

Adventure as the metaphoric basis for constructing a narrative to defuse a collective critical incident

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Abstract

This article describes an exercise in collective narrative practice, built around the metaphor of adventure. This metaphor helped to scaffold the development of stories of personal agency for a group of Australian primary school children whose teachers were afraid they might be traumatised by events which occurred during a school excursion. During the excursion, the group of 110 Year 5 and 6 school children had their accommodation broken into on two separate occasions and various belongings stolen. The very brief period made available for ‘debriefing’ was used to introduce the metaphor of adventure, and open up space for the children to begin constructing a story in which they were ‘powerful’, as an alternative to the story of powerlessness and victimhood in which they were initially caught up.

Keywords: collective narrative practice, critical incident, trauma, group psychotherapy, narrative therapy

A few months back, the organisation I work for was called in to do a critical incident debriefing for 110 Year 5 and 6 school children who were away on a school excursion, accompanied by several teachers and some parents who had volunteered to help out. The group were staying in accommodation a short distance out of town, which consisted of a number of separate cabins and a central dining area. While they were eating their evening meal in the dining area on the first evening, their accommodation was broken into and various belongings stolen. On the second evening, this occurred again, and two men were seen running away from the scene. Two of the teachers and two parents who were assisting with the excursion gave chase, but failed to apprehend the escaping miscreants. The police were contacted, and a security company was contracted to patrol the grounds for the remainder of the excursion.

Meeting with the teachers

When my colleague, Cath Hunt, and I were asked to do the debriefing, we decided that it would be best to see the teachers first, as our assumption was that they would actually be more traumatised than the children were, because they would feel responsible for the situation and probably have the sense that they had in some way failed by not preventing the incident from occurring. Although we have concerns about the efficacy of critical incident stress debriefing (CISD), and the potential for retraumatising people (Adler, et al., 2008; Giddens, 2008), since CISD was what we had been contracted to do, we did this as sensitively as we could, allowing people to describe and reprocess what had occurred, and to describe their emotions and concerns, while at the same time encouraging them to reassure one another that they had done a good job under the circumstances. Nevertheless, we would do this respectfully, conscious of the need for 'a slightly different thoughtfulness' (McKenzie, 2010, p. 2).

During our conversation with the teachers, we were struck by the fact that almost all of them indicated that their greatest concern was that they felt the excursion, which was the high point of the year for the children – the thing they had been looking forward to all year – had been 'ruined'. The teachers also indicated that they were very concerned about the wellbeing of the kids, and that they had observed some of the supposedly 'tougher' kids in tears. They said that it was not the loss of belongings so much as the sense of lack of safety that was concerning the children. We were touched by the teachers' degree of care and concern for the children, and also concerned by the extent of guilt and blame some of them were taking on themselves. We felt that we really needed more time with a few of them, and we encouraged them to follow up with us individually, in person or by phone.

An adventure metaphor

By the time we had finished with the teachers, we had used all of the time allotted for the whole debriefing of both teachers and children, plus a little more, and the bus driver who was waiting to take the group to their next activity was getting concerned that they would be late, so we asked what other time was available to meet with the children. The teacher in charge said that the only time available in the schedule was immediately after the evening meal later that day, and asked if we could meet with them then, to which we agreed. However, she said that we would have a maximum of three quarters of an hour in which to do it before the children headed off for their evening activity, as a very full schedule had been arranged and the teachers did not

want to add further disappointment for the children by causing them to miss out on any anticipated activities.

In discussing how to approach the evening session, we were initially a little uncertain as to how best to proceed, given that the time available was short. Obviously, seeing 110 children individually would be out of the question! Having gone overtime in applying the standard model with the adults, despite the comparatively small numbers involved compared with the number of children, we imagined that attempting the same thing with 110 children was either going to result in chaos, not achieve much, or both. We briefly toyed with the 'Tree of Life' as a possible alternative approach (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006), but decided that we couldn't really manage that with the numbers and the time frame either. Attempting to get 110 children drawing on butcher's paper would be a recipe for chaos and, given that the Tree of Life is supposed to take a whole day, we would have little hope of completing even part of it in 45 minutes. Also, we had a sense that it wasn't an exact fit for this situation. This was not so much about their overall life story as about fitting one single incident into it in a way that didn't lead to negative identity conclusions (White, 2001).

What was needed was something that would scaffold a 'landscape of consciousness' exploration of the events that had happened during this week (in the landscape of action) in such a way as to draw out unique outcomes (White & Epston, 1990) which might currently be unnoticed, and incorporate them into a story with a theme supportive of positive rather than negative identity conclusions. After some discussion, it occurred to me that one possibility would be to offer the children the opportunity to explore viewing the excursion as an adventure. This would fit with what the teachers had said about the kids looking forward all year to this week. It would fit with the dramatic elements of criminals, police, and security guards. It would give the potential of re-storying what might otherwise be seen mainly as 'scary' in terms of excitement and heroic action. Since this was my idea, Cath said that she would prefer it if I took the lead, and she would follow and support me with it.

The session with the children

I began by saying, 'I hear that you've been looking forward to this week all year, as a great adventure – and, by the sound of it, it has really turned into a totally full-on adventure, like you would see on TV, complete with baddies and goodies ... who can tell us about the baddies?' The kids responded with a mixture of details about what had happened. They told us that their rooms had been broken into, that they believed there had been two 'baddies', and that some of the adults had pursued them, but failed to catch them. They speculated that the 'baddies' must have been watching them and might still be watching them. They told us that they figured the criminals were unarmed, because 'otherwise they would have attacked'. This was stuff that was potentially scary, but it already contained within it the beginnings of a new story, which had the potential to construe the physiological arousal involved in their bodily experience in terms of excitement rather than trauma.

We continued the narrative: 'When you watch an adventure on TV, or on a DVD, or at the movies, the story is usually told from the point of view of one of the characters: the hero or heroine. This adventure you've been experiencing, you've experienced from the point of view of one character: the hero or heroine – you! You probably realise that one of the things that usually happens for the heroine or hero of an adventure is that it can get pretty scary at times. Like, you know that scene where the hero or heroine is hanging off the edge of the cliff, holding on by one

finger, and the bad guy is about to stomp on that finger ... How does the heroine or hero feel? Yeah, terrified! And I guess that for you there have probably been some parts of this adventure that have been kind of scary, too. Who would like to tell us about some of the things that have been scary for you?’

The kids told about their fears that the cabins might be broken into again when they were actually in there, and how they pictured the potential assailants as so much larger than themselves, and potentially dangerous. We reflected and validated their feelings, and encouraged them to also talk about things that had made them angry, because often the bad guys do something that makes the hero or heroine really mad. The main things they felt angry about were having stuff taken, and the sense of violation involved in having their space invaded. We asked questions about their responses to these feelings, drawing out a sense of active participation and agency. We allowed this discussion to go on until it started becoming repetitive, and the group was ready to move to a new aspect of the story.

‘At some point, the heroine or hero of the adventure usually has to look within themselves and find something like courage. I don’t know how much you know about what courage is, but it’s when you feel really scared, or terrified, but you know what you have to do and, although you’re feeling really scared, you just go ahead and do what you have to do, anyway ...’ and I guess that all of you here have done that, because you’re still here, so I can see that you’ve all found that courage within yourselves.’

‘Sticking together’ and ‘helping each other out’

This led into exploring the fear in a way that emphasised their strengths and helped them to make what could have been a ‘losing story’ into a ‘winning’ one. A ‘losing story’ would have corresponding identity conclusions, such as ‘loser’, or ‘victim’. A ‘winning story’ would bring with it identity conclusions which emphasised resilience and agency. At this stage, we had the skeleton of such a story, but it needed thickening, and it needed an audience or some witnesses (White, 2007). The obvious witnesses were here in the room: the other children, the teachers, and the parent volunteers. We had little time in which to achieve it, but hoped that we could at least begin a process of making them witnesses to each other’s stories, and supporters of each other’s positive identity conclusions. Thus, we continued, ‘You may also have noticed that, in many adventures, the baddies end up fighting among themselves and betraying each other. The goodies, on the other hand, stick together and help each other out. So I bet that you’ve been helping each other out, too. Who can tell me about somebody who has helped them in some way as part of this adventure?’

As you might expect, the children brought forward examples of how their friends had helped them, by sticking with them rather than leaving them alone, and by reassuring them; how their teachers had helped them by taking charge, not panicking, listening to them, and chasing the robbers; how the police had helped them by attending the scene and by doing their best to apprehend the criminals; and how the security guards had helped them by patrolling the premises. We allowed this discussion to go on for some time as it was affording the children the opportunity to discover and explore with each other unique outcomes and assist each other in building for themselves new stories in which they were active agents rather than passive victims. But we felt that more was needed: the new story needed embodiment. As well, we had noticed the relieved looks on some of the teachers’ faces when the kids spoke of the good job they had done, and were hopeful that this exercise might also offer the adults the opportunity to

do some re-authoring, so we said, 'And at the end of the adventure, the heroes thank each other for the ways they've all contributed. So I'd like you to all stand up, and go and find at least one person to thank'.

Several minutes of chaos ensued. All around the room, kids were hugging each other, running up to teachers and other adults and hugging them, or shaking hands with them, depending presumably on the fit between the teacher's personality and that of the child. After a while, we also noticed teachers approaching kids as well, and also approaching each other. Everyone was smiling and laughing, and the noise was deafening. Several kids came up to us and hugged us. Some others came in groups and thanked us for conducting the debriefing, and shook hands with us. The room was abuzz with positive emotion. Eventually, as we were nearly out of time, we got the teacher in charge to help call the kids back to order, and told them how impressed we were with them, with their courage, their strength, their friendship and ability to look after one another.

Creating a space for diverse meanings and follow-up

Our hope was that, by this stage, most of the kids would be well and truly off with a new story, and that they would continue to build and extend it with each other as time went on. However, we were also aware that the room contained many individuals, each with their own personal story, and that we were attempting to offer a one-size-fits-all scaffolding to people who might have very different starting points. Therefore, in summing up, while emphasising the new storyline we had been constructing together, we also attempted to allow room for variations that might be needed for a few kids for whom the adventure theme might not have resonated as much as we would have hoped.

So, we summed up by saying, 'For most of you, this week will turn out to have been an adventure with exciting bits and scary bits that will be an interesting time to look back on, and a great story to tell your friends. However, if any of you feel the need to discuss any aspects of it further, we would be happy to talk with you individually if there is time before you head off on your next outing. Also, when you get back home, if you feel you need to for any reason, we would certainly encourage you to talk with your school counsellor about it – after all, that's what they're there for'. The teacher in charge then spontaneously decided to get the children to tell us about the exciting and enjoyable activities that they had done during the week, and the things they had enjoyed, after which they went off to begin their next activity.

Outcomes

The change in mood in the room at the end of the exercise, as compared with the beginning, was palpable. The essence of our strategy was to scaffold a situation which would afford the opportunity for the children to replace the dominant story (White & Epston, 1990), which, from some of the things the kids said in their earliest comments, was a story in which they were cast in the role of victims, with a new story, which was absent but implicit (White, 2000) within their old story, in which their role was recast as powerful, rather than powerless. A secondary aim was to similarly scaffold the recasting of the role in which we were aware that some of the teachers were seeing themselves (as betrayers of the trust placed in them to guard the welfare

of the children entrusted to their care) into one in which their role was also powerful rather than powerless. All of the teachers we spoke to at the end of the session were very positive and warm, giving us some hope that we may have achieved this to some extent. We believe that the thanks, handshakes, and hugs that they received from the children will have gone a long way towards healing the effects of the distress the teachers were feeling. This belief was borne out in information from a follow-up phone call with the teacher in charge of the excursion, a couple of weeks later, in which she said that the kids were all okay and happy, and that they had talked as much about how great the 'debriefing' was, and how much they had enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to thank each other, as they had spoken about the actual events of the week that necessitated the debriefing exercise. She also told me that all of the teachers were okay. All in all, this phone call reassured me that we had been reasonably successful in providing a scaffolding to enable most of those involved to replace the story of the week as a 'ruined excursion' with one in which the week was constructed more as an 'adventure'. We also believe that, as opposed to the potential for the previously dominant narrative to have isolated the group of teachers and children in feelings of inadequacy, helplessness, and regret, this conversation will have helped the experience to become one which draws them closer, in bonds of friendship, gratefulness, and solidarity. Narrative is a communal activity, and has a primary function in building community.

Narrative practice or strategic intervention?

A question we have pondered in relation to this work is whether it might be better understood as more of a strategic 'reframing intervention', rather than an exercise in narrative practice. In order to claim that this work was informed by narrative practice, could we have sought out more unique outcomes directly from the children and teachers rather than introducing the adventure metaphor ourselves? Perhaps this would ideally be better and more consistent with the respectful orientation so characteristic of narrative practice. However, we felt quite certain that it would have taken far longer than the time we had available, so we had somewhat pragmatic reasons for taking a somewhat more active part in introducing the adventure metaphor than is characteristic of much of narrative practice. Nevertheless, we still believe that this work is best described within a narrative rubric rather than within a strategic reframing one. Let us elaborate.

Narrative practice involves providing the scaffolding to enable people to discover implicit connections between neglected aspects of their experience and values that are important to them, in such a way that they are able to construct an empowering story that is more in keeping with their personal preferences than the problem-saturated story. The key issue is what can and cannot constitute appropriate scaffolding. We used the theme of 'common happenings in adventure stories' as an effective way of providing the required scaffolding for a large number of people in a short time frame. The introduction of metaphors by narrative practitioners is not a new thing, particularly in situations involving groups of people. Two well known other examples would be the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006) and the Team of Life (Denborough, 2008), in which both introduce a general metaphor (that of a tree and a sporting team), but allow room for the individual to flesh out the metaphor with personal constructions, which develop their own sense of personal agency. We would see the exercise described here as being a part of that tradition.

We also believe that this process has the potential for adaptation to other situations, and would be interested to hear where other people may take it. Critical incident stress debriefing seems to cry out for narrative approaches, involving, as it does, the exploration of a series of events and their meanings for people. Events and associated meanings are what stories are made up of, so it would be reasonable to say that all critical incident stress debriefing involves working with narratives. The existence of the huge volume of literature currently extant on post-traumatic stress disorder certainly suggests that 'critical incidents' have the potential to lead people to negative identity conclusions, so it would be reasonable to assume that one of the implicit goals of critical incident stress debriefing should be the authoring of a story which avoids negative identity conclusions. We would suggest that the 'adventure' metaphor has a lot going for it in terms of avoiding negative identity conclusions.

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