

Story Construction

Type : **Process Description**

Family : **Knowledge**

This method takes a naturalistic approach to story construction, replicating the way that we create stories through telling and retelling over time. The natural process is structured and the time compressed. Aside from teaching a basic skill, this approach can also be used to determine what type of communication strategy is most likely to work as well as providing a method to integrate material in a workshop.

Background


A fable is a long and complex story whose message is memorable but whose details are not. People who hear a fable cannot retell it exactly from memory, which helps the storyteller to maintain control over it. Anyone who has heard a fairy tale or folk story has heard a fable.

There are two messages in a fable. The obvious message is a memorable saying or moral, which is what the audience thinks the fable is about. The subtext message is more powerful yet hidden in the *way* things are described within the fable. For example, a fable about a rich man winning a business deal may be on the face of it "about" the virtues of ruthless competition, since the man may win his prize, but the underlying subtext may emphasize (through subtle glimpses of the man's empty emotional life) how worthless the prize turns out to be. Fables have been used to convey complex meanings like this for many thousands of years.

In a fable the message comes at the end of the story (the subtext message comes throughout). In non-narrative communications the message usually comes first, and then people don't listen to the details. In this way a fable keeps the attention of listeners until it has delivered its full message.

Fables and Sense-making

In the context of sense-making, we usually call fables *purposeful stories*. Story construction has two main uses.

-  The act of creating a purposeful story can be a valuable integrator of anecdotes in order to discover patterns in them and to reveal larger truths. A purposeful story is a social construct rich with complex meaning, much like a family of archetypes or a Cynefin framework, and as such can be used to think about situations and questions.

- Constructing purposeful stories is a useful way to build communication narratives that can convey complex understandings in a form that is memorable, motivating and persuasive.

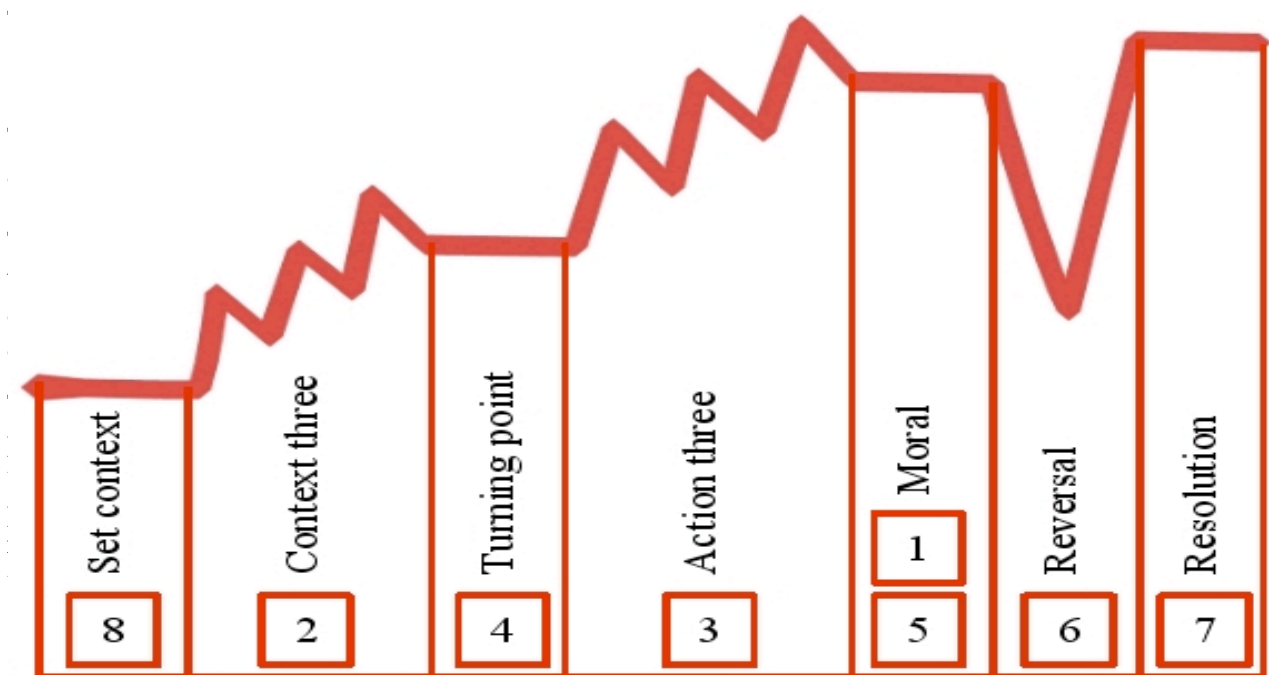
Standard Fable Form

When you help people construct purposeful stories, you lead them through using a fable form, which is a sort of recipe for story creation, using anecdotes as the ingredients. A fable form consists of a series of named slots into which anecdotes fit. The most basic form is this:

- Context - making the audience familiar with the setting of the story, the state of affairs
- Turning Point - starting the action going with a dilemma or problem
- Action (or Message) - what the main character does in response to the dilemma or problem
- Reversal - what happens because of what the main character did (usually some kind of jeopardy)
- Resolution - the return of the state of affairs to a resting position where there are no dilemmas remaining

(There may also be expository elements before the context, after the action, and at the end.)

We usually use a standard fable form in the story construction exercise, but potentially there are many fable forms based on how many anecdotes of what type are used where. There are some cultural differences around the world in how many times elements of the fable form are repeated - for European stories the three holds special significance, for example. In other places two or four repetitions are sometimes preferred.



The template is illustrated above, and is one of several developed by Cognitive Edge

After the turning point comes the action part of the story, represented in our standard form by another successive three anecdotes. This "action three" is a combination of the main character's response to the conditions presented by the turning point and the consequences of that response. Typically this is where the explicit message of the story comes out most strongly (stand by your friends, don't follow little green men, what goes around comes around, etc). The moral is an expository element told at the close of the action sequence.

After the action sequence is usually found a reversal, in which things go horribly wrong. This element, though optional, serves to heighten the feeling of urgency which will make the story and its messages more memorable. It also provides a strong contrast the storyteller can use to repeat the explicit and implicit messages in a more striking way.

The reversal is finally followed by the (required) resolution, in which the story comes to rest again. The resolution need not be positive (indeed the reversal need not be negative), but it is easiest to construct stories that way, so that is the method we use for the purpose of sense making.

Using the Standard Fable Form

When building a purposeful story, one doesn't start at the beginning and build to the end, but rather uses a sequence that goes back and forth over the elements. The numbers in boxes on the diagram show the sequence of story construction:

- 1. Decide on the objective of the purposeful story at an abstract level - what message will it get across?
- 2. Find three anecdotes that get across the general context of the story, as a sort of introduction. The message of the story should not yet be clear in these anecdotes; they should only be about context. Arrange them so they seem to get "larger" or more significant in the order you intend to tell them.
- 3. Find three anecdotes that exemplify the explicit message of the purposeful story. Again arrange them so that they grow more significant, so that they reveal the message in a progressive way.
- 4. Find an anecdote for the turning point that links the context three with the action three.
- 5. Only now should you refine the original message into a slogan or moral to be stated after it has been embodied in the action three. This will not involve the use of an anecdote.
- 6. Find an anecdote that works as a reversal, where after the moral has been demonstrated and stated the stakes are raised and the audience is given something to wonder about.
- 7. Resolve the reversal with another anecdote for the resolution, which emphasizes the message again while returning the tension created by the reversal to normal.

- Only now should you create the expository element at the start of the story which provides the original context. It can be an anecdote or just a description of a situation that leads into the first set of three anecdotes.

Before you can guide a group of people in using this form, you should become familiar with it yourself. It is best to participate in a group story construction exercise so that you can see how the group dynamics contribute to the process. Sit in on a workshop, or see if you can get some colleagues to go through the process with you. If you can't go through the process in a group, then go through it yourself but get someone to listen to you tell the story and improve it. After a while you will get a feeling for how such a story works, and you will also get a feeling for when the process is working and when it isn't.

METHOD

Story construction usually takes between two and four hours. You should have a large room if possible so that people can move around and draw things if necessary. People should have whiteboards or paper and pencil to work with if they like (those these are not strictly required for the exercise). It's also useful to have the fable form diagram drawn large so that everyone can see it, either on a flip chart or a chalkboard; or you can hand out copies of papers with it on them

Familiarization with anecdotal material

Ask people to form small groups with a minimum of four and a maximum of eight people. If it's obvious how, see if you can group people in such a way that each group is as diverse as possible. For example, you might sort people by how long they have been with the organization, then recombine them so that each small group has a diversity of memberships.

Each group should work in some place where they can talk away from the noise of the other groups. Round tables are best, but people can also move their chairs to corners or the room or anywhere they feel they can work isolated from other groups. For this reason it is best if the room has lots of extra space so that groups can work apart.

Start by asking people to talk about anecdotes for a short time, like fifteen minutes. If people are using a body of anecdotes, you will have distributed the anecdotes prior to the exercise in a way similar to two-stage emergence: everyone sees a variety of anecdotes, and every anecdote is seen by a variety of people. Alternatively, if you are doing the story construction "from scratch" and have no anecdotes to work from, ask people to start by talking about the topic of interest and telling anecdotes from their own experience.

After fifteen minutes, ask people to decide on an objective or purpose of the story they will tell, at an abstract level. Ask them what they want the story to accomplish, what they want the audience to bring away from the story. It is sometimes useful to give them a scenario in which they have to tell the story (e.g., convince X that Y is necessary; you are presenting your point of view to a group of X; your X asks you to explain Y to them). Usually the objective will relate to the topic being discussed in the workshop or project. Give only a short time (five or ten minutes) for this objective

choosing task. Alternatively, if your overall time is short, the objective can be chosen for all the stories together, by yourself or simply by people making suggestions and choosing one.

Introduction of fable form

Now tell a fable story you have prepared, or show a video with one. Show the fable form diagram and explain how the parts of the fable were represented in the story you just told or showed. Then explain the sequence in which people should put together elements of the story. Make sure people understand the elements and sequence, and ask for questions; but don't get drawn into a long discussion about what is the best form, or where the form came from, and so on. Keep the introduction short and practical, centered around what people are going to be doing.

First construction

Ask the groups to begin working on their stories using the sequence you described. They should select their first context three anecdotes by the end of the first half hour. All the anecdotes in the stories people construct should come from the anecdotes they "brought" with them, whether from a set they were exposed to, or from their own experience.

As with many other types of emergent group exercise, people may have a hard time getting started. Remind them that they can change the contents of their story later, but that they need to get *something* in place before the first telling. The three context anecdote are an easy group to select, since they only need match the context of the given topic. If people are unsure what anecdotes to choose or ask for a lot of guidance, just tell them to experiment with some anecdotes in their first telling, and they can change them later. The important thing is to just get started with something.

First telling

Ask each small group to appoint a *storyteller* who will visit the other groups and tell the story (in progress) to them. The storyteller must be the same person through all tellings. Also ask each group to appoint an *observer* who will go with the storyteller and observe reactions.

Now ask the storyteller and observer from each group to go to the next *clockwise* group and tell their group's story, or whatever parts of it have been selected. Give them ten minutes to do this. The audience (the remainder of each group) may *not* comment on the story, though they may react non-verbally.

In the telling, transferring the story message depends on a close link between story and storyteller. That is why the storyteller must be the same for all tellings, and that is why the audience should not comment (so the storyteller can begin to build a relationship with the story by telling it uninterrupted).

Also, it is important to keep control of perceptions about what the exercise is for. For example, we do not recommend that you tape story tellings, because it will create a feeling that there is a "right" story to tell or a "right" way to tell the story, when what actually matters is diversity among stories, tellers and tellings. In fact, it is important to get across to the groups that the entire exercise is more a matter of going through a process than of creating a product. People are often astonished to learn that the story they have created is not going to be "saved" or taped or written down. Certainly it can be if people would like to do that, but creating a story is usually not the real point of the

exercise. The point is more to get at insights and perspectives during the process of creating the purposeful story that could not have been arrived at otherwise.

Second construction

After the telling is finished, ask each storyteller and observer to return to their group and report on how the storytelling went. Tell the groups that they can revise their story on the basis of the report, changing any part they feel needs to be changed, but at the same time they should continue to place elements in it according to the sequence they were given. After they have the context three in place, they should select another three anecdotes for the action three, then move on to select an anecdote for the turning point.

If all the people in a group are not participating equally in story construction, you can't recombine groups, since each group must stay together while it constructs a story. To some extent in this exercise you just have to let groups be the way they are going to be. Some people will naturally be more interested in this kind of exercise and others will be less enthusiastic. As long as the story is progressing things should work out fine. One thing you could do is ask the people paying the least attention to story construction to do another activity (two-stage emergence, perhaps, or creating a Cynefin framework) that might also be useful for the overall sense making purpose of the activity. As always, give a generic reason for doing this so that you are never targeting individual people or giving a negative reason for forming another group.

Second telling

After thirty minutes of work on the story, ask the storyteller and observer from each group to go to a *different* group this time (perhaps moving two groups over, or moving counter-clockwise) and tell the story, again taking ten minutes. After this the storyteller and observer should again return and report the results.

More constructions and tellings

You can repeat the construction periods and telling (with report back) periods as many times as is possible and desired, though useful boundaries seem to be a minimum of two times (one is too few to get the idea) and a maximum of five times (more is usually not required).

You can play with the placement of telling (moving people clockwise and counter-clockwise) to spread out who hears what story when, mostly to give the storyteller and observer the most diverse reactions possible. Also, with later tellings the "no audience comment" rule can be relaxed, and audiences can give constructive comments on how well the story works.

Keep reminding people of progress through the story construction sequence they should be making, i.e., in the second construction period they should complete the action three and perhaps the turning point; in the third period they should complete the turning point, moral, reversal and resolution; in subsequent tellings they can add a context piece at the beginning and refine all the elements. How much of the story the groups complete will depend on the time you have available and the purpose of the exercise (whether sense-making or communication is the more important outcome).

If you are able to do more than two rounds of story construction and telling, you can give people more to do than just throw anecdotes into slots: you can start asking them to start considering how they can improve the narrative form of their stories. Why do this? Because as people start thinking about telling a better story, they do a few interesting things. First, they process and integrate more disparate material than they would if they weren't "improving" their story, thus increasing the utility of story construction as a convergent method. Second, by thinking about narrative form, people forget a little about analytical ways to carry out the form-filling task and allow emergent processes to work better. Third, concentrating on constructing a "good story" gives people another perspective on the issues they have been considering and may lead them to fresh insights.

So, between construction-telling cycles, you can begin to interject some information about narrative form, such as a clip from a movie in which important narrative elements can be seen. Or just talk about things people might be wanting to take into account as they create their purposeful stories. If you don't know what to tell people, read McKee's *Story* for pointers. Also, we use these movie clips as good examples of narrative elements.

- from *Jaws*, the scene in the boat where they swap stories (Scene No. 15), which demonstrates story strength elements such as escalating tension and something to care about
- from *Kramer vs. Kramer*, the scene where the father makes breakfast the first time, which demonstrates the power of understatement, subtle exposition and delayed response
- from *Casablanca*, the scene in the marketplace, which demonstrates conflict and timing

Or you may have your own favorite scenes from movies or from books that show specific aspects of well-written stories. One important thing here is to strike a balance between giving people an interesting challenge and giving them such a difficult task that they ignore it and walk away. People are not interested in trying to become novelists in one session; just give them a taste of some of the interesting things they can do while constructing a story together.

If you have enough time, another interesting thing to do is to have people stop the exercise after three or four tellings, discard the story completely, and start all over again with new anecdotes but with the same underlying message. This is a good way to help people come at the issue from another direction and delve deeper into it.