The Fairy Tale – A Form of Organisational Inquiry

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Having started working with fairy tales by inviting groups of facilitators to use them as a way of chartering their journeys and learnings, we have also found the fairy tale to be powerful within organisational contexts. After describing the genre, its characteristics and reviewing where fairy tales fit into the wider management literature, the article will provide as a case study a practical example of how fairy tale has been used. The article concludes with reflections on the fairy tale genre and how it provides opportunities for safe, humorous and appreciative frames of inquiry within as short a time frame as 45 minutes.

Introduction

Once upon a time, in a land far away, at an Australasian Facilitators Network (AFN) conference, I began collecting fairy tales. Facilitator fairy tales. The great interest and response led Simon Kneebone and I to continue by inviting facilitators to co-create fairy tales in Sydney and Melbourne. Facilitators working creatively and spontaneously together in small groups produced a collection of eighteen facilitator fairy tales which we’ve compiled and illustrated to share across the world (Rixon and Kneebone 2007).

Figure 1: Illustration from the story of ‘Esol Gnah’ – A facilitator fairy tale inviting us to consider that no matter the struggle or challenge, people are ‘doing the best they can’.

Do you remember how as children you learned about the world through fairy tales?
Perhaps you have forgotten? Either way, we’ve found that as adults we carry a wealth of understanding and intuition about the fairy tale genre which makes working with fairy tale surprisingly simple. As in the opening of this article, the words once upon a time invite and connect us into a whole intuitive realm of story telling: the realm of fairy story.

Some of the essential elements of the fairy tale are:

1. the depiction of magical or marvelous events as a valid part of human experience
2. the incorporation of fantasy as arguably the most salient formal or stylistic feature of this genre
3. the confrontation and resolution of a problem, frequently by the embarkment on a quest
4. a happy ending, which is so fundamental to the genre that it may be regarded as a definitive feature and
5. encouraging the audience to identify strongly with the central protagonist, who is presented in an unambiguous way (Jones 2002).

You might be thinking – fairy tales? But you may have experienced, when inviting groups to share their experiences and stories around a particular inquiry, an inability of individuals to tell their story. The reasons may vary from culture and group dynamics to ‘storyability’ and whether the person’s experience can yet be told as a story (Boje 2007). It appears that the humble fairy tale has much to offer in being able to provide the opportunity for articulation of ‘what can’t be said’ to ‘what can’ – as individuals go from fantasy to fact (Moxnes 2006).

There has been considerable exploration of the fairy tale through literary and psychological/psychoanalytic lenses (Bettleheim 1976; Luthi 1976; Tatar 1990; Jones 2002), but the use of fairy tale is not entirely new to organisational and management literature. The phenomenal success of the popular book *The One Minute Manager* by Blanchard and Johnson (1983) has been attributed to its fairy tale structure (Monin and Monin 2005). Other popular management books such as *Fish!* by Stephen Lundin and Harry Paul (1998), and *Who Moved My Cheese?* by Spencer Johnson (1998), have also worked with story as allegory in a way similar to the fairy tale.

There are many of the examples of the use of existing popular culture fairy tales in organizations (for examples see Klenke (2002), Moxnes (2006), Smith and Simmons (1983)).

Our work differs. It follows on from that of Dick and Dalmau (1994), where groups are invited to create their own unique fairy tale incorporating elements of story and character that they feel are relevant (See Appendix – A Facilitators’ Guide to Working with Fairy Tale). Using fairy tale in this way provides rich opportunities for managers and team members not only to explore hidden and assumed meaning, as well as a safe and often humorous space for exploring potentially conflict-ridden issues. Working with fairy tale aligns strongly with the Appreciative Inquiry assumption of ‘an organization being a mystery to be embraced’ as opposed to being ‘a problem to be solved’ (Hammond 1998).

**Using Fairy Tale in an Organisation**

Having framed the use of fairy tale with small groups of facilitators to access the ‘being’ of facilitation, it wasn’t long before an opportunity arose to explore it within an organisation which had contracted some consulting work utilising story as a means of collecting and
gaining an understanding around staff members’ attitudes and behaviours towards flexible working options.

As we proceeded to run story circles within the organisation, people voiced similar concerns: ‘It’s about what’s not said’. And, when asked or invited to share more, group members would be unable to articulate it, saying again ‘It’s about what’s not said’ and nod knowingly at each other.

Reflecting on my own experiences using fairy tale with facilitators, I took what would seem to many a risk. I invited a group of senior male managers to spend 45 minutes creating group fairy tales describing the history of flexible working options within the organisation, which were then used to debrief and talk about ‘what’s real’. Surprisingly, at the end of the session, the feedback was extremely positive and the groups suggested ways to make the session even better. I re-ran the fairy tale process with another group of managers, which elicited the following fairy tale, illustrating the surprising results of the group fairy tale process:

Once upon a time in a land far, far away there was a kingdom. And in that kingdom there was a King and Queen (of course). One day they had two little princesses, identical twins. The ironic thing about this is that they were born at exactly the same time (it was a wide birth canal). And so there was a big dilemma: when the King and Queen died, who which one was going to take over as Queen? So it was decided that they would both rule together. Now the thing was that there was a magician in the Kingdom as well. He put a spell on the Princesses which made one of them was very nice – she was British (of course). The other one was evil. Things went along. Whenever the bad princess did something, the good princess was always there to counteract it. So everything went along nicely for years and years. Now the magician was a little bit upset about this, so he arranged that when the King and Queen went out one day they would get ‘tomatoed’ by a big rock falling off a cliff. That meant that the two princesses would get to be Queens of this Kingdom. Now after all this, of course, along comes the good prince. He sees the two princesses and he falls in love with the good princess. But of course they are identical. Of course, he marries the one he thinks is the good one. He is a prince and thinks he can spot the goodness in her. The day after the wedding, he wakes up and there at the foot of the bed is the magician, turned to stone. The prince looks at his wife and wonders if he’s married the good princess or the bad princess. And that’s a fairytale.

After the group had presented their fairy tale to the larger group, I asked the others what they had heard and how it related to the organisation. For them, the evil princess was one division of the organisation, and the good princess was another. What resulted was a very powerful story illustrating the factions that were currently at play at senior levels within the organisation. Amazed, and somewhat curious as to this groups’ interpretation, I returned to the original group and asked them (having heard the second groups’ interpretation) to describe what their fairy tale was ‘actually’ about. Surprisingly, for members of the original group, the fairy tale was ‘actually’ about two ladies job-sharing: one lady’s strengths were matched by the other’s weaknesses. The magician being turned to stone, and the prince’s dilemma of not knowing which princess he had married (the good or evil one), illustrated their uncertainty as to how this new job-share arrangement would work.

Of all the ‘naturalistic stories’ collected throughout the project, it was inviting groups to create a fairy tale which illustrated most effectively those areas where the flexible working
options within the organisation were being met with challenges and difficulties. Ironically, the way this fairy tale ends, in a state where things could go either way, is where this organisation finds itself in regard to its leadership and the continuation of the flexible working options.

**Conclusion**

Creating fairy tales is a process which not only provides opportunities for creative, coherent storytelling in safe and humorous environments, but also enables exploration of meaning and interpretation within groups in surprising and insightful ways. With the humble fairy tale offering a process that can be conducted within as short a time as 45 minutes, it offers a practice that I believe can easily be augmented into a productive and positive organisational inquiry.

**References**


**Appendix: The Facilitators Guide to Working with Fairy Tale**

So how do you facilitate the development of a group fairy tale? Where possible, keep the process simple and provide minimal instruction, drawing on the innate, intuitive understanding that we all have of the fairy tale genre. We’ve found the process works best with small groups of three to five people and takes approximately 45 minutes for one fairy tale.

The following steps describe the process in detail:

Before the session: Work out how you will frame the use of fairy tale in terms of intentionality, purpose and context for your own session.
Step 1: Ask the group ‘How does a fairy tale begin?’ expecting the answer ‘Once upon a time...’.

Step 2: Ask the group ‘How does a fairy tale end?’ expecting the answer ‘and they all lived happily ever after’.

Step 3: Invite the group to brainstorm some common fairy tales they know. What are they? Who are the characters within?

Step 4: Having explored Steps 1–3, you can now confidently say that the group already knows everything they need to know and more about working with fairy tale.

Step 5: Invite the group to create a fairy tale which explores the framing question. Some examples of framing questions are:

- Create a fairy tale chronicling your experience and journey as a facilitator...
- Create a fairy tale which tells the history of flexible working options in this organisation...
- Make up a fairy story about this organisation.
- Create a fairy story about the history of this organisation or team...

Step 6: Allow groups to work on the stories until completed.

Step 7: Invite each group to share their fairy story with other groups.

Step 8: Debrief the fairy stories. What was heard? What resonated? How did the stories relate to their experiences? How does it relate to your intentionality and purpose of the session?

Finally, while the fairy tale genre is renowned for its ‘and they all lived happily ever after’ ending, it is important to consider the perspective offered by Chris Argyris (Professor Emeritus, Harvard Business School): false positivity quickly shuts down learning and an emphasis on being condescendingly positive assumes that staff can only function in a cheerful world, even if the cheerfulness is false (Argyris 1994). While focussing on providing opportunities for learning and exploration, groups may also engage with humour in the alternate and even slightly quirky fairy tale ending of ‘Happily N’ever after’

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**FAVOURITE QUOTES ABOUT STORY FROM THIS ISSUE’S CONTRIBUTORS**

‘Think about the word ‘destroy’” the man said. ‘Do you know what it is? De-story. Destroy. Destory. You see. And restore. That’s re-story. Do you know that only two things that have been proven to help survivors of the Holocaust. Massage is one. Telling their story is another. Being touched and touching. Telling your story is touching. It sets you free.’

Francesca Lia Block in *Dangerous Angels*