

## 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 eighteen 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: email, 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.

### Key Words

Online facilitation, group facilitation, online relationship development, group effectiveness, online groups, story, storytelling, co-operative inquiry, online participant research.

### Introduction

Imagine a family gathering for a grandmother's birthday. A six 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 non-threatening 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 sub-committee or task-force to develop the Code, an email-based online conversation was created. Called the *Ethics and Values Think Tank*, the group involved over 80 members and over a two-year period, they developed a *Statement of Values and Code of Ethics for Group Facilitators* (IAF 2004).

Different perspectives were shared from many cultures and facilitation backgrounds. By including as many as possible in the process, wider applicability and greater acceptance of the code was generated. Online discussion was useful for generating ideas and in-depth dialogue over time on key issues and areas of difference.

Additional in-person forums were held at IAF global and regional conferences in Canada, Bolivia, the United States of America, Malaysia, Australia, and New Zealand. Agreement on the exact wording of the code was reached online on May 4, 2002, and adopted in draft form by the IAF in Texas on May 22, 2002. The code was adopted in full in 2004.

This successfully facilitated online project generated strong motivation to broaden our facilitator knowledge of achieving group purposes using online means, specifically from a facilitation perspective.

Facilitators debate whether using online group tools will ever be as effective as face-to-face facilitation. However many are coming to appreciate the real benefits that can be achieved by using online group tools and are excited about the possibilities that are available.

Previous research by facilitators Pauleen & Yoong (2001) argued that there was little offered in the form of systematic, empirical research to guide online group facilitators. They found this to be particularly true when group facilitators themselves were the main focus of the study (p. 190). Other

researchers within the profession have indicated some key areas and perspectives for further study. For example, Hunter (2003) identified the need for new protocols and processes to help with relationship development in online team work and to address aspects of online disembodiment; Mittleman, Briggs, & Nunamaker (2000) suggested the development of meeting guidelines; Rangarajan and Rohrbaugh (2003) suggested comparing participation rates across differing forms of computer mediated communication systems and introducing online co-facilitation; and Whitworth and McQueen (2003) have suggested further investigation of the impact of their voting method on group cohesion and agreement.

### ***The Facilitation of Relationship Development***

In face-to-face facilitation, the building of relationships between group members is well known and has been dealt with in some depth (see Schwarz, 2002; Bens, 2000, 2005; Justice & Jamieson, 1999; Hunter, Bailey, & Taylor, 1994, 1997, 1999; Hunter, 2007; Kaner, Lind, Toldi, Fisk, & Berger, 1996). A proven range of processes and techniques to support relationship development has been developed and are used by professional group facilitators. These facilitators have a whole toolbox of processes and techniques that can be applied to improve group functioning, including those that emerge from within group interaction (Thorpe, 2007). For example, in her book *Extreme Facilitation*, Suzanne Ghais (2005) presents specific tools and techniques to master difficult situations. Wilkinson (2004) provides specific techniques effective facilitators use to produce consistent, repeatable results with groups and includes 90+ group processes. Harrington-MacKin (1993) has written a team building tool kit with tips, tactics and rules for effective workplace teams. Simmerman's (1993) book has a compendium of four toolkits containing information on facilitation skills and how to generate participative involvement. *The Art of Facilitation* (Hunter, 2007) has, as a feature, a toolkit of facilitative designs and processes. *Co-operacy: A New way of Being at Work*, also by Hunter et al. (1997) includes sixty one exercises, processes and

tools for the development of peer and group relationships.

Many of these face-to-face processes and techniques rely strongly on the ability of the facilitator to read aspects of a group's interaction (such as body language, posture, tone of voice, warm-up, energy levels, seeing what's missing and so forth) and apply process interventions as needed. In online groups many of these aspects of interaction, vital to the facilitator, are no longer available or as easy to read. This means that proven face-to-face processes and techniques are either less effective or simply cannot be applied in an online group situation.

Group facilitators have named several challenges working with online groups such as the lack of body language and tone of voice (Boetcher, Duggan, & White, 1999; Thorpe, 2004a, 2007), different perceptions of time leading to feelings of being ignored, the anonymous and disembodied nature of the medium (Hunter, 2003), different perceptions of private versus public spaces, and limitations in people's reading and writing skills. Also, the anonymous nature of online groups may lead to behavior outside normal social limits (White, 2000). Others have found it harder to build a team online, harder to follow meeting processes, tougher to sort out multiple communication channels, harder to converge and a lack of physical communication cues (Mittleman, et al., 2000).

The connection between group member relationships and overall group effectiveness is an important area of research. Research in the area of online relationship development has shown that stronger relationships lead to improved group effectiveness. For example, Warkentin & Beranek (1999) found that training virtual team members in interpersonal communication dynamics led to improved perceptions of the interaction process over time, specifically with regard to trust, commitment, and frank expression between team members. Lau, Sarker, & Sahay (2000) found professional teams (ranked high in task focus and low in social dimension), were extremely vulnerable to "breakdown" due to a lack of social glue (p. 49) and were unable to recover from a lapse in trust due to a lack of strong social bonding (p. 51). Warkentin, Sayeed, &

Hightower (1997) found that the strength of relational links was positively associated with the effectiveness of information exchange (p. 986). Walther & Burgoon (1992) found that strong relational links lead to enhanced creativity, motivation, increased morale, better decisions and fewer process losses. Chidambaram (1996) concluded that because online groups communicate less effectively and the exchange of information is more difficult, they are more task orientated and exchange less social-emotional information, slowing the development of relational links.

Organizational Communications literature may convincingly argue that strong relationships do not necessarily translate into improved group effectiveness. For example, strong relationships are considered present in situations where *groupthink* (Janis, 1972, 1982) occurs in highly homogenous teams. From a facilitation perspective, *groupthink* and similar dynamics would not be a sign of strong relationships being present within a group. Indicators of groupthink such as a lack of robust critique, ignored concerns and cheap closure (see Hunter 2007, p. 111) would demonstrate to a facilitator that the group would be in an early part of its development. For example, in the M. Scott Peck model of community development (1987) a group with this dynamic would be considered to be in the early stage of “pseudo community” where participants are being nice to each other and avoiding any kind of conflict. In Katzenbach and Smith’s model of high performing teams (1993) the group may be considered a *pseudo team* where members are actually slowed down compared to the contribution they would make without the team overhead. “In pseudo-teams, the sum of the whole is less than the potential of the individual parts.” (p. 91).

Identifying and interrupting unhelpful behavior like groupthink may be a key reason for bringing in a facilitator to help a group reach its objectives. The facilitator would alert the group to any tendency to become autocratic and unconscious, and encourage participants to stay awake and aware. For example, a facilitator may actively encourage members of the group to become the devils advocate, or ask participants to name what is going on in the group, or question member silence, or ask for input from others, or ask for what’s

missing in the group (see Hunter, 2007, pp. 82-84). The facilitator may also directly challenge the group about being in “groupthink mode” (p. 123).

## **Storytelling**

Based on experience as an online facilitator, moderator, working in a distributed cooperative company, and as a trainer of online facilitators, I have seen the impact that story can have on groups. There is a strong value placed on effective storytelling in all human groups. When personal stories are shared within a social or group context, an individual experience may come to represent the whole group’s shared experience. Relationships are forged by the sharing of experience and meaning. This occurs in social space where members are warmed up to exploring their social situation. Some stories are fun. Some share new perspectives or get a point across. Others are deep and potent and resonate for a considerable time. Some stories are so powerful they can continue to be active over decades or even centuries. The power at the heart of storytelling within a group is that it translates into a more resilient group and improves group effectiveness.

There are many who have studied the impact and power of story. Authors such as Joseph Campbell have written about the Power of Myth (Moyers and Campbell 1988), The Hero’s Journey (Campbell, 1949) and Myths to Live By (1972). Jean Houston has written extensively about the transformational power of the classic Greek tale of The Odyssey (1992); and discovering the mythic elements in our lives (1996). Houston continues to expand the conversation about the power of story and the meaning it generates in our lives every week on her website [www.jeanhouston.org](http://www.jeanhouston.org).

Other substantive work has explored the use of storytelling in work groups from a wide variety of perspectives; see Brown, Denning, Groh, & Prusack (2005), Denning (2000, 2004a, 2004b, 2005) and Silverman (2006) for the use of story in organizational settings and development. MacDonald (1992) and Bar-On (2000, 2002) have looked at the use of storytelling in conflict resolution and peace work.

### **How to Define What Story is**

The nature of storytelling means that it can be used across a range of settings to meet a wide range of intentions. When 'story' means many things to many people, can a satisfactory definition of story or narrative be easily achieved? There are differing arguments as to what does, and does not, constitute a story or a narrative (Pentland, 1999). Reissman (1993) discussed what others think and found a wide range of definitions of story. He noted that the definition used by one group of scholars is often overly broad, including just about anything, whilst it can be very restrictive amongst others. "Most scholars treat narratives as discrete units, with clear beginnings and endings, as detachable from the surrounding discourse rather than as situated events." (p. 17). Other writers such as Scholes (1981) and Tilley (1995) define narrative as a story with a beginning, middle and an end. Also the terms 'narrative' and 'story' are often used interchangeably. They are considered to be equivalent by some (Polkinghorne 1988) but not by others, for example Scholes (1981) and Poirier and Ayres (1997).

The same challenge of definition can also be said of group relationship development. Many attempts have been made to clearly define the stages and cycles of a group's journey from its birth to its completion. Finding an acceptable definition of this phrase is difficult because it has been defined in many ways and with varying degrees of depth and complexity (Smith, 2001). In addressing this issue, Hill and Gruner (1973) discuss the fact that Hill was once an avid collector of group development theories. At one point, they report, he met up with another collector of group development theories and found that their combined collections yielded more than 100 distinct theories.

Rather than adopt a mandatory model or definition for the co-operative inquiry, we were keen to decide within our own research group what was the emergent idea for story, and relationship development, and group effectiveness. Thus, at times we used specific types of story, such as a recount of our worst facilitation job, and at other times the stories emerged from conversation or were sparked from the hearing of another's story. Our research group also used a range

of popular development models such as Tuckman's (1977) model of forming, storming, norming performing and adjourning, M. Scott Peck's model of community development, and Katzenbach and Smith's model of high performing teams.

### **The Research Project**

Between September 2005 and December 2006, a group of 18 group facilitators in seven countries across 12 time zones joined together online to delve into the potential that story might have in developing online relationships. We were interested in the efficacy and impact of story and wanted to pursue the facilitative possibilities of international, cross-cultural storytelling online. The study wasn't a search for a particular thing or to come up with specific answers. It was not pre-emptive, but that the process itself would be a journey that would be interesting and offer freedom for those individuals to be involved in their own way. The research question that the study aimed to investigate was: *How is story beneficial in building relationships in online groups?*

The project was conceived as a generative thing. The approach was cooperative in that we would all participate in both the research and the decision-making. Participants were invited from the membership of the IAF networks. Those who joined were strongly drawn to the possibility of tapping into the generative capacities of other facilitators. We didn't want to be isolated researchers; we wanted the research we were doing to be infused with passion and were eager to tap into the collective wisdom of the group and learn from each other.

One of the main goals of the research project was to develop some practical processes and techniques that could be useful in building and maintaining relationships in online groups. The study group also wanted to investigate other areas of online facilitation, including areas of group introductions, generating inspiration, leadership, the power of story, group sharing, motivation, best practice, and the use of metaphor.

The method of co-operative inquiry (Reason, 1988, 1994; Heron, 1996, 1998; Reason & Bradbury, 2000) was chosen as a useful approach and starting point for exploring story in online relationship development. Co-operative inquiry produces data that has a strong grounding in participant experience and multiple perspectives of phenomena. Co-operative inquiry also aligned strongly with recognized facilitator values of equality, shared decision-making, equal opportunity, power sharing and individual responsibility (Hunter & Thorpe, 2005).

Stories were generated and shared using a number of different online tools. We created different inquiries and different patterns of interaction processes. The tools we used included email, audio and telephone conferencing, web conferencing, internet relay chat, a blog, and online surveys. The tools and types of inquiry we used are summarized in the following table.

<b>Media Summary Table</b>
<p><b>Email and web profiles</b> A comparison survey between email story introductions and individual web profiles.</p>
<p><b>Skype™ conferencing</b> Observations about storytelling in a real-time experience with audio. The use of a burning issue question approach to elicit stories.</p>
<p><b>Telephone conferencing</b> How to define what was a story and what types of stories we were interested in sharing and hearing. The power of sharing our worst facilitation experiences.</p>
<p><b>Internet Relay Chat</b> The use of story to open facilitated chat sessions. Tapping into the emotional depth of story.</p>
<p><b>Web conferencing</b> How web conferencing may assist the storytelling process. The use of web conferencing for post-story reflection.</p>
<p><b>Video conference</b> Exploring stories of challenge in the leadership environment using video conferencing.</p>
<p><b>Blog</b> Using a blog to share funny facilitation fables</p>

**Table X.1 Media Summary Table**

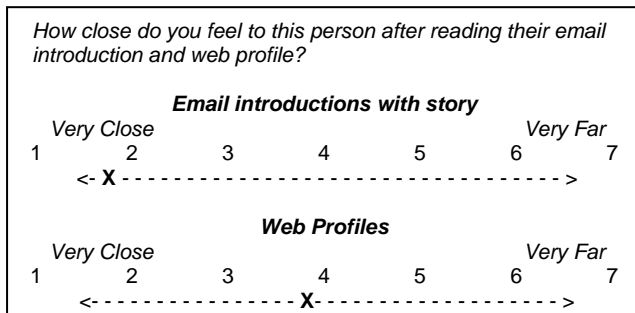
## Using storytelling online

### Comparing Email Introductions with Public Web Profiles

A comparison test was created to explore the impact of two different types of introductions used within our research group at the beginning of the project. The first type of introduction was the email introductions which included a story that participants had made to introduce themselves to each other in the group. The second type of introduction was participant's own web biographies or professional profiles. These web biographies either came from a participant's own website or they were uploaded to the co-researchers page of the project website.

The purpose of the comparison test was to establish what might be useful for the introductions stage of online groups. Participants were asked to review and compare 11 different profiles, each containing a public profile and a corresponding email introduction to our research group. Members were asked to respond to eight questions via the research project website. Thirty eight responses were received in total. While not intended to be statistically significant, the test was aimed at being indicative and to present an early reflection of our group. We wanted to see if people felt closer, could see more personal aspects and identify more points of connection in a story introduction when compared to the same person's web biography. We also wanted to know what participants thought had contributed to their sense or level of trust and the impact that the inclusion of a photo may have had.

Overall, the comparison test showed us that the story introductions were more popular than the web profiles. Participants were first asked to rank how close they felt on a seven point scale in relation to another person after reading their web profile and their story introduction. With one being *very close* and seven being *very far*, story introductions scored an average of 1.9 (close) and web profiles an average of 3.8 (Neither close nor far).



**Figure X.1 Average closeness ranking comparing story introductions to web profiles**

Participants were then asked to identify *What aspects, if any, of the person's attitudes, values, personality traits or concerns can you see in this email [or profile]?* More personal aspects were identified in the story introductions than in their web profiles. The average participant could identify 5.1 aspects in story introductions while a lower average of 3.2 aspects were identified in web profiles. Popular email introduction aspects identified were: family, a 'people person', positive, and some cultural and historical aspects. Popular web profile aspects identified were: some cultural aspects, facilitation, creativity and hard working.

When asked *What are the points of connection, if any, between this person and yourself?* more points of connection could be identified by participants in the story introductions than in the web profiles. An average 3.9 points of connection were identified in the story introductions and 2.3 points of connection were identified in web profiles.

Participants were then asked *What aspects of this email introduction [or web profile] contribute to your level of trust and safety with this person?* Trust aspects identified in story introductions included family, work experience, overseas experience, membership of the IAF, and the level of personal sharing. Aspects of trust identified in the web profiles were a person's qualifications, the photos, and membership in the IAF. Photos on profiles were said to have a large positive impact on participant's levels of trust. Photos engaged the participants' imaginations of what the person was like. Where photos were unavailable on a person's web profile, the person's profile was seen as 'dulled' or 'faceless'. Web profiles were considered to

provide more information, while story introductions were seen as more real, more human, easier to connect with and more engaging.

From the comparison test it was found that introductions made by email that included a story assisted the creation of a more human connection, more aspects of others' could be seen, more points of connection were made, and photos had a positive impact. Story was a useful way for people to present aspects of themselves. Combining these two aspects of introduction with story and the sharing of personal photos appears a very useful way for creating relationship linkages during the beginning stage of asynchronous online groups. The creation of more points of connection between group members early on provided more ways to interact with each other as our group developed over time.

### Skype™ Conferencing

Skype™ ([www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)) is a free internet-based program that uses peer-to-peer technology to make affordable, high-quality voice communications available to people all over the world.

Two concurrent Skype™ conference sessions were set up to discuss the research project in real-time and to share stories in sub-groups of six participants. Challenges getting the technology to work using the Skype™ audio conferencing feature were experienced as soon as the session began. Some participants experienced a long delay and echoing. Others could hear but could not speak in the conversation. For one participant, it sounded as though she was in a room full of people who were all talking at once. The delay and echo experienced by participants slowed down the conversation and made some conversations difficult to understand. Several times the conference rooms crashed. One participant summarized the sessions by describing them as "pretty hard to get past even introducing ourselves." Another participant reflected "In a way, this experience is a very good one, given our topic. So often when we try to do work in a non-collocated way, the first big obstacle to overcome is the

technology. Working together to overcome this snafu<sup>1</sup> is such a 'real life' thing."

Despite the technological challenges, it was great to hear each other's voices for the first time, and as a group we connected on a new level. Up until this point we had only been in contact via email and having the real-time experience and audio channel was very effective in bringing us closer together and giving us a new sense of each other.

Working together in real-time was more familiar and similar to what we were used to when facilitating face-to-face. Things happening in the background of conversations became tied into parts of the group conversation. Strong humor was present. One participant coined the term 'Skype Wrestling' when some loud crashing was heard in the background of a conversation. The *Skype wrestling* term was used again at other times to describe the technology struggles we experienced. The crashing heard by participants turned out to be a participant's dog. This event inspired a round of stories about pets, particularly dogs. Other story themes were about events of the day and traveling.

Although the desired process of having two concurrent sessions and then swapping was a good idea, managing the way in which people came in and out of these groups surfaced as an unexpected disturbance. Essentially the group boundaries were unclear. How to go about adding and joining people to the conversations was unclear and led to people being put on hold or accidentally dropped from the group conversation. One participant described the experience in his reflection on the session as "I got a sense of meeting people, but not a group."

Other Skype™ storytelling sessions with smaller two-three participant groups were more successful. A starting point used for one of the smaller sessions was to ask participants to tell a story about a hot or burning issue for them right now in their work or life. This was a useful way to quickly focus the stories that were told during the session and also created a strong

relevance for those participating. It gave participants a sense that they could gain some learning and insight from both telling their own story and hearing from others. It also presented an opportunity to listen to the hot topics and burning issues of peers and an opportunity for group reflection on each story.

Other Skype™ sessions focused on sharing experiences where the facilitator had reacted defensively or strongly to particular questions or challenges from a group they had facilitated. Stories were also told about facilitating a group which included a challenging participant.

It was considered that sharing these stories and hearing others brought validity to peoples' experience. "By sharing it, and hearing it, we bring some level of validity to other peoples' experiences" was one participant's reflection on the session. Another said "I was simply surprised that we all had the same challenge or similar experience stories." The stories did not necessarily have to be extraordinary or even that much about storytelling, but the question and session was useful. It was believed that sharing our stories assisted the group to articulate their authentic selves and the issues they were facing. Another benefit was the value in storytelling for debriefing after a facilitation event and getting the deeper learning from situations.

### Telephone Conferencing

The use of telephone conferencing was found to be highly beneficial in facilitating the development of our group culture and to discuss key aspects of the wider research project. Creating the group culture is an extremely important part of the facilitation of most new groups.

Culture is about how a group will be together, or 'how we do things around here'. On a group level the group culture could also be considered the group agreement, group contract, charter, ground rules, mores, understandings or desired behaviors. On a structural level the group culture can be perceived as the container within which the group operates (Hunter, 2007, p. 42).

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<sup>1</sup> Snafu - A chaotic or confused situation (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. (2000) Fourth Edition, Houghton Mifflin).

Because we had found the Skype™ conferencing technology so challenging, and knowing that the group culture was so important, a decision was made to use telephone conferencing to develop our group culture. We believed that having a stable tool to connect and communicate through was of paramount importance.

<b>Group Culture</b>
<p><b>Confidentiality</b> Each of us to bring any areas of confidentiality to the awareness of the wider group as and when they occur. Can use the Chatham House rule as needed.</p>
<p><b>Care of data collected</b> Any data created or collected in the wider group processes can be accessed and used by anyone in the group. If an individual or sub-group creates or collects data in an individual or sub-group process and someone from outside that sub-group wants to use it, then they will need to negotiate directly with the individual or sub-group members involved.</p>
<p><b>Spelling doesn't count</b> To assist speed when some are typing, and remove a burden, particularly with numbers.</p>
<p><b>Dealing with difficulties</b> If an issue comes up that people believe is going to prevent us, or seriously delay us, getting to our goals, we as a group are willing to stop at that point and discuss how it shall be handled. That we hold an intent to be transparent about what we have observed. Issues can be raised with the wider group via the medium we are using or by contacting Stephen as a first point of call.</p>

**Figure X.2 Group culture statement developed during the initial telephone conference**

On the agenda for the telephone conference was the need to decide collectively how to define what was a story and what types of stories we were interested in sharing and hearing. We identified that we were discussing “what’s a valid story” essentially so that everyone could feel comfortable in bringing their stories forward into the wider group. A strong preference was initially raised by some participants to focus solely on stories about group facilitation. Others in the group then expressed an interest in keeping open to stories about groups, family, teaching, and leadership. After further discussion, our story scope was reworked to be stories about facilitation

including other stories about groups, family, teaching, and leadership that could in some way inform our facilitation practice. A decision was also moved forward to also remain open to sharing different types of stories told and written by other people, particularly about challenging situations and stories about facilitating groups that didn’t go well.

We found that our group tasks could be more easily achieved using telephone conferencing than using Skype™ or the other asynchronous tools of email and the forum. We decided to use telephone conferencing further and to combine its usefulness with other online tools. One following telephone conference focused on facilitation stories about coping with the impact of emotional disturbances experienced when facilitating. One participant introduced a very powerful story about facilitating a group session with a hostile participant who made strong racist slants against him.

This particular story session was a real highlight of the research project for several of the participants. The value was in hearing from participants from different cultures and exploring the different cultural approaches facilitators would take when facilitating difficult situations. Having a free flowing audio channel to participate in was really beneficial. Feedback could flow quickly between members and the tone of voice, pitch, pause and volume all impacted on the power of stories told.

One key downside found with using teleconferencing was that four-five participants often could not be present for the dialogue and any decisions made. Thus decisions made were not fully inclusive. Participants who missed the real-time conference sessions felt that they had less ownership of the decisions and were less inclined to put them into action or to participate in the discussions about them done via email.

This lack of commitment to the decisions made by others could be considered an *in-group out-group* phenomenon as described in the Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST) model by DeSanctis and Poole (1994). Although agreement was expressed via email afterward to the decisions made by the sub-group, there was no commitment to

those decisions made. This phenomenon did not occur when using other asynchronous tools such as the forum, chat tool and email as a written record of the conversation was available to those who were unavailable.

### **Internet Relay Chat Story Sessions**

Stories were shared using Internet Relay Chat (IRC) tools such as Yahoo!® Messenger, MSN® Messenger, and Paltalk. We found that using a story to open a chat session was a good way to begin as it setup and created a culture of storytelling within the mood of the group. Opening the session with story provoked thinking about members' own interior responses to the story and sparked related stories that then served to build on the emerging group theme.

A strong benefit of using chat tools was that stories could be told in parts with feedback included by the audience. At times short sentences and emoticons were used by audience members to show that a story was being followed and enjoyed. The suspense could be built as the parts of the story and dialogue were shared over time.

Here's an example story from a Yahoo!® Messenger chat session:

Teller: I had my parents over for dinner last night and my older brother and it was really nice to hear my father tell some stories from our childhood - he's often quite reserved and it really warmed my heart

Audience: nice

Teller: I could probably share the story

Audience: ok that would be great

Teller: My brother and his friend who were 13 at the time really wanted to go to a Split Enz concert (they're a kind of a soft rock band, quite famous in NZ)

Teller: Antony's (my brother) friend David (the kid across the street) weren't allowed to go according to David's dad without a parent and David's dad certainly wasn't going to be it!

Audience: ok

Teller: Arnold (my Dad) saw the gleam of hope fade in the young boys as these words were spoken...and they hung their heads in disappointment.

Arnold (my dad) took pity on them and said "oh I'll take them"...

So the two boys went off to the concert with Arnold and David's younger brother Andrew

Audience: :D

Teller: It was a great concert, and Andrew (the younger brother, who was 11) told Arnold that "This is the bestest concert I've ever been to Mr Arnold!"

"Oh" said Arnold, "How many concerts have you been to Andrew?"

"Only one, and it's the bestest concert ever!" said Andrew...

This was the punch line during dinner and it was just great

Audience: :))

Audience: nice story

Teller: yeah - Antony (my brother) is now 37 so it was nice for him to see as an adult what his dad had done for him when he was younger.

Other stories impacted on the depth of communication and deepened rapport. Stories touched participants on an emotional level. After a story about facilitating within a racially conflicted community and a reflective story about online communication, one audience member responded with this statement:

*Wow! my heart is filled, I'm still taking in the first story - I've been in rooms like that, and then your second one is like poetry...and I think they both touch the same deeper humanity in all of us.*

The depth of stories told was also considered an important part of developing relationships and participation within the group.

*Touching our humanity like this is an important aspect of hearing and sharing stories. I think a depth of sharing will call forth a depth of hearing and this attracts a depth of participation.*

Post story reflections and feedback assisted in deepening the experience for both the audience and tellers. For example, one audience member expressed that she really related to the story she had just heard and felt more connected to the storyteller from hearing his story because he had opened up and revealed quite a bit of himself.

*I just really related to that, and I just felt more connected to you because you kinda opened up and talked about yourself quite a bit. So I really appreciated that.*

Another participant expressed that he saw something of the man behind the message and that there were many layers to the story. The storyteller then made an interesting observation that it's a part of facilitation itself to have the courage to expose oneself in such a way that others are given courage to expose themselves or share their thinking. Another expressed that she could see the story with new eyes and new understanding based on our post story sharing.

### **Web Conferencing Support**

One of our research group's participants in Chicago had been talking to Raymond Bejarano, Vice President of WebIQ ([www.webiq.net](http://www.webiq.net)), who offered to support the research project by providing their web conferencing system at no cost. WebIQ is a web conferencing system that provided our group with a useful tool to collect all our data and discussion in one place. Combined with an audio channel such as telephone and Skype™ conferencing, it was a great tool for enhancing the sense of who was in the room and creating a speaking order.

The main page of the WebIQ interface is the Agenda that all participants can see and interact with (as needed). This was useful in maintaining the structure of our session. Having a visual reference for our meeting gave everyone a sense of what we were going to cover and where we were in the process. The system also included a list of the current participants in the room and this

was used as an order of speaking when conducting a round for story feedback or discussion.

During the first WebIQ session, stories from our worst facilitation moments were shared. One surprising finding was that many of us had a similar disaster story about losing control of a session that we were facilitating and someone else having to finish the meeting for us. As the stories were being told via the audio channel, participants could pose questions and comments during the actual telling of the story. All participants could see these questions and comments from the audience showing up on their screen as the story progressed. The storytellers could then choose whether to weave these into their story as they went.

A useful feature of using WebIQ was that we were able to conduct a Plus Delta evaluation (positives and negatives) following each storytelling session. Participants could type their evaluation directly into the system. The system then collated the feedback and presented the evaluations back to the group via the Agenda home page. This was a very quick way to collect feedback on the session that could be presented back to the whole group. Another useful aspect of WebIQ was that any data collected from participants during sessions could be revisited by members who were unable to attend the meeting.

### **Video Conferencing Leadership Stories**

A sub project was initiated by Mark Spain and Steve Colman from Global Learning in Canberra to explore stories about leadership using video conferencing. The goal was to build on a face-to-face four-day leadership programme with twenty middle managers in a large Australian government.

The stories that were told during these sessions were related to experiences of dealing with a challenge in their leadership environment and their own personal development. These stories often involved a third party, such as a mentor, manager or colleague who had a significant impact on the storyteller. This third party had demonstrated leadership and particular values in their behavior that had inspired the storyteller. Some of these stories also

had a 'living or traveling in another culture theme to them'.

Participants offered feedback that they were fully absorbed and engaged in the stories and strongly valued the lessons learned by the storytellers. The sessions triggered more openness, trust and personal disclosure. Positive outcomes identified from the storytelling session included the building of personal trust, active open listening, and learning that people's perceptions can be different.

Although the video conferencing technology was considered clumsy, key benefits identified included being able to see everyone, being able to see that the team was happy (visual feedback of the team's emotions), and that there was deepened honesty and deeper listening by both management and other team members. One participant decided to organize further fortnightly conferences to improve his managers' awareness of the day-to-day work contributions his team members were providing.

Suggestions for improving the facilitation of future meetings included the need to be more inclusive of those who are at video conference centers by themselves, and that the facilitator(s) must control the speaking order to avoid the cross talk.

### **Blog Storytelling**

A sub project was initiated to investigate storytelling using the medium of a web blog within an online facilitation skills programme that a participant was co-leading. The blog was set up using Blogger™ at [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) to explore the topics of dialogue and storytelling. The blog was facilitated over four weeks with 11 trainees. Participants found the blog tool very familiar and easier to use than the forum tool they had been using previously in the programme. The blog was also considered a fun tool for people to use. One participant said:

*It was fun, I went and found lots of blogs on facilitation and put messages on lots of places I hadn't been to before. I looked at the other participant's blogs too.*

Participants were asked to submit a "funny facilitation fable" based on an experience that they had had with their own groups. As participant stories flowed and comments were posted, themes began to emerge from the group sharing. The stories chosen and told generated insights for participants. One participant summarized this by commenting:

*It is good to see an emerging theme and a variety of responses. That helps me understand other participants. Their responses provide insights into who they are and helps me relate to them more personally.*

Another said:

*Stories reveal a lot about passions, beliefs, personalities and experiences. They are rich with images and are wonderful opportunities to learn about each other – more of that!*

Other participants, however, found storytelling on the blog to be challenging. It was difficult for some to "just produce a story." Although the blog facilitator opened with an example story, a clearer context for the storytelling may have been useful, and more options to tell stories other than 'fun' ones. Participant feedback included:

*I don't think you can force storytelling. I think it is better when it comes naturally as part of a conversation.*

*I like storytelling, but find it difficult online*

*One story almost had me rolling on the floor with laughter, it got my imagination going. I thought I'd had tough groups... I think we needed more options/ story choices as it was hard for most to think something up.*

### **Conclusion**

The use of storytelling in online groups offers a useful means for facilitating the development of relationships between members across the differing computer mediated communication channels explored in this research project. Storytelling in introductions assisted people to better present aspects of themselves and to create

more points of connection with each other. Photos had an impact and assisted trust and the 'humanness' of connections. Opening our chat sessions with story provoked thinking in participants, sparked related stories and served to build on an emerging group theme. Telephone and Skype™ sessions provided a familiar tool for us to use that allowed us to connect on a whole new level. Web conferencing assisted our storytelling sessions by providing a strong visual reference for our meeting and gave everyone a sense of where we were in the process. Participants telling stories via video conferencing were fully absorbed and engaged in the story and enjoyed the value of the lessons to both the storyteller and the audience. While the blog storytelling was rich with images and provided wonderful opportunities to learn about each other, it was not for everyone.

The research project highlights some further challenges and areas to investigate further. One challenge for facilitators is in the area of the online group's boundaries. As participants can more readily move in and out of an online group's space and even switch between different tools for communication, effective facilitation of those transitions becomes more important to ensure that the group continues to remain focused on its purpose and is well contained. The facilitator needs to monitor the group movements and assist a group with its knowledge of who is currently in the group, who isn't, and how people can come and go.

Another area for further research is to investigate the amount of technical interruption and setup overhead participants are willing, wanting or can tolerate. We found our first Skype™ experience very challenging and were unable to achieve what we had hoped. This setback didn't stop our group from continuing to use the technology. Participants in this particular research study were open, generous and willing to return and use the tool again. Would that be true for other hierarchical, workplace or community groups?

Our particular research group was voluntary, highly motivated and very keen to learn. They were very open to new things, to the emergent, to the depth that the group might go to with story, but this cannot be

expected of all online groups. The findings from this group may not be highly generalizable to others. How similar would the findings be with other groups, such as in highly controlled, hierarchical groups or in groups with time pressured performance situations?

How far can storytelling extend into the future of computer mediated communication? Will it be useful in building relationships via mobile computing and other emerging technologies?

Storytelling is one of a range of means that may be used in combination with other techniques to build relationships in online groups. This research presents some interesting examples of how storytelling can address some of the communication challenges faced by professionals in the CMC arena today. Storytelling can help improve human connections across a wide range of different computer mediated communication channels. It is particularly useful for addressing aspects of disembodiment experienced by facilitators and groups working in online mediums. Storytelling, as a technique, can be introduced in combination with other facilitated techniques to build online relationships and thus improve a group's internal relationships and its effectiveness.

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## Author Bio

Stephen Thorpe is a group facilitator specializing in the online domain and trains others in online facilitation. Working with Zenergy, he has been researching ways to enhance the effectiveness of online groups. His PhD explores facilitation as a vital domain in assisting online groups with a focus on the use of story and narrative in online relationship development.

Stephen holds a Zenergy Diploma of Facilitation and a Bachelor of Business with First Class Honors from Auckland University of Technology (NZ) where he has a background researching computer-assisted group work. He was part of a team who researched, developed and commercialized a multi-site large interactive digital whiteboard. Stephen has also managed projects developing online and CD-ROM tutorials for systems modeling. He is a part-time lecturer at AUT teaching Human Computer Interaction on the Bachelor of Business degree.

Stephen is the Secretary of the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) and the Editor-in-Chief of the IAF's *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal*. He is a member of the Global Facilitators Service Corps (GFSC), Heart Politics, The New Zealand Computer Society and Toastmasters (District 72: Club 7686).

He has recently written a chapter entitled Facilitation Online in *The Art of Facilitation* and has co-written a chapter on Facilitator Values and Ethics in the *IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation* with Dr. Dale Hunter.

## Key Terms and Their Definitions

### Online Groups

In this chapter, the term *online groups* is used as an umbrella term to encompass the many new types of internet-enabled groups that group leaders are called upon to facilitate. Groups such as global virtual teams, virtual communities, e-groups, discussion forums, chat rooms, facilitated blogs, and audio and web conferencing teams. These new forms of groups communicate collaboratively across time, distance and borders through the use of information and communication technology.

### Narrative

While there is debate about what defines a 'narrative' and a 'story', there are generally four main features of a text (or discourse) that mark it as a 'narrative' and differing from a 'story.' (1) A sequence in time; narrative should include a clear beginning, middle and an end. (2) A focal actor or actors; narratives are always about someone or something. (3) An identifiable narrative voice; a narrative is something that someone tells from a particular perspective. (4) A moral of the story or an evaluative frame of reference; narratives carry a meaning and cultural value such as standards against which actions of the characters can be judged.

### Storytelling

The nature of storytelling means that it can be used across a range of settings to meet a wide range of intentions. When story means many things to many people, can a satisfactory definition of story or narrative be easily achieved? There are differing

arguments as to what does, and does not, constitute a story or a narrative (Pentland, 1999). Reissman (1993) looked to see what others think and found a wide range of different definitions of story. He comments that the definition used by one group of scholars is often overly broad, including just about anything, whilst it can be very restrictive amongst others. "Most scholars treat narratives as discrete units, with clear beginnings and endings, as detachable from the surrounding discourse rather than as situated events." (p. 17). Other writers (Scholes, 1981; Tilley 1995) define narrative as a story with a beginning, middle and an end. Also the terms narrative and story are often used interchangeably. Considered to be equivalent by some such as Polkinghorne (1988) and not by others including Scholes (1981) and Poirier and Ayres (1997).

### **Group Facilitation**

Group facilitation is a process in which a person who is acceptable to all members of a group, is substantively neutral, and has no decision-making authority, is chosen to intervene in a group's process to help it meet its agreed purpose. A facilitator is a process guide, someone who makes a process easier or more convenient. Facilitators 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, developing co-operative participation and evaluation. Decisions are usually made using consensus decision-making methods.

### **Groupthink**

Groupthink is a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.

### **Blog**

Blog is short for weblog. A weblog is a journal (or newsletter) that is frequently updated and intended for general public consumption. Blogs generally represent the personality of the author or the website. Blog readers view and can post comments to the blog author's postings. The activity of updating a blog is "blogging" and someone who keeps a blog is a "blogger." Blogs are

typically updated daily using software that allows people with little or no technical background to update and maintain the blog.

### **Dialogue**

Dialogue stems from the Greek roots *dia* and *logos* and means 'through meaning'. It is a communication form for discovering the shared meaning moving among and through a group of people. Dialogue involves becoming aware of the thinking, feelings and formulated conclusions that underlie a group's culture or way of being with each other. The dialogue process asks participants to "suspend" any attachments to a particular point of view or opinion so that deeper levels of listening, synthesis and meaning can evolve within a group.

### **Co-operative inquiry**

The cooperative inquiry method is a form of research where participants are viewed as co-researchers who participate in decision-making at all stages of the research project. It involves two or more people researching their own experience of something in alternating cycles of reflection and action. Cooperative inquiry rests on two main participatory principles; epistemic participation and political participation. Epistemic participation means that any propositional knowledge that is the outcome of the research is grounded by the researcher's own experiential knowledge. Political participation means that research subjects have a basic human right to participate fully in designing the research that intends to gather knowledge about them. Thus the research is done by people with each other, not by researchers on other people, or about them.

### **Plus Delta Evaluation**

A Plus Delta evaluation is a formative evaluation process that provides feedback on an experience or event and collects ideas for future improvements. It is framed in 'improvement' language rather than language that might be experienced negatively. The *plus* identifies what went well. The *delta* identifies what might be changed to improve a process or particular activity. Plus Delta evaluations can be used with individuals or groups of any size.