

Bubble up stories

An exercise addendum to *Working with Stories in Your Community or Organization: Participatory Narrative Inquiry* by Cynthia F. Kurtz. Last updated December 2016.

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Note: This is not a finished exercise; it's more of a prototype, in need of additional testing and refinement. Please send comments, suggestions, and questions to cfkurtz at cfkurtz dot com.

Purpose

In this exercise, people share stories about a topic in a series of small-group conversations that help the most meaningful and resonant **stories bubble up** to the surface.

The exercise is particularly useful at a **conference or meeting**. It works as an ice-breaker to get people talking; it helps people think together about an issue they care about; and it helps a meeting's organizers find out what people are thinking about.

Requirements

At least **one hour**. At least **18 people**. Paper and pens. A room big enough for small groups to speak without overhearing each other, ideally with tables they can sit around.

Before the exercise

This exercise assumes that people will start off in small groups (as at a meeting or conference) of 6-8 people, probably sitting at **tables** (like people usually do at conferences).

1. Prepare table number sheets

Find out how many tables you will have in the room. Write or print **large numbers** (1, 2, 3, ... n) on a series of sheets of paper. This is to identify the tables. *You need at least three tables, with six people at each, to do this exercise.*

2. Prepare story forms

On the reverse side of each number sheet, write or print a **story form** that will help people record their story and reflect on its meaning. A simple story form might look like this:

Please **summarize** or describe the story here.

What **name** would you give this story?

How do you **feel** about this story? (*Choose up to three.*)

happy sad relieved frustrated proud disappointed not sure

How long do you think you will **remember** it? (*Mark a point on the line.*)

A little while ----- As long as I live

What did the people in it **need**? (*Choose up to three.*)

help information resources
 to understand to be understood
 trust respect cooperation not sure

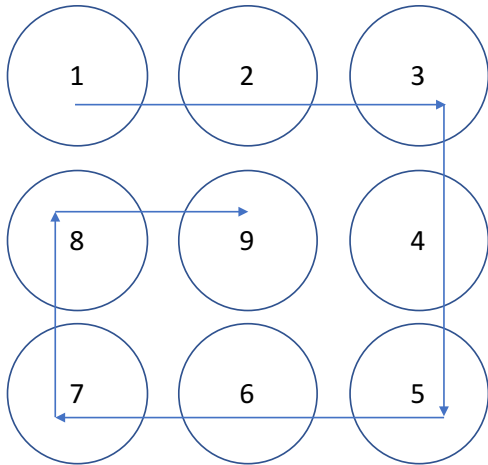
Did they **get** what they needed? (*Mark a point on the line.*)

They got everything they needed ----- They got nothing

Who **needs to hear** this story the most? (*Write in your answer.*)

See *Working with Stories* for more questions you can ask.

Place a numbered story-form sheet on each table. Arrange the sheets in a **spiral**, so that no two tables with adjacent numbers are far away from each other.



If you think people will get distracted by paying too much attention to your story form before they are supposed to, fold the sheets in half and tape them shut.

3. Prepare story-eliciting questions

Choose a **topic** you would like to ask people to share stories about. Write one or a few **story-eliciting questions** that will help people get started sharing stories about that topic. For example:

- What was the biggest **challenge** you faced in the last year? What happened at that time?
- When you think about **trust** (or the lack of it), what one moment in the past year springs to mind? Talk about what happened in that moment.
- Have you ever felt so **excited** that you couldn't wait to get to work on something? Or have you ever **dragged** yourself in to work? What happened that made you feel that way?

Multiple questions are best when groups are diverse, enthusiastic, and/or used to handling complex instructions. Single questions are best when groups are uniform, uninterested, and/or unused to handling complex instructions.

Prepare to show your story-eliciting question(s) to participants (at the appropriate time in the exercise) by using one of these methods:

- **reading** the question(s) out loud
- **showing** the question(s) to everyone by writing it/them on a screen or white board
- **placing** question sheets on each table (two sheets per table) before the exercise (then calling attention to them at the appropriate time)

4. Check table group sizes

Just before you start the exercise, make sure people are in table groups of **at least six people** each. If you have groups of four or five, ask people to join up to create groups of six.

5 minutes – Mix up tables and form small groups

To start the exercise, ask the people at each table to make an **alphabetical list** of their first names. Then ask them to **split the list** roughly in half. Each person in the *second* half of the list should **stand up and move** to the table with a table number one higher – so Aaron at table 2 will stay put, but Zora will move to table 3. (People from the highest table number should move to table number 1.)

Once people are at their new, mixed tables, ask them to **split in half again**. But this time don't use names: **use locations**. Use a **visual landmark**, like a podium or window or set of doors, to help people quickly split into two groups. People won't need to move, but they may want to **turn their chairs** to face each other.

It is important not to let the reluctant dawdle in this first step of the exercise. You'll need the time later on, so **keep people moving**. And don't even *attempt* the exercise if you think people will refuse to get up and move in the first place.

20 minutes – Share stories

Now the three or four people in each half-of-a-table small group should **share stories** around a topic you chose for them before the exercise. Now is the time to tell or show them your story-eliciting question(s): out loud, on a screen or white board, or on paper. Each person should get a chance to tell at least one story.

As they share stories, each small group's task is to **choose one story to retell**. They should choose the story everyone in the room **most needs to hear**.

Make sure you give people five-minute and two-minute **warnings** before this step is finished, because some groups will have trouble finishing the task in the time given and will be reluctant to move on.

15 minutes – Retell chosen stories to original group

Now ask everyone who moved to another table to quickly **get up and go back** to their original table. Once they are there, each person should **retell the story they chose** in their small group to the rest of the people at their table. Ask people to make sure each chosen story gets retold.

While the stories are being retold, the group must again **choose a story** to retell. Again, they should choose the story everyone in the room **most needs to hear**.

During this step people might be confused because they aren't sure they should retell someone else's story. That is *exactly* what you want them to do. You want them to repeat the story their small group chose, whether they themselves originally told it or not. If they didn't tell the story originally, they should retell it as best they can, based on what they heard.

10 minutes – Discuss and interpret chosen story

Now ask each table group to turn over their number sheet to **find the story form** you put on the other side. Working together, each group should **summarize** the story they chose and **reflect** on it by answering your questions about it.

10+ minutes – Retell chosen stories to whole room

Now we arrive at the last part of the exercise. Ask people from some number of table groups (depending on how much time you have) to retell their chosen story **to the whole room**. Use a microphone if you have a big room.

The stories told to the whole room will have “bubbled up” from all of the stories told during the exercise. By doing this exercise:

- You will have collected some stories (one per table) that have **deep meaning** to your participants (because they were chosen twice). If you want to know what those people are thinking about or where their concerns lie, you’ve tapped into it.
- You will have demonstrated to your participants the **value of story sharing**, because they will have seen how the most meaningful stories have bubbled up.
- You will have helped people **connect** with each other by retelling each other’s stories.
- You will have helped people **think together** about a topic important to them. They will finish the exercise with new insights they can use.

After the exercise is over

Collect the story forms people filled out. If you made any recordings, transcribe them. The stories, and the answers to questions about them, will be useful to you in your goals.

It’s a good idea to **share the stories you collected** with everyone who was in the room. Type them into an email; put them on a web site or newsletter or podcast; pass them on by word of mouth; but *give the stories back* to the people who told them. Your participants will be able to retell the stories yet again as they go back to their routines after the meeting or conference is over.

Tips on facilitating the exercise

These are a few things I’ve learned from facilitating this exercise.

It’s only as complicated as you say it is

Whether people perceive this exercise as simple or complicated depends on how you present it. If you say, “Pay attention, because I’ll be giving you a lot of complicated instructions,” people will consider your instructions to be complicated. If you say, “This is a simple exercise that flows naturally in conversation,” people will see it that way. Explain that sharing stories and thinking together about stories is a natural part of conversation – because it is – and people will take to the exercise easily.

Keep it light

Because this exercise throws people into story exchange with strangers in a rush, I would not ask people to share very personal or sensitive stories using it. You *can* include story-eliciting questions that give people permission to open up, but give them safer options as well. More deeply probing questions should wait until people have developed some trust in each other and in the process of sharing stories.

Help people share tasks

When you ask people to fill out the story form together, what usually happens is that one person acts as an interviewer (asking the questions) and one acts as a scribe (writing down the answers). Sometimes one person takes on both tasks. You don't usually have to *tell* people to do this, but if you feel like they might balk at the task or wander off into talking about the weather, you can ask people to *choose* an interviewer and a scribe before they fill out the form.

If you want to record stories

You will probably want to record the final retellings, when stories are told to the whole room. The space on the story form for summarizing the story is more to help people reflect than for you to have a record of each story (people don't usually write down the *whole* story). Even if *you* don't need the stories people will tell, you might find that people want them to be recorded so they can hear them again.

If you want to record more stories than one per table, you can place small audio recorders at each table and ask people to record their retellings of the stories they chose in their small groups. You can even ask them to fill out story forms for those stories as well (if you allocate more time for it).

Expect emotions

The very last step of this exercise, when people retell their chosen stories to the whole room, tends to be quite emotional. You'd be amazed by how strongly connected people can feel to a story once they have chosen it twice and reflected together on it – especially because you've *asked* them to choose a story everyone in the room should hear. Don't be surprised to find people disappointed that *all* of the selected stories can't be told in the time you have. When that happens, make sure you tell people that you will make the selected stories available to them later on (and then do that).