Chapter XL
The Use of Story in Building Online Group Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, story has been a powerful and effective way to build relationships within groups of people. Professional group facilitators know the power that story can bring to the workshops and group sessions they lead. From within the membership of the International Association of Facilitators (IAF), a group of 18 facilitators came together to collectively research the benefits of story in online groups. There was strong interest in developing practical processes and techniques that facilitators could use in building and maintaining relationships in the online groups they work with. This chapter presents some of the findings from a cooperative inquiry the group undertook investigating the use of story using a variety of media including: e-mail, audio, telephone, video and Web conferencing, instant messaging, chat, blogging, and online surveys. Our investigations reveal that story can be a powerful means for building relationships between group members within online groups. The impact of disembodiment, restrictive feedback, unclear membership, and tolerance for technical difficulties are also detailed and some interventions are outlined.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a family gathering for a grandmother's birthday. A 6-year-old boy is listening, enwrapped in the whole atmosphere of storytelling. Many stories are told and speeches are made. The boy's desire for more is engaged and he moves in closer. The grandmother then tells her story. It is a story about milking cows in the cool of dawn while her younger sister learned to play the piano. The

boy really gets it about unfairness and service to others from his grandmother. He genuinely appreciates the rich pictures that are shared and he sees these stories as the stories that shape the family and the individuals around him.

If you can imagine this, then you will see that storytelling engages the thinking, the feeling, and the actions of a person in relation to others and it is not a simple mechanism that can be easily formulated. Storytelling is, in itself, an essential

human element. It does a whole range of things. It draws us in, engages our imagination, and our critique. Stories create linkages with others, with our past, with our present and with our aspirations for the future.

It is by telling our stories that we come to know ourselves, and whenever we hear another's story we begin to understand them. We come to appreciate their strengths and vulnerabilities, their joys and sorrows. Storytelling teaches us to listen and enables us to find our own voice.

The power of story is used by professional group facilitators in a range of ways. Story can be useful as part of an opening to group sessions, for introductions between members, as an ice-breaker, as a way of recalling past group events, as a nonthreatening way to discuss a group problem and explore possible solutions, as a way to share learning and best practice, and to inspire and pass on shared values.

Professional group facilitators are also increasingly learning to facilitate and work co-operatively with groups using a variety of media such as via audio and video conferencing, blogging and forums. They are encountering many of the joys and challenges of working with computer mediated communication. Facilitators have been at work to find ways to improve the online effectiveness of their interventions and the groups they work with.

A facilitator is a process guide, someone who makes a process easier or more convenient. The word "facilitate" comes from the Latin "facile," and means to make easy or more convenient.

Facilitation enables a group of people to achieve their own purpose in an agreed way (Hunter 2007). Professional group facilitators can assist groups in a range of ways such as improving meetings, team building, visioning, planning, community development, decision-making, problem solving, organizational change, conflict resolution, co-operative participation and evaluation.

This chapter introduces the reader to the domain of group facilitation by describing a successful online project by the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) to develop a Statement of Values and Code of Ethics for Group Facilitators. This project illustrates a growing interest that facilitators have in learning about, and developing, online group processes. Following this the face-to-face facilitation of relationship development is introduced along with some of the challenges that group facilitators face when working with groups online. This will set the scene for presenting the cooperative inquiry that was undertaken to investigate the use of story within a range of computer mediated mediums. How we have defined story and relationship development is detailed along with the wider co-operative approach and generative nature of the inquiry. Summarized findings are described. The impact of disembodiment, restrictive feedback, unclear membership, and tolerance for technical difficulties are also detailed and some interventions are outlined.

BACKGROUND

Within the membership of the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) a group of facilitators saw a strong advantage in developing a code of ethics that would move the profession forward and expand the definition of group facilitation itself. The project built on previous work by the IAF in the area of the association's values and facilitator competencies.

The project champions were keen to involve as much of the membership in as many locations around the world as possible. Rather than using a subcommittee or task-force to develop the Code, an e-mail-based online conversation was created. Called the *Ethics and Values Think Tank*, the group involved over 80 members and over a 2-year period, they developed a Statement of *Values and Code of Ethics for Group Facilitators* (IAF, 2004).

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