

‘A STORY UNFOLDS’

Interactive theatre-based problem-solving

What is this?

‘A Story Unfolds’ is an interactive way to explore with groups (including very large ones) issues both social and/or personal, and to identify possible solutions to problems. It involves the telling of a story by a presenter or facilitator, which often has twists and turns and which presents moral dilemmas as they emerge. Key moments of the story are acted out by a group of ‘actors’. As the story develops there are comments from a panel (chosen beforehand) and from the group or audience as to how the topic or problem might be approached. At times both audience and panel are able to ask questions of the ‘actors’. Also at times, audience members have a chance to join the actors on stage to explore, through spontaneous theatre, the ideas and situations which are being raised. Throughout the event, the facilitator responds to what is being raised and asks further questions of all involved. Such an event needs a little planning to make sure that the story is both relevant and interesting.

‘A Story Unfolds’ has been inspired by many sources including ‘Hypotheticals’ as developed by Australian lawyer Geoffrey Robertson, combined with theatre strategies from Brazilian theatre guru and activist Augusto Boal and blended with a bit of original playfulness from myself. It tends to be very interactive, energetic and when successful, very stimulating.

The story needs to be interesting and the ‘actors’ able to act a little, but they do not need to be professional and can usually be drawn from the group. The actual rehearsal time may be as little as 1½ hours, or in some cases just 20 minutes.

I have used this approach to look at such issues as culture and racism, family conflict, violence in families, young people and debt, the impact of unemployment in rural areas, violence against women, problems facing teachers, students and parents in schools, use of alcohol and other drugs, mentoring and intergenerational relationships, and violence against women.

The intention

- To help participants engage with the topic
- To present key issues in relation to the topic
- To encourage creative thinking around the topic
- To point to possible pathways/ideas/strategies/solutions to explore further
- To ‘encourage’ or ‘motivate’ thought and action. That is, for the whole event to be interesting, energising and provocative enough (and perhaps fun) so that people will feel inclined to continue to engage and be active around the issue/topic.

Major ingredients of 'A Story Unfolds'

- **A presenter, host or facilitator** who facilitates the overall process, and who introduces key aspects of the topic through the telling of a story, which may well have some twists and turns. This person needs to be someone who can tell a good story, who can engage with and get an audience involved, who can

ask provocative and interesting questions and who can facilitate this process with creativity and spontaneity

- **A group of 'actors'** who act out key moments of the story. These moments are prepared beforehand. See 'Story outline' below
- **A panel**, who play themselves, and who perhaps have some expertise in relation to the topic and who comment as the story unfolds. 'A Story Unfolds' can be run without a panel, but a panel does add an interesting element
- **An audience** which has the opportunity to comment on what the panel is saying, to add their own comments, at times to ask questions of the actors (as the characters in the story) and to come on stage and contribute as the story unfolds
- **A story outline** which ideally needs to be prepared beforehand.

What each part needs and the preparation

General preparation

- Usually it is the person who is the facilitator who also writes the story outline, so they are familiar with what they are facilitating
- Each 'Story Unfolds' is taking place with some theme in mind. If you are the originator, then be clear what the main aspects of the topic are that can be addressed. If someone is asking you to do it, then make sure you are clear what the topic is and what aspects they would like raised for the audience
- Alternatively the facilitator can prepare a story outline based on the key issues of whatever topic the event seeks to explore. Clearly this needs to be done in consultation with those hosting the event and/or other informed sources
- Apart from the story the actual whole presentation, which means briefing the panel (this is very quick) can be put together in about 1½ hours. However allowing more time really helps. Two hours is good. The preparation is mainly for the rehearsal of the play by the actors.

The actual story

- Make sure it is real and believable yet interesting
- It does require tension, dilemmas and problems to be solved so that the audience can offer ideas about how to sort them out
- It is intriguing to have a few twists to it. But not tricks! People resent being deceived
- It can be fun to have several different finishes to present, suggesting: depending on what we do, things can have lots of possible outcomes; a disaster, a triumph, a 'where to from here?'

The structure of the theatre piece

- Divide it into appropriate 'bits' or scenes each with a start and a finish
- Keep them fairly short and snappy
- Make sure there is dramatic interest in each scene

- Usually finish each with a degree of uncertainty; what will happen from here?
- Usually three to four scenes is enough
- Make sure each scene has a clear opening and a powerful finish line or moment. This helps inexperienced actors keep the scene brief and bring the improvised scene to a close
- Do rehearse it. Even if people say they know what they are doing, it really helps to iron out possible difficulties, be clear about how scenes start and particularly how they finish, and to develop skills and confidence in the actors.

The actors

- You do not need to be professional
- But you do need to be able to act a little
- And they do need to be able to take quick direction from the facilitator. If the actual rehearsal is happening a few hours before the event itself, there is limited time for discussion
- It can help to make sure there is at least one solid and capable actor who is central to the story. Professional is not necessary, but someone you can rely on for dramatic delivery, and around who you can build the story
- Rather than learning lines, it helps for the actors to be clear about the characters they are playing so they can be clear and consistent in their performance
- These are often not professional actors and may well speak softly and/or turn their backs to the audience. Reminding them to 'speak up' and 'face the audience' can help
- If a scene starts to founder 'side-coach' by telling the characters what they can do
- Actors can use their real names as this helps each person remember who is who. However it is useful to remind the audience that these people are not themselves in this event, they are playing characters
- If you use microphones, make sure that:
 - The actors know how to use them. Practise this too
 - There are enough for all actors. Passing them back and forth can really slow down a show. Or...
 - Pass them on as one actor comes off and the other enters
 - Use overhead mics.

The panel

- People are always themselves. They are not acting
- They usually appreciate and require a brief comment as to what is expected of them. It is important that they know they will not be set up or embarrassed. While the story may have a few surprises this is not to trick anyone but to promote creativity and spontaneity. So it is important that panel members feel welcome and valued
- Encourage the panel members to be genuine and honest. They are not trying to get laughs or act a character. They are themselves
- There is no rehearsal needed
- It is good to have a relevant cross-section of people; age, sex, sexuality, culture, and if it is relevant, appropriate expertise
- On some occasions, you can fill the panel with volunteers from the audience even as you are introducing the event itself. You might ask for a cross section of panelists...people of different ages, different sexes, sexualities, cultures, parents, would-

be parents, never-want-to-be parents...And each person simply brings their own individual, personal perspective, when they respond.

The facilitator/presenter

- Needs some personality
- Needs to be able to involve an audience

- Needs to be 'good on their feet', able to work spontaneously and improvise when necessary.

The process of 'A Story Unfolds'

It works something like this. Imagine you are the facilitator. You introduce the topic if the audience doesn't know what it is. You introduce 'A Story Unfolds' as a piece of interactive theatre; a way of exploring the topic in question. Let the audience know that they will see a number of scenes acted out as a way of exploring that topic. Let them know that they will have a chance to comment on what they see and will have opportunities to even get up on stage. Introduce the panel and let the audience know their purpose, which is to offer comment from their perspective as a parent, teacher, young person, politician...etc...

You give a brief outline of the story and then introduce the first scene and the actors present it. From here, it's up to you. You might go to the audience first and ask something like: If you were to witness this scene, would you be worried. Yes? No? A lot? A little? And invite some comments: What would you be worried about? Not worried? What other responses have people had? And you might go the panel as a group and ask the same questions. Or you might ask them to comment from the perspective of parent, teacher, police officer, family friend...and move to the second scene.

You introduce the second scene, and the actors act it out...From here you might add some additional theatre devices, such as freezing a scene and doing 'thought bubbles.' Ask an audience member, or the whole audience, to say what they think is on that character's mind, or how they are feeling....Or you freeze a scene and ask several audience members to stand behind the characters and strike a pose to show what they think that character is thinking or feeling...then ask the characters to turn and say what they think they are seeing in that pose.

Continue in this way moving the pace along or slowing it down depending on the feel of the audience.

Bring it to a close does not mean 'sorting out a problem' per se, but it does mean finding some reasonably satisfying closing. It might be a question to the audience and/or panel members: for a bright future, what does each character need to do? To avoid tragedy what do they need to do? To move towards triumph? And: if this was your friend, family members, student...what could you offer them?

A sense of optimism and hope are good ingredients to introduce towards the close.

'Warming up' the audience to the idea of being actively involved'

People will not always automatically leap out of their seats to become physically involved or even to make a comment. So the facilitator needs to warm up the audience to the idea that this is, possibly unexpected, an interactive theatre event. Ways of doing this are endless, and can be quite simple:

- Ask the audience how they are, and hear some responses
- Ask: 'What sort of a day have you had?' And hearing some answers.
- Ask for a show of hands: 'Who knew this was an interactive event?'

Techniques that can be used throughout

- The facilitator invites the audience and panel to comment...
- The facilitator asks for a response from the audience by a show of hands, by asking questions like these:
 - 'How many people think this is a good idea? A bad idea? Need to know more?'
 - 'Who would ring the police in this situation? Who would definitely not? Who has some other thoughts?'
- Audience and panel may comment on each other's comments
- There are variations on the Boal strategy of The 'Rainbow of desire.' You can freeze the action on stage at an important moment in the story and ask audience members to stand behind the characters to show us by their own body freeze what they think the character is thinking or feeling
- You can use the ever-useful Thought 'bubbles'; asking an audience member to say what they think each of the characters is thinking at key moments in the story
- You can invite the audience to interview the characters in the play, who stay in character while answering
- The panel may also ask questions of the characters, but it makes for interest to limit the panel to 1 (maximum 2 questions) which you ask them to consult about while the audience is asking questions. The panel then has to decide which are the best questions to ask and who to ask them of
- Audience members can say what they could personally and/or professionally offer in such a situation.

Debriefing

- This can be as simple as reminding each actor that they are themselves again
- Of course if something distressing happens during the performance, then some conversation is necessary
- It is nice to thank and congratulate everyone. These events can be a real buzz and it is good to acknowledge the effort

'A Story Unfolds' can be a lot of fun, very interactive and a great way to explore some really serious topics. There is video footage of one such event on my website.

Best wishes

Peter Slattery August 2015