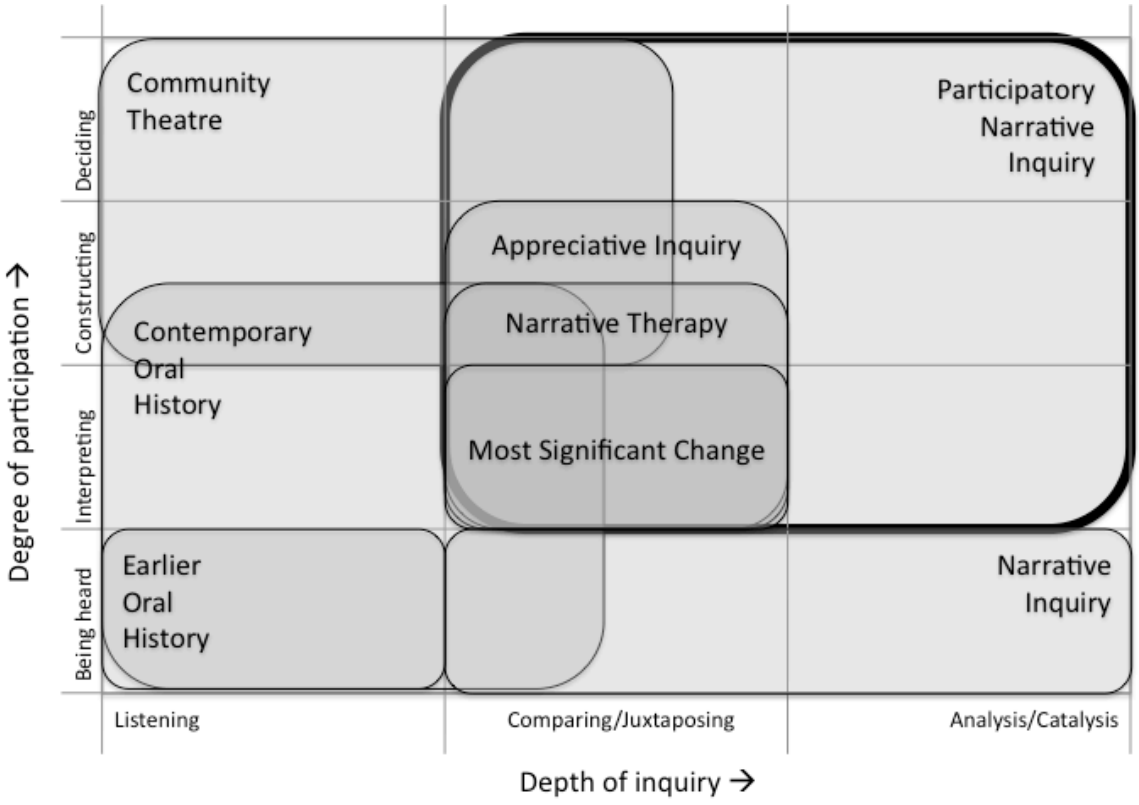
More Work with Stories

Advanced Topics

in Participatory Narrative Inquiry



Third Edition

Cynthia F. Kurtz

Hello reader!

This is a pre-publication copy of *More Work with Stories: Advanced Topics in Participatory Narrative Inquiry*. It is the companion volume to *Working with Stories in Your Community or Organization: Participatory Narrative Inquiry*. It was released August 20, 2013.

The content of this book-in-progress has been extracted from the far-too-long Working with Stories to make the entirey of the writing more digestible. This book contains everything I consider likely to be in the way of learning about Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) in the first place but useful later on.

Remaining tasks to finish this book are:

1. I need to finish the advanced chapter on sensemaking. This will include "What to expect when you're expecting sensemaking," a complement to the already-written "What to expect when you're expecting stories," which you will find in this volume. Some other essays that relate to sensemaking will also be included.
2. In addition to the nine case studies (PNI stories) already written here (putting aside those from other people), I have notes on about 15 more, and may expand that to 20 in the end, bringing our total to around 30 stories describing real narrative projects.
3. *Working with Stories* has about 300 hopefully clarifying figures; I hope to create at least half that many for this book.

Constructive feedback is encouraged, appreciated, lauded, embraced, hoped for, dreamed about.

You can contact me through:
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Or directly through e-mail at cfkurtz at cfkurtz dot com. (To avoid being cast aside as spam, please include my first name in the body of your e-mail.)

Cynthia Kurtz
August 20, 2013

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Contents

INTRODUCTION TO THE COMPANION VOLUME

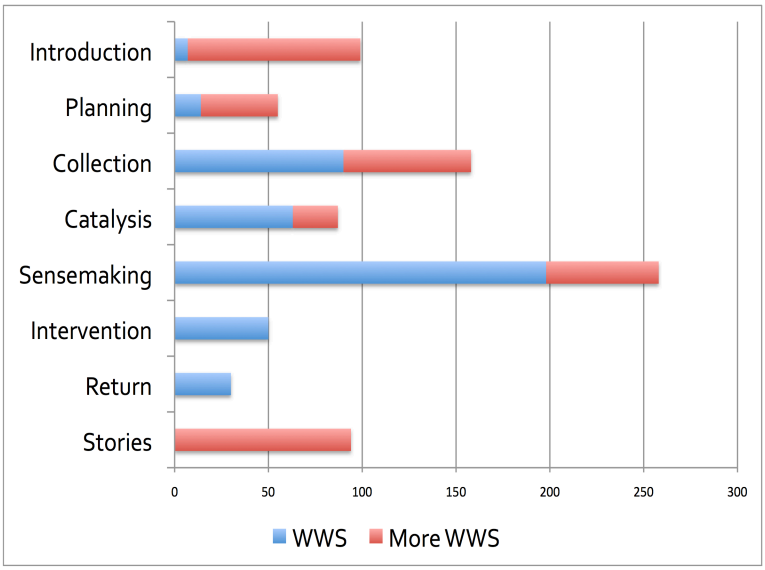
This book is a companion volume to the book *Working with Stories in Your Community or Organization: Participatory Narrative Inquiry*. This second book has two functions: it keeps the entirely of my writing on this topic from breaking anybody's foot if dropped upon it (I hope!), and it keeps some of my writing about the nuances of participatory narrative work away from the eyes of newcomers to the approach, who might find it confusing.

This book builds on and depends on the writing in *Working with Stories*, to the point that it has little utility alone. If you have come to this book after encountering *Working with Stories*, you will find more here along the same lines as what you found there. If you have *not* come to this book from *Working with Stories*, I suggest you read that book first, because much of what is written here will not make much sense to you if you don't.

For the most part, this volume consists of three categories of writing:

1. sections originally intended for the first book that grew very long and detailed;
2. essays written on specific topics (usually brought up in conversation) that fit obliquely into the basic book; and
3. case studies that describe real story projects.

I suspect you might find it frustrating that the chapters of *Working with Stories* and *More Work with Stories* vary so much in length. Here is a break-down of how many pages each chapter has in it, roughly.



As you can see, chapter lengths in *Working with Stories* follow a sort of bell-shaped curve that comes to a peak in the sensemaking chapter. There are two reasons for this curve. The first is that I think people will need the most help with sensemaking. I struggled long and hard with the decision to keep so much about

sensemaking in the basic volume. But in the end I decided that since this is the hardest part of the book, the most likely to be used, the least likely to be well known at the start, and the most fruitful if used well, I should keep the longer parts (like "Facilitating the four elements" and "Optional elaborations" on the exercises) in the basic volume.

The second reason for the bell-shaped curve of chapter lengths is that I know far more about project planning, story collection, catalysis and sensemaking than I do about intervention and return. So the shape of *Working with Stories* represents the combination of my knowledge and my guesses as to your knowledge and your needs.

The lengths of chapters in *More Work with Stories* reflect my knowledge again, but this time they also mark what I hope to be a useful breakdown between what you need to understand first about participatory narrative inquiry and what you are better served by pondering later.

PART 1: ADVANCED TOPICS IN PNI

This part of the book describes fine points of PNI work, things you will want to think about after your first projects. The chapters here follow the same basic plan of chapters in *Working with Stories*. Most of the sections in these chapters essays that stand alone rather than portions of a unified scheme. Some sections are very long and some are very short. Two chapters you might expect to see (intervention and return) are even missing! This is because I had so little to say about those topics that I could not even pretend to create chapters for them.

Chapter 2: Advanced Introduction to PNI

This chapter introduces you to Participatory Narrative Inquiry all over again, but this time in a much more detailed way. It explains why PNI grew the way it did and how it relates to other fields. It lays out a landscape of opportunities and dangers in PNI that should help you understand what to expect from PNI work, and it explains what skills you should cultivate if you want to use PNI most effectively.

PNI justified

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. No, 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 some questions people have often asked 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 ever after. This reminded me of the most frequent piece of feedback about earlier editions of this book: 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. I have written them in chronological order so you can follow PNI as it grew: asking questions about stories; listening to stories (rather than telling them); helping people make sense of collected stories; asking people about their own stories; keeping stories raw; catalyzing sensemaking.

Let me begin by saying that I did not make *any* of the discoveries that formed PNI all by myself. Over the years I have worked with a large number of colleagues, clients, participants, questioners and correspondents (all of whom you will find thanked in the acknowledgements appendix at the end of *Working with Stories*). In each of these stories I recount events that depended on the work of several people. The reason I say "I" a lot is that I am talking about the particular moments in which I first encountered the insights that became cornerstones of PNI methods. Other people also discovered those same insights, sometimes at the same moment I did and sometimes at different moments. In other words, these are my memories alone, but they are not my accomplishments alone.

My policy in recounting 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: it's called 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 ask questions about stories?

The first story I have to tell you about the development of PNI took place in the first year I worked on organizational narrative, at IBM Research. As you might guess, a research group working with stories was a bit of a misfit in IBM's computer culture. There was a danger of being considered insufficiently serious, so we found it expedient to consider ways we could prove both our utility to IBM and our legitimacy to its culture. One of the waves passing through the computer world at that time was XML. (XML stands for eXtensible Markup Language and is simply a standard method of describing how a set of documents will be described.) So the idea of using XML to do something with stories, something that might address IBM's real needs, came up. One of IBM's real needs 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 about the project's goals reflected that first focus. I thought about helping people *organize* stories so they could *find* them again; about helping people *select* and *sort* stories to reduce how many they would need to read to "zero in" on the solution that would *solve* their problem; about helping people *summarize* and *visualize* stories so they could skim hundreds at a glance. Because XML is a system for specifying metadata that accompanies information, my task was to identify metadata that would be required to accomplish the goals of organization, selection, sorting, problem solving, summarization and visualization of stories. (Metadata is just data that describes other data, like a name that describes a picture.)

How to begin understanding what metadata people might want to collect about stories to meet those goals? I already knew that the idea of classifying and deconstructing stories was nothing new. Aristotle distinguished tragic from comedic drama and epic from lyric poetry. In 1916 Georges Polti proposed that all stories could be classified into thirty-six dramatic situations (including such categories as "The Slaying Of A Kinsman Unrecognized" and "An Enemy Loved"). Everyone generates and exchanges metadata about stories every day, in discourse, memory and anticipation. In fact, people telling stories often include explicit metadata about the story or the storytelling situation to prove that the story is worth listening to--"I'll never do *that* again" or "*That* was an incredible experience."

So I asked myself this question: *What are all the questions anyone could possibly ask about a story*? From that I arrived at another question: *What are all the questions anyone has ever asked, or recommended asking, about stories*? The idea was to arrive at a global list from which one could draw sets of questions for particular contexts of use. My original list of fields to consider, in rough order of the degree of attention paid, was: narratology, folklore study (comparative and contextual), professional fiction writing, professional storytelling, case-based reasoning, narrative organizational study, narrative inquiry and analysis, 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 am never happier than when I have hundreds of similar-but-not-quite-identical things to put into little piles; and 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, and 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 into little slips of paper, then played with them. I allowed a structure to emerge slowly, continually checking and adjusting to take account of new perspectives. At a few points I reiterated the design by taking apart the whole structure and putting it back together again.

The number of questions topped out at around four hundred, 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 asked about when they asked about stories. The three largest groupings were what I now call the story dimensions of story form, function and phenomenon. As far as I know, the XML standard itself was never published and was never used in any computer database.

Just as important as the discovery of story dimensions, I think, was my increased understanding of what asking questions about stories could do. I went into the project thinking of only the most pedantic, though worthwhile, reasons to ask questions about stories. I came out of it with a far stronger vision of what questions could do, and that vision has influenced all of my later work.

Some of this discovery was particularly inspired by specific examples of question-asking I found in the sources I read. I'd like to tell you about some of these examples so you can see for yourself where these ideas came from.

Why ask questions about story form?

Metadata on story form can help people compose better, stronger and more compelling stories; understand the working parts of stories they have been told; and think about stories they tell themselves. Two elements of my explorations into story form stand out most.

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 information.

The second piece of story form exploration I remember well was a moment when I was using the software *Dramatica Pro*. This software, which still exists and has a wide following, is a tool that helps screenwriters and novelists develop and improve their stories. Use of *Dramatica Pro* consists, in the main, of answering many 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 grew, 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 viewing the story as a cautionary tale to girls about sexual violence. This was astounding to me. When I chose the fable to consider, nothing could have been further from my mind. I remember the moment when I realized 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 stories from their own organizations and communities?

Why ask questions about story function?

You will probably have recognized that my original goals for the story XML project all had to do with story function. I'll type them here so you don't have to find them again: organization, selection, sorting, problem solving, summarization, visualization. All function, right? That shows the mindframe I had going into the project, though it expanded manyfold coming out on the other side.

In the area of story function I remember one very important experience that helped me understand what answering questions about stories might do for people. Roger Schank was, and is, one of the strongest proponents 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 is the bit that made me jump up 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.

What does this mean? The "Ask-Tom casebase" was a collection of videotaped storytellings built to help people learn about complicated, knowledge-rich topics. Barger was describing the process by which the database's system of typed links between stories was created. To me, in the context of compiling a list of all the questions anybody might ask about stories, this behind-the-scenes comment was nothing less than revelatory. Why? Because through it I realized that the creation of such typed links, an activity which the AI researchers found an onerous task and seemed embarrassed to admit was being done by clerical help, was a *perfect sensemaking activity* for people telling each other stories. Their problem was my solution! A system that helped people think about why and how stories connected with each other would inevitably help them make sense of the stories, and thus the topic they needed to explore. For the purposes of building an expert knowledge system this might be clerical work; but for the purpose of making sense of complex topics in support of decision making, it was empowerment.

This observation dovetailed with one my husband and I had earlier when we built our educational simulations of the natural world. To our surprise we found that we learned much more by *building* our simulations than anyone else could possibly learn by using them! In fact, if we had been able secure funding to go on, we would not have built better simulations but would have built a simulation-builder so that other people could learn what we learned by building their *own* models of the natural world. In exactly the same way, building a web of typed, annotated links among stories can help people understand much more about a topic than simply making use of links created by others. This "don't build it, build a

builder for it" idea has resurfaced in many of the projects I have done in the years since, both in workshop exercises and in online story exchange.

Why ask questions about story phenomenon?

Of the three dimensions, the utility of questions about story phenomenon surprised me the most. Did you know, by the way, that people have been studying everyday stories told in organizations since the 1980s? Many people I meet today do not seem to be aware of this and because of it miss some real nuggets of insight buried in the research literature. The writings of David Boje, Mary Boyce, Yiannis Gabriel, Alan Wilkins and Joanne Martin stand out as particularly insightful. I strongly advise anyone interested in the field to look up some of their papers, and I list some I found most useful in the References appendix.

When I ponder what got me excited about asking questions about story phenomonen, three stories come to mind, mostly from that literature, as having shown me the way. I'll tell them to you now.

In Joanne Martin's work I found the *uniqueness paradox of organizational stories*. Martin's fascinating 1983 paper presents an apparent contradiction in the stories told in organizations, thus:

> 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. But everyone at Company B says Company B is unique because it uniquely values its employees. The paradox is that they are both right. I interpret this to mean that the meaning of the term "valuing employees" differs among organizations in such a way that they probably *are* unique, but only in the details. And it is in the details that organizational stories operate. People tell stories about their organization or community to communicate, and negotiate, the details of its unique character. What excited me about this paradox was not so much that it existed, but that listening to the stories people told could help you understand the unique character of the organization. And how better to find out whether stories represent uniqueness than to ask questions about them?

The second story that stuck with me in my reading about story phenomenon was the nine-day fortnight. Veterans of the field will recognize this story from its title, but for everyone else I'll reproduce the quote that introduced me to it. It is from a paper by Alan Wilkins (whose writing I found exceptionally clear and insightful, I might add, to those wary of scientific jargon). It 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. When you consider story form, a story is like a brilliant diamond you turn from side to side. When you consider story function, a story is like a tool you apply with skill to a task. But when you consider story

phenomenon, a story is like a river flowing through the life of the organization. How much better to ask questions about the river as it moved through time and space and change, and how much more that could offer to those who want to make decisions about the life of the organization.

The third story I want to tell you 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. If you will permit me, I will ease my burden by quoting myself quoting Bauman (this is from a chapter I wrote, with Dave Snowden, in the book *Strategic Networks: Learning to Compete)*.

> [Some] stories .... may appear to be "about" nothing. Anyone looking for concrete evidence of "knowledge transfer" or "peer learning" – or even truth – may discard these stories, which are in some ways the most important to retain. Bauman (1986) 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 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 representing his identity as a member of a noble group, not complaining or bragging. 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 in fact they could be on the verge of reinventing the organisation.

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. In fact all three dimensions of story work together in a synergistic way to help people understand the full meaning of stories told.

Practical proof

All of these ideas were enticing, and reinterpreting *Little Red Riding Hood* was fascinating. But when did I first find out that asking questions about stories would be useful to organizations? Here is the story of my first proof of the concept. In 2001 I was working with Dave Snowden and Sharon Darwent on story projects for IBM clients. We knew that bringing my ideas about questions together with their archetypes (which I call story elements) *should* be useful, but we weren't sure exactly how to go about merging them. We found a client particularly interested in new ideas (thank heaven for such people). This client had collected some forty stories about a problem they wanted to address.

I received the audiotaped stories and transcribed them, then set out to answer some questions about them. I looked at my list of four hundred questions. It would take forever to answer even a hundred questions about each of forty stories, so I needed to prioritize. I looked through my list and chose my favorite ten or so questions to ask, those I felt would be the most revealing. It was important that I had the stories on tape, because I could hear the emotions in the voices of the tellers and audiences. As I recall most of the questions had to do with emotional context, like "Why was the story told?" and "How did the audience respond?" Yes of course my interpretation of the stories was biased, but at the time that seemed a reasonable approach. At any rate I annotated all of the stories with answers to the questions. I also linked the stories to some sets of story elements employees of the client had developed in a workshop setting.

I developed some very simple prototype software to display the stories and patterns in answers to the questions. The interface was laughably simple. I believe it had nothing in it but some bar graphs arranged on a grid. However, the results amazed all of us: myself, Dave and Sharon, and our client. With only forty stories, a handful of questions and story elements, and the simplest possible viewing device, patterns simply jumped out of the stories. The one 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. The client was able to improve their training to help staff members understand customers better, and they had a very specific set of perceptions to counter in the process. We asked questions about stories, and in concert with story elements that made sense to the organization, we discovered actionable insights for positive change.

What better proof of concept could there be? I can remember the moment when I was playing with my prototype and noticed that the stupid-customer stories were mostly rumors. It was like watching a door open onto a scene that had been previously hidden. The process of asking questions about stories has proven to be so useful that I have come to *expect* such a revelation to appear to someone at some point in *every* project. I have rarely been disappointed in that expectation.

Why listen to stories?

You may be surprised to hear it, but I started out in 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 researching how storytelling could improve computer-aided learning (see the story, called "Incorporating narrative into e-learning," in the project stories chapter). As I started out the project, I tried with increasing frustration several different ways to help instructors 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 experiences they were based on (from my own experience and from things I'd heard). This was true even though I was "improving" the stories using all the wonderful advice I could find. I had read around a dozen books on story form, from narratology textbooks to books for professional storytellers to McKee's screenwriting bible *Story*. I followed their expert instructions to the letter, but somehow every time I improved the stories an essential spark was lost. Like the dogged worker I am I kept trying, nose to the grindstone.

At the same time, my colleagues and I *were* listening to stories. We were collecting lots of stories from real people in real workshops. However, we weren't collecting 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 expect that we might be able to draw some "raw material" for our perfectly crafted stories from the workshops, in the same way 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 road, struggling to get to a distant city which 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 get 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 banging 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 told my colleagues about the idea of using stories we had 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 and instead concentrated on figuring out the best ways of helping people get the good stories regular people already tell to where they needed to be. As a result the learning resources we were creating, and our ability to help *other* people create such resources, improved tremendously. The project that threatened to fail became a resounding success.

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 where fictional stories are preferable as the end result -- and there are such situations, of course -- considering true stories will create a far more effective fiction than creating one from whole cloth (if that is even possible). The use of raw stories of personal experience has become one of the cornerstones of participatory narrative inquiry.

I've since come to realize that people who work with stories in organizations and communities (and here I am not talking about professional storytellers) seem to go through three phases, which roughly match my three dimensions of story (form, function and phenomenon). 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. Once they get past that they start thinking about how they can "use" story function to change situations, inject learning, propel messages, and so on (all of which is fairly mechanical thinking). And finally they arrive at the phenomenon stage where they begin to see stories as elements in a complex ecology. They start thinking about ways to tend stories, herd them, take care of them, and get them 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 people to make sense of collected stories?

Another question I often get comes from clients who like the idea of finding patterns in stories, but do *not* like the idea of asking people to make sense of their own stories in sensemaking sessions. This question often comes from people who pay for projects but are not among the group of people being asked to tell stories. It might be a steering committee, say, or a human-resources department, or an agency whose responsibility is to oversee benefits to a group of people in need. Such a client might say, "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 collected stories is yet another story of being dragged into the light of truth. This story took place soon after I started working with Dave Snowden and Sharon Darwent doing story projects with IBM clients. This is mostly their story, in fact, and it is a story of accomplishment. 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 raw stories. At the time we joined forces, we all believed that expert *interpretation* of stories was best, 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, that's what happened. It didn't register on our radar.

The turning point came on one of the first projects I helped support as a newcomer to the group. In this project the group had helped the 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 that 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 recrimination 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.)

We were worried going into this workshop that we would have a lot of work to do after these uninitiated, amateur interpreters had finished their exercise in understanding. But we decided to go ahead anyway, thinking that at least our task would be reduced. You can imagine our astonishment when we found that the quality of the results exceeded our previous finely tuned expert interpretations. Not only that, but when we reported the results, unadorned by our expertise, they resonated better with our client as well. The amateurs didn't falter or fail. They outran the experts by a mile. This was the first 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 concentrated our efforts on exercises that helped people build understandings from their own stories. The insight inspired much of our subsequent work on narrative sensemaking in groups. Before this project I had been using grounded theory, which is a system for enabling the emergence of theory grounded in collected materials. I abandoned that practice after we started supporting group sensemaking, but later came to understand two things: that narrative sensemaking can be a form of grounded theory for

collaborative groups; and that expert attention to stories and patterns does have a place in story work, when it is used as catalytic material. (That story is in the section "Why catalyze sensemaking?" later in this chapter.)

The claim that participatory sensemaking is superior to expert analysis, more than any other in this list, is difficult for many project funders to accept. It is one thing to allow the people being researched 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: only the guilty are suspicious.

Let us 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 them use those 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 might 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 told at one level.

Let me paint you a different picture. Let us 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 workshop where 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 will get a chance to tell their unique story. 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 the sign. Another 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 it all comes down to this. Which is more useful to you, the owner of the shop? One wall or four?

Allowing *only* outside experts to make sense of collected stories jeopardizes success in working with stories for two reasons. It cannot help getting essential things wrong, through not understanding subtle nuances of context which only insiders can know. And it is incapable of making useful insights fully resonate and changes actually happen inside a community, because it is not "of us." It is a paradox of control. When you let people work with their own stories and make sense of their own situations, your ability to make better decisions will grow alongside theirs. When you do not let this take place, your decision-making ability will still grow, but slowly. You can share your sense-making with the people who told the stories 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 ask people questions about their own stories?

In this little history of PNI you have already read about how I discovered the merits of collecting and using real stories of personal experience. You have read how I discovered the benefits of asking questions about stories. You have read how I discovered that asking people in groups to make sense of collected stories produces deeper insights than outside experts can hope to achieve. You have read how I discovered *each* of 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 what their own stories meant. Let me tell you how I found this out.

In the first two years after I started working with Sharon Darwent and Dave Snowden on story projects for IBM clients, we carried out something like twenty story projects. In each project we asked our clients -- this was the project *funders*, not the storytellers -- 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 clients agreed to do this, but when they actually *saw* the dozens or hundreds of stories collected, most 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 such as emotional tone and reported origin. This turned out to be an opportunity disguised as a problem, by the way. I found I loved answering questions about stories, even when it did take 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, because it helps 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. It sounds strange to say it, but it is true.

However, as much as I liked the work, we needed to reduce the work hours we were putting in per project. It just wasn't cost-effective to carry on this way. We talked about this problem constantly, and after several low-ratio projects like this 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 doing it, but seemed to get something useful out of it. In retrospect nothing could be more obvious, but it was not obvious going in. We looked for compliance and found empowerment.

I cannot speak for any of the other people involved in this work, but I myself did not see this revelation coming. I was dragged kicking and screaming into doing it right. I have tried to remember on which project we first asked people to interpret their own stories, but I can't remember which 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 the interpretations people made 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 no outsider could see, even if they read the same stories for weeks or months 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 section called "Why ask questions about stories?" you will see that even though I didn't see this revelation coming, I certainly *should* have seen it. 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, as Roger Schank thought, 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.

I am fully aware that some people will read this story of discovery and remain unconvinced that asking people about their stories is more useful than having experts analyze them from afar. Certainly many in the field of narrative analysis 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 political or less political at work?" I suppose you *can* 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 this story*. Then you say something like, "How strong would you say the theme of "politics" is in this story? Do_es it dominate the story? Is it a side issue? A non-issue? Oh, and by the way, when did that story take place?"

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, its relationship to many other issues found in the story packages you gathered, and its change over time. 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 themselves 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 storytellers 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."

Let us say that you don't choose to progress to the second stage. Say you gather stories and interpret them yourself without asking any questions about them. Say you are an expert in workplace politics, and *you* decide what the stories mean about workplace politics. 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 population of interest. Every storyteller is the best expert on 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 considering the stories. In fact I often juxtapose storyteller interpretations with those made by others, both in the community and outside it. Why this is not a battle 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 view 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.

Why keep stories raw?

I have spoken to many people who collect stories over the years. Many agree that listening to stories is useful and empowering to people. However, quite a few people have not agreed with my stance that it is better to leave stories alone, to keep them in their "raw" form. They tend to think it is better to improve stories by "cleaning them up" to make them read more nicely. They might remove pauses, restarts, and apparently off-topic additions. They might annotate elements that seem strange, incoherent or wrong. I say: *Don't mess with the stories.* Why? Let me tell you a few stories about that.

One of the first story projects I ever did 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 some pretty strange rumors about what you could do with the product and what it could do to you, most of them wrong. (You know, X brand of soap can kill your cat, that sort of thing.) The stories were to be given out to company staff so that they could better understand the customer's point of view and help dispel some of the rumors. One of the managers on the project wanted

to *edit* the collected stories to remove all "errors" and *replace* what the customers had actually said with "facts" about the product. After much pleading I managed to talk him out of doing this, but only by agreeing that he could place a "fact" addendum after each story denouncing what the customer said and setting things straight.

In the end the project succeeded in educating the company's staff about customer perceptions. But if the manager had "corrected" the stories it would probably have failed. Why? Because the collected stories revealed two nested levels of story. Outside the original customer stories grew a second layer of conflict between competing views of truth and fact. The manager wanted to collapse the story nesting down to produce only one factually correct story. If the goal of the project had been to educate the staff about the facts, this might have been a reasonable decision, though you would hardly need customer stories to meet that goal; a lecture would suffice. But for the stated goal of helping staff members understand customer perceptions, retaining the two-level story by keeping the "fact addendum" separate was essential.

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 his 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 the voices should not be silenced. But I also pictured the staff members who were to read these stories. I realized that they would learn nothing if the stories were corrected because the outermost story, the story of conflict, was the story they most needed to hear. Finding a way to *communicate* this insight to the manager was the hard part of that project.

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) around the room on the walls. 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 the door 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* had been created by the outside consultants. Everything he saw was *raw*, authentic, real. My colleagues had not composed any stories, nor had they "improved" any. 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. Such authenticity is critical to success in story work. In my experience, if there are *any* alterations to the actual

words spoken, for any reason, the story project is damaged, sometimes beyond retrieval. I have seen several less emotional versions of this story played out in the years since.

There *are* times when you need to keep some stories away from the larger group because they are particularly inflammatory or malicious, and you do sometimes need to remove identifying details, but you should never disguise or alter the meaningful content of the stories told.

Yes, when a story is created to make a persuasive argument or sell a product, sometimes (but not always) a raw story is not "good enough." But for sharing experiences and arriving at new insights, *the best story is a raw story*. The irreplaceable authenticity of raw stories creates opportunities for understanding the experiences and perspectives of other people that are impossible to come by any other way. The utility of authentic stories cannot be replicated by design, and both authenticity and utility can be destroyed when stories are modified.

Why catalyze sensemaking?

At the point in the life of PNI in which we now find ourselves, I was working on story projects where 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 sessions. Somehow, and I'm not really 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. Maybe the project goals got bigger, or the clients got bigger, I'm not sure. At any rate we started hitting processing problems. People were finding 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 that helped them look through the stories and answers to find patterns. Some clients rose to the task and found their own patterns, but some clients, maybe the busiest ones or those most used to outside help, wanted us to do that for them. They said, "Can't you just tell us what the stories say? Can't you boil them down for us?"

I was wary, you might even say paranoid, about boiling down stories. As an outsider I could never hope to understand the context of the stories like their tellers, and 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, or something, 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 trends 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 about it in the project story called "Shooting the messenger" in the project stories section.)

That first attempt at adding analysis to the mix represented a major turning point in the work that became PNI. You could even say that project *created* the method of 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 that painful mistake brought.

Telling people straight out what I saw and what I thought it meant, as a result of analysis, 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 things up to

possibility, not close them down to defense and attack. 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 I now use and recommend to anyone catalyzing sensemaking. You can read about how these rules play out in the chapters on narrative catalysis, but I will give you a quick synopsis here. I came up with alliterative names for the rules so I could remember them well. They are as follows.

1. *Separate Statements* into *observations* anyone can see, *interpretations* of what the observations mean, and *implications* on actions that could be taken as a result. Make no statement that is not thus identified.
2. *Provide Provoking Perspectives* in the form of *multiple competing interpretations* for each observation. Never tell truths; always provide possibilities.
3. *Maintain Mischief* by making the provocative nature of the communication 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 report to support their sensemaking and decision making.
4. *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.
5. *Prepare for Participation* by creating reports that facilitate group discussion and 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 feelings, beliefs and perspectives 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, beliefs and experiences of other people. This may be fine for general research whose goal is not related to decision making. 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 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? (As Joseph Heller famously said in *Catch-22*, "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you.") The truth is, it is not always possible to follow every rule of catalysis to perfection. All real projects have to deal with real issues of power and control and limitations. Sometimes the person doing catalysis is insufficiently experienced, or those funding the project want more control over the end result, or there isn't time for exhaustive exploration, or you can't get enough people to participate in sensemaking. Still, what I have seen is that the closer a project hews to the rules of catalysis, the better catalysis works, and the better and more long-lasting is the result.

The second story I want to tell you about catalysis is about 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 trends, but I could not say much about whether a trend 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," where 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 feelings, beliefs and experiences 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 catalysis to project results 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 storytelling. 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 storytelling, that if I establish this setting and characters we agree to consider this experience. 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, which includes the statistical analysis of trends 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 on narrative work. Here is Jennifer Greene in her 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 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?

PNI in context

Let me start out this section by telling you that I did not coin the term "participatory narrative inquiry." It has already been in use for decades to mean narrative inquiry with a participatory element.

To give some examples: Randy Spreen Parker used it in his 1996 Ph.D. dissertation, "Participatory narrative inquiry into nurses' moral orientations and ways of knowing." Dorothy Lander used it in her 1999 paper, "Response-ability for Writing Research that Honours Practitioners' Ways of Knowing,'" where she tried to resolve "contradictions between the theory and practice of participatory narrative inquiry'" that "haunt qualitative research."

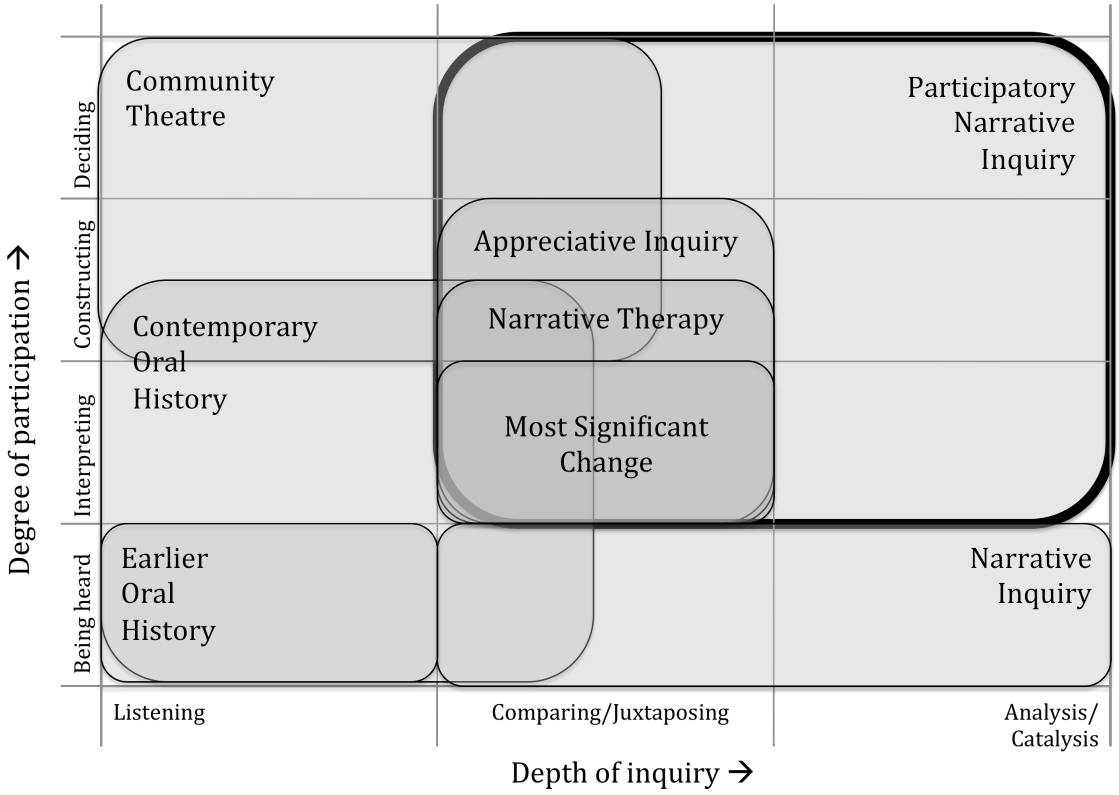
The term was used most recently by Niel Hooley in his 2009 book, *Narrative Life*: *Democratic Curriculum and Indigenous Learning*. Hooley describes his adaptation of the methods of narrative inquiry to create a participatory narrative school curriculum for the benefit of indigenous children.

Hooley describes his approach thus:

> The curriculum methodology of participatory narrative inquiry ... involves the compilation and/or writing of a series of personal narratives on specific themes negotiated by participants in schools such as teachers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and community members. The narratives can focus on general life issues, or themes that have a school or curriculum emphasis. The methodology extends the work of Clandinin and Connelly [leaders in narrative inquiry] in a number of ways. First, the identification of insights that resonate throughout and across the writing according to participant identification. Second, the inclusion of a fourth dimension of educational and social change that arises from the narrative investigation and which therefore sets up cycles of action and reflection.

If you keep in mind that I consider the phases in the outer triangle of PNI (planning, catalysis, intervention) to be optional to the approach, and that I consider PNI to be a wide and flexible field, not a rigid doctrine, I believe I am using the term in a manner that is consistent and compatible with prior use.

This diagram shows how participatory narrative inquiry relates to similar fields in narrative.



PNI shown in relation to similar fields.

Here I place fields on two axes important to PNI: participation and inquiry. The degree of participation denotes not how much researchers or community leaders participate in projects but how much those who tell stories participate. At the first level of participation, people are simply allowed to speak, though they may have little control over what is done with their words and by whom. At the second level, people are asked what their words mean, and their interpretations are considered as authoritative voices of experience. At the third level people construct larger artifacts from their experiences, usually in collaborative groups, such as dramatic reconstructions of events. At the highest level of participation storytellers make all decisions as to what will be collected, what will be done with it, and what goals will be pursued.

On the inquiry axis, the most shallow inquiry involves simply reading or listening to the stories collected. Perhaps the stories are distributed in oral history collections such as the influential American slave narratives, or perhaps only researchers read them. At the second level of inquiry, somebody places stories next to each other, in relatively simple ways, and compares them, perhaps by clustering or theming them. "Somebody" may be the storytellers if the work is participatory, or it may be outside experts. At the highest level of inquiry patterns among stories (and possibly interpretations) are strongly considered using methods of scientific investigation. These may include text analysis, statistics, data visualization, grounded theory, and detailed report writing. If the work is participatory such analyses are used to catalyze group sensemaking, or if the work is not such analyses stand as the result of the work.

An implied third axis here is to what extent the work involves narrative versus non-narrative material. I did not show that here because I think it would be too hard to read. Instead I have placed related non-narrative fields on a separate diagram coming a little after this one.

Where do I place PNI on this diagram? Ideally I would like to place it only in the upper-right corner where both participation and inquiry are maximized. However, I don't think taking such a purist stance is likely to be very helpful to people actually trying to do PNI projects in real communities. I do draw lines at the interpretation level of participation and at the comparison level of insight. People should always be allowed to at least say what their stories mean, and stories should never be simply read one after another. I once took a more relaxed position on both of these axes, but I've since seen some failures below those levels. I believe I can honestly say that I cannot guarantee useful results from PNI without at least these levels of participation and inquiry.

Now let us use this diagram to compare PNI to other narrative fields.

Oral history

Oral history once had an entirely archival purpose and consisted only of people, usually journalists, recording the voices of ordinary people left behind in the written history of famous people. This goal was praise-worthy in and of itself, but today the field covers a much wider range of participation and inquiry. Consider this account from Paul Thompson, in his book *The Voice of the Past*, which I will quote at length because it contains so many linkages to PNI:

> The People's Autobiography of Hackney ... arose from a group ... which met in a local book and community centre.... Members of the group varied in age from their teens to their seventies, but all lived in or near Hackney in East London. Their occupations were very mixed. The group was an open one, brought together by notices in the local papers, libraries, and other places. Any member could record anyone else. At the group meetings they played and discussed their tapes--sometimes also recording these discussions--and planned ways of sharing what was collected with a Hackney audience. For this reason they especially emphasized publishing and issued a series of cheap pamphlets, assisted by a local library subsidy, based on transcriptions and written accounts of people's lives, which have had a large local circulation. These pamphlets in turn stimulated reactions from other people and led to more discussion and recordings. The group also collected photographs, and combined this material as tapes and slides for historical presentations to audiences in the community such as hospital patients and pensioners' associations--another way of giving back to people their own history, showing them it was valued, and stimulating their own contributions. The People's Autobiography thus aimed, on the one hand, to build up through a series of individual accounts a composite history of life and work in Hackney, and, on the other, to give people confidence in their own memories and interpretations of the past, their ability to contribute to the writing of history--confidence, too, in their own words: in short, in themselves.

Thus I draw boxes for oral history in two phases, the second of which overlaps with PNI significantly. Where PNI and oral history do not overlap is where inquiry is deep and decision-making is fully participatory. Oral histories generally do not probe deeply into patterns among stories and storytellers, because the goal of oral history is to record and connect, not support decision making -- or at least decision support is not the *primary* goal of oral history. Neither is oral history usually fully participatory, being heavily dependent on expert field workers; but this may change as oral history continues to grow and expand.

In short, I consider oral history to be something like a cousin of participatory narrative inquiry, though I think it could use a healthy nudge toward greater participation and inquiry.

Community theatre

In community theatre people participate in the construction of theatrical events which compare and juxtapose community stories, often to make sense of conflicts and create change. Such projects are often fully participatory by design, with facilitators either coming from the community itself or deliberately taking on the role of a "joker" who aids but does not control decision making. Augusto Boal describes it thus in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*:

> In order to understand this poetics of the oppressed one must keep in mind its main objective: to change the people -- "spectators," passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon -- into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action. I hope that the differences remain clear. Aristotle proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the dramatic character so that the latter may act and think for him. Brecht proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the character who thus acts in his place but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself, often in opposition to the character. In the first case, a "catharsis" occurs; in the second, an awakening of critical consciousness. But the poetics of the oppressed focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change -- in short, trains himself for real action. ... The theater is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it.

I draw the box for community theatre partially across the "comparing/juxtaposing" level of inquiry because in the course of constructing and adapting fictional plots community members do make sense of stories. Community theatre, while empowering and participatory, does not traditionally involve scientific inquiry. I can easily imagine this taking place, but I have never read of it happening. For example, if a community theatre project centers on water rights, a statistical analysis of water usage by people in different industries or at different income levels might inform the discourse. I am not saying community theatre should expand to include statistics! But attention to complementary approaches (like PNI) might benefit community groups. Community theatre fits perfectly into the sensemaking stage of PNI, where it could benefit from narrative catalysis.

Community theatre is like PNI's wild and crazy neighbor who comes in at three in the morning flush from another adventure in dramatic fiction. PNI thinks it could use a little grounding in science to complement its imaginative fights and generate more practical results.

Narrative therapy

Narrative therapy, which covers work at the individual, family and community level, shares with PNI an emphasis on people interpreting their own stories, constructing larger stories out of them, and comparing them to other stories. In fact, though terms differ and development was unlinked historically, many of the practices of narrative therapy share common ground with the methods of PNI. Call them good friends with many things to like about each other.

To take one example of agreement, narrative therapy relies strongly on "externalizing conversations" which create an enabling "separation of the person's identity from the identity of the problem." This is similar to the displacement that comes into play when PNI asks people to interpret the stories they tell. Says Michael White in *Maps of Narrative Practice*:

> When the problem becomes an entity that is separate from the person, and when people are not tied to restricting "truths" about their identity and negative "certainties" about their lives, new options for taking action to address the predicaments of their lives become available. ... If the

> person is the problem there is very little that can be done outside of taking action that is self-destructive. But if a person's relationship with the problem becomes more clearly defined, as it does in externalizing conversations, a range of possibilities become available to revise this relationship.

Likewise, asking people about a story they have just told, rather than about themselves or their opinions on a contentious issue, can open up new opportunities to see themselves and the issue in new ways. Narrative therapy also shares with PNI a reliance on emergence, paradox, and complexity in the discovery of solutions to difficult problems. Says White:

> The therapist facilitates the development of these alternative storylines by introducing questions that encourage people to recruit their lived experience, to stretch their minds, to exercise their imagination, and to employ their meaning-making resources. People become curious about, and fascinated with, previously neglected aspects of their lives and relationships, and as these conversations proceed, these alternative storylines thicken, become more significantly rooted in history, and provide people with a foundation for new initiatives in addressing the problems, predicaments, and dilemmas of their lives.

PNI and narrative therapy differ, and can complement each other, in two ways. First, PNI can offer greater depth of inquiry to narrative therapy by supplementing comparison with catalytic pattern detection. For example, building graphs of interpretation counts might help people confront hidden assumptions about community problems in ways that enhance the development of "alternative storylines."

Second, PNI can help narrative therapy loosen its reliance on expert therapists and become more participative in practice. Narrative therapy looks in this direction (this is from Gerald Monk's *Narrative Therapy in Practice*):

> ... the counselor is mindful of taking a tentative position--one based on what the well-known family therapist Lynn Hoffman called *deliberate ignorance*. Prediction, certainty, and expert interpretation do not fit with a narrative cycle of working. Developing too much certainty about how to proceed runs the risk of producing a rigid and inflexible practice. The unchecked power or certainty of the counselor's expertise may easily silence knowledge and abilities that might otherwise have come forth from the client.

But still, "the therapist" is central to all such writings, which gives them both an essential and a dangerously vulnerable place in the work.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

AI is an approach to organizational and community work that is narrative and participatory (though in a somewhat more limited way than PNI can be) and supports sensemaking for decision support. Like PNI it is an offshoot of PAR, and like PNI it emphasizes social construction of meaning. It does not go quite as deeply into inquiry as PNI does. But most importantly, unlike PNI, AI focuses exclusively on positive stories. AI is a bit like PNI's nerdy yet endearing neighbor who always harps on one theme but is tolerated for the sake of peace and quiet.

AI proponents often say it differs from "problem-focused" approaches. PNI's focus is not on problems *or* solutions but on *experience*, of which no element is required, featured, excluded or ignored. I understand the point of AI's focus on the positive as an antidote to an excessive focus on problems in organizations. But I also believe such a focus can be dangerously simplistic *in some contexts*. Listening to positive stories does not always lead to positive change, and listening to negative stories does not always lead to negative

change. There is no such simple mapping between story and outcome. In fact, in many narrative projects I have seen strong positive results, in the form of untapped energy suddenly released, come about as a result of paying respectful attention as people talk about their fears and worries, not instead of but *intermixed* with their hopes and assets.

Most Significant Change (MSC)

MSC, like AI, is a moderately participatory method that gathers stories and supports decision making. It is compact and simple to use. It involves mainly the interpretation of stories through comparison. I recommend readers look into MSC and consider incorporating it into their toolkits. But I do have three small problems with MSC that cause me to recommend it only conditionally.

The first is a problem with the word "significant." The MSC guide (by Rick Davies and Jess Dart) says:

> The central part of MSC is an open question to participants, such as: 'Looking back over the last month, what do you think was the most significant change in the quality of people's lives in this community?'

Davies and Dart do say that the story should be significant to the storyteller, but asking the question in this way, if it is not handled well, could send two messages. First, it could signal that even though "significant to you" is stated, "significant to me" is actually meant; and people could perform to expectation, selecting stories of hopefully high relevance. Second, it could signal that even if "significant to you" is meant, the story *itself* should be significant, meaning well-formed; and people could again perform to expectation, telling stories of hopefully high narrative quality. In either case the result could lead not to discovery but to conformity. If I was going to use this question I would add a statement like, "We would like to hear about your experiences. We want to hear about what has been important to *you*, not what may be important to others or what makes the best story."

The second problem with MSC is its use of hierarchical structures for story selection. As I understand it MSC recommends either setting up a temporary hierarchy to select stories or using an existing organizational hierarchy. My response is that hierarchy is not required when stories can select themselves. If you ask people questions about their stories, selecting some stories for a purpose need not involve any top-down decision making; it can be as simple as sorting some cards or cells in a spreadsheet. For example, you could ask each storyteller whether their story might be useful to children, outsiders, or elders; whether it mentions particular themes, roles or issues; and other possible sorting needs. Even something as simple as asking people how they feel about their stories can be useful in sorting the stories for various purposes later on. This seems to me a more egalitarian as well as less time-consuming way to select stories for future use. It also has the benefit of excluding consideration of story quality, which (unless you are choosing stories for persuasive communication) is misplaced.

The third problem I have with MSC is that it is a very, very simple process devoid of any need to deal with messy reality. This is both a benefit and a detriment. From what I have seen, ordinary people can deal with messy complexity much better than MSC seems to believe. So MSC -- with minor modifications -- could be a useful stepping stone on the road to participatory narrative work, but I would like to see people move past it (in time) to something that does more justice to the amazing capacity people have to make sense of stories together. I guess I see MSC like a teacher who means well but can't help underestimating everybody's intelligence. Sometimes it's wonderfully useful, and sometimes it's just irritating.

Narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry (NI) is a form of research in which stories are collected from "informants" by expert researchers, and those researchers interpret, compare, juxtapose and analyze those stories in order to address an issue. Because narrative inquiry is obviously PNI's overbearing big sister who knows she is right, I will spend a little more time considering it.

Traditionally narrative inquiry has not been open to participation, considering all people without solid academic credentials to be unreliable amateurs incapable of insight. However, I discern some movement in the field that says perhaps the gap between narrative inquiry and participatory narrative inquiry is not as large at it once was. Says D. Jean Clandinin in the Handbook of Narrative Inquiry:

> I have been wrestling with this dilemma [of interpreting the words of others] for many years, and I have come to believe, at least at this point, that the most ethical approach is to explain to the participant at the close of the interview that what I will write about his or her interview will depend on the general conclusions I make about the whole group. ... I then try to write about each person with great sensitivity to how they might feel if they were to read it, but I take some comfort in knowing that, for most participants, it is highly unlikely that they will ever read what I publish.

I sense a tension in that statement, an unease with the ways things have always been, and I find that tension everywhere people are writing about narrative inquiry today. Such tension is the entire subject of an article by Katherine Borland ("That's not what I said: interpretive conflict in oral narrative research" in *The Oral History Reader*; and yes, there is abundant overlap between oral history and narrative inquiry). In this article (which seems as if it was *written* to be mentioned in this book) Borland recounts an interaction with her grandmother, Beatrice, whom she interviewed in a study about women's work in the past. In the interview Beatrice told a story, and Borland interpreted it as related to particular elements of historical feminism she was writing about. After showing her grandmother the article in which she interpreted the story, Borland received a "fourteen-page letter" from her grandmother disagreeing with the interpretation. She quotes a section of the 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 explains 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.

A likely story, as they say. I don't believe time constraints prevented Borland from asking her grandmother what her story meant. In fact, I am *sure* it was not that, because I have asked thousands of people what their stories mean, and it takes very little time to do so. I believe traditional beliefs about what "informants" know about what they say was the true culprit. This is clear in 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?

I see four unexamined assumptions wrapped up in that statement, and I would like to respond to each of them.

First, Borland assumes that only expert interviewers can "constitute the initial audience for narratives." Not true. To begin with, there are many ways to collect stories. People can interview each other and trade stories in groups without any experts being present, and in fact I give this method my highest recommendation. But even if expert interviewing is used, its being the initial audience only matters if it controls entry to all other audiences. Say I interview you, and rather than telling you I will interpret your story as I see fit, I tell you that I will carry your exact words and intonations into a sensemaking workshop of community members without adding any interpretations of my own. Will you perceive me as constituting the initial audience for the narrative, or will you perceive me merely as a *conduit* through which your story will pass to its intended audience? Probably both. But such things as audiences are only simple when projects are simple; and projects don't have to be simple.

Second, Borland assumes that because interviewers influence the stories they collect, asking people what their stories mean will not add anything to interviews. I can't quite understand the logic of this statement. It's like saying because the car cannot fly we might as well walk. My response is: Go ahead and let people interpret their own stories. They know a lot more than you think they do about them. Besides, it does not matter if people are "wrong" about their stories, because stories -- I mean, *raw stories of personal experience* -- are not about facts or evidence anyway. They are about feelings and perspectives. What better way of getting at feelings and perspectives could there *be* than asking storytellers 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. The more I read about narrative research, the more I find myself wanting to shake narrative researchers and say: You have the people right there! Ask them what their stories mean to them! You have so much to gain and nothing to lose by it!

Third, Borland assumes that the fact that the "later presentation of those stories ... will influence the way in which prospective readers will interpret the texts" has to be a *bad* thing. Not true. What Borland sees as a weakness of narrative inquiry is a *strength* of PNI. The presentation of stories is central to the sensemaking that feeds discovery. The structure of PNI, including storyteller interpretation of stories, is what makes that presentation work to preserve the context of the original story, grant interpretive respect to the original storyteller, and support collective sensemaking.

Fourth, Borland assumes that narrative researchers, and only narrative researchers, own "their" responsibility to provide interpretations of experience. PNI does not accept such separation but shares the responsibility among all community members, including all storytellers. Let me clarify this. When the goal of research is to establish conclusive proof of scientific laws, the burden of responsibility is solely on the researcher. No scientist would say the general public shares a responsibility to prove that hand lotion cause cancer. But narrative research cannot and should not be used to prove anything conclusively anyway. Its best use is to support the making of decisions and plans, and for that participation offers not "illusory" but real benefits.

Lest I seem to be berating this excellent article, let me say that I found it so heartening that I could not stop thinking about it for weeks. Just the fact that a narrative researcher thought the subject was worth

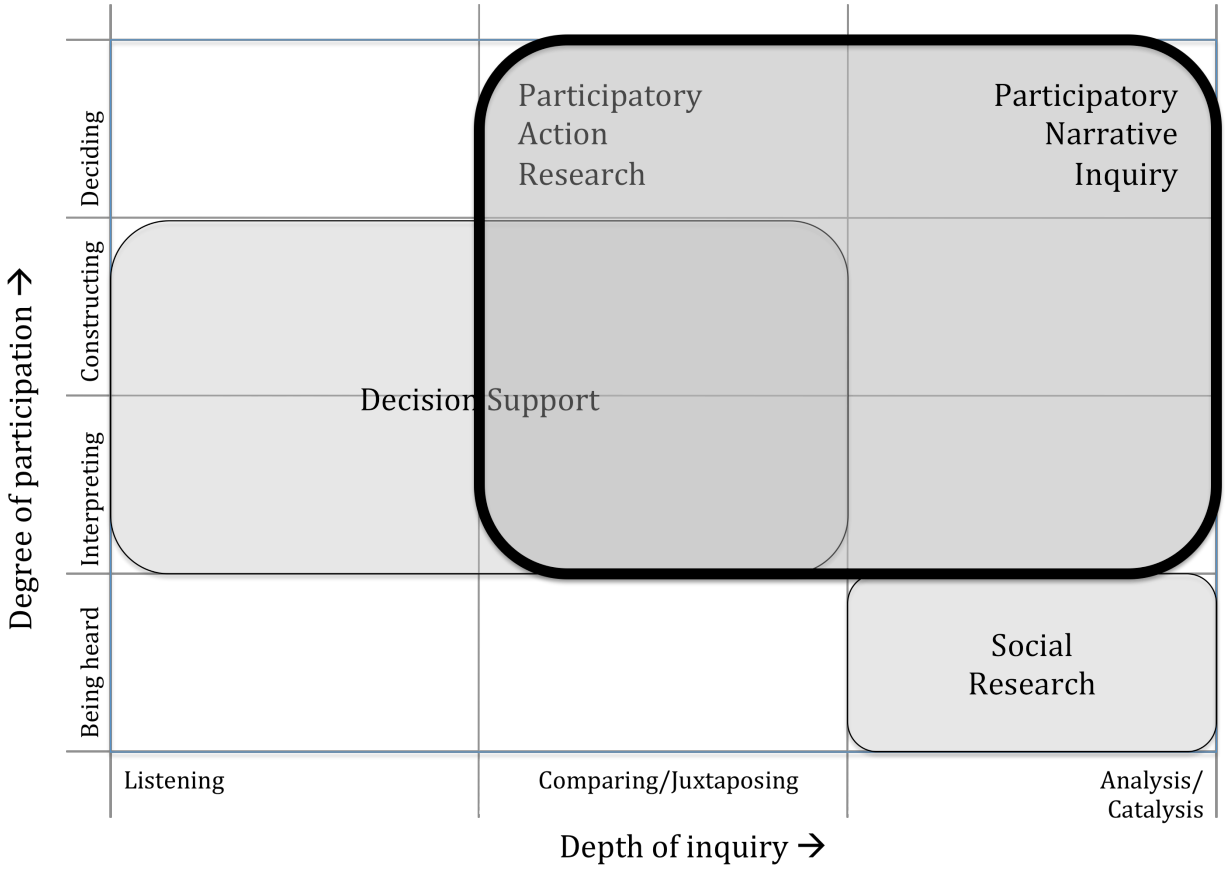
bringing up (and the book editors though it was worth including) tells me narrative inquiry may be ready for a dose of participation.

Now here is the part of Katherine Borland's story that I found the most exciting. Her article included a postscript, which I hope you will excuse my quoting at length.

> ... after 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. While Bea's identification with feminism is not crucial to my argument, it stands as a testament to the new possibilities for understanding that aris when we re-envision the fieldwork exchange.

The process Borland describes here is *exactly* the process PNI brings into practice. In the unintended 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.

Now we move into methods that do not deliberately involve narrative, and for that we need a new diagram (just because there wasn't enough room on the other one).



PNI shown in relation to some more fields.

Decision support

The methods of decision support are many, varied and sometimes contentious. These include scenario planning, SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), systems thinking, the Delphi method, prediction markets, and various other tools and techniques. Each of these has its merits and issues, but none feature narrative strongly. Even scenario planning, though it does build stories, does not gather or work with real stories of personal experience. What most decision support methods share with PNI is an emphasis on participation in interpretation and construction of things -- usually populated matrices of meaning or possibility -- through comparison and juxtaposition. PNI can interact with all such methods by supplying narrative and catalytic material for sensemaking.

To continue the family-and-friends metaphor, the many methods of decision support are like PNI's neighbors in helping-people-think-together world. Like all good neighbors PNI and decision support methods help each other out from time to time.

Social research

Research fields that study people, such as sociology and anthropology, touch on PNI in that they also concern themselves with examining beliefs, feelings and perspectives. These fields, however, concern themselves not with decision support but with proof and evidence, things about which PNI has little if anything to say. As such these are friends of PNI's older sister narrative inquiry (PNI believes they are not the best of friends its sister could have, but narrative inquiry chooses its own friends).

Where PNI and social research complement each other is in the places where proof and decision support can both make useful contributions to solving a problem. In these situations PNI and social research put aside their differences and see what can be done.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

I finish with the most important connection of all. Participatory action research (sometimes called just "action research," but I like it with the participatory part spelled out) is research that supports action through participation. Says Yolanda Wadsworth in *Do It Yourself Social Research*:

> [P]articipatory action research recognises explicitly that in some sense *all* research also involves the participation of people who are more or less consciously party to the inquiry effort--researchers, researched and various groups of 'researched for'--and that this participation can be incorporated consciously for the purposes of enhancing the inquiry's effectiveness. The connection between participation and action--particularly the dynamic social or intersubjective construction of reality (and realities)--is also utilised rather than suppressed, denied or ignored.

If you think this sounds like participatory narrative inquiry, you are absolutely correct. I do not mind telling you that PAR is PNI's best friend. But PNI has some plans you should know about. Do you remember PNI's overbearing, always-right sister narrative inquiry? PNI believes that PAR needs narrative inquiry as much as narrative inquiry needs PAR. The two of them just don't know it yet.

Says Davydd Greenwood in *Introduction to Action Research*:

> AR centers on doing "with" rather than doing "for" stakeholders and credits local stakeholders with the richness of experience and reflective possibilities that long experience living in complex situations brings with it. ... This focus on the world of experience, with its complexity, historicity, and dynamism, means that AR distances itself from the often purified world of conventional social research with its friction-free, perfect information and "other things being equal" assumptions that make being an academic easier, though at the cost of also being irrelevant.

The richness of experience, the long experience living in complex situations, the historicity and dynamism PAR requires can be found most effectively in narrative work. Why PAR has not made more explicit use of narrative is a mystery I cannot explain, but most descriptions of PAR I have found make no mention of narrative. They tend to mention surveys, interviews and town meetings, but never gathering and working with stories. Narrative is what PAR has been waiting for. Even its treatment of context matches the narrative approach; here is Greenwood again:

> AR [action research] processes do not make claims for context-free knowledge. The conventional concept of generalizability equates the general with what is universally true, context notwithstanding. Because AR is built on the notion that all meaningful inquiry is context bound, it offers a very different concept of general knowledge, one that we believe is more powerful and certainly much more useful.

Now I will ask (beg) you to allow me to show you two more quotes that clearly show narrative inquiry reaching out on its side to PAR (this is from Elliot Mishler's *Research Interviewing*):

> ... the interviewer's presence and form of involvement--how she or he listens, attends, encourages, interrupts, digresses, initiates topics, and terminates responses--is integral to a respondent's account. It is in this specific sense that a "story" is a joint production. How the interviewer's role is to be taken into account is of course a difficult problem, but it is not solved by making the interviewer invisible and inaudible, by painting her or him out of the picture.

And this (from D. Jean Clandinin's *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry*):

> The task of the narrative researcher is to relate the meanings of an individual's story to larger, theoretically significant categories in social science, a task distinct from the individuals' specific interest in their own personal story.... Thus, at the level of the report, the researcher and the participant are at cross-purposes, and I think that even those who construe their work as "giving voice" and imagine the participants to be fully collaborative with them in the research endeavor are in part deluding themselves. The researchers are interested in the research questions (and their careers). The participants are interested in themselves. Thus, there is a division between the personal narrative told by the participant and the "typal" narrative, a narrative that exemplifies something of theoretical interest, created by the researcher. From the moment of arranging to meet, through the interview or observation, through the transcription, through the analysis, the researcher's interpretation is omnipresent.

The reason I disagree with Clandinin's statements is the same reason I believe narrative inquiry needs PAR. PAR discards as useless the premise that researcher and participant are working at cross purposes. PAR does not believe participants are "interested in themselves" alone. Instead, it actively enlists them in the work by making them researchers in their own right. In my own experience I find that people are much more willing -- and able -- to become researchers than most researchers find plausible (or in some cases, comfortable). PAR is not about sharing research results; it is about sharing research. And like its best friend, PNI is about *sharing the story of research* as much as it is about sharing the research of stories.

Why does PAR need narrative? Because direct-questioning surveys don't reach far enough into beliefs, feelings and experiences to support the action people want to make happen. Because power differences surface in voting and other non-narrative group methods, even when you say they won't. Because the little people are afraid to speak even when you tell them they can and should, and being asked to tell their stories gives people courage that their experiences matter. Because people don't know how to think together, even when you say they can; and in the same way that interpreting stories is part of "the basic equipment for life" and is thus available to any person on any jury of peers, telling stories is part of the same basic equipment and is thus available to any person involved in any PAR project. Essentially, everything PAR does well, it can do better with stories. And everything narrative inquiry does well, it can do better with participation.

The time has come to state it boldly: The goal of participatory narrative inquiry is to bring about nothing less than a marriage between narrative inquiry and participatory action research. All of PNI's ideas and methods support this essential task.

Objections to this picture

If we put aside your almost-certain irritation with my extended friends-and-family metaphor, you may have a few problems with the picture I have drawn here. Two objections are small and one is large. I will cover the small ones first. First, you may say that narrative inquiry includes participation, or PAR includes narrative, or oral history includes inquiry, or any number of "yes but" answers to my simplistic characterizations of these fields. My answer to all these objections is that I have drawn out what appear to me to be the *dominant* features of each field. It is what dominates each field that determines how well they complement each other.

Second, why merge fields? You may say. Why not respect differences? I am all for that. Let a thousand ideas bloom. In fact, I encourage you to put together your own set of methods and approaches, and build your own diagrams that represent the way you want to support your work. My point is not that these

fields should merge, but that they should speak. These fields have much to give each other, but in practical fact they rarely speak. PNI wants to throw a party and get all its friends and relatives talking. Maybe something good will come of it.

Now to come to the large objection: that PNI is not participatory enough to call itself participatory. People making this claim will have read ahead to the "PNI stories" at the end of this book and noted that none of the ones I wrote about actually involved people making decisions for their own communities. In fact, a suspicious number of them involve companies selling things. What sort of participation is this? They say. (At least *I* would say that if I were reading this.)

I should be clear about the history of the development of PNI. I am an independent consultant with a business, and I have bills to pay just like everybody else. PNI grew out of corporate and government work for big clients, so it makes sense that the projects I can tell you about involve me being paid to help people do something. Otherwise I could have never stayed in this career long enough to write this book. Someday I would like to write twice as many stories about more participatory projects than I have written about to date. If you would consider the name of PNI to be partly realistic and partly aspirational, that would fit the facts of its history perfectly.

But participation means many things to many people. How participatory is participatory enough? Is an increase in participation worthwhile even if it does not raise the roof? I think it is. Here is my argument to support that claim.

To begin with, I suggest we use as a point of reference the stepwise framework often used for participation in development work (this comes originally from the work of Jules Pretty and Rachel Hine; I copy a version of the steps from Tim Prentki's *Applied Theatre Reader*):

> *Passive participation*: People participate by being told what is going to happen or has already happened.
>
> *Participation in information gathering*: People participate by answering questions posed by extractive researchers using questionnaire surveys or such similar approaches. People do not have the opportunity to influence proceedings.
>
> *Participation by consultation*: External people listen to the views of local people. External professionals define both problems and solutions, and may modify these in the light of people's responses.
>
> *Participation for material benefits*: People participate by providing resources, for example labour, in return for food, cash or other material incentives. People have no stake in prolonging activities when the incentives end.
>
> *Functional participation*: People participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to the project. Such involvement tends to occur after major decisions have been made. These institutions tend to be dependent on external initiators and facilitators, but may become self-reliant.
>
> *Interactive participation*: People participate in joint analysis, which leads to action plans and the formation of new local institutions or the strengthening of existing ones. Groups take over local decisions, and so people have a stake in maintaining structures or practices.
>
> *Self-mobilization*: People participate by taking initiatives independent of external institutions to change systems. They develop contacts with external organisations for resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used.

You could argue that asking people to tell stories, then asking people what those stories mean, is just a fancy way of extracting information from them. But I would like to argue that the process of reflecting on a story you have just told, even if it is done in isolation, is more participatory than simple extraction. I know this not because of some abstract concept but because I have watched people learn from their own stories and those of others. I have watched people tell stories in workshops and interviews, and even in web forms. I have heard many people recount how they discovered things they did not know. Saying this is the same as self-mobilization would be wrong in both fact and deed. But I believe it ranks higher than simple extraction. I chose the name of PNI to separate the approach from traditional narrative inquiry, in which (as we saw above) stories are collected, examined, interpreted, summarized, and retold by experts -- with "informants" doing nothing but having their stories surgically extracted.

But PNI does not want to rest at the simple self-reflection level. I have always encouraged my clients, and I encourage you, to include as much participation in group sensemaking as is possible in PNI projects. In my experience the greater the degree of participation the stronger the positive impact of any project that involves people and aims to improve some situation faced by those people. I have also noticed that some forms of participation are easier to manage than others. So I generally encourage people planning projects to think about taking one more step up the staircase of participation, wherever they find themselves now; but I order the steps so as to make the transition more feasible in practice. If you are asking people to tell you stories, why not ask them what their stories mean? If you already do that, why not ask people what the stories other people told mean? If you already do that, why not ask people to build something with their stories? Why not ask them what that means? If you already do that, why not ask people if they can see any trends in the stories that have been told? If you already do that, why not ask people to design interventions based on the stories they have told and heard? Then, why not ask people to help you plan new projects? And so on. The more participatory PNI is the better it works. I may not have seen this happen at the "self-mobilization" level (yet) but I *definitely* have seen it happen at the "interactive participation" level.

Finally, I would like to point out that not all authority is abuse and not all control is coercion. Many communities rely on elders who speak from experience and guide action. Listen to Alex Haley (in *The Oral History Reader*) describe the griots of West Africa:

> And then they told me about something I never had any concept existed in this world. They told me that in the back country, and particularly in the older villages of the back country, there were old men called *griots*, who are in effect walking, living archives of oral history. They are the old men who, from the time they had been in their teen-ages, have been part of a line of men who tell the stories as they have been told since the time of their forefathers, literally down across centuries. ... And the stories were told in a narrative, oral history way, not verbatim, but the essential same way they had been told down across the time since the forefathers. And the way they were trained was that the teen-age boy was exposed to that story for forty or fifty years before he would become the oral historian incumbent.

It is not *always* wrong for some people to have more control of some processes than others. Rarely is everyone in a community willing or able to participate equally in all phases of a story project, and sometimes it really is all right for some people to make decisions others don't. If that were not true there would be no reason for you to read this book, because who am *I* to assert authority on this subject? (Don't answer that question.) Look, stories should never be commodities extracted without care from one place and shipped to another to suit a foreign purpose. That is why I tend to use biological metaphors for stories: seeds, cells, swimming fish, grazing herds. But living organisms do sometimes need to be taken from one person and given to another, if only to help them thrive. Bonds of responsibility and care need not be bonds of ownership. Participation can be handed down the centuries as much as it is handed round

the room, and there is room in human social life for a rich interplay between these time-honored forms of participation.

You left one out!

I hear one final objection: you forgot organizational storytelling. All right. The diverse field called organizational storytelling includes people interested in branding, sales, marketing, advocacy, activism, entertainment, and education. Many of its practitioners help organizations (theirs or ones they consult to) craft compelling stories for campaigns meant to persuade, sell, promote or teach. Some gather stories as a means to find "gems" they can incorporate into persuasive stories, or to help form their message or improve its delivery. However, gathering and working with stories is rarely the dominant feature of work in organizational storytelling, as evidenced by the prominence of the word "telling" in the name of the field. Its primary goal is to tell stories for a purpose.

How can PNI and organizational storytelling work together? The intervention phase of PNI is a perfect place to make use of the great mass of expertise in storytelling available in the organizational storytelling field. Many smart people have thought about the best ways to craft and deliver purposeful stories. In the References appendix I recommend some excellent books that will help you craft purposeful stories when it comes time to do that. PNI gathers excellent raw material for story crafting but does not put much attention into shaping it into purposeful stories. Why? Partly because the primary goal of PNI is decision support, not communication; partly because so many resources already exist to do that; and partly for historical reasons -- it just didn't come up much as PNI developed.

However, let me sound a warning. Be careful not to let what you learn about building and telling purposeful stories reduce your appreciation for raw stories of personal experience. I have seen many people drawn in by the siren song of the perfect story, even to the extent that they refuse to use the term "story" to refer to regular people talking about what has happened to them. Each type of story has its merits and uses in context, and each type of story deserves respect for what it alone provides.

PNI opportunities

For this section of the book I wanted 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 the book. I wanted to communicate the *scope* of opportunities you can gain by listening to stories, to show you the lay of the land and give you a fly-over of what I've seen in my own work.

To do this, I skimmed over all of the reports, records and other project-related writings I've created over the past decade. Every time I saw an *outcome* (something found out, confronted, noticed, discovered, enabled, 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 the project materials I could find, I had about 200 such outcomes. I clustered those, clustered the clusters, gave the clusters names, and removed redundant items. Thus the 133 sorted statements that follow are all summaries of real, usually much more detailed, statements about patterns I and others saw in stories and in answers to questions about them. What I suggest you do with these is, when you read the words "this" and "that," substitute whatever issues *you* want to consider and see what ideas the exercise gives you.

Note that in many of the 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.

The list of outcomes I discovered from this remembering exercise has these large clusters:

1. Climbing through the looking glass -- finding out what you look like from the other side
2. Building a field guide -- finding natural distinctions among storytellers
3. Exploring natural history -- getting to know your storytellers
4. Talking to the elephants -- confronting taboo problems
5. Harvesting ideas -- finding solutions you hadn't thought of
6. Healing the machine -- building trust

I will go through each of these 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 climbing through a mirror rather than looking into one, because you are asking them to *bring you into their mirror world* and show you around. When you immerse yourself in the stories people tell, you are not just looking into their world, you are *going there*. So the outcomes in this cluster all have to do with what people found out by climbing through the mirror.

How they see us. These 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 as 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 of outcomes has to do with gaining a better understanding of the characteristics and groupings of people who are telling stories. I'd say one of the most frequent positive outcomes of story projects is that people realize either that there are subgroups among the storytellers that were previously unknown, or that the subgroups that exist are different from was previously understood. These 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 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 treat both groups the same way, because what works for one motivation 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 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 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 story work excels.

Life history: what makes people tick. These outcomes reveal essential facts about the feelings, beliefs and perspectives of a group of people being considered.

- So *that* is what motivates them.

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.
- That 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 *this* 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 outcomes reveal not so much what people are like, but what explains their actions or inactions.

- So *that's* why they did 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 that they might not react so strongly.
- 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. 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 outcomes explore what people need to be satisfied with the conditions they find themselves in.

- So *that's* what these people want.

We hadn't realized that people need that. We haven't been giving that to them.

- They *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, 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 and so 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 that. 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 very much.
- 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 issue. 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 story 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. This can have a cathartic effect on a person or group or population, in a workshop, in a private office sitting alone, in a building, across an organization. However, the moment when the elephants start to talk is also one of the most dangerous moments in a story project, because people are most likely to turn away or shred the project in reaction. That is one of the reasons why confronting a mass of collected stories is best done in the context of a sensemaking session.

For example, say people have collected some hundreds of stories and they are going to have a few dozen people work with the stories in a sensemaking workshop. These people might think they should send out the stories for people to read before the session, as "homework," to save time for the more important activities that will take place in the session. I've seen that done, so I usually recommend against doing this and suggest handing out printed stories at the start of the session itself. Why? Because the context is different. If people are reading stories alone, perhaps in the midst of other work, they are not ready to hear the elephants talking and will dismiss or ignore them (and then the elephants will not attend the sensemaking session). But when people arrive at a sensemaking session *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 outcomes have to do with the moment of discovery, when people either realize they have elephants they have never seen before; or they realize the elephants are much bigger than they suspected; or they realize the elephants need attention, and soon.

- 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 this one is considered a minor annoyance, but *this* one is much worse.
- We thought that issue was very serious, but here is *another* issue that we hadn'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 issue.

- The trend is *worsening*, not getting better.

This is a portrait of a disaster waiting to happen.

Listening to the elephants: understanding the problem better. These outcomes have to do not with discovering 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* and that 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 those rumors have been coming from.
- We thought that 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 set of situations was described frequently and seemed to often lead to this outcome. Perhaps we can watch out for that situation and help people avoid that outcome in the future.

- It looks like people facing *this* situation/context have very different needs than people facing *this* situation/context. 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 attention to whether people are entering this period in which problems tend to be more frequent.

Perhaps this isn't a problem that can be addressed but 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* situation, but it *does* work well for *that* situation.

- We thought that *this* was causing *that*, but actually, from what people are saying, they think this *other* thing is causing it.

Living with the elephants: addressing the problem. These 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 *that* 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 to know nothing about something you know a lot about is a prerequisite for getting anything useful out of listening to stories.

Ideas for doing things better. These outcomes cover discoveries of solutions worth exploring.

- We never realized that we could do *that* with *that*.
- If we changed *this*, we might get a better response than what we have been getting.
- This probably won't work for what we had *thought* it would do, but we've never realized we could use it for *that*.
- So this *little* thing could have an impact on that *big* thing? We had not thought of trying that.
- It looks like this thing that we were seeing as a problem is *simultaneously* 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 and helps people get past obstacles.

This seems to be something people wish could happen but don't really believe is practical. How much closer to that ideal could we help people get?

This is a portrait of an effective solution.

- If we help *these* people with *this*, they should have less trouble trying to do *that*.

Ideas for helping people help themselves. These outcomes represent new ideas, but not ideas to solve the problem so much as 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 and 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 find *these* conditions. 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* oppportunity, 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 address *that* issue we can stem the tide and help people solve the problem.

Healing the machine

The last cluster of outcomes from story listening projects involves the impact not on those who listened to stories but *on those who told the stories*. The opportunity to be heard and to contribute *can* be the most important opportunity a story project provides. If lying to people about collecting their stories breaks the storytelling machine, truly listening to people, and making sure they know you are listening and value their contribution, has the opposite effect. It builds trust.

I've seen projects that seized this opportunity and used it to change how people felt about and perceived both listeners and tellers, and I've seen projects that squandered the opportunity, even when it was badly needed. How you talk about the project to people is very important. It takes work and testing, but usually you can find a way to convey to a group of people that their unique experiences are valuable to something you all care about.

How you collect stories and what you do with them also has an impact on trust. For example, say you put out a report on a new policy direction that includes not only the insights arrived at in a sensemaking session, but also all the original stories from which those insights flowed. When the storytellers see how their unique experiences contributed to the new direction in policy, they see what they did to help and will be willing to help again (and perhaps most importantly, see themselves as someone who helps). But if you listen to them *without giving them any indication that you used what they said*, they may assume (rightly or wrongly) that you discarded their contribution. It can sometimes be hard to admit that grand policy conclusions were based partly on simple stories. Sometimes the experts in the group find it hard to share attribution with the laity. To be honest I've seen few projects that were willing to keep storytellers in the loop as the results of story listening were brought out. But when I *have* seen it done I've been amazed by the energy it has produced; and that is energy that future projects can tap into.

There is only one sub-cluster in this group. These outcomes, unlike all the others, are not about things you learn but about *what happens to storytellers as they 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 issue, 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 sorry when it was over.

- *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.

With that our fly-over view of the story-listening land of opportunity comes to a safe landing. I hope it has been helpful in planning your own journey.

PNI dangers

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 statements. 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 story projects come out badly. I will describe three classes of danger, each in increasing order of magnitude.

Dead silence

The smallest danger in PNI work is that the collection attempt fails. You try to collect many stories but get few. I've seen this happen when the people collecting the stories don't have a lot of experience in designing questions, or when people don't know how to recover during an interview or workshop when stories are not getting told. I remember on one story project we had to add extra tags to distinguish the relatively few stories from the great mass of opinions and lectures. It wasn't the fault of the respondents that so many non-stories got collected; the problem was in the project and question design. Sometimes poor communications about the nature and goals of the project can lead people to give you other things than stories. People are not used to being asked to tell stories, and if you are not quite clear about that you will often get other things such as opinions, statements or scenarios.

The reason this danger is the smallest is that you can recover from it by trying again. It is not always easy to get the same people to give you more time, but you can often get *other* people from the same group to talk to you. In fact, I usually recommend to people who are just starting to collect stories that they plan some very small collections at the start, of even 20 or 30 stories, so they can see for themselves what works and what doesn't. After they do this, they are more able to adapt when they start doing larger projects.

Self-delusion mastery

Kaffee: I want the truth!

Col. Jessep: [shouts] You can't handle the truth!

- A Few Good Men, 1992

Sometimes people 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 story projects I came up with no fewer than fifteen ways people limit or destroy their own projects. All of the patterns I describe here can come also 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 people 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 publically 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 people to sign non-disclosure agreements so that they will not tell everyone what you have asked them about. Or you can ask the safer questions widely and the more dangerous questions in smaller groups. Or you can ask about a general issue and hope the specific problem you want to find out about comes up. Or you can anonymize more heavily than usual so that people will tell you more of the truth you need to hear. (See the section on privacy, in the story collection chapter of the first volume, for some ideas about increasing anonymity.) Or you can restrict what is done with what is collected so that only a small number of "coal-face miners" are exposed to all of the nasty raw truth. It's like working with dangerous chemicals in a laboratory with proper ventilation and rigid safety protocols: much can be done when you are careful. It sometimes takes some sensemaking work (including opening old wounds) to find these compromises, however, and not everyone is ready or able to do that.

Coded questions. Sometimes people 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 many of them get inserted without the project planners even knowing they are doing it. Sensemaking exercises and deliberate diversity in the planning group can help with this issue. But the best guard against this danger is to pilot-test questions and ask people for their reactions to the survey. Such pilot testing 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 survey make you feel like it is asking the question do want to keep your job?" might be interpreted as "if you want to keep your job, say this survey is not asking the question do you want to keep your job." Sometimes a naive outsider can help unravel that mess, because they can say what cannot be said.

Hopeless questions. Sometimes people 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 so that respondents feel the survey is not worth answering. Respondents might feel that what they say will not be listened to, or the questions may simply be so boring that they don't engage people. This sometimes happens when people have to write questions for people they have disagreements with or contempt for or little knowledge of, or when they are doing a project because someone else is

making them and they don't think it will work. This reminds me of when 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 had a pattern of either running away or collapsing in a giggling heap when people answered the door, which also didn't work.) Pilot testing helps 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 really want to do it. If you can't summon the energy to find *something* that excites you about the project, you won't be able to get respondents to respond with energy either. Use fantasy to bring out your hopes and dreams for the project. What would make it succeed fantastically well? Then harness some of that energy in what you ask people to tell stories about.

Fantastic questions. Sometimes the people planning a story project get so caught up in the story-ness of it 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 people step up to the challenge and provide wonderful performances that reveal almost nothing of their true feelings or experiences. Other people decide 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 what they have to say, even it if 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 asking the right questions in the right way.

Off-base questions. Sometimes people ask questions that make no sense to the respondents, or are even offensive or inappropriate, because those asking don't know enough about the worlds of those answering to ask the right things (and sometimes don't *want* to know). 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 manipulation of the purpose of the project. This reminds me of something that happened when I was in college. I had a physics professor whom *I* thought was a great teacher. He was always showing us wonderful experiments, and his delight in his subject was infectuous (at least to me). The only problem was, he was under-confident and 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 of the students thought it was a great opportunity to make fun of him. When we were asked to do an evaluation of this professor, I heard 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 in making that outcome so easy for the students to game.

Poorly aimed questions. Sometimes people ask questions that are focused on one issue, and that issue turns out not to be important to respondents, so they don't respond to it. But the burning issue that all the respondents *want* to talk about is not asked about. I've seen this happen when story projects are embedded in larger "task force" type projects where goals are so rigidly structured as to plan against surprise. This is self-sabotage by excessive planning. Usually if there are some things you really do need to know about, it is best to balance focus with breadth and ask a few questions that open the field to anything people might want to contribute. If you are asking people to tell you stories and you know *nothing at all* about their worlds, try doing some broad, undirected story collection first. Just ask people to talk about happy times

and sad times, or surprises. Or find some other sources of information about their lives. Find a few "informants" who can give you insights, or find works of fiction that delve into the experience of those you want to talk to. Pretend you are a method actor and get into character. Learn more about the points of view and experiences you want to tap into before you try asking people about anything specific.

Question overload. Sometimes people ask good questions, but they ask too many of them. Usually this is because their project's goals are overly ambitious, or they think they will never get people to answer their questions again, or their storytellers are required to answer, or they are under-confident in the process. I remember one project where somebody forced respondents to answer close to a hundred questions about each story. You can imagine how many of those answers represented real thoughts. I've written about this issue elsewhere so I won't say more about it here.

Asking the wrong people. Sometimes people 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 the patients so they ask the doctors, or they can't stand the idea of asking customers so they ask the customer-facing staff what the customers think. Again, this results in stories that don't address the issues, giving people a way to sidestep the real problem. What I've done sometimes to help clients plan whom they will ask to tell stories is to use a landscape of dimensions (see the sensemaking chapters) to talk about communities or groups that might have stories to tell about the issues of concern. Groups you think of while considering one space in a landscape (perhaps those whose work is fixed and broad in scope) will differ from groups that seem to fit into another spot. Considering all the areas of the space can help you make sure you have considered all relevant views on the issue. Often while doing this people become aware of opportunities for exploring an issue through story work that they had not considered before.

Asking at the wrong time. Sometimes people ask good questions of the right people, but they pick inopportune times for it. This usually happens because the project planners don't know enough (or don't want to know enough) about the people telling stories to know when is a good time. 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 storytellers is the cure here.

Mismatched collection methods. Sometimes people write good questions, and the right number of questions, and they find the right people, but they approach the collection 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 even if it isn't the best way. I worry about people gravitating to online surveys because it's cheaper, when it doesn't work for all groups and topics. There are many ways to collect stories, but not all work equally well for every group and about every topic. For example, it's hard to get most older people to answer an online survey, and it's hard to get teenagers to come to a group session. Delicate topics require extra thought and planning. Sometimes I've seen people with projects where they need to approach two groups of people, and the two groups need different approaches, but the idea of colllecting stories in different ways is too difficult, so they just pick one and run with it. However, what happens in that case is that one group gets over-represented in the story collection, or one group tells different or better stories, because one group had a better fit with the collection technique than the other. The best antidote to this problem is knowing your storytellers and knowing the pluses and minuses of the different collection methods.

Not collecting stories. Sometimes people don't know how to ask questions whose answers are stories, or don't bother to learn. Worse, they don't *know* they aren't getting stories, so they don't try to fix the problem until it's too late. So they go all the way into *trying* to work with the stories, but since they didn't actually collect *stories* the magic of narrative is missing and they get only bland predictable outcomes.

They do everything "right" except that they are using story methods on non-stories, so nothing works. This can sometimes be a problem with having inexperienced people conduct narrative interviews. It can be a great asset to have interviewers who are naive *about the subject of the project*, because they will ask useful questions about it. But they *need* to know a little bit about how to recognize storytelling and how to encourage it. Making sure that you and all of your interviewers and facilitators know the basics about stories and storytelling helps avoid this problem.

Turning away from stories. Sometimes people ask the right number of great 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 things, but when it comes down to actually *confronting* what people said, 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.

Sometimes people want an outsider (like myself) to be what I call an *emotional sponge*: to read everything, "distill" the emotional rawness out of it, and "boil it down" into something they can better handle. Boiling down *is* useful in a logistical sense, because collected stories are often redundant. But sometimes part of the motivation in having an outsider "handle" the collected stories is to avoid confronting the mass of narrative oneself. Granted, it *is* easier for an outsider to handle the mass of narrative, and if it helps the project come to a useful conclusion it may be worth doing. But I won't pretend that reading raw stories is 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 mass of disappointment and pain in the stories. It wears me out emotionally, as my family will attest. I have to warn people who haven't done this yet: the colors drain out of the world when you are exposed to hundreds or thousands of stories of tattered hopes.

The kind of catalytic work I describe in this book only works if it *complements* exposure to raw stories, not replaces or reduces it. In my work on catalysis I try very hard to *pass on* the emotions I find in stories, even or *especially* the negative ones, in what I produce to catalyze sensemaking and discussion. Anyone who supports PNI through catalysis should be prepared to do this. Catalysis should *highlight*, not hide, the raw emotions found in the stories collected: boil *up*, not down or out. Still, sometimes people are so determined in their efforts to turn away from what has been said (even if they displayed great energy at the start of the project) that they pick and choose from what is highlighted.

When people turn away from the stories they have collected, there is not much chance of any real change taking place and the project was 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, and you should prepare others who are involved in the project to face it as well. Brace yourself. It will be difficult, but it will be worth it.

Fighting with stories. Sometimes people do all the up-front work right and collect some great stories, and they read them, but *while* they are reading them 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 the stories that challenge their world views. 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 it doesn't hurt, you're not in the rapids yet.

Letting story projects die. Sometimes people collect great stories, and take things all the way through looking at them, sensemaking, finding patterns, getting to insights. And then they let the project, and the

stories, die. They write a bland report and stuff it in a file repository somewhere, then move on. It reminds me of the way some people go to church on Sundays: we did our soul searching and now we can get back to normal business. People reason: if anybody says we don't listen to our customers we can drag this thing out and display it, but we never actually expected to allow ourselves to be *vulnerable* to change.

I can think of two ways to keep story projects alive and producing new insights: repeat them on a regular basis, and fold them into new storytelling. Repeating story projects is as simple as making the project into a yearly ritual. Folding projects into new storytelling means that you don't stuff a file into a repository but keep the results of the project as an *assemblage* of parts that can be re-assembled when a new need arises. For example, say the result of a story project is a set of story elements. Those need not sit in a file somewhere: they can form new elicitation devices for new storytelling, which produces new insights. Many other results of sensemaking around stories can be folded back into an ongoing process.

Hiding story projects. Sometimes people carry out great story projects, but keep them hidden in a pocket of the organization. Hiding story projects can be a necessary evil, because story projects need a degree of openness to disturbing truths that tends to evaporate in the highest strata of management. Pocketing is not always a danger; sometimes it's a disturbing truth. If you are doing a story 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. That's not out of some kind of morbid obsession, however; it just comes up a lot. Coming face to face with real stories about an issue you care about, or about your own organization or community, is never easy. It is a plunge into the cold water of truth, and most of us avoid it like the plague. I find almost everyone unwilling to confront stories directly, including myself. Sometimes people ask me, with great enthusiasm, to help them collect stories; but when the stories have been collected and stand waiting, they get very, very busy. I get the image sometimes of people backing away from stories, or when forced to confront stories, donning sanitary gloves and holding them up like dead rats. I know where this urge comes from; I share it. Who wants to hear the real truth about themselves?

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*. 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 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 he is nothing but an enchanted scarecrow. In *The Neverending Story*, the magic mirror gate shows the hero 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 he has struck down his own self.

In the chapter of *The Last Battle* (in *The Chronicles of Narnia)* called "Further Up and Further In," C. S. Lewis uses the analogy of a mirror to portray a better world:

> ... the sea in the mirror, or the valley in the mirror, were in one sense just the same as the real ones: yet at the same time they were somehow different - deeper, more wonderful, more like places in a story: in a story you have never heard but very much want to know. The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was like that. The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more.

A story project that ends well goes "further up and further in" to a world of deeper and better understanding, a world in which every blade of grass means more than it did before the project started.

However, a story project can also end well in the *technical* sense of the truth having been discovered, but with devastating emotional impact. We may see what Nathaniel Hawthorne's scarecrow Feathertop saw in the mirror: "not the glittering mockery of his outside show, but a picture of the sordid patchwork of his real composition stripped of all witchcraft." We all fear success when it means finding out 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 Feathertop said, "for the wretched, ragged, empty thing I am!"

But of course, things are never simple with magic, are they? Magic mirrors can confound and mislead as easily as they reveal. The mirrored surface of a pond leads Narcissus to an early death. Says none other than Albus Dumbledore (in *The Sorceror's Stone*) about the Mirror of Erised, "... this 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 is a legitimate fear as well.

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 the 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. 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, than 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 story 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 list 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 story 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?

How should you bring play into story projects? To begin with, when 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 ten or fifty) can agree they don't want a story to be kept, it will be removed from the collection that is distributed; but it will be kept in archival copies.
- 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 from the start rules that define the arena in which your project will be played out, you can prevent self-sabotage (or sabotage by your storytellers) 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 this book create game-like oblique approaches to stories. The section on PNI skills contains even more discussion of playful approaches to story work. All of these ideas were developed not through abstract conjecture but from intense and often painful experience on real projects. In narrative catalysis 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 session, don't just throw stories at people; get people building things with stories *while* they are absorbing stories, not afterward. Keep people, and keep yourself, in the context of play so that you can use the "partial suspension of the rules of the real" to approach the magic mirror of story work in a way that helps *and* protects you.

An important note. 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 damaging as the 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," and the outcome of such a game is 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 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, because 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." Because dramatic games are open to surprise, they are true games of inquiry.

Another bit of advice: bring Yoda with you to the mouth of your cave. Yoda is not threatened by confronting Luke's deepest fears; it's not his cave. And Yoda can give Luke his experience in having entered and exited his *own* cave of self-discovery unscathed and enlightened. He knows what Luke has not yet done, so he can give Luke the confidence he needs to enter his cave (if Luke would but listen). In a similar way, you can have someone unconnected to your identity participate in your story project. They can be your next-door neighbor or your grandmother. Run your questions by them. Read them some of the stories you have heard. Show them the patterns you think you see. Ask them to help you stay in the world of play (dramatic play) so you can keep your weapons where they belong and keep your project alive.

Finally, in the same way that conflict in stories often operates at many levels (within the self, between people, between self and environment/society), self-sabotage can operate at many levels simultaneously. Within a group doing a story project, one person might be opening things up while another is closing things down; or one group might do great story projects but other groups in the same organization might squelch the results; and so on. Of course, the flip side of self-sabotage at many levels is that people can do

the opposite (self-empowerment? self-discovery? self-disclosure?) at many levels at the same time. So even if a project seems doomed because *some* people don't want to face the hard truths, it can still succeed in smaller, safer ways that still have a positive impact.

Breaking the machine

Far worse than the danger of not getting stories or deluding yourself with stories is the danger of *breaking storytelling itself*. When this happens, you may blithely collect great stories from the right people at the right time, and do all sorts of amazing things with them that help you in many ways. However, what you have done has an impact on the people who told you the stories that damages something deep within the universe of storytelling: trust. 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, who is going to see them, or how they are going to be used. This sort of danger is the worst because it is unseen. It is the customer who never returns; it is the kid who grows up hating; it is the citizenry that turns suspicious.

Here is an example. When you look at The Experience Project" (experienceproject.com), the front page is inviting. "Be real. Be yourself. Anonymously connect and share with others just like you!" Millions of "experiences" have been collected here. How to share? "It's fast, free, and fun!" Being the suspicious person I am, I read more. Low down on the page it says "Join now and get started in seconds, or [grudgingly, it seems] learn more about Experience Project." I click there and read more wonderful stuff, with plenty of exclamation points about wonderful things! At the end of this list, it says "Have more questions? Check out our thorough Frequently Asked Questions." Ah. Click. Question nine: "How does Experience Project make money?"

> 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.

So that's the "project" of the Experience Project: selling access to storyteller eyeballs. If this is completely benign, if no boundaries are overstepped, why did I have to navigate to a cranny of the web site where probably something like one percent of people will dig down to find it? Why isn't this on the main page, 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!"

The advertisers page (hidden even deeper) says: "Reaching exactly the audience you want has never been easier or more accurate." Okay, so 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. Yes, they admit the fact, but everyone knows few people actually "drill down" on web sites to find out the nitty-gritty of how things work. People are posting things here about unrequited love and grief and depression. I'm sure talking about these things is useful to people -- but can these people *all* know that they are being watched and targeted? I doubt that very much. I saw one post on the site that mentioned how ads kept appearing that were strangely appropriate after they had told stories -- and then, checking the site again two years later, I easily found a recent 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 are using the site without any awareness of how it operates. Worse, the signup process has no mention whatsoever that advertising is targeted based on the content of stories told.

To provide a contrast, consider storyofmylife.com. This service keeps personal stories for sharing "forever" either within one's family, friend or support network, or with the world. Networks on storyofmylife.com cost a fee, but this is 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 is striking. At storyofmylife.com, the privacy policy is prominent, clear, detailed and well laid out; all of the people involved are described in detail; the mission and goals of both the non-profit that funds the site and the for-profit that operates it are well explained. *Nothing* is buried deep; everything is quickly and easily accessible. In fact, the first tab you see on storyofmylilfe.com is "Why Us?" and this leads to a page about the goals and policies of the site. The site even goes to pains to make it clear that advertisers are *not* given access to personal stories. These people seem to understand that helping people tell stories requires transparency, respect, and care. (Whether people are better off entrusting their personal stories to a proprietary, closed-source, centralized, fee-based, remote system is another issue; but that is not the issue I am talking about here.)

So: in my considered professional opinion (that is code for "some people are not going to like this"), it is *never* necessary to trick people into telling stories, and it is *always* damaging, 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 the storytelling machine itself. The damage may not be apparent soon or even within the lifetimes of those who plan such projects. But stories don't like being mistreated, and they know how to bite back. And that impacts all the stories and all the storytellers in the world.

Why all the danger?

As I explained in the section on PNI justified, 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. In the years since I first encountered the discovery that *truth is more useful than fiction*, I have often thought about it. Not about the discovery itself, which I have seen played out so many times that it has reached the level of a natural law in my mind. But I can't help thinking often about the *imbalance* between this natural law and what I see people doing and wanting to do in this field.

And I keep asking myself the same questions.

7. Why do people call a field in which organizations do many different things related to stories "organizational story*telling*?" Why is the side that helps people craft fictional stories so much more prominent and noticeable than the side that helps people listen to raw, personal, true stories? Why are there so many more people and groups and books and programs on the telling side?
8. 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?
9. 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 organizational goals? It's almost like the telling side stood in front of the listening side, obscuring it, outshining it, blotting it out. Why?
10. 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.

11. Why do people so often start 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 Lilliputian and the dangers Brobdingnagian. 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 Brobdingnagian, and the dangers, with patience and practice, are Lilliputian. 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 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 write the observation "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: [to client] When I see your hands, I wish I were a nurse.
>
> Client: Dish washing, Madge.
>
> Madge: Ever try Palmolive dish washing detergent? Softens your hands while you do the dishes.
>
> Client: Pretty green.
>
> Madge: You're soaking in it.
>
> Client: The dishing washing liquid?
>
> Madge: Palmolive.
>
> Client: Mild then?
>
> Madge: Oh, more than just mild.
>
> Announcer: Right, Madge. Palmolive lasts from the first glass to last grease casserole. And it softens hands while you do dishes.
>
> Client: [Two weeks later] Madge, that Palmolive liquid of yours, I'm simply in love with it.

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 don't know it." Coming back to it years 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.

But at the time, I was too underconfident to use Madge for my presentation, so I came up with "truth is more useful than fiction" instead, as a play on the old joke "truth is stranger than fiction."

Truth is more what than fiction?

When I revisited this revelation for the book, I thought I should 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 847 results (page titles and snippets), I noted every word used in the "X" place in the phrase "truth is X than fiction." This journey through the hinterlands of Google constituted an unscientific sampling of the ways people talk about truth and fiction. From the 847 results I found 39 words or phrases in the "X" spot. Then I clustered the 39 words into four groups, which I'll explain here.

The truth is useful

The first group of results were 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. 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 preceding section about how 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 that 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 a picture 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. 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 their meagre salaries 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, our being evolutionarily unprepared for the scope and size of 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 today's 3D movies), 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 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 so *many* stories: they are trying to replace size with volume.

Another issue is that 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. So, there is another possible clue to the puzzle:

maybe listening to the personal experiences of people outside the normal scope of village life requires an artificially enlarged scope of connectedness for which people are ill prepared.

In *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative* (edited by Gottschall and Wilson) 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 that is true, then 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 close relationship to you* may take conscious effort. This is yet *another* reason to be amazed that anybody is listening to real stories.

The paradox of story work

So what is the end result of all this exploration of truth and fiction, opportunity and danger? A paradox. The telescope is 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 the questions I posed above is that the miserable part of things is located on the end of the narrative telescope most people see when they pick it up. Perhaps it says "look here" on that end. It takes patience, practice and proof to turn the telescope around, or even to see that there *is* another side to the thing. That may explain why so few do it.

But the paradox of 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 become too fully convinced of the view from the other. 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 all techniques have limits and don't mean to claim otherwise, but I probably can't help making it all 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. *You* must pick up your own telescope of story work 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.

PNI difficulties

Have you ever been pursued by a phrase or word 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 this book I was hounded by the phrase "too hard." It kept coming up in relation to PNI.

The phrase seemed to come from two sources. Roughly half of the people who told me that PNI was "too hard" referred to the difficulty of getting people to tell useful stories, of dealing with masses of collected stories and other information, and of making sense of what has been collected. The approach as a whole seemed daunting, and they were wary of plunging in.

The other group of people reacted not to the difficulty of PNI in isolation, but to its *relative* difficulty when compared with other means of inquiry, usually of direct questioning. PNI is too dependent on motivation. It asks too much of participants. People misunderstand; they walk away affronted; they don't do what they were asked to do. The collected stories are ambivalent, the answers to questions are confused, and none of it can be used to prove anything conclusively. Asking directly for opinions is simpler, less risky.

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 each of 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 *be with* stories, to get to know them, to 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 in the wrong way.

There are two ways you can be with stories. The first is to be with *recorded* stories, which you could say exist in a semi-dormant, slow-growing state, like a slime mold as it lies dissipated across the forest floor. Don't look for Hollywood stories or novels, but 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, 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, 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. Any book that presents folk tales close to their original forms, usually recorded from elderly people, will capture enough of their everyday meanings to work for your purposes. Avoid illustrated folk-tale books with only one or a few tales in them; avoid themed collections chosen to make a point; avoid reading only the works of one author. Pick up broad collections instead like the encyclopedic *Folktales from India* (edited by A. K. Ramanujan) or Italo Calvino's collected *Italian Folktales*. When choosing between two collections, pick the one that says its entries were changed the least from the way the old folks told them.

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 story poorly received, 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 far 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 has to be different for every person, but I'd say 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 been 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 being 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 interacting with storytellers an especially daunting aspect of the work. 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 much easier after you've had a good long soak in stories, especially in conversational stories. When you listen to people exchanging stories for long enough, you will see how storytellers surround their stories with evaluative information, and you will observe 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.

How many questions do you have to ask about a story to be asking people about their stories? One. You don't have to ask people to fill in long questionnaires. Just ask them how they feel about their story. Or ask them if they think lots of people have had experiences like that. Or ask them who they've told that story to before. Or ask them how long it has been since they told that story.

So in summary, I would say to the person who says story listening is "too hard" because they don't know where or how to start: this is the best way 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 story listening is "too hard" have not been daunted so 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. Or they expect people to tell stories and fill out forms quickly and clearly, but find people drag their feet or misunderstand or walk away. Or they want greater volumes of stories to give them clearer answers, but find diminishing returns for their efforts. Or they want firm answers but find themselves wading through conflicting interpretations and mixed messages. 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 of inquiry is the same reason it is more likely to *fail* than other methods of inquiry. 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's 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 participatory narrative inquiry 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 one 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 the narrative approach and has found it "too hard" because it asks too much and is too risky? It's the same thing I want to say to the daunted: soak yourself in stories. Why? First, 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. Second, because 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 part of why they get frustrated. They aren't in the world of stories to settle down, just 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 frustrated and disappointed about how hard PNI is, respect stories enough to get to know them well. Stay the course and you'll be more likely to end up satisfied.

Above all, start small and build your skills. Everything is something.

PNI perceptions

I've been giving my working-with-stories spiel, telling people they can do things with their stories that can help them achieve their goals, for about, let's say, ten years now, if we consider the first two years getting my feet wet. I always watch how people respond to the spiel, and I have noticed some patterns in how people respond and how I deal with that. I thought it might be useful to write about this for you, because at some point you might find yourself giving similar talks.

If I think of the main ways in which people respond I come up with three primary responses. Within each I find three sub-responses. (Obviously all that *really* means is that I like to group things into threes.) For each sub-response I have considered -- guess how many -- three possible explanations for *why* people had that reaction: they didn't know any better; they disagree; and 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 story work. 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.

You all look like ants to me

The most common response is the *insufficiency* response. This response is that story work is not serious, does not scale, or has insufficient credentials.

That's cute. Now go away. The *not-serious-enough* reaction happens when people assume I can only be talking about quilts and pie recipes when I talk about stories. The primary indicator of this reaction is lack of eye contact and a profusion of fidgeting. When I see people have 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, 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 absolutely 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 launch 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. This requires time, so if there is no chance of getting enough time I let it go and move on. 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.

How people view this response:

1. To the ill-informed: The war story usually helps a lot. People see that story work *can* be serious and want to learn more. This is not one of the hard issues to educate people about.
2. To the dissenting: A good war story can pry open minds, but usually it takes a few or several (of ascending severity), and these people often pick apart tales of insufficiently resounding impact. That's fine; hold still and let them probe your experiences.
3. To those with 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 will be freed up to help people find a place where it can fit.

This is for little people doing little things. The *does-not-scale* 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 perceive the approach to be possibly 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 stories do not scale up in the first place. This is not strange; it only reflects the deep-seated conflict between our village history and the metropolitan world. 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.

How people view this response:

1. To the ill-informed: They usually ask questions about exactly how the stories and quantifiable patterns are used together. Having some examples on hand helps.
2. To the dissenting: 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.
3. To those with a valid point: Well, yes. Trying to scale up while keeping things human is a difficult balance, just as trying to maintain a winning career while raising a child is a difficult balance. Anyone who is honest with themselves will readily 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 (as in parenthood) 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.

What university did you say you were from? The *not-credentialed-enough* 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. (The area of credentials is one place where the evaluations me as a story worker enter into the evaluations of story work itself.)

I do not fault people for this perception. I remember once as a child, on one of my family's epic treks across the country, 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 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.

How people view this response:

1. To the ill-informed: They want to hear more. They want to know where the approach came from, who was involved in it, how it was developed. They want to evaluate it on its merits and are willing to put aside its rootlessness.
2. To the dissenting: 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.
3. To those with a valid point: Certainly! I am perfectly willing to admit that I *made up* the name Participatory Narrative Inquiry. I am open about the fact that my approach is idiosyncratic, incomplete, flawed, derivative, and fallible. I don't think this any *different* from most work done inside the great wall, 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 the approach on its own merits. And when you evaluate story work on its merits, it performs.

Go back from whence you came

The second large class of responses I want to consider is the one based on fear and denial. It occurs when people understand, 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 latch on to the danger of story work and rush away. I will call the varieties of rushing away Pandora's box, show me the money, and stories going beyond their station.

Pandora, put that box away. This reaction happens when people recognize, rightly, that once a story 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

strongly. When people feel threatened by the possibilities offered, they just 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 a Pandora's box reaction, my response is to bring down the level of emotion. I tell my tamest stories, ones about helping people sort out problems with their email clients. I emphasize that story 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 the positive power of story work 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 just not aspects of story people do not always want to hear about, especially those prone to the not-serious reaction mentioned above.

How people view this response:

1. To the ill-informed: Telling tame stories helps the fearful feel more at ease, but I've noticed that 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 wrong. Often 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 is sometimes compelling.
2. To the dissenting: Sometimes I give the releasing-pent-up-energy argument and it falls flat. Usually that 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.
3. To those with a valid point: Absolutely. At some times and in some places the challenge of change is far 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 the "planting a seed" stance where I ask them to keep the ideas in mind for a future time when another context might make story work more appropriate. It's only respectful to do that.

Show me the money. This is the return on investment (ROI) 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, by talking 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 in story work. I have some stories about teensy story projects that still produced useful outcomes. I don't pull those out in front of the not-serious folks, 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. We might be able to find a way to make it work.

How people view this response:

1. To the ill-informed: 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.
2. To the dissenting: Disagreement in this reaction usually goes along the lines of people saying 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?
3. To those with 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. When people understand what story work 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.

Don't give stories ideas beyond their station. The third reaction in the fear/denial category has to do with identity and class. To put it simply, sometimes I 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 brings mixing of perspectives and power. People having this reaction get 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 stories 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 they 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 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 will know 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 something I pay attention to, which is bad for business. I work best when I can partner with someone who flourishes in the world of status. Still, if I have a fresh cup of coffee I *can* tell a few stories about authorities like government agencies and giant corporations that have supported and appreciated story 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 also recount projects in which stories were collected in anonymous ways and in which maximal distances were retained between classes. I dangle the "prince and the pauper" image of being able to listen in on the storytellings of subordinates without being themselves heard. Essentially I 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.

How people view this response:

1. To the ill-informed: 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 story project. They often come back with issues they would like to address and want to hear about potential solutions.
2. To the dissenting: 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.
3. To those with 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 of those in charge. Only the most confident can pull it off. That's an Emperor-has-no-clothes ploy, but sometimes it works.

Yeah, yeah, I've heard of this

When I started giving my spiel about working with stories, this third category of reactions did not exist. As the years go by I find it grows and grows. It is the category of reactions that mistake what I mean by "working with stories" for doing other things with stories, things the listener doesn't consider appropriate or useful. I separate that into three perceptions: branding, propaganda, and New Age.

By the way, I find this category of reactions much harder to deal with than the other two, and that for two reasons. First, I keep forgetting to think about it and am often surprised by it. Because it has been growing so imperceptibly I have not updated my spiel to prominently include a list of things I am *not* talking about. I need to work on that. Second, I find it's easier to fill a void than to displace an object. If people have no idea what I'm talking about I can educate them. But if they think they already know, if they have already popped me into a pigeonhole, it's a lot harder to squirm out of that box than it is to build a new one. So watch out for that.

I've heard of this, it's for selling things. This is the reaction where 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? The first thing I do is 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 still a story, even if it doesn't boast a Hollywood plot. 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 not only understandings of issues but options available.

If things are going *really* well I bring in narrative sensemaking and explain how people can work together to negotiate meaning by starting with told stories. However, I hold that in reserve and only use it if we are over the first milestone (that stories form patterns). If people are not with me there, the sensemaking part only confuses them.

How people view this response:

1. To the ill-informed: When people have this reaction out of 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.
2. To the dissenting: Disagreements to these explanations have mainly to do with a poor opinion of everyday stories. I find this opinion often 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 are not real stories, heaping them up won't mean anything either. 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. I remember one story on a project last year about medical conditions. It was about rheumatoid arthritis. I had been reading stories about several different conditions, and all were painful and full of sorrow. But this story was about how this man's greatest hope was that someday soon his wife could stretch out of the fetal position and just lay normally on the 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 story? I can't.
3. To those with a valid point: This is the only "those with a 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 ill-informed or 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've heard of 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? This is where I bring out my lists of rules and safeguards. I describe how I have learned through practice to invite people to share their experiences in safety; to guarantee anonymity; to ask people for their *own* interpretations instead of deciding what stories mean to an "expert" observer; to let those interpretations form patterns without applying preconceived hypotheses; to separate my outside interpretations from observations of patterns anyone can see; and to construct *multiple* interpretations so that project supports collective sense making rather than making declarations of fact. I don't deliver this as a lecture, but rather by recounting the stages of an actual project in which people discovered transforming insights. I talk about the role of a story worker like myself as a shepherd who helps stories get to where they need to be while tending them with care and respect.

How people view this response:

1. To the ill-informed: Sometimes people respond to my explanation with curiosity about these rules and safeguards. Where did they come from? What impact do they have? I am happy to fill them in. Next they want to know how they can learn how to use these rules and how they can design a project that includes them. I explore that with them as well.
2. To the dissenting: Some people are sceptical that these rules and safeguards work. They say these are rules with which to build elaborate self-delusions, not rules to create transparency and respectful care of stories. They believe I do advocate participating in propaganda and distortion but, like the scientist cringing in the corner while crying "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 quit this work, not try to help others 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 the safeguard is needed and why I think it works. Some will never be convinced.
3. To those with 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, 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've heard of this, it's New Age crap. The final sub-reaction in the "I know about this already" group is that anything connected with stories is about New Age spiritualism. In this view, because I have used the word "story" I am talking about asking people to connect their chakras, don a hemp robe and chant Wicca 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 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 and professional storytelling meetings. I went to a professional storytelling meeting once, and there was altogether too much soul-bearing and hugging for my comfort. The approach I advocate is not based on crystals or astrological alignment. Not that there is anything wrong with that. It's just not what I'm talking about, and I've found I need to watch for people putting the approach into that box.

How do I respond to the New Age reaction? As with the not-serious reaction, I tell war stories. I tell 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. If things are going well I talk about positive outcomes that can be achieved in story 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 softness will be taken as touchy-feely mushiness. For those folks I keep things on the up-and-up with mainstream cognitive terms like leadership and efficiency and discovery, and avoid fringe emotional terms like empowerment and enablement and giving voice to the voiceless. (Audience and purpose, my college writing teacher said.)

How people view this response:

1. To the ill-informed: Getting people to the point of understanding that I don't mean New Age spiritualism, unlike many of the other perceptions, doesn't get me all the way home. I find that standing right behind the New Age 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 deal of patience. If I do get through to people on this point it's usually slowly and over time.
2. To the dissenting: Sometimes self-identification with the mainstream and only the mainstream is so strong that no amount of protestation on my point will move them 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 paraphenalia of the priesthood. But keep these things in reserve and use them only in emergencies. And before use, 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.
3. To those with 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 and facts 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 this be done without rendering all cognitive function floppy and spineless? Certainly. 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 the approach? Sure, lots of times. When I see a light in their eyes and hear a *click* as the idea fits into a narrative-sized hole in their problem scope, I know we are ready to move to the next stage. I ask them 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. Then 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 need to ask more questions about it.

I did think, at the start of writing this section, 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; 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 this stuff works you don't need my advice to talk with enthusiasm about story work. 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.

PNI skills

Sometimes people ask, "Do I have what it takes to be a story practitioner?"

I never answer that question. When I get it I simply respond as though the person had asked, "What can I *do* to become a story practitioner?" *Anyone* can do story work. It doesn't require any special talent, just patience and practice. Certainly each person will have a *style* of doing narrative work, and certainly people have varying talents and preferences. I like writing books and reading stories better than I like facilitating workshops. But story work is forgiving. If you don't do one part of it as well as you'd like, you can find a home somewhere else and partners who can complement your skills. Few people can find no home in working with stories.

So, what *are* the essential skills of a story practitioner? I was thinking about that issue last year as I worked on a paper with some colleagues. We were exploring the issue of the role we play in helping people work with stories. As we traded experiences and views, I suddenly saw a connection that got me very excited, because it gave me an excellent way to define story work. It was the image of the trickster.

The trickster figure is well known in all mythologies scattered around the world and through time. 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.

I thought about quoting you great chunks of Lewis Hyde's incredible book *Trickster Makes This World* but 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 instead is tell you some stories about what happens when you do, or don't, act as a trickster in story 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 story workers take on the role of a trickster: shape shifting, game playing, in-betweening, and hunting. I'll see what stories I can pull out of my bag of experience for each.

Shape shifting

Tricksters are hard to pin down. Tricksters 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 fine 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," or a way of doing things that works and has worked for a long time.

> 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.

When you help people work with stories, you do not take on a trickster role to protect yourself, though it does have that benefit. Your primary goal is to empower other people to discover things they need to know. This has been the role of trickster stories in every mythology in which they appear, so it makes sense that it should be the role of those who help people work with their own stories.

A few examples will illustrate. Should you tell stories to elicit stories? I started out believing you should. I knew that people often responded to stories with stories, so to get the ball rolling I would tell a story of my own. But over the years I've come to distance myself from my former position on this. Why? Because I have noticed that when you start the ball rolling with a story, you get a smaller ball rolling down a narrower track than you do if you elicit stories with questions. While you tell your story everybody in the group says, "Ah, *that* sort of story. I'll tell a story just like *that*." They see your story take on a definite shape and they attempt to mimic it. Everyone sees a different shape in your story, so you do get some diversity that way. But it's a diversity orthogonal to the diversity you want, the diversity of experience in relation to the topic you are exploring. So I don't do it, or recommend it, anymore.

What do I recommend for eliciting stories? Asking questions, but even that practice has become more shape-shifting over the years. When once I asked a single question to everyone in the group -- take it or leave it -- now I give the group a list of three to as many as seven questions and ask people to answer whichever one appeals to them. The diversity in the questions asked should, if I have done my homework well, match the diversity in the group answering the questions. For example, let's say I have picked up on a diversity of willingness to speak about contentious topics, due to combinations of personality, power and politics. In that case some of my questions might invite safe, comfortable disclosures about trivial things, like the last time people felt proud of something at work. That sort of question shows the way to a hiding place where people can speak without revealing too much. Other questions might cite specific rumors I have found out are making the rounds, or ask people for their private theories for why the corporation is going to hell in a handbasket. Only those who came to the session bursting to tell all, and who have been waiting for permission to vent their emotions, will take up such a cue as that. In other words, I craft questions so that they present not one but several shapes to the group, so that everyone will be able to find something they can say. When I can also ask people which question they chose (and even better, why they chose it) this approach is both productive and informative, and far more so than using a follow-me story. The same shape-shifting benefit applies to venues of story collection. When the issues are contentious, private or highly emotional, I find that offering more than one venue -- say you have the option to attend a workshop, give a private interview, or fill out an anonymous web form -- increases the volume and diversity of stories collected.

Shape shifting presents both a need and a difficulty in story work. In any story work you are likely to encounter pressure to take on a fixed shape. This pressure comes in the form of unevenly distributed participation. People don't need to be power-mongering tyrants to find participation unattractive. They might just be busy or uninterested or fearful. Participatory work of any kind requires sustained effort at many levels, and rarely will you find perfect participation everywhere you look. When people don't want to participate (or tolerate the participation of others) in story projects, you as the energy behind the project may begin to solidify into an *authority* on the project. Authorities speak and are heard, but they cannot shape-shift freely.

When I say you will become an authority on the project, I do not mean that people will look up to you as a role model or give you the keys to the city. What I mean is that people will develop a fixed set of expectations about what you will do, and they will use those expectations to slide into a set of expectations about what *they* have to do. Say you spearhead a project in your community. You set up story elicitation workshops; you transcribe stories; you create catalyzing graphs; you facilitate sensemaking workshops. If you do this you are almost guaranteed to encounter people who want you to do their participation for them. If you say choose one of these questions to answer, people will say but which do *you* think is best? If you say this trend could mean this or that, people will say but which do *you* think is most important? If you say let's build a story together, people will say what do *you* think the story should be like? *You* are the authority, meaning, we are *not*, so we don't have to participate like you do.

When I first started building catalysis reports for clients, 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 excited at 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 trends, 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 remove the raw emotion coursing through the stories and present them with something 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 story worker you should be aware that other people will want, hope, and even expect you to have their courage for them.

How do I deal with people asking me to boil stories down? I boil stories *up*. I find the strongest emotions, the greatest surprises, and most flagrant airings of taboo issues, and I bring them front and center. I remember on one project about a pension fund, I laughed out loud when I read one response: "Pay up you thieves!" I took that quote and made it the title of the report. By boiling stories up I refuse to take on the fixed shape of authority and instead shift shapes between authority, provocateur, naive fool, wise sage, pedantic scientist, every 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. 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.

Now here is where the difficulty lies. Shape-shifting in story work might sound fun and exciting, but in fact it is the hardest part of the work. Why? Because 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.

Well, why *not* become an authority, you might ask? 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. But in the long term the gift of authority is an illusion. Your catalysis will harden into analysis, your food for thought will go uneaten, and

your ability to create positive change will turn to dust. Those you truly wanted to help will not have been helped, because *you didn't help them help themselves*. Only a pretense of change will take place, and things will go back to the way they were as though you had never done your hard work.

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 their 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 developed to bolster courage both in those who were asked to participate and in those who did the asking.

When I think about the rituals of PNI, I always think of the lines in *The Wind in the Willows* where the Water Rat is telling the Mole about the rituals of entering the Wild Wood (which is an excellent metaphor for the world of stories, come to think of it).

> 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 story work! 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 story work. Relaxing mint, maybe, or soothing chamomile.

If you think I am about to initiate you into a secret rite, relax. The only rituals that really work are those that mean something to *you*. Like stories, rituals don't transplant well. I suggest some categories and types of rituals in this book, but you should *grow your own rituals* for story work. Most people do. But pay attention to the rituals you are developing and 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. When you ask people to work with stories, whatever shape you take on, other people will respond with a corresponding shape. You can see them doing this: they get a little "aha" look in their eyes, then do what matches your form. Now switch your shape and watch people follow you again. Ask them a stupid question, or tell a lie, or say you have no idea what to do next. Most people will take up a complementary shape, perhaps by giving you a lecture on how to do things right (oh the lectures I have been given). After a few more shifts you will see one of three things happen: people may depart the exercise physically or mentally, having decided you are incompetent or the work is useless; they may begin attacking you, having decided they can force you into a shape and hold you there; or they may understand why you are shifting your shape and begin making their own way through whatever it is they agreed to do in the first place.

I would say the ratios of these responses are usually twenty percent, twenty percent and sixty percent in most groups. Sometimes the people who get the point of the shape-shifting can carry the others along into participation, and sometimes they can't. But if you don't *try* to shape-shift, your outcome is predetermined: you will get exactly, and only, the shape that matches the one you take on. Of course for many of the interactions in life this is best. If you are injecting medicine into patients, taking on a fixed shape is life-saving. But for participatory sensemaking it is deadening.

Listen to Robert Chambers, one of the pioneers 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 people grasping for quick solutions when I ask them to participate in story work. They are looking for the easy way *out* of the task, but the only way to succeed is to stay *in* it. It is your task to keep them in it. Don't give people templates to follow, but *do* give them help making their own way through tasks. Don't rely on recipes, but do develop a repertoire of methods. You are sure to encounter some people who blame and attack you for this in an attempt to hand you their participation. Shift your shape, change your skin and slip away, leaving the participation back in their hands where it belongs.

Be cloud-like. To illustrate this point I will repeat a story I already used in a self-published paper, *The Wisdom of Clouds*. (It's my paper so I can do that.) I was at a conference once and encountered a person who asked me about my background. I said, "Well, my original field of study was animal behavior." He said, "So you are an ethologist!" I said, "Well, sort of, but after that I spent several years writing educational software." He said, "So you are a software engineer!" Each of these statements was made with great enthusiasm, as though it relieved him in some way to be able to make them. I said, "Sort of, but after that I started working on stories in organizations and complexity and decision making and things like that." With a look of exasperation he asked, "So what *are* you?" I said, "I think I'm a cloud." I meant this literally -- that my professional skills and interests could best be described as a probability density function ranging in what I think are interesting ways across space in several illuminating dimensions -- but I suspect he took it as some sort of suspicious New Age mysticism. At least that would explain his reaction. (I should have explained more fully what I meant, and I hereby apologize, person whose name I have forgotten.)

I am not saying everyone should jump between careers as I have. If everybody did that there would be far less progress in research. Career professionals who stick to one field are the alligators of research, and we need such living fossils to keep the ecosystem of inquiry stable. However, even if you *are* an alligator, you can be all sorts of alligator, and you don't have to wear an alligator shirt. Everyone has diverse abilities and experiences. To do story work you must *draw out the diversity in yourself* so that you can shift shapes and keep people guessing, and thinking, and participating. One of the most frequently asked questions I get at story sessions is not about stories at all. It is, "What the heck is your background?" When I hear that question I know I am doing story work right. If you *never* get that question, work on your shape-shifting.

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, but tricksters play *with* the rules. It is not adequate to say they simply *break* the rules, because sometimes they create entirely new and different rules. Sometimes they turn the rules on themselves and build traps they fall into.

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 of 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. When she found out we only wanted to hear about her experiences with it, 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.

I should have remembered the lessons I learned while teaching. Back in biology graduate school, I once taught anatomy lab courses to pre-nursing students. In the lab we cut up dead cats and two-foot-long sharks (though it sounds insane to tell you that now). 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 know whether I answered it correctly or not, I didn't *need* to put it on the test. The challenge wasn't a way out of the test; it *was* the test. (When that one student told me 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, "That's where toothpicks come from. Didn't you know that?" It took them about five minutes to realize I was lying. I was the authority, wasn't I? Sometimes I would say things like "Oh, it's the kidney or the liver, I forget which." (Sometimes I *did* forget, but sometimes I didn't.) I don't think these students were used to participating in games like that, and I like to think I woke up a few of them.

Why in the world did I do such an excellent job getting pre-nursing students to participate in their own learning, but failed so miserably in getting people to participate in storytelling? 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 bona fide 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 asking people to tell stories I was trying very hard to be a professional story researcher. *I forgot to play.*

It took me several more workshops before I began to loosen up and gain enough confidence to add some elements of gaming, and of course things improved dramatically as a result. One thing I remember happened entirely by accident. My colleague thought it might lighten things up a bit to have donuts and coffee in the room. He knew a great place to get donuts. I didn't get the point, but I like donuts so I said why not. Normally I would have told people about the "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 turned out that asking people to come into a room and do something confusing and boring, *then* presenting them with sugary food, changed the whole thing into a game-like atmosphere in which they jumped into entirely different behaviors. Now 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.) I got onto the company's web site and found a little logo flashlight that looked like a credit card. It cost next to nothing, so our project bought one for each person who was to come to the workshop. We told them nothing about this. On the day of the workshop 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. The lights 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 the best workshop ever.

Now a story about catalysis (which you will have to excuse me telling you about over and over because I know it well). This is what I write on the first page of my catalysis reports:

> The purpose of the interpretations and implications in this report is not to make claims to truth or provide answers to questions, but to *catalyze* thought and discussion. In fact, some of the interpretations and implications you will find here are intentionally extreme and naïve, and most have competing versions listed. This is to help people explore issues more fully.

In other words, I start out every report by *telling people I might be lying*. Some people are surprised and confused by this deliberately mischievous stance. Most reports say: here is what we found, this is what is real. Most reports go straight from observation to conclusion. I try to break that rule. I give people the room to say what I have said is nonsense, because they need that room in order to say it's *not* nonsense, at least some of the time.

Whenever I break rules, however, I always take care to set up some new rules to replace them. You can't say you will break the rules and give *nothing* in exchange, because it leaves people in a featureless void. If there are no *rules* there is no *game*. What are the new rules I present in my catalysis reports? I think of them like the conversation in one of my favorite scenes in the movie *Wall-E*. The robot Wall-E gets out a sheet of bubble wrap, pops a bubble, says "Pop," then hands it to the robot Eve and says, "*You* pop." Those are the rules I present: Pop; *You* pop. 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 is to help you find your own truth. Those are the new rules of the game.

Another example of game playing. Often when planning projects a question comes up about standardization of questions. People say, if the questions are so similar between projects, why not just build one set of questions and use it for everything? Wouldn't that save a lot of time? Yes it would, but the *relevance* of the results to the context and purpose of the project would decline, so the impetus to do the project would decline with it. Stories and story work are inherently contextual. That is why stories don't travel all that well to foreign lands without annotations and translations, and that is why questions that produce useful results on one story project may fail on another. This is both a weakness and a strength. It is a weakness because it *does* take time to suit story methods to each context, whereas more standardized methods might not require such an input. It is a strength because when the method does suit the context, it suits it well enough to produce results nothing else can.

Sometimes I will start a project and haven't yet learned anything about our goals or context, and the client will say, "Why don't you give me a list of questions you are going to ask." That's when *I* get very, very busy.

I don't want the client to see any questions up front, because if they insist on using *exactly* those questions regardless of fit the project could be damaged. I say, "I'd like to hear what *you* need from this project first. Then we can work our way to the right questions." I try to get people to do as much sensemaking at the outset of projects as I can.

At other times people want help but won't admit why. I have been in situations where people needed to know something, and wouldn't be satisfied unless they found out about it, but at the same time didn't *want* to find out about it. They were in a battle with themselves, and I had to fight for the side they were fighting against. They didn't want to hear what the stories had to say, but they would not be satisfied unless they heard it. Those are the projects people are the most likely to abandon in the middle of the process. When I find myself in a tug-of-war project like this, I have to decide which of two options to take. One option is to give people what they *said* they wanted, in which case they will be unhappy with the result but will not be able to blame me directly for it. I'll be able to say, "See here, this is what you *said* you wanted" -- even though I *knew* it would not get them what they needed. They will probably never try narrative work again because they will believe it is ineffective, but at least I won't be vilified. The other option is to give them what they couldn't admit they needed. In that case they will be satisfied with the result, and they might even recognize what I did as useful and narrative work as helpful, but they might *still* blame me for dragging them through the fire. I have experienced both modes of failure in story projects, and they are both unpleasant. (Sounds like organizational therapy, doesn't it? That is probably why PNI shares so many of its ideas with narrative therapy.)

How can a story worker avoid these problems of people battling their own best interests? How can a story worker protect themselves while trying to help others? Keep it a game from beginning to end. This is why I suggest you soak story projects in stories from the first why-don't-we-try-this meeting to the last set of conclusions. As long as people are working with stories they stay in the place of play, and the rules of play -- the temporary suspension of the rules of the real -- apply.

At this point you may find yourself recoiling from these stories of people running from their demons. You may be asking: Why the *sturm und drang*? Isn't story work ever full of joy and hope? It is, it is! But working with stories means you let the joy and hope *rise up* from what you find when you ask people what has happened to them. In fact I have come to consider it *typical* for PNI projects to discover pent-up streams of positive energy blocked by negative circumstances (which can often be resolved). 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* the givens of the world we find ourselves in; and that is why PNI asks "what happened to you" but *never* "tell me 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 doing story workshops I found asking people to do things so painful that I became physically sick after each workshop was over. Finally I had to ask my colleague to take over the talking parts of the workshops out of sheer self-preservation. It was embarrassing to admit I could not do this. But I remembered a snippet from an old radio show my family used to like. At some point somebody asked some guy if he was the one running some sort of business operation. "Nah," he said, "I just stand here and look hard on people so they pay the bill." So I started telling people 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 at being in over my head socially. I think I even found it easier to speak up, once I had that funny little mask to wear. Look, not everybody is good at everything. If you find a particular aspect of story work too hard for you, 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 will ask me in a workshop, "Which of these should we do first?" 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 something useful about this by reading John Holt's books on how children learn. He recommended that parents never ask their child a question to which they (the parent) 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 and 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. Instead of waiting to be quizzed he developed the habit of asking *himself* interesting questions. The corollary of the never-ask-a-question rule is: never correct a mistake. Again hard to practice but wonderfully useful. Years later, after I had perfected this practice, 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 his eyes." The value of the ability to self-question and self-correct is hard to overestimate.

Now translate that example into a group story session. I can pretty much guarantee that within ten minutes of the start of your very first story session, somebody will attempt to box you into a very specific set of instructions. If you say, "Today we are going to be trading some stories with each other," somebody will say, "Can you give us an example of the kind of story 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. (*That's* the truth that matters.) The same thing will happen if you are not careful about any catalytic material you present. If you say, "Here are some graphs that might help you think about the stories," somebody will say, "What does this graph mean?" The correct answer is: I have no idea. *You* figure it out. Push the burden (and the opportunity) right back to where it belongs.

Break rules and make rules. When I start a new project I always ask people to show me everything they have done on the topic so far. They often send me a project report done the previous year, before they decided to try a narrative approach to the problem. Usually this was done using a standard direct-

questioning survey or focus groups. Most of these reports are the same: about ninety-nine percent everything-is-wonderful wallpaper, with just the tiniest bit of unpleasantness (there is this *one* teeny tiny thing that could improve) sticking out in some corner where nobody will notice it. These are the rules of standard research inquiry: inquire just so much and no more. Narrative work breaks those rules, and participatory narrative 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 stories* reduces the walls to rubble. This is why many people either shun the idea of working with stories or back out when they find out what it entails. Is story work only for the strongest of the strong? Not at all. Working with stories doesn't mean bursting into an organization or community and shoving stories around without preparation. Tricksters are *industrious* designers of havoc, and story workers must be just as industrious. 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* read stories about themselves or their community. *Never give lectures* about what horrible truths 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 has happened. If you let people confront stories and process them without public attention, they are much more likely to come out with an insight instead of a defense. They might say, "Wow, I just realized we are making a huge mistake!" And what would you say in that circumstance? Would you say of course you are, I told you so, anybody can see that? Not if you valued your project (or your job, or your safety). You would say "Really?" or "I didn't *see* that!" (perhaps a lie) or "What an insight!" Because it was *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 do this one has to cultivate multiple half-memberships in all the worlds involved in a story project.

Why does this matter? Because story workers need to be able to open and close doors between worlds to stimulate the flow of stories. Doors divide and join; stories hide and reveal. 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 deep 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. Given this joint problematizing of both ontology and

> epistemology, Sense-Making assumes that the quest of human beings to fix the real faces a never-ending riddle. 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.

Here is an example of opening and closing doors. I have found that when people are building clusters of related items in narrative 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 no bigger than seven or eight items in size. Clusters that reach fifteen or twenty items and stay that way usually indicate an unwillingness to penetrate their interior spaces. I remember one workshop where this happened. After discussion with a colleague, we asked the people who built the cluster to split it in two. They did not like our suggestion one bit, and the two clusters they produced as a result lacked meaning. It was lucky this happened just before lunch, because it stemmed the natural flow of the workshop's stories. I pondered later on why our suggestion produced such a bad 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 their clustering exercise was holding something back. In retrospect I wonder if we should have recognized our position better and left well enough alone. Sometimes the hardest thing about being in-between is admitting to yourself where you stand, because it it not always where you had *wanted* to stand.

Another example of in-betweening. When I am asked to help people 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, because I might begin to identify myself as either with or against the organization or community. If I do this 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 story 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. Isn't this book about working with stories in y*our* community or organization? Yes. When you want to do story work in any group to which you fully belong, you *must* find some place to fit between worlds. I can see three ways to do this.

Find sub-groups of the community to which you half-belong. No person or community is a monolith. Cultivate your complexities and find a place to stand between. 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 your community.

Think beyond the community. If you can't find a way to fit between parts of your community, find another community to include in the project, one you half-belong to. Say you want to do a project that centers on your town but you know you are too far in 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. Expand your project to include that town, and cultivate your membership in it until you can fit between both places.

Don't work alone. Find another person who complements your membership, either within the community in another sub-group, or from outside the community entirely. Work closely with them. If you can't be a trickster yourself, form part of a trickster team.

When I start a new project I take a look through many elements of my life to work out these half-in, half-out memberships. I call on my friends, neighbors and extended family for reference. I call on interactions with teachers, ministers, doctors, chemists, programmers, artists, scientists, soldiers, accountants, farmers, bus drivers; a wide variety of incomes, personalities and medical conditions; alcoholics, the depressed and those who have faced addiction. When I am asked to address a project I call on my partial memberships in these worlds and see where I can find a place between. If I find I cannot find such a place, I find someone who can join me between and form a team there.

I remember one project where 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 interviews previously collected. I mentioned that it was lucky I had spent some months in a state of near homelessness once, so I could relate to what the people in the stories were saying. (This happened after I hurt my back and was working very little and lying in bed a lot. I simply could not pay the rent. My landlady was ninety-two years old and had forgotten who I was, so I managed to keep a roof over my head for months longer than I should have, long enough to get back on my feet physically and financially. I did pay the back rent eventually, but any landlady in her right mind (including mine a few years earlier) would have thrown me into the street during those months. It was a lucky break in an unlucky time.) Anyway, the colleague I mentioned this to said he could not follow me to where our stories were, having never been poor by any stretch of the imagination. So 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 the rich. In fact, I think a project full of stories about the travails of wealthy people would be one of the few I would need to seek help on, because I cannot even begin to imagine that life. I am fully out of that world and would need a trickster team to enter it.

Advice for in-betweening

Find your place. Find out who you are and who you are not, and 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, understand the project's context and purpose in the community or organization. Who will benefit from it? Who wants it to happen? Who *doesn't* want it to happen? Does anyone else want it to happen differently? What do *you* want? Find out where you belong in the project and assess whether you need help finding a place between.

Let's say you have convinced your managers, after months of presentation, argument and outright pleading, to try a narrative project at your workplace. You and all of your co-workers hope the project will succeed in finally getting the managers to understand the impact of their heavy-handed decisions on how things feel at the coal face. What will happen if you try to conduct the project without help from above? You are fully in the group of employees and fully *out* of the group of managers. You may produce a resounding impact in your circle of co-workers, but the door to the world of the managers will be locked to you. Not only will the project fail, but your managers will never approve another one since the methods are obviously useless. Without the ability to move between worlds you will not be able to create the change you need. Stop before you start, assess your position realistically, and find a collaborator on the other side who can share keys with you and make the project work. If you can't find such a person, find someone who is outside both groups but allowed at least provisionally into each, and ask them to 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 nonetheless, and that gets him in the door. Professional mediators make it a business to find common ground with everyone, which is why they can open so many doors, and why they are helpful to so many people unable to reach another group.

Keep your place. Sometimes you will find that people don't want you to stay in the in-between place you have chosen. They want you fully in, perhaps so you can do what they don't want to do, or fully out, perhaps so you can't tell them what to do. They may even stand by the door blocking your way. But you cannot help them produce the results they need if you cannot move freely between worlds. This situation is most likely when your project explicitly bridges differences such as cultural background or income. People want to know: are you one of *us* or one of *them*? "Both" is an unwelcome answer, but it is the best answer. It is worth taking the time to explain why your answer has to be exactly that.

Don't guard the door: play with it. Sometimes you may find yourself in the position of gatekeeper between worlds. If people ask you to be "the voice" of another group, it usually means they really want you to be a *filter* for the voices of other people. They want you to guard the door so nothing they don't like gets through. This is related to what I said above about people asking to have stories "boiled down" for them. 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 is why tricksters open *and* close doors: they make something happen though the artful manipulation of 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 build new bridges that arch between worlds. 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 just the things that happen when story 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 story 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 slaughterhouse and carcass. But in *participatory* narrative inquiry the role of the facilitator is not to satisfy hunger but to *increase* it by preparing food for thought. Food for thought is not food at all, but hunger on a plate. So PNI practitioners do not hunt; they lead the hunt. They spread hunger to the 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 story project is about hunger, every story project is about fear. Many trickster tales are about the trickster's unending struggle to avoid traps set for them by others or themselves. Lewis Hyde tells the story of how 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. The idea of the trickster as "bait thief" connects, for me, to 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; but 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 find what they need while protecting what they fear losing. They help people discover the traps in which they are ensnared and escape them even while setting new traps for insights they need. They help people increase the hunger they need, to understand and resolve, while escaping the hunger that turns back onto their own flesh as stereotypes and knee-jerk reactions.

As you can guess, this is a careful balancing act. Sound the call to hunt too loudly and some of the hunters will run away in fear of predation. Sound the call too quietly and the hunters may not gather the enthusiasm to start. Worse, you may find yourself in a position where one group is far hungrier than another, so you may need to engage one while calming the other. Sometimes it is impossible to please everyone and you must choose which group to help most. I've come to expect that any narrative workshop will lose a percentage of people who find the hunt either too tedious or too heedless for their tastes.

Advice on hunting and protecting the hunted

Find the seed of hunger. You can't power a story 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. Finding the hunger as a project starts depends on developing a deep understanding of the motivations that will drive its appetite for insight. This is another reason why it doesn't work to conduct cookie-cutter projects without grounding in sensemaking at the start.

I can recall one project that ended with a whimper because I failed to find my client's hunger. This was a project whose ultimate goal was to help design a new product. One thing I needed to know at the start of the project was: was it more important to understand the *context* of the product's use or to generate *ideas* for product designs? For a lot of complicated reasons, some my fault some not my fault, the answer to this question got garbled. I thought we had settled on the former while they thought it was the latter. The stories we collected and the catalytic material I created for their sensemaking didn't match their hunger, so instead of joining the hunt they left the field disappointed. Extra work by colleagues helped to save the day, but still the hunt could not regain the enthusiasm it had at the start. The sun had gone down and the hunters had gone home.

Cultivate the hunger you find. This is where the trickster's charm and magnetism come in. Tricksters don't just sound the call to hunt: they ride in front, splendidly arrayed on prancing chargers. Like tricksters, stories entice us to come into their world and pay rapt attention to the spectacle they present. You can use this natural attraction to engage people in participation with the stories they tell and hear.

Here is an example, from Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, of a narrative project where a compelling visual image was used to engage people in thinking about a dramatic story.

> What is exploitation? The traditional figure of Uncle Sam is, for many social groups throughout the world, the ultimate symbol of exploitation. It expresses to perfection the rapacity of "Yankee" imperialism.
>
> In Lima the people were also asked, what is exploitation? Many photographs showed the grocer; others the landlord; still others, some government office. On the other hand, a child answered with the picture of a nail on a wall. For him that was the perfect symbol of exploitation. Few adults understood it, but all the other children were in complete agreement that the picture expressed their feelings in relation to exploitation. The discussion explained why. The simplest work boys engage in at the age of five or six is shining shoes. Obviously, in the barrios where they live there are no shoes to shine and, for this reason, they must go to downtown Lima in order to find work. Their shine-boxes and other tools of the trade are of course an absolute necessity, and yet these boys cannot be carrying their equipment back and forth every day between work and home. So they must rent a nail on the wall of some place of business, whose owner charges them two or three soles per night and per nail. Looking at a nail, those children are reminded of oppression and their hatred of it; the sight of a crown, Uncle Sam, or Nixon, however, probably means nothing to them.

I have seen so many examples of hunger being increased or reduced in story work that is hard to choose one to tell about. I'll choose two.

Once I was helping out with a workshop in which people were clustering story elements. I noticed that the sticky notes they were using were very small, about an inch across. I asked the colleague who was running the workshop why the notes were so small. The big ones were too expensive, he said, so we thought we'd try these. I could see right away that this was a mistake. One of the critical elements that influences success in clustering is the ability to zoom in and out on clusters rapidly, as often as every few seconds. Normally people pop forward and back constantly as they cluster. This is why we usually use large sticky notes (about six or seven inches wide) and give people such large markers that they can only write a few words per note. It prevents barriers to rapid zooming. I watched the people using the tiny sticky notes. They were not rapidly zooming. They were standing close to the wall like Mister Magoo, staring at each note in turn and unable to step back and see everything at a glance. While I send a belated apology to that colleague (whom I berated soundly), I thank him for providing such an excellent example of not giving people the experience they needed to increase their hunger. The exercise produced no insight, no enthusiasm. It was not a hunt; it was a confused meander.

Now a positive example, one I like a lot. This story comes from my friend Stephen Shimshock, who wrote the foreword for this book. He and I spent quite a while on the phone preparing for his workshop with young adults who had "aged out" of foster care, along with adult service providers. One of the things I remember best from his account of the workshop was that the young adults told him how excited they were to participate in making sense of the stories that had been collected. As I recall it they told him they were used to telling their stories, because they were asked for accounts of their experiences all the time. But this was the first time they had ever been asked, or even allowed, to *do* anything with those stories that helped them understand anything for themselves. When Stephen told me that, I thought: *this* is the spirit of participatory narrative inquiry. This is an excellent example of hunger found, nourished and set on its way to making positive change.

Protect the fearful. My third piece of advice on hunter and hunted in story work is to keep an eye out for fawns hiding in the tall grass. People do not always advertise their vulnerabilities; you have to find them out through patient attention. Here is 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 can remember one project where myself and a colleague didn't pick up on a vulnerability soon enough. This was a project whose goal was to ease the pains of merger as a giant corporation enveloped a very small one. The project started with some pilot story collection workshops that went very well. Everyone who participated said they enjoyed the day and learned a lot. The story elements produced went right to the heart of the cultural clash between the two firms in a playful way that showed the hunt for insight had been successful. We were in the midst of setting up a much larger online 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 element pictures, and pulled the plug. The idea of circulating such stories around the staid culture of the larger firm was unthinkably dangerous. Within hours the project ground to a halt, never to begin again. I knew the larger culture was old-fashioned, but the punishing vehemence with which the project was eradicated was a surprise. I'll know better the next time a situation like *that* arises.

Now reverse everything I just said

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.

Or, if you prefer Kenny Rogers as a spiritual guide:

> You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em,
>
> Know when to walk away and know when to run.

In other words, tricksters don't *always* trick. Sometimes they are as safe as houses. For every piece of advice I give in this section there is an equal and opposite piece of advice. When you are shape-shifting there are times to present a fixed target, turn the heat off, and be anything but cloud-like. When you are game-playing there are times to stop questioning, tell the absolute truth, and stick to the rules. When you are in-betweening there are times to find the center, let people take you where they need you, and keep all doors safely shut. When you are hunting there are times to stifle hunger, run away from the hunt, and abandon the fearful.

The trickster's greatest trick is to know when to play and when not to play. Every comic has a straight man who makes him funny, and every story project has an element of non-story that makes it more powerful. What is the non-story element that balances the magic of stories? Information gathering. Yes, boring old bean counting.

Let us say you have just completed a lively storytelling workshop. You have engaged, you have enticed, you have provoked ten people into telling fifty stories that reveal and explore their beliefs, feelings and experiences on a topic they care about. Everyone in the room has been dazzled by your display of trickery, simply carried away in transports of transcendent insight. Now let's say you give each person a form upon which they are to answer questions about the stories they just told. They are to note down, say, the degree to which the story they told involves persons acting with high moral fiber. They are asked how likely they

would be to retell the story at a church supper, at a family gathering, in a corporate board room. They are asked how old they are and how much they like Stilton cheese.

The question is: should your form *trick* the people? Should it, for example, misspell or smudge the words "moral fiber" so that the participants might range widely in their attempts to grasp the meaning of the question?

No, it should not. While ambiguity in the right place is critical for success in story work, ambiguity in the *wrong* place can destroy it. Answering questions about stories is not storytelling; it is an ask-and-respond, one-way, one-time act of information gathering. It may still be a game, but it must be one with clear and simple rules. Asking ambiguous questions results in conflated answers, meaning answers to different questions (or interpretations of questions) mixed together in ways that obscure patterns. When it comes time for the assembled information to support sensemaking, it is not the dancing trickster but the plodding beast of clear, concise information gathering that saves the day. This does not necessarily mean the trickster must leave the room; it just means they should be able to plod, when necessary, as well as they can dance.

Summary

Participatory narrative inquiry is a body of concepts and methods that arose during a dozen years of research into working with stories in communities and organizations. During its history PNI has answered six questions that helped to form the way it is today. The questions, and PNI's answers, are as follows.

1. Why ask questions about stories? Because answering thoughtful questions about a story's form, function and phenomenon can help people learn far more about the story, and about its teller and audience and context and meaning, than by simply analyzing or discussing the story.
2. Why listen to stories? Because *true, raw, real stories of personal experience* are more useful for almost every task you can imagine than are stories of pure fiction.
3. Why ask people to make sense of collected stories? Because having people work with their own stories produces better results than having their stories extracted and examined only by experts. The results are more authentic, more grounded, more resonant, and more useful to everyone concerned.
4. Why ask people questions about their own stories? Because *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.
5. Why keep stories raw? Because the *irreplaceable authenticity* of raw stories creates opportunities for understanding the experiences and perspectives of other people that are impossible to come by any other way.
6. Why catalyze sensemaking? Because narrative catalysis, which is not the same as analysis, can enhance sensemaking by provoking thought and discussion through the exploration of pattern and meaning in stories.

In relation to other fields of inquiry, PNI relates most to Participatory Action Research and Narrative Inquiry, two fields I believe have much to learn from each other. PNI has looser but still significant connections to Community Theatre, Oral History, Appreciative Inquiry, Narrative Therapy, Most Significant Change, Decision Support, and social research in general.

In considering the opportunities PNI projects have brought to communities and organizations in my experience, I encountered the following categories: self-discovery from a new vantage point; discovering

groups among people that at a glance seem undifferentiated; getting to know a group of people; surfacing and exploring taboo issues; finding new solutions to old problems; and building trust.

In considering the dangers PNI practitioners have confronted in story projects in my experience, I encountered the following categories: not gathering many (or many useful) stories; self-sabotage; and reducing the trust needed for future storytelling. Within the category of self-sabotage I have seen people (and in this I include myself) hamper their own projects through asking questions that are too safe, that come with coded commands, that destroy hope, that go too far into fantasy, that misunderstand the context, that avoid the topic of concern, or that are simply overwhelming in their volume. On other projects people have asked the wrong people, asked at the wrong time, and asked in the wrong ways to result in useful story collection. Once stories have been collected people have turned away from them, fought with them, abandoned them or hid them. Why do people sabotage their own projects in so many elaborate ways? To avoid confronting the truths they seek. The best way to avoid such a danger is to engage in *narrative play*, to make each story project a drama that unfolds as it enfolds its participants in the "partial suspension of the rules of the real." In this way the strength of narrative can be brought to bear on the goals of any project.

I have heard many people express frustrations with PNI and with story work in general, particularly that the approach is "too hard." This tends to happen either when somebody is having a hard time getting started in a field that seems overwhelmingly complex, or when somebody has come from another field that is more straightforward, like using surveys to gather opinions. In both situations PNI seems "too hard" because the person is insufficiently familiar with stories to have the confidence of experience. The solution I propose to both groups of people is the same: *soak yourself in stories*. The more experience you have encountering stories, whether in conversation or in recorded form, the easier story work will become.

Next I recount reactions I have encountered when I have talked about the ideas of PNI. They fall into three main categories: the insufficiency response (PNI is not serious, does not scale, or has insufficient credentials), the danger response (PNI opens Pandora's box, wastes money, or mixes social classes), and the pigeonholing response (PNI is about branding, propaganda, or New Age mysticism). For each reaction I suggest responses that will clear up misunderstandings.

In the last part of the chapter I consider the essential skills you need to develop to become an effective PNI practitioner. All of the four categories of skill I think are essential have to do with acting as a trickster figure in story projects. The *shape-shifting* story worker avoids setting an example or taking on authority, because their goal is not to control the project but to enable the project's participants to make the project their own. The *game-playing* story worker plays *with* as well as *by* the rules in order to keep stories and sensemaking flowing, industriously making and breaking rules to support participation in narrative inquiry. The *in-betweening* story worker finds places where they can bridge worlds and open and close doors between, to help project participants see into familiar issues with new eyes. The *hunting* story worker leads the hunt by feeding the hunger of curiosity and hope so that project participants can find their own energy to explore.

Questions

In the first part of this chapter I explain that PNI has the form it has because of experiences I and others have had while doing the work which led to its development. If *you* had been present at the development of PNI, how might it have developed differently? How might its history have differed if it had been your

history? I ask this because in order to use PNI effectively you have to make it your own. So, if you were to retrospectively change the history of PNI so it suited your needs and skills and style better than it does, how would it change? What parts would stay the same? What would the history of *your* PNI be like?

Have you heard any of the reactions described in the section on PNI perceptions? Have you had any of those reactions yourself? Which reactions do you think are the most reasonable? Where do you find my responses adequate and where do you think they fail? How would you attack PNI from each direction I describe, and how would you defend it? Now, how do those attacks and defenses play out in your community or organization? Which do you think are most likely, from both sides? What conflicts can you foresee over the goals and methods of PNI? What agreeements can you find?

In the section on PNI skills, which parts appeal to you as qualities you possess or would like to cultivate? Which parts did you skim to get past? (Go on, admit it, you did.) In what ways does thinking of yourself as a trickster in your story work help you, and in what ways is it just irritating? What parts of the whole "story worker as trickster" case do you find useful? What sort of trickster do *you* want to be in story work? (Remember, tricksters don't always trick.) What sort of trickster does your community or organization *need* you to be? Can you see any gaps between what sort of trickster you are and what sort of trickster your community needs? What can you do about that?

Activities

Find at least one person of your acquaintance who hails from one of the fields to which I compare PNI in this chapter. Ask them to read the section in the "PNI in context" section that pertains to their field and respond to it. If you don't know any such person, consult a textbook or web resource on any of the fields I name. What does reading their description of their field next to my characterization of it (in relation to PNI) tell you about the field and about PNI? If you like, do this for every one of the ten fields I name in that section.

Read through the (actual) project outcomes I list in the "PNI opportunities" section again. As you read, mark any of the outcomes that "jump out" as things you would like to hear people say in your own community or organization, or things you would like to say yourself. For example, how welcome would it be if you found yourself saying as a result of a PNI project, "Is that *really* the way they see us?" Very welcome, somewhat welcome, or not at all welcome? How about, "Is that really the way they see themselves?" Go outcome shopping: give each outcome a value. Don't ponder; just impulse shop. When you've gone through the list, bring together all the outcomes you marked as having high value. This should give you an idea of what you want to get out of PNI.

As you did with the opportunities, rate each of the outcomes listed in the "PNI dangers" section. This time rate the items not just on desirability (or the lack thereof) but also on probability. How likely is each of those things to happen in your community or organization, and what would be the impact? Irritating? Disappointing? Devastating? Bring those ratings together to generate a sort of landscape of worry for your PNI projects. What pitfalls should you pay special attention to avoiding?

Chapter 3: Advanced Topics in Project Planning

This chapter brings together several essays on planning PNI projects that were too detailed or wordy to fit into the basic guide.

Habits of project planning

Once in a while my son walks up to me with a tool he has found around the house and says, "How do you use this thing?" My response is always the same: "Give it to me and let me use it, and then I'll tell you how to use it." For a while, when he was younger, he thought I suddenly wanted to use the tool myself and didn't plan to give it back (which did not go over well). But now he understands that I can't tell him how to use the tool ... until I've watched myself using it. That is, *some* parts of me know how to use it, but other parts don't, and he's asking one of the parts that doesn't.

Something similar happens when trying to explain how to collect and work with stories. So I decided to watch myself "use the tool" the last few times I helped people write questions for and about stories. This section of the book is about *habits* I've noticed, or maybe "things I seem to do that seem to help" while planning projects and writing questions. (This is only the first part; I continue the series in other chapters.) I'm not sure how any of these got started, but most of them probably arose from trial and error. The surprising thing, and something I never noticed before, is how much storytelling goes on in planning a story collection. (You'll see that as we go along.)

Please note that I'm going to talk here about what *I* do, not what *you* should do. I'm a consultant, not a person applying these ideas to my own organization and community. My ways may not be your ways. Still, hearing what I've observed about my own habits might be helpful as you observe and improve your own.

Habit: Listening to the story of the project

As my client and I go through the planning process, I try to absorb as much written information as possible about the project's official goals and background. Sometimes there is previous research or conversation I can look at -- a focus group, interviews, online comments, that sort of thing. What I've noticed about this process is that by doing this I'm listening to the story of the project up to the point when I come into it. In every project there has been some plot development before I came along (as there will be when you start your project). Perhaps there have been other attempts to solve the problem and the client hopes for something different this time. Or this may be the first time the issue is being addressed. Sometimes the reason the client has chosen the narrative route is telling (I like to ask why they want to collect stories in particular).

To make sense of the project's story, I've learned to pay a lot of attention to what people are saying between the lines. Like, maybe there is an official document, and in the official document they keep mentioning an issue over and over, and every mention says that the issue is trivial, but it's mentioned twenty times. That means something. Or, things that came out in the magical-thinking conversation are completely absent in the official goal-setting documents. Or, previous research skirts the issue. Or, nobody in the planning group is from the group they want to tell stories. Or, they are worried they won't get many

stories. Or they are worried they will get the wrong stories, or people will say taboo things. And so on. All of these things help me understand the story I am fitting into.

Habit: Worrying

Worrying on purpose, that is. You could call it the creative use of anxiety. One of the things I *always* seem to do on starting a new project is to visualize scenarios of all the myriad ways it could fail. To do this, I take what I know about the client and merge it with what I remember from the myriad ways in which other projects have failed. It's not hard to do this, because every project succeeds and every project fails. The mental image of a disappointed client, in a succession of flavors of disappointment, brings out the weak spots in the project in a way that straightforward reasoning cannot. Perhaps the client expects something I cannot deliver; or they want their storytellers to be more forthcoming than can be expected; or they want to find out things they are unwilling to ask about; or they don't really want to hear the truth; and so on. The story of the project so far mixes with these creative-worry fictions and helps to shape our approach to collecting stories. (This is probably what Gary Klein means in *Sources of Power* when he talks about people using "mental simulation" to troubleshoot upcoming events.)

The result of this creative worrying is a set of concerns that shape the project. Sometimes the concerns are not warranted, and I always check them with the client -- beware the wandering, self-reinforcing narrative -- but most of them lead to helpful guidelines when starting to craft questions. Perhaps we need to be careful not to use inflammatory terms, or we need to bring a difficult issue out into the light, or we should avoid a particular elicitation technique.

Do I visualize scenarios of success? A little, but it's like what Tolstoy said about families. The parts of projects that turn out well are usually similar, but each failed aspect of a project fails in its own way. I think I use scenarios of failure to map out the boundaries of acceptable space. The internal landscape of the space is all above flood level, so I don't need to map it out as carefully; and it's all safe, so I'm ready to be pleasantly surprised there.

Habit: Bouncing off the literature

A lot of the projects I work on (and a lot of the things you will collect stories about) have already been covered by academic studies *in general*. But that is not the same as covering an issue in the particular *context* of the organization or community you or I care about, which is why we are collecting stories in the first place. I've found that I often take a glancing look at the relevant literature in the connected area, but I hold back from doing more than that, for three reasons. First, I rarely have time to do a full literature survey for a short project (though for a long one a deeper dip may be justified).

Second, when I allow myself to think about the mountains of research that have been done in any area, I get so intimidated by the academic hierarchy that I find myself unable to come up with any issues or questions at all, or I second-guess every question I write. It paralyzes me. All this story elicitation seems so sophomoric when compared to *real* research. But don't let yourself think that! What you are doing has value *in context*. The fact that it doesn't have value *in general* is true, but beside the point. (Reading about the goals of participatory action research can help with these concerns.)

Third, if I pay too much attention to an issue in general, it stands between my thinking and the needs and concerns of a particular organization in a particular situation. This is the most serious of the three reasons not to enter the literature too deeply. If a proper project on subject X *should* probe a particular issue, but in fact that issue has no practical use to the organization and the context of the work, you may waste your

most precious resource (the time and attention of your storytellers) in seeking after it, while possibly missing something that *does* matter.

For these reasons, I often do a quick internet search on some of the main research findings in a field, say patient-doctor relationships or collaboration or citizen participation in local government, but I use what I find as *inspiration* for the project, not direction. Stick to what your particular project needs and don't be drawn (very far) into generalities.

Habit: Using scale as a scaffold

I find that scope, or scale, comes up a lot in PNI projects. The same issue can be examined at many levels, from the personal to the interpersonal, small group or family, tribe or clan, nation, and world or system levels.

To consider scale, I select in my mind a series of, let's call them, scale images with which to think about the issues of concern. For example, say the project is about treating customers well. I might visualize one employee sitting alone at a desk; one employee talking with one customer; an employee with their supervisor attempting to resolve a customer complaint; a whole team having a meeting about an issue that keeps coming up; and so on all the way up to large meetings where global issues are raised and global decisions are made. I draw these images mainly from my own experiences, but also from things I've heard or read about, movies I've seen and books I've read.

I superimpose the client's needs, wants, concerns, fears and hopes on this library of scale images. Perhaps the client mentions that employees want to help customers but have too much time pressure to give their full attention to each one. I carry this concern up through all the scales and think about the manifestations on each. How does each employee manage their time? How do employees help each other manage their time? How do they learn from each other? Why don't they have enough time? Who decides how many customers they should handle? How do different supervisors handle this? And so on. This bit of fiction informs the questions we will ask people about things that have happened to them, hopefully in such a way that patterns at *all* of the scales will come out in the stories and be amenable to exploration. We can consider the relevant issues at each scale, and we can pose questions and consider how stories told in response to them might play out at each scale.

I think I settled on using scales as a framework for issue exploration because it's omnipresent when dealing with organizations and communities, and because it's a value-free scaffold. It's a way to reflect on the manifestations of issues in multiple ways that won't distort the outcome the way other scaffolds, like say age or gender or personality or background, might. Also, the habit of thinking about different scales works across projects, so you can get better and better at it as you do more projects. It's one of the true universals in human endeavors.

Habit: Harvesting the chaff, then leaving it behind

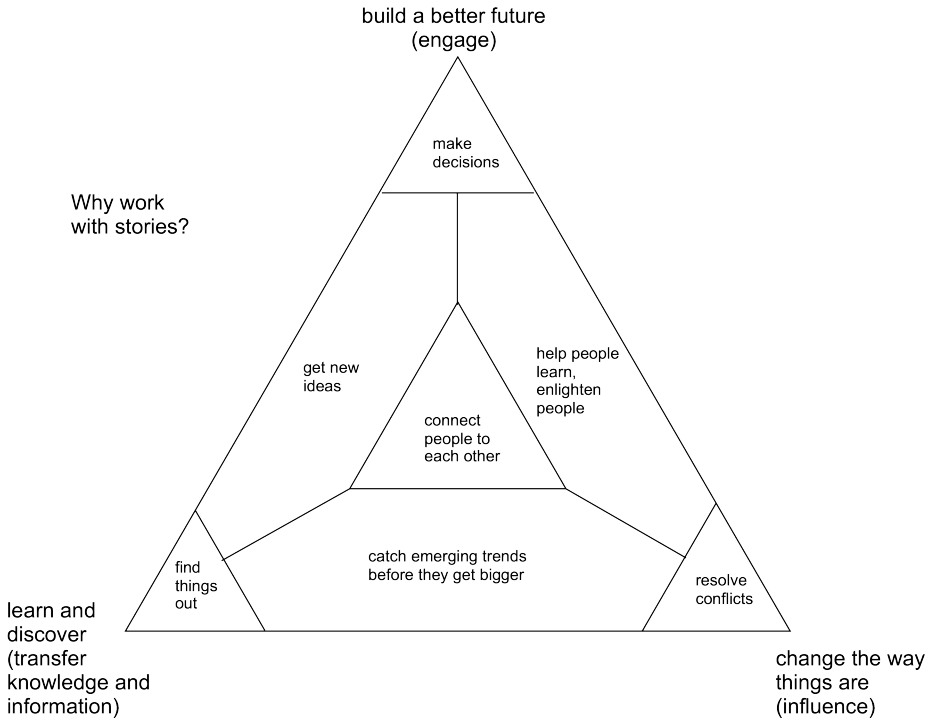
This is such a standard practice that I hesitate to mention it, but I will anyway, for completeness. In the brainstorming phase of creation, quantity and diversity is the goal and the voice of the critic is rightly silenced. Early on, I write down anything and everything that comes to mind. I allow myself to blabber on about the topic, the storytellers, other similar projects, what the client said, what the client didn't say, stories similar to those we might collect: everything. I might pace around talking to myself, or keep a log, or talk to my collaborators, but I spew out anything that comes out and don't mind if it's pretty or correct. The editor comes in later, and I always expect to discard most of the early stuff. (It's usually pretty embarassing later, which is good.) At the end of the pre-questions period I usually have a fairly concise

delineation of the project -- what we are doing, why, how. That gets shown to the client and checked and double-checked before we move on to creating questions. But there is a lot of chaff to be lost before we get to that, and I've learned to recognize the chaff for what it is: important to create *and* important to leave behind.

Planning projects with the story uses triangle

Do you recall the triangle of story uses from the "Stories in use" section of the "How do stories work" chapter from *Working with Stories*? You can use the same triangle at a higher level to plan story projects.

Here I have taken the headings from the "Why work with stories" section at the start of the book (find things out, catch emerging trends, etc) and placed them on the triangle at the level of story projects.



Goals of story projects.

As you plan your project, you can use this triangle to think about your goals. The story *engagement* vertex (telling stories to draw people in) expands into projects that work with stories to *build a better future*: to make decisions, prioritize, create plans, envision a new community. The story *influence* vertex (telling stories to change minds) expands into projects that work with stories to *change the way things are*: to resolve conflicts, address misconceptions, bridge chasms, correct injustices. The knowledge and information transfer vertex (telling stories to inform) expands into projects that work with stories to *learn and discover*: improve agility, capability, resilience, strength.

You can create a triangular *portrait* of your project's goals and motivations, with some areas lit up and others dark. One way to create such a portrait is to tell some looking-back stories about your project before it starts: the best outcome and the worst outcome. In the best outcome, which of the areas of the triangle are most prominent? Do you find things out? Do you get new ideas? And then in the worst outcome, which areas are missing or go badly? Do you fail to resolve conflicts? Do you find it impossible

to make decisions or choose between options? By doing this you can find out which areas matter the most to you. (You might be surprised by what you find.)

Do you recall how the what-is-a-story-for triangle had two levels, one for natural and one for purposeful stories? The triangle for story projects has *three* levels. Some story projects are highly purposeful (top level) in that they have predefined goals. Other story projects are natural or "wild" in the sense that the goal is only to collect some stories and see what comes of it (middle level). Neither is better, but they are different. And below the natural and purposeful planes there exists the actual community or organization, doing what it does (bottom level). How does your project's portrait develop further when you consider these three planes of its existence? What shape does your project take on each plane? Which areas are desirable and which are not? Which are easy and which are difficult? On which does everyone agree, and which are in dispute?

Once you have built a portrait of your project, you can use it to plan the activities that will take place in the project.

If you need to tap into **engagement** in order to make decisions and plan future events, choose methods that draw out energy and emotion, like storytelling exercises or face-to-face interviews. In your questions, pay special attention to words that evoke emotional expression. For example, a question about the time a person felt especially happy or sad or angry would convey that emphasis.

If you need to tap into **influence** in order to understand conflicts and problems, choose methods that draw out conflicting perspectives, like asking different groups of people to answer the same questions or do the same sense-making exercises. In your questions, favor words that ask people to repond from a particular *perspective*. A question about a time people were surprised, or disagreed, or felt misunderstood or alone or unique would tap into perspective-based stories.

If you need to tap into **knowledge transfer** in order to find things out, choose methods that encourage detailed description. Ask people to tell you about the items on their desk or have people build complex timelines of the events in a field or career. In your questions, communicate an attention to learning and discovery. A question about a time when something suddenly became apparent would bring out learning stories.

Understand, however, that you will not be collecting only naturally occurring stories when you draw your project close to a vertex of the triangle. Because the stories you collect will be crafted for the purpose of performing to the specifications you have outlined, they will drift up to the plane of purposeful stories. I usually suggest that every vertex-pointing question or activity be countered with a centering question or activity. Why? Because one of the reasons you are collecting stories in the first place is to find out things you cannot possibly guess in advance. The more you corral stories into one location, the greater your danger of missing useful patterns and trends in unexpected locations where you have not have the foresight to look.

Finally, the triangle model is useful communicating the goals of your project to other people, perhaps those whose support you need to carry out the project. A common problem with getting people to help you (or let you) do story projects is that they misunderstand what you are trying to do, what will happen, and what will be the result of the project. I've seen several projects die because their instigators were unable to communicate to those in charge (of money or permission) what they wanted to do. Or more likely, the instigators were unable to stop those in charge from jumping to erroneous conclusions about what the project was about.

In the same way that people sometimes rush to a vertex or side of the triangle when you ask them to tell stories, people rush to conclusions when you describe a story project. Maybe you want to help people

transfer knowledge using stories, and people think you want to make dangerous changes to corporate culture. Or you want to find stories that engage people, and they think you want to collect personal information. Or you want to do a naturally centered story project, one that collects stories without preordaining what you will get from them, and they want to push you into collecting only "compelling" stories or "the best" stories.

You can use the triangle model to plan how you will communicate to people -- funders, collaborators, management -- about the project. You don't have to *show* people your project portrait, but you can use it to craft a story about how your project will proceed. The portrait can also help you think about how people might respond and plan for those responses. For example, if you want to do a centered project, you might prepare a plan for guiding perceptions coming from each vertex (oh, that's just project planning; oh, that's just marketing and sales; oh, that's just knowledge management) back to a more balanced perception of what you plan to do and why.

Planning projects with stories in personalities

This section draws on the discussion of "Stories in personalities" begun in the chapter called "How do stories work?" in *Working with Stories*. Recall that I spoke then of people who tell stories and either know it or don't, and people who don't tell stories, and either think they do or don't. There are two corresponding axes of distinction to consider in drawing a map of personality in relation to story work: the degree to which people understand story, and the degree to which they understand what they can use story projects to do. You could call them ease of understanding and skill in practice.

I see stories all around me

The degree to which people "get" story, the degree to which they see themselves surrounded by stories, is hard to describe. It's something like what happens when you say something 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 will hear that and say, "Yes, of course, go on." Others will say, "I don't see that at all. Can you *prove* it?" To be clear, I am not making a value statement about the superior people who have superior understanding; I am simply making a statement about how people differ. I don't "get" football, and I hope you don't think that makes me morally or intellectually inferior.

Even some of the "universal" statements made by respected theorists about stories in human life show exactly the same axis of variation, though most of the theorists themselves do not realize it. As Alisdair MacIntyre tells the story 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 started a firestorm of debate), stories are not a central part of the human experience. Life has no story; stories are only things we have created, artifacts like water jugs and tent poles. MacIntyre is clearly not in this 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?"

This 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*, for goodness sake. Couldn't Mink *see* that? No, he could not, because that was not the way he experienced stories. It all depends on whether, when you look around your life, you see *stories* or things one could make stories *out of*. 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 the same 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 of this axis 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 storytelling is essential. When they don't, they say storytelling is an accessory, a nice-to-have. This difference in experience can have a strong impact on whether and how people do story work.

The I-see-stories axis correlates with the axis of whether people tell stories from our earlier discussion of stories and personalities. The more likely people are to tell stories, the more likely they are to "get" a statement about how people think in stories. However, the mapping is not always this simple. Narrative intelligence doesn't always manifest itself in storytelling. Some people who don't tell many stories themselves excel in *noticing* stories, or finding patterns in stories, or helping *other* people tell stories, or creating pathways for stories to travel on. (Personally I'd 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 and nothing else. 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 the world is just sitting there waiting to be explored.)

By the way, a person who doesn't "get" stories can change into one who does. It's more 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've met quite a few people who *could* immerse themselves in story but *choose not to*, and as a result see story work as unapproachable or impractical. If you don't get story but want to use what it can offer, or if you want to work with someone who fits that description, I suggest you look at the advice in the "PNI difficulties" section of the "Advanced Introduction to PNI" chapter.

I see what stories can do

The second axis in the enlarged story-work-in-personalities framework is *what people think story work can do*. Again this relates to the first matrix: people who think they tell stories are more likely to think of

things story work can do. 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 plans. In the faces of some people, as they learn a bit about story work, you can see possibilities blossoming. We could put stories on subway signs and watch people to see which ones they read! We could ask people who *else* might tell a story like the one they told! If we asked these people to do what those people did, then show each group the outcome, they could see how things looked from the other side! If we could get this story to those people, it might help them understand this perspective!

In the faces of people at the other end of the spectrum you will see blossoming not possibilities but obstructions. How will you validate the results? Isn't this just anecdotal evidence? 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? How will this advance the field? I don't mean to put down nay-sayers, and some of these are legitimate questions. The point I'm trying to make is that some people just don't understand what story work is *for*. It doesn't seem to matter how many times you try to explain it. They try to put story work 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 seen 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 consciously tell stories, having *lots of people* tell stories seems to them like nothing piled on top of more nothing.

Caricatures of story work collaborators

If we again combine the extremes on these scales, we get 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 people are "collaborators" rather than "storytellers."

	I "get" story	**I don't "get" story**
I see what stories can do	the dramatic collaborator (often the story performer)	the off-track collaborator (often the confident non-story teller)
I don't see what stories can do	the naive but open collaborator (often the natural storyteller)	the unreachable collaborator (often the unaccustomed storyteller)

All the same caveats as in the first matrix apply here: nobody is *really* like this, these are deliberately created extremes, and so on. And again, these are *my* observations from people watching in this context, not scientific proof.

The naive but open collaborator. As with storytellers, the best collaborator is a person who has never really thought about using stories for anything, but understands intuitively the things you say about the gifts of narrative. 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 new solutions that work best for your goals and group.

The best way to convince a person like this to collaborate on your story project is to tell some great stories about 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. Oz is just more Kansas to them.

You don't usually have to convince an off-track collaborator to participate in a story project, but you do have to make sure you 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 showing the concrete possibilities and returns on different investments in story projects. You can still work with such people, *if* they are willing to open their minds a crack and 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 the project from them.

The dramatic collaborator. These people get story, but they see *so* many things you can do with stories that your work is cut out reining them in. To these people all of Kansas is Oz.

As with the off-track collaborator, this type doesn't need to be convinced that stories can be useful. However, they are likely to load the project up with so much ambition and imagination that it will be impossible to fulfill all of their visions. With this type of collaborator you need to mark out in advance what possibilities you are *not* willing to entertain and where the scope of your project will end. Some cautionary tales may be helpful. It is also helpful to talk a lot about future projects so dramatic collaborators have somewhere else to place their giant ambitions and don't load up the current project until it drops dead from exhaustion.

(And yes I *am* 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 constellation 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 usually will have to put energy into the interaction all the way through the project. The minute you turn your back they are likely to drop the project because it all seems pointless.

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? First, make a statement about how stories work in human society and see if people nod or grimace. Second, tell a few stories, either about projects you've done or projects you know about. See if people respond with animation or look at the clock. Finally, throw up a list of things people can do with story projects, then ask for more suggestions.

1. Naive but open collaborators will not understand your point at first, but as soon as you tell some stories their faces will start lighting up. They will not be likely to add to the list of uses, but may want to hear more stories about things you've seen work.
2. Off-track collaborators will get the point, but they'll suggest goals that don't fit narrative methods, like gathering specific facts or feedback. They will say things like "So you plan to ask people what they ate that day?" or "A good question might be to ask what brand of chocolate they like best." or "So you are

essentially asking people to list their acquaintances?" that show they have no idea what you are talking about, even if they *think* they do.
3. Dramatic collaborators will make wonderfully appropriate and imaginative suggestions, but they will make *too many* of them. (Yes, I do that.) They will say things like "And at the same time, we could do this!" or "Why not expand that up a level!" or "We could ask people to call all of their first cousins!" or other over-the-top schemes.
4. Unreachables will ignore your pitch, give no suggestions, and check their email while you are talking. Their faces will *not* light up, either at the stories you tell or at the great things you can do. You will need to work *very* hard to even get them to stay in the room until you are done.

After you assess your group, you will be in a better position to understand where the potentials and pitfalls lie in those you might call on to collaborate on the project.

Ethics in PNI work

All the parts of this section have to do with ethics in PNI, so I set them out especially. I could have put them in the advanced introduction to PNI, but that chapter was already very long. Besides, considerations of ethics enter into projects most often at the planning stage, when one is making decisions about how the project will take shape. So they fit well here because this is when you will confront these issues most.

Transparency in PNI projects

A question I often encounter during project planning is, "What should I tell people about why I want them to tell stories?"

There are four categories of information you could potentially give the people you will be asking to tell stories in your project.

1. You could tell people *what the project is for*: why you are doing the project, what you hope to achieve, whom you are trying to help, how they can help you achieve your goal, what you would like them to do to help, and what you would like them *not* to do.
2. You could tell people *who is involved in the project*: its funders (who is paying for it), beneficiaries (who will gain from its success), collectors (interviewers, compilers, researchers), and storytellers.
3. You could tell people *why you want to hear stories*: the benefits of narrative inquiry, why you chose it over other methods, what it means about what they should do, what a story is and isn't, which stories are most useful, and what they can do to help you collect better and more useful stories.
4. You could tell people *what will happen to the stories*: who will see or hear them, how much identifying information will be associated with them, how long they will be kept, in what form they will be kept, and in what way their distribution will be limited or protected. (You should always have a privacy policy, so the issue is not what you are *prepared* to say but what information you *volunteer*.)

Whether giving your storytellers each of these pieces of information helps or hinders your project depends on a lot of things about you, your storytellers, and the project. Here I'll consider some favorable and unfavorable conditions for transparency in each of the four possible areas of disclosure.

Telling people what the project is for

When should you tell people *why* you are doing the project? Two issues matter here.

1. Do your storytellers *care* about the subject matter of the project? How does it register on their radar: as a tiny blip of triviality or a giant submarine? Does it *matter* to them? Is it something they think of often? Have they declared their interest in the topic by joining a group or taking some other committing action? How much do you know about their interest in the topic?
2. Will your storytellers think they will *benefit* if the project succeeds? Do they see themselves (or the people or issues they care about) as one of the project's beneficiaries? Or do they consider it to be something about other people and for other people?

If the people you are asking to tell stories are likely to see the project as important and beneficial, they are more likely to contribute if you explain why you are doing it and what you hope to accomplish. You energy and excitement will combine with theirs in a synergistic collaboration. On the other hand, if your storytellers consider the project to be trivial and irrelevant, explaining the project's goals may *reduce* their wilingness to contribute.

Two contrasting examples will illustrate. A standard example of a project in which you do *not* want to disclose a lot of information about goals is in market research. Most customers of products, unless the products are critical to life and happiness, don't much care about product improvement, and they see the benefits to their own lives as trivial. Trying to convey your enthusiasm for improving your shampoo will only turn people away. But hold on -- for *some* products there are *some* people for whom the rules are reversed. For many software products, for example, there is a small percentage of users who not only use the software but also improve it, usually by building things that rely on it: macros, templates and so on. These people usually *do* have enthusiasm for the product and will be *more* likely to contribute if you tell them about your goals. (That doesn't mean you should rely entirely on what they say, because their experiences are not the same as other users' and they are after all only a small portion of the whole group.)

An example of a project in which disclosing goals may be useful might be when the storytellers have already proclaimed their support. Say you want to hear about some of the experiences donors to your charity have had. You are more likely to get useful insights from their stories if you tell them you are trying to improve how their money is spent (or whatever your goal is) than if you don't tell them that. In this case people care about the project (they must, because they care about giving you their time and/or money), and they are likely to see the project as beneficial to themselves, since it increases the value of their contributions. The only caveat here is to be *clear* when you explain your goals to enthusiastic participants. You don't want people to meet you halfway to somewhere you hadn't meant to go.

Many projects include groups of both types at once. For example, say you gather stories about a software application from designers, product managers, salespeople, technical support staff, and customers. Importance and benefit will decrease (and grow in variability) as you move across the firm-public boundary. It is reasonable to give different groups of storytellers different information about the project, unless you expect the groups to compare notes.

There are two special classes of projects in which revealing your project's goals in detail can be fatal, and both have to do with change.

1. Is your goal to *change your organization or community*? If so, giving your storytellers a lot of information about your goal may cause *some* of them to direct their responses in such a way as to apply pressure in directions they want your organization to go. You want the authentic voice of experience, not a campaign of opinion.
2. Is your goal to *change people*? Are you trying to teach them something, or open their minds to new ideas, or find ways to convince them of things, or enlighten them? If so, it's best not to reveal that. Some people will try to prove how perfectly they are doing what you want them to do; some will try to prove you can't budge them; and some will simply walk away. In cases like this it's better to reveal little

about the project (and to ask your questions as obliquely as possible so your intent cannot be easily guessed).

What *should* you say when you cannot reveal the purpose of the project? There are two things you can say.

1. Say *nothing*. Just say "We'd like to ask you some questions about your experiences with X." This is most often possible when the subject matter is trivial or people trust the groups doing the project. If you think many of your storytellers will turn away at this or will demand an explanation, see option two.
2. Describe a *legitimate secondary purpose*. Develop a reasonable story that explains why you might need to collect stories; then make that story true. Having a legitimate secondary purpose is not the same as lying about why you are doing the project, because your secondary purpose may actually be quite useful. The best solution is to find a secondary purpose that aids you in fulfilling your primary purpose but is easy to disclose information about. For example, if your primary purpose is to change minds about an issue, tell people you are collecting stories to put on your web site in order to stimulate discussion about the issue. *Then do that*. Do it as well and completely as if it were the only purpose for the project, and your primary purpose will be fulfilled as well.

Telling people who is involved in the project

How much you should tell people about the groups involved in the project depends on the feelings you expect to find about each group. Ask yourself:

1. What is the *narrative distance* between the storytellers and the different groups of people involved in the project? Do they feel those groups share their values? Do they feel they live in the same worlds? Do they share a context? If people feel another group is similar to themselves, telling them that group is involved might increase their willingness to contribute. Conversely, it can be helpful not to mention groups when you expect storytellers to be uncomfortable on hearing about them being involved. For example, say you are asking customers and employees about customer satisfaction; you might get better results if you don't tell each group of storytellers about the other. But if you are asking people from around the world about healthy eating, it might be motivating to find out about the other groups of storytellers.
2. What is the *value perception* of the storytellers toward each group? Do the storytellers see them as friendly, indifferent or hostile? Do they interpret their actions and statements as truthful and honorable, or do they suspect lies? Do they expect positive or negative news about them? Do they trust or distrust them? One little mental exercise to do here is to pretend (to yourself) that you are telling someone from one group that the other group is involved in the project. What is their reaction? Do they screw up their face? Do they roll their eyes? Do they get up and leave the room? Or do they lean forward and ask what they can do to help?
3. What is the *power relationship* among the project's sponsors, collectors, beneficiaries and storytellers? If people feel subservient to, or at the mercy of, or hoping from attention from another group, the stories they tell will change. Similarly, if the people you are asking to tell stories feel that another group is beneath them, or beneath consideration, the stories will change.

Again, two contrasting examples. Let's say you want to ask patients at a hospital to talk about their experiences. You can expect your storytellers to vary widely in their educational backgrounds and socioeconomic status; thus you could expect the degree of narrative distance between storytellers, sponsors and collectors to be variable. Some patients might feel dependent on the hospital, and might say whatever they think will get them better treatment or attention. Most will probably see the hospital as beneficial, but some might harbor resentment if things have not gone well with their treatment. In this

case I would say fairly little about who is funding the study, who is collecting the stories, and who else is telling stories. I wouldn't *hide* this information; I just would't volunteer it prominently. If you make a big deal about the project's sponsors and story collectors, it might alter the stories you collect.

A contrasting example might be a project where you wanted to ask experienced, award-winning engineers to help you build a company-wide knowledge base about some intricate technical process. In this case the sponsors, collectors, storytellers and beneficiaries would all reside within the same firm. You could expect value perceptions to be fairly high and uniform. Narrative distance would be uniform and relatively low. If there were many new employees the power relationship could be a problem, but let's say your storytellers, because they are experienced, are established in their careers and not likely to worry about saying the right thing. For this type of project I would supply plentiful information about who is involved in the project. In fact such information might play a part in helping convince the busy engineers to set aside the time to contribute.

Telling people why you want to hear stories

You can give your storytellers information on why stories in particular are useful to you. I've seen a range from giving a micro-seminar on the power of narrative inquiry to not even using the word "story." When to tell people about this varies according to a few factors.

1. Are your storytellers *curious*? Some people are naturally curious about methods and ideas, and some make a living from it. If you are asking a group of research scientists to tell you stories, giving them details about why stories reveal greater ground truths than direct questioning will probably get them more enthused to participate. Writers, journalists, teachers, and other generalists are also likely to get excited by learning how and why you are collecting stories. However, there are many valuable and wonderful people who just don't think that way. I once had a workshop full of secretaries nearly screaming at me because I took up their time explaining why stories were useful. When your audience is not likely to want to hear "more, more" about narrative inquiry, say nothing or keep explanations to a minimum.
2. Are your storytellers *busy*? If they can give you only a little time, you will need to keep your comments on the wonders of narrative very brief, even if other factors are favorable. (Reference the screaming secretaries story above.)
3. Are your storytellers *expert* in some area? If so, they are not likely to want to learn about narrative inquiry unless it touches on their field of expertise. There are exceptions, but many people who consider themselves expert in some area (especially if they are in positions of authority) are not willing to be "lectured to" on any subject, even if it would be helpful to the project.
4. Are your storytellers *eager* to help? The more excited you can expect your storytellers to be about why the project is being done, what's in it for them, and who is doing the project, the more likely they will want to hear about narrative inquiry, because they will want to help in the most effective way they can. But watch out; people who are very eager to help might consider any explanations of "how things work" explanations of what they ought to do. You don't want people to perform to perfection; you just want them to tell you what has happened to them. That is the most important message to get across, not what makes a perfect story.

Say your company has a highly technical software product that was created solely for in-house use. The software is primarily used by people in the company's research division. You have chosen to ask research interns (who have just started using the software within the past six months) to tell you about their experiences using it, because you want to ease the learning curve. You can expect most of these science-trained interns to be naturally curious, not overwhelmingly busy, interested in the project, open to

learning new things, likely to see something good in participating (a good mark on their record, at least), and excited about working at the company. It would make sense in this case to expand your explanation of narrative inquiry, at least by a bit. For this group it would also be useful to range more widely in terms of workshop methods, storytelling exercises, more complex questions, and other processes that require storytellers to work with you.

A contrasting project might be one where you are looking to understand the qualities of effective leadership. You have arranged to conduct a number of half-hour lunch-time phone interviews with prominent executives in government and corporate offices. Your storytellers are busy, important and expert. Curiosity and willingness to help will vary but is likely to be far lower than in the case with the interns. These people already have many goals, and yours is not likely to be high up on their list. In this case it is best not to bother these people with long explanations about your methods. Just get to the stories and let them talk.

How do you say as little as possible about narrative inquiry while still getting people interested in participating? My favorite thing to say is, "We can find out about [this] and [this], but we want to know what [this] is *really* like. For that we need to know *what has happened to you, in your own words*." I find that people respond well to this brief statement, because everybody knows that standard measurements often miss a lot. It rings true, and you don't have to say any more than that for people to move on to the storytelling.

But as I have said before: everyone needs to find their own way to explain this. I went through a lot of messy explanations and yawning audiences before I came up with what works for me, and it almost certainly will not be what works for you. Other people I know say all sorts of other things. The best way to whittle down the explanation is to explain it to everyone you meet, watch how they react and what they react to, and keep making it more concise and more packed with meaning.

Telling people what will happen to the stories

To repeat what I said above (because it's important): contributors to any narrative project have a right to expect and demand full disclosure of your privacy policy. However, whether you should *volunteer* this information will vary based on your project and storytellers.

What matters most here is the *perceived* danger of the project to the storytellers, which depends on these factors.

1. What is the *narrative distance* between the storytellers and the project's sponsors, collectors and beneficiaries?
2. What is the *value perception* of the storytellers toward these groups?
3. What is the *power relationship* among them? As you may have noticed, the factors used to decide how much to tell about the groups involved come into play here as well. High narrative distance, low value perception, and wide power differentials all contribute to a perception of danger in storytelling.
4. Is your topic *personal or highly emotional*? If you are asking people about Coke and Pepsi, even if they are distrustful they will probably not care much about what you do with their stories. But if you are asking people to tell stories about, say, the behavior of their family members, people are likely to need some reassurance before opening up (as anyone would).
5. Will you be *identifying* individuals? If your collection is not anonymous, it's best to make that clear up front, because not disclosing that information is likely to backfire later.

If you don't expect your storytellers to perceive any danger in telling you their stories, it's better to let sleeping dogs lie. Having a "privacy" link will satisfy those with questions. However, if there are clear

indications that this issue will drive people away, a highly visible statement of commitment to privacy is critical.

An example of a let-sleeping-dogs-lie project might be one where you are asking people about their experiences with a product that does something without deep emotional resonance -- say you want to improve your shampoo. Because people will not be revealing deep truths about their personal lives, because they are not likely to have a particularly strong feelings about a company that makes shampoo, and because it makes no sense to identify shampoo customers, people are not likely to care much about what you do with the stories. In this case, making a big point of telling them exactly what you will do with the stories may cause suspicion to arise where it would have been absent.

An example of a reassurances-needed project might be one where you are examining public attitudes about government assistance programs. Because people may worry that truth-telling about their experiences may result in retaliations, and because people may have strong feelings and may need to talk about deep issues affecting their lives, and because people are likely to distrust government programs, not telling people what you will do with their stories is likely to result in little disclosure. In this case I would suggest making reassurances of anonymity and privacy visible and clear.

If you don't know whether the people you will be asking to tell stories will perceive danger in the project, try asking a few of them before you start the larger collection.

Bringing it together

This table summarizes the recommendations above.

Telling people...	**is helpful when you have...**	**but not when you have...**
why the project is being done	high interest high benefit	low interest low benefit a goal to change the organization a goal to change people
who is involved in the project (sponsors, collectors, storytellers, beneficiaries)	low narrative distance high value perception low power differential	high narrative distance low value perception high power differential
why you want to hear stories	curious storytellers non-busy storytellers non-expert storytellers eager storytellers	incurious storytellers busy storytellers expert storytellers non-eager storytellers
what will be done with the stories	high narrative distance low value perception high power differential personal, emotional topic identified collection	low narrative distance high value perception low power differential non-personal, trivial topic anonymous collection

I'll finish this section with a few general do's and don'ts about disclosing information about your project.

Do **think about the people** you are asking to tell stories, and *don't* trust your instincts about them. In general the greater the narrative distance between you (the project planners) and your storytellers, the greater the benefit of early, small, pilot story collections in planning a larger project. If you don't know,

don't guess; find out. Try out your explanations and your questions. Even asking three people is better than guessing.

Whatever you say or don't say, **don't lie** about what you are doing, why you are doing it, and for whom. Follow the old rule: *If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all*. Either come up with something nice you *can* say, or don't say anything. But don't try to get people to contribute using an obvious lie, like that you are going to distribute customer stories to your staff (without actually planning to), or that the stories will determine corporate direction (if you have no such intent). People can smell a lie from a mile off. And if they do, the result won't be as simple and manageable as not getting very many stories. It'll be worse: you'll get stories, and you'll *think* you have results, but the results will be distorted in unpredictable ways, and there will be no way to fix it.

Don't broadcast your insecurities through the information you provide. I've seen people try so hard to explain why what they are doing is useful that it's obvious they don't think it will work. You don't need people to understand the point of the whole thing or agree that it's useful or validate your choice of method. You just need them to tell stories. Everyone gets frustrated when respondents say things like "this is STUPID!!!!" or "what is the POINT of this" or "I don't care" and so on. This comes up in all story collections. It's easy to get defensive and try too hard to eludicate the merits of the approach, either in person or by loading too much explanation into an online survey. Don't let yourself do that. Present confident explanations. The more confident you are that people will tell stories, the more they will tell stories.

Do **prepare short and long explanations**. People usually break out into groups based on how much information they want to see. Some people want to do the best possible job they can; some just want to get the thing over with; some might get interested and might not depending on the weather; and some will want to check everything out carefully before they agree to say anything. If your short explanation is a sentence, prepare a paragraph as well, and vice versa. Your long explanation might never get used. But having it ready can increase the variety of stories you collect by giving those who want more information a reason to stay engaged. It can also increase your confidence in the project by helping you feel ready for anything.

Do watch what you say, but **don't overlook transparency as a tool**. Sometimes people think giving storytellers *any* information about the project will be damaging. But that's not always or even often true. Unlike direct questioning in simple surveys, narrative projects always involve an element of motivation. I've seen projects produce lackluster results because the people telling the stories didn't open up as much as the project planners hoped they would. All of us know how to say a lot without saying much. It's almost the default option when we are asked for information. Giving people a compelling reason to dig more deeply into their experiences can upgrade a project's results from satisfactory to revelatory and transformational. Sometimes when you give people exactly the information they need, they will work with you to help the project succeed.

Resolving tensions between needs

When you plan to ask questions about stories, there is often a tension between *what you want to know* and *what people want to tell you*. These are some situations where the tension is greatest.

Dependence. If your storytellers are in some way dependent on you, their first priority will be giving you what they think you want them to give you (which is rarely what you actually want).

Identity. If your storytellers feel that the topic of the questions taps into their identity, their first priority will be keeping the image they present to you positive, coherent and under control.

Conflict. If your storytellers are in conflict with you, their first priority will be either undermining whatever purpose they think you have in mind or promoting a different purpose. (Be careful here because what matters is whether *they* think they are in conflict. Sometimes it's hard to guess.)

Distrust. If your storytellers do not trust you, their first priority will be getting through the exercise without disclosing anything.

Disinterest. If your storytellers don't care about you or about your topic, their first priority will be getting through the exercise as quickly as possible without thinking too deeply about anything.

A great way to find out whether you have any of these situations is to run some pilot story collections and either observe people as they come out of the session (or finish telling a story), or simply ask them how they feel about what just happened. Then look at what they said, thus:

Dependence. A storyteller who feels dependent will finish the storytelling and say, "There! I think I did that right." Or, "Hope that was good enough!" If you hear people saying words like right and good and better and correct, you are probably dealing with dependence.

Identity. A storyteller who feels the elicitation touches on their identity will finish the storytelling and say, "There, I explained what it's like to be a doctor." Or, "It was interesting to think about my motivations in teaching." People accessing identity tend to use words like explain and inform and clarify, because more emotionally-laden words are too threatening.

Conflict. A storyteller who feels in conflict will finish the storytelling and say, "There! I guess I gave *them* a piece of my mind." Or, "*That* should shake them up." Here you want to look for *action* words, like give and take and disturb and bother and shake up and surprise, because their storytelling is an action. They hope to change something by it: either you or the thing you are trying to do.

Distrust. A storyteller who feels distrustful will finish the storytelling and say, "Can I see that transcript? I want to change something." Or, "Let me see that privacy policy again." Or, "I'm not sure I should have said that." People who don't trust you tend to replay the experience over and over in their minds, looking for problems and being retrospectively anxious.

Disinterest. A storyteller who is not interested will finish the storytelling and say, "Time for lunch!" Or, "I wonder what's on TV tonight?" Or, "I've got two more meetings today." In other words, the minute the storytelling session is over, it's gone from their minds. If you ask them about the session itself, they will either not respond, or they will say things like "It was all right" or "sure, great."

If you gather enough reactions to the storytelling event, you will get some hints as to whether, and how much, any of these tensions is present. If you can't run a whole pilot project, just 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 storytelling you will be asking people to do. What to do next?

Your view, their view

What I do and recommend in crafting questions is to *tack back and forth* between meeting your needs and meeting the needs of your storytellers. 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 storytellers, 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 the storytellers' 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 where 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 where you didn't think your qualifications were perfect for it. (I think all of us remember some times like that, when we were stretching our claims of ability, just a bit.) Another one that works here is to think about a time when you were financially dependent on somebody or some organization. Perhaps during college you got a scholarship? Or you received a gift from a relative? It's okay to go all the way back to childhood, as long as you can get into the mindset you need. I remember asking Mrs. Masters up on the hill for a piece of candy and feeling her scrutinizing have-you-been-naughty eyes on me. 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 joking, "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain."

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 at them about. To ramp up the emotions, try to select a time when you wanted to get out of the conversation but couldn't for some reason; and 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 narrative workshops with people cornering me and giving me lectures on whatever they think is wrong with the world (evidently I appear to invite this), and where I felt constrained to *not* say, "That's ridiculous!" 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 some 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: it's probably not good to think of a time when your boss or employer wanted to know something. Go for somebody more distant, 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 a little nervous. You can also use memories of personal interactions, like a blabby neighbor who asks more questions than you'd like to answer.

Disinterest. Think of a time when you were bothered by somebody asking you about something you didn't care about. A perfect example is telephone surveys about ordinary domestic things, 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 back your tangential participation in the event; remember how you were about to hang up or walk away at every moment; and remember how you kept saying "does not apply" in a bored way. Or how you tried to make sport of the whole thing, just 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.

Okay, so now that you have chosen a bona fide memory -- and it should be something that really happened to you, else it won't be powerful enough -- place yourself into that memory and read your questions again. Pay attention to the emotions that surface. See which questions and answers about stories jump out at you and flash messages. Some questions and answers 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; and the too-safe questions and answers will collect too many responses, even ones that *should* really be elsewhere.

Next, take off the memory and tack back to your side of wanting to find things out. Remove the red and green flagged items, then find places where you've lost significant information as a result. Which changes jeopardized your chances of meeting your goals? Picture yourself looking at the collected data, and think about whether you will get what you need. Keeping in mind your simulated storyteller's reactions, tone down the questions and answers you need to keep, and try to arrive at something they will not run from (red flag) or cling to (green flag). Then put your memory back on and become your storytellers again. Keep doing this. Keep finding flags and removing them until you get to a compromise everyone can live with.

At some point the pendulums you are swinging should come to rest, but at a different place for each question on the spectrum between what you want and what they want. 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 hold out for greater disclosure; but when you do that, make sure to provide a good non-response response to divert the flow and keep the true responses pure.

Let me give a little fake example. Let's say I'm working on a project in which I *wish* I could ask a question about coping skills at work, dealing with deadlines and such. Let's say I've written this question: "Do you think your work skills cope well with deadlines?" And the answers run the gamut from, "Yes, I have great confidence in them" to "They used to work but things are getting worse and I can't keep up" to "I've never coped well with deadlines."

Now let's say I've discerned, through some casual story elicitations, that dependence will be an issue with this storytelling group. Here I would drag out some of my memories from college, when my ability to keep attending school depended on keeping my several jobs and scholarship intact. Now I read that question about "work skills" *in my mindset as a dependent student*. Immediately the "great confidence" answer glows green (safe) and the other two glow red (dangerous). Admitting any weakness or uncertainty is the last thing I would have done in that context. It's clear how I would respond.

Of course these are not the flags I would raise in my own mind *today*, outside of that memory context. Today, I'd just choose that I'm horrible with deadlines. I don't mind admitting it. Even if 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 fall apart when things get down to the wire. Some of the people in my storytelling group will respond as I do now. Nothing will glow red or green for them. But that's not a problem; I said I sensed a tension, and that means I sensed that a significant *portion* of the people will be affected. Those are the people I am compromising with; the others will participate without any such compromise. That's why it is always better to increase the range of answers to give the people with tensions something to choose or a story to tell. But don't *lose* anything: enhance, don't narrow. Don't make it work for one group only to lose another.

So, having finished my memory-context reaction, I now go back to my project-planning self and see what other answers I can come up that suit my goal of helping people develop stronger coping skills without raising those red and green flags. Perhaps I add more answers, or perhaps I come up with another axis of

variation that is less likely to raise flags but still gives me useful information. It might be better to ask about what sorts of coping skills work best in what situation, or whether coping skills have changed over time, or what people have learned about coping skills as they have been in their job. There is often a lot of terrain between what you want and what they want: you just have to explore the landscape and find it.

Finally, test your questions with some real storytellers before you start the larger project. If you plan to collect lots of stories, say more than a few hundred, this is very important, because the more stories you collect the more of a tragedy it is when you don't get the answers you hoped for. Play-acting with your memories as a guide gets you part of the way, but real storytellers will almost always surprise you.

Practical ethics in story work

This section came from an essay I wrote sparked by an essay by my friend Thaler Pekar about ethics in story collection (I cite the link to Thaler's full essay in the References appendix). Here is my favorite part of what Thaler said:

> You may have noticed that I've refrained from talking about story "collection," or even story "tellers." These terms are transactional, implying a giver and a taker. 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.

Actually I do use the terms "story collection" and "storytellers" quite often in this book, simply because it's hard to get around them when you are writing how-to sorts of texts. But I strongly agree with Thaler that stories should never be seen as commodities.

This part of Thaler's article won my "consider both sides" prize:

> Be aware ... of people feeling they have no recourse but to say "Yes" when you ask them to share their story. ... [But] 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 arcticle, my son and I had been watching a National Geographic television series called *Dogtown*, which is a documentary about a huge no-kill dog shelter in Utah. In one episode my favorite dog trainer (the me-if-I-had-stayed-in-ethology guy) said that people think the best way to be nice to shy dogs is to leave them alone. But, he said, 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. The "yes yes" story is like the dog in a panic to do anything and everything people say, the 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 like 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 in the way the dog responds to their presence. 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, the stories people tell can show you whether the storytellers are comfortable with what you are asking them to do or are showing stress due to your lack of practical ethics (let's just assume it's from benign neglect). Over the years I have noticed some things that differ between stories told in projects with positive, weak, neutral, and negative practical ethics.

Engagement

When people are "on board" with you in a story gathering effort, they are *in* their stories. They don't hold their stories at arm's length, pinching their noses; they hug them, they wear them. If people are not with you their stories are limp and empty of presence because the people are elsewhere. Listen to the stories and ask yourself: Is there anyone *in* here? If not, think about what would help people enter into the stories and inhabit them. I remember one 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. Of course the respondents got the message and said nothing unpleasant; so the project had essentially no outcome. The project was like an empty house: everyone looked through the windows but nobody went inside. No engagement, no result.

Effort

In a well-working story gathering you can see storytelling muscles at work. Meaning, you can see that people are taking their responses to the questions you pose seriously. They don't say things like "STOOPID!!!!" or "dunno" -- they put some muscle into it and pull along with you. A correlate of effort is patience. If people cannot spare a moment, maybe you haven't given them something worth finding time for. If you find yourself wishing for a stronger response, think about why you are not getting it and what would draw out the effort you need.

Some story projects simply must use external reward or obligation to encourage participation, just because people are busy and have other things to do. But even so, there is a big difference between the leash of compliance and the leap of engagement. Don't make the mistake of assuming people can't or won't care. I'm always amazed when people set out with excellent goals but don't bother to tell their storytellers *why* they are doing the project.

Try this exercise. On one side of a page, list the official goals of your project. What will have happened if it succeeded, from the official (usually funding) point of view? On the other side list some unofficial goals participants might have. What will happen if it succeeds in meeting those goals? Now look for overlaps. How can you plan the project so that it meets its funding goals while engaging its participants in meeting goals they can put effort behind? Now tell people about *everything*: your goals, theirs and the overlaps. Get them pulling along with you to somewhere you all want to go.

Freedom

Everybody self-censors, even when we talk to ourselves. But when things are going well in a story gathering, you can tell when people are maintaining a level of self-censoring appropriate to the context. Watch people as you ask them tell stories. If they flinch when they hear your questions, check what you are asking them to do and what you are planning to do with it. You can watch people flinch in person if you are in a workshop or interview, but there are ways to observe people flinching in other situations -- hesitations, mumblings, markings. I remember once getting some scanned forms from a pilot workshop and finding that several people had drawn angry slashes clear across some of the pages. That meant something, and I needed to find out what before we went any further. (As I recall, it meant a few of the questions offended the respondents' sense of identity.) Another time I remember reading the responses to a survey and finding quite a few people speaking directly to *me*, the person reading the collected responses. They'd say 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 people say about the project, about the people funding it, about those running it, and about the other people telling stories. Sometimes I ask people to guess what other people might say about a story. Would they find it inspiring? Worth retelling? And so on. This is a good question for pilot work, when you are figuring out how to approach people on a subject. If you notice people referring to *anyone* involved in the project in negative ways, it might mean their perceptions of the project and its participants are not what you would like them to be. You can gather such references and consider what changes might address them. I remember once reviewing some stories collected in a pilot project concerning hospital patients. The respondents showed such a strong tendency to try to please those in charge of the project -- essentially jumping up and down telling stories like a dog begging for treats -- that I realized we were going to have to tone down official-sounding requests, to get people to speak freely and calmly. This was a case of too much respect, or maybe respect mixed with fear, that influenced the later project design.

Gratitude

I've come to believe that if you can't find any stories expressing gratitude in what you have collected, you have failed to explore your topic fully. There should be a proportion -- small but real, maybe ten or fifteen percent -- in which people say things like, "I'm glad to have had a chance to talk about this" or "It's good to tell what happened." Granted, some topics are not ones about which people will have pent-up emotion. But still, you should be able to find some expressions of thanks here and there. And the deeper and stronger the emotions the project touches on, the more gratitude you should find. I'd say that most of the tears I've shed in story work have been in times when people thanked me for listening to their stories (and I felt privileged to have been given the honor to hear them). That sort of thing makes the work feel like cooperation, not extraction, and it tells you things are going as they should. If you can't find any expressions of thanks, think about why. Did people feel their story would have no impact? Did they feel it would be misused? Did they feel it had been taken from them (as a commodity)? Did they feel put aside or ignored? What can you do about that?

Hope

At least some of your stories should express hope that they will be useful and helpful to the goals of the project. This is similar to the gratitude measure as a sign of healthy participation. One way to improve your hope score is to make sure you tell people what you are going to do with their stories (and better still, involve them in doing it). When you facilitate a story project it's easy to slip into feeling that you are the only person in the world who cares about it. And project planners can sometimes get -- if we admit it -- a bit possessive about projects. If you want your project to succeed you need to *share your hopes* for it with all those who participate. That doesn't just mean *telling* people what your hopes are. It means *letting your participants have hopes of their own*, and making sure their hopes are *included* in the project. If you don't see any hope in the stories you hear, maybe it's because you are hoarding it.

You can use these measures after you have collected some stories in a pilot effort. But can also use them in the narrative sensemaking that happens *before* you begin collecting. Start by telling a story in which each measure succeeds and another in which it fails. What might happen when a person was engaged or disengaged? Think of some antecedents that could lead to each story happening. Look for mistakes you may be about to make and opportunities you may be about to let slip away. Now use those stories to contrast groups you plan to work with. Take a story of positive engagement and put a teacher, then a student, then a parent, into its main character slot. What would engage or disengage each? What does that mean you should do?

Finally, importantly, imagine that all of the participants in your project suddenly know *everything* you know about the project. Say your detailed notes and discussions suddenly become public. Or pretend that your inner hopes and dreams somehow become the subject of a tell-all documentary. What changes as a result? If the stories yelp and run away or retreat to a safe place you can't reach, are you about to act unethically, and put the project in danger, by hiding information? If the stories come bounding out to meet you full of new energy, could you be about to miss an opportunity to engage them?

Severed stories and those who sever them

One of my favorite moments in my work with stories is when I'm sitting with a body of stories and their accompanying interpretations. This is a position I have been in many times now and have come to love, over and above writing or programming or almost anything else I do. Sitting with the stories, abiding with them, listening to them, is a delight.

Listening to the story of stories

When I receive the stories for a project, they never stand alone but are adorned, encrusted, surrounded with meaningful interpretations. I always start with these interpretations. I begin by generating every possible measure and comparison among answers, visual and/or statistical. Then I pore over them. How many people said they felt happy yet confused about their stories? How many people over fifty told stories in which people needed respect? How many under twenty said that? How many people said their second-hand stories lacked control? If they said one thing, were they more likely to say another? Or the reverse? And so on. These thousands of comparisons form patterns which I sort through, sometimes by eye, sometimes by algorithm and sometimes in both ways. Some patterns line up as expected, some are surprising, some curious, some unsettling.

Importantly, none of these patterns are based on the stories themselves. They are based on *interpretations*: answers people gave to questions about their stories and about themselves and their views.

I carefully avoid looking at any stories without a good framing reason, a question to be answered, in the early stages of the work. I never allow myself to simply wander into the story collection and start exploring.

Why keep myself away from the stories? Because I don't want to form any patterns in my own reading. What I want to do is *find the patterns the storytellers set down for me to find*. The patterns that form in the interpretations given by storytellers create a second-order story, one that encompasses and explains all the stories beneath it. It is the story of the stories, told by the people who told them. I can only find that story-of-stories by listening to what people said about their stories.

The most delightful moment in every project is when the story-of-stories starts to tell itself (or, when the large trends in story interpretation begin to appear and stabilize). If slogging through all the pattern comparisons is like patiently tending a garden, watching the patterns join and merge into strong messages is like harvest day. It is like watching a dense fog lift over a quiet landscape, or rounding a corner and hearing a distant sound become a resounding choir. It is heartening. The people find their voices and speak.

After I have discovered the story-of-stories I communicate it to whoever asked me to help collect the stories. In more technical terms, I explain and illustrate each major trend in prose, in graphs, in statistics, and in stories. As I build this presentation, I finally allow myself to dive into the stories. At this point I read as many stories as I can in order to choose relevant stories with which to illustrate each trend. (Usually that means I read all of the stories, but when there are thousands I cannot get to them all, poor things.)

I always find myself pleasantly surprised at how perfectly the patterns I find in the answers match the stories. I don't know why they wouldn't match up, but I'm always excited when they do. The problem is never to find examples that illustrate the patterns; the problem is to choose among the many excellent examples that present themselves.

People know their stories. I've come to rely on that fact. I have also come to realize that this is not a methodological stance but an ethical one. The rest of this section will explore that stance.

Whose story of stories?

I mentioned this always-surprisingly great match between patterns and stories to my husband one day, as I put together a report on a project. He said, "Gee, if they match up so well, maybe you don't need to do all those statistics and look at all those graphs. Maybe you could just read the stories."

Not knowing any better, bless him, he put his finger directly on the crux of the issue. My reaction was rapid, emotional and instinctual: I recoiled. What would happen if I read the stories alone? I know exactly what would happen. The result would be worse than useless; it would be a disaster. I might as well not even start such a project. The people would not find their voices and speak; I would try to speak in their voices, and I would fail. It would be like any number of bad movies where ghosts or aliens or monsters take over people, issuing grunts, guttural horrors, grotesque gestures. It would not be real speech but un-speech, something wrong, distorted, alien, horrible.

So I've been thinking about this issue, of why it matters that people interpret their own stories. Over the years as I worked with stories, I gradually came around to a belief that if you don't ask people to interpret their own stories *in some way*, you have to take the P out of PNI -- that is, you are just doing narrative inquiry, not *participatory* narrative inquiry. You don't necessarily have to ask people to fill out survey forms about stories; that is just convenient in some circumstances. You can ask people to reflect in a workshop setting, because asking people to build larger stories out of their stories is asking them to

interpret, reflect and participate. (In fact in-person, facilitated reflection is far better when you can support it.) But you do need to engage people in *some* sort of reflection about their stories if you want to hear their true voices.

Stories alone are not enough. I have become increasingly convinced of that fact. It just can't have the positive impact I think story work can and should have, and in fact I think it holds danger.

Whose trails through whose lands?

Let's picture a story collection as a landscape marked with features: rocks here, bushes there, a brook, a solitary peak rising above a grassy plain. Anyone who reads the stories gets a sense of the lay of the land. If you have read through any books with hundreds of folk tales or short stories in them, you will remember what it feels like to begin to sense the rise and fall of the terrain. I love to stretch out with a book of folk tales from a region or history and explore it, all the while thinking of other lands I've visited in the past. Maybe you do too.

Anyone who encounters such a land of stories lays down trails through the land. Some trails are broad and rutted, with nothing but the most stubborn grasses struggling to grow on the compacted earth. Some trails are slight and hard to discern, only visible to those familiar with them. Forming your own trails through a narrative landscape is one of the delights of exploring a story collection. As a lover of folk tales, I look forward to feeling the paths form as I read through a collection. But if you have done this, you also must know that my trails cannot be your trails. The experience of reading a collection of stories is a story in itself, and each such story is unique.

Even the same person reading the same book decades later will lay down new trails. When I used to read Hans Christian Andersen's collected fairy tales every year as a child, I ran first on my favorite trails. One of my favorite stories then was "The Story of a Mother." It was about a mother who loses her child and speaks with Death and -- I don't remember how it ends. As a child I loved that story. It was heroic and romantic, and I think it helped me understand how much my own mother loved me, even if that love was manifested in rules and chores and waking me up in an irritating way. As a mother today, I cannot bring myself to read that story. That trail has grown over and lies untrodden, abandoned, forbidden. When I was writing this page I looked the story up on the internet and tried to read it -- but I found I couldn't. I couldn't face what it said. I couldn't even keep the browser window open, not looking at it; the words leaked fear and pain across into the page where I was writing. Someday I may read that story again and forge a new trail to it, but not in this stage of my life.

People know their stories.

Now picture me again, this time facing a collection of stories told by real people, often people in real distress (because story projects usually involve people unhappy about *something*). Or picture yourself in the same position. If I was to build my own trails through that land of stories, or if you were, of what use would those trails be to anyone other than myself, or yourself? How would my trails or your trails help the people who told the stories, the people who asked for the stories, or the people who might be helped by the stories? They would not help them; indeed they might hurt. My story, or your story, would fight with the story the stories are telling. It might even take over and enslave their story, without our knowing it.

So I don't build my own trails. I let the storytellers show me where to find *their* trails. I do this by asking them to reflect on their own stories. The answers they give me are the trails I follow, and those trails are what I present to those who asked me to help collect the stories. I recommend this practice to everyone who works with stories. Don't build trails. Ask, help, watch.

Severed stories

When I consider the benefits that can be gained by exploring the trails people have laid down among their own stories, I begin to have almost a horror of people reading and presenting the stories of others without such contextual interpretation being somehow preserved.

In their natural setting stories are never told devoid of context. It is only when we set about collecting them in databases that the problem arises at all. People add meta-narrations to their stories all the time, about why they told them, who they want to hear them, what parts are the most important, how they feel about them. Asking people to reflect on their stories is a way to mimic these interactions and preserve at least some of the story's context. That's why it works.

I'd go so far as to say that a story with no context to it ... is not really a story at all. It is a sort of imprint of a story, an impression, like those pencil rubbings people make of old gravestones. If you make no attempt to include *some* sort of story context in what you collect and work with, you are not really doing story work at all, because you are not working with living stories. You are just picking up dead stories and shuffling them around.

It reminds me of that scene in *The Golden Compass* where Lyra discovers a severed child: a child without his daemon (spiritual companion), something torn apart, abhorrent, grotesque.

> The little boy was huddled against the wood drying-rack where hung row upon row of gutted fish, all as stiff as boards. He was clutching a piece of fish to him as Lyra was clutching Pantalaimon [her daemon], with both hands, hard, against her heart; but that was all he had, a piece of dried fish; because he had no daemon at all.
>
> The Gobblers had cut it away. That was intercision, and this was a severed child.
>
> Her first impulse was to turn and run, or to be sick. A human being with no daemon was like someone without a face, or with their ribs laid open and their heart torn out: something unnatural and uncanny that belonged to the world of night-ghasts, not the waking world of sense. ...
>
> She found herself sobbing, and Pantalaimon was whimpering too, and in both of them there was a passionate pity and sorrow for the half-boy.

Passionate pity and sorrow for the half-boy. This is *exactly* how I feel about stories taken out of context. They are naked, lost, half-stories that cry out to be clothed in meaningful context. The kind of narrative analysis where experts build trails through the stories of other people simply by reading them and rearranging them seems to me nothing more than a thin fabric of delusion over the cold-blooded seizure of control. It is the treatment of stories as objects or commodities, things to be remapped and repurposed into new objects for consumption and use by those with the power to use them as they see fit.

Those who hold the cleaver must not use it

I'm aware that this reaction is extreme. It seems extreme even to myself. I can't entirely explain it. It is not rational. Maybe it has come after sitting with so many tens of thousands of stories, feeling their vulnerability to exploitation, and wanting to protect them. I don't actually *know* anyone who rips stories away from their meanings in this way, so it's entirely possible -- no, probable -- that I have constructed a bogeyman to act out my own fears of what *I* might do with stories.

As I was writing this essay I got an email about a project. The email said, we are entering the stories now and you can read some if you want to. My immediate reaction was to recoil. I even drew my hands back from the computer as though the keyboard were burning. *It was not yet time* to read the stories.

It is interesting to reflect that the person who sent the email is used to facilitating storyteller reflections and interpretations in workshops, not to receiving disembodied stories through the ether as I do. I wonder if they are further removed from the daring temptation to use the sharp cleaver I *could* wield to separate context from narrative, daemon from child. Maybe it is the nearness and power of that cleaver that brings the spectre of using it so close to my mind and makes my reaction so intense (and my procedures so internally ritualized). I always say that working with stories has both great power and great danger. This is one of the dangers: of cleaving context from story and thereby subduing one story of stories with another.

Of course, there is another interpretation of my bogeyman story. It only occurred to me as I let the essay steep while I stepped into a hot bath. The bath, that womb-like, back-to-the-beginning font of wisdom, bubbled up the thought that maybe the reason I fear the cleaver so much is that I am *already* wielding it. I am an agent of story intercision myself.

How foreign, how alien is it to gather people into a room or onto a web form and ask them to tell their stories to strangers? No matter how many and how deep the questions I ask, maybe I delude *myself* into believing I am preserving context. Maybe the thin fabric of delusion over a cold-blooded seizure of control is my own. Maybe my procedures are so ritualized not because they preserve context but because they preserve the remnants of what was once context. Maybe what I fear is what I do.

Later I was talking about the issue of being an intermediary in story projects with a colleague, and I noticed that I kept mentioning attributes of tricksters. People who work with stories must stand with one foot in two worlds, as insiders and outsiders at once. They must be ready to break the rules and upset the prevailing order so they can help people discover new rules and new order. They must lie to discover the truth, because only by making it clear that they cannot be trusted can they provoke people to think for themselves. And more than anything else, they must laugh at themselves and question their every statement and motive and plan. If that's true, I thought, I am probably exploring in the right direction. (This realization led to the section of the book called "PNI skills.")

The healing cleaver

By coincidence, on the day after I posted the essay about severed stories on my blog, I listened to two doctors tell stories about how listening to their patients tell their stories helps them work together to find solutions to problems. (This was on a teleconference from the Plexus Institute on the topic of narrative in medicine. I think the Plexus Institute has archived recordings of these calls if you want to listen to their stimulating accounts. Look for archived PlexusCalls.) The two doctors on the call reminded me of something I had forgotten. They talked about how part of the therapeutic solution doctors and other health providers offer to patients is simply the opportunity to tell their story to someone who cares and is listening. *The story is the therapy*, they said. They mentioned the gratitude they have found in patients for this act of listening, not for any solutions proposed but just for *the chance to speak and be heard*.

I had forgotten this. I myself have been amazed to find so many people grateful to be heard in the story collections I have helped people put together. Generally the storytellers in the projects I help clients with have been asked (begged) to contribute to something, a goal or a cause, though sometimes they have been simply paid or required to contribute and given no other reason to speak. Still, in most projects some number of people have inevitably expressed gratitude for what they have usually called the chance or the opportunity to speak. Some who don't say it directly have radiated their gratitude indirectly, through their stories. Sometimes you can just *feel* the relief people have at finally being asked the right question that gives them the permission to share their experiences and perspectives.

This made me revisit my previous ruminations about severing stories from context. If the severing of context from stories is always negative: if asking people to recount their experiences to strangers and using

those stories to represent people without their further participation is a dangerous enterprise open to abuses of power: how could anyone possibly feel *gratitude* about it? Should they not cry out in protest? Why do so many people seem to honestly enjoy the experience?

I wonder if in my soul searching I've been too one-sided in looking for solutions and blame. Maybe sometimes the loss of context in storytelling is *exactly* what is needed. It could be empowering as well as coercive, and maybe at the same time. Maybe sometimes a story that cannot be told within the boundaries of family, friends and community can be told beyond those boundaries, and that could lead to reflections and revelations impossible otherwise. Maybe, sometimes, the cleaver heals.

It reminds me of this great Sting song that goes:

> He looked beneath his shirt today
>
> There was a wound in his flesh so deep and wide
>
> From the wound a lovely flower grew
>
> From somewhere deep inside
>
> He turned around to face his mother
>
> To show her the wound in his breast that burned like a brand
>
> But the sword that cut him open
>
> Was the sword in his mother's hand ...
>
> Though the sword was his protection
>
> The wound itself would give him power
>
> The power to remake himself at the time of his darkest hour
>
> She said the wound would give him courage and pain
>
> The kind of pain that you can't hide
>
> From the wound a lovely flower grew
>
> From somewhere deep inside

Maybe what I have not been considering, in my struggle to work ethically, is that effective story exchange should be both a tie that binds *and* a sword that cleaves. If that is true, cleaving context from story becomes not something uniformly to be avoided, but something to be used at the right place and time.

When is that place and time? I don't know. It is something I'd like to think more about. If the creation of distance is an essential element in story collection, when is it essential and when is it obstructive? When does it help and when does it hurt?

The power to remake himself at the time of his darkest hour. Isn't that what stories do for us, give us the power to remake ourselves? Maybe it is in our darkest hour when we need the distance a loss of context can provide. Maybe that is why I've seen the people with the worst, saddest stories show the most gratitude. They have the most to reveal, the strongest boundaries, and the greatest reason not to reveal their stories without the freeing context of no-context. Why do people call suicide hotlines when they are surrounded by family and friends who would do anything, go anywhere, pay anything, to help them in their time of need? Maybe, sometimes, the cleaver heals.

Clothes or skins?

I'm not saying my ritualized practices of relying on storyteller interpretations as maps of authenticity are not warranted. I still believe it is manipulative and self-deluding to interpret the stories of others without attempting to preserve some understanding of their meaning *in situ*. But maybe the key to helping people collect and work with their stories is not in preserving context above all else, but in helping them manage the interplay of cleaving distance and joining intimacy.

I've thought about this duality in stories for a long time: are they objects or living beings? I've seen lots of people excoriate those on the other side of that divide. Those who treat stories as objects say: Don't put too much stock into stories. Don't treat them as powerful forces and don't be deluded into thinking they represent reality. They are just shiny playthings, constructions created for purposes, artifacts, masks. When my son was very little, he would describe people based on the colors of their clothing, not realizing people didn't define people that way. We would read a book and he'd say, "I liked that red man" or "That blue man said mean things." It was only later that he realized clothing was usually separated from identity. People who see stories as objects see them like clothing, things that can be put on and taken off. They caution us not to take them too seriously.

Those who treat stories as living beings say the opposite: revere stories for their centrality to the human experience. Respect them, don't ship them around as commodities, don't remove their sacred layers of context. People on this side get all hot and bothered about voices and rights, and write long blog posts about the dangers of cleaving story from context and the daring temptations of manipulative interpretation by outsiders. I've been on that side, obviously, but I wonder if I have gotten too storier-than-thou about it for my own good. Maybe it is because I have felt the sharpness of the cleaver in my hand so often that I have not understood its dual uses as I should. On the other side lives that great quote from Oscar Wilde: "Give a man a mask, and he will tell you the truth."

Maybe sometimes stories *should* be masks we can put on and take off. Asking people to come into a room full of strangers, or onto a web site, is like asking them to shed their skins as if they were clothes and try on others. It allows them to step outside of their clothes that say "single mother" or "struggling farmer" or "helpful doctor" and speak freely, unadorned by the confining encrustations of context. It transports.

Casting themselves into the wind

My favorite metaphor for stories is that they are like seeds, so I like to use it as a handy tool to explore any and all dilemmas. Seeds can be seen as objects, things that can be picked up and cast about by those in control of them. Some even speak of seeds as tools, elements of human-controlled technology.

But seeds can also be seen as living organisms with abundant abilities to adapt and respond: sharp spines, chemical weapons, adaptive growth patterns, the power to endure through harsh conditions and emerge when favorable conditions return. I've always been on the side of the living-organism view, I think. It is where I am when I talk about the horror of cleaving context from story. But there is a liberating merit, at the right place and time, to treating stories as objects, to casting them on the ground as a farmer casts seeds. To loosening the bonds of context and sacrificing the sacred to the profane. To Carnival and the breaking of rules. To shaking stories loose from their moorings and prodding them to travel. To giving them the gift of courage and pain.

But it's not that simple. Some seeds don't wait for farmers to cast them, and maybe some stories don't either. Some seeds cast *themselves*, with their pinafores of fluff and their whirligig motors. Some seeds build their own loss of context into their travels, and maybe some stories do, or want to, as well. If that is

true, some stories may wield their own tiny cleavers and cut themselves loose. For these stories, maybe I am not the agent of control at all. Maybe I just delude myself into believing I have power over them.

If it's true that some stories cleave themselves, the ethical narrative intermediary should not expend their energy on preserving context in every situation, because sometimes they will work against what they want to support. Instead they should find out what is most wanted in each circumstance. Which stories want to travel? Which have grown wings? How can you tell? I'm not sure. There must be some way of discerning a winged story from the burrowing sort. There must be some way of finding out which stories have cut themselves loose and are struggling to fly. Maybe in a story wings look like gratitude.

Finding helpers for story work

This section arose as an answer to a question posed by an email correspondent. This person was running a story project and wanted to hire people who could collect stories. He also wanted to hire people who could *train* people to collect stories. The question he asked was, "What makes a good story listener?"

The observant reader will have already noticed that this section appears to contradict what I said in the last part of the previous chapter: than anyone can do story work with time and practice. Story work *does* come more naturally to some people than to others, but the measure of natural talent involved seems -- from my experience -- to be relatively small. And just because anyone *can* doesn't mean everyone *does*. In any random group of people there will be some more able to collect stories well, at the present moment, than others. And there are situations in which one might be looking for people who have *already* put in the time and practice to do story work well, regardless of how easily it came to them. This advice applies to that situation.

The first thing in finding people who can work with stories is that they have to *think in stories*. I used to think everybody did this but have come to the conclusion that it is like handedness: some do and some don't, and all points in between.

To explain what I mean: once I was preparing a blog post based on a magazine advertisement for a sweepstakes scheme. The full-page advertisement was dominated (or so I thought) by two juxtaposed photographs. I saw the advertisement and my eyes went straight to the photos, which I scrutinized heavily and got very excited about (because of the story they told). There was some writing on the bottom of the page, but I mostly ignored that. I brought the magazine to my husband to show him the exciting photographic juxtaposition. He completely *ignored* the photos and went straight to the sweepstakes scheme described below the pictures, which to him was amazing. (After he explained it to me, it was amazing to me too, but I didn't notice it until he explained it.)

If I was hiring somebody to compare photographs, I'd hire me. If I was hiring somebody to evaluate schemes and plans, I'd hire my husband. So, if you want to find people who can help you collect stories well, you want people who notice stories the way I notice pictures and the way my husband notices schemes and plans.

It's almost like the world has many beings swimming around in it, but for some people whole species are transparent while others are solid. One person can see the stories perfectly but can't make out the opinions, and somebody else can see the opinions but the stories are just thin shimmers of light. If you watch people tell and listen to stories, you can tell pretty quickly whether they think in stories or not. Do stories come out of them all the time? Do they ask the kinds of questions that result in stories? Or do they ask other questions?

Does story listening require curiosity? Yes and no. I've known some incurious people who did a great job collecting stories, and I've met some curious people who couldn't let things flow. Listening to stories is a sort of *yin* skill, receptive not creative. Some of the best storytellers are the worst story listeners. I myself have to work pretty hard at listening, at least to people. With people I am always thinking of what I would like to say next. Strangely in nature I don't do that, maybe because I am more respectful and humble. That is why I was a better ethologist than cultural anthropologist. It is also why I like to work with stories other people solicited, because I can't rush in and ruin things.

I would say useful qualities for a story listener are patience, the ability to keep quiet and listen, the ability to observe and notice, the ability to build trust, the ability to help people feel safe to talk. Have you ever met a person who everybody tells them things they had not meant to say? I have met a few people like that, where I just spill things out because I can somehow feel they create good places for stories to come to rest. Stories flock to them. A good test is, when you talk to the person do you find yourself saying, I don't usually tell people this but... If you find yourself censoring your speech instead, that person is not going to be a good story collector. I would venture that everybody on earth can name a person stories gather round and a person stories keep a safe distance from.

So yin curiosity is perfect, but *yang* curiosity can ruin things by turning everything into an inquisition or probing experiment. Meaning, curiosity is useful if it means people can wait and see what unfolds. It is not useful if it means people can't stand to wait and try to force things through taking action. Great story listeners practice *wu wei*, or doing by not doing.

Also, rigor and punctuality can actually be quite useful because it can put people at ease: it communicates stability. I'd rather tell my story to somebody who is following a routine they know well than to somebody who might throw away the rules any second. Some of the best people who do oral histories are plodding sorts. Their arms are open, but not reaching.

So now, if you want to look for somebody who can *train* people to do that. I would say, all of that *plus* a strong ability to introspect. Because they have to know *why* what they do works, how to explain how it works, how to tell if other people are doing it, how to help other people do it, and how to help other people fix things when it isn't working. And also how to tell if people will not be able to do it and should give up and try something else.

To give an example, I've now taken three organized yoga classes. The second teacher was a dancer, and she seemed to assume we could all bend our bodies into pretzels. I got hurt trying to do what she did and had to quit the class. She probably didn't even notice. The third teacher was just learning yoga herself and, though she was enthusiastic and meant well, she only knew one way to do yoga. She didn't know why what worked for her worked or why what didn't work for any of us didn't. She was not that much better than a taped presentation.

My first yoga teacher, on the other hand, was *amazing*. She knew yoga inside and out, but most importantly she could look at anybody in the class, or place her hand on your arm, and know instantly how what you were doing was working for you or wasn't, and how to fix it so it did work. Sometimes I would be struggling and failing, and she could come over and make one tiny adjustment and suddenly everything would fall into place, *and then explain why* it fell into place so I understood. *That* was a great teacher. So, I guess a good trainer for story listening is good at story listening, and good at listening to the story of story listening. If that makes sense!

How would I engineer an interview to find such people? I would ask them to do this, over the course of ten or fifteen minutes:

1. tell a few stories while I listen

2. listen while I tell a few stories
3. ask a third person to tell a few stories (and listen to them and maybe fill out a form)
4. watch somebody else do what they did in step three
5. talk about what happened in the first four parts

A person who is good for the job will be able to come up with insightful observations in all five sections:

1. about their own stories
2. about my stories
3. about the stories they listened to
4. about the stories the other person listened to
5. about the whole process of telling and listening and its variations in the first four parts

If you go through that whole thing and the person doesn't *notice* anything, they aren't going to be able to listen to stories well or train anybody to do it well. Like my second and third yoga teachers, they will not know what is working and what is not, nor where to lay their hand to fix what is not working, nor how to explain *why* they laid their hand there then.

Another source of information: after the interview, talk to the people whose stories were listened to by the interviewee. Ask them how the session went. Ask them whether they felt listened to, whether they understood more about the story after the session than before, whether the interviewee helped them learn anything. Find out what the impact of the listening was on the tellers.

Of course that bar may be set too high, but you should be able to see differences among people by having them all do this. I have met people who would notice twenty useful things during that ten minutes, and I have met other people who would notice nothing. It's curiosity but of a particular flavor. A yang-curious person might not be able to wait until the end and would blunder in to force an outcome without producing understanding -- like it was a machine to be fixed -- but a yin-curious person would notice things that would help people improve their *own* skills.

As to what to look for in resumes and curricula vitae, it's hard to tell. People write what they think they are supposed to write, which is generally not stories. I guess it would be useful to look for things they have done that show attention, patience, receptivity, noticing, yin-curiosity.

Watching. You want good watchers, and good watchers of watching.

Breadth and depth in story work

This section explores the question, "How many stories should I collect in my PNI project?" It won't *seem* to explore that question until much later in the section. But have patience; it does explore it.

Recently I read the book *The Pillars of the Earth*, a historical novel by Ken Follett about the middle ages. I wanted to read the novel because I enjoyed the miniseries. I generally hate movies about fighting (b.o.r.i.n.g.) and fast-forwarded through the clash-and-gore battle scenes, but I enjoyed the rest of the miniseries very much. Everyone said the book was ten times better, so I had no choice but to read it. (It *is* ten times better.)

Depth: 1 cm

When I started reading *Pillars*, my first thought was "now I remember why I read *historic* novels instead of *historical* novels." The subject matter might have been medieval, but the delivery was pure 21st century.

That means: a painful lack of detail. Here is the monk Phillip leaving the monastery where has been raised since he was orphaned at five.

> His farewells were tearful. He had spent seventeen years here, and the monks were his family, more real to him now than the parents who had been savagely taken from him. He would probably never see these monks again, and he was sad.

He was sad? He was *sad*? That's all we get? When I read that sentence I put the book down in disgust. But the next day there it was again, and I had paid for it, so I took it up again.

Depth: 100 cm

By a funny coincidence, the book I had read just before *Pillars* was Dickens' *Great Expectations*. I was struck by the fact that in it another Phillip (Pip) also left the only home he had ever known. Here is how Dickens described it.

> It was a hurried breakfast with no taste in it. I got up from the meal, saying with a sort of briskness, as if it had only just occurred to me, "Well! I suppose I must be off!" and then I kissed my sister who was laughing and nodding and shaking in her usual chair, and kissed Biddy, and threw my arms around Joe's neck. Then I took up my little portmanteau and walked out. The last I saw of them was, when I presently heard a scuffle behind me, and looking back, saw Joe throwing an old shoe after me [for good luck] and Biddy throwing another old shoe. I stopped then, to wave my hat, and dear old Joe waved his strong right arm above his head, crying huskily "Hooroar!" and Biddy put her apron to her face.
>
> I walked away at a good pace, thinking it was easier to go than I had supposed it would be, and reflecting that it would never have done to have had an old shoe thrown after the coach, in sight of all the High-street. I whistled and made nothing of going. But the village was very peaceful and quiet, and the light mists were solemnly rising, as if to show me the world, and I had been so innocent and little there, and all beyond was so unknown and great, that in a moment with a strong heave and sob I broke into tears. It was by the finger-post at the end of the village, and I laid my hand upon it, and said, "Good-bye O my dear, dear friend!"
>
> Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts. I was better after I had cried, than before - more sorry, more aware of my own ingratitude, more gentle. If I had cried before, I should have had Joe with me then. [He had asked Joe not to go to the coach with him.]
>
> So subdued I was by those tears, and by their breaking out again in the course of the quiet walk, that when I was on the coach, and it was clear of the town, I deliberated with an aching heart whether I would not get down when we changed horses and walk back, and have another evening at home, and a better parting. We changed, and I had not made up my mind, and still reflected for my comfort that it would be quite practicable to get down and walk back, when we changed again. And while I was occupied with these deliberations, I would fancy an exact resemblance to Joe in some man coming along the road towards us, and my heart would beat high. - As if he could possibly be there!
>
> We changed again, and yet again, and it was now too late and too far to go back, and I went on. And the mists had all solemnly risen now, and the world lay spread before me.

The depth of Dickens' description, with its conflicting emotions and layers of individual, interpersonal, societal interactions, feels like velvet in comparison to Follett's threadbare description of Philip's "sad" day.

Depth: 1000 cm

But to tell the truth, I had been reading Dickens with a sense of desperation anyway. Ever since Dostoyevsky I've been wandering in a wasteland of superficiality. My advice, if you love depth and have not yet read Dostoyevsky: wait until you are pretty sure you have less than a year left to live. Because reading Dostoyevsky spoils you for reading anybody else, ever. *Everything* else seems like dime-store fiction in comparison. I have nothing left to read, but must read. Yes, Proust, James, Lawrence, Tolstoy, Balzac, Chekhov, Eliot, Austen, Gaskell, Sand, Gogol are deep, but they are deep in a more irritatingly repeating way. Dostoyevsky is a universe unto himself; these others are just solar systems. You get to the end of them too quickly and meet them again on the way back. Take D.H. Lawrence: when I read the words "he was annihilated" for the umpteenth time, a little "enough" switch flipped in my mind. I had got to the end of D.H. Lawrence and was on my way back. With Dostoyevsky you never come back; you just travel inward until you fall into the black hole in the center.

In Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, a mountain with its waterfall is used as Prince Myshkin's image of his youthful home, and this image is brought back over and over to symbolically portray a critical point of his identity and of the entire novel. Here is the prince at the start of the novel, explaining his old home to newly met relations.

> There was a waterfall near us, such a lovely thin streak of water, like a thread but white and moving. It fell from a great height, but it looked quite low, and it was half a mile away, though it did not seem fifty paces. I loved to listen to it at night, but it was then that I became so restless. Sometimes I went and climbed the mountain and stood there in the midst of the tall pines, all alone in the terrible silence, with our little village in the distance, and the sky so blue, and the sun so bright, and an old ruined castle on the mountain-side, far away. I used to watch the line where earth and sky met, and longed to go and seek there the key of all mysteries, thinking that I might find there a new life, perhaps some great city where life should be grander and richer--and then it struck me that life may be grand enough even in a prison.

Later, overwhelmed with the contrast between his simple, idealistic view of life and the complexities of social intrigue, he wishes to return to that image.

> At ... moments he felt a longing to go away somewhere and be alone with his thoughts, and to feel that no one knew where he was. Or if that were impossible he would like to be alone at home ... and to lie there and think--a day and night and another day again! He thought of the mountains-and especially of a certain spot which he used to frequent, whence he would look down upon the distant valleys and fields, and see the waterfall, far off, like a little silver thread, and the old ruined castle in the distance. Oh! how he longed to be there now--alone with his thoughts--to think of one thing all his life--one thing! A thousand years would not be too much time! And let everyone here forget him--forget him utterly! How much better it would have been if they had never known him--if all this could but prove to be a dream.

Finally the image returns to reinforce the novel's central theme, of the incompatibility between the prince's Christ-like simplicity and the hardened pragmatism he finds in the world around him.

> An old, forgotten memory awoke in his brain, and suddenly burst into clearness and light. It was a recollection of Switzerland.... He climbed the mountain-side, one sunny morning, and wandered long and aimlessly with a certain thought in his brain, which would not become clear. Above him was the blazing sky, below, the lake; all around was the horizon, clear and infinite. He looked out upon this, long and anxiously. He remembered how he had stretched out his arms towards the

> beautiful, boundless blue of the horizon, and wept, and wept. What had so tormented him was the idea that he was a stranger to all this, that he was outside this glorious festival.
>
> What was this universe? What was this grand, eternal pageant to which he had yearned from his childhood up, and in which he could never take part? Every morning the same magnificent sun; every morning the same rainbow in the waterfall; every evening the same glow on the snow-mountains.
>
> Every little fly that buzzed in the sun's rays was a singer in the universal chorus, 'knew its place, and was happy in it.' Every blade of grass grew and was happy. Everything knew its path and loved it, went forth with a song and returned with a song; only he knew nothing, understood nothing, neither men nor words, nor any of nature's voices; he was a stranger and an outcast.

Now *that's* depth. If you lay this series of quotes beside the quote from *The Pillars of the Earth*, it's like watching a minnow swim next to a whale. And pretty much every event, every perception, every emotion in *Pillars* is minnow-sized. They never get much bigger than that.

Breadth has its own depth

So, is that the end of the story? Contemporary fiction is shallow, thus useless? No. As I read *The Pillars of the Earth* my opinion of it went up and up. Yes, the individual descriptions of emotions and actions and reactions are radically simple all the way through. There is an overarching theme of sorts, but there is no single image that holds it all together. What *Pillars* does instead is heap up hundreds of simple small descriptions into great mounds of narrative that eventually become nuanced in *aggregation* rather than in detail. The minnows gather into shoals, and together they move like whales. The book holds together perfectly and the main characters resonate, even though the details are so sparse as to exasperate detail lovers throughout. The breadth of the story becomes almost as satisfying, in its own way, as depth in another story. It takes a bit of work to encourage the coalescence, but all good reading should challenge the reader in some way. (I'm not sure if you'd call this literature, but literature, like morality, is a retrospective classification. Ask me in a few hundred years.)

As I read *Pillars* I kept feeling like it reminded me of something, and after a while I figured out what it was. It was two things. First, it reminded me of reading folk tale collections. I love doing this, but it's a very different experience than reading a coherent novel. Each story is short, but the stories layer onto each other in ways that ripple out as you move through the collection, and across multiple collections, until you arrive at new understandings that can't be found in any one story but straddle a great many of them. Bocaccio's *Decameron* is a similar set of related but disparate tales, as is Chekhov's *oeuvre* of short stories (which I read *en masse*). The second thing *Pillars* reminded me of was Henry Fielding's novels *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*. In those early novels the same characters are followed throughout, but their adventures are superficially described and strung together loosely. So I *have* read and enjoyed works of fiction like *The Pillars of the Earth* before, and though they have never been my first choice I have enjoyed them in their own way. It took a while to remember that, but it was worth remembering.

By the way, I noticed an interesting contrast between the critical and popular receptions of *The Pillars of the Earth*. Many critics apparently panned the book, calling it "a cornucopia of banality," "an inert pudding of slipshod research and slovenly writing," and most damning of all, "not literature." In contrast, most of the popular reviews on Amazon.com laud the book's exciting storytelling, which even the critics grudgingly admit is exceptional. Amazingly to me, many of the popular reviews complain that the book is too detailed! One reviewer said: "Some might consider the plot to be a bit slow, especially with the long descriptions of cathedrals and architecture, but definitely worth it!" Long descriptions? *Long* descriptions?

The amount of detail on medieval architecture in this book could have fit into the first five minutes of the first lecture of the first art history class I had in college. There were only a few sentences on architecture at a time -- just the barest of hints! When you compare it to Henry James taking five pages to describe a glance, it seems almost a joke to say the book is detailed. It makes me wonder if we are all living in the same narrative universe. But that's not the point I am trying to make.

Affinity and organizational narrative

As I pondered the various preferences for and effects of depth and breadth in fiction, I began to see a parallel pattern in narrative work. There has been long debate in the field of organizational narrative about whether it's better to work with few or many stories. Sometimes people suggest that attention to detail in few stories is biased, usually through over-reliance on expert interpretation, and sometimes people suggest that a lack of attention to detail is biased, usually through over-reliance on statistical techniques. But bias is a friendly fellow; he visits everyone and overstays his welcome everywhere.

When you collect few stories, you come to understand them in nuanced detail, like Pip's leave-taking in *Great Expectations* and the mountain scenes in *The Idiot*. When you collect many stories, it's not the individual stories but the assemblages that make sense, in the same way that the shallow descriptions in *The Pillars of the Earth* build up into complex portraits of increasingly familiar, nuanced and enjoyable characters. Both styles of narrative and of narrative research can lead to satisfying and enlightening results.

I'm beginning to think it's possible that hiding behind our declarations of superior quality, both in literature and in narrative work, are rationalized cognitive style preferences for depth or breadth. We think we are making methodological choices based on utility, but there is an aspect of affinity as well.

I've worked on narrative projects ranging from a few dozen to a few thousand stories, and I've come to enjoy all degrees of breadth and depth. But I'm most comfortable near the lower end of the range, and I think this is connected to my preference for narrative depth over breadth. I most enjoy projects at the sweet spot of 100-200 stories, but that's not necessarily because it creates the best outcome. It's because I can still read all the stories and revel in their details. (I do get nervous when the number of stories dips below 100, but that's because the statistics get shaky, and I like to balance qualitative and quantitative approaches to even out the forms of bias.) When I have a project with a thousand stories or more, I *can* carry it out, but a little of the fun goes out of it (unless I just read all the stories anyway).

I know people who find a hundred stories too many and people who find a thousand stories too few. I haven't done a systematic study of what sorts of novels they prefer, but I *have* noticed some matches between what people read and what sorts of narrative projects they prefer. So, if you work with stories, or are planning to, you might want to ask yourself whether you gravitate to depth or breadth in your narrative life. If you like long detailed descriptions in your stories, you might also prefer in-depth qualitative analysis of narrative texts. If you prefer aggregations of short descriptions in your stories, you might find statistics and mass narrative collection more to your liking.

Here's a self-test. Find a copy of Henry James' book *The Golden Bowl*. Read a few chapters. Do you love it? Can you stand it? Is your reaction like this one?

> Like all the rest of James' works *The Golden Bowl* gave me a massive headache. Amidst all the adjectives and adverbs James tells an interesting story where all the characters act 'splendidly' toward each other. In this case deceit and infidelity are at the core. Hemingway could have written this in 100 pages or less. James just makes your head spin.

Or this one?

> The subtle discriminations, the way James holds up to the light tenuous motives and turns them slowly - very slowly - so that their hidden facets become, fleetingly, visible; the very real portrayal of interesting characters that James reveals; as well as the languorous, unpredictable turns of a Jamesian sentence - all offer the kinds of pleasures that no other writer (possibly excepting Proust) is able to produce.

These are both from customer reviews of the book. I'm definitely in the latter camp: *The Golden Bowl* is in my top ten books of all time. (In one of these reviews the word "splendidly" gave me goose bumps all over. If you've read the book you know why.)

But most people probably don't need to read *The Golden Bowl* to find out their narrative style. What do you read already? What do you come back to and read over and over? That's probably your best answer.

If you are just starting out doing narrative work, I suggest starting with your strength. Find your narrative home and start your work there. If you prefer depth, start with few stories and go deep. If you prefer breadth, start with more stories and watch them swarm. But after you have become comfortable doing story projects in your narrative home, get ready to leave it and travel elsewhere. Why? Because depth and breadth complement each other, and the best narrative work involves *both* approaches. If you have collected few stories in the past, try a broader shallower collection. If you have never gone deep into stories, try collecting fewer, longer stories and giving them more depth of attention. You are guaranteed to find some new ideas you did not know you needed.

How can you combine depth and breadth in a story project? There are lots of ways to bring them together. You can complement an intense 20-person all-day workshop with a web collection that brings in hundreds of anecdotes. You can collect many anecdotes, then follow up with ten percent of the respondents for in-depth ethnographic interviews. Workshop methods can integrate assemblages of stories into deeper, fewer artifacts. Asking twenty people to integrate hundreds of stories told by dozens of contributors into ten story elements creates a breadth-depth bridge you can use to address an issue from both sides. Many narrative methods can be used in concert, with the outcome of one feeding into another.

If you look for opportunities to pursue both depth and breadth in your narrative projects, I suggest you will find the outcomes to be richer and more useful, and you'll extend your skills so that you can get the most from all narrative contexts.

Summary

Story projects can be used in the same three ways stories can be used: to engage (build a better future), to influence (change the way things are) and to transfer knowledge (learn and discover). When planning projects you can use this triangle of goals to map out the shape of your ambitions. Then you can use the map to plan what your project needs to meet those goals, and you can use it to plan how you will explain the project to others so they will understand what you are trying to do.

People vary on two axes in relation to their own storytelling: whether they tell stories, and whether they think they tell stories. When it comes to working on story projects, people vary on two similar axes: whether they habitually think in stories (so story work seems natural and real to them), and whether they understand what narrative work can do (so story work seems useful to them). These axes can be combined to produce four extreme caricatures of story workers. If you think about yourself and your collaborators in story work on these axes, you might be able to anticipate some of the issues and prepare for them.

How much should you tell your PNI project's participants about your PNI project? How much should you tell them about what it is for, who is involved in it, why you want to collect stories, and what will happen to the stories? The answers to these questions depend on several other questions: Do the participants care about the project? Do they think they will benefit from it? Are you trying to influence them? Are you trying to give them influence over something? What are the power relationships involved? What are they like? What is the topic like? The section ends with some do's and don'ts about transparency in PNI projects.

How can your PNI project resolve tensions between what you want to know and what people want to tell you? The method I propose is to tack back and forth between your wants and the wants of your storytellers, by alternately thinking of each group's reactions to a possible list of questions for and about stories. To consider what your storytellers want, first think about whether they have any tendencies that will impact their needs (dependency, indentity salience, conflict, distrust, disinterest). Then pull up memories of your own in which such tendencies affected your reactions. Pretend to be the way they are in order to consider their needs. Then consider yours again, and swing the pendulum back and forth until it comes to rest on an approach everyone can live with.

How can you know whether your work with stories is ethical? Is it possible to be unethical in your story work without knowing it? (Of course it is.) You can gauge whether your work with stories is ethical by considering the stories you collect. Are the people *in* their stories? Or do they hold them at arm's length? Have your participants put forth an *effort*? Are they pulling along with you? Or have you provided most of the project's power? Do people speak with *freedom* when you ask them questions, or do they *flinch* and and self-censor? Do people show *respect* for the project and its goals? If they don't, why doesn't the project seem worthy of respect to them? Do the stories show *gratitude*? Are people glad for the chance to speak and have an impact? Do the stories show *hope* for the future? If these things are not present, you may be engaging in unethical practices without knowing it.

Stories severed from their original contexts and interpreted by outsiders are more like vacant shells than living things. Those who work with stories must be mindful of the sharp cleaver they wield and wary of severing stories from their lives of contextual situation. Of course, no one can work with stories *without* weilding the cleaver of separation to some extent; the very act of collecting stories and amassing them into groups severs them from the conversations in which they arose. But at the same time, stories do not always lie quiet; some stories weild their own cleavers. Sometimes stories are not torn from their homes but emerge as willing agents of change, hardy travelers eager for adventure. Story workers must provide both safety and opportunity to the stories they encounter.

When planning a PNI project it is often necessary to find helpers who will gather stories for and with you. If you should have to choose among people who might collect stories, perhaps in an interview setting, I suggest you ask people to tell stories, listen to stories, and watch other people tell and listen to stories, then describe what they observed during this process. People who can work with stories well will have noticed many interesting things going on; those people will probably be in the best position to give you the help you need. Listening to stories requires *yin* curiosity, or the ability to be interested in something yet willing to wait and see what happens rather than step in to force a result. Look for that.

People sometimes debate about depth and breadth in story work. Some say it is best to collect thousands of brief anecdotes, and some say it is better to plunge deeply into small numbers of longer stories. My feeling is that statements about what is best tend to be dependent somewhat on personality-based preferences for depth or breadth in everyday thought. I consider some fictional books of varying depth and breadth as analogues of deep or broad story projects. To the PNI practitioner I suggest finding your own preference for breadth or depth and starting there, because that approach will come more naturally to

you. After starting with your strength, I advocate branching out to explore the other side of the breadth-depth scale to extend your skills in story work.

Some useful habits to cultivate when planning PNI projects are listening to the story of the project so far (what has happened up to the date of planning), worrying about everything that could go wrong (in constructive ways), reading a bit (but not too much) in the scientific literature about the topic of the project, considering the project from many scales from individual to systemic, and brainstorming many possible ideas without allowing them to become precious.

Questions

If you consider yourself and important others in your PNI work (collaborators, funders, participants, evaluators, helpers), where does everyone fall in the space laid out in the "Planning projects with stories in personalities" section? Do you see any opportunities or dangers in the way people populate that space? What can you do to avoid the dangers and take advantage of the opportunities?

As you read over the sections of this chapter that have to do with ethical issues (transparency, resolving tensions, practical ethics, severed stories), did you find yourself disagreeing at any point? Do any of the recommendations you read here need adjustment to apply to the contexts and purposes of your story work? If you were to write your own code of ethics with regard to story work in your community or organization, how would it differ from the one given here? Why?

As you read the section on habits of project planning, did you find any of them particularly familiar or unfamiliar? Do you often, for example, inquire about what came before a project, or worry about possible outcomes, or consider projects at different scales? If these habits are unfamiliar to you, can you think of anyone you know who often does such things? Do you *agree* that these habits might be helpful in planning story projects? If you do, how might you cultivate them in yourself or find people for your team who has them already? If you don't think these habits would be helpful to you, can you think of *other* habits you would include in your own "habits of project planning" list?

What is the natural depth and breadth of your narrative life? What sorts of stories do you like to read or hear? Do you like to "go deep" into a complex story, or "swim around" in a sea of small stories? What about your collaborators in story work? How might these affinities impact your work together on PNI projects in your community or organization? Where do your strengths lie?

Activities

Think about a PNI project, either a real one or one you have made up just for this exercise. Draw aspects of the project on the story uses triangle. To what extent will the project engage (build), influence (change) and learn (discover)? How will it do that and why? Next consider the three vertically placed triangles of purpose, natural (wild) storytelling, and grounded community life. How does the project take shape on all of those spaces? What does this mean about how you should collect stories and work with them? Finally, craft a statement for use in describing the project to others that uses your triangle portrait to frame its goals and plan.

Find any available writing on ethics in oral history, social research, narrative inquiry, ethnography, or any field related to PNI. (Better yet, find two or three sets of writing from different fields.) Compare and contrast those writings with what is written in the ethics parts of this chapter. Also think about your own

experience. If you like, write up your *own* guidelines on ethical work in PNI that incorporate the best of everything you have read or experienced.

The interviewing method described in the "finding helpers" section of this chapter isn't just useful when you need to hire people to collect stories. You can also use it to understand more about your own group as you prepare to collaborate on a PNI project. Try interviewing each other using the technique described here. Who draws out stories well? Who listens well? Who notices things? Who motivates people? Who organizes well? Discover the strengths and vulnerabilities of your team members, and look for complementary skills you can use as you work together.

Chapter 4: Advanced Topics in Story Collection

This chapter begins by bringing together several essays on collecting stories that were too detailed or wordy to fit into the basic guide. It continues with a section on "what to expect when expecting stories" drawn from my notes on group story sessions I have facilitated. The chapter concludes with detailed explanations of each of the forty questions about stories summarized in the basic guide.

Habits of story collection

This section continues the exploration of habits, or "things I do that seem to help" started in the planning section. These habits are about writing questions used to elicit stories. The stage of question writing normally takes place after you've got a good understanding, and agreed-upon description, of what the project is for and what you hope to accomplish, and before you test your questions and start collecting stories.

I repeat the caveat that I am speaking here about my habits, which may not suit your needs exactly.

Habit: Telling stories about telling stories

The process of moving from issues and goals to questions seems to go something like this (though not all of these questions are present every time):

- What is the point of this question? Why are we asking it? What do we want to get out of it? What need are we trying to meet? How does it relate to our goals?
- Does this question work better to elicit stories or to examine stories already told? What would happen if it shaped the story, and what would happen if it came afterward?
- If I was talking to someone in person, in casual conversation, and I wanted to know about this, what would I say? If I was pondering the issue and ran into somebody in the hallway, what would I ask them?
- How would *I* answer this question? How would some other people I know answer it? How would some people who disagree or have very different experiences answer it?
- What would cause a person to respond to this question with a story? What wouldn't? What would work better?
- What way of asking about this would turn people away? Why would anybody choose *not* to answer this question? How can we prevent that?
- What sorts of stories are we looking to collect with this question? What sorts of stories *don't* we want to get? How can we improve the question so we get what we need and not the reverse?
- What messages do I want to communicate to my storytellers with respect to this question? What messages do I want to avoid communicating?

If you read these questions carefully, you will see that each one of them elicits stories -- from you. The first question elicits a story about asking the question, getting useful answers, and using them. The other questions all elicit stories about things that could happen when people tell stories in response to the

question. In doing this I am (you are) exploring the conceptual space around the issue by telling stories about it.

Once I was working on some questions with a collaborator, and I realized how many stories we were telling during the process. Then I remembered other projects and how common this is. When starting a project I tend to look back into my own experience and the experience of everyone I know (in life and in fiction) for relevant touchstones. And I don't do that just once: I do it probably dozens of times as I work on the questions. If I'm doing it with someone else, we trade stories back and forth. Sometimes one of us knows something about the people we will be asking to tell stories, and we draw from what we know about them. Sometimes we actually *have* some stories that were previously collected, and we can look at them and ask ourselves questions, like: What question would this have been told in answer to? Or, how would they answer this question about this story? Or, how could we word this question to make sure this story is repressed? (And then avoid that.) We visualize people in the storytelling workshop, or looking at an online form, and come up with stories about how they will respond.

There is one serious danger involved in this narrative method of planning a narrative elicitation. If nobody in your project group has experiences similar to those of the people you will be asking to tell stories, you cannot do a very good job of telling these stories to yourselves. I've been lucky so far in that for most of the projects I've helped with, I've been able to plumb experiences of my own, or people I know well, that are relevant to the issues at hand. I've been sick and hurt and (moderately) poor and unhappy and angry and tired and grieving and proud and strong and stubborn and wrong. But I also know that there are projects where I would be hopelessly at sea. It's important to know where the limits of your experience lie and to get help when you are called to go beyond them. I can't imagine what sorts of stories people might tell about having loads of money, or loving sports, or being blind, or performing in musicals, or being Hindu, or building my own house from scratch, or not knowing where my next meal is coming from, or flying supersonic jets, or lots of other things I've never experienced.

When you come across one of these situations and you have no stories to offer, find stories you can use. Spread out. Gather. Either enlist someone on your team who has had lots of experience and listen to them (for hours if necessary), or gather stories in other ways. Read discussion boards, watch movies, do whatever you can to soak up "what it's like" to be one of the people you will be asking to tell stories facing what you want them to tell stories about. But even while you're doing that, recognize that this will not be as good as having actually lived through what you're asking about. When you know you are reaching beyond your experience, double-check more, trust your instincts less, and test more thoroughly.

By the way, this storytelling process doesn't work very well in writing. I like to talk through questions before I write anything down. If I'm crafting questions alone, I pace and talk to myself. If I'm working with a collaborator, I pace and talk to them. What usually happens is that during this process some phrases jump out that convey especially well what we're trying to ask, and the question sort of crystallizes and takes shape. It seems to go through quantum leaps in utility, jumping to new levels of meaningful communication. For example, let's say I'm working with you and we're writing a question to elicit stories about the issue of burnout. As we explore the topic, we notice that the phrase "at the end of the day" keeps coming up. We realize that asking people to focus in on a time when they felt their energy was used up, perhaps at a natural turning point in their energy such as at the end of a workday, might communicate our need well. A question about end-of-day moments begins to form.

What I've noticed is that when I forget this process and go straight to writing questions, which I do sometimes when I'm nervous or just getting started (chaff), the questions come out pale and devoid of emotional resonance. They sound like survey questions. But when I take the time to tell stories about telling stories and talk it out, I can find nuggets of connection that will draw out narrative responses.

Habit: Telling the stories of old projects

One of my favorite things to do when writing new questions is just to look back on old sets of questions from other projects. Often I'll open up old files and stare at the questions we asked then. What I'm remembering is not only why we asked those questions, but also how people responded to them. I'm remembering all the little stories that played out in the project. I remember a person who poured out their heart and thanked us for asking for their story; a person who took offense and stormed out of the room; a person who misunderstood the question and launched into a diatribe; two people who interpreted the same question in opposite ways; people who marked large "does not apply" slashes on all the questions *after* the one that offended them; people who wrote question marks all over one question; and so on. I remember the emotions I felt when I read the stories connected to each question and answer. The questions from old projects tell their stories, and those old stories help me anticipate what sorts of things might play out in the project I'm working on now.

As you do projects you are likely to develop a similar library of experiences. My advice is to help out your memory by keeping some traces of your previous projects. You may not be able to keep details, but it's usually possible to keep lists of questions you asked. Those can be strong enough memory triggers by themselves to do the trick. It's sort of like letting your eyes wander over your bookshelves to see if your well-remembered books trigger any new ideas. If you haven't done any projects yet, of course you won't have such a library, but you can talk to people who have collected stories or read about story collection projects as you get started.

Habit: Watching your story choices

The last habit I've noticed in writing questions is to keep a watchful eye on my own emotions while writing questions. Why? To check that the stories I am telling are the right stories to be telling. In Neustadt and May's excellent book *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers*, the authors describe several ways in which people misuse analogical thinking and try to reason from analogies that don't match the current situation. This can happen when you are planning questions if the stories you have chosen for reference don't match the experiences of those answering the questions.

Neustadt and May mention three triggers that can lead to the wrong analogies being brought out.

1. If two situations are linked by a strong emotion, such as fear or remorse or sadness or pride, they might seem connected even though they are not. Say you are trying to write questions about power and control in an organization, and you can't get past your feelings about your current autocratic boss. In this case you won't be able to write questions that probe the entire issue, and you need to broaden the view.
2. What Neustadt and May call "folk memories," or memories close to your personal experience, can color your analogy selection. For example, if you are asking people to tell stories about their fussed-over cars, the connection to a car accident in your youth might distort the questions you are able to ask. Sometimes the issues are too close to your own life, and the volume and intensity of stories you can call up are too overwhelming, to make you a good writer of story questions. When this happens you need a less involved perspective for balance.
3. Some analogies that *should* come to mind are repressed because they are too painful to recollect. I've seen this myself; I sometimes realize during the question design phase of a project that I have been complicit in helping the client sidestep an issue that we all know should be asked about. When that happens I have to steel myself, bring the omission to the attention of my collaborators, and figure out how to make sure it stays in the project.

At the group level, the selection of analogous stories can bring into play even more complications: groupthink, political maneuvering, oversimplification, doublespeak. The worst group-level pattern is when analogies are *selected* to advocate an approach or worldview, but *presented* as aids to reasoning. This can create a war of analogies as each person champions their favorite "blast from the past."

There are two approaches to reducing the dangers of inappropriate analogy selection. The first is to build diversity into your project group. If the topic is sensitive or the storytellers are anxious or the project is ambitious, it's a good idea to have several people collaborate on writing and reviewing the questions for a story collection. If you are just getting started and are planning a small project without heavy emotional baggage, of course you can prepare to learn from whatever mistakes you make. But when you need to work on something stronger, you need diversity in the group.

The second approach to reducing this danger is to develop group habits that increase diversity of thought and keep plans from solidifying too soon. I recommend devil's advocacy: what's the reverse of that, and what would it mean if we said that? What if our assumptions are wrong? How could this blow up in our faces? What if somebody had the same experience but saw it differently? And so on.

Don't forget the bad habits!

It would be silly to write about good habits in story elicitation without mentioning their counterparts. Of course we all have our bad habits, so it's important to map those out as well. I keep another library of all the mistakes I've made in story projects and the tendencies that led to them. (Many of them are scattered throughout this book.) A good sense of your weak points in story elicitation, as well as a sense of complementary strengths in your collaborators (and vice versa), is a treasure worth storing up.

Story collecting venues and story personalities

Do you remember the section called "Stories in personalities" about people who tell stories (or don't) and know it (or don't) from the "How do stories work?" chapter of *Working with Stories*? Each of these personalities with relation to storytelling fits a different method of collecting stories best.

Collecting stories from natural storytellers

Recall that the natural storyteller tells stories but is blissfully unaware of their skill in doing so. Of the four main venues for story collection (interview, group session, survey), the best venue for the natural storyteller is the group session. Natural storytellers make group 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.

The second-best venue for the natural storyteller is the in-person interview. If you are interviewing people and you find a natural, see if you can get them to give you more time *without* suspecting why you want it. If you let on that they tell good stories, bang, they turn into a performer and the great stories stop coming. Every time I see one of these people I think of that stereotypical line in crime movies 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.

The worst venue for the natural storyteller is the survey. Even though these people tell great stories, they don't *know* that, so they may be intimidated and leave quickly, thinking the collection doesn't apply to them or they can't fulfill it. These people need a lot of encouragement if you are using 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 just tell one story after another. They may have had a lifetime of people saying "there he goes again" and need to know they are in a place where what they do naturally is safe.

Collecting stories from half-story tellers

The half-story teller believes themselves to be telling stories while they are actually listing facts and providing their opinions. The best venue for the half-story teller is the in-person interview. In an interview you can keep tactfully leading the teller 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 them 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.

The second-best venue for the half-story teller is the 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 real stories you collect.

The very worst venue for story collection from half-story tellers is the group session. Half-story tellers don't necessarily take over the session, but they do something worse: they 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 tons of text and no stories.

Collecting stories from story performers

The story performer loves to tell stories, does it well, and knows it. The best venue for the story performer is the in-person interview, because a good interviewer can suss out the story from the performance. They can keep bringing the storyteller back to what *actually* happened and how *they* actually felt so that something can be used in what has been said. 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 just recount their experiences.

The second-best venue for the story performer is the 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.

The worst venue for the story performer is the group session. These people can single-handedly destroy a group storytelling session. First, they take 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 audience, because it gets them off the hook for contributing.) Second, performers get other performers going while stifling non-performers with the belief that their stories are not "good enough" because they are not full of vivid drama. The very worst is two performers competing, which can suck the life energy out of a storytelling session. If a performer appears in your story 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

The unaccustomed storyteller does not think in stories, but unlike the half-story teller, is well aware of that fact. The best venue for unaccustomed storytellers is the group session - as long as it contains more natural storytellers than half-story tellers or performers. If there are too many performers, the unaccustomed people will rush to claim the comfortable audience role. If there are too many half-story tellers, the unaccustomed storytellers will follow them far away from the land of narrative magic, and the whole thing will end up becoming a debate or a series of lectures. But when unaccustomed storytellers are around natural storytellers, two things happen: the unaccustomed storytellers get a *model* of what to do; and the natural storytellers (who after all think in stories) draw stories out of the others without your having to. Some storytelling exercises, like timelines, help people talk about series of events that may seem like a blur to people not used to recounting them.

The second-best venue for unaccustomed storytellers is the in-person interview. I put this at second-best because it is heavily 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 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.

The worst venue for unaccustomed storytellers is the survey. These are the first people to fall through the cracks in a written story collection, 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 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 whole story in segments, much as if you were drawing the story out of them in person.

The story fundamentals questions expanded

These are the same questions that are listed in the section called "Questions about story fundamentals" in the chapter on story collection in *Working with Stories*, but here each is expanded into several paragraphs about my experiences with the question. In previous editions of the book I only had the simple list of questions. But for this edition I thought I ought to say more about why each question works and where it doesn't work, since I know people have often asked about that aspect of the work. So I went back over as many actual question sets as I could find (about thirty) and thought about my experiences asking them, especially thinking about how people *responded* to them. Thus, each of the questions described in the sections below has been asked about stories on at least one project, and some have been asked on dozens of projects. But please do not think of these questions as canonical. They are here to give you ideas for your own questions. I hope these explanations will help you come up with more questions of whatever forms best suit your projects.

Questions about story form

1. Who was the main character in this story?

How else to ask it: Who was this story about? From whose perspective was this story told? Who was the protagonist of this story? Who was this story's hero or heroine?

How not to ask it: Don't say "who is" the main character, because that makes the story an *object* rather than an *event*, which tends to produce hoarding.

Why to ask it: This question makes it possible to separate stories told from various points of view. You might find it useful, for example, to find stories told by people in one group about people in another group: patients talking about doctors, for example, or doctors talking about family members. Once you have identified a story's protagonist you can ask many more useful questions about them and their goals, plans and actions.

Why not ask it: Those of us who have seen scores of movies can pick out the main character in a story in seconds, largely due to shorthand messages in films such as lingering close-ups. We are usually pretty good at picking out the leading ladies and men in our own stories as a result. However, people not used to such elements of popular education in story form may not be able to articulate whom a story is about. They might find this question frustrating or may answer it in confused ways. However, as you will later see, this question is so very useful that I suggest you find some way to make its intent understood, if you can.

How to collect answers to it: Present a list of possible answers *relevant to the context of the project*, like these for a medical project: patient, doctor, nurse, family member. Or for a community project: visitor, homeowner, renter, town official, state official. Or for an organizational project: executive, manager, employee, support staff, contractor. Answers should be multiple choice since the main character could be in more than one category (patient and doctor, homeowner and official).

2. Who or what worked against the main character in this story?

How else to ask it: Who or what was the antagonist of this story? Who or what opposed the main character in this story? Who or what was the rival or foe or enemy of the story's main character?

How not to ask it: As with the previous question, don't speak of the story as a thing but as an event, a process, an unfolding: something that happened.

Why to ask it: As with the previous question, this helps you find subsets of stories that elucidate perceptions about the behaviors of people in various roles. In quite a few projects finding out how people think about people who fill the roles around them -- say, caregiver, official, person in need, spouse, grandparent, and so on -- is useful to understanding dangers and opportunities. The juxtaposition of questions about protagonists and antagonists (and helpers) gives you a framework you can navigate to ask questions about responsibility, blame, credit, and relationship in the community.

Why not ask it: This question has the same difficulty as the protagonist one in terms of asking people to pick out a character they may have difficulty identifying. It also has the feature, which is *sometimes* a detriment and sometimes not, of asking about something negative. If you think your storytellers will be very unwilling to say anything negative, it may be better not to ask this question. I have seen some people in some situations take opportunities to say negative things as affronts to their dignity: "How dare you insinuate that anyone would work against me!" and so on. This is why I always put "who *or what*" in the slot where "who" is asked for the story protagonist. It is important to avoid asking people to place blame, since that might cause them to stop talking entirely.

How to collect answers to it: Present a multiple-choice list of answers similar to the "main character" question. Be sure in this case to include "none" and "the main character" as options, to cover situations in which there was no conflict or a person was conflicted within themselves. I also like to put in some non-human "what" answers, like "lack of information" or "stubbornness" or "tradition" or "fear" so that people can talk about difficulty without assigning blame.

3. From the perspective of its main character, would you say this story ended well or badly?

How else to ask it: Did the story end well for its main character? Did the main character in this story succeed? If you asked the story's main character, would they say the story ended on a positive note?

How not to ask it: I think it is best to avoid conflict-laden terms like "win" or "beat the competition" because that directs the answer in a particular way. Note that I always mention the main character's perspective, because the storyteller does not always share the same goals as the main character of their story. A patient may tell a story about a doctor's drive to change something, or a mayor may tell a story about a homeowner's campaign. Since this question is about the form of the story, you want to ask people to consider what happened *in the story*, not how they feel about it. (That question comes later.)

Why to ask it: It is almost always of great value to differentiate stories that end well from stories that don't. This is simply because *value*, and value change, is a critical element of story form. Sometimes the story value and the way people feel about it produce some surprising results. I can remember one medical project where we asked both questions. I was amazed to discover a group of stories I called "bittersweet" in which terrible things happened but the storytellers said they felt good about the story. At first I thought there might be a mistake in the data, but as I read the stories I realized what it meant: these doctors felt honored to be in a position to help people through truly horrific situations, so while the stories ended badly they represented a good feeling for their tellers. This led us to some unique insights about doctors that we would have missed without those questions.

Why not ask it: For some storytellers unused to abstract manipulations it may be difficult to distinguish between how they themselves felt about a story and how its characters felt. The project I mentioned above asked trained doctors, who are already expert at understanding the perspectives of others, to imagine their feelings. But many people are not used to perspective-taking in everyday life, so I would be wary of asking this question if my storytellers were not used to this sort of symbolic manipulation. A question misunderstood is a question wasted, so if you cannot be sure of useful responses it is better not to ask it.

How to collect answers to it: This is a good scale question. Over the years I have come to the opinion that when you can use a scale you should. Fixed word answers to questions are hit-and-miss. Does "frustrated" match the feeling or should you have said "annoyed"? Or are those too strong? Would "distressed" would have been better? A scale is harder to get wrong. This one is easy because the answers are in the question: the story ended well at one end, and badly at the other end. The faster people can understand the question and the available answers, the sooner they can make their mark and move on.

4. What did the main character in this story want or need?

How else to ask it: If you want to lead people in a more fanciful direction you can ask what the character wished for or hoped for. If you want people to think about *unmet* needs, you can ask what the character was short of, or did without, or should have had but didn't.

How not to ask it: Be careful (in this and all other questions) to keep the respondent's attention focused on *the story*, not on their own opinions about these subjects. This is a very common error in people who are just starting to ask questions: they say something like, "What do people in situations like this want or need?" You can just envision the person reading a question like that floating out of the context of the story and considering the world of opinion that surrounds it. Remember, the story is an artifact of negotiation, a sort of game piece that keeps the special rules of storytelling in play. That is why all of these question have "in the story" in them. I try never to leave that out, though it is useful to vary where you put it in the sentence.

Why to ask it: Few projects are not well served by this question. Stories are *always* about somebody wanting or needing something (sometimes one, sometimes the other, sometimes both, sometimes contradicting). The question is particularly useful when your project involves finding ways to help people meet their wants or needs, but it's hard to think of a project that wouldn't benefit from this question. I have used it often, and it always works well.

Why not ask it: Like I said, I can't think of a reason not to use this question, except when you can't spare the cognitive budget for it. Since this question works best as part of a complex of at least three questions (who was it, what did they want or need, did they get it), you may not have time for it in a collection that can bear only very few questions.

How to collect answers to it: Even though this question is universally useful, it is not universally successful. I have seen some cases where the question failed because people could not find answers they wanted to pick. You do need to have a good idea of what sorts of stories you can expect so you can write answers people will want to choose. That is not a high barrier, for there are several ways to get past it. You can simply make this a write-in question with no predetermined answers. You can have some answers but prominently feature an "other, please specify" blank. You can use write-in answers during pilot testing, then use the answers most commonly written in (or clusters of answers) to come up with good predetermined answers for the larger story collection.

5. Who or what helped the main character in this story get what they wanted or needed?

How else to ask it: Who or what did the main character call upon for help in this story? Who or what was the main character's guardian angel or helpful spirit? What resources did the main character call upon for help in the story?

Why to ask it: This question is useful when your project is evaluating support or help to a population. Say your organization exists to help new parents, and you want to find out whether certain initiatives have been truly helpful. If you ask new parents about their experiences, it may be important to ask them where they sought or found help. Or if a project is about getting new ideas of ways you could help a population, asking people where they get help now could reveal opportunities to support them.

Why not ask it: As long as people have figured out who the main character of the story is, it will not be difficult for them to figure out who helped that person. So narrative literacy is not an issue here. However, this question is likely to fail if your storytellers are excessively compliant or fixed in their beliefs. For example, patients who feel powerless in front of their doctors might *automatically* say their doctors helped them, and people in jail might *automatically* avoid admitting that prison officials could have been helpful to them. Perfectly uniform answers do not reveal. Any question that will *always* be answered the same is not worth asking.

How to collect answers to it: As with the antagonist question, this should be a multiple-choice list that features both roles populated by real people and forces or traits. This is a particularly useful question to allow write-ins on, especially in pilot work, because people are likely to surprise you.

6. How strongly did the main character want or need something?

How else to ask it: To what extent, how much, how desperately, in what magnitude, etc.

Why to ask it: This question qualifies the "what did they want or need" question in a way that helps you pick out stories of greatest desire or need. It is very useful in projects specifically looking at needs.

Why not ask it: For most projects this question is not recommended simply because isolating high-need stories is not important enough to merit taking the time.

How to collect answers to it: This a great scale question: from no need at all to a crushing need.

7. Did the main character get what they wanted or needed in the story?

How else to ask it: Was the main character successful in getting what they wanted needed in the story? Was the main character's want or need met?

Why to ask it: I find this question very useful, because it makes it easy to distinguish stories of met and unmet needs. If you pair this up with questions about behavioral traits like responsibility, trust, teamwork, and support, it can be powerful. Actually, I'll go farther than that. If you ask the "what did they want or need" question you simply *must* ask this one too, because otherwise there is not much point in asking the first question. I had one project where we asked the need question without this one, and we couldn't do much with the results. If people needed reassurance, for example, and hundreds of stories where people got reassurance are intermingled with hundreds of stories where they didn't get it, you can't say much about reassurance.

Note that this question is similar to the question of whether the story ended well or badly. But it is specific to needs and for that reason works as a sort of "needs complex" with the other questions in that group (who were they, what did they need). If you ask this question you don't need the "well or badly" one, though if you can have them both they will give you even more insight. There may be stories in which people's needs were met but the story still ended badly -- perhaps nobody could help in the face of overwhelming disaster. Or maybe the person got no help but persevered and "won" anyway through sheer force of will. Those little contradictions are gold mines of insight.

Why not ask it: If you don't ask what people needed, don't ask this question because it will not be much use alone. Otherwise I can't see any good reason other than lack of time to leave this question out.

How to collect answers to it: This is another great scale question. For this one I like to set up not just getting or not getting, but a wider range from getting nothing to getting *too* much. That opens the door for people to talk about situations where they were coddled or not given the responsibility or freedom they needed.

8. How much help did the main character get towards getting what they wanted or needed?

How else to ask it: If someone helped the main character get what they wanted or needed, how much help was given?

Why to ask it: This question qualifies the "who helped them" question in a way that helps you pick out stories of greatest aid. It is useful in projects specifically looking at support (not just needs).

Why not ask it: For most projects this question is not recommended simply because isolating high-support stories is not important enough to merit taking the time.

How to collect answers to it: This a great scale question: from no help at all to either perfect help or too much help (if you want to jump over that line).

9. Which of these things, if they had been available to the main character of the story, would have helped them?

How else to ask it: If you could go back into this story with a magic wand, what would you give to the main character to help them get what they wanted or needed?

Why to ask it: This question asks people to engage in a bit of "what if" fantasy play. It is particularly useful, as are the other need questions, when you want to find out how to meet needs. This question asks people to apply their imaginations to discover new solutions rather than simply complaining about conditions. It can be very helpful in projects where you hope to discover new opportunities, especially in resolving old problems that seem impossible to address.

Why not ask it: Because this question asks people to enter into a stronger element of play, some will refuse to answer it. Be careful, because if people become frightened or feel "put upon" they may leave the exercise entirely, even if they pretend to do the rest of it. Only ask this question if you think people will be willing to explore with you and are not too jaded, angry, closed-in, or defensive to take the question in a playful spirit. Unless you are very sure of your storytellers I usually suggest confining questions like this one to pilot work, where people understand the wider-ranging nature of the exploration.

How to collect answers to it: This question is best asked without any available answers. This is a great place to catch every idea under the sun. Giving people a fixed list to a question like this will reduce its utility.

10. What changed in this story?

How else to ask it: Describe a change that took place in this story. What transformations or alterations took place between the beginning and end of this story?

Why to ask it: This is a good question to use if you have no idea what you will find in the stories. It is best used in pilot work and/or to gather a broad spread of experiences and ideas. Asking simply about change opens up reflection to consider any or all topics, whether they have anything to do with the stated goals of the project or not. I wouldn't even try very hard to keep people focused on the events of the story with this question. If someone asks, "Do you mean what changed as I told the story?" and another person asks, "Do you mean what changed as I heard the story?" answer "yes" to all of them. This is a question for mapping the unknown.

Why not ask it: If your project goals are focused and you have no mandate to explore widely, this question may waste valuable time you need for other things. Many of the answers to this question will be strange or nonsensical from the standpoint of a strongly goal-oriented project. Only include the question if it has value to you in context.

How to collect answers to it: This is best asked as a completely open-ended, no-set-answers question. It is very hard to guess at what people will think changed in a story. After pilot work you might be able to draw out some common answers and present them, but you should always keep an "other" slot here for the unexpected.

11. Describe any [values, conflicts, risks, challenges, strengths, …] you see in this story.

How else to ask it: Please list; can you think of any; do you see any; what are some; find some.

Why to ask it: This question is a mini-exercise in extracting story elements. To be honest I haven't had much luck with it myself, at least not when it is undirected. What seems to work better is to use this question to ask about values and other named story elements that have been set up as important to the

organization or community. For example, organizations often have values (like teamwork and honesty) listed in their mission statements. What I like to do is ask people to associate those values with their story, but also give them the option of marking the story as a counter-example of a value (or values). So if the organization has four founding values, this question might have nine available answers: four affirming the values, four countering them, and one "other" answer for stories that bypass the entire value set.

Why not ask it: In general this question is open-ended enough to be frustratingly wide in a focused project. Responses may be hit-or-miss depending on the energy of those answering the question: it feels like a task to list things, so people may pass over it. I would confine open use of the question to pilot work.

How to collect answers to it: In pilot work I would leave this question wide open and ask people to write things in. You will have a job to do cleaning up all the nearly-identical ways people referred to the same things; but when you have no idea what to expect this could be of great merit. When you do want people to consider published statements, be sure to clue them in that you really do mean the organization's official statements. Using the same words might not be enough; tell people something like, "In our official mission statement we put forth these values. Please describe any of them you see in this story." But do not put in official statements unless you give people the freedom to counter them. If you ask this question without the countering option, you will send such a strong signal to comply to policy that you will hear no more stories or answers of any utility to the project after this question is encountered for the first time. Minds will snap shut.

12. How long ago did the events in this story happen?

How else to ask it: When did the events in this story happen? In what year did this story take place?

How not to ask it: I have seen two problems with this question. First, if there *were* no events in story, if it is fictional or hearsay, or if something built up for a long time, people may have trouble answering the question (and may get stuck on trying to answer it correctly). Second, people may get confused about whether you are asking when the events happened or when the story happened. Sometimes people respond with, "I just *told* you the story, so it just happened!" That's why it is important to keep the words "the events in the story" in the question. But see problem one. The only solution I have found is to include an "other" answer so that people can explain situations that don't match the available choices.

Why to ask it: This question gives you the ability to track trends over time. When it is paired with questions about conditions like trust or behaviors like responsibility, it can be a powerful indicator of the zeitgeist in a community. I can recall several projects in which some indicators fit a worsening pattern while others remained stable or improved.

Why not ask it: If the time span covered by the stories you expect to hear will be very small, asking this question will just waste time. For example, if all of the stories you collect took place on the same day, it is not *usually* useful to ask at what time of day they took place.

How to collect answers to it: You can present this question either as a timeline or with a single-choice list. A timeline would start at some time in the past you think people will recognize, like "the turn of the century," and end with the present moment. For a single-choice list, I find that having only a few entries works best, something like more than five years ago, between one and five years ago, less than one year ago, in the past month. Make sure your time frames match the stories you expect. I can remember one project in which university students told stories. For our when-did-it-happen question the time frame of "more than five years ago" gathered no answers. Of course in retrospect this made perfect sense, since no student is at the university for that long. Answers nobody will choose are time-wasters.

13. At what point in the history of your interaction with [the topic] did these events happen?

How else to ask it: At what stage of your history with [the topic] did the events of this story take place? When did this happen, on the timeline of your history with [the topic]?

Why to ask it: Often people have a history of involvement with a topic: having a disease, working in an area, living in a community. It can be very useful to connect stories to different stages in those common histories. This is particularly useful in medical situations, where people progress through stages of discovery, diagnosis, early treatment, coping, initial recovery, perhaps some setbacks, more recovery, and so on. Often it is useful to contrast stories told by people in different stages in the progression of some process. You can look at differences in things like needs, resources, confidence, outcomes, fears, and so on.

Why not ask it: This question is not useful when there is no parallel history worth relating about a topic. You would not ask people to locate their story on a timeline of their history with toothpaste or cheese or chairs, unless they had some other reason to "have a history" with those things.

How to collect answers to it: If there are well-known stages to a process use them, but make sure everyone in the group understands the terms. If you are collecting stories from patients and doctors, for example, don't use clinical terms the patients don't understand, even if they are the best way to describe the history of treatment. If there are no well-known stages, open up the question in pilot testing and don't give any answers, then see what people said. If their history is really parallel many are likely to use common terms you can pick up on.

14. Where did the events of this story take place?

How else to ask it: In what location did the events of this story happen? Can you point to the location where the events of this story took place?

How not to ask it: Make sure to focus attention on the *events* of the story, not the *telling* of the story. It might be interesting to know where the story was first told, but if you aren't explicit you will get an impenetrable mixture of story and event, which will reveal nothing.

Why to ask it: This question is most useful when your project covers several geographic regions and you want to know how certain features -- of needs, beliefs, fears -- differ among them.

Why not ask it: Location doesn't matter to some projects. Asking people where they lived when they found out they had arthritis is probably not that important, unless your project means to explore locational factors in arthritis incidence. I have mostly seen this question used to direct resources to areas of greatest need, so if that is not among your goals you probably won't need this question.

How to collect answers to it: Do not ask for more detail than you need. This may be a privacy issue, since anonymous storytellers might be able to be identified by the locations they give. If you use a map, don't ask people to put a "pin" on it; ask them to choose a region, and as large a region as will still be useful to you. You can also use a list of regional names, and the same large-as-possible rules apply there.

Questions about story function

1. How do you feel about this story?

How else to ask it: What are your feelings about this story? Which of these words best describes your feelings about this story?

How not to ask it: Do not ask, "How does this story make you feel?" I don't like that question because it implies people have no control over their feelings. I don't think people like being spoken of as though they could be tossed this way and that by a story, even if it is their own. Also, asking how a story "makes" someone feel puts forth the image of stories as propaganda or control mechanisms, and that is not the image you want people to have of the stories they tell. You don't want people to think you don't believe *their* story because it has an agenda.

Why to ask it: This question has been a mainstay in almost every project I've worked on. It has been behind many of the most important discoveries. If only three questions can be asked about stories I ask this one. How people feel about the stories they tell is one of the most important reflections they can make.

Why not ask it: Even though I said this was a foundational question, there is one special situation where you should not ask it, in favor of another question which normally is less useful. The other question is "What is the emotional intensity of this story?" The situation is one where the people telling the stories are exceptionally distant from their feelings on the topic. You might find this in professionals speaking about a subject on which their expertise is well recognized, especially when that expertise depends on their being unemotional about the subject. For example, some scientists can describe no emotions about their research topics because they have learned to put away all such things when they put on their laboratory coats. Yes, that is a caricature, but you will find it to a greater or lesser extent in many professionals who pride themselves on their cool heads. In such a situation answers to this question will cluster around the responses with the least emotion attached to them and will produce no useful patterns. When you think your storytellers will not be in touch with their emotions, either avoid this question or (if you have time) pair it with the intensity question to hedge your bets.

How to collect answers to it: I have asked this question as a scale from positive to negative, and that's fast, but it throws away a lot of nuance that comes in handy later. So I prefer to present multiple-choice answers in matched pairs: happy-sad, pleased-angry, relieved-frustrated, grateful-disappointed, enthused-indifferent, surprised-unsurprised, hopeful-hopeless, delighted-outraged, relaxed-stressed, amused-bored, enlightened-confused, and the always-important "not sure." Three things to watch out for here. First, pare down your list of possible answers to the absolute minimum you think you will need, but at the same time add any pairs that apply specially to your context. For example, the hopeful-hopeless pair is valuable in many situations but useless in some others. Try for no more than four pairs of responses. Second, avoid creating hiding places. If any of your answers create a how-are-you, fine-thanks, no-exchange exchange, remove the answer. Third, it is important to allow multiple responses, but ask people to limit the number they choose to two or three that apply most. If everyone checks every box, you will get no patterns.

2. What is the emotional tone of this story?

How else to ask it: What is the emotional intensity apparent in this story? What would you say is this story's "temperature" in terms of emotional intensity? What tone does this story take, from negative to positive? If you had an emotion detector, what would its reading be for this story? (The more machine metaphors the better.)

Why to ask it: This question gets at the same aspect of the story -- its impact -- as the feelings question, but it allows people to avoid speaking about their feelings. If you are faced with emotion-blocking walls, this question is an excellent way to run round them. When you have a large cognitive budget it is sometimes enlightening to include both questions so you can contrast them; but usually that is not possible.

Why not ask it: When your storytellers will bear the scrutiny, the feelings question is better because it allows more nuanced exploration.

How to collect answers to it: This question works best as a scale from "strongly" or "very" negative to strongly or very positive, with "neutral" in the middle range. Alternatively you can drop the value axis and just use a scale from calm to intense, but then you need a second question that asks about value, such as "how do you think this story turned out" or something. I find the negative-to-positive scale works well and takes little time.

3. Why was this story told?

How else to ask it: What was the purpose of this story? What motivation do you think caused this story to be told? With what intent was this story told? Why do you think this particular story was chosen instead of another?

How not to ask it: Don't ask about the story in the present tense, for example, "What is the purpose of this story?" As above it describes the story as too much of an unchanging object rather than an event. Also, it is better not to ask "Why did you tell this story?" even though you know people will be telling their own stories. Ninety-nine percent of answers to *that* question will be "Because you asked me to!" (Never mind how I know that.)

Why to ask it: In the right context this question can work wonders. In the wrong context it is worse than useless; it is damaging. What is the right context? When your storytellers are engaged, curious, and open to exploration. They will enjoy asking themselves why they chose that story and what it means that they told it. And the project will gain some valuable insights when you look at how these answers connect to other answers.

Why not ask it: When your storytellers are reluctant, suspicious, incurious, bothered by the whole thing, defensive (you get the picture), they may see this question as an affront. Why did I tell that story? Because it is my story! Because it matters to me! How dare you question my right to tell my story? How dare you insinuate that I had underhanded motives in telling it? You people .... and so on. If people feel insulted by this question, they may stop telling stories and stop answering questions. If you are unsure of how people will respond to this question, or if you expect a variety of responses to it, either drop it or provide some no-answer answers along with meaningful answers. You can even put in the answer "because you asked me to" or "because I was answering the question."

How to collect answers to it: This won't work as a scale, so you should either come up with some reasonable responses or leave it open to interpretation. A list I have often used is this one, with a monotonically increasing level of emotional intensity: to inform, to educate, to entertain, to reminisce, to support, to influence, to persuade, to inspire, to warn, to attack, to defend.

4. How surprised were you by the events of this story?

How else to ask it: How surprising were the events of this story? To what extent did the events of this story surprise you? How much did what happened in this story surprise you?

How not to ask it: Don't ask whether the *story* surprised people; ask whether the *events* in the story surprised them. Why? If the story was the person's own, they will say, "Why should my own story surprise me?" They might even take offense that you seem to be questioning their right to tell their own story.

Why to ask it: Cognitive scientists say stories are about "violations of expectation" and we tell stories to make sense of such violations, which are typically at the edges of experience. Asking this question is a good way to find the stories that map those edges and distinguish them from the middle-ground stories that match expectations. If you pair this with questions about your project's themes, you can find out some very interesting things about what people expect and don't expect in context.

Why not ask it: There is one population of people with whom this question will not be very useful, and that is professionals who take pride in being surprised by nothing. People used to fighting fires every day, whether literal or metaphorical, may disclaim surprise about any set of events. As the rule says, if you expect no variation don't ask the question.

How to collect answers to it: This question is perfect for a scale, from complete lack of surprise to complete surprise. But be careful not to put any other insinuations into this scale that insult, for example adding "bewildering" or "overwhelming" surprise might send the message that you think the respondents are easily overwhelmed or bewildered.

5. What surprised you about the events of this story?

How else to ask it: What in the events of this story surprised you? What did you find surprising in the events of this story?

How not to ask it: Again note the emphasis on the events of the story, not the story itself.

Why to ask it: This is an excellent question when used in open-ended exploration to discover issues that come up. What people found surprising in their stories is bound to surprise you.

Why not ask it: If you are collecting many stories, and open-ended questions (with no predetermined answers) are not feasible, you should avoid this question unless you have done some pilot work or otherwise are very confident that you know what people will want to answer. It is difficult to come up with a list that works without such preparation. Still, in relation to the above question (how much did the events surprise you) this will work better for professionally-unsurprised groups, because it doesn't ask people to "own up" to surprise but merely to put forth some examples of surprise well managed.

How to collect answers to it: Best to keep this one open to any entry unless you have strong results from earlier work. In any case be sure to include "not sure" and "nothing surprised me."

6. What did you learn from the events of this story?

How else to ask it: Can you describe any realizations or understandings you came to as a result of the events of this story? What have you learned from the events of this story?

How not to ask it: As with the questions above, avoid referring to the story itself.

Why to ask it: This question is most useful when one of your project goals is the transfer of knowledge, say from more experienced workers to their younger counterparts. I find it very useful when people know a lot but can't articulate very well what it is they know. They might tell a story that contains vital knowledge, but even after the story is told the knowledge is still not perfectly visible. To *them* it is obvious that they found the leaking pipe because they had the critical insight that water flows differently at a high altitude, but all they say in the story is that they found the leaking pipe. In this situation it can be immensely valuable to ask people to say more about the story and what it meant to their understanding of the situation.

Why not ask it: In some contexts this question could be a disaster. I am speaking of situations in which people are recounting stories in which they were powerless in front of a force. Can you imagine asking a person whose house was destroyed by a tornado what they *learned* from it? Some few may be able to answer, but such a response may only be possible decades later. This scenario highlights the general rule to picture yourself as the person being asked the question. Could anyone hear such a question in such a situation and not jerk away from it?

How to collect answers to it: As with the "what surprised you" question above, this is best asked with free entry unless you have done the pilot work to have some useful answers to provide.

7. To which of the questions above is this story an answer?

How else to ask it: Which of the questions above did you answer?

Why to ask it: This question links told stories to the questions you asked to get them. It is a bit of book-keeping, but it is important to remember it. If you used a menu of eliciting questions, you probably wrote them to match a diversity of backgrounds, personalities, positions, motivations, whatever matters about what is different among your storytellers. Knowing which question they responded to can help you segment the stories using that diversity. For example, say you created story elicitations that ranged from very safe hiding places, where people could avoid saying anything remotely negative, to blatant invitations to point fingers and inflame tempers. Which stories were told in response to the inflaming question and how do they compare to the safety question? What do people say about the organization when invited to be safe? What do they say when invited to vent their plumes of anger? Or say you created story elicitations that ranged in focus from the individual to the entire organization. How are the individual-focus stories different from those with a broader view?

Why not ask it: This question only makes sense if you have used the "menu of questions" approach. If you do use that approach there is no reason not to include this question. However, you may not need the storyteller themselves to answer it; your interviewer can do so, or you can ask people in a group session to mention it on the transcript.

How to collect answers to it: Use the number of the question (when it is always obvious, such as on a sheet of paper or a white board in a group session) or a short name for it.

8. How long do you think you will remember this story?

How else to ask it: Of all the stories you could have told about [the topic], to what extent do you think this *particular* story stands out in your memory?

How not to ask it: Note that, unlike some of the questions above, I don't have a problem with asking directly about the story when it comes to remembering. In fact I *favor* asking about the story rather than events in this case. Why? Because stories are *about* remembering. A person might not like saying they are surprised by their own story, but they will have no problem saying they will remember their own story. It's what stories are for.

Why to ask it: The purpose of this question is to distinguish two important types of story: sacred and mundane. Mundane stories are about everyday mechanics (how things work) while sacred stories are about the essential facts of existence (why things are the way they are). Every community has its sacred stories, as does every family and individual. When you can distinguish stories that matter from matter-of-fact stories, you can place that distinction next to others that help you understand what it is that matters and why.

Why not ask it: Never ask this question in the first way I have phrased it here when people are telling stories about devastating personal events. I found this out the hard way with cancer patients. It is the height of insult to ask people if they will remember getting cancer. In that way this question is similar to the "what did you learn" question in giving offense. For those situations use the second option given above. It gives you the same gauge of which stories matter more than others but without any chance of diminishing the experience in general. When this is not an issue, the remembering question works better because it is more quickly understood and answered.

How to collect answers to it: I like to use a scale for this question. I once used fixed choices with names like days, weeks, months and years. But it's hard to guess at what sorts of scales might work for memory. A scale from "I'll remember it as long as I live" to "I'll forget it by tomorrow" works well. You can use a similar scale for the standing-out-in-memory question, like "This story doesn't stand out at all" to "This story is more important than any other."

9. Does this story remind you of any proverbs or sayings?

How else to ask it: When you think of this story, do any proverbs or sayings come to mind?

How not to ask it: Don't give people a task to "express this story as a proverb" because people will feel their story has failed if they can't express it thus. Many stories don't fit that mold. It is better to ask for glancing reminders than perfect matches, to avoid any hint of judgment on story quality. Don't make the task into an assessment.

Why to ask it: This is an excellent imagination question, meaning, a question that draws on the imaginations of your storytellers to help you find your way through the stories they told. The best way to use this question is to elicit a wide range of proverbs in pilot work, then choose the most frequently cited of what you collected to place as predetermined answers in the larger collection. Since proverbs are essentially ultra-compressed stories, explicit links from proverbs to stories can create lines of penetration through your stories through which you can reach to the heart of important issues. For example, say you asked this question in a pilot story collection (with particularly willing storytellers) without specifying any answers, and you got these responses:

> A little knowledge is a dangerous thing
>
> Better safe than sorry
>
> Don't meet troubles half-way
>
> Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all
>
> Cowards may die many times before their death
>
> Fortune favours the brave

Would you say risk is important to these storytellers in reference to the topic you are considering? I would say so. They have just helped you find a path that will help make sense of the stories. Now if you use those in your larger story collection, asking not for any proverbs but which of these particular proverbs applies best, your storytellers have drawn out a risk path through your stories on which sensemaking can travel.

Why not ask it: This question is less useful when your project is very focused or when you can't collect pilot stories. Another problem is that each country tends to have its own proverbs, so they may not be equally understood among all your storytellers, though that is easy enough to check on. Finally, some people who have a great need to be treated with respect (usually of high or low status) may find comparing their stories to proverbs to be insulting, as though they were "only telling tales." If you expect that reaction don't use the question unless you can explain its merit to the project.

How to collect answers to it: Keep this open unless some pilot work has supplied useful answers. Actually, a very good pilot collection may supply you with two or three axes along which you would like to explore, such as risk, responsibility and cooperation. If you can afford the time, it would be useful to give each axis its own question.

10. Does this story affirm or contradict any other stories you have heard or experienced?

How else to ask it: Can you think of any other stories that stand with or against this story in some way?

Why to ask it: This is one of the few questions about a story that leads into another story. It is difficult to use in a short time, which is why it isn't used very often. But if you have the time to listen, perhaps in an interview, this can give you some useful depth of exploration. Asking people to follow the threads of connection in their own memory can help them delve deeper into the topics you are exploring. This sort of recursion exercise, where stories lead to stories lead to stories, can be useful when you are asking people to remember things hidden deep in memory and difficult to recall. If you think stories may be hidden behind stories it may be worth trying. Especially in a group, stories may bring out other stories through such a question.

Why not ask it: It is difficult to do this in a survey but easier in an interview or group session. Some people who are rushed for time may not like the idea of "expanding" the story collection (from within) beyond what they had expected. In some contexts if the experiences being related are fragmentary or few, people may not have built many connections. And some people may simply find the recursion confusing.

How to collect answers to it: Since the answer to this question is a story, you can either ask people to briefly describe the other story, or you can use the question as a portal to the telling of a new story. For the follow-on story you will ask the standard questions again, including this one, which may perhaps lead into a third story.

11. Who was most responsible for the events that took place in this story?

How else to ask it: On whom did the events of the story depend most? Who was most accountable for the events in the story? Who was the most to praise or blame for the story's events? Who was the story's prime mover? Who made things happen in this story? If this story had gears, who turned them?

Why to ask it: This question is helpful in situations where looking at perceptions of praise or (more often) blame is important. When people are recounting stories about things that have gone on within the organization or community, perhaps stories about why things got to be the way they are now, this can help you build material that helps people make sense of various explanations of roles played in the changes.

Why not ask it: This question does require a bit of higher-scope thinking, meaning that you need to ask people to think about the story in an abstract way about the forces at play in it. Not everyone is used to doing this. The reason I have so many "how else to ask it" questions here is that which way you can ask the question depends on the backgrounds you can expect your storytellers to have. If you are not sure, try a few different versions in pilot testing, then read the stories that go with the questions and see which question seems like it was understood best.

How to collect answers to it: Here I would use a multiple-choice list of answers related to recognized roles in the community. Be sure to include the answers of nobody, everybody, I don't know and I would rather not say.

12. Who should have been responsible for the events that took place in this story?

How else to ask it: On whom should the events of the story have depended most? Who should have been most accountable for the events in the story? Who should have been the most to praise or blame for the story's events? Who should have been the story's prime mover? Who should have made things happen in this story? If this story had gears, who should have turned them?

Why to ask it: This question is used as a follow-on question to the one above. When used in situations when people are talking about appropriate topics, this pair can mine extensive deposits of attribution. It is when the answers to these questions do not agree that their worth is most strongly shown.

Why not ask it: If there is not likely to be any blame or praise in the story, or if your topic has nothing to do with things that could have assignable blame or praise, this question pair is not of much use. And the same higher-scope thinking caution applies to this question as to its sibling.

How to collect answers to it: The specific form of the question should match the question above, with the word "should" emphasized as the one difference between them. The answers should also be identical. This makes the point that the pair hangs together and should be considered as a point and counterpoint.

13. Who showed [respect, trust, cooperation, honor, ...] in this story?

How else to ask it: Of these people and groups, which showed [respect, trust, cooperation, honor, ...] the most? How did [respect, trust, cooperation, honor, ...] play out in this story?

Why to ask it: This question is similar to the responsibility question, but it probes perceptions of *interaction* more than action. In some projects it is important to map perceptions of interaction among people in different groups or roles, especially if a goal of the project is to understand those interactions. If you want to improve services, for example, it may be useful to ask people to mark out patterns of helpful and unhelpful service interactions in their stories, as they see it.

Why not ask it: I can't think of any circumstances where asking this question would be damaging. It is more that if it does not match the project's goals it will not produce useful results.

How to collect answers to it: The answers to this question should be the groups and/or individual roles most important to the community. If it pertains to the project, you might want to give answers that represent not one behavior but a set of them. For example: the customer was respectful but the company was not; each respected the other; the company was respectful but the customer was not; neither respected the other. Put trust, cooperation, honor, or any other interactional attribute where "respect" is and you can explore that pattern. Be sure to include the answers of nobody, everybody, I don't know and I would rather not say; and because some stories may not feature the quality you want to explore, have a "this does not apply" answer as well.

14. How predictable would you say the events in this story were?

How else to ask it: How much could the people in this story predict the events that happened? How prepared were the people in this story for the events that happened? How stable were the events of this story?

Why to ask it: This is the first example of a question engineered to produce a specific catalytic outcome. When you ask people this question as a scale, you can plot stories to create a landscape of perceived stability and instability. Why do that? Because it can show you what people *expect* in relation to other questions you have asked. For example, say you ask this question along with two more scales: honesty (Did the main character of the story behave with honesty?) and success (Did the main character get what they needed?). Say in the place where people were dishonest and succeeded in getting what they wanted or needed, the story was perceived as stable. You often find this sort of pattern in situations where people have given up hope: the stability you see is the stability of despair. Alternatively, opportunities can become apparent in areas where events are unstable and people have hope for change. So the predictability or stability question is a valuable aid to mapping areas of perceived opportunity, danger, hope, fear, complacency and resignation. When you can look at the landscapes of two different groups (say teachers

and students, business owners and employees, etc) you can often find out surprising overlaps and differences you would not have seen without this question.

Why not ask it: This question is hard to understand and easy to get wrong. Some groups will need extra explanation and will ask extra questions about what you mean by it. I have tried many different ways to ask it and have never found the perfect way. Coming up with answers that make sense helps a lot.

How to collect answers to it: This question has to be a scale so it can produce numerical values for a landscape picture. I like to label the two ends of the scale with terms that make sense to the people telling the stories. One set that seems to work well is the contrasting metaphors of a machine (like clockwork, like a well-oiled engine, like a factory) and anything that is (as much as possible) *not* a machine (like a storm, like a river, like a crowd). Machines are excellent metaphors for stable expectations: if you put the same thing in, you always get the same thing out. Unpredictability is well supplied by life and the natural world.

Questions about story phenomenon

1. Where did this story come from?

How else to ask it: What is the origin of this story? To whom did the events of this story happen?

How not to ask it: Do not say, "Where did you get this story from?" It makes the story an object you can get and take. Keep the focus on the story as an event.

Why to ask it: This question is perfect for some projects and perfectly useless for others. It works very well when collecting gossip: second-hand stories, rumors, apocryphal beliefs widely held but of doubtful provenance. In some projects those are the meat of what is collected, and for those projects this question is critical. It is often in the differences between direct and vicarious experience that you mind the most telling trends, the most common being that "those people" are despicable in rumors but kind in direct relation.

Why not ask it: Gossip sits far outside of some story projects. In projects where people put in their professional faces, or where the experiences they recount are intensely personal and not about a community, gossip just doesn't come up. I have seen this question gather no variation whatsoever, with every single answer pointing to first-hand experience. If you anticipate a response like that, don't waste your time on it.

How to collect answers to it: The answers to this question don't vary by project, though you may choose to word them in different ways. You want to know if the story is based on first-hand experience (it happened to the teller), second-hand experience (it was told to the teller by the person it happened to), third-hand experience (you can follow the logic), hearsay or rumor. Hearsay and rumor are different, because the word "rumor" contains a hint of subversion and truth-telling. Hearsay is just what was heard said with no further meaning. When possible I like to subdivide rumor by truthfulness, usually listed as "rumor but I know it's true" and "rumor and I'm not sure if it's true" and "rumor and I think it's not true." I also like to include "historical truth," meaning something everybody knows, and the always useful "not sure" and "rather not say." The answers given to this question should match your storytellers' level of education; people don't know what "first-hand" means are more likely to respond to "it happened to me."

2. Based on what you know of [the community or organization], do you consider the events described in this story to be common or rare?

How else to ask it: Do you think the events in this story are things that happen often in [the community or organization]? How likely do you think the events in this story are to happen in [the community or organization]? If you told this story to people in [the community or organization] would they be able to tell you many others just like it, or would it be unique?

How not to ask it: Do not ask if the story *itself* is common, because it will seem as if you are judging whether they chose the correct story to meet your needs. Make sure to make some mention of the context of the community or organization, because people need to understand that you want them to consider that context. You don't want them to think about whether the story is common or rare in their entire lives; that would be a different question. This is not the same as memorability; something can be rare yet uninteresting, or common yet devastating or uplifting.

Why to ask it: To get at perceptions of organizational trends this question is quite useful. Differences in perspective among roles is often revealing: say managers believe a problem is rare while the employees beneath them see it as common.

Why not ask it: There is one situation where this question is useless: when people don't know what is common or rare in the community or organization. I tried this question once with college students and it failed (meaning there was very little variation in the responses). That made sense in retrospect, because young students are often not as aware of the scope of experience in a community as are adults, simply because they are still not very practiced at considering the perspectives of others. (When we asked them about their social *standing* in relation to other students, they could report upon that with precise detail.) I found the same lack of response in medical patients, and this also makes sense. Patients often have relatively little contact with other patients. Even if they belong to a support group, this does not mean they understand the experience of *all* the patients at the hospital. If the purview of your storytellers, their scope of experience within a community, is likely to be limited for any reason, this question is not worth asking.

How to collect answers to it: This is a good scale question ranging from something people see every day to a rare occurrence.

3. What scope of [the organization or community] is involved in this story?

How else to ask it: How much of [the organization or community] is involved in this story? If you drew a circle around everyone involved in this story, how large would it be? What is the extent or range included in this story, in terms of people involved in it?

Why to ask it: This question is useful when you want to think about varying perceptions of events and trends across an entire organization or community. It is especially useful when you are gathering stories from people whose purviews vary strongly, say from city council members who have to think about city-wide issues to people concerned only with taking care of their own children. If you ask about purview (or have some other way of getting at it) you can use answers to this question to look at what happens when broad-purview people talk about narrow-scope experiences, and what happens when narrow-purview people talk about broad-scope experiences. For example, in one project we found that people whose stories covered a broader scope also found those stories to be more memorable than those who told smaller-scope stories. This reflected a different sense of responsibility for the collective goals of the organization between people in different roles.

Why not ask it: This question suffers from the same problem as the one about commonality; some people can't answer it because they don't know enough about the community or organization. This is, however, a question you can answer yourself without much concern about misrepresentation. People are either in a story or they aren't. So if you want to use this question but think people won't be able to answer it, you can answer it yourself.

How to collect answers to it: I like a scale for this question with the individual on one end and "the whole of" the organization or community on the other, or even beyond it if you think that might apply. However, sometimes there are specific organizational elements you might want to name instead of using a continuous scale, for example individual, family, street, village, town, county, city, state and so on.

4. Which of these [roles, events, groups] are present in this story?

How else to ask it: Do any of these [roles, events, groups,] come up in this story? Are any of these [roles, events, groups] touched on by this story?

Why to ask it: This question has supportive and connective functions. It creates links between *structural* facts of the organization or community and the feelings and beliefs you will gather in response to other questions. A city has districts and parks; a company has divisions and products; people with a disease have symptoms and tests. You need to map these things so you can map other things against them. Note that this is not the same question as the one in story form about values, conflicts, risks, challenges, strengths and so on. Those were the cultural meanings in the community, its fluids and muscles. The structural facts of the community are its bones. Say a story is a rumor about corruption in the city council; it would be useful to know if the recent earthquake or the mayor's office or the police department comes up in it. Questions like these are handholds you place in the story collection so you can use them to climb around on the organization's or community's structure.

Why not ask it: If the "community" you want to collect stories from is not really a community at all but it just people who like chewing gum or something, this question won't make much sense. If there are no roles or events or groups everyone in the community knows about, there is no structure on which to place handholds. Of course, if that is true you might as well ask yourself: Am I considering the right community? Perhaps you are defining it too broadly or narrowly. If you can't ask this question, make sure it is for the right reason.

How to collect answers to it: The available answers to this question should be elements of the organization or community you can reasonably expect every one of its members to know about. Watch your jargon and test your questions with all groups you expect. Add explanations if necessary. I remember one project where the doctors and nurses knew exactly what we meant by "clinical support staff," but to the patients we might as well have said "modulated multiphasic shielding." If you supply five possible answers to a question, and to twenty percent of your respondents two of the five questions are meaningless gibberish, what do your statistical tests mean? Not nothing; worse than nothing; nothing that *looks* like something.

5. What do you think [other people, or another group, in the organization or community] would say about the events in this story? [Would they say the events were common? Would they say the story turned out well? Where would they say the story came from? How long would they remember it?]

How else to ask it: The reason I put all the questions at the end in brackets is that this "question" represents a general category of questions that extend any other question into a consideration of how other people

might answer them. Which works best for your project will depend on which questions are most important to it.

How not to ask it: Be careful not to imply that you want people to consider what other people would think about the *quality* or *worth* of the story. That question should always be off limits in questions of reflection.

Why to ask it: This question is exceptionally useful for mapping perceptions clustered around divisions. One pattern I've seen often is where managers and employees each believe the other group will find their stories fabrications of forgettable failures, while they believe their own stories are as true as the day is long, rare, memorable, and wildly successful. Finding out who believes who believes what maps not just perception but perception of perception.

Why not ask it: There is some danger in naming particular groups, because you may hit such raw nerves that people will become unable to reflect clearly or may simply refuse to participate further. If you expect this to happen, either speak obliquely ("people who don't know you," "people who don't work with you") or speak of *everyone* in the whole community or organization as a whole. It can sometimes help to collect write-in answers first, where the question asks for both the group and the reaction, then pick up on ways to speak about division without raising a flag of attack.

Also, this question suffers from the same problem as the ones about commonality and scope, in that a lack of awareness of the community can lead to a lack of answers. Lack of awareness may be interesting, but it is not usually *useful* unless it is unevenly distributed within the community.

How to collect answers to it: Available answers to this question should match exactly the answers available for the question it parallels. If the first is a scale keep the second the same; if the first has choices the second should have the same ones.

6. What would you like [other people, or another group, in the organization or community] to say about the events in this story? [Would you like them to say the events were common? Would you like them to say the story turned out well? Where you like them to say the story came from? How long would you like them to remember it?]

How else to ask it: If you could magically influence how people received this story, how would you want them to answer the question about how they perceived it? How would they see the story if you could control their perception of it?

How not to ask it: As with the previous question, do not imply anything about the story's quality or worth. If all of the answers you collect to this question say, "I would like everybody to think my story is a good story!" you have failed. Miserably. Read the whole book again as a penance. Your goal is to help people put narrative quality *aside* because it is unimportant to the collective work on which you are engaged.

Why to ask it: This question is about desire. I don't know about you, but in *my* perfect world every individual, from prime minister to street sweeper, is ready to rise up in a mass and shout "How perfectly horrible!" when I stub my toe, and thousands compete to draw my bath. Everybody wants that perfect world; but the shapes of our perfect worlds vary. Mapping those shapes can help you understand what people want so that they can figure it out for themselves. This trio of questions -- I felt angry about my story; my boss probably thinks it is funny; I wish he would feel angry about it too -- can reveal three overlaid landscapes of experience, expectation and desire. It is in the spaces where those landscapes pull apart that some of the most surprising insights arise.

Why not ask it: You can see that if you took every question you asked about a person's own perception and added to it questions about their expectations and desires of perceptions by others, the number of questions you asked could quickly get out of hand. If you do use a trio like this you can probably only get away with one set. But if that set pertains very strongly to the goals of the project, it may be worth blowing your budget on it. Try it out in pilot tests to be sure it provides enough value to make it worth the risk.

How to collect answers to it: As with the question above, available answers to this question should match exactly the answers available for the one or two questions it parallels.

7. If this story was more widely heard, what would be its impact on [the organization or community]?

How else to ask it: What would happen if this story was more widely known in the organization? What would happen if everyone in [the community or organization] heard this story?

Why to ask it: As with questions about responsibility, this question maps not perceptions but *explanations* of what is going on the community or organization. When someone says their story would turn the world upside down if it was more widely known, it means they believe *something* in that story connects to their private theory of how things got to be the way they are now. When someone says their story would be of little consequence, that says something too. One story sits within the storyteller's perceived river of cause and effect while the other sits on the bank watching events go by. Taken together, many such annotations can provide insight into what people believe is wrong (and right) with the organization or community. The question is most useful when projects focus on finding new ideas to address old problems.

Why not ask it: Asking this question is not advised when the experiences recounted are very private or sensitive (thus it is too dangerous to even *hint* at stories becoming known). It doesn't work very well when people have little knowledge of the community or organization, so can't speculate as to what might happen if the story were spread. A certain level of community coherence is necessary to gain benefit from the question; otherwise the private theories the question maps are not there to map.

How to collect answers to it: This is a good candidate for a scale question: it *can* fit on a scale, and coming up with choice answers that will make sense to everyone is difficult. I like to label the ends of the scale from no impact ("like a whisper in a storm" or "like a drop of water in the sea") to a huge impact ("like a tsunami" or "it would turn things upside-down"). Remember to include an answer for stories that are *already* well known, for which the question does not apply. You could include choices based on pilot work with a free-entry answer, however. People might come up with some excellent choices on their own (or they might not, but if not you could always fall back on the scale option).

8. Are there any people or groups you think particularly need to hear this story?

How else to ask it: Of the groups or roles listed, which most needs to hear this story? Which groups are crying out to hear this story, though they may not know it? Where does this story need to go? Who needs this story?

How not to ask it: I wouldn't ask who *wants* to hear the story or who would *like* to hear it, because that does not get at explanations. The use of "needing" to hear gets at what will turn the wheels of change, which is what many projects are about. I also wouldn't ask about the story's potential *impact* on various groups, because what you are looking here is perceived *gaps* between potentiality and actuality.

Why to ask it: This question is similar to the impact question above in examining explanations, but it goes further by asking about the roles of actors in some future story. If someone says their story needs to be

heard by a particular group, it means not only that the story is involved in their private theory but that the group is *linked* (by the story) to the theory. When a group needs to hear a story, the link described is the *missing link* that will make everything work, or work better. What you are doing with this question (and the ones just before and after it) is asking people to explain what their story says about what the community could do differently.

Why not ask it: In the same situations as in the previous question, this question should not be used.

How to collect answers to it: The groups and roles listed here should match those used anywhere else roles or groups are listed in answers. Making these consistent throughout makes the work go faster and communicates that those are things you want people to think about. In most projects these are obvious and can be listed quickly: customers, staff, etc; that sort of thing. However, don't close off possibilities you hadn't thought of. Asking some of these questions with open, free entries in pilot work will enhance your ability to discover explanations later on. And when you can, ask why people entered the answer they did. Also remember to include the whole organization or community in all such questions.

Note that you could ask this question's reverse (are there any groups who should *not* hear the story). I had that question in the list in previous versions, but I took it out this time. In fact I've never asked the reverse question in a real project (whereas every other question in this version of the book has been asked in practice). The should-not-hear-it question just seems too prone to sparking a flight response. If you have a particularly game group you could try it, but if so I'd do it in free-entry form and see what you collect.

9. What does this story say to you about [rules, cooperation, trust, power, hope, conflict, ...] in this community?

How else to ask it: What do you find in this story about [rules, cooperation, trust, power, hope, conflict, ...] in this community? Which of these issues (rules, cooperation, trust, power, hope, conflict, ...) do you think this story speaks about most?

Why to ask it: This question asks people to explicitly connect their story to issues the project intends to explore. Do you remember the question about issues in the story form section? (It was "Describe any [values, conflicts, risks, challenges, strengths, ...] you see in this story.") This is the same question, but here the focus is not on the story itself but on how it acts as a *mirror* to reflect the community or organization. Through answering this question, each storyteller stretches a strand of similarity between the point of their story and one (or more) of the larger features that describe the community: a mountain peak, a lake, a monument. As these strands accumulate, they form patterns that change the appearance of the features, hopefully in a way that illuminates them.

Why not ask it: In order to string a line from a story to a community feature, one must have some awareness of the feature. When people don't know their community, it is hard for them to draw any such link. Their inability to draw it, or their partial drawings, may be informative. Whether they are informative enough to ask the question may need to be tested in practice.

How to collect answers to it: You can ask this question either in reference to one issue (in which case the answers will be things you expect stories to say about that one issue) or you can ask the question about multiple issues (in which case the answers will be the list of issues). Which is best depends on whether you want fine detail on one issue or a broader look at several. In either case pilot collection of free-entry answers will enhance what you can offer as fixed answers later.

10. Would you say this story holds together well or poorly?

How else to ask it: How well do you think this story stands together or coheres? Is this story internally consistent? Does this story hang together? Is this story credible, tenable, reasonable?

Why to ask it: You might notice that this draws on the first of three methods of story evaluation discussed in Lance Bennett's work on storytelling in criminal trials (see the section called "Stories are sounding devices" in the "What are stories for?" chapter of *Working with Stories*). Thus this question, and the next two, are most useful when people are interpreting not their *own* stories but those told by others. That's why I have placed them at the end of this list, so they won't be confused with the other questions. I have in fact never used any of these last three questions on stories people told themselves. I have found them *very* useful, however, in compiling story collections in which people were asked to evaluate stories gathered from other people or from official sources. Of course, not all stories told by participants have to be their own stories. You could, for example, ask people to find a story in official documents or news reports that they want to bring to a sensemaking session, then ask them these evaluative questions about it. It is then "their" story in the sense that they selected it, but it is not a story of their own telling.

This question is particularly useful when you want to look at varying explanations of causation and varying predictions about the future. Differences in how people view stories told about how things got to be the way they are, and why those people do those things, can help elucidate why people differ in their actions based on those explanations.

Why not ask it: If you ask this question about a person's own story it is likely to backfire, because it will seem like a judgement on your part. Best to avoid the question in that case.

How to collect answers to it: This question fits a scale naturally, from a perfect jigsaw puzzle of a well-fitted story to a heap of disconnected fragments.

11. Is there anything missing from this story?

How else to ask it: Can you see any gaps in this story, places where something has been left out? What would make this story complete? What is the *rest* of this story?

Why to ask it: This question draws on Bennett's second evaluation of stories, completeness. Evaluations of completeness are useful when projects have to do with trust: are we being told everything? What is being concealed from us? If your project would benefit from a story-eliciting question about "what the ___ don't want you to know" this question might be useful to ask about stories told or selected.

Why not ask it: As above, only use this question when people are evaluating stories told by others.

How to collect answers to it: You could ask this question as a scale from completing to missing things, but I find it more useful to ask the open-ended question of *what* is missing from the story.

12. Does this story ring true?

How else to ask it: How true to life do you find this story to be? Does this story seem to be about real events? To what extent do you think this story accurately describes real events?

Why to ask it: This question draws on Bennett's third evaluation of stories, veracity. As with the previous two I would not ask it about stories people had told themselves, in case they think you are attacking their truthfulness. This question is a sort of lightning rod for perceptions of lying. If your project needs to uncover suspicions about people or groups or approaches or ideas, perhaps even competing conspiracy theories, this question will help to draw them out. An example might be if you are asking people about the

forces that drive political campaigns: are supposedly "grass roots" movements really "astro turfed" manipulations by the powerful? And so on. If finding out what people think is "the real story" behind something, this question will be useful to you. Many such assessments might build up into revealing patterns, like that stories that mentioned working together rang true, but stories with the word "teamwork" in them did not.

Why not ask it: As above, only use this question when people are evaluating stories told by others.

How to collect answers to it: This is a fine scale question. Metaphors are useful to set the extremes of the scale, and luckily there are many available metaphors for truth and falsity to choose from. As true as the day is long, as false as a gambler's promise, as true as a compass, as false as a three dollar bill, as true as two plus two makes four, as false as a salesman's smile.

How not to ask too many questions about stories

In this section I want to address what I know to be a universally frustrating gap between how many questions you *want* to ask about stories and how many you can actually ask in practice. First I want to explain why you can't ask as many as you want to; then I want to help you reduce your optimal list of questions to what will work.

Recall the explanation of ***cognitive budget*** from the section called "How many questions to ask about each story" in the story collection chapter of *Working with Stories*. It is the amount of time, attention, interest, and concentration that your storytellers can contribute to the project. Let's start by setting up a situation where you *don't* keep within the cognitive budget you are offered by your participants. What will happen? Two things will happen.

First, people will walk away from the project. Not just physically; there are many ways to walk away. People might tell different stories than they would have if you had kept them engaged, or they may check "not sure" on more questions, or they may think a question is offensive but not bother to tell you about it, or they may have thought about signing up for another session but change their minds, or they don't find the time to attend a sensemaking session, or they forget about the project the day it's over. As with selling products, the most dangerous people are not the complainers but the people who walk away and never come back to complain.

Second, even if people *don't* walk away from the project, even if they are so devoutly patient that they answer every one of your too-many questions, the quality of what you collect will *still* decline. Attention will inevitably wander and the meaningful content of answers will tail off, *even when people are sincerely trying to help*. I've seen people ruin otherwise good projects by allowing themselves to be over-ambitious about how many questions they can ask of willing participants.

Beyond the limits of will and commitment is another set of limits, those based on capability. Rarely can *anybody* answer thirty or fifty questions about one 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 reviving; but the hundredth bucket is more likely to contain mud and sand than clear water.

This is one of the worst possible outcomes of a story project: *false patterns*. A great multitude of answers is collected, but it's impossible to tease out the answers that mean "I thought hard about this and carefully picked the best choice" from those that mean "I blindly stumbled through whatever would get me to the next task as quickly as possible." It doesn't matter if people stumbled blindly because they were irritated or because they were just tired. When this happens, the trends you see in the data are not just useless; they

are *misleading*. The only thing you can do in a situation like that is to scrap the thing and start over with more realistic ambitions.

Often as I help people develop their questions they say something like, "Why don't we ask as many questions as we want to, and then people will just answer as many as they want to answer?" They even try putting statements at the top of the form 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* page, or they look at *whole* progress bar widget thing. If you are in an interview, they try to figure out how many pages are in your *whole* script. After they have assessed the *scope* of the task, *then* they go back and start answering questions. As a result, the answers you will get to the first question on a form with twenty questions on it are not the same answers you will get to the first question on a form with five questions on it. In other words, the feeling of too-much doesn't just come in at the end; it washes back to impact the whole set of questions. It swamps everything. When I think of asking people questions I always think of one of the rules I developed for holding small birds in my hands: the tighter your grasp, the weaker your hold.

You can even see this in people's faces, if you watch them. Try it. Make up two forms: the one you *wish* you could use and the shorter one you know you had better use. Give them out randomly to different people. I guarantee that unless you have some fantastically committed people looking at it, you will see faces pleasantly occupied in the first case and faces falling into disappointment and frustration in the second. Did you ever hear that old folk tale about the boy who wanted to eat nothing but bread, then magically got his wish? How he was happy the first day, a little less happy the next day, and all but insane after a year?

Reducing your question wish-list to fit reality

What can you do if you want to ask twenty questions and can only ask four? How to choose? You are guaranteed to have to wrestle with this monster, if your ambitions are anything like mine. I have developed and regularly use four methods of question reduction: backwards planning, question defense, diversity detection, and pairwise comparison.

Backwards planning. One way to reduce your wish-list of questions to something tractable is to picture the project finished and plan it backwards. The project is over and you have succeeded in meeting your goals. The information you gathered has supplied wonderful catalytic material out of which insightful sensemaking grew. Now think: which answers to which questions were pivotal to that outcome? Look over your list and see which questions you can easily imagine as essential and which you cannot imagine that way. Which of the success stories you tell yourself are strong and which are weak? And do any of the success stories require questions you don't have in your list? (Not to make it longer, but you might as well be comprehensive in your imagining.) I do this on most projects: I envision myself wildly successful and being borne around the public square by my cheering question list in triumph. On the shoulders of which questions do I ride? Of course projects can surprise you, and questions you thought would bear you in triumph can in actuality slink away with royal spoons in their pockets. So I wouldn't use this method in isolation; but it can be helpful in context.

Question defense. Another imaginary method is to attempt to defend each question in front of a jeering crowd. Try to articulate why you want to ask it. Pretend you are 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.) If you cannot make a good case for why you need to ask any question, drop it. If the

question is complicated and hard to understand, or if it will take a long time to answer, or if it probes sensitive areas, ask your hecklers to give you a harder time. 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.

Diversity detection. This method is based on an observation from many projects: that questions whose answers show little diversity are wasted opportunities to ask another question. Of the questions I have seen wasted (meaning we used up some of our storytellers' precious cognitive budget to ask them and got no useful result) most of them have been lacking in diverse responses. For example, on one project we asked people about their religious affiliation. Ninety five percent of them said the same thing. Wasted question. This is one of the strongest reasons to do pilot work: to drop off the list questions that don't gather useful diversity. Maybe everybody loves dogs, or everybody plans to vote out the incumbent, or nobody cared about that old statue anyway. Don't waste your time on it. If you can't do a full pilot project, ask around and do an informal survey to figure out if you will hit low diversity in a question you would like to ask.

Pairwise comparison. This method was first thought up by Benjamin Franklin, if the story I heard is true. Here is how it works. Place your wish list of questions in a table, as its rows and columns. Give each question a number or abbreviation that is the same in both row and column. Now, in each cell that represents a pair of questions, ask yourself: If I can have only one of this pair, which do I want more? Write the number of the question that won the contest for your approval 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 they be merged without losing anything? Or should they be moved further apart? You might have to iterate parts of the table a few times if you are merging and splitting questions.

By the way, duplicate questions are not always bad. Most of the time they result in wasted cognitive budget, irritated storytellers, and wasted sensemaking time. However, in two special cases they can be useful. The first case is where you know very little about your storytellers or expect excessive variety (say they are random people walking by a street corner). The second case is where you want to consider a particular topic intensely, say trust or creativity or leadership. In those cases, very similar questions can aid in mapping out an unexplored area of the conceptual landscape. For example, I've seen people ask both "How do you feel about this story?" and "How did this story turn out?" The answers are usually similar -- if I feel good the story turned out well -- but in the places where they *don't* match, you can sometimes find useful pockets of unexpected insight. If it's *important* enough to spend some of your cognitive budget on it, spend away.

Now, when you have got through all the cells in your table (half of them really, since the order does not matter), count up how many times each question appears. This will give you a ranked list of questions. Simply choose the top questions on the list and use them. 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: the two questions in a pairwise cell elbowing each other aside as they defend their right to exist in front of a jeering crowd; the two questions telling their stories of success; the two questions laying out their cards of diversity on the table. These methods are all ways of improving how well you listen to your own thoughts, singly or in a group, as you come to a decision as to the best way forward.

Finally, one thing I've noticed about having too many questions is that the ease with which people trim their question lists is correlated with their confidence in the project. In other words, hanging on to lots of

questions is usually a sign of fear, uncertainty and doubt about a project. If you have fears about your project, don't puff up the project 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.

Having your cake and eating it too

If I have not yet talked you out of being ambitious about how many questions you ask about each story, I suggest using what I call the *have-some-more method*. In this method you prepare several groups of (less and less critical) questions, then give people control of the device that spits them out. The idea is to hide the longer journey from those who don't want to go on it. When every door must be opened, only those who truly value the journey will open it.

- If you are using computer-based forms, place an "I'd like to answer a few more questions about this story" button at the bottom of the first page, alongside the "I'm done with this story" button. If they click the yes-more button, you can ask more questions, then show the same button again.
- If you are using paper forms in a group session, give out one set of forms, then place another set on a side table and tell people they can go and get a second page if they want one. Don't give them the second page, because that will become part of the obligation and make it overwhelming to those uninterested in the longer task. Just show them it is available. Some people will jump up and grab the extended forms; others will chew on their pencils until you talk about something else. That's what you *want* to happen. It is far better than forcing the pencil chewers through a process they don't want to participate in.
- If you are conducting interviews, ask people "Would you like to answer a few more questions about this story?" then wait to hear their response. If they say they would rather not, let the subject drop and move on.

The difficulty of the have-some-more approach is deciding how you will order the questions, because each packet of questions will gather fewer responses (only the saints and pedants will make it the whole way through). This method is not something I recommend highly; it's better to get a good solid short list. But situations do exist in which you need to maximize your questions: perhaps you will never get these people to speak to you again in a million years. If necessary you can take a chance on this method.

Special considerations for scale questions

Writing scale questions, where the answer lies between something on one side to something else on the other, requires more preparation and care than writing choice questions. But if done well scale questions can provide more useful answers than choices. The way in which you form your scale questions will have a big impact on the answers you collect. Here is some advice on scale question design.

A common response to scale questions (especially among people whose interest in and commitment to your project is low) is to rush to one side of the question as a way to avoid thinking about it. The most obvious or correct or safe choice draws people like a magnet. To begin with, the way people write has a strong impact on which sides of scales get chosen in any culture. In left-to-right cultures the right side is often seen as the better or more correct side. If the meanings of the scales you set up line up with a left-to-right bias (the right is always the better choice), you may find that people lean right-wards in a way that obscures the true meaning of their answers.

Say you want to ask the question:

How much responsibility did the main character in this story take on?

Say you provide a scale like this:

none; they were weak-willed and did nothing ------ all of it; they took charge and got things done

People are more likely than not to reflexively choose the admirable side of the scale just because it is on the right, especially if several other scale questions also go the same way.

The problem with people doing this is that you want people to *think* about the scale and mark the spot that represents their actual reflection on the story. How can you keep people engaged and thinking rather than reflexively choosing the obvious answer? I know of three ways to do this. I like to use them all at the same time, but in careful proportion.

Flip the scale

The first method is simply to flip some of your questions so that the more socially correct answer is on the *left* side, like this:

How much responsibility did the main character in this story take on?

all of it; they took charge and got things done ------- none; they were weak-willed and did nothing

This tends to wake people up as they realize that simply running a line down the "proper" side of the scales will not work and they have to attend to each one. Still, if the questions are repeated for multiple stories, people motivated to conform to expectations find the knee-jerk answers pretty quickly.

Present two evils

The second method of avoiding better-side bias is to remove values from your scale axes by making both extremes equally bad, thus:

How much responsibility did the main character in this story take on?

they took on *too* much responsibility; they made others too dependent on them ------- they took on no responsibility at all; they let others handle everything

This sort of question can wreak havoc on conformist behavior because there is no obviously correct answer. Such a double-negative question *can* cause people to step past the expected response and reflect deeply on the story in order to choose between the two evils presented. In the right conditions a question like this can be revelatory. However, I have also seen this method backfire badly. When there is strong social pressure to bury the negative, people can not only abandon such bad-to-bad questions, they can abandon the whole enterprise. A question like this can work wonders, and a question like this can destroy a project. So I use this form of shaking up scale responses *only* when I know in advance that the people answering the questions will not have strong feelings of danger about the topic. When a question approaches the sacred ground of personal identity, asking people to choose between evils may feel like an attack, not an opportunity for reflection.

Present two forms of happiness

The third method of disrupting better-side bias is the same as the negative one but with both sides pointing to positive evaluations. For example:

How much responsibility did the main character in this story take on?

they *could* have taken more responsibility, but instead they held back and encouraged others to find their *own* solutions ------- they took charge and did what had to be done on their own; others could rely on them

This method asks people to choose not between two evils but between two extremely desirable states. Again it is difficult to guess which is the more socially acceptable answer. Again the question draws people past programmed responses and asks them to reflect more deeply on the story. Can the good-to-good method backfire? Yes it can, but in a more subtle way than the bad-to-bad method. People can interpret such a question as a social cue that they are not permitted to talk about negative things. This might impact the next story they tell and how they answer questions about it. This is not as dangerous as the bad-to-bad backfire, because people won't abandon the exercise. And it can be countered by making sure there are some negative evaluations in *other* questions to avoid a feeling of sugar-coating the truth. But *in some conditions* this method will reduce the penetration of the inquiry by making it appear best to keep things quiet and safe.

Mixing solutions

What I find works best to avoid better-side bias is to mix the three solutions in such a way that flipping axes is often used, good-to-good once in a while, and bad-to-bad only if the need is great and the danger of insult to identity slight. If the project was about, say, motivation among health workers, I would expect identity protection and conformity to be high, so I'd include a fair dose of flipped and good-to-good scales, but not a single bad-to-bad scale. In contrast, for a project about toothpaste I'd expect identity protection to be low and conformity to be medium, but lack of interest to be very high; in that case I'd use all three methods to wake people up and draw their interest back to the task at hand.

When you can't ask questions about stories

Let's pretend that you have collected or discovered some stories, say hundreds or thousands, and you want to do more than simply read them. You want to find useful patterns in them that will help you make decisions and detect emerging trends. Participatory narrative inquiry is impossible because the original storytellers are inaccessible for one of any number of reasons. What options are available?

Asking without asking

First, are you *sure* you cannot ask any questions? You might just need to bring more imagination into it. Not all methods of asking people what stories mean involve asking people what stories mean. Sometimes people can tell you as much by what they *do* as by what they say. Here are some ideas for gathering interpretations of stories without asking questions.

- Gather some stories, then put them up on a wall somewhere where people go, like in a train station. Watch where people stand to read them. Look at which ones get the most smudged from fingerprints or which have the most shoe dirt in front of them. Wear patterns are great feedback mechanisms. Even graffiti can be feedback. You can even put the second part of each story under a little flap and see how dirty the flaps get. Conduct the same experiment in multiple locations with meaningful differences: in a cafe, a public square, a laundromat, a pub, the lobby of a posh hotel (if you can get permission). See how trends differ among the locations. You can learn a lot just by looking at what is dirty and what has stayed clean when there are lots of people in a place.

- Gather some stories, then put a bunch of little pieces of paper in a public place with stories on them. Make them look like they fell out of a newspaper. Come back the next day and see which ones are still there. Do this in several different places and look for patterns.
- Gather some stories, then put out some web banners or polls or news items or blog posts with the *first* parts of the stories. Include a "read the rest of the story" link and see which ones get clicked on. Link this information with data in the web logs like location, time of day, and where people came from to get there. Web logs are like wear patterns in capturing interpretations through actions.
- Gather some stories, then send out a survey about some unrelated issue and include a story in each one. See if different numbers of people respond to the different surveys. Do this with several surveys about different topics or sent to different groups and see what results you get.

Asking people what stories mean does not have to mean asking them to fill in a form. True, that is the most obvious way, but don't let the obvious way stop you if you can't do it.

If you really can't ask

I have done some projects where I supplemented storyteller interpretations with analyses of my own, as well as some projects where only stories were available. The results are not as strong, but they can still be real and useful.

Before I start the rest of this section I should say that there is a large and complex literature on narrative methods of inquiry in the social sciences. There is much you can read there if you want to explore those topics. However I must admit that I tend to get in a huff every time I read a textbook on methods of narrative inquiry. The universal assumption that expert interpretation of stories told by others is tantamount to proof bothers me very much. Examples of stories interpreted by experts that entirely ignore the obvious fact that any other expert, as well as any other person, might give a different or even opposite intepretation, abound. I find the "I know what this means" mindset to be very similar to the "I am the world" mindset of some artificial intelligence practitioners. It seems -- to me -- like some researchers who use and promote narrative analysis see expert interpretation as something that adds value, while I see it as something that removes value and should be used only as a tool of last resort. In my experience, applying expert interpretation to a story is like using a chain saw to harvest tomatoes. You will get *something* out of it, but it may not have much use in practical terms.

So, when I think about what options you have if you have stories but no interpretations, the options form into groups of increasing difficulty and decreasing utility.

Option group one: Asking proxies

If you have stories and you can't ask their tellers what they mean, you might be able to ask people *close* to the tellers what they mean. This could be people related to them in some way - their grandchildren maybe - or people similar to them in some way. For example, say you have a thousand anonymous stories told by customers of your product. Would it be better to consider the interpretations of (a) an outside expert, (b) your CEO, or (c) other customers? Of course the ideal is all three, because the more interpretations the better your view. But if you could collect only one set of interpretations I would suggest asking your other customers.

Sometimes you can't find anyone close to the original storytellers. Perhaps they are isolated or long dead. Perhaps nobody who is related to them or like them will talk to you - they are activists against your policies, for example. In this case you need to move on to the next group of options.

Option group two: Examining storytelling events

The second way you can work with stories without intepretations is to watch storytelling - the narrative event - to look for interpretations storytellers have embedded in their stories. When you have access to recorded story exchanges in audio or video, you can examine elements of storytelling events. Some useful questions you can answer might be:

- Did the storyteller laugh (or make any other sounds) during this story? When?
- Did anyone in the audience laugh (or make any other sounds) during this story? When?
- What source did the storyteller give for the story?
- Was there a silence after the storytelling finished? How long was it? Who and what ended it?
- Did anyone interrupt the telling of the story? (when, who, why)
- What part of the story was told with the strongest emotion by the storyteller?
- In what part of the story did the audience listen with the most attention?
- Was there a part of the story that seemed to be ignored by the audience?

You can look at patterns in answers to these questions without making the work non-participatory, because they are not *your* interpretations. They are observed interpretations by the people whose opinions you care about -- the storyteller and audience.

You can also look for and mark evaluative statements in storytelling events (as explained in the section on "Stories in conversation"). People include meta-narrative content (essentially, a story about their story) in their stories all the time, and it's not that hard to find if you know what to look for. There are even some stock phrases people pull out when they want to communicate their story's importance or truth or authority or unimportance or triviality or entertainment quality. People might say "I learned a lot!" or "I shouldn't be telling you this but" and so on. People use many means to signal their intent as to how they would like people to interpret their story. Most people are pretty good at picking up on such evaluations since we hear and use them ourselves every day.

Another way to watch storytelling is to watch the pattern of story back-and-forthing. You can do this in any situation where stories are told in response to other stories: in a chat session, in a room, over the phone. The way stories invoke other stories can provide information you can use to understand the intent of storytellers. There are many other nuances in the negotiations that take place as people trade stories - the field of conversational analysis is related where it touches on narrative.

Option group three: Analyzing texts

Studying exactly what was said in a story is still outside the realm of expert interpretation because anyone can agree on the words that were used. But it is weak in its ability to detect true intent, which puts it lower in the value scale.

Concordances are lists of non-trivial words in story texts - houses, dogs, weapons, iPods, babies - the things you see in those "wordle" pictures on the web. When a person mentions something in a story, it means that thing matters in some way, and that can mean something across many stories. For example, say you have three hundred stories that mention babies, two hundred that mention weapons, and fifty that mention both. Concordance methods can also include words placed close together - did they say "baby" within five words of "weapon" and so on. I don't think there is that much value in concordance all by itself, just because there are so many reasons people might mention the same word. It's a weak indicator of meaning. But if concordance can be combined with other information that is more emotionally meaningful, such as prosody or proxy evaluations, it can increase in value through juxtaposition. If stories

that included the word "friendship" were more likely to have been seen by same-community proxies to have been told "to defend a position," that is a pattern you can examine.

Value statements are phrases where people express a value they set on something. There are not that many ways to say whether something is good or bad, and you can search for and collate these statements. The simplest thing is to look for obvious value words like "good" and "best" and so on. That gives you the roughest approximation. Next you can look for other ways of expressing value, like "I liked that" or "that's fine" or "I was happy." I don't think you can automate this entirely, because finding the value statements doesn't easily show you *what* was being valued. But a system that highlights possible value statements and helps people enter data about the thing referred to are still a step up. I haven't done this, but I can imagine annotating a set of stories with metadata like "government - bad" and "family - good" and seeing what comes of it.

Statements of fact are another useful thing anyone can see and mark in stories. Statements of fact are not the same as actual facts, but they can be telling nonetheless, especially when they disagree or are clearly wrong. Rumors are especially full of stated facts - everyone knows the government was behind that - so they may be especially worth mapping in projects where public opinion is being considered. These are not hard to find; you just look for places where people claim that something is true or untrue, like "nobody reads newspapers anymore" or "people annotate their stories with meta-narrative."

To be honest, though, I haven't spent much time on textual analysis of stories. I've done it here and there to try out ideas, but have never been very happy with the results. The output is full of false positives, dead ends and weak trends. If it has to stand alone I wouldn't trust it to tell me anything important.

Way back in IBM in 1999 I did a little research project where I put a variety of batches of text through one of the data mining tools IBM was selling at the time. Some of the texts were non-narrative listings of facts, some were conversational, some were newspaper articles, and some were short stories, movie scripts and folk tales. I tested tools for clustering, summmarization and feature extraction. All of these tools did very well on fact lists and news items, but very poorly on the stories. The problem was that the stories contained so many nuances and subtle variations of word use that the software was befuddled. It's hard to parse a story because it depends on a structural form that operates at a higher level than word use. The crux of a story may appear to a textual analysis system as a part where nothing important is happening.

Here's a bit from the novel *Bleak House*:

> "You may bring the letters," says my Lady, "if you choose."
>
> "Your ladyship is not very encouraging, upon my word and honour," says Mr. Guppy, a little injured.
>
> "You may bring the letters," she repeats in the same tone, "if you --please."
>
> "It shall be done. I wish your ladyship good day."

No computer would understand that her ladyship has just taken a dramatic step in her last (seemingly unimportant) statement by embedding two meanings in the word "please" -- one stilted and the other beseeching. She has crossed a threshold into a space in which she and Mr. Guppy are aware of the secret the letters contain, and she asks him to help her without forcing her to admit anything out loud. He takes the hint and moves on. A concordance that simply throws that "please" up onto a shelf with all the other pleases in the novel would be useless to understand this scene. Many stories are like this, and not just novels but the anecdotes we tell every day.

I did bring away two conclusions from trying to use automated textual analysis to look at stories. First, nearly all textual analysis systems that exist to date concentrate their efforts on nouns. In stories the nouns are not as important as the verbs, followed by the adverbs. If I was put in a box and forced to build an automated textual analysis system for stories, I'd go after those. (When I wasn't trying to break out of the box, that is.)

My second observation about textual analysis of stories is that I think to some extent people *do* use textual cues in reading stories, but we can't articulate what it is we are doing. If a computer were to *watch* a group of people interpreting stories, they might find out things we hadn't noticed we are doing. You could even do things with those devices they have now where you can track what words people are looking at and how long their eyes linger. An automated system trained in this way might find unanticipated ways to do what we do naturally.

But again, the closer your proxies can get to the storytellers the better you will fare in such an enterprise. An algorithm trained on the actions of people who share much context in common with the storyteller will derive different methods than an algorithm based on watching people from a different group. I've watched myself read stories, and I do read them differently if I know I share a lot in common with the storyteller than if I know I don't. Have you ever caught yourself reading three lines into an article, then going back up to the top to check the name of the writer for clues to their similarity to yourself? Probably few people can avoid taking such context-detecting actions, and they surely impact the way we read things.

Option group four: Asking story experts

This group of options crosses the line into expert interpretation, but it keeps the expertise in the realm of narrative and away from the subject matter of the stories themselves. (You can be a story expert yourself with some reading and practice, so I place you in this category.) When participatory information about stories is weak, I sometimes develop an emergent set of story subjects, or *gists,* to support it. These are shorthands for story plots, like "I did my part but somebody else didn't" or "We help each other out" or "I faced a difficult challenge and succeeded."

The way I do this is based loosely on grounded theory and generally takes the form of three passes through the stories, thus. First I write up one or more gists for each story, not caring much about reuse. If a particular story cries out for a gist I have already written, I will copy it and paste it in, but I don't force conformity. The second time through I read the stories again and compare the gists for each to my overall list. At this time I also whittle the gist-list down so that each gist is uniquely meaningful (none are redundant), each is populated sufficiently (none have few stories), and the total number is manageable (typically around twenty or so). Then I go back and read the stories a third time. This time I am not allowed to create any new gists or do any lumping or splitting unless I feel a story presents a serious challenge to the organization derived. When I finally feel like each story has been well described by its gists, I am finished.

Does this process of gist production insert my own bias? Yes of course it does. But it limits the bias to describing the *events* of the story. I try to keep these gists defensible, so that if I link a story to the gist "I did my part but somebody else didn't" I picture myself making a case for that explanation in front of an assembled body of storytellers who nay-say it. If I can't defend the placement I remove it. But most of us are masters of self-deception, so I only use this method when I feel it is necessary. It would be better to multiply it and have two people create two emergent sets of gists. This is definitely better but not always possible.

You can also use structural analysis, which is the consideration of story form by itself. In this you look at things like characters, settings, plots, conflicts and story arcs, and essentially treat stories like they are movies or novels. I have used some methods of structural analysis to supplement storyteller answers at times. Some questions I have asked myself are:

- Who is the protagonist of this story? Is it an individual, group or role?
- Who acts in conflict with that person or group or role? Who helps them?
- What scope of time and space is covered by the story? How many people does it involve - a few or many?
- Which official roles are important to the story? Police? Aid workers? (etc)
- Do certain events of interest occur in the plot of this story? Is there cooperation? Deception? Self-deception? Discovery?
- Which genre of fiction does this story best resemble?
- How much non-narrative content is included in the story?
- Is this a true story, or is it a form of half-story? (scenario, situation, reference)

You may notice that some of these questions are similar or identical to those asked of storytellers. The rule here is that you can answer questions yourself as long as they are *structural* statements about the story's *shape*, not *interpretive* statements about the story's *meaning*. Some of those do overlap with things you ask storytellers. For example, you can make a case from the way the story is told that a particular person is its protagonist, and people can agree on that. You can learn more if you ask the storytellers themselves whom their stories are about; but if you can't ask them you can answer this question yourself. It would not be difficult to get a few people trained in narrative analysis to seek agreement on structural analysis of a body of stories. What the story means about its teller and issues in the community is another story.

Like textual analysis, I consider expert narrative analysis a weak option best used in concert with another.

Option group five: Asking subject-matter experts

The very worst option for making sense of stories, in my experience, is to ask people who study the people who told the stories to interpret them. Why? Because they tend to have very strong opinions -- based on their own experiences -- about the storytellers, for or against. The most biased interpretations of stories I have seen have been made by people who consider themselves experts in the subject matter of told stories. If I had no choice but to work with subject matter experts in dealing with a batch of stories, I'd look for experts who disagree, or experts who come from different educational or geographic or cultural backgrounds, or experts who are expert for different reasons. I would try to increase the diversity of views in some way to counteract the shared assumptions held by experts in any field. There is no field of inquiry, academic or otherwise, that does not have its arguments and schools of thought; so why not use that to your advantage?

Another thing you can do when you expect the interpreters of stories to have strong unexamined (or even examined) assumptions about them and their storytellers is to confuse the assumptions by removing information about context. You can "scrub" stories so that they hide gender identities, localities, references to religion, and other contextual tie-ins. I once had some confidential stories I wanted to use to demonstrate the success of the narrative approach. How could I make my point without revealing the actual stories? I thought about the situation described in the stories and translated each story into a different subject matter domain, keeping the structure of the story intact. The real situation was highly sensitive and the fictional one was not, but the mixture of conflicts and goals was similar enough that the underlying patterns still made sense. This took some work, but when I finished I had a data set that

perfectly demonstrated the utility of the sensemaking system without revealing the original stories. If I had to use the interpretations of subject-matter experts on a set of stories I would consider doing a similar translation to a domain in which the assumptions of the experts would not be called into action. If you are an expert in, say, energy technology, you will respond in a different way to a set of stories translated into the domain of, say, biomechanics.

In addition to removing context, it also works to insert distracting context. On a project whose purpose was to help executives improve their leadership skills, Dave Snowden and I intermixed stories about contemporary leaders with ones about historical leaders - Helen Keller, Napoleon, Abraham Lincoln, and so on. In another project we injected stories of historical conflicts into a data set based on recent events. The historical stories were not disguised, but they were intermixed without notice so that when viewing contemporary stories, project participants would discover unexpected linkages. Here the goal was to stimulate people to break out of old ways of thinking, but the same technique could be used to help subject matter experts avoid interpreting stories based on knee-jerk reactions. For example, if you wanted to ask experts to interpret a collection of stories about political violence, you might inject some stories about political activism, state suppression of free speech, utopian or dystopian communities, and so on. The point would be to disrupt the tendency of experts to fall back on easy answers without reflection. These sorts of methods of keeping experts on their toes, along with as much diversity of thought as can be found among experts in a field, would help to buffer the impact of accepted-thought bias.

One last method of guarding against interpretation bias is to ask experts and value their opinions, but also ask non-experts - people on the street - and compare the answers. This does not mean that experts are wrong or that people on the street are wrong. It means that their differences can be instructive.

Summing up

So those are all ways in which anyone can make sense of a group of stories without the ability to ask their tellers what they mean. Some of them are similar or identical to what you can find described in textbooks on narrative inquiry and some are based only on my own experience helping people collect stories and make sense of them. Which of these techiques are best? Each has its benefits and detriments. My recommendation is, if possible, to mix multiple approaches so that you can bounce different sources of information off each other. In that way the different methods can help each other over their various difficulties like the deaf watching while the blind listen. Together they are bound to find something they can use.

What to expect when expecting stories

One of the comments I got when I asked people what was missing in previous editions of this book was that it didn't have as much explanation as they wanted about the nuts and bolts of collecting stories in group story sessions. I wanted to address that gap this time around, so I started thinking about how to do that. I thought about writing fictional "vignettes" of things I've done and seen other people do in group sessions, and how they turned out; but I was afraid I'd inadvertently embarrass or offend people. I thought of answering questions in the manner of a frequently-asked-questions list; but when the questions aren't *real* those lists always seem pathetic.

Then I thought of the book *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, which (for those who don't know) is an essential book on pregnancy. What I liked about that book, when I had occasion to rely on it, was that it listed lots of things that *could* happen and what you should do if they do happen. Of course most of the

things they covered were *bad* things, but I liked that. I like to prepare for the worst when I'm facing the unknown.

I looked up *What to Expect*, just for fun, and was surprised to find negative reviews about it. Those comments read like perfect cautionary tales for anything I might write about story work. This review of the book was a good example:

> To make a long story short, after getting about 120 pages into this book, I called my best friend nearly in tears. I told her I was reading the book, and before I could go into details, she said "oh for goodness sakes, don't read THAT! It's all about what you can't do and what can go wrong."

But others disagreed:

> Honestly, I have no idea what all those people mean when they say ... that the book is designed to scare you by pointing out everything that can go wrong... This is just not true!

Evidently *some* people are like me and want to hear about all the awful things that *could* happen in advance, so that if those things *do* happen they can say, "Ah, I know what to do." But other people find preparing for disaster puts the whole thing in too negative a light and drains their energy. Another reader of *What to Expect When You're Expecting* said:

> Clear and easy to understand, I felt the authors ... reassured me that none of my concerns are silly. They had a great way of keeping me CALM (as I am a fact seeker, and often read a little TOO much and scare myself!).

That's *exactly* what I do. I'm a fact seeker and a certified expert in scaring myself. So, if you are like me you will probably love this section of this book. If you don't like cautionary tales, you are duly warned: skip this section! But no matter what I could possibly say about what could go wrong, the great thing about gathering stories (which like being pregnant is an augmenting process) is that people tell and listen to stories all the time. We already know how to do this, just like women already know how to have babies. Listening to stories is as easy as falling off a log, and sometimes as painful.

Now, how to go about telling you what to expect when expecting stories? Luckily for you and me, I'm an obsessive note-taker. So rather than sit and come up with things that could happen to you, I decided to mine my own records of things that have actually happened to me. I read over all of the notes I could find (covering 30-some sessions) and pulled from them about 250 stories of "things that have happened" in group sessions. The notes I show here are actual notes I wrote to myself during and after these sessions.

One problem I faced was that quite a few of these sessions combined storytelling and sensemaking. I could not easily consider the two goals separately, even though they are covered by separate chapters in the book. So I created one giant list of stories, then clustered them into groups with similar plot lines. I did this three times (taking it apart between) before I was satisfied that the clusters I created would be helpful to you. For a while I thought I would write a special "group sessions" chapter independent of story collection and sensemaking, but in the end I decided that would be too confusing. After much fretting I looked at my clusters and decided whether each had more to say about story collecting or about sensemaking, then moved it into the appropriate chapter. Once the cleaving blow was struck I could move on. Hence the counterpart to this section lies in this book's chapter on sensemaking, for better or worse.

In the sections that follow I consider one cluster of "things that happened" in group story 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 follow with some advice about what you can do if these things happen to you. Some of the clusters are about bad things and some are mixed between good and bad. Few are undiluted miracles; but all are real. I left out any stories about things I have already talked

about, like how stories flow in groups, so what remains are only the things not already in the book elsewhere.

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

The people you invite to any group story session will show up with a wide 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] who participated put out this 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 species of expectation I've seen in group story sessions, or ways people respond when asked to tell stories in a group setting. I give the species 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 different behaviors of those 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 and 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 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. They try to fade into the background and get through the session without saying anything, and 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 private, anonymous interview opportunity after the session is over sometimes helps 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 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 could possibly 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 asset 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 the subject, essentially ignoring your goals. Some questioners assume that *you* intend to teach them about the topic and start grilling you, becoming surprised, disappointed or even angry that you don't know all that much about it. Questioners don't tell stories, and they prevent other people from telling stories as well, since they are looking for facts and advice, not unimportant ramblings about mistakes and feelings. If questioners and gurus get together it can ruin storytelling, because questioners can lead gurus easily 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, and then ask them to help with yours.

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 the 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 outshout 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 the topic and want to learn more about it; but unlike questioners, learners know how to listen respectfully and 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 often willing, even sometimes *too* willing, to help you with little tasks like noting down stories or copying sticky notes.

To get learners to tell stories, as with questioners, 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 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 the busy people or gurus in the session because they think (rightly or wrongly) that those are the people in charge, so those people must be brought to listen to their complaints. To venters, collecting stories might seem 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 their piece outside of the session. This will help them reach their goal so they can turn their attention to helping you reach yours.

Over-compliers

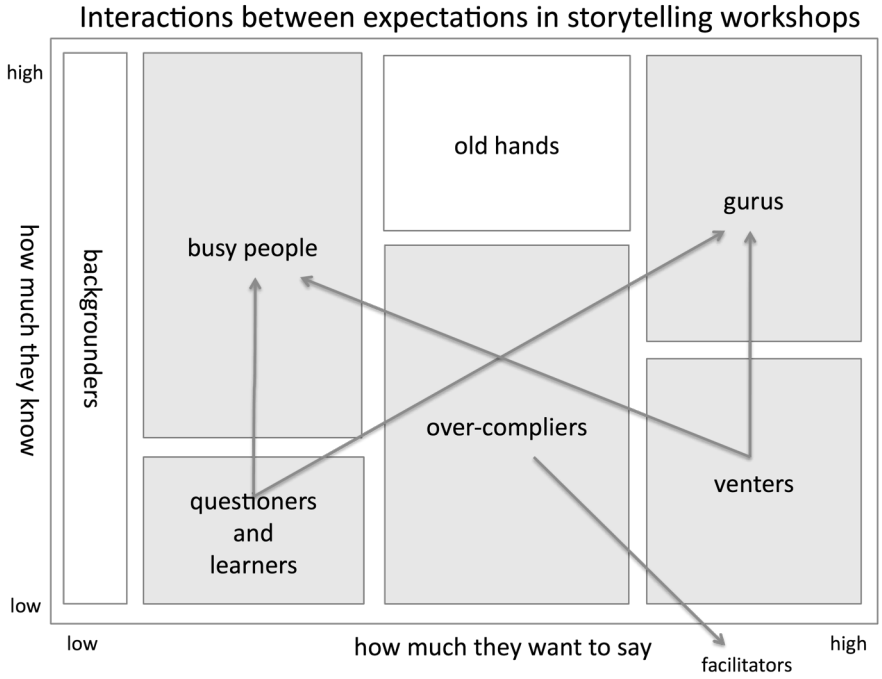
Over-compliers might know some valuable things, but they want to help too much and try too hard. They do *exactly* what you tell them, and they are worried about following the instructions perfectly. If you slip up and say the story should involve three people, all of their stories will involve exactly 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 styles (and nobody has just one) can tell great stories. A storytelling 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.

Some caricatured names for how people often behave in group story sessions.

This graph shows where the styles 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).



How the "species" of behaviors interact.

This graph shows the same thing, but with interactions between the expectation species overlaid. The old hands, backgrounders and learners are in danger of falling out of the storytelling and need to be kept in. Questioners and venters attach themselves to the busy people and gurus, who don't mind being drawn attention to, thus giving energy to the interaction; both participants in those interactions need to be guided out of them (or at least into giving them the form of recountings of events based on emotional experience from a perspective). The over-compliers fasten their tentacles on any available facilitators and need to be carefully disengaged.

If you find yourself overwhelmed with places to apply your palliative energy, look first at questioners, venters and over-compliers (those where the arrows start), because they are the most likely to *set off* less-productive patterns. That will also encourage all-around participation, which will draw in the backgrounders, old hands and learners. Those tendencies are likely to need the most attention to guide the conversation towards the sharing of raw stories of experience.

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 session. 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 need people with these different expectations to interact; you just need them to interact by telling 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 room together. This section is about whether people understand *what* you want them to do and are willing to go along with it, even if they 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 develop a sort of "patter" of performance at the start of any group session. You have to practice it and practice it until it seems natural. Don't read from papers; speak from memory. Find the simplest possible way to get across what you need people to do that works for you.

Here is a simple bit of patter I developed: you should modify it to something that feels comfortable. 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 convinces people of that you should put 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 papers you have in your hands, right *here* on the page, and there is more you can read *here* on this table. Does anybody *not* have these papers? Okay.

This sentence explains very briefly (I see only two or three words in each blank here) 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, unless it is days long, you will never get to telling stories. Keep things moving or you will lose the room. This bit also tells people that the papers you gave out (forms to answer questions about stories, mostly) are important to the session and you don't want them to ignore them.

> 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 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.

> 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 special 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 have thought, by the way, that I would say not to use the "s" word: story. I can't seem to get around it. I have tried lots of different words, but they just don't work. Anything I have tried -- events, experiences, perspectives, incidents -- carries a connotation that causes people to veer off into things you don't want. Asking about events or incidents or circumstances gets you lists of dates. Asking about perspectives or experiences gets you 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 should match your 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. Large cards you pull out could do the trick as well. Don't present these words as tests or goal posts, just as reminders and suggestions, memory triggers. If you chose your words well for your context and purpose, 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 call on -- another signal that they are about to start doing something.

> We will be taping the rest of the session. Do you see the number written at the top of the papers you got, right *here*? That is your participant number. Remember it, because it is the only way you will be identified. This session is 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 papers people have). Don't make your plan sound insipid or timid. If you planned your project well and know your storytellers, nobody will be surprised or upset. 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 exercise you will ask people to do, or whether you will just ask them to break up into small groups and tell stories without anything more complicated than that.

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 the groups start their tasks. Be ready to answer them, but be quiet about it.

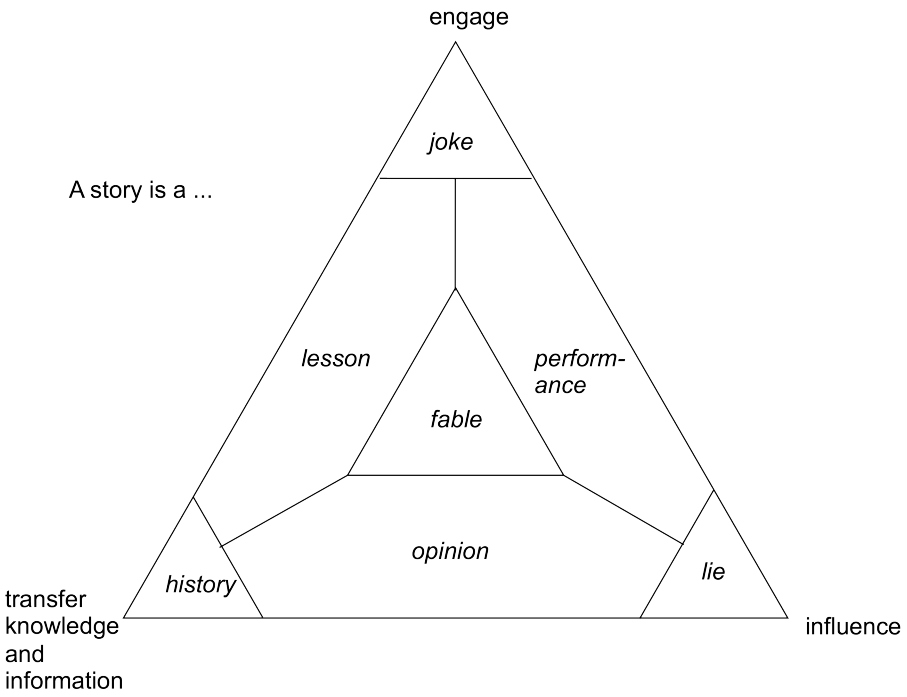
The last thing I want to say about this issue of presenting the tasks of the session to its participants is that it helps to display your confidence in the session's participants up front. Here is one of my notes I saved to show you down here:

> 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. I think giving out the coupons up front was a good idea because it did two things. First, 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 took it off the "why am I wasting my time with this" feeling. Second, I think 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 obviously 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.

I have found that giving people a *pleasant surprise* as the session starts increases their willingness to participate. An unexpected gift is one way to do this, but it's not the only way. There are many ways to please people, and some of them are subtle and easy to do. You might speak to people with an unexpected (perhaps unaccustomed) level of respectful attention. You might be dressed better than they expected, or the room might be cleaner than usual. Their 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 forms to fill out make a difference. Why does all this matter? Starting out the session with a display of confidence -- not just in yourself and in storytelling but in the session's participants -- helps them get over any concerns they have about the session being "not good enough" to them, to you or to 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.

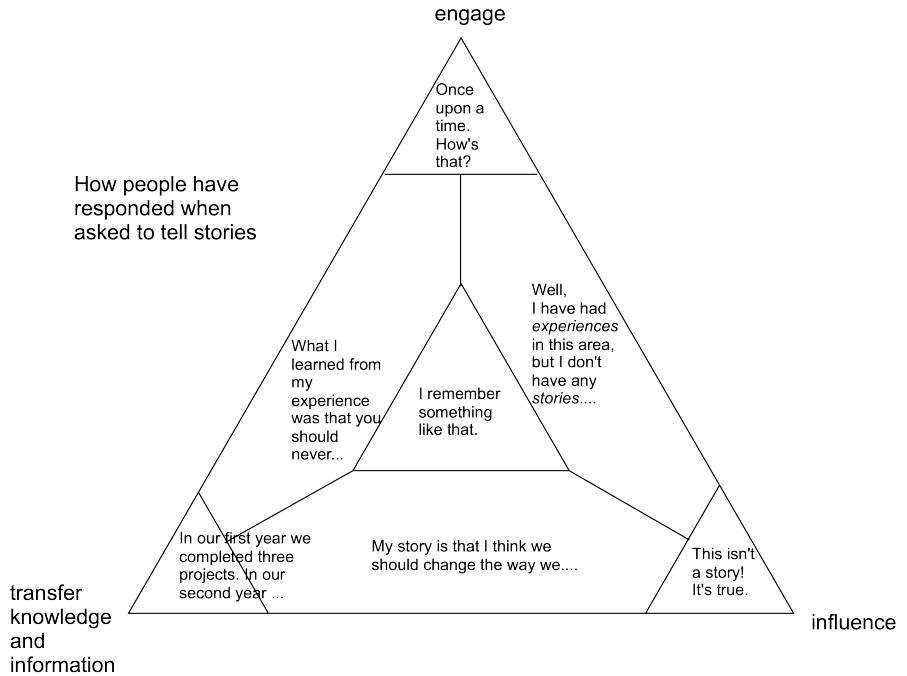
People understand storytelling, or they don't.

Do you remember the triangle of story uses from the "Stories in use" section of the "How do stories work" chapter? I'll repeat it here so you don't have to go and find it.



Perceptions of the word "story."

This second triangle shows some actual comments I noted down in group story sessions, and what (I think) they indicate the people were thinking about what stories could be used to do.



Things people have said in group story sessions that show their perceptions of the word "story."

When you ask people to tell stories, they will almost always move away from what you want them to do in two predictable ways: they will move towards one or two of the triangle vertices; and they will float up from the natural plane to the purposeful plane. When people *don't* move in a defined direction, they may become frustrated because they expect *you* to move them in a direction and are waiting for directions.

Some example notes:

- One guy said, "You want some sort of performance, right?" (performance)
- The joke, "That's my story and I'm sticking to it" keeps coming up. (opinion)
- 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. (general confusion)
- These people *thought* they were telling stories, but they weren't. They were just lecturing. (transfer)
- Some people went on too long. Other people got bored and weren't learning anything from long listings of people's experiences. (transfer)
- They complained that they didn't see how what they were doing had anything to do with fables. It was clear to me but they were frustrated that they didn't see the connection. (general confusion)

Why bother keeping people in the middle of the natural plane of storytelling? Because for story work to lead to useful outcomes, it requires the authenticity of wild stories. As soon as a wild story is given a purpose (usually through what people think you want them to do) it becomes a purposeful story and authenticity dissipates. Authenticity is the essence of story listening. It is what separates the approach from focus groups and surveys, which are soaked in purpose.

How can you keep people in the middle of the natural storytelling plane? What I've found works best is to *balance* your attention on three elements of experience, each of which keys in to one of the triangle vertices:

1. Asking "what *happened*" highlights *events* and pulls the story toward *knowledge transfer*.
2. Asking "what happened to *you*" features *perspectives* and pulls the story toward *influence*.
3. Asking "how did you *feel* about what happened to you" features *emotions* and pulls the story toward *engagement*.

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 creates a downward motion through its emphasis on what actually happened to the teller, 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 or brought narrow views of stories along with them? As people are telling stories, pay attention to which vertices of the triangle people seem to be attracted to. Such attractions will vary both by individual personality and by group culture. Engineers tend to be drawn to the information-transfer vertex, while writers gravitate to engagement and salespeople to influence. The better you get at recognizing deviations from the center of the natural plane, the easier you will find it to help people return there.

What follows is some advice on countering each type of deviation from stories told in the center of the triangle.

Countering the "a story is only a joke" perception

If this idea gets hold of your story session and people are telling stories only to entertain, the session will probably not produce many useful stories. Funny, yes, but not revealing. Beware that people may jump to this definition of story because it gives them a hiding place to avoid talking about their true experiences. Once one person creates such a hiding place, others may join them there. Of course *some* joking is great in a story session; it keeps things lively. But if the joking spreads to the point that people aren't disclosing any real feelings or experiences, you might need to make some subtle corrections. Avoidance joking usually feels awkward and spastic rather than relaxed.

One method of dealing with avoidance joking is to find a task you desperately 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 story particularly well, or something. See if temporarily removing them gets people 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 great it is that we are addressing them. 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 stop the game entirely.

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

Countering the "a story is only a lie" perception

Sometimes people 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). Yes, this can happen even after you said the word "real" ten times. I've seen this mostly when the participants see themselves as very serious or expert in the topic, or when the topic itself is seen as very serious or sensitive. I have seen important people get "all in a huff" about the idea that they, respectable members of the 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" or "that's a likely story" or "are you people telling stories about me?" or "that's no story, it's the truth" and so on. 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 generally seek out some reason to pop 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 is that you should feel free to delve deep into both the positive *and* negative of what you have experienced. Nothing is off the table. This is confidential and the more we strike the critical issues the better." (Never underestimate the many uses of the words "I forgot to mention" in correcting conversations.) I deliver 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 is meant to send a "word to the wise" message that yes we really *do* want the truth, and you (the wise) 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; you should take them as such and answer them. Only answer them obliquely, as they were asked.

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

Countering the "a story is only a history" perception

It is easy to notice when people veer over into the information vertex of the storytelling triangle, 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 in the context of the group 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 get away) has suddenly found themselves very much in need of refreshment or the bathroom. Or you may find two people having an intense technical discussion about some esoteric detail and everyone else staring at the floor. Unlike storytelling, listing is usually far more fascinating to the list-maker than to anyone else.

You don't have to stare directly at people to notice whether they are engaged in storytelling or not. Just keep them in your peripheral vision. What I usually do when I see the gazes of people in one group drifting around the room is, I slide into a position where I can overhear what is being said. If I hear lists being drafted I pretend to be interested in the conversation. Then I interject something that brings the conversation back to events, like "Wow, and when did *that* happen?" or "What was *that* like?" Another ploy is to feign ignorance (or claim valid ignorance, which works even better): "This item on your list, I don't understand it. Can you give me an example of what you mean by it? How did *that* play out?" In other words, don't *stop* people who are making lists, because they probably can't help it. Instead try to help them turn their list of items into a list of stories. If you make the hint well enough the people might be glad to tell "what happened" in each case.

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 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 old habit. Busy people do not make lists; their secretaries do that (but watch out, because busy list-makers may *dictate* lists to other people in their groups, who become *de facto* secretaries simply because they are located nearby).

Countering the "a story is only a performance" perception

This reaction is probably the most common I have seen: it is that 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. Each is dangerous. The unworthy shun the limelight and the worthy seize it, but you need them to *share* it.

How can you detect the performance interpretation of stories? Drama. People who are talking very loudly, gaming things up, competing with each other for the best story, gesticulating wildly, using assumed voices,

standing up, striking poses as though they were on stage. That's one sign. Another is 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 one group I overheard who started out their conversation by saying, "I suggest we call ourselves 'the good group.'" That sort of joke usually means 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*, 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 performance? 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, because it's what they do. Like list-makers, they usually don't even know they are doing it. But I will watch the group to make sure they stay on topic and non-performers get a chance to speak. I may drop in and say, "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) is really taking over a group, I might find some critical task only they can complete to satisfaction. A bag full of critical tasks only troublemakers can complete to satisfaction 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 others, 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? The gurus (they have their patter down already), the venters (same thing) and the over-compliers (this might be the performance you want). The busy people are too busy to perform; to the backgrounders this is an opportunity to hide; the questioners want to be in the audience, not on the stage (but watch out; they may urge performances on); and the old hands are too modest to perform.

Countering the "a story is only an opinion" perception

Yet another interpretation of a story is as an opinion: not a recounting of actual events but a series of declamations about "the way things are" (usually deplorable or admirable). Sometimes people will attempt to start a story, and then 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 hits on their favorite subject (on which they have prepared and delivered several rousing speeches in the past). This is like performance in that people monopolize the group's time, but opinion-givers make no pretense to drama. They just pontificate. You do it; I do it. Nobody is immune. Ask me about wildcrafting herbal teas and you'll get an earful.

People at personal podiums are easy to detect. Not only do they typically speak loudly and expansively, but they use fairly formulaic ways to announce their speeches. For example, 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 pick out verb tenses as you overhear conversations. 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 talking about things they have opinions about.

Now, how to counter the story as opinion? As with all the other interpretations, this is not dangerous unless it grows out of proportion. But if people are doing nothing but trading opinions, a few faux-naive questions may lead things back into the recounting of experiences. You can link opinions to experiences by asking about history: "What led you to take that position?" or "How did your views on that come about?" Or you can (obliquely) ask for examples: "What would it be like if that happened?" or "How does that play out in practice?"

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 something to say, it may simply be best to let it run its course. 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 not-quite-storytelling statements.

Who takes stories as opinions? The busy people and gurus stand together on this interpretation, as figures of authority with strong positions to defend. The venters of course 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 may get carried away and hold forth on their opinions if they get very excited about the topic. This is one of the few instances in which old hands can be caught up into taking over the discussion; but they are not hard to nudge into storytelling, being less likely to take questions as attacks on their entrenched positions. The 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 one's say doesn't seem enough like a put-on mask to them.

Countering the "a story is only a lesson" perception

The final segment of my story-purpose triangle is the one in which people interpret an appeal to tell stories as a request to receive a lecture. I remember one person in a session starting a small group task with the joke, "Gather round, children, and I'll tell you a tale." This was a useful indicator that they were entering into a teaching response. Other indicators are people referring to their many years of experience or other proofs of advanced knowledge; saying things like "you have to understand" or "I'll explain it to you" or "a frequent misconception is" and other indicators that they intend to enlighten those around them; and stating facts in an encyclopedic manner. Again, lest I sound arrogant, I do this all the time when the conversation enters into an area I think I know something about. It is another of those can't-help-it things good people don't intend to do.

How to reduce teaching? Well, teaching is not all that bad as long as it involves telling stories. Some of the greatest teachers in history have made use of stories. I would rank this interpretation as one of the least damaging. The difficulty here is not so much in what is said but in who gets to speak. On hearing stories given as lessons I usually just keep tabs to make sure the people *without* lectures to deliver are still getting a chance to describe their experiences.

Who gives lessons? Of course the gurus are lecturers *par excellence*, since this is how they see themselves; and the questioners egg them on. The busy people might or might not lecture, depending on how honored and generous they feel. Venters tend not to lecture because their complaints are not coherent systems of knowledge. Backgrounders hide, as always. Over-compliers are less likely to teach than to perform, mainly because they are not used to it. Finally, the old hands in the group may slide into teaching if they meet up with a particularly friendly audience. This is not necessarily a bad thing; a lesson from an old hand in the

topic you want to explore might be worth the risk of it taking over (and it probably won't take over completely, anyway, since old hands know when to shut up).

By the way, even though you need to keep people both on the natural plane and in the middle region of the triangle *until after the story has been told*, centering is not necessary or useful when you ask people to answer questions about their stories. I find that telling people they will have a chance to describe and explain their story later helps them keep the story in the center. It allows them to tell the story without explanatory purpose, knowing that will come later.

Interpretations x personalities = diversity

To close this section I would like to direct your attention to the section called "Stories in personalities," on people who tell stories (or don't) and know it (or don't), and the section called "Story collecting venues and story personalities" in this chapter. Why? Because the ways in which people tell stories and think they tell stories also has an impact on the way they tell stories in group sessions. These two sets of caricatures apply to story sessions in an orthogonal way, meaning that you can have a questioner who thinks he tell stories (but doesn't) pursuing a guru who (doesn't know she) tells stories. I leave it as an exercise for the reader to put these things together and think about how they might interact (or better yet, observe it in reality).

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 the one people usually think of first. It is only 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 section on conversational storytelling. 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 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 storytelling. 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 the participant is trying to meet a perceived expectation or requirement of their participation which has been imposed on them or to which they have committed. 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 that the pressure on each storyteller is lessened. People can *feel* your need for their contributions; 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 let on. Remember the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Why *not* challenge people? Won't pressuring them spur them to succeed? Not in my experience. Look, telling 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, we novice storytellers are terrible judges of our own stories. I've seen people tell one excellent and relevant story after another, then claim that they have had no useful experiences in the topic. I've also seen the reverse: people convinced they have dropped gems of valuable wisdom even though they have done nothing but parrot official manuals.

My advice is to wait people out. Often *after* people believe they have finished performing to whatever expectation they believe you have presented them with, 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 usually 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 your expectations low and broad 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 storytellers 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. People vary in how much self-disclosure danger they are willing (or able or eager) to take on. They vary in how much danger any particular topic presents to them. They vary in what sorts of resources they have on hand to cope with the danger of disclosure. They vary in their habits of disclosure: do they often confront their own limitations or do they avoid them? And they differ in 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. For this reason it is important never to offer the reduction of this danger, but always to offer resources using which people can reduce it themselves. The practice of giving people options in how deeply to plumb their experiences does this: instead of deciding for everyone involved how much they will reveal, a diverse set of questions gives people the opportunity to set their level of revelation to match their fears and ambitions.

Also like performance danger, this danger declines along with your expectations. 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. My suggestion is to prepare a few extra questions for any interview or group story session, in case you have misjudged the depth with which people are willing to consider their experiences. This is usually easy to do because most project planners think up more questions they would like to ask than they actually get to use. Say you think of eight questions you would like to ask people, and order them from least to most penetrating. You have decided you can use four questions in your group story session, so you pick the middle four of the range. In a separate place you keep the other four bracketing questions. If people are more alarmed by your questions than you had expected, pull out the two extra-tame options. Conversely, if you find a group extremely motivated to dredge up the depths, slip them 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 read 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. Also, people are set off by a wide variety of technology triggers. People who will publish the most intimate details of their lives in writing might balk at being recorded on tape, and vice versa.

Even with groups you thought would be uniform in their reactions you might be surprised by differences that threaten to unbalance your story collection.

My own experience has taught me that three things matter in reducing danger from technology in story collection: simplicity, transparency and provision.

Simplicity means never to 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* your group session you will have less to explain during it.

Transparency means never hiding what you are doing with technology, who is doing it, with whom, for whom, and why. I like to use small, unobtrusive audio recorders and refer to them quickly, as a side issue not worthy of serious consideration. Tell people about your technology plans in the same way. Explain what will happen to any technological records you collect, but don't read off *all* the details of your plans; just tell people you *have* the details and are happy to share them with anyone who wants to see them. This is an intermediate position between too little and too much information about technology. Transparency based on trust does not have to be paraded; in fact, it is when transparency is paraded with the most pomp that people begin to wonder if the emperor has no clothes.

Provision means being ready to negotiate terms if and when people are not happy with the technology plan you have set up. If you have understood your storytellers well, you may not need the provisions you put in place. But it is better to leave them unused than to lose valuable stories because you had no other response than "I guess you can leave." For example, say you plan to run tape recorders in a group story session. It would probably not cost you too much additional effort to ask one or two colleagues to sit in as potential note-takers if some small groups request 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. I would say that in the majority of projects I have done where a coherent community exists (i.e., the storytellers are not just scattered customers of a product), this is 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 storytellers and developing a sound privacy policy. All of the other dangers I list here may reduce the number and quality of stories you collect, but community danger has the potential to derail your project from empowerment to disempowerment.

How can you reduce community danger? I talk a lot in this book about "knowing your storytellers," by which I mean knowing how the majority of people in each group can be expected to react to things you might do (like ask them to tell stories in a group session). The best way to reduce community danger in storytelling is to expand that consciousness up a level by coming to know your *community* as well as you know your storytellers. Where are the schisms of opinion? Where are the connections of common concern? The more you know about the whole community the less likely you will be to put people in a position where they will find themselves in danger from it. I remember on one project a colleague I was working with had designed a group story session in which patients, family members, health care workers and doctors would all sit at tables together telling stories. I had seen patients defer to doctors in story groups before, performing (sometimes with hysterical energy) in front of people towards whom they had great faith (and great fear). I suggested we separate the patients and family members from the health care

professionals, at least at the start, so that those who saw themselves as less powerful would have a chance to tell their stories without fear of offense. On another project I watched a manager tell story after story, surrounded by employees whose only contributions were nods and "yes, yes" validations of *anything* the manager said.

What I like to do when planning a group session is to imagine people from different community groups together, reading the questions we intend to ask, reviewing the tasks we intend to ask them to do. What do the imagined people say to each other? Where do their eyes go? Do they fidget? Do they shrink down in their chairs? Do they stand up and gesture? Do they take charge? Do they argue? What happens? If you can't picture such a conversation, get help from someone who can.

Another connection between community danger and story collection practice is in the diverse sets of questions you prepare (and sometimes diverse ways in which people can tell stories). If you think people in the community will vary in their perceptions of community danger, give them permission to find their level. Perhaps some people are more authorized to tell community truths than others, or more willing to take on the risk, or more used to being laughed at and dismissed. When I used to prepare one question for everyone to answer, I could see in the responses that some people felt the question was too dangerous while others wanted to go deeper in. I think people like seeing that you anticipated variations in community danger and addressed them, even though it takes up more time to consider multiple questions or venues. In many cases it's worth the trouble.

That's *your* part of reducing community danger. The other part lies in the people themselves. As with character danger, I find it helps to simply ask people to think of the community as they speak. For most people a hint suffices, something like, "We are here to find solutions, not to point blame, so please be civil." Another option is to post a few rules of the meeting, like "If you would not say it to your parents or children, don't say it here" or "If you just told a negative story, find a positive one to tell next." I like to use the story version of the Golden Rule: *Never tell a story about someone that you wouldn't want someone to tell about you*. That doesn't mean people should hide the truth; it just means they should be as fair in their storytelling as they would like others to be.

Reducing community danger in story projects comes down to trust, yours as well as theirs. Unless you are very well connected in the community, you will be unlikely to have the means to anticipate all possible dangers to storytellers from the community (and from storytellers to the community). It will often be necessary, after all your preparations and communications, to simply *trust the people* to participate in a positive way.

Anyone who does participatory work has to accept that its price is loss of control. This is a miracle more often than it is a disaster, but you need to recognize that disaster is possible. You can do *everything* right and a project can still fail. Perhaps the time is not right for the people to confront a topic and they need to *pretend* to confront it, for now. Maybe the amount of anger (or complacency, fatalism, avoidance) connected to an issue is too great to permit the telling of stories about it. Maybe the group dynamics in a room go all wrong. These things do happen. Collecting stories is a great adventure, full of promise and peril. It is not a task; it is a journey.

My advice is to maintain a healthy awareness of your own trust and its limits. If you don't trust the people, what would help you trust them? Do you trust them *enough*? Enough for what? Do you trust some people more than others? Why is that? Is there anything you need to do to develop stronger trust in the project's participants?

I like to picture myself handing my project plans over to the people involved in the project, then stepping back and waiting quietly for their response. This helps me gauge whether my trust is adequate. If I picture

the people ripping my project plans to shreds and storming out of the room, I may need to revisit the project design. Perhaps it does not meet their needs. If I picture myself unable to step back quietly and jumping forward to point out and direct, I may need to revisit the project design. Perhaps I have not shared the project with its participants as much as I should, and feel it is "my" project more than is healthy. Trusting other people to do their part in a project you have worked hard on can be difficult. I know *I* find it hard, after I have spent days preparing for a session, to simply let people talk, especially when they take the long way round to where I wanted them to go. But it's the only way to succeed *together*.

Now, once you have tested and verified your trust for the people in your project, be sure to *show it to them*. Show the people that you understand and accept the fact that *they hold the project in their hands.* Why? Because doing this can help them step up and take responsibility for the success of the project. Don't assume they *know* you trust them to participate. In a group session in which I think trust could be an issue, I like to say:

> This is *your* project. This is your session. I am here to help you, but you are the ones who will determine what will become of this effort. It is up to *you* what we do today.

(If you can't bring yourself to say such a thing, why can't you? What will help you say that? Another useful test.) When I have given this little speech I have often been surprised by how surprised people are by it. Many people today have been poked and prodded by so many surveys and forms that they don't recognize participation when they see it. Make sure people understand the part you are asking them to play. Make sure they understand that you trust them to play it. Then *really do trust them* to play it.

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

People who belong to different groups, or who take on different roles in the community, or who just have different personalities, respond differently in a group story 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 one about Supply Chain Management.

These things mean that you can't just roll out your one standard plan for every group story 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. If you don't know what the people will be like, it is worth doing some research beforehand, in the form of asking people and just hanging around listening to how people talk.

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. Asking *them* to make lists works for *them*.

Here are a few axes 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 are like encyclopedias: you don't read the whole thing at once, you pick out a volume. The danger with long experience is that people will give you the volume summaries, not the content. These people are the most likely to respond with typical scenarios or opinions rather than actual stories. You may need to give them special help recalling specific incidents to recall. If they say, "I always went down to the wharf in the morning to watch the boats come in." You can say, "Was there any particular morning that stands out?" And so on.

People with little experience have the opposite problem. They are not like encyclopedias but like brochures. They 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, if they have a little help. In fact I find people with little experience very helpful when I am collecting stories, for two reasons. First, because their experience is (usually) fresh they can recall its details better; and second, because they have few experiences it does not bother them if you ask for details. If you ask an old sailor to describe an event in detail, the details will be lost to memory, and the sailor may feel you are insinuating that they don't have many such stories by asking about one. But people who have been, say, on a boat once in their lives can dive into deep detail on the experience of a first-time boat passenger. This makes a nice complement to the many experiences, sometimes described at a more shallow level, of the highly experienced.

Younger versus older people

In general (though definitely not in particular) younger people tend to be more willing to go along with strange requests. They are easier to get doing role-playing skits and writing fairy tales and so on. Older people are usually more skeptical and less willing to do things on other terms than their own. You wouldn't approach a group of sixty-year-old managers with a plan to do fanciful role playing (at least not if you knew nothing about them), nor would you ask 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 decades ago, 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 at the bank 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.

Some of the people you will find in any story session will be there because they truly believe in the project and are determined to do their part to support it. Some will be there because somebody asked them to come and they would feel bad if they broke their promise. Some will be there because a supervisor ordered them to come, on pain of punishment. Some will come for the 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. But if you know your storytellers well enough before your group session starts, you can meet them where they are, not at some place they will never be. Meeting people where they are is the only way to have some hope of moving them elsewhere. You can get those who came for the cookies interested in what impact they can have. You can help those who were ordered to come understand that participation is a kind of power available to them. You can help those who feel a social obligation to a friend feel a social obligation to the entire community. In other words, you can only fire people up to participate if you 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 am a very 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). I love to ask people questions that feature metaphors, like "If this software was an animal what animal would it be?" or "If you could wave a wand and make this community different, what magic would you use?" I could run with questions like those for days, frolicking in meadows of tangential relationships, sipping mildly from rivers of chocolate promise. But to some people such questions are doors slammed in their faces. The message they get is not one of exploration but of obfuscation. "What are you *getting* at?" They 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 open up vistas for some people close them down for others.

In some groups, by the nature of the aspect that unifies them, people will fall into only one of these categories. People who handle many little details with precision, like secretaries, quality assurance engineers, waitresses, maintenance workers, tend to be concrete thinkers. When you ask these people what they plan to be doing next Saturday, they can often 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 in my life 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 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, because you will find yourself there alone.

On the other hand, people who are used to frolicking in meadows of tangential relationships and sipping mildly from rivers of chocolate promise, that is, abstract thinkers, are the connectors of the world: the writers, researchers, game builders, entrepreneurs. These people don't maintain clockworks; they grow

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 at the start 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 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" wildebeests. My point is: you can *ask* abstract thinkers about the facts of their experience, but be aware that you will get some fantasy mixed in anyway. 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 create 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.

Of course these are extreme caricatures. Some people think in both ways, and some groups will contain mixtures of 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 the concrete thinkers the tiniest hint of invitation to fancy and see if any of them take it up. Give the abstract thinkers room to speak directly without metaphor when they need to. Prepare for surprise by having questions and other materials you will only use if there is need for them.

How about planning to take people out of their habitual comfort zones? Should you pressure people to look at things differently? Should you challenge them? There is some merit in this approach, I suppose, but there is much risk as well. Pushing people out of their usual habits of thought may be productive, but it takes huge facilitation skill. Besides, I don't think it's very participatory to use force. Better to invite than insist.

Process versus place domains

This one has to do with the conjunction of people and topics. Some of the things you will ask people to tell stories about are stories already, and some are not. Let me explain that better. If you picture the domain, or land, of the topic people will be telling stories about, some domains have a clear central path running down them, an inherent *sequence* of events. You start here, you go here, and you end up there. An example might be if you are asking people about buying a house: there is a fairly standard set of events through which people move in their experience of house buying. Having a baby, starting a business, 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 predetermined sequence of events. The topic is more like a *place* where 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 experience, like buying a camera or learning how to regulate exposure, but the entire landscape of photography has no strong sequence. Other such 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 formulating stories as they do when you ask about place domains. 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 this help, either

embedded in your questions or ready to provide clarification when needed, helps move storytelling along when otherwise it might stall as people try to put together sequences worth describing.

One more thing about this difference is that different people may experience the same topic as process or 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 commands, the purchasing process may have a strong and unchanging sequence to it. If you expect groups with different experiences of some topic, either separate them into different sessions or give each group 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 the topic? Are you young or old? Are you committed to the 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 misjudge them and prepare badly, leading to frustration and few stories told. If you find the differences are too great, find help bridging the gap.

Summary

People vary on two axes in relation to their own storytelling: whether they tell stories, and whether they think they tell stories. When your goal is to record the stories people tell, it is useful to pay attention to these axes of variation. Different venues of story collection naturally work better with different tendencies than others. For people who tell stories but don't know it, a group session is the best way to gather stories. For people who think they tell stories but don't, interviews are best. For people who tell great stories and know it, interviews are also superior to other forms of collection. For people who don't tell stories and know it, group sessions are best.

In the "story fundamentals questions expanded" section of the chapter details of use are given for the forty questions about story form, function and phenomenon. As you consider the use of each question you should think about helping people center their attention on the story (not on themselves or their opinions), what the people can be expected to know and understand, what might offend or confuse them, whether they are considering their own stories or those of others, the goals of the project, and the motivations of participants to stay engaged in the process.

The universal truth about asking questions about stories is that you can never ask as many questions as you want to. How to choose which of your must-have questions to ask? Plan your project backward by considering how the answers to a question will benefit your desired outcome. Defend each question in front of a real or imagined crowd. Look for questions that will fail to find useful diversity in responses. Consider possible questions in pairs in order to produce a ranking. All these methods will help to reduce your question list to something that will work.

When you ask scalar questions whose answers are numbers in a range, there is a tendency for people to rush collectively to whichever side of the scale is considered most socially acceptable (usually the right side) rather than actually considering the question's meaning. To combat this I recommend using a variety of methods. You can flip some scales so the socially correct answer is not on the socially correct side. You can make both side of the scale either equally good or equally bad, so there is not one obvious correct side.

And you can mix all of these methods together to draw interest to the meanings of the questions rather than the automatically correct answers.

What should you do if you find yourself in a situation where you have collected stories but cannot ask people questions about them? I describe several things you can do, in order of decreasing utility. You might be able to ask questions indirectly, by looking at patterns of attention and use. You might be able to ask other people who are close to the original storytellers in some way about the stories. Sometimes can look at the events in which the stories were told for cues to the evaluative content of the storytelling. You can analyze story texts (though you should be aware of the limitations of that approach). You can analyze the narrative elements of the stories. Finally, you can ask experts in the subject matter of the stories what they mean. This is the worst option, and if you have to do it, I suggest some ways to get around the problem of bias.

Some things you might encounter when you collect stories in a group session are as follows.

- People might understand and accept the goals of the session, or they might not. Motivations in story collection sessions can be caricaturized as busy people (too busy for little people like you), backgrounders (who prefer to fade back), gurus (who know a lot and want you to know it), questioners (who came to find out), old hands (who know a lot but don't need to broadcast it), learners (who are open to anything), venters (who have an axe to grind), and over-compliers (who are very eager to please). These motivations interact to produce fairly predictable patterns.
- People might understand and accept the tasks of the session, or they might not. What helps to get people to the place where they understand what the group is doing together is to develop a message that helps you convey completely and confidently what you are asking people to do.
- People might understand storytelling, or they might not. If you prepare for the ways in which people (fairly predictably) respond to a request to tell stories, you can keep them centered on the task at hand. You are likely to encounter people who (reasonably) think you want them to tell jokes, lie, list events, perform, provide opinions, or deliver lectures. Becoming familiar with each of these misunderstandings and learning to counter it will increase your skill at gathering stories.
- People might feel the session is safe enough to tell stories in, or they might not. You might find people perceiving audience danger (will my story be well received?), character danger (will they mind my story about them?), performance danger (is this what I was supposed to do?), self-disclosure danger (will dredging out this memory hurt?), technology danger (will I read this on the internet?), and community danger (will they say I was the one who told?). Learning to recognize each of these perceptions of danger will help you alleviate them so people can speak.
- You might understand your groups and topic well, or you might not. Consider whether people have short or long experience with the topic, whether they are older or younger, whether they are volunteers or committed members, whether they have concrete or abstract habits of thought, and whether the topic is one of process or place. The more you know about the people you are asking to tell stories, and about yourself, in reference to these issues, the better you will be able to plan your story collection session.

The most useful habit when it comes to designing questions to be asked for and about stories is to tell stories. It is important to find stories that will help you gather stories: stories of other projects, stories related to the topic, stories about the people, stories about people facing similar challenges. It is also important to watch your stories to make sure they do not mislead you into a misunderstanding of the project's context. Make sure the stories you have in mind as you prepare to gather stories do not cause you to distort or avoid or derail the story collection you need to make.

Questions

Isn't this just a grab-bag of a chapter? It's all over the place with its assorted advice. What do you make of it? What in this chapter works for you and what doesn't? What can you use, and how? (And why?) What do you wish this chapter had in it that it doesn't? Where can you get what you need?

As you read the section on the story fundamentals questions, did any of them strike you as being particularly applicable to the context of either your community or organization in general, or any projects you might be thinking of? Did any seem particularly useless, unappealing or even dangerous? Did any stand out as being questions you yourself would like or dislike being asked? Why is that?

As you read the section on "what to expect," if you look back into your experience, can you think of times you or somebody else acted with that motivation or perception? Can you recall a time when somebody tried too hard to comply with directions? Did anyone ever think that when you said "story" you meant "joke?" Can you remember someone feeling anxious that their story would be overheard? Do your experiences match these descriptions? What would your own "what to expect" list look like?

Go back to the previous chapter and apply the question on habits to those described in *this* chapter.

Activities

Find at least one person of your acquaintance who matches each of the story personality categories (natural storyteller, half-story teller, story performer, unaccustomed storyteller). For each person, enter into conversation and see if you can elicit a story from them. Afterwards, jot down a few notes about what the person said. Did you guess their type right? Did they surprise you? Was it easier or harder to get them to tell a story than you expected?

For a real or imaginary story project, go question shoppping in the list of story fundamentals questions. Which questions would work best for the project you envision? Now set yourself a limit to the number of questions you can use, and practice whittling down your list of questions using the methods set out in the "How not to ask too many questions" section.

This activity is for a group who wants to prepare to collect stories in a group project. Hold a storytelling session in which some of the participants deliberately take on the caricatured roles described in the "what to expect" session. Pretend to be gurus who lecture or backgrounders who hide; pretend to misunderstand what is meant by storytelling; pretend to be afraid to fail or afraid to speak. Other people should not take on roles but should practice *coping* with those taking on the roles. Role-players: don't tell the practicers what roles you are taking on. Practicers: try to figure out what roles people are taking on, then try to get them to tell stories. After a while, switch who is role-playing and who is practicing, then do the whole thing again.

Chapter 5: Advanced Topics in Narrative Catalysis

This chapter brings together some writings on catalysis that were too detailed or wordy to fit into the basic guide.

Habits of catalysis

This section continues the exploration of habits, or "things I do that seem to help" that started in the planning section. These habits are about preparing catalytic materials.

When I think about habits I have developed in every other stage of PNI, I can come up with a single list of habits that apply to that stage. But during catalysis, I don't call on *one* set of habits; I pull up several different sets that come into play during different parts of the process. These are my habits and may not be yours; but reading about them should still be helpful to you.

Bookkeeping

When you are preparing your data, verifying data integrity, scoping your exploration and producing results, your habits must be *meticulous*. In this part of catalysis, draw on your inner bean counter. You must be patient, careful, vigilant and thorough, even obsessively so. You must double-check and triple-check your work. Here the challenges lie mainly in enduring the monotonic repetition of boring yet critical tasks.

When I am in the bookkeeping parts of a catalysis project, I've noticed that I have certain obsessive sorts of habits, like generating the same results over and over to check that they always come out the same. Sometimes I will catch myself opening a file to check it three times, as though it might have changed when I was not looking. I seem to need to build up a sense of security that the results I have produced are accurate. I am risk-averse during this period, nervous, like a little mouse running next to the wall. I use my anxiety as a tool: the more I have of it, the more work I know I have to do. My confidence in my treatment of the collected data grows as I work with it, which leads to the ending of this phase of the work. When the mouse steps away from the wall, it is time to move on.

To support my efforts in this stage of catalysis, I break up the monotony of the task with colorful variety. Creating, evaluating and maintaining exact order in data is a constrained process, so I take breaks by enjoying a lack of order in other situations. I watch funny, witty science fiction movies; I play silly games; I tinker with toys; I watch patterns of light play on the forest floor. I seek respite in playful miscellany before another plunge into the austere order of rows and columns of data.

Globetrotting

When you are accumulating observations, when you are exploring the interpretations you have written about each observation, and when you are clustering interpretations, your habits must be *associative*. In

this part of catalysis, draw on your inner explorer. You must be curious, connective, creative. Here the challenges lie in keeping your mind open and alive to discoveries you had not foreseen.

When I am in the exploring parts of a catalysis project, my habits are writerly. I become wry and ironic, entertained by juxtaposition, enticed by paradox. I pluck associations out of the air, poetically rearranging concepts. I conduct creative research (re-search: search and search again) in a wide-ranging manner. When I am reading stories, I free associate on ideas suggested in them, leaping from one stepping-stone of suggestion to the next. I often dream about the stories I am reading in this stage, and I use the insights from those dreams to improve on my explorations. I use my curiosity as a tool: I let it lead me down new paths until I meet myself coming round the other way. My confidence in my exploration of the data grows as I map out more and more interlinked paths through the world the stories and answers show me.

To support my efforts in this stage of catalysis, in my breaks I do the opposite of exploration: I withdraw into quiet. I find repetitive, mundane tasks I can do while musing in the back of my mind about the avenues I have encountered. I clean my office, I wash dishes or walls or clothes, I sort papers, I swing on the hammock and stare into space. I don't seek entertainment or distraction or variety; I seek stillness so my imagination can work.

Rabble-rousing

When you are generating multiple interpretations of observations, your habits must be *contrarian*. In this part of catalysis, draw on your inner agitator. You must turn every argument on its end, question every supposed fact, counter every view, attack every sacred object. Here the challenges lie mainly in sustaining the emotional effort required to shout what cannot be whispered, heedless of outcome; and in knowing the boundaries of agitation well enough to provoke without insult or injury to anyone (including yourself).

Personally I find this part of catalysis emotionally draining, even frightening. It is unnerving to deliberately come up with views counter to what is considered normal or correct, even when you are drawing them from stories you have read. It's unnerving to describe such views in a report. It's unnerving to conceal your own position and risk appearing incompetent or deluded. If you find yourself avoiding this part of catalysis, don't worry; it means you are a sane human being.

This part of catalysis requires courage and strength. One reason I intersperse the generation of multiple interpretations with their exploration, instead of writing all the interpretations together, is that I know I can only muster the required courage on an intermittent basis. The feelings of the people who wrote the stories, their hatreds and fears and prejudices, course through me as I try to speak in their conflicting voices. When I can hear one group saying "you are parasites clinging to our backs" while the other shouts "you would be nothing without us" it can be both exhilarating and exhausting to write those things down. Adrenaline will flow as you write the things no one can say out loud about your community or organization. Be ready to handle it.

To support my efforts in this part of catalysis, I seek calming refuge and serenity. I take long walks in the enveloping woods, or I soak in a candle-lit bathtub, or I lie in bed reading books of consolation. I find myself drawn to weepy movies about enduring love. I seek comfort and nurturing while I summon my courage to provoke.

Enabling

When you are writing your final catalysis report, your habits must be *enabling*. In this part of catalysis, draw on your inner coach. You must be supportive, inspirational, motivating, helpful. Here the challenges lie mainly in understanding your audience, developing your material, and honing your compositional skills so you can deliver a package that suits its context and purpose.

In this part of catalysis I keep in front of me a mental image of the people who will be using my report. It's like I have a picture of them in a frame, and I keep picking up the frame and peering into their eyes to guess at whether I am helping them in what I am doing. I usually have a vague idea of who will be using the report, gleaned from conversations as the project started, and I construct an image from that. I pretend to become them, knowledgeable about the subject matter but unfamiliar with catalysis or sensemaking, trying to make sense of this menagerie of a report I have put before them. I try to sense what they will find confusing and smooth the paths they might stumble on.

To better prepare the report at this stage I often bring in help. My husband and child are often treated to excerpts from what I am writing as the project nears completion. I never find it useful to print my graphs or test results, and I rarely print individual observations or interpretations, but I *always* print my report summary. In fact, I use the urge to print the report summary as a gauge of how the report-writing phase of catalysis is going. When I find I simply *need* to see the thing on paper, it means I am close to finishing the project. As I used my balance of anxiety and confidence in the first stages of catalysis, I use my balance of polishing and publishing in the final stages to find out what remains to be done.

To support my efforts in this part of catalysis, I take breaks from responsibility. Writing the final report is all about serving others with a consistent focus on helpfulness. I've noticed that when I'm writing my useful reports I need to take breaks from utility. I do things nobody needs or wants me to do. I might take some pieces of wood and nail them together into something that has no utility whatsoever, or I might dig a hole in the ground for no reason, or I might make a mess and not clean it up. (For a mother this is a huge departure from normal life!) I gather energy to guide and help by becoming temporarily unreliable, unreasonable, and useless. It's freeing, and it prepares me to serve again.

Finding your catalysis habits

Is it possible to find all of these people in one person? Not perfectly. I do best at exploration, well at explanation, mediocre at bookkeeping, and poorly -- haltingly -- at agitation. Your suite of skills will surely be different than mine. How well you fare at developing each of the sets of habits you need for the different elements of catalysis is something you might not know until you try it. Don't assume you can tell before you start what you will be best at. Try working your way through a small catalysis project and see where your strengths and weaknesses lie.

What if you *know* you can't take on one of these sets of habits? What if you couldn't be meticulous to save your life, or you would have to become a different person to explore patterns in data? That's easy: get help. Find somebody who excels at the thing you struggle at, and share the work with them.

Only be careful how you split the work. Some parts of catalysis are easy to pass off to someone else. The divide between producing results and the remaining phases, in particular, is sufficiently abrupt that it would be easy to hand catalysis across it. One person or group might generate two hundred graphs, and another person or group might use the results to finish the process. There is no harm in splitting catalysis in *that* particular place, because the results speak for themselves. Similarly, if one person accumulates observations and another interprets them, the split would still be feasible, since interpretation is unlikely

to cause a result to become more or less remarkable. Cleaning up the final report is another task that can be given to someone who excels at instructional writing.

Other parts of catalysis are not so easy to split apart. Say you plan to have one person generate multiple interpretations and another one explore them, or you plan to have one person interpret and explore while another clusters interpretations. Such a division would be problematical without strong collaboration, because there will be so much understood yet not written that leads to what is clustered. For example, I say in the sections above that stories or excerpts that illustrate clusters if interpretations will "jump out" as the report is being written. If you have not been with the observations and interpretations since they first arose, matching stories probably will *not* jump out for you. That part of catalysis, starting with interpreting observations and ending with clustering interpretations, stands as a block that cannot easily be split apart.

Catalysis can certainly be done by a closely collaborating team, however, and in that case complementary skills should mesh well. Just because I am used to finding all these people inside myself doesn't mean *you* have to, or that it is the best way. Maybe your best way of doing catalysis is something you alone can find.

Details on verifying data integrity

Verifying data integrity means checking to see where your data holds together as a coherent and meaningful body of intentional communication, and where it doesn't. This section of the book complements the sections on verifying data integrity in the chapter on narrative catalysis in *Working with Stories* (separated by implementation method: paper, spreadsheet, analytical package). It goes into more detail on exactly what sorts of problems with data integrity you might find in your catalytic work and what you can do about them.

Every data set has clear places in it, places where it's obvious what people meant by what they said. And every data set has **muddles** in it. These are the 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, respondents who didn't respond, answers that don't mean what they seem to mean.

Muddles remind me of these lines 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 went to college I used to sit in the library studying until late at night. All the psychology students used to come over to the library to conduct their surveys on fellow students, and I often found myself answering surveys just to break the

monotony. One time a student asked me to memorize a long list of words -- foods, maybe. I saw the long list, knew there was no way I could possibly memorize the whole thing, 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 this 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 found that I had no idea what any 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's psychology professor did with my ridiculous attempt to amaze everyone with feats of memory. The student never asked me *why* I filled out the thing in that absurd way or what I meant by it. I suspect they simply threw away the result as an outlier.

My point is: people do things like that. When you give them a task to complete they come up with all kinds of hair-brained schemes to do what they think you want them to do faster and better and more interestingly than everybody else. They just 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 single question in any survey 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:

1. I thought about my answer long and hard, and it represents my considered reflection.
2. 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 one I thought was closest. But this isn't *really* what I think.
3. I had *no idea* what this question meant. I picked the answer that sounded most reasonable anyway, because I didn't want to admit I had no idea what to say.
4. I know which answer I would have *liked* to choose, but I wasn't going to get caught choosing that! So I chose the one I had better choose, given the way things are. You know what I mean.
5. How was I supposed to pick *one* of these? It could be any of them! So I picked this one, why not.
6. I *think* I chose the answer I was supposed to choose. Did I get the right one?
7. I know how I want this project to come out, so I picked the answer I thought would nudge things the right way.
8. I always pick the most inconspicuous answer to each question. I don't want to stand out.
9. I always choose the answers that will rankle the people in power the most. Truth to power!
10. I wasn't paying much attention, to tell the truth. I skimmed the answers and picked one that sounded interesting, then I moved on.
11. I picked the first answer on the list without reading the list. I got the whole thing done in five minutes!
12. Huh? What answer did I give?

But even if there *were* such follow-up questions, nobody would answer them honestly anyway. They'd all say they answered meaningfully, because they were *supposed* to answer meaningly. Then you'd have to ask people whether they answered meaningfully when they said they answered meaningfully. Even if you collected the information in an interview, and the interviewer marked whether they thought people answered meaningfully, you still couldn't be sure of it. Maybe the people *looked* thoughtful, but they were really thinking about lunch. Figuring out what people mean by what they say is something every project has to deal with.

It is important to manage the muddles at the start of your catalysis effort and deal with them *before* you begin churning out any results. Why? Because if you don't deal with muddles up front, you might waste 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 until you realize some of the data they *ought* to cover is missing. You might even go so far as to annotate your observations with interpretations and begin to build them up into trends before you realize that some of the observations don't hold up.

Let's say you are doing a PNI project, and you didn't bother looking at data integrity but plunged 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 uniformly said they hated the urban development plan the city is considering. 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. Maybe they have the least time to deal with it, or it impacts them the most negatively, or its style conflicts with their self-image as movers and shakers, or it sounds far-fetched and unrealistic to them, or they think it's not ambitious enough, or they feel its mundane details are beneath them: you could go on and on.

But if you had been more careful at the start 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 choice *on every single question*. You might have noticed that they always picked only one answer to each question, even when they were *asked* to choose three. Could this mean that instead of *actually* hating the plan, they just didn't pay much attention to the survey? Could it mean that the survey was too long for the busiest people to fill out meaningfully? Yes it could. *And it could also mean* that the very busy people hated the plan. That's a muddle.

A guide to common muddles

This is a sort of catalogue of some types of muddles I have often come across in my catalysis work.

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 mid-point 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.) 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 read some of the stories as 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 entire survey, 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 does such systemic non-response happen? Why would a person mark all the questions on an answer sheet without actually considering them? Maybe people were forced to participate and looked for ways to refuse while pretending to respond. Maybe some questions unwittingly 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 in the project. For whatever reason, a person who answers every single question in the same way is sending you a message. The message is not their meaningful answers to your questions, but their unwillingness to participate in the project. It is up to you to discover the message and respond by removing the non-meaningful 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 is meaningful, but sometimes it simply 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. Unlike mid-point clusters, 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 get 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 form or in the 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."

Generally when only some proportion of the people answered a question it weakens, because you cannot know what the people who didn't respond *would* have said had they responded. Sometimes the question simply 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 difficult it is to place a value on a scale the less people place values (I call this the "ugh" response). The question "did the main character get what they wanted" might gather a large response, but the question "to what extent do you think this story exemplifies responsible behavior in a leader" requires more thought and is more likely to be passed over. The same goes for questions that approach taboo subjects, questions that ask people to evaluate those in power, and questions near the end of the survey. (All of these are of course only speculations and don't prove anything. But that's the beauty of catalysis: we are not *after* proof. Speculation is just more food for thought, *as long as it is never offered alone* or as proof.)

Choice data: lopsided answers. This situation happens when the responses to choices favor one or two choices to the near exclusion of others. Sometimes the answer that receives the lion's share of responses is the safe or noncommittal answer; this is especially true if there is no obvious noncommittal answer like "not sure" or "rather not say" provided. But it may 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 of people answers to this question will be well distributed, but in situations where people either don't know each other or are wary of "telling

tales," almost all stories will be first-hand. Reading the stories often helps determine whether the answers represent true interpretations.

Choice data: too-heavy emphasis on the first few choices. Sometimes when a question has many possible answers, say ten or fifteen, people check the first answers disproportionately often. This sometimes means people were rushing through the question and didn't carefully read all possible answers, 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. It's just not how a scientist thinks. 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 "choose *up to three* answers." When I find this pattern of too many answers, what I usually try to do is figure out who answered in that way and what it could possibly mean they meant by it.

In one project I can remember, two back-to-back questions asked people to choose "all that apply" from about a dozen choices (a mistake, in retrospect). Interestingly, the people chose nearly twice as many answers to the first question as to the second. The first question was about a positive attribution (the benefits of an official policy) and the second negative (the problems inherent in upholding that policy). This led me to the speculation that people over-answered on the benefits question because they felt socially obligated to say as many good things about it as possible. Thus patterns in their individual answers to the benefits question could be expected to be only weakly meaningful in the particular. In contrast, since people seemed to feel less obligation to over-answer on the problems question, those answers might more fully represent their true interpretations. I did indeed find few patterns of coincidence between answers to the question and other questions in the survey, when compared with 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 on average five answers per option. These are small numbers to compare, and most statistical tests will be inapplicable at that scale. You can fix such size mismatches either by offering fewer choices or by lumping answers afterward.

So, if you want to ask the question:

> How do you feel about this story?
>
> [ ] happy [ ] sad
>
> [ ] relieved [ ] frustrated
>
> [ ] peaceful [ ] angry
>
> [ ] hopeful [ ] hopeless
>
> [ ] amazed [ ] bored
>
> [ ] energized [ ] disappointed

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

> How do you feel about this story?
>
> [ ] happy [ ] hopeful [ ] energized

[ ] sad [ ] hopeless [ ] disappointed

Or you could ask the first question, then lump together the results afterward. Offering fewer choices is better if you can guess what those choices should be and you have very little of your participants' time to work with. Offering more choices and lumping afterward is better if you have a larger cognitive budget and a weaker guess at what people will want to answer. It can be hard to guess at how people will feel. I remember once setting up the question "why did you choose this story to tell" and only finding out later that I had left out the most likely answer, which was "to warn." This is why I like to have write-in "other" choices whenever feasible, because sometimes people will fill in the answer you should have seen.

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 the lumping multiple ways, and I do sometimes do that. But eventually you have to make a choice and move on.

Choice data: the no-man's-land answer. Sometimes you 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 cannot be explored further. If it is not quite universal it can be more telling, such as when only people in one group or who told one particular type of story avoided the answer. 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 eleven of the twelve available answers, was "no benefits at all." Clearly this represented a line in the sand people knew better than to cross. (Unless it could be accounted for by other reasons, of course, such as its position in the list or its confusing relation to the question. I was approaching a statement of fact there and had to stop myself, didn't I?)

Choice data: confused distinctions. 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 use several choices, among them "common" and "everyday." I found that people couldn't distinguish between these choices, so they seemed to flip a mental coin. Another culprit has been the "how long will you remember this" story, with the answers "for a while" and "not for long" being muddled together. Confused distinctions usually repeat patterns of coincidence, both connecting to the same things over and over. If people who said their story was "common" tended to think it was memorable, so did the people who said their story was "everyday." You see these confused-answer teams tagging along with each other like inseparable friends.

When I see confusion of answers like this, I usually go back and try out how the patterns look if the answers are lumped together: because really there is little to distinguish them. To avoid such situations I have moved over the years towards more usage of scales with no intermediate labels to be confused together. I also make sure to ask myself, in every set of available answers, whether any two could be considered as difficult to distinguish and whether they both are necessary. If you need to know whether people felt disappointed or discouraged, can you explain why? If you need them both, can you find two words that capture your intent while being a bit further apart and less liable to be muddled together? One of the most common mistakes I see in people designing questions is that they never picture themselves answering the questions, and they never try them out by actually answering them in relation to a real story. If you don't do that you can't see where the muddled distinctions lie.

Choice data: internally divided answers. The opposite problem to confused distinctions is that of distinctions you didn't anticipate within one answer. For example, say you asked people what the main character of their story needed to succeed, and lots of people chose "help." But as you read the stories you come to realize that some people took "help" to mean tactical support, while others took it to mean the availability of information, and still others meant compassion and emotional support. These three

meanings of "help" are mixed together in those answers, perhaps with no way to tease them apart again. Another word that often causes problems is the word "understanding," which can mean *gaining* understanding or being understood oneself. I have seen similar issues come up with words like care, respect, success, failure, fairness, and many other words that convey multiple meanings depending on context. When you place answers to a question as isolated words, people are guaranteed to interpret them in multiple ways. If you can get at those multiple interpretations in some way -- if you can link them to something that distinguishes them -- those multiple interpretations can be wonderfully helpful. But you have to be smart, or lucky, or both, to gain that prize.

On one project I can remember, differing interpretations of the word "ambition" created the heart of the useful food for thought produced. The question was about whether the main character of the story was ambitious. Some people said, in effect, "No, they were not ambitious; they helped others rather than helping themselves." But others said, in effect, "Yes, they were ambitious; they helped people." Both of these were valid interpretations of the word "ambition." The first I had anticipated; the second I had not. This distinction was able to help the project because there were other questions, and the texts of the stories themselves, that drew apart and elucidated the different interpretations (though it took me some time to find the way to draw them apart). If there had been no way to draw apart the two interpretations, the trend would have been lost and the divided answer would have been useless to the project.

So I have mixed feelings about answers that invite multiple interpretations. Sometimes they can reveal transformative insights about the experiences of people in the community or organization. But sometimes they can simply waste everyone's time. I think it is best to use answers you suspect may be interpreted in multiple ways like spice: placed carefully here and there to draw out flavor, but surrounded by clarity. For each answer you provide to a choice question, think about the ways people could interpret it. Check a dictionary or thesaurus for meanings you had not thought of. Lengthen the choice if necessary to make it clear which of those meanings you mean to communicate. 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 to your project if you could see those distinctions? What would be the loss in *not* being able to distinguish them? Is it important enough to spend some of the time and attention you will be given to distinguish it? Might there be other ways to distinguish it? And so on.

Of course, often you don't find out about multiple interpretations until after the fact. On almost every project I have ever done people have surprised me in *some* interpretation of some word or phrase. What does fairness mean to you? Balance? Equality? Responsibility? Dinner? Lunch? Sunset? Any word you think you know you will find people interpreting in multiple ways. So to some extent you need to prepare yourself to untangle the internal divisions you find in interpretations of answers, no matter how great your questions were. These are the explorations of catalysis.

Muddle management

So, how can you handle muddles in your collected data? I use three methods, all at once.

Explore the contours of non-response. When people don't answer questions, you can sometimes find patterns in the way they *didn't* answer. Say there was much less variation in one particular scale than you expected. Does that mean everyone agreed on that answer, or does it mean everyone perceived some subtle social signal in the question that meant the acceptable answer was limited? In other words, was the pattern in the interpretations of the stories, or was it in the question itself? One way to look at this is to examine the muddle more carefully.

In one project I encountered such a muddle: several scales in which a large number of stories had values at or very close to the middle of the range. When graphed together in scatterplots the values created clusters at the centers of the graphs. Did these clusters represent perceptions that only mid-range values were acceptable? Or did they truly represent the storytellers' interpretations of their stories? To find out I looked closely at the stories linked to those midpoint clusters. I found that they were disproportionately rated as positive. If the pattern came from the questions themselves, I would have found a random assortment of stories in the clusters, but finding only positive stories meant that the clusters probably represented true interpretations of the stories.

In another project we gathered a strangely large number of "not sure" answers, enough to eliminate some questions from consideration. However, I wanted to explore why people made that mark so often, so I looked at coincidences of "not sure" answers with other information. I found out a few things. One was that the people who told the most stories marked "not sure" more often than those who told fewer stories. I wondered if the availability of the "not sure" answer helped them feel safe enough to tell more stories. Another pattern was that the people who chose the more emotional (and more taboo) answers were more likely not to answer some 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. This helped me to map out a sort of landscape of sensitivity among the stories told: to distinguish the safe from the risky, as perceived by their tellers and communicated through their combinations of response and lack of response.

So when you attempt to gather responses and fail, look again at the empty spaces where people appeared to say nothing. Sometimes those empty spaces combine to say something powerful.

Add more information. It is almost never possible to go back and ask the original storytellers what they meant by their answers, so I don't count that as a legitimate possibility -- in fact, I have never seen it done, though theoretically it *could* be done. What I mean by getting more information is adding information you can add yourself.

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 help figure this out is to look at the stories yourself, or better yet get two or more people to independently rate the stories on ending well or badly. The point is not to "correct" the assessments of the storytellers but to add another dimension of interpretation. If your independent ratings say that all the stories truly do have happy endings, that tells you one thing; if they say only half the stories appear to be positive, that tells you something else. It does not tell you the storytellers were lying or wrong; it tells you that their answers differ from other interpreters. Every bit of contextual information you can add helps you make sense of what a pattern means.

Another way to get more information about answers is to look at *how* people answered. Not what they said but how they said it. For example, if you are using an online survey you can often find out how long people took answering the survey. Someone who fills out a survey in thirty seconds speaks in a different voice than someone who takes half an hour to do the same thing. In an interview setting the interviewer can note how long the interview took. In a group session you can do this by having a person sit somewhere and asking people to hand that person their forms when they are done with them. All you need to do is ask that person to make some kind of notation on each form that records whether they received it early, middle or late in the form-filling period. That's useful information you can add without burdening the form-filler. 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, whether they marked up their form pages with comments or scribbles, and whether they made clear, precise marks or rapid slashes. All of this additional information can help you make sense of what people said.

I remember one project where we had support staff (mostly secretaries) and managers filling out the same question forms about their stories. The support staff filled in every single question carefully, with precise clean marks. They followed instructions to the letter and took their time to consider every option. The managers rushed through the process, misunderstood the instructions, ignored long lists, checked "not sure" often, made quick scribbly marks, and stopped answering questions before the survey was over. The way in which these two groups answered the questions went some way in helping us understand the answers they gave.

Another project suffered from poor response both to the story elicitation and to the questions. We ended up gathering many half-stories: opinions, advice, scenarios, rants. I went back through the stories and added a notation on whether the entry constituted a true story or whether it fit into any of several classes of half-story. This information helped me pull out only the stories, in which patterns of question response created more meaningful patterns than in the undifferentiated mass of material collected. Sometimes a little tidbit of information, obvious to anyone, can transform a mass of unusable non-patterns into shapes that inform. The trick is in figuring out what is needed and when: but opportunities present themselves to those who listen to the data.

In a third project we had people assign story elements (created during the story collection session) to their stories. As I read the assignments I could see that the story elements created danced around some of the most difficult issues, avoiding taboos: especially of blame and responsibility. I decided that paying attention to only the story elements created could miss some patterns. So I derived story themes, or summaries based on plot points common to the various stories: things like "Inefficiency that is not my fault wastes my time." I then juxtaposed my themes with the storyteller-created elements. It turned out that looking at both the way the storytellers characterized their stories and the way I, as an outsider, characterized them, added insights neither set of interpretations could alone. You could argue that my insertion of my own bias in these themes derailed the participatory nature of the project; but that would only be true if I considered my themes to be authoritative, which I did not. They were just one more interpretation, one more perspective to add balance to what had been collected.

Prune the dead wood. Sometimes you can't do anything at all with a muddle. Sometimes it's a waste of time to explore its contours or add information to it. In those times it is better to trim away what doesn't add value and move on to considering what you do have. Some losses of data can be happy events, because they free up more time to ponder the patterns you do have more deeply. I often find patterns in demographic data, for example, that rule out expected explorations. Maybe all the people with long experience are also older; so I can throw out either of those questions without losing anything of importance. Or I can find no patterns at all that relate to gender, so I can put that question aside. Or we made a mistake in referring to department names and left two out, and we cannot find out where our anonymous participants work, so that door is closed. Or the last question in the survey gathered such poor response, probably because of question fatigue, that any patterns it shows are unacceptably weak. Sometimes it can be freeing to let things go and move on. Sometimes you have no choice, so you might as well see it as positive!

Details on scoping catalytic exploration

This section, like the preceding one, was originally located in the chapter on catalysis in *Working with Stories*, but grew beyond all reasonable bounds and had to be moved here. It complements the sections called "scoping your exploration" for each of the methods explored (paper, spreadsheet, analytical package) there.

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 the catalysis. Catalysis 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? 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 at one time or another 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 one hundred stories. About each story we asked only eight questions. Four were scalar questions and four were choice questions. About each storyteller we asked an additional four questions: one scale and three choice. Since questions about storytellers will be considered for each story, that makes a total of five scalar questions and seven choice questions we should consider. Like I said, our project is small.

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

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

We are already up to 296 images! 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? We know that 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 images 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 twenty to fifty 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 a hundred images.

If you are using a spreadsheet, the software can create each image 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. As with work on paper, 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 images very quickly. In my work for clients I often generate several *thousand* images in the course of a day or two. The issue here is less the time required to create each image (often milliseconds) but the time required to *learn* how to use the system and get it to do what you want. You can't spread out *learning* over several people as easily as you can spread out *creation*. Typically you either understand the whole system, which is capable of creating *all* the graphs you need, or you don't. That 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 you can spread among members of a group.

Considering images and test results

Whether you will run out of time to *consider* images and tests depends not on technology but on experience and time. Be careful not to use up too much of your time generating images only to find you cannot possibly look at them all. Considering images, though it depends on them being generated, is the more important part of the work. If pressed for time I would rather generate half the images and have time to fully explore them (and the stories) than have twice the images with too little time to look at them.

As I begin work on any catalysis project, I put all of my energy into image 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 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 the generation of results. You could use a similar one-quarter point, or better, you could use your anxiety as a guide. When the images 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 images as well as their generation? Yes, with care. For example, 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 in the position where you are unable to generate or consider all the images and tests you could possibly generate or consider during catalysis on your project, try these options for reducing your task to fit into the time you have available. These are all methods I have worked out while trying to fit my catalysis work for clients into the time they 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. Later, when I am churning through results and don't need to stop and rethink my scoping decisions, this pays off.

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 across the stories collected. For example, say you asked people what brand of soap they use, and ninety-nine and 44/100ths of them said the same thing. It is not likely 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, this step could save you a lot of time. The first thing I always do, once I get the data and verify it, is look for areas of the landscape I need not (more like cannot) explore further. I have worked on some projects that seemed impossible until I *looked* at the data, after which they fit nicely into the time I had available (and I breathed a huge sigh of relief). 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 numbers are each too small to include in your considerations, but if combined become stronger. When the meanings of the answers are close enough together, doing some careful lumping can strengthen a data set 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 carefully lumping together similar answers 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, or with different lumping schemes, to see if anything important might be lost by the 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. If you drop off looking at the twigs you can cut your work in half, without necessarily losing much of the strong meaning in the data. One easy way to trim the twigs is to use story counts as thresholds for consideration. Say you asked ten questions about one hundred stories, but you don't have time to generate and consider a hundred question combinations. Say for each pair of questions you start by counting how many stories have an associated answer for both questions. If you gave people the option of not answering questions, maybe only thirty or fifty of the question combinations will pass a story-count threshold of, say, fifty stories. Cutting off what you consider at this point will not distort your data, but it will reduce the time you need.

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

In contrast, an example of a twig-trimming method that *would* distort your data would be one that involved striking a particular answer to a question. Say you asked people how old they were, and then to save time you decide to ignore all stories told by people over sixty. That would be a bad idea, because the collective voice you hear would be different. If trimming your data twigs is like putting on earmuffs so that only the loudest sounds come through, making selective deletions from the data you consider is like turning away from some voices and toward others. That would save time but defeat the purpose of catalysis.

A second tree, one that interacts with the tree of your data, is the tree of methods you use to consider it. There are almost always some optional explorations in any catalytic practice, things that are not essential but nice-to-have. For example, I usually calculate t-test results to find differences in means between subsets of data (e.g., stories from the West office were rated more positive than stories from the East office). When there is time I also like to calculate and compare measures of *skew*: 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, a level of detail reserved for times when I have the luxury of a more thorough look. Because I have dropped out an entire *category* of calculation I haven't cherry-picked results, just limited the depth of exploration. I *might* find useful trends in the skew comparisons, but dropping the entire category of tests removes any possibility of inserting bias, and I can always come back if things go better than I expected in the rest of the work.

Triage trend strength. You can calculate a measure of trend strength -- a correlation coefficient, a t-test difference between means, a skew coefficient, a simple range or count -- and sort your possible graphs by these measures, then generate images only for the strongest trends. I do this often on projects with a lot of questions but little time to consider them. When faced with a hundred possible correlations I may consider only the ten or twenty strongest ones, then see how much time I have left for the rest. As with the method of twig-trimming, this does not allow bias to enter, because the data themselves determine which trends will be considered.

Kill two birds with one stone. You can sometimes create composite images that stand in for many more detailed images. For example, if I have a lot of scale combinations to cover, I will generate a correlation matrix that shows which questions correlate with 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 and get ideas about how you can reduce your work by creating such summaries. If you need to generate fifty diagrams, can you instead generate one diagram that shows the same thing? Even if it takes you ten times longer to create that diagram, you will still save time in the end.

Don't obsess over details. A huge time-waster in any kind of work that produces a report is what I call *prettification*: making the report perfect. If you had all the time in the world you could produce an object of beauty, but beauty is not your object in this work. Use self-governing measures to keep obsessive pecking in check. For example, my problem is writing very long things (like this book). Knowing this, I only allow myself to write my catalysis reports in a slideshow presentation program (like PowerPoint). This forces me to find ways to say things in brief paragraphs instead of writing chapter-long treatises. The reports still get pretty long, but no one page gets out of hand. You are likely to find yourself wasting time on similar obsessions, so you will know best how to keep yourself focused.

Be patient, yet tolerant of impatience. Sometimes I find that plodding through every comparison I have laid out becomes unbearably tedious. There is usually a point in every project where I find it absolutely necessary to clean my office or bake an apple pie or do some other thing which really means I'm simply bored with what I'm doing. At times like this there is often a temptation to abandon my well-thought-out thresholds in favor of getting through the doldrums more quickly. This is almost always a mistake,

because I set the thresholds for a reason. My advice during the boring parts of the work is to pace yourself. Go ahead and bake that pie, then come back and get through ten more graphs. Plan ahead for a slower pace in the more boring times. Use any variety of stimulant that works for you: coffee, apple pie, office cleaning. When you find yourself cutting corners, back off and take a walk, then come back, remind yourself of why you set up the plan you did, and stick to it.

Improve efficiency. The faster you work the more you can do in the same amount of time. If you do catalysis more than once and do not change the way you do it, you are not doing effective catalysis. You should learn and improve on each report. After you deliver the report, do your own "after action review" and take some notes on what went right and wrong. When you start your next project, go back and read your notes (and look over your report) to see what you want to do differently this time.

Don't try anything fancy. This bit of advice goes against the one just above it. Always aim to improve the efficiency of your methods, but *not while you are doing them*. 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. Do your method improvements *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. Only 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 that keep catalysis useful to sensemaking. If you add capacity but turn explorations into fixed answers, you will not have solved a problem but created a new one. And like making improvements to your efficiency, getting help lined up is best done between projects, not during them.

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 your design will create. If you cannot possibly cover all the combinations, think about what you should do about that. You can ask fewer questions; you can provide fewer answer choices; you can change the types of questions. For example, scale questions are easier and quicker to consider than choice questions, especially when the choice questions have several possible answers. When a project is ambitious but there is 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 to save time later.

The less time you have to do your catalysis the more likely you are to miss useful patterns, no matter how many time-saving techniques you use. But these techniques can help you minimize the risk that you will scope your effort in ways that introduce bias or blindness into the process.

What do answers to questions about stories measure?

One difficult decision when applying statistical techniques to narrative data is whether to treat the answers to questions about *different* stories given by the *same* people as dependent or independent samples. This essay is for those who, like myself, have thought about this topic.

All statistical methods make assumptions about what the numbers you use are about. Many tests assume that the data being compared are *independent*, that is, not related to each other. For example, if you measure the heights of a hundred random people you would not expect those heights to be correlated with each other. But if you measure each person's height *and* weight you would expect those numbers to be related, or dependent, samples.

In many PNI projects you ask people to tell multiple stories. In some projects everyone tells the same number of stories: two or three or four. In other projects people tell a variable number of stories: from one to ten, perhaps. The critical question I want to consider here is: do two answers to the *same* question about *different* stories told by the *same* person represent two samples (evaluations of two stories), or do they represent one sample (evaluations by one person) measured twice? The reason you need to decide this is that different statistical tests apply to independent data (two samples) and paired data (two measurements of one sample).

On the one hand, asking people to tell multiple stories clearly creates a link among the stories they told. Asking the same person about their best day as a doctor, then about their worst day, is like measuring their height and weight, right? If this is true, you can only use statistical tests on "paired" data, because each person's stories cannot be considered independently.

However, there are a few problems involved in doing this. First, it is difficult to apply such tests in practice. If you use the "menu" approach to asking questions, where people can choose which story-eliciting questions to answer, different people will contribute different numbers of stories in response to different questions. But paired-sample statistical tests require perfect uniformity in pairing. Thus you may end up having to conduct statistical tests on only a fraction of the data you actually collected. Also, if you can only do statistical tests on the *people*, not their *stories*, your sample sizes may have to be much larger to use statistical methods at all.

Most importantly, the links between stories told by the same person may be weak or nonexistent because of diversity in the stories told and because of weak relationships of story ownership.

Say you ask the same people to tell stories about trust, fear and responsibility. Say in each of those story-eliciting questions you leave the door open to diversity in how negative or positive, how emotionally intense, how personal, how involved, how taboo the stories should be. Say you invite people to tell stories from their own experience, stories they heard from others, stories they heard as rumors, and stories "everyone knows." Then you ask people questions about the stories they told. Some of the questions ask how the storyteller feels about the story, but other questions ask how *other* people might feel, or about factual elements like the story's main character or location or time period. Do answers to questions about those stories constitute *repeated measures of the people* who told them?

I believe that the answer to this question is no. I believe that answers to questions about stories *can* be considered independent samples for statistical analysis, *even* when multiple stories were told by the *same* people. Here is my reasoning. Every example I can find of a paired-sample measurement specifies a clear link between measurements, such as blood pressure (of the same person) before and after a treatment. But *stories are not properties of individual people, even when individual people tell them*. There is no one-to-one relationship between story and storyteller.

The best metaphor I can think of to explain this is that stories are like outdoor cats living in country houses and fields. We had a cat once, when I was a child, that stopped being our cat. We went on a camping trip around the country for two weeks, and we asked our neighbors to feed the cat while we were gone. We loved our cat very much and bestowed many hugs and kisses on her before we left. However, when we returned from the trip, "our" cat refused to come home. She liked our neighbors better, so she decided to become *their* cat. There was nothing we could do about this (cry as we might), because the cat was not a property or attribute of our household. She was her own animal. Another time a beloved cat disappeared, and after we had mourned him for a month, he walked into our kitchen again without a word of explanation. Whose cat had he been for that month? Who mourned him when he came back to us? Someone? Anyone? We never found out.

Stories are like that. They choose where they want to live, and they may "belong" to many people. Sometimes a person will tell a story they believe is their story alone, much as people believe their outdoor cat is only their cat. But two or even several people might *also* consider the story to be their story alone.

Says David Norrick in *Conversational Narrative*:

> The [story] teller ... must shape remembered materials into a verbal performance designed for the current context. This may include interruptions and comments from listeners; indeed, recipients may seek to redirect the story line, to reformulate its point or even to become full-fledged co-tellers of the story. ... [Stories] 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.

I have often seen this dynamic play out in story collections, where several people might tell and interpret the same story. Should such a shared story be considered to measure the people who told it, or should the people be considered devices using which the story has been measured?

Consider what would happen if you conducted a survey that asked people questions about "their" cats in order to find out more about the community and its cat population. Do people find their cats affectionate, strong, dangerous, handsome, picky eaters, good mousers? Now let's say I "own" three cats (A, B and C). Cat A stays in my house and never leaves it. Cat B regularly visits my neighbor's house, where she is given treats and petted. Cat C, the adventurer, visits no fewer than five houses, including a mouse-filled barn where the farmer gives him fresh milk from time to time. Cat D, who is not strictly speaking "my" cat, comes by my house from time to time to renew his friendship with Cat A and accept a bit of attention from me. Cat E got into a fight with Cat C once, and I shoo him away whenever he comes near my house, though I can't help admiring his tortoise-shell coat and wonder where he lives.

Now, should my answers to questions about cats A, B, C, D and E be grouped together as repeated measures of *myself* and my household? Or should the answers be grouped by *cat*? Of course, grouping by cat also presents difficulties. When I say "that big tabby that comes round in the morning," is this the same cat my neighbor means by "old stripey?" Can we be sure of that? Should we attempt to capture and tag and document each cat and its habits, and place it definitively in one and only one household? Or should we just consider all the cats as independent entities and keep all the answers to questions about them separate?

In statistical work, such decisions always depend on the *research design* of the data collection effort. The research design of PNI projects involves drawing a diverse *sampling of experiences* from the population. The *purpose* of this sampling is not to measure the *people* who tell the stories, but to measure *the stories themselves*, as *collective elements* of the community or organization. Thus the *units* being sampled -- the stories -- are independent, even though some happen to be told by the same people. Stories may be measures of people, but people are also measures of stories.

By contrast, consider how things would be different in a community in which all cats were of the indoor variety. There might still be *some* cat-sharing going on, as people went on trips and took care of each others' cats. But there would nothing like the indeterminate ownership of outdoor cats common to country life. In such a case I think it *would* be necessary to keep each household's cat interpretations linked in any statistical analysis.

But stories are not like indoor cats. Indeed, they wander even more than outdoor cats do, straining the metaphor as they rapidly multiply and change. Consider rumors that start small and spread throughout a community or organization within days. No cat can be that diffuse or prolific.

But, you say, you advocate looking at patterns in interpretations of stories by individual measures such as age and organizational role. Are those not individual attributes? Not exactly; they are more like *memberships* than measurements.

Let's go back to our cat example. Say that while gathering answers to questions about cats, I also gather information on each respondent's age group. If I look at patterns of cat interpretation across age groups, am I considering differences among the perceptions of individuals? Or am I considering differences among the *cats* encountered by age-defined subsets of the community? What if the cats act differently around people of different ages? Certainly cats react differently to the intense loving of children (which often plays out as grabbing and squeezing) than they do to the quieter companionship of older people. Stories are also likely to "visit" younger and older people differently, due to changes in the culture over time. I would argue that I am not asking the question, "How do older people talk differently about cats/stories than younger people?" but the question, "How do the community's cats/stories, as experienced by older people, differ from the community's cats/stories as experienced by younger people?" In other words, I am using the information about cat/story interpreters to assess the cats/stories, not the interpreters.

As will be obvious to you by now, the elaborateness of this explanation shows my lack of confidence in it. I can see both sides of the argument, to be honest, and I have spent much time trying to work out the best approach to the problem.

One factor that pushes me in the direction of independent-samples tests (besides their preserving more of the data) is that they are the more conservative option. They are more likely to under-report significant differences than to over-report them. So erring to the independent side is less likely to lead to erroneous discoveries of trends.

But still, this is one of many reasons I never consider statistical analyses to be definitive in my own story work. I use statistics to suggest and to highlight, but I make decisions based on more than what the statistics shows by itself. This is probably wise in any case, especially when it comes to using mixed qualitative and quantitative data; but it is particularly useful when tricky questions of method like this one arise. The main reason I am telling *you* about the issue is that if you use statistics in story work you will most likely need to come to your own understandings and decisions about which methods are best.

Summary

After you have collected some data, usually in the form of answers to questions about stories, some work on looking for muddles in your data will save you time later on. What I call muddles are situations where your participants, taken together, answered your questions in ways that make it difficult to tell whether they all *meant* to answer your questions in that way or whether they didn't understand the question, couldn't find an answer that fit, didn't like any of the answers available, avoided the unpleasant, and so on. To handle muddles I suggest looking for patterns of non-response, adding more information to the mix, and removing questions from your catalysis that cannot be meaningfully considered.

There is never enough time to do the catalysis your project needs. To reduce the catalysis crunch, I recommend these techniques. Look for data you cannot use and can put aside, data with low variation, small quantity or some other disqualifier. Lump together data with marginally useful yet weak numbers.

Put aside data subsets below a minimum size. Put aside trends below a minimum threshold of strength. Produce composite images that consolidate work. Avoid wasting time on unnecessary details. Cultivate your patience to get through repetitive tasks as quickly as possible. Improve your efficiency so you can work faster. Don't mess with your efficiency while you are in the middle of a project. Get help from people and computers. Plan your project with your catalysis time budget in mind from the start.

When doing statistical work on answers to questions about stories, should you use tests designed for independent samples or paired data? Is each answer an independent measure of the population, or is it a linked component of measurements of the person who told the story? I make the argument that stories, because they can be told by multiple people, are not measurements of people but of the entire community or organization. So answers to questions about stories are less measurements of individual people than they are independent measurements of the community or organization. Still, I do not consider this argument to be perfectly iron-clad, which is why I consider statistical analyses in narrative work to be suggestive but not definitive.

When you do narrative catalysis you must develop habits not of one description but of four: meticulous when producing results, explorative when accumulating observations, contrarian when writing competing interpretations, and enabling when preparing a catalysis report. A group of people can share these habits, but they must be careful to share adequate context so the process holds together.

Questions

As you read the section on muddles in data, did any of the situations described there strike you as being particularly likely to happen in your community or organization? Will people be very unlikely to pay attention to a form, or will they not be able or willing to follow an intricately worded question, or will they think it's hilarious to throw a wrench into the works, or will they be too busy to be bothered with long question forms? What can you do to address any muddles you foresee *before* they happen?

Similarly, as you read through the question on scoping your work, be honest with yourself and admit which things might be hardest for you. Do you get bored easily? Are you a bit sloppy on details? Do you keep derailing your efforts because you can't stop fussing with the process as you go? Do you often bite off more than you can chew? Is prettification a problem for you? Do you have a hard time asking for help? Conversely, what are your strengths? Are you a master of efficiency? Are you excellent at triage? If you have a team or workgroup, what are your collective strengths and weaknesses? What about your community or organization in general? Do any of these things interact with aspects of your collective culture?

Go back two chapters and apply the question on habits to those described in *this* chapter.

Activities

Find at least one set of advice on the quantitative analysis of questionnaire or survey results. Ask someone you know who works in this area, or read a textbook or some pages on the internet; there is lots of information available on the topic. Add what you've heard or read to the advice I give in this chapter about "muddles" in answers to questions about stories. How much overlap do you find? Do you find differences you can attribute to PNI questions being about stories instead of directly about opinions? Do

you find other differences? What can you learn by combining my muddle advice with that of other writers?

In the activities for the chapter on catalysis in *Working with Stories*, I suggested doing a small but actual narrative catalysis on a body of folk tales or some other group of stories you can get your hands on easily. If you did that before, go back to it now and look for muddles in your data. Can you find evidence for any of the categories of muddle I describe in this chapter? If so, what can you do about them? If you do address the muddles in your data, does your data set change as a result? What does that mean to your interpretations and your report?

Again, if you did the small-but-actual narrative catalysis activity in the catalysis chapter in *Working with Stories*, go back to it and consider the section in this chapter on scoping your catalysis work. Did you use any of these methods when you did the project? Did you triage? Did you improve your efficiency? Did you get help? Now, do you see any things you *should* have done but didn't think of then? What might have improved your work? If you like, choose another small set of stories and do the small-but-actual project again; only this time, pay deliberate attention to each of the catalysis-crunch reduction methods described in this chapter. Prune, lump, trim, triage, shorten, simplify. Does the work get simpler? Does your efficiency increase? Have you come up with any ideas to improve your catalysis that I haven't thought of? Does your list of good ideas exceed my own? (It will, if you do catalysis more than a few times.) See what you find out.

Chapter 6: Advanced Topics in Narrative Sensemaking

This advanced chapter, yet to be completed, will mostly contain a section called "what to expect when expecting sensemaking" which is half of the clustered-story project that complements the section I wrote for story collection. I also plan to write a short "habits of sensemaking" essay to match those for project planning and story collection. Together with a few related essays that will make up this chapter.

Part 2: PNI Stories

This part of the book contains stories about actual PNI projects carried out by myself and others over the past dozen years. Reading over them should help you learn some useful things about what doing PNI is like in practice: not only useful outcomes but also challenges and failures!

Chapter 7: PNI Stories from Other Lands

The first four stories in this part of the book are not my own but were written by colleagues who graciously allowed me to include them here. My goal in including these stories is to help you get a better idea of what goes on story projects, what difficulties come up, what insights appear, what opportunities present themselves. All of these stories provide useful examples of each of these things. Many thanks to Jonathon, John, Stephen and Stéphane (interesting pattern there, huh?) for writing up their adventures and giving me permission to include them here.

Collecting stories in a poor urban community

by Jonathan Carter (janniecarter at gmail.com)

Framing the project

What was the impetus for your project? What led to it taking place? Why were you doing it?

Policy documents by the South African government express an interest in social networks and suggest that interventions should be improve the utility of these networks. These documents define terms like social networks, social capital and social cohesion hazily and tend to merge them. I had a particular interest in social networks and set out to understand the dynamics of social networks and groups in poor communities that could be tapped into by government to assist in government service delivery.

What were the project's goals?

My 'research objective' was to assess how existing government approaches to service delivery 'fit' with social networks. I was searching for a set of unknown unknowns. I didn't like the social network analysis approach to networks and when I started the research decided to use techniques like event maps, open discussions and repeated sessions with groups. I hoped these repeated visits would establish trust and insight into the dynamics of the community.

My research started in a predominantly Black African community with a scoping exercise to test the feasibility of the techniques I wanted to use and by what we saw, it looked like we would get what we wanted. Soon after the research started, the colleague I was working with decided to take a job elsewhere. This was a major problem as she spoke the local language, which I couldn't. As a result, I asked someone else to assist me and I gave her the opportunity to decide which community to work with. As I was subject to government funding cycles, I was under time pressure to get the work done quickly and therefore did not have the luxury to scan the new community. What we didn't know was that the new community held a set of worst case examples of managing and working with social networks. The history of the community is plagued with stories of corruption, being ignored by government, state land being handed over to an un-democratic entity to run, poverty and the transient nature of life that comes with poverty in many parts of the country.

When we first arrived, we heard one set of stories through the first few interviews we held. We then broke into another circle of people and we could not believe the stories we were told. The most interesting aspect of this was that I still feel no person lied to me. Some people failed to mention some facts that they could have, but I have no reason to think that anyone lied. After about two months of getting to know the community I was still not sure what 'the vibe' was. Too many gaps were missing.

At that time, I was fortunate enough to attend the *Cognitive Edge* course and learn about anecdote circles [Editor's note: I call these "group story sessions"] and then planned to hold some anecdote circles with what I determined were a representative sample of the community.

So in a nutshell, I ran the anecdote circles because after two months of conversations and discussions with a wide range of people I still could not validate anything I had found to that point. I saw anecdote circles as the way to really get into the head of the community. My plan was to gain a deeper understanding of the community.

The story of the project

How did the project get started? What happened first?

Getting people into the anecdote circles was really easy as we had been visiting the community for a while. So a few key people knew us and were happy to be part of the process. I had given the community a feedback report based on the research up to the time of the anecdote circles, which also built our trust.

What sorts of stories did you collect? How were they collected? Who collected them?

I agreed with my research assistant that she would arrange the groups, the venue and the time groups would meet as part of her fee. We discussed how to arrange the groups and identified key people to ask to pull the groups together. These were as follows:

A priest we knew and had interviewed arranged a meeting with the religious leaders in the community. We managed to get seven priests; unfortunately, no Islamic leaders from the community were able to attend.

A lady who worked with people living with HIV/AIDS was asked to bring a group of people living with HIV/AIDS together. Four ladies attended this anecdote circle.

A group of women we had met a few times were asked to participate in a group and four of them came.

We asked an NGO in the community to arrange some youth and got a group of four men and two women between the ages of about 20 and 22, all unemployed. This was a cracking success.

An elderly lady who is an active civic leader in the community was asked to arrange a group of African ladies. This was the first group, seven attended and it was a complete failure due to my inexperience.

We asked a youth civic leader to arrange a group of youth that would be very mixed racially. We got a group of five youth together. He asked to arrange a second group, which flopped because we could not find enough people.

We asked a principal of a pre-school to organize a group with other principals and five attended.

All circles were held in a church hall. All the groups were seven or less, but none were less than four. I think four, plus myself and the research assistant, is an ideal number. From the second anecdote circle on, I sat at the opposite side of the circle to my assistant.

All groups were preceded by an explanation of the ethical issues concerned and signing of consent forms. This was an absolute pain, but unavoidable. If handled properly, it can be used to create the right atmosphere, although that atmosphere can be achieved a lot quicker than the time it takes to explain these forms.

Once the forms were signed, I explained the three rules:

1. no interrupting,
2. if you disagree tell the experience how you remember it, and
3. only share experiences.

I also showed them the voice recorder and warned, quite sternly, that everything I said would be recorded.

I had read over the guide to anecdote circles from *Anecdote* [Editor's note: see the References appendix for a link] a few times and wanted to experiment and find the ultimate question. Experimenting was a bad idea as I found myself asking very long winded questions about past friends and happy and sad experiences that took long to ask and were not understood. I stopped experimenting once we found that keeping it as simple as possible was the most effective route and started them by asking: Let's say I am looking for a place to live and I am considering this place, what experiences about living here would you share with me to help me decide to live here or not?

I think this question can be asked in any community. It is ambiguous enough, but simple enough to be understood. Ambiguity is critical to ensure that people do not game and are forced into raising issues that they decide are important to them.

Occasionally we had to remind the participants that opinions were not of value and that we just wanted to hear experiences, but most of my time was spent as an engaged listener.

In some groups, they would decide to go around the group giving each person a chance to answer the question. Once the first round was finished, a pause of silence would follow before the random outpouring of experiences began. It was best to let the group decide how best to start and simply not force anything. Out of all the circles, we had to probe two or three people to get them to talk, otherwise most people contributed without any encouragement. Generally, the people who needed probing would open up after the probing. The probing involved nothing more than just asking: what about you, do you have any experiences?

There was only one group that did not lead to the sharing of many experiences, which was the first. I had planned to take a research assistant that could be a translator but she couldn't make it. We had also not prepared the venue before picking up the group, which didn't set the right tone. In the rush, I didn't think about how best to arrange the group and as result we had seven women staring at the two of us. One of the people in the group acted as a translator, which did not work. I think it created a power imbalance that we could not manage or influence. It was an awkward experience from beginning to end and being the first one didn't help my confidence much.

On average, the introductory part lasted thirty minutes and the main discussions lasted an hour. Most of them fizzled out fairly rapidly and it was usually quite clear when to end the session.

How did the project end? Were conclusions drawn, and by whom?

I have written up the findings elsewhere in terms of data that emerged. [Editor's note: If you are interested in those findings please contact Jonathan.]

Evaluation

What turned out the same as you expected? What was worse than expected? What was better?

Part of the deep insight that was shared was stories about important events in the history of the community. These were especially important to me as I was aware of some events, e.g. a housing project, in the past that had created tensions, but was told different and contradictory versions of the events. During the anecdote circles, the detail shared was incredibly helpful in clearing up confusion. I did not get the full history of the community, but did get some of the events that are marked in individual and collective memories as turning points in the community. Knowing these turning points provides a base from which one can explore further.

The extremely rich detail in the stories and experiences shared gave a sense of where, when, why, what and how. Myths and stories of how myths were formed also emerged, adding to these rich insights. For instance, a number of people commented about people that spread rumours about HIV/AIDS in drunken conversations in a bar. From these simply told stories it became clear that there is stigma towards HIV/AIDS in the community and that the bars are one place where consciousness about HIV can be dealt with. This is one example of many insights I never asked for or planned to ask about, but I got it.

Can you share one conclusion of your project that you don't think you could have arrived at in any other way than by asking for and looking at stories?

Kurtz and Snowden (2007) argue that the naturalizing sense-making approach collects a sufficiency of information, rather than trying to collect all that can be known. When I finished the anecdote circles, I felt I had a sufficient sense of the ecology of the community to stimulate evolution (as Kurtz and Snowden suggest). A wide range of issues were brought forward, but I don't have enough to validate or verify any of them. As an example, I was told stories about children on drugs a sufficient number of times to know it was a problem that must be dealt with. In a general sense I understand the dynamics of the problem well enough to start breaking it (the key issue is being addressed in that community), but also understand exactly how complex an issue this is to address that a few constantly monitored and coordinated efforts are required. My understanding of these coordinated interventions, and associated risks, was gained only from what I heard during the anecdote circles. However, I have no valid measure of the number of young children addicted to drugs; how many of them finance their habits by selling scrap at an illegal scrap yard, or; how many take drugs with their parents. But I know all of these are problems that require a coordinated effort to deal with.

Many of my colleagues love their quantitative methods and want to show how valid and reliable their findings are. I am not sure how to respond to validity. I heard the above issue enough times to know I collected a sufficiency of information to know that the above issue is real. I did it very quickly. I don't need time to conceptualize how to repeat this in another community, nor do I need many resources.

What sorts of reactions did you get to the project during and after it?

I have used the results in articles I have written and to inform other research I am doing. But I am very disappointed, and ashamed, that I cannot use the findings of the research to effect change in the community. The only consolations I have are the people who participated enjoyed the discussions and were given quite personal advice from an experienced social worker. I also gave the community the report I mentioned above. The major recommendations I made in that report have not changed. I have sought

advice from a range of role players, one of whom have extensive experience with communities similar to this community and have personal experience with individuals from the community. He advised me sternly to not publicize my recommendations unless I am able to spend the time that will be necessary to defuse tensions as a result of my findings. I will not be able to manage these and keeping away from the community in hand happens to be the most responsible way forward.

I was not asked by the community to do the research and was asked during the research to be responsible. I have taken the 'cop out' way, which happens to be the most responsible way out too.

High and low points

Do you remember any pleasant surprises during the project?

I found the participants to be incredibly open about their experiences. We thought that the participants probably never get opportunities to speak openly like we gave them and reveled in it. Besides the trauma that is shared, it also means that you are able to gain a deep and rich insight into the psyche of the community in an incredibly short period of time. The short time spent creating the right atmosphere is all that is needed to create the trust and start peeling open a deep can of worms. I learnt more about the community from completely ordinary people in the first three anecdote circles (i.e. 2 days) than I had in the previous two months of direct questioning.

How about unpleasant surprises?

I found more than I wanted to know. The experiences shared to me during the anecdote circles depressed me at the time I hosted them and they depressed me again when I read the transcripts. The community was an extremely poor and psychologically damaged community so the issues were extreme, but I am sure similar stuff will emerge in similarly poor communities elsewhere in the world, including Northern hemisphere countries. I think above all, preparing yourself to hear traumatic experiences is critical and do not try ignore the effects they have on you. I have read similar comments by Dave Snowden.

My assistant is a mature and experienced social worker and I knew she would be able to counsel anyone were a very traumatic experience shared. Researchers wanting to use the same technique, especially in poor urban communities anywhere in the world, should have a clear plan for counseling someone after sharing an experience of rape or sexual abuse. I hate to put it that way, but want to get the message across.

Do you recall any "aha" moments when you realized or learned something critical?

There were so many surprises and aha moments during the research as a result of dots being joined and complete hair raising issues being discussed (e.g. a priest visited a family to find a two year old smoking a joint with his parents) that it is difficult to pin-point one worth mentioning. However, I was very surprised by (a) how easy it was to get the deep insight into the way people behave and think in the community and (b) that the simpler the question I asked, the deeper were the insights and the richer were the stories. We all have stories and you don't have to read and write to be able to tell them!

Advice

What do you wish you had known before your project that you know now?

I think most people like to talk and discuss their experiences. I have only ever participated in one focus group. I was badly placed and felt that throughout the process I was being judged. In anecdote circles,

participants are not being judged about their perceptions. They are being asked to share their experiences and the dynamic is completely different and this creates openness and plenty of sharing. Be prepared for the volume that comes out.

I shared the details of the failed circle because I think other researchers who want to use this technique should plan for failed anecdote circles. Occasionally they are going to happen and you must accept it. In a focus group, you can ask direct questions. This does not work in an anecdote circle and a lot of what determines success is out of your hands and you should not be put off by the odd failure. You are working with the natural side of humans; failure is a natural part of success.

What do you think you'll do the same and differently when you do your next project?

I think that were I to approach this research from the start now, I would plan that my first visit to the community is a Monday or Tuesday morning in the middle of the month. This timing is important so that the effects of end-of-month and weekend socializing and bingeing are avoided. I would arrive with a research assistant (of appropriate ethnic origin), a cartoonist, a voice recorder and some refreshments and find a private place, like a church that I could use and then ask a few people to join in an anecdote circle in return for some refreshments. I would literally ask people on the side of the road to join and would host two or three anecdote circles on that first day. Each anecdote circle would have no more than seven people. I would start by explaining to them that I have come to do some research in the community to understand the community's strengths and ask them to share experiences with me about living in this community to help me decide whether to live here or not. Every word said will be recorded and I would let the cartoonist run wild as he draws up cartoons of the various characters in the anecdotes.

At the end of this first day, I would get the recordings transcribed and the cartoons drawn up neatly and then decide on my next steps. I feel confident enough in this technique that I could follow the above steps tomorrow in any community in South Africa where levels of unemployment are high. I cannot think of any research interventions that would benefit from starting this way. However, had I started like this in the community I worked in I would have probably run like mad and never set foot in it again.

An example where I could have applied the above approach is to understand aspects of xenophobia. This could be achieved by hosting anecdote circles with each of the ethnic groups living in the area. Start each group with the question I mentioned above and once it is going, ask them what experiences they would share if you were of other ethnic origins in the community (e.g.: if I was Somali, If I was Zulu). However, if xenophobia is a problem, it will come out naturally in a group that is targeted by xenophobic hatred without having to fish for it as long as you have not mixed ethnic groups in the same group. The above tips are provided for extreme cases: if something is an issue, it is likely to emerge without prompting.

What advice would you give to a person who wants to do a similar project?

I have touched on some process issues that others should be aware of, but based on what I experienced, I think the following are critical:

Keep the starting question (and any others) short and simple.

Although not always possible, two facilitators create an atmosphere that participants are part of a discussion rather than talking to a facilitator. When using two facilitators they must sit at opposite sides of the circle.

I feel four in a group is a minimum, even if there is only one facilitator, and this is a very good number. My guess is that eight participants is the maximum feasible limit.

If you use a voice recorder, advise the participants that it will capture everything said. Dave Snowden comments that if you force people to tell the truth, they lie; if you let them lie, they tell the truth. I advised participants to hold back and they did the opposite.

Anecdote circles are best used when trying to capture unknown unknowns. It is not a technique that can be used for all purposes, but it can complement other techniques, especially quantitative techniques, very well. It is possible to find out some specific issues, but do not rely on the technique to achieve this. In their guide, Shaun Callahan and others from *Anecdote* use the analogy of a ship setting sail. I think this is appropriate as you can't force the wind to blow or even blow in a certain direction, but once you get going you can tack within the limits of the wind strength and direction. The same applies in an anecdote circle. Get the group going by asking a very simple and ambiguous question, then steer them by asking the starting question from a different angle. For instance, if you want to know HIV/AIDS related issues you could ask some way into the discussion what experiences they would share if you had HIV/AIDS. However, do this intelligently. For example, asking this question to a group of people whose HIV status you do not know may backfire.

Be conscious of the bonds of coherence. I hoped bringing all the priests together would increase the variety of issues discussed as well as reveal the full ambit of issues relevant to the churches. I had vague inclinations about a problem all the priests had with one of the priests in the community, but didn't fully understand it. Nor did I appreciate the lack of communication between the priests. We asked one priest to invite the rest so assumed if there were unworkable tensions the invitations would reflect this. The disliked priest came, but could only stay for the first few minutes and once he left, the mood changed and they started sharing experiences. But not all the priests knew each other and therefore the anecdote circle was hard work. It did not produce as much volume as I hoped. If I was more conscious about the lack of communication between the churches, I would have held separate anecdote circles with parishioners from each church i.e. individual anecdote circles with three churches would have produced far deeper insight than one anecdote circle represented by 8 churches together.

But we a very successful anecdote circle with some pre-school principals who were all from different organisations. The major difference between the pre-school principals and the churches is the pre-schools help and support each other, whereas the churches compete with each other. Remember those bonds of coherence!

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Helping a community market listen to its customers

by John Caddell (john at caddellinsightgroup.com)

Framing the project

What was the impetus for your project? What led to it taking place? Why were you doing it?

The Broad Street Market of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, was founded in 1860, and is the oldest continuously operated market house in the United States. More than forty Market vendors sell fresh produce, meats, prepared foods and gifts to residents, workers from the nearby State Capitol complex, and visitors. The Market is the anchor of the culturally- and economically-diverse Midtown neighborhood, which is undergoing a renaissance with new facilities like the Harrisburg Area Community College intown campus and the Midtown Arts Center.

I am a member of the board of directors of the market. The idea to do the project came during a phone conversation I had with our new board chairman. I mentioned that, given the evolution of the market's surrounding neighborhood, I wasn't sure what the role of the market should play in the neighborhood, the city and with its customers. The chairman replied that he knew what the role was, and he spelled it out very clearly and succinctly. "Interesting," I said. "The person in the mayor's office who oversees the market said this was the market's role, and that's very different from what you just said." At that moment I felt like we needed to go to the various stakeholders and find out what role they wanted the market to play in their lives.

What were the project's goals?

The goal of the project was to gain a shared understanding among the various market constituencies -- including customers -- about their view of the market -- what was its mission and purpose, and what they envisioned as the future role of the market. In my original project proposal, I anticipated interviewing all different types of constituencies -- customers, representatives of the City, the board, non-customers, community leaders.

The story of the project

How did the project get started? What happened first?

The first step was getting the approval of the board. I wrote up a proposal and presented it at a board meeting. I don't think I explained it very well at all, and I doubt the proposal was carefully reviewed -- but it was cheap and addressed a question we all were curious about, so the board said "go ahead."

Once I got started, I realized the scope was going to be too broad to present results within the expected timeframe (2 months). With some constituencies (community leaders, noncustomers), it would take a lot of legwork even to figure out how to reach them. So I scoped down and focused on the customers. I got a voice recorder and headed to the market.

What sorts of stories did you collect? How were they collected? Who collected them?

I made six trips to the market to record stories. My goal was to get 60 stories, and I ended up with about 65.

What sorts of annotations or question-asking were done? Who answered the questions or added the annotations?

I didn't really understand "questions about stories" then, so I ended up asking fairly demographic questions -- how long have you come here? How close do you live? Etc. [As I started reviewing the transcripts, I realized that some themes emerged. Some people mentioned that they found being at the market entertaining. Others that they came there to see friends. Etc. But because I didn't ask specific questions about these, I didn't get enough information on those themes. If I had the project to do over again, I would do a few interviews to see patterns, then create some questions around the themes that were emerging, and ask those of everyone after.]

How were the stories looked at or considered? Who was involved in this?

Once the interviews were done, I had the stories transcribed (the most expensive part of the exercise: about $200). In addition to the answers to questions about the stories, I took some of the patterns I saw (did they mention community? Friends? Entertainment?) and put the results into a spreadsheet.

In preparation for looking at the stories, a nice person was able to take my spreadsheet and do a huge number of pairwise comparisons, which she put into graphs. For example, of the people who mentioned community, what age group did they fall into? And a hundred other comparisons. Out of these, I pulled out the ten or so most interesting graphs. I also took the transcripts and extracted about 30 of the most vibrant or interesting stories in them.

The board took a few hours one night to review the excerpts and the graphs. I stuck hardcopies of the graphs on the wall, and laid the excerpts around the meeting room. I had the group look at these and put their ideas on stickies (pretty much following the process described in this book).

We came up with 9 clusters, named:

- Events
- Parking/Facilities/Accessibility
- Safety
- Community
- Marketing/Signage
- Convenience
- Social Interaction
- Sanitary/Cleanliness
- Business incubator

We didn't do much with the graphs, though a few people who reviewed it saw some patterns, specifically that with a younger demographic we can tap into strong yearnings for community and local sourcing.

Then we talked about what we had just done. There was 90 minutes of discussion about the 9 items, which everyone agreed represented the customers' perceptions about what the market was and what it needed to be. We established a bunch of near-term actions, including a very frank discussion of the need to assure the financial viability of the market (which had really existed month-to-month for years).

How did the project end? Were conclusions drawn, and by whom?

We are using the information in the project in various ways. On one level, when we have board discussions, we refer to the findings and to the customer stories to help us understand the customer's

viewpoint. This has been helpful, for example, in being assertive with vendors about their need to keep their stands utterly clean. Another example: the local police department approached us to see if we would allow them to set up a temporary recruiting station in the Market. It took about three seconds of discussion to say yes -- it supports our "safety" and "community" pillars.

Also, we are using these findings as input to our strategic planning process and visioning for the market. We can create stories that describe how we see the market evolving, using these 9 fundamentals, and those stories can underpin our planning and fundraising activities.

High and low points

Do you remember any pleasant surprises during the project?

There were a lot of pleasant surprises. It was really nice to hear from the customers. In particular, learning what an important part the Market plays in the life of the community -- not only as a provider of food, but of connection and diversion.

How about unpleasant surprises?

There weren't any unpleasant surprises. People were very open and receptive to talking. The board took their responsibilities seriously.

Do you recall any "aha" moments when you realized or learned something critical?

In one interview, a woman began to discuss growing up in the neighborhood 60 years earlier, where the trolley ran and the various merchants with shops near the market. Then she said that one of the Market stands they went to then is still in operation, run by the daughter of the former owner. It struck me then that the Market was more than just a collection of stands with vendors, more than just a building. It was the continuation of a legacy, a connection to the past, and needed to be preserved and cherished.

Were there any times during the project when things seemed too difficult or challenging to go on? What was the challenge and what did you do about it?

I did begin to run out of steam collecting stories near the end. I wasn't looking forward to the last couple of trips. I just told myself that on that trip I needed 10 stories, that I wasn't leaving before I got ten stories. And I stuck it out.

Evaluation

What turned out the same as you expected? What was worse than expected? What was better?

I expected to learn a lot from the customers and that didn't surprise me. It was harder than expected to do the interviews. I couldn't imagine doing it all day -- even though people were very gracious and very few declined to talk.

Did the project meet its goals? Were there other benefits you hadn't expected?

The project met its goals; we got a list of important, customer-validated findings to use as a basis for strategic planning. These included the importance of community, safety, pricing, local content,

cleanliness. Since we did the project these terms have become a standard part of our dialogues about the market.

Can you share one conclusion of your project that you don't think you could have arrived at in any other way than by asking for and looking at stories?

One of the most gratifying and surprising outcomes of the project occurred after we had finished the sensemaking exercise. Six of us sat around a table, eating pizza and drinking beer, and spent an hour and a half (!) discussing the stories, the implications, and things we should do. I was very surprised that the session lasted that long. It was also surprising that the dialogue was very rich, very open and unbounded. Some novel ideas came up and were discussed at length, including the frankest discussion of the market's financial situation and how to fix it than we had ever had. People came up with lots of new suggestions to do things with little/no investment.

One unexpected finding from the project was the realization that many customers drive to the market. There is a deep-seated assumption on behalf of the board and City that most market customers walk from their homes or workplaces to shop there. But fully half of the people I talked to drove there. And, as a result, the question of parking, which was not a topic of serious discussion before, became one after the study was complete. We had never heard of this as an issue, and, since it was such a widely-held assumption, I don't know how we would have learned this other than through a story project.

Advice

What do you think you'll do the same and differently when you do your next project?

The biggest change I'll make going forward is to do more advance research before plunging into story-gathering. As I mentioned earlier, I found that interesting items emerged from the initial interviews, but I didn't ask any questions about those items. In the future I'll note those and create "questions about the stories" for those items. For example, the idea of friendship & entertainment were not items I thought about in advance of talking to customers. If I had asked questions about these items, we probably would have gotten more data about them.

What advice would you give to a person who wants to do a similar project?

I would tell anyone considering a story project to go ahead and do it. Even as a beginner, even though you'll make lots of mistakes, as long as you gather enough stories, the patterns will make themselves known. You'll get useful, surprising, powerful results even if you're not a skilled practitioner yet.

Evaluating effectiveness helping youth in foster care

by Stephen Shimshock

Framing the project

What was the impetus for your project? What led to it taking place? Why were you doing it?

I work for a non-profit organization that provides services to youth and families impacted by the foster care system. In our direct service offices we often have a small group of people involved in community work. One major focus or our community work addresses the needs of youth aging out of care. Our organization was looking for a way to understand the impact of our involvement in this community work. The work was collaborative in nature often involving 20-40 organizations. Challenges with sharing data and information resulted in stilted efforts in the past.

I was beginning my doctoral studies in Social Science and volunteered to try some type of Action Research approach. I was also growing increasingly fascinated with Internet groups (such as Wikipedia) and how they self-organized to accomplish incredible tasks. Past efforts of evaluation focused on the "effectiveness" of the collaboration. Effectiveness is particularly hard to measure in dynamic social interactions. Ponder this question, "How effective are you as a parent?" Now, imagine I added the statement, "Please provide evidence of your parenting effectiveness so I can help determine if you should continue this activity." What type of conversation do you think would emerge from such a line of inquiry? To most people that scenario appears absurd; however to most organizations it isn't absurd to ask, "How effective is this community collaboration?" Imagine a slight change in the inquiry question. "What have you learned as a parent?" Changing the question will likely lead to a more engaging conversation. Both the asker and the asked gain a richer understanding of parenting. The foundational inquiry question became, "how do the members of the collaboration learn together, what have they learned, and what action will they take based on what they learned?"

What were the project's goals?

The goals for the project were to:

- Help the collaborative group learn about their community and act on the information they learned.
- Involve community members as much as possible.
- Build a method for a community to conduct and author their own evaluation.
- Distribute the role of "researcher" across the group be researched.

What did you think would happen during the project before it started? What were your expectations?

The prospect of trying a different approach to inquiry excited me. However, I am the type of person that like things fairly well laid out and clear before starting. I would be six months into my project before I discovered Working with Stories. My expectations were supplanted by my fear of the unknown. Intuitively, I felt like I was moving in the right direction. My main expectation was to end up with something that felt more respectful to the human condition, in particular to the struggles youth aging out of care. So many efforts to evaluate social services focus on various types of outcome measures thought up by professionals without consulting those that are subjected to the inquiry.

The story of the project

How did the project get started? What happened first?

I work for a fairly large organization so I needed some executive approval before I began. The project started with an unceremonious yellow light, meaning it wasn't seen as a dumb idea but it also wasn't seen as the beacon of break-through inquiry I thought it to be. In addition, what I "sold" was merely the idea of doing evaluation differently. I actually didn't have a fully baked plan for what to do. I moved forward with a patchwork of ideas, primarily gleaned from the book Fourth Generation Evaluation.

My first thought was to provide the collaborative group with a social networking site where they could communicate with each other more readily and problem-solve in a near real-time environment. I could simply be a fly on the wall and watch the conversations as they unfolded and use that as the data set for inquiry. The idea was well received and I set up a site for them, invited over 100 participants and then I waited patiently to the sound of crickets. Only a handful of people signed up and beyond creating a profile they visited the site very infrequently.

After months of struggling I introduced the idea of interviewing people to gather more information. The group liked the idea and once again I needed to find a methodology. This is when I stumbled upon Working with Stories and the project took on some real structure. I felt so lucky to find such a valuable resource of information that aligned so perfectly to the overall mission of my project.

What sorts of stories did you collect? How were they collected? Who collected them?

I work at our headquarters unit in Seattle and my project site was at our Boise field office. I didn't have much money in my budget to travel so the geography created a slight barrier to story collection. After doing some research on the web I decided to try Anecdote Circles as a method for story collection. I like this idea because it afforded me the opportunity to meet with multiple people at once and it seemed like something I could do via our video conferencing system – which works rather reliably.

I met with the collaborative partners to identify the types of stories they wanted to collect. It was decided that Service Providers and Young Adults would have separate Anecdote Circle sessions. The thinking was that Young Adult may feel more comfortable sharing stories with each other and may speak more freely about the services offered in the community.

The Service Providers were interested in how people experienced services in the community – in particular when services were being offered by multiple agencies. They wanted to know if they were doing a good job working with each other. In addition we developed questions to solicit stories that have impacted Young Adults and Service Providers. This would hopefully reveal what types of situations and experiences are important to people. The questions were intentionally left open ended and worded in such a way that a participant could easily tell a positive or negative story. Below are a few samples of the questions asked to each group. Notice that some questions are somewhat similar. This was done in hopes of being able to compare stories of a similar nature across the two groups.

Young Adult Samples

Have you ever had an experience where you worked with multiple service providers at the same time? Can you recall a time when you wished things were better coordinated, or can you recall a time when you surprised at how connected and smoothly things worked?

Picture a time in the future when you are perhaps 70 or 80 years old. Looking back on your life, what experience from your transition into adulthood do you believe you will remember as a "turning point" in

your life? (it could be a turning point that led to better things or one that made things worse – or you may be in the middle of it right now and it's too soon to tell)

Imagine you just met someone. They recently turned 18 and had to move out of the foster home where they lived. They tell you that they are a bit scared and unsure about how to get housing, a job, etc. They ask if you know anyone they could talk with and get some help. Who would you refer them to and why? (It may be someone in the helping profession but it could also be a friend, pastor, etc.)

Service Provider Samples

Think of a time when you had to arrange services across multiple agencies for a young adult. Please talk about a time when coordinating these services went really well or a time when it didn't go so well?

Picture a time in the future when you are perhaps 70 or 80 years old. Looking back on your work with young adults, what experience do you believe you will remember and still be retelling?

Talk about a time when you made what you thought was a "small" gesture but it seem to make a big difference to your client.

My role in this project was to be the inquiry facilitator (as opposed to researcher). In that capacity I facilitated the Anecdote Circle sessions. There were two sessions for Service Providers and two sessions for Young Adults. We ended up gathering 65 stories from 14 Service Providers and 12 Young Adults.

In addition to the Anecdote Circles we also set up a Google Docs account and created an online form for collecting stories. While many were enthusiastic about this option only two people submitted stories by that method. For future projects I think online collection methods can work but we would need to develop a better strategy for alerting and directing people to the form.

What sorts of annotations or question-asking were done? Who answered the questions or added the annotations?

We developed a set of questions about the story. This was printed out in advance and a stack of these forms were placed within reach of participants during the Anecdote Circle sessions. When someone told a story they were instructed to grab a form and provide a title for their story. In order to keep the flow and focus of the session moving we asked participants not to fill out the form right away but rather wait until the end of the session. Participants were given about 10 minutes at the end of the session to answer the questions about their stories.

In retrospect I see this as one of these most critical parts of the process and unfortunately it was a part that I didn't put enough thought into at the time. The questions about the stories are a great source for finding patterns. However, the source is only as good as the questions asked. In this case the wording of my questions made some of the analysis difficult. In the future I would spend more time thinking through what types of analysis can be done with the questions.

There were three questions that I found useful in the analysis for this case. The first was asking how the participant felt when telling the story. They were given a set of emotions they could check or identify their own. Second, they were asked to rate the circumstances in the story from a range of very predictable to unpredictable. Finally, I also found value in the question about the frequency of the circumstances in the story they told. The questions I did not find much value in were about when the story occurred and the purpose of their story. This does not mean those are not important questions, rather the way in which I worded them made it difficult to analyze.

How were the stories looked at or considered? Who was involved in this?

Once the Anecdote Circles were complete I created transcripts of all the stories. I also provided some initial analysis and in consultation with Cynthia decided to use her naming convention and called the report a "Catalysis Report." The purpose of catalysis report is to provide a first level of analysis with the intention of catalyzing the group into further thought and inquiry. I found this report difficult to write and in the end I believe (based on my own opinion and feedback from the group) that I included too much information. It is preferable to keep this report brief and to highlight multiple and perhaps competing perspectives.

Did you do any group exercises? If so, what were they and how did they go?

In addition to the Catalysis Report the group also agreed to have a full day Sense Making session. This was the one and only time I interacted with participants face to face. Both Service Providers and Young Adults participated in the Sense Making day. The participants included people from the Anecdote Circles and those new to the project. This was done intentionally to broaden the input into the project. The Sense Making day started with a quick review of the project to set the context for participants. The we dove right into the stories.

Each group (Service Providers and Young Adults) were broken into two subgroups of four (we had a total of 16 people). We then proceeded with a variation of the story elements exercise as outlined in the book. We decided to focus on Situations, Characters, and Values. This process actually went smoother than I expected. Once we had filled numerous sticky notes we began the clustering and re-clustering process.

One major learning moment for me came when we were naming clusters. In the future I will ensure that I develop a set of rules for what types of names people give to their clusters. For example, the Service Providers named one of their characters "Systemic Barriers." This is hardly the name of a character. One of the attributes in this cluster was called "Robber of Souls." This would have been a more apt title for the cluster. Instead of developing some new language and terms that would break them from entrenched thinking they provided the clusters with common categorical names. As a side note, in the future I will find a way to have someone take notes during the clustering. The conversations that occurred were very rich and it would have been helpful to capture some of them for further sense making.

After the groups developed several clusters they placed their clusters on the Confluence Framework. This process actually took far less time than I thought. I didn't spend much time explaining the framework. I also didn't draw any lines. I simply established four corners. The bottom right is where everyone knows the answer. The upper right is where experts know the answer. The upper left is where there are many answers and the bottom left is where there are no answers. This was adequate enough to get them to place their clusters on the framework. I the future I think it would be helpful to have them identify the four corners by telling a story that exemplifies the extreme corners and then place their clusters within that context. I think this would add another level of contextual relevance to the framework.

The development of the framework moved quickly. At this point in the process the Service Providers and Young Adults had been working separately. With their frameworks complete they entered into a discussion about their frameworks to talk about similarities and differences as well as providing the rational for their cluster placements. This conversation then led into an exercise where the participants developed a list of ideas, recommendations, and issues for the collaboration. These lists were forwarded to the collaboration steering committee for review and action.

How did the project end? Were conclusions drawn, and by whom?

After the Sense Making day the lists developed by the Sense Making participants were reviewed with the Steering Committee. In addition, a summary of the project was sent out to many members of the collaboration with an invitation to provide a summary of their own thoughts and/or findings. This input was summarized in a final document that highlighted the findings, implications and recommendations. My initial hope was that this document would get produced collaboratively by the group using Google Docs. However, this group is fairly tech-avoidant and it was difficult to garner support for this type of participation. As the facilitator I ended gathering the feedback and typing up the summary report myself.

There were several key findings for the group. For the sake of brevity I will highlight one of the most poignant findings. It became clear from the stories and the framework that the Young Adults in the community very often find themselves in complex space. They are looking for a job, a place to live, applying for a service, starting school, etc. The Young Adults identified working with Service Providers as a complex exchange. "We don't know we are going to get burned by a Service Provider until we get burned. They may be having a bad day or they may not like us." This issue was juxtaposed against the Service Providers who identified that Young Adults seem to lack motivation. This led to a conversation, although briefer than I expected, about how Young Adults may be motivated but they haven't reached a level of trust with a Service Provider. This trust-earning phase of the relationship could appear like a lack of motivation. In addition, the Young Adults joked about how there are indeed times when they are unmotivated.

I asked the Young Adults to identify what they thought would be a good method for learning and navigating in complex space. They identified trial-and-error. Problem solving skills can be a real asset in complex space and there is a vast amount of research that points to deficiencies in problem solving skills for those who come from abusive backgrounds. This insight led Service Providers to consider how they can build in the teaching of problem solving skills into their service offering. They also are exploring how they can provide Young Adults the opportunity to experience failure and recovery in a safe environment. This may change how Service Providers set up eligibility and compliance requirements for services.

There were several other findings that will hopefully impact the direction of the collaboration. The overall process worked well despite participants expressing confusion at times. They said they weren't always sure where things were going. I am not sure yet if this is a valid concern or if this is par for the course with this type of work. I do believe that I could have done a better job providing more interim communication to ensure people understood the status of the project on a regular basis.

What happened after the project was over?

The collaboration steering committee is in the process of integrating the recommendations into their planning. One of the recommendations was to engage in this type of process on an annual basis. It is unclear at this point if they will continue the process.

High and low points

Do you remember any pleasant surprises during the project?

There were too many pleasant surprises along the way to describe them all adequately here. I will highlight a few of the more memorable ones. I can be quite abstract in my thinking and problem solving. However, when it comes to planning I am pretty logical and linear. Planning a story project for the first time is anything but linear. It was quite challenging for me to continually reshape the plans for the project. I was

pleasantly surprised to see how well this worked out. There were times I would hang my head in despair thinking I was prodding people down a path of total confusion. Yet, somehow in the end things come together and we ended up with some tangible items to act on.

I was amazed at how engaged people were in the Sense Making process. I believe this is in part because they have a vested interest in the material being made sense of, it's their stories! People enjoy diving deeper into their own stuff. I am a fairly seasoned facilitator and that was a big plus for making this stuff work. Adapting along the way is crucial. The best advice I received from Cynthia regarding the Sense Making day was "if you want to have a successful Sense Making session then have another one first." Essentially, the only way to get good at this stuff is to do it. While having experience as facilitator was helpful it's no substitute for Sense Making facilitation experience. In retrospect, I think it would be wise to have several mini-sessions with trusted friends and co-workers before trying out the real thing.

I started my career (and it was short lived) as a therapist. I was always struck by how incredibly honored I would feel to be in the midst of someone's story. This work has brought me back in touch with that sense of awe and wonder. Listening to the stories of others is a fantastic way to put you in touch with the vast spectrum of the human experience.

How about unpleasant surprises?

The main unpleasant surprise was more my own issue rather than an issue with story work. In this project several people expressed a sense of being confused as to the point of the whole process. I have come to learn that part of this is par for the course and part of it is a by-product of experience. If you could tell people exactly what to expect from a story project and exactly what they will get from it – you are more than likely doing it wrong. However, you can provide people with a general map of what you are doing and what to expect along the way. In the future I will make sure I identify the key stakeholders and ensure that I am continually providing them with updates about the project and reminding them about the purpose of the work.

Do you recall any "aha" moments when you realized or learned something critical?

My aha moments happened on a regular basis and many of them I have shared already in my comments above. Overall, I would say the biggest aha for me is that story work is really about cultural change. The promise of story work in my opinion is in its ability to provide a method for managing complexity. A story project isn't intended to find some universal truth and spread it across the world. Rather, it's best suited to help a group find their own localized versions of the truth and co-create new realities. A story project does not lead you to the change – it is one of the primary mechanisms of change. The project becomes an intervention in itself. The resulting cultural shift will fuel the changes needed.

Were there any times during the project when things seemed too difficult or challenging to go on? What was the challenge and what did you do about it?

Yes! The primary challenge with a story project is quite simple to articulate; there are multiple ways to have a successful story project. While that statement sounds innocuous it really creates a challenge for learning how to do a story project. Let me share a personal story. I saved a bundle on my children's swing set because I bought an open box item that was missing a few parts. However, I am a fairly competent handy-person and could quickly assess the situation and determine with confidence that I could improvise and build the swing set with stuff I had in my garage. My decision was based on years of experience building and putting together a wide variety of things. I adapted and few things put the swing set up without any major issues. My kids love it – and after 3 years it's still going strong.

The conundrum is how do you get years of experience doing story work? Who is going to let you take on a story project if you have never done one? How do you sell something whose outcome isn't known? Imagine being with your boss and saying, "we will bring people together, have them share stories, make sense of them, and then we will have an output of something but we won't know what that is until the project is over." That is a very tough sell. My advice is to start small and start often. Don't pin all of your hopes on a big story project. Do several small ones with friends and coworkers. Or start a project with a local club or church group that is unaffiliated with your work. Start small and start often. The more you do the more you can articulate what to expect and the more confidence you gain in your ability to adapt along the way.

Evaluation

What turned out the same as you expected? What was worse than expected? What was better?

Given this was a new venture for me I tried to set less-than-ambitious expectations. I had some hopes for the project but I kept my expectations low, such as, I expect to get a handful of participants – even if they are only going along because they know and trust me. I found low expectations were the easiest to meet.

My questions about the stories turned out to be worse than I expected. I really thought I had a good set of questions but I found them only minimally useful. In the future I will spend way more time testing questions not only for the integrity of the question itself but also for its usefulness to be analyzed.

The stories collected were far better than I expected. It was such an honor to listen to the stories told by the participants. When faced with open ended questions and a sincere desire to listen, people really seem to open up. It was a pleasure to interact with others in a way that felt respectful of their time and their point of view. I wasn't extracting information from them; rather I wanted to listen to them.

Did the project meet its goals? Were there other benefits you hadn't expected?

This project had two overarching goals. First, I wanted the community collaboration to have some type of evaluation of their work. Second, I needed a project for my PhD dissertation – merely doing the project met this goal. As to the first goal, I would say the goal was met somewhat. That isn't a very enthusiastic evaluation but in all honesty I feel like I gained more from this project than anyone else. However, that says more about me and my newness to this work than it does about the work itself.

The collaborative partners had mixed feelings about the project. They were troopers and really did put their best foot forward. We didn't have anyone that hated the project. However, some of them felt like we took a long route to get to findings they felt were nearly self-evident. I think the group ended up with something of value. While some of the finding do have a "no duh" feel to them, for the first time the collaborative group can back up these findings with evidence. They can point to the specific stories that highlight the findings. Much of their work has been based on anecdotal evidence already. They historically took action based on a consensus from the group. They can continue to base their actions on anecdotal evidence but now they can produce the body of evidence.

My assessment of goal achievement may seem somewhat negative but my outlook on future projects is very positive. I am now engaged in multiple small story projects and I am constantly looking for ways to "play" with stories to increase my experience level. I am certain that each project I take on will get better and better. Managing complexity is not easy, in fact its downright messy. However, the results are often elegantly beautiful.

Can you share one conclusion of your project that you don't think you could have arrived at in any other way than by asking for and looking at stories?

Yes! It was so interesting to see that negative stories from young adults occurred frequently in circumstances that were unpredictable. In essence, a good portion of their stories occur in complex space. The service providers also had a high number of complex stories but there was one startling difference. For the workers, the complex situation was one they faced as part of their job. For young adults the complex situation was their life (they were being removed from home, kicked out of school, etc.). The service provider can go home after work to relative stability and predictability. They have a way out of the complex situation at the end of the day. For the young adult the complexity doesn't stop at five o'clock, it ebbs and flows continuously. This is a dynamic that isn't that difficult to conceptualize, it makes sense. However, it would be difficult to develop a survey tool or other measure that could highlight that specific issue. Narrative inquiry allows for a much more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of a dynamic.

What sorts of reactions did you get to the project during and after it?

This question has been answered throughout some of the other questions. The response to the project was good as the project was being introduced. People were open and receptive to the idea. I think people are yearning for something deeper and more humane when it comes to understanding social issues. From that perspective the project felt very much at home with many of the social service providers and young adults.

With the project in its final stages it's too early to comment on reactions "after" the project. As stated earlier, some struggled with making the connections between what was learned and what actions to take next. Others felt the project worked well and provided the collaboration with some tangible ways to articulate the value of collaborating.

Advice

What do you wish you had known before your project that you know now?

Start small and practice lots. I cannot stress enough how important it is to play with these concepts before taking on a project. Take the time to practice some of the group exercises before trying them with a "real" group. When developing story eliciting questions and the questions about the stories be sure to take adequate time to test the questions. Again, test the questions for how easy they are to understand by others and for their analytical usefulness. For example, when you formulate a story eliciting question ask yourself what types of stories you expect to hear from such a question. Then go ask a few people that you know to answer the question and see what you get. Did they understand the question? Did they tell a story? Was it the type of story you thought you would get? Then have people try out your questions about the stories and then try to analyze the data. Is it easy to analyze? Will you be able to see patterns in the data? The story eliciting questions and the questions about your stories are the crux of the project – take the time to get this part solid. Special Note: I say all of this with one caveat to those like me; don't get stuck in this step! Get this part solid (I used the term solid as opposed to the word right). Don't spend so much time that you stall the project. Get a good set of questions move forward and don't be afraid to course correct along the way.

What do you think you'll do the same and differently when you do your next project?

I have discussed many things I would change and do the same already but there are a few worth repeating. I like anecdote circles as a method for story collection. However, I would find other methods to increase

the diversity in the ways people tell their stories. Also, I like the idea of introducing things other than told-stories. A picture, for example could tell a story. And, there are numerous other sense making items like newspaper articles, reports, etc. These should all be fair-game for a story project as inputs.

I am continually experimenting with both story eliciting questions and questions about stories. Currently, I am in between projects but my friends and coworkers would think I am in the thick of a major project. I continually ask them to try stuff out and refine questions. I am not looking for the "perfect" question, but rather I am experimenting with "types" of questions to get a sense of the "types" of responses they evoke and how those responses will inform a project.

What advice would you give to a person who wants to do a similar project?

The easy advice is read *Working with Stories*. Seriously, don't skim it, take the time to really read it. My copy is filled with notes, dog-eared pages, coffee stains and highlighter marks. Read it thoroughly and then lock it in a draw. Go and try a small scale story project. Then unlock the draw and read the book again. The book is very comprehensive and seems to make more sense the more times you read it.

Another indispensible piece of advice would be to find people that are doing this work and talk to them frequently. Because there isn't a cookie-cutter way to do a project it helps to hear voices of experience. I have a small community of fellow story practitioners and they provide me with a tremendous amount of inspiration and ideas.

Finally, let me offer one metric of success. If you are engaged in story work and you find that your life is changing in some small or large way, then you're heading in the right direction.

Using a specific narrative process to face conflictual situations

by Stephane Dangel (http://storyable.posterous.com)

Framing the project

What was the impetus for your project? What led to it taking place? Why were you doing it?

This French industrial company averaging 900 employees requests anonymity due to privacy policy. The company operates on BtoB and BtoC markets and, though mid-sized, is organized in two business units. Each of them is largely autonomous and somewhat competing and has its own internal structure and "equipment for success". A few support departments, independent from the two business units, are shared resources (Finance, Human resources).

The development of a brand new product range required a major organizational change: two departments each belonging to different business units had to be merged to perform the task.

The departments had very similar missions however different goals.

The newly created department's manager quickly felt something was wrong in the team. A strong resentment of tension was felt and sometimes fierce overt arguments were occuring far beyond what we could have expected from old rivals and from "ordinary" business pressure.

Before I joined the group to help as a consultant, the department's manager had run a workshop with the whole department. The workshop was not narrative-driven: traditional quality management tools were implemented. The manager was very upset because he learnt from the workshop that "evrything was ok" which would have been great if only it were true!

What were the project's goals?

The goal of the project was to understand what was really going on over there. What was the sense of people's behaviour? Why weren't they speaking overtly? In order to go beyond the official version, rich material was required, meaning a narrative one. I chose to use a very specific narrative technique I developed myself [Editor's note: see below for more information on this method]. The "I forgive" method is a solution to elicit stories and make sense within conflictual situations. Note that forgiveness needs to be considered here from a positive and somewhat humorous view.

What did you think would happen during the project before it started? What were your expectations?

As the situation seemed to be highly conflictual, it is easy to understand that the more sensitive the matter is, the more difficult it is to get easy to use and meaningful material. The most meaningful definition is to view conflictual situations from a storytelling prism. Most narrative capture occurs in situations where people naturally tell stories. So, by extent, conflictual situations are those where people are reluctant to tell stories. It restricts conflictual situations to blocked and stressful ones, and that's what I thought at the very beginning.

So, I expected from my method to surpass these potential fences.

The story of the project

How did the project get started? What happened first?

A place outside the company was chosen to gather team-members and run a new workshop. However skeptical, everybody came to attend, which was a good start!

I explained the rules and whereabouts of the "I forgive" method.

To sum it up, people were assigned to recount events related to the matter at stake involving other team-members, beginning their sentences with "I forgive". "I forgive" has a double-sense and that's what loosens the stress attached to the conflictual situation.

What sorts of stories did you collect? How were they collected? Who collected them?

I was aiming at collecting material instead of data and events instead of opinions, bias-exempted.

People were divided into three groups, each one was asked to form kind of a story circle. Groups were picked at random with one member writing everything that was said. At the end of each round, these "secretaries" went to another table to recount stories they had just collected. This specific phase generated complementary stories, either similar ones (similar situations) or stories as answers to other stories.

For example, someone told: "I forgive X for playing the seducer to get some financial advantages from Human Resources". Another person told: "I forgive the organization for unjustified salary stagnation so that the only thing I could do was to mourn to the Human Resources".

People told me they wouldn't have shared all these stories without the "I forgive" process.

What sorts of annotations or question-asking were done? Who answered the questions or added the annotations?

People asked questions to secretaries to make sure they had understood retold stories but factual comments and expressing point of views were firmly prohibited. These precisions were added as annexes to the original stories by secretaries in order to be shared with the plenary group.

How were the stories looked at or considered? Who was involved in this?

The group began to cluster stories in "stories that seemed to go together".

Three clusters were spontaneously identified:

workplace related stories

personal stories

mix-up between personal and workplace stories

The third one offered the most numerous stories, followed by workplace related and personal stories.

After that and despite having added sub-clusters, people didn't feel comfortable because they didn't know what to do out of that stuff. They understood the situation better, but what they wanted now was to find ways to improve things.

How did the project end? Were conclusions drawn, and by whom?

I introduced a complementary ad hoc process that wasn't scheduled to manage the new issue of improving things. The way I built the process was inspired from the original and interesting David Snowden's Cynefin Framework, however not following all its rules. [Editor's note: this is a form of landscape exercise]

It helped people to organize their stories into territories with frontiers that could be crossed under the banner of "sharing knowledge and best practices". In the case of the negotiated financial advantage with Human resources, the story has crossed the frontier between "personal initiative" and "established trick" for potential general use.

What happened after the project was over?

Personal stories were located in a place named "Not relevant to the team", and the assignment was to keep them safely there. It's neither a negation of those nor an attempt to hide them, which would have been a counter-productive "I put my hands in front of my eyes, then I'm invisible" action. People who wanted to deal with them were simply encouraged to find another place than the workplace to do so.

Everything else had to be treated to evaluate their potential contribution to the department's improvement. The department is now planning to build a "constant improvement system", where I hope stories could have some importance.

High and low points

Do you remember any pleasant surprises during the project?

The successful experience! When tackling conflictual situations, there is some uncertainty. Well, it's the same thing when you're tackling ordinary situations... It reminded me of an old conversation with a trade-unions basic representative, years ago during a strike in a factory. He told me the reasons for most strikes weren't that people wanted more money because they didn't have that money yesterday and they weren't bothered by it. The real reasons are often very intimate, internal, located in the relationship area and involving a high level of individual tension. Because these reasons are not corporate correct and lack collective ambition, trade unions put the "more money" message forward. It was also a relief to see we succeeded in getting to the real stories with the group.

How about unpleasant surprises?

We had to add archetypes [Editor's note: I call these "story elements"] to facilitate the flow of stories because some participants were reluctant to involve namely other people. So, archetypes like "The Careerist", "The Icy Organization" aso. were introduced in the process.

It was a real challenge, as was the somewhat fuzzy situation, when people didn't know what to do to improve things out of the collected stories.

If these fences hadn't been enforced, the project would have been complicated.

Evaluation

What was better than expected?

I feared stories would reveal some issues that I couldn't tackle properly because they would be close to psychotherapy. Even if I've been trained to narrative therapy, I'm not a therapist and I would have had trouble in handling such things.

Were there other benefits you hadn't expected?

This common experience seems to have helped the department to really become and act as a team. And it is also important regarding the development of the product range they have to achieve. So, we got some benefits in the team building area as well as in the comprehension and improvement-action ones.

Can you share one conclusion of your project that you don't think you could have arrived at in any other way than by asking for and looking at stories?

I remember this six-word story: "everyone has scars, everyone has stories". And this sentence: "ancient Greek rhetoricians had (...) different forms of mentioning by not mentioning".

I think they express the whole thing. To illustrate it, I'd tell a single example out of the case. We got stuff like that: "I forgive deaf-blinds for their everyday bringing of cookies to share". And it triggered comments (however not factual ones) and reformulation like that: "I forgive *us***,** deaf-blinds, for bringing cookies as smoke screens". It would also have been difficult to obtain frontal attacks with same content and without side damage! The workshop could have turned into a messy and useless moment.

What sorts of reactions did you get to the project during and after it?

I didn't try to get a lot of feedback from the group about their stories because they belonged to them and I didn't want to appear as interfering with their ownership. When tackling some conflictual situations involving other people, you're somewhat the witness of a scene you're not part of. You're like a neighbour witnessing some domestic argument occuring in the next appartment. Your duty is to help as you can, without taking over the argument, or maybe more accurately dispossessing them.

But people felt also globally relieved and appeased.

Advice

What do you wish you had known before your project that you know now?

Having more information about the team's history, being able to conduct a kind of social network analysis prior to the workshop may have been helpful. But it could also have introduced some biases which could have altered my position.

What do you think you'll do the same and differently when you do your next project?

I would focus and reflect more on clusters and ways to build and handle them. I think we could have benefited more from clustering than we did. Deepening the clustering stage could have provided as effective results as we did with the method we have used. Reading and reflecting on the chapters Cynthia Kurtz wrote, detailing the use of clusters, will be relevant.

What advice would you give to a person who wants to do a similar project?

Spend a lot of time before the project in reflecting on the methods you're planning to implement in order to make them stick to the situation: when necessary, reframe them even if your frame is well designed. The issue is to avoid losing precious time during the course of a workshop to really focus on the matter at stake as well as maintaining your legitimacy as a facilitator.

The I forgive methodology

Complexity and honesty:

When asked to unpack stories, people don't hesitate much. Usually, they agree to deliver. Most narrative capture occurs in the day to day realities and is natural. Except when there are tensions or conflicts either related to the question at stake or regarding relationships (when working with a group of persons, but similar trends concern individuals as well). Even if a privacy statement is issued, valuable, meaningful stories are difficult to obtain, notably because nobody is innocent and everybody is often afraid of retaliation in the form of back-prosecution from other participants. In those cases, people prefer to tell stories of secondary interest, avoiding telling really interesting stories, or to tell stories showing that everything is (falsely) OK.

Using the subtleties of the "I forgive" behaviour:

I suggest a specific method which focuses on the problem at stake and tries to get the most out of it.

The basic concept is to require people to begin their sentences with "I forgive [name or archetype] [who...] or [for...] [doing or saying or... something]". They are stories because we ask for events, and the conflictual situation involves kind of a plot.

There's somewhere a humorous dimension, which allows a dual meaning (forgiveness and accusation in the same time) to be expressed overtly and The author as well as the targets of the story easily understand such duality. That's why participants accept to play along. Yes: play.

Listen: "I forgive my mother-in-law for establishing a huge list of artifacts she will take back when her daughter and me separate".

How to use the "I forgive" device:

Apart from the basic concept, the method is open to various techniques.

Eliciting/collecting stories:

When working with a relatively small group, story circles (anecdote circles) are adequate. When working with a larger group, techniques such as World Café and Open Space are also efficient.

Story elements are also highly adequate and even the old-fashioned KJ-diagrams technique may produce good results.

Asking for events beginning with "I forgive..." will generally be sufficient to trigger the process. Otherwise, eliciting stories questions can be used.

When several groups of people are involved in the process, it is often valuable to switch people and/or material at certain stages (rounds) to get additional perspectives. As a side effect, it will also loosen some amount of stress.

Distant collecting work is possible, through social media apps. Blog storming (David Snowden initiated the device), instant messenging, Twitter, a Facebook group aso. can be used, solely or in combination. I favour freeware and well-known apps. because leading people to use tools for purposes they weren't meant for empowers them positively.

Archetypes construction:

Some participants may have trouble naming individuals within extreme conflictual situations and face-to-face confrontation. The sole way to avoid it is to forgive fictional characters instead of real persons, through archetypes. Cynthia Kurtz told me she had experienced archetypes such as "the controlling monster", "the over-reactor", "the nagger", "the lazy bum"... in some corporations. Going so far into archetypes constructions is useful and may be achieved through a behavioral grid and attributes sorting but more generic and universal archetypes are also relevant, depending on the matter at stake.

Working on stories and Sensemaking:

The "I forgive" very simple frame is open and adapted to a wide range of techniques. Ad hoc techniques such as the one I've developed in the case study are efficient. Story elements are completely described in the book in a ready-to-use manner. And I invite people to refer to this paper:

http://opim.wharton.upenn.edu/~ulrich/documents/ulrich-KJdiagrams.pdf

to remember if necessary about KJ diagrams. Story elements and KJ are very different in the sense one avoids to categorize items whereas the other sees no harm in categorization.

For distant work on stories, additional device such as a wiki may be associated with apps I quoted in the collecting section. Apps that are integrated in the Facebook platform (discussions functions, questioning applications, wikis and Digg-like) can be operating as well. Specific storytelling applications could also achieve the task: Cynthia Kutz's Rakontu project is an example.

Decision making:

Bridges to decision-making are integrated in most techniques I described above. For distant work, a basic poll application may be a valuable solution. As for the sensemaking and working stage, it's up to the user's preferences. However, merely statistical tools are far less adapted than combinations between statistics and qualitative approaches.

Chapter 8: PNI Stories from My Journey

The following 9 stories [9 so far, probably 20 or 25 on completion] are from projects I participated in. In nearly all of them I played the role of an external consultant. Not only that, but I often consult to other consultants who use my advice to carry out workshops and story collections themselves. As a result I can only you tell you *parts* of the stories of these projects. Typically I came into the project after some critical decisions were made (such as to include me in the project). Usually I can't tell the end of the story -- the project's ultimate result -- because I stepped out of the picture before that happened.

I debated whether to include these incomplete stories in the book because I could not tell you how they came out in the end. I decided that at least *some* of the stories would be useful to you even though I could not supply you with endings which might demonstrate the power of the approach to create long-lasting change. In most of these stories I simply don't know whether the projects ultimately succeeded. But they represent a history of surprises, discoveries and insights that I think will help you as you build your own experience.

In choosing which projects to include, I looked for those that would provide instructive examples of the *benefits* and *dangers* of working with stories. Stories of benefits are those in which the approach led the way toward useful solutions. Stories of dangers are cautionary tales about circumstances I encountered and mistakes I and others made. When two or more projects derived similar benefits or faced similar dangers, I chose the one I felt was most memorable and complete. (I also left out many projects that I simply don't remember well enough to write a story about. These you will find referenced in many small stories scattered throughout the book. You might notice some references to these stories here and there as well.)

I have taken several steps to ensure confidentiality to the clients for whom these projects were carried out. To begin with, the stories not in chronological order, so they may have taken place at any time within the past dozen years. I have not given the names of any clients, and even some of the references to particular industries have been changed to conceal private details. I have usually described only a small fraction of what was achieved or discovered in each project, and sometimes what I chose to tell you about was not the most important part but the part I felt my client would be most willing to share. For these reasons I don't see these stories as a reference of case studies where you can look up an industry or problem, but rather a sort of folk-tale collection where you can gain some general insights from reading about the experiences of others.

Also, in many of these stories various colleagues were involved in the work. I don't say who any of those colleagues were, just that some tasks were done by people other than myself. When I describe mistakes, I try not to say too much about who made them, unless it was me (in which case I'm happy to own up). I've learned more from my mistakes in this work than from anything else, so I offer them to you here.

Incorporating narrative into e-learning

Framing the project

What was the impetus for your project? What led to it taking place? Why were you doing it?

My second year at IBM Research was funded by a grant from the e-Business Technology Institute. (It was part of IBM at that time but later split off.) Our proposal to the eBTI was called "Improving distributed learning with storytelling techniques." We wrote the proposal because our two groups, one working on organizational narrative and one working on e-learning, wanted to work together on a topic of mutual interest. My group had developed ideas and tools (story techniques) and the e-learning group had identified a need (e-learning gaps), and we wanted to see how they could fit together.

What were the project's goals?

A critical difference between person-to-person learning (classes and help desk support) and mediated learning (help resources) is in the *context* added by the sharing of experiences, values and insights. Help systems provide information, but people transfer knowledge. We wanted to find ways to help resource authors improve the knowledge transfer in their products by incorporating narrative.

To give an example of such contextual knowledge transfer, we talked about how users often come to help resources looking for a solution to a problem, but because they don't understand their problem they look in the wrong place for the answer. In a class or during a help-desk call, a knowledgeable person can recognize the real need and redirect the user to the correct information; but in a static resource such redirection is difficult. We thought that stories might create a sort of connective tissue that would help people find solutions to problems they didn't understand. The superior memorability and motivational capacities of stories were also things we thought would enhance factual resources.

What did you think would happen during the project before it started? What were your expectations?

We thought we would find ways to help e-learning authors write stories and incorporate them into the resources they were building. We expected to teach people about story structure, memorability, and all the recommended topics in writing a "good" story. We even talked about building a story authoring tool for instructional designers.

The story of the project

How did the project get started? What happened first?

The first thing I did (after some background reading on e-learning) was to hold a "prototyping" phase. In this work I basically tried out different ways of building instructional resources with incorporated stories. As a simple and available test, I tried to improve help resources for the e-mail software everyone at IBM used every day.

The resources I built were complete failures, but the experiment was a success. The problem I discovered was that even with extensive knowledge of the *facts* surrounding the software, I couldn't come up with *stories* about its use that would be helpful to anyone. My prototype notes said things like "you can't make this stuff up out of thin air" and "everything I am writing about has happened to me" and "I can write

stories, but I can't write *useful* stories." For example, I tried to make up characters who would have varying experiences with the software (executive, artist, scientist, accountant, things like that), but the only character whose stories didn't sound ridiculous was the one that matched my own personality and background. I couldn't *enter into the experiences of other people* to write about them. I am not a fiction writer, you might say, but that's just the point, and in retrospect it's a good thing I wasn't. The goal of the project was to help *any* instructional author add stories to their resources. If we needed them to become Jane Austen the project was going to fail.

At the same time as I was building what I called a "repository of pitiful attempts" at narrative-enhanced help resources, we were collecting stories. But we didn't understand what we could do with the stories at first. Our goal was to use them simply as inputs to task analysis (to find out what people do when they use the software) and needs analysis (to find out what people need to know and don't know).

I don't exactly remember when or how this happened, but one day it suddenly hit me that the something I was missing in the prototype writing attempts was exactly the something we were getting out of the story collection sessions. In other words, I realized that if we *shifted our focus* from helping instructional authors write fictional stories to helping them collect and organize *real* stories, we would be much more likely to meet our stated goal. In essence, the thing were trying to create was all around us; we just hadn't seen it.

We also realized that not only the form of individual stories we were collecting, but also the *patterns* in the stories -- characters represented, topics covered, connections to factual information -- was better than anything we could come up with. What we needed to do was develop ways to help people collect stories, let them organize themselves, and get out of the way as much as possible. After that our whole emphasis shifted.

What sorts of stories did you collect? How were they collected? Who collected them?

We ended up holding about fifteen story collecting sessions on four topics (two on software and two on techniques). Myself and a colleague in the e-learning group ran all the workshops ourselves. Because we were developing methods, we had long discussion sessions after each workshop and changed our techniques each time, keeping what worked and discarding failed experiments (and there were many). The twice-told stories exercise was the result of these experiments. Unlike the other methods I describe in this book, the twice-told stories method was originally developed specifically to help people with no experience collecting stories get started (which is why it's a good first method to try).

We recorded all the stories on audiotape, and I transcribed all of them. This took forever, but it gave me irreplaceable experience. By the way, if you are getting started working with stories, think twice before you pay somebody else to transcribe tapes for you. Listening to dozens of people tell hundreds of stories is a *great* way to develop your instincts about such nuances as what is a story and what isn't, how people start and stop telling stories, how people feel about the story they are telling, how others react, how people respond to instructions, and so on.

What sorts of annotations or question-asking were done? Who answered the questions or added the annotations?

We didn't ask any questions of the storytellers themselves. I answered questions (about things like values, surprises, performance, reaction, truth, rumor, source, and so on) about the stories as I listened to the audiotapes. (So, yes, I broke my own rule about interpreting stories from outside the group of interest. The projects that led to that rule came later and, as they say, are other stories.)

How were the stories looked at or considered? Who was involved in this?

I used the methods of grounded theory to do two things with the workshop transcripts: extract useful stories, and build conclusions about instructional needs for each topic. I wrote a report on each topic, and these were given to people involved in documentation and design for each software package or process.

In addition, the last set of stories and conclusions were used to build a new instructional resource about a common work process. Stories collected about the process were incorporated verbatim into the resource (I think it said something like "Tips from real users") and linked with factual information. The resource was deemed a great success both in popularity and in utility.

Did you do any group exercises? If so, what were they and how did they go?

We did *lots* of group exercises. We were experimenting. Many of them turned out badly, but some were great. Most of the ones that worked well (timelines, metaphors, twice-told stories) ended up influencing my later work.

How did the project end? Were conclusions drawn, and by whom?

We produced a how-to manual that any instructional author could use to collect and incorporate stories into a help resource, as well as the reports mentioned above. The research project produced many insights about collecting and working with stories which informed all of my later work in the area.

High and low points

Do you remember any pleasant surprises during the project?

I think the main pleasant surprise was when our workshop methods *finally* started to work. After many failures we finally reached the point where we could hold a workshop with a variety of people that reliably produced a good crop of excellent stories, and it was a great relief.

How about unpleasant surprises?

We made a lot of mistakes as we experimented with different ways of asking people to tell stories, and people let us know it. People said we were wasting their time, that they couldn't understand what we wanted, that our approach was all wrong, and so on *ad nauseum*. Several times people angrily stalked out of the room or said things that made me want to shrivel up into a little ball. As we kept refining our methods this happened less often, but at some point I realized that in every group there will always be at least one person who is either having a bad day or just thinks what you are doing is stupid. You have to develop a thick skin about it, so eventually I did. By the time we gave our last workshops of the year, I was weathered.

Do you recall any "aha" moments when you realized or learned something critical?

The main aha moment was the "we are swimming in stories already" moment mentioned above. In fact I'd say that was the most important aha moment of my entire career in narrative work.

In retrospect the revelation reminds me of Arthur Plotnik's great book *The Elements of Authorship*, which makes the point that you can only become a writer *after* you get over your ridiculous ideas of "Becoming a Writer" and get to the practical task of finding something to write about, *and then writing*. Similarly, many people who discover the world of narrative put "story" on a pedestal and think they have to "measure up"

to what Hollywood has said a story has to be. But in a way a "Hollywood story" is a distortion. It's a hot-house story, raised under special conditions in order to produce exotic and amazing but unnatural blooms. Real stories are tough, and they grow in sand and mud and rock and wind and storms, and sometimes they have nasty thorns. It takes a naturalist to find and work with them, not a hot-house gardener. Of course there is nothing wrong with hot houses or amazing plants (or stories), but they only get in the way when you are trying to help people exchange knowledge. I think if I hadn't found this out through beating my head against a wall for months I would not have understood it as well as I do (though many later lessons reinforced this first one).

Were there any times during the project when things seemed too difficult or challenging to go on? What was the challenge and what did you do about it?

One thing that was really difficult in the project was that I absolutely *hated* standing up in front of people and asking them to do things. I found it really hard to "do the talking." I did it, but after several workshops it was starting to make me physically sick. Things went much better when my colleague took over that task and I switched to hovering in the background, taking notes, and making sure the tape recorders were turned on. What I learned from that experience led me to always caution people to recognize their limitations in story work, and also to work with others whenever possible and find complementary abilities.

Evaluation

What turned out the same as you expected? What was worse than expected? What was better?

The whole project turned out different than expected; but that was a good thing. It was much harder to help people write fictional stories than I expected; but that turned out not to matter anyway. In a way the project succeeded in spite of my ignorance, which says a lot about the power of narrative, doesn't it?

Did the project meet its goals? Were there other benefits you hadn't expected?

The project met its goals to develop methods for incorporating stories into instructional resources. The main unexpected benefit was that we found a way to incorporate stories that not only required no narrative understanding on the part of the resource builder, but also created a whole new way of incorporating the knowledge of a community of learners into their own support. By collecting stories, instructional authors can extract knowledge from the community, process it, and return it to the community. It's sort of a bootstrapping, or ratcheting up, of the community's knowledge about a system or process or tool. This was an entirely unexpected benefit of the work.

As far as proving that stories could provide context to factual information, the informational resource we built using stories did indeed seem to help people find the information they needed. One benefit seemed to be that people found the "real user" stories so interesting and motivating that they explored information they might have passed by when it was merely reference material. The stories bridged the factual information (and provided the connective tissue we hoped they would) by giving people reasons to explore things they hadn't explored before. Some people told me that they got into the resource, found the stories, and simply read them one after another. Since the stories were heavily linked into factual information, people could come back to them again when they needed to recall something and find it again.

Can you share one conclusion of your project that you don't think you could have arrived at in any other way than by asking for and looking at stories?

I don't remember a lot of details about the project, but I do know that we found out things about software and processes that it would have been nearly impossible to find out any other way. One example I remember was that people often told us stories in which belief and rumor entered into their use of software. When a piece of software seemed impenetrably confusing, they would do superstitious rituals like clicking certain buttons every time they did a particular task, even though they knew the buttons were unrelated to the task. Or they would do things because they heard a rumor that something had happened to someone else and they wanted to avoid it. I do superstitious things just like that, and usually those behaviors have to do with particular stories from the past. For example, I compulsively save my work about every ten seconds, and any software that doesn't have a Control-S save (or some other shortcut) is nearly impossible for me to use. That's because of a few horrible experiences of wonderful insights lost forever. I remember hearing quite a few stories of that sort -- about how people layer their beliefs, perceptions, values, and cultures on top of software and processes. That sort of thing can provide insights to designers of software, and it can also help people design information resources so that they meet people in the space between the software and their needs.

Advice

What do you wish you had known before your project that you know now? What advice would you give to a person who wants to do a similar project?

The project I've described here took place nearly a decade ago and I've done many other projects since then, but I'll describe a few things I can recall learning the hard way on that project. I'm describing these mistakes in detail (as I remember them) because I want to make a point that *mistakes are gifts* in doing story work. Some of the basics of collecting stories from real people are hard to communicate and have to be experienced to be understood. You *need* to fail, at least a little bit, to develop skill in collecting stories. In fact I suggest building some low-cost failures into your first projects.

The mistake: One of our most disastrous story workshops was with a group of secretaries. They all knew the same things about the software we asked them to talk about, so they had little to say to each other about it. They also saw nothing of use to them in the workshop, and some stormed out. Later, when we deliberately brought together people with more variation in expertise and job titles, we got much better discussions and storytellings (and reactions). *The moral*: Don't bring people together who all know the same amount about something, or who all know the same things. Bringing novices and experts on a topic together is a great way to get people talking, because the novices want to find out and the experts want to help. Or you can bring two groups of people together who use the same thing but in different ways (say webmasters and web users). It's only when you can observe *real knowledge transfer* that you get the best stories. (Just make sure the groups aren't from separate social/power worlds, or you will get no stories at all.)

The mistake: Early on we tried asking people to form groups of two. This always produced total paralysis. They just stared at each other, or at their shoes. Groups of three didn't have that problem. *The moral*: Use minimum small-group sizes of three people.

The mistake: In our first storytelling sessions we did a bad job of telling people what would take place when they agreed to come. Some of them thought the session was a class and were upset when we didn't "teach" them anything. It was also very hard to get people to understand *why* we wanted to collect stories.

A turning point was when we started to use the phrase "We want to know what it's *really* like" (to use this software or go through this process). That seemed to get across to people that we were looking for something beyond the facts about these issues; we wanted to know what their experiences had been. *The moral*: Manage expectations about storytelling sessions. Write clear invitations and spell out the goals, the process and the result. Also, make sure you have rehearsed responses ready for when people say things like "What are we doing here?" and "What do you want us to do?" and "You're wasting my time." Stammering and apologizing really turns people away.

The mistake: In the beginning we were underconfident when we started the session and asked people to do things. We kept whispering to each other and referring to our notes, and all that sort of thing. Some people, especially some of the high-expertise older people, headed for the door. After this we rehearsed our "act" until we had it down. The more confident we sounded, the better stories we collected. *The moral*: Rehearse doing story collection, so that when you actually do it you won't sound unprepared and drive people away. If you rehearse the session, as silly as that sounds, you'll sound like you've done it dozens of times before (even if you haven't), and people will feel at ease, and they will tell stories. The rule of self-fulfilling prophecies really does work: tell people things like "When we do these sessions people naturally tell stories" -- even if you are actually doing it for the very first time -- because as soon as they *do* start telling stories it will magically become true. (If you don't like lying, just use your friends and family for your first session and get some free confidence that way.)

The mistake: We started out with way too much detail and instruction, and people either balked (if they hated detail) or dove too far in (if they loved detail). The balkers either sat there or walked out, and the divers generated long lists and complex complaints, but no stories. It was only later when we slimmed things down to what seemed a ridiculous minimum that we started to really get stories. *The moral*: Give few and uncomplicated instructions, then step back and get out of the way while people respond. Don't over-control the session, because you will get only what people think you expect. Give people room to express themselves (but not *too* much!).

The mistake: We were amazed at first at the wide range of responses we got to the word "story." Some people thought we wanted them to tell jokes. Some thought we wanted them to make things up. Some thought we wanted opinions and complaints. I remember one guy who said, "Once upon a time. How's that?" (I don't think he was taking the whole thing very seriously.) Probably the worst responses were when people said they had used the software but didn't have any *stories* to tell about it. Clearly there were some problems of perception. It was only when we started talking about experiences, surprises, learnings, breakthroughs and other more directed terms, and using the "what it's *really* like" phrase, that we got past the "many meanings of story" problem. In essence we moved the word "story" to the background and didn't introduce it until it was more clear what the goals of the process were. At that point people were more able to understand in what sense we meant the word. *The moral*: Don't bring out the word "story" until people have a better sense of what you are trying to do and why you are doing it. (Try asking someone point-blank "for" a story sometime, and you'll see them freeze like a deer in headlights.) It is also helpful to learn to recognize what people say when they think you mean a joke, lie, fiction or opinion when you say "story" and rehearse your response accordingly. Help people form an idea of what you are asking them to do and why you are asking them to do it, so that they can give you what you need.

Probing a wound gently

Framing the project

What was the impetus for your project? What led to it taking place? Why were you doing it?

This was a project for a client in the chemical industry. It was a pilot project, a test to see if narrative methods met the client's needs.

What were the project's goals?

This corporation manufactured a chemical that had acquired a reputation for use other than what was intended, a dangerous use. The client wanted to find out what they could do internally, in employee training and communications, for example, to help their staff members address the problem.

What did you think would happen during the project before it started? What were your expectations?

This was one of the first projects I ever did in which stories were gathered around a *sensitive* topic, so I had minimal expectations. My hope was mainly that we would find *something* the client could use, but I had no idea what we might find.

The story of the project

How did the project get started? What happened first?

The client considered it impossible to approach customers misusing the product, so we concentrated on staff who faced customers in some way.

What sorts of stories did you collect? How were they collected? Who collected them?

A pilot workshop was held in which people were asked to tell stories - probably about twenty or so people. Consultants external to the client's organization came in and ran the workshop. At the workshop, stories were told and then used to derive a set of story elements meaningful to the participants.

The workshop was recorded and the tapes were given to me. I transcribed all of the stories told in the workshop. It was a small number of stories, not more than 40 or so.

What sorts of annotations or question-asking were done? Who answered the questions or added the annotations?

I asked myself three questions about the stories I listened to:

Why did the storyteller believe they were telling the story?

Where did the storyteller represent the story as having come from?

How emotionally intense, relative to other stories, was this story, for its teller and for its audience?

I answered these questions based on listening to audiotapes of the storytellings, which included audience reactions. So these answers were my own opinions, but they were based on cues the storytellers had given in their stories, so I felt they were defensible. Having audio versions of the stories made it much more

possible to answer the first and third questions, because it was easy to hear the emotion in the voices of storyteller and audience.

I also connected each story to one or more of the story elements derived, simply by asking myself which were most prevalent in the story. Again this was a judgement on my part, but I justified each connection using the elements in the story and its telling and reception.

In addition, each story was linked to factual roles such as staff, customers, authorities, the media, and so on, based on how strongly they were present in the stories.

How were the stories looked at or considered? Who was involved in this?

I put the stories, the questions about them, and the linkages to the story elements into a simple database. I then looked at patterns in subsets of the data, asking questions as I went.

Did you do any group exercises? If so, what were they and how did they go?

The only group exercise done was the story element derivation conducted when the stories were collected.

How did the project end? Were conclusions drawn, and by whom?

I wrote a report on what I found in the collected stories and connections, and I presented this report to the client. In addition, the stories (and answers to questions about them) were distributed not only to managers but also to staff members involved in supporting the product so that staff could see the patterns for themselves.

The major finding of the project was this. Perceptions of the corporation's customers in the stories collected varied from highly informed and intelligent to ignorant and simple-minded. Some of the story elements reflected this range. When I placed the answers to questions next to story element assignments, a pattern appeared. Stories that represented direct personal experience with customers tended to describe intelligent, informed customers, while stories that came from hearsay and rumors tended to describe ignorant, simple-minded customers. The pattern was clear and strong; it could be seen both in the data and in the stories themselves, once the subsets were compared.

Here was a clear picture of a problem: staff members carried contradictory perceptions of customer behavior. The fact that the study's target behavior (misuse of the product) was spoken of mostly in rumor could mean a few things. Perhaps customers who talked to the staff didn't show the behavior; perhaps the staff *avoided* circumstances where the behavior might take place; perhaps, being ill-informed about the behavior, the staff "filled in" the gaps in their knowledge with rumors.

I'm not entirely sure what the client did after learning about this pattern. My recollection is that they felt as a result that customer-facing staff needed to learn more about the details of the misuse behavior so as to have a better foundation for their perceptions about it. Distributing the stories was the start of that improvement, but I believe they planned other means of helping staff understand the issue as well.

High and low points

Do you remember any pleasant surprises during the project?

What surprised me the most about this project was that we actually found something very important in a very small number of stories. This was the first time I had seen such a strong result, and it convinced me that the combination of collected stories and interpretations of them was powerful. I did answer all the

questions myself in this project, but seeing the power of interpretation was one of the milestones that led me to use participant interpretations later.

How about unpleasant surprises?

I personally found listening to these stories to be emotionally distressing. Many were about people being badly hurt, and sometimes hurting themselves. It was draining to become immersed in that world. I've since listened to and read many other stories of hardship, but this was my first time, and I learned on this project to take frequent breaks and pull away from the relentless sadness of exploring difficult topics.

Do you recall any "aha" moments when you realized or learned something critical?

I do remember the moment when I first saw the pattern I mentioned above, the difference between first-hand and rumor stories. It was in a bar chart counting stories, I believe. I checked and double-checked the pattern, surprised, because I hadn't seen it when I listened to and typed in the stories. It was there in plain sight, but I didn't see it until I compiled all of my individual observations about the stories.

Were there any times during the project when things seemed too difficult or challenging to go on? What was the challenge and what did you do about it?

One of the members of the client's team for this project was unhappy with some of the stories collected. The client intended to distribute the stories internally to help staff understand the product misuse problem, and this person was afraid the staff would be unable to correctly evaluate the erroneous perceptions of some customers. He wanted to *rewrite* the stories to remove all inaccuracies; but this would undermine the project, whose goal was to help the staff understand customer viewpoints. After some discussion he agreed to place facts about each story under it. This worked out well.

Evaluation

What turned out the same as you expected? What was worse than expected? What was better?

The fact that we derived useful and actionable results from such a small sample of stories and questions was a huge surprise, and it led to many other, larger projects in time. This was the first positive proof that the idea of working with stories could actually work.

Did the project meet its goals? Were there other benefits you hadn't expected?

Because this was a pilot project we had very small goals, and we exceeded them. Afterward the client pursued several other projects on similar topics (I was not involved with them) and derived useful results again.

There was an additional benefit to this project: it taught me something about cross-domain story use. After this project was complete we wanted to tell the story of its success to other clients. But the stories were confidential and we could not share them. We could not even share the larger story of the patterns we found, at least not in its original context. What I needed to do was find a way to *translate* the overall findings into another domain that wasn't sensitive so that we could share the patterns without sharing the stories. After some exploration I found another overarching story - credit cards in the hands of university students - in which similar themes of misuse and staff perceptions of customer behavior matched. I rewrote each story as a story about students and credit, renamed some of the story elements, and kept the

questions and answers intact. With this fictionalized data set it was easy to show other clients the patterns we had discovered (thus the power of the approach) without revealing anything about the actual context of the project. The utility of this fictional translation led us to explore additional ways to use fictional transfer to help people explore sensitive topics in new ways.

Can you share one conclusion of your project that you don't think you could have arrived at in any other way than by asking for and looking at stories?

Asking staff members at any corporation what they know about their customers is fraught with problems. Naturally staff will want to appear as knowledgeable as possible, because their jobs depend on it. So if we had asked these people how well they knew their customers there would have been scant variation in the responses given. Asking the staff to tell stories about the behaviors of their customers brought out a diversity of perception that helped the client understand where they should address gaps in capability. This was done without making the staff feel vulnerable to judgement (since the stories were not about their abilities or knowledge) and at the same time useful in helping to address a difficult problem.

Advice

What do you wish you had known before your project that you know now? What advice would you give to a person who wants to do a similar project?

Well, obviously I now believe it is better to ask the storytellers themselves questions about their stories. I look upon results like these with suspicion today and would never plan a project in this way. Even though this project proved the utility of the general approach to me, our reliance on outside expert opinion weakened the result and perhaps the outcome. I don't know how the staff members who ultimately received the stories perceived my interpretations, especially those about motivation and representation. They may have rejected them for all I know. That wasn't necessary and isn't advisable.

I also wouldn't advise people to collect such a small number of stories, no matter how heavily annotated, and base any strong results on them -- unless, as in this project, the effort is as a pilot test of the idea of collecting stories.

Holding up a mirror

Framing the project

What was the impetus for your project? What led to it taking place? Why were you doing it?

Some colleagues and I were asked to add a narrative component to a leadership development course in a large computer corporation.

What were the project's goals?

The *overall* project's goal was to help the highest-level executives in the organization become more effective leaders. Our narrative project was just a small part of this, so it needed to fit into a range of activities that included training and ongoing peer support. The narrative project's goal was to help the executives reflect on their own experiences of leadership and compare them to experiences reported by others from various perspectives.

What did you think would happen during the project before it started? What were your expectations?

We had some trepidations going into this project. These were people high in the hierarchy of the organization, and we planned to bring them stories told by those directly under them about their leadership. So we we wondered what would be the best way to help people examine perceptions of their own leadership without triggering defensiveness or denial. We also knew that these hard-hitting executives had little time to spare and would not be willing or able to sit through long narrative explorations. So we had a strong need to tailor the project to a demanding context.

The story of the project

How did the project get started? What happened first?

Our group held several planning meetings with the people in charge of the overall project. We talked about where our part should fit into the overall project. We discussed timing and constraints.

What sorts of stories did you collect? How were they collected? Who collected them?

My recollection is that scripted telephone interviews were used to collected several stories from each executive and from a few to several people working under each of them. For anonymity no names were collected, but each executive was given a code, and all stories told by themselves and their reports were marked with it. The number of stories was small, probably not more than fifty or so.

What sorts of annotations or question-asking were done? Who answered the questions or added the annotations?

At the time of this project we were not asking people questions about their own stories, so myself and another member of our team answered these questions about the stories collected:

Why was this story told?

Where did this story come from?

What was the emotional intensity of this story?

Because so many of the stories collected were not actually stories but were opinions or facts, we added a question as to whether the story actually recounted events. I also believe story elements were derived from the stories and linked to them (possibly in a workshop with the participants but possibly by other people working on the project).

Two other bits of information added to these stories (by us) were groups of people involved in the stories - perhaps employees, customers, investors - and which domains of the Cynefin framework best fit the story's events. These were included to give the participants more paths to explore as they encountered the stories.

How were the stories looked at or considered? Who was involved in this?

In this project I did not look for any patterns in the stories or write any kind of report. The stories went directly into the hands of the executives themselves, as part of the leadership program.

Did you do any group exercises? If so, what were they and how did they go?

There was a sort of exercise involved in this project, but it was not a group exercise. This was the first project in which my colleagues and I tried out the idea of stimulating thought by introducing stories from a separate domain - historical leadership - into the experience. The idea was that seeing stories juxtaposed with their own stories, but from a different perspective, would cause the executives to see their stories in a new light.

How did we introduce the stories? To begin with, I bought a CD-ROM version of the entire Gutenberg Project library, which at that time consisted of about five thousand out-of-copyright books. Next I came up with a list of balancing criteria for the historical leaders I would look for: equal numbers of male and female leaders, from all continents, from different industries, in power and out of power, and so on. Then I looked into the genre classification of the titles and chose those likely to have stories about historical leaders. There were over four hundred items classified as biographies and nearly a thousand in the history section, so right away I knew I would be able to find what I needed. As I looked over the lists of documents I chose those that fit into empty slots in my balancing grid.

Of course, each of these documents was long, sometimes dozens of pages long. I needed nuggets, little stories executives could read in a minute or two that would give them crucial insights into leadership. So I read and read, and as I read I pulled out possible candidates. Out of perhaps a hundred of these candidates I selected forty or fifty to use in the project. I tried to find stories that would be unfamiliar to the readers, stories that perhaps shed light onto a little-known facet of each leader's personality. I wanted to surprise and engage in order to stimulate thought.

As part of their participation in the project, each executive received the entire set of stories - told by executives, including themselves; told by people reporting to executives, including their own subordinates; and told about historical leaders. These were delivered in a simple software system that helped them compare and contrast stories based on answers to questions about them. Each executive was also given their unique code so that they could tell which stories were by or about them in particular. The stories were given out one week in advance of a final sensemaking workshop in which the executives met and discussed the stories together.

How did the project end? Were conclusions drawn, and by whom?

I was not in the room when this happened, but what I was *told* was that the executives made a bee line to the stories about themselves and read those quickly. But soon after they absorbed those stories, they began to browse through the entire data set, following the structure set up by the answers to questions and connections to story elements. They might for example notice that several of their own stories were rated high on emotional intensity, then search for other stories of that type, then encounter stories about Napoleon and Helen Keller as well as fellow (anonymous) executives. I was told that the executives came into the final workshop brimming with ideas they wanted to discuss about effective leadership. They came in with a strong sense of having compared their own experiences, and the experiences of people reporting to them, to those of others.

High and low points

Do you remember any pleasant surprises during the project?

I was very happy to hear about the response of the executives to the collected stories. We had worried that they would refuse to read stories about their own leadership, or that they would read only their stories and

ignore all others, or that they would not be able to carve out time for the exercise. Surprisingly, I was told that many of the executives said they couldn't stop reading the stories, and some said they read them all and even looked at the patterns among stories for insights they could use. So in terms of creating a useful contemplative experience the project was a great success.

How about unpleasant surprises?

I was disappointed when I first received the results of the telephone interviews to find that many of the transcribed comments were not stories. This is a typical problem when interviewing executives; many tend to be so used to being asked for their opinions and judgements that they need extra help talking about experiences. Because the interviews were scripted there was evidently no way to improve the narrative content of the responses in real time. I can't recall precisely, but I think possibly only about half of the "stories" collected from the executives actually involved recountings of events. Realization of this paucity of stories led to some stressful discussion among the group as to what we could do. We decided to add a question about whether each entry recounted events, stated facts, or stated an opinion. This then became another part of the structure participants could traverse. If I could go back in time I would plan the interviews differently so as to get a stronger experiential component in place.

Do you recall any "aha" moments when you realized or learned something critical?

I do remember one moment, which was when I first tried out the blending of the historical stories with the contemporary leadership stories. It was exciting to see how the juxtaposition worked.

Were there any times during the project when things seemed too difficult or challenging to go on? What was the challenge and what did you do about it?

Most of the challenge in this project was up front in the planning. We knew how to collect stories and connect them so they would reveal useful patterns. What we didn't know was how to make the package engaging enough to offer a useful experience for the people. Our ambition was high, and we felt it all through the project when it resolved itself in the final workshop.

Evaluation

What turned out the same as you expected? What was worse than expected? What was better?

The engagement was better than expected. Actually, this was one of the few projects I've worked on where the storytellers were given their own stories to work with *in the context of relation to others*, and I would like to see that sort of thing take place more often. I think it is an underused tool for training and reflection. The proportion of stories in what was collected was worse than expected, and if I had the project to do over I would try to improve on that.

Did the project meet its goals? Were there other benefits you hadn't expected?

Yes, the project met its goals, though exactly how much the executives benefited from the experience is impossible to say. We did benefit from the experiment in mixing stories from different contexts, since we used the idea again in several other projects that centered around helping people improve their sensemaking ability with respect to a topic of concern.

Can you share one conclusion of your project that you don't think you could have arrived at in any other way than by asking for and looking at stories?

By the time a person becomes a senior executive at a large corporation, they have already read volumes about leadership. In this project we were able to give these people a new perspective on leadership based on stories of experience that complemented the things they already knew. If we had not collected and merged stories in this way -- if we had gathered only direct answers to a standard survey, for example -- I do not think the project would have come out as well as it did.

Advice

What do you wish you had known before your project that you know now? What advice would you give to a person who wants to do a similar project?

Surprise people. If your goal is to help people reflect on their own experiences and compare them with those of others, don't show them what they expect to see. Find a new angle on the topic and collect stories from it to provide something people have not yet encountered. Help people stretch their thinking into new areas. But choose your stretches carefully. Stories about historical leaders connected with the positive identifications of these executives, and that got them interested in exploring similarities. If we had mixed in stories from, say, fairy tales, or academic researchers, or plumbers -- even though all of these might be great sources of wisdom -- the executives would not have seen the stories as useful. There is an old saying that every story is surprising, and every story is familiar. So if you plan to use surprise to help people think, balance that with the familiarity of identification.

We said, they said

Framing the project

What was the impetus for your project? What led to it taking place? Why were you doing it?

The project was done for a governmental educational agency.

What were the project's goals?

The project was an exploration of the issue of national identity: what it means to belong to the nation under consideration. I can't recall whether the project was done in the educational agency because someone wanted to look at national identity in relation to education, or simply because someone else in the government wanted to explore national identity and the schools seemed like a useful place to gather data on it.

What did you think would happen during the project before it started? What were your expectations?

This was a kind of blue-sky project, done more for pilot testing ideas than for a fixed outcome.

The story of the project

What sorts of stories did you collect? How were they collected? Who collected them?

In group workshops students and teachers were asked to talk about their experiences in relation to what it means to be a native of the country. They were asked questions like this:

If you had a friend from another country, what experience, good or bad, might you tell them about to describe what it's like to be from here?

Have you ever seen a person behaving in a way that made you think, that's the way we are here, or that's not the way we are here? What happened?

And so on. Generally the idea was to get at recollections centered around what they identified as behaviors unique to or connected to national identity.

This was not a large project, so only several dozen stories were collected, perhaps fifty or so. The collection took place in a group setting.

What sorts of annotations or question-asking were done? Who answered the questions or added the annotations?

The collected stories were transcribed and printed, then in a second set of workshops, the same students and their teachers *separately* considered all the stories and derived from them two separate sets of story elements. In other words, both groups looked at the same stories and generated their own explanatory story elements for what they meant. At the end of each workshop, each student and teacher connected each story to the story elements they had created. This meant that each story was doubly connected based on two sets of interpretation.

One issue we were looking at in this project was how we could bring together stories interpreted by different groups. I wanted to find a way to compare interpretations using stories as mediators. I looked at the attributes used to describe each story elements, of which there were several for each. These were adjectives like "responsible" or "careless." As expected many of these were similar enough to serve as connections. Thus one group's "Hero" might be considered similar to the other group's "White Knight" because they shared more than half of their attributes. This mapping between interpretations helped us explore places where the two interpretations of the same stories agreed and contradicted.

There were also some questions answered about the stories -- where they came from, why they were told, how intense they were -- but I can't remember if I answered the questions or the storytellers did.

How were the stories looked at or considered? Who was involved in this?

I received the stories and their linkages to the story elements, and I looked at patterns in them. One pattern I remember being important was this. Some of the stories were about people acting in a way that did not match their conceptions of what it was to be a citizen of the country. Since both students and teachers interpreted the same stories I could see, in their element assignments and attributes, differences in how uncitizenlike behavior was interpreted. Generally, students described these behaviors as ignorant (they don't know how we do things here) or inexperienced (they haven't learned the ropes yet). Teachers, on the other hand, characterized the behaviors as selfish (they don't care about others) or even malignant (they should go to jail). Students seemed to have a more contextualized and nuanced view of behavior than teachers, who seemed quicker to jump to conclusions.

Did you do any group exercises? If so, what were they and how did they go?

The only group exercise was in the parallel derivation of story elements by students and teachers.

How did the project end? Were conclusions drawn, and by whom?

I wrote a report, though it was more about the potential for using this multiple-interpretation method in other projects than about the specific patterns I found.

High and low points

Do you remember any pleasant surprises during the project?

I was excited when the difference between student and teacher interpretations of uncitizenlike behavior appeared in the data. I believe it was only because the *same* stories were interpreted by both groups that the pattern appeared as strongly as it did. So it was a pleasant surprise that the project proved the value of gathering multiple perspectives on the same stories.

How about unpleasant surprises?

This is one of only a few multi-perspective projects I have ever done, and I have been sad that it has not been repeated more often. Why is this? Because it entailed a large commitment of time on the part of the teachers and students. First the students needed to tell stories; then both students and teachers needed to build story elements; then they all had to come back and connect the story elements to the stories. These three stages of the project took several hours in total. Rarely is it possible to get that much of anyone's time to tell, reflect on, and connect stories together. I have since helped people run single half-day workshops in which people tell stories, derive story elements, and connect them to stories; but it requires strong facilitation skill to pull off such a three-ring circus of activity and not everyone can do it. So I have been disappointed to see this method such an obviously useful yet underused tool.

Do you recall any "aha" moments when you realized or learned something critical?

I do not recall actually giving these stories to the students and teachers, but as I explored them I became convinced that this sort of multi-perspective interpretation connection could be of much use in helping people understand other cultures. Can you imagine what would happen if you could do a similar project, not with students and teachers but with citizens of two warring nations, and then distribute the connected data set to everyone in both countries? Each group could then see their own stories, and those of others, from both perspectives.

Were there any times during the project when things seemed too difficult or challenging to go on? What was the challenge and what did you do about it?

As I recall, it was difficult to get the teachers to allocate the time to participate in the project. If we couldn't get the teachers to participate we would not get useful results. The students were willing and able to help, but the teachers had to find time. This would be a challenge in using this technique any time one group is more accessible or willing than the other. In fact, I would say that if it is not possible to get all the groups for equal time, this process cannot take place.

Evaluation

What turned out the same as you expected? What was worse than expected? What was better?

I wasn't sure at the outset that having two groups of people interpret the same stories would show us anything at all. That we did see one strong pattern was exciting and promised stronger utility in larger projects.

Did the project meet its goals? Were there other benefits you hadn't expected?

The project met its goal in the sense of testing the idea of gathering multiple interpretations. I don't think there were other benefits, but it was a small project.

Can you share one conclusion of your project that you don't think you could have arrived at in any other way than by asking for and looking at stories?

You can imagine asking students and teachers to characterize their views of citizenship without telling stories first. You might ask them, for example, to list characteristics of good citizenship. I doubt those lists would differ very much. People know what they are supposed to say. But when we asked them to talk about the behavior of people acting in stories, they answered not with their "official" opinions but their emotional, gut-level reactions. This was a stronger way to understand how the world views of students and teachers differed with respect to national identity. You could imagine using the same technique to explore how other groups feel about national identity, like entrepreneurs or industrial workers or entertainers or journalists.

Advice

What do you wish you had known before your project that you know now? What advice would you give to a person who wants to do a similar project?

This is a great technique and I think more people should try it. But you do have to think, going in, about your ability to get equal time and attention from all the groups you want to compare. It doesn't have to be two groups: it could be several. Just watch your paperwork, because the time needed to put it all together is higher than a more straightforward project.

Too much and too little

Framing the project

What was the impetus for your project? What led to it taking place? Why were you doing it?

This project was done for a government education agency.

What were the project's goals?

The project's goal was to explore perceptions of teachers related to the question, "What is the purpose of education?" in order to find opportunities to improve teacher training and meet teacher needs.

What did you think would happen during the project before it started? What were your expectations?

This was a rather straightforward project of medium size with no special features, so I expected things to be clear cut.

The story of the project

What sorts of stories did you collect? How were they collected? Who collected them?

About three hundred stories were collected from about a hundred teachers using a web survey.

What sorts of annotations or question-asking were done? Who answered the questions or added the annotations?

This project helped me understand the limitations of asking questions, in two ways. First, far too many questions were asked about stories. This led many of the respondents to skip questions. In fact, when I got the collected information I had to discard about half of it because of insufficient variety in the answers. Essentially, quite a few of the respondents had not changed many of their answers from the defaults put before them. This was the first project in which I encountered such an abysmal response, and it was the impetus to develop a whole set of methods to determine data integrity before even beginning to look for trends in the data. It also helped me understand that the limitations on how many questions people are willing and able to answer is a threshold that cannot be ignored.

Secondly, I'm sure the survey designers meant well, but the questions used transmitted signals that only positive experiences were to be shared. When organizations use code words such as "Leadership" and "Teamwork" they send a signal that they don't want to hear about "Bosses" and "Getting along." The designers of this survey hewed closely to the tamest words they could find, and the respondents took notice and responded with tame stories and tame answers to questions. Don't stick your neck out and tell the truth, was the message, and everyone got it. As a result trends were only weakly suggestive at best. For the number of stories collected this was sad, because the exploration could have been deeper and stronger.

How were the stories looked at or considered? Who was involved in this?

I looked for patterns in the stories and answers to questions about them.

Did you do any group exercises? If so, what were they and how did they go?

This project involved no group exercises, just a story collection and analysis.

How did the project end? Were conclusions drawn, and by whom?

I wrote a report on my findings and sent it to the client. I don't know what they did with it.

The major finding in this project was, as I said above, weak. Still, so many similar questions had been asked that their weak patterns formed clusters that together painted a picture. One major conflict came out: between innovation and inclusivity. On the one hand, innovation was characterized as being on the cutting edge, sometimes ruthlessly experimenting with new techniques and generating collateral damage as a result. Against this was inclusivity, characterized as looking after the entire flock and slowing down so that even the weakest members can catch up. These forces were seen as being at war with each other. Tellingly, innovation was seen as winning the war, in the sense of being considered most in line with the

purpose of education. If the data had not been so weakened by lack of response, I would have called this a striking result, but as it was I could only call it intriguing and worthy of further exploration.

High and low points

Do you remember any pleasant surprises during the project?

I was glad when some trends did appear even when I had to discard half the data set. For a while it was looking as though the project would fail utterly. So that was a relief.

How about unpleasant surprises?

It was dismaying when I saw the no-response peaks in the data and realized how much of the data indicated a lack of response. What bothered me most was how hard it must have been for these teachers to find time in their busy days to reflect and answer questions about education. It was an opportunity missed.

Do you recall any "aha" moments when you realized or learned something critical?

Not unless you count the moment in which I realized how frustratingly weak the trends were.

Were there any times during the project when things seemed too difficult or challenging to go on? What was the challenge and what did you do about it?

One thing that was *exceedingly* difficult in this project was making decisions about trimming the data set. I saw that the responses had insufficient variation, but there were many possible ways to "prune" the data set and make it useful. I felt nervous about deciding which stories should be kept and which should be lost. I spent a lot of time making calculations as to how much variation would be kept in with various levels of trimming. Ultimately I ended up with what I thought was a reasonable, defensible level of pruning, but it was a judgement call. The best thing is to never have to make such judgement calls because you have set up criteria in advance. But that is not always possible.

Evaluation

What turned out the same as you expected? What was worse than expected? What was better?

The lack of trends was unexpected, though if I saw another project set up this way today I would be sure to expect a similar result.

Did the project meet its goals? Were there other benefits you hadn't expected?

I don't believe this project met its goals. The funders had wanted to arrive at stronger trends they could act on, and we arrived only at weak suggestions of trends.

However, there was a benefit to the longer-term process of doing narrative projects. As unpleasant as this project was, it taught me an important lesson that has been very useful in the years since. Whenever somebody wants to ask people a hundred questions about their stories, or whenever somebody writes questions that broadcast constraints on what can be said, I can pull out this "horror" story and set them

right. If this had never happened I would not be able to help people form projects that avoid these problems. Maybe the readers of this book can learn from it as well.

Can you share one conclusion of your project that you don't think you could have arrived at in any other way than by asking for and looking at stories?

This question almost doesn't apply to this project, because the stories were collected in such a way that they offered no advantages over a direct survey. In fact, I think a direct survey might have worked better than what was done in this case. This serves as a reminder that while story projects can outperform non-narrative inquiries, they can only do that if they are well planned.

Advice

What do you wish you had known before your project that you know now? What advice would you give to a person who wants to do a similar project?

Do not ask too many questions about stories! Watch your cognitive budget, and know your storytellers. Do not constrain the responses you gather by communicating unacceptable responses. If you do these things your project will fail.

Contradicting ourselves

Framing the project

What was the impetus for your project? What led to it taking place? Why were you doing it?

This project was done for a government agency whose mandate ... had something to do with technology. I forget the details.

What were the project's goals?

The agency wanted to consider the feelings, needs and fears of the general population with respect to technology in the future. The general hope was that they would surface needs they could meet in advance of problems and maybe nip some problems in the bud.

What did you think would happen during the project before it started? What were your expectations?

This project had a reasonable setup: a strong yet simple goal; only one population of respondents, so no comparisons; an open-ended, exploratory environment; a non-sensitive subject; and a reasonable time budget. No danger signs going in.

The story of the project

What sorts of stories did you collect? How were they collected? Who collected them?

As I recall, an on-line survey was created (not by me, by another consultant) and administered. I believe about two or three hundred stories were collected. I'm not sure how they chose people -- it might have

been an open call on a web site. They must have had some way to try and get a random sample of respondents, but I wasn't involved in that part of the project.

What sorts of annotations or question-asking were done? Who answered the questions or added the annotations?

The people were asked questions about their stories.

How were the stories looked at or considered? Who was involved in this?

I received the stories and answers to questions, and I wrote a catalysis report.

Did you do any group exercises? If so, what were they and how did they go?

No group exercises were done in this project. It was just a web survey.

How did the project end? Were conclusions drawn, and by whom?

I gave the report to the agency (well, actually I gave it to the consultants who hired me and *they* gave it to the agency). I have no idea what happened after that, sadly.

The main thing I found in these stories and answers to questions was a tangle of contradictions. The people who answered this survey are strongly of two minds about technology. In their stories they described technology as dangerous, unreliable, worsening -- and needed. Even in those who said the worst things about technology, like that it would lead to terrible outcomes in the future, said we couldn't live without it. They told a story of hopeless, fatalistic dependence on a technological future they felt was rolling along with or without their consent. Another interesting trend was that those whose work involved technology the most were the least convinced that we need it. Perhaps they saw technology more as a tool to use or put aside than as a force carrying all before it.

High and low points

Do you remember any pleasant surprises during the project?

I found the contradictions in this project intriguing. The project's goals were simple and straightforward, so I had expected straightforward responses. Instead I saw a dense mesh of mixed feelings. This taught me the value of highlighting (as opposed to dampening) contradictions. As a result I developed a habit of, you could say, turning over stones to try and get at what is going on under what can appear to be simple trends. As it happens, asking people to tell you stories is a good way to do that.

Evaluation

Can you share one conclusion of your project that you don't think you could have arrived at in any other way than by asking for and looking at stories?

Contradictions. I have seen some research on ways to allow people to indicate ambivalent feelings on a topic, for example by asking them to mark one *or more* choices that indicate their feelings along a gradient. I like that, but people are sometimes confused by such complex instructions. What brought out the contradictions so well in this project, I think, was two things. The fact that we asked people to tell stories in the first place gave people the freedom to consider complex feelings in a way that asking people

to check one box, or even two boxes, could. Second, we asked people to interpret their stories by considering several dimensions such as reliability, safety, effectiveness, ease, authority, friendliness, fun, and so on. Breaking the interpretations into so many dimensions allowed the differences -- fun but not safe, authoritative but not reliable -- to come out. If we had asked for stories but asked people to place them on only one dimension, say desirability, we would not have found what we did.

Advice

What do you wish you had known before your project that you know now? What advice would you give to a person who wants to do a similar project?

If you suspect that people might have contradictory feelings about the topic you want to explore, make sure you give them several dimensions on which conflicts can play out. Give them a large stage to play out their stories. The other thing that worked well in this project was a strong yet simple topic. Every project balances breadth and depth. The more breadth you cover, meaning the more topics you ask people to consider, the less depth you will get. Contradictions are deep thickets, so it's best to plunge into only one such thicket per project. If you have multiple topics you need to cover but want to explore contradictions in each, that's fine -- just plan multiple simple smaller projects and go deep on each.

Shooting the messenger

Framing the project

What was the impetus for your project? What led to it taking place? Why were you doing it?

This project was done for a government education agency.

What were the project's goals?

The goal of the project was to learn about what works and what doesn't work in education: what helps children learn and what doesn't help them learn.

What did you think would happen during the project before it started? What were your expectations?

This was an exploratory, open-ended project with a simple, well-understood goal. It seemed like it would proceed in a straightforward way.

The story of the project

What sorts of stories did you collect? How were they collected? Who collected them?

I believe this was a large project with several hundred stories collected from teachers, parents and students in a number of schools. I'm not sure how the stories were collected; it might have been using a web form or in workshops.

What sorts of annotations or question-asking were done? Who answered the questions or added the annotations?

Some group or groups of people derived story elements -- probably characters, values and themes, but I'm not sure -- based on stories told. The same set was used by parents, teachers and students to interpret their own stories. Each respondent chose a numerical value for each story element to show how strongly it was present in the story. The result was a mapping between stories and story elements, along with some other answers to questions like how the storyteller felt about it.

How were the stories looked at or considered? Who was involved in this?

After data entry, I was given all of the stories and markings, and I sat with them for a time. I wrote a report, which was presented to the agency people who funded the study.

Did you do any group exercises? If so, what were they and how did they go?

The only group exercises I remember were those used to derive the story elements (after which the participants linked them to the stories).

How did the project end? Were conclusions drawn, and by whom?

This project was pivotal for me because it was the cause of my rules about separating statements and providing provoking perspectives in catalytic project support. When I wrote the report for this project, I was still writing reports with what I saw, what I believed about it and what I thought could be done to address it all mixed together.

What did I see? There were several relevant patterns, but one in particular stood out clearly. Several of the story elements derived by the storytellers had to do with internal strength -- passion, motivation, courage and so on. Another group had to do with morality -- honesty, generosity, humility and so on. Pulling these groups of story elements together, I saw that they were related in a surprising way. According to the way people had marked their own stories, weak, frightened students were seen not *unfortunate* but *irresponsible*. This striking pattern was not evenly distributed, but was weak in students, stronger in parents, and *very* strong in teachers. I called this the "weakness is malice" pattern and cited it as requiring attention to provide the help students needed to succeed.

Having been a weak, frightened student myself, I felt for these children. I knew I had strong feelings about this pattern, so I tried to keep my statements about it professional. But I was completely unprepared for the response I received. When they read my report, the people at the agency became personally offended by my claims and began to make personal attacks on me and on the quality of my work. They vehemently denied that any such pattern could be found and claimed I had cherry-picked the data to suit an agenda. This was entirely untrue - I had only looked at all possible patterns, as I always do - and I was at a loss as to how to respond. The project seemed as though it would end in disaster.

One of my colleagues at the time had the marvelous presence of mind to find a way around the problem, for which I give him high and enduring credit. He visited several of the schools involved in the study, presented my report to those in charge, and asked for their reactions. One after another they responded that the pattern was not only real but well known and a genuine obstacle to the success of children with difficult problems to overcome. He asked if they would be willing to go with him to the government agency and say the same thing again, and they agreed. By the end of that meeting the agency people were keen to discuss ideas on how they could best help struggling students.

This project had a deep and long-lasting impact on PNI methods. You can read about its impact in the "Why catalyze sensemaking?" section of the advanced introduction to PNI. Because of the changes I made after this project, I have never had another report received with such negative emotion as this one.

High and low points

Do you remember any pleasant surprises during the project?

Yes. I was pleasantly surprised to find not only the malice pattern but several other useful patterns having to do with motivation and understanding in helping children learn. Having seen some other projects produce lackluster results, I was enthused to see some truly groundbreaking results.

How about unpleasant surprises?

As I said above, the day on which I received personal insults was hard. But as it led to some serious soul searching and important improvements, in the long term it was a gift much appreciated.

Do you recall any "aha" moments when you realized or learned something critical?

I remember the day when my colleague told me about the meeting with the school principals and the government agency (which I did not attend). From what the people at the agency had said, I did not think anyone could have changed their viewpoint on the issue. But hearing from people in the field did the trick.

In retrospect the approach my colleague took, of going straight to the heart of things, was all of a piece with the participatory spirit of the work. Working with stories is about taking stories to where they need to be. My report did not carry the stories well enough because it carried too much of myself with it. What was needed to overcome the perceived bias was that those closer to the stories should tell the stories themselves, with my involvement obscured. In a way, all of the practices I developed after this project have been attempts to recreate that meeting, to let the people who told the stories and answered the questions speak for themselves.

Evaluation

What turned out the same as you expected? What was worse than expected? What was better?

This project was one of the most painful and valuable I have ever done, and I am grateful for it. It improved the quality of all the projects that came after it. I wish you such projects, and I wish you the strength and good friends to benefit from them.

Did the project meet its goals? Were there other benefits you hadn't expected?

I would like to believe the project had a positive impact on the school system in the end, but of course I can never be sure of that.

Can you share one conclusion of your project that you don't think you could have arrived at in any other way than by asking for and looking at stories?

This was a perfect example of a belief -- it's wrong to be weak -- so deeply seated as to be invisible to everyone involved, including those who sought it. It is a belief almost everyone would deny if confronted

with it directly. Do *you* judge other people unfairly? Who would answer "yes" to that? This is exactly where narrative methods excel.

Advice

What do you wish you had known before your project that you know now? What advice would you give to a person who wants to do a similar project?

When you do story work that involves looking at patterns in stories and answers to questions, it is not enough to *say* you have been impartial in your analysis. You have to *prove* it. When I started including multiple competing interpretations in catalysis reports I found that people were surprised by it. Sometimes it takes people some time to get used to what they see. They try to *find me* in what I am saying. But after a while they stop looking for me and start looking at the stories and patterns, which is what I want them to do. I am not such a fool as to think I always succeed in this endeavor, but I do try.

If you want to look at stories and patterns for other people, you have three options. You can speak from authority; you can stand completely out of the way and refuse to draw any conclusions or present any patterns at all; and you can dance around. The first option is dangerous unless you stay within a defined specialty. The second reduces your bias to exactly zero, but puts a huge burden on the people you are trying to help. Few are willing or able to pore through the large numbers of patterns a helper such as yourself can tackle. I find the third option a workable balance.

The near miss

Framing the project

What was the impetus for your project? What led to it taking place? Why were you doing it?

This was a project for a major hospital.

What were the project's goals?

The goal of the project was to explore the topic of retention in nurses and medical receptionists. Turnover was high in these two groups and the project's funders wanted to find out why and what they could do to improve the situation.

The story of the project

How did the project get started? What happened first?

I helped the client and a colleague develop a set of questions surrounding the issues they thought would be most important to retention: stress, work-life balance, motivation, professional development, and so forth. To do this we reviewed job descriptions, prior interviews, and all other information the client could provide that told us about the people and their work. In a series of telephone calls and emails we improved the questions with the client's help.

What sorts of stories did you collect? How were they collected? Who collected them?

This was a medium-sized project with a few hundred stories collected using a web form.

What sorts of annotations or question-asking were done? Who answered the questions or added the annotations?

Each respondent answered questions about their own stories, of which they told a few. We carefully wrote the questions so they would apply across both groups of respondents and we could compare them.

How were the stories looked at or considered? Who was involved in this?

I sat with the stories and answers and produced a catalysis report, which was given to the client. I don't recall what they did with it except that they based further exploration and discussion on it.

Did you do any group exercises? If so, what were they and how did they go?

I'm not aware that there were any group exercises involved in this project.

How did the project end? Were conclusions drawn, and by whom?

There was one strong conclusion of this project, and it is what makes the project useful to this collection. The funders of this project had a fairly strong idea going in of what they would find. They knew these nurses and receptionists were busy people. They knew the stress of long hours and overwork was going to be central to their ambivalence about staying in their jobs. They were looking for ways to decrease that burden.

What the stories and answers told us was something entirely different. The reason the respondents didn't stay long in their jobs *wasn't* because they were overworked. In fact, these people had a huge appetite for challenge and hard work. What they were missing was a sense of purpose. These people had a strong sense of identity in their work: they wanted to help people, and they didn't mind working hard to do it. What made them want to leave, when they did, was that their hard work didn't seem connected to that identity. Work that seemed disconnected from helping people (and improving their skills at helping people) - busywork and repetitive drudgery with no apparent utility - seemed to them like running in place when they wanted to travel. When these people had obviously useful work, opportunities to learn, and the trust they needed to make a contribution, they wanted to stay. And they *wanted* to work hard.

High and low points

Do you remember any pleasant surprises during the project?

I remember getting very excited when I found that the stories and answers we had collected told a different story than the one the project funders had understood about at the start of the project. Moments when you discover a previously undetected explanation for trends or behaviors are always exciting, because such discoveries often bring opportunities for positive change.

How about unpleasant surprises?

I don't recall any unpleasant surprises in this project. It was probably one the most enjoyable I've ever done -- energetic client, excellent collaboration with colleagues, useful results well received and appreciated. I wish all projects could go so well.

Do you recall any "aha" moments when you realized or learned something critical?

There was one group of stories about an event that evidently had a big impact on the way people felt about their work. The hospital had done a sort of pilot project where a group of nurses at some location or in some function had an opportunity to share ideas online, something like a group blog. The nurses got very excited about the project, but it was shut down after a short time and no plans were made to pick it up again.

I could see how frustrating it must have been to these people to have had the solution to their problem handed to them, apparently randomly, and then taken away again. This story of the solution dangled in front of those in need of it became emblematic of the situation communicated by the respondents. To the administration's point of view, the pilot project was just one of many and had no special importance. They didn't understand that it mattered to the nurses, or if they did, they didn't understand why. Finding this particular pattern of stories helped the client understand both what the storytellers wanted and how the client could help them get it.

Evaluation

What turned out the same as you expected? What was worse than expected? What was better?

This project stands out in my mind as a near miss, meaning a project in which we could have let an important discovery pass us by. Because the client thought the problem was centered on stress and overwork, we could have explored only those topics. As it turned out, the fact that we had ranged broadly in our exploratory questions and didn't confine ourselves to the obvious topics of stress and overwork turned out to be pivotal to the project. If we hadn't given people the permission to talk about identity and purpose in their work, we might have missed the pattern. As I recall, we left the doors wide open on what experiences people could talk about. We asked them to talk about times when they loved or hated their work, when they felt valued or abandoned, hopeful or hopeless, challenged or bored. I can't recall exactly how we came to this open-ended design, but it was a good idea.

Did the project meet its goals? Were there other benefits you hadn't expected?

I can't say what happened as a result of the project, though I do recall that the clients were excited to learn about opportunities to improve retention through offering better support for challenge in meaningful professional growth.

One of the most useful things we found in these stories, other than the overall pattern, was that there seemed to be a rough *timeline* of disillusionment we could track in the stories based on how long people had been in their jobs. It seemed that people would come to the job full of energy, and at some critical point they would tentatively reach out to the institution, perhaps with a new idea for improvement or excitement about a project that spoke to them. If their enthusiasm was met with silence or constraining structure (fill in this form so we can better ignore you), they transitioned to an attitude of learned helplessness. Once people had fallen into this state of resigned indifference they slowly drifted into exploring other options. The challenge to the institution was to *detect* these critical moments and capture their energy in such a way that harnessed it to help both the hospital and its employees. This gave the group much to think about.

One of the valuable assets I got from this project was proof that it pays to do as much up-front work as possible when designing questions. This is not always easy. Many forces press on those who create

questions to ask about stories. The people telling the stories have little time and attention to give. The people asking the questions want to know everything they can possibly know. As a facilitator I want to make my clients happy, but I also want to do my best do bring the voices of the storytellers to those I am helping to listen. There are reasons to keep things focused, and there are opposing reasons to keep things broad. In this project we found a good balance.

Another thing I gained from this project was an awareness that when the people for whom stories are gathered are in administrative or supervisory positions with respect to those who tell the stories - which is often the case - they may need some help thinking about deeply-held beliefs and underlying motivations. I've often seen administrators focus on issues like financial incentives, work schedules and physical settings, but rarely do they talk about issues of purpose, fulfillment, identity or emotional reward. It is not that administrators don't care about the people they support; it is just that they are most familiar (and perhaps most comfortable) considering the logistical aspects of their work. When this situation arises I take care to check whether the project funders might be limiting their scope of exploration due to habitual constraints on the focus of their support.

Can you share one conclusion of your project that you don't think you could have arrived at in any other way than by asking for and looking at stories?

Sometimes an issue can be so important to people that they can hardly speak about it. In these cases direct questions are just parodies of serious conversations. Imagine asking a person to rate their mother's love on a scale, or to choose one word to describe their belief system. It is a useless exercise better left alone. Not for everyone, but for some people in some positions, particularly in ones that involve helping others, their work is like that. Can you ask a nurse or teacher or firefighter to quantify what their work means to them, and why they put up with the long hours and constant stress? Not directly. This is an example of stories bringing out values and beliefs that are difficult to articulate because they are so deeply buried in our selves that what we bring to the surface to show to others can only be a greatly simplified summary of what lies deep beneath.

Advice

What do you wish you had known before your project that you know now? What advice would you give to a person who wants to do a similar project?

If you think you know exactly what a project is going to be about, take a few steps back from that and broaden your view. You *may* be pursuing the goal of proving or falsifying a fixed hypothesis, but chances are if you want to listen to stories you want something more than that. You don't just want to know whether you have guessed correctly; you want to know where the problems and opportunities lie, and what you can do to solve the problems and seize the opportunities. There is some danger in pursuing too broad a course and asking people to talk about anything they like; but the opposite danger, of narrowing the discourse to a fine point, is the greater one. My usual strategy is to find a balance point midway between both dangers, then tip slightly over to the broader view, just in case.

Discovering the obvious

Framing the project

What was the impetus for your project? What led to it taking place? Why were you doing it?

This project was for a pharmaceutical corporation.

What were the project's goals?

This was an ambitious project whose goal was nothing less than understanding what patients believe, hope and fear about doctors and pharmaceutical companies. A practical goal was to revisit a previous market segmentation (done using a non-narrative survey) and see if it could be tested and deepened by supplementation with narrative material. But there was also a mandate to explore some of the untrodden places in the world of the patient experience where rumors and conspiracy theories abound.

What did you think would happen during the project before it started? What were your expectations?

I came into the project after it started and was not involved in the planning or design of questions. So I knew very little going in and had few expectations.

The story of the project

What sorts of stories did you collect? How were they collected? Who collected them?

A few hundred stories were collected from patients in workshops, where they also derived story elements -- characters, values and themes -- and linked their stories to them, marking the strength of presence of each. Participants also answered several questions about each story and about themselves. In addition, this project is one of the few I've been part of in which people answered questions about stories told by others. This was done in order to detect a range of views on events commonly reported, especially related to control, power and intentions.

How were the stories looked at or considered? Who was involved in this?

I received the stories and other data and presented a catalysis report to my client. As I recall my client added some of their own insights to what I had given them and presented all of this together to their client. It was a fairly large project with many points for discussion. I do remember having at least one telephone call with the people for whom the work was done (at the pharmaceutical group) where we showed them the patterns we had observed and discussed interpretations and implications.

Did you do any group exercises? If so, what were they and how did they go?

All the patients in the study participated in creating story elements and linking stories to them. This is difficult to carry out in practice because it requires large amounts of time from participants, but the consultants who facilitated the work (my clients) were motivated and energetic, and they got everything put together very well.

How did the project end? Were conclusions drawn, and by whom?

The work resulted in several useful outcomes, but I will tell you the one conclusion I remember well. This was something that surprised everyone - myself, my client, and their client.

The previous market segmentation had focused on patient mindsets and attitudes toward medical care - were they cooperative or reluctant, for example, or did they see doctors as helpful or obstructive. In the stories and answers collected in this project, it was clear that this segmentation was missing an important dimension. We found that many of the things patients said about themselves, their families, their doctors, and pharmaceutical companies differed depending on what sort of medical condition they had to deal with. It makes sense that some elements of experience would vary by condition, such as the degree of daily pain and whether the condition was difficult to talk about. But what we found was that people with different conditions held different *beliefs* about the behaviors and intentions of doctors and pharmaceutical companies. Even views of morality and responsible behavior differed by condition. When we asked people about their expectations of what a doctor should do and what a pharmaceutical corporation should do; or of how a doctor and patient should negotiate boundaries; or of what constitutes reprehensible behavior on the part of a doctor or pharmaceutical company or representative; or of how and whether friends and family should be involved in care, people with asthma responded consistently differently than people with high blood pressure, and so on. Certain fundamental aspects of each condition - was it risky, painful, disfiguring, isolating, progressive, rare, misunderstood; did it involve societal stigma; did it lead to behavioral changes - had impacts that reached far further than had been previously understood.

This surprising result makes perfect sense in retrospect but was not obvious beforehand. The *experience* of having a condition in which you might be rushed to the emergency room for a life-saving procedure at any time would surely differ from the experience of having a condition where you have daily pain and discomfort but no life-threatening emergencies. Differences in those experiences might lead people to different expectations and explanations about the way they interact with the medical system. What this result said to the pharmaceutical corporation was that perhaps they should consider the fundamental attributes of each condition in determining what those patients needed most. Continuing to consider only attitudinal differences between patients might miss an opportunity to provide the help people need and earn their trust.

High and low points

Do you remember any pleasant surprises during the project?

I love it when projects turn up new ideas, things nobody saw before but that seem obvious once they appear. Sometimes people say that when you find out something obvious you haven't done much of value. I don't believe that. I say that if you have found something obvious *that wasn't obvious before*, you have done the best possible thing because what you found was *waiting* to be obvious. That's a success. In fact, that might be a good measure of a successful project: did it make anything obvious?

How about unpleasant surprises?

This was one of the last projects I did just before I started using statistical analyses in the quantitative part of the work. It's a bit embarrassing to admit now, but at this point I was still "eyeballing" differences between numbers (answer counts, placements on scales) in my reports. I remember having a few telephone calls on this project where my client and I tried to tease out whether a pattern was real based on

staring at it together. It was difficult and frustrating, and I'm relieved I got past that limitation. Statistics might be a pain, but doing without them can be even worse.

Do you recall any "aha" moments when you realized or learned something critical?

Just that one about discovering the impact of medical conditions on ways of seeing the medical system, which was "aha" enough.

Were there any times during the project when things seemed too difficult or challenging to go on? What was the challenge and what did you do about it?

One difficulty with this project was that because the issues were complex and the exploration deep, the report was very long, too long. My client had a lot of difficulty making sense of all the patterns I presented, and they pressed me, hard, to prioritize what I had found. I never like prioritizing results because it smacks of selection and allows bias to enter. Inevitably some trends are highlighted and others are not, and who am I to judge what matters? But this project forced me to figure out how I could prioritize without biasing the result.

The way I solved the problem was to mark the relative strength of each pattern, typically as strong, medium or weak. Strength referred not to surprise or importance or meaning, but to simple numerical differences: this difference is larger, in proportion, than that one. This helped me sort through the many results in order to find those to highlight in our discussion. I still believe strongly in presenting all available patterns to clients, and I still do, but this pattern strength method has proved useful in many other projects.

Evaluation

What turned out the same as you expected? What was worse than expected? What was better?

This was a successful project for everyone, at least as I remember it. Everyone got something useful they could use going forward, including possibly the people who told the stories themselves.

Did the project meet its goals? Were there other benefits you hadn't expected?

I was excited to find out about the impact of medical conditions on patient views, both for the results of this project and because it lent support to a widening array of story elements we could use in future projects. I already used story elements (characters, themes and values), and had experimented with situational story elements in a workshop setting. But these differences by disease led me to think about similar conditions or environments. If people could characterize the circumstances they find themselves in, could finding ways to talk about attributes of those situations help people communicate feelings and beliefs between situations? Could condition-based story elements help a person with lupus help a doctor with migraines understand why they didn't want to try a particular treatment? Could a city planner use a constructed condition to explain to residents their vision for the city's future? It's a promising idea that has yet to be fully explored.

Can you share one conclusion of your project that you don't think you could have arrived at in any other way than by asking for and looking at stories?

I can't say for certain that asking people to characterize doctors and pharmaceutical companies, ones they know well or in general, without asking them to tell stories would not have resulted in similar results as far as the overall conclusion of the project. Possibly differences in views of the medical system would have come out even in direct questioning. But because these patients were given permission to include rumors and speculation in their stories and reflections, this helped to bring out such subtle details into sharper focus. Issues of control and negotiation over decision making in particular are difficult to articulate in direct questioning.

Advice

What do you wish you had known before your project that you know now? What advice would you give to a person who wants to do a similar project?

This project is a good example of a "when you think you know all there is to know" project. When you think there is no reason to learn more about a topic but you haven't yet explored it in a narrative way, you may find yourself surprised by what you can find. In that situation, as this project shows, what works best is to cast a broad net and prepare yourself to be surprised by the obvious.

APPENDICES

At this point only a list of references cited is included here. Eventually there will be an index and possibly a glossary.

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