

Using Story to Carve Out Spaces in Which the Organisation Can Start to Breathe

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Stories give, rather than take, time. This is a special attribute, much neglected, but to be treasured, in a work world where we're inclined to finish each other's sentences, competing for time and space in the organisational agenda and politics. This short essay explores some different ways of opening up the neglected or squashed breathing and story spaces in organisations – invitation, corridors and stairs, journeys, exhibits and objects, silence and empty spaces, importing the story spaces crafted by others, as a lens through which to view the organisation. All of these, and many others, are ways to reorganise time, space, rhythm, relationship and perspective at work.

How often have you been in a meeting where the air has been sucked out of the room because somebody else has jumped in and squashed the space to finish a thought or a sentence from the conversation?

We're all inclined, it seems, to lean in and crowd organisational workspaces, finishing or challenging each other's sentences, competing for airtime. There seems to be a clash between the urgency of the organisational timetable and the slower, more gentle rhythms needed for effective encounter.

The strength of stories in organisational settings is that they give shape and shared understanding. They give, rather than take, time. It's not only in the telling that stories add strength, but in the finding, shaping, and paying attention to those that lie hidden or are muted. Stories are about 'un-judgement', about moving people from goals and endings, from competition to win the opinion 'upper hand'. Stories offer a chance to drift – or nudge – towards an examination of meanings, shadow meanings and perspective.

In my work with Organisational spaces and story, we've learned a lot. Here are a few of the ways in which we've learned to pay attention to crafting story spaces, temporary or permanent, inhabited or pathways:

1. Invitation:

What kind of invitation do you issue: formal, informal, verbal and physical...?

I recently had a meeting at a foundation which specializes in research into work. The reception desk was a kind of split-curved mirror. When you walked in front of it, your body split at the waist: the upper half walked in one direction, while three distorted pairs of legs walked the other way.

As Appreciative Inquirers are no doubt sensitive to, the wording of an invitation to any kind of meeting or encounter needs warmth and welcome which invite the individual to bring their whole self. The same can be said for the physical reception space. The silent story painted on the canvas of the reception area engages or disengages the visitor.

We learned an important lesson about presence when doing oral histories with eminent founders of a development bank. They were surprised, overwhelmed and often a bit alarmed

by our warm interest in their own stories and career trajectories up until the point they'd joined the bank.

The two important things we noticed were first, that simply the act of telling stories that they (and others) took for granted was moving; and that when the teller insisted on moving straight into the story of the bank, and did not dwell on their own stories, the reminiscence was much less rich. Since then we've consistently remarked that the more informal invitation to be present personally, as well as professionally, must be extended for any kind of conversation to work.

A gentle way to invite people in groups to weave a space both personal and professional (both qualities are essential for a story space at work) is to use ice breakers thoughtfully.

Recently, we held the first meeting of a group advising on the value of museums, libraries and archives to business. The meeting was held in a rather ordinary meeting room, which we dressed a little with postcards, pin boards and other slightly oblique objects, creating a little mystery. We asked people to introduce themselves by name and institution, and by their favourite museum, library or archive. We didn't say 'most inspiring', we just asked for 'favourite'.

Rather than rolling eyes, we got personal favourites, often from childhood. The emotion and the energy in the room heightened as people were given permission, without being pushed, to express themselves personally. These 'ways in' are part of the story spaces we can construct, artfully and subtly, in organisational contexts.

Some questions you might find useful to consider:

What are the rituals of encounter and departure which, in your daily working context, frame each conversation, wherever it takes place? How do they give a little breathing space to you, or to colleagues, to be able to make a space between you in which 'stuff' will happen? Or do the rituals crowd out that invisible shared space where the spirit of work lives and breathes? Have you made sure that you are fully present, attending to the full presence of the other, which allows for the personal connections that ground professional encounters?

2. In-between spaces

Sometimes called *liminal* spaces, these are spaces where you are on the threshold between one world and another. These intersection points are rich in deeper stories.

A few years ago we worked with an organisation where it was part of the rhythm of the day to find time, several times, to pray. This was never a jarring interruption. The call to prayer sounded in the background, and, at gentle intervals, participants could withdraw discreetly – even leaving meetings, that they would rejoin after a short interval.

The edges of prayer time also offered a chance to establish rich informal connections, *liminal* moments in the interstices between public and private persona, and these were, quite unconsciously, essential to the rhythm and effectiveness of getting work done together.

The movement is from formal to informal. Or again, there's the 'hand on the doorknob' moment well known and loved by the medical profession. The formal consultation has not yielded much. As the patient stands up and is ready to leave the room to go they say, as if by chance 'oh, just one more thing doctor' and it's in that apparently insignificant moment that the story arises.

I know of several people who plan to take a little extra time to slow down and meet people as they

move through the organisation.

How can you become alert to and make room for the margins and in-between times and spaces in your workspace and working schedule where slower encounters and the exchange of experience can happen naturally? Corridors and staircases are rich sources of informal encounter and storytelling. Lifts are less so in the cultures I've experienced. Perhaps as lift encounters are too public – lacking the travelling cocoon of apparent privacy which seems so important.

Might I recommend taking note of the invisible or visible thresholds that demarcate one kind of workspace from another, and consider what kind of story space there might be available there, waiting...

3. Journeying together

Journeying, so much part of the structure of storytelling, is also a good way to consider *story finding*: not just in the serendipitous chance meetings I've described above, but with purpose and destination.

Yiannis Gabriel calls organisational story researchers 'fellow travellers'. So one area to consider is how to create a situation where people are 'moving, together'.

When redesigning a workspace we often arrange a study tour, and bus people together, with us as fellow-travellers. We take them places they might not otherwise visit and have them hear from people who work there. We encourage a certain amount of formal debriefing, but most importantly make room for them to be there with each other.

Another example: I'll plan a business meeting by agreeing to walk to an art gallery, doing business along the way, stopping together to engage with the collection before having a cup of tea together and heading back – heading back into business conversation, and then back to our regular business days...

4. Meeting places

It's wise to pay attention to meeting places. Allowing room for the background to weave a kind of story space, as well as clearing a space in the foreground, has been a great help in our work.

One architectural practice I know makes a point of planning creative meetings at slightly offbeat off-sites in museums, libraries and archives. Lord's Cricket Ground is steeped in history; the Magic Circle Rooms do weave magic.

Sometimes the only alternative is a space which is already owned by one part of the group. This can cause covert hierarchy and office politics. Taking over the room for those present in a very physical way can work well.

In one assignment (helping to define the brief for an architects' competition for a new health centre) we invited people to make postcards from pictures of where they worked. We plastered these onto brown paper over the walls.

Not only did they change the ownership of the room temporarily, they also told a story, through patterns and clusters, which held its own surprises – it turned out that security and safety was a much larger issue for all the staff than had been evident, perhaps because these personal stories had been largely kept to themselves, perhaps in embarrassment. Releasing

them into an exhibit also made a new conversation space where people had permission to talk.

You don't always need to think 'big', either. A story meeting space can be as tiny as a postcard.

When we wanted to research people's workspaces, we made a postcard with a few trigger questions on one side and a picture of a hut on the other.

The card was an invitation to talk, but we noticed that it also made a private conversation space for us as researchers to encounter and converse with strangers in a large bustling exhibition space. The postcard defined a different kind of 'storyish' conversation space.

Some questions you may find useful: Must a meeting take place in a meeting room, or could it take place elsewhere: like perched on a wall outside a railway station with a coffee? And if we are in our 'usual spaces', can we re-imagine meeting places as places that dislocate us a little? i.e. take us somewhere else while in our usual space – as in the postcard examples.

5. Exhibits, objects and metaphors

In Notes Towards a Definition of Culture, T. S. Eliot describes Englishness as: 'Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a Cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut in sections, beetroot in vinegar, Nineteenth Century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar.'

The description of detail or the choice of metaphor, exhibits or objects are more than props. They are story spaces, often overlooked in what they can bring to an organisation's ability to see and describe itself more clearly.

Something happens in organisations: the blending of language and experience into meaningless middle words. We can use stories to take people towards the specific, to evoke large narrative spaces through small details. By inviting people to notice, list and share details we can shift the conversation space to a place where we can use objects and metaphors as vehicles to talk about painful, intangible or complex feelings.

Sometimes we invite people to bring objects which sum up an experience, describe a culture or relationship for them. The objects allow the teller to place the story outside themselves, which gives them permission to tell the story more deeply in a safe way. The objects can also create surprise, mystery – sometimes shock. We once asked people to bring objects which told a story about their work. One person brought a shell case from former Yugoslavia, now inscribed as a vase. By night, people being shelled would crawl out to collect the shell cases and then recycle them for the tourist trade.

Telling such a story, through an object, can tell you more about the person and the work they do than any formal job descriptions.

In a recent interview with a curator working with a bank, we talked about the choice of contemporary art for the bank's spaces: conversations about the selection of the art and visits to studios made it so much more than decoration. Her commission was, in her eyes, about extending people's thoughts to things they may never have thought about, opening up their perceptions and enriching their working lives in surprising and unexpected ways. Carefully selected programme notes allowed people to encounter the pictures and their ambiguity, drawing them in and allowing them to weave their own stories with that of the work.

Perhaps it is time to take a look at, and encourage the zooming in, of small details – through objects, art, or metaphor, when you next work on a project?

6. Empty spaces

In Chinese paintings there is often an empty space – to leave room for the imagination. This is because in classical Chinese art, incompleteness and imperfection are virtues.

Organisations and the people in them often seem frightened of silence and empty space. Perhaps we feel we must fill the silence with noisy clatter, rather than sit with it. But in music or poetry, it is the silence between the notes/words, as much as the texts and sounds themselves, that shapes the thing.

In some storytelling workshops, we've encouraged a kind of silent clapping through the waving of hands, which allows the silence after the story to make the story whole.

Some thoughts: Can we make space for silence and imperfection at work? Even as small an encouraging silence which allows the other to finish a sentence, uninterrupted, and knows that it has been heard? Can we imagine an un-crowding, un-judging and un-cluttering which story spaces in organisations could provide? Can we imagine ourselves not as tellers, shapers, interviewers, agents, translators or interpreters, but simply as active witnesses, who by acts of witnessing in organisational contexts: of people, their stories, of what goes on around us and the objects which tell a story about the organisation, weave story spaces for others to inhabit? Can we commit to helping people to see, rather than focus on being seen?

7. Importing open spaces

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran* Azar Nafisi writes of the secret book club she sets up with her pupils: *'We were not looking for blueprints, for an easy solution, but we did hope to find a link between the open spaces the novels provided and the closed ones we were confined to.'*

We are all used to using metaphor, illustration and example to carry people to a different place of understanding - but perhaps it's time to shake up tired metaphors by bring in fresh ones - so that a fresh perspective can be opened. A first step then is to bundle up the clichés and put them somewhere in a deep dark place not to be touched for several hundred years - in my work I'm tired of blue sky, out-of-the-box-thinking and silos, what are you ready to bury? The next step is to tune in to small metaphors, images and analogies which can nudge conversations subtly in new directions. But perhaps most important are the bigger spaces we can open up through importing events that happened to people in another time and place provide a prism, a lens through which we can examine our own situation with other. Once you have cleared a space for silence, breathing, story, it is possible to import stories from elsewhere into these clearings as well - and allow them to support the work: Fantasy, fiction, science fiction, history, biography. It doesn't matter a great deal. These new stories, fresh analogies and images are simply ways of cutting out doors and windows in the closed, stuffy cell of the organisation for new light and life to flow through.

I won't pretend it is always easy, As Azar Nafisi says, story is not an attempt at easy solutions, it's an attempt at new ways of seeing - whatever these might mean. But I believe we can work towards story spaces that open up new ways of seeing, new encounters and exchanges - allowing organisations and those who work in them to breathe again. And I have no doubt these will in turn endow the organisation in transformative ways – I've seen it. And I hope that in considering some of the areas above, you will too.