Participatory Narrative Inquiry

People sharing stories for a reason

A talk for the Mohawk Valley Museum Consortium

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What is PNI?

 Participatory narrative inquiry is an approach in which groups of people participate in gathering and working with raw stories of personal experience.

 PNI focuses on the profound consideration of values, beliefs, feelings, and perspectives through the recounting and interpretation of lived experience.

 participatory, not extractive

 using stories to think together, not just collecting them

 deep exploration, not surface level

 everyday anecdotes, not polished performances

 people reflect by answering questions about stories
Why stories?

The sharing of stories is an ancient social device for the negotiation of truths.
Don’t we already tell stories?

Once upon a time, when people made more of their own things, they created more stories about their life experiences. They told these tales ... to give each other insights, to entertain each other, and to engage each other in times of celebration, trial, mourning, or reverence. But primarily they did it to connect with each other....

Since that time, for all the wonderful progress made in communication technology, the world has grown alarmingly less personal. People have given over much of their individual power to the collective, and have let themselves be increasingly distracted from personal storytelling by flashier but ultimately less gratifying activities that compete for their attention.

Jack Maguire, The Power of Personal Storytelling
What are stories for?

A story is a **connection** we create to get to know each other and build relationships.

The best stories help us see the world through **each other’s eyes**.
What are stories for?

A story is a mental structure we create to remember, learn, and imagine.

The best stories help us make sense of our lives.
What are stories for?

A story is a **communication** we create to inform, persuade, or entertain.

The best stories **reach out** and touch their audiences.
How do stories work?

The shape of a story

It's like a knot. We tie it, then we untie it.
How do stories work?

The rhythm of a conversational story

Conversation = tick-tock
Turn taking

Story = holding the floor
Privilege + danger = ritual
How do stories work?

The shape of a *conversational* story

- Orientation
- Story
- Complication
- Resolution
- Abstract
- Storytelling
- Evaluation
- Coda

*title textbook*
How do stories work?

Why all this complexity?

It’s like wrapping paper.

We wrap stories and gifts in social ritual.

Both rituals send the signal:

I’m reaching out
I’m vulnerable
Be kind
Don’t attack
At least wait a while
How do stories work?

More storytelling rituals: response stories

People build long chains of connected stories.

Response stories say:
I felt that way too
We are alike
We are together

Like reciprocal gift exchanges.
How do stories work?

Stories told by multiple people:
• show we were part of what happened
• strengthen connections

Like “going together” on a gift.

More storytelling rituals: co-telling
How do stories work in communities and organizations?

In a healthy story sharing culture

- **Everyone** gets to tell stories
- Everyone gets to *finish* their stories
- But everyone has to **negotiate**

- People know **which stories** to tell when and where and to whom

- People use stories to **account** for their actions and to **judge** others
- People use stories to make **decisions**
How do stories work in communities and organizations?

When story sharing is healthy, it’s easy to find:

- Response stories
- Co-tellings
- Retellings
- Elaborations
- Mistake stories
- Counter-stories
- Sacred stories
- Condensed stories
How does PNI work?

Gather stories

One-on-one interview

Group interview

Peer interview

Group story session
How does PNI work?

Find patterns (in answers to questions about stories)

By hand

With a computer
How does PNI work?

Build stories out of stories

Timeline

Discovery:
- Aha! stories
- Energy stories
- Stories with wings
What are some examples of PNI projects related to museums?

**Children’s Museum**
- Wanted to improve learning opportunities
- Asked children to describe museum visits
- Used cartoon reporter interview
- Gave children certificate of thanks for their help
- Learned how children reacted to exhibits and what they retained

**Slavery Museum**
- Wanted to explore impact of museum exhibits on assumptions about other people
- Asked about experiences, especially about surprise, curiosity, seeing things through new eyes
- Learned who was being surprised, how, why

**“Future of Volunteering” Project**
- Consortium of museums, zoos, libraries, Meals on Wheels, etc
- Asked about efforts, recognition, rewards, relationships
- Discovered distinction between two types of volunteers: active (change the world) and quiet (relationship focused)
- What motivated one group demotivated the other
Questions?

Find out more at:
- workingwithstories.org – textbook
- pni2.org – PNI Institute
- storycoloredglasses.com – blog
- cfkurtz.com – web site
- narrafirma.com – software
- narratopia.com – game

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