

SIETAR Europa Congress 2013 in Tallinn, Estonia

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Find more information and contribute to our digital storyboard:

<http://interculturalstorytelling.wordpress.com/>

REVIVING the tradition of STORYTELLING FOR GLOBAL PRACTICE

Intercultural storytelling as a source of knowledge transfer and organisational learning

The power of storytelling



We are convinced that storytelling is a powerful method, and there are several reasons to that. One important aspect is that telling stories is a natural process and each of us does it all the time. Whenever we communicate, we tell stories. We do so to make ourselves understood, but also to process our experiences, to digest them and integrate them into a meaningful whole. The reflection that is ingrained in this process might be one reason for the attractiveness of the method. Reflection is certainly something that is especially relevant

for intercultural storytelling, as we will explain later on.

Another aspect that makes storytelling a powerful tool is that it is a very egalitarian method. Everybody can do it and sometimes even people who have low self-esteem for various reasons (e.g. postcolonial trauma or perception of hierarchy) feel attracted by storytelling as a simple and natural means of communicating their views and experiences. Once you put people in the right mood and one person starts to remember special moments in his/her life, the enjoyment is almost guaranteed. Listening to each other's condensed experiences creates a special atmosphere. In this positive environment people are willing to share and reflect. As we all know from learning theory, creating such an environment is a key element of learning. Stories are much easier to remember than facts and figures. Stories speak for themselves, and each learner can get out of it whatever is relevant to them and links to their personal experiences and needs. This is one reason why it makes a lot of sense to use storytelling for educational purposes, but also in other settings like knowledge management or marketing.

Storytelling as intercultural practice

Maybe we have already managed to convince you of the power of storytelling. At this point it might also be important to define what we understand by storytelling. As we have mentioned, storytelling

can be used in different settings (knowledge management, education, marketing etc.), but we believe that there is a particularly high potential in using storytelling for intercultural practice. Here are some reasons why we are convinced of this:

Every culture has its tradition of storytelling and it can be a very useful approach to also work with the stories, myths and tales of different cultures to make people aware of the hidden values and beliefs. Stories have been used for centuries as a means of teaching values. When we want to encourage people to get a better understanding of cultural diversity and help them to live with these differences, we will always come back to discussing values and value systems. Values serve as landmarks and give orientation in our everyday behaviour. Talking about values is not an easy thing. Stories can help us to give life to these abstract concepts that – often subconsciously – guide us.

However, when we talk about storytelling as a method or tool, we don't mean working with given stories. The stories we work with are based on real-life events, situations that someone really went through and can talk about. We want to encourage people to find these stories and make use of them. As everyone knows, there are thousands of stories people tell about their experiences with working in an international team, about moving to a new country or about living in a culture that is not their own. Lots of stories are written down in blogs, which can be seen as a confirming argument for the human need to process experiences in one way or another. We are convinced that these stories are a treasure chest for intercultural learning and we feel that uncovering them is worthwhile.

Let's go back to the common experience of storytelling and how we can build on it when working with intercultural groups or teams. In intercultural trainings it is inevitable to explain what culture is and how we define it. When talking about culture, there is a general tendency to stress differences and the uniqueness of each culture. We need to talk about the differences, but this is much easier in an atmosphere that allows similarities to be appreciated. Creating a feeling of familiarity facilitates the flourishing of openness towards working with the differences.

People who share their stories will feel the uniting effect that stories have. When the participants have listened to someone's story, they share this experience and connect to the storyteller. The effect might not be as strong as if they had gone through this experience together, but still, a story is the revival of a situation experienced in a different context. However, not only the storyteller will revisit his or her experience – also the listeners will be stimulated to return to their own experiences.



Storytellers and listeners will always find similarities and connections – and this makes them feel enthralled. Storytelling activates our emotional memory. Just take a story about the first party at school as an example. Someone might talk about the songs that were played or the hormones in the air. It is not only the storyteller getting emotional when talking about this experience, but also the listener – as there is always a linkage between the two stories. These common experiences can be found in every story and are a great means of building trust in intercultural groups.

A further aspect which makes storytelling so suitable for intercultural trainings is that stories are open-ended. We all know about the challenge of handling the request for directions on how to deal with particular intercultural situations and the complexity the situations bear. Working with stories

allows us to convey messages without giving instructions that could be proofed wrong. The latter might happen due to the difficulty to predict how a situation will finally evolve – as this always depends on cultural as well as personal factors.

Why is the process of storytelling so appealing?

In order to answer this question, we have to look at both sides for further explanation: on one hand the person who tells a story and on the other hand the person who is listening.

If we start with the listener, we realize that this person is not only listening to the story he/she is being told, but develops pictures of the story's scenes in his/her mind. These pictures can never be the same as the ones of the storyteller, but the listener is taking on an active part in co-creating the story. By doing so, he or she finds connections to their own life and history and automatically reflects how they would have resolved the situation or reacted to it. This is why in storytelling the listener learns as much as the storyteller.



The storyteller fulfils a more active role. He or she accesses their personal database of experiences and makes a choice by deciding what he/she wants to talk about. The story is of course never a mirror image of reality, as the storyteller decides – consciously or subconsciously – what to tell and what to leave out. This choice gives him/her a feeling of power, of being in charge of reality. This may sound negative, but in fact is not, as this is a process taking place all the time.

This feeling of being in charge and being able to face reality is also an extremely important aspect of intercultural practice. The situations experienced in different cultural settings can be very confusing and people often have the feeling of being lost – not only lost in translation, but also lost in reality. By telling a story again people have the chance to sort it out, to put it into an order that works for them. Moreover, if someone has a person listening to them while telling the story, it makes them feel good, in power, in control. In simple terms, it is this psychological process that allows storytelling to work.

We could go on to talk about the underlying theory of storytelling – from learning theory to neuroscience. We could also talk about other fields in which storytelling is used, like in qualitative research or organizational learning. However, there would be a lot more to say, but at this point there is only one method we would like to point out, as it can be seen as a foundation of storytelling – at least in the way we use it.

This method called Appreciative Inquiry (AI) might have been heard of or used in someone's own training or coaching practice. What is the core idea? Appreciative Inquiry is an approach that suggests looking at reality with an appreciative eye, focusing on the things that work rather than on those which don't. But why is it mentioned at this point and what is the link to storytelling? We are mentioning it in this context because from our point of view the appreciative perspective is often missing in intercultural practice. There is a strong tendency to focus on the challenges, problems and conflicts that might arise from cultural differences. If we want to contribute to the sustainable development of diversity in our global practice, we should learn very quickly how to focus on the positive, appreciate the moments when diversity becomes alive. If we really want to live this

approach, we need to know what these situations feel like. We need to have a clear picture of it – only then will we profit more from these positive appreciative moments. This is now only a very general statement on Appreciative Inquiry, whereas this method can be experienced more lively in our practical sessions.

The link between the Appreciative Inquiry and storytelling is that in an AI process we also use the power of narratives. The standard AI process comprises four stages, namely discovery, dream, design and destiny. In general, storytelling is mainly used in the first two phases. In the first phase people are asked to talk about things that work, about moments in which they feel good, when they feel the flow. How often have we asked our trainees when they really felt the enjoyment of cultural diversity? If we talk about culture shock, we will harvest culture shock. If we talk about critical incidents, we will harvest critical incidents. We have the opportunity to choose what we focus on. This is one of the core ideas of AI. We are convinced that it is time to concentrate on the positive aspects of cultural diversity, to make it easier to digest instead of adding complexity to intercultural encounters, to learn to let realities exist next to each other, resisting the trigger to judge and put things into the order of our value system.

We think that experiencing is stronger than listening and therefore we'd like to invite you to a mini-process of storytelling. We would like to stick with the topic of enjoying cultural diversity, as we believe that this issue is something that connects and drives us all. We invite you to check out our website and find some inspiring stories. Then start exploring your own stories.

What makes a good story?

Every story needs an engaging storyline. Before you start, take a minute to revisit your database of experiences and let it come alive again. Dive into it one more time and reactivate your senses – which images of the situation appear, who was there, at what time of the day did it take place etc.



When you start telling your story, be aware that leaving room for imagination is something good. It is great to stimulate your listener's inner pictures, but never give away all of it. Start describing something, but then also resist going into detail. A good story doesn't have to be long and precise. The key element is to pull your listener into your world.

In every story there should be something like a challenge to be solved. We want to explore the boundaries and see the effort that it took. Let there be some tension, some friction, otherwise we cannot feel the relief of the solution.

Our project in progress

Our workshops have a very concrete outcome that we want to achieve. While engaging in the interesting process of storytelling, the participants have the chance to feel what we call the power of storytelling. As we believe in the potential this method bears for intercultural or global practice, we want our workshops to go on – virtually.

That is why we have developed a digital storyboard for everyone's use:

<http://interculturalstorytelling.wordpress.com/>

What is behind this idea?

This storyboard serves as a platform to share intercultural stories and experiences. With this initiative, our objective is to show that cultural diversity is more than an abstract concept.

It is time to talk more about all the positive things that happen between people from different cultures, about the intercultural relationships that work well and the teams that collaborate effectively. Have you already started sharing stories about situations in which you enjoyed cultural diversity?

If we continue talking about the challenges and conflicts, we will continue producing challenges and conflicts. How often have you been surprised by a person from another culture? How often have things turned out differently than you expected? Cultural stereotypes are like the bars of a prison window. They disguise our open view upon reality. But do you want to remain a prisoner?

We have the opportunity to choose which perspective we take upon the intercultural reality of our world.

How does our storyboard work?

On our intercultural storyboard we are collecting stories about cultural diversity and making them more accessible. We encourage all diversity enthusiasts to become part of our community.

READ: Our intercultural storyboard is dynamic. You want to read and get inspired by new stories.

WRITE: We focus on different topics around cultural diversity. Every few months we announce a new topic and encourage people to contribute their stories related hereto. You want to become part of the storyteller community and contribute your stories on a regular basis?

USE: Stories are there to be spread. You are welcome to reuse the stories you find on our digital storyboard. If you are an intercultural trainer, coach or researcher and come across helpful material here, feel free to use it. On our platform you will find authentic real-life stories that are worth being shared.

GIVE & TAKE: If you use a story, contribute one. This way our intercultural storyboard can grow.

Stories can be in written form, recorded as an audio file or videotaped.

Send us your story to [interculturalstorytelling\(at\)gmail.com](mailto:interculturalstorytelling@gmail.com) and we will publish it as soon as possible.

Learn more:

Cooperrider D.; Whitney D.: A Positive Revolution in Change: Appreciative Inquiry.
<http://wgbis.ces.iisc.ernet.in/biodiversity/sdev/appreciativeinquiry.pdf>

Denning, Stephen (2011): Storytelling. Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.

Denning, Stephen (2011): The Leader's Guide to Storytelling. Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative. Revised and updated edition. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Elliott, Charles: Locating the Energy for Change: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry, <http://wgbis.ces.iisc.ernet.in/biodiversity/sdev/appreciativeinquiry.pdf>

Recommended videos:

Appreciative Inquiry: A conversation with David Cooperrider
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JDfr6KGV-k>

Diana Whitney on OD and Appreciative Inquiry: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kYLC1Va_aE

Appreciative Inquiry – a beginning: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVBMMJORMao>

Books in German:

Frenzel, Karolina; Müller, Michael; Sottong, Hermann J. (2006): Storytelling. Das Harun-al-Raschid-Prinzip. München: Dt. Taschenbuch-Verl (dtv, 34325).

Frenzel, Karolina; Müller, Michael; Sottong, Hermann J. (2006): Storytelling. Das Praxisbuch. München: Hanser.

Thier, Karin (2010): Storytelling. Eine Methode für das Change-, Marken-, Qualitäts- und Wissensmanagement. 2. Aufl. Berlin u.a: Springer.

About us:



Margret Steixner is an intercultural trainer/coach and co-director of NDurance Austria. She has lived in different African countries and earned her PhD researching the development of intercultural competence. As an educationalist and researcher she is eager to refine existing methods and tools.

Manuel Heidegger is an e-learning professional, intercultural trainer and director of business development at Argonaut Training Facilities Ltd. He specializes in virtual and intercultural team-building and runs regular workshops on the Argonautonline.com e-learning platform.