

# Tell me a story!

■ Helena Ehrenbusch

## Abstract

The intention of stories is most commonly to entertain or educate, but they are also a most normal part of our lives. We retell our daily happenings, experiences of art, ideas of the world, constantly. Some more skilful jugglers of words make the stories to look like performances, which is a quick bridge to create connections, meet friends, clarify understandings, gain power and respect. Other stories are so ordinary that we even don't register them as stories.

This article is about story telling as a practical tool. I shall give a short glimpse to the theoretical underpinning, and a practical example from my personal practice to illustrate the usage of this method.

"I remember particularly vividly my first assignments and experiences as a supervisor for social service organizations. Back then, I always tried to plan future meetings. I carefully thought through the course of the meeting, what I was going to do next, what tasks I was going to give to the participants, etc. It was as if that detailed plan was supposed to protect me from the unexpected, to help me experience more success. Now I'm in less of a hurry, less of a planner. I listen a lot and try to understand people and their organizations. I know my strengths and weaknesses, and I can talk about them out loud, explore them. I have a deeper and deeper understanding of the authenticity of my working style."

Supervisor Lina Bartusevičienė from Lithuania

This is a fragment of a story of Lina's development as a supervisor. I do believe it touches most of the readers,



even from other professions, as the experience described is familiar to everybody, who learned to work with people. The way from the insecurity of a beginner, who needs to prepare every minute and above for the upcoming session, to a mature professional, who has trust in process and experience in uncertainty. Lina's story brings up memories, offers comfort for the beginners, allows comparison and recognition for more experienced professionals. It is a personal story, which opens the door for sharing and conversation.

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The intention of stories is most commonly to entertain or educate, but they are also a most normal part of our lives. We retell constantly our daily happenings, experiences of art, ideas of the world. Some more skilful jugglers of words make the stories to look like performances, which is an easy way to create connections, meet friends, clarify understandings, or gain power and respect. Other stories are so ordinary that we even don't register them as stories.

One of the most vivid memories from my childhood is my grandmother, reading me the bedtime stories. She had some real stories about her childhood, that allowed me to be part of her games and friends, to have fun with people I never met. It was about learning to know my family. As my father was sailing the sea, I was hungry for the stories of pirates and sailors, where I probably learned, how to cope with the close one being away for months, the unpredictability of the situation. And the stories, my grandmother never understood, why she has to read them over and over again – the simple stories of people and animals living their everyday life. I remember dog Ferdynand the Magnificent, who taught me dreaming out of the box, or fairy tales from various nations, which puzzled and amazed with the cultural thinking differences. I guess the main value of repeated listening was the predictable rhythm, learning about emotions in safety, mindful rehearsal of social situations and seeing the world from another perspective. Somehow I was so inspired from these stories, that I started to write myself in quite an early age. I composed poems to understand and work through events and deep feelings. I wrote political fantasy stories for the hope of better future. In my adulthood I learned how to put stories into the non-verbal language – dance and choreographies. So I was surprised and happy to meet storytelling as a tool also in my professional education in psychotherapies.

Storytelling originates from **narrative therapy**. The focus in narrative therapy is on stories, what people carry with them through their life, and which have shaped their understanding of the world and themselves. Narrative therapy aims to separate the individual from the problem, allowing the externalization of issues from the person (antonymous to internalisation process). In therapeutic setting, through the structured approach, individual is working through the personal traumatic stories, and re-creating new understandings or outcomes to get

power and control over his life. Therapist relies on individual's own skills and sense of purpose to guide himself through difficult times. (Morgan, 2000) Shared stories in group therapy setting create belonging and understanding that nobody is alone.

Storytelling is widely used also in **marketing and politics**. Persona brands encourage business owners to tell the story, what should be attracting and connecting possible clients. Role models and influencers are targeting specific groups with messages, of how good, easy, or profitable it is to consume certain things. The underlying idea is, that for a single human being it is easier to connect to the individual story, than to facts about the item or service. We are looking for good experiences, similarities, which is used for the benefits of marketing. As for politics, especially during the election period, we see opinion leaders sharing their beliefs and value systems, which are enough generalised to touch as many people as possible. Unfortunately stories are also used to manipulate people's thinking towards favourable directions by dictatorship or autocratic regimes.

**Organizational** (also "business") storytelling is about making narrations in human communication. (Sole, Wilson, 2002) Business sector is built up on "hard" knowledge that can be classified, categorized, calculated, and analysed. Storytelling is contrasting the rationale, researching and teaching wisdom and culture through informal stories and anecdotes. Narrative is said to be more "synthetic" than "analytic", which helps to share norms and values, develop trust and commitment, share tacit knowledge, facilitate unlearning, and generate emotional connections. (Giroux, Marroquin, 2005/6)

Storytelling in **supervision** can be used for working with a wide scope of themes from individual issues to organi-

sational level, e.g how to view and develop the service, discuss the experiences, and evolve client work or personal professional development, team-building, managing conflicts and facing challenges, understanding the past and shaping the future, or unifying group decisions.

### **Main concepts of storytelling**

1. Realities are socially constructed. People are interpretive beings and we continuously create and recreate reality through our interactions and conversations. In these constructions our own opinion is influenced by the groupings, society, and time, where we belong, which also allows us to rewrite our stories.
2. Experience is shaped by language. We learn about life and skills through movement, interactions, observations, explanations. Language gives us tools to interpret, systematise, and make meaning. Word-ing gives a visible shape to our thoughts and emotions.
3. Reality is composed of multiple interpretations. A group of people, sharing something common (e.g working in the same organisation), possess multiple narratives of the same experience. There is always a dominant story, which is louder or more available. When the dominant remains to be the only visible story, it can lead to thin conclusions, stereotyping, or labelling. By telling and listening to more perspectives (alternative stories), we can expand our understanding and make significant changes towards the wanted future.
4. In the social setting the absolute truth or universally accurate description of people or problems does not exist, though it is very human to long for it. Being successful in social context means either being stronger or having an ultimate skill of making compromises and knowing own borders.

## Storytelling techniques

In storytelling we search for meaning and conversation through creating and telling the stories. What we need is a safe environment, a facilitator to create and contain the space, a paper and a pen for everybody (or why not a full notebook for a longer process, or possibility to use computers, if available). Creative techniques and tools, like cards, toys, musical instruments, movement exercises, etc., are helpful.

Hereby I shall describe 4 different techniques, that can be used in sequence or separately, dependant on the need. The practical examples are from an organisation, where I was asked for a supervision to resolve a conflict. I chose storytelling, as the conflict had escalated, and there was no place to initiate rational cooperation.

## Personal Story

Central to storytelling is the individual, who is empowered to find his voice and define himself, to evaluate the stance and resources, gain control and take responsibility of the following. The task of the supervisor is to offer the framework for constructing the narrative, and guide the supervisee through the process. The most simple skeleton of a story could include:

- description of the main character (can be also in third person);
- what does he think, want, dream of;
- what known resources are helpful, and what obstacles are stopping him;
- how he overcomes (wants to overcome) the obstacles; and
- how does or could the full action change him?

*"I am born to the family of artists and teachers. We were always poor. I learned, that money was something dirty and possessed only by really stupid people. My family valued wisdom, philosophical conversations about life,*

*creativity and freedom.*

*My mother suffered under psychiatric disorders, and died too early. I think, it was just logical that I went to study a helping profession. I wanted to understand people better and help them to cope with their problems.*

*I am really good at my work, as my clients and colleagues say. I am empathic, able to adapt to various situations, and people trust me. I think my personal experience and the rich baggage of education, literature and inspirational talks have helped me to become, who I am.*

*Unfortunately I cannot enjoy my work any more, as I am really disturbed of the recent trends in our organisation. I have considered my work to be more of a mission-ary type, but the new colleagues are pushing our organisation into making more money and fame. I think we really need to concentrate on developing the quality of our service, which actually needs attention.*

*I am circling in my emotions, I cannot think clear, and I have a feeling, nothing is possible. I have been thinking, if I should quit my job."*

In this example we were creating the starting point for the storyline – creating the character, describing the path, giving a hint to a problem. The next techniques are aimed at bringing the person out from the disturbing emotional state, to look at the problem from outside, which theoretically should empower him to exit the emotional circle, and start to look for solutions. The personal story gives him the chance to see and hear his own ideas, as the others have a chance for a glimpse to a personal viewpoint.

Another possibility is to write a the Personal Life Book or Work Portfolio instead of one story.

## Guidelines

Everybody's journey to this workplace has been different, worth of writing a book. Think about your journey for a

moment. Take a pen and paper to:

- create a title for your story/book;
- think of 3 important milestones in your life, and conclude each of them with one word – these will be the chapters of your story;
- find 1-3 sentences under each chapter, that would sum up the events, most important details of this chapter;
- think of the future – your work-oriented visions, wishes. Make it a final chapter with the headline and description, like the others;
- look through your story, make necessary amendments, add illustrations. Tell the story to the other(s).

## Externalization Technique

Externalisation technique enables to distinguish the problem from the person. The ideal outcome is, that our supervisee understands, he does not have to become a whole different person to change something (no need to "fight or die"), but maybe a shift in an opinion or certain behaviour would free the brain from emotional overload, which allows to re-evaluate the situation and create possible solutions.

Externalisation can be a follow-up to the Personal Story, as in my example below. You can ask guiding questions to support the process, like: "If the problem can talk, what would it say to you?"

*„I belong to this organisation for about a decade. I really like it here. When I had my job interview, I was excited and frightened at the same time. Everybody seemed so professional and I was not sure, if I shall fit in, or can hold the standards. I was amazed by the organisational culture. Every opinion was always welcomed, heard and discussed. Every concern was taken seriously. For me it was maybe like an ideal family stereotype. Today I do not recognise my organisation any more. We*

have expanded and I don't even know everybody any more. The newcomers have brought in a new communication style. My colleagues talk rumours and label the others with not really nice nick-names. Differences in opinion are highly criticized. I feel like I cannot feel bad or sad, as I hear, my feelings are not OK, because it is negative and therefore not OK.

I do not understand, what happened. Why do I feel like being in an orphanage, where everyone must stand for themselves and the loudest or strongest is the winner? [...]

When I look at my story, I think of the word "family". Families change. First, two people meet. Then they maybe get children, who grow up, and then leave. Every step is a stressful change, which I also see at my work. Families have a tendency to de-part or reformulate their existence, as a reaction to stress. I wonder, where can we go from here."

### Deconstruction Technique

Deconstruction can be used alone or as part of the general storytelling process, and can be developed into two possible directions.

a) Dividing the problematic situation into smaller parts or pieces, which allows a better overview or understanding of the specific disturbing factor. In conflict people tend to incline towards overwhelming desperation and generalization – everything or nothing. Emotions and ideas are circling, and we totally forget, that actually every problem has an outcome, possible solution.

"Nothing is possible any more", doesn't give us any information or clue, how to proceed. The goal is to become more specific, go into more detail – "What exactly is not working? Where would you like to see the change?"

Deconstruction can be used for breaking down the story, clarification, specifying the core problem. Helpful questions: what?, why?, when?, where?, who?

### Guidelines

Please think of the most critical issue in your story, which you would like to change. Name it in one word.

Describe the situation in 3 separate sentences. E.g a)

What is happening? b) What are your thoughts in this situation? c) What are your feelings?

### "Disrespect

a) In our meetings the tone of communication is aggressive, not inclusive any more.

b) I think my new colleagues are arrogant, and ignorant, and they just don't care.

c) I feel deep sadness, because I feel that my values are ridiculed."

Deconstruction, as you see, allows to communicate personal understanding, but it also gives a hint to the issue, which needs to be addressed – in this example I would think, it is the communication culture. The person feels hurt, and needs to be heard.

b) Retelling the told-and-heard stories by the other group members, which resembles in a way the prolonged dialogue technique. Retelling gives participants a chance to be attentive, reorganise the heard information, develop empathy, see alternative angles. The whole process should have a very clear structure. I suggest, in the retold stories, the protagonist should be named by a code-name or a chosen symbol (not his real name), that would minimise the risk of unwanted traumatising, and gives the protagonist a chance to withdraw from the "translated" story.

### Unique Outcomes Technique

This technique leads us to solutions and wished changes to the storyline, and is technically very similar to solution focused short therapy final stages. The aim is to construct positive, empowering story about the past experiences

and learnings. Ideally it should give every participant a stronger professional identity, more visible goal, or other wished outcome.

Do not limit yourself to one and only story – make positive and negative narratives, alternative stories, create unique outcomes, let people write letters to themselves or members of the group.

Helpful questions in this stage: what would be the ideal working condition?, what are the circumstances, where you would never like to work?, what would you like to tell to yourself, if time was winded 5 years forward?, what can you do to make the change happen?

And remember—we can change opinions, behaviour, relationships, culture, but not the people!

*"I am dreaming of a respectful communication. For the next project we shall sit down, map all the ideas, talk through the plusses and minuses of every idea, make a rational conclusion. We shall have an agreement, that every opinion is valuable. I am ready to offer a framework for this meeting."*

*"I like the way we work. I have a really good system, which has always worked for me. We just need the appropriate indications for success measurement. I do see the future really bright. We have expanded, we have many interesting projects running, and we are really visible in social media. I do believe, the people who do not understand the value of this approach, can also make their decisions, if they want or don't want to continue with us. I am in peace with the idea, if there are people, who want to leave."*

In this example, the stories are written in a positive language, present tense, like they are already happening – the future re-written. Remark to the content—as you can see, the storylines of the same organisation members go into very different directions. I do not know yet, if any

common ground is possible, but in the next session we shall try to find one common keyword, a repeating word from all the stories, around which we could try to build up a common story.

WARNING! Please do not use storytelling unless you are very sure, you can contain the space and the stories. Most disastrous result could be the unnecessary retraumatisation of participants.

### Conclusion

I believe, that storytelling has taught me personally some of the most valuable skills in my supervisory competencies, which my clients have been valuing and bringing out, like making systemic analyses and finding meaningful keywords from seemingly random stories.

Storytelling is an inclusive method, as it can be adapted to all ages, nations, and professions.

Stories in supervision can be used to research the background of the client, understand the viewpoint, emotions, wishes and visions, find ways to solutions. Storytelling supports healthy debate, raises awareness of our thoughts and actions, and influence to others. ■

### References

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