Narrative Therapy and Community Work

Level One
Online
5-day Intensive



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with
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Workshop Outline

Acknowledgements and Introductions

The Ideas that shape Narrative Practice

Externalising Conversations

Externalising Conversations: Statement of Position Map No.1

Therapeutic Posture

Re-authoring Conversations

Re-authoring Conversations: Dual Landscapes

Re-membering Conversations

Narrative Documentation

Definitional Ceremonies

Outsider-Witness Practices

Collective Narrative Practice

Tree of Life

Table of Contents

PowerPoints

See separate document.

Handouts

4 What is Narrative Therapy?
5 Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger
6 Our Values and Intentions as Narrative Therapists
7 Some Intentions in asking questions in Narrative Therapy
8 Structuralism and post-structuralism
9 Questions to facilitate a narrative / post-structural worldview
10 Maps of Narrative Practice: Why might we use them?
11 How to Externalise the Problem linguistically: Some ideas about the linguistic descriptions of problems
12 Metaphors used in resisting the problem
13 Personal Agency
14 It takes a community
15 Practical ways of linking lives through shared purposes
18 Re-membering conversations: Some history
19 Re-membering conversations: Some additional questions
20 Therapeutic documentation
21 What to document & Some useful kinds of documents
22 Outsider-Witness Responses
23 Maps of Narrative Practice: an overview
24 Some tips for engaging with Narrative Therapy training exercises
25 Counselling Notes

Exercises / Activities

26 Some key ideas that shape Narrative Practice
29 Exercise: 'How stories shape us'
30 Exercise: Externalising Conversation (Statement of Position Map 1)
32 Exercise: Questions to develop stories
34 Exercise: Re-authoring conversations: describing a story about a new skill, richly
35 Exercise: Re-authoring conversations: reducing the influence of a problem
37 Exercise: Re-authoring (Landscape of Action)
38 Exercise: Re-authoring (Landscape of Identity)
39 Exercise: Re-membering Conversations
40 Exercise: Re-membering, version 2
43 Exercise: Re-authoring and Outsider-Witness Practices
45 Exercise: Looking back, looking forward
46 Reflecting on the training exercises

References / Resources

47

What is Narrative Therapy?

There are many different themes that make up what has come to be known as 'narrative therapy', and every therapist engages with these ideas somewhat differently. When you hear someone refer to 'narrative therapy' they might be referring to particular ways of understanding people's identities. Alternatively, they might be referring to certain ways of understanding problems and their effects on people's lives. They might also be speaking about particular ways of talking with people about their lives and problems they may be experiencing, or particular ways of understanding therapeutic relationships and the ethics or politics of therapy.

Narrative therapy seeks to be a respectful, non-blaming approach to counselling and community work, which centres people as the experts in their own lives. It views problems as separate from people and assumes people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives.

The term "narrative" implies listening to and telling or re-telling stories about people and the problems in their lives. In the face of serious and sometimes potentially deadly problems, the idea of hearing or telling stories may seem a trivial pursuit. It is hard to believe that conversations can shape new realities. But they do. The bridges of meaning we build with others help healing developments flourish instead of wither and be forgotten. Language can shape events into narratives of hope.

Engaging with the narrative metaphor in the development of therapeutic practice invites us to think about how we can encourage people to do what they routinely do – to place the events of their lives into storylines – but in relation to some of the more neglected events of their lives. This opens possibilities for the further development of therapeutic practices that are more de-centring of the therapist and centring of the meaning-making skills of the people who consult us. This has been one of the biggest attractions for me about the narrative metaphor.

Notes:

1. Morgan A (2000). *What is narrative therapy? An easy-to-read introduction* (p. 2). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.
2. From http://www.narrativeapproaches.com/tensecintro.htm
3. See M. White in Denborough, D. (Ed.) (2001). *Family therapy: Exploring the field's past, present and possible futures* (p.1 35). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger

As Indigenous people of this country, our stories are precious. They have survived over generations. Our elderly have passed them onto us and we will continue to pass them onto our children. We have our own ways of telling and listening to stories which are important to us.

When we come into contact with mainstream health services, either as client or workers, sometimes we find very different ways of talking about people's lives. We find a focus on aims and objectives, or on projects which involve easily measured outcomes. Often these ways of speaking about people's lives do not fit comfortably for us (nor for many other people).

The telling of stories however is something we can relate to. As Aboriginal people, we have always told stories about our lives, and we know how important it is for people to be connected to their own stories, the stories of their family, their people, their history. These stories are sources of pride. When people become disconnected from them, life can be much harder to live.

Our people understand the significance of our stories, and the importance of taking care to tell them in the right places, to the right people and in the appropriate ways. Once these stories begin to be told we can listen for the moments of change, the times when people are moving their lives in positive directions.

As Indigenous Australians we're going to keep telling our stories in ways that make us stronger.[1]

Note:

1. Wingard, B., & Lester, J. (2001). *Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger*. (pp. v, vi, vii). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Our Values and Intentions as Narrative Therapists[1]

To approach people in ways that show respect for their knowledge and abilities.

To treat people as people, not as objects.

To approach problems as things that are separate from people.

To avoid pathological labels.

To present ourselves as people, not as authority figures.

To recognize and appreciate the complexity and uniqueness of every human situation.

To focus on relationships and community (on the interrelatedness of things), not individuals (separateness or isolation).

To cultivate curiosity and to notice and to question our assumptions.

To work in ways that promote social justice.

To work together with others in finding ever-better ways of dealing with problems.

Note:
1. This handout was developed by Jill Freedman & Gene Combs, Evanston Family Therapy Center, Ill. USA. www.narrativetherapychicago.com

Some Intentions in asking questions in Narrative Therapy[1]

Asking instead of assuming

Asking questions that generate experience

Asking questions that offer the possibility of different perspectives

Asking questions that contribute to a sense of collaboration and honoring of the person's knowledge

Asking questions that contribute to shrinking problems and growing preferred stories

Asking questions that support stories of personal agency

Asking questions to locate problems in larger sociocultural discourses

Asking questions that invite the person into the not-yet-known or to make new distinctions

Asking questions that invite playfulness and imagination

Asking questions that support stories of preferred identity

Asking questions that support shared meaning making

Note:
1. This handout was developed by Jill Freedman & Gene Combs, Evanston Family Therapy Center, Ill. USA. www.narrativetherapychicago.com

Structuralism and Post-structuralism[1]

Structuralist View	Post-Structuralist View
• Seeks to classify individuals in terms of **general** classes or types.	• Seeks **specific** details of people's identity.
• **Expert knowledge** is valued. (Experts have the power to define people's identities. They know more about people's personhood than the people themselves.)	• **Local knowledge** is valued. (People have the power to define themselves based on their own knowledge of the details of their lives.)
• Surface phenomena hold the clues to **deep** identity. Only expert specialists have the power to accurately decode surface clues.	• **Surface** phenomena are all we can really know. Each of us has the power to interpret our own experience.
• Individual lives are interpreted and valued according to **rules** or norms.	• Individual lives are valued and interpreted in terms of how they embody **exceptions** to what might have been expected.
• Experts have the power to assign meaning to people's life stories by decoding the **formulas** that underlie their structure.	• People have the power to construct meaningful lives through the **stories** they enact, tell, and remember with one another.
• The high value placed on generalizations that hold true for large populations can make for **thin conclusions** concerning specific people's lives.	• Multiple story strands from various points of view are valued. This makes for thick descriptions of people's lives.

Note:
1. This handout was developed by Jill Freedman & Gene Combs, Evanston Family Therapy Center, Ill. USA. www.narrativetherapychicago.com

Questions to facilitate a narrative / post-structural worldview[1]

1. Am I asking for descriptions of more than one reality?

2. Am I listening so as to understand how this person's experiential reality has been socially constructed?

3. Whose language is being privileged here?
   Am I trying to accept and understand this person's linguistic descriptions?
   If I am offering a distinction in *my* language, why am I doing that? What are the effects of the various linguistic distinctions that are coming forth in the therapeutic conversation?

4. What are the stories that support this person's problems?
   Are there dominant stories that are subjugating or limiting this person's life?
   What marginalized stories am I hearing? Are there clues to marginalized stories that have not yet been spoken?
   How might I invite this person to engage in an "insurrection of knowledges" around those marginalized stories?

5. Am I focusing on meaning instead of on "facts"?

6. Am I evaluating this person, or am I inviting them to evaluate a wide range of things (e.g. how therapy is going, preferred directions in life)?

7. Am I situating my opinions in my personal experience?
   Am I being transparent about my context, my values, and my intentions so that this person can evaluate the effects of my biases?

8. Am I getting caught up in pathologizing or normative thinking?
   Are we collaboratively defining problems based on what is problematic in this person's experience?
   Am I staying away from "expert" hypotheses or theories?

Note:
1. This handout was developed by Jill Freedman & Gene Combs, Evanston Family Therapy Center, Ill. USA. www.narrativetherapychicago.com

Maps of Narrative Practice[1]: Why might we use them?

To quote Michael White:

On occasion, in teaching contexts, I have been asked why it is necessary to have maps for therapeutic practice. My response: 'it is not at all necessary'. However … we all refer to guiding ideas of some sort in the development of therapeutic conversations, although very often guiding ideas have become so taken for granted and accepted that they are rendered invisible and unavailable to critical reflection. I believe that this is a hazardous development, for it has the potential to restrict us to the unquestioned reproduction of what is familiar in terms of therapeutic practice, regardless of the consequences on the lives of the people who consult us.

1. For guidance on our journeys with people who consult us about the predicaments and problems of their lives.

2. To assist us in finding our way to destinations that could not have been specified ahead of the journey, via routes that could not have been predetermined.

3. As a reference for accountability: to render more transparent the therapeutic process that Michael White has developed.

4. Therapeutic conversations are not ordered, and I make no effort to determine my response to people's expressions ahead of these expressions.

5. A map gives a structure that can guide practice. Interestingly, it is rigorous practice and repetition of this non-linear structure that enables spontaneity – the expressions of life that seem most spontaneous to us are those that we have had the most practice in.

Note:
1. White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice* (pp. 5–6). New York, NY: Norton.

How to Externalise the Problem linguistically: Some ideas about the linguistic descriptions of problems[1]

1. Listen for what may be pushing the person around. For example:
    - 'I feel really guilty about it' … How is the guilt getting in the way of what you want?
    - He's always been a lot of trouble! … How has the trouble got in the way of the connection you'd prefer with your son?

2. The externalised name of the problem may change. It is an evolving conversation. If a number of problems are being mentioned, maybe ask the person to clarify which would be most important to speak about in the time that you have.

3. Externalising is an understanding of identity that linguistically has us changing a verb or adjective (doing or describing word) into a noun – a thing. For example:
    depressed / the depression
    fighting / the fights
    hopeless / sense of hopelessness
    worry / the worries

Often we will hear people using more descriptive or 'experience-near' names for the concern: 'the black cloud of depression', 'the fidget bug'. It is important that we adopt this language and centre their knowledge about the problem.

4. Initially the problem may be called 'it' or 'the problem'. There is often more than one problem

5. Externalising practices when used meticulously and carefully enable people to separate their identity from the problem and have a sense of being able to act in relation to the problem. This can also mean people can join together against the problem – rather than see the person as the problem.

Note:
1. This handout was originally compiled by Carolyn Markey and Chris Dolman.

Metaphors used in resisting the problem[1]

All metaphors that are taken up in the development of externalising conversations are borrowed from particular discourses that invoke specific understandings of life and identity. These discourses influence the actions people take to solve their problems, and they are shaping of life in a general sense as well.
The diversity in these metaphors is very much due to the fact that most of them were coined by people who have sought therapy.

- Walking out on the problem (from the concept of agency)
- Going on a strike against the problem (from the idea of civil action)
- Setting themselves apart from the problem (from the concepts of separation and individuation)
- Defying the problem's requirements (from the idea of resistance)
- Disempowering the problem (from the idea of empowerment)
- Educating the problem (from the concept of teaching)
- Recovering or reclaiming the territory of their life from the problem (from geographical conceptions of life)
- Undermining the problem (from geographical conceptions of life)
- Reducing the influence of the problem (from the concept of personal agency)
- Coming out of the shadows cast by the problem (from the idea of light)
- Reducing the problem's grip on their lives (from the psychological conception of life)
- Taking their lives out of the hands of the problem (from puppetry)
- Resigning from the problem's service (from the concept of employment)
- Taming the problem (from the concept of training)
- Harnessing the problem (from the equine world)

Note:
White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice* (chapter 1, Externalising conversations). New York, NY: Norton

Personal Agency

This is a sense of self that is associated with the perception that one is able to have some effect on the shape of one's own life; a sense that one is able to intervene in one's own life as an agent of what one gives value to and as an agent of one's own intentions, and a sense that the world is at least minimally responsive to the fact of one's own existence … The restoration and/or development of this sense of personal agency provides an antidote to the sort of highly disabling conclusions about one's identity that feature perceptions that one is a passive recipient of life's forces.[1]

… the experience of personal agency and the capacity for responsible action are founded upon a special form of social collaboration. This is a social collaboration that assists people to traverse the space between what is known and familiar to them, and what might be possible for them to know about their lives and identities.[2]

In contrast to internal state conceptions, intentional state conceptions of identity are distinguished by the notion of 'personal agency'. This notion casts people as active mediators and negotiators of life's meanings and predicaments, both individually and in collaboration with others. It also casts people as the originators of many of the preferred developments of their own lives: People are living out their lives according to intentions that they embrace in the pursuit of what they give value to in life; they are going about the business of actively shaping their existence in their effort to achieve sought-after goals.[3]

Notes:

1. White, M. (2005). Children, trauma and subordinate storyline development. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (3&4).
2. White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice* (p. 269). New York, NY: Norton.
3. White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice* (p. 103). New York, NY: Norton.

It takes a Community[1]

When and why to think about including other people in the therapy process:

- So that people don't feel alone with a problem
- When "insider knowledge" would be useful
- To celebrate a unique outcome, a new step, or a noteworthy stand
- To support an emerging identity
- As therapy nears an end, to review significant developments in the work by making a consultation tape or asking people if they would be willing to serve as witnesses or consultants in the future

Ways to help build-in practices of community:

- Schedule regular consultations (once a week or once a month—even once a quarter) with one other person or a team to serve as reflectors or witnesses.
- Arrange to see all first appointments with a team, even if it's only a team of one other person.
- Create a partnership with one colleague. Agree to respond to each other's letters, tapes, or emails.
- Create a retrievable registry of people who would be willing to serve as consultants or outsider witnesses.
- Make collective documents to share.

Note:
1. This handout was developed by Jill Freedman & Gene Combs, Evanston Family Therapy Center, Ill. USA. www.narrativetherapychicago.com

Practical ways of linking lives through shared purposes[1]

It takes a community, but how do we find one?

Discourses that stand in the way of linking lives:

- Discourses of individualism
  (self-actualization, individual ownership, self-reliance, individual rights, etc.)

- Pathologizing discourses, with their focus on individuals that makes confidentiality of central importance.

- The discourses influencing how we get paid—what insurance will pay for, who gets charged, the language and machinery of reimbursement.

- Popular expectations of what therapy looks like: who is included, what is talked about, what someone seeking therapy is required to do

We find it helpful to focus on linking lives around shared purposes as a poststructuralist task. A poststructuralist lens helps us focus on values, purposes, commitments, hopes, wishes, intentions, and the like. This is very different than convening groups around diagnostic labels or particular problems.

We find that the context in which we propose to include others is crucial. When we think and talk about ourselves and others relationally, introducing others into the context of therapy seems fitting. If we have constructed an individual, bounded relationship, the idea of suddenly introducing a team can feel threatening.

Small practices that pave the way for bigger ones:

1. Asking about others. Who would not be surprised? Who has gone ahead of you showing the way? Who would support this development? If you could have a team in on this who would you want to be on the team?

2. *Cultivating awareness of other people's stories as we work.* If we find ourselves reminded of other events in other people's lives, we can ask the people we are with if they would be interested in hearing those stories, or perhaps in hearing directly from the person we are thinking of.

Continued…

3. *Asking if we can share people's stories.* We can think about who in our network would be heartened or helped by it or interested in it in some other way. (people who come for help as well as therapists) We can then ask if we might share their story with a particular person or people and why.

4. *Reporting back on sharing stories*. We can keep notes when we share one person's story with another and keep track of any responses. We can report these back. Sometimes stories become more richly described through this process. Sometimes the beginning of a mini-league is formed as people respond to the responses

5. *Using "stuffed consultants".* Although stuffed consultants do not create community, they can introduce the idea of the importance of relationship and of input from others. It may be easier to introduce others into the work after using stuffed consultants.

6. *Using different selves as witnesses to each other.* We can ask people what their 3-year-old self would have to say if they could see certain recent developments in their adult life. Or we can use a person's "bold self" as a consultant to their "timid self."

Bigger practices (but keep thinking small):

1. Outsider witness groups or reflecting teams are great, but it may be easier to *find one person with insider knowledge who can serve as a witness.*

2. *Making documents and asking who they might be shared with*

3. *Letter writing campaigns*

4. *Writing to others with insider knowledge*

5. *"Consulting your consultants."* Introducing the possibility of making a tape or document expressly for the purpose of sharing hard won knowledge with others. Consider introducing this possibility at turning points, important accomplishments, and the end of therapy

6. *Convene a witness or witnessing group to respond to written questions, audiotapes, or videotapes.*

Continued…

When & why to think about including others

- So that people don't feel alone with a problem
- For insider knowledge
- To celebrate a unique outcome, step, or stand
- To support an emerging new identity
- To review the developments in the work as therapy nears an end—by making a consultation tape or asking someone if they would be willing to be called upon as an outsider witness or consultant.

Ways to help build in practices

- Build in regular consultations—once a week or once a month—with one other person or a team as an outsider witness
- Schedule first appointments with one other person or a team.
- Create a partnership with one colleague. Agree to respond to letters or tapes with that person.
- Create a registry that is retrievable of people who would be willing to serve as outsider witnesses.

Note:
1. This handout was developed by Jill Freedman & Gene Combs, Evanston Family Therapy Center, Ill. USA. www.narrativetherapychicago.com

Re-membering Conversations: Some History

In the mid to late 1980s Michael White began to write about some of his conversations with people who had been referred to him on account of what was called a 'delayed grief reaction' or 'pathological mourning'.

Often these people had received therapeutic treatment based on the 'saying goodbye' metaphor, that is, the requirement to accept their loss and proceed with their life detached from the deceased loved one.

People therefore experienced not only the loss of a loved one, but in this requirement to 'say goodbye' and move on', people also experienced a loss of self and identity.
Michael White became interested in conversations that were re-incorporating of the person's relationship of the lost loved one into their life, rather than a further forfeiture of the relationship.

These ideas and practices were first published in: White, M. (1988), Saying hullo again: The incorporation of the lost relationship in the resolution of grief. *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, (2), 17-55.

It was also during the mid-1980s that David Epston introduced Michael White to the work of the American cultural anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff. It was on account of this reading that he began to refer to these conversations as 're-membering conversations'.

Barbara Myerhoff wrote about her work with an elderly Jewish community in Venice, Los Angeles. These people had migrated from Europe to the United States as children and infants in the early twentieth century, ultimately retiring to California. They had not only experienced the loss of family during the Holocaust, but many had also outlived their own children or were within rare contact with them. These things, as well as poverty, inadequate housing and transportation, and gentrification of the area around them, contributed to them being, as a group, both isolated and invisibilised.

The centre of their social life was a senior citizen's centre, and what Myerhoff called 'Definitional Ceremonies', forums that are purposefully created to provide an opportunity for the performance and re-performance, to an audience and to themselves, of their preferred identity claims. The implication of others in these claims was called 're-membering' by Myerhoff.

Notes:
White, M. (1997). Narratives of therapists' lives. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.
White, M. (2007). Maps of narrative practice. New York, NY: Norton.

Re-membering Conversations: Some additional questions[1]

Figure's contribution to Person's life

- In what ways was _____ supportive of you?
- What is it that makes this support significant to you?
- Are there particular ideas or activities you enjoyed sharing or doing together?
- What was this like for you to be sharing these things with _____?
- What did you experience when you were with this person?
- What was it that _____ contributed to your life during those times?
- Were there other things that _____ brought to your life?

Person's identity through the Figure's eyes

- What do you think _____ appreciated about you that had him/her supporting you in these ways?
- What do you think _____ appreciated about you during these times?
- What did this tell _____ about you or tell them about what is important to you?

Person's contribution to Figure's life

- In what ways did you respond to this support?
- Might there have been particular things that you did to take in or receive his/her support?
- In what ways might _____ have known you were responding to his/her support?
- What might this have been like for _____, to know they were contributing to you in this way?
- What might this have meant to _____?
- What do you think might have made possible for _____ through knowing you?
- What do you think this might have brought to their life?

Implications of this for Figure's identity

- In what ways might you have made a difference to how _____ thought about themselves or saw themselves?
- What might your response have confirmed to _____ about what is important to them?

Note:

1. This handout was originally compiled by Chris Dolman).

Therapeutic Documentation

… the words in a letter don't fade and disappear the way conversation does; they endure through time and space, bearing witness to the work of therapy and immortalising it. A client can hold a letter in hand, reading and re-reading it days, months and years after the session. I have had clients tell me that they regularly re-read letters I sent them years ago to remind themselves what they endured, how far they had advanced their lives, and the extent to which they considered themselves to have changed.[1]

As well as letters recording what has happened in a session, other important uses of documents include:

- To record particular knowledges that a person needs to have available to them at times of crisis, whether these knowledges are knowledges of particular skills or knowledges of preferred identities;
- To spread the news of preferred stories to others in the person's family or community;
- To contribute to the rite of passage accompanying the end of work together.[2]

What distinguishes a narrative letter is that it is literary rather than diagnostic; it tells a story rather than being expository or explicatory. The letter engages the reader not so much by developing an argument to a logical conclusion as by inquiring what might happen next. Structured to tell the alternative story that is emerging along with therapy, it documents history, current developments, and future prospects.[3]

Notes:

1. Epston, D. (1994). Expanding the conversation. *Family Therapy Networker*, Nov/Dec. Reprinted in Epston, D. (1998). *Catching up with David Epston: a collection of narrative practice-based papers published between 1991 and 1996*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.
2. Fox, H. (2003). Using therapeutic documents: a review. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 4, p. 27.
3. Freeman, J., Epston, D., & Lobovits, D. (1997). *Playful approaches to serious problems: Narrative therapy with children and their families* (p. 112). New York, NY: Norton.

What to document[1]

- Keeping in mind the narrative metaphor, what part of the interview do you want to retell?
- Was there something that particularly caught your attention and transported you?
- Was a turning point described or a stand taken?
- Were there sparkling moments that shouldn't be lost?
- Were there clear implications concerning "absent" commitments, hopes, intentions, values?
- What will it be useful to have in more vivid, palpable circulation?
- What would it be good to be sure to remember?

Some useful kinds of documents

- THERAPY NOTES that document preferred directions in life.
- LETTERS summarizing therapy conversations, extending or thickening emerging ideas and stories and at times including people who did not attend a session.
- CERTIFICATES of membership, completion, special achievements, statements of position, etc.
- LISTS (especially for children) of accomplishments, knowledge, important people or relationships, etc.
- ARTISTIC RESPONSES of all kinds.
- COLLABORATIVE DOCUMENTS sharing insider knowledge and giving people the opportunity to make contributions to others.

Documents can be made by people in response to therapy conversations or outside of them, by therapists, by groups, and collaboratively between therapists and those coming to therapy.

Note:
1. This handout was developed by Jill Freedman & Gene Combs, Evanston Family Therapy Center, Ill. USA. www.narrativetherapychicago.com

Outsider-Witness Responses[1]

The retellings of the outsider witnesses do not constitute an account of the whole of the content of what is heard by them, but centre on those aspects of the tellings that most significantly engage their fascination.

Categories of response

1. *Identifying the expression*

As you listen to the stories of the lives of the people who are at the centre of the definitional ceremony, which expressions caught your attention or captured your imagination? Which one's struck a chord for you?

2. Describing the image

What images of people's lives, of their identities, and of the world more generally, did these expressions evoke? What did these expressions suggest to you about these people's purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams and commitments?

3. *Embodying responses*

What is it about your own life/work that accounts for why these expressions caught your attention or struck a chord for you? Do you have a sense of which aspects of your own experiences of life resonated with these expressions, and with the images evoked by these expressions?

4. *Acknowledging Transport*

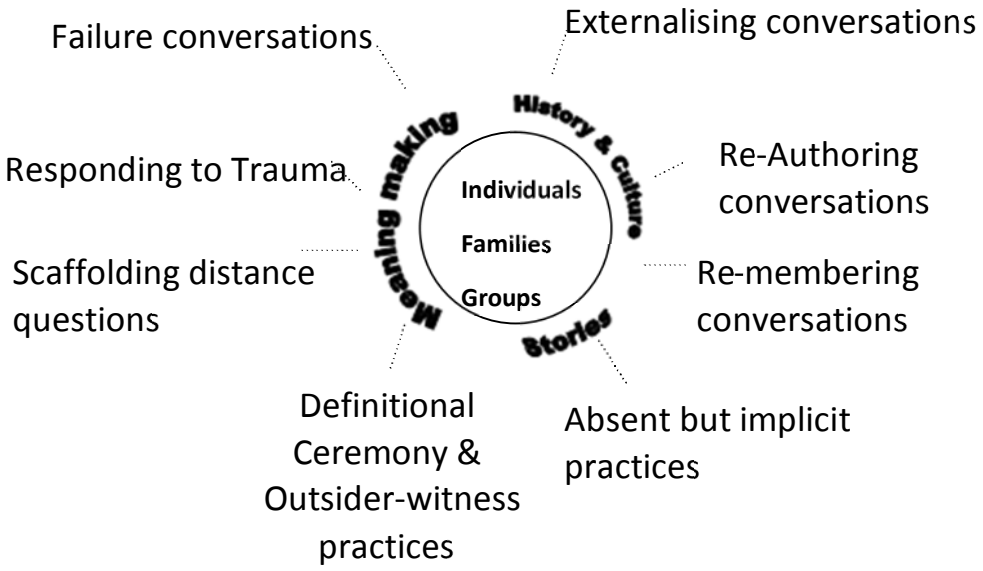
How have you been moved on account of being present to witness these expressions of life? Where has this experience taken you to, that you would not otherwise have arrived at, if you hadn't been present as an audience to this conversation? In what way have you become other than who you were on account of witnessing these expressions, and on account of responding to these stories in the way that you have?

Notes: The sample questions that I have provided here are for illustration purposes. They give an account of how outsider-witness responses might be organised in order to reproduce the class of acknowledgment that is characteristic of definitional ceremony. Many other questions can be constructed around each of these categories of outsider-witness response.

Note:

1. From Michael White Workshop Notes Published on www.dulwichcentre.com.au September 21st 2005.

Maps of Narrative Practice: an overview[1]



Note:

1. This handout was developed by Carolyn Markey and Shona Russell.

Some tips for engaging with Narrative Therapy training exercises[1]

Keep in mind the intention is to create a context for the multiple stories that shape our life, relationships, identity (hopes/values/commitments/intentions) and work.

Interviewer:

- Spirit of curiosity and the naïve enquirer;
- Avoid assumptions by asking questions that invite the person to undertake their own meaning making;
- Avoid advice giving and offering examples from your own life/work, you'll have your turn to be asked the questions (even though it is likely that you hear things in the person's story that resonate personally!);
- Keep checking in that the pace, questions and conversation is okay for the person;
- Try to take note of key words and phrases that the person has said, use the person's own language for each question.

Interviewee:

- Avoid being a passive recipient of questions – let the person know if a question feels like too much of a stretch, is uncomfortable or you don't wish to answer the question;
- Take your time and try to stay connected to the question being asked;
- Keep in mind that the questions are structured to scaffold the conversation but not in a linear fashion, if one question is tricky or doesn't connect it's a good idea to move to the next one and see what unfolds …

Narrative note-taking

- It is not necessary to write everything down as it can take your energy away from the conversation and relationship that you are engaged in;
- Use the person's words and phrases in their own local and personal way of speaking, trying not to analyse or put your own ideas/words over the top;
- Take note of which words and phrases speak to the problem story and which ones speak to alternative stories of life, relationship and identity (hopes, values, intentions, commitments);
- Take note of emerging themes and ideas to reflect them back to the person to offer opportunities for 'thickening' or gathering richer descriptions.

Note:

This handout was developed by Poh Lin Lee.

Counselling Notes

Naming the Problem
Context and History
Characterising

Effects

OK / not Ok / both?
Why?

Gaps in effects
Responses
Initiatives

What's important - values, beliefs, hopes

Some Key Ideas that shape Narrative Practice

Stories of healing

'As indigenous Australians we're going to keep telling our stories in ways that make us stronger'. (Aunty Barb Wingard, Kaurna Elder, 2001).

Injustice, trauma and relations of power

Many people we work with in the helping professions have histories of being subjected to multiple injustices, which are invariably linked to broader social issues. For many, these injustices take the form of interpersonal violence, gendered violence, and other injustices based on gender, class, culture, religion, age, sexuality, ability.

How do we respond to the effects of historical and ongoing injustices in people's lives? As receivers of stories of social suffering, what are our responsibilities? How do we ensure our conversations are just, with people who have faced so much injustice and unfairness?

Two commitments

'Of the many purposes that have shaped my explorations of therapeutic practices over the years, two are particularly relevant. One of these has to do with the imperative that I have placed on the development of therapeutic practices that decentre the voice of the therapist…that have the effect of bringing to the centre of the therapeutic endeavour some of the knowledges of life and skills of living of the people who consult therapists.

Another purpose that has been particularly relevant to my engagement with the narrative metaphor has been shaped by a commitment to deriving practices that are non-normative…in the sense that they do not, in an unquestioned and automatic way, simply reinforce and reproduce the valued forms of mainstream culture.' (Michael White, 2011)

People have skills and know-how

People have skills and know-how, generated in the history of their lives and found in their families and communities, that can become relevant for addressing their current predicaments. These skills and knowledges are present in the everyday stories of people's lives. Through the re-telling of stories, people re-familiarise themselves with these skills and knowledges, and their values, hopes and intentions for their lives.

Some Key Ideas that shape Narrative Practice continued…

Stories shape life

People are meaning-makers – we go through life actively ascribing to meanings to the experiences of our lives. The stories we carry with us through our lives – about ourselves, our relationships, other people, our communities – provide a frame or lens through which we interpret the events of our lives. These stories are influential, they do not just reflect life, they shape life. They influence our memory, our perceptions, our feelings, thoughts and actions.

Life is multi-storied

Commonly people present with problem-focused, deficit accounts of their lives. People feel trapped in one-dimensional lives. However, life is multi-storied, not single storied. There are many dimensions to people's lives, and there are many stories unfolding at the same time. Some stories are more dominant than others, and people's lives are also full of events that go un-storied. When subordinated stories become more richly known to the person, further meaning-making occurs and other conclusions about life and identity become apparent, and other possibilities for action become available.

Stories exist in a broader context

The stories people tell about their lives do not exist in a vacuum, they are shaped by 'cultural stories' or discourses, which make possible different versions of events. So whenever people engage in meaning-making, they are drawing on cultural discourses. Narrative practice is interested in exposing discourses that are problematic for a person, so that they can be evaluated and space for alternatives can be created.

Identity is social and relational

A person's identity is not fixed nor internal but it is a social achievement, created in relationships with others. It is relational, distributed, performed, and fluid. People's actions are shaped by their intentions, values, hopes, principles, in contrast to naturalistic accounts of identity.

Rich Story Development

Narrative practice seeks to acknowledge the problem stories of people's lives – what they are concerned about and contending with in their lives and how these are affecting them and others. It also seeks to bring forward the alternative stories of people's lives – their responses to what they have been through, and other stories of life that are more in line with their preferred sense of identity. These can also shape life!

Some Key Ideas that shape Narrative Practice continued…

Connections with Others

Narrative practice seeks to provide opportunities for people to be linked to others through sharing skills and know-how and contributing to others lives, and through themes around what is important in their lives. It's also about finding audiences to people's preferred stories.

Practitioner Positioning

Narrative practice endeavours to focus on the person's circumstances, concerns and what they might be hoping for; offer conversations that are interesting and generative of the person's curiosity about their own life; emphasises the person's own skills, knowledges, meanings & experiences; collaborative; accountable to the person's feedback about the conversations; hopeful and useful.

Note:

This handout was developed by Chris Dolman.

Exercise: 'How stories shape us'[1]

Topic of the Interview

Please think of a pleasing story about you that has been told a few times – a story that others have told about you that you have liked. This might be a story about a particular skill you have, or some personal quality you express in your life, or what other people appreciate about you in your communities, family or work places.

1. Can you tell me a bit about the story you've chosen?
2. Do you remember when this story got started? What were some of the events that contributed to …….. (this story) taking shape and being told?
3. Can you say something about the people who had a sense of this or had a part in telling or talking about this story? Who were they, how did you know them?
4. What has it been like for you to have …….. told about you? How has it maybe added to your life?
5. Would you say this story fits or not, or a bit of both, with how you may see yourself at times?
6. Has this …… been ongoing or is it less influential than it once was?
7. Does the story reflect at all, things that are important to you more generally or things that you hold dear in life or not?
8. Are there particular places/people this would be more known to than other people or places?
9. Do you have any ideas about the direction you would like this story to take in the future?

After two interviews, discuss the following

- In focussing on one storyline, what did it have you thinking about other ideas or stories that could be told about yourself?
- How did the questions reflect the narrative understanding that a story is made up of a number of events connected over time according to a theme or plot?
- How do these questions relate to the idea that stories not only 'reflect' life but 'shape' life?

Note:

1. This exercise was originally developed by the Narrative Teaching Partnership (Adelaide, South Australia: Shona Russell, Carolyn Markey, Sue Mann, Maggie Carey and Alice Morgan.

Exercise: Externalising Conversations[1] (Statement of Position Map no.1)

Think of something that is slightly problematic for you in your work or life.

Interviewee to briefly describe the problem to interviewer. Please ask the following questions to interweave the person's words to the questions.

Category One: Naming the problem

Negotiating an experience-near and particular description of the problem

1. I'm interested to understand a bit more about when these concerns started. Can I ask you some questions about this?
2. What was going on around you at the time the problem started?
3. Can you think of particular circumstances that may have influenced the concerns you are having now?
4. Are there particular things that are happening when it occurs?
5. Does the problem arise more often when you're with particular people?
6. Is this problem more present in particular places or situations?
7. How long have these concerns been around?
8. Some people say it helps to find a name to refer to this problem, what name fits or how might you characterise it?
9. In describing [this problem], what mental image or picture might come to mind?

Category Two: Exploring the Effects of the problem

… on various aspects of the person's life and relationships

10. Is it okay if I ask you some questions about the ways [this problem] has impacted on your life?
11. How does [this problem] affect the daily tasks that are important to you?

Continued…

12. In what ways does [this problem] affect your relationships with those around you?
13. How does [this problem] affect how you think about yourself or see yourself?
14. In what ways does it affect how you treat yourself?
15. Does it affect how you feel physically in any way?
16. What do you notice about how [this problem] gets in the way of what you are wanting in life? OR
17. How does [this problem] affect the hopes and plans you have for your life?

Category Three: Evaluating the Effects of the problem

Inviting the person to take a position in relation to the problem

18. What do you think about the effects [this problem] is having on your life?
19. Is this okay with you or not okay, or a bit of both, that [this problem] is affecting you in these ways?
20. So where do you stand on how [this problem] is affecting your life?

Category Four: Justifying the Evaluation

Enabling people to begin to speak about their values, beliefs, hopes, dreams, principles, purposes

21. Why is this okay/not okay for you?
22. Why do you feel this way about how [this problem] is affecting you?

Note:

1. This exercise was originally developed by the Narrative Teaching Partnership (Adelaide, South Australia 2006): Shona Russell, Carolyn Markey, Sue Mann, Maggie Carey and Alice Morgan.

Exercise: Questions to develop stories[1]

Inquire about those details of experience that enhance experiential involvement.
(Questions therapists ask themselves)

- What more do you want to see, hear, or feel in order to step more fully into the experience?
- What can you ask to invite the person to be more involved in the experience?

Develop richly described story lines that extend over large stretches of time.
(Questions for people who have come for help)

- Can you tell me about a past time that is related to what you have just been describing?
- What are the roots of that experience we have just been talking about?

Ask about meaning.
(Questions for people who have come for help)

- What does that mean to you?
- What does this event say about what you give value to or stand for?
- What is important about that? Why is it important?

Ask about people.
(Questions for people who have come for help)

- Who supported this way of doing things?
- Who else was there?
- Who is important in your going in this direction?

Continued…

Invite multiple points of view.
(Questions for people who have come for help)

- Can you tell me what your partner saw, and what that meant to them?
- What would the eight-year-old you notice if they could watch that scene playing out?
- What might you learn if you could watch that argument as if you were outside the room looking in?

Inquire about knowledge, skills, and abilities.
(Questions for people who have come for help)

- What did you have to know in order to handle that situation? What is it like to appreciate that you had that knowledge? What difference might it make for your relationship in the future to be able to rely on that knowledge?
- How would you name the skill that you showed in getting out of that mess? Where did you learn that skill?
- Is this an ability that you developed, or have you had it as long as you can remember? Have there been other times in your relationship when it has played an important role?

Note:
1. This handout was developed by Jill Freedman & Gene Combs, Evanston Family Therapy Center, Ill. USA. www.narrativetherapychicago.com

Exercise: Re-Authoring Conversations Describing a story about a new skill, richly

The person being interviewed is to think about and describe a new skill in their work or life that they are pleased about. Try to think of a fairly recent event. This may be trying something new for the first time or something else you have done that is significant to you. Please choose an event you are happy to talk about and explore.

1. Please begin by describing what it is you are pleased about.
2. Can you tell me some more about this?
3. Where were you when this happened?
4. What were some of the things that you did to get ready for this?
5. Were others involved and were they important in the steps you took?
6. Can you describe in more detail what you actually did?
7. Can you remember what was important to you about doing ……. at the time?
8. When you think about these things that are important to you ……., is there a word or phrase that would capture what it is you've been describing?
9. Do you think these things say something about values that are important to you?
10. Thinking back, can you think of other times in your life when this has been important to you?
11. Could you please tell me more about this event in the past?
12. What is it like to make this connection between this event in the past and now?
13. What might it be like for you, if you were to keep connected to these values formed in the past?
14. What might it make more possible?
15. What might other people notice if you were to continue to take steps in the direction you have described?

Note:

1. This exercise was originally developed by the Narrative Teaching Partnership (Adelaide, South Australia 2006): Shona Russell, Carolyn Markey, Sue Mann, Maggie Carey and Alice Morgan.

Exercise: Re-Authoring Conversations Reducing the influence of a Problem[1]

Take a moment to think about a problem you are facing in your work.

1. Can you think of a time recently where you might have resisted or made an attempt to reduce the influence of the problem in your work and life?

2. What was happening at the time? Who was there? Can you describe the place?

3. What did you do? What did you say? What did you think? What did you try?

4. Was there a particular idea, knowledge or skill that you used during this time to resist or reduce the problem's influence?

5. What would you name this particular initiative, skill or knowledge?

6. Does it have a colour, sensation or something else? How might you describe ……..?

7. What happened in this moment to the influence/presence of the problem? Can you describe it as an image or metaphor?

8. Can you tell a story that would help describe the history of …… in your life and work? Has …… been with you for a long time or has it more recently arrived?

9. How do you invite …… to stand with you in your work?

10. What would others notice when …… is present in your work? What would they see you doing? What would they hear you saying? What would they notice about the atmosphere or the way you carry yourself?

Continued…

11. Which individuals, institutions/structures in your context might support or value ……?

12. Does …… have allies or other skills and knowledges that it calls upon to support you in resisting/reducing and standing up to the problem?

13. What does this ability to resist/reduce or stand up to the problem speak to what is important to you?

14. Is …… linked to any particular metaphors, cultural or family practices or legacies that you are a part of?

15. Who might you have learnt …… from or who might you have learned this with?

16. What difference would it make to the influence of the problem if you were to carry …… with you? To your work and the lives of others?

17. Do you have any ideas of how you might be able to stay connected with …… as you move forward in this commitment to resist/reduce or stand up to the problem?

18. How did you experience this conversation? Was there a difference between the conversation about the problem and this conversation? What stands out to you, surprises you or leaves you with some discomfort?

19. Was there a question you wished had been asked of you?

Note:

1. This exercise was originally developed by Poh Lin Lee.

Exercise: Re-Authoring (Landscape of Action)

Think of something that you have done recently that is a bit 'outside the ordinary' for you, and that you were pleased about.

1. Tell me a bit about what happened – what did you actually do that was a bit 'outside the ordinary'?
2. Where were you? What else was happening at the time? Who else was around?
3. What is it that makes it 'outside the ordinary' for you?

4. How hard was it?
5. What do you think made it possible for you to do it?

6. How did you prepare yourself for it?
7. What steps did you take to get yourself ready to do what you did?
8. What were you thinking about at the time that made it a bit easier?
9. What things did you say to yourself that helped you?

10. What do you think was the turning point that led you to be able to do what you did?
11. What might have provided a basis or foundation for you to do this?
12. Have you ever made similar preparations or taken similar steps?

13. What skills did you have to develop in order to do this?
14. What name would you give these steps?

15. What do you think your next steps might be in maintaining this development in your life?
16. Do you have any ideas as to how you might bring this more into your life?
17. Does this development now evoke different images of your life in the future?

Note

1. This exercise was originally compiled by Chris Dolman and Carolyn Markey.

Exercise: Re-Authoring (Landscape of Identity)[1]

Think of a character trait that you are pleased that you bring to your work.

1. What is this character trait you bring to your work?
2. When you think of [character trait] could you tell me a little more about it?
3. To what purpose have you put [character trait] to?
4. How would you like to make use of [character trait] the future?
5. What might I notice about your work that reflects these traits of yours?
6. What does using your [character trait] in this way say about what is important to you?
7. Why is it important for you to use [character trait] in this way?
8. What are the values that you hold that support you to use [character trait] in this way?
9. How does what you are saying fit with some of what you hopes for your work/life?
10. Who else may not be surprised that you hold these hopes for your work/life? How would they know this about you?
11. What might these hopes for your work/life reflect about what you stand for in your life?
12. What might they say about what you are committed to in your life/work?

Note:

1. This exercise was compiled by Chris Dolman and Carolyn Markey.

Exercise: Re-membering Conversations[1]

Topic of the Re-membering conversation

Think about someone you like and respect who wouldn't be surprised that you chose the kind of work you are involved in. It might be someone from your early life, a carer, a family member, a grandparent or parent, a teacher or an old friend. This person may not be alive any longer.

The interviewer will use the following questions to facilitate a re-membering conversation around this topic.

1. What might be some of the values or beliefs that you hold that possibly led you to be working in this field?
2. Who would recognise and appreciate some of these values you hold?
3. Can you tell me a bit about this person … their first name, how you knew/know them, are they still alive, any special things about them, how often do you see them, what might you do with them?
4. How might (person's name) have come to know these things about you?
5. What were some of the things they might have seen you doing, that would have told them that you hold these beliefs and values?
6. How did knowing that person (name them) possibly influence aspects of your life?
7. Can you think of some things that you do that may have been possibly due to their influence?
8. What do you think it might mean to them to know that you do these things?
9. What do you think it means to them to know you?
10. In what ways do you think you may have contributed to their life?
11. If you were to see yourself now, through that person's eyes, what might you be pleased about in yourself?
12. Are there times when you have a conversation (real or in your head) with that person? Are there times when you'd want to tell them things?
13. Does their 'voice' influence or help or encourage you at any time?
14. What difference might it make to you if you were to think of their influence as you do what you do? What might this make more possible?

Note:

1. This exercise was originally developed by the Narrative Teaching Partnership (Adelaide, South Australia 2006): Shona Russell, Carolyn Markey, Sue Mann, Maggie Carey and Alice Morgan.

Exercise: Re-membering, version 2[1]

1. Ask questions to identify a person from the past (or a public figure, author, etc.) who would recognize, support and affirm the things that a unique outcome reflects if s/he were here to do so. Examples:

- Who from some time in your past would be least surprised to see you doing and feeling the things that you have been talking about?
- Was there a teacher, a neighbor, a relative or other person when you were younger who appreciated the skills you are using in this recent event?
- You said that this incident showed that you value _____. What time in your past showed that you valued _____? Who from back then most noticed what you stood for?
- Is there someone you haven't actually met who would appreciate and support the step you are taking if somehow they knew about it?

2. Ask questions to bring forth details of the story of the past relationship or the basis of the hypothetical relationship. Examples:

- What happened that let you know they appreciated and/or understood you in this way?
- Is there a particular incident that really illustrates this aspect of your relationship with that person…or was it a lot of little interchanges over time? Can you tell me about it?
- If you haven't actually interacted with this person, what makes you think that there would be appreciation or support if you did?

3. Ask questions inviting the person to describe the contributions the other made to his or her life. Examples:

- How did that person contribute to your life?
- What did you learn through your relationship with that person?
- What did that person show you it was possible to do or think or feel?

Continued…

4. Ask questions inviting the person to describe the other's perception of them in ways that might contribute to identity conclusions. Examples:

- If I could look at you through that person's eyes, what would I see?
- What did that person feel in their heart toward you?
- What did that person know about you that you sometimes don't know about yourself?
- What did that person observe you doing that led him or her to believe you stand for _____?

5. Ask questions inviting the person to describe the contributions he or she made to the other. Examples:

- What did you contribute to that person's life?
- How is or was that person's life different because of knowing you?
- If you haven't actually interacted, what do you imagine your contribution would be if you did meet?

6. Ask questions inviting the person to describe his or her perception of the other in ways that might contribute to identity conclusions. Examples:

- What do you most appreciate about the person?
- What does he or she stand for that is important to you?
- What do you know about this person that you would wish them to know about themselves?

Continued…

7. Ask questions inviting the person to keep the other closer as a member of their life.

Examples:

- What would you be awakened to about yourself if you kept the other's vision of you present?
- What difference might it make in your daily work if you experienced having that person right there with you in your heart?
- If you were to see yourself right now through that person's eyes, what would you most appreciate about yourself? If you saw yourself this way from now on, what difference would that make?
- Can you imagine holding that person's knowledge of you a little closer during difficult times? What difference might it make if you did?

Note:
1. This handout was developed by Jill Freedman & Gene Combs, Evanston Family Therapy Center, Ill. USA. www.narrativetherapychicago.com

Exercise: Re-Authoring & Outsider-Witness Practices[1]

Gather into small groups

Person A: Choose a picture that reflects a value that you hold precious in your work. Take a few minutes to think about a small story or time when this value was with you.

Person B: To interview Person A using the questions below.

Others: Position themselves as outsider witnesses and listen to the story that Person A is telling, taking note of words or phrases that resonate with them.

Person B to interview Person A

1. Could you tell me about the picture you chose, and the value that you would like to speak about today?

2. Could you tell me a story about how [this value] is present in your work?

3. In what other ways do you bring [this value] into your work?

4. Why is it important for you to use [this value] in these ways?

5. Who might notice this about you?

6. What might others experience from you when [this value] is present?

7. What do you think this might be like for them? In what ways might this make a contribution to them?

8. Who, from the history of your life, would not be surprised to hear you speak about [this value]?

9. How would they know this about you?

10. What do you think has supported you to hold onto [this value]?

11. What might [this value] reflect about what you hope for your work/life?

Person B to then interview Others using the four categories of outsider-witness enquiry

1. The expression

- As you listened to [Person A], what did you hear that stood out for you, or that struck a chord with you, or that you were drawn to?
- What were the particular words or expressions that caught your attention?

2. The image

- What did the story suggest to you about what might be important to [Person A], or what they stand for in life?
- What image did this evoke for you?

3. Resonance

- You have spoken about what stood out for you in hearing [Person A's] story. What is it about your own life /work that has you being drawn to these expressions?

4. Transport

- Where do you think this conversation has taken you?
- What might be more possible as a result of hearing [Person A's] story?
- What aspects of [Person A's] story would you like to stay with you?

Rotate positions and repeat the process.

Exercise: Looking back, looking forward[1]

Please think of three key learnings / discoveries / possibilities.

Choose one that you would like to speak about. In small groups, take turns interviewing one another using the following questions as a guide:

1. What name would you give this learning / discovery / possibility?
2. Please describe it in more detail.
3. When did it take place?
4. In what way is it was different from what you already knew?
5. Why is it significant to you?
6. What difference might this make in your practice?
7. What difference do you hope it might make to the people who consult you?
8. In what ways does it influence your commitment to your work?
9. What is one next step you might do in taking this up in your journey?

Note:
1. This exercise originally developed by David Denborough.

Reflecting on the training exercises

1. What was it like for the person asking the questions?

2. In what way might they be different from the types of questions you ask currently in your work?

3. What did you notice about the effects of the questions?

4. Did something stand out in particular in the responses you heard to your questions?

5. What was it like to be asked these questions?

6. Did you find the questions moving too fast, too slow or something else?

7. What difficulties did you face in answering the questions?

8. Were there particular questions that sparked your curiosity?

9. What was it like to observe the conversation?

10. What effect do you think this form of curiosity, questioning or co-research might have on the people who consult with you in your context?

11. In what ways might this offer possibilities or ideas in your own context?

12. In what ways might you be able to adapt the questions for your context?

Note:

1. These training notes have been influenced by the work of Michael White and David Epston, and have been developed to enable practitioners to develop their skills in narrative therapy. This exercise developed by Poh Lin Lee.

References / Resources

On-line

Dulwich Centre general site: www.dulwichcentre.com.au

Online courses: www.narrativetherapyonline.com

Free videos on last Friday of every month: http://dulwichcentre.com.au/category/friday-afternoons/

Online bookshop and registration for training events: www.narrativetherapylibrary.com

Searchable bibliography of narrative therapy writings: www.narrativetherapylibrary.com/bibliography

Receive regular news of projects, publications, events by subscribing to Dulwich Centre Emails news:

www.dulwichcentre.com.au/email-news.html

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