

## TACIT Methods – Teaching Material

**Method title:** Storytelling

**Workshop size:** 16 participants

**Location:** Flexible layout, chairs in groups, lecture format or a circle all need to be possible.

**Trainer:** Veronica Conboy/Matt Halkes

**Facilitators:** 1 +1 trainer

### Content

This module introduces learning to use storytelling as a method of teaching or transferring information to an audience. Through presentation and discussion, understanding is gained of how the brain processes information and responds to stories, and the essential elements of a coherent and effective story. This is developed using a series of exercises to encourage creative thought and use of language, and the ability to start to devise stories for use in their own work environment. Finally some interactive exercises will facilitate a discussion of presentation and storytelling skills.

### Educational Objectives

After completing this module, the participant will have completed the following learning outcomes:

#### *Knowledge/understanding*

Participants will:

- Understand, in broad terms, how the brain processes information and creates narrative and why this understanding is important.
- Understand what differentiates a story from a parcel of information, and the necessary building blocks to creating an engaging and effective story.

#### *Abilities/skills*

Participants will:

- Reframe their own organisational story in terms of a traditional narrative, and use this tool to refine the story.
- Use language and ideas creatively and flexibly.
- Use some basic presentation skills to improve their impact as speakers.

#### *Competencies*

Participants will:

- Take the first steps towards generating and presenting their own organisational story.

## Materials used to deliver the method

Lecture/discussion 1: Neuroscience of Story

Lecture/discussion 2: Elements of Story

Slides not provided:  
workshop leaders may  
with to devise their own,  
or use a different  
teaching medium.

Story Games

Handouts

1. Neuroscience (for all participants)
2. Story Elements (for all participants)
3. Story Games (for facilitators only)

## Materials required to deliver the workshop

Type	Amount	Purpose/location
Pens	16	
Notepaper	3 sheets per attendee	
White boards/ charts	4	1 per group, standing next to working area of each group
Objects for "this is not a spoon"	1 per two attendees	

## Preliminary reading required to understand the method (to be sent before the workshop)

See handouts and attached reading lists:

### **Handout No 1: The Neuroscience of Story**

The brain is made up of billions of nerve cells, intricately connected. It contains nerve centres (groups of neurons and their connections) which control many involuntary functions, such as circulation temperature regulation, and respiration, and interpret sensory impressions received from eyes, ears and other sense organs. It also contains centres or areas for associative memory which allow for recording, recalling, and making use of past experiences. Consciousness, emotion, thought and reasoning are more abstract functions involving many centres.

It is not the place of this paper to deliver a complete understanding of the biochemical neural mechanisms that underpin input, output and process, but to provide a board-brush analysis of function with reference to narrative.

Most of what reaches your conscious mind is highly processed input coming from regions one or more stops downstream from the sensory areas. These areas process incoming information from sensory organs (eyes, ears, smells, pressure receptors and so on) and turn it into something that makes sense to the conscious mind.

This processing turns the continuous incoming stream, this complex cacophony and signals, into a narrative string with which the conscious mind can work. Simply put, the raw sensory input is arranged into a string of observations that "make sense" .... a story.

In evolutionary terms, stories are old. Much information transfer in business or education nowadays is conducted using slide presentations. Microsoft Powerpoint was first released in 1987. Go further back: humankind has been majority-literate in developed nations for less than 200 years. Writing as a way to communicate has been dated as far back as 8,500 years. Cave paintings indicate that inscription as a way to communicate existed at least 40,000 years ago. However evolutionary biology suggests that humans had the complex language and social organization indicating that they shared stories at least 100,000 years ago, and probably considerably longer.

The dominance of story as a mode of interaction, communication, archiving and information recall has evolved with us: so that we are all "hard-wired" to think, to understand, to make sense of things in and through story concepts.

Tapping into an instinctive and evolved communications system as a teaching method makes obvious sense.

Kendall Haven, a scientist-turned storyteller uses the term Neural Story Network to describe the mechanism by which incoming information is processed and turned into narrative for the conscious mind to consider. For more details on this see the Reading List.

The basics of information processing are as follows: incoming information from a variety of sources (visual, auditory, olfactory and so on) is initially processed in areas that give it recognition and understanding as an object, a specific recognized sound, or a moving thing, or a person. It is then processed via the centres which add emotional response, reference previous experience and memory, and then passed through the Neural Story Net which makes sense of the information in terms of cause and effect and reason. In order to produce something that "makes sense" to the conscious mind, it may do so by adding assumptions, disregarding apparently non-conforming information, creating new information, and inferring connections, motives, intent, significance, based in part on emotional response and past experiences. Only then does it reach the parts of the brain that get to think about it consciously in terms of a narrative that makes sense.

In summary, between your sensory organs and your conscious mind, information is massaged into narrative shape. What reaches your conscious mind is your personal interpretation of what your sensory organs actually recorded. It is worth noting that when you impart information, that will be similarly processed by the listener so that the information you have provided is filtered through *their* own perceptions, emotions and previous experience so that they will in turn have created their own story BASED ON the information you have provided. That is the story they will act upon.

Understanding this is important. As a communicator you need to minimize the distortion created during processing by your audience. The effective way to do this is to present it as a story that ALREADY makes sense.

In order to do this, three things that need to be achieved when reaching a target audience are:

- To engage the audience (so they want to listen).
- To hold their attention (so they pick up as much of the information you are transmitting as possible).
- To get through their processing without significant distortion of your information and message.

This third point is key to using stories. An effective story structure has certain elements, and presenting a strong and coherent story provides information that is intuitively understood and remembered.

## Further Reading

Gottschall, J. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2012.

Haven, K. *Story Proof*. Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2007.

Haven, K. *Story Smart*. Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2014.

## Handout No 2: Building Blocks of Story

There are many books and lectures that will tell you exactly what a story is, and which elements make a string of words into a narrative. Unfortunately there is no single set of guidelines which holds true for every story. That said, there are some obvious elements to what makes a story, and also some tips and pointers for how to make the story you want to tell, one that engages and inspires.

What follows is a brief description of some of these and some pointers for further reading.

*“Begin at the beginning.....and then go on until you come to the end: then stop.”*  
(Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s adventures in Wonderland*)

A story needs a beginning, a middle and an end. The beginning sets the scene, the middle adds detail and takes you on a journey of discovery. The ends wraps it up and gives it meaning.

Meaning is important: when crafting a story, the one single thing you need is to be able to answer the question “why?” Why do we do this, why is our product useful, why does this information matter? There may be more than one “why”, of course, and stories can be very simple or highly complex depending on context. But ask yourself why, to get to the crux of your piece.

Emotion is key. It can be used in different ways, but one of the vital parts of stories that engage is that they have the power to move people.

Stories are fundamentally about people. Providing a character that the listener can identify with or empathise with tends to pull them into the story. If they care about that character, then they will go on a journey with them. Of course the characters don’t have to be human, but stories we tell about animals or even inanimate objects tend to be anthropomorphized: we think of them in human terms.

For more complex stories, there are models available, that have been drawn from analysis of myth and folklore, the tales we have been telling each other to educate for thousands of years.

The classic example of this is Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey”. Joseph Campbell, a comparative mythologist, wrote about this in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, proposing that all of humankind’s myths (including all the stories fundamental to the major religions) essentially carried the same plot. The Hero, unknowing and unaware, receives a Call To Adventure, which is a stimulus that sets them on their journey. This takes them from their known world into the unknown. Crossing that threshold they have to pass a guardian. In the Unknown, or the Underworld, they may meet mentors or helpers. They undergo challenges and temptations. At some point they descend into the abyss, where they undergo a kind of death or deconstruction. They are reborn, transformed, and through further challenges journey back out of the Unknown and into their old world. Scarred possibly, or changed, but carrying some treasure that they discovered on the way.

This concept was taken up by a Disney executive in the 1980’s and promoted as a blueprint for film structure, and is closely adhered to in the film industry today, so that for example films such as Fight Club and Toy Story, and many many others, carry this basic plot structure.

Another set of elements has been proposed by Kendall Haven thus:

The Character has

- Traits – that can control receiver attitude towards story characters
- A goal – that they need to achieve in their story
- A motive – the drivers that make their goal important.

On the way, the character may meet:

- conflicts and problems – that stand in the way of achieving their goal
- risk and danger – likelihood (risk) and consequence (danger) of failure to achieve the goal. Makes for excitement and suspense.

The story is described in the struggles, a series of events a character undertakes to reach their goal.

Finally details can bring the background and environment of the story to life.

The Bare Bones version of this reads thus:

The Character.....

Needed -----

Because -----

But -----

So, -----

Finally -----

An alternative resource is to regard a story as requiring a plot, a character or characters, conflict, a theme and a setting. Or even simpler, character, agenda and plot.

Whether you use a more complex “recipe” to build your story, or just take the very simple elements of a narrative with a beginning and an end, an engaging character, a reason why, and some emotion....well, that’s up to you. We’ll be doing some exercises that help to build stories in the workshop.

Before you attend, try this as an exercise for someone who wishes to use stories more. When hearing people speak, or reading a newspaper, or studying a text, asking yourself if the information you encounter is actually a story, and if it is not. And in the latter case, what would turn the information into a story? Or turn a poor story into a better one? Once you have done this for a while you will get a feel for creating and working with stories.

## Further reading

Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton University Press, 1949. - Reprinted Harper Collins, London, 1993.

Haven, K. *Story Smart*. Santa Barbara, Ca: Libraries Unlimited. 2014.

Vogler, C. *Mythic structure for writers*. Studio City, Ca: Michael Wiesl Productions, 1998.

## Handout No 3: Storytelling games

These are some examples of games that could be used in the workshop. Substitute them with your own if you prefer.

### Ice-breakers

These get people relaxed, and start them right away telling stories, and show how easy it is.

#### “We all tell stories” - 1

Divide group into pairs. Ask them to tell a short story about their journey to the workshop, or something amusing that happened in the last 24 hours. Take no more than 3 minutes per person. *10 minutes, with 20 for feedback*

#### “We all tell stories” – 2

This assumes every workshop participant carries a smartphone. Divide group into pairs. Ask them to find a photograph on their phone, within the last 10 on their camera roll, and tell their partner the story behind the picture.

### Creativity

These get people thinking and working flexibly and using creativity.

#### “This is not a spoon”

Divide group into pairs or threes. Hand out simple objects (examples: a spoon, a cork, a die, a ribbon, etc) and ask them to describe what it could be. For example: this is not a ribbon, it is the rope used in a tug of war by the gnomes that live at the bottom of my garden. They hand the object back and forth, coming up with different uses for it. *Approx 15 minutes, with 20-30 for feedback* from each group.

#### “The emotion room”

Solo working. Give each participant an emotion, ask them to write a short piece, describing a room to evoke that emotion, There must be no movement, and no people in the room. *Approx 15 minutes, with 30 minutes for feedback.*

### Story

#### “Legend Starters”

A legend is a story that is probably based on truth, but has been embellished over the years until it is hard to know what the original facts were. This exercise aims to get people thinking imaginatively with language.

The whole group sits in a circle. Start off with a simple sentence. Pass it around the circle, each person embellishing/changing it a bit until it becomes an outlandish claim, a legend. For example:

- That cat looks as if it understands every word I say
- Jane's cat understands every word she says
- I think Jane's a witch. She and her cat talk to each other.
- There's a witch that lives in the village. She's got a cat that goes round town and takes all the gossip back to her.

Etc.

“stories in real life”

Solo working

These help people use their own understanding of stories, through the fairy tales they will have heard as children, to recognize the points of story in a modern or business context.

Take a simple folk tale or fairy tale, for example Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White or Cinderella.

-translate the characters to roles within your workplace. Who is the Big Bad Wolf, or the Woodsman, or the Fairy godmother?

-translate or rewrite the plot and characters to a modern context.

-write a short story of something within your workplace: something that happened in the office, or the story of a project and how it developed.

-translate that into a folktale world. Adjust as necessary to fit your workplace story into the shape of the folktale. Then translate it back. How has it changed? What was not there in your story before?

*Overall, about an hour*

## Performance/presentation skills

“wink murder”

This aims to draw attention to how we use eye contact. It is a good game to kick start a discussion around how we use body language and eye contact. Many will have played this as children.



Sit participants in a circle. One person is chosen as the detective and sent out of the room. One of those remaining is chosen as the murderer. The detective is brought back in and stands in the centre of the circle. The murderer kills people by catching their eye and winking at them-victims should die as dramatically as possible! The detective has three chances to guess the identity of the murderer.

“Speaking in space”

This is an exercise in holding attention and using gesture and body language. Work in pairs. Pairs stand opposite each other and a few feet apart. A tells a simple fairy tale, so quietly that B might have to strain to hear. A illustrates their story with gesture. Discuss afterwards how connection, eye contact and movement help to get across the story.

## Resources

“Pass it on”, A Resource for Teaching Storytelling with Young People.  
Available from: Traditional Arts Team, email [info@TradArtsTeam.co.uk](mailto:info@TradArtsTeam.co.uk)

Johnstone, K. *Impro for Storytellers*. London: Faber &Faber, 1999.