



Personal Storytelling

Benjamin Kafka

<p>Name of Activity</p> <p><i>Personal Storytelling</i></p>	<p>Total time</p> <p>A minimum time of 10-15 minutes per person to be given to each storyteller and if you want to invite specific stories and more complex stories, then I would advise giving storytellers at least 20-30 minutes time.</p>
<p>Overview</p> <p>The method explores the power of stories and storytelling is as a tool for change. Stories are the way we construct coherence of our experiences and create meaning for our lives – individually and collectively, stories shape our actions as individuals and as groups. Stories are a powerful leverage point for change because we can become aware of them and work to reshape them – again both individually and collectively.</p>	<p>Materials/room</p> <p>Can be conducted both indoors and outdoors.</p>
<p>Number of people</p> <p>Small and large groups</p>	<p>Target groups & Age</p> <p>Varied, from children to adults.</p>

Learning outcomes

Have the opportunity to share and experience and thereby create deeper understanding for the storyteller's personal history, social context and work environment.

Create an opportunity for deeper personal connection and community building.

The foundation is laid for the group to have a conversation on values underlying their educational (or other) work.

PART I: The background to the Method*Educational philosophy:*

We are continually surrounded by stories. Our entire social, psychological and political reality consists of stories. Stories we tell ourselves, stories we hear, stories we tell others and stories we tell together with others. Stories are the way we construct coherence of our experiences and create meaning for our lives – individually and collectively, stories shape our actions as individuals and as groups. Stories are a powerful leverage point for change because we can become aware of them and work to reshape them – again both individually and collectively. Stories are also a powerful tool for change.

What is special about stories?

- Stories centre our attention, and they help to select and structure facts, experiences, etc.
- They let these facts come alive by adding emotional content. Stories can be funny, sad, surprising, personal – etc.
- Stories connect people. They give people the opportunity to relate the story to their own experience; in personal stories the storyteller opens him or herself to the audience in a way that creates a special field of trust between the storyteller and listeners.
- Stories allow us to express values as lived experience rather than as abstract principles and therefore have the potential to move others and inspire action. (Marshal Ganz, 2008)
- Neuroscientists have found out that we remember stories similarly to how we remember actual experiences (Hasson, 2016)
- Stories are more memorable than the facts alone can ever be.

PART II: The Method

The workshop tool described here invites individual members of a group to share in the form of a story an important experience they have had. The objectives of this particular storytelling variant are as follows:

- Give participants an opportunity to share their experience and thereby create deeper understanding for their personal history, social context and work environment;
- Create an opportunity for deeper personal connection and community building;
- Lay a foundation for the group to have a conversation on values underlying their educational (or other) work.

This can work well in small and large groups – what changes is mostly the mechanics of sharing. One thing that is important to consider is the trade-off between as many people as possible hearing a particular person's story – and the connecting power it has when many people share their own story, even if the listening circles are smaller.

Method Description

This description has the following parts:

1. Invitation
2. Thoughts about/instructions for preparation
3. Setting it up and thoughts about timing

Before your meeting, you can share an invitation with the storytellers. You can also invite people spontaneously – the latter works better when the invitation is for everybody or almost everybody to share a story. An invitation could read a little bit like this:

Invitation: You are invited you to tell a personal story about (*insert topic*). This session is about sharing experiences, understanding more deeply the work and challenges of the other participants, and seeing the underlying concepts and assumptions we hold about (*insert topic of your meeting*). Some of these assumptions may be similar, others may differ. It is also about getting to know each other better personally – and growing together as a community.

In our experience, sharing stories and reflecting about what one has heard is a great way of learning – and especially so when it comes to the 'juicy' parts of our work: the nitty-gritty, our tacit knowledge, our assumptions, our values and world-views, our drive to act!

So, we would like to invite you to be a **storyteller** during this session.

Thoughts about / Instructions for Preparation

It is helpful to give people a short brief on storytelling. What makes a great story? Instructions to storytellers could contain the following points:

- The story should be about a challenge you have faced in your work. A challenge from which you have learnt and that has to do with your view of (*topic*).

- Think back to the great stories you've heard – they have a *beginning*, *middle* and an *end* and usually have a challenge at the core of them with the key element of overcoming or grappling with the challenge.

- Ask yourself what is the breakthrough point and/or learning of your story. What is its 'arc' – meaning where does tension build, and where is it released?

- The story need not be a success story, and it might still be evolving.

- To prepare as a storyteller, set some time to do a little bit of writing. This is your real story you are telling – not one with made-up characters. Think of your story topic and make some notes along these lines (think of this as the 'spine' of your story):

- Here's who I am...

- Here is the challenge that we faced and is the challenge that I personally faced...

- Here's who is/was involved...

- Here's what happened/when/where... then because of *that* what happened... and because of *that* what happened...

- Here's where we are now...

- You are welcome to bring your story notes to support you as you tell your story, but don't read your notes. This isn't a formal or rehearsed presentation (no PowerPoint!) – rather imagine you are sitting around the campfire with your peers telling them your story. This preparation work simply helps you craft your thoughts into a story that we can listen and learn from.

Setting it up/Timing

When you invite people to tell their story, you should also let them know about timing. A minimum time in my experience is 10-15



minutes per person. If you want to invite specific stories and more complex stories, then I would advise giving storytellers at least 20-30 minutes time.

Again, you might share an overview of the process with participants ahead of time:

- **Framing and introduction of the process:** The whole group is together and the facilitator introduces the process. If there are pre-selected storytellers, they briefly (1 sentence) introduce their story and participants choose which story they want to join and listen to.

Alternatively, divide into small groups (e.g. of 3 people each) in which everybody is invited to share a story

- **Small group storytelling:** After the introduction, participants move to separate spaces to share their stories.

- **Breathing space and small group harvesting:** At the end of each story, take a moment to breathe. I recommend deliberately taking 2 minutes of silence (time it) and invite listeners to see what images, feelings or even movements the story inspires in them. After the silence, they can share this with the storyteller. Lastly the storyteller will be invited to share what gifts or key insights they are

taking away from sharing the story. A nice variant is to invite listeners to spontaneously draw a little picture after having heard the story, and briefly explain it to the storyteller.

• **Convergence and harvesting:** At a set time, the whole group comes back together and moves into a plenary conversation to share their inspiration and learning from the session. You might also ask a specific question (e.g. what have I learnt about values in our group) and ask participants to have a quick buzz with their neighbours or at tables of 5–6 and then share.

Notes and Additional Resources

These references are starting points on narrative work – some more practical, some more theoretical. Have fun!

1. Marshall Ganz. 2008. <<https://friendsofjustice.wordpress.com/2009/02/18/marshall-ganz-why-stories-matter/>> and <<http://marshallganz.usmblogs.com/files/2012/08/Chapter-19-Leading-Change-Leadership-Organization-and-Social-Movements.pdf>>.
2. Uri Hasson. 2016. <<https://blog.ted.com/what-happens-in-the-brain-when-we-hear-stories-uri-hasson-at-ted2016/>>.
3. Mary-Alice Arthur calls herself a 'story activist' and is a facilitator who started working with stories long before it became a buzzword. Her website contains many resources and tools as well as inspiration for further work <www.getsoaring.com>
4. Beyond storytelling Conference and community of practice: This is a more recent initiative of facilitators with different backgrounds with a common interest in storytelling <www.beyondstorytelling.com>.
5. On the archetypal structure of stories, see the classic by Joseph Campbell (1949) *The Hero with a thousand faces*. The 'monomythical' structure he discovered can be found in virtually every movie or fairy tale.
6. For a larger literature list, see a draft article by my colleagues David Wagner and Christine Blome (in German – but references are mostly in English): <https://www.giz.de/akademie/de/downloads/Story_Telling_and_Leadership.pdf>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benjamin Kafka is a freelance trainer, coach and consultant in organization, team, and leadership development. He frequently works in multi-lingual, cross-cultural and multi-stakeholder environments – with governments, academic institutions, civil society and with businesses. He very much enjoyed facilitating the 2015 and 2017 summer academies of Learn2Change.