will help them most. In general, financial liquidity (ease of spending), social status, and social connections tend to decrease, and age tends to increase, as each group comes forward to adopt the innovation in its turn.
3. **Early majority:** This group of adopters (34%) waits longer to take up the innovation, but is still in the forefront of its adoption.
4. **Late majority:** This group (34%) lags behind the early majority, watching and waiting to see how the innovation will play out before they take it up.
5. **Laggards:** This group (16%) brings up the rear of innovation adoption. They prefer not to change the way they do things, even if they might benefit from the change.

Rogers' theory might be useful in a timeline exercise if your project involves considering how people in your community or organization have taken up or might take up some kind of new idea, like a new farming method or educational approach.

## Kurt Lewin's three-stage change model

This model describes how organizations and communities change the way they do things. Lewin, who coined the term "action research," was concerned with how groups of people change, mainly from the view of helping them do this in a positive way.

1. **Unfreezing:** The community recognizes that change is necessary and that things can't go on as they have been, overcomes its inertia, and weakens defense mechanisms that keep things in their current state.
2. **Change:** The old ways are challenged, but the new ways are not yet in place, so this is a transitional state of uncertainty, confusion and possibly conflict.

3. **Freezing** (sometimes called “refreezing”): The new ways are firmly in place, and the community begins to stabilize.

Lewin’s model might be useful in a timeline exercise if your project involves making sense of some kind of major, far-reaching change in your community or organization, either past or possible, like building a mass transit system or passing significant legislature.

### **John Kotter’s eight steps of leading change**

This is not a model of how change happens; it’s a model of how people can *make* change happen. (Prescriptive models like this one can be just as useful as descriptive models, as long as their application is one of comparison, not judgment.)

1. Establishing a sense of urgency.
2. Creating the guiding coalition.
3. Developing a vision and strategy.
4. Communicating the change vision.
5. Empowering employees for broad-based action.
6. Generating short-term wins.
7. Consolidating gains and producing more change.
8. Anchoring new approaches in the culture.

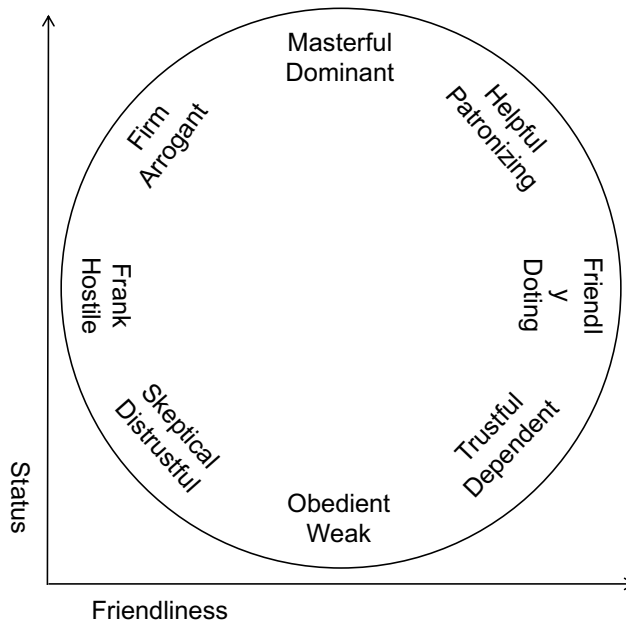
Kotter’s model might be useful in a timeline exercise if your project involves any kind of planned change program, whether in the past or future, and whether it has succeeded (or will succeed) or not. In particular, finding places where reality doesn’t match this stepwise pattern could open up useful discussions about the nature of the community or organization. Maybe multiple visions and strategies compete for dominance, or instead of short-term wins there are short-term disasters.

## **Landscapes**

These are five examples of the sorts of published models that work well for landscape exercises (but they are *examples*, remember, not suggestions or requirements). By looking over these you should be able to understand what makes a model useful for landscapes, and you should be ready to find more like them.

### **The Interpersonal circumplex**

This model, developed by Mervin Freedman, Timothy Leary, and others in the 1950s, describes aspects of individual personality and motivation. It is used in psychological evaluation.



The vertical axis of the model describes the perception of *status* (or dominance or power or control) on the part of the person being evaluated. This is not necessarily the person's *actual* status. It is the status the person perceives themselves as having in relation to the person or people they are interacting with. The same person might have different feelings of status or control in different social contexts.

The horizontal axis of the model describes the person's degree of *friendliness* (or solidarity or warmth or love) with respect to the social context they find themselves in. Again, this is as it is perceived by the person, and in a particular context, not in general.

Putting the two axes together, a person whose perceptions place them at the lower-right edge of the space would be considered exceptionally trusting (friendly, high perceived status). A person on the opposite corner (hostile, low perceived status) would be considered exceptionally *mistrusting*. As the model is defined, its exact center describes the most well-adjusted human being possible, and all deviations from the center point represent pathological conditions (to a greater or lesser degree).

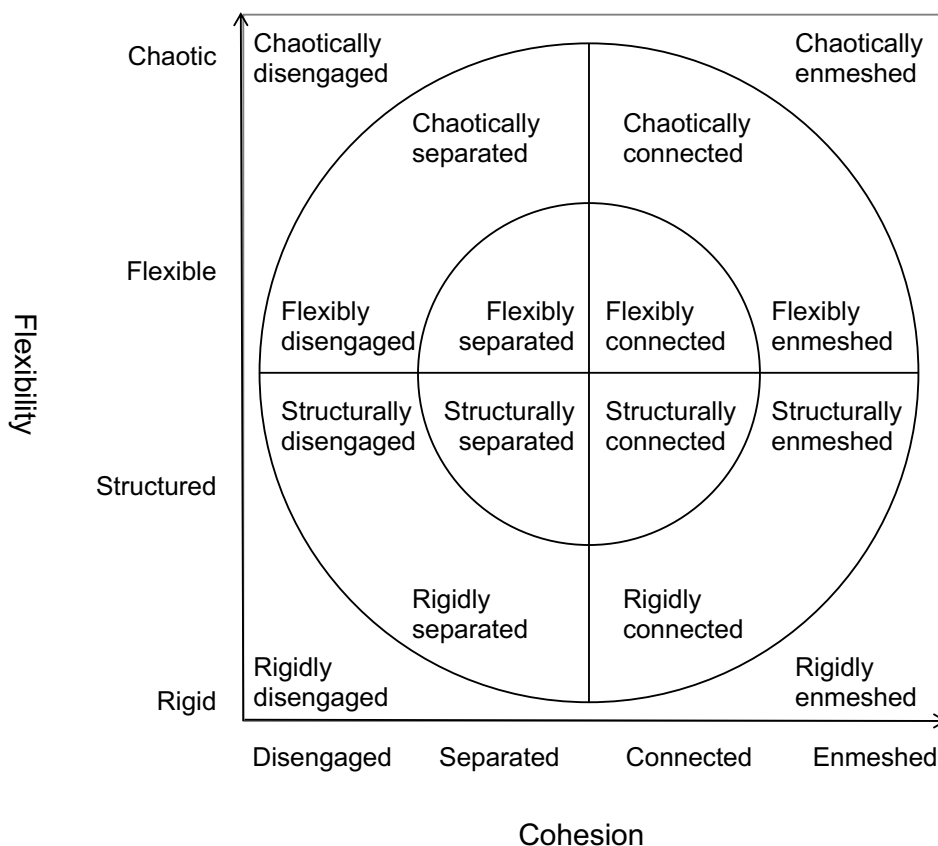
This model is called a "circumplex" because it is usually drawn as a circle, with names given to pie-slices of the space. But it's really a two-dimensional landscape model with the corners sawed off. Why people turn squares into circles like this I don't know, but it could have to do with the scarcity of pure states in complex human behavior. If you want to use a circumplex model for sensemaking, I would suggest *not* presenting it as a circle, just to keep open the options of exploring extremes. This is especially important if you are considering fictional as well as factual stories. It's better to let empty spots emerge during sensemaking than it is to fence them off in advance.

This model might be useful in projects where people need to think about the perceptions of storytellers and of characters in their stories, for example in a project about people

choosing to use or avoid drugs. For a historical view of the interpersonal circumplex as well as its current uses, see the book *Paradigms of Personality Assessment* by Jerry Wiggins.

## The Circumplex model of marital and family systems

This model, created by David H. Olson and Dean M. Gorall, is used to consider how families relate to each other.



The vertical axis of the model describes *flexibility* (adaptability, changes in roles and rules) in the family, from low to high. Named states along the axis are: rigid, structured, flexible, and chaotic.

The horizontal axis of the model describes *cohesion* (emotional bonding, interdependence, togetherness) in the family, from weak to strong. Named states along the axis are: disengaged, separate, connected, and enmeshed.

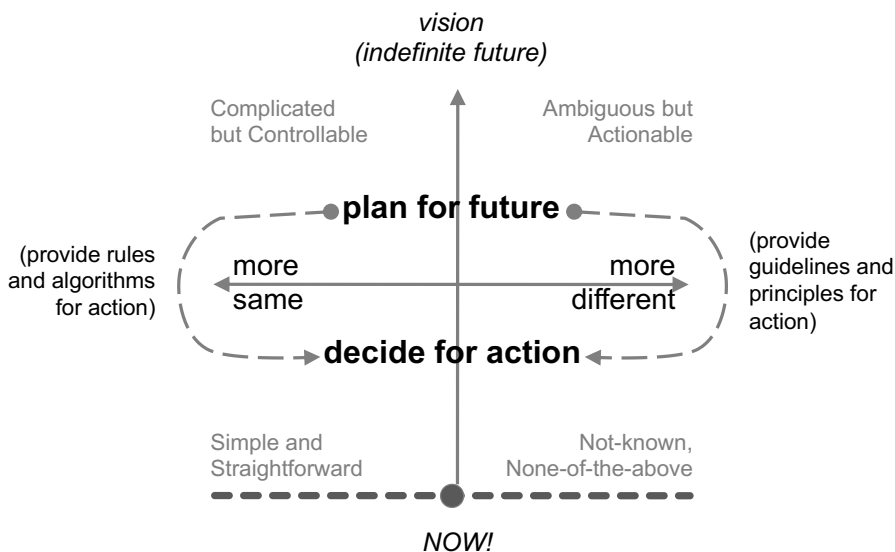
The center area of the circle is defined as the most *balanced* condition, which is considered the most healthy state for a family to be in: neither too close nor too distant, neither too rigid nor too chaotic. The further a family moves to the outer corners of the space the less balanced, and less healthy, the family becomes. Note that even though this model is called a circumplex model, it is *not* generally drawn with its corners cut off. The corners indicate extremely unbalanced (usually pathological) states.

This model includes a third dimension: *communication*, moving from positive (empathy, listening, clarity) to negative (criticism, double binds, hiding information). The third dimension is considered a “facilitating” dimension in that it influences the other two. It is not generally drawn on the model itself. You could easily incorporate communication into a landscape exercise by color-coding or adding symbols or dots to sticky notes to indicate whether communication in each story was more positive or negative. The third dimension does not work in the same center-balancing way, of course, because more positive communication is always better. Generally communication is expected to be better in balanced than in unbalanced families, but departures from expectation could occur.

This model might be useful in projects where dynamics within small groups of people is of interest, such as in projects about families or work teams. For more information on this model see Olson and Gorall’s 2003 paper “Circumplex model of marital and family systems.”

## The SCAN framework

This model, created by the enterprise architect Tom Graves, is used for sensemaking and decision support in a variety of contexts within organizational and community work.



The vertical axis of the model describes the amount of *available time* as perceived in the situation, from “now” (no time available, such as in a crisis) to “infinity” (infinite time available, such as in long-range planning). The more time available for making a decision, the greater the array of options available. When we have lots of time to think before we act, we can rationally consider options, draw up checklists, conduct experiments. When we have to act quickly, in “real time,” emotions and “gut feelings” become more important. Sometimes we may plan to plan, that is, *think* we have made a decision by rationally considering options, but find at the last moment that the decision we made is not the decision we *actually* have to make in the end. In this way one story (taken as a whole) could cover the entire spectrum as it plays out.

The horizontal axis of the model describes the degree of *uniqueness* as perceived in the situation, or how likely it is that if we do the same thing we've done before, we'll get the same result as we did before. At the left-hand extreme of the uniqueness dimension, the same action *always* produces exactly the same result. This is like what might happen if we approached a grandfather clock we've long owned (and are sure is in good repair) to wind it. After we finished winding the clock, we would barely even look to see if it was still working, because it always does. The closer we get to the always-the-same end of the uniqueness axis, the more we rely on *rules* and *algorithms* (like our clock's mechanism and the way we wind it) because they reliably produce the outcome we want to achieve.

At the right-hand extreme of the uniqueness axis, it is simply *impossible* to get the same result by taking the same action. This is like what might happen if we attempted to redirect the waters of a swirling flood during a hurricane. Even if we did manage to divert such a flood *once*, it would be insane to believe we could follow the same procedure to divert the *next* flood. Each flood is unique due to interacting particulars of land use, soil makeup, erosion, flood control measures, rain, wind, waves, and even human error. In fact, some well-known failures of engineering have occurred precisely because what worked in the past failed to work in a new and different situation. The closer we get to the entirely-unique end of the uniqueness axis, the more we rely on *guidelines* and *principles* (like "avoid river banks during rainstorms" or "inspect levees frequently for leaks"), because no matter what happens they will help us adapt to the circumstances we find.

At the midpoint of the uniqueness axis, you might find an activity like raising a child. Every child is like other children in some ways and unique in other ways. We can use our experience with one child to show us how we might be able to act with another child, but it would be dangerous to assume that *everything* that works with one child will work with another. In the middle of this axis both rules and principles have bearing, but we must be mindful of their limits in context.

This model might be useful in projects having to do with the consideration of decision making in situations of interest, for example in projects about crisis response or urban planning. Thinking about how people in your collected stories have made decisions under varying conditions can help you make sense of how things happened the way they did and how things might need to change in the future. There is a lot more to SCAN than I've described here; you can find out more about it in Tom Graves' book *SCAN: A framework for sensemaking and decision making*.

## The I-space (information-space) framework

This model, created by Max Boisot, describes the use of information as it flows among people. The model has three dimensions, of which you can use two or three.

The vertical axis of the model describes the degree of *codification* of information, or how much *structure* is embedded in its articulation. The dimension ranges from vague, easily misinterpreted information, such as "it's a nice day today" (nice to whom? nice in relation to what?) to highly structured, detailed, impossible to misinterpret information such "the temperature as measured by this particular type of thermometer is this many degrees Celsius; the wind speed as measured by this type of anemometer is this many miles per

hour” and so on. Fully codified information is not open to interpretation. As a result, the more codified the information, the less effort is required to understand and use it. Story structure is itself a method of codification, though it is one that deliberately goes only part of the way to full specification.

The horizontal axis of the model describes the degree of *abstraction* of information, or how general or specific, abstract or concrete, global or local it is. This dimension ranges from the very *general* statement, such as “in the temperate latitudes, snow generally falls in winter” to an intermediate statement, such as “the weather in the Northeast United States is following seasonal patterns this year” to a very *specific* statement, such as “the town of Middle Grove received two inches of snow within the past hour, especially on the North side of town.” Note that codification is independent of abstraction. Information can be structured yet general (as in precise measurements of changes in average global temperature) or vague yet specific (as in the statement, “it’s snowy outside my window”).

The third axis of the model describes the degree of *diffusion* of information, or “the speed and the extent to which particular types of data and information spread within a target population.” If information once discovered flows quickly and widely, diffusion is high; if it flows slowly and locally, diffusion is low.

This model might be useful in projects where you want to improve your community’s collective adaptability in situations where information flow is critical to safety or efficiency, such as on factory floors or in coordinated volunteer efforts. Another aspect of the model which I have not described but which you might find useful is the *Social Learning Cycle*, a phase-based model of how knowledge flows in organizations and societies. The best reference on I-space is Boisot’s book *Knowledge Assets*.

## The Confluence toolkit

This is my very own set of dimensional tools. I designed it to help people make sense of situations in which organization (intentional plans) and self-organization (unintentional emergent patterns) intermingle and interact. I won’t describe it here because you can read all about it in my book *Confluence*.

# Story Elements

There are two types of models you can use in the story elements exercise: models to *compare* to your story elements, and models to *evaluate* your story elements.

To make the compare-evaluate distinction more clear, I’ll use an analogy. Suppose you are a car racing enthusiast. Suppose you are *such* a racing enthusiast that you have built your own race car. Once you’ve finished the car, what might you want to do next? You might want to *compare* it to established brands of race cars—Ferrari, Lamborghini, Porsche, etc—to see which brand yours resembles most and least. And you might want to *evaluate* your car by referring to some sort of racing-car guide book, to see where your car meets or exceeds “industry standard” expectations.

Apart from not going anywhere and being made of words, a set of story elements is not that different from a custom-built race car. Each creation is unique to its creators, purpose, and context; each has its own style and flavor; each is like and yet unlike named types in its category. So the two types of models I present here are like brand-name cars (element packages) and industry-standard car guides (evaluation packages).

Remember to introduce these models only *after* story elements have been created. Otherwise you risk putting forth the message that these models represent elements that *ought* to exist rather than generalized descriptions of elements that *often* exist. The utility of the comparison lies in the opposite of prescription: understanding what is unique, and uniquely meaningful, about the world from which the collected stories were drawn.

## Situational story elements

Situational elements are created in response to the question, “What is going on in this story?” A set of situational story elements can help people make sense of what is going on in their organization or community today and what has happened in the past.

### *Comparing situations with the Native North American medicine wheel*

The medicine wheel has nothing to do with medicine as we typically define it, but it does have a lot to do with health—emotional, spiritual, collective health. This ancient ritualized process has many forms and methods, but at its simplest, it is a set of situational story elements.

- **East.** The East is the direction of the dawn, spring, and *new beginnings*. The color of the east is red, like the rising sun. There is some risk in the East, because situations are unformed, spontaneous and chaotic; but there is much opportunity in the East as well. In the East we adapt quickly to new circumstances and seek sources of hope and potential.
- **South.** The South is the direction of mid-day, summer, and *growth*. The color of the South is yellow, like the sun overhead at noon. In the South, situations are forming, changing, and complex. Situations in the South can be managed if we establish relationships within them, but they cannot be controlled. The South is a place of transformation.
- **West.** The West is the direction of the setting sun, autumn, and *maturity*. The color of the West is black, like the gathering darkness. In the West, situations cohere and coalesce into understandable yet complicated patterns. In the West, we learn from the wisdom and knowledge of experienced elders or experts as we develop our own maturity.
- **North.** The North is the direction of night, winter, and *rebirth*. The color of the North is white, like the moon and the snow. In the North, situations are simple and stark, quiet and still, waiting. In the North, we reflect, solve problems, bring events to completion, sort things out, and preserve order.
- **Center.** The Center is the direction of balance and of *self*, individual and collective. From the center, we embark on journeys toward all the other directions, but where we go and why we go depends on what we find in the center.

To compare a set of created situations to the medicine wheel, groups can place sticky notes with each of these labels (East-beginning, South-growth, West-maturity, North-rebirth,



Center-self) in a compass-like circle around their story elements (with the “Center” note in the center, of course). Then they can move each story element nearest to the medicine wheel directions it seems most connected to. For example, a story element called “Safe haven” might be placed near the North (winter, rebirth) direction. (For people in the Southern Hemisphere, the North-South direction should be reversed to make more sense.)

Groups can add annotations to the diagram marking why they think any story element belongs where it was placed. After the group has connected everything they think connects, they can stand back and look at the overall pattern. What have they learned about their situations by comparing them to the medicine wheel directions? Where do their situations lie? Is there any part of the medicine wheel they have left empty? Why did that happen and what does it mean?

There is much more information available on the medicine wheel and its many forms and uses. Some versions of the medicine wheel have more elements specified, such as animals, minerals, and plants. Some have more directions specified, such as other compass points (e.g., Northwest, Southeast) plus up (sky) and down (earth). I particularly like two books as references: *The Medicine Wheel: Earth Astrology* by Sun Bear and Wabun Wind, and *Leadership Lessons From The Medicine Wheel* by Gary Lear. *Dancing with the Wheel: The Medicine Wheel Workbook* (written by Sun Bear, Wabun Wind and Crysalis Mulligan) includes detailed instructions for using the medicine wheel in group exercises very similar to the ones described in this book.

### ***Evaluating situations with SWOT analysis***

SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. This method was created by Albert Humphrey in the 1960s and is a popular method of decision support.

Using SWOT analysis as part of the story elements exercise is very simple. After the story elements have been created, each group should lay out a table with situational story elements as rows and SWOT elements as columns, and talk about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats represented by each story element. You can use SWOT analysis with any type of story element, but it fits with situations best.

Since this method is so well known, it is easy to find out more information about it on the internet or at any library. A similar method you could also use in this place is PEST analysis (PEST meaning Political, Economic, Social, Technological), or its longer-acronymed cousins PESTLE (adding Legal and Environmental) and STEEPLED (adding Ethical and Demographic). All of these methods are useful for evaluating situations drawn from stories.

Starting with stories creates a more grounded version of SWOT analysis. So even if you end up with what looks like a conventional planning output, you’ll know that it is built on a firmer foundation than one built by asking these questions without having worked your way through stories first.

## Theme story elements

Theme elements are created in response to the question, “What is this story about?” A set of theme story elements helps people make sense of the issues people care about in the community or organization, from multiple perspectives.

### *Comparing themes with the Tipu Ake ki te Ora Lifecycle Model*

This model is used to help organizations and communities think about and plan for the future. In the Maori language the full name of this model means “growing from within ever onwards and upwards towards a place of well-being.”

The story of this model’s creation is fascinating. In the 1950s Peter Goldsbury had been a student at a small rural school in New Zealand. Many years later he returned to find the school thriving. This surprised him, since he knew that not long before his visit the school had been doing badly, its students falling far behind their peers elsewhere. Peter asked the school’s leaders what they had done to turn things around so completely.

The school leaders described their ways of thinking, which were based largely on ancient Maori teachings. Having spent many years working in organizational development, Peter realized that these ways of thinking might be useful to others. So he and the school leaders collaborated to produce the Tipu Ake model, which they called “a project leadership model for innovative organisations.” The model is now being used by organizations and communities around the world to create positive change.

The central metaphor of the Tipu Ake model is that of a tiny seed growing into a giant tree in the forest. Each element of the model is a theme that interacts with the other themes in the same way that the forces of life interact in the forest. This is not a stage model, which is why it is a good match for comparison with themes derived from stories. The Tipu Ake themes, like themes from stories, cut across all possible time scales as they interact and intermingle.

For each theme, the model includes an essential definition; a metaphorical connection to the forest tree; a time-worn saying that illustrates the theme; “birds” that sow seeds (create new ideas) related to the theme; and “pests” that destroy, but also recycle and diversify. The themes are as follows.

- **Undercurrents.** For the theme of undercurrents, the metaphor is of the soil in which the tree grows. In the chaos of birth and rebirth, what matters is the courage to change. We are birds when we face the issues. We are pests when we base our convictions on false assumptions. The saying for undercurrents is, “The greatest enemy is the one within us—conquer that and the rest are easy.”
- **Leadership.** For leadership, the metaphor is of the seed from which the tree grows. True leadership leads without controlling, inspires without censoring. We are birds when we share our knowledge. We are pests when we pay too much attention to ego and credit. The saying for leadership is, “A kumara [sweet potato] never calls itself sweet—that’s for the eaters to say.”
- **Teamwork.** For teamwork, the metaphor is of the roots that feed the tree and keep it stable. Teamwork is about working together to get things done. We are birds when

we develop trust and support each other. We are pests when we struggle over power. The saying for teamwork is, “We leave our hats at the door,” meaning that our external powers have no say over the team’s work together.

- **Processes.** For processes, the metaphor is of the trunk of the tree, keeping it strong. Processes must work without elaboration or obstruction. We are birds when we improve our effectiveness. We are pests when we develop rigidity in our processes or slow things down with avoidable delays. The saying for processes is, “Own your own processes; keep them simple and effective.”
- **Sensing.** For sensing, the metaphor is of the tree’s branches, reaching out. Sensing means becoming aware of everything that is going on in the organization or community. We are birds when we listen. We are pests when we use only predefined measures. The saying for sensing is, “Keep your ears open. Sense what is happening around us; reflect on it together to learn.”
- **Wisdom.** For wisdom, the metaphor is of the flowers of the tree. Wisdom means sharing and protecting the essential collective wisdom of the community or organization. We are birds when we live our values. We are pests when our values clash. The saying for wisdom is, “We have no room around here for Matapiko [stingy] gatekeepers—we share our knowledge.”
- **Well-being.** For well-being (also called Ora), the metaphor is of the fruits of the tree. Well-being is about developing a vision of the future that is worth working towards. We are birds when we focus on outcomes. We are pests when we become smug and complacent. The saying for well-being is “When we focus on outcomes, nothing becomes a barrier.”
- Finally, the model includes two other elements or themes: *sunshine*, which represents external energy, and *poisons*, which stop the process of germination. Because these are external to the tree image, they don’t have bird and pest elements, nor do they have sayings, but they are part of the model as influencers from outside the tree itself.

To use the Tipu Ake model in a story elements exercise, after groups have created their theme story elements, they should create sticky notes representing some or all of the Tipu Ake themes. They should use whichever representations of the Tipu Ake themes hold the most meaning for them. For some groups this will be the name and description of the theme, for some the metaphorical association, for some the saying, for some the birds and pests.

Then groups should connect their story element themes to the Tipu Ake themes in some way—by drawing lines, by placing things together, by adding annotations, by arranging the two sets of themes in a way that represents relationships. For example, a group might place the Tipu Ake themes along one vertical line and their own themes along another, then shift the themes around until they feel the two lines connect well across horizontal “rungs” of a “ladder.” That’s one way to visualize the connections, but there are many others.

You can find out more about the Tipu Ake ki te Ora Lifecycle model on the internet at [tipuake.org.nz](http://tipuake.org.nz), where the group of volunteers who put together the model have assembled a large number of useful papers, presentations, and videos. According to the Tipu Ake web

site, “acknowledgement [of the model] is by *koha* (a gift in return based on its value to you).” So if you use the Tipu Ake model, make sure you find a way to return a gift to its creators, as I have done by telling you about it.

### ***Evaluating themes with Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)***

Causal Layered Analysis comes from the field of futures studies, but in its outlook it has a lot in common with narrative work; so it’s not surprising that it works well in a narrative sensemaking workshop. According to its creator, Sohail Inayatullah, CLA “is concerned less with predicting a particular future and more with opening up the present and past to create alternative futures.”

CLA describes four layers of meaning in any situation, all operating at the same time, as follows.

- **Litany.** The litany is the body of well-known statements about the situation as they are presented in public, by the media and in popular knowledge. The situation at the level of the litany is apparently obvious, lacking depth and requiring little thought. Things are hopeless, or already solved, or somebody’s fault.
- **Systemic causes.** The second layer of meaning is concerned with social systemic causes of the situation, such as technological factors, political movements, and historical events. At this level research is conducted, data is collected, and interpretations are put forth (sometimes as facts); but deep assumptions are rarely challenged.
- **Worldview/discourse.** At the third layer of meaning are deeper assumptions about the situation, things everyone knows and nobody questions—“positions that create notions of collective identity.” At this level worldviews clash, ideologies define, stakeholders support their interests, and cultures see the world differently.
- **Metaphor/myth.** At the deepest layer in the stratum lie “the deep stories, the collective archetypes” of societies. At this level we have “gut-level” emotional reactions to situations based on the deepest experiences of our existence.

CLA does not claim that any of these layers are superior to others, only that all of them will be present in any situation people consider and define. This makes CLA a perfect model with which to more deeply consider thematic story elements drawn from stories: because all themes have layers.

To use Causal Layered Analysis in a story elements exercise, after each group’s thematic story elements are complete, ask them to copy their theme element names onto new sticky notes. Next groups should create a layered view (in a new space) by marking out lines to separate the four CLA layers (like a layer cake) on the paper. Their story elements should be placed along the top of the space like candles on the cake. Then for each story element, groups should fill in the layer cake with at least one *aspect* of each theme that fits best into each CLA layer. Table cells can be filled with sticky notes or by directly writing on the paper; but remember to keep people writing in large print so that they will be able to see larger patterns when they step back.

Some questions that will help people find these aspects are as follows.

- Litany: What newspaper headlines might be written about this situation? What is well known about it? What is obvious?
- Systemic causes: What events or actions caused this situation to happen? What solutions are available in this situation? What factors are in play in it?
- Worldview/discourse: What are some of the explanations different people might have for this situation? What would different groups say about it? How many of these positions can you describe?
- Metaphor/myth: What's the *real* story of this situation? What's going on deep down? How do you *feel* about it at the gut level? Can you think of any proverbs, folk tales, or stories that fit this aspect of the situation?

After the layers have been filled in for each story element, groups should stand back and look at the larger patterns that appear.

This is not the only way to use CLA in a story elements exercise; it is just the way that seems most useful to me. I have never actually *done* this, mind; this is just how I think I *would* use CLA if I had the chance to. So you should experiment with your use of this model (and with all of the models I have listed here, and any others you might find) and figure out what works for you.

You can find out more about Causal Layered Analysis on the internet or in *The Causal Layered Analysis Reader*, a book edited by Sohail Inayatullah which includes case studies of the model's use, as well as more information about its history and theoretical underpinnings.

## Character story elements

Character elements are created in response to the question, "Who is doing things in this story?" A set of character story elements helps people make sense of the behaviors and motivations behind the actions people take in the stories.

I'd like to make a special note on character-type models. I had a very hard time choosing models to recommend for comparison with and evaluation of character story elements. This was not from want of choices; it was from want of *clear* choices. There have been abundant attempts to categorize the way people behave. Many of these derive from the work of Carl Jung.

I thought about including Jungian archetypes here; certainly they represent a set of elemental character "packages" that describe behaviors and motivations. But I decided not to include them, for two reasons. First, it's difficult to find any one definitive set of Jungian archetypes. Many different people seem to have interpreted Jung's writings in many different ways (which is probably what he wanted). Second, some of Jung's archetypes are difficult to use in group work without large facilitation experience (or so it seems to me). When people are talking about improving their community or organization, I would not relish asking them about their anima (female soul of a man) or animus (male soul of a woman) in relation to the behavior of the people around them. All sorts of differences in

worldviews related to gender roles would get mixed up into the sensemaking, which might simply cause the process to stall.

I always say that stories go deep, but Jungian archetypes go perhaps *too* deep—and too *personally* deep—for use in the contexts PNI envisions. PNI is about community, not about the depths of *individual* psyches. I haven't found Jungian archetypes used much in organizational work, though I'm certainly no expert on all of their applications. If you want to use Jungian archetypes in PNI exercises, by all means do so, and please tell me and everyone else how you used them. I don't feel capable of telling you what I think is the best way of using Jungian archetypes in a sensemaking workshop, because I'm not sure I *could* use them well. My guess is that the majority of my readers couldn't either. So instead of describing Jungian archetypes here, I've chosen two other approaches that I think will have more practical utility in the sensemaking workshops you might actually facilitate.

### **Comparing characters with Belbin team roles**

This model, created by Meredith Belbin in the 1970s, describes how people in a team take on complementary roles as they work together. The model does not represent personality types, but *complementary behaviors* people tend to assume in groups. One person might take on different roles in different groups depending on their memberships and purposes. The model was created based on research into how people work in teams, specifically looking at what clusters of complementary behaviors lead teams to succeed in collaboration.

Nine team roles are defined by Belbin. The first three are oriented towards *action*.

- **Shaper.** Shapers are all about challenge. They enjoy stimulating the team to do better, to explore further, and to question assumptions. Shapers can help the team get past obstacles by drawing out enthusiasm, but they can also push too hard and come off as aggressive.
- **Implementer.** People in this role get their work done with great discipline and order. They are highly motivated, but they may be closed-minded and unwilling to consider making changes.
- **Completer/finisher.** These perfectionists like to see things done, done well, and done on time. They work hard, take deadlines very seriously, and set high standards for their work and everyone else's. However, people in this role can frustrate team members who don't want to worry over details, and they are not good at delegating (because they don't want anyone else doing things wrong).

Roles in the second group are oriented towards *people*.

- **Coordinator.** Coordinators are excellent delegators, confidently handing out tasks to those most suited to carry them out. However, some may see coordinators as manipulative, delegating not for efficiency but to avoid doing the work themselves.
- **Resource investigator.** These are the explorers of group work. They pursue contacts and opportunities with enthusiasm, gathering ideas from their broad networks. However,

resource investigators may be sloppy with details, and they may lose enthusiasm for the work once they have explored all they believe there is to be found.

- **Team worker.** The work of team workers can seem unimportant, but they keep the team working smoothly by listening to everyone and negotiating disputes before they get out of hand. The down-side to team workers is that because they listen to everyone, they may have difficulty coming to decisions and taking definite positions.

The final three roles are oriented towards *thinking*.

- **Plant.** Plants come up with new ideas and new ways of thinking. They work best alone, don't take criticism well, and keep disrupting structured processes with their innovative ideas. But plants also serve an important function in the group because they bring new "seeds" of thought into discussion.
- **Monitor/evaluator.** A person taking on this role sees things impartially and from all sides, carefully weighing the pros and cons of all ideas. However, people in this role can be critical, and they can place a drag on group enthusiasm with their cautious and careful analysis.
- **Specialist.** Specialists know one thing very well, and they are happy to educate everyone else in the team about it. However, whenever the work called for falls outside of the specialist's field of expertise, they lose interest in the work.

By the way, I don't know about you, but I'm plenty confused about the name "plant." The other names all make sense, but it leaves me wondering. The Belbin web site says the role "was so-called because one such individual was 'planted' in each team." But what does *that* mean? *Why* was one planted in each team? I've seen other references to these roles say the name "plant" refers to the tendency of these people to keep to themselves, like potted plants apparently (*do* potted plants keep to themselves?). Some people call the "plant" the "ideas person" or "innovator." I think those names work better, but I'm keeping "plant" here so you won't be confused if you look up Belbin roles yourself.

Most people naturally gravitate towards some of these roles and away from some others, but rarely is anyone only able to fulfill one role in a group. This is good, because the original research from which this model was developed found that when any of these roles was missing from a group, or when there were too many of any role, the group was less likely to be successful.

You might think this set of characters won't work for story projects. You might say that if stories were collected from people in a diverse community, perhaps from different groups who don't see eye to eye, how could elements derived from those stories match up with a set of roles taken on by members of successful teams? But you see, that's just where the utility comes in: in the comparison with success. If your organization or community were a successful team, it would have elements of these behavioral roles in it, even if the roles weren't situated in actual individual people. Somehow new ideas would be brought to the table; somehow the pros and cons of decisions would be analyzed; somehow deadlines would be kept; somehow disputes would be negotiated; and so on. Comparing sets of

behaviors drawn from stories with an ideal portrait of a well-functioning team can help people think about what is happening in their community or organization.

To use Belbin team roles in a story elements exercise, ask each group to line up the nine Belbin roles alongside their character story elements and simply look for connections. How they portray those connections can vary from annotation to placement to connecting lines. Just ask people to build something that visually explains where the character story elements and the Belbin roles overlap, and where they don't.

You can find out more about Belbin team roles on the Belbin web site at [belbin.com](http://belbin.com), or in Meredith Belbin's book *Team Roles at Work*.

### ***Evaluating characters with the “Big Five” personality traits***

Also called the Five Factor Model, the “Big Five” personality traits are based on five questions about individual personalities. The questions were developed through the combined work of several psychologists, including Warren Norman, Lewis Goldberg, Paul Costa, and Robert McCrae.

The five questions are as follows.

1. How *open* is the person to experience? At one end of this scale are people who are insatiably inventive and curious, always ready for a new adventure. At the other end are the ploddingly consistent and cautious, uninterested in anything new. The degree of “preference for novelty” is another way of phrasing this question.
2. How *organized* is the person? At one end of this scale are people who are highly efficient, with a place for everything and everything in its place; dutiful, conscientious, with strong self-discipline. At the other end are people described as easy-going or careless; unpredictable, ready to jump to action—or not, as the mood takes them.
3. How *outgoing* is the person? At one end of this scale are people who vastly prefer the company of others, to the degree that they become drained when alone and are always looking for company. At the other end are people who get their energy by writing books that grow far too long in the quiet of their country offices, surrounded by nothing but trees and rainfall, then snowfall, then rainfall again. (Ahem.)
4. How *agreeable* is the person? At one end of this scale are those who trust easily, are compassionate and warm towards others, and are ready to cooperate. At the other end are those who are habitually suspicious and slow to trust—not necessarily malicious, but slow to warm up.
5. How *neurotic* is the person? At one end of the scale are those who could be called sensitive or nervous, who take everything personally, have thin skins, and are easily roused to anger, fear, and anxiety. At the other end are those whose feathers never get ruffled, whose emotions are stable, who are secure and confident in all circumstances.

Groups can use these “big five” questions in a story elements exercise by placing each character element at some point (or area) on each scale. One way to do this is to draw five vertical lines in a space; copy the character element names five times; then place the sticky notes on each scale, sliding them up and down until they seem to be in the right



places. As the character elements are considered, patterns of gaps and concentrations should appear. For example, maybe none of the character elements created are outgoing; or all of them are neurotic; or only the ones that have to do with planning are organized. Annotations can be added in another color to highlight interesting patterns among the elements. Finally, groups can discuss what they have learned from asking these questions about their character elements and what that means about the project and the community or organization.

You can find out more about the “big five” personality traits—well, all over the internet, to begin with. I would suspect you would find these described in many recent psychology textbooks as well. This body of research is so well-known that it is fairly easy to find manifestations of it in many textbooks of psychology and even in popular self-help books about psychology. I’m not going to suggest a particular book, but that’s just because there are so many out there that you don’t need my help choosing one.

## Value story elements

Value elements are created in response to the question, “What *matters* to the characters in this story?” A set of value story elements helps people think about what matters, and what *doesn’t* matter, to different groups of people in the community or organization—and how those values might come together or clash.

### **Comparing values with the Rokeach Value Survey**

This model, which is really just a list of values, is used to survey people about their values in empirical psychological work. It was developed by the psychologist Milton Rokeach in the 1960s.

The values are grouped into two sets of eighteen values each: *terminal* values (things people would like to achieve by the end of their lives) and *instrumental* values (ways people would like to be, or see in others).

The terminal values are:

1. A comfortable life (a prosperous life)
2. An exciting life (a stimulating, active life)
3. A sense of accomplishment (lasting contribution)
4. A world of peace (free of war and conflict)
5. A world of beauty (beauty of nature and the arts)
6. Equality (brotherhood, equal opportunity for all)
7. Family security (taking care of loved ones)
8. Freedom (independence, choice)
9. Happiness (contentedness)
10. Inner harmony (freedom from inner conflict)
11. Mature love (sexual and spiritual intimacy)
12. National security (protection from attack)

13. Pleasure (an enjoyable, leisurely life)
14. Salvation (saved, eternal life)
15. Self-respect (self-esteem)
16. Social recognition (respect, admiration)
17. True friendship (close companionship)
18. Wisdom (a mature understanding of life)

The instrumental values are:

1. Ambitious (hard-working, aspiring)
2. Broadminded (open-minded)
3. Capable (competent, effective)
4. Cheerful (lighthearted, joyful)
5. Clean (neat, tidy)
6. Courageous (standing up for your beliefs)
7. Forgiving (willing to pardon others)
8. Helpful (working for the welfare of others)
9. Honest (sincere, truthful)
10. Imaginative (daring, creative)
11. Independent (self-reliant, self-sufficient)
12. Intellectual (intelligent, reflective)
13. Logical (consistent, rational)
14. Loving (affectionate, tender)
15. Obedient (dutiful, respectful)
16. Polite (courteous, well mannered)
17. Responsible (dependable, reliable)
18. Self-controlled (self-discipline)

Usually the best method when you want to compare two sets of things is to draw a table in which one set comprises the rows and the other the columns, the cells representing combined pairs between the two lists. In the cells some kind of annotations are made: letters such as “A” for agree and “D” for disagree, sticky-note explanations of how each pair holds together or doesn’t, or simple dot marks in cells where agreement occurs (and nothing otherwise). After the table is complete, patterns should appear in which some areas of the table are busy with markings while some are empty. If the rows and columns are sorted in some way (say from positive to negative, or personal to societal, or common to rare) the patterns can be even more revealing.

Building a patterning table with a set of story elements against the thirty-six Rokeach values is somewhat daunting, though it does have the highest probability of revealing interesting

patterns. If reflecting on a set of created values is important to your project, you can set aside the time to do this well.

If you can't spare that much time or attention, I can think of three alternatives to using the entire list of Rokeach values.

- **Trimming.** You could prune Rokeach's lists of values to remove elements you think would be less likely to come up in the context of the sensemaking workshop. For example, "Mature love" is not likely to come up in a project about weather forecasting, and "Salvation" is not likely to be useful in a project about a town park. You can do this before the session, or you can ask groups to remove some values from the Rokeach lists before they start using them.
- **Ranking.** Instead of thinking about how every story-element value pairs up with every Rokeach value, groups could quickly pick out the *top three* Rokeach values for each story element and mark only those in the chart, leaving the rest of the pairs unexamined in detail. This is still a pairwise comparison, but it's a faster one, more like skimming than fully considering the values.
- **Clustering.** Instead of making a table at all, groups could write each value (their own and those from Rokeach's system) on a sticky note, then move both sets of values around so *proximity* means similarity. This might be more or less difficult to accomplish, depending on how many cross-connections there are between values. Still, this method is faster than making pairwise comparisons in a table, and it might draw more imagination from groups who need to range more widely in their thinking.

You can find out more about the Rokeach values and their history and uses in Rokeach's 1973 book *The Nature of Human Values*.

### ***Evaluating values with the Competing Values Framework***

This model was developed by Robert Quinn and John Rohrbaugh in the 1980s, as part of a study on the indicators that distinguish effective organizations. The framework sets up two axes, each describing a tension between two values: *stability* competes with *flexibility*, and *internal focus* competes with *external focus*. Effective organizations, say the framework's authors, manage these competing tensions by achieving paradoxical mastery over all four values at once (becoming, for example, both stable *and* flexible).

The two axes come together to describe four ways of looking at values, called "models," thus:

1. **Human relations model:** Flexible, internally focused. In this view, what matters most is that people work well together, get along with each other, enjoy their work, and reach their *potential* individually and collectively.
2. **Open systems model:** Flexible, externally focused. In this view, what matters most is that the organization is *dynamic*, agile, fully informed, ready to seize opportunities as they appear, and prepared to grow rapidly.
3. **Rational goal model:** Stable, externally focused. In this view, what matters most is that the organization is effective, competent, and above all *productive* in meeting its goals.

4. **Internal process model:** Stable, internally focused. In this view, what matters most is that the organization works perfectly, like a *well-oiled* machine, with excellent information and knowledge management, internal communication, and stability of process.

Later, in work with Kim Cameron, Quinn used the original two axes of tension to define four organizational culture types based on how the tensions are resolved. The types are:

1. **Clan:** Flexible, internally focused. Like a family, this culture is based on trust, teamwork, and participation. People look forward to becoming involved in synergistic achievements, looking to be part of something bigger than themselves.
2. **Adhocracy:** Flexible, externally focused. This risk-taking culture is focused on innovation, freedom, and growth. People are curious and inventive, and they hope to surprise everyone by discovering the next big thing.
3. **Market:** Stable, externally focused. This competitive culture values high expectations, rapid development, and toughness. People are driven to succeed, outperforming all previous scores and leading the market.
4. **Hierarchy:** Stable, internally focused. This bureaucratic culture is rule-bound and proud of it. People are careful and cautious; teams run smoothly; errors are quickly detected and fixed; processes are under perfect control; results are guaranteed.

To use the Competing Values Framework in a story elements exercise, ask each group to lay out the two dimensions of the framework on a space, as if this were a landscape exercise. Don't mention the four quadrants yet (if people know about the quadrants, ask them to leave them off the space for now). Then ask each group to place their value story elements into the space based on where they think each fits on the two dimensions. Is the value more closely related to stability or to flexibility? Does it have more of an internal or external focus? As with a landscape exercise, any values that could arguably be in two places can be split into two sticky notes with the two aspects that cause the split placement noted.

Once each group's value story elements have been placed into the space, groups can then apply labels to the four quadrants (from either of the two lists above, or from others—there are more quadrant labels available if you look around the internet). Then groups can talk about what their placements mean. Are any of the quadrants empty? Are there similarities between the values in each quadrant? What can groups learn about the values they drew from the stories by looking at them against this framework?

To find out more about the Competing Values Framework, see the original paper by Quinn and Rohrbaugh ("A spatial model of effectiveness criteria: Towards a competing values approach to organizational analysis"). By the way, Quinn and Rohrbaugh also came up with personality-trait mappings for the Competing Values Framework, which you could use for comparison with character story elements. Look for the CVF and roles, and you'll find it.

## Composite Stories

These are some story templates I've found by poking around in books and on the internet. As I've said with every other exercise, these are not the models you must use; these are

the *sorts* of models that work. It's easy to find more of these; why not look around and see what you find?

## Aristotle's plot points

The Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote in his *Poetics* about the structure of dramatic plays around 330 BCE, and his three-part drama has been used for centuries.

However, if you read what Aristotle *actually* said about plays having three parts, you'll find it is not all that meaningful. What he actually said was this:

A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles.

That isn't very different from what the Red King said to the white rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*:

"Begin at the beginning," the King said gravely, "and go on till you come to the end: then stop."

I almost wonder if Lewis Carroll was making a joke about Aristotle. It's hard to find a less useful statement about stories than this. *Anything* that has duration can be said to have a start, a finish, and something in between, but that can't help anybody build a good story.

The useful parts in the *Poetics* come later on, like this one:

Every tragedy falls into two parts, Complication and Unravelling or Denouement. ... By the Complication I mean all that extends from the beginning of the action to the part which marks the turning-point to good or bad fortune. The Unravelling is that which extends from the beginning of the change to the end. ... Many poets tie the knot well, but unravel it ill. Both arts, however, should always be mastered.

Now *that* we can use. In any story, things get complicated, then things get resolved. That is a very simple story template with only two slots in it: *complication*, or the tying of the knot; and *unraveling*, or the untying of the knot. We can use that. And we can ask people to think about things like: What *is* the knot? How does it get tied? How does it get untied? That's a nice and simple, but thought-provoking, story template. It is also easy to add elaborations to it, such as repetitions (increasingly intricate complications, for example).

Aristotle also hints at a story template with more pieces to it, thus:

Plots are either Simple or Complex, for the actions in real life, of which the plots are an imitation, obviously show a similar distinction. An action which is one and continuous in the sense above defined, I call Simple, when the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of the Situation and without Recognition. ...

A Complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such Reversal, or by Recognition, or by both. . . .

Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity. . . .

Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a Reversal of the Situation. . . .

Two parts, then, of the Plot—Reversal of the Situation and Recognition—turn upon surprises. A third part is the Scene of Suffering. The Scene of Suffering is a destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds and the like.

The people who wrote Monty Python's "Spanish Inquisition" routine must have read this part of the *Poetics* (the two important things—the *three* important things) about complex plots. Supposedly this document was not actually written by Aristotle, but was a set of lecture notes jotted down by his students. When you understand this, the hesitations in the text make sense. Aristotle knew there were three plot points he wanted to talk about, but his students didn't. (The funniest thing about Aristotle's *Poetics* is that you can now find student-written—wait for it—study notes about it on the internet.)

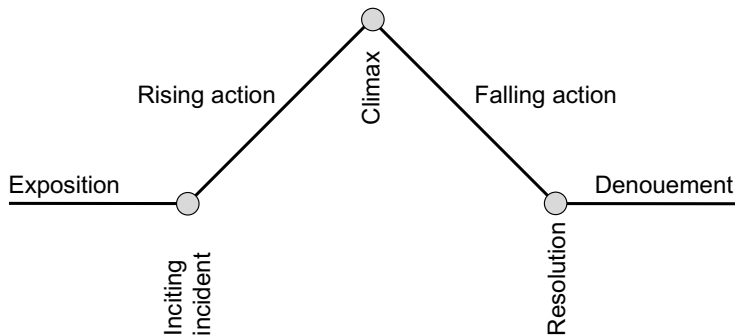
So we can add to the complication and unraveling three more elements: *reversal* of the situation, *recognition* of the state of affairs (by the story's protagonist, presumably), and a scene of *suffering*. The next question is, *where* should these things be added? Should they be between the complication and the unraveling? Within them? Aristotle didn't say, so your guess is as good as mine.

Here's an idea. Why not offer up these additional plot points as free-floating elements your participants can use in their simple story template wherever they think they work best? This would give people some "spices" to make their story more engaging, but allow them to choose where—and if—they want to apply them.

To find out more about Aristotle's *Poetics*, which I highly recommend reading, just look in your local library for classical documents, or search the internet, where free copies abound.

## Gustav Freytag's pyramid

Freytag was a playwright and novelist who in 1863 proposed a five-part "dramatic arc" for stories. The structure is usually called a pyramid because it is drawn in a triangular shape.



The parts of the pyramid are as follows.

1. **Exposition:** The setting and characters are introduced. There may be hints of conflict in this part, but they are muted.
2. **Inciting incident:** The story's central conflict is introduced, and this sets the plot in motion. This event can also be called the inciting moment, the precipitating incident, or sometimes the story's "hook" (as in, the hook that draws people into the story).
3. **Rising action:** A series of events builds the story's tension and excitement as the conflict introduced in the inciting incident plays out. This is sometimes called the complication.
4. **Climax:** Also called the crisis, this is where the story turns and things change, for better or worse. In a tragedy things usually get worse at this point; in a comedy things usually get better.
5. **Falling action:** The conflict begins to resolve itself, in one way or another. The protagonist might solve the problems created by the conflict, or they might be saved by someone else, or they might simply be defeated by the situation.
6. **Resolution:** The conflict is fully and finally resolved.
7. **Denouement:** The conflict and its resolution are explained and reflected on, and all loose ends are tied up.

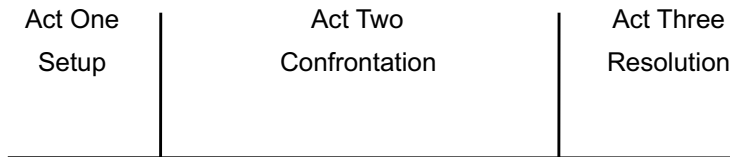
To find out more about Freytag's pyramid, you can read his original book (*Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*), in German or in English. The English translation is out of copyright and freely available on the internet. Or you can search the internet, on which you will find dozens of slightly varying descriptions of Freytag's structure.

## Syd Field's Paradigm

Field was an American screenwriter and teacher of screenwriting. His 1979 book *Screenplay* lays out a three-act structure he calls "the paradigm." His ideas have been widely taken up in screenwriting. This structure, like Freytag's pyramid, comes with a diagram. The diagram is used in a few different forms. I'll show it to you in four versions, from simplest to most complex.

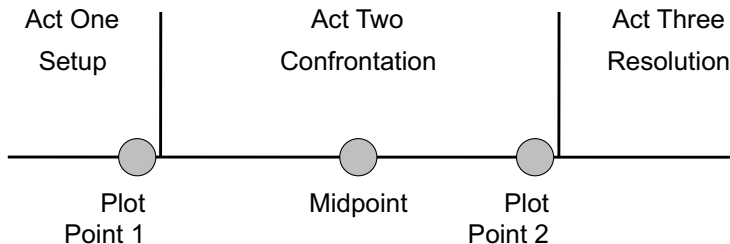
In its simplest form, Field's paradigm divides a story into three acts:

1. **Setup** (Act One): Introduces the setting and characters.
2. **Confrontation** (Act Two): The protagonist of the story struggles with something.
3. **Resolution** (Act Three): The conflicts in the story are resolved.



A slightly more complex version adds three surprising plot points, as follows:

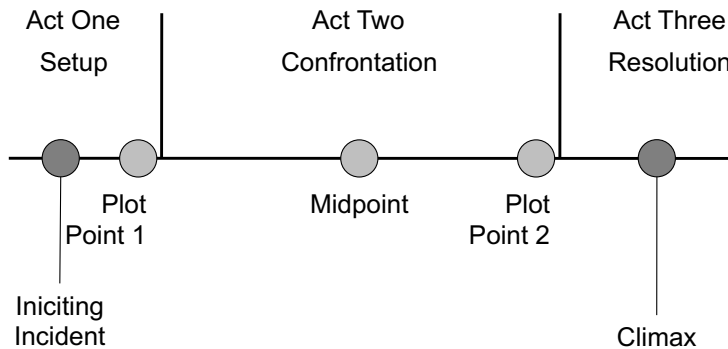
1. **Plot point 1:** This point, near the end of Act One, is a surprising event that changes the protagonist's life. It is not the same as an inciting incident (that comes in the more complex form of the model); this is more like something that changes things so completely that there is no going back to the way things were in the first act.
2. **Midpoint:** This part of the plot, usually midway through Act Two, keeps the confrontation phase of the story full of energy by putting forth a surprising reversal.
3. **Plot point 2:** This point, near the end of Act Two, adds another dramatic surprise. This time the surprise ends the period of confrontation and begins the period of resolution.



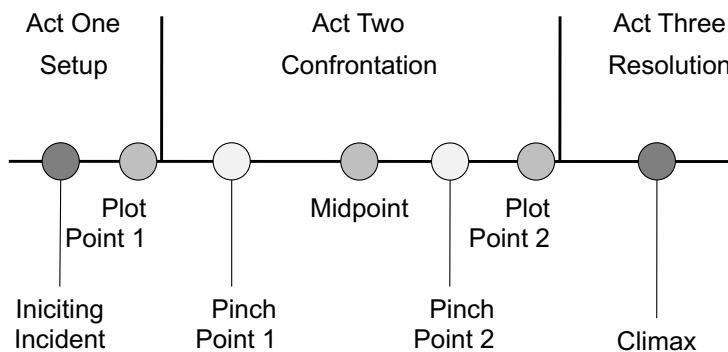
A third version adds two more incidents to the setup and resolution phases:

1. **Inciting incident:** Also called the catalyst, this is the point in the setup in which events are set in motion.
2. **Climax:** Here is where the main conflict or problem of the story is completely and finally resolved, and the protagonist succeeds or fails in the attempt.





Finally, there is one more level of complexity in the full paradigm, which adds two “pinch points” that give the confrontation complexity and remind the audience of the central conflicts underlying the story.



You could use Field's paradigm at any of its levels of complexity. Or you could use it in stages, by having groups work their way through its four versions one at a time. Or you could ask each group to choose a level of complexity.

You can find out more about Field's paradigm by reading his book *Screenplay* or by reading any of the (many) interpretations of it on the internet.

## Stein and Glenn's story grammar

Starting around the 1970s, several researchers have studied how children learn to tell stories, what sorts of stories they tell as they learn, and how they remember and retell stories. In 1977, Jean Mandler and Nancy Johnson created a detailed “story grammar”—a set of expectations about the structure of stories, which children learn from their elders—based on an analysis of orally transmitted folktales. In 1979, Nancy Stein and Christine Glenn simplified the grammar for use in instruction.

When Mandler and Marsha Goodman tested Stein and Glenn's model in 1982, they found that when people were told stories that did not conform to the model (due to events being out of order or omitted), they *altered* the story as they retold it in such a way that it conformed to the model. Educational specialists have since recommended that children be

helped to understand this “universal” story grammar, so as to improve their comprehension of learning materials.

Stein and Glenn’s grammar is as follows.

1. **Setting:** The characters and other elements of setting are introduced.
2. **Initiating event:** Something happens that starts the story moving with a problem or dilemma.
3. **Internal response:** The protagonist reacts to the initiating event. The response is called “internal” because the protagonist’s feelings about the event are important in the response.
4. **Attempt:** The protagonist takes action to resolve the dilemma or solve the problem.
5. **Consequence:** The protagonist’s action has some outcome, good or bad.
6. **Reaction:** The protagonist responds to the consequence.

The benefit of using this story template is that because it was developed with the instruction of children in mind, it is relatively simple. It has no stage directions or plot twists. It just follows the feelings of a protagonist attempting to solve a problem.

You can find out more about this story grammar by looking up the references mentioned above (see the References Cited appendix for details; look under Mandler and Stein). I don’t see this model used much outside of the world of primary education, but if you search for terms like “story grammar” and “story schemata” (schemata are sets of expectations) you are likely to find out more about it.

### **Kenn Adams’ story spine**

Adams is a playwright with much experience in improvisational theatre. In his book *How to Improvise a Full-Length Play* he outlines his “story spine” structure, which he calls a “tool” for improvisation. The story spine goes like this.

- The Beginning (or Balance)
  - Once Upon a Time...
  - Every day...
- The Event (or Catalyst or un-Balance)
  - But one day...
- The Middle (or Quest for a Resolution)
  - Because of that...
  - Because of that...
  - Because of that... (etc)
- The Climax
  - Until finally...
- The Resolution (or New Balance)
  - And ever since then...

To use the template, ask groups to fill in each of the ellipses with inspiration from a collected story. Note that this model includes some repetition in it (“Because of that...”), which is in the nature of a quest.

The benefit of this template is its absence of categories. You don’t even have to use the names for the parts of the story (like “The Beginning”). You can just use the conversational prompts (like “But one day...”). If you need something very simple and quick, this template may be perfect.

To find out more about the story spine, look for Adams’ book *How to Improvise a Full-Length Play: The Art of Spontaneous Theater*, or search the internet for the term “story spine.”

## Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey

Campbell was an expert in comparative mythology and religion. His “hero’s journey” story structure claims to capture the fundamental pattern of myths around the world. The hero’s journey has seventeen stages broken up into three larger phases, as follows.

### Separation

The separation phase of the journey involves the hero’s transition away from the normal world.

1. **The call to adventure:** The hero begins in a normal situation (normal to the hero, that is) with life going on as it always has. Into this world comes some kind of message or challenge inviting the hero to enter into a new adventure.
2. **Refusal of the call:** The hero at first ignores the call, possibly through fear but possibly through an obligation to others. Eventually the hero has a change of heart and takes on the challenge.
3. **Supernatural aid:** Some sort of magical or supernatural helper (human, animal, or object) arrives to help the hero on the quest. The helper may seem weak or insignificant at first, but later turns out to be critical.
4. **The crossing of the first threshold:** The hero begins the adventure by taking leave of normal routines and surroundings.
5. **Entering the belly of the whale:** The hero enters fully into a dangerous situation. There is no going back, and the story’s tension increases.

### Initiation

In the initiation phase, the hero endures tests and trials, and emerges changed.

1. **Road of trials:** The hero passes through a series of tests in order to begin the transformation into what they will become. During these tests the hero’s allies and enemies become apparent.
2. **Meeting with the soul mate:** The hero encounters someone or something that symbolizes love, birth, and creation. This could be an actual person or supernatural being, or it could be an idea or even a memory, but it represents positive energy.

3. **Overcoming temptation:** The hero encounters someone or something that symbolizes temptation, in the form of short-term relief. If the hero succumbs to temptation, the quest will fail. The hero must pass through this ordeal in order to continue the quest.
4. **Atonement with power:** The hero discovers and confronts the true source of power that controls the hero and the journey. By grappling with this power, the hero takes full responsibility for the journey. This stage ends when the hero defeats, reconciles with, or gains the support of the power. The hero and the power reach a state of atonement, or balance, between them. (This stage is sometimes called “Atonement with the father,” but it doesn’t mean a literal father; just the father as a *symbol* of power.)
5. **Apotheosis:** The hero ascends to a god-like state (which is what “apotheosis” means), achieving power through the deeds in the initiation phase. The hero may change in appearance through gaining new understandings and abilities. (Glowing is common.)
6. **The ultimate boon:** The hero achieves the goal of the journey and receives a boon or reward of some kind, thus resolving the most important tension of the story.

### **Return**

The return phase of the story is all about what happens *after* the goal of the quest has been achieved.

1. **Refusal of the return:** Having achieved the goal, the hero faces the responsibility of bringing the reward back to the ordinary world. But the hero does not *want* to go back to the life they led before. They want to stay in the excitement of the adventure.
2. **Magic flight:** The hero decides to return home with the boon. Pursuit is sometimes involved (generally by whoever had the boon before the hero got it) to keep up the excitement.
3. **Rescue from without:** The hero is rescued from pursuit by an unexpected helper. The hero may need help with their return because they have been weakened by the quest; or the journey back may be long and difficult. In any case, the hero’s ego, which had been inflated by success, is corrected by their realization that even a returning hero needs help.
4. **The crossing of the return threshold:** The hero returns to the ordinary world and attempts to integrate the exciting journey with the banalities of daily life. This may be even more difficult than crossing the first threshold, since the hero must find meaning in ordinary life that they never needed to find before. This is the hero’s final challenge.
5. **Master of the two worlds:** Having overcome the final challenge of reintegration into ordinary life, the hero can claim mastery of both ordinary and quest worlds, able to exist in both and move freely between them.
6. **Freedom to live:** Having faced the ultimate challenge and succeeded, the hero becomes free of the fear of death, thus free to live without fear and enjoy every moment for what it brings. The hero may become a teacher or leader. They may not be judged fairly by others in the ordinary world, and they may not stay there, but they have the freedom to choose where and how they will live because of what they have achieved.

Headly stuff, huh? This is a complex story template. I would only use it in a long session with highly motivated participants. Still, it could help people think deeply about change in a community or organization.

Campbell's original structure has since been modified by several authors into simpler models with eight or twelve stages, but I find that the simpler versions leave out some of the most interesting aspects of the original scheme. You can find out more about Campbell's "monomyth" (as he called it) in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. If you look around on the internet you can find this structure (and the simpler ones) applied to explain many popular movies (including *Star Wars*, which George Lucas edited based on Campbell's book). Another benefit of using this template, though it is complex, is that a lot of people know about it, and some will be excited to have the chance to use it.

### Labov's and Waletzky's model of conversational story structure

You might recognize this one; it's from the "How Do Stories Work?" chapter of *Working with Stories*. There I called it the "iceberg" model of conversational story. It's just as good a story template as any, and it's a nice simple one.

The three parts of the story "above water" are pretty much exactly the same as those in any of the simple three-part story structures you've read about so far.

1. **Orientation:** The setting is introduced.
2. **Complication:** Things get complicated.
3. **Resolution:** Things get resolved.

You can use this as a very basic story structure for this exercise, especially in cases where you think people will be reluctant to do anything more complicated.

As a second step, or combined with the basic three-part structure, you can ask groups to deliberately plan out *conversational* elements of their stories that will aid in the oral delivery of the story. Ask people to add these things:

1. An *abstract*: Before the story starts, the storyteller gives the audience a quick up-front idea of what the story will be about.
2. One or more *evaluation* statements: During the story, the storyteller reassures the audience that the story is worth listening to.
3. A *coda*: At the end of the story, the storyteller explains why the story mattered in the context of the sensemaking workshop.

As with the three parts of the story above the water line, these conversational elements should be inspired by stories from the collection. If not inspired by an actual plot, they can be inspired by a phrase, an image, a metaphor, or any other allusive element. For example, if a group is building a story about civic duty, for their evaluation they might find a phrase that rings true in a collected story—say it's something like, "If I want to get what I want from this town, I'd better do my part."

## Algis Budrys' seven point plot structure

Budrys was a science-fiction author and critic. He came up with a simple plot structure that is easy to fill in, thus.

1. A character
2. in a context
3. has a problem
4. and tries to solve it
5. and fails—and tries and fails some more, in bigger and bigger ways
6. and finally succeeds or finally fails, in the biggest way of all
7. and the story is over.

I've actually simplified this a bit. Budrys calls step six "victory or death" and step seven "affirmation." But I like the simple nature of the first few parts, so it seems useful to extend those throughout. What I like about this structure is its simplicity: no fancy words, no magic flights, just the bare bones of people facing challenges. It may be too simple for some groups in some settings, but for people you think would be daunted by some of the more fancy-sounding schemes, this might be the right fit.

You can find out more about this structure in Budrys' 2010 book *Writing to the Point*.

## Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory

Todorov was a philosopher who developed his "theory" of narrative form through analyzing the structures of classic fables, primarily those in Boccaccio's *Décameron*. As seen by Todorov, stories have more of a circular than a linear structure. Central to his view is the concept of equilibrium or balance, which is disrupted and restored in every story.

Todorov puts forth five stages to a story, thus.

1. **State of equilibrium:** Everything in the world of the story's protagonist is as it has always been.
2. **Disruption of the equilibrium:** Some event or action throws everything off balance.
3. **Recognition that the disruption has occurred:** The story's protagonist becomes aware of the disruption.
4. **Attempt(s) to repair the damage:** The protagonist makes one or more attempts to return things to a state of balance.
5. **Restoration of a new equilibrium:** Things return to a state of balance, though not always in a positive way; final failure can lead to an equilibrium of loss.

Within one story there can be one repetition of this departure from and return to equilibrium, or there can be more than one disruption. Multiple disruptions generally build to a climactic last restoration.

You can find out more about Todorov's theory by reading his 1971 essay "The Two Principles of Narrative."

## Phase models

All of the models described in the timelines exercise section (page 159) will also work as story templates. Models for timelines are models for stories, after all. Any phase-based model can work as a story template, or as the inspiration for building one. If you look back at those models now, you'll see that many of them bear some resemblance to these story templates.

## Using story templates

*Enough with all the story templates already!* That's what you're saying, isn't it? I thought you would. But I *did* have a good reason for putting so many templates in front of you, and it isn't just my usual reason of being annoyingly thorough. I wanted you to *notice* a few things.

- I hope you noticed the *fundamental similarity* in these story templates. Even though they were created by people from a variety of fields, in a variety of centuries, and for a variety of reasons, they never contradict each other. They just offer slightly different views on what makes up a story.
- I hope you noticed the interesting *variety of flavors* in these story templates. Maybe one seemed accessible to you, another was logically sound, and a third struck you as particularly engaging. That's why it's a good thing that there is no one canonical story structure I can hand down to you on tablets of stone. Diverse views of story form suit themselves to diverse contexts of use.

So why does it matter that these story templates are the same and yet different? What does it mean to *you*? It means that you have the freedom to use whichever of these templates you like, or tweak one of these templates, or find another not on this list, or blend two or more of these, or make up your own entirely new story template. As long as what you use substantially agrees with what I've listed here, it will work to help people build stories.

As you think about what story template you would like to use for the composite stories exercise, think first about the educational backgrounds and experiences of your participants. Choose a template that's simple enough for them to understand yet complicated enough to be interesting and challenging to them.

Think about *your* readiness to use the template as well. If you have chosen a template but don't feel ready to explain it, learn more about story form in general. Read more folk tales, then come back to the template you've chosen and think through it again. You need to understand the template very well, because you need to be able to explain it to other people. So if there is a template you think looks interesting, but you can't quite get it into memory—the words seem strange or the order seems wrong—choose another one, or change it. Make sure you can draw or recite the template from memory before you use it in a sensemaking workshop.

Remember to test any story template you want to use by running through the exercise with real people considering real stories. Ask people lots of questions about the template as they work, and be prepared to make small changes as the experiment proceeds.





# Part II

## Practical Advice

Each of the six chapters in this part of the book contains general advice on doing PNI work. All but the last two of them were originally written for inclusion in the third edition of *Working with Stories* and have been living ever since in *More Work with Stories*.

Chapter	Page	Name
8	195	<a href="#">PNI Opportunities</a>
9	205	<a href="#">PNI Dangers</a>
10	221	<a href="#">PNI Perceptions</a>
11	233	<a href="#">The Trickster Role of the PNI Practitioner</a>
12	255	<a href="#">Practical Ethics in PNI</a>
13	261	<a href="#">Why PNI Is Hard</a>



## Chapter 8

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# PNI Opportunities

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I would like to give you a more in-depth idea of what you can do with PNI than the quick summaries I wrote in the introductory “Why work with stories” section (at the start of *Working with Stories*). So I skimmed over some of the reports, records, and other project-related writings I’ve amassed in my PNI project work over the years. Every time I saw a *project outcome* (something someone found out, confronted, noticed, discovered, enabled, or put in motion), I jotted it down. As I did this, I translated every outcome from specific to generic, partly for client confidentiality and partly to make the outcomes transfer better into any situation you might be facing.

When I got through all of my project materials, I clustered my list of project outcomes, clustered those clusters into higher-level clusters, gave the higher-level clusters names, and removed redundant items. The notes in the sections that follow are summaries of real (usually much more detailed) notes on outcomes of real PNI projects.

Note that in many of these project outcomes there is mention of a fictional-composite “us” and a fictional-composite “them.” Usually “they” are the people who told the stories and “we” are the people who asked them to tell the stories. These groups *can* be the same people, but sometimes they are not.

My highest-level clusters were:

- Climbing through the looking glass—finding out what you look like from the other side
- Building a field guide—finding natural distinctions among storytellers
- Exploring natural history—getting to know your storytellers
- Talking to the elephants—confronting taboo problems
- Harvesting ideas—finding solutions you hadn’t thought of
- Healing the machine—building trust

I will go through each of them in order.

## Climbing through the looking glass

One of my favorite parts in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* is when Alice discovers that things in the world on the other side of the mirror are not the same as what you can see in the mirror:

Then she began looking about, and noticed that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was a different as possible. For instance, the pictures on the wall next the fire seemed to be all alive, and the very clock on the chimney-piece (you know you can only see the back of it in the Looking-glass) had got the face of a little old man, and grinned at her.

This is an excellent metaphor for seeing yourself through the eyes of other people. When you look into a mirror, you see yourself reflected in a mechanical way. You *look*, but you do not *move*. Asking people questions in controlled surveys with closed-ended questions that exclude exploration is like looking into a mirror.

But when Alice *climbed through* the mirror into the other room, she saw things she could not have seen without going there. Asking people to tell you stories is like that. When you immerse yourself in the stories people tell, you are not just looking into their world. You are *going there*. The outcomes in this cluster all have to do with that.

### How they see us

These project outcomes reveal how another group sees the group collecting the stories.

- Is that *really* the way they see us?
- Do we *really* come off that way?
- I would have never thought people would use *that* word to describe us.
- It appears that people see our role as *this*, when we thought they thought our role was *that*.
- We thought they saw us as *helpers*, but they see us as unwelcome outsiders who don't understand and can't help.
- People don't think we *know* about this issue. They think we aren't *aware* of their problems with it.
- We thought the way they see us was simple, but it is complex and contradictory.
- These people feel they have a different relationship to us than *these* people do. That must be why they have interpreted our actions so differently.
- These people don't think *anybody* is listening to their needs, least of all us.

### What they think we are saying

These outcomes discover how a communication has been interpreted, which is not always how it was meant to be interpreted.

- So we see it like this and *they* see it like that. It's amazing that we could interpret the same thing so differently.

- That is *not* what we thought they thought that word meant.
- So *that's* how they have been interpreting that thing we said. That was not what we *thought* we were saying.
- We hadn't realized this issue *could* be looked at from that point of view.
- If they think *that*, it explains why they reacted to what we said in that way. Perhaps we should have said *this* instead.
- We never even realized people were seeing *this* as different from *that*. Now that we come to think of it, they *are* different, from *that* point of view.
- So if we hear *this*, from now on we know it means *that*, not *that*.
- We asked about *this*, but people responded with feelings about *that*.
- People interpreted *this* to mean *that*, which must mean they think *this*.
- Perhaps the way we asked this question *led* people answer in that way. Maybe that word *cued* them into a meaning we hadn't intended to convey.

## Building a field guide

This cluster has to do with gaining a better understanding of the characteristics and groupings of other people. It points to one of the most frequent outcomes of PNI projects: that people become aware of subgroups among groups they thought were uniform, or people become aware that specific subgroups are different than they thought.

These project outcomes give people a sort of *field guide* to the groups involved in an issue so that messages and approaches can be tailored to what works best for each group.

### Species identification

These project outcomes explore what people are really like, which is often not the way they were seen before the stories were collected.

- *These* people are held back by *this*, but *those* people are held back by *that*.
- We had assumed that all of the reasons people had for doing this were the same. But *these* people did it for this reason, and *these* people did it for this other reason. We should not be treating both groups in the same way. What works for one group will not work for the other.
- We assumed those groups would be very different in their outlook, but these areas of commonality are surprising, and useful.
- This thing we've been doing *seemed* to be working because *these* people were responding favorably to it. But these *other* people had the opposite reaction, and we didn't see their feelings because the *first* group was more vocal. But the second group has been increasingly unhappy with what we've been doing, and that could be a problem.
- People in this situation need something quite different than people in *that* situation, but we have been treating them all the same. *That* might be why there has been such a variable response and outcome.

- So we've been paying more attention to *these* people than to *those*. No wonder that group feels upset.
- We thought *these* people had a problem with this, and they do; but it's a surprise that *those* people have a problem with it too.
- We thought *everybody* was concerned about this, but in fact only *these* people are concerned about it, and these *other* people are concerned about this *other* thing instead.
- These two groups of people are having contradictory reactions to our messages. For one group they are appealing but to the other group they are upsetting.
- It looks like the people in these different groups not only have different experiences with respect to this issue; they seem to also have different *expectations* about what the issue entails and what is normal.

### Species interaction

These project outcomes uncover how two different groups of people come together or split apart.

- Wow, these people really live in different worlds. No wonder they don't see eye to eye.
- It looks like *these* people are making a lot of assumptions about *those* people that are not always based on accurate information. Perhaps helping them learn more would reduce some of these problems.
- These two groups define what is good and right differently.
- We hadn't realized that people with different backgrounds saw the issue so differently.
- These two groups of people seem to be working at cross purposes.
- When *these* people talk about this, they mean something different than when *these* people talk about it, and that is just because of the nature of their experiences being different, not because of any confusion or lack of education about it. It makes sense now that they *would* see it differently.
- So these people are afraid of *that*, while those people are afraid of *that*. I can see now why they seem to work against each other. Perhaps addressing *this* could help.

## Exploring natural history

The project outcomes in this cluster have to do with getting to know people better: studying them, really. Understanding why people do what they do and say what they say (especially when it is important to make sense of what they have done and may be about to do) is an area in which PNI excels.

### Life history: what makes people tick

These project outcomes reveal essential facts about the feelings, beliefs, and perspectives of a group of people.

- So *this* is what motivates them. That's a surprise.
- Is that really the way they see themselves?

- These people are doing things for more complicated reasons than we thought.
- *That* was not what we expected people in that category to say. We will have to think again about that category and what it means.
- We hadn't realized these people feel that this issue is so central to their *identity*. If we seem to block them on that issue we are threatening them more than we thought. If we *help* them on that issue we may be able to help them more than we thought.
- Where people fall on *this* scale seems to have a big effect on how they responded to this issue.
- People don't seem to want to waste their time talking about this issue.
- This situation seems so dangerous to these people that they seem unable to talk about it at all.
- It looks like people felt they *had* to answer this question in only one way.
- These people are more proud of their ability to do *this* than we had realized.
- The fact that they said *this* means that they haven't thought much about *that*.
- They told a different story if they gave *this* answer than if they gave *that* answer.
- We always thought they were like *this*, but they seem more inclined to *that*.
- The people who it *seemed* would be most likely to say *this* said *that*, and vice versa.

### **Behavioral study: why people do what they do**

These project outcomes reveal not so much what people are like, but what explains their actions (or inactions).

- So *that's* why they did that. We didn't know that.
- We never realized *that* was holding them back from doing what we thought would be easy for them to do.
- So *this* is why these people are so afraid of *that* happening.
- *This* must be a trigger for them. Maybe if we didn't do *this*, they might not react so strongly to *that*.
- We had thought everybody would care about this issue, but it looks like whether people feel like they should care about this issue is heavily dependent on the *role* they see themselves as playing.
- This seems to be a problem for people, but they seem to think they can't do anything about it and are resigned to the status quo. No wonder they feel hopeless.
- This group of people doesn't seem to see the problem we are trying to address at all. It looks like they don't think it exists.
- It looks like these people just *can't* do anything about the issue we have asked them to help us with. It's not that they don't care, it's that they are unable to help.

## Habitat study: wants and needs

These project outcomes explore what people need to be satisfied with the conditions they find themselves in.

- So *that's* what these people want. That clears things up.
- We hadn't realized that these people need *this*. We haven't been giving it to them. No wonder they're upset.
- These people *say* they want *this*, but they aren't aware that they *really* need *that*. Perhaps helping them with *that* will help them.
- We keep asking these people what they want, but they don't *know* what they want. They are more confused than we thought. We need to look into this more.
- They really need *some* of this, but we've been giving them *too* much of it, and it is having the opposite effect. We need to match what we give better to what they need.
- We thought we were overdoing this, but it looks like people want even *more* than we had been doing.
- We thought people didn't want to be bothered with this issue, so we were avoiding asking them about it. But in fact they have been *offended* because they feel ownership for it and resent being left out of it.
- People seem to be saying that things used to be like *this*, and now they are getting more and more like *that*, and they wish it wasn't happening.
- Wow, they *really* don't like it when we do *this*. But they don't mind *that*.
- So they consider *this* a lesser evil than *that*. We thought they were the same.
- People really hate it when *that* happens.
- We thought *this* issue was hampering people, but it doesn't seem to bother them at all.
- So they *like* it when we do that! We were not even doing it on purpose.
- It's interesting that we got such a tepid response on this. We thought it was important to these people, but apparently they don't care about it.

## Talking to the elephants

Nearly a standard result in PNI projects is that the elephants in the room break their silence and start loudly telling story after story to anyone who will listen. As a result it becomes impossible to continue to deny the existence of problems everybody knows about. Such a release can have a cathartic effect, whether people are sitting alone in private offices, having lunch with friends, working together in a meeting, or sharing stories across an organization or community.

However, the moment when the elephants begin to speak out is also one of the most dangerous moments in a PNI project, because people are most likely to turn away or shred the project in reaction. This is one of the reasons why confronting a mass of collected stories is best done in the context of a facilitated sensemaking workshop.



For example, say you have collected some hundreds of stories, and you are going to have a few dozen people work with the stories in a sensemaking workshop. You might think you should send out the stories for people to read before the workshop, as “homework,” to save time for the more important activities that will take place in the workshop.

I’ve seen that done, and I recommend against it. If people encounter the stories alone, perhaps in the midst of other work, they will not encounter them when they ready. But when people arrive at a sensemaking workshop *and understand why they are there*, they are ready to make the most of the opportunity of conversing with the elephants and learning from them. There is an element of ritual, of *greeting the elephants* if you will, that smoothes the transition to self-awareness.

### Seeing the elephants: recognizing the problem

These project outcomes have to do with the moment of discovery, when people realize that there are elephants they have never seen before, that the elephants they knew about are bigger than they suspected, or that the elephants require their immediate attention.

- People *really* have a problem with this and need our help with it. We *can’t* just keep ignoring it.
- We knew people didn’t like this, but we were ignoring how *much* they didn’t like it.
- So this thing we were trying to do to *help* is actually *offending* people.
- We didn’t realize how much they were bothered by that failing in our approach. I guess we thought it was tolerable.
- We thought people knew we were struggling to fix this problem, but it looks like they think we don’t *care* about the problem.
- We knew people didn’t like these two things, but now we can see that they consider *this* one a minor annoyance. They see *this* one as *much* worse.
- We thought *this* issue was very serious, but here is *another* issue—one we haven’t even been talking about—that seems like it may soon dwarf the first issue in terms of impact.
- Oooh, *this* could be a bigger problem than we thought.
- I guess it’s time to start talking about *this*.
- The trend is *worsening*, not getting better.
- *This* is a portrait of a disaster waiting to happen.

### Listening to the elephants: understanding the problem

These project outcomes have to do not with discovering that there are elephants in the room but with beginning to turn the project’s attention to them and considering their shapes.

- *This* is why things keep going wrong!
- People never talk about this issue, so we thought they didn’t care about it. But from these stories it appears that they are taking it *for granted*. We had better not *stop* making sure it is there for them.

- It looks like people have particular problems in *these* interactions with us, and these *other* interactions go more smoothly.
- So *that's* where the rumors have been coming from.
- We thought the problem was caused by *this*, but in fact it looks like the problem is caused by *this and that* happening at the same time, with their effects adding up to the whole.
- We thought people were worried about *this*, but in fact they are worried about *this and that* at the same time, and we have only been addressing *this*. We had better start paying attention to *that*.
- *This* was described frequently, and it seemed to often lead to *this*. Perhaps we can watch out for it and help people avoid it in the future.
- It looks like people who are facing *this* have very different needs than people who are facing *this*. Perhaps we should start more carefully considering which set of conditions applies when we provide help.
- People need more help during *this* time than during *that* time. We should pay more attention to *this* time, since it is when problems tend to become more frequent.
- Perhaps *this* isn't a problem we can't solve. Perhaps it is just something that is in the nature of the activity and can't be fixed.
- *This* approach doesn't work very well for *this*, but it does work well for *that*.
- We thought *this* was causing *that*, but actually, from what people are saying, they think *this* is causing it.

### Living with the elephants: addressing the problem

These project outcomes have to do not with confronting or learning about the elephants, but moving towards action that resolves any problems they bring up.

- We've been going about *this* the wrong way.
- Our way of thinking about *this* may be overly simple.
- So *this* approach is clearly not working. It sounds like it is making things worse instead of better.
- We thought *this* was working for people, but clearly it isn't.
- We had thought to address *this* in order to help, but it looks like addressing *that* would help more.
- Wow, people really think *this* is a bad idea.
- *This* approach is more of a double-edged sword than we had realized.

## Harvesting ideas

The best story projects surprise people with new ideas. Being ready to be humbled by the wisdom of people who seem (at first glance) to know nothing about a thing, especially if it's about a thing you know a lot about, is a prerequisite for getting anything useful out of listening to stories.

## Ideas for doing things better

These project outcomes are discoveries of solutions.

- We never realized we could do *that* with *that*.
- If we changed *this*, we might get a better response than we have been getting.
- *This* probably won't work for what we thought it would do, but we might be able to use it for *that* instead. That's an idea worth exploring.
- So this *little* thing could have an impact on that *big* thing? We had not thought of that.
- It looks like *this* thing, the thing we were seeing as only a problem, is actually both a problem and an asset. I wonder what we could do to bring out the asset part of it.
- *This* looks like an opportunity to help people where we can really make a difference.
- Doing *this* looks like it would help people meet their challenges better.
- So *this*, when it is present, rubs off the rough edges of *this* and helps people get past obstacles to doing *this*.
- *This* seems to be something people wish could happen but don't believe is practical. How much closer to that ideal could we help people get?
- *This* is a portrait of an effective solution. We can use that.
- If we could help *these* people with *this*, they should have less trouble trying to do *that*.

## Ideas for helping people help themselves

These project outcomes represent new ideas, but not ideas to solve the problem: ways to help people solve their own problems.

- We thought *these* people couldn't help with *that*. But from these stories it looks like they *could* help. They even be a *resource* for dealing with *that*.
- Why don't *these* people work with *these* people? They seem to share a lot. Maybe connecting them would help both groups.
- If we supported them in *this*, they might be more willing to help *us* do *that*.
- The people who are most able to contribute to *this* can contribute because of *these* conditions. So if we improve the likelihood of those conditions happening, we might be able to help more people contribute and help everyone else.
- Ah, so people need to be able to do *this*, but *that* prevents them from doing it. Perhaps if we help with *that*, they will be better able to do *this*.
- If we gave people *this* opportunity, it looks like they would take advantage of it and help everyone by it.
- When people are thinking about *this*, they are less likely to do *this* than if they are thinking about *that*. Perhaps their frame of reference has an impact on the way they make *this* decision.
- We thought people weren't willing to be challenged in *this* way, but it looks like they would welcome the challenge and would rise to it.

- The common factor in these stories points to *this* issue. Perhaps if we can help people address it, *that* problem will be reduced as a result.

## Healing the machine

The project outcomes in my last cluster, unlike all the others, are not about things you learn by gathering stories. They are about *things that happen to people who tell stories*.

- People certainly have a lot of energy around *this* issue.
- When people talked about *this* they seemed to perk up.
- The exchange of stories in the group went way up when we introduced *this* topic.
- I wasn't sure people would open up about *this*, but we seem to have hit a vein on it.
- One of the people asked me after *this* session if they could come to another one.
- Watching that man's face when he told that story was amazing. He must be so proud of that accomplishment.
- *That* person *really* needed to tell *that* story.
- At first it looked like half the people were going to walk out! But in the end I think people were glad they were able to talk about *this*.
- *That* story just came spilling out, didn't it?
- It was amazing how *that* particular story rippled through the whole group and made so many more stories come out.
- I've noticed a change in how people talk about the project, now that they've actually contributed some stories. Word is getting out and more people want to be involved in it.

And now our fly-over view of the land of PNI opportunities has come to a safe landing. I hope it has been helpful in planning your own journey.

## Chapter 9

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# PNI Dangers

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The obvious topic to follow a list of PNI opportunities is a list of PNI dangers. To write about dangers I didn't have to pore over hundreds of project outcomes. Perhaps because negative stories stick better in memory, I was able to quickly come up with a short list of ways in which I've seen PNI projects come out badly. I will describe three classes of danger in increasing order of magnitude: dead silence, self-delusion mastery, and breaking the machine.

## Dead silence

The smallest danger in PNI work is that your collection attempt fails. You try to collect a lot of stories but get only a few.

I've seen this happen most often when project planners design confusing or vague questions, like:

Vague question	Likely answer
Have you had any experience with ____?	Yes.
Tell us your story of ____!	(A performative and possibly fake story)
Please describe your experience with ____.	It was fine.
What have you experienced related to ____?	It needs to change.

These are all misfires, and they all stem from poor communication about the nature of the request. People are not used to being asked to tell stories. If you are not quite clear about what you are asking people to do—tell you about the things that have happened to them and how they feel about them—you will get mostly opinions, statements, and scenarios.

I remember one project in which we had to add extra tags to distinguish the relatively few actual stories we got from the great mass of opinions and lectures. It wasn't our

participants' fault that we collected so many non-stories. We simply failed to communicate to them what we wanted them to do.

Another reason people sometimes fail to collect stories is that they don't know how to set a context for story sharing in an interview or story-sharing session. Their introductions are weak and rambling, and when people start telling non-stories, they either don't notice or don't know how to get the interview or session back on track.

If you have run into this problem, don't worry. The reason this danger is the smallest is that *you can recover from it* by trying again.

It's not always easy to get the *same* people to share stories again, but you can usually get *other* people from the same group to talk to you. In fact, I usually suggest to PNI newcomers that they deliberately experiment with a few different (but very small) story collections, so they can see for themselves what works and what doesn't, and they can practice trying, failing, and trying again. That's how I learned to do this work. I can start you out with some questions that work, but if you want to design and carry out your own projects, you will need to practice failing and recovering.

## Self-delusion mastery

Kaffee: I want the truth!

Col. Jessep: [shouts] You can't handle the truth!

*A Few Good Men*, 1992

Sometimes project planners collect stories, but they sabotage their own goals when it comes to getting anything useful out of the effort.

Self-sabotage is particularly prevalent in organizations or groups where a culture of denial is strong. People collect stories and then say, "See? We knew there wasn't a problem" or "See? We knew those people wouldn't tell us anything useful."

There are many ways to accomplish the feat of self-sabotage, intentionally or otherwise. As I looked back over the PNI projects I've worked on, I came up with no fewer than 15 ways in which I've seen people limit or destroy their own projects. Of course, all of the patterns I describe here can come about because of inexperience as well as avoidance, but inexperience and avoidance are mutually reinforcing. As people gain more confidence in doing story work, they become less afraid of what they will find.

### Too-safe questions

Sometimes project planners want to know something, but are afraid to ask the tough questions. So instead they ask very safe questions that tiptoe around the issue. As a result they don't get the stories they need to address the problem. They say "we'd love to know about this issue" but at the same time, "we can't possibly ask that!"

Now, granted, this problem is often not imaginary. Asking revealing questions can be tantamount to publicly admitting guilt. But there are ways to work out compromises so

that you still get most of what you need without showing your dirty laundry. There are ways to protect your public image while still getting the stories you need.

- You can ask about a general issue and hope the specific problem you want to find out about comes up. (This option is the most often used.)
- You can facilitate combined story-sharing and sensemaking workshops, keeping the stories inside the workshop and available only to those who attend it.
- You can ask safer questions in larger groups (e.g., in a survey) and riskier questions in smaller groups (e.g., in an in-person workshop).
- You can ask a mutually-trusted third party to gather stories for you, asking them to keep any potentially identifying information away from your eyes, thus helping people to speak up without fear of repercussions.
- You can restrict the availability of the collected stories so that a smaller number of people will be exposed to the raw truth. It is never useful to keep stories entirely secret (and it's not participatory), but there are ways to ensure respectful access. For example, instead of making the stories available on the internet, you can place them in the care of people who can talk to people who want to see or use them.

These are just a few options; there are many more. Working with the truth is like working with dangerous chemicals. If you are careful, if you work in a laboratory with proper ventilation and rigid safety protocols, much can be done. If you are not careful, little can be done.

## Coded questions

Sometimes project planners ask questions with hidden codes whose message is “Yes we are asking about this but *you had better not tell the truth* about it.” There are many, many ways to transmit signals of expected compliance, and they can be expressed without project planners even knowing that they are doing it.

There are three ways to guard against this issue:

1. You can build a diversity of perspectives into your planning group. As hard as it can be to work with people you don't agree with, it does make hidden messages easier to spot.
2. You can pilot-test your questions especially well. This has to be done carefully, however, since coded messages of expected compliance can reach all the way into questions about coded messages of expected compliance. In other words, the question “Does this question make you feel like it is asking if want to keep your job?” could be interpreted as “If you want to keep your job, say that this question is not asking if you want to keep your job.”
3. You can bring in a naïve outsider and ask them what they think. The uninvolved can sometimes say what cannot be said. Even if what they say is incorrect, it can still give you a fresh perspective. That's why I often suggest that people try out their questions with people who have nothing to do with their projects. It provides an alternative point of view that might be both ignorant *and* enlightening.

## Hopeless questions

Sometimes project planners have *low confidence* in the people they are asking to tell stories, or in the process itself, so they ask limp, redundant, pitiful, self-apologizing questions. This conveys a sense of hopelessness or pointlessness to participants, which causes them to feel that the questions they have been asked are not worth answering.

This can happen when project planners write questions for people they have disagreements with, or contempt for, or little knowledge of, or when they are doing the project because someone else is making them do it.

The situation reminds me of how my sister and I used to sell cookies door-to-door as kids. Our iron-clad winning pitch was, “You don’t want any of these cookies, do you?” (We also tended to run away or collapse in a giggling heap when people answered the door, which also didn’t work. But I digress.)

Pilot testing can help with this issue. But if you try to write questions and they come out limp, you might want to consider why you are doing the project and whether you actually want to do it. If you can’t summon the energy to find *something* that excites you about your project, you won’t be able to get your participants to respond with energy either. So ask yourself:

- Why *are* you doing this project?
- What are your hopes and dreams for it?
- What gets you excited about it?
- What would it be like if your project succeeded fantastically well?

Summon that energy as you talk to your participants. And if there is no energy to summon, rethink the project.

## Fantastic questions

Sometimes project planners get so caught up in the idea of stories that they want to hear amazing, astounding stories, and they try too hard to get people to tell them. They ask questions that are too elaborate or require too much of a creative response, or their questions have a hidden invitation for people to perform Hollywood versions of their experiences.

The result is two-fold.

- Some participants step up to the challenge and provide wonderful performances that reveal almost nothing of their true feelings or experiences.
- Other participants decide that they are unqualified to perform their meagre tales and walk sadly away.

If you want to ask people to tell stories, put away your storytelling books, and put away all the grand narrative ideas that go with them. You need to communicate to people that you really do want to hear about what has happened to them and how they feel about it, *even*



*it is very simple and plain and boring.* If you ask people to polish their experiences, or even *hint* that you are looking for polish, you will get polish without meaning.

An indicator: if you catch *anybody* apologizing for their stories, you are not approaching them in the right way.

## Off-base questions

Sometimes project planners ask questions that make no sense to their participants, or are even offensive or inappropriate, because they don't know enough about the worlds of their participants to ask in an appropriate, respectful way. Sometimes they don't *want* to know. As a result, the few responses that do come back are nonsensical, sabotaging, or self-promoting.

An extreme form of the off-base question is the question so far off-base that it invites bias and manipulation. For example, asking people about the behavior of other people must always be done in a circumspect, anonymous way. Asking people who is to blame for problems is an invitation to abuse.

The situation reminds me of something that happened when I was in college. I had a physics professor who I thought was a great teacher. He was always showing us wonderful experiments, and his delight in his subject was infectious (at least to me). But he was under-confident. He didn't convey authority. He stammered and mumbled, and some of his experiments went wrong, and he often wasn't sure what he was going to say or do next. I thought this was endearing, but some students thought it was an excellent opportunity to make fun of him (and maybe of teachers in general; I never understood it).

Eventually we were asked to do an evaluation of this professor. As the survey was being handed out, I overheard some of the students laughing about how they would ruin his evaluation as a joke. Some of them even cheated by putting in multiple bad reviews. He didn't get tenure, partly because of that bad evaluation. I wrote a letter to the university supporting him and telling the story of the cheating, but I'm not sure it made any difference. To some extent I blame the survey instrument the university used for the evaluation. They made it easy for the students to game the system.

## Poorly aimed questions

Sometimes project planners ask questions that are strongly focused on one issue, but the issue is not important to project participants, so they don't respond to it. At the same time, there is a burning issue that project participants *want* to talk about, but they are never asked about it. So the project goes nowhere.

I've seen this happen when the goals of PNI projects have been so rigidly structured and limited as to plan against surprise, usually out of fear.

If there are some things you want to ask people about, and you aren't certain that they will want to tell you about those things (and not other things), try doing some broad, undirected story collection first. Just ask people to talk about happy times and sad times, or surprises, or times when their views on things changed. Learn more about their general experiences and perspectives before you ask them about anything specific.

## Asking too many questions

Sometimes project planners ask good questions, but they ask too many of them. This can happen because planners:

- Have indulged in wishful thinking and set overly ambitious goals
- Think people will care more about an issue than they actually do
- Think they can force people to answer as many questions as they like (and it will still mean something)
- Think they will never get a chance to ask the questions again (so they'd better jam in a lot of questions)
- Have low confidence in their questions or participants or PNI in general (so they'd better ask more to get some)

For example, I remember a project in which somebody forced some employees to answer something like 100 questions about each story they told. You can imagine how many of those answers represented real thoughts.

## Asking the wrong people

Sometimes project planners ask good questions, but they aren't willing to ask the people who will tell the stories they need to hear. For example:

- They can't stand the idea of asking their patients, so they ask their doctors about their patients.
- They can't stand the idea of asking customers, so they ask their customer-facing staff about their customers.
- They don't want to ask their political opponents, so they ask their allies what their opponents think.

This results in stories that don't address the issues, sidestepping the real problem.

In my consulting work, I have sometimes helped my clients avoid this form of self-sabotage by using a landscape exercise to talk about the various communities or groups that might have stories to tell about an issue of concern. For example, you can imagine setting up a landscape defined by dimensions such as:

- Knowledge and control
  - How much do these people know about our product?
  - How much control do these people have over how our product is made?
- Impact and awareness
  - To what extent have these people been impacted by this problem?
  - How aware are these people that this problem impacts them?
- Experience versus feeling
  - How much experience have these people had with the topic we want to explore?
  - What is the attitude of these people towards the topic?

An exercise like this can transform your planning from asking “Who are we comfortable asking to tell stories?” to “Who can tell the stories we need to explore?”

## Asking at the wrong time

Sometimes project planners ask good questions of the right people, but they pick inopportune times for it.

This usually happens because people don’t know enough (or don’t want to know enough) about the people they want to tell stories. They call people during dinner, or they try to catch people on their way out of the doctor’s office, or they ask people for failure stories right after a success, or vice versa. Pilot testing and knowing more about your participants is the cure here.

## Using the wrong collection methods

Sometimes project planners write good questions, and the right number of questions, and they find the right people, but they approach the people in the wrong way.

This is often a “looking for your keys under the light because that’s where the light is” problem. Sometimes people want to do what seems more comfortable and familiar, even if it isn’t the best way. I worry, for example, about people gravitating to online surveys. Sometimes I talk to people who don’t even want to *know* what other methods are available. Sure, surveys are fast and easy, but they don’t work for all groups and topics.

Another thing I have seen happen is that project planners know they need to approach two different groups of people differently, but the prospect seems daunting, so they pick one approach and run with it. Then one group tells more meaningful and relevant stories than the other, and the project falls apart—or worse, “proves” that one group has little to say.

The best antidotes to this form of self-sabotage are: knowing your participants well, and learning enough about every story collection method to be able to use it when you need it.

## Not collecting stories

Sometimes project planners want to gather stories, but they don’t want to *learn* about how stories work. So they ask questions, but the questions don’t gather stories. Since they don’t know anything about stories, they don’t know that they didn’t get stories, so they don’t try to fix the problem. I’ve seen people go all the way into trying to work with the stories they collected without ever realizing that they didn’t collect any stories. When this happens, people usually conclude that working with stories doesn’t work.

This problem is easily solved. Take the time to learn the basics about stories and storytelling, and make sure that all of your helpers learn them too. Pay attention to the tool you are using. It will work better that way.

## Turning away from stories

Sometimes project planners ask the right number of good story-eliciting questions, of the right people, and in the right ways, and at the right times. But then when the stories *are* collected, they don’t want anything to do with them. They go to all the effort of collecting

stories, but when it comes down to actually working with the stories, they can't bear it. This is as human, raw, and understandable as what is in the stories themselves; but it can ruin a project.

I have dealt with this issue many times in my role as a consultant. Sometimes it has seemed to me that clients have wanted me to be an emotional sponge: to read the stories, "distill" the emotional rawness out of them, and "boil them down" into something they can better handle. I've had people say exactly that: "Why don't you look at the stories and boil them down for us." Boiling down stories can be useful in a logistical sense; stories can be redundant, and people might not have the time to read hundreds of stories. But sometimes, part of the reason people want to hire an outsider to "handle" their collected stories is to make it easier to avoid confronting the stories.

It is easier for an outsider to work with upsetting stories. I can sometimes help my clients work with their stories in ways they can't. Even so, reading raw stories is not easy for anyone. On some projects, especially those dealing with disease or mistreatment (perceived or real), I have had a hard time coping with the masses of disappointment and pain in the stories. It wears me out emotionally, as my family will attest. The colors drain out of the world when you are exposed to hundreds of stories of tattered hopes.

So there is a limit to even what an outsider can do. More importantly, narrative catalysis only works if it *complements* exposure to raw stories, not replaces or reduces it. When I create catalytic material for my clients, I work hard to *pass on* the emotions I find in their stories, even (and sometimes *especially*) the negative ones. Anyone who supports PNI by doing catalytic work must be prepared to take on this task. Catalysis must *highlight*, not hide, the raw emotions found in the stories. It must boil them *up*, not down or out.

When people turn away from the stories they have collected, there is not much chance of any real change taking place. Such projects are essentially doomed from the start. This is another "do you really want to do this project" issue. If you are going to start collecting stories, you should be prepared to find out what they say, whether or not you will have help from outsiders. Brace yourself. It will be difficult. But it will be worth it.

## Fighting with stories

Sometimes project planners do all the up-front work right and collect relevant and meaningful stories, and they don't shy away from the stories. But *while* they are encountering the stories, they work their hardest to deny everything the stories say. They fight with what they have collected.

Many times I've seen people find a reason (any reason) to disqualify stories that challenge their world views, even though they worked very hard to gather the stories. They say the stories are "hysterical," or the storytellers are "uneducated" or "irrational"—or many, many other manifestations of denial.

When people "yes but" the stories they have collected, they are destroying the insights they could be gaining, because *whether the stories are hysterical is beside the point*. The point is that *people felt that way* about their experiences, and *that* is what you wanted to find out.

Again, if you really want to hear what people have experienced, prepare yourself to let the stories ripple over you without struggling against them. Listening to real, raw, wild stories is like being caught in rapids: if you're not getting bruised, you're not in the rapids yet.

## Letting story projects die

Sometimes project planners collect relevant and meaningful stories, run productive sense-making workshops, and generate new insights. And then they let the project, and its stories, fade away into oblivion. They write a bland report and stuff it in a file repository somewhere. This can happen because:

- The project was never actually meant to create change. It was meant to provide lip service. For example, a product team might think: if anybody ever says we don't listen to our customers, we can drag out this project and display it. But we don't have to allow ourselves to be *vulnerable* to change.
- The project planners did want to create change, but they didn't think very far into the future. They didn't think about what would happen after their project was over.
- The project planners did want to create change, and they did think far into the future, but they had only partial or grudging support for the project, so the moment it was over their permission and access ended.

I can think of two ways to keep PNI projects from fading away:

1. Repeat the project. Make it into a yearly ritual. It might fade into the background in the between times, but it will surge again and again as the circle turns, in a new way each time.
2. Mix the project into your ongoing story sharing. Don't stuff it into a repository. Keep it as an *assemblage* of parts that can be re-assembled when a new need arises. For example, say the participants in your sensemaking workshop created a set of story elements. Those elements don't have to just sit in a file somewhere. They can be used to help people share new stories, which can produce new insights.

## Hiding story projects

Sometimes project planners carry out meaningful and productive story projects, but keep them hidden in a pocket of the organization.

Hiding PNI projects can sometimes be a necessary evil. PNI requires a degree of openness to disturbing truths that tends to evaporate in the highest strata of management. So pocketing is not always a danger; sometimes it's a disturbing truth.

If you are planning a PNI project in an organization, be aware that the appropriate degree of exposure is not always apparent at the start. I've seen several projects that had high promise and produced illuminating results but could not travel safely without being ripped apart by those to whom maintaining the status quo was an ongoing interest (hidden or otherwise, self-aware or otherwise). I'd say it's better to create a pocketed but enlightening project that might someday leave its nest than to try to spread a project so widely that it can never reach completion.

## The magic mirror of truth

Obviously I have thought a lot about the issue of self-sabotage in story work. But that's not out of some kind of morbid obsession. It just comes up a lot in my line of work.

Coming face to face with real stories about an issue you care about, or about your own organization or community, is not an easy thing to do. It is a plunge into the cold water of truth. I find that almost everyone is reluctant to confront the stories they want to collect. Sometimes the very clients who have asked me to help them collect stories with great enthusiasm have backed away when the stories were collected and stood waiting to be read. (People can get very busy all of a sudden!) At other times I have felt people emotionally putting on sanitary gloves and holding up stories as far away as they could reach, as if the stories were dead rats.

I know where this urge comes from; I share it. Who wants to hear the real truth about themselves? Nobody. It's useful, and helpful, and hard.

The concept of a device by which we discover deep truths about ourselves (or about things we care about) surfaces in many ancient and modern stories in the form of *magic mirrors*, devices that show us things we could never normally see. Sometimes magic mirrors show us things we should be able to see but have been actively avoiding. For example:

- In the story of Snow White, the queen is told by her magic mirror that she is no longer the fairest of them all.
- Beauty (she of the Beast) learns of her father's illness by seeing him in a magic mirror.
- Merlin uses a magic mirror to peer into the past, present, and future.
- Alice steps through a mirror to Wonderland
- In Tennyson's poem *The Lady of Shalott*, a cursed lady's mirror reflects the image of a world she cannot join.
- In Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story *Feathertop*, a dashing young man looks into a magic mirror and discovers that he is nothing but an enchanted scarecrow.
- In *The Neverending Story*, the magic mirror gate shows Atreyu his human counterpart (Bastian) as he truly is, not as he would like to be. Later, Bastian becomes his fantasy, but Atreyu remembers Bastian's true self and uses that knowledge to save him.
- In the *Star Wars* movie *The Empire Strikes Back*, the dark cave into which Luke Skywalker ventures serves as a magic mirror. Luke believes he is fighting his nemesis Darth Vader, but discovers that he has struck down his own self.

We all fear success when it means finding out that we are not what we thought we were. Our community is not united; our leadership is not treasured; our product is not useful; our plans are not welcomed; our hopes are not shared; our books are not worth reading. We fear discovering ourselves, as Hawthorne's *Feathertop* said, "for the wretched, ragged, empty thing I am!"

But of course, things are never that simple. Working with the complexity of stories means that we never find out such simple things. We may find out that our community is not

united in the ways we thought it was, but we may find out that it is united in other ways we had not imagined.

There are other things to fear. Magic mirrors can confound and mislead as easily as they reveal. Albus Dumbledore (in *The Sorcerer's Stone*) says about the Mirror of Erised:

[T]his mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.

Being misled or bewildered by the stories we hear—and the desires they express—is a legitimate fear as well. When planning projects, it is important to admit that listening to stories *can* be as distressing as it is helpful. Stories, especially the right stories, can turn the world upside-down. The fear of confronting the right stories (or the wrong ones) is a healthy and protective fear, one we should respect.

But at the same time, the great benefits of working with stories require us to put aside some of the instinctual protections that keep us safe. How can we resolve this dilemma? What can protect us from protecting ourselves?

The key is *narrative play*. In my experience, the safest and most effective way to work with stories is not to confront them directly but to deal with them *obliquely*, in a spirit of play. In all of our stories of magic mirrors, it is only those who approach the mirrors straight on, with great seriousness—the queen in *Snow White*, Luke Skywalker, Feathertop—who are hurt by what they see. Those who gain benefit from their magic mirrors—Alice, Merlin, Dumbledore—approach them obliquely, in a spirit of play.

For example, consider how Dumbledore responded when Harry Potter asked him what he saw in the Mirror of Erised:

“What do you see when you look in the mirror?”

“I? I see myself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks.”

Harry stared.

“Once can never have enough socks,” said Dumbledore. “Another Christmas has come and gone and I didn’t get a single pair. People will insist on giving me books.”

Is that his real answer? It’s hard to guess, isn’t it?

Similarly, in *Star Wars*, Yoda brings play into his very first conversation with Luke:

LUKE: How far away is Yoda? Will it take us long to get there?

CREATURE: Not far. Yoda not far. Patience. Soon you will be with him.

The “creature” is of course Yoda himself, playing with Luke’s idea of what a great Jedi master will look like. Yoda pushes Luke to imagine the impossible, to tap into forces outside of himself, to expand his definition of what is real beyond what can be seen.

LUKE: I don’t... I don’t believe it.

YODA: That is why you fail.

When Luke encounters his magic-mirror cave, Yoda attempts to explain to Luke that the cave is a game.

LUKE: I feel cold, death.

YODA: That place... is strong with the dark side of the Force. A domain of evil it is. In you must go.

LUKE: What's in there?

YODA: Only what you take with you.

Luke looks warily between the tree and Yoda. He starts to strap on his weapon belt.

YODA: Your weapons... you will not need them.

Luke gives the tree a long look, then shakes his head "no." Yoda shrugs...

Yoda is clearly setting up game-like rules for the encounter, with his "must" and "will" and "only." But Luke misses the point and cannot see the game for what it is. So Luke ignores Yoda's advice and enters the cave with his weapons ready, only to find he has slain not his enemy but his mirror image.

I always think of that scene of Luke entering the cave when I think of people fighting with their own PNI projects. When we confront real, raw, personal stories, we enter a dark cave and find ourselves waiting, cloaked in our deepest fears. But Luke's weapons did not help him in his cave; they only hindered his exploration. All the methods of self-sabotage I listed above are weapons we use to protect ourselves from success and failure. Like Luke, we do not need them, and like Luke, we find it difficult to leave them behind.

Play is the answer. Bring play into your project from beginning to end. Stories *are* games, and they are meant to be played with, not sorted and stacked and poked and prodded. It only makes sense that we should build game-playing into our PNI projects as well.

When I think of the way a sense of play benefits story work, I picture some of the most playful characters in folk tales, the tricksters, encountering magic mirrors. You might find such a visual image helpful as well. Think of Puss in Boots, for example, strutting into Luke's dark cave in his fancy boots, playing with the feather on his cap, singing a scrap of a song. Think of Coyote in front of the Mirror of Erised. Think of Anansi finding a scarecrow looking back at him. What would they do? (Chapter 11 (page [233](#)) explores this topic further.)

How can you bring play into your PNI projects? To begin with, when you are collecting stories, communicate the rules of the game to your participants, and know them well enough to set up rules they will be willing to play along with. Some such rules might be things like these:

- No names will be recorded. Everyone will know which stories are their own; but no one will know who told any other stories.
- Choose whichever of these questions matches what you feel ready to say.
- If you don't like this question, tell us why, and tell us what question you would prefer to answer.



- All mentions of names will be removed from stories as they are transcribed. All audio recordings will be destroyed after transcription.
- If any three people (or 10 or 50) agree that they don't want a story to be kept in the active collection, it will be archived.
- All experiences will be regarded as valid; none shall be regarded as authoritative.
- All answers to questions will be given equal attention.

And so on. By setting up rules that define the arena in which your project will be played out, you can prevent self-sabotage (or sabotage by your participants) by building in safeguards against your own need for protection (and theirs).

Many of the rules and structures of narrative catalysis and narrative sensemaking I describe in *Working with Stories* create game-like oblique approaches to stories. All of these ideas were developed not through abstract conjecture but from intense and often painful experience on real projects. In narrative catalysis, for example, we dance between views, playing one character, then another, until we cannot remember who we once were. In narrative sensemaking, we cluster, build, place, and construct, staying in the realm of creation and out of the realm of judgement.

In your own PNI practice, recognize these elements of play for what they are, and learn to understand their uses and merits. Don't put them aside as trivial accessories. For example, in a sensemaking workshop, don't just throw stories at people. Get people building things with stories *while* they are absorbing the stories, not afterward. Keep people, and keep yourself, in the context of play, so you can use the "partial suspension of the rules of the real" to approach the magic mirror of story work in a way that both helps *and* protects you.

Note that by play I do *not* refer to a game of pretense or affectation. This is often found in projects in which those in power *pretend* to address an issue everyone knows will be left untouched. Play *at* inquiry can be as disempowering as play *of* inquiry can be empowering.

To distinguish these styles of play I like to think of James P. Carse's terms (in *Finite and Infinite Games*) of *theatrical* versus *dramatic* games.

- Roles in a theatrical game "are scripted and performed for an audience." The outcomes of such games are predictable in advance: "we are always able to look back at the path followed to victory and say of the winners that they certainly knew how to act and what to say." This sort of PNI project—and I have seen some of these—does protect people from the truth, but such projects are empty performances, frauds. They are not *inquiries*; they exist only to conceal. If you find yourself asking people to "tell us your success story" or "talk about your best moment," beware: you are entering into the world of theatrical games.
- By contrast, the players in a dramatic game "avoid any outcome whatsoever, keeping the future open, making all scripts useless." Dramatic games are open to surprise. They are true games of inquiry.

One final bit of advice related to self-sabotage: bring Yoda with you to the mouth of your cave. In the passage from *Star Wars* I quoted above, notice that Yoda is not threatened by

confronting Luke's deepest fears. *It's not his cave*. Yoda can give Luke the experience he needs because Yoda entered and exited his *own* cave of self-discovery many years ago. He knows what Luke needs to do and has not yet done, and knowing this, he can give Luke the confidence he needs to enter the cave—if Luke would but listen.

In a similar way, you can ask someone who is unconnected to your identity to help you through your PNI project. Such a person might be your next-door neighbor, your grandmother, or a member of your knitting group. Find someone who cares about you but knows nothing—and maybe cares nothing—about your PNI project. Ask them to be your Yoda. Show them your questions. Read them some of the stories you gathered. Show them the patterns you think you see. Show them your plans for sensemaking. Ask them to point out any ways in which you might be sabotaging your own project out of fear or defensiveness. Ask them to question you, challenge you, even ridicule you. Ask them to help you stay in the world of play—dramatic play, not theatrical play—so you can keep your weapons where they belong and keep your project alive.

## Breaking the machine

Far worse than the danger of not getting stories or deluding yourself with stories is the danger of *breaking story sharing itself*. When this happens, you may blithely collect the right stories from the right people at the right time, and do all sorts of amazing things with them that help you in many ways, all the while making it impossible to ever do such a thing again because you have destroyed the trust that brought the stories out in the first place.

This danger can come about through inexperience, but it more often results from . . . I'm going to be kind here and say greed or stupidity, and not complete evil. Sometimes people ask people to tell them stories, but they lie about what they are going to do with the stories. This sort of danger is the worst because it is invisible. It is the customer who never returns; it is the kid who grows up hating; it is the citizenry that turns suspicious.

### A cautionary tale

The remainder of this chapter compares two web sites that were built to collect stories. I wrote it in 2014. As of 2025, neither of these web sites exists. The comparison is still useful, but the end of the story is different now than it was then.

The front page of The Experience Project” ([experienceproject.com](http://experienceproject.com)) was inviting. “Be real. Be yourself. Anonymously connect and share with others just like you!” Millions of “experiences” were being submitted. “It’s fast, free, and fun!”

Being the suspicious person I was, I read more. Low down on the front page, it said “Join now and get started in seconds, or [grudgingly, it seems] learn more about Experience Project.” I clicked there and read more wonderful stuff, with plenty of exclamation points about wonderful things! At the end of that, it said “Have more questions? Check out our

thorough Frequently Asked Questions.” Ah. Click. Question nine: “How does Experience Project make money?” The answer:

Given EP’s architecture, where people claim the experiences and topics that are most important to them while remaining anonymous (e.g., we don’t know a user’s address, phone number, or real name), EP provides advertisers a way to reach the people most receptive to their products— without overstepping boundaries.

The advertisers page (hidden even deeper) said: “Reaching exactly the audience you want has never been easier or more accurate.”

So that was the “project” of the Experience Project: selling access to storyteller eyeballs. People need to advertise. I accept that. I don’t have a problem with selling advertising. I have a problem with *lying* about selling advertising, which is what hiding something under pages of exclamation points is.

If this site was completely benign, if no boundaries were overstepped, why did I have to navigate to a remote cranny where probably something like one percent of people would dig down to find it? Why wasn’t that sentence on the main page of the site, next to “It’s fast, free, and fun!”? I wonder what would happen if the top page said “Help us use your personal story to sell advertisers access to your attention!”

People posted stories on [experienceproject.com](http://experienceproject.com) about unrequited love and grief and depression. I’m sure that talking about these things was useful to these people—but could they *all* know that they were being watched and targeted? I doubt it very much. I saw one post on the site that mentioned how strangely-appropriate ads kept appearing just after they had told stories. Checking the site again two years later, I found another post virtually identical to the one I found before. In each case, the poster wondered how that coincidence could have come to pass. So, clearly, people were using the site without any awareness of how it operated. The signup process included no mention whatsoever that advertising was targeted based on the content of stories told.

As a contrast, consider [storyofmylife.com](http://storyofmylife.com). This service kept submitted personal stories for sharing “forever” within one’s family, friend group, or support network, or with the world. There was a fee to create a network on [storyofmylife.com](http://storyofmylife.com), but this was explained up front (though I could not find out the price without registering, as far as I could tell).

The difference in presentation between these two sites was striking. At [storyofmylife.com](http://storyofmylife.com), the privacy policy was prominent, clear, detailed and well laid out. All of the people involved were described in detail. The mission and goals of both the non-profit that funded the site and the for-profit that operated it were well explained. Nothing was buried deep; everything was quickly and easily accessible. In fact, the first tab you saw on [storyofmylife.com](http://storyofmylife.com) was “Why Us?” and this led to a page about the goals and policies of the site. The site even went to pains to make it clear that advertisers were not given access to personal stories.

In short, the people who created [storyofmylife.com](http://storyofmylife.com) seemed to understand that helping people share stories with each other required transparency, respect, and care.

## The twist in the story

That's what I wrote in 2014. In 2025, the [storyofmylife.com](http://storyofmylife.com) web site is down, and the last comment on a Facebook group with the same name, written in 2016, is "Is there any way to get our stories?"

So I think I need to correct my original opinion about that site. In the end, both sites failed to help people share stories with transparency, respect, and care.

I did say in my 2014 essay that "Whether people are better off entrusting their personal stories to a proprietary, closed-source, centralized, fee-based, remote system is another issue." I didn't realize that "other issue" would turn out so badly. Maybe I should have been less positive about it.

Back then I ended this section by saying:

It is *never* necessary to trick people into telling stories, and it is *always* damaging to do so, no matter how laudable your project goals are. If you feel the need to hide *anything* about why you are collecting stories, who will see them, what you will do with them, who is paying you to collect them, or how they will be kept and distributed, you are in danger of breaking story sharing itself.

To that I would now add that if you take people's stories without a plan to give them back, you are in just as much danger of breaking the machine as if you lied about why you did what you did. And in the long run, we will all suffer for it.

## Chapter 10

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# PNI Perceptions

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I've been giving my PNI spiel for a long time now. I always watch how people respond to the spiel, and I have noticed some patterns in how people respond and how I deal with their responses. I thought it might be useful to write about this for you, because at some point you might find yourself giving similar talks.

When I tell people about PNI, they tend to respond in one of three ways:

1. This has no value
2. This sounds dangerous
3. I already know about this

Within each of those responses there are three sub-responses, which I will describe in the sections below. (Obviously all this *really* means is that I like to group things into threes.)

And then, for each sub-response, I have considered—guess how many—three possible explanations for *why* people had that reaction:

1. They don't know any better
2. They disagree with what I said
3. They have a valid point

Note that I have left out any reactions to my spiel caused by the way I give it or my personality. I originally had five overall responses, but realized that two of them were actually about me and not about PNI. I could write volumes about my investigations of why people like or don't like me, and some of it might even be interesting in a funny navel-gazing sort of way. But I don't think it's useful to the exploration of this topic.

## This has no value

The most common response to my PNI spiel is the *insufficiency* response. From this point of view, story work is not serious, does not scale, or has insufficient credentials.

## It's not serious

This reaction happens when people assume that talking about stories means talking about quilts and pie recipes. The primary indicator of this reaction is a lack of eye contact and a profusion of fidgeting. When I see people having this reaction, they might as well be making the “blah blah” hand signal in my general direction, it's so obvious that they are waiting for me to shut up. Do I get this reaction more often from men? Yes, I do, but it's only a matter of degree.

One tack to deal with this issue is to avoid the use of the word “story” and instead use terms with more authoritative sounding prefixes like narra- and cogno- and meta- and so on. I *sometimes* do this, but I refuse to do it entirely or all the time. I have gained so much respect for the great power and danger of stories that I don't *want* to put a hair shirt on it to make it appear more serious.

How do I respond when people react as though I've been extolling the wonders of Hello Kitty? I tell a war story. I've seen stories work wonders in projects with difficult, sensitive, even frightening topics, and I have the stories to prove it. If you have done more than a few projects (and they were not all about chewing gum) you should have some war stories of your own.

**When people don't know.** A good war story usually helps a lot in this situation. Through it people see that story work *can* be serious and want to learn more. This is not a difficult issue to educate people about.

**When people disagree.** A good war story can pry open minds, but usually it takes a few or several (of ascending severity), and people can pick apart tales of insufficiently resounding impact. That's fine; hold still and let them probe your experiences.

**When people have a valid point.** On a spectrum from chewing gum to bomb disposal, story work is *not* right up there at the top. It has its limitations. The sooner you can admit that, the more energy you can free up to help people find a way to make use of it.

## It won't scale

This reaction happens when people assume the only thing you can do with stories is listen to them one by one in small individual or group interactions. They see PNI as potentially useful on a small scale but impossible to scale up to larger problems (because it relies on intense human interaction). I find this reaction prominent when people believe their scope of attention is large, thus all small-scale solutions must be quickly discarded to save time.

To begin with, this is an erroneous assumption. *Everything* scales up if you have the time to do it. How did the ancient Egyptians build the giant pyramids with no earth-moving machinery? Simple. They thought there was nothing strange about pounding one rock onto another rock for ten years in a row. We believe there is no time for anything today, but sometimes we mistake *choices* for *conditions*. Some things are important enough to spend the time on, when the outcome is important enough.

However, the no-time assumption is so universal and iron-clad that I never try very hard or very long to struggle against it. Instead, when I sense a does-not-scale reaction coming, I

pull out a magic word: *quantification*. Having lots of time may be inconceivable to many people today, but having lots of *information* is comfortably familiar.

It is true that reading and making sense of hundreds or thousands of stories one by one does not scale well (given lack of time). But compiling *quantifiable interpretations* of stories by those who know them best does scale well. What's more, it scales back down too, in the sense that people in small groups can use patterns formed by hundreds of interpretations to make sense of their own local situations.

But beware: never invoke the powers of quantification in relation to stories without watching for the bounce-back soul-draining reaction. Sometimes people will counter that piling up any kind of data about stories strips them of their humanity. This reversal sometimes comes from the *same* people who said that stories do not scale up in the first place. This is not strange; it only reflects the deep-seated conflict between our village past and metropolitan present. In preparation for this reversal I hold in reserve another magic phrase: *mixed methods* research. Describing the way in which I use patterns to find stories and stories to find patterns often helps people understand that I attempt to balance the requirements of scale and meaning.

**When people don't know.** In this situation, people usually ask questions about exactly how stories and quantifiable patterns are used together. Having some examples on hand helps.

**When people disagree.** There are strong biases on either side of the spectrum of qualitative and quantitative research. I've met people who wouldn't touch a statistic with a ten-foot pole and people who would sooner eat a worm than sit through a touchy-feely story. When I sense that the person I am speaking to inhabits one extreme of this spectrum, I downplay the other extreme and reassure them that due diligence is paid to their part. This is never completely successful, but it helps.

**When people have a valid point.** Yes, trying to scale up while keeping things human *is* a difficult balance. Anyone who is honest with themselves will admit that a mixed-methods project will explore less deeply *and* less broadly than a single-methods project could. But on the other side of that loss is the synergism of exploring two worlds at once. Patterns and stories can help each other make sense. And I can tell some stories that illustrate that, of course. I'll bet you can too.

## It's not an established methodology

This reaction takes place when people evaluate the worth of the approach primarily by what institutions promote it, not by what it can do. This reaction often follows on the heels of the realization that the approach I am talking about has no journal, no academic departments, and no annual conference. A light goes out in the eyes of these people as they put me, and everything I say, into the "guest on Oprah" category. (My lack of credentials is one place where evaluations of myself enter into evaluations of story work.)

I do not fault people for this perception. I remember once as a child, on one of my family's epic treks across the United States, standing in a parking lot next to some national monument (Yosemite?) watching a messy, tipsy-looking man handing out brochures. I took

one. It turned out that he had his own private theory about physics and the cosmos, and he thought handing out brochures in parking lots was a valid way of promulgating it. I watched the people taking the brochures too, and the greater portion finding other ways through the parking lot. (These people are essential, the soap-box people, the ranters, the unhinged. If you can find one in a big city, get a cup of coffee and find a spot to watch. Not them: the others. The spectrum of responses is simply fascinating.)

From some perspectives, I am not one bit different from that man in the parking lot. A blog? A self-published book? A list of projects?

When I meet with this reaction I do a quick test. How high is the institutional-credential barrier? Is it impervious to utility? I usually conduct this test by telling a story. Not a story about me; a story about the power of story work. I can tell people these stories until they fall asleep, and long after that. If the person can see the utility of the approach for what it is, we can talk on. If the reaction in their eyes is “that’s nice, invalid individual,” I give up and move on. Can’t please everybody.

**When people don’t know.** People like this usually want to hear more. They want to know where PNI came from, who was involved in it, and how it was developed. People who are willing to evaluate PNI on its merits and put aside its rootlessness usually find value in it.

**When people disagree.** The wall around some academic researchers is so high and strong that no story could ever breach it. I know this because I once lived inside that wall. (Do I miss it? Yes, very much. I miss the unconditional love of the affiliated for the affiliated. But I don’t miss the privations and self-delusive constraints that went with it.) When I sense an exceptionally strong academic wall, I usually give up and go away. I was never one for climbing the heap. Nothing wrong with it, but it’s not my thing.

**When people have a valid point.** Certainly! I am perfectly willing to admit that I *made up* the name of Participatory Narrative Inquiry. I am open about the fact that it is idiosyncratic, incomplete, flawed, and derivative. I don’t think this is any *different* from most of the work people do in academia, but somehow the very fact that I am willing to cry institutional “uncle” seems to help people move past the institutional-credential barrier. Paradoxically, it helps people move on to evaluate PNI on its own merits. And when you evaluate PNI on its merits, it performs.

## This sounds dangerous

The second large class of responses I want to consider is based on fear and denial. It occurs when people understand—quite correctly—that story work has the potential to reveal unpleasant truths. This is not the whole truth; story work also empowers, enables, and energizes. But some people in some contexts believe that story work could hurt them, waste their money, or upset the order of things.

### This could hurt us

This reaction happens when people recognize, again rightly, that once a PNI project is set in motion, it *could* lead to them being asked to change or give up some power. This is the



essential nature of participatory action research, in which action is as much of a goal as research. People in positions of power are most likely to react in this way.

One thing I've noticed is that fear/denial reactions tend to be muted. When people feel the approach is silly or fringe, they communicate this quickly and loudly. When people feel threatened by the possibilities on offer, they get very quiet and very busy. This is not to say they are wrong in doing this; it's just how I've seen people react.

When I sense this reaction, I bring down the emotion in the conversation. I tell my tamest stories, ones about helping people sort out problems with their email clients. I emphasize that PNI projects can be done at many levels of intensity. Like a pediatrician with a needle, I mention small pilot projects as especially useful to gently probe sensitive wounds.

At the same time, I highlight PNI's power to address intractable problems. I talk about pent-up energy released, people grateful to be heard, feelings of inclusion and hope, openings, transformations. These are not lies. They are simply aspects of PNI that people need to hear about in this context.

**When people don't know.** Telling tame stories helps the fearful feel more at ease, but I've noticed that this doesn't work by itself. Something has to compensate for the danger, and that something is *the power to make good things happen*. People out of power often think those in power want nothing but more power. But that's not always the case. Sometimes they are frustrated at the fact that their power doesn't translate more efficiently to positive change. Showing them how stories can improve this translation can be compelling.

**When people disagree.** Sometimes I give the releasing-pent-up-energy argument and it falls flat. Usually this means people have become cynical or fatalistic and believe only in a Machiavellian world of control. In their view there is no energy to be released, and all transformations are affronts to their identity. This sort of reaction is a slamming door, and I usually just walk away from it rubbing my squashed nose.

**When people have a valid point.** Absolutely. At some times and in some places the challenge of change is too dangerous to consider. I cannot possibly understand the context and challenges of trying to keep an organization or community running in balance. If I sense this reaction, I fall back to a "planting a seed" stance, where I ask people to keep these ideas in mind for a future time when another context might make story work more appropriate. It's only respectful to do that.

## **This could waste our money**

This is the *return on investment* reaction. I usually see it in people who feel they are deprived of options or resources. That may be nice for the rich folks, they say, but we are dealing with reality here and can't afford this kind of high-risk work. We need to carefully mete out each penny we spend, so we will be going with a safe choice, like a standard survey, thank you very much.

How do I respond to this reaction? First, I talk about how story work can scale down to almost no cost at all. Go ahead and do your standard survey, I say, but why not add two narrative questions to it and see what you find out? Just a spoonful of narrative can help a

survey produce more delightful results. You don't have to find tens of thousands of dollars to get useful results doing PNI work. I have some stories about teensy PNI projects that still produced useful outcomes. I don't pull those out in front of the not-serious folks, mind you, but for the constrained they are encouraging.

Another tack I take in this case is to ask which resources are limited and which are not. Sometimes when people don't have money they do have time or knowledge or connections. Story work is possible on a shoestring if people are willing and able to build their own skills and can ask others for help. There are free tools, free books, and free advice. And there are exchanges of things other than money. I often exchange work for other things I need, like network connections, examples of work I can show prospective clients, and good word of mouth. So do a lot of other people. Resourceful people know that money is only one resource of many.

A third means of dealing with this reaction is to ask how people are spending their money now. If they are already paying through the nose for a solution that doesn't produce the outcome they need, they might want to consider redistributing their funds.

**When people don't know.** Usually when I let resource-constrained people in on the secret that story work doesn't have to be expensive, they get very excited. People making the most of scant resources are highly motivated to work toward their goals. A little encouragement to these folks often goes a long way.

**When people disagree.** Disagreement in this reaction usually goes along the lines of people claiming that I can't fathom the severity of their constraints. You rich consultants can't possibly understand our world, so any "solutions" you offer are just sales pitches intended to manipulate us into adding our pittances to your overflowing coffers. To this I respond: HA! I can describe the sorry state of my financial affairs in sufficient detail to cut any of these delusions off at the pass. However, I hate games of doing-without, so I only enter into them when the situation is dire. The better thing is to simply and respectfully ask: What are your constraints and how can I help you work within them?

**When people have a valid point.** This is another one of those "planting a seed" situations. If they truly do not have the means to do any story work right now, they might someday. In this case I offer only general educational help. As long as people understand what PNI can do for them, they can return to it someday when their prospects are looking up. In the meantime, they can continue to learn about it a little at a time and thereby improve their outcome when the right time does come.

## **This could upset the order of things**

The third reaction in the fear/denial category has to do with identity and class. I sometimes encounter people who believe that stories, or more precisely *those people's* stories, are beneath them. If I'm pitching story work to a CEO, for example, and the CEO begins to understand that they might actually be asked to listen to the experiences of people far below them, they (rightly) perceive dangers to well-established class boundaries. It's a mixing thing. The mixing of stories leads to a mixing of perspectives and power levels.

People who have this reaction display telltale signs of alarm and disgust on their faces, as though I had just used a double negative or dragged my filthy handkerchief across my sweaty brow. They look at the floor; they discover a prior appointment; they shuffle their symbols of authority around. If confronted with evidence of this reaction, those having it will deny it with hysterical force. They may not know they are doing it themselves. But you can see it happen, and if you talk about this work long enough you *will* see it happen.

I remember once pitching a story project at a government agency. At the start of the meeting, the room filled up with middle-aged male managers and their younger female subordinates. As my colleagues and I described how a story project could help their organization draw on the positive energy of the collective hopes people have for the organization's future, I watched the young women get more and more excited and the older men shut down. You could see it happening: one group was thinking "we could actually have an impact on how this place works" and the other group was thinking "they could actually have an impact on how this place works." The meeting ended when the managers wanted to constrain the project such that, essentially, there would be no way for the project to empower those at the bottom.

I've now seen this sort of thing happen several times in projects that had strong support until those in charge realized that those beneath might speak to those above, at which time the projects were abruptly and without explanation canceled.

How do I respond to this reaction? First, I control my own emotions. The respect I have grown for stories—for every single story told by every single human being, no matter how humble—is part of my own identity. After I emerge victorious from my struggle to *not* slap some sense into the person, I *attempt* to enter into name-dropping mode. People who know me know that I hate name-dropping and do it poorly, which is why I said "attempt," because I don't always succeed. Sometimes I can't get past the reaction and walk away under my own cloud of disgust.

But when I can sense some degree of humanity under the disdain, I respond to the reaction by bringing out some of the names of the heavy-hitters who have funded and approved of story work I've done. To be honest, I fail in this more often than I succeed. You might do better. I have sat at lunch with lots of important people, but I can never remember their names afterward. Status is just not a thing I pay attention to, which is bad for business. Still, if I have a fresh cup of coffee I *can* tell a few stories about government agencies and giant corporations that have supported and appreciated my PNI work in the past.

I cannot tell people honestly that there will be no mixing of classes in story work. But I can describe how other people in high places suffered no permanent damage from it and in fact received positive benefits. I can recount projects in which stories were collected in anonymous ways and in which maximal distances were retained between classes. Sometimes I dangle the "prince and the pauper" image of being able to listen in on the experiences of subordinates without being seen or heard. Essentially, I attempt to explain that the mixing is both worthwhile and controllable, to some extent, especially when the project is designed with that constraint in mind.

You might think this is pandering to the worst corruptions of power, but I don't see it that way. If I can get those in charge to listen to the perspectives and experiences of those not in charge, *both* groups can be helped by it. In fact I have seen that happen more than once. It doesn't have to be a zero-sum game.

**When people don't know.** People with this initial reaction are often relieved when I explain that they don't have to expose themselves to the rabble to conduct a PNI project. They often come back with issues they would like to address and want to hear about potential solutions.

**When people disagree.** Sometimes I fail in convincing people that story work is sufficiently safe, worthwhile, or prestigious. As I said, I know I have poor skills in this area, so I forgive myself and move on.

**When people have a valid point.** No story project can offer perfect safety to those in power. If speaking truth to power is empowering, telling stories to power is even more so. So yes, I do admit that the element of risk to power structures can never be completely eliminated. Story work requires courage on the part of those in charge. Only the most confident can pull it off. That's an Emperor-has-no-clothes ploy, but sometimes it works.

## I already know about this

When I first started talking to people about working with stories, this third category of reactions did not exist. But as the years go by, I find that it grows and grows. It is the category of reactions that mistake what I mean by "working with stories" for other things people do with stories, things the listener doesn't consider appropriate or useful. I separate this category into three sub-categories: sales, propaganda, and spiritualism.

By the way, I find this category of reactions much harder to deal with than the other two. It's easier to fill a void than it is to displace an object. When I talk about stories, if people have no idea what I'm talking about, I can educate them. But if they think they already know what I mean, if they have already tucked me into a pigeonhole, it's a lot harder to squirm out of the box than it is to build a new one.

### I already know about this, it's for selling things

This is the reaction in which people think I am talking about advertising, branding, marketing, television commercials, and so on. Once I talked for five minutes to a person about how you could learn so many things by listening to the stories people tell, only to have them respond with, "So you tell stories, right?" Sigh.

My guess is that the world of advertising has latched onto storytelling so strongly, and so many people have noticed it, that it has become *the* superficial understanding of what stories do and are for. That's sad. But at the same time, I have no wish to denigrate those who use storytelling to promote ideas and products. That would be the pot calling the kettle black, since I use storytelling to promote my own services. Still, I wish people were more aware of the entire spectrum, no, *world* of what story is to humanity ... a point about which I may have written from time to time.

So how do I respond to the it's-for-sales reaction? I draw attention to the fact that *people tell stories every day*, dozens of them. I find this necessary since so many people seem to have forgotten it. I point out that even somebody telling their spouse about picking their child up from school is a story, even if it doesn't have a special-effects budget. With that understanding in place, I tell a few stories about projects in which everyday stories, when collected together, have revealed astounding insights that have transformed understandings, provided new options, and spurred new action.

At that point, if things are going *really* well, I bring in narrative sensemaking and explain how people can work with stories to negotiate meaning. However, I hold that in reserve and only use it if we are over the first milestone (that everyday stories have meaning and utility). If people are not with me there, the sensemaking part only confuses them.

**When people don't know.** When people have this reaction out of a lack of information, they often become very excited about what is possible on the listening side of story work. There is little emotion involved in this perception, so the new information opens up options they want to explore.

**When people disagree.** Disagreements to these explanations are usually based on a poor opinion of everyday stories. I often find this reaction in people who write or tell stories professionally. They are so used to evaluating stories on form that they cannot admit inconsequential anecdotes told by untrained laymen to the status of being real stories. And if everyday stories aren't real stories, heaping them up won't lead to anything.

When I find this reaction, I call forth a few of the real everyday stories I remember from projects I've done. Some of those little stories, sitting there in the midst of hundreds, have jumped out, made me laugh or cry, and stuck with me.

For example, I remember a story on a project I worked on about medical conditions. It was about rheumatoid arthritis. I had been reading stories about several medical conditions, all painful and full of sorrow. But in this story, a man's greatest hope was that someday soon his wife could stretch out of the fetal position and just lay normally on their bed. He remembered days in years past in which he and his wife had taken walks in their garden. Who of us thinks of walking fifty feet as a dream lost, and lying still as a hope deferred? Can anyone call that an inconsequential anecdote? I can't.

**When people have a valid point.** This is the only "valid point" entry that I can't come up with something to say about. To my mind there isn't *any* valid point to be made about stories being "only" for sales. It's just so obviously wrong-headed. I have tried to think on both sides of the issues here, but on this one I find myself stumped. One glance at history should disabuse anyone of the notion that stories can only be used to sell things.

## **I already know about this, it's propaganda**

This is the reaction that stories are the same as propaganda, and that all stories and all storytelling are suspect as a result. Even when I say I advocate *listening* to stories, people with this reaction believe I mean listening in a lying sort of way, perhaps by asking leading questions, or listening to half the story, or distorting what is heard, or selecting what will be retold. They say that even though I say I only listen to stories, I am really *telling* stories

using the stories I hear (probably distorted) as input. In this view stories *are* lies, so they contaminate anything I could possibly do with them. Telling is lying, and listening is telling, so it's all lies from one end to the other.

How do I respond to this reaction? I describe the rules and safeguards that govern the use of PNI. I describe how in PNI we:

- invite participants to share their experiences in safety and freedom
- guarantee anonymity, both direct (no names) and indirect (no naming)
- ask participants to interpret their own stories (instead of having experts decide what the stories mean)
- separate observations (things anyone can see) and interpretations (views from perspectives)
- facilitate group sensemaking with open-ended exercises
- return the stories, data, patterns, and workshop records to the community or organization
- tell the story of the project (instead of reporting conclusions about data)

I don't deliver this as a lecture. Instead, I tell people *the story of an actual project*, one in which people discovered transforming insights. I talk about the role of a story worker as a shepherd who helps stories get to where they need to be while tending them with care and respect.

**When people don't know.** Sometimes people respond to this explanation with curiosity about the rules and safeguards of PNI. Where did they come from? What impact do they have? I am happy to explain. Next they want to know how they can learn how to use these rules themselves and how they can design a project that includes them. I am happy to explore that with them as well.

**When people disagree.** Sometimes people are skeptical that the rules and safeguards of PNI work. They say these are not rules to create transparency and respectful care of stories; they are rules with which to build elaborate self-delusions. They believe I *do* advocate the creation of propaganda, but, like the scientist cringing in the corner and crying out "they said they would use it for good," have told myself a story to excuse my own unethical behavior. If I believed that, I would stop doing this work, and I would stop trying to help other people do it. All of my safeguards have been hard-won. Each has a story of development, and I can provide clear before-and-after comparisons that illustrate why I think each safeguard is needed and why I think it works.

**When people have a valid point.** I'm sure I *do* delude myself to some extent. I'm sure I *do* fail in my quest to be a careful story shepherd. But I have seen such strong positive outcomes from story work that I think it is worth doing it (and worth continuing to improve my practice of it) anyway. When people raise this point, I humbly accept their criticism and say that I've thought long and hard about the issue myself. And then I tell a story about the positive power of story work, flaws and all.

## I already know about this, it's New Age crap

The final reaction in the “I know about this” category is that anything connected with stories must be connected to spiritualism. In this view, because I have used the word “story,” I am talking about asking people to connect their chakras, don hemp robes, and chant hymns to Mother Earth. From this perspective, anything related to story is both weird (meaning not-of-us) and based on delusions and misunderstandings, thus useless.

This view is related to the no-credentials and not-serious views, but it adds the “already know it” element of classing story work with snippets previously remembered from popular misconceptions about professional storytellers. (I went to a meeting of professional storytellers once, and there was altogether too much soul-bearing and hugging for my comfort.)

When people have this reaction, I tell them that PNI is not based on crystals or astrological alignment. Not that there is anything necessarily wrong with any of that. It's just not what PNI is about, and I've found that I need to watch out for people putting it into that box.

If a simple denial of this accusation is not enough, I bring out my war stories. I tell some stories about real projects that had real impacts in tough situations. I talk about relieving pain, detecting abuse, soothing conflicts, opening eyes to damaging assumptions. I shift the focus from the ethereal cosmos to the nitty-gritty street life of everyday stories.

Then, if things are going well, I talk about some of the positive outcomes that can be achieved in PNI work, like raising hopes and giving voice to the voiceless. But I'm careful about that, because to some very hard-headed people, any hint of hope will be taken as touchy-feely mushiness. For those folks I use mainstream cognitive terms like leadership and efficiency, and I avoid terms like empowerment and enablement.

**When people don't know.** Getting people to the point of understanding that I'm not talking about spiritualism doesn't always get me all the way home. Standing right behind the this-must-be-spiritualism reaction I often find the not-serious and not-credentialed reactions. They tend to bolster each other. So educating people on this particular point often requires a highly tuned performance, perhaps several, and a good deal of patience. If I do get through to people on this point, it's usually slowly and over time.

**When people disagree.** Sometimes self-identification with the mainstream (and only the mainstream) is so strong that no amount of protestation on my point will move people from their opinion that I am talking about strange doings. It's like I'm saying “blah blah story blah blah” and they can only hear that one word. So I use another word they like better: statistics. Nothing impresses the mainstream like statistical mumbo-jumbo.

Here's a suggestion. Find a stats textbook. Learn the basics. Internalize the names of a few statistical tests and other arcane paraphernalia of the priesthood. But keep these things in reserve and use them only in emergencies. And before you use them, check to make sure there is no one in the audience who actually *knows* what you are talking about and will detect that you are remembering fragments from a textbook or a stats course you took twenty years ago.

But seriously, folks, I don't try all that hard to pursue people who hysterically cling to mainstream conformity. If their mind isn't open just a teensy bit, they probably won't get much out of story work anyway.

**When people have a valid point.** All right. I admit it. Stories are touchy feely! They are about *emotions*. Of course they are not objective measurements of fact! But here is my counter-point: where have numbers got us? Is it not worth exploring what can be done, in a complementary fashion, to reinsert some humanity into the world of finding things out and making decisions? Can we talk to each other as human beings without rendering all of our cognitive functions floppy and spineless? Of course we can. And I have some great stories about how it has been done.

## The sound of understanding

You might be wondering why I am only talking about negative reactions. Doesn't anybody ever understand what I am talking about and see the potential of PNI? Sure, lots of times. When I see a light in their eyes and hear a *click* as PNI fits into a narrative-sized hole in their problem scope, I know we are ready to move to the next stage.

Then I ask people to tell me about a problem or issue they would like to tackle, perhaps one they have not been able to address to their satisfaction with other methods. Usually people can come up with these easily, and I listen and ask questions.

After that I do two things: I tell stories about projects around similar goals and problems I've worked on or know about from the past, and I throw out a fistful of ideas around projects they could do in the future. I try to match the size of the fistful and the ambition of the ideas to the level of risk-taking evident in the person I'm talking to. If I hear another click, we can start talking about more specific ideas. If I don't, maybe I didn't understand their problem well enough, and I need to ask some more questions about it.

I did think, at the start of writing this chapter, about sub-divisions of the "I get it, I can use this" reaction, but in the end I think it's like Tolstoy said. Happy conversations about story work are all alike, and every unhappy conversation is unhappy in its own way. When you can see that things are working as they should, off you go. If you have seen how well PNI works, you don't need my advice to talk with enthusiasm about it. It's only when you hit walls, as we all sometimes do, that we need to compare notes and help each other get the message out.



## Chapter 11

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# The Trickster Role of the PNI Practitioner

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Sometimes people ask me:

Do I have what it takes to be a PNI practitioner?

I never answer that question. When I get it, I respond as though the person had asked:

What can I *do* to become a PNI practitioner?

Because *anyone* can do PNI. It doesn't require any special talent, just patience and practice.

Certainly each person will have their own *style* of doing PNI, and certainly people have varying talents and preferences. I like writing books and reading stories better than I like facilitating workshops. But PNI is forgiving. If you don't do one part of it well, you can do another part of it well and find partners whose skills can complement your own. Few people can find no home in PNI.

So let's ask the question in another way:

What are the essential skills of a PNI practitioner?

The short answer is: the skills of a trickster.

The trickster figure is well known in all mythologies. You would have to look far and wide to find a mythologist or folklorist who *didn't* believe tricksters were essential to all societal systems of collective sensemaking. Tricksters play tricks on everybody and everything, on themselves, on others, on society, on life, and on death. They do this to protect themselves, but they also do it to help others. Tricksters have been helping people—inspiring them, challenging them, opening their minds—in the stories we have been telling each other for thousands of years.

To explain what I mean, I thought about quoting you great chunks of Lewis Hyde's incredible book *Trickster Makes This World*, but I decided not to. You probably already know something about tricksters already, and if you don't, I would rather you go and read that whole book.

What I will do is tell you some stories about what happens when you do, or don't, act as a trickster in PNI work. Luckily I have failed in this as much as I have succeeded, so I can supply your needs in both ways.

There are four essential ways in which PNI practitioners take on the role of a trickster: shape shifting, game playing, in-betweening, and hunting. I'll pull some stories out of my bag of experience for each.

## Shape shifting

Tricksters are hard to pin down. They can be anything, anyone, anywhere, anytime. They are rich and poor, stupid and smart, industrious and lazy, foolish and wise, selfish and kind, powerful and weak. Tricksters walk the line between preparation and surprise, full of confidence going in, yet ready to admit mistakes and start all over again.

Lewis Hyde explains how most animals have "species knowledge," a way of doing things that works and has worked for a long time. Tricksters have a different kind of knowledge.

Kingfisher, Snipe, Polecat, Bear, Muskrat—each of these animals has a way of being in the world; each has his nature. Specifically, each of them has his own way of hunting and, in these stories at least, he is never hungry, because he has that way. Coyote, on the other hand, seems to have no way, no nature, no knowledge. He has the ability to copy the others, but no ability of his own. . . .

What conceivable advantage might lie in a way of being that has no way? . . . whoever has no way but is a successful imitator will have, in the end, a repertoire of ways. If we can imitate the spider and make a net, imitate the beaver and make a lake, imitate the heron's beak and make a spear, imitate the armadillo and make armor, imitate the leopard and wear camouflage, imitate poison ivy and produce chemical weapons, imitate the fox and hunt downwind, then we become more versatile hunters, greater hunters.

Should you tell stories to elicit stories? I started out believing you should. I knew that people often responded to stories with stories in conversation. So I decided to start every story-sharing session by telling a story to the assembled group. I thought that by doing this I would "start the ball rolling" and help people tell meaningful and relevant stories about the topic we intended to explore. I spent hours carefully crafting, polishing, and rehearsing each story I planned to tell.

I did this several times before I realized that it was a huge mistake. Telling a story did start a ball rolling, but it started a very small ball rolling down a very narrow track. The stories people told in response to it were bland, meaningless, even defensively trivial. I wasn't getting them to reflect on what had happened to them and how they felt about it. I was getting them to perform.

I could see this in people's faces. As I told my carefully prepared and rehearsed story, I could see them thinking, "Ah, *that* sort of story. I'll tell a story just like *that*." They weren't looking

back over their experiences. They were looking at the shape of my story and figuring out how to match it.

Of course everyone saw a different shape in my story, so the stories people told did have a certain amount of diversity to them. But it wasn't a diversity of experiences. It was a diversity of interpretations of my implicit instructions.

So I stopped telling stories to get stories. I changed my way.

After that realization I tried several other approaches to get people started sharing stories. I don't remember all of the things I tried (this all happened 25 years ago), but one of the things I tried was *asking questions whose answers are stories*. That worked better than anything else, and it continues to work better than anything else.

But even that practice has shifted over the years. I used to ask everyone the same question—take it or leave it—and now I give everyone a menu of 3-5 questions and ask people to choose a question that appeals to them. I build diversity into my questions to address the diversity in the people who are answering them.

Using Lewis Hyde's terms, I present project participants with several ways they can imitate—they can imitate the spider and make a net, imitate the beaver and make a lake, and so on—so they can find a story they want to tell. Afterwards, I can ask them which way they chose and why they chose it, bringing even more insight to the exploration.

I learned the same lesson about methods of story collection. Today, when a project aims to address contentious, private, or highly emotional issues, I (strongly suggest to my clients that we) offer multiple ways for participants to tell a story, for example inviting them to attend a workshop, give a private interview, or fill out a web form. I have found that this practice increases the volume, diversity, meaning, and relevance of the stories collected.

## **Resistance to shape-shifting**

When you facilitate a PNI project, you may encounter some pressure to take on a fixed shape. This pressure will come in the form of weak or unevenly distributed participation.

People who are eager to participate in a project welcome shape-shifting. They recognize that it provides them with the freedom to take ownership over the project and shape it to suit their needs. When you give them options, they think and plan and contribute.

The situation is different with reluctant participants. They have no interest in owning or shaping anything, so the freedom you offer seems like a burden rather than a gift. When you give them options, they either respond with frustration or walk away.

If your project has more reluctant than enthused participants, you may end up becoming an *authority* on the project. By this I don't mean that people will look up to you as a role model or give you the keys to the city. I mean that people will develop a fixed set of expectations about what you and they will be doing in the project. Specifically, they will think you are going to do a lot, and they are going to do very little. Expectations like that can ruin participatory projects.

Here's a cautionary tale for you. Let's say that you have spearheaded a PNI project in your community. You set up story-sharing sessions; you transcribed stories; you created catalytic material; you facilitated sensemaking workshops. However, because few of your participants were truly engaged in the project, you kept running into situations like this:

- When you asked people to choose a question to answer by telling a story, they said, "Which do you think is best?"
- When you told people that a pattern in their stories could mean this or that, they said, "But what do you think it means?"
- When you asked people to build a story in a sensemaking exercise, they said, "What do you think our story should be about?"

The subtexts of all of these questions is: You are the authority here, and we are not, so we don't have to participate like you do.

Such a project will fail. It might run its course, and it might look fine on paper, but it will not result in useful insights, and it will not bring about change.

So, if you are planning a project and you see a no-you-do-it dynamic taking shape, stop, step back, and think about why people have so little enthusiasm for the project. What kind of project would they *want* to take ownership over? Can you build *that* project?

### ***Another example of resistance to shape-shifting***

When I first started building catalytic material for my clients, which were usually large corporate departments and government agencies, I often encountered a strong desire on the part of the project sponsors to back out of their plans to participate in the project.

Many of my clients were enthralled by the idea of collecting stories. They loved the questions we came up with together. But once the stories were collected, reasonable and well-meaning people sometimes got very, very busy. They would say, "Why don't you boil down the stories and the patterns, and just give us the highlights?"

It took me years to realize that when people said *boil down* they meant *boil out*. They wanted me to transform the raw emotions that coursed through the stories into "highlights" that were safe, calm, cold to the touch.

I don't blame them for this. I would probably do the same thing in their place. Facing raw stories of personal experience about people or issues you care about is an act of courage. As a PNI practitioner, you should be aware that other people will want, hope, and even expect you to have their courage for them.

Now that I understand this dynamic, when I prepare catalytic material for sensemaking, *I boil the stories up*. I find the strongest emotions, the greatest surprises, and the most flagrant airings of taboo issues, and I bring them front and center. I remember a project I worked on that had to do with a pension fund. I laughed out loud when I read one participant's response: "Pay up you thieves!" I made that the title of my report.

By boiling stories up I refuse to take on the fixed shape of an authority and instead shift shapes between authority, provocateur, naive fool, wise sage, pedantic scientist, and every other role I can think of to take on.

This does not always go over well, which is why it is necessary to have a big bag of shape-shifting tricks, a mischievous frame of mind, a wide variety of clients, and frugal habits. But when the shape-shifting works well, people say things like this (paraphrased from a real conversation):

Some of the things you said in this report were just ridiculous! They made me say, “Who is this person and why is she saying these things?” But other things were spot on and got me all excited about things we could do as a result. Other things made me think in ways I had never thought before. So all in all it worked out great!

That is *exactly* the effect I aim for. The question “who is this person” is exactly what you would ask about a shape-shifter.

## Rituals and shape-shifting

Shape-shifting in PNI might sound fun and exciting, but in fact it is the hardest part of doing PNI. It is *natural* to want to become an authority on your project. Whether you are an outside consultant or an inside force, you will feel a colossal temptation to succumb to this attraction. The gift of authority will be offered to you, and it will be difficult to refuse. Keeping things participatory can feel like choosing lead over gold. But as we know from folk tales, this is the only way to prove your true worth.

Why *not* become an authority? Why not take the helm? As an authority, you will gain a voice, and the right, to guide the project where you believe it should go. That sounds good. But PNI is participatory work. If you don’t share your PNI project with your participants, your ability to create positive change will crumble into dust. Those you wanted to help will not have been helped, because *you didn’t help them help themselves*.

When people need to gather their courage to do a difficult task, they often rely on ritual, whether they rub paint on their brows, don a lucky tie, or glance at their desktop sculptures as they write. It is for this reason that many of the elements of PNI practice involve ritual. PNI rituals serve the purpose of bolstering courage, both in those who are asked to participate and in those who ask them.

When I think about the rituals of PNI, I always think of a few lines in *The Wind in the Willows* in which the Water Rat is telling the Mole about the rituals of entering the Wild Wood.

You shouldn’t really have gone and done it, Mole. I did my best to keep you from it. We river-bankers, we hardly ever come here by ourselves. If we have to come, we come in couples, at least; then we’re generally all right. Besides, there are a hundred things one has to know, which we understand all about and you don’t, as yet. I mean passwords, and signs, and sayings which have power and effect, and plants you carry in your pocket, and verses you repeat, and dodges and tricks you practise; all simple enough when you know them, but they’ve got to be known if you’re small, or you’ll find yourself in trouble.

I could say the same thing about my PNI practice: passwords, and signs, and sayings which have power and effect, and all of it. I'm not sure what plants would be worth carrying in your pocket, but there are surely some that would have a beneficial effect on PNI. Relaxing mint, maybe, or soothing chamomile.

If you think I am about to initiate you into a secret rite, relax. The only rituals that work in PNI are the ones that have meaning to you. Like stories, rituals don't travel well. I mention an assortment of rituals in *Working with Stories* (like self-fulfilling prophecies), but you will grow your own rituals in your own PNI work. Most people do. Pay attention to the rituals you are developing. Make sure they help you find the courage you need to keep shifting your shape.

## **Advice on shape-shifting in story work**

### ***Present a moving target***

In some of the situations we face in life, keeping a fixed shape is a life-saving act. In a medical emergency, for example, no first responder would stop to find a patient's family and go through a long list of treatment options. The delay could kill the patient.

But in other situations, such as in participatory sensemaking, keeping a fixed shape is a life-draining act. Listen to Robert Chambers, a pioneer of participatory community work:

[B]e *optimally unprepared*. This is a paradox of participation. Participatory processes cannot be 'properly planned', where 'properly' refers to fixed content and strict timetables. . . . If you have planned a session in exact detail, you will be thrown off by participation: 'I am sorry, we have no time for that.'

Of course some planning is good. Of course some things have to be covered. Of course time management matters. But you cannot fit exploring, experiencing and learning to tight, preset timetables. . . . Good participatory processes are predictably unpredictable.

### ***Keep the heat on***

When I was a child we used to tell a joke that went like this:

Me and my cousin in Texas, we know everything in the world. Go ahead, ask me a question. (They ask a question.) My cousin knows that one! (Repeat *ad nauseam*.)

That joke reminds me of the way I sometimes see participants try to half-participate in PNI projects. They are looking for the easy way *out* of the work they need to do. But the only way for the project to succeed is for them to stay *in* the work. It is your job to keep them in the work. Don't let them turn you into their cousin in Texas.

What you *can* offer your participants is *plenty of help* doing the work they need to do. And the more you practice helping people do this work, the better your help will be. Just be aware that you will encounter people who blame and attack you for giving them ownership over the project they want to succeed. Be ready to shift your shape, change your skin, and slip away, leaving the participation in their hands where it belongs.

**Be cloud-like**

I had an interesting conversation at a conference once. It went like this.

Person: So what you're doing is basically sociology. But you don't sound like a sociologist. What is your background?

Me: Well, my original field of study was animal behavior.

Person: So you are an ethologist! (said with enthusiasm)

Me: Sort of, but after that I spent several years writing educational software.

Person: So you are a software engineer? (said with a touch of frustration)

Me: Sort of, but after that I started working on stories in organizations and complexity and decision making and things like that.

Person: So what *are* you?

Me: I think I'm a cloud.

Person: (exasperated sigh)

I meant what I said literally—that my professional skills and interests could best be described as a probability density function that ranges across several relevant dimensions—but I suspect that they took it as some sort of suspicious New Age mysticism. At least that would explain their reaction. I should have explained more fully what I meant by it, and I hereby apologize, person whose name I have forgotten.

Obviously I am not saying that everyone should jump between careers as I have. If they did, there would be far less progress in the world of research, participatory or otherwise. Career professionals who stick to one field are the alligators of research, and we need our living fossils to keep the ecosystem of inquiry stable.

However, even if you *are* an alligator, you can be *all sorts of alligator*. Everyone has diverse abilities and experiences. If you want to do PNI well, you must *draw out the diversity within you* so you can shift shapes and keep people guessing, and thinking, and participating.

## Game playing

Tricksters are consummate liars. Says William Hynes in *Mythical Trickster Figures*:

[Trickster's] lying, cheating, tricking, and deceiving may derive from the trickster being simply an unconscious numbskull, or, at other times, from being a malicious spoiler. Once initiated, a trick can exhibit an internal motion all its own. Thus, a trick can gather such momentum as to exceed any control exercised by its originator and may even turn back upon the head of the trickster.

Game players play *by* the rules. Tricksters play *with* the rules. It is not adequate to say they simply *break* the rules, because sometimes they create new and different rules. Sometimes they turn the rules on themselves and build traps they fall into.

## The evolution of game playing in PNI

I didn't understand this when I first started helping people work with stories. The first story workshops I ran were not games; they were battles. In my earnest confusion I tried to tell people what I wanted, which was to hear stories about their experiences with the software they were using. The people didn't understand what I meant, so they substituted what they *wanted* me to mean. Some people gave lectures; some asked questions; some complained; some bragged; some criticized; some just went away.

I remember one secretary who thought we would be training her in the use of the software we were asking about. When she found out that we only wanted to hear about her experiences with the software, she jumped up, exclaimed, "This is a waste of my time!" and practically ran out of the room.

Things didn't get better for a long time. I kept being earnest and sincere, and I kept failing to get my point across.

### ***What I forgot***

I should have remembered the lessons I had learned a decade before. Way back in biology graduate school, I taught anatomy lab courses to pre-nursing students. In the lab we cut up dead cats and two-foot-long sharks (it sounds insane to tell you that now, but it's true).

On the first day of every class, I told my students that *I knew barely more than they did* about anatomy, which was true. I also issued a challenge to the class. I said that every time they could catch me out by asking me a question I couldn't answer correctly, I would remove that question from the test.

I can still remember the amazement on their faces as they prepared to trick me into destroying the test. Only one student ever figured out the game: that if they could *pose* the question, and if they could *tell* whether I had answered it correctly, I didn't *need* to put it on the test. The challenge wasn't a way to destroy the test; it *was* the test. (When that one student told me that he had figured out my secret, I told him to keep it to himself.)

I also told blatant lies. Once a student found a toothpick stuck in the spinal column of a shark. They asked me why it was there, and I said, "Oh, that's where toothpicks come from. Didn't you know that?" It took them five minutes to figure out that I was lying. Another time, when someone asked me what part of the cat they were looking at, I said, "Oh, that's the kidney or the liver, I forget which." (Sometimes I *did* forget, but usually I didn't.) I don't think these students were used to participating in games like that, and I would like to think I introduced a few of them to the power of thinking for themselves.

Why in the world did I do such an excellent job getting pre-nursing students to participate in their own learning, and then failed so miserably at getting people to participate in story sharing? I think it was an identity thing. In graduate school, I was forced to teach to earn a stipend, but I didn't consider myself a real teacher. I had no training in education, and didn't see myself that way. The whole thing was a joke. I was an amateur playing at being a teacher, so I made up games. But when I was wanted to ask people to tell stories, I was trying very hard to be a real story researcher. *I forgot to play.*



### ***How things got better***

It took me several more tries at story-sharing sessions before I began to loosen up and gain enough confidence to add some elements of play to the experience. And of course things got better right away.

One thing I remember happened entirely by accident. My colleague Neal Keller (my fellow traveler on the facilitation journeys that started PNI) thought it might lighten things up to bring some donuts to the session. He knew a great place to get donuts, so he brought some to one of our sessions. I didn't understand why he did that, but I liked donuts, so I thought sure, why not. Now, normally I would have told people about our "refreshments" in the invitation to the workshop, as an "incentive" to participation. But it was too late when the idea sprung up. So we surprised the people in the next workshop.

What a difference it made. It turned out that asking people to come into a room and do something confusing and boring, and *then* giving them unexpectedly nice food, changed the whole session into a game. After that, when we asked people to tell stories, they didn't get angry and leave or subvert our goals. They listened and laughed, and *they played along*.

Noticing the difference, I had an idea. We had a very important workshop coming up with a group of very important people, senior engineers with little time to spare for "fluffy" stories. It was like pulling teeth to get anybody to come to the workshop in the first place. We had to go several levels up to find managers willing to lean on the people we wanted to hear from. (We had a champion high up who leaned magnificently.)

So I went onto the company's web site and found a little logo flashlight that looked like a credit card. It cost next to nothing, so we bought one for each person we invited to our story-sharing session. *We told them nothing about this*. On the day of the session, our participants filed in, grumpy, checking their watches, staring at the floor. The donuts perked them up a bit, but this was a tough group.

Then we got out the flashlights. You should have *seen* these guys. They were like little kids, flashing their lights all over the room. The lights were a symbol, a ritualistic gift. They said, "Something *different* is going to happen. Wait and see what it will be." We got *excellent* participation that day. Those engineers told the most amazing stories. Once they understood the rules of the game, they played it perfectly. They bounced stories off each other, they laughed, they (nearly) cried, they delved deep, *they understood*. It was one of the best story-sharing sessions I've ever facilitated.

### **Game playing in catalysis**

One of the things I often do in my consulting practice is provide back-end project support. That is, people give me a lot of stories and other data they have collected, and I give them back catalytic material to use in sensemaking workshops. This is how I introduce every set of catalytic material I create:

The purpose of the interpretations and ideas you see here is not to make claims to truth or provide answers to questions. It is *to catalyze thought and discussion*.

In fact, some of the interpretations and ideas you will find here are intentionally extreme and naïve. This is to help you explore your topic more fully.

In other words, I tell people that *I might be lying* to them.

Sometimes people are surprised or confused by this deliberately mischievous stance. It's not what they are used to. Most researchers say: here is what we found; this is what is real. Most researchers go directly from observation to conclusion. I try to break that rule. I try to give people the room to say that what I have said is nonsense *because they need permission* to think and talk about it for themselves.

But because I have broken a rule, I set up a new rule to replace it. Tricksters never break rules and give *nothing* in exchange. They don't create featureless voids, because they know that if there are no *rules*, there is no *game*.

What are the new rules I create in my catalytic material? I think of them like my favorite conversation in the movie *Wall-E*. The robot Wall-E gets out a sheet of bubble wrap, pops a bubble, and says "Pop." Then he hands it to the robot Eve and says, "You pop."

Those are the rules I create. Pop. *You* pop. I made an interpretation; I made another interpretation; now *you* make an interpretation. Don't trust *me*. Don't listen to *me*. Look, think, and talk for *yourself*. I may be lying, but it's not because I'm stupid or malicious. It's because I want to help you find your own truth. Those are the rules of the catalysis game.

## Game playing in question design

When I am helping people plan PNI projects, a question often comes up about standardized questions. People say, "If the questions you use in PNI are so similar between projects, why not just build one canonical set of questions and use it for every project? Wouldn't that save a lot of time?"

Yes. It would. But the *relevance and meaning* of the questions to the context and purpose of each individual project would suffer, and PNI as a whole would be weakened. If I was somehow forced to use a single standardized set of questions in every PNI project, I would stop doing it. It wouldn't be worth the bother.

Story work is contextual because stories are contextual. Stories don't travel well outside their original context and purpose, and a set of questions that makes one PNI project a success could cause another project to fail.

This is both a weakness and a strength of PNI. It is a weakness because it *does* take time to build and test a unique set of questions for each PNI project (not to mention its unique set of group activities). But it is also a strength, because when a set of questions does suit a PNI project's context and purpose well, PNI can produce results nothing else can.

## Game playing in project planning

Another thing that used to happen to me—a lot—in the early days of my consulting career was that clients would come to me wanting me to help them both do and avoid doing a PNI project. They wanted to explore an issue, and they wouldn't be satisfied until they had

explored it. And at the very same time, they desperately wanted to avoid exploring it. They were in a battle with themselves.

For a long time, when I found myself in tug-of-war projects like this, I would respond in one of two ways.

- I would give my clients what they *said* they wanted, even though I could see that they actually wanted something else. I knew they would be unhappy with the results, but I also knew that they would be unable to blame me for it. I would be able to say, “This is what you *said* you wanted”—even though I knew it would not get them what they actually wanted. I also knew that they would probably never try PNI again, but at least I wouldn’t be vilified.
- I would try to push my clients into doing the projects they obviously wanted to do but couldn’t admit they wanted to do. When I did that, I knew that they would be satisfied with the result, and they might even recognize the project, and PNI, as helpful to them. But they would blame me for dragging them through the fire, and the resentment would linger. And in the end they would probably never use PNI again anyway.

This didn’t happen on every project, mind you; it only happened on one out of ten or twenty projects. But it happened often enough to be a cause of concern. I don’t remember how I made each of these decisions, but I do remember that the more I cared about a project, the more willing I was to be blamed for doing it well.

I finally resolved the dilemma by developing the story-sharing project-planning exercise I describe in *Working with Stories*. That’s where it came from.

I remember the first time I tried asking a client to share a story about a project they wanted to do. I was on a phone call with my client (a consultant) and their client (a corporation). In the lead-up to the call, I had discerned that this was going to be one of those tug-of-war projects. They had sent me a lot of work they had already done to address an issue, mostly with surveys and focus groups, and I could see that they had been actively avoiding any direct contact with the problem they wanted to solve.

So, in a moment of frustration-fueled inspiration, I asked my client’s client this question:

Could you do something for me, so I can understand? Pretend your project is over and the problem you want to solve is completely, perfectly, ideally solved. It no longer exists. What happened in this project that caused that to happen?

It’s hard to describe the feeling of that moment. It was a breakthrough. It felt as if we had been standing in a dark, close cellar and I had opened the door and beckoned everyone to walk out into the sunshine with me. My client’s client responded with a gush of pent-up energy and hope. They talked about the problem in a way that was missing in all of the documentation I had received. They got to the heart of what they wanted to do and why.

I don’t recall anything *else* about that call. I can’t even remember which project it was, so I can’t be sure that the project was a success. But I do remember the client’s strong emotional response to being given permission to break through the taboo on expressing their needs, wants, hopes, and fears about the problem they wanted to solve.

So that's why I started asking all of my clients, and telling all of my students, to embed tiny PNI projects inside the planning phases of their PNI projects. Sharing stories at the start of a project makes it *a game from start to finish*. The game prevents you from lying to yourself about why you are doing what you are doing and why it matters to you. It helps you to understand not only what only what you want to do, but also what you hope and fear will happen when you do it.

## Why so much drama?

At this point you may find yourself recoiling from these stories of people running from their own demons. You may be asking: Why all the *sturm und drang*? Isn't PNI ever full of joy and hope? It is, it is! But working with stories means that you let the joy and hope *rise up* from the stories people tell when you give them the freedom to fully explore their experiences and perspectives. And this is true both in projects and in project planning.

In fact, I have come to consider it *typical* for PNI projects to discover pent-up streams of positive energy blocked by negative circumstances. When you refuse to consider the negative, you cannot find the positive energy waiting to be released behind it.

This is a paradox worthy of a trickster. Says Lewis Hyde:

... trickster stories are radically anti-idealist; they are made in and for a world of imperfection. But they are not therefore tragic. ... In fact, it may be exactly because these stories do not wish away or deny what seems low, dirty, and imperfect that their hero otherwise enjoys such playful freedom. Trickster is the great shape-shifter, which I take to mean not so much that he shifts the shape of his own body but that, given the materials of this world, he demonstrates the degree to which the way we have shaped them may be altered. He makes this world and then he plays with its materials. There is the given of death, the given of waterfalls and sunlight, of sleep and impulse, but there is also an intelligence able to form the givens into a remarkable number of designs.

We can only form a "remarkable number of designs" if we consider *all* of the givens of the world we find ourselves in; and that is why PNI always asks "what happened to you" and never "tell us your success story."

## Advice on game playing in story work

### Question everything

Question power, authority, knowledge, wisdom, morality. Question yourself. Question questioning. But don't question to attack or conclude; question to expand and include. Question in a light-hearted, playful way. Ask questions that laugh. Point out absurdities, or manufacture them from thin air.

Here is an example of laughing at yourself. I might as well tell you that I am a nervous person around people. When I first started facilitating story-sharing sessions, I found that asking people to do confusing and uncomfortable things was so painful that I became physically sick after each session was over. I finally had to ask Neal to take over the talking parts of the sessions out of sheer self-preservation.

It was embarrassing to admit that I could not do this. But I remembered a snippet from an old radio show my family used to like. At some point in one of its skits, somebody asked a guy if he was the one who was running some sort of business operation. “Nah,” he said, “I just stand around and look hard on people so they pay the bill.”

So I started telling the people in our sessions that I was just there to “look hard on people” so they told stories. It became a little joke that helped me cover up my discomfort. I think I even found it easier to speak up once I had that funny little mask to wear.

My point is that not everybody is good at everything. If you find that a particular aspect of story work is too hard for you to handle, don't keep banging your head against the wall. Find somebody who does it well and team up with them.

### ***Lie like a rug***

Sometimes people in a PNI session will ask me, “Which of these should we use?” And I'll say, “Yup.” Or people will ask me a question whose answer I know well, and I'll just say, “I wonder...” and walk away.

I learned to do this from reading John Holt's books on how children learn. He recommended that parents follow a simple rule: *never ask your child a question to which you already know the answer*.

When I first read this, I thought it was ridiculous. How else can children learn unless you quiz them? What color is this? What shape is that? What is two plus two? Besides, I know a lot, don't I? *Why shouldn't I instruct my child?*

But then I tried it for a while. It worked wonders. When my son was a toddler, every time I caught myself about to say, “What color is that dog?” I would say instead, “What do you like about that dog?” This was a question I truly didn't know the answer to. He got used to this, and instead of waiting to be quizzed, he developed the habit of asking himself the same sort of questions, like “What do I want to make out of this Lego set?”

The corollary of Holt's never-ask-a-question rule is: *never correct a child's mistake*. This was again hard to practice but wonderfully useful. Years later, I was with my son in a natural history museum, looking at dinosaurs. He made a clearly erroneous statement about a fossil. I caught myself up and said nothing but “Hmmm.” Two minutes later I heard him say, “Oh, you know what, I was wrong. I think that hole must have been the dinosaur's ears, not its eyes.” I said nothing, just turned away and smiled to myself. It is hard to overestimate the value of the ability to self-question and self-correct.

Now let's translate these examples into the context of a group story-sharing session. Within ten minutes of the start of your very first story-sharing session, somebody will attempt to box you into a very specific set of instructions. If you say, “Today we are going to be sharing some stories with each other,” somebody will say, “Can you give us an example of the kinds of stories we should tell?”

The correct response is: I don't know. I forget. I can't come up with anything. I lost my notes. Say *anything*, true or not, to get across the message that you want people to interpret the task for themselves.

### ***Break rules and make rules***

When I start a new PNI project, I always ask my clients to show me everything they have done on the topic so far. They often send me a project report from the previous year, before they decided to try PNI. Usually this was done using a survey or focus groups.

Most of these reports are the same: about 99% everything-is-wonderful wallpaper, with just the tiniest bit of unpleasantness (there is this *one* teeny tiny thing we could improve) tucked away in some corner where nobody will notice it. These are the rules of standard research inquiry: inquire just so much and no more.

Story work breaks those rules, and participatory story work breaks them even more. The very act of asking real people *what actually happened to them* chips away at walls of denial, and *asking them to work with their own stories* reduces the walls to rubble.

This is why so many people either shun the idea of working with stories or back out when they find out what it entails. Is PNI only for the strongest of the strong? Not at all. Working with stories doesn't mean you have to burst into an organization or community and shove stories around without forethought or preparation. Tricksters are *industrious* designers of havoc. As you work with stories, you will develop your own expertise at breaking and making rules.

### ***Save faces***

One of the rules of breaking rules is to pay careful attention to saving face. *Never watch anybody encounter stories* about themselves or their community for the first time. *Never give lectures* about the horrible truths that have been revealed by the stories you have collected. Simply give people what you have to give, then *step back* to a respectful distance and keep quiet while people absorb what you collected.

If you do this, if you let people process the stories you collected in a quiet, private way, they are much more likely to come out of the experience with an insight rather than a defense. They might say, "Wow, I just realized that we are making a huge mistake!"

And what should you say in response to that? Should you say, "Of course you are making a mistake, I told you so, anybody can see that"? Not if you actually want to help them. Say "*Really?*" or "*I didn't see that!*" (perhaps a lie) or "*What an insight!*" Because it's *their* insight, not yours. Keep your hands off it. Your way is not their way. Your way is no way.

## **In-betweening**

Trickster figures are half-breeds. They exist half-in and half-out of multiple worlds. This gives them both insider and outsider status everywhere they go. No world can maintain a firm grip on them, so tricksters are free to roam from world to world carrying messages, gifts, and mysteries.

This is what I mean when I say that in PNI we "help stories get to where they need to go." To be able to carry stories from one place to another, we have to cultivate multiple half-memberships in all of the worlds that matter in the projects we facilitate.

Why does this matter? Because to stimulate the flow of stories, PNI practitioners need to be able to *open and close doors between worlds*. In the same way that stories conceal and reveal, doors divide and join. Said Mircea Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane*:

The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.

Every door has two sides. Perhaps one is gold and the other straw, or one strong and the other paper-thin, or one locked tight and the other open. Those who live on each side of the door cannot reach through to the other side, *but a trickster can*. Tricksters create change by pulling apart what was together and bringing together what was apart. To do this they must be able to work both sides of the mechanism.

I find resonance between this view and Brenda Dervin's view of sensemaking, thus:

Sense-Making describes itself as methodology between the cracks, as addressing the in-between. . . . Sense-Making thrusts itself between chaos and order, structure and person, facts and illusions, external worlds and inner, universals and particulars. Sense-Making posits reality as ordered in part, chaotic in part, evolving in part. Sense-Making assumes a human being that is also ordered in part, chaotic in part, evolving in part. . . .

The real is always potentially subject to multiple interpretations, due to changes in reality across space, changes across time, differences in how humans see reality arising from their differing anchorings in time-space; and differences in how humans construct interpretive bridges over a gappy reality. In attempting to fix which of these explanations is best, we have ricocheted through a series of philosophic all-or-none answers, placing the explanation entirely in reality or structural condition or culture or person or chaos or society, and so on. Instead of choosing all or none, Sense-Making focuses on some, assuming all potential explanations might hold under some conditions.

I love it how she says “humans construct interpretive bridges over a gappy reality.” Bridges, doors, stories.

## **In-betweening in facilitation**

I have found that when people are building clusters of related items in sensemaking workshops, they sometimes produce very large clusters in areas that represent sensitive or taboo topics. It is the usual practice to ask people to keep their clusters to a maximum of 7-8 items. Clusters that reach 15-20 items (and stay that way) usually indicate an unwillingness to penetrate their interior spaces.

I remember one workshop where this happened. After a quiet discussion, my co-facilitator and I asked the people who had built the cluster to split it in two. They did not like our suggestion one bit, and the two clusters they produced after the split lacked meaning.

It was lucky that this happened just before lunch, because our clumsy intervention stemmed the natural flow of the workshop's stories. I pondered later on why our suggestion produced

such a negative result. I think it came down to the fact that this was a group of highly experienced analysts who saw us as outsiders to their world. We were not half-in their world. We were maybe five percent in. That was not far enough in to tell these people that their clustering exercise was holding something back.

In retrospect, I think we should have recognized our position better and left them alone. Sometimes the hardest thing about being in-between is admitting to yourself where you stand, because it not always where you had *wanted* to stand.

## In-betweening in project planning

When I am asked to help a client with a new project, I usually find out a *little* about the organization or community involved. But I am wary of finding out too much. I don't want to begin to identify with or against the organization or community. If I do, I will lose my half-in half-out status and become subject to the pressures of full insider or outsider status.

Sometimes people ask me if I do PNI work in my own family or community. I can't. I'm too far in to make it work. At the same time, if I know nothing at all about the group whose stories I am asked to work with, I cannot make headway either. I have to find something familiar *and* something foreign to work with. So do you.

Wait just one minute, I can hear you saying. Aren't you writing about working with stories in *your* community or organization? Yes. When you want to do PNI in a group to which you fully belong, you must find a place to stand in between two or more places that exist within the group. I can see three ways to do this.

- **Find sub-groups** of your community, ones to which you half-belong. No person or community is a monolith. Cultivate your complexities and find a doorway to stand in. Maybe you love rural life but miss the city. Maybe you speak Russian but only at home. Maybe you used to think you were going to be an artist but went down another path. Find something familiar and foreign within yourself and within your community.
- **Think beyond your community.** If you can't find a way to fit between places in your community, find another community to include in your project, one you half-belong to. Say you want to do a project that centers on your town, but you know you are too involved in the town to make it work. Maybe there is *another* town that has a partial claim on your identity. Maybe you used to visit your grandparents there, or you spent the war there, or you always wished you lived there but never could. What would happen if you expanded your project to include that town?
- **Don't work alone.** Find a collaborator who complements your membership, either outside your community or in a different sub-group than you belong to inside it. Work closely with them. If you can't be a trickster by yourself, build a trickster team.

When I start to work on a PNI project, I look for half-in half-out memberships I can call upon. I think about my friends, neighbors, and family members. I remember interactions with teachers, ministers, doctors, chemists, programmers, artists, scientists, soldiers, accountants, farmers, bus drivers. I think about people I know who have different incomes, personalities, and medical conditions. I think of over-achievers, survivors, alcoholics, the



depressed, those who have faced addiction. I call on my partial memberships in all of these worlds so I can find places between them where I can stand. If I cannot find the connections I need, I find other people who can help me build a trickster team.

For example, I remember a project in which we collected stories from people identified as having very low incomes. As we planned the project, I was talking with a colleague about some of the stories we had read in some interviews that were previously collected. I mentioned that it was lucky I had spent some months in a state of near homelessness once (brought on by physical disability), so I could relate to what the people in the stories were saying. My colleague replied that he could not follow me to where our stories were, having never been poor by any stretch of the imagination. He was an inadequate in-betweener in that context.

But he would have been a much better in-betweener than I could be if the stories were about people with high incomes. In fact, I think a project full of stories about the travails of wealthy people would be one for which I would need to seek help, because I cannot even begin to imagine that life. I am fully out of that world and would need a trickster team to approach it.

## Advice for in-betweening

### *Find your place*

Find out who you are and who you are not, then remember it. Don't pass over attention to place; give it your attention from the start of the project. If you are fully in or fully out of the world you want to help, do something about it right away, before it is too late.

To find your place, think about your project's context and purpose in your community or organization.

- Who will this project benefit? Who will it *not* benefit? Does everyone agree on this?
- Who wants the project to happen? Who *doesn't* want it to happen?
- Does anyone want the project to happen differently than you have planned it? What would they rather see happen?
- What do you want? Where do you fit in the project? How do you see it?

Find out where you belong in the project and think about whether you need help finding a place in between the answers to these questions.

Let's make up an example. Say you have convinced your managers, after months of presentation, argument, and outright pleading, to let you carry out a PNI project at your workplace. You and all of your co-workers hope the project will succeed in finally getting your managers to understand the impact of their heavy-handed decisions on the work you are trying to do.

What will happen if you don't include any managers in your project team? Remember, you are fully in the group of employees, and fully out of the group of managers.

The likely answer is that, though you may produce a resounding impact in your circle of co-workers, the door to the world of your managers will be closed to you. Not only will

your project fail, but your managers will never approve another one, since the methods you used are obviously useless. Without the ability to move between your world and theirs, you will not be able to create the change you need.

So stop before you start, assess your situation realistically, and find a collaborator who can stand in the doorway with you. Perhaps one of your managers has a kid in your kid's karate class, and you can ask them if they would like to play a part in the project. If that's not possible, find someone who is outside both groups but is allowed (at least provisionally) in each, and ask them to help you fill out your team. You might be surprised how easy it is to find such a go-between. Perhaps your uncle is a manager at a different corporation in a different industry; but he is a manager, and that might get him in the door. Find a connection you can use.

Professional mediators make it their business to find common ground with everyone. That's why they can open so many doors, and it's why they can help groups that are unable to reach out to other groups without help. The very word "mediator" means "to halve; to be in the middle." There's the trickster paradox again: splitting and joining at once.

### ***Keep your place***

Sometimes PNI participants (and project planners) don't want you to stay in the in-between place you have chosen. They want you fully in (so you can do what they don't want to do) or fully out (so you can't tell them what to do). They may even stand near the door to block your way. They will ask: are you one of *us* or one of *them*?

The answer has to be "both." Anyone who wants to help people create the change they need must be able to move freely between the worlds they inhabit. If one person can't do that, they must build, preserve, and defend a project team that can.

### ***Don't guard the door: play with it***

As a PNI facilitator, you may find yourself in the position of gatekeeper between worlds. If people ask you to be "the voice" of a group, it might mean that they really want you to be a *filter* for the voices of the group. They might want you to guard the door and make sure that nothing they don't like gets through.

When tricksters open doors, they do it with full knowledge that the wind and rain will blow in and upset the carefully arranged scenery on the other side. That's why they both open *and* close doors. They make things happen by artfully manipulating what is near and far, familiar and strange, safe and dangerous. Says William Hynes:

The trickster often turns a place of safety into a place of danger and back again. He can turn a bad situation into a good one, and then back into a bad one... the trickster is often the official ritual profaner of beliefs. Profaning or inverting social beliefs brings into sharp relief just how much a society values these beliefs.

Why do tricksters do this? To break down doors that have stopped working and build new doors that open (and close) in new and better ways. Hynes again:

The bricoleur is a tinker or fix-it person, noted for his ingenuity in transforming anything at hand in order to form a creative solution. The trickster manifests a

distinctive transformative ability: he can find the lewd in the scared and the sacred in the lewd, and new life from both...the trickster traffics frequently with the transcendent while loosing lewd acts upon the world. ... Yet the bricoleur aspect of the trickster can cause any or all of such lewd acts or objects to be transformed into occasions of insight, vitality, and new inventive creations.

Occasions of insight, vitality, and new inventive creations are exactly the kinds of things that happen when PNI projects go well. This is the goal you seek.

## Hunter and hunted

Tricksters are hungry animals, driven to find and get and consume. So they hunt. When we listen to stories, we are hungry for understanding and insight. So we hunt for and consume stories. Every PNI project is about hunger of some kind: *someone wants something*.

In traditional narrative inquiry, the role of the researcher is to hunt, catch, prepare, and present a palatable meal of predigested understanding. Like much contemporary meat, such meals are free from the haunting sights and smells of the slaughterhouse.

But in *participatory* narrative inquiry, the role of the researcher-facilitator is not to satisfy hunger. It is to *increase* hunger by preparing food for thought. Food for thought is not food at all, but hunger on a plate. PNI practitioners lead the hunt. They spread hunger to their participants and urge them to join in the chase for insight.

Yet while tricksters are hungry hunters, they are also vulnerable to predation. In a similar way, even though every PNI project is about hunger, every PNI project is also about fear.

Many trickster tales describe a trickster's unending struggle to avoid traps set for them by others or themselves. For example, Lewis Hyde tells the story of how coyotes (real coyotes) are known to not only overturn traps but urinate or defecate on them as well, seemingly to make it known that they cannot be deceived so easily.

This idea of the trickster as "bait thief" reminds me of the mixed comfort and danger involved in telling and listening to stories. Stories can reveal painful truths that strike deep, wounding us where we are most vulnerable; and they can also, even at the same time, delight us with visions that deeply satisfy our sense of belonging and help us make sense of a mixed-up world. If you doubt this, get out one of your oldest photo albums and taste the bittersweet memories it brings. Who better than a bait thief to help people manage the complexity of narrative exploration?

People who work with stories they care about are both hunter and hunted, and they need help with both roles. PNI practitioners help people increase the hunger they need (to understand and resolve) while escaping the hunger that threatens them (in the form of stereotypes and knee-jerk reactions).

This is a careful balancing act. Sound the call to hunt too loudly, and some hunters will run away for fear of predation. Sound the call too quietly, and some hunters will see no reason to begin. I've come to expect that every workshop will lose a few participants to apathy and

another few to fear. The best solution, I find, is balance the attractions and repulsions of the work to help participants feel welcome, safe, free, and inspired to challenge themselves.

## **Advice on hunting and protecting the hunted**

### ***Find the seed of hunger***

You can't power a PNI project on your own hunger alone. You have to *find a seed of hunger* in your community or organization before you can help it grow. To do this, you must develop a deep understanding of the appetite for insight that already exists in your participants.

I can recall a consulting project that ended with a whimper because I failed to find the seed of my client's hunger. This was a project whose goal was to design a new product. As the project began, I asked my client which was more important to them: understanding the *context* of their new product's use, or generating *ideas* for product designs. In the ensuing discussion, I thought we settled on the former answer, and they thought we agreed on the latter. We didn't discover the miscommunication until it was too late to change the course of the project, and they ended up dissatisfied with what they had learned. That was an important (if painful) lesson for me. After that project I got better at making sure I understood what people really and truly wanted before we started to work together.

So my advice to you, whether you are doing your own PNI project or helping someone else do one, is to make sure you understand what each person involved in the project, from participants to collaborators to funders, wants to get out of it. Find the place where their hunger for discovery sits, even if it's tucked away deep inside.

### ***Cultivate the hunger you find***

Tricksters don't just sound the call to hunt: they ride in front, urging on the crowd. You know what stories can do for the people who need them. Bring that energy to them. Don't show people what *you* can do with stories; show them what *they* can do with stories.

Quite some time ago, I helped Stephen Shimshock (who I asked to write the foreword for *Working with Stories*) plan a sensemaking workshop with young adults who had grown up in foster care. After the workshop was over, he told me about it. I remember the moment when he told me what his participants said to him. They told him that they had already been asked about their experiences as foster children a million times. But this was the first time they had ever been given the opportunity to *do something* with their experiences, something that might help other people. When Stephen told me this, I thought: *this* is the spirit of PNI. This is an excellent example of hunger found, nourished, and set on its way to making positive change.

### ***Protect the fearful***

Even as you lead people onward in the hunt for insights they can use, keep an eye out for fawns hiding in the tall grass. Participants do not always advertise their vulnerabilities. You may have to find them out through patient attention.

Listen to Julie McCarthy in *Enacting Participatory Development*:

By inviting participants to explore the possibility for change in their lives, you are inviting them to take risks and are therefore responsible for their emotional safety. Challenge the group emotionally, but always ensure that participants know there is a safety net to catch them. Experimentation does involve risk but should not be deadly. Although workshops often focus on life skills or the resolution of conflicts from participants' own lives, they should still be clearly separate spaces from the rest of the participants' lives.

I remember a project in which a colleague and I didn't pick up on a vulnerability soon enough. This was a project whose goal was to ease the pains of a merger as a giant corporation swallowed up a very small one. The project started with some pilot story-sharing sessions and sensemaking workshops that went very well. Everyone who participated said they learned a lot from what happened. The story elements they produced went straight to the heart of the cultural clash between the two firms, but in a playful way that showed that their hunt for insight had been successful.

We were in the midst of setting up a much larger story collection when the word suddenly came in to halt the project. Someone high up in the giant corporation had found out about the project, saw the story elements, and pulled the plug. To this person, the idea of circulating such stories was unthinkable dangerous. Within hours, the project ground to a halt, never to begin again. I knew the culture of the larger corporation was staid and old-fashioned, but the vehemence with which the project was eradicated was a surprise. From that project I learned not to run too far ahead of my clients, collaborators, and participants.

## When tricksters don't trick

One of my favorite quotes from the *I Ching* goes like this:

When it is time to be still, then stop;

when it is time to act, go ahead.

In other words, tricksters don't *always* trick. Sometimes they are as safe as houses. The trickster's greatest trick is to know when to play *and when not to play*.

So for every piece of advice I have given you in this chapter, there is an equal and opposite piece of advice.

- When you are shape-shifting, there are times when you must present a fixed target, turn the heat off, and be like a stone, not a cloud.
- When you are game-playing, there are times when you must stop questioning, tell the absolute truth, and stick to the rules.
- When you are in-betweening, there are times when you must find the center, let people take you where they need you, and keep all doors safely shut.

- When you are hunting, there are times when you must stifle hunger, run away from the hunt, and leave the fearful behind.

Say you are walking on air because yesterday you facilitated an unexpectedly lively and productive story-sharing session. People opened up and told stories you never thought you would be able to hear. You are all excitement as you plan your next steps.

Your phone rings. It's one of your session participants. She's sitting with two of her co-workers. They have been talking about what might happen if their stories get out. They know they won't be identified, but they want to retract their stories anyway. They are very sorry, but they must insist that their stories be removed from the collection.

Would this be a good time to play a trick on these participants? Should you dance around and cajole these stressed-out people into changing their minds? Should you play a game with them? Or should you do as they have asked immediately, completely, and without question?

I'll let you answer those questions for yourself.

## Chapter 12

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# Practical Ethics in PNI

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This chapter was inspired by a 2011 essay on ethics in story collection by Thaler Pekar. Here is my favorite part of what Thaler said:

Story is not a commodity, something that is taken from one person and given to another. This is especially true in development work, where there often is a tendency to take a poor or ill person's story and offer it to a potential donor in exchange for a monetary gift.

The need to refrain from treating story as a commodity goes beyond nonprofit and advocacy work; it should inform all your work with narrative. True narrative intelligence respects the sharer of the story and recognizes that his or her story is a unique part of them that cannot, and should not, be taken and shared without permission.

This part of Thaler's article won my "look at it another way" prize:

The pendulum can swing too far in the other direction as well. I've often heard well-meaning nonprofit executives say "we simply can't tell this person's story; they are too vulnerable, and we must protect them." This, too, involves a kind of power imbalance. People have the right to be fully informed—and to make their own decisions about whether to share, or not share, their stories.

I love that. It reminds me of dogs.

Around the time I read Thaler's article, my son and I had been watching a National Geographic television series called *Dogtown*, a documentary about a huge no-kill dog shelter in the Western U.S. In one episode, a dog trainer said something like this (paraphrasing):

People think the best way to be nice to shy dogs is to leave them alone. But that's *not* the best way to be nice to them. They *want* to come out of their shell. They *want* to have healthy relationships. They just need help, and for that they need patience and respect.

Stories can be like that too. A story a person tells in a panic to comply with an authority is like a dog that cowers and urinates in its rush to submit. Both behaviors are signs of poor treatment, intentional or otherwise.

So as I read Thaler's article I was thinking: I'm sure there are many people who *want* to gather stories in an ethical way, just as there are many people who want to take good care of their dogs. But I wonder if people wonder if they are being unethical without knowing it. People need to learn how to treat dogs well, and people need to learn how to treat stories well. So, how do you know you have avoided doing harm to stories (and to storytelling)?

My best answer is: Watch the stories. You can watch stories like you watch dogs. An anxious dog puts its tail between its legs, slinks, looks away, and licks its lips. A dog about to explode in fearful aggression stares and grows rigid and still. If you watch a person with their dog, you can see how the person treats the dog. Even when the dog is alone, traces of the practical ethics of people they have known remain on them, and a good dog trainer can read them.

In the same way, you can tell from the stories people tell whether they are comfortable with what you are asking them to do or are showing stress due to your lack of practical ethics (let's assume it's from benign neglect). Over the years I have noticed some things that differ among stories told in projects with positive, neutral, and negative practical ethics.

## Engagement

When people are eager to participate in a PNI project, they are *in* their stories. They don't hold their stories at arm's length, pinching their noses. They hug them. They wear them. When people are not eager to participate, their stories are limp and empty of presence because the people are not in them.

I remember a project in which the questions were carefully written to avoid actually asking anything because the project's planners didn't want to encounter anything unpleasant. The project's participants got the message and said nothing unpleasant, and the project had essentially no outcome. It was like an empty house: everyone looked through the windows, but nobody went inside. No engagement, no result.

## Effort

In a practically ethical PNI project, you can see that your participants are taking their responses to the questions you pose seriously. They don't say things like "STOOPID!!!!" or "dunno." They put some muscle into the project and pull along with you.

A correlate of effort is patience. If you have set up your project right, people should be willing to listen to what you have to say and take their time doing their part to make the project work. If people cannot spare a moment for your project, maybe you haven't given them something worth finding time to do.



Here's a planning exercise you can use to find the effort you need:

1. On one side of a page, list your goals for your project. If it succeeds, what will have happened, from your point of view?
2. On the other side, list some of the goals your participants might have. What will happen if the project succeeds in meeting those goals? (If you don't know, ask some potential participants. Tell them about the project and ask them what they would like it to do for them.)
3. Look for common goals. Those are the things you can tell your participants about without needing to change anything about your project.
4. Look for differences. Those are opportunities to make your project work better by tapping into the effort people will be willing to put into meeting their own goals.
5. Prepare to tell your participants how your plan will attempt to meet everyone's goals—yours and theirs—so you can all pull together.

## Freedom

We all self-censor, even when we talk to ourselves. When things are going well in a PNI project, people feel free to maintain a level of self-censoring that feels appropriate to the context in which they find themselves. When things are not going well, people self-censor more than they would like to.

You can see this happen when people tell stories. If they flinch when they hear your questions, they are self-censoring more than they want to. If you are collecting stories in an interview or story-sharing session, you can watch people flinch in person. They make working-out-what-to-say faces instead of looking-back-over-the-past faces. The stories people tell show evidence of flinching as well: hesitations, mumblings, markings.

I remember once being sent some scanned forms from a pilot story-sharing session (that happened far away from me) and finding that several people had drawn angry slashes all the way across some of the pages. That meant something, and I needed to find out what it meant before we went any further. (As I recall, it meant that a few of the questions offended the respondents' sense of identity. We fixed them.)

Another time, I remember reading responses to a survey and finding that quite a few people spoke directly to *me*, the person who (they thought) would be reading the collected responses. They said things like, "Do you actually think people are going to *tell* you what they really think here?" and "This project measures nothing." I did not write that survey, but I told its writers what I had found out about it.

## Respect

Another measure of practical ethics is what a project's participants say about the project, the people funding it, the people running it, and the other people who are telling stories.

Sometimes I ask project participants to guess what their fellow participants might say about a story. Would they find it inspiring? Worth retelling? Annoying? Beneath their notice? And so on. This is a good question for a pilot story collection, when you are figuring out how to

approach people on a topic. If you notice people referring to *anyone* involved in the project in a negative way, it might mean their perceptions of the project and its participants are not what you would like them to be.

I remember once reviewing some stories collected in a pilot project with hospital patients. They showed such a strong tendency to try to please us—essentially jumping up and down telling stories like a dog begging for treats—that I realized we were going to have to tone down any official-sounding requests if we wanted to help them speak freely and calmly. This was a case of too much respect, or maybe respect mixed with fear.

## Gratitude

I've come to believe that if you can't find any expressions of gratitude in what you have collected, you have failed to engage your project participants. Once in a while, someone should say something like:

- I'm glad to have had a chance to talk about this.
- This is great. Nobody has ever asked me about this before.
- It's a breath of fresh air to actually talk about these things. I hope we can change this.

Granted, some topics are not ones about which people will have pent-up feelings to express. Probably nobody will thank you for asking them about their phone service or their barbecue grill. That's fine. But if your project touches on emotional topics, you should be hearing some gratitude.

I'd say that most of the tears I've shed in my PNI work have been at times when people thanked me for listening to their stories, and I felt privileged to have been given the honor to listen to them. That sort of response makes this work feel like cooperation, not extraction, and it tells you that things are going as they should.

If you never hear any expressions of thanks, think about why that is happening and what you can do about it.

## Hope

At least some of the stories you collect should express hope that they will be useful and helpful to the goals of the project. This is similar to the gratitude measure, but it's more about people taking ownership of the project. You should hear people say things like:

- I'll bet \_\_\_\_ haven't heard a story like that before.
- We are bringing out some good stuff here! I hope this opens our eyes!
- We are really getting to the heart of \_\_\_\_ here. I'm glad to see it.

When you facilitate a PNI project, it's easy to slip into feeling that you are the only person in the world who cares about it. We project planners can sometimes get—if we admit it—a bit possessive about our projects. But this is participatory work. If you want a PNI project to succeed, you need to *share your hopes* for it with your participants. That doesn't just mean *telling* people about your hopes. It means *including the hopes of your participants* in

your project. If you don't see any hope in the stories you hear, it might be because you are hoarding it.

## **Assessing your practical ethics**

You can test the practical ethics of your project planning phase in a few different ways.

- Tell a future-history story in which your project has succeeded or failed in each practical-ethics aspect: engagement, effort, freedom, respect, gratitude, hope. This will give you twelve stories that cover a range of outcomes. Then think of some antecedents that could lead to each story taking place. What might cause your participants to be exceptionally engaged or disengaged? Look for mistakes you may be about to make and opportunities you may be about to let slip away.
- Gather some initial stories in a pilot collection, then talk about how much of each aspect of practical ethics you see in the stories. Do you see engagement? Effort? And so on. If any of the aspects are weak or missing, what can you do to improve the situation?

Here's one last test of practical ethics, which I'll bring back to my dog-behavior analogy. What would happen if every potential participant in your project suddenly found out about every aspect of your project plans? What would happen, for example, if your detailed notes and discussions became public? How would the stories you want to gather change as a result? Would they come bounding out to meet you, full of energy and hope? Or would they cower in fear, snarl and snap in anger, or yelp in pain?



## Chapter 13

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# Why PNI Is Hard

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Have you ever been pursued by a word or a phrase that keeps knocking on the doors of your mind? Something that comes up in conversation so many times that you begin to wonder if its repetition means something? As I was writing *Working with Stories* I was hounded by the phrase “too hard.” It kept coming up in relation to PNI.

The phrase seemed to come from two sources.

- Some people told me that PNI was “too hard” in a practical sense. They weren’t sure they would be able to get people to tell meaningful and relevant stories, and they weren’t sure they would be able to help people make sense of the stories they collected. PNI as a whole seemed daunting to them, and they were wary of plunging in.
- Other people told me that PNI was “too hard” in comparison with other means of inquiry. PNI is too dependent on participation, they said, and that makes it a risky method. People misunderstand and don’t do what they were asked to do, or they walk away affronted. Stories can be ambivalent, answers to questions can be confusing, and even when everything works, none of it can be used to prove anything. Asking for opinions seems simpler and safer.

It seemed to me that it might be helpful to develop a response to each of these statements. So I thought: what do I have to say in these situations? How can I respond to these reactions?

## It’s not that hard, really

Every human being has the essential skills to tell and listen to and make sense of raw stories of personal experience. The main reason I think many people find PNI overwhelming at first is that they start out in the wrong direction. They try to learn all about stories: what they are and are not, how they tick, how to put them together, and so on. It seems an obvious way to go about learning, but I don’t think it is useful, at least not at first.

The best thing to do first is simply to *sit with stories*, get to know them, walk and talk with them until they become as familiar as everything and everyone around you. If you haven't done that yet, you have started out in the wrong way.

There are two ways you can be with stories.

**Sit with recorded stories.** Stories that have been written down exist in a semi-dormant, slow-growing state, like a slime mold as it lies dissipated across the forest floor. To immerse yourself in stories like these, don't look for Hollywood stories or novels. Look for smaller, more intimate, more natural, wild stories that lie closer to the origin of stories as agents of community sensemaking. Find books of oral history interviews, folk tales, records of conversations, old letters, old diaries. Look for things people *actually* said about things they *actually* experienced.

You might think, by the way, that folk tales don't fit in here. But people didn't always use folk tales the way we do now, as mass-media entertainment. In times past, folk tales wove through everyday life in the form of lessons, warnings, messages, and questions. People told them, or referred to them, just as we refer to proverbs now (which are mostly ultra-compressed folk tales) in everyday speech. If you can find a book that presents folk tales close to their original forms, usually recorded from elderly people, it will capture enough of their everyday meanings to work for your purposes. Pick up broad collections like the encyclopedic *Folktales from India* (edited by A. K. Ramanujan) or Italo Calvino's collected *Italian Folktales*. If you have a choice between two collections, pick the one that says its entries were changed the least from the way the old folks told them.

**Sit with conversational stories.** The other way to be with stories is to encounter them in *conversation*. This is the excitable, fast-moving state of narrative life, like a slime mold in the rapid coordination of assembled movement. To encounter stories in this way, plant yourself in a busy coffee shop or social gathering and listen. You will hear stories enter into conversations, hesitate, jockey for position, join forces, seize control, retreat in confusion. Take a notepad and start writing down the things you hear. Eventually you will start to pick up on nuances you blundered past at first, like someone retracting a poorly received story, then reframing it and attempting another introduction with the same story arrayed in more suitable attire for the group.

Which of these methods of being with stories is more natural to you will depend on your own background and personality. I love to read more than I love to sit in busy coffee shops, so I seek out large bodies of recorded stories. You may find listening to stories in conversation more to your liking. The two types of immersion complement each other, so a combination of both is best, but either will teach you much about stories.

Whichever form of story immersion you choose, what will happen to you as a result is likely to be similar to what happened to me and what I've seen happen to other people. You will start to develop a sense of the shapes and functions and movements of stories that no explicit explanation can give you. This will give you the *confidence of experience* to support your first steps in actively working with stories.

How many stories does it take to get to this point? It's different for every person, but if you have not spent time with at least one or two thousand stories yet, you need to spend more time with stories. I wouldn't keep a count, though: when it happens, you will know.

After you have sat with stories for long enough, all the books about how stories work will not confuse you; they will help you make deeper sense of what you already know. This phenomenon is not unique to PNI. It is a pattern you will find in any endeavor that involves natural complexity. Someone who has been with gardens for twenty or thirty years is not confused or intimidated by books on gardening; the confidence of experience gives them a context in which they can make sense of advice and instruction.

The other thing you will notice after you gain some experience sitting with stories is that you will begin to feel ready to *interact* with them. You will find yourself eliciting stories by asking questions whose answers are stories, and you will find yourself asking questions about stories people have told.

People often find eliciting stories an especially daunting aspect of PNI. They say, "What should I ask? How should I ask? What will people say? How should I respond?" What they don't realize is that this sort of thing becomes easier after you've had a good long soak in stories, especially in conversational stories. When you have spent some serious time listening to people exchanging stories, you will see how storytellers surround their stories with evaluative information, and you will see how audiences incorporate questions into storytelling events. You will see that this doesn't always happen in words. Sometimes it involves a language of gestures and grimaces. But you will see it happen, and you will learn what to expect.

Once you understand the question asking and answering that naturally goes on during storytelling, asking people questions about their stories will become easier. It will become less an act of interrogation than of participating in the conversations that naturally revolve around stories during storytelling events.

So in summary, I would say to the person who says story listening is "too hard" because they don't know how to start: this is how to start. Soak yourself in stories, then start interacting with stories, and you will have a much easier time doing *anything* you want to do with stories afterward.

Above all, start small and build your skills. Everything is something.

## It really is that hard

The second group of people who have said to me that story listening is "too hard" have not been daunted as much as disappointed. Typically they have come from a different discipline, usually qualitative or quantitative research, and they have tried going the narrative route and found it frustrating.

The problem in this case is not so much that people don't know where to start; it's that they are used to things being faster and easier.

- They seek to gather conclusive evidence for or against something, but find they can't.

- They expect people to tell stories and fill out forms quickly and clearly, but find that people drag their feet or misunderstand or walk away.
- They want greater volumes of stories to give them clearer answers, but instead they run into diminishing returns.
- They want firm answers but find themselves wading through conflicting interpretations and mixed messages.

In short, it's all too hard.

PNI *is* hard. It is not clean or clear or simple. It is high input, high risk, and high output.

I find there is a tendency, probably common to all human beings, to jump past the first two parts of that sentence and pay attention only to the last part: high output. But all three parts are equally important. If input is not high enough—yours and every participant's—or if things go wrong, the *potentially* high output of PNI could be low or nonexistent, or even negative. Nobody should work with stories in organizations or communities without a full awareness of this fact.

The reason PNI digs deeper than other methods is the same reason it is more likely to fail than other methods. It is hard because it is good. It is good because it is hard.

All of this makes working with stories hard to popularize. It is not an approach that spreads like wildfire. I'd rather it be slow than wrong, and I'm not in any hurry to change the world, so I don't mind if the majority of people stand off and view PNI from a distance.

But still, I do find it sad when people get frustrated with PNI and give it up, because the high output part is real. Stories *can* work wonderful magic. I cherish those moments when I've seen people come to transformative insights that have freed up unimagined sources of energy to solve impossible problems.

When PNI works well, it's like that moment when you bite into the one perfect tomato, the one you finally grew after three years of blight, dog disasters, and worm invasions. That moment is the moment you remember every time you touch the soil in the spring, because you know that someday it will happen again. There will be a lot of dirt under your fingernails before that happens, but you don't mind. That's how you feel when you know. But some people give up before they know.

So, what do I want to say to the person who has tried PNI and found it "too hard" because it is too risky? It's the same thing I want to say to the daunted. Soak yourself in stories.

Why? Because before you have a good long soak in stories, you can't see the values they bring to inquiry, so you can't sustain the high input required. Also, until you understand the life of stories, you won't know where to place your high input, and you won't know where the risks lie. Like a gardener who tries to grow food without learning to love the soil, you will bring failure upon your own efforts.

Most of the people I've seen come to PNI from other fields have not been *willing* to take the time to be with thousands of stories and learn how they live. They just want results, and that's why they get frustrated. They aren't in the world of stories to settle down. They're



just here to visit. But the world of stories doesn't open itself to casual visitors. Only the locals know the soil, and only the locals grow the best tomatoes.

So if you want to work with stories, and you come from other lands of inquiry, and you don't want to be disappointed about how hard PNI is, respect stories enough to get to know them well. Settle down and learn the lay of the land.

Above all, start small and build your skills. Everything is something.



# Part III

## Conceptual Explorations

The three chapters in this part of the book all come directly from my blog, Story-Colored Glasses.

Chapter	Page	Name
14	<a href="#">269</a>	<a href="#">Why PNI Is Not More Popular</a>
15	<a href="#">277</a>	<a href="#">Stories, Narratives, and Hasty Generalizations</a>
16	<a href="#">307</a>	<a href="#">Stories and Non-Violent Communication</a>



## Chapter 14

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# Why PNI Is Not More Popular

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I started out in this field in the same way many people do: I got excited about all the advice on “how to tell a great story” and assumed that only the best, most compelling stories could “get things done,” whatever it was you wanted to do. That all changed in my second year of this work, when I discovered that truth is more useful than fiction (that is, that true stories of real-life experiences are more useful than made-up stories).

In the years since, I have often thought about the *imbalance* between my realization and what I see people doing (and wanting to do) with stories. And I keep asking myself the same questions.

- Why do people call a field in which organizations do many different things related to stories “organizational *storytelling*?”
- Why are the people who help people craft fictional stories so much more prominent and noticeable than the people who help people listen to raw, personal, true stories? Why are there so many more people and groups and books and programs on the telling side of things?
- Why have I seen so many people—clients, researchers, consultants, practitioners—start their journey through organizational narrative on the telling side? Why have I heard the same starting-with-the-telling story from *several* other people who work in this field? Why does it so often require a striking revelation (such as the one I had) to understand that *listening* to stories is at least as useful as telling them?
- Why did it take *me* over a year to come to this realization? What was I doing before that? What was I *thinking*? Why didn’t I see it sooner? What made me *assume* that telling stories would be the best way to address all manner of goals? It’s almost like the telling side stood in front of the listening side, obscuring it, outshining it, blotting it out. Why?
- Why, when I tell people about the many benefits of listening to stories, do they (almost always) want to hear *not about that* but about what you can achieve by *telling* stories? Why do I feel like a gadfly, constantly being brushed off? I don’t *mind* being a gadfly, mind you, but I want to understand why it happens.

- Why do people so often start story-listening projects full of energy, then abandon or sabotage them? Why do they turn away from what is truly an effective approach to decision support? What turns things sour? Why are the challenges of listening so *surprising* to so many people? Are we that afraid of our shadows?

I started out looking through the same end of telescope as everyone else did: we saw the benefits of listening to true, raw, real stories as tiny and the dangers as huge. My telescope turned itself round, not through any great effort or gift of my own, but through one lucky accident after another.

Now I see things from the other side, to my mind as they truly are. The benefits of listening to stories are huge, and the dangers, with patience and practice, are tiny. But I can't help wondering (and wondering and wondering) why so few other people have made the same transition. There must be *some* explanation for it. I know it can be hard to face the truth, but can it really be *this* hard?

I want to make it clear that I am not saying anything *against* the telling side of organizational narrative. I work on the listening side because I think it has more power to support collective decision making for positive change. But I also respect those who work on the telling side, as long as it is done with integrity. I especially respect those who span all areas of story work, because the two sides *should* complement and help each other. The trends I am pondering are not about whether all the parts of the organizational story puzzle should exist, but about the *imbalance* I see in the sizes of the pieces.

## You're soaking in it

To tell the truth, I didn't think "truth is more useful than fiction" on the day I made my big discovery about stories. What I *really* thought of was an old television commercial about soap. If you are around my age and from the U.S., you might recognize this conversation:

Madge [a hairdresser]: [to her client] Ever try Palmolive dish washing detergent?  
Softens your hands while you do the dishes.

Client: Dishwashing liquid?

Madge: You're soaking in it. It's Palmolive.

Client: Mild?

Madge: More than mild. Makes heaps of suds that last. And like I said, it softens hands while you do the dishes.

When I sat at my desk juxtaposing my failures to write resonant fictional stories with the amazingly rich true stories people had told me, I thought, "I'm soaking in stories and I don't know it." Coming back to that moment decades later, that silly old commercial is a *perfect* metaphor for listening to stories, because washing dishes is just the sort of mundane thing people don't want to do, but that gets surprisingly good results.

At the time I first wrote about my true-stories-are-better realization, I was too under-confident to mention such a silly thing as a commercial for dishwashing detergent. So

instead I came up with “truth is more useful than fiction,” as a play on the old joke “truth is stranger than fiction.”

## Truth is more what than fiction?

When I revisited this revelation while I was working on *Working with Stories*, I thought it might be interesting to look into where the truth-fiction joke came from and how it is used.

Apparently the first use of the phrase “truth is stranger than fiction” was in 1823, in the poem *Don Juan* by Lord Byron:

'Tis strange, -but true; for truth is always strange;  
Stranger than fiction: if it could be told,  
How much would novels gain by the exchange!  
How differently the world would men behold!

Then Mark Twain said:

It's no wonder that truth is stranger than fiction. Fiction has to make sense.

And G.K. Chesterton chimed in:

Truth must necessarily be stranger than fiction, for fiction is the creation of the human mind and therefore congenial to it.

Intrigued by this proverb and remembering my change to it, I tried a little experiment. I typed “truth than fiction” into Google. In the page titles and snippets I could see, I noted every word used in the “X” place in the phrase “truth is X than fiction.” Among 847 results, I found 39 words or phrases in the “X” spot. I clustered the 39 words into four groups, which I'll explain here.

### The truth is useful

The first group of results was along the same lines as my “more useful” revelation. Truth is:

more powerful, funnier, better, stronger, more beautiful, more fascinating, more interesting, more gripping, foxier, less dull, more miraculous, reads better

This is exactly what I see through the telescope: the truth will set you free. So far so good, right? Hang on.

### The truth is dangerous

Look at the second set of results. Truth is:

scarier, sadder, worse, more stark, more deadly, more bitter, more ghastly, more dangerous, darker, more horrible, crazier, more bizarre

This set of results brings to mind what is called the psychological immune system, that complex of cognitive biases and heuristics that protects us from falling apart when we confront “stark reality.” Says Daniel Gilbert in *Stumbling on Happiness*:

We may see the world through rose-colored glasses, but rose-colored glasses are neither opaque nor clear. They can't be opaque because we need to see the world clearly enough to participate in it—to pilot helicopters, harvest corn, diaper babies, and all the other stuff that smart mammals need to do in order to survive and thrive. But they can't be clear because we need their rosy tint to motivate us to *design* the helicopters (“I'm sure this thing will fly”), *plant* the corn (“This year will be a banner crop”), and *tolerate* the babies (“what a bundle of joy!”). We cannot do without reality and we cannot do without illusion. Each serves a purpose, each imposes a limit on the influence of the other, and our experience of the world is the artful compromise that these tough competitors negotiate.

True stories keep our glasses translucent rather than opaque; so they are scary, but necessary. Gilbert goes on to say:

Rather than think of people as hopelessly Panglossian . . . we might think of them as having a psychological immune system that defends the mind against unhappiness. . . . [T]he physical immune system must strike a balance between two competing needs: the need to recognize and destroy foreign invaders such as viruses and bacteria, and the need to recognize and respect the body's own cells. . . . A healthy physical immune system must balance its competing needs and find a way to defend us well—but not *too* well. . . . A *healthy* psychological immune system strikes a balance that allows us to feel good enough to cope with our situation but bad enough to do something about it. . . .

This is *exactly* the function of listening to stories: to learn just enough about what is good *and* bad about our situation to do something about it. When stories are only used for telling, there is a danger of defending oneself so well that an auto-immune disorder develops.

One aspect of psychological immunity is *confirmation bias*: the tendency to favor information that confirms things we already believe to be true. Reading about the forms of this bias brings to mind the chapter (page 205) on ways in which I've seen people sabotage their own interests when they consider, plan, carry out, and complete a story project. Consider these aspects of confirmation bias:

- Selective *collection* of evidence comes in when people ask the wrong people the wrong questions at the wrong times and in the wrong ways, making sure that they will avoid collecting stories that challenge their beliefs.
- Selective *interpretation* of evidence comes in when people fight with the stories they have collected or disqualify stories or storytellers.
- Selective *recall* of evidence comes in when people collect and confront stories, but process them in a way that reduces the outcome of the story project or hides its result so it will be quickly forgotten.



When I consider this, I stop wondering that listening to stories is not more prominent and begin to be amazed that *anybody* is doing it.

## The truth is foreign

The third set of “Truth is X than fiction” usages travels into well-studied in-group out-group territory. Truth is:

rarer, weirder, lamer, stupider, grosser, odder, messier, geekier, gayer, more racist

This makes me think of the same psychological immune function operating at the group level. It points to common biases such as in-group bias (those people can't have anything useful to say), out-group homogeneity bias (there are no nuances to what those people think), and the group attribution error (those people are the way they are because they are that way; there is no point finding out why). When this immune system is working well, it should let in just enough of the “other” to be useful without endangering group identity and coherence. However, such protections can be too strong for our own good.

Notice how many of the “truth is foreign” descriptors have to do with social status. If you can find an image from the Madge commercial on the internet—I can't include it here without permission—look at the disgust on the woman's face as she finds out she is soaking in lowly dishwashing liquid. Also notice how Madge gently but firmly pushes her hands back into it. Is it possible that people don't want to hear stories about people beneath them in the social order because they fear it will drag them down by association?

According to social comparison theory, people prefer to compare themselves upwards rather than downwards in the social order. In that light it is interesting that packaged fiction created for the purposes of advertising and entertainment tends to reinforce upward social comparison. The famous example of the people on the sitcom *Friends* having an apartment that would cost far more than they could possibly afford is only one of many such upward comparison forces.

In their 2005 paper “Income Aspirations, Television and Happiness: Evidence from the World Values Surveys,” Luigino Bruni and Luca Stanca:

... present evidence indicating that the effect of income on both life and financial satisfaction is significantly smaller for heavy television viewers, relative to occasional viewers.

In other words, the more television you watch, the less satisfied you are with your income. I wonder what would happen if the reverse study was conducted: would people who are regularly exposed to non-fictional, raw stories of personal experience told by those with lower socioeconomic status experience a lower correlation between income and happiness?

## The truth is boring

The final set of “Truth is X than fiction” usages are few but interesting. Truth is:

less believable, less cool, smaller, shorter, weaker

My guess is that these have partly to do with the phenomenon of the *supernormal stimulus*, or the fact that we are evolutionarily unprepared for the scope and size of our current stimuli. For tens of thousands of years, people told stories around quiet campfires, without the aid of Hollywood special effects and wall-sized enlargements of everyday sights.

There is a famous story that during an early motion picture screening, of *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* in 1896, members of the audience screamed and attempted to get away from the train that was apparently heading straight at them. It is unclear whether this really happened or whether the reaction was to an early 3D film with the same subject. But in either case, if you compare this reaction to the blasé reactions of people today to scenes of giant spaceships descending and the like (even in 3D), it is clear that our expectations about the presentation of fictional stories have been radically transformed.

Compared to this level of impact, simple anecdotes told by regular people can seem so inconsequential as to almost fade from existence. They are like small eggs abandoned by their mothers who instead incubate the larger eggs left by parasitic cowbirds. Maybe this also explains why people sometimes want to collect thousands of stories: they are trying to replace size with volume.

Long ago, people rarely heard true stories about people outside their village or tribe. Most people have heard about Dunbar's number, which is essentially the maximum number of people we can keep track of being related to. This number is generally reported to be around 150 people, though depending on the circumstances it can be larger or smaller. This could be another clue to the puzzle. Maybe listening to stories about the personal experiences of people outside the normal scope of village life requires an artificially enlarged scope of connectedness for which we are ill prepared.

In *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, Daniel Nettle talks about why "drama" tends to involve supernormal stimuli:

A drama consisting of a genuine slice of life, unedited, would be unlikely to be very interesting. The reason is that conversations are only interesting to the extent that you know about the individuals involved and your social world is bound into theirs; as their distance from you increases, the interest level declines. Given that dramatic characters are usually strangers to us, then, the conversation will have to be unusually interesting to hold our attention. That is, the drama has to be an intensified version of the concerns of ordinary conversation.

By this account, fiction is exciting because it *has to be* to get you to engage in paying attention to the experiences of people you don't know. If this is true, it can be no surprise that listening to raw, personal stories told by people whose experience you need to know about *but who have no relationship to* may take conscious effort. This is yet *another* reason to be amazed that anybody is listening to stories.

## The paradox of truth in story work

So what is the end result of all this exploration of truth and fiction, opportunity and danger? A paradox. A telescope has not one view but two, and it must be seen from *both* ends to be fully understood. As the Gestalt therapist Barry Stevens said:

The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable.

I think the answer to all of the questions I posed at the start of this chapter is that the miserable part of story listening is located on the end of the telescope most people see when they pick it up. Perhaps it says “look here” on that end. It takes patience and practice to turn the telescope around—or even to see that there could be another side to it. That may explain why so few do it.

The paradox of truth in story work means that *neither* end of the telescope is more correct. If some people are too easily convinced of the view from one side, perhaps *I* have been too easily convinced of the view from the other side. Maybe I am too confident in my belief that you can play your way out of danger in story work. Certainly I understand and admit that listening to stories has its limits, and I don’t mean to claim otherwise. But I probably do make it seem easier than it is, simply because I have grown to love the work so well.

I can’t see through your telescope. I can’t see what challenges you face. There may be dangers I haven’t seen and opportunities I can’t fathom. If you want to work with stories, you must pick up your own telescope and find out what it shows you. Perhaps you will come up with a way of looking through it that I have not yet discovered. In fact, that’s pretty much a guarantee, if you play with the thing long enough.



## Chapter 15

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# Stories, Narratives, and Hasty Generalizations

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Over the past several years I've noticed a trend in articles that tell us how we should all be thinking nowadays: an admonition to stop thinking in terms of stories because they're simple and the world is complex. I've seen this crop up probably a dozen times, though sadly I seem to have made note of only a few such examples.

Here's one: a 2016 article by Jonathan Chait in *New York* magazine lists criticisms of the media by those working in it. The part that bothered me was one particular quote:

The problem for journalism is: Our actual problems are bigger, more complicated, more sprawling and complex, than good guys and bad guys. I don't take any issue with the press attending to conflict. That's Job One, actually. But the simplicity of the narrative is incredibly debilitating. News organizations chase simple narratives, and if they are prize-hunting, they look for an evil actor.

What bothered me was the straightforward, unequivocal link drawn between the words "narrative" and "simplicity." That's like saying "art" and thinking everybody knows you mean "dogs playing poker."

Ah, but they didn't say the simplicity of the *story*; they said the simplicity of the *narrative*. What's the difference?

## Story and narrative

It's pretty clear what a story is. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end; and something happens in it. That's why most people understand what I mean when I ask them to tell me a story. It's a real-life, common-sense word, like "boot" or "cup." But "narrative" is a word rarely used by the common people, and because of that, it is sometimes viewed with suspicion of manipulative intent. That's probably why I like the word "story" so much and use it so often; it's an honest word that means what it sounds like.

I always picture the two words as a kid with a balloon. Story walks on the ground, because that's where story lives, close to life, where things happen. Narrative dips and rises, soars and falls, because narrative is loosely tethered to life. That little bit of string is the only thing that keeps it from floating away.

If you look at the etymology of the two words, you can see the same on-the-ground, in-the-air distinction going back in time. Both words link to ancient words for knowledge, but they have different histories.

"Narrative" comes from the Sanskrit word *gna* (to know), which developed into the Latin *gnarus* (knowing or skillful) and *narrare* (to explain or make acquainted with). These words emphasized the transfer of knowledge, and not only through the recounting of events.

Indeed, the word "narrative" only began to be used to refer to a story or tale in the late 1500s. It is tempting to speculate that before the intellectual revolution of the Renaissance, it was not necessary to mark out the transfer of knowledge through storytelling as a separate phenomenon in need of a separate name, because it was just the way people explained things.

The word "story" began with the Proto-Indo-European *weyd* (to see or know) and *weydtor* (one who sees or knows). This developed into the Greek *histor* (witness, or one who knows), and then the Latin *historia* (a record or account of events). The word "story" was simply a shortened form of "history" until the late 15th century, when it began to be used to refer to descriptions of fictional as well as factual events.

So "narrative" draws its meaning from the act of *communication* (for teaching and persuasion), while "story" draws its meaning from *the recounting of events* (for inquiry and exploration).

In recent years, however, the meaning of the word "narrative" has been jumping all over the place. In my reading, I have noticed four ways in which people have used the term.

1. A narrative is a story.
2. A narrative is a communicative event of which a story is a part but not the whole.
3. A narrative is something that is *like* a story but does not qualify to be a story for some reason.
4. A narrative is an abstract idea that explains something about the way things are or should be.

Let's go through each of these uses of the word in turn.

## Narratives as stories

I put this usage first because it's easiest to describe. In this view, a narrative is a story and a story is a narrative. Donald Polkinghorne suggested the use of this meaning, for example, in his 1988 book *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*:

In everyday conversation the term "narrative" is equivocal. The most inclusive meaning of "narrative" refers to any spoken or written presentation. When in a

questionnaire, for example, the "narrative" designates that answers are to be given in sentences or paragraphs instead of single words or short phrases. ... I will not use "narrative" in this generalized, derivative sense. ... As I use it, the term "story" is equivalent to "narrative."

I like this nice, simple way of thinking, and I wish I could use the word "narrative" in this way, as a synonym for story. But this connotation of the word, while it does exist, is weak in relation to the other meanings and seems to be on its way out of use. However, at the same time, this sense of the word has interacted with other meanings in ways that (as I will explain) have created a crisis in the world of stories and storytelling.

## Narratives as storytelling events

Some authors use the term "narrative" to describe the totality of a storytelling event, encompassing the modality of the telling and its repercussions. Here's Seymour Chatman in *Story and Discourse*:

[E]ach narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (*discours*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated.

Thus, if I tell you a story, the story is the thing I told you, and the narrative is the story plus my telling of it to you (our discourse), which describes how I told it and when, and your reaction to it.

Mieke Bal uses the word in this way in *Narratology*:

A narrative text is a text in which an agent relates ('tells') a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof. A story is a fabula that is presented in a certain manner. A fabula is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors. An event is the transition from one state to another state. Actors are agents that perform actions.

And so on. This usage of the word meshes well with the ancient distinction between story and narrative, but the word is rarely used in this way outside of academia. My guess is that this is because the whole building-block structure set up here is so confusing.

In fact, every time I read one of these explanations, I can't help thinking of the wonderful exchange in *Through the Looking Glass* when the White Knight offers to sing Alice a song.

'The name of the song is called "Haddocks' Eyes."'

'Oh, that's the name of the song, is it?' Alice said, trying to feel interested.

'No, you don't understand,' the Knight said, looking a little vexed. 'That's what the name is called. The name really is "The Aged Aged Man."'

'Then I ought to have said "That's what the song is called"?' Alice corrected herself.

'No, you oughtn't: that's quite another thing! The song is called "Ways and Means": but that's only what it's called, you know!'

'Well, what is the song, then?' said Alice, who was by this time completely bewildered.

'I was coming to that,' the Knight said. 'The song really is "A-sitting On A Gate": and the tune's my own invention.'

The danger in building such intricate layers of meaning is that most people generally can't (or don't care to) keep track of all the layers. So to make things easier, they choose some parts to pay attention to and some parts to ignore. The end result is that some layers come to be perceived as more important, or better, than others. Then, instead of helping people understand a wonderfully nested structure, you end up promoting a simple message, like that everybody should stop telling stories and start crafting *fabulae*, which sound so much more interesting.

I don't think it's necessary to build up special words to describe the way things play out when stories are being told. You can just call the way things play out a "storytelling event," and you're done.

But that's me. I prefer concrete terms for everything, because there's less to remember and more to share. If I was the kid with the balloon, I'd probably let it go. The problem is, I can't, because *there is no adjective* that means "having to do with stories." It's a hole in the English language. Don't you think that's strange? Why do I have to use the word "narrative" when I mean "having to do with stories"? The word "history" has a perfectly functional adjectival form: historical. But "story" has no such thing. "Storical" is not a word. So I am regularly forced to jump a fence into another etymological garden and distort what I had meant to say. I would like to stop doing that, but I haven't yet found a way.

Back to our list of things people think "narrative" means.

## Narratives as not-quite-stories

Some people use "narrative" (as a noun) to refer to things that other people keep calling stories but that they don't feel are actually stories. This is a more practical consideration, and it tends to be used by people who have a more hands-on relationship to stories.

For example, Iannis Gabriel says in *Storytelling in Organizations*:

I shall argue that not all narratives are stories; in particular, factual or descriptive accounts of events that aspire at objectivity rather than emotional effect must not be treated as stories.

Similarly, in *Story Proof*, Kendall Haven wants to use the term "narrative" to separate "plot-based" accounts from "character-based" accounts, thus:

In plot-based narratives, this happens, then that happens, and then that happens. Plot-based narratives do not spark your interest or create meaning. Stories are character-based and are driven by the details that describe that character's goals, motives, obstacles, and struggles.



I read a hint of exasperation in definitions that try to use the word "narrative" to separate "real stories" from things that seem like stories but are not. I understand the need to make the distinction, but using the word "narrative" to make it just seems to muddy the waters even more.

My word for "things you think are stories but that's just because you don't know enough about stories" is *half-stories*. Some examples are:

- scenarios, such as "you put your coin in this slot, and then this thing here whirrs for a while, and then you get your hot dog"
- situations, such as "it was one long hot day, I'll tell you that"
- sequences, such as "on Monday we had pizza and on Tuesday we had pasta"
- story references, such as "it was one of those dog-in-the-park moments, if you know what I mean"

These are all things people say that look like stories from the outside, but if you walk into them you find that there's nothing on the inside. I'd rather use a word that starts with "story" and adds something to it rather than dragging the narrative balloon down.

Now here's a funny story about people using the word "narrative." Edward Branigan, in his book *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, compared two sentences:

The king died and then the queen died.

The king died and then the queen died of grief.

Most people would agree that the first statement is not a story. It is a recounting of a sequence of events, but it contains no elements of causality or character experience. Iannis Gabriel would call it a "descriptive account of events." Kendall Haven would call it a "plot-based narrative." I would call it a half-story. The second sentence adds to the first, as Haven would say, a character's "goals, motives, obstacles, and struggles," or, as Gabriel would say, "emotional effect." The second sentence is a story, right?

Wrong. Branigan didn't use this example to explain what qualifies as a story. He used it to explain what qualifies as a *narrative*. He didn't provide a term for what he considers the first sentence to be; he just introduced the two sentences with the word "these." So he left us without a term for the non-narrative thing-that-was-said.

But that's not the whole story. In putting forth the king-and-queen example, Branigan was quoting E. M. Forster, who used the same sentences (in his book *Aspects of the Novel*) to explain what qualifies as not a story or a narrative, but a plot.

We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. 'The king died and then the queen died,' is a story. 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief,' is a plot. The time sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say 'and then?' If it is in a plot we ask 'why?'

So the same elements—causality and the emotional understanding of character experiences—have been used to explain why the first king-and-queen sentence is:

- a narrative that is not a story
- a sentence that is not a narrative
- a plot that is not a story or a narrative

It's no wonder people are confused about what these terms mean.

## Narratives as abstract ideas about the way things are

Sometimes people—more and more often lately, it seems—use the word "narrative" to mean an overarching explanation of the way things are. This usage of the word departs from anything to do with stories, and that lays confusion on top of confusion. Worse, this sense of the word is often used pejoratively—for example, "you just think that because you have a narrative of blame."

Actually, most of the blame for this particular meaning of the word "narrative" has to be laid at the feet of Jean-Francois Lyotard—or more likely at the feet of those who misunderstood what he was trying to say (but really that blame bounces back onto him anyway, because he could have said it better). Lyotard famously defined the postmodern condition thus:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives.

The French term Lyotard used was *grands récits*, which is usually translated as "big stories," but the French word *récit* can also be translated as "telling" or "presentation." This hearkens back to the older meaning of the word "narrative" as an explanation that might or might not include a story. Based on my reading, I think it would be more accurate to say that Lyotard meant to speak of incredulity towards grand *explanations*, not grand *stories*. Sadly, it seems that his poor choice of words (or poor translation of his words, or both) has influenced the trajectory of the word "narrative."

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy ([iep.utm.edu](http://iep.utm.edu)) has this to say about Lyotard's description of "narrative knowledge":

Narrative knowledge is the kind of knowledge prevalent in "primitive" or "traditional' societies, and is based on storytelling, sometimes in the form of ritual, music and dance.

Thus in his use of the term "narrative," Lyotard did not mean to refer only to stories. He meant to refer to *knowledge that has traditionally been communicated in the form of stories*—which is an entirely different thing.

Here's Michael Böhler in *Narrated Communities* (with bracketed explanations my own):

Under 'knowledge', then, Lyotard does not simply understand an ensemble of denotative statements to be judged solely according to the 'true'/'false' criterion in the framework of a language game among experts that has been regulated with normative precision. Instead ideas such as *savoir-faire* [knowing by doing], *savoir-*

*vivre* [knowing by living], and *savoir-écouter* [knowing by listening] blend into the concept *savoir* [knowing], with the corresponding criteria of usefulness, of justice and/or happiness (ethical sagacity), and of audial or visual beauty.

Again, this describes the type of knowledge people often transfer by telling stories, but *not stories themselves*. So if Lyotard used "narrative" to mean "the passing on of knowledge gained from experience," how did his writings push the word "narrative" upwards, in the direction of things that are abstract and untethered from experience?

I think the reversal happened because of the word "metanarrative," which is both crucial to Lyotard's argument and devastatingly easy to misunderstand. A metanarrative has often been described as a story about stories, but I believe Lyotard meant it more as a *telling about telling*, or the passing on of knowledge about the passing on of knowledge.

His argument, in a nutshell, was that scientists have been trying to convince the rest of us that the knowledge we have derived from experience and passed on by song and dance and story for thousands of years is no longer legitimate because they have something better: knowledge derived from proof. The problem is, they have tried to sell us on the superiority of this knowledge-from-proof with a *story* (in which science is the hero who has saved humanity), which is ... a way to pass on knowledge derived from experience.

Lyotard's warning was about the danger inherent in a narrative that seeks an end to all narratives, which is as nonsensical a notion as a war that will end all wars. This was a nuanced, elegant, even beautiful argument; but it's far too complex to have made its way into popular culture intact.

What seems to have happened is that Lyotard's crucial distinction between overarching, context-free explanations for the way things are and fine-grained, context-dependent explorations of local reality on the ground has been put aside, and the word "narrative" has become associated only with metanarrative. And this simplification has created a vague suspicion of anything associated with narrative, *including stories*.

This is exactly the *reverse* of the effect Lyotard hoped to create. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy again:

Lyotard does not believe that science has any justification in claiming to be a more legitimate form of knowledge than narrative. Part of his work in *The Postmodern Condition* can be read as a defence of narrative knowledge from the increasing dominance of scientific knowledge.

It is not surprising that this has happened. Such a thing has happened many times throughout history. Linguists and etymologists assure us that language is above all a lazy thing. Subtle distinctions tend to smooth out over time. Words shrink; prefixes and suffixes fall off; multiple meanings disappear. As Lyotard's famous sentence made its way into the culture, it was warped into something that upended its original meaning, thus:

- Simplifying to the extreme—discard; goes without saying
- I define postmodern—the smart people nowadays
- as incredulity towards —don't believe in

- metanarratives—stories
- because they are are overarching, context-free explanations—because they're simple

Can I prove without a doubt that this has happened? I can't. But it seems a likely outcome of the circumstances of the case. An author writes an elaborate, convoluted argument that relies on the nuanced understanding of a strange new word that bears a strong resemblance to—yet contradicts—a term in familiar use. The writing becomes hugely popular. Some read it and understand it deeply, while others skim it and miss the point entirely. People talk about it. The complex argument gets reduced to a distorted sound bite. The new word slides back into the old word it resembles. The simplified message seeps into the culture in ways the original author never intended. It's an old, old story, one that is bound to repeat as long as earnest intellectuals are rewarded for obfuscatory jargon and everybody else just talks to each other.

Let this be a warning to all earnest intellectuals. If you want to speak in favor of one thing and against another thing, *don't use the same word for both things*. It doesn't matter if you stick some extra letters onto one version of the word. They will get trimmed off, and people will end up hating both the thing you spoke against and the thing you spoke for. Humpty Dumpty was wrong. You can't make words do what you want them to do, because words are just things used by people, and you can't make people do what you want them to do. (Example: agile.)

If Lyotard had contrasted "traditional" rather than "narrative" knowledge (as I have seen his words improved upon by some), and if he had spoken of local versus global explanations, or context-free versus context-dependent explanations, he might have been better understood—and he might not have endangered the very thing he hoped to support.

Lyotard later called *The Postmodern Condition* "a bit of a parody" and "the worst of my books." He admitted to having "less than limited" knowledge about the science he was writing about, and he said he "made up stories" to prove his point and referred to books he hadn't actually read. I'm not sure what to make of that, but I'm not really concerned with the question of whether Lyotard was right about the postmodern condition. I'm just concerned with what he did to the word "narrative," and by extension, to what people think stories are for.

I feel like should show you some examples of the way "narrative" has come to mean what Lyotard meant by "metanarrative." Here is a smattering of statements from a variety of articles, blog posts, and conversations I found on the web. See if you can pick up the thread that joins them.

"Stories make a messy reality seem neat, purposeful, meaningful, and that's one of the reasons why our brains love stories."

"Storytelling glosses over uncertainties; methodological detail and even results can get lost in the narrative's overarching trajectory."

"We find messages that are framed as stories more memorable, easy to understand, and convincing. And we all fit our own memories and identity into a neat storyline

as well—we tell ourselves that this led to this; this was a big turning point; this had to happen so this other thing could happen.”

“The world is complicated—too complicated for us it seems—so we humans like narratives that compact a lot of information into simple formulations.”

“It is important that investors think objectively when looking at these issues rather than choosing the argument that fits their own political or ideological narrative.”

“Narratives are simple stories that we tell to ourselves and to others to explain the world.”

The common thread in these quotes is that they frame stories, whether personal and everyday or manufactured and promoted, as near-perfect replicas of Lyotard’s metanarratives: with an “overarching trajectory,” a “neat storyline,” “compact,” “ideological,” and used “to explain the world.” Lyotard’s *petit récits*—complex, local stories grounded in everyday reality—seem to have disappeared from view. This may explain why so many people tell stories but believe they don’t—because they think they shouldn’t.

My response to the cloud of confusion around the word “narrative” has been to simply avoid using it as a noun. You will not find it used that way in any of my writing over at least the past decade. I have been using the word as an adjective, to mean “having to do with stories,” but I would like to stop doing that as well, as soon as ever I find any other word that will work in its place.

I believe it is time to admit that we story folk have lost control of the word “narrative” and must abandon it entirely. Our balloon has grown into a zeppelin, and it groans and strains above us. If we don’t loosen our hold and let the word float back to its pre-Renaissance meaning, as a means of knowledge transfer synonymous with “explanation” (or even “worldview”), it will drag “story” even further away from the ground—which is the sensory, physical, emotional, visceral reality of our lives. It may even now be too late. Is the word “story” still on the ground? If it is, can we keep it there? If it’s not, can we get it back?

## Stories and simple stories are not the same thing

This thought leads me to a TED talk I recently discovered called “Be Suspicious of Simple Stories.” It was delivered in 2011 (yes I *do* live under a rock, thanks for asking), and it was given by the economist Tyler Cowen.

I wish I had noticed this talk years ago, because it is full of easily fixed mistakes. Someone like me finding this talk is like a carpenter finding a broken down tool shed in an otherwise picture-perfect garden. It breaks my heart to see somebody saying a thing like this, and I cannot do otherwise than my best to fix it.

Let’s take the talk apart so I can show you where it’s broken. (I’ll just show you the bits I think are most important.)

[T]he more inspired a story makes me feel, very often the more nervous I get.

My first thought on seeing this was that it reminds me of what Marshall Rosenberg said about stories in his book on *Non-Violent Communication* (which I explored in a previous blog post; see page 307). Both of these people recounted personal, emotional, visceral reactions to stories, and then proceeded to explain them using abstract rationalizations that ring hollow.

The good and bad things about stories is they're a kind of filter. They take a lot of information, and they leave some of it out, and they keep some of it in.

Yes, stories filter information out. They also *add* information in, in the form of ideas, values, emotions, and perspectives. Stories don't just filter reality; that's too simple a description of what they do. Stories *play* with reality. That's what they're for. Telling and listening to stories is a form of play, and play holds a prominent position in human life because it makes us capable of adapting to varied circumstances.

But the thing about this filter, it always leaves the same things in. You're always left with the same few stories. . . . [I]f you think in terms of stories, you're telling yourself the same things over and over again.

It is true that various people have written books over the years claiming that there are only seven or 20 or 36 or other numbers of stories. But that doesn't mean much. You can lump just about anything together into a small number of types if you ignore the details.

There are only five kinds of living things on earth—Monera, Archaea, Protista, Plantae, Animalia, Fungi. That doesn't mean life on this planet is simple. Can you imagine David Attenborough intoning in his irreplaceable voice, "There are only five categories of life on earth—so there's no point looking at any of it, is there? This documentary is over." No dancing birds of paradise; no dolphin pass-the-thing parties; no angler fish plunging through the dark with murderous intent; no night-blooming dead-thing flowers; no whale mothers desperately supporting their exhausted babies as they struggle to reach the surface to draw one more breath. Just a list of five things.

Yes, there are seven kinds of stories. There are 20 kinds. There are 36 kinds. There are billions of kinds. How many kinds of stories you think there are says more about you, or what it is you're trying to do, than it says about stories.

I remember a funny story about classifying things from my days in biology. There was this famous professor whose ego was legend. One day he was walking through a nature preserve with a gaggle of adoring students, calling out dense Latin references to various species he could identify from the merest glimpse. The crowd responded to his pronouncements the same way people say "ooh" and "aah" as fireworks appear in the sky. One particular bit of bright color in the field ahead led to an instant identification as a rare species of flower. But as the group approached the rare flower, they realized that it was not a flower at all, but a scrap of litter, and they began to laugh. The professor, discovering his mistake, cleared his throat, raised his gaze, and began to call out species names again; but the magic was gone, and the crowd laughed more with every identification he made.

That story always comes to my mind whenever I see people "ooh" and "aah" over some new pronouncement about how many kinds of stories there are.

There was a study done, we asked some people to describe their lives. And when asked to describe their lives, what's interesting is how few people said, "mess". ... [W]hat people wanted to say was, "My life is a journey." 51% wanted to turn his or her life into a story. 11% said, "My life is a battle." Again, that's a kind of story. 8% said, "My life is a novel," 5% "My life is a play."

There's a good reason people said their lives were stories: they *are* stories. A life is a sequence of events in time. So is a story. That's part of why we tell stories: because they resemble our lives.

But Cowen seems mostly bothered by the fact that people represented their lives as *simple* stories. It seems likely that in this study he gave people a limited *context*—a small space and a small time—in which to describe their lives. So of course people told simple stories. They were *asked* to.

In storytelling, *context shapes content*. This is true to such an extent that the same story told in two different contexts can only be seen as two different stories. Saying "we gave people two minutes and they told us simple stories" is like saying "we gave people two minutes with a pile of popsicle sticks and feathers, and not one of them painted the Mona Lisa." I would challenge Cowen to signal his willingness to listen deeply to the complex stories of people's lives, and then see if he still hears simple stories. I don't think he will.

So how many of you know the story about George Washington and the cherry tree. It's not obvious that's exactly what happened.

Of course that's not exactly what happened. Nobody thinks it is. That cherry-tree story is a category of story I call a *condensed* story, one that has solidified into something very small yet quite meaningful (in American culture, anyway). It's most likely on its way to becoming a proverb, or even an idiom, which is the most compressed form of story. But just because compressed stories exist, it doesn't mean other stories don't.

[N]arratives tend to be too simple. The point of a narrative is to strip it way, not just into 18 minutes, but most narratives you could present in a sentence or two.

Note here that Cowen has equated the words "narrative" and "story." This is what I meant, above, when I said that two senses of the word "narrative" have been interacting in a way that has created a crisis. This is the crisis. Two senses of "narrative" (as a story and as an overarching, context-free explanation for the way things are) are in conflict and in conflation at the same time. The result has been confusion, which has created logical errors such as this statement.

A statement of this type is known as a *hasty generalization*. It is a logical fallacy of sampling, of mistaking a small and unrepresentative part for the whole. We were warned against this mistake by one of our great leaders way back in 1966:

Robin: I guess you can never trust a woman.

Batman: You've made a hasty generalization, Robin. It's a bad habit to get into.

Yes, of course there are simple stories in the world. But it is a mistake to believe that all or even most stories are simple. This is the equivalent of walking into a village, seeing three children at play, and proclaiming loudly that the village is populated solely by children. Stories have not become simpler. What *has* become simpler is the subset of stories people have been paying attention to; and that's a trend I've been thinking about.

When someone can't see something you can see, it's never enough to say "just look around you," because that's the problem: they *haven't* been looking, and they aren't going to start looking because you told them to. No, what you need to do in a situation like that is to show people what they haven't been seeing. So I'm going to show Tyler Cowen (and everyone else who thinks stories are simple) that stories can be beautifully, deeply, magically complex.

There are at least three ways for stories to be complex: internally, relationally, and externally.

### **Internally complex stories**

A story that is internally complex is rich, deep, detailed, full of nuance, difficult to describe succinctly: bigger on the inside than the outside.

This is the hardest of the three types of complexity to communicate, because it depends on the experience of *narrative immersion*, which no one can have for anyone else. If you've never read Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, the term "unbounded advantages of disgrace" can never mean anything to you. If you've never read George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, you'll never understand what it means that I sometimes feel like my own Casaubon (and sometimes like my own Dorothea). I could cite many more examples, but it won't help if you haven't been where I've been. That's why we read great literature: because it gives us a place to play that is as complex as life itself.

This is not to say that internally complex stories only exist in literature. Sit down with any old person and really let them go—that is, create a context in which long and complex stories are both appropriate and appreciated—and you'll hear enough internal complexity—enough mess, if you like—to sate any appetite. The problem is that hardly anybody does this anymore. *That doesn't mean the stories aren't still there*, waiting to be told and heard. It's a mistake to think they're gone just because we're not listening.

### **Relationally complex stories**

A story that is relationally complex may not be full of nuance, but it is full of stories. It is a nested story, with levels upon levels, like a tardis in a tardis.

I have learned to interpret my dog-earing of physical books (when I read physical books, that is) as a sort of running commentary. A small dog-ear means that I was enjoying the book but not particularly enthused by what I was reading at the time. A large dog-ear shows that I was energized to continue and frustrated to have to stop. A lot of my books start with small dog-ears then progress to larger dog-ears as the story heats up. A multi-page dog-ear denotes my maximum level of enthusiasm, frustration, or both.

Page 35 of my copy of *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* is a large and multi-page dog-ear, and I remember making it, which is a story of its own. I made that dog-ear because the level of story nesting I encountered on the page exceeded my ability to make sense of



what I was reading. At the moment I stopped reading, I was in the middle of a story called *The Tale of the Young Man and the Barber of Baghdad*. That story was nested inside another story called *The Tailor's Tale*, which was itself nested inside *The Tale of the Hunchback*. *The Tale of the Hunchback*, as told by Scheherazade, was nested inside *The Tale of King Shahriyar and his Brother Shahzaman*.

These were the words that led me to dog-ear four pages in my panic to escape:

"What kind of talk is this?" cried the barber. 'By Allah, I will accept nothing before I have shaved you. You must know that I would regard it as a pleasant duty and a great honour to serve you even without payment. For although you do not seem to appreciate my merits, I appreciate yours. I remember one Friday when"

And then I could bear no more. At five levels down I was suffocating in stories, and I simply had to surface for air. *That's* a deeply nested story. There are many such in the historical records of storytelling around the world. Pick up any book of folk tales and you'll find nested stories like this. Nesting stories was once so common as to be an expected part of every well-told story. Today we expect our stories to follow simple, single arcs; but this is a pale imitation of the storytelling we used to expect.

In 2003 I did a little research project on story form. For it I created outlines of folk tales to understand more about how they were put together. I developed a grammar I could use to diagram a story, using letters to denote its elements: exposition (E), context-setting event (C), turning point (T), protagonist action (A), reversal of fortune (R), and resolution (S).

Few of the folk tales I examined were simple, and most involved some degree of nesting. One Indian tale, called "The Kurumba in the Parrot's Body," had this structure:

EC1 [ETSE] C2T [CTRS [TRS] ] A1 [ECTARSE] A2 [ECTAR [TRS] S] A3RSE

This means that the story started with an element of exposition (E), followed by one context-setting event (C1), then entered into a nested story ([ETSE]), which had its own exposition (E), turning point (T), resolution (S), and concluding exposition (E). The next nested section of the story ([CTRS [TRS]]) had another story nested inside it, and this structure repeated later on in the larger story.

A similarly doubly-nested structure can be found the well-known story "Little Claus and Big Claus," as told by (and probably simplified by) Hans Christian Anderson:

EC3TA [ CT [CTAS] S [TAS] ] RS [C2TA [CTAS] S [TAS] ] RS [T [CTS] S [CTAS] ]

Lately [meaning: when I wrote this essay], my son and I have been enjoying Emily Wilson's excellent new translation of *The Odyssey*, which passes back and forth between different levels of nesting in a way that we find richly satisfying. Whenever I break through to another level of nested stories, I always get this feeling in my mind that links to the feeling in my hands when I plunge them into the soil of my garden. Delving into a nested story *feels like life*, and it feels good. That's why we love it so much.

But we don't get much exposure to nested storytelling these days, not unless we seek it out; and I think our poor story diet has influenced our beliefs about what stories are good for. I would venture to guess that every person who has written a well-meaning blog post

or given a well-meaning talk about how stories are dangerous because they're simple has never immersed themselves in a deeply nested story. You could not possibly experience such a story and continue to claim that stories are universally simple things. Going from watching a television sit-com to imbibing the raw energy of one of the great epics of oral literature is like getting off a carousel horse and mounting a living, breathing monster of an animal. Stories can be much more than you think they can be. They can be full of life, and they can be far from simple.

The attentive reader will have noticed that I have again given an example from literature. This is not because such examples are more important or numerous; it's because you can read *The Odyssey* as easily as I can. Personal stories are often just as nested, but it's harder for me to point to any you can read. What I can tell you to do is to *listen*. Find an old person and *give them permission* to tell you what has happened to them in their life. Or gather a few friends and keep nudging the conversation back to things that have happened to people. I guarantee that you will hear some nested stories. It might take a little while for the nested stories to come out, because people aren't used to being listened to anymore. But be patient; the stories will come.

### Externally complex stories

A third way in which stories can be complex is to be connected to each other. This is another aspect of storytelling that was once so common as to be unremarkable but has been recently neglected.

One culprit has been the compilation of folk tales and urban legends into printed volumes that have removed the connections among stories. Classifications of folk tales by surface-level categories such as "animal tales" and "tales that involve demons" have also severed ties that traditionally held such stories together in use. Apparently, few folk tale collectors thought to ask their sources, after they had told a story, what story they usually told next and why. This artificial isolation of stories has caused us to see them as things that are sorted and enumerated, not related to each other in complex webs that negotiate additional layers of meaning.

The tension between preserving folk culture and creating an entertaining diversion started along with the very first written versions of folk tales (going back, most likely, to Homer). The brothers Grimm, for example, edited their folk tale collection six times in thirty years, due primarily to criticism from a public that wanted their story books pleasant, simple, and fun.

Here's a bit from the story of Rapunzel that illustrates the change. In the part of the story where Rapunzel's captor discovers that a young prince has been visiting her, in Oliver Loo's translation of the 1812 edition it says:

So they lived in fun and joy for some time, and the fairy did not come behind it, until one day Rapunzel started and said to her: "But say to me Frau Goethel, my clothes-lets are becoming so tight and will not fit any more." Ach you godless child, spoke the fairy, what must I hear from you, and she noticed right away, how she was deceived, and was all enraged.

In Jack Zipes' translation of the 1856 edition, the prince begins by asking Rapunzel to marry him; and after she agrees, they form a plan for her escape. It is to work on that plan, not for "fun and joy," that they meet every day.

The enchantress didn't notice a thing until one day Rapunzel said to her: "Tell me, Mother Goethel, why are you so much harder to pull up than the young prince. He gets up here in a twinkling." "Wicked child!" shouted the enchantress. "What have you done? I thought I had shut you off from the rest of the world, but you betrayed me."

Notice a few things here. First, I love how the 1812 version keeps intact the chatty idiosyncracies that show it was recorded from a real person. I can just see her wiping her hands on her apron as she says "and the fairy did not come behind it" and "what must I hear from you" and so on. But these aren't the only details that were smoothed out. There was also a delicious complexity to the morality of the original tales that would have been a lot more fun to play with. (Some of this can be attributed to the styles of the translators, but some of these differences seem to go beyond translation.)

Some folk tale collections have gone so far as to represent their rearrangements of tales as *improvements* over the stories as told. From the 1843 book *Popular Tales and Legends*:

The volume in the reader's hands lays claim to very little merit, beyond that of careful selection. . . . Lack of matter there was none; the object was to get together, in an accessible form, a variety of pieces, which were only to be met with, scattered throughout voluminous works, and then, not infrequently mixed up with others of a less interesting (not to say objectionable) character.

Folk life is messy; that's what keeps it real. I would personally love to read verbatim *in situ* transcripts of every folk tale ever collected, but apparently I am in the minority, and the collections we have reflect the audiences for whom they were written.

Some folk tale collections denounce the artifice of selection even as they practice it. Here are David Leeming and Jake Page in *Myths, Legends, and Folktales of America*:

We are well aware that the categorization of our highly selective examples is, in some instances, arguable. It is as if the stories themselves are laughing at such an attempt to pin them down.

Of greater merit, to my mind, are the folk tale collections that attempt to preserve some sense of connection among tales, even if it is a matter of reassembly rather than the preservation of linkages at the source. Says A. K. Ramanujan in the introduction to *Folktales from India*:

Instead of arranging the tales according to some classificatory scheme (e.g., romantic tales, tales of magic, etc.), I have arranged them in eleven cycles or sessions, each consisting of eight to eleven tales. . . . Thus, we will encounter similar themes in point and counterpoint several times, often expressing contradictory attitudes (e.g., about fate or sibling bonds), so that tale becomes relevant to tale; they interpenetrate and interpret each other, and together create a world.

And in *Tales of the Greek Heroes*, Roger Lancelyn Green says:

My predecessors have taken isolated stories and re-told them at various lengths—but they have, as a rule, remained isolated. Here I have tried to tell the tale of the Heroic Age as that single whole which the Greeks believed it to be.

Do I remember these two books better than the thirty-odd other compilations of folk tales I've read? Yes, I do. The Indian book in particular has always been my favorite, and it might have something to do with the relationships among its stories. I used to disdain folk-tale collections that were centered around themes because I thought they were further from their sources, but I've come to realize that they may be closer to the way people experienced storytelling in the past. No storyteller in the world has ever sat around listing the stories they knew in the order specified by the Aarne-Thompson Motif-Index. They connected stories the way we do: by reminding. One thing led to another, and so on.

So if our compilations of folk tales don't capture the external complexity of historical storytelling, what does? What are we missing from our picture of how people have told stories in the past, and how does it relate to the ways people tell stories today? It takes some looking, but there are still hints and glimpses of connections among folk tales. I'll show you a few I've come across.

To begin with, I can't stop thinking about this wistful note I found in the introduction to the Grimm brothers' 1853 book *Household Stories Collected by the Brothers Grimm* (italics their own):

We may see sometimes, when a whole harvest has been destroyed by storm or other calamity that heaven sends, still some little nook has found a shelter near the low hedges or bushes by the roadside, and some single ears of corn have remained standing. When again the sun shines favourably, they grow on, unnoticed and in solitude: no early sickle reaps them for the great store houses, but in the autumn, when they are ripe and full, some poor hands come and seek them, and, gathered ear by ear, carefully bound, and more highly prized than other whole sheaves, they are carried home, and the whole winter long they serve for food—perhaps also, they are the only seed for the future.

So it has appeared to us when we have seen, how, of so much that bloomed in former times, nothing has remained but ballads, a few books, some sayings, and these innocent household stories amongst the people. The places near the stove, the kitchen-hearth, the steps to the loft, feast-days still kept, meadows and forests in their quietude, above all, *untroubled fancy*, were the hedges that protected and delivered them over from one time to another.

What a sense of loss. Note the references to isolation: "single" ears of corn remaining "in solitude" and "gathered ear by ear" to be "carefully bound" (into collections). The saddest thing of all, to my mind, is that this was written *two centuries ago*. If the brothers Grimm saw their story collection as such a meager remnant of the formerly abundant life of stories, just *think* what the social life of stories must have been like *four centuries ago*.

The book *Traditional Slovak Folktales* (collected by Pavol Dobšinský and edited and translated by David L. Cooper) is near to my heart because my family comes from the region; indeed, I was happy to recognize some fragments of culture—metaphors, rituals, superstitions—I heard as a child. In the introduction to the book, the editor describes a particular storyteller who sounds a lot like the grandfather I can barely remember.

One Slovak narrator from whom a later generation of folklorists collected tales, Jozef Rusnák-Bronda, can serve us as an example of a gifted storyteller. Born in 1864 in the upper Hron River valley, he learned the trade of carpenter from his brother-in-law and traveled around northern Slovakia (then Upper Hungary) for his trade. ... Unable to continue working due to an injury, he nevertheless continued to go to the mountains with the woodcutters, where he performed various duties, including cooking and guarding the hut. Later, when even this work became too strenuous for him, the woodcutters helped him with his duties in order that he stay with them and tell his stories, which he told during the evenings and when there was bad weather. He would tell stories of accidents and jokes as well as demonological stories and the longer wondertales. Often he would receive an extra portion of liquor for his tales. In the village he would occasionally be invited to women's spinning parties to tell tales, but he would change his tales when children were present.

So that's how folk tales were told. It sounds a lot like what happens when my family gets together today, and maybe you recognize this description as well. I'm not sure how many people are telling stories we would call *folk tales* anymore, but we are definitely still telling *stories*, and the circumstances of the telling don't sound all that different.

We used to always tell this joke about one of my sisters: that if you missed a TV show you could just ask her about it—but you had to be careful, because her retelling was usually longer than the show. She still tells a lot of stories, and they're still pretty long and complicated, but I'm probably the only one who notices (or at least thinks about) what is going on. That's probably the way storytelling has always been: some people just can't help spinning yarns, and everybody else enjoys it (and puts up with it at the same time), and only a few pedants think to ask what it all means.

Here's another glimpse of old-time storytelling, from *Folktales from the Irish Countryside*, compiled by Kevin Danaher:

The tales given below come from six different sources. ... The first of these was an elderly farmer ... [who] loved to tell of ghosts and fairies and monsters. ... His next door neighbor ... was known in the whole district as a woman of great piety and of boundless charity. ... Her tales were mostly of the moral kind, of good deeds rewarded, of the virtues and miracles of the saints and of the mercy of God. The third of our storytellers ... had always an enquiring mind and a very retentive memory, which made him a veritable mine of information about the traditions of the past. Our fourth ... was a famous mower with a scythe ... many of his stories were about ghosts and other strange beings encountered on his travels. ...

[Another storyteller] had a serious, rather ponderous style of delivery and liked to give the magical and horrible aspects of his stories their full value.

That's something we miss when we read through a collection of folk tales: that not every teller told every tale. One tended toward the magical, another the historical, a third the instructive. That sounds a lot like the way people talk today, doesn't it? That one sister I mentioned tells *long* stories, but I tell *more* stories. I've noticed that I rarely make it through more than two or three *minutes* of any conversation without telling a story about one thing or another. It's just how I think, and I can't help expressing myself in that way. If somebody collected stories from my sister and myself, they'd describe our stories differently, but we'd still be part of the same tradition.

But the most important thing about stories as told in real life is that they are rarely told one at a time. This is the worst thing that has happened as stories have been written down: the experience of storytelling as *a chain of linked events* has been lost. Here's a glimpse of it, from *American Indian Myths and Legends* (selected and edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz):

[S]tories are often told in chains, one word, character, or idea bringing to mind a related one, prompting another storyteller to offer a contribution. . . . Rather than being self-contained units, [stories] are often incomplete episodes in a progression that goes back deep into a tribe's traditions.

I found the introduction to the 1969 book *The Mwindo Epic* (edited and translated by Daniel Beibuyck and Kahombo C. Mateene) fascinating for its in-depth examination of a complex network of stories in a culture in which storytelling had, as of 1969, not yet lost its roots. In the Nyanga culture from which the epic of *Mwindo* was collected:

Tales are narrated, partly sung, mimed, and partly dramatized on a great variety of domestic, legal, ritual occasions to entertain, to instruct, to explain, to moralize. It would be inexact to isolate for any given tale a single one of these functions. Most, if not all, Nyanga tales simultaneously perform recreational, pedagogical, etiological, and moralizing roles, but specific situations may demand special emphasis on a single function.

And the function of storytelling in the Nyanga people was not isolated in professional storytellers (though those existed) but was scattered throughout the people:

All Nyanga know a certain number of texts; some are able to narrate, sing, or recite them coherently and completely, others are confused narrators, able only to communicate the essence of their content.

We've gotten used to the idea that the people who told the old folk tales were very different than we are today. If that is true, I think it's true in degree and not in kind. Folk life is not lost to us, not yet. It continues, everywhere around the world, in city and country, in culture high and low. But it has changed, in two important ways.

First, the telling of stories has become something that only a specialized priesthood can *admit* to doing. Though many people still tell stories, they don't *call* it storytelling. They call it something else: chatting, gossip, catching up, spending time together, having a nice

conversation, getting to know each other, and so on. I don't know how many people I've met who tell story after story, clearly relishing the ritual, but when I *hint* at the possibility that they might be telling stories, react as though I've accused them of taking on airs, pretending to be something they have no right to be. "Oh, no, I was just *talking*," they say.

You can see the same thing if you do a Google image search on the word "storytelling." You will see images of books, stage sets, and sales pitches, but hardly any pictures of people talking to each other. If you want to see pictures of *storytelling*, you have to search on the word "conversation," because that's where storytelling is hiding. We're just talking.

But wait! you say. Didn't you just say that people didn't think of their everyday storytelling as anything special in the past? Didn't you say that only a few pedants paid attention to what was going on? Yes, I did. But I believe—this is based on what I've read and observed—that there was once a widespread sense of *ownership* of the words "stories" and "storytelling" among the great mass of people. Telling stories was once something everybody thought everybody did. Now it isn't.

The second change that has come over storytelling is that because people think of stories as things that are isolated (both from other stories and from other aspects of life), they don't recognize forms of culture that used to move back and forth easily between storytelling and other modes of communication. The lines we once drew lightly around storytelling have risen into walls.

For example, when a meme makes its way around the internet, people tell stories about it; they can't help it. But when I try to point out that people have been telling stories about memes, or even that some memes *are* stories, I've noticed that people tend to have one of two reactions: they try to deny that the stories are stories ("we're just talking"), or they try to turn the stories into what they think are *legitimate* stories—that is, movie plots or newspaper articles or novels or stand-up comedy performances.

In other words, stories are still very much features of daily life, but the *idea* of stories as features of daily life has been much reduced. And I believe that this reduction in awareness of everyday storytelling has contributed to the belief that stories are things of which we should be suspicious.

## Simple versus simplified stories

All right. Now that we've seen how complex stories can be, let's go back to Tyler Cowen's talk.

We're biologically programmed to respond to [stories].

As a former evolutionary biologist, this makes me cringe. Programming is the wrong metaphor for any living thing. We are not built; we grow. As one blogger recently put it, "For Mendel's sake, ban the cyborg-speak, will you?"

People tell and respond to stories because stories do a lot of useful things in our lives. Stories also create dangers in our lives. If the benefits of stories did not outweigh their

dangers, we wouldn't still be telling stories, just like we're not still living in trees or drilling holes in people's skulls.

They [stories] contain a lot of information.

How can stories be simple and at the same time contain a lot of information?

They have social power. They connect us to other people. So they are like a candy that we're fed when we consume political information, when we read novels.

Saying that something is "like candy" is generally understood to mean that the thing is attractive yet bad for us. Using things that have social power to become more connected to other people seems like something that is *good* for us. So I don't understand how this makes sense. I would understand it if Cowen said "Stories are fun but useless, so they are like candy." That would still be wrong (because not all stories are fun, and not all stories are useless), but at least it would make some sense. This doesn't.

As a simple rule of thumb, just imagine that every time you're telling a good versus evil story, you're basically lowering your IQ by ten points or more.

First: biological programming and IQ are both overarching, context-free explanations that are wrong, misleading, and often used to manipulate.

Second: We need to make a distinction between *simple* and *simplified*. There is nothing in the world wrong with a simple story. We all start our lives understanding only the simplest of stories. As we grow, we begin to understand and tell stories that are more and more complex. It is true that if you are only capable of understanding and telling simple stories as an adult, you need to learn more about stories. But I don't think that's what Cowen is talking about here. I think, when he mentions a "good versus evil" story, that what he's really talking about is *simplified* stories. A simplified story is a story that has been *made* simple for a reason, and that reason is almost always manipulation.

If we take his "good versus evil story" to mean a simplified story, that is, one that deliberately removes nuance to influence or control, then I can unequivocally agree with his statement. Too many people today experience too many simplified stories and not enough simple and complex stories. We'll get to what I think we can do about that later on in the essay.

Another set of stories that are popular—if you know Oliver Stone's movies, or Michael Moore's movies, you can't make a movie and say: "It was all a big accident." No, it has to be a conspiracy, people plotting together, because in a story, a story is about intention. A story is not about spontaneous order or complex human institutions which are the product of human action, but not of human design. No, a story is about evil people plotting together.

This statement reveals a severely limited view of the universe of stories. If Hollywood movie plots are the only stories you have ever been exposed to, then yes, you might think all stories are about intention. But oh, what you have been missing. The depth of stories about spontaneous order, and about complex human institutions which are the product of human action but not of human design, and about every other thing under the sun, will astound you.



Actually, when I read the words "complex human institutions which are the product of human action, but not of human design," my mind flew like a shot to *Dombey and Son*, Dickens' complex tale about a miserable man so deeply trapped in the human institutions we've built around money and greed that he is unable to love his own child. I could probably come up with ten more examples, some of them from my own life experience, but I don't think I have to.

As a good rule of thumb, if you're asking: "When I hear a story, when should I be especially suspicious?" If you hear a story and you think: "Wow, that would make a great movie!"

Yes. This is correct. You *should* be suspicious if you hear a story and think that. You should be suspicious of your own diet of stories, because such a statement proves that it is impoverished. Read some great literature, some fine collections of folk tales, and some well-collected oral histories. Plunge into some lengthy, deep, wide-ranging conversations about the past with your friends, family, and colleagues. Then come back and listen to the story again. I'll bet you will hear it differently. (Of course, you could come back and find out that the story actually *is* a simplified story. If that's the case, read the rest of this essay, because we will be getting to that situation later on.)

Another kind of problem with stories is you can only fit so many stories into your mind at once, or in the course of a day, or even over the course of a lifetime.

Well, yes, sure, you can only fit so many stories into your mind over the course of your lifetime; but that's because you will only be alive for a limited time. That doesn't mean anything about stories. Just because I can only breathe so many times in my life, it doesn't mean I should stop breathing.

There's another reason we don't need to worry about running out of space for stories in our lives: *stories pack well*. They expand when we need them, but they can also shrink to an astonishingly small size when we need them to do that. We are capable of telling, listening to, making up, and making sense of millions or maybe even billions of stories in our lifetimes. In fact, most of us do exactly that, whether we know we're doing it or not.

For instance, just to get out of bed in the morning, you tell yourself the story that your job is really important, what you're doing is really important.

Well, there's your problem right there. "My job is really important" is not a story. It's a statement, an opinion, a belief, an explanation maybe. But it's definitely not a story. In a story, something *happens*. Aristotle called it potentiality followed by actuality, meaning that something *could* happen, and then something *does* happen. That's a story. "My job is important" is not a story.

Ideally, I ought to have some very complex story map in my mind, you know, with combinatorials and a matrix of computation, and the like, but that is not how stories work.

No amount of combinatorials or matrices of computation will make a belief into a story.

Stories, to work, have to be simple, easily grasped, easily told to others, easily remembered.

I don't know where Tyler Cowen got this idea, but it is completely untrue. Stories, to work, have to have a beginning, a middle, and an end; something has to happen in them; and they have to be told and heard by people. They do not have to be simple. In fact, few stories are simple. Most are complex, even if they are short.

So stories will serve dual and conflicting purposes, and very often they will lead us astray.

Yes, this *is* true. This is one of the amazing, heartbreaking, life-saving complexities of stories. A person who claims that stories are simple, and then *in the very next sentence* gives an example of a way in which stories are *not* simple, does not understand stories.

However, these two sentences do get one thing right about stories: that it is impossible to say one thing about stories without soon finding oneself saying the opposite thing, because with anything you can think of that stories do, they also do the opposite. They bring us together; they push us apart. They make us smart; they make us stupid. They lead us astray; they bring us home. That's one of the reasons why, while some stories are undoubtedly simple, *stories as a whole* are as complex as we are.

A third problem with stories is that outsiders manipulate us using stories.

Yes, and we *resist* manipulation from outsiders using stories as well. Everybody gets to play the game. Haven't you seen the great stories people have told in response to attempts at manipulation with stories? (Google "Kendall Jenner Pepsi ad." You're in for a treat.) Mentioning only one side of the story game is like saying, "We can't go out on the highway! They'll all be driving *cars!*"—*while driving a car*.

Speaking of cars...

Let's consider two kinds of stories about cars. Story A is: "Buy this car, and you will have beautiful, romantic partners and a fascinating life." (Laughter) There are a lot of people who have a financial incentive to promote that story. But, say, the alternative story is: "You don't actually need a car as nice as your income would indicate. What you usually do is look at what your peers do and copy them. That is a good heuristic for lots of problems, but when it comes to cars, just buy a Toyota."

The first of these so-called stories is a causal statement, not a story. It has no setting, plot, or characters; nothing happens. Two things are linked, but that's a link, not a story. It could be rewritten as "a nice car makes a happy life" without losing any meaning. The second story is not even a causal statement; it's a straight up argument. "You don't need a nice car" is about as far from a story as you can get.

If you are going to argue that people should be suspicious of a thing, you should first find out what the thing is. Ideally, you should be able to give examples of the thing that are

examples of the thing. If I went around saying "watch out for vampires, because they'll turn you into werewolves," nobody would listen to me, and rightly so.

You can never get out of the pattern of thinking in terms of stories, but you can improve the extent to which you think in stories, and make some better decisions.

I am having trouble responding to this sentence because I have spent the last eighteen years [at the time of writing] helping people make better decisions through the use of stories. There is no doubt that I am biased when it comes to the question of whether stories help or hinder decision making; but I would like to encourage Mr. Cowen to examine the abundant evidence for himself.

So if I'm thinking about this talk, I'm wondering, of course, what is it you take away from this talk? What story do you take away from Tyler Cowen? . . . Is it like quest, rebirth, tragedy? Or maybe some combination of the three? I'm really not sure...

This is a *fascinating* statement. First he suggests that viewers will interpret his talk as one of three simple stories. This seems in keeping with the message he has been promoting. But then he says, first, that they may interpret his words as "some combination" of stories, and second, that he's not sure how they will interpret his words. If all stories are simple, this is impossible. But in fact, he has unwittingly pointed to two *more* ways in which stories can be complex, ways I forgot to mention above.

1. Stories can be combinatorically complex, meaning that they can take elements of setting, character, and plot from other stories and mix them up in new ways. We all mix up stories every day, only we're so good at doing it that we don't realize it. Listen to three people have a conversation about just about anything. If you listen carefully, you'll hear stories being blended into new varieties. Society is a great big story mixing machine, and it never stops mixing.
2. Stories can be complex in multiple perspectives, meaning that the same story as experienced by two people can be two completely different stories. That's why Cowen can't guess what story we will hear when he talks: because each person hears a different story. That's one of the complexities of stories.

When I thought of this multiple-perspective aspect of storytelling, a story flew into my mind: the Jorge Luis Borges short story *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*. In the story, Pierre Menard attempts to translate the classic novel *Don Quixote* into an updated version for contemporary audiences. While doing so, he immerses himself so completely in the work that he recreates *Don Quixote* word for word and line for line as it was originally written. The resulting work appears to be identical to the original but is actually an entirely new work.

Borges' story highlights one of the most exciting things about stories, to my mind: that the same story is not the same story in a different place and time. This means that no story can ever be too old or too simple or even too familiar, because you can never know what a story will mean until you tell it, or hear it, or remember it.

## Where the stories are

But what Cowen said about the stories he told in his talk made me curious. *Did* he tell any stories during his talk? He told one. I'll go back and get it.

I used to think I was within the camp of economists, I was one of the good guys, and I was allied with other good guys, and we were fighting the ideas of the bad guys. I used to think that! And probably, I was wrong! Maybe sometimes, I'm one of the good guys, but on some issues, I finally realized, "Hey, I wasn't one of the good guys." I'm not sure I was the bad guys in the sense of having evil intent, but it was very hard for me to get away with that story.

This may be the only actual story in the talk. He used to think he always did the right thing, and then one day he realized that at least once he had done something wrong, and that caused him to reevaluate his identity as a good person. Now *that's* an interesting story. And it's a complex one, especially given his black-and-white representation of "good guys" and "bad guys," which is itself revealing and worthy of thought and discussion.

That story reminds me of a whole bunch of stories I'd like to tell in response. Here's one, just to get the ball rolling.

In my life I've been all over the place politically. I've been a staunch conservative and a bleeding-heart liberal. Let's say twenty years ago I was in a knee-jerk-liberal phase, and I happened to see a guy making jokes on TV. His name was Dennis Miller, and he made this one joke that really got me going, because we had just received a bizarrely intrusive census form. The joke was: If the government wants to know how many people there are in the country, why don't they just count how many census forms they've sent out?

I loved that joke, so I looked up Dennis Miller to see what other sorts of funny things he might be saying. Apparently he is (or was at that time) quite the libertarian. I was shocked to see this, because it meant that *I* might be a libertarian; and that made me question (yes, all over again) what I really was. That was the day I stopped being anything else than a human being. I still have lots of opinions, but nowadays I'm just a person.

Okay, Tyler, your turn. What does *that* story remind you of? I'll bet we could get a pretty complex chain of stories going. Why not try it?

## Thinking in terms of stories

There are just a few more bits of Cowen's talk that I think we need to look at.

I'm not here to tell you to burn your DVD player and throw out your Tolstoy.

And here we have yet another reference to commercial storytelling. Come to think of it, there is not one reference to conversational story sharing in the whole talk—except for the one personal story Cowen seems to have told without knowing he was telling a story.

Do you see what I'm saying about how people don't think their stories are stories? I'm not making this stuff up.

To think in terms of stories is fundamentally human. There is a Gabriel Garcia Marquez memoir "Living to Tell the Tale" that [says] we use memory in stories to make sense of what we've done, to give meaning to our lives, to establish connections with other people. None of this will go away, should go away, or can go away.

Damn straight.

Should we think more in terms of stories, or less in terms of stories?

I've talked to a lot of people about stories, and I've watched a lot of people tell stories. One thing I've learned is that people vary an *enormous* amount in how much they think in terms of stories. As Winnie the Pooh so sagely told us: "Some do and some don't. You never can tell with Heffalumps."

I think very much in terms of stories. I'm pretty sure I do this to compensate for an almost complete lack of episodic memory. Witness this conversation, one of many similar:

Friend: [A movie] was a pretty good movie.

Me: Really? I'm not sure. I don't think I've seen it.

Friend: You've seen it.

Me: Really? How do you know that?

Friend: You saw it *with me*.

Me: I did? Where did we sit in the theater?

Friend: Front and center, in the third row. Don't you remember? Hardly anybody was there. We went there after dinner at that Greek restaurant.

Me: Oh, yeah, I remember it now. It was a good movie.

Those who know me well are used to these conversations, and they know that I'm always asking "where was it" and "what color was it" and "what did I have on" because my memory is almost completely visual. I experience events like everybody else does, but in my memory they all get plated out onto these tintype sheets, and after a while that's all I have left. That's why I got so excited in *The Neverending Story* when Bastian was drawing up pictures from the picture mine and laying them out on the snow, hoping to recognize something from his life. That's how I remember pretty much everything. Making stories out of the pictures helps me hold them together.

Each person's relationship to stories is a complex story just like mine, full of details about their genetics and birth and childhood and all the things that have happened in their lives. So it's not a matter of whether we *should* think more or less in terms of stories; it's a matter of working with what we already do. But that's not just true for stories; it's true for *every* mode of thinking and learning. I once knew a man who claimed that he had read three books in his whole life. I've read thousands. But we're both smart people, capable of many

things. Details like exactly how we learn and think aren't important. We're all different, and we all have to figure out how to make our brains work.

Thinking in stories is *one* of our ways of thinking, but it isn't the only one. We also make lists, compare options, build logical arguments, create representations and designs, play with metaphors, make observations, try experiments, develop procedures, negotiate rules. For some people, thinking in terms of stories is a habit; for others it's a crutch; for some it's a joy; for others it's a foreign land; and *that's just okay*. The important thing is to find what works for you, do it as well as you can, and—this is the hard part—refrain from telling everyone else how to use their own brains. It is as wrong to blame people for thinking in terms of stories as it is to claim that we all need to be doing so.

## Stories, manipulation, and bouncy balls

We are once again at the main issue raised by Tyler Cowen's talk.

When we hear stories, should we be more suspicious?

It would be dangerous to be more suspicious when we hear a story, because that might just make the people who want to manipulate us move over to some other thing we no longer think is suspicious because it's not a story. We should be suspicious whenever we think someone is trying to manipulate us, and we should be aware that manipulation can take on many forms.

And what kind of stories should we be suspicious of?

For this question I have a suggestion. We should be suspicious of *simplified* stories, whether we are hearing them or telling them.

How can you tell if a story is simplified? To answer that question, I am going to ask you to indulge me in a metaphor. Stories are playthings that help us live more creatively, so it makes sense to compare them to toys.

A simple story is like a ball. Stories pop into our minds and out of our mouths all the time, every day, as things happen to us and we think and talk about them. As children, we spend a lot of time playing with simple stories. We try stacking them, squishing them, eating them, standing on them. We learn what we can and can't do with stories, and with the things *in* stories: time, people, cause and effect, help and hindrance, intention, motivation, chance, power, mistakes, love. Playing with stories helps us learn how to live.

As we get older, our stories get more complex. A complex story is like one of those multi-sensory balls that do things regular balls can't. They wiggle, glow, expand, change color, or roll around in strange ways. They have weird bumps, rubbery fingers, holes, grab handles, or slippery skin. They have liquid, glitter, tiny stars, smaller balls, and all kinds of other things inside. Children use multi-sensory balls to explore reality in new ways. What will happen to the water inside the ball when we throw it? Can we swing the ball around by its rubbery strings, or will they break? (They break.)

In the same way, we use complex stories to help us explore reality in new ways. What would happen if a man died before he could finish a monumental opus and left it to his reluctant wife to finish? *Middlemarch*. What would happen to a healthy man who visited a tuberculosis sanatorium and decided he liked it there? *The Magic Mountain*. Our most complex stories are like every kind of multi-sensory ball ever made rolled into one, and as adults we keep playing with them as long as we live.

A simplified story is also like a ball, but it's like one of those balls that is attached to a paddle with a gummy string. You can't do much with a simplified story except mash at it with the paddle over and over again. There is something to be said for the hand-eye coordination gained by playing with a paddle ball, and it does make a wonderful racket, but the apparatus cannot be said to excel at supporting creative play.

Kids tend to play with a paddle ball until they master the art of getting the paddle to hit the ball consistently, then lose interest. Likewise, people tend to tell simplified stories for a purpose other than play: to achieve a goal or to make a racket, but not to make sense of things. It's hard to experiment with a thing that can only do one thing. That's why simplified stories are not as useful (to their tellers or their audiences) as either simple or complex stories.

So how can you tell a simple story from a complex story? Bounce it. How do you bounce a story? Ask questions about it. People do this all the time in conversation. They'll say something like, "But why did you stop stirring it? Didn't you realize it would burn?" or "Where did the ringing sound come from?" They're bouncing the story around, seeing how it responds, playing with it.

The wonderful thing about bouncing is that it doesn't just tell you whether a story is simple or complex. Bouncing *makes* simple stories complex. It adds ridges and bumps and finger holes (that is, detail and nuance) until the ball turns into a multi-sensory ball. In fact, bouncing is how complex stories come into being. Something happens, and a simple story forms, and we start bouncing it, and questions get asked (by ourselves and others), and the story gets more and more complex over time. Every complex story ever told (including all of our great literature) started out as a simple story somebody bounced.

Okay, but how do you tell a *simplistic* story from a simple or a complex story? Bounce it. A simple story bounces simply, and a complex story bounces complexly, but a simplified story bounces *back*—to its original intent, like a ball tethered to a racket.

For those who are exasperated by this extended metaphor (I know you're out there), I'll put this explanation into more concrete terms. Asking questions about stories is a great way to find out what sorts of stories they are. Questions about simple or complex stories spark discussion, dialogue, exploration, and discovery. People say things like, "I never thought of that!" or "That puts it in a whole new light." Questions about simplified stories just cause people to repeat the messages they designed the story to deliver over and over, in ways they think might work this time. People say things like, "Regardless, quality is always our first priority." or "Yeah, sure, but I still lost in the end, because everything's stacked against me." The ball just bounces back to the paddle again. (Oops.)

## Complexifying stories

What should you do if you think someone has told you a simplified story in order to manipulate you? What should you do if you realize that you have been telling a simplified story, to yourself or to others?

Break the gummy string. Disconnect the story from its intent. Change it into a complex story. You can do it. Anybody can. Here's how.

First check to see if it's a story. If nothing happens in it, it's not a story. "Your life is important" is not a story. "This car will make you happy" is not a story. Those are statements, claims, arguments; and you can counter them in other ways.

If you're sure that what you heard (or told) is a story, bounce it around to see whether it's a simple story, a complex story, or a simplified story. If it bounces simply (meaning: you get simple answers to your questions), it's a simple story. If it bounces complexly (meaning: you get surprising answers that lead you to new questions), it's a complex story. If it bounces back (meaning: you get extremely consistent, tunnel-vision answers), it's a simplified story.

If you find out that the story is a simple story, you can either make it complex or leave it alone. There's nothing *wrong* with simple stories; they're just the small things of life. You can step over them like you do ladybugs on the sidewalk.

If you're sure the story is a simplified story, now is the time to break that string. There are at least five ways to do it.

1. Make the story internally complex by retelling it with more nuances and details. By doing so you can extend it, question it, challenge it, deepen it, transform it. If you heard the story, retell it in your own way, from your own point of view, and it will become a complex story. If the simplified story is your own, you can still tell it from a different point of view: just come at it from a different angle. Put yourself in a different frame of mind, retell the story, and see what changes. Or ask someone else to retell your story from their point of view.
2. Make the story relationally complex by telling a new story that has the original story nested inside it. People do that all the time when they tell stories about their reactions to stories they've experienced. If you stand outside a movie theater and listen to what people are saying as they come out, you'll hear lots of nested stories. Nesting a story transforms it in two ways, changing it in both context (because you're surrounding it with a new setting) and content (because nesting requires retelling).
3. Make the story externally complex by connecting it to other stories. I did that above when I told my gosh-I-must-be-a-libertarian story in response to Tyler Cowen's story about being wrong. People do this all the time. Every time somebody says "that reminds me of the time" they're making stories relationally complex.
4. Make the story combinatorically complex by mixing it up with other stories. If you can't figure out how to do this on your own, get some friends to help you. Throw the story together with some other stories and see what you get.



5. Make the story complex in multiple perspectives by explaining how you perceived it. Talk about your feelings as you heard or read it. How did the word choices in the story play out for you? How about the emotions? The way the characters were portrayed? Then get somebody else to respond to the story and compare your experiences. (Yes, this is a type of story nesting, but I think it deserves special mention because it's so useful.)

It is not necessary to run away from stories, even those that are obviously engineered to control. You and I and all of us already have what we need to engage with the stories in our lives. What we need is to start paying more attention to stories—all kinds of stories—and practice working with, and playing with, the stories that are all around us.

I sound like I've broken my own rule, don't I? I've told you to think in terms of stories, even if you don't usually think that way. But I am convinced that many people today *can* think in stories, and would benefit from doing so, but do not believe that they are *allowed* to do so because they are not professionally associated with storytelling—or because of some other nonsense about how stories are bad for them.

That's ridiculous. You *are* allowed to think in stories, and it *is* good for you (and it's bad for you; but learn more about stories, and it'll be better for you than it would have been). If you can breathe, you can tell and listen to and make up and make sense of and enjoy the stories in your life. It's your birthright as a human being. It belongs to you as much as it belongs to anyone else.



## Chapter 16

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# Stories and Non-Violent Communication

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Amazon says my first exposure to Nonviolent Communication (NVC) took place in 2008, because that's when I seem to have bought Marshall Rosenberg's 44-page book *The Surprising Purpose of Anger*. I think I may have bought the book for parenting purposes, because my son would have been about five then and was probably taking his first steps into asserting his independence. I do remember that the book's thesis, that anger masks unmet needs, made perfect sense to me, and I've been loosely using the idea ever since.

Over the past several years I've heard people talk about NVC now and then, and I've read a few web pages about it here and there, but never paid it a lot of attention. So when I was at a conference and saw that one of its sessions was on NVC, I thought it would be a good opportunity to learn more.

Most of the session was as I remembered and expected: judging actions and emotions stands in the way of understanding needs and values. That made sense. But then there was a slide (or something) that described one of the four steps of NVC. It said "Feelings: emotions or sensations, free of thought and story."

Wait, what? Free of thought and story? Why? Sharing stories is one of the ways we articulate and understand our feelings, right? Why should stories not be included in this?

So I looked to see if this was a fluke. It wasn't. A few short excerpts from web sites and books on NVC (emphases mine):

What is unique about Nonviolent Communication (NVC) ... is that it *gets us out of our stories* — the stories that we've already told over and over to no avail to deaf or disinterested ears, without relief.

Nonviolent communication is designed to *strip away the narrative* people automatically build in their heads — that big looming cloud of supposition you might be carrying around about a person or situation, disabling you from working effectively.

This was the sad but familiar idea that stories are bad because they are simple. It's one of the symptoms of the decline of knowledge about stories in everyday life, a misunderstanding that takes the word "story" to mean a simplistic representation that holds us back from nuanced understandings—like a Disney fairy tale or a TV commercial. Yes of course, stories *can* be simple and limiting; but they are also capable of expressing and exploring manifold complexities. I'm used to countering that argument, so I wasn't surprised by it.

But some other mentions, particularly of conversational story sharing, were more concerning. For example (again, emphasizes my own):

(on many lists with names like "Obstacles to Empathetic Communication" and "Communication that Cuts Off Connection") Story-telling: *Moving the focus* away from the other and back to your own experience - "I know just how you feel. That reminds me of the time..."

Intentionally or not, [telling a story in response to someone else's story] can also have the effect of bringing the attention back to your own experience rather than keeping the focus (at least for the moment) on the person we want to support. Especially when someone is sharing intense feelings, sharing an anecdote or comparing their situation to one of our own is *unlikely to foster greater understanding or connection*. Because it shifts the focus away from them, it can act as a form of minimization or denial. (during an exercise practicing "Ways to Respond *Non-Empathetically*") (Speaker) "My mom passed away last week" (3rd person / Story-telling card) "That reminds me of this time when my dog died. I was really sad for a couple weeks. But then I got a new one!"

Now I was wide awake. These were not examples of story sharing; they were examples of *unhealthy* story sharing being used to paint *all* story sharing as something to be avoided. That's like saying to an asthmatic, "You wouldn't wheeze so much if you would just stop all that breathing."

Curious, I wondered where this animus toward stories was coming from. So I took a closer look at Rosenberg's original book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*.

## A particular view of stories and storytelling

As I read through Rosenberg's book, I found a few telling mentions of storytelling situations. First was a story about a school principal who had been dominating every conversation by telling boring, unconnected stories about his childhood. At the triumphal conclusion of the story, someone finally told the principal that he had "a big mouth."

What surprised me about this story was that Rosenberg attributed its crisis not to the principal's domination of the conversation but to his "storytelling habit," as if storytelling *itself* was to blame. Strange.

A second story about storytelling was even more troubling. Rosenberg described a group of people who were sharing stories in a room—just the sort of thing I help people do. But his take on what was happening was quite different than (I think) mine would have been in

the same room. I'll try to shorten his account as much as I can without removing needed details.

I've been invited from time to time to work with groups of citizens concerned about racism in their communities. One issue that frequently arises among these groups is that their meetings are tedious and fruitless. . . . I knew members of one such group that had been organized to effect change in the local school system. . . .

One man began the meeting by calling the group's attention to a recent newspaper article in which a minority mother had raised complaints and concerns regarding the principal's treatment of her daughter. A woman responded by sharing a situation that had occurred to her when she was a student at the same school. One by one, each member then related a similar personal experience. After twenty minutes I asked the group if their needs were being met by the current discussion. Not one person said "yes." "This is what happens all the time in these meetings!" huffed one man, "I have better things to do with my time than sit around listening to the same old bullshit."

I then addressed the man who had initiated the discussion: "Can you tell me, when you brought up the newspaper article, what response you were wanting from the group?"

"I thought it was interesting," he replied. I explained that I was asking what response he wanted from the group, rather than what he thought about the article. He pondered awhile and then conceded, "I'm not sure what I wanted."

And that's why, I believe, twenty minutes of the group's valuable time had been squandered on fruitless discourse. When we address a group without being clear what we are wanting back, unproductive discussions will often follow.

I have helped thousands of people build connections by sharing stories. If you were to ask any of the people I've helped whether their needs were being met by the current discussion, not one person would say "yes." That does *not* mean their needs were not being met! It just means that the activity they were engaged in wasn't one that produces obvious results right away.

I'm also not surprised that the man who started the story sharing didn't know what he wanted. *Nobody knows what they want when they share stories.* That's how it works. We have an instinct to share stories with each other, and we have it for a reason. Sharing stories draws us together in ways we can't explain to build connections and understandings we need to survive. It's a way of communicating that is deliberately oblique and roundabout, and it's *especially* useful when we don't know what we want. My guess is that the people in that room drew together in subtle but important ways during those apparently squandered twenty minutes. Rosenberg just couldn't see it.

We all have an easy time making sense of some things and a hard time making sense of other things. Narrative conversation sounds like meaningless chit-chat to people who don't get stories, just like football looks ridiculous to people who don't get sports and coffee smells like mud to people who don't get coffee. I don't get spectator sports. When my

family starts going on about some championship or another, I wander off, because it all sounds like meaningless jibber-jabber to me. I just didn't get the gene for it. However, I get it that lots of other people *do* understand and appreciate spectator sports, and I don't go around telling people it's a fruitless waste of time.

Yes, story work *does* seem unproductive—right up until the moment when its productivity becomes obvious to everyone. You can't predict in advance when that moment will arrive. It emerges. I always think of the first part of any story sharing session like a garden whose seeds are germinating. Nothing *seems* to be happening, but a lot is going on under the surface. I've found that in any group, some people understand this from the first moment of the session, and some need help getting there. People who habitually think in stories can sense what's happening as the stories flow. People who don't think in stories can't sense anything happening, and they get frustrated with the apparent fruitlessness of the discourse.

I've met people like Rosenberg, and the man who had better things to do with his time, many times. I've helped them become more aware of what was going on around them, and I've helped them participate as the group moved on to the next stage of story work, the part where the seeds germinate and the group's productivity becomes obvious to everyone.

It's possible that the group Rosenberg was trying to help was stuck in a phase of story sharing where people share individual stories without drawing them together into anything coherent. It sounds like they needed to start juxtaposing and linking stories to make sense of them together. But twenty minutes is a very short time frame for story sharing. I usually ask people to share stories for at least half an hour, and that in small groups, before they start drawing anything together. If this was a group of say ten people all sharing stories together, twenty minutes would not have been time enough for the drawing-together to start.

Also, people often get stuck in that early phase for a reason, which is usually that they aren't *ready* to draw things together yet. That doesn't mean they'll *never* be ready; it just means they need to do more connecting and accumulating first. This is often especially true for taboo or sensitive topics. There is a pace to story work, and it takes practice to understand and work with the process.

Here's the next story I found in Rosenberg's book about storytelling:

[I]f an aunt is repeating the story about how 20 years ago her husband deserted her with two small children, we might interrupt by saying, "So, Auntie, it sounds like you are still feeling hurt, wishing you'd been treated more fairly." People are not aware that it is often empathy they are needing. Neither do they realize that they are more likely to receive that empathy by expressing the feelings and needs that are alive in them rather than by recounting tales of past injustice and hardship.

Actually, people often express the feelings and needs that are alive in them *by* recounting tales of past injustice and hardship. If you are not a person who pays attention to stories, you might not see this happening. That doesn't mean it's not happening.

Nobody likes to be interrupted while telling a story, even if they've told it a million times. No, *especially* if they've told it a million times. When an old person tells you a story that they *know* you have already heard over and over, they are expressing to you a deep emotional need: to be heard, to matter, to be acknowledged as a fellow human being. Cutting them off in the middle of their story would be cruel, especially when they have exposed their need in a way that is so obvious to everyone. I find it strange that someone who was so focused on unmet needs would be so willing to disregard this particular need. Sure, if Auntie is mired in a negative story, we can work with her to highlight positive stories and so on. That's narrative therapy, and it can be amazingly effective. But no story worker would ever cut anyone off in the middle of a story they so obviously needed to tell.

I'm not saying Rosenberg is at fault in this theoretical scenario; he's just ... unaware. His response is not very different from what would happen if you put me on the sidelines at a football field. I'd be bored to tears, and I might get a little annoyed about watching a bunch of guys chasing a stupid ball around, and I might say things that trample on feelings I can't perceive.

Here's another interesting tale that comes just after the "auntie" story.

Once at a cocktail party I was in the midst of an abundant flow of words that to me, however, seemed lifeless. "Excuse me," I broke in, addressing the group of nine other people I'd found myself with, "I'm feeling impatient because I'd like to be more connected with you, but our conversation isn't creating the kind of connection I'm wanting. I'd like to know if the conversation we've been having is meeting your needs, and if so, what needs of yours were being met through it." All nine people stared at me as if I had thrown a rat in the punch bowl.

I wonder if the conversation wasn't creating the kind of connection Rosenberg wanted because people were sharing stories. I wonder if people stared at him because they had been doing something they themselves didn't understand. That would make sense. If you were walking down the street, and someone came up to you and started asking you why you put your foot in exactly that position, or what caused you to hold your knee in exactly that way, you'd stare at them too. It doesn't have to mean the conversation was *actually* useless. In this story, and in the story about the community group, Rosenberg seems to have taken the group's confusion as proof that he knew something they didn't, when it could have been the reverse.

It would be one thing if one person was confused about the nature of story sharing in groups, but Rosenberg's advice to interrupt storytelling has been taken up by some—not all, but some—of his followers. Here's a sentence from a blog post extolling the virtues of interrupting "long stories":

Telling the details is a strategy that people sometimes take when they want to be understood deeply or when they like their comfort zone and are avoiding taking action.

And how do you tell which of those things is going on? I've been working with stories for seventeen years [at the time of writing], and I can't always tell. I find it works best to give

people the freedom to choose *for themselves* what their stories mean and why they are telling them. Sometimes people are not yet ready to step out of their comfort zone, but if you let them tell a few stories—and *listen* to their stories—they'll *get* ready. I've seen that happen lots of times, but I've *never* seen an interrupted storytelling end in anything productive.

We are all limited by our personalities and habits of thought. Every one of us knows someone, maybe someone close, who thinks in a way that makes no sense to us. One person hates planning ahead while another can't stand spontaneity; one person is passive-aggressive while another is just plain aggressive; one plans in pictures, another in words, another with their hands. We're all different, and that's good. The danger is when any of us thinks everyone else is like them, or should be like them.

I've noticed that many social science professionals, in many different fields, have what Diana Forsythe called "I am the world" reasoning, in which they assume that every human being thinks the way they do. I've met a lot of story professionals, for example, who believe so strongly that "stories are the way human beings think" that they pepper everything they say and write with such universal statements. I always try to correct people when they say things like that, because no statement about stories in human life applies to everyone equally. Nobody *never* tells stories, but people vary considerably in how much they tell stories and how important (and useful) stories are to them.

My guess is that Marshall Rosenberg made the same "I am the world" mistake, only on the other side. All of the things Rosenberg said about stories are true—but their opposites are equally true, and for whatever reason, he couldn't see that. I would never want to disrespect this accomplished man or his valuable contributions to our world. I just wish I could have had a quiet conversation with him about the role of story sharing in human life.

What I would tell Rosenberg, if I could, is that *stories are like fire*. Both inventions are prehistoric in origin, and both led to major improvements in human life and society. The acquisition of managed fire helped people colonize colder climates, deter predators, and develop stronger social ties. Most importantly, fire helped people cook their food, which led to greater intelligence through better nutrition.

The development of story sharing helped people cooperate more effectively, making possible a variety of collective survival strategies unavailable to uncoordinated individuals. People sat around fires and told stories, and this helped people develop strong social ties. Most importantly, stories helped people cook their experiences—that is, make sense of the things that were happening to them and pass on the life-saving knowledge thus obtained. This led to greater collective intelligence.

Yet both of these ancient practices can have devastating effects if they are not treated with care and respect. Fires and stories support and imperil human life. No one would claim that we should stop using fire, in all the myriad forms that support our modern lives, because it also carries danger with it. The same is true with stories.

Just as we can learn to distinguish between violent and non-violent communication, we can learn to distinguish between violent and non-violent story sharing. Violent story sharing is



dominating, controlling, refusing to listen, drawing attention back to oneself. Non-violent story sharing is collaborative, generative, connective, and empathetic.

## What NVC says about stories and empathy

Now I'd like to address another surprise I encountered on reading more about Non-Violent Communication. Storytelling has been categorized in many lists of things that lead to *sympathy* (understanding someone's plight, feeling sorry for them) but not to *empathy* (seeing things through another person's eyes). I found this astounding, because seeing things through another person's eyes is *exactly* what happens when people share stories.

When story sharing is healthy, people don't just throw response stories out to dominate the conversation or draw attention to themselves. That's not how it works. People listen to the stories others tell, ask questions about them, and respond with stories that communicate their empathy and understanding to the original storyteller. Linking stories together in this way is an act of community, of mutual support.

But the writings I've read on Nonviolent Communication seem to ignore this aspect of story sharing. For example, one of the quotes I mentioned above is a perfect example of the storytelling that happens when story sharing is *not* going well. I'll copy it down here:

(during an exercise practicing "Ways to Respond Non-Empathetically") (Speaker)  
"My mom passed away last week" (3rd person / Storytelling card) "That reminds me of this time when my dog died. I was really sad for a couple weeks. But then I got a new one!"

Yes, that's a horrible response story! But it's unrealistic. You are not likely to hear such a response in any group of people who care about each other, or even any group of people who were brought up with good manners. Anyone who would tell a story like that in a situation like that would not have been listening or connecting.

I wondered why this strange example was being used to represent something that is likely to happen in a group, when it is actually something that is *unlikely* to happen. It raised my suspicions. When someone gives a distorted, pathological caricature of a behavior as an *example* of the behavior, you can be sure that whoever is speaking hasn't taken the time to understand what the behavior is actually like.

Still, I didn't want to simply condemn what people were saying about stories. I hate it when people make claims without providing evidence. That's what I'm faulting Marshall Rosenberg for doing, after all. So if I wanted to claim that story sharing, taken as a whole, increases rather than decreases empathy, it seemed to me that I ought to provide some proof of that. So I went looking for proof.

## What the research says about stories and empathy

To begin with, I've seen articles for some time linking empathy to reading fiction. A 2006 study (by Raymond Mar et. al.) found that people who recognized more names of literary authors, and reported habitually reading literary fiction, and said they often got "lost in a

story," scored higher on tests of empathy. However, it was unclear whether reading fiction increased empathy or empathetic people liked fiction.

A 2013 study (by David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano) did find an increase in empathy after reading fiction, but only after reading *literary* fiction (as opposed to popular fiction). Say that study's authors:

[W]hereas many of our mundane social experiences may be scripted by convention and informed by stereotypes, those presented in literary fiction often disrupt our expectations. Readers of literary fiction must draw on more flexible interpretive resources to infer the feelings and thoughts of characters. That is, they must engage ToM [theory of mind] processes. Contrary to literary fiction, popular fiction, which is more readerly, tends to portray the world and characters as internally consistent and predictable. Therefore, it may reaffirm readers' expectations and not promote ToM. We propose that by prompting readers to take an active writerly role to form representations of characters' subjective states, literary fiction recruits ToM.

So literary fiction gives us incomplete, vague, and surprising information, which causes us to have to work to make sense of what is going on. Healthy story sharing does the same thing. Rather than being "readerly," or passive, it's an active, though ritualized, negotiation process. When people are listening to each other (and not just waiting for their turn to speak) you can see them actively making sense of the stories they are hearing and telling. This doesn't always happen, but that doesn't mean it can't.

Another aspect common to healthy story sharing and literary fiction is *transportation*. Richard Gerrig's 1993 book *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* introduced the term *emotional transportation*. Similar to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow*, emotional transportation describes the feeling of being "lost in a book," so deeply engrossed in a story as to feel temporarily removed from the everyday world and located, so to speak, elsewhere.

A 2013 study (by P. Matthijs Bal and Martijn Veltkamp) connected transportation theory to empathy by asking people to read excerpts from well-regarded literary short stories. Not surprisingly, the authors found that self-reported transportation correlated with increased measures on tests of empathy. Surprisingly, though, they also found that people who read non-fiction texts, or did not report transportation into the fictional worlds they read about, showed *decreased* measures of empathy.

That decrease connects, I think, to what happens when story sharing does *not* go well, and I think that's what Marshall Rosenberg was talking about.

## The neurological basis of narrative engagement

Next let's consider a series of studies conducted by Uri Hasson and his colleagues at Princeton University on the neurological patterns that occur when people tell and listen to stories. In a 2010 paper (by Stephens, Silbert, and Hasson), the authors described how they found that when several people listened to the same story while in a functional MRI machine, their brains developed neural patterns that were spatially and temporally coupled, that is, that showed similar activity patterns in the same brain areas over time.

When they compared the neural patterns of a storyteller and of people listening to an audio recording of the same storytelling, neural coupling took place between teller and audience as well. The only difference in the patterns was a processing lag of one to three seconds in story listeners.

Some of these neural couplings were in areas of the brain that process auditory information, which means nothing more than the fact that all of the people were listening to something similar (because even the storyteller was listening to her own voice). But some couplings were in areas "known to be involved in processing social information crucial for successful communication, including, among others, the capacity to discern the beliefs, desires, and goals of others."

These initial findings led Hasson and his colleagues to devise a series of experiments to isolate the conditions that led to these higher-order social-information neural couplings (as described in Hasson's 2017 TED article). When they had people listen to stories in a language they did not understand, the social-information coupling disappeared. When they had people read lists of unconnected words, again, there were no shared patterns in social-information brain areas. Sentences that made sense but did not connect into coherent stories also created no neural entrainment in social-information areas.

As I read about this research, I was excited about the idea of storytelling creating physical resonance in our brains. However, two things bothered me. First, the reports I read did not mention whether any attempts were made to test non-story speech of personal relevance, for example, the expression of feelings or opinions about a topic. After all, the same coupling *could* have come about without the actual telling of stories.

Secondly, I'm not sure that brain activity in the areas responsible for processing social information has to be uniformly pro-social. It could describe decreases as well as increases in empathy. As far as I can tell, test subjects were not evaluated for changes in empathetic feeling. So this research doesn't necessarily connect story sharing with empathy.

Still, other results from the same research point connect story sharing with increased social *understanding*, if not empathy. For example:

1. Hasson and his colleagues asked story listeners to write down as much as they could remember from the story they heard. Those who were able to recall the story more fully showed stronger neural coupling.
2. Those who recalled stories best were also more likely to show *anticipatory* responses—that is, neural coupling that preceded instead of lagging behind the same pattern in the storyteller. (That sounds to me like active "writerly" engagement.)
3. In one experiment, the researchers presented two groups of people with the same fictional story of a man losing his wife in a crowd. One group was told that the wife was disloyal, the other that the husband was overly jealous. Each group showed neural coupling with people in their own group, but not with people in the other group.

I take these combined results as even more evidence that story sharing can be both healthy and unhealthy when it comes to understanding each other. In fact, I would go so far as to say that *I've seen all of these things happening* in groups of people sharing stories. You have

probably seen them too. Everyone has experienced what it's like to tell a story and have other people *join you inside it*. They listen to the details, anticipate your emotions, and leave their assumptions behind. Everyone also knows what it's like when somebody *won't* join you inside your story. They don't pay attention to details; their responses are distant and delayed; and they replace what you *actually* say with what they think you might say based on their assumptions about you.

It's like your story is a train. Sometimes people board the train and go on a journey with you. And sometimes they wait for your train to pass by so that *their* train can come in and take them where *they* want to go. If a story sharing conversation is like a train station, it can be busy with passengers coming back from one train only to surge onto another, laughing and crying as they travel together, or it can be full of annoyed and annoying people sitting on benches and grouching about delays.

This makes it seem like it's always the listener who doesn't engage in healthy story exchange, but sometimes it's the teller. Sometimes people tell stories that *nobody* can get inside, including themselves. Their train cars have no doors. Sometimes this happens when people close themselves off due to traumatic experiences or bad habits. And some people just aren't used to going on journeys through their own experiences.

But again, it's not always the storyteller's fault, either. Sometimes stories come out opaque and featureless when people feel forced to speak, or when they don't trust those who are asking them to speak, or when the atmosphere is one of censorship. One of the things I always look for in story projects is whether people are *in* their stories. It's hard to explain exactly what I mean, but when a person is in the stories they tell, the stories reflect their unique perspectives. If one person's story could equally well have been told—word for word—by any other person, they aren't *in* the story. It's *a* story, but it isn't *their* story.

Here's an example of a story with nobody in it:

Last month there was a lot of work to do. It was difficult to meet the deadlines. The support was inadequate. The work got done anyway. People worked together and made sacrifices. The next set of deadlines will be even more difficult.

That's a train with no doors! Now here's the same story with somebody living inside it:

We had so *much* work to do last month. I don't think I've ever worked so hard in my life! The worst day was when a bunch of us went to the boss and asked for some help meeting our deadlines. I was the newest person in the group, and I was *nervous*. I was afraid she'd say "if you can't cut it, get out" and let me go. She didn't do that, but she didn't give us any help either.

We walked out of there determined to do what we could without her help. We came up with a great plan, and by working as a team, and giving up our personal lives for a while, we got the work done on time—just barely, but we made it. I'm proud of what we did. But I'll tell you, I learned *a lot* about who has my back and who doesn't around here. And I'm not the only one. I don't think anybody is going to be knocking on a certain door anytime soon. We're on our own.

I made up both of those stories, but I've read many like them. Projects with more stories like the first one tend to fail, and projects with more stories like the second one tend to succeed. The first story is uninhabited. It has few personal pronouns, expressions of emotion, emphases, or unique perspectives. It's a story, but the person who told it didn't feel comfortable inside it. They might have felt unable to speak freely or uncomfortable with the situation or the topic. They might not have felt they were being listened to. Sometimes it's hard to tell why stories are uninhabited. Causation in story sharing works backward and forward at once. Sometimes a train car shows up with open doors, but if nobody is waiting, the doors close or even disappear.

## Stories and oxytocin

So that was interesting, but I wanted more. I kept exploring any connections I could find between stories and empathy. After a while I fell into a rat's nest of contradicting studies about stories and oxytocin. This hormone is involved in a variety of social situations, from family bonding to sex to hanging out with friends to petting the family dog. It is linked to trust and empathy, but in ways that are far from simple. For example, increased oxytocin also seems to correspond with envy, schadenfreude, and ethnocentrism (see for example a 2009 study by Simone G. Shamay-Tsoory and others or a 2010 article by Jeremy Hsu).

From a 2010 study (by Carsten K. W. de Dreu and others) about oxytocin and groups:

[P]articipants self-administered oxytocin or placebo and made decisions with financial consequences to themselves, their in-group, and a competing out-group. Results showed that oxytocin drives a "tend and defend" response in that it promoted in-group trust and cooperation, and defensive, but not offensive, aggression toward competing out-groups.

The reason oxytocin matters to you and me right now is that apparently its production also spikes when people listen to stories. Frustratingly, though, I can't find any discussion of the strength of this finding, or any replication of it, or any exploration of context. Does it happen in response to *all* stories? Or only certain stories in certain contexts? Almost everything I can find about the relationship between oxytocin and stories comes from Paul Zak, a scientist-turned-evangelist who calls oxytocin "the moral molecule" and (so say many) has simplified and glamorized its effects on behavior to the point of danger.

I did run into a curious 2017 study (by Natascia Brondino) about oxytocin and gossip:

Twenty-two female students were randomly assigned to a gossip conversation or to an emotional non-gossip conversation. . . . Salivary oxytocin and cortisol levels were measured. Oxytocin increased significantly in the gossip compared to the emotional non-gossip conversation. . . . Our findings suggest that oxytocin may represent a potential hormonal correlate of gossip behavior.

I was not able to read this whole study, but I did find lots of discussion about it on a bevy of news stories and blog posts about how gossip is "good for you." (Such is the buzz around oxytocin that any mention of it sounds like a miracle cure.) What I managed to find out

(mainly from a 2017 article by Sirin Kale) was that the "emotional non-gossip conversation" involved in this study was actually the telling of a personal story.

The first group—prompted by an actress who steered the conversation—gossiped about a recent unplanned pregnancy on campus. The second, non-gossip group heard an actress tell an emotional personal story about how a sporting injury meant she might never be able to play sports again.

So *that's* interesting. Stories were exchanged in both cases, but oxytocin did not spike in both cases. It's possible that stories are only linked to oxytocin when they are specifically about one's social group.

Okay, so here's a 2014 study specifically about stories and social groups (by Dan R. Johnson and some others):

Participants read a story about a counterstereotypical Muslim woman and were then asked to determine the race of ambiguous-race Arab-Caucasian faces. Compared to a content-matched control condition, participants who read the narrative exhibited lower categorical race bias by making fewer categorical race judgments and perceiving greater genetic overlap between Arabs and Caucasians.

If all stories produce oxytocin, and oxytocin causes people to defend their in-group, this study should have come out differently, right? But notice what *type* of story was told: a "counterstereotypical" story. That story might have acted to *expand* the definition of the in-group to include the Muslim woman in the story, causing the oxytocin spike (if there was one) to be applied differently. Most people encounter plenty of stereotypical stories every day, and they probably have the opposite effect. That's more evidence that stories help and hinder pro-social behavior.

## The importance of context in studying story sharing

I have just two more studies to put before you (and then I promise to stop). Together they point to the paradoxical nature of story sharing as it relates to empathy. The first study (from 2015, by Rachel Ruttan and Mary-Hunter McDonnell) examined empathy and experience, and was given the excellent title "Having 'Been There' Doesn't Mean I Care." From its abstract:

[P]articipants who had previously endured an emotionally distressing event (e.g., bullying) more harshly evaluated another person's failure to endure a similar distressing event compared with participants with no experience enduring the event or those currently enduring the event. . . . [T]hese findings present a paradox such that, in the face of struggle or defeat, the people we seek for advice or comfort may be the least likely to provide it.

The authors of this study attribute the lack of compassion they found to two things. First (they say), we tend to retain positive memories more easily than negative ones, so our struggles seem smaller now than they did in the past. Second, knowledge of our own success back-flows onto the story, so that our success seems more certain now than it was

then. In other words, the stories we tell ourselves *change* as the events of the story unfold. That makes sense.

But there are methodological details that set a particular context to the storytelling involved in this study. In each of the five parts of the study, researchers had people read fictional vignettes that described people struggling with distressing events, then answer some questions about their evaluation of those fictional people. They did *not* test what might happen if people actually *talked* to people who were struggling with distressing events. Reading a vignette about a person you know to be fictional doesn't have the same impact as talking to a person who is telling their story to your face. These results can't say *anything* universal about the way we evaluate the experiences of other people. Here's what concerns me most: the authors claim their results prove that seeking advice from real people—presumably in real conversation—will have the same effect they found in a completely different context.

In storytelling, context is a thousand times more important than content. When people engage with each other during an event of face-to-face story sharing, they exchange a variety of subtle signals that keep story sharing healthy in that context. We all learn to give and receive these signals as we learn to get along with each other, and we learn how to pay attention to the context in which we are sharing stories. One of the things we learn is that the same story told in two different contexts is two different stories. But people seem to design and interpret research studies about storytelling without taking account of context. It's as if people studied how opera singers breathed and said it means something about breathing, and then studied how divers breathe and claimed that they had overturned everything we knew about breathing. That would be ridiculous, because anyone can see that an opera singer and a diver breathe in very different ways. But somehow because it's *stories*, people think it's all one big undifferentiated thing.

One more study and I'm done. This one (from 2013, by Susan Bluck and some others) comes from the field of nursing, which has become a hotbed of research on stories and empathy (for obvious reasons). In this study, people were asked to respond to the reading of a "pain narrative" in one of three ways: by retelling the pain narrative they had just read; by telling a story about an autobiographical memory of a pain experience of their own; or by telling a story about an experience of pain they recalled from a movie they had seen. The autobiographical memory condition corresponded with an increase in measured empathy; the other two conditions did not.

This seems to contradict the previous study, which said that recalling one's own similar experience led to *decreased* empathy. However, people in the first study were not asked to *recall* a previous experience; they were only asked to *react* to the vignette they read by answering some questions about it. The people in the second study were explicitly asked to "select" a story to tell in response to the vignette they read.

The act of choosing a story to tell is intensely social. It makes use of subtle cues that define the context of the conversation in which it takes place. It is important, for example, that in the second study the response stories were told *orally*, to an interviewer (I presume) who might have been seen as standing in for the original storyteller in the conversation. Thus

responses were different than if the people had been asked to write down a story. Even the words used to ask participants to select and tell a story were important, because they expressed social norms.

Participants in both conditions [both the autobiographical storytelling and the retelling of the story they heard] were instructed to frame their recollection as a response to the person who wrote the pain narrative, and were told 'Tell your story as if the person whose pain story you read was sitting here in the room with us'.

The first study set up a situation of judgement without accountability, and the second study set up a situation of accountable normative social response. That's why their empathy results were so different. It might not have had anything to do with whether people had succeeded or failed in their struggle.

People who present research on stories, and people who evaluate such research, have a responsibility to pay adequate attention to context. When someone says a story had an effect on people, we need to ask: In what context was the story told? Who was present? What relationships and identities were salient at the time? What did people think was expected of them? *How* was the story told? How were people asked to respond? In other words, we can only understand what a storytelling event means when we understand the full story of the event. And we can't compare storytelling events whose contexts don't match. People reading written stories, watching movies, and exchanging stories are having such different experiences that it's impossible to lump them together into any single statement about what stories do or how they work.

In summary, I don't think anyone has sufficiently answered the question of whether stories increase or decrease empathy. I doubt there *is* one answer. Stories inspire and destroy, enlighten and confuse, bring people together and tear them apart. Stories are as complex as we are, and we are never going to understand them until we work with their complexity rather than denying it or ignoring it.

## **Towards Nonviolent Narrative Communication**

Now let's move from theory to practice. At this point I think I can list some things people can do to share stories in a way that Marshall Rosenberg would find not only acceptable but worthy of being included in Nonviolent Communication.

My first thought for this section was to go through "the four-part NVC process," as people call it, and talk about how people can use healthy story sharing to:

1. Observe without evaluating
2. Explore feelings
3. Uncover needs
4. Make and respond to requests

But I couldn't do that because, well, those are all things we do naturally when we share stories with each other—if we're listening and not trying to one-up each other or dominate



the conversation. All of those things are built in to the process of sharing stories that we developed tens of thousands of years ago. If you sit in a room with a bunch of people sharing stories, and nobody's being a jerk, all of that stuff will happen. It might happen slowly, and it might be oblique and glancing and intermittent, and it might not be obvious, but it *will* happen. I've seen it happen many times, and maybe you have too.

What surprises me most about Nonviolent Communication is that I can see remarkable similarities between what it tells people to do and what people naturally do when they share stories. Going through the four parts:

- **Observing without evaluating.** If you shared a personal story with me, would I call you an idiot in the middle of it? Of course not. When we tell stories we ask for the floor and the indulgence of the group to recount our experiences as we see them. It's common courtesy to let people explain how something seemed to them at the time without evaluating their statements harshly.
- **Exploring feelings.** If I told you a personal story, would you be surprised if I told you how I *felt* as the events of my story unfolded? Of course not. That's an expected part of telling a story. When we petition a group for the right to tell a story, part of the permission they give us is permission to explore and express our feelings about what happened to us.
- **Uncovering needs.** After I have told you a story about something I experienced, do you have a better sense of my needs than you did before you heard the story? Of course you do. We share stories with each other in part to communicate our needs. Most people are used to picking up on needs by listening to the stories people tell. They may not be able to articulate what they're doing, but that doesn't mean they aren't doing it.
- **Making and responding to requests.** Have you ever listened to someone's personal story, then later realized that they told you the story because they wanted something but couldn't ask for it directly? Of course you have. People use stories to make requests of each other all the time.

It's almost like Marshall Rosenberg didn't find what he needed in story sharing, so he invented it; but he seems to have invented the same thing people were already doing when they shared stories—though maybe story sharing was too meandering and unreliable for his goals. I can understand that. If you have a burning need to reach some goal, and people seem to be wandering around in a wasteland, you aren't going to be satisfied with them chancing onto useful things once in a while. But sometimes meandering and unreliable progress is the only kind of progress available, at least at first.

Story sharing is like an old banged-up off-road all-terrain vehicle. If you drive it on the road, it will be uselessly slow and hard to control, and you're better off driving a fast, powerful vehicle that can get you where you want to go faster and more efficiently. Nobody would drive an ATV from one city to another. But if you're trying to round up some smelly cows in a muddy field in the rain, a banged-up old ATV might be just what you need. I'm not saying NVC isn't needed—far from it. I'm saying that NVC and story sharing are different versions of the same thing, and as such, they might be able to do more together than either can alone.

Still, I haven't addressed the issue of trimming out the bad parts of story sharing. I was thinking that I should write some advice on how to be a good story sharer, but I realized that the work had already been done thousands of years ago. Just follow the Golden Rule. You don't need anything else. Do you want to be heard? Listen. Do you want to be helped? Help. Treat other people's stories with as much respect as you would like them to treat your own. It's that simple. Do that, and story sharing will be healthy, and all the things it should do will happen.

But let's say that you want to follow the Golden Rule and don't know how. You're out of practice. We're all out of practice, because the TV doesn't care how we behave. What should a kind, thinking person do if they want to practice healthy story sharing as they go about their social life? Here is some advice. I've arranged these sections in order of importance: listener first, then teller, then facilitator.

## **When you are listening to a story**

### ***Enter into the story***

Allow yourself to be emotionally transported. We've gotten used to the phrase "the suspension of disbelief" in reference to fiction, but it applies just as much when we are listening to each other. Suspend your disbelief that anyone could actually feel the way the person who is talking to you says they feel. If their emotional reactions seem ridiculous, suspend that disbelief and *pretend* you accept the way they say they see things, just for a little while. If you can do this for a fictional character who means nothing to you, surely you can do it for people you care about. Right?

Entering into a story is a journey. You start out in your own world, in yourself. Then, as the person starts talking, if you're listening, you start walking. You walk past what you *thought* they would say, past what you *want* them to say, and past what they *should* say; and finally you get to what they are actually saying.

I always picture this journey like I'm walking through a series of rooms or spaces separated by doors. I open each door, stand on the threshold for a moment, and then pass on through to the next space. Usually I think each space I find myself in is the last space, only to discover that I'm still holding on to some type of evaluation, because I can still see another door in front of me. The very last door opens onto the story the person is actually telling, and *that* place is a whole new world.

I don't always make it to that last place. I *can* be a good story listener, but it's hard when I'm tired or nervous or frustrated. Sometimes I turn around after one or two doors and walk back. Sometimes I pretend I can't see the door in front of me because I'm tired or annoyed or whatever. I'm sure we all do that. But after practicing listening to stories for decades, I have become more aware of the spaces I'm in and the doors that stand in front of me. That at least keeps me from thinking I'm listening better than I am.

How can you become more aware of the spaces and doors of your story listening? Listen to yourself listening. Listen to your thoughts.

- If you think to yourself, "Of course he *would* say something like that," you're in the first space, the space of what you thought they would say.
- If you think, "If she would only stop being so obsessed with the stupid (whatever)," you're in the second space, the space of what you want them to say.
- If you think, "What an idiot! Anyone can see he over-reacted," you're in the third space, the space of what they should say.
- If you think, "Oh, so *that's* how she felt; that's what that felt like to her," congratulations, because you have finally arrived in the wide-open space of another person's experience. Now you can *listen*.

If you haven't experienced this yet, go out and try it, because it's quite amazing when it works. I don't get all the way there very often, partly because the journey is hardest with the people we know best. Things like marriage and other sources of frustration make the doors harder to wrench open. But when I do manage to get all the doors open and complete the journey, I'm—okay, a little proud of myself, but more importantly—energized, enlightened, and grateful.

### ***Play with the storyteller***

When you finally get to the wide-open space that is another person's experience, you'll find two things there: the storyteller, who has been waiting there for you, and their story. Now it's time to play. Notice that I didn't say "play with the *story*," because you don't get to do that. It's their story. But you can play with them as they play with their story.

How can you do that? Talk to them. It's not okay to interrupt a story in order to shut it down, but it's perfectly okay to interrupt a story with a playful question. But be careful. If you aren't in the wide-open space yet, you might not be able to come up with playful questions. You'll be more likely to ask judgmental questions, like, "Why can't you stop obsessing about the stupid (whatever)?" or "Don't you think you over-reacted?" Those questions slam doors shut.

A truly playful question gambols in the wide-open space like a . . . pony or some other thing that gambols. People love playful questions about their stories. Playful questions show people that you've joined them in the wide-open space, which is a nice feeling to start with; and playful questions help people make sense of their stories, which is half of why we tell stories in the first place. A playful question might be something like, "If you could go back in time and tell yourself before the whole thing started what was going to happen, how do you think you would have responded?" Or, "To think that you only missed her by five minutes! What if you had met her then?" And so on.

How can you tell if a question you would like to ask is a playful question? I'd like to say "it's playful if it's gamboling," but I suppose some literal-minded people won't be able to do anything with that. How about this. A playful question is a gift. It gives the storyteller something they can use in their own sensemaking process about the story. A non-playful question is more like a demand. It gives them nothing and asks them for something.

Of course there are times when you need to ask a non-playful question to meet your own needs. Maybe you need to make sure that your rights are being respected, or that you are not being lied to. That goes without saying. I'm talking about the kinds of non-playful questions that come out of the closed-in spaces we walk through before we get to the wide-open space. When someone is telling a story and you think of a question you want to ask, think: is this question a gift or a demand? Would I want it to be given to me if this was my story?

What if you don't want to ask questions? Can't you just listen politely? Sure you can. Playful questions don't have to be asked in words. They can arise from facial expressions or body language. Even laughing at one place and not another can cause a playful question to form in the storyteller's mind. Professional storytellers depend on the playful questions they see in their audiences. They go home after their performances and go over all the playful questions that emerged, and they play with their stories based on them. Regular people do that too, only in a milder and less conscious way. If you're listening to a story and you want the storyteller to know that you are in their world with them, send them some playful questions in any way you like.

You can experiment with this in everyday conversation. I do it all the time. In one conversation I might ask a literal playful question, but in another I might see what happens if I just raise my eyebrows or lean forward when I think the person might benefit from my reaction. In other words, if you play with asking playful questions, you can get better at it. I've come to enjoy coming up with playful questions while listening to stories, and I've come to enjoy the little bursts of gratitude people can't help showing when they recognize a playful question they can use. Does this sound like a game? That's exactly what it is. Story sharing is a game people have been playing for a very long time. It wouldn't have lasted this long if it wasn't fun.

I forgot to mention one other kind of question you can legitimately ask while someone is telling a story: a door-opening question. Sometimes, when you're trying to get out of one of your judgmental spaces on the way to someone's wide-open space, a clarifying question can help you keep moving. Door-opening questions ask people to help you make sense of how something appeared or felt to the storyteller. Some clarifying questions might be "Why did you think the police were after you?" or "When did you find out the dog was missing?" or "Did you know she thought you were cheating on her?" But be careful not to confuse clarifying questions with judgmental questions. Asking "What kind of an idiot thinks the police are after them?" will not open any doors, unless it's the doors back out of the story.

### ***Stay awake on the journey back home***

After you have finished listening to a person's story, and your playful questions have had their fun and settled down for a quiet nap in the wide-open space of the person's experience, what should you do now? How should you *leave* the story?

You cannot take one step from another person's wide-open experience back to your own world. That would be as ridiculous as watching a sci-fi movie in a theater, then walking out and looking for your spaceship. It's called the *suspension* of disbelief, not the *abandonment*

of disbelief. You have to live in your own head; it's where you keep all your stuff. So when you leave another person's story, you have to walk back through all the rooms you walked through on the way in. You *need* to do this for your own narrative health. You don't want to lose yourself and become someone else, but you don't want to lose what the other person's story has taught you, either. To go through life without learning anything from anyone is to be trapped in the prison of your own mind.

As you walk back through your rooms of evaluation, pay attention to how they have changed. Does what you thought the person would say seem different now that you've fully entered into their story? Do you see what you want from them differently now? What about the Room of Shoulds? Is it different now? In your journey back, you are no longer playing with another person and their story. You are negotiating with yourself and with your own sense of reality. You can walk back with your eyes closed, whistling past the graveyard, so to speak, or you can walk back aware and alert.

As with the journey in, I can't say that I always make the journey back with my eyes open. Sometimes I'm tired, and I just want to lie down somewhere. Sometimes I find such a contrast between what I saw going in and what I see coming out that I don't want to face it. Sometimes I have to make the same journey many times before I can open my eyes on the way back. Everybody does that. We can be optimistic about what we are capable of while forgiving ourselves for not being able to rise to every occasion with equal courage and strength.

Of the three things I've mentioned that story listeners need to do for story sharing to be healthy, from what I've seen in the world, this last one is the hardest. It's not that hard to listen politely to a story, especially if the social cues that surround the storytelling remind us of where we are and what is expected of us there. We do it like we go to a religious gathering or a community meeting or a family dinner. When it's over, we want to take off our nice clothes and forget all about what the faith leader said or what grandma lectured us about. That's a mistake, because the benefits of healthy story sharing only accrue when we are willing to be changed, a little, a *negotiated* little, by listening to stories. We don't have to be transformed by every story, but—eventually—we should get somewhere new. That's the challenge and the promise of story listening.

I would like to recall to your memory what proponents of Nonviolent Communication have said about people sharing a story in response to another person's told story. It's way up at the top of the essay, but don't you stir yourself; I've got the relevant sentence right here.

[S]haring an anecdote or comparing their situation to one of our own is unlikely to foster greater understanding or connection.

I hope you can see that this statement is indeed likely to be true if the person comparing situations has not entered fully into the first person's story.

- If I've been listening to you from the room of what I think you are likely to say, I might tell a story in response that ignores your feelings or only superficially links to what you said.

- If I've been listening to you from the room of what I want you to say, I might tell a story that tries to manipulate you with guilt or obligation. (This is where the one-upping "You think you've seen suffering" stories come in.)
- If I've been listening to you from the room of what you ought to say, I might tell a story that admonishes you or gives you "helpful" advice. (The "my dog died" story from above fits here, and maybe in the first spot as well.)

But: if I've been listening to you from the wide-open space of your own experience, the story I tell in response is likely to foster greater understanding and connection—because I'll have been listening to what actually happened to you and how you actually felt about it.

What if you think of a story to tell in response and you aren't sure if it's the right story to tell? There's an easy test. Just like a playful question, a response story should be a gift, not a demand. After you've told your response story, the original storyteller should feel grateful, and you should be able to feel their gratitude. Picture yourself telling the story in response, and picture their response. If you can picture gratitude, it's probably a good story to tell.

Hold on, you say. This is pretty one-sided. What if I think of a story that I feel a need to tell? Are you saying I need to squelch that need? Of course not. Gifts don't have to be given to one person only. You can tell a response story that is a gift to the storyteller *and* to yourself. Sharing stories is only a zero-sum game if you make it into one.

### ***An example of a story listening journey***

I wanted to give you an example of someone going all the way into someone else's story, so I looked back into my experience. I did think of several times when I've gone all the way into someone's story and back with life-changing results. But those stories are too personal to write about here. The one illustrative and available story I can think of (actually, it has been jumping up and down begging to be told) is the story about the construction guy.

This was when I was in college. My sister and I had a plan to meet a bunch of people at a place for a thing. I remember a cozy restaurant with dark wood and stained glass. Anyway, I got there first and joined the party, and I ended up sitting next to some random guy. We chatted for a few minutes, and I found out that he worked in construction. At the time I thought of myself as a lofty intellectual, and I couldn't think of a single question to ask a construction guy. We sat there playing with our drinks, and things got more and more awkward.

Then my sister showed up. She's what you'd call a people person. She bounced into the conversation and started peppering the construction guy with questions. In a few minutes she got it out of him that in his spare time he restored old player pianos, about which he had encyclopedic knowledge. He told us story after fascinating story about all the pianos he had restored, and what it was like in the days when player pianos were all the rage, and how player pianos were designed, and so on. It just so happened that I was heavily into playing the piano at that time (so I was not only a wannabe-intellectual snob, but a wannabe-pianist snob to boot). It turned out that the construction guy knew a lot more about pianos and piano playing than I did.

What an *idiot*. I heard "construction" and assumed that the construction guy and I would have nothing to say to each other. My sister heard the same thing and breezed past it to find out what the guy *actually* had to say. I sat there moping in the room of what-people-like-that-are-probably-going-to-say, while she ran through door after door, quickly arriving at the wide-open space of his actual experience. I always remember that story as being linked to the dark wood and stained glass of the restaurant we sat in. I focused on the dark, impenetrable wood, and she focused on the intricate, glowing patterns in the stained glass.

I followed my sister through the doors into the player-piano guy's experience, but I did a lot of thinking on my way back out. In the decades since, I have thought of that guy many times. Every time I sit down with a stranger to chat, he appears before my eyes as I prepare myself to be surprised by the real story of the person I'm talking to. And do you know what? I have never been disappointed. *People are amazing*. You just have to listen to what they *actually* have to say.

To sum up this section, here's a quick guide to healthy story listening. When you are listening to a story, listen past what you thought they were going to say, past what you want them to say, and past what they ought to say, until you get to what they are actually saying. If you need to, you can ask clarifying questions that help you open doors; but never ask questions that judge. Those move you back a space in the game. Once you get to their wide-open space, ask playful questions and tell connecting stories that are gifts, not demands. Afterwards, think about how what you heard changes what you think they will say next, what you want them to say next, and what they ought to say next. As you go about your life, practice doing these things. Get better at them.

## **When you are telling a story**

### ***Enter into your own story***

When you tell a story to someone else, allow yourself to be emotionally transported by it. Suspend your disbelief that anyone could actually feel the way the way you do. No, you haven't lost your place in the essay. The advice is the same whether you're listening or telling, because when you're telling you're listening. Just as we have to suspend disbelief when we listen to the stories of others, we have to suspend disbelief when we tell our own stories. We have to keep talking past what we usually say, past what we think our audience wants us to say, and past what we think we ought to say, to get to the wide-open space of exploring what actually happened to us and how it actually felt.

Some journeys through our own stories are easy and fun, and some are so difficult they take decades to complete. Sometimes we tell ourselves a story over and over again, but we tell it trapped in one of our rooms of judgement, unable to move fully into the experience. But then again, sometimes we will be telling ourselves the same story for the thousandth time, and a door will suddenly open and we will finally be in that wide-open space. I've had that happen, and I'm sure you have too. It's frightening, and it's exhilarating.

### ***Let people play with you (but back out if they won't)***

Let's say you are telling me a story. Let's say you think you've been doing a pretty good job of entering into your story. You've walked through your rooms, and you seem to have

reached the point of exploring and communicating what really happened to you and how it felt. Let's say I seem to have done my part too, and you think you can see me in your wide-open space.

Now let's say I ask you what I think is a playful question about your story. How should you respond? I can see three possibilities.

**It's not a playful question.** The question I've asked isn't *actually* playful. I just *think* it is. That's because I *think* I'm in your wide-open space, but I'm actually stuck in one of my rooms of judgement. My question is actually critical or blaming, or it shows that I haven't really been listening to you at all.

In that case, the best thing for you to do is to take the question as what it is: an *indicator* of where I am, which is not where you are. You can respond to my non-playful question by helping me pay more attention to what you are actually trying to say, perhaps by giving me more detail about some part of your story. Or, if perhaps you've already done that and I'm still not budging, you can just give up and walk away.

You have that right, you know. Everyone has the right to back out of any story, whether they are telling it or hearing it. I've seen lots of people do this. They start to tell a story, then realize that nobody is coming on the journey with them (or not going very far into it), then put away the story until another time when people have more energy or interest (or they find a better audience).

There is another thing you can do when someone asks you a non-playful question while you're telling a story. You can *convert* the question into a playful question, and then respond as if the listener had asked that question. This is not easy to do, and in some situations it may be impossible. But it's a good skill to develop if you like to tell stories.

The very worst thing you can do when you're telling a story and someone asks you a non-playful question, or indicates in some other way that they're not in the story with you, is to barge on and tell the story anyway. I've seen a *lot* of people do this. They have such a burning need to tell their story that they ignore the signals they're getting. Maybe they've already tried to tell the story to a few other people and they're getting desperate. Or maybe they aren't very good at judging where other people are listening from. Or maybe they've never experienced the gratitude that comes from being heard, so they don't realize they aren't getting it. For whatever reason, they put on their blinders and push on in hopes that eventually *somebody* will respond.

Do you remember that principal in Marshall Rosenberg's book who had a storytelling habit? This was his mistake, I think. Here's how Rosenberg tells the story:

Almost as soon as the meeting began, I saw what the staff had been telling me. No matter what was being discussed, the principal would interject, "This reminds me of the time ... " and then launch into a story about his childhood or war experience. I waited for the staff to voice their discomfort around the principal's behavior. However, instead of Nonviolent Communication, they applied nonverbal condemnation. Some rolled their eyes; others yawned pointedly; one stared at his watch.



I endured this painful scenario until finally I asked, "Isn't anyone going to say something?" An awkward silence ensued. The teacher who had spoken first at our meeting screwed up his courage, looked directly at the principal, and said, "Ed, you have a big mouth."

Poor Ed. I feel for him. I've done this myself, and I've seen other people do it too. Clearly this man had a deep need to tell his stories, probably because he hadn't yet managed to explore them as fully as he needed to. Maybe he had already burned through his relatives and friends, and he just couldn't stop himself from trying one more time to get *some* kind of connecting response from somebody. He was, as they say, looking for love in all the wrong places.

I find it sad that Marshall Rosenberg was so attuned to the needs of the other people in the group but was so disdainful of Ed's need to be heard. Ed's storytelling doesn't look like a bad habit to me; it looks more like an unmet need. If he didn't need to explore his stories, he still needed to learn how to back out of telling his stories to non-responsive audiences. Poor guy. I hope somebody listened to him eventually. Maybe if anyone in that group had actually listened to one of his stories he would have been able to stop telling them.

**It's playful but you're not ready.** A second possibility when I ask you a playful question is that it *is* actually playful, but you aren't ready for it. I *thought* you were in your wide-open space, and maybe you did too, but you were still trapped in a room of judgement, having failed to suspend disbelief in your own story. You can't handle the question, not yet.

All of us have been in this position: we are haltingly telling a story we are not yet ready to explore fully—maybe it's a very private story, or deeply emotional, or maybe we haven't got very far into it ourselves. What should you do if you aren't ready to play with a story I'm asking you a playful question about? The kindest thing is to provide an indicator that you're not there yet. You can say exactly that: "I'm not there yet." But there are many other ways to communicate such a signal. You can say "That's interesting" or "I'll have to think about that" or "Food for thought" or just "Yeah." People who are listening well will pick up the not-yet signal and back off, maybe with an idea to ask you about the story another time. If people don't take the hint, you can just drop the storytelling entirely.

Sometimes people let other people drag them through their stories, out of passive aggression or a misplaced sense of obligation. Sometimes story listeners get so caught up in their identity as great helpers that they rush through their rooms and wait, panting, in the wide-open space for the storyteller to get there. They're so eager to hear about your experience that they don't notice you aren't there yet.

Facilitators and therapists sometimes have this problem, because they get overly confident, or they feel obliged to show people results quickly, or they feel a need to see themselves as able to handle any kind of problem. I've been prone to this error myself. Surely I can help this person explore their story, because I'm an expert. Right? Well, not always. Sometimes people need time to work their way through their rooms of judgement on their own.

If someone is dragging *you* through your own story, you can ask them to back off, or just walk away. If they know what they are doing, they will reflect on it and come back later to see if you are ready.

**It's playful and you are ready.** The third and happiest possibility is that I have asked you an actually playful question that you are ready to consider. You don't need advice for that situation, because that's the fun part of story sharing. When people come together and help each other explore their experiences, it's magic. I love the feeling I get from a resonant story session, whether it's in a professional setting or just hanging out with friends or family. It's why we tell stories.

### ***Go back through your own rooms***

Now let's say that you have told me your story, and I've asked you some playful questions about it, and we have explored the story together. Now I'm on my way back through my rooms of judgement. As the person who told the story, you also need to walk back through your rooms of judgement and return to disbelief about your own story (even if it really happened). In a sense, you need to tuck your story back into your memory and come back to the present time.

Why do you need to do this? Why can't you just stay in the experience? Because you also need to learn from your own storytelling, and you can only do that if you walk back from it. What have you learned about the stories you usually tell yourself and others? Do they seem different now? What about your perception of what I want? Has that changed? Have I surprised you? What about the story you ought to tell? Does *that* seem different now?

Sometimes, when the story we need to tell ourselves is too deep and too important, we can't make the journey into it and back again on our own. That's why we help each other on our journeys. I'm sure you can think of some people who have helped you on your own journeys into your stories. I know I can. Narrative therapists specialize in helping people come to the wide-open spaces of their experience and return from them safely. They do that in part by going along on the journey. But nobody can make someone else's journey for them.

That's why story work can be so frustrating and so apparently fruitless. You can't force it or plan it. You have to work with it: pick up on its subtle hints of progress, respect its uneven pace, respond when it calls, wait when it doesn't. I always call story work high input, high risk, and high output. It's not the right approach in all situations, but it can complement simpler and more direct approaches when the context is right.

### ***An example of a storytelling journey***

Let me see if I can come up with an example of the storyteller's journey. It would have to be the story of me telling my story to someone else and getting something out of it. Let me think.

Okay, here's one. One time in a social group, for reasons I have forgotten, the talk turned to eyeglasses. I mentioned that I first got bifocal glasses at the age of twenty, and that I was embarrassed for quite a while and insisted on wearing progressive lenses so that no one could see that I had bifocals at such a young age.

One mother in the group quickly responded that her daughter had got her first bifocals at six years old. Obviously upset, she turned to her daughter, who was sitting next to her, and said, "Do you feel traumatized?" in a jeering sort of way. I of course immediately apologized and explained that I didn't know it was even possible to need bifocals at such a very young age. Then I quickly changed the subject.

In the days that followed that event, as I walked back through my rooms of judgement, I considered what I had learned. The experience taught me not to assume that I know enough about any medical issue to know what is normal and what is not. I don't want to marginalize anyone's experience by saying that mine is marginal.

The funny thing is that since I was helped to that revelation, I've noticed people doing the same thing to me, for example saying how awful it is that they've had one migraine (when I've had thousands). But it doesn't upset me anymore, because I know how easy it is to do the same thing out of ignorance. My storytelling and the woman's response helped me to see my own experience in a new light.

That was not an example of a playful question, by the way. That mother was standing in the doorway between what she wanted me to say and what she thought I ought to say. I managed to convert her question into a playful one—but later on, not while I was talking to her. I knew that if I responded right away I would respond angrily, and so would she, so I walked away from the storytelling. I knew I should walk away because I know what it's like when someone seems to trivialize a problem that is important to *my* kid. What we had in common helped me to understand her valid (if not well communicated) point—after I got over my pride, that is.

Saving face is a deeply important part of story sharing. Probably half of what goes wrong in story sharing goes wrong when people don't give each other the space they need to nurse their wounded pride. I didn't see that woman again, just because of shifting social occasions, but if I had known her better or seen her a bunch more times, I would have asked her about her daughter's bifocals so I could learn more about her experience. That's what people do. We come back when we are ready, when we can.

So here's a quick guide to healthy storytelling. When you are telling a story, tell it past what you usually say, past what you think your audience wants you to say, and past what you think you ought to say, until you get to the point of exploring what really happened to you and how you really feel about it. Once you are there, if you receive any gifts in the form of playful questions and connecting stories, respond to them with the gratitude you feel. If you don't feel any gratitude, or if you don't receive playful questions or connecting stories, *stop* telling your story; this is not the right time or place for it. Afterwards, think about how what happened changes what you think about what you usually say, what your audience wants you to say, and what you ought to say. As you go about your life, practice doing these things. Get better at them.

## **When you are facilitating story sharing**

This section is about what you should do if you want to help other people tell and listen to stories. How can you help people do the things I mentioned above?

***Learn about stories and about story sharing***

I always tell people who want to get started in story work to do four things:

1. Read about conversational and community story sharing until you can explain to someone else how stories work.
2. Sit in a cafe and listen to stories being told in conversation until you can pick them out and sense the social dynamics that surround them.
3. Read folk tales until you can feel the bones of each story as you read it. (If you don't understand what that means, you haven't read enough folk tales yet.)
4. Practice eliciting stories in conversation, asking questions about them, and responding to them until you can predictably discover little bursts of gratitude in the people you are listening to.

Of course you can hold narrative interviews and facilitate story sessions right away. You'll make mistakes and you'll learn from experience. That's fine. But you'll learn faster and do better if you do these things as well.

It's like riding a horse. You can just get on and start riding, but you can also spend a lot of time around horses, mucking out their stalls, feeding them apples, brushing them, looking soulfully into their eyes (well, one eye at a time), avoiding their stomping feet. The people who ride horses best get to know horses in every way they can. The people who do the best work with stories get to know stories in every way they can.

I've probably told a hundred people to do these things, and so far nobody has ever told me that they have done them. I'm not surprised. I didn't do any of them until *after* I made my first mistakes in story work. In fact, one of my biggest early mistakes was not realizing that these things could matter. But they do matter. They'll end up happening anyway if you do story work for a while—opportunities will come up—but if you do them on purpose you'll get more out of them.

***Translate knowledge to practice***

Now let's say you've learned a lot about stories and story sharing. You feel totally prepared to get out there and do stuff with people and stories. You're finally in front of a room of people. What should you tell them?

That's the hardest part of story work. You can't tell them very much. In fact, the more you tell people about sharing stories the less well it works. You can seriously derail what would otherwise have been a great story session by giving people a lecture that transfers all the knowledge you have gained about stories to their brains. Why? Because it isn't a knowledge thing. It's a practice thing. It's like teaching someone to ride a horse. If you've spent decades around horses, you know that the things you know can't easily be explained. That's why people don't go to horse riding lectures; they take horse riding lessons. Likewise, you need to give people story sharing lessons.

The best thing to tell people about sharing stories is that everyone naturally does it, because that's true, and they will. Then you can watch them doing it. If you keep in mind all the things you've learned, you will notice things happening, and you can take tiny little actions

to correct them. I remember taking a yoga class long ago and having the teacher come around and just nudge my arm to the left by one inch. It seemed like nothing, but it made a huge difference. That's the kind of thing you do when you facilitate story sharing. You nudge. (Sorry that's not a horsey example. I've never actually taken a horse riding lesson. I've been going off what I learned from a friend who has a horse. I'll bet horse riding trainers go around and nudge people who are riding horses. It's like that.)

What does it look like to nudge story sharing? Well, say someone tells a story, and somebody else asks them a non-playful, critical question in response. You can go over to them and ask a question (possibly while pretending you didn't hear what came before) that converts the non-playful question to a playful question. Then the storyteller can respond to that.

Or let's say one person is telling story after story, and they don't realize that the other people in their group are not responding. You can wander over and ask the full-speed-ahead storyteller if you could have a quiet word with them. Once you are out of hearing, you can ask them for a private interview to explore some of the insights you've been hearing about. You've given them the promise of being truly heard (in a different context), met their unmet need, and freed them up to work more productively with the group they are actually in. Then you can go back to the group (to which the storyteller has returned) and come up with some excuse to remind them of the goal toward which they are working, or the rules about everyone getting a chance to talk.

One of the nicest things about working with stories is how often it works without any effort on your part. Sure, it does go badly once in a while. There are some conditions under which it is likely to go badly, but you can learn about these and avoid them. For example, it's best not to set up story sharing sessions with people whose positions of power are very different, like executives and staff members or doctors and patients. For such groups it's better to split people up at first, then see if you can help them negotiate a conversation later on, after people have shared stories in a place where they felt safe. That's something you learn as you go, like never walking behind a horse without making sure it knows you are there. Horses can kick, and stories can hurt. That's no reason to stay away from them.

### ***Respect the pace and process***

The last thing you need to do when you facilitate story sharing is to have patience and respect the process. As I said, the obviously useful part of story sharing often takes place in the last quarter of the time. Before that happens, story sharing often looks useless—that is, if you can't read the signs. If you want to help people gain the benefits of story sharing, learn to read the signs and develop your instincts through practice and patience.

## **Significant synergies**

At long last I have completed my argument. I believe that story work and Nonviolent Communication are not at odds but are related and complementary. More specifically, I believe that Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) and NVC could be used together to produce better results than either approach could alone. I don't know if I've convinced you

of this, but if I have, the next question to ponder is: what would this marriage of methods look like in practice?

PNI is a grounding method. It helps people explore their experiences in order to draw out things they can use. I have long advocated the use of PNI as a precursor to a variety of methods which start by asking people to list or describe things—feelings, forces, strengths, and so on. Any method that asks people to articulate anything through direct listing or questioning can be grounded by first asking people to explore their experiences, then drawing out what is needed from those experiences.

It's not hard to tell whether story-based grounding will improve a list-based method in any particular situation. Just ask people to make a list, then ask them to set aside the list and share a few stories from their experience. If the experiences match the list, you don't need any more grounding. But if the experiences you hear disagree with or add to the list, more grounding will probably improve your results.

### **Making observations in NVC and PNI**

The first part of NVC, making observations about what is going on, already connects to stories. Quite a few of the examples of observations given in Rosenberg's book are actually stories. For example:

Hank Smith has not scored a goal in twenty games.

Whenever I have observed Jack on the phone, he has spoken for at least thirty minutes.

Yesterday evening Nancy bit her fingernails while watching television.

Pam was first in line every day this week.

So you could say that, in a way, NVC and PNI work in the same way, because they take an account of what has been happening (or is happening) and draw things out of it.

I know what you must be thinking right now: NVC helps people make observations free of evaluation, and telling a story doesn't, so you can't compare them. Yes, stories are chock-full of evaluation. In fact, models of conversational storytelling use that exact word to describe elements of opinion and belief embedded in stories. For example, if I'm telling a story and I say "you would not *believe* how hard we laughed," that's called an evaluation statement, because it doesn't describe an event that happened in the story.

A story is a container within which it is socially acceptable, even socially expected, to include evaluation with observation. That's partly why we tell stories: to have a way to say "this is what I believe, and could you please not attack it just yet?" Of course, this permission has limits—even within a story the most egregious of statements will be attacked—but for most of the things we want to say to each other, stories give us a way to express our feelings and beliefs in relative safety. You could say that a story is like an extended hand. It invites us to extend our own hand and engage in a shared ritual.

### ***An example of making observations by sharing a story***

I wanted to find an example of a situation in which someone said something that might be considered upsetting if it was said outside of a story, but inside the story it was okay. As before, I did think of several good examples, but they were all too personal. Maybe the best way to show you is to tell you a story.

Some time ago, the tiles started to fall off our bathroom wall. I got out my tools and tried to patch the hole, but as I found more and more tiles loose, it became apparent that I was not going to be able to handle this much water damage on my own. After working our way through four different home repair guys, each of whom said he would give us an estimate and never did (frustrating! "no job too small" indeed), my husband and I decided we'd have to do the job ourselves. We took out all the tiles, replaced the water-damaged wood, and put up new insulation, a new vapor barrier, and cement backing board. All we had left to do was put up our new tub surround, which sounded like a breeze.

So on this one day, my son and I were trimming the tub surround by a few inches so it would fit into the bathroom. The instructions said to cut it with a jigsaw. I was a little nervous because one mistake would mean buying another \$200 tub surround. We set the panel on some sawhorses and cut it, nice and straight. Imagine our surprise when nothing happened. The acrylic had healed right up again. You could barely see the place where the saw had gone through the plastic. We checked the tub surround instructions. They didn't say anything about it being impossible to cut acrylic with a jigsaw! You'd think they would have anticipated that. You know, cut this thing that you can't possibly cut.

So we tried a few different things. We tried a ceramic blade; that helped a little, but not much. We tried turning down the jigsaw speed; again, not much help. In the end we had to cut two inches, stop, hold the jigsaw blade on a freezer pack for a minute, then cut another two inches, all the way across the panel. It took forever to figure this all out, but we finally did it, no thanks to anyone.

Then it was time to put up the panels. The tub surround instructions said to use Liquid Nails. I wasn't sure, because (a) I was already a little wary of the instructions after the cut-this-impossible-to-cut-thing fiasco, and (b) what people said online varied from "you must use Liquid Nails" to "whatever you do, don't use Liquid Nails." But Liquid Nails was what my husband bought, so we used Liquid Nails.

The panels fell right off the walls. We tried to brace them with wood and they still fell down. In a panic, we washed all the Liquid Nails back off the walls, and I sent my husband out to buy anything *but* Liquid Nails. He came back with Loctite Power Grab (the thing the "anything but Liquid Nails" people said to use). It smelled horrible—I thought I was going to pass out—but it stuck, and we were able to finish the job.

Later on I talked to a construction guy who said he uses Liquid Nails all the time, but he braces it a lot more than we did, like with tons of wood everywhere. So why didn't the instructions say that? "Use Liquid Nails and brace it all over, or use Loctite and don't inhale"? Sigh. You live and learn.

Now let's say I've just told you that story. Say you're a person who knows a lot about fixing bathrooms. You might be a home repair person, or you might even be the person who wrote the instructions on the tub surround we bought. In that story I made several evaluative statements that, if I had made them to you baldly, without the protective covering of a story, you might not have wanted to hear. I said, in effect:

- Home repair people cannot be trusted. They say "no job too small," but if you actually have a small job they will leave you in the lurch.
- The people who write instructions for home repair things care nothing for the safety and peace of mind of the people who buy their products.
- Regular people can do their own home repairs. They don't need to hire specialists (who are untrustworthy and don't care). It might take forever, and it might not be beautiful, but anyone can fix their own house.

If I sat down with you and said those things straight out, you might think I was an opinionated jackass. You might be offended. You might argue with me or walk out. But because I framed the whole thing as a story, you would probably afford me a limited degree of freedom to speak without attack. Hearing "I needed help and didn't get it" is very different from hearing "You are a morally corrupt person." That's how story sharing works. It's not free of evaluation; it's not supposed to be. But to a story listener, the same statements of evaluation are not as threatening or insulting when they are situated in lived experience.

By the way, I had Marshall Rosenberg's book open to the "Observing Without Evaluating" chapter as I was writing this section, and my eyes fell onto an example that is serendipitously perfect:

NVC is a process language that discourages static generalizations. Instead, observations are to be made specific to time and context, for example, "Hank Smith has not scored a goal in twenty games," rather than "Hank Smith is a poor soccer player."

Do you see the difference? Rosenberg's first example is a *story*, and his second is not. Observations that are "specific to time and context" have a shorter name: stories. Rosenberg *was* essentially advocating story sharing. He just couldn't see it.

## Exploring feelings in NVC and PNI

Another thing NVC does is help people to explore their feelings. It seems that the common practice is to do this through a combination of coaching, questioning, and guessing. That is, again, a direct way to get at feelings.

In PNI we take a less direct approach. We encourage people to tell the whole story of what happened to them, complete with any evaluation statements they feel the need to put into their story. Then we ask them to take that story and examine it as a construct. Because the story is not them but a thing they made, they can consider and discuss the feelings expressed in it without feeling attacked. In the same way that a child can tell you more about how their stuffed animal feels than about how they feel, people can often articulate their feelings better by examining a story they've just told than they can by directly accessing and describing those feelings.



I thought I should tell you a story about a time when I saw this happen, but actually I've seen it happen hundreds of times. In PNI we ask people questions about the stories they have just told. This can happen through answering questions on a form or by working with stories in an exercise. I've watched lots of people answer questions about their stories in these ways, and I've talked to them afterwards. The two things I always hear from people are surprise ("I didn't realize I felt that way") and gratitude ("These questions helped me figure out how I was feeling"). Rarely does anyone say they found well-written (and well-tested) questions tedious or worthless.

I attribute this surprise and gratitude to the decline in widespread skills in story sharing. I'll bet people used to be more comfortable exploring the feelings in their own stories. In fact, I'm sure of it, because I can remember my parents and older relatives doing exactly that when I was a child. Today a lot of people seem to be more comfortable exploring the feelings they find in the stories they buy. But I think people know deep down what they are missing, and they are grateful when they have a chance to work with their own stories. In every project we discover a hunger for sharing stories and making sense of stories together. Part of that has to be because sharing stories helps us to explore and articulate our feelings.

So I would say that NVC and PNI can help each other draw out feelings. PNI can ground explorations in lived experience. In turn NVC can help people distinguish between various statements about feelings. I love the sections of Rosenberg's book where he helps people understand the difference between statements such as "I feel you are an idiot" and "I feel that this is wrong" and "I feel sad." Those could be supremely useful in helping people to draw expressions of emotion out of their stories, and I'd like to use them in some workshops. There are definitely some places in which the language and direction of NVC can improve the way we help people work with their stories, and I'm excited to explore those.

## Understanding needs in NVC and PNI

Next NVC practitioners help people understand the needs behind their emotions. Again, that works well with stories. One of my favorite sets of questions to ask about stories is this one:

- Please choose a person in the story you want to think about. Describe them.
- What did that person want or need most?
- Did they get what they wanted? How much of it did they get?
- Who or what helped them to get what they wanted? Who or what hindered them?
- Why do you think they wanted what they wanted?
- What did they hope for? What would have made the story turn out better for them?

Those questions come from Greimas' actant theory of story roles, with its subject (who the story was about), object (what they wanted), helper (what helped them), opponent (what held them back), sender (why they wanted it), and receiver (what they hoped for). This is narrative structure, the form that shapes every story ever told. When people can examine their own stories, they can find the feelings and their needs they have placed there, even if those things are not readily available to them in a direct way.

This idea of finding your own feelings in a story you told reminds me of a story I told on my blog several years ago. Let me see if I can find it. Here it is:

I remember a time last summer when my son came up to me with a tool and asked what it did. I said, "Hand it to me and we'll find out." I didn't remember what the tool did, but once I had it in my hand, the tool and my hand told me the story of its use by the way they moved together; then I knew.

My hand knew what the tool did even though I didn't. In the same way, our stories know how we feel and what we need even when we don't.

Have you ever seen the lists of feelings and needs (called inventories) that people use in NVC? People use them to think about what they feel and need in a situation. Now imagine that instead of just reading such a list and picking out things that seem to match their current state, people start by sharing stories about their experiences, then use the same lists to draw feelings and needs out of their stories. The experience becomes less of a blind search for sensation and more of an expedition into a territory already mapped out by the story. I think doing this would enhance a NVC practice by helping people help themselves to discover feelings and needs they didn't know they had. (Of course, maybe somebody is already doing this. I couldn't find any mention of it, but that doesn't mean it's not happening.)

## **Making requests in NVC and PNI**

The last piece of the puzzle is about requests. NVC helps people come up with positive ways to request a needed change. The same thing happens in PNI, but it's not so much a request as it is an *idea*, a spark of what-could-happen. When people have been telling stories and working with their stories together, and it's a healthy, productive exchange, new ideas always emerge. They are never ideas anyone would have thought of before the story sharing started. You can tell this is happening when people start saying things like, "We just need to" and "All this time we've been" and "What if we" and so on.

These ideas can *become* requests (and plans and programs), but they start out as stories. An idea of what-could-happen is a story about the future. This shouldn't surprise you. When you build with wood you get something made of wood, and when you build with stories you get something made of stories. You can *translate* what you get from stories to requests; in fact, that's often what happens at the end of sensemaking, during the drawing up of lists: opportunities, discoveries, ideas, quandaries, assets. But we get there by staying in the world of stories as long as we can. The protective coating of stories keeps us in the place of play until we are ready to go back out into the world of facts and opinions again.

That brings us to the end of what has been a surprisingly long essay, even for me. I hope it has been helpful to someone. I needed to write it, apparently, and I've learned a lot in the process. If you would like to talk about synergies between NVC and PNI, let me know. This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

# Part IV

## Historical Records

This part has four chapters in it. All are backward-looking; all are personal; and all might be interesting to people who want to know how I got started doing this work and how it went. The first two chapters were written on my blog, and the last two were included in the third edition of *Working with Stories*.

Chapter	Page	Name
17	341	<a href="#">The Experiential Underpinnings of PNI</a>
18	367	<a href="#">A Little Bit of History Repeating</a>
19	387	<a href="#">Why I Wrote These Books</a>
20	391	<a href="#">Acknowledgements and Biography</a>



## Chapter 17

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# The Experiential Underpinnings of PNI

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I hate it when people claim their truths are more truthful than everybody else's truths. Because then I have to go and find out what other people say about whether *that's* true, and then what people say about *that*, and so on. I've read a lot of books that say "do this" and "do that" without much of an explanation *why* you should, other than a thorough condemnation of everything else.

What I like best is when people can tell me a *story* about how something has been useful to them in a real situation. If they used something and it helped them do something, I might be able to use it too. I can use that sort of thing far more than I can use absolute statements of truth and falsity. What would be the use of a cookbook that had nothing in it but praise for olive oil and condemnation for butter? What could you do with that? Not much, at least not by itself. Experience is the best teacher, mine, yours, and ours.

Still, in introducing PNI to you, I wanted to give you some idea of why I recommend the things I recommend. So I started writing down questions people have asked me about justifications for elements of PNI, like, "Why does it matter that the stories are *raw*?"

I soon realized that every answer I could give was a *story* about how I (and others) learned things that changed the way we did things. This reminded me of the most frequent piece of feedback I got about the first and second editions of *Working with Stories*: that there were too few *stories* in it. So instead of making claims to truth about PNI, I decided to tell you some stories about how it developed the form it has today.

## The story of PNI

I have written my story-answers in a (roughly, not perfectly) chronological order, so you can follow PNI as it grew:

1. Why listen to stories instead of telling them?
2. Why ask questions about stories?
3. Why ask people questions about their own stories?

4. Why help groups make sense of stories?
5. Why keep stories raw?
6. Why catalyze sensemaking?

But before I start, let me say that I did not make *any* of the discoveries that created PNI all by myself. These are my memories alone, but they are not my accomplishments alone.

My policy in telling these stories has been to name people only when I can name them in a positive light. When mistakes were made, if they were not my own, I describe them only in a roundabout way. My own mistakes I am happy to divulge, because I value them and hope you will too.

I have a rule which people who know me will recognize: I call it the embarrassment rule. The rule states that if I look back on work I did a year or two ago and *don't* find it embarrassing, that's a bad thing, because it shows I'm not making progress. These stories show simply *magnificent* progress.

## Why listen to stories instead of telling them?

You may be surprised to hear it, but I started working with stories in the same way many people do, on the telling side. I got excited about all the advice on “how to tell a great story” and assumed that only the best, most compelling, most carefully crafted stories could “get things done,” *whatever* it was you wanted to do.

How did I change my focus from telling to listening? I'll tell you.

My second year at IBM Research, in 2000, was spent on a project that researched ways to improve computer-aided learning with storytelling. As the start of the project, I tried, with increasing frustration, several different ways to help instructors and trainers write purposeful stories that would help people learn how to use software or do any number of things more quickly and easily.

I kept failing. The stories I crafted were always less compelling, less memorable, and less educational than the real-life experiences they were based on. This was true even though I was “improving” the stories using all of the wonderful advice I could find. I had read a dozen books on story form, from narratology textbooks to books on professional storytelling to McKee's screenwriting bible *Story*. I followed the expert instructions in these books to the letter. But somehow, every time I improved the stories I wanted to help people tell, an essential spark would be lost. Like the dogged worker I am, I kept trying, nose to the grindstone. If I was going to help people improve their educational materials with stories, I thought, I had better learn how to do it myself.

At the same time, my colleagues and I *were* listening to stories. We were collecting lots of stories from real people in real story-sharing session. But we weren't collecting the stories to *show* to anyone. The idea of “getting stories to where they need to be” had not yet entered my mind. We were collecting stories to find out what people did (task analysis), what they needed (needs analysis) and what they lacked (gap analysis).

I did think that we might be able to draw some “raw material” for our perfectly crafted stories from our story-sharing sessions, in the same way that a novelist visits cities they plan to write about, as background preparation for the real work of building perfect stories. But it went no further than that.

I remember the moment when I realized that the perfectly crafted stories I was trying to create were sitting all around me quietly waiting to be noticed. I was sitting at my desk looking at the stories I had written and the stories we had collected. Suddenly I saw that the *raw stories of personal experience* we had collected from real people, without any expectation of retelling them, were *already* the stories I was trying to build. I was starving in paradise.

I remember having a sudden mental image, like a waking dream. In the dream I was walking on a rutted, muddy road, struggling to reach a distant city that seemed to recede further with each step I took. But it was not a road at all. It was a *bridge*, and under it, a gently undulating river of stories flowed directly into the city. All I had to do was walk off the bridge, step onto the waiting boat, and glide forward on the river of stories.

Why did I discount the stories we had collected? Why did I not see that they were waiting to carry me where I wanted to go? Why did I continue to bang my head against the wall when the answer was right in front of me? Because I had a dangerously narrow idea of what a story could be. I have pondered this dangerously narrow idea, in its many manifestations, ever since.

After this revelation, I excitedly told my colleagues about the idea of *passing on the stories we collected* instead of trying to write our own. They loved the idea as much as I did, so we changed the project. We abandoned our original ideas about how writing “good” stories would improve e-learning. Instead, we focused our energy on helping people get the stories people had to tell to the people who needed to hear them. As a result, the learning resources we were creating, and our ability to help *other* people create such resources, improved by orders of magnitude. Our failing project became a resounding success. (You can read this whole story, called “Incorporating narrative into e-learning,” in *The Working with Stories Sourcebook*.)

This experience, and many similar ones after it, convinced me that *true, raw, real stories of personal experience* are more useful for almost every task you can imagine than are stories of pure fiction. In the few situations in which fictional stories are more useful—and there are such situations, of course—working first with true stories will create a far more effective fiction than creating one from whole cloth (if that is even possible).

I’ve since come to realize that most of the experienced people I know who work with stories in organizations and communities have stories to tell that are similar to my own. They seem to have gone through the same three phases in their story work, and the phases match my three dimensions of story (form, function and phenomenon).

1. People seem to start out, as I did, infatuated with story form. They memorize McKee’s *Story* and try to turn every story into a “great” story, as I did.

2. At some point they stop thinking about how they can *build* stories and start thinking about how they can *use* stories as tools of collective thought: to pass on knowledge, to solve problems, to brainstorm new ideas, and so on.
3. Later (sometimes much later), they begin to see stories as phenomena, as complex patterns in complex social ecologies. They start thinking about ways to tend stories, herd them, take care of them, and get them to where they need to go.

That final stage, in my opinion, is the best place to end up when you want to work with stories in communities and organizations.

## Why ask questions about stories?

This story took place in the first year I worked on organizational narrative (1999) at IBM Research, before the first story I told.

### My search for story metadata

As you might guess, a research group that focused on stories and storytelling was a bit of a misfit in IBM's world of information technology. There was a danger of being considered insufficiently serious. So we found it expedient to consider ways we could prove our legitimacy to the prevailing culture.

One of the waves passing through the IT world at that time was XML (eXtensible Markup Language), a standardized method of describing how a set of documents will be described. So the idea came up of finding a way to use XML in our work somehow.

One of IBM's real needs at the time was that of information overload as an inhibitor of organizational learning. So I was asked to consider how we could use XML as a tool to address issues of information overload related to organizational story databases, perhaps of best practices or expert advice.

My first ideas for the project reflected that focus. I thought about helping people:

- *organize* stories, so they could *find* them again
- *select* and *sort* stories, to reduce how many they would need to read to “zero in” on a solution that would solve a problem
- *summarize* and *visualize* stories, so they could skim hundreds at a glance

XML is a system for specifying metadata, or data that describes other data, like a name that describes a picture. My task was to identify metadata that would help people organize, select, sort, summarize, and visualize stories, so I asked myself: What types of metadata might people want to collect about stories to meet those goals?

I knew that the basic idea of categorizing stories was nothing new. For example, Aristotle distinguished tragic from comedic drama and epic from lyric poetry, and Georges Polti proposed that all stories could be classified into 36 dramatic situations (including such categories as “The Slaying Of A Kinsman Unrecognized” and “An Enemy Loved”).



I also knew that everyone generates and exchanges metadata about stories every day, in discourse, memory, and anticipation. In fact, people who are telling stories often include explicit metadata to prove that their stories are worth listening to—“I’ll never do *that* again” or “*That* was an incredible experience.”

So I asked myself: *What are all the questions anyone could possibly ask about a story?* From that question I arrived at another question: *What are all the questions anyone has ever asked, or recommended asking, about stories?*

## Sixteen fields, 400 questions

I decided to compile a global list from which one could draw sets of questions about stories for particular contexts of use. My original list of fields to consider, in rough order of the degree of attention I paid to them, was: narratology, folklore study (comparative and contextual), professional fiction writing, professional storytelling, case-based reasoning, narrative organizational study, narrative inquiry, narrative psychology, narrative philosophy, knowledge management, knowledge representation, artificial intelligence, information retrieval, literary theory, and journalism.

Having decided on this list of fields, I sought the seminal books and papers in each field, then began looking in them for instances of metadata—questions, categories, segmentations, classifications, analyses. Everything that didn’t start out as a question I reframed as a question. I’m a natural organizer, and I’m never happier than when I have hundreds of similar-but-not-quite-identical things to put into little piles. So that’s just what I did.

I found that looking for story metadata was like breathing: it was *everywhere*. In fact, the problem was not to *find* metadata related to stories; the problem was to make sense of the huge mass of it and reduce it to something tractable.

So I read and read. After I reached a feeling of satiation in every field I had intended to cover—this took nearly three months, which was a rush job compared to the way I like to do things—I stopped writing things down and started cutting things apart. I snipped the questions I had written (yes, by hand) into little slips of paper. Then I played with them. I allowed a structure to emerge slowly, continually checking and adjusting to take account of new perspectives. At a few points along the way, I reiterated the design by taking apart the whole structure and putting it back together again.

The number of questions topped out at around 400, and they formed slowly into three large groupings at the top level of a hierarchy several levels deep. The hierarchy of questions represented a fairly inclusive mapping of the things people ask about when they ask about stories. The three largest groupings were what I now call the story dimensions of story form (stories as messages), function (stories as cognitive tools), and phenomenon (stories as social connections). (At first I said “trace” instead of “phenomenon.” I thought of a better word later.)

## The impacts of the discovery

As far as I know, my XML standard was never used or published. I asked IBM for permission to publish it (and the paper I wrote about it), but the request was denied.

However, my discovery of the three dimensions of stories had a huge impact on all of the work I did afterwards. I went into the project thinking of only the most pedantic (though worthwhile) reasons to ask questions about stories, and I came out of it with a far stronger vision of what questions could do for people. That vision influenced all of my later work.

### Some particularly eventful revelations

I was particularly inspired by certain specific examples of question-asking I found in the sources I read. I would like to tell you about some of these examples, so you can see for yourself where the ideas behind PNI came from.

#### *Revelations about story form*

Metadata on story form can help people compose better, stronger, and more compelling stories. It can also help them understand the working parts of stories they have been told and think about the stories they tell themselves. Two elements of my explorations into story form stand out most.

**Questions as coaching tools.** The first was a quote in Doug Lipman's excellent book *The Storytelling Coach*. In one part of the book, Lipman explains three types of "suggestion" a storytelling coach can give to a person working on a story: a positive suggestion (what if you did this), a personal reaction (when you said this I felt that) and a question. Said Lipman:

It may seem odd to classify questions as a form of "suggestion." Yet they rank as my most powerful kind of tool for drawing on your creativity while directing you toward specific improvements. Questions point you toward answers within you, the storyteller—not within me, the coach.

I can still remember the moment when I read that statement. Something within it spoke to me of a purpose much more exciting than simply finding a story in a database. I began to see that using questions to explore stories might have impacts on *making sense of the world*, not just finding the information you need.

**Questions as insight engines.** The second piece of story-form exploration I remember well was a moment when I was using the software *Dramatica Pro*. This software is a tool that helps screenwriters and novelists develop and improve their stories.

Use of *Dramatica Pro* consists, in the main, of answering dozens of inter-related questions about a story's characters, plot, theme and so on. The tool essentially embodies knowledge about story form and creates a facilitation in which writers are guided through the application of that knowledge to their particular story.

Our group bought a copy of *Dramatica Pro*, and I played with it as part of my exploration of professional screenwriting tools. Not having a story in mind, I thought I'd play with a folk tale. Casting about randomly, I chose the story of *Little Red Riding Hood*. I knew it well (so I thought), having heard and read many versions of it over the years.

As I answered the questions put to me by *Dramatica Pro*, an awareness began to grow. Then, suddenly, a door opened up through which I saw the familiar story in a completely new light. I had never before had the faintest inkling of the sexual nature of *Little Red*

*Riding Hood* until that day. I quickly looked up the folk tale on the internet and found the issue much discussed, with many seeing the story as a cautionary tale to girls about sexual violence. This was astounding to me. When I chose that story to consider, nothing could have been further from my mind.

I remember the moment when I realized that my answer to one of the questions put to me by *Dramatica Pro* was “rape.” I jumped up from my desk and began pacing the room, possibilities bounding all around me. If I could come to such an eye-opening discovery about a folk tale I had known (or *thought* I had known) since childhood, what fountains of insight might people be able to discover about the stories they told about their own organizations and communities?

### ***Revelations about story function***

You may have noticed that my original goals for the story-XML project were entirely focused on story function. Organizing, selecting, sorting, summarizing, visualizing: these are all cognitive tasks. That shows the mind frame I had going into the project. It expanded manifold coming out on the other side.

In this area I remember a particular experience that helped me to realize how answering questions about stories might help people.

Roger Schank was, and is, a leading proponent of the use of stories for knowledge transfer, mainly in a field called case-based reasoning. I was reading about the work of Schank and others on this topic, and I came across a fascinating account by Jorn Barger, a programmer who had worked on some of Schank’s story databases. This was the bit that made me jump out of my seat:

All the links from story to story in the Ask-Tom casebase had to be ‘hand-crafted’ or hardwired, which ultimately meant looking at every possible pair of clips and asking whether either would make an interesting followup to the other, and which of the eight CAC-links it made most sense under.

The “Ask-Tom casebase” was a collection of videotaped storytellings (“clips”) linked together in an “expert system” whose purpose was to help people learn about complicated, knowledge-rich topics. Barger was describing how his group had built the typed links that connected the storytelling videos to each other.

To me, in the context of my exploration at the time, this behind-the-scenes comment was nothing less than revelatory. Why? Because through it I realized that the creation of typed links, an activity which the expert-system researchers found an onerous task (and seemed embarrassed to admit was being done by clerical help), *was a perfect opportunity for sensemaking*. For the purposes of building an expert knowledge system, link-building might be clerical work, but for the purpose of making sense of complex topics in support of decision making, it could be empowerment.

I began to envision a system that would *help people think about why and how stories connect to each other*. I felt that such a system could help them make sense of the stories they were encountering and the topic they were exploring.

### ***Revelations about story phenomenon***

Did you know that people have been studying organizational story sharing since the 1980s? Many people I meet today do not seem to be aware of this and have missed some essential nuggets of insight that are buried in the research literature. The writings of David Boje, Mary Boyce, Yiannis Gabriel, Alan Wilkins, and Joanne Martin have long stood out to me as particularly insightful. I strongly advise anyone interested in organizational and community narrative to look up some of their papers.

When I think back on what got me excited about asking questions about story phenomenon, three stories come to mind, mostly from that literature. I'll tell them to you now.

**The commonality of uniqueness.** Joanne Martin's fascinating 1983 paper presents a paradox of organizational stories:

Researchers have noticed that organizational cultures, and in particular organizational stories, carry a claim to uniqueness—that one institution is unlike any other. . . . In spite of these claims to uniqueness, cultural manifestations share common elements and express common concerns.

In other words, everyone at Company A says Company A is unique because it uniquely values its employees. And everyone at Company B says Company B is unique because it uniquely values its employees. The paradox is that *they are both right*.

My interpretation of the paradox is that even if every organization ascribes to the same goals, for there to *be* organizations, the goals must be given unique local meanings. The localness does not create the uniqueness; the uniqueness creates the localness. People tell stories about their organizations and communities to communicate and negotiate who they are (and what they do and why) because by doing so they bring their distinctive collective existence into being.

When I first read about this paradox, what excited me about it was not so much that it existed—it's not exactly a new insight—but that *listening to the stories people tell could help people to understand the unique character of their organization*. And how better to find out how stories represent uniqueness than to ask questions about them?

**The nine-day fortnight.** I found the second story in a paper by Alan Wilkins (whose writing I found exceptionally clear and insightful, I might add, to those wary of scientific jargon). The story goes like this:

. . . most employees at one company I researched have been told the story about how the company avoided a mass layoff in the early 1970s when almost every other company in the industry was forced to lay off employees in large numbers. Top management chose to avoid a layoff of 10 percent of their employees by asking everyone in the company, including themselves, to take a ten percent cut in salary and come to work only nine out of ten days.

This experience became known as the “nine-day fortnight” by some and is apparently used as a script for the future of the company. In 1974 the company was again confronted with a drop in orders, and it went to the “nine-day fortnight”

scheme for a short period. When other companies in the industry began layoffs, the old-timers used this story to quiet the anxiety of concerned newcomers. . . . Employees occasionally tell [this] story to communicate that this is the “company with a heart”. Everyone I talked to in the company knew the story, which is used both as a symbol and a script.

What excited me about this story was *the way in which it took on a life of its own* within the organization. Remember, I started out thinking primarily about story function and (somewhat less so) about story form. But how much better it would be, I realized, to ask questions about the river of stories that flows through a community or organization. How much more it could offer to those who want to make decisions that determine the future of that community or organization?

**Lying as truth-telling.** The third story I want to tell you about is from the work of the folklorist Richard Bauman. His slim volume *Story, Performance and Event* introduced me to the possibilities of considering the contexts of storytelling. In it, Bauman describes how stories may be patently untrue at a purely factual level, but may reveal much deeper truths about the community in which they are told.

Bauman quotes one man, during “an exploration of storytelling and dog-trading in Canton, Texas”, who says:

When you get out there in the field with a bunch of coon hunters, and get you a chew of tobacco in your mouth, and the dogs start running, you better start telling some lies, or you won’t be out there long.

In other words, among this particular population of coon-hunters, lying is a mark of truthfulness, that your word, deep down, can be trusted: that you belong. Such storytellings are critical determinants of identity negotiation. Says Bauman:

Since at least the time when a distinctive body of American folk humor first emerged during the early years of the American republic, the hunter and the trader have occupied a privileged place in American folklore. Dog trading at Canton is a thriving contemporary incarnation of this American folk tradition. The tall tales and personal narratives of its participants place them in unbroken continuity with the generations of hunters, traders, and storytellers that have given American folklore some of its most distinctive characteristics.

In other words, these hunters tell the stories they tell to “place” themselves within the “unbroken continuity” of a larger cultural identity. When one coon hunter told Bauman, “any man who keeps more’n one hound’ll lie to you”, he was complaining or bragging. He was representing his identity as a member of a noble group. You can imagine that someone observing storytellings like these and looking for evidence of “best practices transferred” would conclude that the group performed no function and should not be supported, when they could be on the verge of reinventing the organization.

This insight, that *context can upend content*, even to the remarkable extent that lying can be seen as a sign of truthfulness, played a part in convincing me that if any questions could be asked and answered about a story, they should be questions of context.

You might suppose I will now say that only questions about story phenomenon have proven useful in real story projects. But that is not the case. All three dimensions of story work together in a synergistic way to help people understand the full meaning of stories.

### **Practical proof**

All of these ideas were enticing, and reinterpreting *Little Red Riding Hood* was fascinating. But when did I find out that asking questions about stories would be useful to people in organizations and communities?

Actually, the story I want to tell you about this is not the first story I have to tell about it, chronologically speaking. Things like it had already been happening for a year (in the e-learning project). But I remember it better because it was a bigger surprise.

In 2001, I was working with Sharon Darwent and Dave Snowden on story projects for IBM clients. We knew that bringing my questions together with their archetypes (which I now call story elements) *should* be useful, but we weren't sure how to go about merging them. We found a client particularly interested in new ideas (thank heaven for such people). They had collected some 40 stories about a problem they wanted to address.

I received the audiotaped stories and transcribed them. Then I set out to answer some questions about the stories. I looked at my list of 400 questions. It would take forever to answer even 100 questions about each of the 40 stories, so I needed to prioritize. I chose my favorite 10 questions to ask, those I thought would be the most revealing.

Because I had the stories on tape, I could hear the emotions in the voices of the tellers and audiences. As I recall it, most of my questions had to do with emotion and presentation, such as for example:

- How emotionally intense was this story?
- With what purpose did the story seem to have been told? (To inform, entertain, defend, explain, attack, etc.)
- Where did the story seem to have come from? Was it presented as first-hand, second-hand, or a rumor?
- How did the audience respond to the story?

My answers to these questions were undoubtedly biased, but at the time answering them myself seemed like a reasonable approach. I annotated all of the stories with answers to my questions. I also linked the stories to some sets of story elements that employees of the client had developed in a workshop. The story elements were their creations, but the links between the and the story elements were my interpretations.

After that I developed a very simple software prototype to display the stories and answers. The interface was laughably simple. I believe it had nothing in it but some bar graphs arranged on a grid. But the results amazed all of us: myself, Sharon, Dave, and our client. With only 40 stories, a handful of answers to questions, and a ridiculously simple data visualization, patterns came jumping out of the data.

The pattern I remember best was that stories that involved customers doing stupid things with the product were more likely to be hearsay than direct experience, and stories from direct experience tended to involve customers who used the product correctly. Here was a river of meaning revealed! People were passing around rumors that were largely disconnected with reality.

As a result of this insight, our client was able to improve their training to help staff members understand their customers better, working from a specific set of staff misperceptions that they could counter with factual information.

I can remember the moment when I was playing with my prototype and realized that the stupid-customer stories were mostly rumors. It was like opening a door into a room I had never seen before. Since then, the process of asking questions about stories has proven to be so useful that I have come to *expect* a revelation of some kind to appear to someone at some point in every project. I have rarely been disappointed in that expectation.

## Why ask people questions about their own stories?

In this history of PNI, you have already read how I discovered the merits of listening to stories and answering questions about them (myself). You have read how I discovered these things not by virtue of the tremendous foresight housed in my prodigious brain, but in retrospect, *after* circumstances had dragged the solution in front of me and patiently waited while I ignored the obvious.

With this preparation, you will not be surprised to hear that I ignored the now-perfectly-obvious benefits of asking people questions *about their own stories*. Let me tell you how I found this out.

In the first two years after I started working with Sharon and Dave on story projects for IBM clients, we carried out something like 20 projects. In each project we asked our clients—this was the project *funders*, not the project participants—to answer questions about the stories we and they collected. Just like the people building expert systems, we saw question answering as “clerical work” some poor unskilled worker had to wade through.

Often our clients agreed to do this, but when they actually *saw* the dozens or hundreds of stories we collected, most of them balked. What could we do but answer the questions ourselves? I remember many a late night when Sharon and I sat with hundreds of stories marking answers to questions (like the ones I mentioned in the previous section).

This turned out to be an opportunity disguised as a problem, by the way. I found that I loved answering questions about stories, even when it took up half the night. I learned a lot about stories and storytelling by doing it. In fact, I recommend answering some questions about stories yourself. It can help you learn more about stories than any textbook can. When you sit with stories, they speak to you. But you must sit with many stories, not a few; and you must give them the time, attention, and respect they deserve.

However, as much as I liked this work, we needed to reduce the work hours we were putting into each project. It wasn't cost-effective to carry on this way. We talked about this

problem constantly, and after several low-ratio projects, we agreed to try something new. We started trying, tentatively at first, to ask people to answer questions about stories they had just told.

Imagine our surprise when we found out that people not only didn't mind answering our questions but seemed to enjoy it. In retrospect nothing could be more obvious, but it was not obvious at the time. We looked for compliance and found empowerment.

I have tried to remember on which project we first asked people to interpret their own stories, but I can't remember which one it was. I think this is because it happened gradually. At first we combined questions we answered with questions storytellers answered, because we were unsure people would comply with our request to "help us with the clerical work" of answering questions about stories.

What I *do* remember, and very well, is that as we began to gather more and deeper reflections from the tellers of stories, the patterns we found increased in utility by orders of magnitude. It was only when we started paying real attention to people's interpretations of their own stories that some of the real "wow" patterns started jumping out of what we had collected.

We could *never* have imagined some of the things storytellers told us about their own stories, not when they all spoke at once. People spoke of hope and fear and responsibility and courage. They knew things about their own stories that we could never know, even if we read their stories for weeks on end. It was as though we had been searching in the dark, and someone switched on a bright light.

I now consider this to be one of the principles of PNI: *people know their stories*. There is no better foundation on which to work with stories than stories combined with what their storytellers say about them.

If you go back and reread the paragraphs in the previous section, you will see that even though I didn't see this revelation coming, I *should* have. The signs were all there.

- When Doug Lipman said asking people questions about the stories they were building was helpful, I should have realized the same would be true for people talking from their own experience.
- When I rediscovered *Little Red Riding Hood* with *Dramatica Pro*, I should have realized that people could rediscover the stories they told themselves about their own lives.
- When I saw that building links between stories was not clerical work but an opportunity for sensemaking, I should have seen that another type of clerical work—the type I was spending late nights doing—was just as useful.
- When I read about the nine-day fortnight, I should have noticed that Alan Wilkins said, "Everyone I talked to in the company knew the story." I should have thought: maybe *asking* people about the story might have informed his understanding of what the story meant to the organization.



Maybe I recall these inklings the most strongly not because they impressed me at the time, before I discovered asking people about their own stories, but because they supported that realization so well later, in retrospect. (It's a theory.)

## A theoretical defense

I am aware that some of my readers will read this story of discovery and remain unconvinced that asking people about their own stories is more useful than having experts analyze them from afar. Certainly many in the field of narrative inquiry will question it. Is that not the role of the expert, to know more than the "informant" who tells the story? As I hope the above story shows, I do not know this by abstract principles but by hard-won experience.

But let me explain it in more abstract terms, for those who prefer their explanations that way. One of the problems with direct surveys is that it is so very easy to create situations in which the acceptable answer is embedded in the question. In fact it is nearly impossible *not* to do this. It is so very easy to find out what people believe you want them to say, and so very difficult to find out what they actually believe.

Let's say you want to ask about politics in a workplace. Can you ask, "Are things getting more or less political at work?" I suppose you *could* ask, but why bother? Is anyone going to *answer* a question like that honestly? Many employee satisfaction surveys are like this. I like to joke that they could be replaced with one giant question: "Do you want to keep your job?" The exercise is one of guessing the right answers, not of exploring issues. The whole thing becomes a charade, a grotesque play that amuses no one and changes nothing.

Now consider what happens when you ask people to tell you stories, then ask them what their stories mean. In the first stage, you say something like, "Tell me what happened the last time you woke up in the morning and wished you were sick so you wouldn't have to go to work." This means: I invite you to enwrap your feelings, beliefs, and perceptions in the protective social ritual of a storytelling event. I promise to treat your story package with respect and care, as any socialized adult would know to do after giving such a signal.

After the story has been told, in the second stage, you say, "Please answer these questions about your story." This means: Let us look together at the securely wrapped package you have placed on the table between us. My eyes are focused on the package. I am *not* looking at you. I am not asking you to tell me how you feel. I invite you to focus with me and tell me only *what is in the story*. Then you say something like, "How strong would you say the theme of "politics" is in this story? Does it dominate the story? Is it a side issue? A non-issue?"

If you set dozens or hundreds of such stories and answer sets next to each other, you have just found out far more about what people believe about politics in the workplace than you ever could have by asking them directly. You have mapped the prominence of workplace politics and its relationship to many other issues found in the story packages you gathered. You can use that map to explore the issue of workplace politics in ways that an "instrument" of direct questioning can never provide. (And the people can use it too, if you will let them.)

Questions about stories are nothing like questions about people. Questions about stories communicate respectful attention and negotiated truth, not interrogation and proof. They give participants the freedom to speak at a protective distance from their feelings. You've heard stories about children who were helped by talking about a stuffed puppet when the real subject of the discussion was themselves. Asking questions about stories uses the same approach. It would be difficult to get any adult to speak through a puppet, but most people will speak through their stories. Most people recognize the ancient ritual of storytelling, understand what it is for, and know how to respond.

Asking people to tell stories is part of this, but I have come to believe that asking people *about* their stories is just as important. When I think of this situation I always remember the quote from Oscar Wilde: "Give a man a mask and he will tell you the truth."

Now, as a contrast, say you don't progress to the second stage. Say you gather stories, then interpret them yourself, without asking any questions about them. Say you are an expert in workplace politics, and *you* decide what the stories mean. My experience has been that *no outsider can be fully aware of the meanings of stories to those who told them*. You simply cannot penetrate to the meaning of a story in context, no matter how expert you are or how well you have studied the topic. Everyone is the expert of their own stories.

But it is not necessary to create a battle between storyteller and expert. They can bring their complementary assets to work together. Asking people what their stories mean does not bar experts from interpreting the same stories. In fact, I often juxtapose storyteller interpretations with those made by others, both in the community and outside it.

This is another essential strength of stories (and principle of PNI): *Stories nest*. You can compose a story that includes the original story, the storyteller's view of it, the views of others in the community, and your view as an outside expert. Is that not a richer, more intricate story than anything you could possibly come up with as an expert working alone? Surely so. What if your views conflict? What if you interpret the story differently than the storyteller did? All the better. Conflict only makes the story richer and more productive.

## A theoretical connection

Around the same time as we were experimenting with asking people questions about their own stories, I was reading a lot about narrative inquiry. This is a form of qualitative research in which expert researchers collect stories, then interpret, compare, juxtapose, and analyze them in order to study an issue. In my readings I began to notice some connections to the things we were finding out in our experiments.

The example that stands out best in my memory is a 1998 article by Katherine Borland. In the article, Borland recounted an interaction she had with her grandmother, Beatrice, whom she interviewed for a study about women's work in the past.

In her interview, Beatrice told a story. Borland interpreted the story in the light of the specific elements of historical feminism she was studying. When her research was complete, Borland showed her grandmother her article. Afterwards, Borland's grandmother sent

her a “fourteen-page letter” that disagreed with her interpretation of the story. Borland quoted a section of her grandmother’s letter, thus:

Not being, myself, a feminist, the ‘female struggle’ as such never bothered me in my life. . . . So your interpretation of the story as a female struggle for autonomy within a hostile male environment is entirely YOUR interpretation. You’ve read into the story what you wished to—what pleases YOU. That it was never—by any widest stretch of the imagination—the concern of the originator of the story makes such an interpretation a definite and complete distortion, and in this respect I question its authenticity. The story is no longer MY story at all. The skeleton remains, but it has become your story.

Borland described her reconsideration of the project following receipt of this letter.

I now feel I ought to have arranged a second session with my grandmother in which I played her the taped version and asked her for her view of its function and meaning. Time constraints prevented me from doing so.

When I read this, I immediately felt a need to question whether time constraints truly prevented Borland from asking her grandmother what her story meant. I thought it might have been more likely that traditional beliefs about what “informants” know (and should be allowed to say) got in the way. My feeling seemed to be supported by Borland’s statement about whether non-experts should be allowed to interpret their own stories:

To refrain from interpretation by letting the subjects speak for themselves seems to me an unsatisfactory if not illusory solution. For the very fact that we constitute the initial audience for the narratives we collect influences the way in which our collaborators will construct their stories, and our later presentation of those stories—in particular publications under particular titles—will influence the way in which prospective readers will interpret the texts. . . . How, then, might we present our work in a way that grants the speaking woman interpretive respect without relinquishing our responsibility to provide our own interpretation of her experience?

It seemed to me that there were four assumptions wrapped up in that statement.

***To refrain from interpretation by letting the subjects speak for themselves***

This framing seems to imply that if an expert does not interpret a story, it cannot be interpreted at all. By the time I read Borland’s article, I knew this was not true.

An expert interviewer might say that a storyteller’s interpretation of their own story would be wrong, inexperienced, or ill-informed. To which I would say: it is not possible to interpret a story about one’s own personal experience wrongly. Personal stories are not about facts and evidence; they are about feelings and perspectives. And what better way to get at feelings and perspectives than by asking people what their stories mean to them?

I have never seen a project in which I was not amazed by the insights people had about their own stories. Honestly, the more I read about narrative research at that time, the more I found myself wanting to shake narrative researchers and say: You have them right there!

Ask them what their stories mean to them! You have so much to gain by it, and nothing to lose! It's not a zero-sum game. You and they can both weigh in.

***We constitute the initial audience for the narratives we collect***

Expert interviewers are not the only people who can listen to stories. Project participants can interview each other, or they can exchange stories in groups without any experts being present. It is not necessary for an expert interviewer to “constitute the initial audience” for a narrative. It is how narrative inquiry has traditionally been done, but it is not the only option. It is just one option of many.

And even if stories are collected by expert interviewers, the fact that interviewers are “the initial audience” only matters if they control entry to all other audiences.

For example, if you were interviewing me, you could tell me that you will be carrying my exact words and intonations into a sensemaking workshop of my peers without adding any interpretations of your own. In that case, would I perceive you as constituting the initial audience for my story? Or would I perceive you as a *conduit* through which my story will pass? Possibly both; but audiences are only simple when projects are simple, and projects don't have to be simple.

***Our later presentation of those stories ... will influence [later interpretations]***

Here Borland makes it sound as if interviewers must *insulate* storytellers from the eventual audiences of their stories. But that's not how story sharing works. We all frame our stories to suit the audiences we tell them to. In fact, collecting stories told to one audience and retelling them to other audiences—audiences they were not meant for—is a distortion of the ancient practice of story sharing.

In PNI projects, we tell the people who tell the stories who will hear their stories before they start to talk. If we are interviewing them, we make sure they understand that we are not the audiences of their stories. We are only there to pass their stories on to their real audiences. Giving people this information helps them to frame their stories. It also helps them to be more forthcoming, because they know who they are talking to. Transparency about the “later presentation of stories” is central to PNI practice.

***Our responsibility [is] to provide our own interpretation***

When I read this, I wondered: Why is Borland ignoring the responsibilities of the *storytellers* to provide interpretations of their stories? They must feel such responsibilities, since we all explain our stories every day. Certainly the reactions of Borland's grandmother seemed to reflect her felt sense of responsibility—and right—to interpret her story.

To be clear, when the goal of research is to establish conclusive proof, the burden of responsibility *should* be solely on the researcher. No scientist would say that the general public shares a responsibility to prove that a particular hand lotion causes cancer. But narrative research cannot and should not be used to prove anything conclusively. Its best use is to support collective understanding. For that purpose, participation offers not “illusory” benefits, but real ones. This is why, in PNI projects, we create a *shared* responsibility for

the interpretation of stories among all of the participants in the project, whether they tell stories, build catalytic material, make sense of stories, or facilitate any of these activities.

Lest I seem to be berating this excellent article, let me say that when I first encountered it, I found it so heartening that I could not stop thinking about it for weeks. The fact that a narrative researcher thought the issue was worth bringing up (and the book editors thought it was worth including) told me that narrative inquiry was ready for a dose of participation.

Borland's article included a postscript, which I hope you will excuse my quoting at length.

[A]fter a ten-month absence, I visited Beatrice and gave her a copy of the present version of this paper for her final comments. She took it to her study, read it, and then the two of us went through it together, paragraph by paragraph.

At this juncture she allowed that much of what I had said was 'very true', though she had not thought about the events of her life in this way before. After a long and fruitful discussion, we approached the central issue of feminism. She explained, once again, that feminism was not a movement that she had identified with or even heard of in her youth. Nevertheless, she declared that if I meant by a feminist a person who believed that a woman has the right to live her life the way she wants to regardless of what society has to say about it, then she guessed she was a feminist.

Thus, the fieldwork exchange had become, in the end, a true exchange. I had learned a great deal from Beatrice, and she had also learned something from me. Yet I would emphasize that Bea's understanding and acceptance of feminism was not something that I could bestow upon her, as I had initially and somewhat naively attempted to do. It was achieved through the process of interpretive conflict and discussion, emerging as each of us granted the other interpretive space and stretched to understand the other's perspective.

The process Borland describes here is very similar to PNI. In the final exchange between Borland and her grandmother, each learned from the other; each had an opportunity to challenge her own assumptions; conflict produced useful discussion; and each "granted the other interpretive space and stretched to understand the other's perspective." Can you imagine a better explanation of the benefits of group sensemaking? I can't.

I don't remember exactly when I found this article, but I do remember that it got me very excited about the potential of what we were doing, and it gave me hope that the approach we were developing would eventually find a place in the world of research.

## Why help groups make sense of stories?

Some of the people I meet like the idea of finding patterns in stories, but not the idea of letting people make sense of their own stories. They say things like:

Why should we let people make sense of their *own* stories? Shouldn't we be the ones to do that? Or some expert consultants?

My position on that—now—is that having expert consultants work with an organization's or community's stories is an exercise in futility. But that was not the position I once held.

The story I have to tell about making sense of stories is yet another story of being dragged into the light of truth. This story took place soon after I started working with Sharon Darwent and Dave Snowden on story projects for IBM clients. This is mostly their story, in fact. I participated only on the fringes of it, in discussion over the phone, though I occupied a more central role in other similar stories afterward.

Sharon and Dave had started out just as I had, writing crafted stories to help clients achieve goals, and they had made their own independent transition to collecting and valuing real-life stories. At the time we joined forces, however, we all believed that asking experts to *interpret* collected stories was the best way forward, both in answering questions about stories and in building larger stories out of them. I did it; they did it; we all considered it a strength of our expertise. We thought asking the people who told the stories to build things out of them—well, we *didn't* think about it. It didn't register on our radar.

The turning point came on one of the first projects I helped to support as a newcomer to the group. In this project, we had helped our client collect videotapes of something like a hundred retiring employees describing their long careers. In our enthusiasm we had allowed too many people to generate too many hours of videotape, and we realized that we could never get through them all in time to meet the project deadline.

After a flurry of frantic discussion, we decided to ask the employees *themselves* to watch the videotapes. We planned to distribute the videos so every participant saw a few interviews and every interview was seen by a few participants. Then we would invite people to a workshop in which they would interpret the stories together and come up with their own conclusions, saving us the trouble.

(I make this sound like a hugging-all-around solution, but actually there was a lot of re-crimination about who got the bright idea of collecting so many stories without thinking through how we would process them all. I must say that the person who collected too many stories was the same person who came up with the excellent idea that saved the project and changed the approach; so we forgave that person in the end.)

Going into the workshop, we were worried that we would have a lot of work to do after these uninitiated, amateur interpreters had finished their exercise in trying to understand the stories on their own. But we decided to go ahead anyway, thinking that at least our task would be reduced.

You can imagine our astonishment when we found out that the quality of the workshop results exceeded our previous finely tuned expert interpretations. Not only that, but when we reported the results to our client, unadorned by our expertise, they resonated better with the client as well. The amateurs didn't falter or fail; they outran us by a mile. This was another manifestation of the PNI principle that *people know their stories*.

After that project, we abandoned all attempts to build things with stories ourselves, and instead focused our efforts on building participatory exercises that helped people make sense of their own stories. Before then I had been using grounded theory, a research

method that enables the emergence of theory from collected materials—as seen by experts. I abandoned that practice after we started working on ways to support group sensemaking.

Years later, I came to a more nuanced understanding of what I saw at first as a binary choice. Narrative sensemaking can be seen as a form of participatory grounded theory, which is why expert attention to stories and patterns *can* have a place in it, when it is used as food for thought. (That story is in the section “Why catalyze sensemaking?” later in this chapter.)

## The danger and promise of participatory sensemaking

The claim that participatory sensemaking is superior to expert analysis is difficult for many researchers (and project funders) to accept. It is one thing to allow people to tell stories; it is another to allow them to answer questions about their stories; but it is something powerful, sometimes powerfully dangerous, to allow the people being researched to *build things* out of the stories they have told. Why is that? I think it is because built things take shape and begin to have collective lives. They become useful to those who built them. They become tools, and there is always the worry that tools can become weapons. But that worry is mostly an illusion. Usually the things people build in sensemaking workshops help everyone.

Let’s make up an example to explore this issue. Say you own a coffee shop. You want to find out what your customers think. You ask them to tell you stories. You ask them what their stories mean. You look for patterns in those stories and answers. This is all well and good; but are you willing to let your customers use their stories to build a vision of what your coffee shop should be like in five or ten years? What will they be able to do with that? Will they be able to tell *you* what to do with *your* coffee shop? Is that what you want?

Most people would consider that a nightmare scenario, at least when it is described in that way. But that is not the only way to describe participatory sensemaking. That scenario misrepresents a few elements of what could happen. First, it makes it sound like the coffee shop’s owners would be excluded from the sensemaking or that their voices would be drowned out. That is a common fear among project funders. Second, and more dangerously, that scenario assumes that sensemaking can result in only one story being told.

Let me paint you a different picture. Say you own a coffee shop. You want to find out what your customers think. You ask them to tell you stories. You ask them what their stories mean. You look for patterns in those stories and answers. You then hold a sensemaking workshop in which you ask your customers to come to the coffee shop, look at the stories and patterns, and engage with you in a series of story-building exercises in which *each* group important to the coffee shop gets a chance to make sense of what you collected. When you are finished:

- One wall shows a story built by the shop’s regular customers, for some of whom the shop has been a second home for decades.
- Another wall shows a story built by tourists who just happened to be in the city that day and saw your sign.
- Another wall shows a story built by employees of the shop, current and former.

- On the fourth wall is a vision of the shop, in the past, present, and future, by three generations of the shop's owners, including yourself.

The four walls of your shop represent a *nested* story, a story that contains *many* perspectives. Is there conflict among the stories? Of course there is. But as the owner of the shop, which is more useful to you? One wall or four?

Allowing *only* outside experts to make sense of collected stories diminishes story work in two ways: experts are bound to get essential things wrong; and experts are incapable of making insights resonate within a community. You can share your sense-making with your participants for reasons of egalitarianism, but you don't even need that justification. You can be ruthlessly selfish and still see that people should work with their own stories. It helps you as much as it helps them.

## Why keep the stories raw?

I have spoken to many people who collect stories over the years. Many agree that listening to stories is useful and empowering. However, quite a few people have disagreed with my stance that it is better to leave stories alone, to keep them in their “raw” form. They think it is better to improve stories by “cleaning them up” to make them read more nicely. For example, they might remove pauses, restarts, and apparently off-topic additions. To that I say: *Don't mess with the stories*. Why? Let me tell you a few stories about that.

### That's not true

One of my first story projects was for a company that wanted to think about how its customers perceived one of its products. They had collected some stories from customers about the product, and some of the stories contained strange rumors about what you could do with the product and what it could do to you. The stories were to be distributed to company staff so they could better understand their customers' points of view (and help to dispel some of the rumors).

One of the managers on the project wanted to *edit* the collected stories, remove all errors, and *replace* what the customers had actually said with factual statements about the product. After much pleading, I managed to talk them out of doing this, but only by agreeing that they could attach a “factual addendum” to each story.

If the only goal of the project had been to educate the staff about the facts, editing the stories would have been a reasonable decision—though you would hardly need customer stories to meet that goal; a fact sheet would have sufficed. But it would have disrupted the goal of helping staff members understand the perceptions of their customers. In the end, we kept the stories as they were originally collected, errors and all, and they helped the company's staff to better understand both the facts and the perceptions of their customers.

Did I see *this* one coming? Well, I guess I am happy to report that for at least one of these stories my intuition was on target. I remember getting an email from the story-changing manager with their first batch of corrected stories attached and having a strong visceral reaction to what I saw. It was partly a reaction of respect, that the stories represented the



voices of the customers, and that the voices of the customers should not be silenced. But I also pictured the staff members who were to read the stories. I realized that they would learn nothing if the stories were corrected, because the story of the conflict between perceptions and facts was the story they most needed to hear. Finding a way to *communicate* that insight to the manager was the hard part of that project.

## You can't tell me

Here is a second story about raw stories, this one not something that happened to me but to two of my colleagues. For anonymity I'll call them Colleague A and Colleague B. This happened not long after the factual-addendum incident.

Colleague A and Colleague B had done a story project in an organization in which stories were collected from, and story elements were created by, two groups: some employees, and the managers above them in the corporate hierarchy.

After both groups had completed their work, separately, Colleague A attempted to hold a meeting in which the managers were shown both sets of story elements. As I recall it, they had placed large drawings of the story elements produced by both groups (with the help of a cartoonist) on the walls around the room. One of the managers strode up to the drawings and looked them over. Then he returned to the conference table, banged his fist on the table, said, "*This meeting is over,*" and walked out before Colleague A had a chance to say another word.

After many attempts, my colleagues managed to arrange a second meeting with the same managers. This time Colleague B tried to explain the story elements to the managers. The same manager who had walked out before launched himself at Colleague B, grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket, and slammed him up against the wall. "*You can't come in here and tell me,*" said the man, "*that those people said those things about us.*"

Colleague B, to his infinite merit (I could not have done it), calmly explained that the drawings the man was so angry about were produced *by the exact same method* as those produced by the group of managers that included the angry man himself. It was only when he heard this that the man relaxed his grip and walked back to the drawings. The room was silent while the man looked at the drawings made by both groups. Then he returned to the table ready to talk about the issues raised.

Why did the manager calm down? Because he understood at last that *nothing he saw had been created by outside consultants*. Everything he saw was *raw*, authentic, real. My colleagues had not composed or even "improved" any stories. They had only *helped the stories get to where they needed to go*. Because the results were authentic, the man could respect their sources and listen to their messages.

I think my former colleagues would agree that we all learned a lot from that incident. We learned about the intensity of the need we all have to save face when we are confronted with difficult truths, and we learned that an ounce of up-front clarity is worth a pound of after-the-fact repair. For example, today I would not present a set of story elements to anyone without first explaining the process by which they were derived. Indeed, looking

back on the incident now, I can see that it took a lot of courage for that manager to walk back to those story elements, even after he found out where they came from.

Still, my point in telling you this story is that story work can only succeed if it is done in an atmosphere of authenticity and transparency.

## Why catalyze sensemaking?

At the point in the life of PNI in which we now find ourselves, I was working on story projects (I was not yet calling them PNI projects) in which we listened to stories, kept them raw and unchanged, asked their tellers questions about them, and asked people to work with their own stories in sensemaking workshops.

Then somehow, and I'm not sure how this happened, the projects we worked on got bigger. Instead of fifty or a hundred stories we started helping clients gather several hundred or even a thousand stories. Maybe our projects got bigger, or our clients got bigger, I'm not sure. At any rate, we started to run into processing problems. People started to find the sheer mass of stories too large to handle. They could not possibly read them all, even though each story was only a paragraph or two long.

We showed them how to use the software I had built that helped them look through the stories and answers to find patterns. Some clients rose to the task, found their own patterns, and discovered their own insights. But some clients, maybe the busiest ones or those most used to outside help, wanted me to do that for them.

I was wary, you might even say paranoid, about doing this. As an outsider, I could never hope to understand the context of the stories like their tellers could, or like others in their organization or community could. I refused to do this for some time, but finally one client was very persistent, or we were very motivated to work with them, and I agreed to look at the stories and answers for the client.

It didn't go well. I found what I thought were strong patterns in the data, and I wrote a report describing them. The client did not see what I saw. They were insulted, defensive, angry. They found my report biased and misleading. They responded with attacks on my professional ability and personal ethics. I remember being so upset that I stopped checking email for days, afraid of what I might find next. In the end the project was saved, not by me but by some excellent restorative work by a colleague. (You can read this story, called "Shooting the messenger," in *The Working with Stories Sourcebook*.)

That first attempt at adding analysis to sensemaking represented a major turning point in the work that became PNI. You could even say that project *created* catalysis, because if it had not happened I might never have questioned the way I had been doing things.

But as it *did* happen, I spent a lot of time thinking about it in the months and years afterward. I *never* wanted to create those negative emotions again in those I was trying to help. This was not so much because their responses hurt *me*, but because it destroyed the beneficial effect such a project could have. From the safety of time I can see the immense value of that painful mistake.

Telling people straight out what I saw and what I thought it meant was not just counter-productive; it was disrespectful to their own clearly superior knowledge of the subject matter. I knew I needed to find a better way. I needed to *catalyze* thought and discussion, to open the patterns I found up to possibility, not close them down to defense and attack.

So, over the course of the next several projects, during which I made other but smaller and less painful mistakes, I gradually came up with the rules that define narrative catalysis:

- *Separate statements* into *observations* anyone can see, *interpretations* of what the observations mean, and *ideas* for actions that could be taken as a result. Make no statement that is not thus identified.
- *Provide provoking perspectives* in the form of *multiple competing interpretations* for each observation. Never tell truths; always provide possibilities.
- *Maintain mischief* by making the provocative nature of catalytic material clear and present at all times. When the burden of proof comes near, push it back to where it belongs, in the minds of those using the material to support their sensemaking.
- *Explore exhaustively* through all avenues available. Remove the possibility of cherry-picking by examining the whole tree: every fruit, flower, leaf, twig, and root. This ensures that the observations offered are *everything* anyone can see and not a biased subset.
- *Prepare for participation* by creating material that facilitates group sensemaking. This includes keeping things brief and easily taken up so as to spur discussion over digestion.

I have now seen these rules work wonders in dozens of projects. They turn analysis into catalysis, shouting matches into constructive dialogues, and threats to the status quo into aids for planning a better future.

Having seen both sides, I can now clearly state my belief. When a project involves the experiences, perspectives, feelings, values, and beliefs of human beings, any method of analysis that results in *one* set of unequivocal conclusions *and* is constructed outside the community in which the conclusions will be applied *will fail*. It may not fail not right away, but eventually and surely it will fail.

Conclusions cannot flourish in foreign soil. Transplanted conclusions may grow for a time, and they may even *seem* vigorous, above the soil. But that growth is dependent on the artificial fertilizer of strong inputs of energy. When the energy stops, the conclusions will die, because their roots are weak.

I know this is a strong statement, and I know many will disagree with it. I have read volumes about the many elaborate contraptions researchers build to manage their controlling influence on conclusions about the feelings, values, and beliefs of other people. This may be fine for general research whose goal is not related to decision support. But when the ultimate goal is to support decision making for positive change, none of these contraptions work, not in a lasting way. The only options are to keep all analysis within the community or to give up the hammer of analysis for the many lenses of catalysis.

The next obvious question, of course, is whether catalysis *itself* is an elaborate contraption that doesn't work in the long term. Of course I *have* thought of that, being the nervous person I am. Am I doing what I accuse *them* of doing?

Yes. It is not always possible to follow every rule of catalysis to perfection. All real projects have to deal with real issues of power, control, and limited time and energy. Sometimes the person doing catalysis is insufficiently experienced, or those funding the project want more control over the end result, or there isn't enough time for exhaustive exploration, or you can't get enough people to participate in sensemaking.

Still, the closer a project hews to the principles of catalysis, the better catalysis works, and the better it leads to long-lasting results.

### **Where the use of statistics in catalysis came from**

The second story I want to tell you about the value of catalysis has to do with statistics. As I grew the basic rules of catalysis over the course of several projects (whose results kept improving), I began to be increasingly frustrated by the limitations of simple analysis.

By comparing counts of how many people said this or that about their stories I was able to look at patterns, but I could not say much about whether a pattern was strong or weak. I was doing a lot of what I called "eye-balling" at that time—staring at graphs trying to make sense of them. I kept picturing one of my favorite *Far Side* cartoons, "Early microbiologists," in which cavemen in laboratory coats sit at tables and peer intently into petri dishes without the aid of microscopes. That was *exactly* how I felt!

I had taken statistics courses in graduate school (with Robert Sokal, who was not only a leader in the field of biological statistics at the time but also my boss for several years and a good friend). But as much as I felt statistical methods were superlative tools for *biological* study, I was wary of using them when it came to looking at the experiences and perspectives of people. They sang a siren song of certainty, and I was concerned that they would lead me back into the lotus-covered land of drawing conclusions for other people.

Still, I felt the need to find out what was possible. So after discussion with my colleagues, I added some simple statistical tests to the software we used and tried them out on the next project.

Reader, I misjudged statistics. I misjudged it badly. Statistics can be a good friend to catalysis. To my surprise, I saw a step change in the utility of my catalytic material when I was able to switch from saying, "Gee, maybe these things could be related?" to "The R value of this correlation is 0.52, and the correlation is significant at the 0.05 level."

What I failed to understand at first is that *the purpose of statistics is to create limited agreement among people who reasonably disagree*. In this it is much like story sharing. Each has a set of ground rules, and each operates within those rules to negotiate truths in relative safety. Our collective ability to work within the rules of statistics, that if I follow this procedure correctly we agree to accept this result, parallels and complements our collective ability to work within the rules of story sharing, that if I set forth this abstract we agree to attend to this story.

Yes, statistics presents a particular and narrow perspective on data. Yes, this perspective can be manipulated to control beliefs and perceptions about what has been observed. But stories have the same weaknesses and the same strengths.

The approach I now recommend for catalytic work relies on mixed-methods analysis, an approach that combines qualitative work (essentially, reading the stories) and quantitative work (the statistical analysis of patterns in answers people gave about their stories). Why a mixture of qualitative and quantitative? Because this is the natural way to consider quantities of stories people tell and their interpretations of those stories.

Reading the literature on mixed-methods research is like reading my own writings about narrative work. Here is Jennifer Greene in her 2007 book *Mixed Methods in Social Inquiry*:

A mixed methods way of thinking involves an openness to multiple ways of seeing and hearing, multiple ways of making sense of the social world, and multiple standpoints on what is important and to be valued and cherished. A mixed methods way of thinking rests on assumptions that there are multiple legitimate approaches to social inquiry, that any given approach to social inquiry is inevitably partial, and that thereby multiple approaches can generate more complete and meaningful understanding of complex human phenomena. A mixed methods way of thinking means genuine acceptance of other ways of seeing and knowing as legitimate. A mixed methods way of thinking involves an active engagement with difference and diversity.

Sounds like I wrote it, doesn't it? That tells you something.

There is one problem with the use of statistics in catalysis: not everyone can do it, or do it well. Yes, this is a barrier. But catalysis is not an essential component of PNI. I place it in the optional triangle of PNI because it requires additional skill and preparation. It enhances PNI, but it is not required. Also, statistics in catalysis is like spice: a little goes a long way. Isn't that just like a good story?

## In conclusion

So that's the story of PNI—so far. I hope that years from now, someone will write a new history of PNI that goes far beyond these initial discoveries.



## Chapter 18

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# A Little Bit of History Repeating

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I wrote this blog post in 2018 in a burst of nostalgia. I wasn't sure whether to include it in this book or throw it away as a bit of ain't-I-special navel-gazing. But in the end I decided to keep it here because I think some researchers (action or otherwise) might find it useful to understand where (I think) PNI fits into the world of research.

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So a few weeks ago, I was looking for something on my "old stuff" hard drive, and I ran into some essays I wrote around 1988. That was back when I had my IBM portable PC. It weighed thirty pounds and had a little orange-text screen, and it was a pretty good heater if you sat in bed with it on your lap (and legs).

Anyway, as I said, the other day, instead of looking for whatever I was supposed to be looking for, I started reading these old essays. And I noticed something strange about them. They were written around the time I discovered complexity theory and roughly a decade before I learned anything about stories. At the time I thought I'd be an ethologist (animal behaviorist) forever, and I gave little thought to my own species.

But here's the strange thing. Those old essays sound a lot like the things I've been writing lately about PNI. I think you might be interested in hearing about that.

I've always thought Participatory Narrative Inquiry got its start during my two years at IBM Research (first during my explorations of questions about stories, and then when Neal Keller and I created what we called the "Narrative Insight Method"), then developed further through my research and project work with Dave Snowden and Sharon Darwent.

But I wrote those essays ten years *before* IBM. I wasn't thinking about stories, or even people, in 1988. I *was* thinking a lot, however, about how social organisms look back on their experiences and make decisions.

I'll show you some of the writing so you can judge for yourself. But if this connection is real, it means that at least some of the roots of PNI go back all the way to the days when complexity theory changed the way I thought about social behavior. And if *that's* true,

it raises the possibility that PNI developed because it is the inevitable result of taking complexity into account when considering the behavior of social species such as our own.

## On hierarchy as help and hindrance

This is the first of the three essays I think you might like to read. It came directly out of a feverish run through some books and articles about complexity and chaos.

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Multiplicity. Even the word is too long. Have you ever sat very still and thought about how many there are of everything? Try it for a while—but only for a little while, because it's dangerous. You can go in either direction; the confusion is marvelous in both the infinite and the infinitesimal. Think big: towns, nations, worlds, galaxies. Think small: bodies, molecules, electrons, empty whizzing space. Space in either direction.

It's a paradoxical result: the contemplation of complexity leads to the homogeneity of the void. Everything there is turns out to be only a small part of everything there isn't. If the universe were made of numbers, most of them would be zero.

So here we are, a bundle of neurons and some other cells, in the middle of this complex void. We, among all the animals, have the ability to see outside our native scale to other measures of time and space. How do we cope? How do we read the mail or shop for food without suddenly, paralyzingly, confronting the enormity of it all?

The answer lies in a special feature of the human mind that seems to have evolved specifically to deal with the burden of awareness: hierarchy. We organize things. We divide time into centuries, years, seconds. We divide space into light years, kilometers, microns. Think about anything we experience, and we will have arranged it hierarchically. What is a child's first reaction to a number of blocks? To pile them up. To make, not a group of equal components, but a smaller number of nested units composed of those components. In hierarchy lies safety.

It is precisely for this reason that it is necessary, at times, to put away the crutch of hierarchy and try to stand unaided on the shifting sands of complexity. Maintaining an awareness of other-than-categorical connections among elements of disparate origin requires that we—sometimes, temporarily—place them all on the same level. To discover similarity in the shape of a leaf, a differential equation, and the swoop of a flute, we must suspend our hierarchical definitions and allow new connections to leap up from a flat sea of perception.

As a visual image, I like to shape each piece of information into a tiny sand grain in a flat wide desert. All are equal; all contain only the crucial property of being observed. Then experience, intuition, and thought, like a warm wind, catch up these grains and form them into new and ephemeral patterns of truth.

Letting the mind loose in this way, by consciously breaking down some of the barriers that subdivide our experience, allows our integrative genius to work on the raw material of reality and produce exciting results.

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I remember the image that was foremost in my mind when I wrote that essay: the Grand Canyon (in the Western US). I spent a lot of time in those years thinking about making sense of complexity, and I kept going back in my mind to the times I had visited the Grand Canyon and had been stopped in my tracks by its complexity.

How is it possible, I wondered, to live in full awareness of the complexity in the universe? In its enormity, its detail, its mesmerizing intricacy, its worlds within worlds? Must we become numb and stupid to carry on in the face of such wonder? Can we?

And I remember how I solved the conundrum—or rather, how the solution came to me, because it was more of a reception than a creation. One day, in the midst of this dilemma, I was eating a sandwich while contemplating the blades of grass in a field (another Grand Canyon) when the answer suddenly came to me: The elements. The alphabet. The types and categories of things. In the bible, Adam gives names to the types and categories of animals. Why does he do that? Because he has to figure out some way to live in a sea of complexity. So do we.

We cannot cope with an inconceivable number of things, but we can cope with an inconceivable number of *combinations* of a conceivable number of things. Focusing on the classes instead of the instantiations makes it possible to live life without being overcome with awe. The hierarchies we create are the fictions we need to stop our over-developed awareness from damaging our sanity. From this perspective, what Plato was after was not truth itself, but fiction whose purpose is to help us cope with truth.

Just look at how our hierarchies help us.

- The alphabet shapes the wild sounds we make and hear into neat, predictable groupings.
- The periodic table (and the types and categories of stones) makes the Grand Canyon not only bearable, but enjoyable.
- Biological nomenclature corrals the countless hordes of beasts and vermin into compact species, nested inside genera, families, orders, phyla, and kingdoms.
- The laws of physics transform the shocking realities of physical life—rushing, falling, colliding—into manageable formulas.

Wherever we find unpredictable complexity, we build predictable, complicated maps to help us make our way through it. Without those maps we would be lost.

But the solution of complication comes with a price, and the price is amnesia. At the start, our maps are conscious creations, and we discuss and experiment as we refine them to suit our needs. But eventually, inevitably, we forget that our structures are fictions and our conditions are choices, and our maps become our prisons. Every map we build becomes the territory it once represented, and only in the places where it has worn bare can you see the reality that still lies beneath it.

## How this idea influenced PNI

The fingerprints of this idea are all over PNI. To begin with, all PNI projects start by suspending assumptions about "the way things are" and preparing to listen to the way things

*really* are, in the minds of the people who have lived through whatever it is we want to think about. This is nothing less than the deliberate destruction of hierarchy—temporarily, thoughtfully, and for a reason. We roll up the map and put it aside, and we walk unaided on the ground.

I have said before that when you listen to someone telling you a story, you have to listen past what you thought they were going to say, past what you want them to say, and past what they ought to say, until you get to what they are actually saying. In practice, this means that in PNI we don't address research questions or gather information or question informants or apply instruments. We start conversations, and we listen. We let people choose the experiences they want to tell us about, and we invite them to reflect on those experiences with us. The way we set up the context for the conversation, the questions we ask, and the way we ask them—all of these things work together to push past the structures of our lives to the reality that lies beneath them.

We are not, of course, so deluded as to believe that we succeed in this entirely. Every PNI project succeeds and fails when it comes to getting to ground truth. But we try and we learn. I learn something new about engaging participants and helping them delve into the insights of their experiences on every project I work on; and so do all of us who are doing PNI work.

The idea of temporarily and purposefully dissolving structure comes up again in PNI's technique of narrative catalysis, where we look at patterns in the questions people answered about their stories. One of the rules of catalysis is to generate and consider deliberately competing interpretations of each pattern we find. As a result, catalysis never generates answers or findings, but it always generates questions, food for thought, material for making sense of the map in relation to what lies beneath it.

Sensemaking is the place in PNI where the map and the land come into the strongest interaction. It is in sensemaking that the map is rolled out again, but (to extend the metaphor) with a group of engaged people standing under it, actively mediating between the map and the land it represents, negotiating, adjusting, rewriting. When PNI works well, the map emerges from sensemaking new-made, better, more capable of supporting life—until the next time it needs updating.

So you could say that PNI is a solution to the solution of life in a complex world. It's that little spot of yin in the yang that makes the yin survivable.

Is PNI unique in this? Of course not. Lots of methods and approaches do similar things for similar reasons. All the same, I find it fascinating to realize that the roots of PNI stretch further back than I thought they did, and further out than social science or psychology or, really, anything human. I knew nothing about sensemaking (in the way Weick and Dervin wrote about it) back then; but coming from the study of social behavior in a variety of species, I arrived at a similar place. That's just . . . cool.

## On optimality and incomplete information

Here's the second essay. This one was from a little later, when I was over having my mind blown by complexity theory and was starting to use it to hammer away at foraging theory (the particular part of ethology I found most interesting).

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When biologists speak of the use of information by animals, they usually consider the question of what an animal should optimally do given that its information is less than perfect. In my opinion, the study of "imperfect information," as it is called, has been marred by two problems.

First, information has always been assumed to be *about the environment*. But if one considers the totality of information that could possibly be used to make decisions, it also includes information about the internal state of the individual making a decision and information about how the environment affects the future internal state of the individual.

Second, studies of imperfect information have a hidden assumption of awareness that may or may not be realistic. They ask the question of what an animal should do *based on its knowledge that its knowledge is incomplete*. For example, Stephens and Krebs (1986) ask, "How should a long-term rate maximizer treat recognizable types when it knows that they are divided into indistinguishable subtypes?"

Do we have any proof that animals are at all aware that the information they hold is incomplete? Is not the knowledge of the inadequacy of one's knowledge a type of information in itself, a type of information that we cannot assume animals have access to? I would hold that animals always act *as if they had complete information*, since they cannot know that their information is incomplete. The question then becomes one of constrained optimization within the information base available.

More interestingly, the behavior of animals acting optimally with incomplete information is then removed from its promise of being optimal in the overall sense, in the sense that the animal always performs the correct behavior for the conditions at hand. This should more closely approximate real behavior than theories that assume knowledge of ignorance. In other words, *knowing that you know nothing is knowing something*, and this is something that we cannot assume animals know.

If you look at incomplete information in this way, it is a lot simpler. Optimization just becomes optimization under a blanket of uncertainty, and is no longer especially correct or adaptive. Maximally optimal organisms might still make wrong decisions based on incomplete information, because optimality and infallibility might not always be perfectly linked. This means that we should watch not what *should* evolve, but what *does* evolve given the amount of information available (including information about what information is available).

Which leads into my next point: that the value of increasing information is not necessarily monotonically increasing. And that there are types of information we don't consider, such as internal information (where I am coming from) and relational information (how it all fits together).

It is a point of constraints. Evolution optimizes behavior inside of the constraints of what an animal can possibly know. But natural selection doesn't know that animals don't know everything. Obviously any animals that are aware of their inadequacy will win out over others that always think they are right; caution should win. But *how does caution evolve*? If there is a population of animals eating two prey items which they cannot distinguish (say noxious models and good mimics), and one organism evolves that knows that it cannot know which are models and which are mimics, then by definition it knows that models and mimics exist, which is distinguishing between models and mimics. Right?

Or if a population exists which samples from a distribution of prey energy amounts, and one individual evolves that knows that its sample is not completely representative of the universe of prey types, then does it not know something about the universe of prey types (if only that it is or is not adequately represented by the sample) that it by definition cannot know?

In statistics, we take a sample of a universe of data and hold it to be representative. We know that it should be representative because we have some idea of the larger universe from which we selected it. The point is that we have *selected* the sample. I don't think animals select a sample. I think they only have *access* to a sample.

Animals live local lives. They cannot know that the prey types they encounter are only one percent of the prey in a particular forest, or 0.00009% of all the animals of that species. They can only see what is given to them. Therefore they are not aware that any more exists. To them, the sample is the universe, and they base their decisions on it. They may have some uncertainty, but they cannot quantify it as we do when we know that our sample is 9% of the universe. What way of telling the size of the universe do animals have? None. Perhaps they have a rough idea that 90 bugs is not a good sample, but does not the number of bugs change all the time?

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That second essay ends a little abruptly, doesn't it? I don't remember why. Anyway, that idea grew into my master's thesis, which would have grown into a Ph.D. dissertation if the department I was in at the time had been willing to consider simulation modeling a legitimate form of research. It was not, and I left science in a huff. (But I have written about the idea a few times over the years, and that makes me happy, so I'm good.)

In case my argument in that essay was not clear, I'll put it more simply: *Never assume anyone knows what they don't know*. That sounds obvious, but it's a hard habit to break.

Funny story: around the time I wrote that second essay, at a reception after a talk, I had the opportunity to ask John Krebs (of Stephens and Krebs foraging theory fame) a question about foraging theory. I have spent decades puzzling over the conversation, which went like this:

Me: What do you think about the idea that foraging theory anthropomorphizes animal knowledge and information use? I think there might be things we're not seeing because we don't think like other species do. I wonder what would happen

if we approached information from a different point of view, from *their* point of view, as if we thought the way they think.

Krebs: How long have you been in graduate school?

Me: Two years.

Krebs: You'll get over it.

I still can't make out what he meant by that. Did he mean that ethologists don't anthropomorphize animal knowledge and information use? Or that they do, but they can't do anything about it? Or that nobody cares? Or that I should shut up and do as I was told? I still don't know.

But I wasn't the only one thinking about the issue. In the years after that, I attended several lectures on research that suspended assumptions about the way animals thought, and as a result, discovered some surprising things. In the study I remember best, researchers took birds of a species that was famous for having no courtship ritual whatsoever, filmed them interacting, and slowed down the film, to find an elaborate courtship ritual playing out so quickly that the human brain cannot see it happening. I remember being so excited during that talk that I could barely sit still, because it confirmed what I had been thinking about the way we went about studying animals and making claims about their behavior.

Another study I remember proved the now-well-known fact that putting colored bands on birds' legs to study their social relations is a bad idea, because having a colored band on your leg changes your social standing. That seems obvious now, but it was quite a revelation at the time. Another study revealed that some male fish mate by pretending to be female fish. This pattern was hidden in plain sight for decades, because everyone who saw it assumed it must be a misunderstanding or a fluke. Then it was elephants communicating in wavelengths we can't hear, and plants sending messages in wavelengths we can't see, and the surprises just kept coming. I haven't exactly kept up with new developments in the field of ethology, but the little I have seen has given me hope that researchers are continuing to explore animal behavior in new and creative ways.

## How these ideas influenced PNI

What does this essay have to do with PNI? Lots. I can see influences on the development of PNI that came from each of the three points I made (about the limits of knowledge, the types of knowledge, and the value of information).

### *PNI and the limits of knowledge*

You've probably heard about a thing in psychology called the Dunning-Kruger effect, where people become over-confident in an area because they are unaware of their ignorance. Back when I wrote that second essay, I was trying to express my feeling that ethologists had developed two simultaneous manifestations of a relational Dunning-Kruger effect, thus:

1. The normal, self-reflective version, in which they overestimated their own knowledge about the knowledge of their study subjects.

2. A vicarious version, in which they attributed knowledge of the limits of knowledge to their study subjects, when their study subjects had no such knowledge about the limits of their own knowledge.

What I didn't realize until recently is that (a) people don't just do this with respect to animals; and (b) I've never stopped thinking about the problem.

Let's think about animals for a second. Animals almost certainly don't sit around worrying all day about how much they know and how much they don't know. They know what they know, and they assume that's all there is to know. As far as we can tell, we are the only organisms that think about how much we don't know. So any random human being is likely to know more about the limits of their knowledge than any random dog or cat. But that doesn't mean we all know a lot about what we know and don't know; it just means we all know *something* about it.

I would guess that there is a normal distribution of awareness about knowledge limits. Some small number of people are probably aware of their ignorance to the point that they can take it into account in their decision making. The majority of us are dimly aware of the boundaries of our understanding, to the extent that we can apply rules of thumb and margins of error when we feel vaguely under-confident. And another small number of people are probably almost as clueless about the limits of their knowledge as any random dog or cat.

Figuring out how much any given person knows about how much they know is not an easy task, even when you can talk to them. How *do* you ask someone how much they don't know about something? You can test them to find out how much they know, but if you want them to estimate how much they *don't* know, don't you have to *tell* them the scope of the topic before they can make an estimate? And then don't they know more than they did? And then do you have to describe what's beyond that so they can make a new estimate? It's like trying to count the number of weeds in a pond when the only way you have of counting the number of weeds causes more weeds to grow.

So I'm not sure the question is that much easier to answer with people than it is with animals. But that doesn't mean we don't need to keep trying to answer the question; in fact, we need to answer it even more urgently with respect to each other. As social animals, we spend a lot of mental energy trying to figure out what other people need and how they will respond to the things we do and say. Everybody needs to do that in daily life, but when we are in a position to help people, we need to do it even more. If we think people know more about their needs and their limitations than they actually do, we are apt to predict their needs and responses wrongly, and we might end up hurting people instead of helping them.

Sometimes I think people give up trying and simply *pretend* they know what other people know about the limits of their knowledge. And then when someone asks them *how* they know that, they say things like "You'll get over it." *Not* getting over it—by actively pursuing answers to that question—is one of the goals of participatory narrative inquiry. In a sense, PNI came out of decades of my not getting over my original desire to make sense of perspectives that are different from my own.

**A cautionary tale.** A tragic example of what happens when you make erroneous assumptions about other people's knowledge of their limitations can be found in the story of Ignaz Semmelweis, the nineteenth-century doctor who famously tried (and failed) to convince other doctors to wash their hands after dissecting corpses and before treating pregnant women. (Actually, doctors *were* washing their hands, but with ordinary soap, which did not kill enough streptococcal bacteria to prevent subsequent infection.)

According to Wikipedia,

Semmelweis described desperate women begging on their knees not to be admitted to the First Clinic [where physicians also examined cadavers; in the Second Clinic, midwives did not, and the death rate was much lower]. Some women even preferred to give birth in the streets, pretending to have given sudden birth *en route* to the hospital (a practice known as street births), which meant they would still qualify for the child care benefits without having been admitted to the clinic. (Wikipedia)

Semmelweis wrote a series of articles advancing the theory that "cadaverous particles" were the sole cause of patient infections. His theory was attacked on many grounds, some reasonable, some questionable, and some simply prejudiced (such as the belief that his theory arose solely from his Catholic faith). He did not react well to these criticisms, becoming more and more combative, drinking heavily, and calling doctors who refused to change their practices "murderers." At the age of 42, Semmelweis was tricked into entering an insane asylum, held there against his will, and severely beaten, dying weeks later from his injuries. Only with the discovery of germ theory two decades later was he proven right—not as to his explanation of his findings, but as to his belief that lives could be saved by the measures he tried to promote.

The widespread rejection among Semmelweis' contemporaries of what today seems like common-sense advice has often been used as an example of blind perseverance in the face of contradictory evidence. But I'm not as interested in how other doctors reacted to Semmelweis' advice as I am in *his* failure to understand and adapt to their needs and limitations.

Ignaz Semmelweis was a man who cared deeply about his patients. He was "severely troubled" by the high incidence of puerperal fever in the wards he administered, writing that it "made me so miserable that life seemed worthless." These strong feelings set him apart from many doctors of the time; and later, his unique experiences set him even further apart. The death of a close friend and colleague, Jakob Kolletschka, forcibly and painfully challenged Semmelweis' views on infections and autopsies. He recounts the incident thus:

I was immediately overwhelmed by the sad news that Professor Kolletschka, whom I greatly admired, had died. . . . Kolletschka, Professor of Forensic Medicine, often conducted autopsies for legal purposes in the company of students. During one such exercise, his finger was pricked by a student with the same knife that was being used in the autopsy. . . . [H]e died of bilateral pleurisy, pericarditis, peritonitis, and meningitis. . . . Day and night I was haunted by the image of Kolletschka's disease and was forced to recognize, ever more decisively, that the disease from which

Kolletschka died was identical to that from which so many maternity patients died.  
(Wikipedia)

Notice the words Semmelweis uses here. He was *forced to recognize* the connection, and *ever more decisively*, meaning that he must have revisited the tragedy over and over, as we do when someone close to us dies. Even his choice of the word *haunted* implies repetition, such that a place haunted by a ghost is described as being "frequented," that is, visited frequently. In this light, Semmelweis seems less a visionary than a man tormented by the *consequences* of his limited vision. If he had never experienced such a deep despair over his inability to make sense of the patterns he saw, he might have been as reluctant to examine the limits of his knowledge as the doctors he tried to convince.

It seems to me that Semmelweis' failure might have sprung in part from his inability to understand the impact of this experience on his awareness—and the impact of the *lack* of such an experience in the careers of his contemporaries. Consider the fact that one doctor Semmelweis did convince had a similar experience to his own:

Professor Gustav Adolf Michaelis from a maternity institution in Kiel replied positively to Semmelweis' suggestions—eventually he committed suicide, however, because he felt responsible for the death of his own cousin, whom he had examined after she gave birth. (Wikipedia)

Semmelweis seems to have assumed that other doctors were as haunted by their ignorance as he was; but it sounds like most of them were not. The theory of the four humours was in full force at that time, and most doctors probably felt no need to venture past its readily available explanations. They were satisfied with the state of their knowledge, *saw no gulf beyond it*, and were content to carry on as they had always done.

I wonder if Semmelweis would have gained more traction if, for example, he had refrained from posing any theory at all, and suggested changes to practice solely on the basis of the evidence he had collected. After all, he could have proposed his changes without attacking the predominant medical theories of the day. Neither he nor anyone else at the time could explain *why* the washing of hands with a chlorinated lime solution greatly reduced the incidence of infection in maternity wards; but the fact that it *did* reduce the incidence of infection was not in dispute.

As I said above, such an inability to imagine the experiences and mindsets of other people, based on erroneous assumptions about the nature and limitations of their knowledge, is something we directly seek to address and correct when we carry out PNI projects.

How do we do this? We ask people to tell us what happened to them, and we ask them questions about their knowledge and awareness during the events of the story. We ask questions like these:

- How predictable was the outcome of this story? Did you know what was going to happen next? Was that true the whole time, or just some of the time?
- What in this story surprised you? What in it *didn't* surprise you? What do you think would surprise other people (or not)?



- If this story had happened ten years ago, how do you think it would have come out then? What about fifty years ago? What about in another location?
- What could have changed the outcome of this story? What makes you say that?
- What did the people in this story need? Did they get it? Who or what helped them get it? Who or what hindered them?
- Does this sort of thing happen to you all the time, or is it rare? What about to other people you know? What about to people you don't know? Can you guess?
- If you could go back in time to the start of this story, what would you say or do to help it turn out differently? What would you avoid changing?

The answers to these questions help us understand not only what happened to people but also what they know and don't know about it. Sometimes the most illuminating answer is "I don't know." And we sometimes ask follow-up questions, like:

- For this question, why did you say "I don't know"?
- What does that mean to you, that you don't know?
- What would you like to know?
- How do you think you could find out? Could you?
- If you did know, how would things be different?
- Is there anyone who *does* know? If so:
  - How and why do they know?
  - If you could ask *them* the question, what would they say?
  - Are there things *you* know that *they* don't?

People facing situations like Ignaz Semmelweis faced can ask questions like these to understand (as much as anyone can) the perspectives, needs, and limitations of those they are trying to help.

## **PNI and the not-always-increasing value of increasing information**

Now let's get back to the second point in the second essay: the value of increasing information. When I wrote that essay, I was concerned about an assumption I found distributed throughout the scientific literature on foraging theory, which was that the value of increasing information increased monotonically. In all of the models and theoretical frameworks I read on information use, more information was assumed to be more optimal than less information. I didn't see why that should always be the case. In particular, I thought the assumption might be problematical in situations where individual choices are interlinked in a complex network of mutual influence.

So I wrote a computer simulation to find out whether "smarter" individuals with somewhat better information about density-dependent resources would always out-compete "dumber" individuals with less information. ("Density-dependent resources" are resources whose value to each individual depends on the number of other individuals drawing from it, like a bird feeder that holds the same amount of food whether five or fifty birds visit it.)

According to foraging theory, there was no point in writing such a simulation, because the outcome could be predicted in advance; but I wrote it anyway, because I was curious. Surprisingly, the "smarter" simulated allele did not fixate (exclude all others) in the population. Rather, the two alleles kept returning to a roughly 75/25 ratio, representing (for that simulated situation) a "mixed evolutionarily stable strategy," that is, one in which a *mixture* of strategies is more optimal than any one pure strategy.

It took me a while to figure out why this was happening. After I spent some time watching my simulated organisms make their decisions, I realized that what I was seeing made perfect sense. The smart individuals would find out exactly where the best food sources were and rush to them, only to find all the *other* smart individuals there dividing up the food. The stupid individuals would wander aimlessly from place to place. Most of the time they'd get nothing but the crumbs left over, but sometimes they'd find themselves feasting at a "bad" food site that was nevertheless better than the "good" sites the smart crowd was picking to pieces. After a while, I couldn't get the joke "nobody goes there anymore, it's too crowded" out of my mind.

The result I got was counter-intuitive to foraging theory because there was an inconvenient trough in the value of increasing information. The smart organisms knew that a food source was better, which was more than the stupid organisms knew; but they didn't know what all the *other organisms* were about to do. Thus their intermediate level of information was sometimes better and sometimes worse, such that the net value of the increase was not enough to eliminate the relative value of stupidity. The greatest fitness, at the population level, was in a mixture of strategies, *including some that had no obvious value on their own*. (I should mention that the idea of an optimal mixture of strategies goes all the way back to Cournot's 1838 concept of a duopoly; but still, the idea was not commonly applied to foraging theory at the time I was thinking about it.)

Now let's come back to PNI. Situations in which complex interactions influence the options, choices, and behaviors of everyone involved are also situations in which PNI works best—and I now realize that this is probably not an accident. PNI is at its most useful at times when it *seems* like you know enough to come up with a viable solution, but you have been stymied by missing information you can't guess at. In fact, most PNI projects start from a situation in which, even though "everyone knows" what the problem is, prior attempts at solutions have shown the current level of knowledge to be insufficient. You could even say that the whole reason PNI exists is to compensate for troughs in the value of intermediate levels of information in complex situations.

That's why surprise is such an important part of PNI. I've noticed that on every PNI project, somebody is surprised by something. An assumption is overturned, a trough turns into a peak, and new options open up as a result. I've always found this to be profoundly satisfying, and now I know why.

## **PNI and types of information**

The third thing that bothered me about foraging theory when I wrote that essay was how researchers used the word "information." Whenever people gave examples of information in the papers and books I read, it was nearly always about facts *external* to the organ-

ism: where food could be found, how much energy could be found in the food, weather conditions, and so on.

But that can't be the only information an organism needs, I thought. There must also be *internal* information, such as the organism's hunger or satiety, its health, its age, its reproductive state, and so on. An animal with excellent knowledge about its internal state should out-compete an animal with poor internal knowledge, right? But nobody seemed to be studying internal information, or even acknowledging that it existed.

And there must also be a third type of information, I thought: some idea of how all the other pieces of information fit together. I called this *relational* information. For example, if I am a tiny bird perched on a branch in mid-winter, I must know that I am in danger if I don't obtain enough food to replenish my fat stores to a certain extent. Such information may only be "known" at the level of an instinctual urge, but it should exist in some way, because it must stand behind the decisions animals make about how much energy to expend on foraging. Should I stay on the branch and conserve my heat, or should I swoop down in search of food? Without internal and relational information it's hard to make such a decision.

So I wondered why researchers never seemed to pay attention to either internal or relational information, even in theoretical considerations of animal behavior. My guess was that these types of information were so much harder to observe and control that people tended to ignore them. It's easy to vary the values and distributions of food sources and then watch what animals do in those situations, especially when you can see them evaluating the obvious differences between the food sources. Trying to figure out what animals know about their internal states and how the world works is a more daunting challenge. But that doesn't mean those types of information don't exist or don't matter.

Now let's think about how this applies to PNI, because, of course, it does. Just like the researchers whose papers I was reading back then, we all theorize about the mental and emotional states of the people whose needs, limitations, and probable responses are important to us. We do this individually every day, and we do it collectively when we embark on a project to solve problems or improve conditions in our communities and organizations. And like those researchers, we have an easier time thinking about external information than internal or relational information.

That's something I have noticed when I talk to people who are just starting out doing PNI work. If you visualize all the questions you could possibly ask about a story, arrayed in a set of concentric spheres around the story, people always seem to start out thinking about the outermost sphere. They ask questions about the basic facts of the story, like:

- Where and when did this take place?
- Who was involved?
- What was the topic or theme of the story?
- What problem was solved? Who solved it? What was the solution?

After they've gotten more practice thinking about projects, people start moving inward, inside the bubble of their participants' experiences, to where internal information is important. They start asking questions only a story's teller can answer, like:

- How did you feel when this happened?
- What surprised you about it? What did you learn from it?
- What do you wish had happened?
- What helped you in the story? What held you back?

Finally, experienced PNI practitioners move into the center, where relational information (that is, beliefs and values) can be found. They start asking questions about what the storyteller thinks the story means about the way the world works, like:

- Why do you think this happened?
- Does this happen often? Should it?
- What would have changed the outcome of the story? Would that be better or worse?
- Who needs to hear this story? What would they say if they heard it? What would happen to you if they heard it?

Another thing I've noticed is that the closer PNI moves to the center of these concentric spheres, the more it deviates from other modes of inquiry. When a PNI project asks questions anyone could answer about a story, it's hard to distinguish from any other kind of survey-based research (and it's hard to make a case for its use). In such a situation, the story is just another data point, and it's not all that critical of a data point either. You could ask people questions at the outermost level with or without a story, and the answers would not be that different. For example, you could ask people to give you a list of all the problems they solved in the past year, and you wouldn't get much of a different picture than if you asked them to tell you a story about a problem they solved.

When a PNI project asks questions closer to the center of experience, however, the story becomes much more than a data point. It becomes a vehicle by which participants can make sense of their own experiences, drawing forth internal and relational information they didn't realize they had (or cared about). As a result, when PNI works well, by the end of the project, everyone learns something about themselves and each other.

So in a way, you could say that my work on PNI has been a continuation of my earlier attempts to get people to "move inward," closer to the center of the experiences and perspectives of those they seek to understand.

## **On experiment and reality**

I have one more old essay to show you. It's an appendix to a paper I wrote for a graduate class, apparently in the sociology department, about an experiment on social interactions among fish. At first I didn't remember the project described in the paper, but as I read I began to remember bits of it. What I remember most is that I did the project in the "fish room" of the biology building basement. The light switch in that room was wired badly,

and two or three times I got an electrical shock when I flipped the switch with wet hands. That's a thing you remember.

Most of the experiments I did in my early days as a wannabe-ethologist had to do with social interactions: dominance hierarchies, how kin find each other, tit-for-tat balances, methods of communication, social signaling, intention movements, and so on. I was intensely curious about the evolution of social interactions, because ... well, I still can't understand how anybody could *not* be intensely curious about that.

The experiment went this way. I netted 150 pumpkinseed sunfish from a pond and put them in a tank. (Or somebody netted them. It says "for use in another experiment.") From those 150 fish I picked out ten groups of three fish of roughly equal size (because any big-fish-little-fish contest is a foregone conclusion).

For each of the ten groups of three fish, I followed this procedure:

- Isolation: I put all three fish in tanks by themselves for five days.
- Establishment of dominance: I put two of the three fish together and watched them until I could see which one was dominant. (They peck at each other, like chickens.)
- Re-isolation: I isolated the loser of the dominance contest for another day. (The winner got to go back into the big tank.)
- Test: I put the loser from the previous encounter together with the third (still isolated) fish and watched what happened.

What was *supposed* to happen, according to prior research, was that the losers in the first contests would remember their low status and lose in the second contest as well. What *did* happen was that eight of the ten losers won the second time around. As I explained in the paper, this could have meant a wide variety of things, but it could not really be said to mean anything, because the sample size was so tiny. I knew that going in, and so did my professor. It was just a practice project to write a practice paper.

None of that is interesting. What *is* interesting (to me, now) is that I wrote an appendix to the paper, and that appendix, even though it's mostly a jokey thing I wrote to myself, connects to PNI. I can't guess if I actually submitted the appendix with the paper or just kept a copy for my own amusement. In any case, here's what I wrote.

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*Appendix: The Poorly Understood and Sorely Neglected Behavior of Pumpkinseed Sunfish in Laboratory Tests.*

As I reviewed the literature for this experiment, and again as I watched the fish setting up dominance relationships, it occurred to me that although many descriptions had been published of the social behavior of the pumpkinseed sunfish and other species, never had anyone attempted to describe the peculiar suite of behaviors that is shown when fish are placed in a testing tank and observed. I will now endeavor to present an extended ethogram of the experimental behavior of that species, with due attention to the fish-human interaction.

In the course of my work, I soon realized that I could divide the entire behavior of the fish in the test situation into a series of discrete stages that occur repeatedly and in a predictable sequence.

1.) Disbelief (D). When a fish is first placed in a strange tank, or the partition dividing a tank is removed, or some other equally amazing thing happens, the fish's first thought is—"I am dead." This has some basis in nature; when a fish is suddenly caught up and thrown into a new body of water, it is most probably in (a) another fish or (b) a net. Thus the fish upon entering the test arena spends some time in what others may call shock but which I prefer to call disbelief (mostly because it is a longer word, and it simply doesn't do to have scientists running around using small words). Now the state of this poor fish would be almost comical, if one were completely callous and cold-hearted (which I am not!); it lolls about on the bottom or in a corner, sometimes rocking gently, for a period of anywhere from ten seconds to half an hour.

2) Escape (E). At some point (as I have said, this is highly variable and begs further study) the fish suddenly realizes that it is alive. Its very next thought is—"If I'm alive, then ... I'm trapped! I've got to get out of here!" It then proceeds to push its way out of what it assumes to be water but what most annoyingly turns out to be an invisible force field, or what we humans know better as glass. The fish, as any good Vulcan would do, assumes that there has to be a weak spot in the force field, "Somewhere where the ion magnifier exceeds its photon limit. It is only logical." With its mouth open and its gills flaring, it presses here and there and here and there and there and over in that place and down here and up there—you get the idea.

I can see another parallel for this behavior in nature. Surfaces in nature, be they pond bottoms or stream edges, are mostly made of stones; and stones often have fish-sized holes between them. So a fish trapped in, say, a small pool off a running stream, needs only to poke and prod until it finds a way out. The intensity of this behavior often gets quite high and varies substantially among individuals, due undoubtedly to some differences in susceptibility to claustrophobia.

3). Recognition (R). You may have noticed that so far I have not mentioned interactions between the two fish. Far from being unprofessional and unobservant, I reserved the recognition of another fish to its own stage. At some point one of the fish looks around and gasps—"Good God! There is another fish in here!" And it is from this realization that we get the data point "Attacked first," for that fish usually wants to get a good nip in before its fellow occupant itself reaches the R stage.

You may ask why the fish did not notice its companion before, especially when they both decided to poke at the same spot. Yes, this is another parallel in nature. Fish in the wild get bumped up quite a bit: things are always floating by, children will be throwing rocks, crayfish are scuttling around, outboard motors are making a ruckus. So even the most violent escape attempts by another fish are treated as the usual disturbance—get as far away from it as possible, but for heaven's sake don't stand there gawking at it! Thus it is only in a moment of lucid tranquility that the recognition stage arrives on the fish. To the

nipped fish, the R stage is entered abruptly and assuredly, as nothing else feels quite like a pumpkinseed sunfish bite.

From this stage on begin the "normal" interactions we record on our data sheets and analyze, ignoring as good scientists the unseen (but standard! at any rate) behaviors described here.

Perturbations of the normal scheme of things are of two types: relapse and awareness. A relapse is caused by a large disturbance, such as the observer tripping over the blind or camera, dropping something loudly, or banging the testing tank with any number of things. (Not that any of these things has ever actually happened to me; I merely heard of them through other experimenters.) A relapse usually drives both occupants of the tank back to the disbelief stage, from which it is a long wait to realization of life, frantic escape, and back to aggression.

Awareness, the second type of perturbation, is often more devastating for the observer because of its psychological implications. This perturbation occurs when the observer is foolish enough to bump the blind or sit in such a way that a bit of his or her clothing shows (the observer who wears brightly colored clothing clearly knows nothing about fish), or cough (this has produced innumerable disasters to science). At this point the fish becomes aware of the fact that "Something ... is out there ... watching me." (Or us, if the R stage has been reached.) The fish assumes a position quite like that taken in the disbelief stage, with the exception that the fish faces the observer, glaring intensely this one thought: "I see you, you disgusting finless giant; I know what you're doing; and whatever it is you are waiting for me to do I will try my hardest to avoid." At this time the observer quite predictably mutters (inaudibly, of course, so as to prevent a relapse) several epithets that would not evoke full cooperation if heard and understood.

This concludes the extended ethogram of the true behavior of the pumpkinseed sunfish, adding precious insight to our scientific understanding of this interesting species.

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That essay is a silly little thing, but I had something serious in mind when I wrote it, and I haven't stopped thinking about it in the decades since. The more you read about the science of behavior in any species (including our own), the more obvious it becomes that a lot of the findings we rely on were derived in artificial contexts, just like my ridiculous project watching fish interact in empty tanks and pretending it meant anything at all about what their lives would be like in a natural setting. (It was a practice project, but the experiments it referenced and sought to replicate followed similar procedures and drew similar conclusions.)

The most obvious example of such blindness in human research is the much discussed fact that almost all psychological and sociological research—research that tells us how "humans" think and feel—is done on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) university students.

The WEIRD acronym comes from the instantly-famous 2010 paper (by Joseph Henrich and others) called "The weirdest people in the world?" Other researchers brought up the issue

before that paper (for example, the "carpentered world hypothesis" was first put forth in 1973), but the WEIRD name has given the discussion new energy.

As a 2010 New York Times article put it:

[A] randomly selected American undergraduate [is] 4,000 times likelier to be a subject [of psychological research] than a random non-Westerner. ... Western psychologists routinely generalize about "human" traits from data on this slender subpopulation, and psychologists elsewhere cite these papers as evidence. ... [R]elying on WEIRD subjects can make others feel alienated, with their ways of thinking framed as deviant, not different.

I'm not going to cite any of the studies that demonstrate the flaws of WEIRD research here—they're easy to find—but I would like to mention a few things I noticed in recent discussions that connect to PNI.

In a 2023 blog post, the mental health professional John Grohol lists the reasons psychologists are still not widening their research populations. Using university students is convenient; it's cheap; it's the way things have always been done; and it's good enough for the time being. *You'll get over it*, basically.

Grohol then says this (*italics his*):

There's little to be done about this state of affairs, unfortunately. Journals will continue to accept such studies (indeed, there are entire journals devoted to these kinds of studies). Authors of such studies will continue to fail to note this limitation when writing about their findings (few authors mention it, except in passing). We've simply become accustomed to a lower quality of research than we'd otherwise demand from a profession.

Perhaps it's because the findings of such research rarely result in anything much useful—what I call "actionable" behavior. These studies seem to offer snippets of insights into disjointed pieces of American behavior. Then someone publishes a book about them, pulling them all together, and suggesting there's an overarching theme that can be followed. (If you dig into the research such books are based upon, they are nearly always lacking.)

Don't get me wrong—it can be very entertaining and often interesting to read such books and studies. But the contribution to our *real understanding* of human behavior is increasingly being called into question.

I have learned over the years that if I try to defend PNI as being "scientifically valid" I will fail. PNI just doesn't hold up as a scientific endeavor. Its participants are given too much control over the process for PNI to prove anything conclusively. There's no control group. The sample is self-selected and non-representative. Interpretation is biased and variable. There are no inter-interpretation validation checks. Conclusions are idiosyncratic and local. Results cannot be replicated, not even later on the same day. What it all means depends on whom you ask, and when, and how.



This is what I mean when I say that *PNI is not a science; it's a conversation*. When you invite people to tell whatever stories they want to, interpret their stories however they like, talk about their stories in groups, and draw their own conclusions, "proof" isn't a very useful word. "Useful" is a useful word. Above all else, PNI aims to be useful.

In a way, PNI is the ultimate anti-WEIRD research paradigm, because it aims for a *real understanding* of human behavior—that is, an understanding that is contextually situated, internally relevant, externally meaningless (and happy to be so), and purposefully, aspirationally, hope-fully *actionable*.

Here's one more quote about WEIRD research, from a 2013 Slate article by Bethany Brookshire, that relates to PNI:

So the next time you see a study telling you that semen is an effective antidepressant, or that men are funnier than women, or whether penis size really matters, take a closer look. Is that study WEIRDly made up of college psychology students? And would that population maybe have something about it that makes their reactions drastically different from yours? If so, give the study the squinty eye of context. As we often add "... in bed" to our reading of the fortunes in fortune cookies, it's well worth adding "... in a population of Westernized, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic college students" to many of these studies. It can help explain many of the strange conclusions.

The purpose of PNI is, *precisely*, to apply the "squinty eye of context" to statements about what is normal, or real, or human, so that they can grow into insights we can use in our lives and communities.

## The types and categories of research

As I said above, I take this connection across the decades to mean that PNI was in a sense fated to happen when complexity theory worked its way into the study of social behavior. As a nice side effect, it also means that my professional career has been a lot less rambling and accidental than I thought it was. At least I've rambled over some of the same spots, and that's a comfort.

I can't help but wonder, though, why it took me so long to realize that I was still working on the same issues. Why did I not see that my work on PNI was a continuation of "not getting over" my early concerns about hasty generalizations and unexamined assumptions in the study of animal behavior? I don't know. Maybe it was because I left science in a huff. Maybe the idea of "leaving science" was the problem in the first place. Maybe science, or research, shouldn't be so easy to leave.

People always ask me how I got started doing story work, probably because I don't sound like any sociologists or anthropologists (or storytellers) they know. I used to say "it was an accident" and describe how I applied for a job at IBM Research because my husband was already working there and we could commute together, and I ended up getting hooked on "this story stuff" as a result. That's all true, but lately I've noticed myself saying, "I started out as an animal behaviorist, but after a while I switched species." That always gets a laugh,

but probably the deeper reason I say it is that I'd like to have a more coherent story to tell myself. But it's not a fictional story; it's a real connection. So why didn't I see it?

Maybe it's not just me. Maybe it's the way we all think about research. Maybe it's too organized. Maybe it has too many types and categories. Maybe sometimes—temporarily, thoughtfully, and purposefully—we need to place everything on the same level and let new connections appear.

We need more diversity in our research populations (both researcher and researched), and maybe we need new connections among some other things too: sociology, psychology, anthropology, and ethology; proof, utility, and action; participation, observation, and experimentation; contextual and universal conclusions; academia, business, government, and even some out-there independent scholars like me, who bounce around from one field to another, thinking they've crossed vast distances when they've really just been pacing the same small circles for decades.

Why don't we all walk around together finding out useful things? That sounds good. Let's do that.

## Why I Wrote These Books

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I have been a researcher and consultant in the field of organizational and community narrative since 1999. Over the years of this work, as story projects came and went, I kept thinking about the fact that the wonderful ideas and techniques I was developing were bottled up and available only to giant corporations, government agencies, and academic institutions with money and knowledge and power. While being grateful that those powerful bodies were willing to pay me to do this work, I could see that the people most in need of story techniques were Margaret Mead's small groups of thoughtful, committed citizens trying to change the world.

I began to imagine what would happen if every community around the world was uncovering such insights by sharing and working with their stories. I thought of people trying to negotiate better working conditions on migrant farms, or coping with refugee status, or recovering from floods, or working to bring back a struggling city block or rural village, or trying to get compensation for incidents like the Bhopal disaster, or trying to "green up" their community. If *they* could benefit from some of these understandings about stories, if *they* could use this power to discover insights and create positive change, it could change the world one small community at a time.

The urgency of this task increased when I encountered a wonderful book called *Where There Is No Doctor* by David Werner, Carol Thuman, and Jane Maxwell. I think I picked it up in a bookstore sometime around 2003. The following statement in the introduction of the book created a deep connection with the discomfort I had been feeling about my work with stories.

*Where There Is No Doctor* was written for anyone who wants to do something about his or her own and other people's health. However, it has been widely used as a training and work manual for community health workers. For this reason, an introductory section has been added for the health worker, making clear that the health worker's first job is to share her knowledge and help educate people.

Today in over-developed as well as under-developed countries, existing health care systems are in a state of crisis. Often, human needs are not being well met. There is too little fairness. Too much is in the hands of too few.

Let us hope that through a more generous sharing of knowledge, and through learning to use what is best in both traditional and modern ways of healing, people everywhere will develop a kinder, more sensible approach to caring—for their own health, and for each other.

The Wikipedia page on *Where There Is No Doctor* quotes a review by Haroon Saloojee in the British Medical Journal that says:

Chances are that if you visited a remote district hospital in a developing country you would find a well thumbed copy of *Where There Is No Doctor* in its library. The book is intended primarily for village health workers, but generations of doctors and medical missionaries who have worked in under-resourced communities globally will vouch for its value in providing concise reliable information.

*Where There Is No Doctor* spoke to me. It said: You are like a health worker in your work with stories, and like them your first job should be to share your knowledge and help educate people. It said: In the world of stories as in the world of medicine, too much knowledge is in the hands of too few. It said: Through a more generous sharing of knowledge, and through learning to use what is best in both traditional and modern ways of story work, people everywhere will develop a kinder, more sensible approach to caring for their stories—for their own narrative health, and for each other.

Why did I believe too much was in the hands of too few? Because I had seen it for myself. I noticed the displacement of ordinary people from ordinary stories in my very first story projects. Time after time I have watched people balk at being asked to tell stories—because they think “story” means “Hollywood” or “front page.” They think any story they could tell would not be “good enough.” They also balk when they are asked to work with stories—to build something out of them, for example—because they do not believe they are *qualified* to do so. Indeed, people sometimes respond with something akin to fear when I’ve asked them to tell or work with stories. It is as though I have asked them to cut out a tumor or build a skyscraper.

I can still remember the moment I first discovered this perception of not being qualified to tell stories. I was transcribing an audiotape from one of my very first group story sessions. One participant in the session told story after story, each of them fascinating and useful, and then—literally in the next breath—said, “But I can’t think of any stories to tell.” It’s a good thing I was listening to a tape and not in the room with the person, because my jaw dropped to the floor.

Since then I have often pondered, at great length: *What made that person say that?* And I can’t help wondering as well: Would someone have said it a thousand years ago? A hundred?

It is not so much that people have lost the *ability* to tell stories as much as they have lost the expectation that it is their *place* to tell stories. Their place, apparently, is in the audience.

But when people are qualified only to *consume* stories, they give up the power that can arise from familiarity with using stories to make sense of their lives. And by extension, *groups* of people who have given up the power to work with stories lose the ability to use their combined stories to make sense together of the goals and trials of their organization or community.

I am of course not the only person who has noticed this trend. Robert Fulford put it well in his book *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture*:

This has been the century of mass storytelling. We live under a Niagara of stories: print, television, movies, radio and the Internet deliver to us far more stories than our ancestors could have imagined, and the number of stories available to us seems to grow larger every year. This phenomenon, the rise of industrialized narrative—storytelling that’s engineered for mass reproduction and distribution—has emerged as the most striking cultural fact of the twentieth century and the most far-reaching development in the history of narrative.

Jack Maguire, in *The Power of Personal Storytelling*, put it this way:

Once upon a time, when people made more of their own things, they created more stories about their life experiences. They told these tales to each other regularly, gracefully, and productively. They did it to give each other insights, to entertain each other, and to engage each other in times of celebration, trial, mourning, or reverence. But primarily they did it to connect with each other. Sharing real-life stories was an essential element in forging friendships, alliances, families, and communities. It brought individuals a greater intimacy with each other and, simultaneously, a stronger sense of self.

Since that time, for all the wonderful progress made in communication technology, the world has grown alarmingly less personal. People have given over much of their individual power to the collective, and have let themselves be increasingly distracted from personal storytelling by flashier but ultimately less gratifying activities that compete for their attention. As a result, we citizens of today’s world have lost some of our core vitality—our feeling of having direct contact with the lives we lead, of relating meaningfully with others, and of being individuals in our own right, with our own clear identities.

Thus I, and others, found the narrative situation today to be a perfect analogue of the situation *Where There Is No Doctor* was written to address.

With this realization I began to have an idea. What if next to every copy of *Where There Is No Doctor* there could sit *another book*, one that helps people take care of their own stories the way they take care of their own health? What if I could write such a book?

Ambitious, yes, and probably arrogant, but sincerely meant. That idea led me to write *Working with Stories*. (And to expanding it into a four-book series—did I mention ambition?) My hope is that these books will get at least some people started along the road to taking control of the narrative health of their own organizations and communities.



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## Acknowledgements and Biography

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This chapter was part of the third edition of *Working with Stories*. It was too long, so I took it out of the fourth edition. But I would miss it if it disappeared entirely, so I decided to keep it here. I've updated it to include some more recent events.

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Ideas are like giant but kind whales that let us swim along with them, if we behave ourselves. These books, taken together, are a portrait of an idea I have come to know and love, Participatory Narrative Inquiry. I have had the good luck to swim alongside “my” idea—I call it “my” idea not as a possession but as a relationship—in the company of many other people. I would like to thank them here.

Since what I've done is mixed in with how other people have helped me and my work grow, I might as well blend biography and acknowledgement together. That is the most honest way to tell the story.

### **Where I started: animal behavior**

I grew up loving animals and visual form, so I started my education determined to become an artist, a biologist, or both. I took biology in college with an art minor, but dropped out of art in the mistaken idea that I had no natural talent for it. (That was my mind at twenty; I know now that a taste for hard work is the only natural talent worth having.)

After college I spent five years in an ecology and evolution Ph.D. program studying ethology, or more specifically the evolution of social behavior in animals. My driving passion was to become a field biologist and spend my life wrapped up in nature.

After trying several ideas, I settled on a research project studying harbor seals, to investigate their poorly understood social dynamics and to help reduce the impact of fishing on seal populations. In the cold of winter I walked to my research site, a little wooden blind perched on a hill above a beach where a group of seals hauled out.

I planned to do this for years, but one day I slipped on a patch of ice and fell while carrying some heavy equipment, hurting my back badly enough to remove the possibility of strenu-

ous physical work for years to come. It sounds strange to say it now, but at the time I felt like the ocean brushed me off like a gnat.

## A long recovery and a new passion

Over the next year I spent a lot of time lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, and sampling the modern pharmacopeia of painkillers in various states of confusion. It was during this time, quite by accident, that I discovered chaos and complexity theory. I had bought a copy of James Gleick's *Chaos*, mistakenly thinking it was about philosophy and/or religion, which I was exploring with some energy at the time. I remember staying up all night two nights in a row reading *Chaos*, to which the drugs in my system added a wonderfully fractal quality. It was 1988 and as far as I knew, nobody had yet applied these ideas to the study of animal behavior. New research ideas jumped out of every chapter.

In the few hours I could work each day, I restarted my work using simulation. I wrote what I hoped would be the first simulation of many, was surprised by it, surprised my advisor by it, and attended a conference in Paris to present my ideas. I hoped for a new beginning. But the academic department I was in was not the right place at the right time to marry complexity with ethology, at least not on a computer. They rejected my plan, considering only field work or laboratory experimentation worthy of a degree. Field work was out of the question; for years I couldn't even pick up a glass of water with one hand. And I hated lab experimentation. I had already killed too many small animals in my first projects, before the seals, to ever want to do that again. So I quit school and took the consolation prize of a M.A. degree.

I remember the day I made the decision to leave science. I was sitting in Notre Dame cathedral in Paris watching a mass, having hobbled there like some old woman from my hotel. I wrote in my journal, "Aujourd'hui je suis un écrivain." Which is probably awful French, but it was *meant* to mean: Today I am a writer.

I now think this was a horrible mistake. I should have done anything they asked to get that little slip of paper, because its absence has haunted me ever since. But it was *my* mistake, and I guard it fiercely.

## New plan: software development

We now find our heroine jettisoned from science yet unable to pick up a bag of groceries. Luckily I had caught the programming bug way back in high school (on punched cards no less) so I had a sideline going. I took a job working for a professor in my former department and helped him build software for environmental decision support.

Then I met my husband and married him. That part's none of your business. Anyway, he had this crazy idea to build and sell environmental simulation software that would help regular people learn more about nature. I said, why not? I'm footloose and fancy free, and it's a fitting revenge to tear down the walls of academic science. Let's help the world learn.

So we spent the next several years doing that. As it happened, Paul was a far better programmer than I was, so I apprenticed with him and earned my stars as a software designer. In 1998 we released three software packages: a garden simulator, a plant growth



simulator, and an interactive story creator. (That last was his idea and creation; I only wrote him some stories to start it off. My discovery of the world of story work was yet to come.)

Our work on environmental education software was a great success in terms of helping people; I think at least a million copies of our garden simulator made it onto computers worldwide. We were proud of our contribution to international science literacy. We also discovered that we make an excellent work team. We have since collaborated on several software projects, done for love or money or both, and have never been disappointed in our ability to do more together than we can alone.

But financially, the project was a disaster. When we started the work, educational software was selling for about \$60; at the end it was \$20 if you could get that. We set our software free to roam the internet and turned to the world of big business to work off our debts.

## **New plan: writing**

At first I worked on Wall Street doing technical writing. The work was challenging, but the commute was endless, so I looked around for something better. My husband had found work as a contractor at IBM Research, and he showed me an advertisement for a technical writing job in a group doing something called organizational storytelling. I had never heard of such a thing. But we could share the easy commute, so I applied for the job.

The group was called the Knowledge Socialization group, and my boss was John C. Thomas. John is fairly well known in the world of user experience (UX) research. John had gotten excited about stories, and he had gotten some internal IBM sponsors excited about stories, so he was able to put together some funding to build a research group. I was its second member. On paper I was a type of temporary worker called a “technical supplemental.” I had this image of a giant IBM reaching down and swallowing me like a vitamin pill.

## **A welcome surprise**

I thank John to this day for his exceptional ability to realize that I was not really a technical writer; I was a researcher in disguise. I did do some writing for John, but he let me expand the definition of “writing” far beyond what my official position said I should do. So I spent my first year at IBM describing wide circles through the realms of possibility where stories, organizations, communities, and computers (it was IBM after all) meet.

I remember the moment when I realized that organizational narrative meshed with ethology. It was like coming home to find an old friend unchanged and waiting to meet me. I plunged into the subject with the energy of a convert.

It was during this year that I first had the idea to ask questions about stories and discovered the dimensions of story form, function, and phenomenon. John added a few other people to the group, including Annita Alting and Andrew Gordon, and we participated in a hearty exchange of ideas.

About six months into 1999, I went to the second IBM-wide “story meeting” of everyone in IBM interested in story work. This meeting brought together people who designed software, marketed products, thought about the future, supported services, everything. There I met Dave Snowden, Sharon Darwent, and Rob Peagler. Dave and Sharon worked in

Global Services, IBM's huge consulting arm, and they and we were the two groups working most strongly on stories. We exchanged some ideas, but our work was for the most part separate. As I recall it, I didn't exactly agree with everything they were doing, and I suspect they thought our group's work was boring in a computer nerd sort of way. Rob was in a marketing group, and he and I bounced ideas off each other starting then (and still do).

I remember helpful discussions at that time with Tom Erickson, Irene Greif, Daniel Gruen, Wendy Kellogg, Debbie Lawrence, Peter Malkin, Michael Muller, Peter Orton, Matthew Simpson, Carl Tait, Ted Taptiklis, and Jaya Vaidyanthan. I'm sure there are others I've forgotten from that time and for that I beg their forgiveness.

IBM had a rule about tiny vitamins: they could only stay in the body of the beast for one year. However, over the course of my year there I had made some friends. One of these was Neal Keller, who worked in ... I don't remember the official name, but his group helped everybody at IBM Research who was *doing* research do it better. They helped people use the software they got on their laptops, fixed problems, held training courses, and made the research facility more efficient as a whole (a daunting task and well done).

Neal found out about our work on stories and wanted to use it in his work, so we started talking. Our group had a general mandate to help *anybody* in IBM who wanted to think about how to use stories in their work, and I remember quite a few meetings with people in software, training, internet, and lots of other divisions, dispensing my newly acquired knowledge.

### **The turning point that led to PNI**

Near the end of my first year, Neal discovered an internal call for proposals to IBM's E-Business Technology Institute. (This no longer exists, but it was going strong at that time.) Together we put in a proposal for a one-year project to fund work on using stories for e-learning. We succeeded in getting the funding and in getting special permission for me to remain on as a temporary employee for another year. I got right back to work.

It was in my second year at IBM Research, working with Neal, that I really began to learn about people and stories. The most significant moment in my entire career, in fact, took place partway through that year's project. It was when I discovered *that raw stories of personal experience* were more useful than any fictional story could be. (I describe that moment in the "Incorporating narrative into e-learning" project story in *The Working with Stories Sourcebook*.) I also spent many hours watching people tell stories in workshop and interview settings, and many more hours carefully listening to and transcribing tapes of conversations.

It was also during this time that I first "sat with" several collections of stories and learned how answers to questions about them could form patterns that revealed insights impossible to see from simply reading the stories or thinking about the topic. My many discussions with Neal and John had a positive impact on all of this work. What Neal brought was an amazing ability to cut through the intellectual crap and make things happen with people. He knew people better than I did, and you can thank him for some of the insights that ended up in these books.

## More IBM work

As my second year at IBM ended, Dave Snowden convinced the IBM's Institute for Knowledge Management (IKM) to hire me as an independent contractor. I started work for the IKM in 2001. This new start had a slightly different mandate than the previous one. Because the IKM (and all the corporate world) was in the midst of discovering complexity theory, I was asked specifically to consider how organizational narrative could work with ideas from complexity. Another old friend met, unchanged and ready for a new embrace.

It turned out, again to my surprise and excitement, that narrative and complexity had met before and were old friends from tens of thousands of years back. You see, stories form complex, emergent patterns; and all complex patterns have (or are) stories.

Thus I began a close collaboration with Dave Snowden and Sharon Darwent that lasted several years, off and on. There were several other people in "the group" that was first at the IKM, then IBM's Cynefin Centre, then Cognitive Edge. Some were more and some less involved, but I can't recall the details now. Let me see, I can think of Rich Azzarello, Steve Bealing, Shawn Callahan, Steve Barth, Rob Peagler, Friso Gosliga, Fiona Incledon, Tony Mobbs, Peter Stanbridge, and Warwick Holder. But I am sure there other people whose names I have forgotten, and for this I apologize.

My collaboration with Sharon was always and unequivocally excellent. We enjoyed a perfect synergism of ideas, and many of the practical insights described in these books came in part from her capable mind. My collaboration with Dave was a paradox: the best and worst of times. Some of our work together was the finest I've ever done (with anyone other than my husband; he gets first place of course), and some of the disappointments were my worst as well.

In any case, my work with Sharon and Dave had a huge impact on the development of PNI. Some of the ideas came from only myself, Dave, or Sharon, and were later refined and improved by the other two (and by others named or unnamed). Some ideas were joint affairs from the start and cannot be easily teased apart. Some came from my work before we joined up, and some came from theirs before we joined up, but all of the ideas changed and improved as we worked together. If you have learned anything useful from these books, Sharon and Dave deserve your thanks.

## The Genoa years

Besides supporting quite a few consulting projects in various parts of IBM, Sharon and Dave and I put a lot of work into the Genoa program, which was supported by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Administration (DARPA) of the U.S. government. I remember attending a "dog and pony show" that preceded this program (meaning, we line up and show you what we can do) at the end of 2000. I was just coming out of IBM Research and looking for work. A copy of my never-published form-function-phenomenon paper had made its way into the hands of Admiral John Poindexter and (I was told) was among the influences that got him interested in the idea of using stories to make sense of threats and opportunities in national defense and other future-looking spheres of government.

After the meeting, the Admiral asked me to join the project and asked whether I wanted to work independently or through IBM. I chose IBM for safety, though I later regretted the loss of freedom (isn't that always the choice). Dave also impressed and was asked to work with me (or me with him, if he would prefer it that way).

We did quite a lot of work over the next few years for the Genoa program, whose primary goal was to augment human capacities to make sense of complex situations (and which contained many other projects along those lines). Many of the experiences that formed the narrative sensemaking methods described in these books were based on experimentation in the workshops we held as part of the Genoa program. In those workshops we worked with some top-notch thinkers—analysts, historians, policy makers, engineers, cognitive scientists. They helped us immeasurably in developing and testing methods to help people work with stories to discover new insights about difficult problems.

I would like to thank all of the workshop participants and collaborators in that work. Among them were Tom Boyce and John Lowrance at the Stanford Research Institute, Mark Lazaroff and Steven Sickels, then at General Dynamics, and Dennis Gormley, then an intellectual at large. All of these people (and some whose names I have forgotten) were important to the work and helped inform and improve the ideas developed as a result.

The other major outcome of the Genoa project (with respect to PNI) was a research project I carried out to discover and prototype ideas for visualizing large quantities of stories and answers to questions about them. I had built the first “narrative database” of stories in 2001 for an IBM consulting client, marrying my questions about stories with Dave's and Sharon's archetypes (which I now call story elements). I slowly improved the software for use in various projects, but when we left IBM for good it was time to start over.

As part of Genoa's mission to augment human sensemaking with computer tools, I was asked to consider and compare all plausible ways to look at stories (and answers to questions about them) that might help people discover useful insights. I built what I then called the “Mass Narrative Representation” prototypes. I think there were five or six of them, each based on applying published research in visualization to the problem of looking at stories and answers to questions.

I later combined my MNR prototypes into an application called SenseMaker Explorer. Some of what I learned about asking questions and finding patterns in answers came from my work on Explorer and my use of it in client projects. For several years I continued to update and improve Explorer, and my husband built and maintained Sensemaker Collector.

## **The Singapore years**

Another important source of ideas was Singapore's RAHS (Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning) program. As the Genoa program wound down, Dave was frequently asked by the government of Singapore to visit there, and eventually he convinced the powers-that-be there of the utility of narrative work. Unlike the DARPA work, I had nothing to do with getting that project started, other than spending two weeks in Singapore sick with bronchitis, which I doubt helped much.

The RAHS project had similar goals to Genoa and, like Genoa, it lasted for three years. I conducted about ten research projects as contributions to RAHS. Some resulted in software, and some resulted in papers I later published (or self-published).

All of the work I did on RAHS had an impact on the ideas described in these books. I had more opportunities to work with people telling and working with stories in workshops; I sat with more story collections; I read related research literature; I built prototype software; and we conducted more explorations and experiments on group sensemaking methods. Some of the RAHS work benefited from collaborations with Alicia Juarrerro (specifically the work on narrative landscapes), Steve Bealing, and Warwick Holder.

## More and more projects

Alongside all this research was ongoing project work for a variety of clients, of IBM, then Cognitive Edge, then myself personally. I wish I had kept a better count of the projects! My best guess (as I am updating this chapter in 2025) is that I have worked on something like 200 projects, large and small.

I am not sure when I first began to do catalytic work, that is, look for patterns in stories and answers to questions. It may have been in 2004. It was not my original intention to do this. Clients were supposed to use the software I wrote to find patterns themselves. But people wanted help making sense of stories and answers to questions, and since I wrote the software, I knew how to use it well. So I started building catalytic material. I built a lot of it. I learned from my mistakes, some of which were shall-we-say quite educational, and improved my techniques as a result. I hope I have sufficiently described the methods of catalytic work so that you can do it as well as I can (with practice).

On some of the later client projects with Cognitive Edge, I collaborated strongly with Michael Cheveldave. This was another excellent and wholly positive meeting of minds, and some of Michael's good ideas can be found in these books. For example, he was the one who came up with the "is this a common story" question, which has proved exceptionally useful in practice.

## Starting work on *Working with Stories*

When I started working on my own, one of the first things I wanted to do was to write down what I knew so other people could do what I did. In the "Why I wrote these books" chapter of this book (page 387) you will find my account of what led me to want to do this. Writing the book, then improving it through its second and third editions, then expanding it into four books for its fourth edition, has been a driving force since I started writing things down in 2008.

## A big life change

I have not yet mentioned a change that had a big impact on my work. For the first several years of my work in this area, I traveled frequently, sometimes as often as monthly, to meet with clients and to facilitate group sessions. After my son was born in 2003, I stopped traveling almost entirely. As a result, there was a gap of somewhere around 12 years in which I did not facilitate any in-person group sessions or workshops. I didn't stop *thinking*

about facilitation—I helped people plan and prepare to facilitate sessions, and I reviewed videos and transcripts and notes of sessions—but I was not *physically* present in a facilitated session for quite some time.

During those years I worked a lot on project planning and catalysis. To some extent this could be seen as a weakness of the third edition of *Working with Stories*, that its writing on facilitation was based in part on dated experiences. (I believe I have since remedied that weakness.) On the other hand, if I *had* kept traveling frequently during those years, I would not have been able to develop the methods of narrative catalysis I use and describe in these books. I'm not even sure I would have been able to write *Working with Stories* if I had kept traveling frequently. Writing books takes time.

After I parted ways with Cognitive Edge, I continued to work on consulting projects for clients around the world. I also developed NarraCat (tools for narrative catalysis) and Rakontu (software for helping groups share and work with their stories).

### **Working on the third edition**

In the six years I spent working on the third edition of *Working with Stories* (between consulting gigs), I made many new friends with whom I shared ideas. They also had an influence on these books.

John Caddell was the very first person who wrote me a thank-you note for writing the first edition of *Working with Stories* in 2008. His case study ("Helping a community market listen to its customers," in *The Working with Stories Sourcebook*) was a featured element of edition two, and his unflagging support helped me to keep writing when the task I had set myself seemed impossible to achieve. (John has written his own story-related book, *The Mistake Bank*, which I strongly recommend.)

I talked with Stephen Shimshock about his Ph.D. research on participatory evaluation methods, and his thoughtful questions and feedback on the second edition of *Working with Stories* spurred me to fill many of the gaps in what I had written before. I enjoyed our collaboration so much that I asked Stephen to write the foreword for the third edition of *Working with Stories*, as well as a case study ("Evaluating effectiveness helping youth in foster care," in *The Working with Stories Sourcebook*). Stephen is a perfect example of someone who saw the benefit of PNI and lost no time applying it with original flair to a goal worth pursuing. His ideas have had an influence on these books.

Jonathan Carter added a valuable case study of hard-won project experience ("Collecting stories in a poor urban community," in *The Working with Stories Sourcebook*) and some more great ideas to the mix.

Thaler Pekar stands out as the correspondent who provoked the most exploratory thought in those years, with her excellent questions and relevant discussions. I would also like to thank Shawn Callahan and Karen Dietz for their encouragement. All three of these people agreed to let me interview them for the third edition of *Working with Stories*. I decided not to include the interviews in the fourth edition of *Working with Stories* (or in this book). They were long, and Thaler, Shawn, and Karen have written their own useful books and articles, which I encourage you to read.

Stéphane Dangel was a model of patient encouragement, and he contributed a case study about his own story-eliciting method ("Using a specific narrative process to face conflictual situations," in *The Working with Stories Sourcebook*).

Tom Graves encouraged me to keep writing, and graciously allowed me to include a figure from his SCAN model (which ended up in this book).

Carol Mase, Tom Roy, and Cynthia Weeks listened to me chatter on for hours about projects I had worked on. The transcripts of those discussions turned into some of the case studies in *The Working with Stories Sourcebook*, and they also helped me to remember many stories I could tell in *Working with Stories*. Carol, Tom, and Cynthia told me that they learned a lot from the experience, but I think I learned more, and I could not have written about (or thought about) my experiences in such depth without their encouraging presence and thoughtful questions.

I asked Niels Schuddeboom, Stephen Shimshock, and Jim Webber to read the sensemaking chapters in the third edition of *Working with Stories* early, because I was unsure if my explanations were sufficiently comprehensible. Their thoughtful suggestions helped me improve the clarity of my explanations.

Keith Fortowsky, Niels Schuddeboom, and Harold van Garderen provided careful, detailed, and thoughtful feedback on the third edition of *Working with Stories*, helping me to find and fix many mistakes I failed to notice.

In preparing the third edition of *Working with Stories* for publication, I was fortunate to have the expert help of Ellen Kaplan-Maxfield, who hand-crafted a high-quality, professional index for the book. Ellen also read the book very carefully and found many small mistakes and grammatical faux-pas I had not seen. (I could not afford to ask Ellen to help with the fourth-edition index, but I still appreciate her help with the third edition very much.)

The third edition of *Working with Stories* also benefited from a wondrous variety of useful discussions with Ajit Alwe, Mark Anderson, Katrina Andrews, Steve Barth (the idea that we metaphorically place a story on a table between us came from him), Hannah Beardon, Madelyn Blair, Sonja Blignaut, Tom Cagley, Zarrin Caldwell, Khoon Min Chin, Lilia Efimova, Lang Elliott, Peter Goldsbury, Katharine Hansen, Yvette Hyater-Adams, David Hutchens, Mireille Jansma, Tony Joyce, Tom Kadel, Mary Klinger, Marco Koning, John McGarr, Terry Miller, Steve Newton, Rob Peagler, Marc Maxson, Limor Shiponi, David Vanadia, Jerry Waxler, Graham Williams, and Frank Wood. If this list leaves anyone out, please forgive my oversight.

## After the third edition

In the years since the third edition of *Working with Stories* was published (in 2014), I consulted on many more PNI projects. The nature of my consulting practice did undergo a surprising change, though. Before 2014, most of my consulting work was of the back-end type. I did often help with project planning as well, but the bulk of my paid consulting work was spent doing mixed-methods analysis and the preparation of catalytic material. After 2014, that began to change, as more and more of my clients wanted more coaching than back-end support. That's what happens when you write a textbook!

I was happy about the change. I was happy that people wanted to learn how to do PNI themselves instead of having me do it for them. So I did a lot more coaching after that, and (as of this writing) I still do quite a bit more coaching than back-end work.

By the time my son became a teenager, I began to travel again, and I went back to facilitating in-person sessions and workshops, updating my fading knowledge on that point. With the onset of COVID-19, I stopped traveling again, but by then online meetings were ramping up. So I turned my attention to facilitating online story-sharing sessions and sensemaking workshops. That gave me enough experience with online facilitation to give it more attention in the fourth edition of *Working with Stories*.

Besides consulting on many client projects, large and small, I worked on three projects of my own between the third and fourth editions of *Working with Stories*. All of them were (or turned into) open-source projects; all of them were business ventures I hoped would make money; none of them succeeded in the sense of making enough money to keep doing them; all of them succeeded in the sense of helping people.

### **NarraFirma**

As soon as I finished writing the third edition of *Working with Stories*, I started hearing from people about it. The thing people said most often was that they wanted more help actually carrying out PNI projects. They wanted me to build some software to help them do it. There were a few options available at the time, but they were prohibitively expensive for many of my readers. Some people tried to use NarraCat, my open-source package for catalytic work, and found it hard to use. (I knew it was; I wrote it to use myself.)

So my husband and I decided to take the plunge on a new business venture. Starting in 2014, we spent 18 months working together on an open-source software package for PNI practitioners. Our hope was to make enough money from support contracts and sponsorships to keep working on NarraFirma for years.

To our surprise, despite what (lots of) people had told me about their need for PNI software, the market for NarraFirma was smaller than we thought it would be. Of course, some people did use and like NarraFirma, and they told us so. But it made less of a splash than we hoped it would. A few people helped out with donations and development commissions, most notably Harold van Garderen and Chris Corrigan. We are so grateful for their help. Without their support, we would probably have given up on NarraFirma.

But we didn't give up on it. Instead, it turned into another labor-of-love project we couldn't afford to keep up but kept up anyway. Besides the three person-years Paul and I put into building the first version of NarraFirma, I have spent about another three person-years on it since then, a week or month (or six months) at a time, maintaining it and slowly improving it as I used it in client projects. As of this writing, NarraFirma is still alive and kicking, though it has not changed that much in recent years. I would love to be able to keep improving it. I would love to get a grant, or a lot more donations, to make it a lot better. But we'll see what the future holds.



## **Narratopia**

This was a bit of a side project, but I enjoyed working on it. Narratopia is a card game for conversational story sharing. People can use it to chat with friends, family members, neighbors, and colleagues, and people can use it to gather stories in PNI projects. After selling about 50 copies of the game, I decided to make it free and open-source. You can find Narratopia on the internet (along with its own list of grateful acknowledgements) at [narratopia.com](http://narratopia.com).

## **The PNI Practicum courses**

In 2022 I started building the PNI Practicum, a set of project-based online courses. This was another project that took years to get going, that I had high hopes would fund my PNI work, and that ultimately failed—in the sense of making (enough) money. The courses succeeded in lots of other ways, though. To begin with, I created yet another open-source resource people can use to learn about PNI. Anyone who can put together a cohort can use a PNI Practicum course to carry out their first PNI projects in an atmosphere of peer learning and support. As of this writing you can find the courses at [cfkurtz.com/pnipracticum](http://cfkurtz.com/pnipracticum).

The other good thing about the PNI Practicum courses was that they made it possible for me to write the fourth edition of *Working with Stories*. I had thought about going back to the book for years, but I didn't see a path forward. The courses gave me a path, and I followed it. This is what happened:

- One of the things I knew I needed for the courses was a better way to learn about PNI than reading my 650-page tome, which I knew many people found daunting. So I decided to write a shorter, simpler version of the book for use in the courses. I started out by building a series of Powerpoint slide sets, one for each chapter. People loved them so much that I decided to turn them into a book. I called it *Working with Stories Simplified*.
- When I finished *Working with Stories Simplified*, I realized that a lot of the content I had written in it was new—and not in *Working with Stories*. So I used the new book to help me revise and update *Working with Stories*.
- I also wrote a set of “canned” sets of questions for people to use in their course projects. Those grew into *The Working with Stories Sourcebook*.
- I needed some reading lists for the courses. Building them brought my attention back to my long-forgotten book *More Work with Stories*, which grew into this book.

So as you can see, the fourth edition of *Working with Stories* would never have existed if I had not created the PNI Practicum courses. They helped me draw my 25 years of experience into a more coherent and useful package than I had before.

I would like to thank everyone who gave me feedback and support as I developed the PNI Practicum courses: Rachel Colla, Augusto Cuginotti, Lucy Duncan, Paul and Elliot Fernhout, Susannah Laramee Kidd, Adelle Kurtz, Jen Mason, Rob Peagler, and Miriam Richardson.

I would also like to thank everyone who took one of the courses: Rob Peagler, Lucy Duncan, Susannah Laramee Kidd, Heather Fox, Sebastian Dziallas, Augusto Cuginotti, Chris Corrigan, Elena Denaro, Frederique Te Dorsthorst-de Muij, George DeMet, Laurent Stoffel, Stefan

Morales, Susan Basterfield, and Caroline Rennie. All of these people helped me improve the PNI Practicum courses and the *Working with Stories* books.

## **Working on the fourth edition**

One summer day in 2024, I opened the *Working with Stories* LaTeX file for the first time in ten years. My task was simple: spend a month or two removing some of its least useful sections and adding a few tips here and there. I lined up the chapters of *Working with Stories* and the new *Working with Stories Simplified*, comparing what I had written in each.

I soon saw that I had much more to do than that. *Working with Stories* needed major surgery if it was going to reflect my current understandings. So I set to work improving it. It took nine months, but the book is much better now. It's tighter and cleaner and more focused. I removed a lot of clutter: fussy over-explanations, redundant examples, dithering oscillations, under-confident apologies, pedantic diatribes, annoying asides, and oh my how long that book was. I apologize to everyone who ever read it. It was the best I could do at the time. I can do better now.

The funny thing was that, even though *Working with Stories* was too long, it was also too short. I learned a lot more about story work between 2014 and 2024, and I learned a lot more about how to help people get started doing story work. So in the fourth edition I added a lot of new advice for dealing with situations I had not covered before.

At some point, near the start of this work, I was talking to Tatiana Feitosa Correa Lima, and I mentioned my concern that I might be ruining the book by changing it so much. Knowing the book well, she volunteered to read the new edition and compare it to the old one. She read every new chapter as I finished it, and she sent me many valuable questions, comments, and suggestions. She pointed out confusing turns of phrase, unclear references, weak arguments, poorly organized sections, redundant or missing explanations, and other mistakes. You can thank her for making the book more useful to you.

## **The most important thanks of all**

Finally, as I did in 2014, I must thank my husband Paul, who has patiently endured another decade of investment in and discussion about the software, the game, the courses, and finally, more books.

And now, as then, I cannot close this autobiography of gratitude without giving my son Elliot special mention. After I finished writing each section of the third edition of *Working with Stories*, I read it out loud to him. As I read, I frequently stopped and asked him to explain, in his own words, what I had just read. If he couldn't explain what he had heard, or if his attention drifted while I read, I knew I had some clarification work to do. Putting the book through its paces in this way helped me to improve its accessibility. (And people noticed! They would tell me how friendly and helpful they found my writing style. I always told them who they had to thank for that.)

Even more importantly, throughout my son's childhood, I had the privilege of watching and helping him tell and listen to stories, not just a few but thousands upon thousands. We spent years spinning the finest of yarns from the fibers of daily life, creating worlds within

worlds while tackling every hope and fear known to humanity. Watching his mind grow and change had as important an impact on the ideas in these books as my interactions with any other collaborator in story work, expert as many may be. Because my work is in stories and everyone tells stories, a child is as much an expert as any other human can be, and maybe more of an expert than any adult can hope to be. Everything I have done since he was born has benefited from his ever-present contribution. The ideas I have now are not the ideas I had then; they are deeper and richer and better. He's all grown up now, but he's still my favorite storyteller in all the world.

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## Appendix A

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Six people at a table looking at a map: Meeting of the neighborhood or community land use planning committee in Locust Hill. Caswell County, North Carolina. Photo released October 1940 by Marion Post Wolcott (1910–1990).