

Running a story telling group

This document has been copied from the Storytracks website www.storytracks.co.uk/group.pdf in case it becomes unavailable on line.

The Storytracks approach is inclusive - that is, everyone is capable of engaging at some level in storytelling. That said, some people may need a lot of input at the individual level to help them benefit from stories in a group. The following guidelines apply to people with mild, moderate or severe learning disabilities who have some verbal skills either in speech, sign or the use of communication aids; are aware of and respond to the talk of others, and can sit and concentrate for extended periods of time. People with severe and profound learning disabilities are likely to benefit more from an interactive storytelling approach, such as Keith describes in the Globe projects ([link](#)) or multisensory storytelling such as Odyssey Now ([link](#)). Here are some pointers to help you set up and run sessions

Place: You need a large enough space for people to split up into smaller groups, and for doing related activities such as art or writing.

Time: A two hour session gives time for people to arrive, leave, relax and swap anecdotes over a tea break. We got some of our best stories during this period.

Group size: You need a large enough group for people to pair up and work together: eg for team games. Eight to ten is good - fewer than six and it is difficult to generate an atmosphere, and you will be struggling when people miss a session.

Group membership: You want a mixture of abilities in the group, with two or three people who are already good at telling and listening to stories, and only two or three people who are functioning at an early level of language development (eg. using and understanding only a few key words at a time).

Resources: plenty of magazines, pictures (advertisements or postcards) which depict something odd or surprising; loads of symbol and picture cards to cue activities; art materials; large soft ball; 'talking stick' or similar to help cue people to take turns in a group; CD player and lots of music, including stuff to relax to and stuff to dance and play games to; big flip chart and paper for doing the schedule for the session; props such as old phones, funny hats and wigs, joke shop toys; blutack.

Group rules: Begin by negotiating ground rules for the group in relation to the purpose: listening, telling, sharing the time and the space, respecting each other: specifically - look at

people who are telling the story, don't talk when others are talking, no discriminating language. Take some time each session to go briefly over these. Exemplify what you mean by acting out behaviours yourself for members to correct -eg. inattention, not looking, talking over each other.

Roles: Get people actively involved from the start by sharing around responsibilities: putting out chairs, taking register, finding out who wants what at the tea break, clearing up.

Confidentiality: You may want to have a rule that personal stories are confidential. Personally I think the whole point of personal stories is that they get picked up and told to other people, and this is exactly what we want to happen with our storytelling groups. On the other hand, some stories may have a very intimate significance, and it is a good idea to have a general rule that people will say if they want their story kept within the group (you can ask after each story, or sum up at the end of the session).

Choosing and using stories: We used a mixture of traditional stories, stories from the tv and news and reminiscence from group members. Have a storyboard where people can make suggestions of their favourite stories to tell.

PLANNING FRAMEWORK

Our storytelling course was structured around four strands of storytelling: story themes, story lines, story skills and story community.

1 Story theme

The theme of the week relates to the fundamentals of storytelling - what is a story, where do stories originate?, who are the tellers? Who owns the story? How can stories be shared/ what do stories do for us? It functions to nourish the imagination of the group with powerful and resonant symbols, to develop personal myth making. We took a different theme for each term, starting with creation stories, and going on to stories about our families: traditional tales of fathers, mothers, daughters and sons, brothers and sisters and grandparents.

2 Story lines: collecting and sharing personal narratives

This strand involves the collection and development of personal narratives around significant events; everyday happenings. These story lines weave together to produce the fabric of our lives as remembered experiences. Activities involve the telling of the stories, and discussion around topics, genres and feelings : eg ghost stories, funny stories, romance. Central to the story lines strand is the emphasis on the experience of telling and

listening to stories, so that space is provided each week for anyone who wishes to tell a story, ensuring that each participant builds up confidence in themselves as a narrator.

3 Story skills

Story skills involve the specific abilities needed for telling and listening to stories, within a participatory framework/model which emphasises the collaborative nature of storytelling. The story skills strand involves exercises and games to practise skills (eg eye contact, voice and intonation, facial expression, body orientation) and also implicit work through modelling good storytelling and poor practice; reinforcement of what people are doing well - noticing and commenting. Later in the course, when people have gained confidence, it can involve watching themselves on video and explicitly adapting behaviours. Finding a communal voice to join in stories and respond to stories in the role of listener, which also links to the next strand.

4 Story community

This strand involves the development of a sense of group identity, through games, the discussion of group rules and conventions and the use of particular rituals - starting and finishing, allocating responsibilities, the assembling of a group record in the form of a story book about the experience of the group.

GAMES AND ACTIVITIES FOR STORYTELLING SKILLS

The following suggestions for games have come from all over the place - some I have made up, others are adaptations or straight imitations of ones I have found in books such as *The Gamesters Handbooks*, *Social Skills for the Speech Impaired* by Armin and Kuhr and workshops I've attended - notably run by Wolf and Water and by Michael White. Thanks to all of these mentors for sharing ideas!

Beginning your story

1 In a group, think of some ways of letting people know you have something to tell them: listen to this, ..I've got something to tell you...something happened to me...you know what....saying names with upward intonation...let me tell you...hey...I remember...

Traditional beginnings: Once upon a time...long ago and far away...

Walk around the room to a beat. When it stops, touch the person nearest you on the arm, and say your opening sentence.

2 Get into groups. One group talks among themselves and the other group tries to attract their attention.

3 Make a sound to start a story - clap hands, use a drum, bang foot on the floor, ring a bell.

Story structure and sequencing

1 Draw some story patterns – up to climax, down to end (hill); boat setting out on sea, then landing... aeroplane taking off, landing...

2 ?!= these are the key elements of story. – question/problem/beginning; event/climax/unexpected happening; conclusion, finale. Go through them making equivalent intonated sounds. Then deal out cards with these on them. Go round making the sounds and showing the cards in the right sequence.

3 Do the same thing with musical instruments – a questioning sound, a strong exciting sound, a calming relaxing sound.

4 When I ...The group supply codas to this beginning (or have pictures that people choose in turn): was little...was waiting for the bus...went on holiday...saw the doctor...was out shopping...went to hospital...went to the cinema...was having a bath....was looking out of the window...was in McDonalds...was talking to Paul..was going to bed...was watching tv. This functions as a story starter – groups or pairs can develop the theme and find an ending,

5 Who, where, what, why...set of cards with answers to these questions, + set of cards. One person turns up a question card, and asks the question – who was there? Where were you? What happened? another has to pick an answer

6 When I was going to St Ives.... Using a bag with figures inside it, each person in turn takes something from the bag and says ‘when I was going to St Ives, I met a....’ The figures can be retained to make up a story with, in pairs or small groups. (linked story – Chicken Licken or other tales with serial meetings).

Feeling and animation

1 Picture this. Using photos or pictures/symbols. First of all go round, getting everyone to imitate the expressions on the cards and talking about them. Then each person (or in pairs) picks a card and imitates the expression for others to guess.

2 Copycats. Go round the group thinking of feelings. One person makes a face/body movement and takes it off themselves and throws it to someone else. They have to imitate the feeling and change it into a new one.

3 Feeling-word snap. Put the feeling together with the word and say it in the appropriate voice eg scared, angry.. Can also be played by one person making the expression, and

another person supplying the word or vice versa.

4 Manner of the word. Split into 2 groups. One group thinks of activities which must be done by the other group – eg. dig the garden, toss a pancake, clean your teeth, wash the window, lay the table, have a drink, run for a bus, do the ironing. The second group thinks of some adverbs. They do the activity ‘in the manner of the word’ for the first group to guess (activities and adverbs can be supplied in picture or word form if necessary). Eg. quickly, slowly, sadly, cheerfully, angrily, happily, loudly, quietly, calmly, frantically, frightened, bravely/heroically, tiredly, energetically, with a pain, clumsily, bored, excitedly,

5 Weather words: Show what the weather is like by acting it out – eg windy, rainy, cold, hot, muddy, snowing,

6 Be a hero. One group thinks of a set of characters which the other group must act – eg. dragon slayer, film star, judge, doctor, wise old woman, sick old man, jolly drunkard, miser, evil magician, giant, robber, good fairy, talking horse. In its simplest form, the second group act them in turn for the first group to guess, with points being allocated.

Ending stories

1 That's the end. As you go round the group, playing a game like ‘I went shopping’ one person is given a red card. When it is his or her turn, he makes his contribution, then lays the card down, saying ‘and that's the end’. He or she can then choose the next game.

2 That's the end (communal) Tell and sign a traditional story all together (very short). At the end, everyone says ‘and that's the end’ and drops their hands to their laps.

3 Let me know you're through. This game is based on some research done on Margaret Thatcher's style of interview. She would routinely cue the interviewer that she had finished talking - dropping her voice at the end of a sentence, looking away, dropping her hands. Then when the hapless journalist tried to take his turn she would round on him saying ‘Will you let me finish...’ thus completely wrongfooting him. Decide beforehand what the end line of the story will be, and see how many cues you can give that you have finished. Count them or mark them on flip chart paper. Someone else then takes a turn.

ASSESSMENT

Analysing and developing storytelling skills

I wanted one of the outcomes of the projects to be a practical tool which would assist

teachers and therapists to assess strengths and needs in storytelling for all the people with whom they work. There are many different approaches to assessment available: the one described here is based on a definition of storytelling as a primarily social activity, and places as much emphasis on feeling and animation, and the rituals of telling, as it does on the cognitive activities of recall and organisation. It's based on work by McCabe and Peterson (1991) and Norrick (2002)

McCabe, A., & Peterson, C. (Eds.). (1991). Developing narrative structure. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Norrick, N. (2000) Conversational narrative: storytelling in everyday talk. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin.

Telling stories

The three dimensions of storytelling in this model are:-

- *Structural/referential* the logical sequence of the narrative, and the inclusion of key elements.
- *Affective/evaluative* the way in which the meaning and significance of events is conveyed.
- *Form and style* the rhetorical devices used to cue the genre, to secure attention, and to give a pattern to the narrative.

Language skills

Language Skills for storytelling are assessed separately, and in relation to the story the teller wants to tell.

Pragmatics: audience awareness

As storytellers mature, they become more able to take account of the needs of their listeners. This is apparent in each of the three dimensions, and is represented in the model by a shift from the centre (self awareness) to the outer perimeter (awareness of others). Thus in the affective, evaluative dimension, children animate their narratives with a high level of emotional involvement, which derives from their own engagement with the story. Later they evaluate the meaning of the event for the listener, using phrases like 'you'll never guess what happened next!' 'I was really scared, you know'. . Structurally, tellers start just by mentioning two events one after the other, then start to connect them with and but at this stage they tend to assume that the listener knows what is going on, so they do not clarify things very much. Later they use linguistic devices such as pronominal reference, causal explanations, explicit descriptions which show awareness of audience perspective. Formally, rhetorical devices become more self conscious - for example, a phrase which has elicited a reaction may be repeated in the story - and are varied to suit the needs of different audiences and different genres

Assessing your students using the model

Step 1

Observe them telling a story, or joining in with a story if they cannot do so independently. Under each heading, make notes about the things they are doing well and the things they need to develop.

Structure

The main structural components are those identified in most assessments of narrative competence:

- Recall and sequencing of events
- Labelling of main characters
- Mentioning the appropriate time and place of an event
- Explanations of what is happening, why and how
- Overall control of the organisation of the story
- Summarising, beginning and ending the story

Affect and evaluation

- Animation of the story through intonation, pitch, emphasis and stress (voice or sign)
- Use of facial expression
- Use of gesture
- Reference to the internal states and feelings of characters
- Description of events, people and objects in the story which have an emotional colour and indicate the attitude of the teller 'it was SO hot!'
- Words and phrases which indicate the attitude of the teller to the events, or invite the audience to adopt a perspective - (I was waiting and waiting ie I was getting fed up; I was only going to get a drink...ie. I was an innocent party)
- Use of dialogue - taking on the persona of another character and saying what they said
- Ability to mark the high point or climax of a story - usually through more use of gesture and expression and stress, + some phrase which tells the listener what to think eg. I was so scared!

Formal devices

- Here I include openings and closings of stories as these tend to be highly conventionalised: guess what?, do you remember? Hey, listen; hand wave to gain attention; and that was that; so there you are; dropping of signing hands to lap to indicate that a monologue has finished.
- Traditional devices such as refrains in stories (little pig, little pig, let me come in) or invitations to the audience to contribute - and guess who I saw?)
- Patterning and formal devices used within the story: (first I looked under the bed, then I

looked in the bathroom, then I looked in my bag, but I couldn't find it anywhere! The repeated I looked functions as a formal device here).

Step 2

Now draw up a profile of what the individual is currently doing in storytelling, and their strengths and needs in each aspect. Link this to a general overview of language skills - can the person use only single words, simple sentences, or complex sentences? Are they best with very concrete vocabulary, or can they handle more abstract terms?

Step 3

Now look at the story the person wants to tell and work with them to develop a script. Identify the key events and elements that will be mentioned (structure) the ways in which the person will animate the story (facial expression and gesture, intonation etc) and the formal conventions she or he will use to gain and maintain attention during the story, and to end the story.

Step 4

Next look at available language and communication resources and identify what vocabulary and syntactic structures are already available to the person, and which need to be directly taught.

Step 5

Work with the person to develop their script until they are very familiar with it - get them to tell and retell their story to lots of different people. Then you can work on the pragmatic aspects of audience awareness - eye contact, pausing, creating gaps in the story for the audience to join in.

Listening to stories

Current approaches to narrative development focus on the role of the teller, rather than the listener. However, it is apparent that storytelling, even as a solo performance, requires an audience; and in conversational storytelling, where the purpose seems to be to build rapport, listeners play a very active role indeed. They provide feedback and reinforcement, prompt elaboration and clarification, and are alert to opportunities for co-narration and follow on 'response' stories. We need to develop listening skills as well as telling skills. The following framework is based for the first 6 levels on Erica Brown's model of participation (RE for All, London: David Fulton 1996) and on Norrick (2002) for levels 7-10.

1 Encounter. Being prepared to sit and attend as a member of an audience, for increasing periods of time.

2 Supported participation. Tolerating physical prompts for responses - eg. use of switch or musical instrument .

3 Awareness. Noticing the storyteller or some aspect of the story such as a prop eg. making eye contact, orienting the body towards the telling space.

4 Response. Showing some kind of spontaneous response to some aspect of the story or the teller eg. laughing, imitation of a sound or movement.

5 Engagement. Directed attention, focused looking, listening, showing interest, recognition or Recall

6 Involvement: Active participation - reaching out, joining in with the story.

7 Feedback - giving back channel responses: nodding, co-active gestures, leaning forward, saying oh no, really, wow! at appropriate points.

8 Exploration: questioning and commenting: monitor the storyteller and ask for clarification and elaboration of key points.

9 Co-narration - taking up an opportunity to contribute to the story eg. show us how you put out your hand for the bus; say what you said to your mum.

10 Response story - tell all or part of a story which is related to some element of a preceding narrative.

Levels 7-10 require the listener to follow the story and attend over time to the content, as well as to the teller. These represent very big steps pragmatically for individuals with communication difficulties; nevertheless, the skills involved can be prompted at first, and scaffolded by a story helper. As with the model for tellers, there is a progression from a self-directed to other-directed focus - at the levels of encounter and supported participation, the person may lack any real awareness of what is going on. This gradually develops through awareness, response, engagement and involvement - but even by Level 6, the focus is primarily on me and my response to what is happening. Gradually through levels 7-10, recognition of others' contribution leads to increased adaptability.