

Recipe for creating a group fairy tale

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The Fairy Tale Genre

The fairy tale genre is a specific form of story telling.

Many of you might remember how, as kids, you learnt about the world through fairy tales. Or maybe you have forgotten, most likely you have. Whichever, what we've found is that as adults we carry within a wealth of understanding and intuition about the Fairy tale genre. It is this understanding and intuition about the fairy tale genre which makes working with the fairy tale surprisingly simple.

Some of the essential qualities of the fairy tale are¹:

1. Fairy tales depict magical or marvelous events or phenomena as a valid part of human experience
2. The incorporation of fantasy may be regarded as the most salient formal or stylistic feature of this genre
3. The confronting and resolving of a problem, frequently by the undertaking of a quest as essential to the fairy tale
4. A happy ending is such a basic and important aspect of the genre, it may be regarded as a third definitional feature
5. The audience is encouraged to identify strongly with the central protagonist, who is presented in an unambiguous way

A great question we received by email:

“I guess a fairytale is necessarily MUCH simpler than a regular adult story, and MUCH MUCH less complicated than real life. What's the trick to stay simple?”

William Blake had a great quote “Enough, or too much”.

In our opinion the trick to staying simple is in providing minimal instructions, and drawing on the innate, intuitive understanding that we as adults have of the fairy tale genre.

¹ Sourced from “The fairy tale: The magic mirror of the imagination, Steven Swann Jones, Routledge, 2002”

The Process

We've found this process works best with small groups of 3-5.

The process takes approximately 45 minutes for a small group to create one medium-rare fairy tale. Longer if you want revisions and a "well done".

Step 0: 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 ever after".

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

Step 4: Having explored Steps 1-3 you can confidently say that the group already knows everything they need to know, and, more that they haven't realized yet, about working with fairy tale.

Step 5: Invite the group, based on the framing question 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 organization..."
- "Make up a fairy story about this organization."²
- "Create a fairy story about the history of this organization or team..."

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

Step 7: Invite each group to share their fairy story with other members of the group.

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?

² Sourced from "To tame a unicorn – recipes for cultural intervention, Bob Dick and Tim Dalmau, Interchange, 1994 3rd edition"

Variations and Other Spices

Fact first then to fiction?

When it comes to creating a fairy tale a group has some choices. They can either use an existing experience and transform this into a fairy tale, or they can work creatively and see what fairy tale emerges.

Providing this option can often be helpful to groups.

This can be as simple as inviting a group to first explore and share some experiences they have had around the framing question and then launch into the fairy story process previously described.

A separate process doesn't necessarily need to be used for this, as often when invited to think either of their own experience or work creatively, some groups will naturally share an experience which they would like to work with and transform into a fairy story.

What about illustration?

A feature of the fairy story books from our childhood was the illustration. Illustration can be incorporated in the process in a number of ways.

A member of the group or someone invited along specifically, can quickly sketch a picture relating to each story. This can be done on butcher's paper with thick textas as soon as each story has been told.

It should be very simple – just get drawn a few of the elements from the story. It can be done in the form of a 'book cover' for each story - this will involve eliciting a story title from the group. They can work on a title while the picture is being drawn.

The drawing should take as little time as possible, losing as little of the group's momentum. Although this is difficult in the timing and pacing of the session the pictures created do give the group a mnemonic for each story. This helps when there are a number of stories being created and told at a session, and in recalling them later.

It also gives the group something tangible to represent their story - their efforts and thinking in creating it.

Alternatively, illustrations can be produced after the session and added to the written up version. There are other possibilities – using a number of illustrations per story, a comic strip version perhaps.

The role of the illustration needs to be considered.

Illustrations done in the session may be more meaningful to the group than ones produced afterwards, perhaps by someone who wasn't at the session. On the other hand, more finished artwork added later can show that the story is valued and forms a stand-alone Fairy Story. These are things you may need to weigh up.

How you decide to use illustration will depend upon what you - and the group - see as the purpose of your Fairy Story exercise.