Working with Stories
in Your Community or Organization

by Cynthia F. Kurtz

When you work with stories, you can ask people to tell stories about their experiences related to some subject of importance to you (and usually to them), and you can also ask them to answer some questions about those stories. When you do these things, you can find out things and make things happen that wouldn't be possible otherwise.

This book is an informational resource for people who want to get started working with stories on a small scale in their communities and organizations. It is also available online at http://www.workingwithstories.org.

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome

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- find things out,
- catch emerging trends,
- make decisions,
- get new ideas,
- resolve conflicts,
- connect people,
- help people learn, and
- enlighten people.

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Status

This is the third draft after addition of three case studies in Spring 2009.

Improve the book!

Each section of this book is linked to a reader-contribution page on the Google group that accompanies the book. See the link under "For further reading" in each section. To add your own insights and advice to the book, or to ask questions of other readers, please join the Google group.

About the author

My name is Cynthia Kurtz. I've been working as an independent researcher and consultant at/with/for a series of places (IBM Research, IBM's Global Services consultancy practice, IBM's Institute of Knowledge Management, IBM's Cynefin Centre, and Cognitive Edge) in the area variously called "organizational narrative", "business narrative", and "narrative knowledge management" (among other names), since 1999. Before that I was an evolutionary biologist and wrote environmental educational software.

Looking for something bigger?

If you want to do a larger project, or have someone else do a project for you, or get started consulting in this area, I suggest you look at the Cognitive Edge web site for a more in-depth approach. They have many open source method documents on their web site, and they also give an excellent training course for people wanting to learn more about the approach (and more besides) which I strongly recommend for anyone wanting to get deeper into the subject. The Anecdote group is also a great source of information and training on these ideas and methods.

About this book

This is an online book about how to get started working with stories, using an approach I helped develop and recommend, on a small scale in communities and organizations. Since 1999 I've helped plan and carry out several dozen story projects for corporations, governments and non-profits around the world, and I've learned a lot. This book is my attempt to give some of what I've learned to the world.

I got the idea for writing a resource like this many years ago, but never had the time (or felt I knew enough) to attempt it. When I found the book Where There Is No Doctor, which was

written to help people who have little access to medical care learn to help themselves, I started joking with friends that I should write a book called "Where There Is No Story Consultant". I looked around on the web, but aside from a thousand books on how to *tell* stories, I could find almost nothing to help people get started working with stories.

There are quite a few people working in this area, all over the world, most of them as consultants to large firms and governments. People who want to get started doing this sort of consulting, or who work at places that have budgets, have many resources they can use to get started in this area. But as far as I know, there aren't many good resources for people in small communities or organizations working without budgets to get started doing small-scale story projects.

My assumptions

I assume you are a person who is responsible for or represents or just belongs to a community or organization and wants to help that community or organization become more healthy in some way. Perhaps you believe your community needs to:

- know something about its members or customers or constituents, or
- learn better, or
- be more productive, or
- be more peaceful, or
- resolve an internal conflict, or
- get along better with another community, or
- plan for the future, or
- make decisions, or
- reduce danger, or
- broaden thinking, or
- consider fresh perspectives, or
- get new ideas, or
- remember the past, or
- learn from each other, or
- pursue a common goal, or....
- many other purposes.

I assume that maybe you've heard about this type of work in general and want to find out more about how you can get started doing this sort of project but don't know what to do and have some questions. I also assume that you don't have the time or money or interest (yet) to get more deeply into the subject than what I cover here. I point to some recommendations for further reading in the [Resources](#) section and at the end of some sections.

A note on terms

The approach I describe here was developed by a loose community of people working over the years, sometimes together and sometimes apart. Sometimes we have agreed on what to call things and sometimes we haven't: that's healthy. I use the terms I like best (they are the ones I use to myself) for two reasons: first, it's my party and I'll say what I want to, and second, I prefer the terms I use because I think they are simpler and easier to understand. You are free to look at alternative terms in other places and decide whether you agree with me or not.

A note on pictures

You are probably wondering why there are so many pictures of leaves and things in this book. I like to take pictures of nature, so I have lot of pictures I can use (most are things in my back yard). I was looking for pictures to accompany the text and to provoke thought, and these seemed to work to get people thinking. (Your mileage may vary.)

A note on references (and the lack thereof)

I'm the kind of person who usually writes papers with a hundred references listed, and that takes time. In order to force myself to get this written quickly (because I don't have a lot of time to spare and because I have a tendency to take too long to perfect things) I haven't allowed myself to cite references for statements like "people have an innate ability to tell and understand stories". Most of what I say here is from my own experience helping people with story projects, but I do say some things I first

read in the literature on narratology and sociology and psychology and anthropology and so on without specific references. Most of the statements I'm making here can be looked up easily by anybody who cares to look. Generally, if I say "it is well known that" something, it means "you can go and look it up and you will find evidence for it". Granted, that is not proper scientific writing, but I'm writing this as more of a friendly conversation than a peer-reviewed publication. You as the reader should take it in that light. I do list some of my favorite references in the **Resources** section.

License

What is working with stories?

Working with stories means:

1. asking people to tell stories (and usually, asking people to answer questions about the stories they tell), then
2. working with the stories (and sometimes with the answers to the questions and the patterns they form) to find things out, catch emerging trends, make decisions, get new ideas, resolve conflicts, connect people, help people learn, and/or enlighten people.

The approach I describe in this book developed over about a decade as a joint effort with several colleagues at several places (for a list see the **About this book** section). It's not something that belongs to anyone, but something that grew in a community of people working with stories in their own unique ways. I think of the approach as sort of like a huge but kind whale that lets us swim alongside as long as we behave ourselves. This book is an invitation to come and swim along yourself.

I first wrote the phrase "working with stories" as a broad description of all the things one might do with stories back in a 1999 paper (which was never published). When I wanted to write this book I looked at all the names people use to describe this approach, but I didn't think any of them really did justice to the scope of what I wanted to show was possible. So I went back to what I've always called it, to myself. I like the phrase because it connotes:

* working with a medium like clay or wood, or tending a garden: shaping it, learning to understand it, making something of it
* working with other people: getting to know them, respecting them, working together as a team

I thought of calling the book something having to do with "minding" or "tending" stories, but finally settled on "working with stories" because it seemed more approachable and understandable.

What working with stories is *not*

The main difference between this approach and many others that collect stories is this: a person who is working with stories does not tell or interpret or change or even select stories, *ever*. All of these things are done *only by the people in the group of interest*. What the person running a story project does is *help the stories get to where they need to be* to help the community achieve a goal. To do this they can collect stories, ask questions about them, and help people look at, think about, and talk about the stories, the answers, and patterns they form. I and others have seen from experience that this approach is superior to approaches that don't respect the integrity of the raw story and end up (whatever their good intentions) injecting the biased interpretations of people outside the community.

Things you can do

These are some of the things you can do when you work with stories.

Find things out

By asking people to tell stories about subjects you care about, and then

asking them some questions about the stories they've told, you can look at the **patterns** that appear when many of these stories are considered together. An example of a project that finds things out might be one where you ask a group of nursing home patients to tell stories about interactions with their doctors.

Catch emerging trends before they get bigger

This is sort of like finding things out, but it covers situations where you don't know what sorts of things people are concerned about and you don't have any particular questions to ask, but simply want to know what is on the horizon in terms of growing problems or opportunities. An example of a project that catches emerging trends might be one where you ask a group of teenagers to tell stories about parties they have been to or volunteer work they have enjoyed.

Make decisions

Looking at patterns in told stories (especially when done in a group sensemaking session) can provide practical support when choosing between available options. When you want to collect stories to support decision making, you might want to get people to move into fictional space to consider alternative possibilities for the future. An example of a project that helps people make decisions might be one that presents stories representing three different possible futures of a town and asks townspeople to answer questions about the stories and respond with stories of their own.

Get new ideas

If you want to plan for the future or solve a problem but want to find as many possible options as you can, you can cast a wide net and invite a large group of people to brainstorm with you by asking them to tell stories. An example of a project that gets new ideas might be one that asks people in an area plagued with gang violence to tell stories about times when they saw tense confrontations defused without violence.

Resolve conflicts

One way to help people in a group understand life from the eyes of people in another group is to collect anonymous stories from both groups and make them available in ways that make it easy to connect stories across traditional boundaries. An example of a project that resolves conflicts might be one that asks kids from all over the world to tell about their first friendship or their happiest day with their parents or their proudest accomplishment, and reveals their nationality only after the story has been read.

Connect people to each other

Stories can connect people within as well as between groups. Providing a means for people to tell stories about their experiences in a group can help new members understand the unwritten rules of the community as well as provide a cultural language for resolving disputes. An example of a project that connects people might be one where university students are asked about their first day in their dormitory.

Help people learn

Telling stories to help people understand complex topics is both an ancient practice and an innate capacity. Providing a means to collect, provide context for, organize, and make available such learning stories can help a community to be more collectively productive. An example of a project that helps people learn might be one where a piece of software incorporates "Eureka!" and "Help!" buttons which encourage users to tell the story of what they discovered or what went wrong. In the "Help!" instance, the story could also function as a search pattern to help the user find a solution to their problem as well as to help other users articulate their needs and tell the software designers about improvements they could make.

Enlighten people

Groups that have a mandate to educate people about particular subjects will find that story projects can be helpful to them in two ways. First, collecting stories of real experiences about a topic can help plan the best method of communicating a message. Second, one of the best ways to reach people if you want to persuade them of something is to show them the raw experiences of real people, not more of the hype and prepared advertising they are immersed in. An example of a project that changes minds might be one that collects stories about adoption and makes them available to people on the fence about becoming adoptive parents.

A story project can include any one or more of these purposes, and probably more I haven't thought of.

Things you can't do

So what *can't* you do by working with stories? You can't find specific answers, test hypotheses or conduct experiments as you would in a scientific endeavor. If conducting a proper scientific experiment is like using a tiny scalpel, asking people to tell stories is like using a bludgeon: it's a very blunt instrument. You can come up with hypotheses, but you can't control how people will interpret the questions you ask them, so you can never be sure if those hypotheses were proven or disproven. You can't create a control group, because you can't control how people will react. But *for those very reasons*, asking people to tell stories is a far better instrument for finding out how they feel and think than any other method. Giving up control is the best way to get at the truth.

A particular turning point in my understanding of working with stories was when I learned about **participatory action research** and realized that it was the best way to think and talk about any area involving the thoughts and feelings and beliefs of people. Participatory action research recognizes that it is impossible to study a group of people without changing them, and so it *embraces* that fact and uses it to help people *participate* in making change happen in beneficial ways. It marries research with action and participation, or rather it admits the fact that research *is* action and participation, when the subject of that research is people.

The other thing you can't do in a story project is *lie*. If you try to use the stories people tell you to create propaganda that distorts what they said (though not all propaganda does), chances are the truth will come out. And when it does, not only will nobody ever trust you enough to tell you the truth again, but nobody will ever believe that anything you report as being a true story is really what anybody said. That's why the so-called "reality shows" are such a joke: nobody really believes any of it is unscripted. You can't really *use* stories; you can just *work with* them (and they sure know how to defend themselves!).

For further reading

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **What is working with stories?** Google Group page.

Why work with stories?

These are answers to some questions I commonly get asked about this approach.

Isn't this the same as surveys and questionnaires?

There is a phenomenon I like to call "the power of stories", which is that people act differently and expect different things when they tell stories than when they talk normally. There is a ton of literature on the differences between storytelling and other conversation, which anybody can look up. Some of the things I've personally noticed about people and stories are:

1. Telling a story is by nature a more personal, animated and emotional response than providing a factual answer because it taps into a different set of instinctual behavior patterns. Because of this, people often reveal things about their feelings or opinions on a subject while they are telling a story that they wouldn't have been willing or able to reveal when asked a direct question about the topic.
2. People tend to have stronger reactions to hearing stories, in terms of the emotions they show, than they have to hearing factual information. For example, listeners tend to fidget less and lean in more when a story is being told than when someone is giving opinions or relating information. This makes asking people to interpret stories (i.e., answer questions about them) a good way to surface their feelings about important issues.
3. A story has a natural situation-tension-resolution shape, and people usually tend to find it difficult to "leave" the story before the resolution has occurred, whether they are telling it or listening to it -- it pulls them in and contains them until it has completed its course.

The most important of these observations is the first one: asking people to tell stories gets different, and usually more "telling", results than asking people to respond to simple direct questions. If the kind of thing you need to know, or you need other people to know, has to do with beliefs and opinions and feelings, asking people to tell you stories can provide a more authentic result than asking them direct questions.

For example, compare these two questions:

1. Do you think your local government is doing a (a) terrible, (b) okay, (c) good enough, or (d) excellent job meeting your needs?
2. What was the last interaction you had with your local government? Can you tell us what happened? (After the story is told) How do you feel about that story? What do you think it says about your local government?

Obviously the second approach is going to get you richer information if you want to answer the question "how do people feel about the performance of their local government?". Note that this approach does involve some instances of question asking, but the questions asked are *about the stories people have told*, not directly about the topic of interest. That distance creates a degree of safety which allows people to tell you things they would not otherwise be able to tell you.

Having said that, any information you can find about designing and writing good surveys and survey questions (of which there is a lot on the web) should be useful to you. There are all sorts of free survey tools on the web and lots of information available on how to use them, all of which apply here.

But aren't stories just "anecdotal evidence"?

Yes they are, but it depends on what you are doing with them. For example, say you asked people to tell stories about a giant software company whose name starts with M. You might get some pretty strange stories, like that they are in charge of governments, or that they eat children, or whatever. Of course it would be ridiculous to believe any of those stories, which is what the term "anecdotal evidence" refers to: believing told stories to be objectively true. The point of a story project is not to take told stories as any sort of objective truth, but to take them as indicators of the feelings, beliefs and opinions of those who told the stories. In fact, asking groups of people you expect to have opposing opinions the same story-eliciting questions is a wonderful way to conduct a story project, because you can see all of the different truths arrayed in front of you and survey the landscape of belief.

When you ask different people the same questions (for and about their stories) you can apply quantitative methods to the data produced to create the kinds of scientific, non-anecdotal evidence you need to draw statistical conclusions. For example, you might find that 80% of people who told stories they labeled as "strongly negative" about the giant software

company also reported having purchased products from that company in the last year.

Does anybody really tell the truth in these things?

That depends on what you mean by "truth". One of the things I learned on starting to work with stories is that there are many types of truth. There is objective truth, which is probably what you mean by your question, but there are also other truths: emotional truths, like "I feel sad about this" (even if the thing they feel sad about isn't strictly speaking true); cultural truths, like those that come up when urban legends surface; group truths, like those that everybody in the group knows but rarely shares with outsiders, religious truths, mythological truths, personal truths, and on and on. When you do a story project, unlike a scientific experiment, you are not very interested in finding or passing on objective truths. The other kinds are more important, and stories are exceptionally wonderful vehicles for transmitting non-objective truths.

Why does it matter if the stories are "raw"?

Let me tell you a story. One story project I did was for a company that wanted to think about how its customers perceived one of its products. They 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 people on the project wanted to *edit* the stories to *remove* all "errors" and replace what people said with "facts." I managed to talk the person out of doing that, but only by agreeing that they could place a "fact" addendum after each story denouncing what the customer said and setting things straight. The person did this, but the "fact addendum" worked against the goals of the project, since it was obvious to everyone that the point of the project was not to establish the facts (which the staff members knew already) but to help people understand the way customers thought.

In my experience, if there are *any* alterations to the actual words spoken, for any reason, the story project is pretty much ruined. There *are* times when you need to keep some stories away from the larger group because they are particularly inflammatory or erroneous or malicious, and you may need to remove identifying details, but you should never disguise or alter the meaningful content of the stories.

Is this the same as qualitative research?

Many projects in the fields related to qualitative research (narrative inquiry, narrative research, ethnography, focus groups, and so on) have a central problem: they involve researchers collecting stories which they interpret, thereby inserting their own biases into the project. It's true that researchers are supposed to be trained in such a way that they avoid inserting biases, but running a focus group or observing a group without seeing what you want to see is a fine art which (in my opinion) few can really practice. The approach I describe in this book removes expert interpretation and instead relies on considering many instances of interpretation by the storytellers and by others in the community or communities of interest. When you run a story project using this approach, *you never interpret a single story*. What you do is look at *patterns* in the interpretations of stories by others: those whose voices you want to hear or convey.

This is just the kind of marketing stuff used for selling candy, isn't it? It's not for serious work.

Actually it's been used for some pretty serious stuff, life and death issues on large scales. In fact, using narrative methods is one of the best ways to get into spaces where it is difficult to get answers to questions because people are unwilling or unable to provide answers in any other way.

You are just preying on people and finding out their secrets, aren't you? What about privacy?

What to do about **privacy** is one of the major decisions involved in setting up and running a story project, as it is with any project in which people disclose information about themselves. Whether privacy is a strong issue depends on the group of people you will be asking to tell stories, the nature of the stories you will be asking them to tell, the purpose of the project, and what you intend to do with the stories.

Why don't you talk about methods for telling stories, to motivate and persuade people?

There is a fairly large industry centered around telling people prepared stories in order to motivate, persuade, educate, inform, and inspire them. Certainly that sort of thing has its place in the world, and you can find lots of information about it on the web and in books, but ... I find it narrow and, honestly, not very interesting. I'm much more excited about what can happen when you listen to people and connect people, because I think it is many times more powerful than simply trying to influence them.

For further reading

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Why work with stories?** Google Group page.

Stories that work

What I mean by "stories that work" is stories that contain enough of four essential elements to make insight-producing patterns appear: experiences, events, emotions and perspectives.

Experiences

You need to collect true, raw experiences of real people: not platitudes, opinions, suggestions or complaints. Stories can be second-hand, third-hand or even rumored --

even newspaper stories are fine -- as long as the story *resonated* with the person who told it. In the case of second-hand stories there are really two stories being told: the original story and the story of its resonation with the storyteller (which is worthy of notice in itself). But if a person says "our company motto is, we always overcome", that is not a story.

Events

You need to collect stories about *things that happened*. Many of the things people will respond with when you ask for stories I call **half-stories**, because they are somewhat useful but not the same as a real recounting of events. These are some of the types of half-stories that are common.

- **Situations**: People might say something like, "I had a hard time my first day at work. Nobody thought I would be able to pick this stuff up fast enough." Quite often people will stop there, only having described a situation without resolving it. If this sort of thing happens in a group session or interview, you can of course say "And then what happened?" But if you have no such opportunity (it's over the web, or the people doing the interviewing are following a script or are otherwise untrained), the full story can be lost.
- **Scenarios**: Sometimes people generalize their experiences into a sort of generic story, like this: "You click here, you click there, it doesn't do what you think it will, you give up, and then later you find out you just didn't wait long enough but there was no way of knowing it was doing something." Obviously this must have happened a few times, but the generalized scenario is not as good as the particular story, because too much telling detail has been lost.
- **References**: Sometimes people don't tell a story but simply refer to it, expecting that others will pick up on the reference. This is sometimes a problem in group sessions. People might say something like, "Remember that time in the elevator? It was like that." Which is fine to the people who know what happened in the elevator, but not much use to a story project.

Emotions

It's not hard to get people to tell you what happened during a period of time if you only ask for the facts. But often in a story project you need to know more than facts; you need to know how people *felt* when things happened.

Perspectives

The last thing you absolutely need to have stories that work is individual perspectives on events. You need people to tell *their own stories*. For example, people might tell you what happened in an incident, but may be afraid or unable to tell you how they themselves felt about it. That sort of story is less able to "work" in the way you need it to than the person's own story.

What is a story anyway?

The very simplest definition of a story is: a recounting of events where you wonder what is going to happen, and then you find out. In order for you to wonder what is going to happen there has to be a **tension** between two or more possibilities (it's why there needs to be a comma in that first sentence). Aristotle called it potentiality, development and result -- meaning, something *could* happen, something *does* happen, and what happens *means something*. There can be other recountings of events that are not stories -- for example, lists of things that happened on different dates, or places you stopped on your way to the coast -- but if there is no uncertainty there is no story. Uncertainty is the reason stories draw us in and engage us, because they tap into problem-solving instincts that have evolved over millions of years.

The dominant metaphor I use throughout this book is that stories are like seeds. I like this metaphor because it captures how stories condense complex understandings and perspectives into packages that can be transmitted and stored, then retrieved from storage, planted, and germinated again in the fertile soil of receptive minds. And like seeds, stories are organisms of their own, worthy of respect and admiration.

For further reading

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Stories that work** Google Group page.

BEFORE YOU START

Planning your project

There are five decisions you need to make in planning a story project:

1. Why are you doing the project? (goals)
2. What is the project about? (focus)
3. What will the project juxtapose? (breadth)
4. How big of a project will it be? (scope)
5. How will you carry out the project? (plan)

Goals: Why are you doing the project?

If the project was over and had succeeded beyond your wildest dreams, what would have taken place? What would you have gained or found or achieved? Ask yourself this question, write down as many brief answers as you can think of (without stopping yourself to critique; just brainstorm), then cluster the answers together (put ones that seem similar, for any reason, together) and see what patterns emerge. Then do the same thing with the opposite question: what if the project was over and had *failed* beyond your worst nightmares? What would you have missed or lost or been disappointed about? This can actually bring out more goals than the positive story, since you might not admit some goals to yourself.

It's best to do these kinds of thinking about goals in a group if you have one. You might end up with more than one goal, but usually one will be primary and the others will be secondary.

To better understand your goals it is useful to put them into a category or categories. You might recognize this list of things you can do with a story project from the start of this book:

- find things out,
- catch emerging trends,
- make decisions,
- get new ideas,
- resolve conflicts,
- connect people,
- help people learn, and
- enlighten people.

Which of these match what you want to do? If more than one match, which are the most important? Does that help you refine your goals?

Focus: What is the project about?

The focus or center of a project can include things like:

- a topic, like "our community's ten year vision"
- a question, like "what is the range of views about the planned bridge?"
- a decision, like "should we build a shopping center or a park?"
- a problem, like "what can we do about science illiteracy?"
- a goal, like "we would like to improve our services to patients"
- a group of people, like "my family's story"
- a perspective, like "how new immigrants see our town"
- a person, like "stories about our founder"

The focus is going to have a lot to do with the project's goals, but it is more like the "what" instead of the "why" of the project. These are some ways to think about the focus of your project:

- If you could **ask** any person any question and would be guaranteed to get an honest answer (magically), whom would you ask and about what? Why would you want to know that? What would knowing that do for you?

- If you had "magic ears" and could **overhear** anyone talking to anyone at any time and in any place, where and when and whom would you want to listen to? Why?
- If you could be a "fly on the wall" and **observe** any situation or event, what situation would you want to witness? Why?

Some answers might be:

- If I could, I would ask my grandfather how he came to this country, because I'd like to understand that part of my past.
- I wish I could ask customers who have stopped coming here why they left, so I could change those things and make them want to come back, and prevent other people from wanting to leave.
- I wish I could overhear people making a decision to commit a burglary, so I could understand their motives and prevent it from happening.
- I'd like to overhear people talking honestly about whether they think I'd make a good mayor, because I need to decide whether to run or not.
- I'd love to be a fly on the wall the very first time a person sat behind the wheel of a car, because I'd be able to better understand what sorts of misconceptions they had that I could help them with.
- I'd like to be a fly on the wall when people are finding courage they didn't know they had in terrible circumstances, so that I could better help the young people in my community to find courage they didn't know they had.

Once you have thought of some of these fictitious ideal circumstances, you will know what the focus of your project will be: it's whatever you want to ask about, or overhear, or observe.

Breadth: What will the project juxtapose?

All good story projects have breadth as well as focus, though breadth is easier to overlook. Breadth usually involves juxtaposition, or comparing things side by side. For example:

- possibilities, like "shopping center, park, and bridge"
- groups of people, like "immigrants and natives"
- perspectives, like "technophiles and technophobes"
- time frames, like "views today and views from the turn of the century"
- locations, like "local views and views from around the world"
- goals, like "things we'd like to accomplish in the next ten years"

Breadth is not so much about why you are doing the project but what will make it succeed. For example, you aren't going to be able to find out what your community's ten year vision should be unless you include people from all parts of the community, or all ages, or all perspectives, or stories from the community's past. One way to decide on the breadth of your project, once you have your focus, is to pretend the project succeeded and ask yourself "what made it work?" And then pretend it failed and ask yourself "what made it fall down?". The answers to those questions may give you what you need to decide on the breadth aspect of the project.

Scope: How big of a project will it be?

The collection of stories and other information generated by a story project should be **rich in meaning**. That does not necessarily mean it needs to be *large*. There is a tension between the sheer number of stories you collect and how many questions you can ask about each of them (and get meaningful answers). I've seen story sets with 50 stories in them that were richer in meaning than story sets with 500 stories in them but in which either few questions were asked or few meaningful answers were given.

As far as a minimum, I wouldn't recommend collecting fewer than 30 stories. One hundred stories is a good number: enough to show some useful patterns and trends, but not enough to be hard to manage. When you get over 200 stories dealing with the volume starts to get limiting.

But it depends on what you are doing with the stories. If you are looking for patterns in them

yourself, volume is a more important consideration than if you are just making them available for other people to look at and talk about. It also depends on how many projects you've done and what sorts of methods you've worked out for processing the stories. If you're just starting, a nice manageable project where you ask 30 people to tell two stories each is a good idea.

Plan: How will you carry out the project?

What I mean by the plan of the project is *what you do in it*. For nearly all story projects you collect stories, so that part doesn't differ (much) from project to project. It is in what you *do* with the stories that one project differs from another.

There are three general types of plan:

1. Look: Find useful patterns that provide insights into important topics.
2. Think: Make sense of things and come to decisions.
3. Talk: Connect people and stories.

Any project can involve more than one type of plan, but usually one will be more important than the others. For example, you may help people resolve conflicts by giving them ways to look, think and talk about the stories told by other people; but probably getting them to talk will be the primary plan.

Bringing it together

Once you know your project's goals, focus, breadth, scope, and plan, it's a good idea to write them into a nice clean sentence that you can use to describe the project to anyone involved. Here are some fictional examples.

- In order to find out what people want for our community in the future (goal), we will ask people from all demographic categories in our community (breadth) to tell at least two stories (scope) about the next ten years of our community (focus), and we will look for patterns in the stories told (plan).
- In order to rediscover forgotten ideas and get new ideas for extending the art of

photography (goal), we will ask 20 current photographers (scope) to talk and think about (plan) stories about decisions and dilemmas (focus) collected from 150 photographers (scope) going back through 15 decades (breadth).
- In order to improve our patient care (goal), we will collect stories about office visits (focus) from 50 patients and doctors (scope) across a wide spectrum of disorders and complaints (breadth), then we will look at and think about the patterns we see in the stories and disseminate a report to all doctors and waiting rooms in the network (plan).
- In order to help foreign students succeed at our university (goal), we will ask thirty students (scope) from all countries attending the university (breadth) to tell stories about their first month at the university (focus) and make those stories available to other foreign students who need help settling in (plan).

For further reading

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Planning your project** Google Group page.

Knowing your storytellers

There are a few things you need to understand about the people you will be asking to tell stories before you decide what is the best way to approach them. Consider these questions about the group you will be asking to tell stories (or about any subgroups, if there are differences).

How much do authority and power matter to your storytellers?

Are they people who expect to be obeyed or people who expect to be ignored? Or will the authority level of storyteller and listener be unimportant?

If authority matters to your storytellers,

- With people who are *used to authority*, you may need to prove the worthiness of your project, you may need to approach them in a respectful or even subservient way, and you may need to guide them towards telling stories, which they may disdain as beneath them. They may refuse to participate in exercises or travel to group sessions, but they will often consider giving an interview to a properly deferential person.
- For people *unused to authority* or afraid to say something that people in authority will hear, you may need to convince them that you really do want to hear their voices. Group sessions and exercises may be useful to help this group of storytellers speak out. If the issues are too private to air in a group, a carefully worded interview may be best, and special attention to your privacy policy is essential.

If you are dealing with a community or organization that is highly stratified, you have to be careful bringing people of different ranks together. It is sometimes better to separate groups of people who will inhibit each other from storytelling.

If authority is not an issue in your group of storytellers, for example if they are just people who live on the same block, you can ignore these issues. But watch out -- there may be authority lurking where you hadn't expected it. Maybe the older people will expect more deference, or the people who have lived on the block longer, or the people who keep the park clean, and so on and so on. One useful way to find out if there will be any authority issues is to ask people who you think might have different levels of authority how they would feel about participating in a group session with people from another group. If they say something like, "What? With them?" you have an issue to attend to.

What is your storytellers' level of confidence?

Are they timid or boastful? With people who tend to boast you have to watch out for lectures and attempts to "set things straight", and you may need to focus their energy on telling real stories of their experiences. With people who

are excessively timid you may need to provide extra measures of privacy and ways to contribute without becoming too exposed to possible ridicule.

How busy are your storytellers?

Some people literally cannot give you five minutes out of their day, and others can give you days and days. If people are very busy you will probably need to avoid asynchronous methods such as email (they will not respond) and you probably will not be able to get them to commit to a planned group session. You may have to content yourself with a half-hour interview conducted over the phone during their lunch hour (but that still may be very fruitful). When people have plenty of time to give you, you can have the luxury of asking them to go through exercises, answer many questions, and so on (though see the section on cognitive budget).

Are all your groups equally easy to get access to?

If you need to juxtapose the views of more than one group of people, you may have difficulty getting the same numbers of stories from all groups. For example, it is usually easier to get stories from employees at most organizations than it is to get stories from people who use the services of the organization (customers, visitors, etc). You may need to spend more time and energy on one group than another in order to make sure the focus and breadth of your project is supported.

How much importance do your storytellers place on succeeding?

You would be amazed at the number of people who try to figure out how to "win" when you ask them to tell stories. They assume there is one right response and try their hardest to succeed. Depending on your storytellers, this issue can range from trivial to ruinous. For example, some respondents refuse to tell a negative story, no matter how horrible their experiences with something have been, because they think they will succeed only by telling about something wonderful. Or they think you want to hear "useful" stories, so they try very hard to tell a story that is obviously elucidating, even if it is not something that happened to them or anyone else. These attempts to "win" can be elucidating (what do they think it means to win?), but when mixed in with real experiences they can make it harder to find out what is actually happening in a situation.

When you have indications that your storytellers will be trying too hard to succeed (rather than just telling honest stories about their experiences), there are two ways to deal with it. First, you can explain carefully the point of what you are doing and how they can succeed in helping you -- thereby using their drive to succeed in useful ways. Alternatively, you can disrupt their drive to succeed by asking questions in ways that don't provide an obvious way to succeed. For example, instead of asking "What was the best day you ever had at work?" you might ask "What happened the first time you went out on a client project?". By directing them to a very specific recollection you can avoid giving them the options of choosing an astoundingly wonderful story with which to win the game.

How concerned are your storytellers with privacy?

This one is obvious: if you think the group of people you will be asking to tell stories will be more aware of security and privacy issues than most people, you need to pay a lot of attention to your privacy policy. Don't assume; ask, because people might be more wary than you think. Also, if you will be talking to two groups and one is more concerned than the other, you might want to use two different methods to talk to them.

How large of a bag of grievances are your storytellers carrying?

Is there a lot of pent-up emotion in this group of people? If you expect to release a lot of emotion

you need to pay attention to privacy and make it very clear what the goals of the project are, in order to avoid people taking out their negative emotions on you instead of releasing them by telling you what they are upset about. Helping people feel that it is safe to talk about their negative feelings is important, because probably the goal of your project is to understand those feelings and find out what can be done to ameliorate the situation. If you can't help people surface their negative feelings in a safe and productive way, your project will have been in vain. Some of the exercises such as exploring metaphorical space can be helpful in opening emotional floodgates safely.

Are your storytellers' feelings about you and about the project positive or negative?

Will the people you will be asking to tell stories view you (and possibly the group you represent) as a friendly helper or as a hostile force? If you will be viewed as hostile, you can either follow the procedures for the "bag of grievances" situation (strong anonymity, clear goals, helpful exercises), or you can remove yourself from the center of the project by having someone *else* elicit stories. For example, asking people to interview each other, or asking outsiders to conduct interviews or run group sessions, can help people open up and talk about you when you are the problem they are upset about.

How seriously will your storytellers take the project?

I remember once answering a phone call and being asked if Coke or Pepsi was more in line with my lifestyle. I said, "It's sugar water!" (As I recall the interviewer dryly commented, "Oh, a philosopher.") The point is, some people may not think your project is as important as you think it is. This often happens when the storytellers are young people. I don't know how many web collections I've seen where one of the dominant answers was "this thing is STUPID!!!". Sigh.

When you think your storytellers will not take the project seriously, either because they think nothing is serious, or because they think the

subject matter is unimportant (as I did with the Coke/Pepsi call), or because they think nothing anyone does can change anything (even if the subject matter is important), there are some things you can do. Exercises can help draw out stories that people think don't matter, as can group sessions, where enthusiasm tends to grow as stories are told. Engaging or interesting questions (here the "fictional scenario" method of asking for stories can be useful) can draw people in. Statements about the importance of the project can get some people interested. In general you will need to *sell* the project to people in order to draw them in, either by impressing them with a sense of purpose or by entertaining and engaging them.

What do your storytellers think of stories and storytelling?

People vary on whether they think stories are worth telling. I've found that whenever the group you want to tell

stories is made up mostly of analytical, logical, careful thinkers, it can be difficult to convince them that the effort is not just **"fluff"**. That mindset makes it difficult to get people to contribute, both because they aren't used to telling stories and because they don't think their experiences could possibly be helpful. With this sort of group I've found a mini-course on the power of stories to create change is sometimes necessary. It can come in the form of a three minute talk at the start of an interview or group session or a two-sentence introduction in an email or on a web site. As with the situation of taking the project seriously, you need to sell the project to these people before they will be willing to tell you anything useful. Exercises can also be helpful in getting these people to open up, as can group sessions.

You also have to be careful if the group you want to tell stories is of the opposite type. If they are people who pride themselves on being great storytellers, they will be more likely to derail the project in another way. They may be more apt to perform or to tell a good story that is exciting but not actually useful. For these

people structured exercises can be useful, and one-on-one interviews can be wonderful, but an unstructured group interaction can be a disaster because it can devolve into a talent show.

For further reading

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Knowing your storytellers** Google Group page.

Knowing your topic

The topic you want to ask about interacts with the people you will be asking to talk, so it is impossible to consider them separately. These questions pertain to that interaction rather than to the topic alone.

Is the topic sensitive?

Some topics are more private than others, no matter who is talking about them. If you know in advance that the topic is something the group you are talking to will be sensitive about, like things that touch on health, families, religious belief, and so on, you need to take special precautions to make sure **privacy** is dealt with carefully. You may also need to avoid methods of story collection that involve people talking in front of others.

Is the topic something people will know their own feelings about?

On some emotional issues that may be buried deep beneath the surface, people may need help expressing their feelings. Group sessions and exercises can be helpful with this, as can one-on-one interviews with a real person to provide a listening ear and help people probe deeper into things they hesitantly hint at. In this case a simple survey may not get much useful information because it will not stimulate people to dig deeper.

Is the topic vulnerable to self-promotion?

Some topics may invite people to promote themselves, which can reduce the usefulness of the resulting stories. For example, if you run an open-source programming forum and you ask people to tell stories about their greatest programming success, you are likely to end up with essentially a heap of resumes and advertisements instead of useful stories of real experience. If the topic you want people to talk about has this potential element, you can avoid self-promotion by making the project's goals clear, using group sessions and exercises to draw people out, and asking carefully worded questions that ask people to select experiences based on usefulness to the project rather than boast-worthiness (e.g., "Can you remember the worst day you ever spent as a programmer?").

Does the topic cover a long or short time period?

If you want people to talk about things that happened over a long period of time, you will need different techniques than if you are asking about shorter time scales. People remembering long spans of time, like careers, tend to generalize a lot and may need help selecting particular experiences to talk about. Best-worst questions can help with this, as can exercises.

For further reading

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Knowing your topic** Google Group page.

Privacy

For some groups and some subjects privacy will not be an issue. But because story projects often delve into deeper and more emotional areas than surveys about favorite fast foods, chances are you will need to think about how you will reassure people that their privacy will be respected.

For most story projects it is important to think carefully about the privacy policy you will create, to communicate the policy with the people you are asking to contribute, and importantly, not to change your policy after story collection has started. Usually you will be able to summarize your policy in a few sentences, and you should place these sentences in every communication with respondents to head off questions and problems.

There are four essential aspects to privacy in a story project: collection, identification, distribution, and review.

What will be collected?

In a typical story project you collect stories and answers to questions about them. It is possible, however, if the topic is so sensitive that you won't be able to get results in any other way, to collect information about stories *without* collecting the stories themselves. There are two ways to do this:

1. Ask people to tell stories to an interviewer or group and answer some questions about them, but record only the answers and not the stories. The stories will exist only in the memory of the interviewer or group, but the answers to the questions will remain, and patterns in these may be helpful to your project.
2. Ask people to *think* of a story *but not tell it*, then answer some questions about it. This method protects the storyteller completely since nobody hears the story at all. It is slightly dangerous however in that the resulting answers may not be truthful, if for example your storytellers are not very enthused about participating. If you are conducting interviews in person it may be possible to discern whether people are answering truthfully or not.

Will storytellers be identified and if so how?

There are two ways for stories to be dangerous: dangerous for *you* to hear, and dangerous for *other people* to hear.

If telling the story you need to hear will get people in trouble with you (i.e., you are in the government or you are their employer), you have three choices:

1. retain all identifying information (and get much less than the truth)
2. ask a third party to retain identifying information and only allow you access under particular circumstances and with particular safeguards in place to protect privacy (and get some of the truth)
3. retain no identifying information (and get the most truth you can get)

By giving up information useful for one purpose (like finding people who did things) you can often get information useful for another purpose (like understanding why people do things). For example, if you wanted to know why people stole things from store shelves you might ask people to tell stories about times they'd stolen and gotten away with it. Obviously if you asked them to give your their name and address you wouldn't get much of value, so you might have to give up the ability to track down admissions of guilt in order to better understand motivations and prevent thefts in the future.

If telling the story you need to hear will get people in trouble with other people (i.e., the stories are about people who may not be happy to have the story told), you have more choices:

1. retain and publicize all identifying information (and get much less than the truth)
2. retain but don't publicize identifying information (and get some of the truth)
3. ask a third party to retain identifying information and only allow you access under particular circumstances and with particular safeguards in place to protect privacy (and get more of the truth)
4. retain no identifying information (and get the most truth you can get)

Which of these levels of protection you give people depends on the goals of your project, what you want people to talk about (your focus) and whom you will be asking to speak.

If you don't collect identifying information, how will you make *sure* people will not be able to be identified as individuals? If you invite specific people to group sessions or send emails to specific people, you can't very well forget who they are, but you can disassociate any stories they tell and questions they answer from identifying details. For example, if you hold a group session, you can record the session but destroy the tapes after anonymous transcripts have been created. If you elicit responding emails, you can copy the information from the emails, paste it into a text file or spreadsheet, remove any identifying details, and delete the original emails. In this way you can reassure your storytellers that nothing they say will be connected to their name.

Related to this issue is that of web security. If you are asking for information through email or on a web form, how will you assure people that the email or web communication will not be intercepted? Some online survey taking services offer secure connections, which can help (though people may still have misgivings). Email cannot easily be made secure, so I don't recommend using it if your topic is especially sensitive or your group of people is especially wary. Phone or in-person meetings and interviews avoid this problem.

How much non-identifying (but still personal) information will you need to gather about the people who tell stories? Typically age and gender is important, but you may need to know other things like ethnic background, nationality, location, and other things. It's usually best to keep the list as short as possible. Try making the case for why you need each piece of information, and if you can't make a convincing case, don't collect it. Also, it is usually best to offer a "Decline to answer" option for all such information.

To whom will solicited information be distributed?

For some projects you will only need to have a few people read contributed stories and answers to questions. For others you will be distributing collected stories very widely, perhaps to the

whole web. In general the more widely you will be distributing stories the more carefully you should review each piece of information you gather about the storyteller to think about who should have access to it. There are many partial solutions; for example, you might know the ages and genders and nationalities of storytellers, but you may post only the stories on a community site.

Will storytellers be able to review and change their information?

Another way to reassure storytellers, if you plan to incorporate their stories into a resource that is shown to other people, is to allow them to review and change their contributions after the initial storytelling session or interview. Giving people a chance to go back and review their statements, and possibly to remove things they feel they should not have revealed on later reflection (no questions asked), will help them to open up in the first place. Of course, offering such an option may be technologically difficult, and it will require that you hold on to information about individuals (so that you can show them what they said again). But often people who will not be willing to participate under any other conditions will agree to contribute if they have the right to review, edit and delete entries.

For further reading

I've found guidelines for oral history projects to be very useful in understanding the issue of privacy in listening to people telling stories. Type "oral history privacy guidelines" into a search engine and you'll find lots of good information on this topic.

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Privacy** Google Group page.

COLLECTING STORIES

Deciding on methods

These are all the ways you can collect stories.

- You can **observe** people talking to other people. You can do this in person (e.g., by following them around for a workday) or over the web (e.g., by reading ongoing chats); individually or in groups; and as part of their normal routines or in a special session.
- You can **interview** people. You can do this in person, over the phone, through email, over the web, or on paper; individually or in groups; with one interviewer or many.
- You can have people go through **exercises** designed to collect stories. You need to do this in a group session, but you can do it in person or in a conference call.
- You can **combine** the above methods, either separately (e.g., offering people multiple ways to contribute), or together (e.g., using interviews, observation and exercises simultaneously in a group session).

There are several choices you need to make before you begin to collect stories. Each of these choices will depend on the group of people you are asking to tell stories and the goal of your project.

Asking or observing?

Do you want people to tell *you* stories, or would you rather listen to them telling stories *to other people*? Direct methods include interviews, group sessions and surveys through email or the web. Indirect methods involve observation of people either in their daily lives or in special situations such as low-facilitation or self-running group sessions. Direct methods are much easier than indirect methods to carry out, but indirect methods can be more useful when

people are unlikely to disclose their real feelings (or what really happened) when asked directly.

Conversations or exercises?

Exercises that help people tell stories require a certain amount of facilitation and require a group session (physically or virtually). Whether the exercises are necessary or whether you can just involve people in conversations depends on who you are talking to and what you are asking them to talk about.

If you think

- it will be difficult for your storytellers to articulate their feelings about your topic, or
- they will tell only "official" or "safe" stories, or
- they will be more likely to give lectures or opinions, or
- you have very little of their time and want to make the most of it,

choosing some exercises might be useful to your project.

However, if

- getting people to tell stories will not be an issue, or
- you have very little time to run the project, or
- you aren't sure you want to run an exercise, or
- you can't get people together physically and can't or don't want to run a virtual exercise, or
- you think the people will resist doing anything that seems artificial,

you'd be better off just letting things flow naturally. (Still, it wouldn't hurt to know about some exercises and have them in your back pocket in case you need them.)

Individual or group?

Would you rather ask or observe people alone or together? In some situations (about some topics and with some people) the dynamics of a group may bring out stories that would not have surfaced otherwise because people may remind each other of stories and get each other going. An example might be people talking about their childhoods. If people are asked on a web form they might not be able to think of anything, but in a room full of people reminiscing many more instances may come to mind. But in some situations people may be less willing to disclose their true feelings in a group.

Facilitated or self-running?

Interviews, group sessions and exercises can be facilitated, meaning someone with at least a little knowledge about what is supposed to happen *guides* things along; or they can be self-running, meaning that you give people a task, whether it's simply talking about a subject or carrying out an exercise, and then *leave them alone* to do it (though of course you will need to record what they say or write while they are doing it).

If your storytellers are going to be hesitant to talk about the topic you want to hear about, a self-running method may bring out more raw emotion because there will be no obvious project listener facing them as they speak. On the other hand, self-running methods also bring more risk that people will not respond in a way that gets you useful stories, and you won't be able to fix the problem (since you won't be there).

There are two other possibilities that bridge the gap between the extremes:

- Intermittent facilitation: giving people a self-running task (talk amongst yourselves about this, or do this exercise), then leaving the room and coming back every five or ten minutes to make sure things are going as expected.
- Available facilitation: giving people a self-running task, then moving far enough away that you can't hear everything they are saying, but close enough that they can call you over to ask questions, and close enough that you can get the general tenor of what is going on. (Usually you can tell from afar whether people are telling stories or just talking, because during storytelling one person is talking and others are listening for a longer period of time than usual.)

You can do either of these things in a group session or in an individual interview (for example the person might be talking into a tape recorder with you in the next room).

If facilitated, low or high facilitation expertise?

Interviews, observations, and exercises can all be done with a high level of expert training (of the interviewer, observer, or exercise facilitator) or a low level. You can put years of time into educating yourself and others to conduct various methods of story collection, or you can have people who know very little about the process do the collecting. Each side has its advantages.

- Experts have lots of techniques they can pull out of their toolkits and they can often recognize problems brewing before they get worse. But experts do tend to get narrow in their thinking about the right way to do things, and more importantly, people do have predictable reactions to experts as having nefarious motives and may not tell them as much as the experts would like.
- Novices, on the other hand, have few techniques and rarely see problems coming. They tend to follow whatever rudimentary training they got (such as blindly following a script even if the interview is going terribly). However, novices sometimes have great new ideas, and they rarely become narrow-minded (because they have no idea what to expect). Most importantly, people tend to tell obvious novices more. Asking novices to conduct interviews, for example asking people to interview each other, can improve

the rawness and honesty of the stories told. If the novices are carefully prepared so that some of the worst misfires can be anticipated and avoided, this method can be quite useful.

If a group, one group per session or more than one?

Storytelling groups usually work well when they are small, say five or six people. You can choose to have only one group per session, or you can have two or more groups telling stories at the same time. Of course, having more than one group per session means that you either have to have more than one facilitator (expert or novice) or you have to use self-running methods. Some of the exercises work better when you have multiple groups working at the same time (the hubbub keeps people interested), so if you plan to use them you may consider having concurrent group work; but it requires more time and energy on your part to make the session a success.

Physical or virtual?

Is it important to be physically present with the people who are telling stories? Or is doing it over the phone or web just as good? For some situations you need the give and take that goes on when people are physically located together and can see each other. This is especially important for stories with strong emotional components or that are hard to recall (but which are not so private and personal that people will bottle up when other people are around). The other factor on this decision is how comfortable your storytellers (and you!) are with technology.

Synchronous or asynchronous?

Do you want to be present when people are telling stories (whether physically or virtually), or would you prefer to have them respond to something you sent them? Which of these produces more "stories that work" will depend on your storytellers. Some people are more lively in conversation and more able to access feelings they would not write about; others feel

safer and can think more clearly when writing things out. If you can, it's good to have both options available and allow people to choose one or the other. For example, you could send an email to a group of 20 people asking them to participate in a story project, and give them the option of having a face-to-face interview or answering questions via email.

Short or long?

Deciding how much of your storytellers' time you can take is an important choice. The more time you can get people to give you, the more and better stories you will get; but the more time you ask for, the fewer people will be able to give it. A group storytelling session could range from half an hour long to half a day long; a phone interview could range from ten minutes to an hour; a survey could have three to dozens of questions.

For some groups (especially busy people) you will get more stories from a shorter time period, because more people will be able to contribute, and when they do contribute they will be able to attend fully for that short time. For other groups you will get more stories from a longer time period, because though fewer people may contribute, those that do will be able to plumb deep into their feelings, perhaps using exercises.

Factual or fictional?

You can ask people to talk only about their true experiences, and probably the majority of story projects proceed in that way. You do however have the option to ask people to tell stories about what *might have* happened or what *could* happen. Sometimes allowing people to talk about things that aren't true allows them to tell more of the truth. I love this quote from Oscar Wilde: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." If the topic you are exploring will be very difficult to talk about, and if you think your storytellers will be willing to play along, you can consider exploring fictional realms. You can insert fictional exploration into any interview or group session, and all of the

exercises can include fictional elements. Just keep track of which stories were told as deliberate fictions so you can find them later.

Low or high technology?

Decisions about technology can be divided into two choices: how you will record the actual stories, and how you will record answers to questions about the stories.

For recording the actual stories, you have these options (arranged from lowest to highest technology dependence):

1. Remember and jot down things later. This is risky but the least obtrusive method. It is best used when you are observing someone (say at work) and you have to show a low profile.
2. Take notes on paper or a laptop. This method is not very obtrusive, but details may be lost. If you do this, make sure you separate notes on what people said from your thoughts or comments. Sometimes what I do is write "(me)" in front of anything I'm thinking so I know it's not what anyone else said. The usefulness of this method will also depend on how fast you (or whoever is helping you) can write or type.
3. Audiotape the session and transcribe it later. This method is rich in detail but more obtrusive for the people talking. Note that I *don't* recommend videotaping people telling stories unless you specifically need video records of stories to show to other people. This is simply because the visual detail doesn't add much to the story, and people tend to find video taping much more intrusive than audio taping. Why this is true I don't know, but I've definitely seen a difference in the discomfort level between sessions where a video camera is "aimed" at people and sessions where a small audio recorder is placed discreetly on the table.
4. Ask for stories via chat. This method is useful because it engages people in conversation (either individually or in groups), and it automatically produces a record of the conversation (and any stories

in it). There is no audiotape or person scribbling notes for people to get upset about, either. The only bad thing about chats is that because of their overlapping nature they are famously hard to make sense of afterward, so there still will be some work to do to get from chat logs to stories.
5. Ask people to type stories in free-form text (as in email). This method *could* yield rich stories, but because there is no specified length of answers you will get a wide range of responses, and some people may balk at what they think is too much typing. On the other hand, some people like answering things via email because it is a medium many are familiar with, and it allows people to be flexible in their responses, so with some groups you will get a better response this way than any other.
6. Ask people to type stories into a box on a web page. For some groups this will be a good way to get a response, because some people (especially younger people) are quite familiar with the paradigm of filling out things on the web. The benefit of the fixed-size box on a web page is that it is clear to people that you don't need a long response, which may make them more willing to tell stories. But for some people (older people for example) they may feel confused or even insulted at being asked to fill in a form, especially about a personal subject.

For recording the answers to questions about stories, you have these options:

1. Ask the questions yourself and note responses on paper or on your own computer. This may make the session take longer, and you may exhaust the patience of your storytellers before you get through the questions, but the data will all be in the computer and you won't have to come back and do more work later. The other benefit of this approach is that it allows you to intervene when people don't understand the question and would just circle or click randomly if you weren't there.
2. Hand out paper forms and ask people to circle items, then enter the data yourself later. People can read faster on paper and

will be able to circle things very quickly, so they will be more willing to answer the questions than with other methods. But you will still have to do the data entry later.

3. Ask people to answer questions in plain text (as in email). As with asking for stories in plain text, this method will get a variable response. Some will balk, some will welcome the flexibility.

4. Ask people to fill out a form on a web page (either on your computer or on theirs). This can be useful, because no data entry is required and it tends to go quickly. The down side of this method is that people can be wary of web security (will the information get out?) and may refuse to fill out the form (or worse, enter garbage information just to get through it).

The first three methods here are flexible, because they can be interrupted and commented on at any time (during the interview, in the margins of the paper form, as asides in an email). The last method can include a comment field, but feedback will necessarily be limited and contributors might become frustrated as a result. One possibility is to use the more flexible methods if you are collecting few stories, or at the start of the project, or if you aren't sure your questions are perfect; and reserve the less flexible web methods for when you are collecting more stories or when you are sure your questions won't be changing.

Choosing between these technology options will depend on these things:

1. your technology know-how
2. your budget (of time as well as money)
3. the reactions of your storytellers to technology (will asking them to use a web site attract them or scare them?)
4. the feelings of your storytellers about the intrusiveness and safety of different methods (paper safer than web?)

Know your resources

One of the most important things in doing this sort of work is to know the resources you have to work with, including yourself. If you are

going to have a hard time asking people to do things they don't want to do (answer personal questions, come to a group session, do an exercise), find someone who can help you do that. If reading dozens of long email interviews will bore you to tears, find someone else who likes to do that sort of thing. You may have to experiment to find what works, and you may find abilities and interests you didn't know you had, but be prepared to adapt what you do to what you feel comfortable with and can do well.

If you have the good fortune to have a team of people doing the project, talk about how you can complement each other in carrying out the project. Perhaps one person can handle the technological side of things; perhaps one person can process the data; perhaps one person can write the persuasive messages that encourage people to contribute; perhaps one person can conduct interviews; and so on.

For further reading

The **Anecdote** group has put out an excellent white paper called **The Ultimate Guide to Anecdote Circles**, which describes some of the same techniques covered here. (If you wonder why I don't use the term "anecdote circles" in this book, it's because I think highlighting one method tends to make it seem as if there is only one way to collect stories. In my experience it's more important to develop a set of story-collecting skills that work in a variety of contexts than to develop one method only. Still, the white paper at Anecdote is a great resource and highly recommended.)

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Deciding on methods** Google Group page.

Asking for stories

One of the biggest challenges when starting to write story-eliciting questions is learning to write **questions whose answers are stories**. I remember listening to audiotapes in a project

where people who had worked at a factory for decades were asked to tell stories about working at the factory (which was about to close). Over and over I heard the interviewer say, "Do you remember your first day at the factory?" And almost every time the interviewee replied, "Yes I do." and there followed a long silence while I cringed.

For any question used to elicit a story, try answering it *in every other way than by telling a story* -- because people will try to find a way to do that. If you can't find any way to answer the question *except* by telling a story, it's a good story-eliciting question.

Ask what happened

I put this up front because I've found that adding the question "What happened?" to nearly *any* story-eliciting question can cure most problems of perception. Compare these two questions:

1. Can you remember your first day at work?
2. Can you remember your first day at work? What happened on that day?

The first question breaks the cardinal rule (asking a question whose answer is not a story) and the second doesn't. The "what happened" bandage can fix many an ailing question. Of course it can get irritating to have "what happened" stuck onto the end of every question you ask, but sometimes it is not necessary, and when it is, it can be reworded in many ways, like asking what people did or said. You can also add it into the question itself, as with "Can you tell us what happened on your first day at work?"

Directed and undirected questions

A **directed** question is one that directs the person to talk about an issue you care about. Examples of directed questions are:

- Was there ever a time when you were surprised by how connected or disconnected you were to the community?

- Have you ever felt overwhelmed with information?
- Can you remember ever waking up and not wanting to go to work because you felt you couldn't face such a hostile environment again?

An **undirected** story-eliciting question is one that doesn't ask about a particular issue, but about the person's experiences in general. Examples of undirected questions are:

- What happened on your first day at work?
- Tell me about your wedding.
- Can you remember your worst moment as a doctor?

When you ask undirected questions you tend to get more raw emotions and honest reflections. People love to talk about things like the day they met their spouse or the moment they first skydived and so on. The disadvantage of using undirected questions is that you cannot control *what* people will talk about, and only a fraction of the stories may be about the topics you care about. Directed questions focus on the issues you want to know about, but because you are asking people for something very specific, people will be more likely to try to give you what they think you want rather than speaking freely from experience.

If your topics are very broad or if you care about several things you might be able to ask an undirected question, then ask people a question *about the story* that captures what topic it is about. For example, if you wanted to know about trust, you might have a question about how important trust is to the story. If your topics are narrow or few, or you think people will be unlikely to talk about the topics unless asked specifically to, you will need to ask directed questions. Another approach is to ask people two or more questions and balance them between directed and undirected, seeking both goals (authenticity and specificity) at once.

Ways to ask

There are many ways to ask for stories, and there are many opinions about what works and

what doesn't. There isn't one best way, but each has its advantages and disadvantages in different situations and with different groups of people. These are some of the types of story-eliciting questions I've seen used and the results I've seen from them.

Asking for stories

You can directly ask for stories by saying something like:

- Can you give us a story about health care in your community?
- Could you tell us a story about useful road signs?
- Could you share a story with us about what courage means to you?
- Have you heard any stories about buying prescription drugs over the internet?

The advantage of this approach is that it makes it perfectly clear what you want. If the people you will be asking to tell stories are high on one of the risk factors (very eager to "do things right", or asked about something very personal, or apt to think the whole thing is stupid), it may be necessary to mention that you actually want stories to avoid people sidestepping less obvious requests.

The disadvantage of this approach is that people may react negatively to such a question because it seems to them that you are asking them to *give* you something that belongs to them. People have a stronger "why do you need to know that" radar today than they used to (because every time they buy a thumbtack online they are asked for a ton of information) and may be wary. If you are asking questions anonymously and asynchronously, people may walk away in droves without your knowing why.

Another disadvantage is that people aren't always aware of whether they tell stories or not. Some people say "I never tell stories" and then proceed to. Other people present themselves as great storytellers, then proceed to deliver

opinions and lectures, but tell no stories. I remember transcribing an audiotape of a group session where a person told story after story, all of them interesting and useful, and then -- literally in the next breath -- said, "But I can't think of any stories to tell." (It's a good thing I was listening to a tape and not in the room with them, because my jaw dropped to the floor.) In other words, there is absolutely no correlation between whether people *think* they tell stories and whether they *actually* tell stories. So if you ask explicitly for stories, you run the risk of people who think they don't tell stories (but actually do) turning away with an "I never tell stories" response.

So in general I don't recommend this approach *unless* you are working with a group of people who are *very* unlikely to tell a story unless you are *very* specific in asking for one.

Asking for memories

An indirect way of asking for stories is to ask for memories (or recollections, reminiscences, experiences, history, reflections, remembrances). This implies looking back over the past, which hints at storytelling, but doesn't come right out and ask "for" a story. Some questions in this style might be:

- Can you describe some of your memories from your years working here?
- Can you tell us some of your history with this client?
- Can you share some of your experiences with your headache medicine?
- What are some of your reminisces about your career?

The advantage of this approach is that it avoids putting off people who won't want to "give" you a story. The disadvantage is that it may end up collecting too many half-stories -- fragments that don't really give you the "power of story". For example, people might say "My experience was that the headache medicine was okay" or "My memory is that this has been a great place to work." You may decide that you don't mind whether you get whole or half stories, especially if your storytellers are going to be very reluctant

to speak. I'd advise using this approach only if you think people will be unwilling to tell stories if you use other methods.

Asking via fictional scenario

This approach involves setting up a fictional situation, then asking for a story in response. For example:

- A parent you met at your school's open house calls you and says she is going to send her son to another school because "nobody here cares anymore". What story might you tell, either from your own experience or that you heard about, to help her decide what to do?
- An old friend is in town and wants to see the sights. You suggest they visit the plant where you work. The friend refuses, saying "I'm not going where they make *that* stuff!" What story might you tell the friend to encourage them to visit your plant?
- (for a teenager) Your best friend calls you in tears complaining that her parents have grounded her on the eve of a big party. What story might you tell her from your own experience that would help her get through it?

This approach is particularly useful when the people you are asking to tell stories will not be willing to tell you their real opinion about a sensitive topic. Asking them about a fictional situation navigates them past their automatic reaction and may get them to talk about a touchy subject when a more direct question would not.

However, as with the "asking for memories" question, this can be hit-or-miss because people sometimes reply to fictional-scenario questions with one of two misfires:

1. they *refer* to the story they would tell without actually telling it ("I'd tell them about the time I was grounded"), or

2. they forget all about telling a story and just say what they would tell the person ("I'd tell them to give my school another try")

If the group will be very reluctant or closed-mouthed or unwilling to admit things, this approach might prod them to reveal things they wouldn't have otherwise, so it can be valuable in that situation. In other situations it may not be worth the risk to use it.

Asking via told story

This approach involves telling a story, then asking people to respond to it. For example:

Please read this story.

- *I just came to the airport to see off my cousin, but they asked for identification and treated me like some kind of criminal. And the irony is how they have all these signs saying how wonderful their restaurants are. I'm not coming here ever again!*

Does that remind you of any stories you have heard, or things that happened to you, at the airport?

The advantage of this approach is that it is a strong focuser: it helps people understand exactly what you want. The disadvantage is that it is a strong focuser: it helps people understand exactly what you want. This means that the performers out there will put on a show for you (and try to match the presented story in some way they think is best, but which may not be obvious to you) rather than reflect honestly on their experiences. If your storytellers suffer from the "need to succeed" problem, this approach is not the best one. However, if your storytellers are exceptionally meek or especially likely to wander off course or lecture, this approach can bring out more stories than otherwise.

Asking for a point in time

This approach asks people to select a time reference of

importance (moment, time, point, minute, hour, day, week, month, year) and tell what happened during it. The moment can be selected on the basis of general memorability:

- What was the most memorable hour of your career at this company?
- Can you recall what day of your tenure at the university stands out most in your memory?

on the basis of emotions:

- Could you describe the week when your campaign struggled the most?
- Can you tell us about your proudest hour as a firefighter?

or in terms particular to an issue the project cares about:

- Was there ever a moment when you felt that trust in your team was either strengthened or weakened?
- Can you describe a time when you felt you had made a major discovery in your understanding of your research topic?

The advantage of this approach is that it helps people with long experience to avoid generalizing or summarizing. By asking for a particular time reference it helps people to understand that you want to know about something that happened *in time*, not outside of it. The disadvantage is that people might tell you what block of time was important without actually telling you what happened during it. They might say something like "The worst day was that day at the zoo." Adding "What happened?" at the end of the question can help with that.

Note in the "strengthened or weakened" example that it is perfectly okay to give two options in one question. Often people who are not willing to tell one story will tell another, and managing to ask two questions in one (without being confusing) is a good way to maximize the number of stories you get.

Asking for an event

Another method similar to asking for a point in time is asking people to select an event (episode, incident, occurrence, occasion, situation, circumstance) and tell about it (describe, recount, depict, relate). The episode can be selected on the basis of general memorability:

- What event most stands out in your mind from your years as a mail carrier?
- Can you describe an occasion you particularly remember as being important on your bus route in the past year?

on the basis of emotions:

- Is there a particular incident you feel the most distressed about that happened while you were in hospital?
- Can you recount for us an event that took place during your time here when you felt particularly calm and at ease?

or in terms particular to an issue the project cares about:

- When you think of the phrase "trust takes years to build but can be broken in a second", what one event of the past seven years stands out most in your mind?
- Could you relate to us a situation when your leadership skills were challenged?

The advantage of this approach is that it makes it clear that an event is being asked about, something happening. That may prod people who don't understand the recounting nature of the task to understand what is being asked of them. A disadvantage, however, is that people might feel that the events they remember are not sufficiently important to be counted as Events (with a capital E) and may not respond. People are *terrible* judges of whether something is important, especially when it comes to personal stories. If you have a particularly meek group of storytellers who think you couldn't possibly want to know what happened to *them*, this type of question can be hazardous. On the

other hand, if you have a group disposed to pontification, this sort of question can keep them centered on the recounting of actual events.

Asking for an extreme

This approach involves asking people to recall the extremes of their experience either in general terms:

- Can you tell us about the highlight of your last project?
- What was the worst thing that ever happened in your years in the department?

in emotional terms:

- What was the angriest you ever felt in all the years you worked at this job?
- Can you remember the happiest you ever felt on the job?

or in terms particular to an issue the project cares about:

- Can you remember feeling particularly appreciated in your work?
- Have you ever been frustrated at a communication gap between yourself and your students?

The advantage of this approach is that when people are looking back over a long period of time, it can help them to choose particular incidents to talk about. Also, by asking for extremes, this approach helps people who are reluctant to speak to move beyond giving "safe" accounts of "what normally happens" to some of the things they actually have feelings about.

The disadvantage of this approach, by itself, is that if you ask people something like "Can you remember feeling frustrated?" you run the risk of them saying "Yes." Or even if you say "What was the worst thing that ever happened?" they might respond with "The bank closing." For that reason I always recommend either adding the "what happened" addendum to any extreme

question or combining it with another question type, like an event or point-in-time question.

Asking for surprise and change

This approach asks people simply to remember times in which their expectations have been overturned or in which something important changed (surprise, turning point, shift, change, climax, crux, transition, crisis, critical moment). It is similar to asking for experiences or extremes, but forms its own class because most good stories contain surprises or changes of some kind.

For example:

- Can you remember a time when you were surprised at how well a project was going?
- Was there ever a moment when things seemed to shift and change, and after that nothing was the same again?
- Tell us about a memorable crisis at the police station.
- What do you think was a turning point in your thinking about international diplomacy?
- Can you tell us about a critical moment in your estate planning process?

The advantage of this approach is that it can help people who think they have nothing to say find something to say; it helps them select an event to tell about. And it can lead to some excellent stories. The disadvantage is that it opens the door for people who don't want to respond to say "No, I've never been surprised" or "No, nothing has ever changed". If you expect indifference or hostility to the questions, you might not want to give people this out. But if people are going to be meek or find it difficult to choose things to talk about (perhaps because you are asking them to reminisce about a 40 year career), this approach can be helpful.

Asking about specific decisions, people, places or things

This approach asks people to recall a particular decision, location, person or object and talk

about their experiences with regard to that subject. For example:

- What happened at the moment when you decided to join our faculty? (decision)
- Do you remember the first time you walked into this courtroom? What happened on that day? (place)
- Can you recount for us the day you first met your spouse? (person)
- You've been driving this car for nearly twenty years now. When you look at it, do any special times come to mind? (thing)

The advantage of this approach is that it focuses people on something you want them to talk about. The disadvantage is that after you've focused them on the subject they may forget to tell a story about it and simply start talking about it.

Mixing approaches within one question

It is a good idea to mix different approaches to story-eliciting questions within one question. For example:

- What story do you think you might tell your grandchildren about the best moment of your career at the company? (asking for story, fictional scenario, extreme, time reference)
- Can you remember a moment in which you were surprised about the trust in your team? What happened during that moment? (time reference, surprise, issue of interest, what happened)
- Can you share with us a memory about a time you've had volunteering in which you felt the most fulfilled? (asking for story, memory, time reference, extreme, issue of interest)

Also, testing the questions you intend to use with a small group of people is a good way to find out whether they result in storytelling or not.
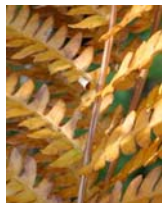
The pattern of questions

It's best to avoid having more than one question of the exact same type in a row, especially if you are asking via email or some other non-face-to-face method. People are experts at quickly finding boring things and dismissing them. If you saw this on a web form:

- Can you remember a time when a project went surprisingly well?
- Can you remember a time when you felt surprisingly frustrated?
- Can you remember a time when a client was surprisingly upset?

you might turn away your attention on noticing how similar the three questions were. However, if you read this:

- Can you remember a time when a project went surprisingly well? What happened during that project?
- Can you recall for us an incident in which your frustration level went through the roof? What did you do about it?
- Did you ever have to deal with a client who was very upset? What did they do and what did you do?

You might have less trouble paying attention.

For further reading

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Asking for stories** Google Group page.

Asking about stories

You don't have to ask people to answer *any* questions about the stories they have told. If you have a very small project (and you are in the group of interest so you can interpret stories directly) you may want to just collect stories and leave it at that. However, asking people to interpret stories can be a powerful way of finding out more about their feelings and beliefs, especially if you can

juxtapose many such interpretations and look for patterns in them. Stories and answers to questions about them reinforce each other and provide a richer base of meaning than either can alone.

Time, questions and cognitive budget

When thinking about how many questions you can ask about stories, you need to consider your **cognitive budget**, or how much mental energy people can put into responding. The number and complexity of the questions you can ask (as well as how many stories you can ask people to tell) will depend on the cognitive budget you have to work with. Cognitive budget is an amalgam of

• time,
• attention,
• interest, and
• ability to concentrate.

All of these factors can come into play. Be careful not to think that if you have a lot of people's time you have a large cognitive budget. Any of the other factors can reduce the cognitive budget and in fact are probably *more* important than time. For example:

• You might have an hour of somebody's time, but their attention might be divided between answering your questions and watching their toddler.
• You might have only three minutes of somebody's time, but you may have their complete attention and concentration as well as enthusiasm to help.
• You might have a captive audience required to sit in front of a computer and fill out a form until it is complete, even if it has a hundred questions in it, but that doesn't mean they will pay attention to the 99th question (or even the 21st).
• You may have a group with lots of time, attention, and ability to concentrate, but little interest in the project. That sort of thing is typical when you are asking questions of young people or elderly people: they may have time and attention to give

you, but they may not be motivated to contribute.

I want to raise a special alarm about asking people dozens of questions, even when people are willing to answer them. Doing this is not often going to get you a useful response, because people's attention will wander and their answers will be devoid of meaning, *even if they are sincerely trying to help*. I've seen people ruin otherwise good projects by allowing themselves to be over-ambitious (or blind) about how many questions they can ask. Asking too many questions produces one of the worst outcomes of a story project: answers are 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 clicked on whatever would get me to the next page." In that case the trends people see in the data are not just useless; they are misleading. The only thing you can do in a case like that is to scrap the thing and start over with more realistic ambitions.

One thing to consider is that if you need to be ambitious about how many questions you can ask, you can choose a method of asking the questions that allows for full or partial answers. For example, if you are conducting interviews you can ask people "can I ask you a few more questions?" every once in a while. If you have paper or web forms you can instruct people to ignore any questions they don't want to answer, rather than circling or clicking things just to get through the form. The difficulty when you take that approach is deciding how you will order the questions, because typically people will answer the first few before they lose interest. It's not something I recommend highly (it's better to get a good solid short list), but if for some reason you need to maximize your questions (e.g., you will never get these people to speak to you again in a million years) you can take a chance on it.

Fitting in question answering

Asking questions about told stories fits more naturally into some venues than others. If you are using a survey, questions about stories will naturally intermingle with questions for stories. If you are conducting a one-on-one interview, you will also intersperse the two types of questions, though you may need to do some extra reminding of what each question pertains to.

In a group session or exercise, asking questions about stories is more difficult, since you don't want to disrupt the flow of storytelling to ask questions as each story is told. There are two methods you can use to connect told stories to questions about them.

1. At a break in the session (or at the end if it's short), ask each participant to recall the stories they told, then hand out paper forms on which people can quickly mark their answers. Ask people to give their stories names which will help you link the answers to the story they told (in the transcript). This method works well if you have a small group and a short session, because each person will probably have told only a few stories and the link-up will be simple.
2. Another method is to have an observer (either someone helping you or a particularly helpful participant) jot down the teller of each story and a memorable name for it, then give each participant a set of forms with the names for stories they told already filled in. This method is better if the participants aren't likely to remember what they said (perhaps if they are older or distracted) or if you don't expect them to be very willing to fill out the forms without some help.

Goal-related questions

Goal-related questions are questions specifically asking about the issues you defined as being important to your project *as they apply to the story told*. For

example:

*   In this story, would you say that the people trusted each other?
*   Would you say the people in this story showed compassion for each other?
*   When you read this story, what does it say to you about democracy?
*   Does this story make you feel more or less confident about technology as an enabler?

Be careful to make sure people know you are asking the question *about the story* and not in general. I've seen people ruin answers by not being clear about this distinction. For example, if you asked the first question in this list without the "in this story" part, people might think you are asking them if they think people trust each other in general. That may be an interesting question to ask, and it has its place later (see the questions about people), but it won't elucidate the story you want the person to interpret.

The usual way to write these sorts of questions is to take the issues you defined for your project, ranked in terms of importance, write a few questions for each (trying to maximize the breadth of ways to ask), then choose between them based on either how you think people will respond or how people do respond in a test run.

Another type of goal-related question with great utility in *some* situations is the **emergent construct** question. As is explained in the section on exercises, emergent constructs are abstract packages of meaning about behaviors, beliefs, values, situations, themes, or other areas of interest to the project. They are derived during an exercise in which stories are told and meaning emerges from interactions among people. If you conducted an exercise like this as part of a story project, you may have already collected some of these constructs, and you can use them as a way to ask people questions about stories. Some examples of emergent constructs might be:

*   Self-serving fearmongers (personification)
*   On the ropes (situation)
*   Can't get no respect (theme)
*   We're all in the same boat (value)

When emergent constructs are used as questions, the general question is, "How present is this construct in the story?" So for example when a person has just told a story about people helping each other after a tornado, they might rate the "We're all in the same boat" construct as having a high value.

Construct questions tend to require more preparation than non-construct questions, because -- depending on the constructs that emerge -- people may not know at a glance what the brief phrase for each construct means, especially if the group is varied. For example, some constructs may include cultural references that not all of your storytellers will understand. Say you run an exercise during a group session and the construct "Only the Shadow Knows" emerges. Younger storytellers will not know that "The Shadow" was a popular comic-book and radio character from the 30's, so you may get blank or nonsensical answers from that group. It can help to translate narrowly-understood terms to more general terms (like "Only the Shadow Knows" could be changed to "mysterious powers" or something).

However, having given that warning, if the group you are asking to tell stories is fairly coherent, that is, will understand internal references, emergent constructs can provide powerful ways for people to safely disclose sensitive information. For example, if you ask someone whether bureaucracy stifled their options in the story they just told, you might not get a truthful response; but if you offer them a quote from Kafka's *The Castle* (which comes from a situation that emerged in a group session), you may get more of a "telling" response.

Narrative questions

You can also ask people to consider one or more of **three essential dimensions** of stories and storytelling:

1. Story **form** is the internal structure of a story: things like setting, characters, plot

and point. A good story uses effective narrative form to deliver a message well.
2. Story **function** is its utility to our thinking and learning: things like meaning, understanding and connection. A good story helps us learn what we need to learn, find out what we need to know, or remember what we need to remember.
3. Story **phenomenon** is the story of the story: things that describe context, like where and when and why a story was told, who heard it, how it can and will be retold, and so on. A good story lives on because it sustains the health of the community.

Which of these types of narrative question is most important to your project will depend on your project's goals. For example:

• If your project is primarily about finding things out, story function will be important to you.
• If the goal of your project is to connect people through storytelling, story phenomenon will be important to you.
• If you want to find messages you can use to help people understand things better, story form will be important to you.

Here are some example questions in each of these areas.

Story form

• How long ago did the events in this story happen?
• Where did this story take place?
• Is this story a deliberate fiction?
• Who would you say is the main character in this story? Is it one person or more than one?
• What changed in this story?
• What conflicts do you see in this story?
• Are there any instances in this story of people competing? Collaborating? Coming to the aid of another?
• Did the story turn out well or poorly? If you are not the teller of this story, do you think the teller thought it turned out well or poorly?

- Are there any important risks or challenges faced by characters in this story?
- What would you say the people in this story want?

Story function

- What in this story surprised you?
- How long do you think you will remember the events that happened in this story?
- Does this story remind you of any proverbs or sayings?
- How do you feel about this story? If you were not the teller of this story, how do you think the teller felt about it?
- Why was this story told? If you are not the teller of this story, why do you think the teller thought they were telling the story?
- Is there anyone in this story you identify with? Is there anyone you don't identify with? Why?
- Does this story contradict any other stories you've heard?
- Have you heard stories like this one before?
- What did you learn from this story?
- What would fix the problems that appear in this story? What problems would this story fix?

Story phenomenon

- How common are the experiences described in this story? Would you characterize the story as about everyday things or about something more important than that?
- Where did this story come from? Did it happen to you or to someone else? Did it really happen?
- Who can tell this story? Who can't tell it?
- How widely can this story be told? Can it be told to anyone or only to people you trust? If this story *was* told in public, what do you think would happen?
- Is there anyone who you think needs to hear this story? Is there anyone who you think should not hear this story?
- If you have heard this story before (or one like it), how has it changed over time? How has it changed when different people have told it (or ones like it)?

- What does this story say about what is right with this community? What does this story say about what is wrong with this community?
- What does this story say about how people in this community come together or fall apart?
- What does the story say about the distribution of power and status in this community?
- Does this story contain any unwritten community rules?

These are just some examples to give you ideas; you should be able to come up with more questions of whatever type best suits your project. Note that the questions I've listed here all refer to "this story", not "the story you just told". The reason is that getting different groups of people with diverse views to answer the same questions about the same stories can be powerful. It does require a bit more coordination on your part -- you need to collect stories, anonymize them, present them to other people, and collate the results together -- but especially for projects in which conflict resolution is involved it can be a transformative element.

Questions about people

It is almost always useful to juxtapose questions about the storyteller and question-answerer (who may not be the same person) with questions about the stories they told (or answered questions about). Some obvious people questions are things like age, gender, locality, income level, occupation -- the standard survey stuff.

In addition to these obvious questions, it is often helpful to ask questions related to the person's general opinions about project issues, for example things like

- In general would you say the government is doing a good job?
- Do you think our company puts customers first?

- Do you feel like you have enough support to do the work you are asked to do?
- How would you say that living in our town ranks among places you have lived?

Note that these questions are not in relation to any stories, but are direct inquiries about the person's opinions -- the same as would be asked in a standard survey. When you collect this information as well as stories and interpretations of them, the juxtaposition can tell you useful things. For example, you might find that people say that "our company treats its employees well", but they might tell stories in which they have endured contempt. That sort of contrast might lead to further inquiries about problems related to differences between official and personal versions of reality.

Decisions about each question

There are several decisions to make about each question you want to ask.

Open-ended or closed-ended?

Open-ended questions are those where you don't predefine any answers but just write down exactly what people say or allow them to write or type whatever they like. Closed-ended questions have predefined lists of answers.

Open-ended questions have the benefit of allowing unexpected trends to emerge, but they come with the burden of reading and checking over and making sense of a lot of text. If you are collecting few stories, or if you are collecting stories primarily to show to other people, using a lot of open-ended questions can be elucidating, but if you want to look at patterns they are less useful because you can't count them up -- though you can categorize them and count how many are in each category.

The advantage of using a closed-ended, fixed list of choices is that you will get quick responses. And they don't use up as much cognitive budget, because recognition is always easier than recall. The disadvantage is that if

you have not correctly anticipated all possible answers you may miss some. For questions where you know all possible answers, like age ranges or locations, this sort of question is best. You can of course add an "Other" box and allow people to type or write or say other things when you are not sure you have a complete list.

If closed-ended, ordinal or nominal?

An **ordinal** list of choices is one where the *order* matters (age ranges, for example). A **nominal** list of choices is one where only the *name* of each item matters (gender, for example). For many questions this will be a simple characteristic of the list of choices, but for some you could present the same question either way. For example, you could ask:

How do you feel about this story? Pick the one that best describes your feeling.

- It doesn't bother me
- I'm quite upset about it
- It makes me feel warm and fuzzy
- I'm boiling over with anger
- I'm amused
- I think I learned something from it

or you could ask:

How do you feel about this story?

- very bad
- bad
- neither good nor bad
- good
- very good

In the first case the list incorporates items that represent many dimensions of meaning instead of just one, but people have to read through the whole list, and it may not include the feeling they have. In the second case the list covers the whole ground and is very quick to scan, but gives only unidimensional information.

If closed-ended and ordinal, unipolar or bipolar?

A **unipolar** list of ordinal choices is one that goes from nothing to something, like for these questions:

- How much do you think trust matters to this story? (not at all, very little, somewhat, to a great extent)
- How sceptical do you think the people in this story are?
- How completely would you say that this story illustrates the proverb "Too many cooks spoil the broth"?

A **bipolar** list of ordinal choices is one that goes from one thing to another thing, like for these questions:

- How would you say the people in this story respond to danger? (extreme fear, some fear, neither fear nor excitement, some excitement, extreme excitement)
- How would you characterize management support for employee satisfaction in this story? (no support, some support, adequate support, more support than is comfortable, suffocating support)
- How do the people in this story interact? (extreme cooperation, some cooperation, neither cooperation nor competition, some competition, extreme competition)

The advantage of unipolar lists is that they are easy to understand quickly. The disadvantage is that it is easy to see what the "right" or socially acceptable answer is. You can break that pattern by switching the direction of the lists (i.e., putting the "best" answer on the bottom, then the top, etc), but people may still hunt for the acceptable answer.

The advantage of bipolar lists is that they usually thwart people trying to find the right answer, because there isn't one, especially if you are careful to make sure that either both or neither of the sides of the scale is a "good" thing. They also usually give you a richer answer than a unipolar list because a wider range of possibilities can be included. However, the disadvantage is that bipolar lists can be

harder to understand, so they use up the cognitive budget and increase the possibility of getting "click past" answers instead of real answers. There is also the problem that people can't pick both sides of the scale at once when issues are complex: for example when the people in the story show both fear *and* excitement. You can try to anticipate these issues, but sometimes they surprise you.

If you think direction-following is going to be a big problem and/or you think people will be willing or able to give you enough time and attention, bipolar lists are often better. But if the cognitive budget you have to work with is very limited (say a person standing momentarily in front of a kiosk) it may be better to stick with the safer unipolar list.

If closed-ended, ordinal and bipolar, include a middle option?

If you use a bipolar list you need to decide whether to include a middle "neither" option. Some people say that having a middle option gives people a way to avoid answering the question and so distorts your results.

For example you could ask:

How do you feel about this story?

- very bad
- bad
- neither good nor bad
- good
- very good

or you could ask:

How do you feel about this story?

- very bad
- bad
- good
- very good

You can see that the person answering the second question will not be able to find the noncommittal option and will have to make a real choice. However, if you do take out the

neither option, you should provide one of these options:

- not sure
- does not apply
- I'd rather not say
- I decline to answer
- I don't understand the question
- I don't like the question
- I don't think the question makes sense
- and so on

so that you avoid the situation of people choosing "good" only because there is no "neither" choice available. In general the more ways you provide to differentiate between authentic and click-past responses the more informative your results will be.

If closed-ended and ordinal, words or scales?

When you want to ask a person a question to which the answer is some point along a scale, you can either ask using words (e.g., tiny, small, medium, large, huge) or scales. Scales can be numerical (e.g., "please choose a number between zero and ten") or graphical (e.g., "please make a mark on this line").

The advantage of using words is that people can respond to them quickly by recognizing which word best matches their feeling. However, it is sometimes hard to come up with lists of words that work, and different people may interpret the same words differently. A numerical scale is free of the interpretation of terms, but quantification is sometimes a hard thing for people to do, especially if the question is about an emotional issue. Sometimes making a mark on a line is easier to do than choosing a number, but then again people can become confused when they see a simple line with nothing written on it, and there can be a higher up-front cost to explaining what they are about to do.

To give an example of some of the options here: There is a lot of debate in the medical community about the best way to assess how much pain a patient is in. These are some of the pain scales that have been developed:

- The Verbal Rating Scale uses names for pain categories, like "none", "mild", "discomforting", "distressing", "horrible", and "excruciating".
- The **Wong-Baker Pain Faces Scale** shows the patient six faces with expressions ranging from very happy to crying, and with labels showing both a number and a text, ranging from zero ("no hurt") to five ("hurts worst"). There has been some criticism of this scale because the worst face is shown crying, and some people (especially children) think they cannot choose that option unless they are actually crying. Hence, interpretation matters even if pictures are used instead of words.
- The Numerical Pain Scale asks the person to describe their pain by choosing a number between zero and ten, with zero representing "no pain" and ten representing the "worst possible pain".
- The Visual Analogue Scale uses a numerical line marked with numbers from zero to ten, with the left side labeled "no pain" and the right side labeled "worst possible pain", on which the patient is instructed to either circle numbers or make a mark.

There are all sorts of studies showing that each of these is better than the others in one situation or another, but as far as I can tell there is no overall consensus as to which is best; each has its strengths and weaknesses. Often people use all three methods (words, numbers, lines) at the same time and don't specify what method the patient should use. That approach avoids difficulties understanding or being able to respond to any of the methods, but it increases the amount of time and attention needed to answer the question.

Mixing questions

I advise against making all the questions you ask of the same type, because even though people may be able to read and understand them more quickly that way, they may also get one question confused with another or get bored. There is a tension between people's need to understand (hence the

need for clarity and consistency) and their tendency to get bored or lose interest when things repeat (hence the need for variety).

My suggestion is to write out alternative versions of each question and think about the clarity versus engagement issue. Then when each question has found its best expression, start thinking about the order in which the questions will be asked.

On the order of questions, it is more important that a question seem related to the ones around it *by what it asks about* than by what type it is. I've found that the best interviews and surveys are coherent, like a natural conversation. If you were going to ask the questions in a normal conversation, in what order would you ask them?

Testing

Another tip is to **test** your questions before you use them, either by asking people for reactions to them or by actually collecting a small number of stories and looking at the patterns you see to find out if some of the questions need refinement. For example, on one project I noticed in early tests that of the answers to the question "How do you feel about this story?" people disproportionately picked the answer "good". I realized that at least some people were probably choosing "good" as a way to avoid revealing how they really felt (it was the equivalent of saying "fine" when someone asks how you are), so I changed that answer to something more telling.

For further reading

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Asking about stories** Google Group page.

Watching storytelling

Methods for collecting stories by observing people, either in their daily lives or in a special group session, draw heavily from **ethnography** and **participant observation**.

The only difference here is that the observer takes special note of stories told and interactions surrounding **storytelling events**. One important difference between collecting stories this way and asking people directly for them is that the observer needs to pay attention to social cues in order to answer questions about stories. Of course, nobody can deny that answering questions about stories yourself inserts your own bias. One way to minimize bias is to write questions for observation that capture things going on during the storytelling event. For example, some valid questions might be:

- Did the storyteller laugh during this story? When?
- Did anyone in the audience laugh 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? 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 could then look at patterns in those questions, because they would be patterns of interpretation by the people whose opinions you care about -- the storyteller and audience.

Gleaning stories from previously collected texts

In some circumstances you may not be able to ask people to tell stories, but you may have access to conventional interviews or records of their conversations. You may still be able to glean enough stories from what they said to carry out a story project.

There are some fairly simple techniques for finding stories among records of spoken or written text:

- Look for past tense verbs, like "said" and "did".
- Look for personal pronouns like "he" and "she" and "we".
- Look for story-starting statements: a reference to a time ("one day"), memory ("I remember when"), experience ("I had" or "I did"), action ("I went"), event ("It rained"), place ("That house"), person ("He liked to") or rumor ("I heard").
- Look for story-continuation statements like "and then" or "soon" or "finally" or "the next thing that happened".
- Look for story-ending statements that summarize ("And so you see") or justify ("I learned a lot") or report a reaction ("He liked it") or ask for approval ("Can you believe it").

In general, if something is *happening* it's a story. You will find that after you've carefully located the first dozen or so stories you will develop an intuition and not have to look for them; you'll just see them.

Transcribing storytelling

Because storytelling is a performance, and because it usually contains a lot of "telling" emotion, it's useful to note some things when transcribing people telling stories that are not normally noted in transcribing other conversations. Some things you might want to highlight are as follows.

Words that stand out

Words said with particular emphasis or emotion, like "I couldn't *believe* that happened", can be important to understanding a story. This is especially useful when noting such emphases makes the emotional aspects of the story easier to understand. For example, if your transcript doesn't distinguish between these:

- **we** knew what to do
- we **knew** what to do
- we knew **what** to do
- we knew what to **do**

you might not know which of these stories is being told (and these are quite different stories). If your project involves reading stories (by yourself or others) you will find that working this in to the transcript is quite helpful. You can come up with a simple notation such as *asterisks* around emphasized words, to do this.

Ums and ahs

Most transcriptions remove ums and ahs. I've found that story transcriptions are better when they don't, because those can be important indicators of the emotional elements of storytelling. Most people will um and ah when they are nervous or unsure about something, or are trying to remember something, or are unsure of how something will be received. This isn't the type of transcribing where you are reporting a news bulletin; hesitations and confusions and poor grammar are *part* of what you want, not something to be thrown away.

Socially significant sounds and silences

Most transcripts ignore things like laughter, muttering, the sound of shuffling feet, and silence; but when somebody is telling a story those sorts of social cues can be very useful indications of what is going on in the storyteller's and audience's minds. Simple notations such as [laughter] and [long silence] can be helpful. One colleague developed a method of denoting laughter by putting one [HA] for each unit of laughter (as he defined it), so a long bout of laughter registered as [HAHAHAHA]. It's also useful to note *who* is laughing, or umming, or coughing, if you can tell that. Pauses are also important: a common practice is to use dashes for short pauses and ellipses for long pauses.

Sarcasm and other subtle cues

As we all know from email, a lot of the verbal and visual cues we give each other in person are lost when things are translated into text. Transcribers of storytelling should be aware of things that might not come across the same in text and make notations. For example, you might add notes like "said with a sarcastic tone" or "said in a Darth Vader voice" or "waving hand around" or "pointing out window" and so on.

For further reading

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Watching storytelling** Google Group page.

Supporting storytelling

These are some of the barriers to telling a story, all of which I've seen in projects where people were asked to tell stories.

- You can't possibly want to know about *my* experiences. (low confidence)
- I'm not about to tell you the *real* truth. (private topic, untrusting group)
- It's been so long, I don't remember details. (long duration)
- You want some sort of performance, right? (succeeding)
- Hey, I can say anything I want here. (venting, complaining)

I won't explain these in detail because they are covered in the **Knowing your storytellers** section (because knowing your storytellers is the best way to find out what barriers you can expect to find) and you should be able to match these up with the characteristics described there.

Helping people turn statements into stories

These are some of the sorts of half-stories you sometimes get and some things you can do to turn them into stories.

- Opinion: I don't think the cafeteria service is as good as it used to be. The people are rude. Response: Can you give me any examples of things that happened?
- Scenario: When you go to the cafeteria you feel like they don't want you there. Response: Can you tell me about any times when that happened?
- Situation: One guy at the cafeteria has been rude to me. Response: Can you tell me what happened?
- Reference: Well you probably heard what happened down at the cafeteria yesterday. Response: No, can you tell me what happened? (Or: Yes, but can you tell me what *you* think happened?)
- Story: Yesterday I was at the cafeteria and I asked for something special and the guy practically threw the food at me! I was going to talk to his superior, but you know, then I saw how unhappy he was and I thought, no he's not rude he's just overworked. I mean those guys are there all day every day and nobody gives them any respect, and so today I decided I will give them a big smile and see if that helps. We'll see. Response: That's very interesting. (And then the interview can move on.)

Of course, some people won't tell stories no matter how much you help them, so you have to know when to stop trying and move on. But most people, when given a few hints such as these, will start telling more stories as the session goes on. You can use the responses either in person (in an interview or group session) or beforehand (by writing them in to survey questions).

Vulnerable moments

If you are talking to people face to face or over the phone, whether individually or in a group, you can notice and support three particularly

vulnerable moments when people are telling stories. Helping people get over these hurdles can improve the output of storytelling sessions, both in the volume and the quality of stories.

Point of vulnerability: start

In the turn-taking dance that is a conversation, telling a story is a performance that can only take place if both parties allow it to happen, because telling a story requires that a person hold the floor for an extended period of time. Did you ever hear someone start to tell a story and then hear someone else interrupt them -- and see the look of disappointment on the face of the storyteller? Or hear someone tell a story and then hear a pause that makes it obvious the other person was not really listening but waiting for them to be done so they could speak? Because telling a story is taking a risk in terms of conversational give and take, people can be reluctant to do it *even if you say you want them to.*

People ask permission to take the floor and tell stories in fairly standard ways, whether they are talking to one person or to a group. Some of the ways people ask to tell a story are by referring to:

- a time ("one day")
- a memory ("I remember when")
- an experience ("I had a job like that")
- an action ("I went out")
- an event ("I talked to him")
- a place ("That park used to be")
- a person "(He used to")
- a rumor ("I heard that")

Often people will say one of these story-starting statements and then *pause* to see if people are going to listen to their performance (in effect, to find out whether they have the floor). If other people respond they go ahead; otherwise they stop. If you happen to be one of the people responding you can recognize these statements for what they are and nudge the storytelling to happen, by just looking at them in a listening

sort of way, or if that doesn't work, by saying "Uh-huh?" or "What happened?" or "I'd like to hear about it" or some such thing.

In the case of asynchronous (not face-to-face) storytelling, you can help people get over the obstacle of starting to tell the story by being very encouraging in the questions you ask and in the statements you make about how useful the stories will be to your project goals. Making it clear to people that you need *the insights only they can provide* will help them to open up.

Point of vulnerability: crux

In every story there is a point where the storyteller reaches a peak of emotion, where their voice rises, their body language becomes more expansive, and they look more at the people listening to them. They are looking to see if people are giving their story the attention it merits so they can continue.

When you see that, you can know two things: first, that this is why the storyteller is telling the story, and second, that they need your support. At this moment the storyteller needs his or her audience to pay attention. If you are conducting an individual interview, you can just lean in and look at the storyteller so that they know you are listening. If they are telling the story in a group of which you are a part, you can't make anybody else listen but you can make sure the storyteller knows that you at least are attending.

Point of vulnerability: finish

Once a person has told a story, they often feel vulnerable and will try to save face by:

- summarizing their story ("And so you see he never went back")
- justifying it ("And that was how I learned not to trust that man")
- referring to an authority figure ("My boss thought that was a good story")
- asking for approval ("Can you believe that")

If you are talking to people in person, it's a good idea, in the pause just after they finish a story,

to say something. Some types of useful reinforcing statements are:

- appreciative -- "Wow"; "That's interesting"; "I never heard that before"; "Fascinating"; "That's worth remembering"
- summarizing -- "So they caught the guy, huh?", "So you left the zoo, huh?"; "So you wrote that letter, huh?"
- questioning -- "Did you ever see that dog again?"; "Does it seem different years later?"
- grateful -- "Thanks for sharing that"; "Thanks for talking about that"

Note on the last type (grateful) that it's *not* a good idea to thank people *for* the story (i.e., "Thanks for that story"), because the "a story is a possession" mindset creeps in and people can close down. But you do need to give people *something* to go on, some kind of positive response, because otherwise they may not venture forth out of the safety of silence again. I have seen people's faces fall after they have told a story and got no response. Often it's the second or third story people tell that is the most useful (partly because they start to understand what you want to know, and partly because they feel safe enough to tell about deeper things), so it's important to help them get over the point of vulnerability found at the end of the first story they tell.

If you are asking for stories through writing, as silly as it seems, it's okay to put a line that says "That's interesting" or some such thing at the bottom of web form or email. You can also put something less silly but still to the point like "We appreciate your help very much" at the end of the form. It serves the same purpose.

Restarting stalled storytelling

Often storytelling in a group session starts out well enough with the **questions you ask**, but the group stalls when it seems like all the stories have been told. Usually at this point there are more (and possibly more useful) truths the session can reveal, but the people need some

help expanding the dialogue. These are some techniques I've seen work to get people going:

- Ask people to think about whether a told story just told **reminds** them of anything -- anything at all -- and see where that leads. Or, contribute your own reminding and see if that provokes any memories from the group. The reminding can proceed from any of the story elements -- characters, behaviors, feelings, events, settings, conclusions, challenges, and so on. For example you might say "Does that plant manager remind anybody of anyone else they know?"
- After a story has been told, ask about **alternatives** that could have happened. For example, if the story ended with a project succeeding, you could ask what could have made the project fail. This can remind people of other similar stories (e.g., when other projects failed, when the thing that could have made that project fail happened, and so on).
- After a story has been told, think of something you can **change** about it -- like who it happened to, or where or when it happened, or who told it. Ask people to think about what might have happened if the story was retold that way. It can even be helpful to talk about things that couldn't possibly happen, just to get people to expand their thinking into new areas. For example, if someone just told a story about storming out of a town meeting after feeling that nobody was listening to their input, you might say "I wonder what would have happened if you had been in charge of the meeting" or "I wonder how that would have played out if the meeting had been on a desert island" or "I wonder how that story might have sounded if it was told by the guy sitting next to you."
- If people are telling only the safest stories and you don't feel that they are reaching their true feelings, you can gently push things to the extremes by asking people for **more** of whatever they are talking about, in whatever direction the storytelling is timidly

heading. For example, if someone has just told a story that hints at not being trusted -- perhaps they were irked at not being allowed to fill the water cooler themselves -- you can say something like "Anything worse than that?" or "Anybody experience anything worse?" or even "Can anybody top that one?" What this does is two things: first, it communicates to people that it's okay to move to the extremes, and second, it taps into the universal urge to compare ourselves to others and try to do as well as they have done or better. This may urge people to go further than they would have in opening up an area they were reluctant to talk about. However, be a bit careful with this one: it can bring out performances instead of honest reflections as people try to "win the game" by "going one better".

More tips

Here are some scattered things from my experience.

- Be patient. It can take time to get started telling stories. I've seen both interviews and group sessions where most of the good stories came in the last quarter of the time. That's fine, as long as it happens.
- Don't let silence bother you. Sometimes it means people are about to come out with something important. Wait it out, at least for a while, and don't jump to fill up every lull.
- Expect some people not to get the point of what you are doing or attack your methods. In every group session or batch of interviews there is always going to be one nay-sayer who thinks what you are doing is stupid. Sometimes people will even walk out of the interview or group session. You have to develop a tough skin about it.
- Consider gifting. Sometimes giving people an unexpected gift creates a temporary window of social obligation that helps them open up to you. For example, you might have donuts in a group session, or you might open an interview by giving them a voucher for a free cup of coffee, or you might start a web survey by giving them a small online gift certificate. In one set of

group sessions a colleague and I ran years ago, we handed out tiny flashlights with the company logo on them, and the room was abuzz with pleasant surprise. The gifting has to be unexpected, otherwise it doesn't produce the result, and yes it's a bit of a trick, but it's a nice friendly trick. It sends the message that you appreciate the fact that people are contributing their time (as you do) and you want them to know it. I've seen it turn a room full of curmudgeons into a lively storytelling group.
- Avoid telling stories or giving examples. You can make brief references to things that will help other people think of stories, but if you tell whole stories yourself some people will think they need to do exactly what you did and will not talk honestly about their own experiences. Actually I have waffled about this issue over the years, because when I started out working with stories I *did* "model" storytelling to get people started, and it worked. Telling a story in front of people is a lot like using a fictional scenario to ask for stories. Its benefit is that it makes very clear what you want from people, and that helps if people are inclined to complain or lecture instead of telling stories. But most people have a strong tendency to mimic as exactly as possible any examples they have been given. If you feel you need to tell a story to get people started, or if you've tried it and it works well for you, by all means go ahead and do it. But keep the story simple and not excessively entertaining, educational, or of other great merit, because people will try to match it. That is what I mean by "brief references," which can be stories, as long as they do not provoke the mimic response.
- Don't give people a long lecture about what a story is, because they will try to make perfect stories for you. People don't need to know anything about stories to tell them. You may need to tell them why you want stories, but you do not need to define what a story is. If people really press you for an explanation, say "just talk about things that happened" or some other short answer.
- Create a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you give people the impression that they will need to do something special or different, you will

be less likely to get at their true feelings. So, just tell them that when people talk stories naturally arise; and they will.

These tips apply to group sessions.

- Watch out for dominators. Some people, because they are in a position of authority or they have a lot of natural ebullience, will tell more stories than others. I've seen sessions where ten people watched and whispered as the group leader told every single story and answered every single question. In such a situation there are more and less subtle responses you can make. You can ask questions *at* the people who are not telling stories (i.e., look at them when you ask) and avoid looking at the dominators; that is the subtle response. The less subtle response is to ask the dominating people to come to a special session or grant a special interview where their very important viewpoints can be given the careful attention they deserve (of course never revealing that you mainly need them out of the way so the other people can talk freely).
- Have more than one facilitator if at all possible. By doing this you can either rotate your presence (to avoid getting stressed out or narrow-minded), or you can attend to different aspects of the session (for example, one person handling the technology and one the people, or one talking and one observing, and so on). Talk about how to best use your skills if they are complementary.

For further reading

The **Anecdote** white paper called **The Ultimate Guide to Anecdote Circles** also describes some of the same techniques covered here.

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Supporting storytelling** Google Group page.

EXERCISES

Using exercises

When you use an exercise, you give people a **task** to carry out that accomplishes one of two purposes:

- In **generative** mode, for storytelling, the task helps people bring out stories that would otherwise go untold. People doing a generative exercise will be building something, but the real outcome of the exercise is not the thing they build: it's the stories they tell on the way. The task is really just a way to get people past whatever stops them from telling the stories without it.
- In **integrative** mode, for sensemaking, the task helps people bring together disparate material into a coherent, complex whole. Whatever people build in an integrative exercise is the primary outcome and any stories told are secondary.

All of the exercises described here work both in both modes, but they are described mainly in generative mode because, well, I wrote that part first. If you are using them for sensemaking, check that section to see how to use the methods for integrative purposes.

Pros and cons

Exercises dig deeper than you can usually get in unstructured conversation. They ask more of people than just sitting in a circle talking. They can be useful to help people bring out things that are hard to articulate or deep below the surface, and they generate diversity in situations where it is lacking. However, exercises require people to work together, and they require a greater investment (on your part and your storytellers' part) in time, space, attendance, facilitation, and attention.

Requirements

In order to use these exercises, you need to be conducting a group session. The session does not have to be physical: people can work on a task in a chat session or over the phone. But if you have the opportunity a physical session is better. You need at least three people, because otherwise there won't be enough diverse input to support doing the task. And you need *at least* a half hour per exercise. For some exercises you need blackboard or wall space to work on (physical or virtual), but for some you don't.

Types

I've seen people use many types of exercises, but these are four I think are the most useful for helping people tell stories and make sense of them, in order from least to most difficult to facilitate:

1. twice-told stories
2. composite stories
3. histories
4. emergent constructs

A note about finding your style

I've seen quite a few people do these exercises in group sessions, and one thing I've noticed is that everybody does them differently and, for the most part, everybody does them right. Meaning, you can bring some of your own experience and knowledge to bear to make the exercises work for you and your needs. You don't need to adhere to a strict recipe but should take these descriptions as food for your own thought processes.

For further reading

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Using exercises** Google Group page.

Twice-told stories

This is a simple exercise that is easy to facilitate. Basically you ask people to **choose** a story from among those that come up, which they will retell to you, or if you have more than one group, to the whole room, or if you have more than two groups, to another group. You can give them a selection criterion or ask each group to come up with their own.

It's best not to allow people to pick "the best story", because that will bring out performances instead of truths. The better thing is to choose (or help people choose) a criterion that is related to the goals of the project, like "choose the story that best exemplifies what we need to change about our community" or "choose the story that you think the mayor most needs to hear".

Which story is chosen to be retold is actually unimportant when this exercise is used in generative mode, though it may be telling. What is most important is that the task of selecting a story with some (any) characteristic causes people to **help each other tell stories**. The social obligation to help the group carry out the collaborative task can trigger contributions that might not have been put forth if there was no task to complete.

During the time when people are telling and selecting their stories, you should of course be taping (or having observers write down) every word people say, but you should leave the groups alone and either stay in the background or leave the room entirely. I've found that having quiet music playing during this part of the session creates a sort of restaurant atmosphere that encourages people to talk.

Because this is the easiest exercise to facilitate, it's a good one to start with if you feel you need to build competence (and confidence) in conducting exercises.

For further reading

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Twice-told stories** Google Group page.

Composite stories

This exercise is similar to twice-told stories except that instead of asking people to choose a story you ask them to *build* one. The story they will be building will have the timeless shape of a folk tale.

Why use a folk tale structure? Because folk tales have been used to convey complex truths around the world throughout history. Building one helps people explore what is needed to represent their (possibly quite complex) experiences with respect to the topic you want them to talk about. Most folk tales grew from the combination of many stories of personal experience. By giving people the shape of a folk tale and asking them to use that shape to build a larger story out of the stories they tell, you will help them to bring out the stories they need to tell.

Basic form

The standard folk tale shape has these elements:

1. Context -- introduction of the setting and characters, explanation of the state of affairs
2. Turning point -- the dilemma or problem or initiating event that starts the story rolling
3. Action -- how the people in the story respond to the dilemma or problem
4. Reversal -- complications, further difficulties, challenges, things going wrong
5. Resolution -- the outcome of the story and reactions to it

These are essentially Branigan's story elements from his book *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, but they also appear in other places, with variations. I like to abbreviate this basic form with the acronym **ECTAERSE**, with the Es marking points where there is often expository or explanatory content (that is, when nothing is happening but the audience is being told something). Note that the S in ECTAERSE is for reSolution, since R is used up for Reversal.

To start the exercise, give people a form to follow by telling them about the elements and writing the terms somewhere where they can see them. Next ask each group of three to six people to choose a central **message** for their story. It should be something related to the goals of the project (of which they should be aware), but people should put their own spin on the topic so that it resonates with them.

After people have selected a message, ask them to select from the stories that naturally come up in conversation and fit them into the slots in the form to build the folk tale. The different slots of the form will naturally select different types of stories based on their function in the larger story, thus:

- A Context story would be one that gives you an idea of what some kind of *situation* is like.
- A Turning point story would be one where a *dilemma or problem* is important.
- An Action story is one where *what someone does* is important.
- A Reversal story is like a Turning point story: something is *challenging* someone.
- A Resolution story is where an *outcome* is especially important.

The rest of the session (all of which you should be recording or having observers take notes on) will be a back-and-forth iteration of telling the story and improving it. It's best to have at least two tellings of the story, and three or even four are better if you have the time. Give people 20 to 30 minutes per building session, then ask them to choose someone from their group to tell the composite story -- to you if it's one group, to the other group if there are two, or to the group to the left or right if there are more than two groups. Limit the telling phases to ten minutes or less to keep people from building very long stories.

As the designated tellers perform the story they will be able to tell from their audience's reactions what works and what doesn't, and they will be able to go back to their group and report on what happened in order to improve the story. Trying to improve the story helps people to range farther in their recollections

and also takes them away from feeling they are "filling in a form", so that they can talk more freely and even enjoy the opportunity to delve into their memories while learning about something interesting. The goal of the exercise is for each group to build a composite story that effectively and memorably communicates the message they have decided on conveying. Of course, when this exercise is used in generative mode, that goal is only important because it causes another goal to be accomplished: that you collect lots of diverse stories of real experience along the way.

Variations on the basic form

On a research project I did years ago, I took apart dozens of folk tales to find out what makes them tick, and I discovered these interesting things about variations on the canonical ECTAERSE story form:

- All elements but the turning point (T) and resolution (S) can drop out if the story is very short, making the shortest possible folk tale format TS.
- All expository (E) elements are optional, though they can also increase in number to several repetitions in any of the E spots in the formula.
- Each non-exposition element can expand to cover formulaic numbers of repetitive episodes. The typical number of repetitions varies from region to region; for example, European folk tales typically have repetitive units of three, Japanese tales have two, and Indian tales have four. Usually tension builds within the sequence of repetitive elements; each gets "bigger" than the last.
- Non-exposition elements can also recurse, meaning they can embed an entire folk tale in the spot allocated to that one element. Some of the great Arab tales (*A Thousand and One Nights*, for example) do this, sometimes to a dizzying extent.

What all this means to your use of the form in a composite story exercise is that you can vary the form you give people to use in an exercise, thus:

- If you have little time or an uncooperative group, use a simple three-element form like TAS.
- If you have more time, use the full ECTAERSE form, either leaving out the exposition elements (simplest), requiring them (more complex), or making them optional (even more complex).
- If you have a group for whom repetition and recursion might be interesting and exciting (perhaps programmers or writers), or if you have a lot of time or a very cooperative group, you can give them the more elaborate options and let them play.

For further reading

This exercise is also described (with some differences) in the open source method document **Story Construction** located on the **Cognitive Edge** web site. It is also described in the **Brambles in a Thicket** book chapter (Kurtz and Snowden), available on the Cognitive Edge web site.

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Composite stories** Google Group page.

Histories

This exercise is particularly helpful when people have to recall events over a long period of time, like their entire lives or careers, because it helps them find significant moments to talk about. In a historical exercise, as with all the other exercises, people build something and tell stories along the way. In this case what is built is a wall-sized (or screen-sized) diagram of events on one or more time lines. The diagram is built out of sticky notes stuck to the wall (either where you have already pasted large sheets of paper or where it's okay to stick notes on the wall). If the exercise is taking place virtually, a shared screen can take the place of the wall, and shapes in a presentation program can take the place of the sticky notes.

Basic form

These are the steps in a simple historical exercise.

1. Ask each group of three to six people to agree on a **topic** that the diagram will explore. This should be related to the goals of the project, like "our town through the decades" or "firefighting through the years" or "our family's journey". Each group should come up with their own interpretation of the main topic that resonates with them.
2. Ask each group to choose a **starting date** for the time line, or how far back they will consider events. Have them mark the present time and the start date with sticky notes (the present time on the right and the starting date on the left).
3. Ask people to tell some stories that capture an essential description of the **present moment**, then write a brief title for each story and build a **cluster** of these notes at the end (the right hand side) of the time line space. They should aim for at least three descriptive stories there.
4. Now have each group **work backwards through time**, telling stories along the way. Ask people to talk about **turning points**, or times when things changed in significant ways, in the history of whatever topic they are considering. Depending on the goals of your project you may want to ask them to think about particular types of turning points, like problems, decisions, dilemmas, learning moments, times of joy or despair, times of solidarity or conflict, accidents, surprises, and so on. The more willing the group is to do complicated things the more elaborate you can ask them to get about turning points.

Why ask people to work backwards? The answer to that is an interesting story in itself. Years ago some colleagues and I were conducting a workshop where we had people making fictional time lines to explore possible alternate histories related to a topic. The first thing that happened was that one of the groups drew their time line backwards, with the present moment on the left and the starting date on the right. We looked at that and thought "strange", but left them alone. Next, we noticed that people seemed to add elements to their time lines that seemed appropriate *based on what had happened before*. In other words they were plodding along in their thinking, running on expectations instead of exploring the fictional space. All of the groups did this, even the one that drew their line backwards. It was just the line, not the time frame they were considering, that was backwards.

But still, this backwards idea got us thinking. In the next exercise, we tried an experiment: we asked people to build one of their fictional time lines by working backwards through time, in effect telling the story from end to beginning. What we found was that the backwards time lines had more imaginative and multi-perspective elements and seemed to allow people to range further in their consideration of possibilities. It stopped people from plodding along and forced them to think more creatively. After that workshop we changed the time line method to use that discovery.

Variations on the basic form

Optionally, you can extend this exercise to an exploration of fictional space. This sort of thing can be very useful when you need to help people open up their emotions about something difficult to talk about. (You can use fictional stories just as you use factual stories; but it's best to mark them so that you know which is which.) To do this, add these steps to those above.

1. After each group's factual time line is complete, they should talk together about what would constitute an **inconceivably utopian**, perfect, heavenly state of affairs. They can tell some fictional stories around what that state might be like. Ask them to give each of those stories a name, then place the cluster of sticky notes above the present day note, as high up on the wall (or screen) as you can.
2. Now ask people to work the utopian time line backwards and finish it by connecting it at some point to the factual time line (but

not to the present moment). Along the way ask people to tell fictional stories that show how the state of affairs transforms to the state of perfection. As with the main time line you can ask them to describe particular moments, like decisions, dilemmas, accidents and so on.

3. When the utopian time line is done, ask people to stop and think about its opposite: an **inconceivably dystopian**, horrible, ruined state of affairs. Ask them to do the same storytelling around that state, placing the cluster near the bottom of the wall (or screen). Then have them work that fictional line back to the factual line in the same way as with the utopian line.

If you have been recording or noting observations during the entire creation of the diagram, you should have collected quite a few stories about experiences and beliefs.

Two notes about sticky notes:

• You can use the normal square or rectangular kind, but if you can find *hexagonal* sticky notes they are much better. The main reason is that they fit together in a beehive pattern that makes it easy to cluster related notes together. (The novelty of their shape also sometimes gets people interested in doing something new.) A good source for these is a company called **Thinking Tools**, but there are several other suppliers on the web now -- just Google "hexagon sticky notes" to find more. It's usually a good idea to get more than one color of notes, because you can use the colors to designate things like different types of turning points (this makes it easier to figure out what people meant after the exercise is over).

• No matter what shape of sticky note you use, use *big* ones. The reason is that when you have a wall filled with notes you need people to be able to see both the detail and the larger picture at the same time so they can "zoom in and out" in their mind quickly. Give people large markers and ask them to *write big*. If you are doing the exercise on the computer, this can be a bit daunting (it's the worst disadvantage really), but you can

get around it partially by either having a large screen or zooming in and panning around a lot.

For further reading

This exercise is also described (with some differences) in the open source method document **The Future, Backwards** located on the **Cognitive Edge** web site.

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Histories** Google Group page.

Emergent constructs

The dictionary says a **construct** is:

1. something constructed.
2. an image, idea, or theory, especially a complex one formed from a number of simpler elements.

So this method is about helping people bring simple elements together to represent complex ideas. The constructs built using this exercise are **emergent** because they emerge from the interactions in a group of people, and that is important because it enables the constructs to capture essential elements of what matters about the topic at hand.

Using emergent constructs to help people tell stories has two functions. First, it helps people dig deeper into unarticulated truths to get at stories that better reveal useful insights. Second, when an area is especially difficult to speak about because people are afraid of being blamed or of blaming others, emergent constructs can create a distancing abstraction that makes it safer to speak out.

Basic constructs

The four types of emergent construct I've often seen created are:

- **situations** like "on the ropes" or "war-time footing" or "in the boxing ring" or "safe haven" or "constant worry"
- **themes** like "can't get no respect" or "violation of norms" or "excuses" or "power grabs"
- **personifications** like "unscrupulous opportunist" or "worker bee" or "double dealer" or "showboat" or "figurehead"
- **values** like "we're all in the same boat" or "value all life" or "prosperity for all" or "exploiting opportunities" (this is not good versus evil in general but what matters to people, what they value or don't value)

You can either decide which and how many construct types you want to ask people to think about, or you can give individual groups the choice. I would suggest no more than two types for most groups, though a particularly interested group may create three.

Process

The process of getting to emergent constructs involves four stages: collecting elements, clustering them, describing the clusters with attributes, then clustering the attributes into constructs.

Collecting elements

Ask people to tell stories about a topic, either in general or using a story-eliciting question (as described in the section on **asking for stories**). While one person is telling a story, other people in the group should be writing down any **elements** they hear in the stories, thus:

- for situations: conditions or circumstances or states of affairs
- for themes: issues or problems
- for personifications: characters or people or players or forces in play
- for values: actions or behaviors

As with the history exercise, people should write the elements on sticky notes (or if the exercise is being done virtually, they can create objects in a presentation program). People should just jot the elements down very briefly, not think about it, and not censor: anything is allowed. If you are deriving more than one type of construct at once, ask people to use a different color of sticky note for each type of element (e.g., blue for conditions, red for people).

As people tell stories, elements they note may remind them of other stories, which is good because the diversity of the input will be increased. They should keep going until they have collected at least twenty or thirty elements of each type they were asked to collect.

Clustering elements

When each group has finished collecting elements, they should place them on a wall (or on the screen) in random locations. Next people should take the elements and **cluster** them, which means placing them together "when they seem related" in any way. People should discuss what belongs together as they work, and stop when they feel they have reached a consensus. Ask people to keep the number of clusters in the range of four to seven.

If more than one group collected elements, you will usually want all the groups to cluster their elements together. But if the groups are different in some way (authority, background, etc) you may want to keep the whole exercise separate and derive two sets of constructs, so you can compare them.

A warning: don't let people *categorize* the items instead of clustering them. Once in a while you get a group that starts marking off areas with labels and placing elements inside them. It's better to stop people from doing that if you can. What you are trying to do here is help meaning emerge *in many dimensions at once*. Creating categories restricts the groups of items to only one dimension of meaning, which will not be useful in exploring a complex topic.

When the element clusters are complete, give each one a number, then write that number on

each sticky note in the cluster. You'll need that information later.

Describing clusters with attributes

Using a new set of empty sticky notes, ask people to describe each cluster with several **attributes**, which should be balanced between positive and negative (say three positive and three negative). What this step does is move from specific elements that came out of real stories to abstracted meanings that apply to broader understandings of the topic in general. Some suggested questions to ask to get attributes:

- for situations: What are the opportunities and dangers in the situation?
- for themes: What would an optimist and a pessimist say about the issue?
- for personifications: What would the character's best friend and worst enemy say about them?
- for values: How would someone who values the thing describe it, and how would someone who does not value it describe it?

Write on each attribute which element cluster (number) it came from.

Clustering attributes

Once there are several attributes per element cluster, *remove* the element clusters and put them away. Then take the attributes and place them randomly on the empty wall (or screen) and ask people to cluster them in the same way they did the elements. Ask people to give the resulting clusters (again four to seven is best) memorable names.

Using the constructs to tell more stories

There are two ways to use emergent constructs to help people tell more stories. You can just let people talk about the constructs and record any stories that come up, maybe giving people a few hints along the way, like asking "Do any of these things remind anyone of anything that has happened?" Or you can continue the exercise with a bit of role-playing. You can ask people to

use the constructs in fictional scenarios like the following:

- two personifications can be placed into a relationship
- a personification can be placed into a situation
- a personification can be asked to tell a story about a theme
- people can be asked to create a story in which particular values and beliefs clash

and so on. There are endless possibilities when combining constructs for exploring the landscape of emotional truths. Using them in this way requires a group willing to play along, and with some groups that option is unavailable, but when possible it can be fruitful.

Variations on the basic form

Though I've only seen situations, themes, personifications, and values used in story projects (probably because they are the broadest categories), if you look at the basic elements of a story (setting, characters, plot, point), more types should be possible.

1. A story's **setting** provides situations and themes, which have already been covered in the basic form.
2. A story's **characters** can provide personifications and values, but also **relationships** like "cat and mouse", **motivations** like "climbing the corporate ladder", and **beliefs** like "nothing we do will make any difference".
3. A story's **plot** can provide situations, but also **transitions** like "eye-opening realization".
4. A story's **point** can provide themes, values, beliefs and **rules of thumb** like "don't look back".

If any of these additional types seem useful, you can try asking people to generate constructs of some of these other types. An additional set of element types is:

- for relationships: connections or interactions

- for motivations: intentions or desires or wants or interests
- for beliefs: actions or behaviors (same as values)
- for transitions: changes or shifts or surprises or turning points or transformations
- for rules of thumb: mottoes or sayings or maxims or slogans or unwritten rules or morals

An additional set of attribute questions is:

- for relationships: How does the connection aid and hinder its members?
- for motivations: What are the benefits and detriments of having the thing that is wanted or intended?
- for beliefs: What would lead a person to do the action, and what would lead a person to avoid doing it?
- for transitions: How does the turning point change things for the better and for the worse?
- for rules of thumb: What would somebody who lives by this rule, and somebody who thinks it's useless, say about it?

You can also come up with your own types of construct. There is no fixed list; if it you test it and it works for you, great.

For further reading

This exercise is also described (with some differences) in the open source method document **Social construction of emergent properties** located on the **Cognitive Edge** web site. It is also described in the **Brambles in a Thicket** book chapter (Kurtz and Snowden), available on the Cognitive Edge web site.

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Emergent constructs** Google Group page.

WORKING WITH COLLECTED STORIES

Look: Finding patterns

When you look at stories and answers to questions about them, you can find **patterns** that provide **insights**. Note that I do not say you can find *answers* that provide *solutions*. Stories are not laboratory instruments and they cannot be perfectly controlled or measured. Any act of looking at stories involves interpretation which is guaranteed to vary from person to person. If you are looking for answers in stories you will not find them. However, what you will find, and lots of it, is things that make you think, things that surprise you, things that bring new perspectives to your exploration, and things you may not want to hear but need to hear.

There are three general ways of looking at the information you gather in a story project: looking at stories alone, looking at answers alone, and looking at stories and answers together.

Looking at stories

The method I've used for looking at stories and found useful is inspired by **grounded theory**. The basic idea of grounded theory is that instead of constructing a hypothesis and then collecting data to test it, for some topics (and especially when dealing with interpretation of texts) it is better to start with the data and let the theory emerge from it, grounded in it so to speak. I'm not very concerned with the debates on whether the method really generates "theory" or is scientifically rigorous, but I've found the general ideas very useful for looking at stories. If you know enough about grounded theory to know there are two schools, you should know I

like the **Glaserian** or inductive/emergent side of things for narrative work.

What I suggest to look at stories is the following. If it is at all possible, I suggest having two or more people go through this process independently and share their results to maximize the diversity of interpretation.

Soak up stories

First, read all the stories you have (and here I am assuming you haven't collected thousands). I like to think of it as "soaking up" stories like a sponge. As you read, highlight everything that "jumps out" at you. What jumping out means I hesitate to define, but it's sort of like things people said that seem important to them or to you or to the project's goals. I usually try to highlight phrases or clauses or sentences rather than single words. I call the things you select "elements", though grounded theory calls them "codes" (which to me, being a programmer, sounds strange).

You can select elements in a few different ways:

1. by printing the stories and circling or highlighting words
2. by opening a document and bolding words (this is the equivalent of circling, on the computer)
3. by copying words from one document to another

Marking things by circling them on paper or bolding them on the computer is faster and more intuitive (less distracting), but it requires you to do a second step of copying what you've circled or bolded to the computer or other pieces of paper after selection is complete. Copying and pasting can feel artificial and goes more slowly, but then again you've got the text right there when you are ready to move on. I've done it both ways. For smaller bodies of text I think the circling/bolding method is far superior; but when I have a lot of text to get through or not much time to work with I give up and use the copying method.

Feel free to move back and forth through the stories and change what you've selected as you go. Sometimes you get halfway through the stories and then realize something you hadn't been selecting has been growing in importance in your mind; or conversely, you realize that something you have been selecting is not really very important after all. It's perfectly okay to go back and make changes. What you want to do is reach a **saturation point** where you feel that the things you have selected, when extracted from the whole texts, will capture enough of what is important about what people said that you can leave the whole texts behind without losing very much essential meaning.

Cluster

When you have finished reading the stories and highlighting elements, you should have a nice pile of short pieces of text: things like "he never came back" and "I felt abandoned" and "the winter was so long" and so on. Next you just take these things and cluster them, merging and splitting clusters as you go. I've done this clustering in three ways:

1. by writing or printing elements on sticky notes or pieces of paper and moving them around on a table or wall
2. by copying elements onto shapes in a presentation program and moving them around on the screen
3. by pasting elements into columns in a spreadsheet

Which of these you do depends on how much time you have and how many elements you have. If you have a lot of time or few elements, you can painstakingly copy the texts to pieces of paper or bubbles in a presentation program. Having the freedom to move things around fluidly improves your ability to think intuitively, and physical space is better than virtual space for this sort of emergent thinking. But if you have a lot of elements or not much time, the spreadsheet method, though less intuitive, works. Just make a new column whenever you think you have a new cluster to place items in.

Remember to cluster based on **unspecified similarity**, meaning that you should put things together *if they seem like they belong together* without thinking about why you are doing it. It's important to stop yourself from categorizing things on one dimension like "strength of emotion" or "negativity", because that will give you a narrow interpretation of what people said (and it gives bias purchase). This is one place where I think grounded theory falls down a bit, because it calls the groups "categories" and the activity "sorting", which seems to me too directed for true emergence to take place. The act of clustering is one of using your intuitive connecting mind, not your analytical separating mind, to see relationships that you cannot easily articulate but that may be important nonetheless.

When you have placed all of your items into clusters, review the clusters to see if you want to change anything. When you don't feel any tensions in the group of clusters (i.e., nothing wants to split or join), stop.

Describe the clusters

Once your clusters are complete, describe them to yourself. What does each cluster say to you about what the people who told the stories feel? Also, look at how the clusters interact, as though they were members of a family or players in a game. Are there tensions or open conflicts between members? Are there some that reinforce each other? Are there coalitions? What does the whole body of clusters say?

Looking at answers to questions

If you asked questions about the stories people told, you will want to look at patterns in the answers. Here are some suggestions for doing that.

Single questions

The first and most obvious thing to do is simply to look at how people answered each question. What proportion of people said their story made them feel sad and what proportion said it made them feel encouraged? What is the

distribution of answers across the five age ranges? And so on. Are the answers what you expected? What surprises do you see?

Pairs of questions

If you asked, say, five questions about each story, you will have twenty-five pairwise combinations between them. You can ask things like, when the storyteller was over fifty, were they more or less likely than otherwise to say their story was uplifting? Or, when the storyteller said their story was about trust, were they more or less likely than otherwise to say their story ended badly? And so on. There are many possible combinations to explore. If you have few stories or few questions you may be able to explore them all, but if you can't, choose pairs you think may be interesting together.

Larger patterns

Above the level of pairs of questions, you can ask broader questions. Here are a few ways to explore larger trends:

1. Pretend the body of data is an *omniscient observer* of whom you can ask any question you like and get an accurate answer. If you came up with some ideal questions when you started planning the project, you can go back to those now. Also, reading some of the stories can help you think of questions you'd like to ask your omniscient friend. For each ideal question, see what sort of patterns you can find in your data that answer the question, even if only partially.
2. Think about what your *assumptions* are about what you will find in the data, then see if you can surprise yourself. For example, you might see the question "How long have you been doing this sort of work?" and think "I'll bet the old-timers have more stories about how things used to be better." Then go and test that assumption, if you can.
3. Take the single-question and question-pairs observations you've already made and start *rearranging* them. Do they say anything

synergistic if you put them together? That might lead you to explore more patterns.

4. When you make an observation, think about what questions it *leads to* in turn. For example, if you find out that most of the stories that made people feel "glad" took place over a year ago, you might want to look at all of the answers regarding stories that took place in the past year to see if you can see any other patterns that can explain the loss of "gladness". And so on.

Looking at stories and answers

Looking at stories and data together can arise out of either end of the partnership -- from looking at stories alone or from looking at questions alone. Say you are looking at stories and want to find out whether stories in which you noticed a trend towards fatalism happened in younger or older veterans, so you look at the answers to the age question for those stories. Or say you notice a group of five stories in which people said the story was "too dangerous to tell in public" yet made them feel "enthused" about their work, so you read those stories to find out what happened to trigger that interesting combination of answers. As you develop observations from either side of the equation you should be able to tack back and forth. The stories and the answers to the questions are really just two ways of finding out the same things, and they should complement your understandings of what the people are saying to you.

Who is listening to whom?

The people who might be involved in a story project fall into three groups:

- people who are being **listened to**: people in the "group of interest"
- people who are **listening**: those who are running the story project (this probably includes you)
- people who are **listened for**: usually the project sponsors, or people who have responsibility for what is being asked about and may be in a position of authority over it

These three groups might be all the same group, for example if you are helping your own community with its own project:

- listened to: the community
- listening: the community (and you in particular helping them do that)
- listened for: the community

Or they may be three separate groups, for example if you have been asked by friends who own a coffee shop to ask their customers to tell stories about the shop:

- listened to: customers of the shop
- listening: you
- listened for: shop owners

Or two of the three groups might be the same (e.g., you are the owner of the shop; or you are a customer of the shop).

Now you may recall that in the "Why work with stories?" section I said:

> The main difference between this approach and many others that collect stories is this: a person who is working with stories does not tell or interpret or change or even select stories, *ever*. All of these things are done *only by the people in the group of interest*.

When you plan how you will work with stories in your story project, it is important to think about these three groups and how you will be asking them to help you with the project. The best story projects are those in which the people who are listened to participate in all phases of the project, meaning they do at least some of the looking at, thinking about, and talking about stories. (In the coffee-shop example, you might ask some customers to do a sensemaking exercise.) However, in some cases this is not possible, usually because the group of interest is unavailable, unable or uninterested.

When the group of interest cannot look at, think about, or talk about stories, it is best to follow

these guidelines to avoid biasing the outcome of the project.

Rule 1: Separate statements

First, the listening and listened-for groups (i.e., those not in the group of interest) should get into the habit of separating statements about stories, answers and patterns into three categories:

- **Observations** are things that anyone could be expected to see and agree on. An observation is something like "People younger than 20 were more likely than people 20 or older to say their story reflected peer pressure." Anyone in any of the three listening groups can make an observation.
- **Interpretations** are opinions about what an observation or story or answer or pattern *means*. Most of the answers people give to questions about their stories will be interpretations. Only people in the group of interest should make interpretations *unless* the second rule is followed (see below).
- **Implications** are opinions about what could or should be done about the issues raised. Answers to questions about stories sometimes involve implications, such as when the question is something like "What do you think should be done about the problem described in this story?" As with interpretations, only people in the group of interest should make implications unless the second rule is followed.

Rule 2: Provide provoking perspectives

The purpose of interpretations and implications is to **provoke thought and discussion**, not to provide answers or solutions. To support this, people in the listening or listened-for groups should **always generate at least two differing interpretations or implications per observation**. Try to make the interpretations compete as though people with opposite perspectives said them. You can even make some of the interpretations and implications deliberately naive and extreme in order to provoke reactions that jar yourself and

others out of habitual thought patterns. Following this rule can be difficult but it greatly reduces the trap of confusing interpretations with answers, and helps any group of people broaden their reflections and discussions on the topic and consider fresh perspectives.

You can school yourself in creating competing interpretations and implications. For example, you can think:

- you could look at it this way or that way
- this sort of person might say this and this sort of person might say that
- it could mean this or it could mean that
- one person might say this and another person might say that
- you could take it this way or that way
- one way to look at it might be and another might be

And so on. Sometimes it can be helpful to think of people you know (or can imagine) who would not be expected to agree on the topic and imagine what they might say, like "my mother would say this, and my college friend would say that" or, for a group, "our happiest customer would say this, and our angriest customer would say that." These habits of thought can become accepted practice in your group.

A note on technology

You may have noticed that I have said nothing about what technology you should use to look at stories. There are three reasons for this.

1. If you know how to use a spreadsheet to count and sort and graph results I don't need to tell you anything (and if you don't know how to use a spreadsheet, there are plenty of resources on the web to help you). Using a statistical package and writing your own scripts to process data are also options you may have available which I don't need to explain.
2. The folks over at **Cognitive Edge** sell software specifically designed to support looking at patterns in narrative data, and I don't want to step on their toes.

3. I have no idea what you need or have to work with, and it's impossible for me to make recommendations for the wide range of things people might possibly want to do in a story project. There is no one best way to support storytelling with technology; there are many possible ways.

For further reading

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Look: Finding patterns** Google Group page.

Think: Making sense

Sensemaking refers to how people make sense of the world in all its complexity and uncertainty in order to make decisions. Group sensemaking means a group of people thinking about something together. In a story project, groups can use the body of collected stories and answers to questions about them to think about issues they care about or decisions they need to make. Group sensemaking with stories can either involve discussion or exercises (or both).

Discussion

Here are some ways to make sense of the stories and answers collected from a group of people.

* Distribute the collected stories to group participants so that everyone has read at least a few stories and every story has been read by at least a few people. Ask people to talk about the stories they think are the most -- something -- resonant, important, dangerous, useful and so on. Talk about why those stories were chosen. Talk about what each means about the issue and what can be done about it.
* Have several people spend some time looking at the stories on their own. Ask them to bring some observations, interpretations and implications to the meeting. Swap observations and derive new

interpretations and implications, then talk about the similarities and differences and what they mean.
* Have groups of two or three people sit down and look at the stories together, in the style of extreme programming (an approach where all programming is done by teams working together). See if you can increase diversity between groups and decrease it within groups, so as to maximize the range of viewpoints represented. Have each group come up with observations, interpretations and implications; then swap and discuss.
* Have several people or groups look at the stories and come up with observations and selected stories. Then paper one or more walls, or maybe even a whole room, with printouts of stories and graphs of trends, and have a group of people -- either those who made the observations, or others, or a mixed group -- walk around and talk about what they see.
* If the group doing the sensemaking is *not* in the group of interest, remember to ask people to separate statements and provide provoking perspectives, as described in the patterns section.

Exercises

The exercises mentioned here (twice-told stories, composite stories, histories, and emergent constructs) can be used in either the **generative** mode, that is, to generate stories, or in **integrative** mode, to bring together existing stories into convergent understandings. In generative mode the output of the exercises takes a back stage to the stories told, but in integrative mode the output of the exercises is a jewel of great value.

To use any of the exercises as an integrator, distribute the collected stories to group participants as you would for a discussion. Handing out papers at the start of the session is the easiest way to do this. I don't recommend sending people things to read beforehand as some will and some won't. Ask people to sit quietly and read their stories (which should be short), then ask people to put away the stories and go through the exercise using the stories they read. Don't allow people to refer to the

printed stories after they have read them, since you want them to have to remember the stories and think about them. Having the story in front of people tends to make them focus too much on details and not enough on what is meaningful in the story.

Now ask people to carry out the task with the stories they have read. It is fine if people tell more stories during the exercise and incorporate them into their task. After the task is complete (a story has been chosen and retold, a composite story has been built, a history has been outlined, constructs have emerged), ask people to talk about the thing that has been created and what it means about the issues at hand or decisions to be made. I've seen quite a few instances where the task outcome contains surprises that turn previous thinking about project issues on its head.

Optionally, people can then go on to talk about what implications the task outcome has for what they should do with regard to the issue. They can even use the task outcome to try out ideas -- for example they can place new items on a history, or have a personification tell a story about an initiative, and so on. This can be a way to explore ideas that come up as a result of the integrative sensemaking.

The rules about generating interpretations and implications (separate statements, provide provoking perspectives) apply just as much to sensemaking exercises as to general discussion, because the exercises are primarily interpretive activities. One way to make sure exercises provide provoking perspectives is to deliberately populate your sensemaking groups with people you expect to have different viewpoints. You will then be able to compare outcomes to see how the interpretations differ.

Be aware that people sometimes become upset about the outcome of the exercises used in integrative mode. Sometimes the result of the exercise is that people are confronted with something that turns their prior beliefs on their heads and pushes on tender spots, possibly for the first time. These are a few of the (real but heavily anonymized) incidents I remember taking place:

- participants discovered that people they revered shared attributes with people they despised
- people in authority found out how their subordinates really saw them, and vice versa
- staff members were confronted with their true feelings about their customers
- two merging groups saw their unspoken misgivings about each other come out into the open
- people saw that the real reason they were failing was their own prejudices

I've seen and heard about people leaving the exercise in a huff, and worse, when cherished beliefs were toppled in this way. The danger is greatest when you have two or more groups integrating information separately and then sharing the results.

What is important during these moments of discomfort is to stay calm and not become defensive yourself, because people will undoubtedly attack your methods when they see results they don't like. Explain carefully and clearly how the results came about, and allow people some distance and time to ponder the result. It can sometimes help to give people a task to carry out that allows them to save face by coming up with new ideas based on what was discovered (thereby turning an unpleasant discovery into a productive insight). Usually when people are given adequate information, time to process it, and something constructive to profit by, they can move past defensiveness and come back with new insights and ideas that transform the experience from disabling to enabling.

For further reading

The other exercise I recommend for sensemaking with stories is building a sensemaking framework. I'm not going to explain how to do that here, because I already wrote (with Dave Snowden) a fairly detailed description of that method in the paper *The new dynamics of strategy: Sense-making in a complex and complicated world*, in the the **IBM Systems Journal**. Another description of the method can be found in the

article called **Model Creation by Social Construction** on the **Cognitive Edge** web site. Building a sensemaking framework, while wonderfully useful, is a more advanced activity than the exercises I describe here, so I'd recommend you get some practice with them before you attempt it.

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Think: Making sense** Google Group page.

Talk: Connecting people and stories

To explain how a story collection can help communities, bear with me while I extend the a-story-is-a-seed metaphor much further.

In a natural ecosystem, the **soil seed bank** is the community of living seeds present in the soil.

In a human ecosystem, the mind story bank is the community of living stories present in the minds of people.

The soil seed bank is constantly being updated by new seeds falling and being churned deep into the soil by water percolation, decomposition, and disturbances such as falling trees. As the soil churns, old seeds come to the surface and germinate.

The mind story bank is constantly being updated by new stories being told and churning deep into minds by the percolation of ideas, reflection, and disturbances such as relocations and deaths. As minds reflect, old stories come to the surface and are told again.

Soil seed banks are like living museums of the plant community, places where dormant organisms are held in memory for future growth and in safety for use after a cataclysmic event.

Mind story banks are like living museums of the human community, places where dormant stories are held in memory for future

understanding and in safety for use when they are most needed.

A soil seed bank is a reflection of what is going on above the soil. Studying the soil seed bank can reveal patterns that give us important insights into the community and its unique characteristics and needs, and it can give us a glimpse into the past and future of the ecosystem.

A mind story bank is a reflection of what is going on in the world of human endeavor. Studying the mind story bank can reveal patterns that give us important insights into the community and its unique characteristics and needs, and it can give us a glimpse into the past and future of the community.

One of the problems with large-scale commercial agriculture is that though it produces short-term vigor, it reduces diversity in the soil seed bank. This impoverishes the system and reduces its ability to help the plant community survive and recover from catastrophe.

One of the problems with the large-scale commercialization of storytelling is that though it produces short-term entertainment, it reduces diversity in the mind story bank. This impoverishes the system and reduces its ability to help the community survive and recover from catastrophe.

A **seed bank** is an artificially created collection of seeds maintained by people in order to preserve diversity in the face of depleted soil seed banks. One of the challenges in managing seed banks is the need to constantly replant seeds in order to maintain the viability of the stored seeds. In particular maintaining the endosperm layer surrounding the seed embryo, which provides sustenance to keep the dormant seed alive and able to germinate, can be a challenge. Seeds whose endosperm is lost cannot survive.

A story bank is an artificially created collection of stories maintained by people in order to preserve diversity in the face of depleted mind

story banks. One of the challenges in managing story banks is the need to constantly retell stories in order to maintain the viability of the stored stories. In particular maintaining the contextual layer surrounding the story embryo, which provides memorability to keep the dormant story alive and able to be told, can be a challenge. Stories whose context is lost cannot survive.

As you can see, this explains a lot (at least to me!) about why putting a system in place to collect and redistribute stories on an ongoing basis can be so helpful to a community (of people).

Building and maintaining a story bank

An "artificially created collection of stories maintained by people in order to preserve diversity" can vary all the way from one simple web page to an online community as large and complex as eBay or Facebook. One of the best ways to decide what sort of story bank you want to build is to look around on the web for examples. Type into a search engine:

- "tell us your story"
- "share your story"
- "what's your story"
- "X stories" where X is whatever topic you are interested in -- e.g., birth stories, divorce stories, bereavement stories, abuse stories, innovation stories, homeschooling stories, diabetes stories, etc...

By looking through what comes up from those searches you should be able to find examples that give you ideas; and after looking at some examples you should be ready to answer these questions about how you want to build your story bank.

Will you use the web?

That's kind of a funny question since it seems everybody uses the web nowadays. But you can put out story collections in other ways: by printing books and brochures; by displaying posters and running kiosks; by staging performances where stories are retold; and so on. It's not a foregone conclusion that the internet (though it has clearly changed the world) is the best vehicle for your project.

Will people see answers to questions?

If you have asked people questions about the stories they told, do you want to include their answers? Doing so can be useful to readers, but it may be distracting, and it may reveal things about the storytellers that they might not like published.

How will people navigate through the stories?

Do you want to provide some means of navigating the stories based on the answers to questions, or other things about the stories like themes, or just have the stories in a list? For example, you might present the stories sorted by location or the teller's age, or by what happened (in some way that matters to the people reading the stories), so that people can find exactly what they want. You may also want to provide ways to link stories to each other so that people can follow pathways through them.

Navigation can be by fixed categories that never change, or (with some more work) you can allow people to do searches and sort stories by all answers to all questions. It depends on what you think the people reading the list need and how many stories you have (or expect to collect). If they will be well served by just reading stories in order, you don't need special navigation systems. But if you have lots of stories, or if the stories vary widely in such a way that people may need to choose only a subset, you may want to think about ways to help people do that.

Depending on the reason you are building your story collection, you may actually want to *thwart* the way people want to read the stories. For example, you could make it difficult to avoid reading stories told from other viewpoints in order to introduce people to new and unfamiliar perspectives. Here's an example that

made that point brilliantly way back in 1857. From George Eliot's novelette *Janet's Repentance* (in the book **Scenes of Clerical Life**):

> Mrs. Linnet had become a reader of religious books since Mr. Tryan's advent, and as she was in the habit of confining her perusal to the purely secular portions, which bore a very small proportion to the whole, she could make rapid progress through a large number of volumes. On taking up the biography of a celebrated preacher, she immediately turned to the end to see what disease he died of; and if his legs swelled, as her own occasionally did, she felt a stronger interest in ascertaining any earlier facts in the history of the dropsical divine -- whether he had ever fallen off a stage coach, whether he had married more than one wife, and, in general, any adventures or repartees recorded of him previous to the epoch of his conversion. She then glanced over the letters and diary, and whenever there was a predominance of Zion, the River of Life, and notes of exclamation, she turned over to the next page; but any passage in which she saw such promising nouns as "small-pox," "pony," or "boots and shoes," at once arrested her.

Notice how Mrs. Linnet chooses stories by steps: first by message (the secular portions); then by the climax of the story (what the preacher died of); then by plot points (whether he had fallen off a stage coach, etc); and finally by environmental elements (boots and shoes). What is funny about this passage (and why Mrs. Linnet serves as the comic relief in the story) is that she thwarts the purpose of the religious books entirely: she goes straight for the elements she values most. In developing methods for navigating story collections, normally one would expect to help people quickly meet their particular needs. But on the other hand, there *may* be cases where there is a message the story collection wants to get across, such as getting along with people from different groups, and one might not want to make thwarting the central point of a collection as easy as Mrs. Linnet found it.

Will contributions be allowed?

Will you allow people to contribute stories to the collection, or will it simply present stories already collected? Most web story collections permit contribution, but in some cases, for example if they are stories about an event that had a limited duration, you may not want to keep them open.

If contributions are allowed, will they be moderated?

If people are allowed to contribute stories to the site, you can either have the stories read before they are placed on the site or not. Moderation is usually necessary to keep out spam and other undesirable input, but allocating someone's time to babysit the site may not be something you can afford to do. Another option is to have a peer reporting system where site visitors can mark stories as inappropriate, at which time they become hidden until someone in charge of the site goes over them. Most of the smaller sites I've seen opt for having a moderator as gatekeeper.

What technology will you use to support the site?

There is a huge array of software available for supporting online communities, much of it free (search for "open source forum software" or "open source wiki software"). Many packages can be adapted easily to supporting a story bank. For example, you can take any of several free forum or wiki software packages and, by using some common rules about how a story is represented and categorized, make it possible to find stories about particular topics or search for different answers to questions. **Semantic wikis** in particular are useful for supporting stories with associated answers because they support adding metadata (answers to questions) to texts (stories) and searching and browsing on them.

This is all easier if you moderate submissions, but you *can* also ask people to adhere to rules about how to write and annotate and place stories. It depends on your membership. If your storytellers are familiar with using the web and

filling out forms and using forums and wikis, you can ask them to do some pretty elaborate things like use structured text to format questions and answers in templates. If your audience is mixed or unfamiliar with web technology, it's best to use email submission or other lower-technology methods to help stories get to where they need to be.

More questions

Some other questions might be:

• Will everyone be able to read every story, or will you help people use "circles of trust" or other mechanisms to say who can and cannot read their story?
• Will you clean up stories to remove identifying details or leave them alone?
• Will you support multimedia content or just text?
• Will you help people find patterns in stories themselves (for example by giving them means to count up how many stories fit selection criteria)?
• Will you allow people to discuss stories? Some wikis have "talk" pages attached to each article, and you could envision such a thing for each story in your story collection.

Start small

My final suggestion for helping people exchange stories is to start with a simple project, see what issues come up, and *then* build something larger. Your community and your purpose are unique, and it will be impossible to anticipate what obstacles you will face until you get started. It's better to have to start over again and learn from early mistakes while you still have energy left than to have to abandon an overly ambitious project that got one critical thing wrong. I think the mistake I've seen more often than any other in watching people carry out story projects is trying too hard and expecting too much at first. Start with a small garden before you plow that field.

For further reading

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Talk: Connecting people and stories** Google Group page.

CASE STUDIES

Collecting stories in a poor urban community

by Jonathan Carter, janniecarter at gmail.com

*Editor's note: In this case study Jonathan refers to anecdote circles, which use methods covered in the **deciding on methods** and **supporting storytelling** sections of Working with Stories.*

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 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** 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: 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 at
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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 the section called **Think: Making sense**).

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.

Incorporating narrative into e-learning

by Cynthia Kurtz

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 (histories, 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.

APPENDICES

Resources

These are some informational resources I recommend for supporting work with stories.

Oral History

Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology, edited by David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum.

This is a great book for understanding the complexities of oral history, which is basically asking people to tell stories and so a useful topic to study if you want to do story projects. I particularly liked chapter seven ("Oral History: An Appreciation"), where this quote appears:

> Oral history has a proper place in the system of evidence, experience, and analysis that produces good history, and properly used it can make an important contribution. Improperly used it can be mischievous and destructive.

That reflects my own understanding of what I call "the power and danger of narrative". Listening to and telling stories can do wonderful things, but if handled badly it can backfire. Stories, like people, demand respect.

The Oral History Reader, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson.

This is just an excellent overview for finding out what oral history is about, its history, what people are doing with it, views of its future, what sorts of problems often arise, and so on.

Stories in communities

[Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative](), by Richard Bauman.

This little book, though certainly not exhaustive or groundbreaking, is one of the best descriptions of what storytelling in real communities is like that I've ever found (and better than any textbook on folklore that I've read, either). Here's a quote:

> [C]onsiderations of truth and belief will vary and be subject to negotiation within communities and storytelling situations. This would suggest that if we are interested in the place of narrative in social life, it is the dynamics of variability and negotiation that we should investigate; the issue should be transformed from a typological comparative one to an ethnographic one.

According to Bauman, many stories that may be patently untrue at a purely factual level can reveal deeper truths about the community in which they are told. He quotes a 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." Among the coon-hunters described in this book, lying is a mark of truthfulness, that your word, deep down, can be trusted. People who stick to the literal truth simply aren't playing by the rules. I think when it was when I read about those coon-hunters that I first understood the power and danger of listening to stories.

[Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences](), edited by Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman.

This edited volume has several useful chapters, but my favorites are "The Narrative Quality of Experience" (Chapter 2) by Stephen Crites and "Storytelling in Criminal Trials: a Model of Social Judgment" (Chapter 4) by W. Lance

Bennett. Crites talks about how stories are essential to the human experience because the time element in stories parallels the time element that defines our lives. Crites also talks about the essential difference between sacred (what we are) and mundane (how we operate) stories, thus:

> [Sacred] stories, and the symbolic worlds they project, are not like monuments that men behold, but like dwelling places. People live in them.... For these are stories that orient the life of people through time, their life time, their individual and corporate experience and their sense of style, to the great powers that establish the reality of their world.... Between sacred and mundane stories there is distinction without separation. From the sublime to the ridiculous, all a people's mundane stories are implicit in its sacred story, and every mundane story takes soundings in the sacred story.

When you do a story project, you collect many mundane stories but you can almost always find some of the sacred stories lurking beneath them. After a while you learn to recognize when a story contains a sacred element. Those are the stories that most need to be guided to where they need to go.

Bennett's chapter on storytelling in criminal trials talks about how people weighing evidence rearrange what they hear until it forms a story:

> [E]ven when evidence is introduced in the often disjointed "question-answer" format in a trial, the key elements generally will be abstracted by jurors and arranged in story form during deliberation.

He also says that people use narrative form to try out explanations:

> The story form ... aids the listener in drawing certain conclusions about the interpretation: Is it plausible? Is it more plausible than some other interpretation? Is it humorous? Is it ironic? Does it fit with some prominent theme in my relationship with the storyteller or in our immediate interaction? Have I had an experience like this that I could recount to indicate my comprehension of, or agreement

with, the point of the story? In short, stories are powerful means of transmitting precise interpretations of distant and complex events to people who either did not witness those events or who did not grasp them from the storyteller's perspective.

The exciting thing about this chapter, and this quote, is that this perfectly describes what people who face the challenge of making *any* decision need to do; which is why gathering and looking at, thinking about and talking about stories is one of the best ways to make a sound decision.

The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture, by Robert Fulford.

This isn't an academic tome, it's just a fascinating look at how storytelling affects culture. This is from a page I have marked:

> This has been the century of mass storytelling. We live under a Niagara of stories: print, television, movies, radio and the Internet deliver to us far more stories than our ancestors could have imagined, and the number of stories available to us seems to grow larger every year. This phenomenon, the rise of industrialized narrative -- storytelling that's engineered for mass reproduction and distribution -- has emerged as the most striking cultural fact of the twentieth century and the most far-reaching development in the history of narrative.

Well said. My feeling is that the scale has balanced too far into the range of industrialized narrative and out of the range of *personal* narrative for a healthy society. I think people need to hear more of the raw experiences of other people and less of prepared, packaged goods. (And not fake rawness either like on talk shows and reality shows; that's just another trick of packaging.)

Gig: Americans Talk About Their Jobs, by John Bowe, Marisa Bowe and Sabin Streeter; and **Gig: Americans Talk About Their Jobs at the Turn of the Millennium** by the same authors.

I like these books because they are great examples of people successfully collecting and disseminating unscripted, raw stories of personal experience. If your story project gets stories like these, you are doing it right. Also, I like this quote (from the first Gig book):

> **Gig** presents the mesmerizing, many-textured, profound, hilarious, and above all, unscripted voice of the individual. Unmediated by TV or magazine editing, it's something that nearly goes unheard beneath the deluge of movies, TV, celebrity coverage, advertising, and general hype that pours down upon us every day. When it is heard, it's almost always distilled and distorted by high-level media pundits whose last experience of ordinary American life was around 10,000 expense account cocktails ago. We feel that the world hears too much from "experts" of all political stripes, and not enough from the people for and about whom they presume to speak.

Indeed.

Sensemaking

Sense-Making Methodology Reader: Selected Writings of Brenda Dervin, by Brenda Dervin and Lois Foreman-Wernet, with Eric Lauterbach.

Of the sensemaking folks I like Brenda Dervin the best. She's one of those people who, when I read what she writes, I'm constantly saying "yes yes" under my breath. In this book she attacks one set of unexamined assumptions after another, from "traditional categories of users" to connections between democracy and the use of information. Dervin also has a **sensemaking web site** with lots of information on it.

Methods

Focus Groups as Qualitative Research, by David L. Morgan.

For the most part I think focus groups are not that useful, but I did learn a lot from this little blue book. It helped me to figure out what

pitfalls to avoid and what opportunities to pursue in the context of a group session.

Narrative and decision making

Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions, by Gary Klein.

I've got a forest of notes sticking out of this book. This is probably the single most interesting quote in the book:

> Before we did this study, we believed that novices impulsively jumped at the first option they could think of, whereas experts carefully deliberated about the merits of different courses of action. Now it seemed that it was the experts who could generate a single course of action, while novices needed to compare different approaches.

That certainly turns decision support on its head! Klein goes on to debunk every theory of cognitive science that says people carefully weigh the pros and cons of a long list of options before taking action, and instead says that *people who really know what they are doing* think back into their past and remember *patterns* (i.e., stories) that relate to the current situation; and if they can't find any patterns that match, they mentally *simulate* new patterns and think about what might happen. This book makes the case for supporting decision making with narrative.

Masons, Tricksters and Cartographers: Comparative Studies in the Sociology of Scientific and Indigenous Knowledge, by David Turnbull.

This fascinating book challenges the notion that all technological and scientific advances are planned and rational enterprises and "assumes that there is not just one universal form of knowledge (Western science), but a variety of knowledges." Turnbull describes several instances of technological marvels made in the ages when masons and other artisans who had an intimate knowledge of materials and a "laboratory" in which to experiment allowed structure to emerge from the interaction of parts without central architects or blueprints.

He argues that even today knowledge, including scientific and technological knowledge, is assembled, social, and local:

> I argue that the common element in all knowledge systems is their localness, and that their differences lie in the way that local knowledge is assembled through social strategies and technical devices for establishing equivalences and connections between otherwise heterogeneous and incompatible components.

Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers, by Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May.

This is a fascinating look at how analogies can be used and misused (deliberately and unconsciously) in making complex decisions, mostly in foreign policy. They describe:

- how some stories have an allure out of proportion to their appropriateness as an analogy because of emotional elements such as fear
- how some stories have an inappropriate degree of strength in coming to our attention as analogies because they are connected to "folk memories", or things too close to personal experience to be ignored
- how some patterns that *are* analogous to the situation are not called forward because they are too painful to think about

If you want to help people make decisions based on past events, this is a good book to read to avoid common errors.

Narratology and story writing

Narrative Comprehension and Film, by Edward Branigan.

Most of this book is about film narrative, but if you want to think about what makes a story a story, how people think about stories, and the many ways in which stories can be presented, it is fascinating.

Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, by Mieke Bal.

This is another great book for understanding the "insides" of stories. I especially liked learning about all the different elements that come together to make a story work (and what happens when they don't). You don't have to know about narratology to work with stories, but it helps you understand more of what people are saying when you do hear a story. For example, Bal has an interesting way of talking about the forces operating in a story in pairs: subject-object, power-receiver, helper-opponent. I've found those helpful in understanding what told stories are trying to say.

Story: Substance, Structure, Style and The Principles of Screenwriting, by Robert McKee.

This book is the grand-daddy of books about story structure. If you want to know what makes a good story, read this. It is written for screenwriters, but it is so accessible and understandable (not to mention enjoyable) that it is worth reading anyway. The only down side is that McKee's ego is the size of Mount Everest; but put that aside and you'll find this useful if you want to understand what makes stories tick.

Complexity

I haven't talked about complexity much here (just a few brief mentions of emergence), but if you really want to work with stories you can greatly increase your effectiveness by learning about complexity theory, or the study of **complex systems**. This is simply because some of the same phenomena that take place in other complex systems also occur when people tell stories to each other.

Turbulent Mirror: An Illustrated Guide to Chaos Theory and the Science of Wholeness, by John Briggs and F. David Peat.

There are four reasons this book is my absolute favorite book about complexity and chaos (and I've read quite a few):

1. the writing is completely accessible and understandable for any audience

2. there's nothing *wrong* in it (you'd be amazed how many of the popular books get some of the basic facts way wrong)
3. it covers both complexity and chaos (and gets the distinction between them right)
4. it makes the whole idea of complexity and chaos amazingly enthralling (I don't know how many times I was underlining things and sticking notes all over it in my excitement!)

If you can only read on book one complexity this should be it, in my oh-so-humble opinion.

The Self-Made Tapestry: Pattern Formation in Nature, by Philip Ball.

If you were trained as a scientist, you will find this book exactly what you need to understand complex systems. It is light on the social elements, but the many examples from bubbles to boiling water to seashell patterns (with loads of great pictures) give you a lot to think about.

Chaos: Making a New Science, by James Gleick.

I read this book when it came out in 1988. I can't remember a bit of what's in it, but I do know I stayed up all night for two nights reading it, and I've never thought the same way since. I think probably any book that is your first introduction to complexity and chaos will be on your "best books" list, but still, this book is an excellent gentle introduction to the topic through reading about the people who are studying it.

For further reading

Reader comments, tips and advice can be found on the **Resources** Google Group page.

Contact information

For inquiries related to this book or web site, please write to cfkurtz at cfkurtz.com.