

# Learning through **STORYTELLING** Higher Education

Using Reflection & Experience to  
Improve Learning

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We depict the three phases of this process as *event*, *tool* and *dialogue*. The *event* involves the context and past experience (outer circle) and the story itself, with a particular focus on patterns of communication and feelings of the teller (inner circle). The *tool* can involve a range of approaches that are primarily vehicles to make an event available for discussion. *Dialogue* is the process of working with stories to enable critique of practice and identification of implications for practice. This final stage is the key component of formal storytelling and an essential aspect of reflective learning.

## INDIVIDUAL WORK WITH STORIES

Working with stories in formalised ways provides tellers and listeners with opportunities to have in-depth conversations about their experiences and to process them in ways which may lead to insight and bring about thoughtful change to practice. To ensure the safety and wellbeing of tellers and listeners throughout reflective processes it is prudent to consider support and confidentiality issues (Alterio, 1998).

It is important to provide safeguards with any formalised reflective storytelling process because participating in such activities can raise disconcerting issues. It is therefore appropriate to provide students with suitable support such as access to counselling or other services (Alterio, 1998). In addition, it is important to deal with issues of confidentiality. While stories clearly belong to tellers, through reflection, listeners are also likely to develop personal insights.

While it is relatively straightforward to ensure that original stories remain with tellers through negotiated agreements made prior to forming storytelling partnerships, listeners may incorporate aspects of their learning from a teller's story into a later telling of their own story, something that is virtually impossible to monitor. This dilemma is discussed in depth in Chapter 10 where ethical issues are considered.

We use one storytelling process in which we record stories and sometimes have them transcribed so they are available for individual and joint reflection. If the cost of transcribing tapes proves insurmountable, a useful alternative is to provide audio-tapes to tellers and listeners so they can re-play their stories between their first and second meetings. Any notes can then be referenced back, using a timer or counter on the tape recorder. This particular formalised storytelling process, which involves one listener and one teller, requires a pre-story meeting to discuss support, confidentiality, story ownership and ethical issues and to agree on taping

and transcribing arrangements (Alterio, 1998).

The actual process consists of two meetings: one to tell the story and another to maximise learning through reflective dialogue using the transcript or audio-tape. While the amount of time between these two meetings is flexible, two to four weeks seems to maximise gains. This timeframe allows for the tape to be transcribed or duplicated and for the teller and listener to receive their copies for the purpose of reflecting individually on the story.

This process, which values emotional responses, has four stages. It incorporates oral, written and dialectic reflection and involves individual and joint reflective phases. The teller has full control over which story is told. The story can be *spontaneous* or *predetermined*. A quiet room where the teller and listener can work undisturbed is required, along with a tape recorder and a tape.

### Stage 1 – Deciding on a story

The teller may choose any story. This may be one which has already been talked about with friends or written about in a journal. If prior reflection has occurred, the story is classified as *predetermined*. If the teller has difficulty thinking of a story, the listener can assist with key prompts based on Diekelmann's (1990, 1992) work with nurses. Examples of such prompts are:

- Tell me a story, one you will never forget, about something that happened in your practice.
- Tell me a story about something that caused you to rethink and change aspects of your practice.

If the teller comes to the session with several stories and needs to make a choice about which one to tell, the listener can help by asking some key questions, for example:

- Which situation are you most concerned about?
- Are there any common themes or patterns in the situations you have recalled?

At this point it may also be appropriate for the listener to support the teller to develop a plan which accommodates the untold stories in an acceptable way.

### Stage 2 – Telling the story

The main focus in this stage is on the story being shared. For individualised formal storytelling to be an effective tool, it is important for the teller to introduce contextual aspects such as locating their story in a specific time and place and describing key players in ways that enable the listener to ascertain their significance. Disclosing and valuing affective aspects also enriches this storytelling process.

It is important for the listener to stay focused on the teller's story rather than introduce new material or making reference to their own experience, regardless of whether it is similar or not. For the listener to be effective in their role, an open non-judgmental listening approach is required. At times the listener may ask clarifying questions, establish facts and, of course, give minimal encouragers such as nods and smiles.

Once the story is told, the teller and listener dialogue about it to uncover layers of meaning and identify alternative perspectives. This may involve statements or questions that seek to clarify content, explore feelings, expand aspects of the story or examine possible solutions or resolutions.

### Stage 3 – Reflecting individually

Once the story is transcribed or the tape copied, both the listener and teller receive a copy to enable an individual reflective phase to take place. The teller has opportunities to delete, add or alter any aspect of the story. The transcript or tape often alerts the teller to stories with similar themes or helps the teller to remember forgotten aspects of the current story. The listener also reflects on the written or aural account of the teller's story, identifying any aspects about which they wish to seek further clarification.

### Stage 4 – Reflecting jointly

The focus of this second meeting is to reflect jointly on the teller's story. This meeting can also be audio-taped if the teller wishes as it frequently provides dialogue pertinent to developing and changing practice. At this stage, the teller shares with the listener any additions, deletions and alterations they have made or want to make to their script or tape. These are then discussed and their relevance identified. The listener's role is to assist the teller to clarify, explore and expand the story to ensure maximum learning gains can be made. It is also appropriate at this stage for the teller and listener tentatively to explore possible links between aspects of the story and the significance of any themes or patterns that have emerged. For example, there may be links between the roles of key players and their

actions. Some actions may reveal power related themes. It is important that the listener uses reflective questioning rather than statements as making these links essentially belongs to the teller and dialogue needs to be focused around the teller's growing insight.

In the final phase of this stage it is important that the teller and listener focus on insights gained. Some stories are resolved at this point in ways that feel complete to the teller and need no further discussion or action. If this is not the case, the teller has opportunities to formulate possible solutions to unresolved issues and to explore, through dialogue, their potential, and the consequences of implementing them. Once the teller is clear about which options to pursue, an action plan is constructed. It is up to storytelling partners to decide if they want to arrange a further meeting to discuss the outcome of instituting the action plan (Alterio, 1998).

Some stories may be re-visited many times, in many ways. Re-negotiation of original storytelling agreements is always an option. Transcripts or tapes of the story may be re-read or listened to several times. Each storytelling pair decides how they want to manage their arrangement. Formalised storytelling, like purposeful teaching, captures everyday moments and turns them into learning opportunities. The teller's level of openness to viewing alternative perspectives and devising acceptable solutions, together with past experiences and intensity of feelings associated with the story, affect how it is processed and what learning is achieved. In the following example Jim, a male lecturer teaching in a higher education setting in a large cosmopolitan city, recalls how a racial accusation left him devastated. He told his story in response to the key prompt: 'Tell me a story about something that happened in your practice, something you'll never forget'.

It was a dreadful thing, it was to do with race relations. There was a discipline problem where I had to deal with three students from a minority group. I had always worked very hard for this group but I ended up disciplining them. I didn't handle one aspect of it very well although it wasn't intentional. I was accused of racism and a complaint was laid with the Human Rights Commission and Race Relations. Race Relations thought it had been blown out of proportion and wouldn't get involved but it got to a level where the person in the Human Rights Commission dealt with it rather badly. She was taken off the case because she had listened to the three students and not taken into account that there might have been another perspective, mine! I felt like things were out of control. I was being accused of racism despite working very hard for the minority group these three students belonged to and I had given extra to these students to make sure they had the

best opportunities. It impacted quite badly on me. I'm very cautious now in my dealings and I'm almost paranoid about racial jokes. I won't get involved in anything that might put me in that position again so I haven't really come to terms with it.

Jim went on to explain how this experience was only resolved when the Human Rights Commission appointed a different person to the case. This person talked to everyone concerned and came to the conclusion that there was no case to answer. The aftermath of this experience had long-term effects for Jim because he was not offered an apology and was left with unresolved feelings. He talked about learning 'to be cautious' and 'feeling helpless' to defend himself. These feelings were still evident when he shared his story; however, they changed as Jim reflected on and discussed various aspects.

Using the four-stage formalised individual storytelling process described, Jim was able to attend to the three stages of reflection as identified by Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985): returning to an experience, attending to feelings and re-evaluating the experience. This process enabled him to make public his private anxieties and provided him with a safe forum in which to explore them. During the joint reflective phase, he reassessed his role in the incident and decided he had contributed to his feelings of helplessness by becoming defensive. He came to the conclusion that he would benefit from putting some strategies in place to ensure that he did not react to challenging situations in the same way again. Jim described how the storytelling process helped him reach resolution by saying, 'telling my story then seeing it all down in black and white [in the transcript] then discussing what happened and why I still felt so strongly about it enabled me to move on'.

As a result of telling his story and engaging in reflective dialogue, Jim was also able to identify factors that were out of his control, such as the inadequate processes his institution initially followed to investigate the complaint. Letting go his feeling of helplessness, accepting that, given his level of skills and range of experience at the time, he had done his best, and devising a plan which included having regular supervision so he could manage future challenging situations constructively, were significant advancements for Jim.

Key aspects of this storytelling process demonstrate a constructivist approach to learning. Collaboration between teller and listener is essential, for such relationships rely on trust and commitment. Through conversation meaning is constructed and insight gained, although what the teller and listener learn may differ. The context in which the original event occurred

– the *happening setting* – is recalled and aspects of it are described in the story being told in the *telling setting*. Both contexts are important, for each contributes to the quality of the reflective process.

## SPONTANEOUS DRAWINGS

Another effective reflective tool is spontaneous drawing. Already used extensively within psychology and psychoanalysis, it is seen as a tool to aid assessment or as part of a therapeutic intervention. Within a reflective learning context its primary purpose is to enhance learning and encourage professional development. Restricting its use to this purpose requires dialogue primarily focused on the level of congruence that exists between the oral story and the associated drawing.

Using spontaneous drawing as a beginning point for storytelling enables tellers to have a pre-storytelling reflective phase. While drawing, tellers have opportunities to ponder on their stories and this reflection, known as intrapsychological processing (Vygotsky, 1978), can add clarity and focus to the subsequent telling. Such reflection enhances learning potential and increases the likelihood of achieving positive learning outcomes. Spontaneous drawing is particularly useful in assisting students to integrate theory and practice, or to articulate and integrate theory developed from practice. Frequently, such links are too complex or nebulous to be available in other ways. Drawing enables the complexities of practice realities to be brought to consciousness and thus become available to the drawer who is seeking to make connections and associations that will increase insight into practice.

The process of working with drawings, which can appear deceptively simple, is guided by five key principles:

- Drawings belong to the drawer. Ownership is important and to feel safe the drawer must know that they have the right to say what their drawing is about, and what happens to it. Of particular importance is the problem of projection: that is, an unconscious process involving transfer of subjective reality or problem on to an object or person (Jung 1926). When this happens, the subjective reality comes from the person listening to the story, which is told from the drawing, and is projected onto the object or person in the drawing or onto the drawer. There may be elements in a drawing which consciously or unconsciously remind listeners of events from their own past experience resolved or unresolved. Problems are particularly likely to arise if such issues are unconscious and unresolved. It is therefore important that listeners