

Sticker stories

An exercise addendum to *Working with Stories in Your Community or Organization: Participatory Narrative Inquiry* by Cynthia F. Kurtz. Last updated January 2017.

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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](mailto:cfkurtz@cfkurtz.com).

Purpose

In this exercise, people work with previously collected stories, printed on repositionable label stickers, to quickly assemble a **landscape of meaning**, which they then talk about.

The exercise is particularly useful when you have collected a body of stories and want to help people make sense of them, but you have very little time to work with. It is also useful when you want to show people very quickly what it's like to work with stories (and thus why it's useful to collect them).

Requirements

At least **40 minutes**. At least **6 people**. **48 stories printed on sticky notes**, one set per group of six people (see appendix for format). Large sheets of **paper**. Large colored **markers**. Walls or tables (or clean floor) to put papers on.

Before the exercise

1. Gather stories

Collect 48 stories. These can be from interviews, from group sessions, from the internet, or from published sources such as books or newspapers. Wherever you get your stories from, make sure that they are:

1. Accounts of personal experience
2. Collected from real people in real conversation
3. On a topic your participants will care about

For example, if you draw your stories from newspaper articles, use quotes from interviews, not summaries written in the passive voice. There should be some nuggets of real grounded experience in the stories you use, or the exercise won't work. Check for personal pronouns like "I" and "he" and "she" and "we." If you don't find many of them in what you have gathered, you need more personal stories.

Use the sheets in the appendix to these instructions to prepare your stories to be printed on large labels. Edit your stories for length so they fit into the spaces provided. Use the largest font

size you can without reducing your story texts too much. Remember to keep the original unedited stories available so people can read them in their entirety if they want to, and keep links to the story sources if they are from published sources.

Make sure each story has a brief but meaningful name, so people can use story names to talk about stories.

2. Choose dimensions

After your 48 stories are ready, come up with two dimensions that:

1. Are relevant to (and can be easily related to) the stories you collected (which you should know well)
2. Matter to your participants
3. Might provide insights when considered together

Represent these dimensions as simple questions people can answer by placing stories in space. Some example dimensions might be:

- How much trust did you see in this story?
- How much conflict?
- How differently did people see things?
- How much mastery did people show in handling the situation?
- How much control did people have over what happened?
- To what extent did people reach out to each other across a divide?
- How much of an impact did compassion play in this story?

And so on. Use questions that start with “how much” or “to what extent,” not questions that start with “why” or “how.” Come up with questions to which every answer will be “this much” or “that much.” Brainstorm lots of dimension-creating questions, maybe a dozen or so, then choose the two questions you think will help people think together best.

Make sure your dimensions are *orthogonal*, that is, not related to each other. If your topic is trust at work, for example, don’t choose dimensions like “how much trust” and “degree of cooperation,” because those things will obviously be linked. Choose dimensions that will surprise people. Choose dimensions that will surprise *you*. If you can guess beforehand what shapes will appear in the space you’ve defined with the dimensions you’ve chosen and the stories you’ve gathered, you need better dimensions. If your answer to “what will you see in this space” is “I’d need to place the stories to find out” – and “I can’t wait to do that” – you’ve found good dimensions.

Edit the instructions on your label sheets to match the dimension questions you have selected.

3. Print materials

Finally, print your story sheets. Print one set of 48 stories, plus instructions, per group of six people.

You can print your story pages onto sticky note sheets – specifically:

Avery Multipurpose Labels, Removable, 2 x 4 Inches, Pack of 120 (6481)

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B008OTCWWI>

The template at the end of these instructions is sized for this product.

But you don't have to use sticky labels. You can print your stories onto plain paper and cut them apart, then give people double-sided removable "sticky note" tape to place stories. Or you can give people regular tape, or rubber cement, or poster putty. There are lots of ways to make stories quickly stickable.

If you don't want to make your stories sticky, you can make them thick instead, by printing them on card stock and having people place them on a table. This will *probably* keep the whole landscape from taking flight if someone sneezes. Probably.

4. Prepare the space

For each group, place a large sheet of paper (probably 2x3 feet, like a standard sheet of "butcher paper" or easel paper) stuck to a wall or on a table or clean floor surface. Make sure people can stand right up next to (or leaning over) the paper, because they'll need to read stories on it from up close.

On each large sheet of paper, draw two axes (with arrows) and the dimension labels you chose before. Make sure the graph on the giant papers looks the same as the one on the sheets you hand out to people.

Also place two or three large markers of different colors at each station.

15 minutes – Read and place stories

If people are not in groups of six already, ask them to form groups of six.

To start the exercise, give each person one printed page with **8 stories** on it. Or, if you've cut the stories apart, give people 8 random stories. It doesn't matter if the stories on pages stay together. It also doesn't matter if some people read more stories than others. It only matters that each group receive, and read, one *complete* set of 48 stories.

Working alone, without talking, each person should:

1. **Choose** 4-6 stories from the 8 they were given (leaving at least 2 stories behind). Ask people to choose the stories they think are most likely to help everyone in the room think about the chosen topic.
2. **Place** each chosen story on the space where it seems to belong. People should not analyze or categorize stories. They should simply react to what they have read, placing each story intuitively where it seems to belong.

Some people read a lot faster or slower than others. If you see that some people are done placing stories while others have only placed one or two, you can encourage

people to help each other complete the task in the time given. If a whole group is done placing stories early, you can quietly tell them what's next, so they can get started early.

15 minutes – Discover features

After all of the chosen stories (that is, 36 stories per group) have been placed on the space, ask each group to work together to **annotate** the landscape they have just filled with stories.

Ask groups to **circle** and **label**:

Gaps (why no stories there?) and

Clusters (what is the common theme?)

They should write directly on the paper to add these annotations. Each group's goal during this part of the exercise should be to **discover patterns** in the stories that **surprise** them and help them **make sense** of the topic. They should add **at least three annotations** to their landscape. (See below for a tip on making this part of the exercise work well.)

5+ minutes – Sum up and/or compare patterns

If you are doing this exercise with only one group, ask people to use the last five minutes to talk about the **overall experience** they have just had. People should talk about:

1. what they have **learned**
2. what **surprised** them
3. what **questions** have arisen
4. which **stories** they will particularly remember
5. what they are **curious** to explore next

They can summarize these things by adding more annotations to their sheet of paper. Or they can just talk about them.

5+ minutes (optional) – Compare landscapes

If you have more than one group doing this exercise, use the last five minutes to open up the discussion to the whole room. You can ask each group to do a quick report on what they discovered in their landscape, or you can ask people to walk around the room and look at the annotations written by other groups. Because every group worked with the *same* stories, people might find it interesting to compare the patterns and annotations the different groups produced.

5+ minutes (optional) – General discussion

If you have time, you can now lead the whole room in a discussion of the topic, referring back to what people found out in the exercise, but expanding the discussion.

After the exercise

If you can, **take photographs** of the landscapes people created and make them available to the people who made them. If you want to, you copy the stories and annotations into digital representations (such as slides) that people can share, discuss, and even build on afterward.

Tips on facilitating the exercise

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

Use tasks and rules to keep people engaged

The first part of the exercise tends to go quickly, because people have been given a simple task and a short time to do it in. It is in the second step, when people are discovering patterns in the stories they have placed, that groups sometimes fall apart. What I've seen in that people seem to split into two groups based on how they perceive what they've just been asked to do.

1. One group feels overwhelmed by the idea of reading even *more* stories than they just dealt with. They come up with an excuse to disengage: they can't read the small print, or they're tired, or it's too much to read, or they don't see any patterns.
2. The other group gets engaged with the stories and the activity, but they might not be interested in talking with the disengaged part of the group. They might write annotations on the paper without discussing them, or talk only to one other person.

Your task is to keep *everyone* engaged in this part of the exercise. What I find works is to give people a **task** to carry out together (write at least three annotations on the space) and a **rule** to carry it out (all annotations must be discussed **out loud**, not just written down).

Consider education levels

Some people can read and absorb written information much faster than others. Perhaps more importantly, some people see themselves as much more intellectual than others. If you are preparing to facilitate this exercise with a group of people who do not see themselves as "big readers" or capable of highly abstract thought, keep your stories short and simple, keep your dimensional questions clear, and give people extra time to place stories and find patterns. You might need an hour instead of forty minutes with some groups. And if you think people will not feel confident enough to read and place stories on their own, ask them to work in pairs. Anyone can benefit from this exercise, but some people will need more time and help than others to go places with it.

Watch your groups

Since every group starts this exercise with the same stories, it can be especially useful to group people together with others of similar status or backgrounds. For example, you might want to have managers and staff, or students and teachers, or men and women, or players and coaches, work on their landscapes separately. In that case, plan extra time for the comparison step, and pay special attention to equity. Make sure people see that each group has gone through the

exact same process with exactly the same stories. And make sure you have allocated your time and attention equally, so no one thinks the other group has received special treatment. The differences and similarities revealed might surprise people in entirely new ways.

Appendix: Story label sheets to print

Add your stories to the following pages, being careful not to change the formatting that makes the table fit the labels you will print on (if you want to use sticky labels). Also make sure to change the texts marked “First question here” and “second question here” to the appropriate questions.

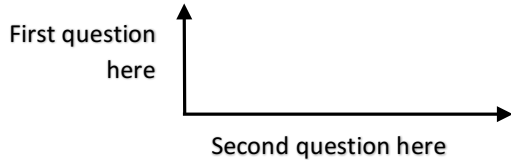
If you want to format your pages in a different file, use these dimensions (for US letter-sized paper):

- Document margins: top 0.5 inches, bottom 0 inches, left 0.16 inches, right 0.16 inches
- Table width: 8.19 inches
- Cell width: 4 inches
- Cell height: 2 inches

You can also find information on formatting text to fit on these labels on the Avery web site (search for product number 6481). Or you can use a different type of printable label sheet, or a different paper size. In any case, leave room for 8 stories per sheet. Instructions are optional (I included them here because the sheets had room for ten table cells).

Step One - 15 minutes

Working on your own, **choose** the 4-6 stories you think everyone needs to hear most. **Place** them on the space, thus:



Story name – Story text

Story name – Story text

Story name – Story text

Story name – Story text

Step Two - 15 minutes

Working together, **talk** about what you see in the space.

Circle and label:

gaps (why no stories there?) and

clusters (what is the common theme?).

What does the overall **pattern** of stories and themes tell you?

Story name – Story text

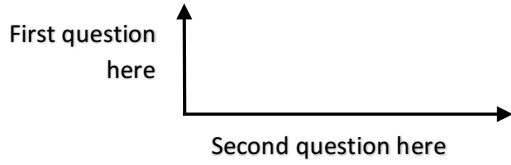
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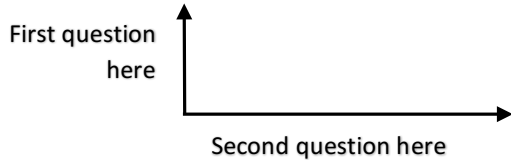
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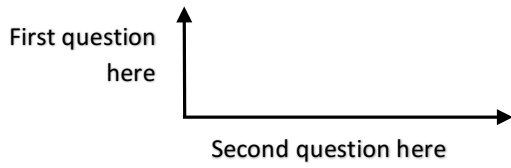
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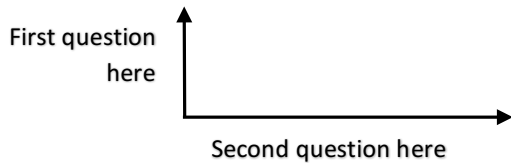
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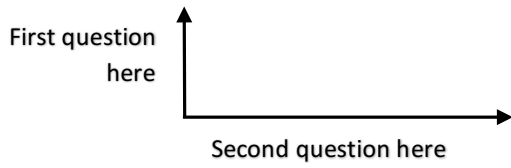
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