

Ground truthing with 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 method; 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 to improve some kind of document. It might be an informational or teaching resource; it might be a mission or values statement; it might be a historical account. The juxtaposition of personal experiences grounds the document in reality.

Requirements

One to two hours. At least three people. A document or documents to be considered. Paper, pens, and a table. A room big enough for small groups to speak without overhearing each other.

Before the exercise

Break up the document(s) you want to ground-truth into short portions of text, or **entries**, based on logical divisions. For example, if you want to ground-truth your organization's values statement, place the description of each value in a separate entry. Try to keep entries short enough to read in a few minutes.

Print each entry on a separate piece of paper, fold it in half, and write a name or brief summary of the entry *on the outside* of the paper. Tape or staple each entry sheet shut (so people won't look inside until it's time). Scatter the folded entry sheets on a table so people can see the names of all the entries. (If you don't have very many entries, print them twice.)

5 minutes – Introduce the exercise and form groups

Quickly describe the exercise and ask people to form groups of 3-4 people each (*not* pairs). If everyone knows everyone, mix people up.

5 minutes – choose entries

Each person should now go to the table where the entry sheets are found and choose one sheet to take back to their group. People should *not* open the entry sheets.

30 minutes – story sharing

Each person in a group, one at a time: Recall a time when the words on the paper you chose were important to you. It might be a time when something happened to you, or it might be a time when you heard about something from someone else. Tell the other two people in your group what happened at that time.

While the story is being told, the other two people in the group should listen for:

- **Beliefs** – things the storyteller holds to be true – or false
- **Values** – things that matter to the storyteller – or don't

Generally it works best when one person choose beliefs and one chooses values before the story starts. It can be helpful to jot down notes on spare paper. When the story has been told, those listening should report back on the beliefs and values they heard. Do not offer interpretations or judgments. Just report back on what the storyteller seemed to believe or value as they spoke.

(If your goals in looking over your documents are different, you can change what you ask people to notice in stories. You might want, for example, to ask people to notice emotions, or virtues, or strengths, or weaknesses. The important thing is to give people things to look for that will be relevant to the comparison they want to make.)

When you are finished going through the beliefs and values in the story, open the entry sheet you chose. Read it together, out loud or silently. Now talk about connections and gaps between what is written and the story you told. Do any parts of the entry connect to the values and beliefs you found in your story? What did you talk about that is *not* represented there? Annotate the entry sheet to reflect what you talked about.

(Optional) 30 minutes – Second round of story sharing

If you have enough time, you can go through this process again. People can stay in the same groups or reshuffle themselves into new groups. They can work from entry sheets others in their small group have already chosen – to get multiple views on the same entries – or they can choose new entry sheets. In any case, people should follow the same exercise plan as before: remember a related experience, tell about it, observe beliefs and values in it, report back, discuss, and annotate.

10-30 minutes – Reporting to the whole room

Each small group choose one story-entry pairing and tell the whole room about it. Briefly explain what happened in the story, the beliefs and values the listeners heard in it, and what connections and gaps the group found in the entry.

10-20 minutes – general discussion

End the session with a general discussion of the document(s) being considered, what you learned by comparing your experiences with it, and how it can be improved to take those experiences into account.