

Perfectly Mixed Up:
A tale of personal stories and theatre-making

For many years I have facilitated Applied Theatre workshops and projects, working with a range of participants including students of applied theatre, young people facing the challenges of the care system, elderly people in supported living and adults in recovery from drug and alcohol abuse. In all these settings the creative process has involved the telling, devising and performance of stories: traditional, fictional and personal.

Stories of all kinds can provide us with a route into deeper understanding of ourselves and can aid us in the process of shaping our experiences into a healthier and more integrated narrative. Through exploring different perspectives and imagining events from different viewpoints, fictional stories can provide us with a wide-angle lens through which to see the bigger picture. A teacher who notices that a child in the class is being ostracised or is feeling left out may tell the story of *The Ugly Duckling*, encouraging the children to think about the different perspectives of the characters in the story, to act out the roles and discover for themselves what 'not belonging' may feel like.

In this paper I focus largely on personal rather than fictional stories, in particular on the distinction between two types of personal story.

1. The underlying set of beliefs, or stories we tell ourselves about our lives and that we live out in our attitudes, choices and decisions.

2. The catalogue of experiences and memories that can be triggered readily through verbal, visual or sensory stimulus.

I find it useful to make a distinction between these two features and identify the first as 'personal narrative', the second as 'personal story'. *The Ugly Duckling* example, although directly linked to the teacher's observations about a child's personal experience, is not a 'personal story' despite the obvious parallels to a lived experience. However, it is an invitation to the children to explore their thoughts and gain an appreciation of the possible limitations of their perspective. This perspective is one aspect of what I am calling 'personal narrative'. I use the term 'personal narrative' to describe an underlying belief system that influences and in some part determines our choices, decisions and most importantly, the way we make sense of what happens in our lives. A personal narrative is a fluid and ongoing narration that takes places in our thoughts, our feelings and our memories. Sometimes these narratives are limiting and destructive, sometimes not, but we all carry them and we all interpret what we see and experience through the filter of this narrative.

As *The Ugly Duckling* example illustrates, traditional tales can be used to provide a framework for developing children's awareness of, in this example, a narrative of belonging and difference. A child may develop a belief – that they never fit in and people don't like them – that becomes a strand of the personal narrative that shapes their response to situations. These personal narratives are not necessarily known to us consciously despite the influence they have on our lives. The child who was feeling left

out may not want to, or feel able to talk about the experience, particularly if it is a regularly occurring experience but through identification with a character in a story may gain necessary perspective and see the situation differently; without directly exposing the child's personal experience, the limiting pattern of this particular personal narrative is invited to shift.

I illustrate this shift with a story from the practice of *Perfectly Mixed Up* (PMU), a theatre company of 7 members comprising Masters students studying Applied Theatre in the University of Exeter and 'looked after' young people aged 17/18 in the process of leaving the care system. Since May 2011, PMU has created a series of devised performances, all of which draw on the group members' personal stories. As the participants work collaboratively to devise material for performance, they become part of a shared experience that carries a narrative of its own. The trajectory of the creative process is linear: from devising the material to the end point of performance. Regardless of the ups and downs of people's lives, of the shifting group dynamics, of illness and celebrations, this linear process continues. When a personal narrative emerges that challenges a participant's ability to engage, the linear framework provides a container within which the personal narrative is given space to change direction.

Sunset in a Cup

Kelley (not her real name) joined PMU for a week-long theatre project, *Sunset in a Cup* in May 2012. She was 17 years old, and had spent much

of her life moving from one foster placement to another. Kelley's personal narrative included the fact, as she saw it, that she never stuck at anything and would definitely leave the project before the end because, in her words 'it's bound to be shit'. It was helpful of her to alert the facilitators to this powerful narrative, but it was also communicated without words; Kelley became fidgety at the end of each day and for the first couple of days left before the session ended. With the lived experience of endings being brought about without Kelley's active agreement (removal from foster care, exclusion from schools), removing herself before something ends is a congruent and sensible response. However, as this behaviour becomes embedded in Kelley's personal narrative, she is in danger of becoming disempowered by her own actions, falling into the trap of behaving in a way that gets her excluded from situations before she has had a chance to belong or even fully join in. *Sunset in a Cup* was a Digital Storytelling project in which the group gathered and shaped personal responses to stimulus (see Appendix i) and digitally recorded the collectively devised stories that emerged. The primary and declared intention of *Sunset in a Cup* was to create and record these digital stories. The secondary, underlying purpose was to provide an opportunity in which Kelley and others might 're-write' an aspect of their personal narrative, not through directly engaging with it but through having a new experience of (in Kelley's case) participating. The intention was that this could filter into her repeated experience of being excluded and would become a new, (albeit small) voice in her well-rehearsed narrative of 'never sticking at anything'.

Kelley did stay until the end of the project, declaring on the last day that when she woke up that day she had decided not to turn up, and not to be there for the performance event. She told us she only did because her foster carer 'made (her)', yet her foster carer has tried to 'make her' complete projects in the past and been unsuccessful. That Kelley completed the full week and then didn't want to leave after the performance event marked a shift in her relationship to endings that both she and her foster carer commented on.

The Drama Spiral

Working with personal rather than fictional story can be an intimate process that, without careful attention paid to the creation of boundaries and a maintenance of a sense of safety, can create an unsafe environment for participants, exposing them to vulnerability and unacceptable risk.

'Personal story' describes experiences, events and attitudes that can be shared as something that happened, with a beginning and an end. A personal story can be stimulated by a question, a statement, an image, a smell, a feeling. For example, 'a time I lost something', the first cold winter I can remember'. The creative process of devising material for performance through sharing personal stories can evoke painful memories as well as positive ones. The facilitator carries responsibility to maintain appropriate boundaries and ensure the individual is protected from unwanted vulnerability. Our lives provide rich resources for theatre – the

small moments that, when uncovered and remembered can be made significant for an audience. The theatre created within PMU is drawn from small memories and stories - not the big life stories - of company members.

One of the most useful tools I have used in the creation and maintenance of appropriate boundaries and generation of safety when working with personal story is The Drama Spiral ('Spiral') developed by Clark Baim and described as 'a decision-making model for applied theatre facilitators who incorporate the personal stories of participants into their work' (Baim 2012: 2). (See Appendix ii for image).

Using the Spiral as a point of reference helps determine the level of personal disclosure and maintain the boundaries of disclosure as agreed tacitly or explicitly within the group. I refer to two PMU theatre-making projects to illustrate the way in which the Spiral offers a framework for maintaining appropriate boundaries.

The Girl Who Lost and Found

During a week-long project in April 2012, PMU created a show, *The Girl Who Lost and Found*, based on personal stories from company members. Responding to the theme 'something I have lost' each person told a story from their lives triggered by the stimulus. The experiences ranged from

humorous to nostalgic. One person told of losing her passport and discovering it only at the airport prior to a plane journey, another spoke of losing her confidence in herself when she started her degree, another of the loss of her little cuddly toy called Puddy, lost in a playground when she was 4 years old. The group heard these stories and before choosing one to present as a short scene, there are a series of questions to be addressed, both silently and internally by each person, and explicitly through conversation.

- i) is this personal story traumatic or in any way unresolved?
- ii) is it satisfactorily resolved?
- iii) is it a positive memory?
- iv) were there themes within the stories that emerged as common to all?
- v) did any story particularly resonate with more than one other person?

The answers to these questions will determine the position the scene will inhabit in relation to The Spiral. If the personal story is traumatic or unresolved, it belongs in the centre of The Spiral, a position in which the facilitation of a skilful therapist is needed.

This level of working normally requires clinical training and qualification in psychodrama, dramatherapy, experiential or related therapy methods. (Baim 2012:10)

A devised piece of theatre for performance is not the appropriate arena for this story to be shared, particularly not with the person playing themselves. If it was a traumatic or distressing experience but that is now resolved, it may be possible to include it for performance in an abstract form (see Casey's story below for explanation). The reasons for including this material would need to be considered carefully, and if the decision to include it is made, the material can be safely and responsibly placed on an outer ring of The Spiral. (See Appendix ii)

If the personal story is a positive one, the person may choose to play themselves or someone else in the story, and if the story also had thematic links or emotional resonances with others' stories, a fictionalized version may be developed, or at the outer edges of the spiral, a new story that only hints at the original experience might be the appropriate material to develop. The group and the facilitator together make these decisions with reference to the different zones within The Spiral.

The stories about losing something had potential to be poignant because of the make up of the PMU cast, some of whom had experienced the trauma of having been removed from their birth family. This underlying narrative of loss was not the topic, instead, the shared small stories were a vehicle to explore not just losing something but also finding something. As the group devised a scene to tell the story about the 4 year old girl who lost her Puddy in the playground, they focused on ways they could use their bodies to create the playground activities – someone became a see-saw, someone else a climbing frame. They talked, developed their ideas and as the scene emerged and an ending was needed, one of the young

people suggested that the girl who had lost her Puddy should stand in the middle of a trust circle, an exercise called Wind in the Willows, (see Appendix iii) whilst everyone stood around her and supported her as she fell. As the young person said, 'She'll feel supported and that will remind her that if you lose something you can still carry on because other people will help you and you can find what you lost somewhere else, even if you never get that actual lost thing back again.'

The idea was accepted and the scene ended, silently, with the actor playing the small child being supported in a trust circle as she fell. This aspect of the performance was a point in which the underlying personal narratives were momentarily the primary focus, albeit unstated. The need for group members to resolve painful loss as represented by the 'Puddy' story, was framed as a movement gesture and in that decision, was also the decision that it didn't matter whether the audience understood or not. In fact, if audience members were aware of the history of some of the performers they may have experienced that moment as significant, but the purpose was primarily to resolve the loss and illustrate how to move on from it. In expressing this possibility to an audience, the performers may inhabit that potential for themselves in relation to their own losses.

More than the Sum

Over a period of several months in 2013, culminating in a devised piece of theatre, *More than the Sum*, PMU again used personal story as the starting point for creative work. An incident in the rehearsal room resulted

in the inclusion of a short dance/movement piece that drew on a personal, traumatic and unresolved experience for one of the participants. However, the piece that evolved from this experience was so far removed from the actual story that no audience would have known where the roots lay. The group had been warming up to movement work by 'painting' their names. They each had an imaginary pot of paint into which they dipped a toe, foot, elbow, ear, etc, and with the 'paint' on that part of their body they painted their names in the air. They were then asked to think about a time in their lives when they had felt invisible; maybe they had wanted to be invisible because they were playing a hiding game, but maybe they didn't want to be invisible and it was an unhappy experience. Rather than speaking these stories they made either an abstract 'painting' of the feeling or a more concrete 'painting' of that memory, marking out other people, the situation and themselves in it. As people began to move one of the young people, Casey (not her real name) stopped suddenly and sat at the side of the room, visibly upset. As she turned and spoke to me she described how she had been invisible all her childhood and she realised she still feels like that. 'It's really horrible' she whispered. I offered her the choice of leaving the room and talking to someone about it, or staying in the room and continuing with the exercise. I hoped that if she stayed in the room, the exercise would provide a new experience of invisibility; as she moved she would be visible and central to the 'dance'. She opted to stay in the room, despite feeling so upset. As she returned to the group I changed the rules slightly, suggesting that as each of them developed a sequence of movements to paint their own story, they could also follow movements

from others in the group, learn their sequences and allow these new sequences to become their dance. The music played in the background as the group of seven shifted through their own sequences and skillfully moved around Casey, shadowing and following her as she moved, playfully adapting and extending her sequence until the 'dance' was over. As the music came to an end there was an involuntary moment of laughter as they looked at each other. Casey had become central to the piece; the rest of the group had made her the leader, and given her their focused and accepting attention. The dance evolved from her experience, and the story of painful and damaging childhood neglect and invisibility became a short, joyful experience of being valued, accepted and very definitely visible. In the final show this moment was fleetingly referred to within one of the movement pieces, but its origin was never declared. Even in the rehearsal, once the music ended and the dance was over, we had a short break and Casey's unhappiness was not spoken about. The mood had changed, the group were enjoying each other and the talk in the break time was of other things. The process of Casey changing her personal narrative from 'I've always been invisible' to 'I like it when people see me' was never referred to and indeed, to speak of it verbally when the shift had happened so physically, was potentially intrusive and unnecessary. Without negotiation the group had provided a route for one of their members to re-write a painful and damaging personal narrative that, even if only for a short time, gave Casey access to a different way of experiencing herself in relation to others. Her personal story belonged in the centre of The Spiral, but the expression of it was transformed as it was placed instead on an outer

level, and what was performed had only a passing hint at its origins, even for the performers.

Perfectly mixed up narratives and stories

Using The Drama Spiral as a decision-making tool supports PMU in creating an environment in which underlying personal narratives are respected, and also challenged, without ever addressing these personal narratives directly. Through engagement with the task of working collaboratively, devising material and making artistic decisions about the material to be used for performance, the group members function as a community in which individual voices are heard and all experiences are valued. In this environment, some strongly adhered to beliefs about oneself can become evident, and the strength of the small community provides a framework within which those beliefs, if damaging or destructive, can be challenged and, even if fleetingly, transformed.

The personal narrative was given space to reshape itself, as the personal stories were heard and placed into a context alongside others' memories and the group, as a community, created their own subtext as they committed themselves to a shared goal; devising material for performance. When the journey towards this shared goal was sidetracked by the powerful undercurrents of personal narratives, the group would notice the pull.

The need to return to the shared goal becomes the safety net and the boundaries created by commitment to this shared task necessitates that

individuals within the group re-frame their personal narratives in order to achieve the goal.

Fiona Macbeth, December 2014

Bibliography

Alrtuz, M. (2014) *Digital Storytelling, Applied Theatre, & Youth: Performing Possibility*. Oxford: Routledge.

Baim, C. (2014) The Drama Spiral: A Decision-Making Model for Safe, Ethical, and Flexible Practice when Incorporating Personal Stories in Applied Theatre and Performance in [Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice: Critical Vulnerabilities in a Precarious World](#) (pp.79-109) edited Alice O'Grady, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

Appendix

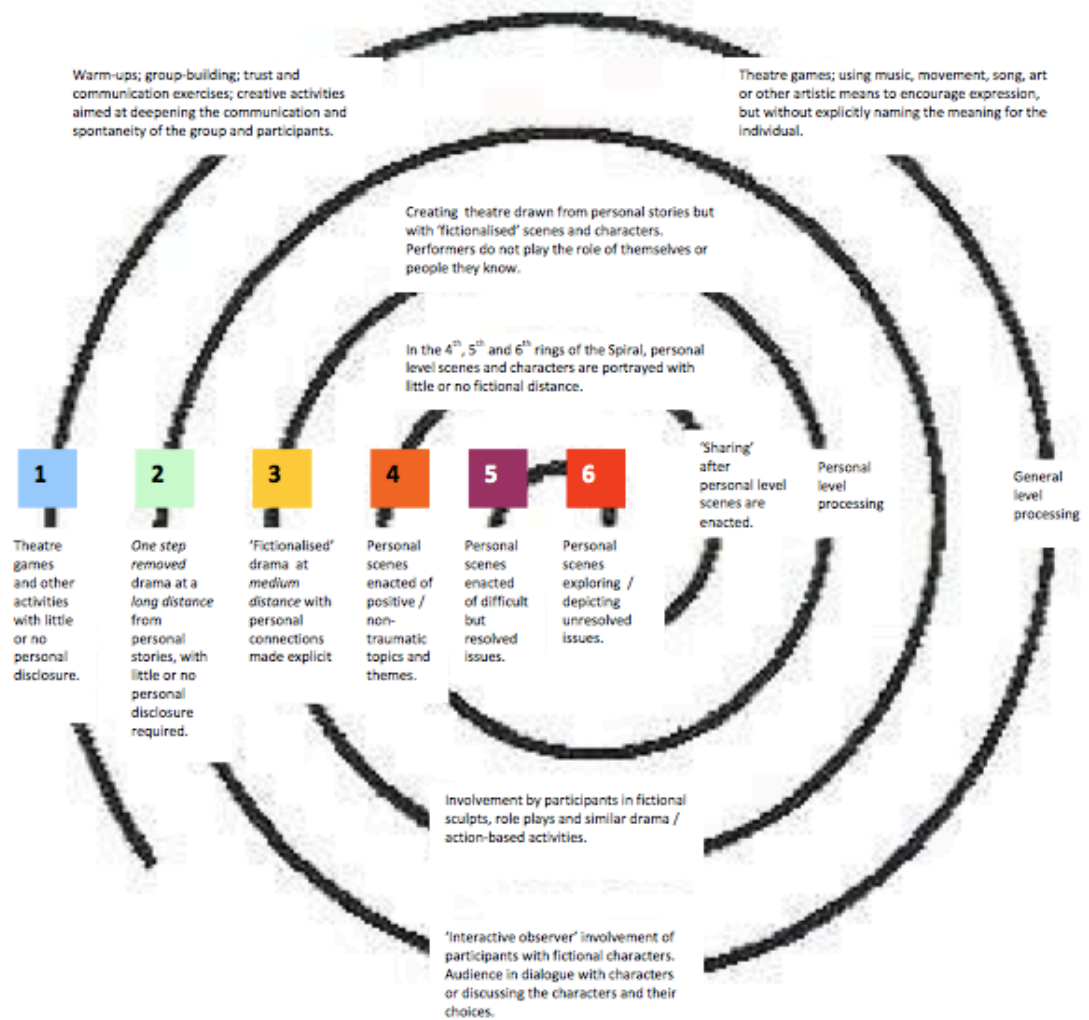
i) The stimulus for Sunset in a Cup was a poetry-writing exercise.

Each person wrote in response to the following openers

- I come from a place....
- I look forward to a place ...
- I bring to this place....

The poetic responses from each individual were gathered together and the resulting poem was formed into a series of photographed images, recorded with voiceovers. This final piece was a patchwork of all the participants' different responses; a collaboratively created story-poem.

ii)



Clark Baim, 2014

iii) Wind in the Willows trust circle exercise

<http://www.wilderdom.com/games/descriptions/WillowInTheWind.html>

Willow in the Wind

- Provides a gentle, but important and challenging activity to begin building genuine trust amongst people. Requires good facilitation and fairly mature group.
- Group members should already have spent time together, know each other's names, etc.
- Establish a genuine tone; whilst fun is allowed, the primary objective is looking after and caring for one another. This requires a calm, supportive atmosphere. If participants are unable to genuinely sustain this kind of atmosphere, then look for a less serious activity. There is the potential for physical and psychological injury.
- The group needs to be taught correct spotting technique:
 - one foot in front of another
 - arms outstretched, elbows locked, fingers loose
 - ready and alert
- In groups of about 8, one person volunteers to be the "willow" in the middle. Facilitator demonstrates the "willow":
 - feet together
 - closes his/her eyes
 - arms crossed and hands on shoulders
 - keep butt cheeks tight and body straight
 - establishes contract with group (see below)
 - does a "trust lean" and allows him/herself to be "passed around" the group.
- The final step before leaning is to create a contract between the "willow" and the group. It can go like this:
 - Willow: "I am ready to fall. Are you ready to catch me?"
 - Group: "We are ready to catch you. Fall away."
 - Willow: "Falling."
 - Group: "OK"

- Important: Ensure the group is tight, should-to-shoulder, arms outstretched. In this position, hands should almost touch the person standing in the middle. This ensures that the initial fall will be very gentle. Gradually the group can ease back to allow a more expansive lean. Distribute large and small people evenly, to avoid weak points in the circle.
- The "willow" should allow him/herself to be passed around by the group as long as she/he likes (usually a couple of minutes). When he/she has had enough, simply open eyes, stand up, and thank the group.
- The quality of the atmosphere and caring will generally determine the proportion of people prepared to volunteer. Above 80% is usually a sign of a reasonably healthy group.
- As a debrief or an intervention if a group isn't creating a trusting atmosphere, I've asked people to individually rate out of 10 how supported they felt by the group -- and show this to the group by holding the number of fingers up. This allows the facilitator to draw out more objectively which people felt supported and what else the group might do to support more people.