

**Enhancing the Effectiveness of Online Groups:
An Investigation of Storytelling in the
Facilitation of Online Groups**

Stephen Thorpe
BBus Hons (First Class), DipFac, CTM

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Dedication

To my mother, Maureen, for her remarkable and vibrant stories from working with South Auckland's new migrants and refugees.

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Stephen Thorpe

Claims to Originality

The research undertaken in this PhD thesis is the first effort to investigate the potential of storytelling in the development of relationships within online groups. It makes an original contribution to the knowledge of online facilitation by investigating the effectiveness of storytelling in online relationship development.

It makes an original contribution to the field of group facilitation by investigating the potential storytelling has in addressing some of the difficulties faced by facilitators of online groups.

Practical outputs for the field of online facilitation are the formation and investigation of a range of processes and techniques that can be applied in online relationship building and maintenance across a range of online software.

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Abstract

Building relationships in the world of online groups is a recent, exciting and challenging area for the field of group facilitation. Evidence has shown that online groups with strong relationship links are more effective and more resilient than those without them. Yet, the processes and techniques to effectively facilitate the building of these online relationships are not yet understood and there is scant empirical knowledge to assist practicing group facilitators in this important task.

Challenges arise when many of the embodied aspects of inter-personal communication, such as body language, tone of voice, emotions, energy levels and context are not easily readable by group members and facilitators. Many of the well established group processes and interventions that facilitators rely upon in face-to-face situations do not translate effectively or are simply not available in an online group situation. Storytelling, however, presented one approach from the domain of face-to-face group facilitation that might translate well online. Storytelling is well known as an enabler for people to connect at a deeper and an embodied level. It can be highly effective at building strong social ties and group resilience – right across a wide range of settings.

This thesis inquired into storytelling's potential for online facilitation practice with the question of *how is storytelling beneficial in building relationships in a facilitated online group?*

Starting with the premise that storytelling will be an effective approach, eighteen facilitators from the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) came together to collectively research the area using a participative approach. The intent of the approach was to involve online facilitation practitioners in the research so that their motivations, ways of looking at things, and questions could have value and that their experiences would be at the heart of the data generated. A variety of online software tools were used including: email, Skype™ conferencing, telephone conferencing, video and web conferencing, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), blogging, online surveys and within the 3-D interactive world of Second Life™.

The study affirmed that storytelling assisted relationship development across a range of online settings. As anticipated, storytelling aided identity creation; scenario description; describing conflict and to articulate learning edges. The availability of an extra text channel during a primarily oral communication is seen as a potentially valuable contribution to the art of storytelling. In addition, the study offers a challenge to the storytelling field in proposing that direct contact between teller and listener is not always a priori requirement. The blending of roles raises some ethical challenges for online facilitation practice. The also inquiry confirmed that software tool selection was critical for ensuring full participation and buy-in to online group decisions. The 3-D, avatar-based medium of Second Life™ assisted with emotional connections.

A range of new opportunities emerged through co-researchers engaging with the research process that inform the practice of group facilitation. They expand the role and horizons of the online facilitator in relation to the wider profession of group facilitation. Reflections are made about the International Association of Facilitators *Statement of Values and Code of Ethics for Group Facilitators* and *IAF Core Competencies* and some guidelines for the practice of online facilitation are offered.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Attestation of Authorship.....	iii
Claims to originality	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Abstract.....	vii

Chapter 1-Introduction

1.0 Introduction	21
1.1 Thesis Structure	23
1.2 Intended Audience	24
1.3 Background.....	25
1.3.1 Research Directions.....	27
1.4 Storytelling	29
1.5 The Research Project	30
1.5.1 Method	30
1.5.2 Cooperative Inquiry	31
1.6 Definition of Terms	32
1.6.1 Online Groups	32
1.6.2 Group Facilitation	32
1.6.3 Narrative.....	33
1.6.4 Storytelling.....	33
1.6.5 Relationship Development	34
1.6.5.1 An approach to defining story and relationship development.....	34
1.6.5.2 Channel	36
1.6.6 Thesis Framework.....	36

Chapter 2-Storytelling

2.0 Introduction	39
2.1 History of Storytelling.....	39
2.1.1 Socially Constructed Reality.....	43
2.2 The Art Form of Storytelling.....	44
2.2.1 The National Storytelling Network	44

2.2.2	Defining Aspects of the Art Form.....	45
2.2.3	Two Way Interaction.....	45
2.2.4	Oral and Written Expressions	47
2.2.5	Using Actions.....	47
2.2.6	Presenting a Narrative	47
2.2.7	Encouraging Active Imagination	48
2.2.8	Summary	49
2.3	Functions of Stories	50
2.3.1	Stories Create Culture in Groups	50
2.3.2	Stories Are Purposeful	52
2.3.3	Storytelling Creates Connection and Belonging	53
2.3.4	Storytelling Promotes Openness	54
2.4	Storytelling in Facilitated Groups.....	54
2.4.1	Storytelling as a Facilitated Process.....	54
2.5	Conclusion	56

Chapter 3-Group Facilitation

3.0	Facilitation.....	59
3.0.1	Beliefs Underpinning Group Facilitation.....	59
3.1	Current Trends in the Facilitation Field.....	61
3.1.1	More Common Use	61
3.1.2	More Facilitation Approaches	62
3.2	Contemporary Issues in Facilitation	63
3.2.1	What is a Facilitator?.....	63
3.2.2	Involvement in Content.....	65
3.2.3	Facilitator Neutrality	66
3.2.4	Balancing Participation with Results	67
3.2.5	The Place of a Facilitator's Values	67
3.2.6	Who is the Client?	68
3.2.7	Consensus Decision Making	69
3.3	Emergent Dynamics in Online Facilitation	69
3.3.1	Disembodiment	69
3.3.2	Full Participation.....	69
3.3.3	Diversity and Complexity	70
3.3.4	Privacy.....	71

3.4	Facilitation and Relationship Development.....	71
3.4.1	Facilitating Relationship Development in Face-to-face Groups	71
3.4.2	The Facilitation of Relationship Development Online.....	73
3.4.3	Some Future Directions.....	75

Chapter 4-Method

4.0	Introduction	78
4.0.1	The Research Question.....	78
4.0.2	Phenomenological Method.....	78
4.1	The Participative Paradigm.....	79
4.1.1	Participative Research	80
4.1.2	The Participative Worldview	81
4.1.3	Epistemology.....	81
4.1.4	Ontology.....	82
4.1.5	Axiological Theory	83
4.1.6	Why the Participative Paradigm?.....	84
4.2	Cooperative Inquiry	87
4.2.1	Other Uses of the Cooperative Inquiry Method	88
4.2.2	Limitations of the Co-operative Inquiry Method	89
4.2.2.1	Generalizability.....	89
4.2.2.2	Validity.....	90
4.2.2.3	Reliability.....	91
4.2.2.4	Trustworthiness.....	91
4.3	Research Design	92
4.3.1	Initial Plans.....	93
4.4	Emergent, Generative and Group-centered Inquiry.....	94
4.4.1	The Co-researchers.....	94
4.4.2	The Research Journey	96
4.4.2.1	The pilot phase	96
4.4.2.2	Data collection	96
4.4.2.3	Introductions	97
4.4.2.4	Developing the group culture.....	98
4.4.2.5	Cycles of storytelling and reflection	99
4.4.2.6	Participation survey.....	99
4.4.2.7	Some technical support for participation	100

4.4.2.8	Midwest Facilitators Network conference workshop.....	100
4.4.2.9	After Action Review of the pilot phase.....	100
4.4.2.10	1st sub-project - Inspiring Online Participation	101
4.4.2.11	Onlinestory.net	102
4.4.3	Phase 1 - Reflection on Topics and Developing a Plan	103
4.4.3.1	The research plan	105
4.4.4	Phase 2 - First Action Phase on Topic	106
4.4.4.1	A slow down in the research project	106
4.4.4.2	Storytelling via web blog	107
4.4.4.3	Leadership stories via video conferencing.....	107
4.4.4.4	Comparing email introductions with public web profiles.....	108
4.4.4.5	Storytelling in Second Life™	109
4.4.5	Final Reflection Phase.....	109
4.4.6	Post Data-collection Reflection Phase	109
4.5	Data Analysis.....	110
4.6	Reflections on the Method.....	118
4.7	Summary.....	119

Chapter 5-Findings

5.0	Introduction	121
5.1	Findings	123
5.1.1	Comparing Email Introductions with Public Web Profiles.....	123
5.1.1.1	Closeness.....	124
5.1.1.2	Characteristics identified.....	125
5.1.1.3	Points of connection.....	127
5.1.1.4	Trust	128
5.1.1.5	Photos.....	129
5.1.1.6	Preference for story introductions from email	129
5.1.1.7	Some new questions emerging for the group	130
5.1.1.8	Summary	131
5.1.2	Skype™ Conferencing	131
5.1.2.1	Technological challenges	132
5.1.2.2	Benefits experienced	133
5.1.2.3	Managing group boundaries.....	133
5.1.2.4	Further sessions.....	133

5.1.2.5	Summary	135
5.1.3	Telephone Conferencing	135
5.1.3.1	Group culture	135
5.1.3.2	Confidentiality.....	136
5.1.3.3	What is online facilitation?	137
5.1.3.4	What is a valid story?.....	138
5.1.3.5	Further use of telephone conferencing	138
5.1.3.6	Limited participation.....	139
5.1.4	Stories Using Yahoo!® Messenger Chat	141
5.1.4.1	Storytelling processes.....	141
5.1.4.2	Story a useful way to open	141
5.1.4.3	Reflections on the chat tool.....	144
5.1.5	WebIQ™ Web Conferencing Support	144
5.1.6	Transition to Sub-Projects.....	145
5.1.7	Inspiring Online Participation Using Student Net.....	146
5.1.7.1	Learning from others.....	147
5.1.7.2	Connecting with others and reducing isolation	147
5.1.7.3	Were the student-teachers inspired?.....	148
5.1.7.4	Reflections from the trainer-facilitator.....	148
5.1.7.5	When was the trainer inspired herself?	149
5.1.7.6	Summary	149
5.1.8	Leadership Stories via Video Conferencing.....	150
5.1.8.1	Summary	151
5.1.9	Blog Storytelling	151
5.1.9.1	Summary	153
5.1.10	Storytelling in Second Life™.....	153
5.1.10.1	What is Second Life™?.....	153
5.1.10.2	A strong emotional connection.....	155
5.1.10.3	A felt sense of place	156
5.1.10.4	Changes in the perceptions of place	157
5.1.10.5	Summary	157
5.2	Summary.....	158

Chapter 6-Discussion and Implications

6.0	Introduction	162
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6.1	Reflections on the Storytelling Art Form	162
6.1.1	A Two-way Interaction	162
6.1.2	Oral and Written Expressions	163
6.1.2.1	Developing emotional connections	163
6.1.2.2	Direct contact - indirectly.....	163
6.1.3	Using Actions.....	164
6.1.4	Presenting a Narrative	165
6.1.5	Encouraging Active Imagination	167
6.2	Functions of Storytelling	168
6.2.1	Stories Create Culture in Groups	168
6.2.1.1	Archetypes may emerge.....	169
6.2.2	Stories Are Purposeful	169
6.2.3	Storytelling Creates Connection and Belonging	170
6.2.4	Storytelling Promotes Openness	172
6.3	Online Facilitation	173
6.3.1	What is a Facilitator?.....	173
6.3.1.1	Addressing a fundamental shift in group work	174
6.3.2	Code of Ethics for Group Facilitators	175
6.3.3	Effectively Matching tools, Processes and Agreement	177
6.3.4	Online Place	178
6.3.5	Emotional Connections	180
6.3.6	Storytelling's Adaptability	180
6.4	Guidelines for the Online Facilitator	181
6.4.1.1	When to tell a story?	181
6.4.1.2	Group boundaries.....	182
6.4.1.3	Technical interruption	182
6.4.1.4	Group support and other roles.....	183
6.4.1.5	Group culture	183
6.4.1.6	Assume goodwill.....	183
6.4.2	Techniques for Using Story Online.....	184
6.4.3	Add Cultural Markers.....	184
6.4.4	Online Storytelling Process.....	184
6.4.4.1	Using story with email	184
6.4.4.2	Using story with audio conferencing	185
6.4.4.3	Using story with video conferencing	185

6.4.4.4	Using story within 3-D environments	185
6.5	Reflections on Cooperative Inquiry	186
6.5.1	A Meta-view of the Methodology	186
6.5.2	Developing Practical Knowing	186
6.5.3	System as Objective Observer.....	187
6.6	Some Areas for Further Research.....	188
6.6.1	Impact of an Extra Mode of Communication.....	188
6.6.2	Tolerance for Technical Interruption	188
6.6.3	Discovering the Boundaries	189
6.6.4	Extending into Mobile and Other Emerging Technologies.....	189
6.6.5	Validity of Findings with Other Groups	190
6.6.6	Success Model.....	190
6.6.7	Interactive boundaries of dual band storytelling	191

Chapter 7-Conclusion

7.0	Conclusion.....	193
References		196

Appendices

Appendix A	Theoretical Perspectives.....	217
Appendix B	Invitation	221
Appendix C	Cover Letter.....	222
Appendix D	Information Sheet.....	223
Appendix E	Consent Form	227
Appendix F	MFN Conference Report 23-24 Jan 06	228
Appendix G	Survey 12 December 2005	232
Appendix H	Mid-Placement Meeting Process and Guidelines.....	240
Appendix I	Chat Session Evaluations.....	242
Appendix J	Trainer-Facilitator Interview	247
Appendix K	Comparison Summary Results	260
Appendix L	Skype Report 04Nov05	268
Appendix M	Skype Transcript 04Nov05	271
Appendix N	Skype Report 11-12 December 2005	296
Appendix O	Meeting Initiation Transcript 11-12 Dec05.....	299
Appendix P	Telephone Conference Report 2-3Dec05.....	302

Appendix Q Telephone Conference Report 16-17Dec05	306
Appendix R Yahoo Report 9-10Dec05.....	307
Appendix S Yahoo Report 13-14Dec05	318
Appendix T Yahoo Transcript 13-14Dec05	322
Appendix U Yahoo Transcript 1Feb06.....	328
Appendix V Yahoo-Transcript 27Jan06	335
Appendix W Trainer-Facilitator Feedback	344
Appendix X Video Conference Interview	347
Appendix Y Feedback from Online Facilitation Programme	354

List of Tables

Table 4.1 Motivation for a participative approach	87
Table 4.2 Co-operative Inquiry validity procedures	90
Table 4.3 Initial research plan	93
Table 4.4 Planning challenges faced	94
Table 4.5 Proposed plan for the pilot phase at 1 Nov 2005	96
Table 4.6 Group culture statement	98
Table 4.7 Areas identified for investigation	104
Table 4.8 The research plan	105
Table 4.9 Investigation summaries.....	111
Table 5.1 Investigation summary table	122
Table 5.2 Media mode type summary table	122
Table 5.3 Group Culture Statement.....	136
Table 5.4 Key findings summary table	158
Table A.1 Framework of inquiry paradigms	220

List of Figures

Fig. 3.1 A decision-making continuum	60
Fig. 3.2 Number of books on group facilitation published per year	62
Fig. 4.1 A spectrum of research approaches	81
Fig. 4.2 Map of the online storytelling research group	95
Fig. 4.3 Midwest Facilitators Network conference workshop via Skype™.....	100
Fig. 4.4 Home page of Onlinestory.net	103
Fig. 4.5 Research and projects.....	104
Fig. 5.1 Median and mode (M) and average (A) closeness ranking	125
Fig. 5.2 Median, mode and average characteristics identified in email introductions with story compared to those from web profiles (error bars represent one standard deviation)	126
Fig. 5.3 Median, mode and average points of connection identified from email introductions with story compared to those from web profiles (error bars represent one standard deviation)	127
Fig. 5.4 Median, mode and average aspects of trust identified from email introductions with story compared to those from web profiles (error bars represent one standard deviation).	129
Fig. 5.5 Introduction preference	130
Fig. 5.6 Storytelling session on Boracay Island in Second Life™.....	155
Fig. 6.1 Former view of group facilitation and online facilitation	174
Fig. 6.2 A continuum of ways of groups working.....	175
Fig. 6.3 New perspective on group facilitation and online facilitation	175

List of Illustrations

Ethel O’Sullivan (my grandmother) with her great grandchildren	20
A painting of the Falling In story by Stephen Thorpe.....	38
The Office – in Canberra, Australia	58
A Postcard from Boracay Island, Second Life™	77
In Second Life™: Sharing stories of how we came to be facilitators.....	120
In Second Life™: Sharing stories of challenges faced	161
The Peace Dove.....	192