

Section 1:

About storytelling

1.1 The importance of storytelling

The ability to narrate is fundamental to human experience. Human beings have always told each other stories, whether great myths and legends or just the events of everyday life.

Nowadays, storytelling is increasingly gaining recognition as an art form that sustains and expresses cultural identity. There are many opportunities for people who wish to develop their skills as storytellers – at festivals, on courses and in story circles. But, if you have difficulties with language and communication, these opportunities are not very accessible. Oral storytelling has always been a very demanding skill, requiring a good memory, a high level of linguistic competence, flexibility in perceiving and adapting to the audience, imagination and dramatic flair, and great self-confidence. This book is designed to support inclusive storytelling, and reflects our emphasis on participation by people who may have a range of learning disabilities or special educational needs.

1.2 Ethos

The philosophy underpinning this book is that everyone has stories that are worth telling, and deserve to be heard and valued. People have different skills and styles, and tell stories in different ways using gestures, facial expressions, pictures, signs and symbols as well as their voices.

Our model of storytelling is a social model, that is, stories (and the skills needed to tell them) are learned through participating directly in the act of storytelling. The role of the trainer is to develop and build the abilities of everyone in the group; provide a rich source of stories to draw on; and show by example how stories can be told together.

This book is unique in its approach to the culture of oral storytelling. Traditional stories are often told by a single, fluent narrator who is in full control of a range of stories, impressing the audience through his or her verbal skills. Our approach to storytelling emphasises the participatory and communal aspects that develop an intensity of listening to the storyteller and an atmosphere in which a contribution told from the heart is valued

for what it communicates about our common humanity. We seek to make connections between powerful archetypal traditional myths and the lived experience of day-to-day challenges and triumphs, and to illuminate the importance of the small, the unnoticed and the unorthodox for our audiences.

1.3 **Why is storytelling important for people with learning disabilities?**

The role of stories in the lives of people with learning disabilities is just the same as for everyone else – stories are fun and interesting, help you to make friends, understand the world and develop your imagination. When you remember things that have happened to you, you can share the good things (and the bad) through telling others, who then help you to feel proud of yourself, or cope with a bad experience. Traditional legends offer us hopes, dreams and possibilities, as one storyteller, Robin, makes clear when talking about Aladdin:

'What I like about it is that it's a really good story about how he started out as a poor washing boy, and it reminded me of when I was young. I was always a little boy and could do nothing but play with toys, watch TV and read books, but like Aladdin I always had to do a lot of washing. But one day Aladdin discovered he wanted to go somewhere he could find a magic lamp, and it's like me when I feel like I really want to go out to a place to visit, like a castle or a cave or something. And as he rubs the lamp a genie comes out with the three wishes and it reminds me of wanting to get a job and make a lot of money. And then he falls in love with this girl and becomes rich, and to me it makes me feel like I want to go out in the world and talk to people.'

Recent developments in the fields of self-advocacy and person-centred planning have highlighted the role of narrative and story in the development of a strong and coherent sense of identity. Storytelling is a crucial life skill. We need to construct a narrative every time we describe a problem – to the doctor, to the police or to the council, etc. Moreover, in learning to make independent decisions, the ability to recall and reflect on the meaning of our experiences is also critical. We can only make informed choices if we can remember the consequences of a previous similar decision, and our reactions to it. Thus, storytelling is a functional skill that supports personal development, as well as opening the door to rich imaginative worlds and enabling people to become familiar with their own cultural heritage.

1.4 Our framework and teaching

There are many different approaches to the teaching of storytelling, and all of them involve slightly different definitions of what a story and/or a storyteller is. For example, in one framework that is extensively taught in schools, a story is defined as centring on a hero who solves a problem that is usually told by one person as a monologue. This is fine for traditional legends, and indeed is usually what you will encounter at story festivals and story circles. But it does not work so well for anecdotal storytelling, where often groups of friends or families all tell a story together, and where the story is not necessarily built around a problem, but around an event which is a departure from routine, and therefore interesting and 'reportable'. We have found that collaborative telling about reportable events is the best place to start for people who have communication difficulties and who are nervous of storytelling. (See extracts 6 and 34 on the accompanying DVD).



Our framework for stories involves:

- **Who** – the people
- **When** and/or **where** – the setting
- **What happened** – the main events
- **The sparkle** – the unexpected, interesting climax
- **How you felt** – the emotions associated with the events that you want the audience to feel as well
- **What was said** – the reactions and exclamations of the people in the story