

# Tools for loosening the problem-story<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

People deep in conflict can often tell you all about how unreasonable and downright nasty is the other party. Rigid with righteous fury, they accuse, blame and denigrate. This is a very difficult position from which to resolve differences. Effective ADR requires some way of helping people relax these tightly bound problem-stories.

Powerful new tools are emerging from the “narrative” approach to mediation and counselling. I will explore how two of these tools can help parties in a dispute to find new ways of relating to each other:

- Externalising conversations
- Scaffolding.

My aims are to:

- Describe and demystify the narrative approach (*A great deal of confusing jargon often clutters discussions about this!*)
- Share some practical tools that mediators can use immediately
- Indicate the rigour of these tools by describing briefly some of their theoretical underpinning
- Give a glimpse into the full set of tools that is evolving.

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<sup>1</sup> A presentation to NSW Chapter of LEADR–Association of Dispute Resolvers, 13 Feb 2007

### ***“Tightly bound problem-stories”***

As a practising mediator, I found myself wanting better tools for those really difficult mediations where people are locked into unproductive perceptions of each other.

As an example, consider this workplace dispute between two co-workers. When I met Robyn and Lynne (not their real names), they were working at the same level within their organisation, though Robyn had been Lynne’s supervisor for a few years beforehand. Their interactions had become extremely destructive – they were at each other’s throat. They made these comments during their separate pre-mediation sessions:

#### **Robyn**

*Lynne gossips with the others about me. I’m a sociable sort of person, and I want to be able to approach them and not be ignored. They don’t speak to me, they don’t work with me, they even hide the key to the equipment cupboard! I wouldn’t dream of going into their workroom; I’d be accused of harassment. I don’t trust Lynne; she tries to catch you out. I spend a great deal of my time trying to be perfect.*

#### **Lynne**

*I’m furious about Robyn. She comes into the room and very loudly calls “Good MORNING Lynne” in a snide way. I organise my day so I don’t come across her. I bond with the others by witnessing her tactics. She doesn’t like failure, and so she does other people’s work for them. When she was our supervisor, I never got thanked or praised. All she does is demand and criticise. What a control freak!*

Each of them had a well-formed, stable view of the other party, that focused on the behaviours that they find most distasteful and upsetting. This intense concentration

on such a narrow description of each other made this mediation extremely difficult. It is an example of a **“tightly bound problem-story”**.

We can learn a great deal from our difficult experiences. Faced with this vigorous enmity between Robyn and Lynne, I went looking for tools to help me deal more effectively with these situations. I found a very useful set of tools in the field of narrative therapy, and that presents an opportunity and a challenge: we can learn new tools from our colleagues in counselling, and we must adapt those tools as we move them from that context into the mediation context.<sup>2</sup>

In some ways, the narrative tools can appear quite similar to the “interest-based” approach used by many mediators, though it is easy to underestimate the difference between them. I find these tools useful within an interest-based approach, and yet there are some tensions that are a continuing area of interest for me.

I choose the term “tools” quite deliberately; a mediator can continue to use whatever works in a given situation, and when faced with a difficulty, can pull out one of these tools from the “toolkit”. These tools do not need to be considered as a replacement for an interest-based approach. They draw on a different cognitive framework (described below in the section called “Theoretical foundations”). They rely on a rhetorical shift – how you say something is important. So they offer another way to help frame productive questions, which I take to be a central role of a mediator.

The term “narrative” is accurate but can be quite misleading. People often interpret it to mean that somehow the parties recount a factual (or fictional, visioning) tale and that helps in reaching a resolution or settlement of their dispute or difficulty. Indeed, there may well be “narrative” techniques which involve story-telling of this sort. However, the term is being used here in a different, quite specific way, which we will explore.

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<sup>2</sup> Participants at the 2006 National Mediation Conference in Hobart may have heard John Winslade’s keynote address and workshop on Narrative Mediation. Australasia is at the forefront of developing narrative approaches: the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide is a world-leader, and the Charing Cross Narrative Therapy Centre teaches this approach in Sydney. See the References for contact information.

## ***Theoretical foundations***

This section describes briefly the theoretical foundations of these tools, lest we underestimate the mental shift required of the mediator.

Mostly, we tend to use patterns of thought that are called “Structuralist”: we believe that what happens on the surface (like “positions”) is driven by what is further down, at the level of “interests”, or further, at the core of personality or self. These are like the layers of an onion, and give a good idea of why this is called “Structuralist” thinking.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, the narrative approach is “Post-structuralist”: there is no privileged position from which an observer can tell what is “right” or “wrong”, or judge the “realities” of the world experienced by the parties. All experience is necessarily interpreted, and the mediator’s interpretation is not privileged over the participants’. Indeed, as mediators, we can be most useful to the parties by helping them seek out new possibilities for interpretation. This argument is very consistent with the Neutral Third Party role!

The narrative approach uses a number of key assumptions:

- People are “meaning-makers”, selecting events and interpreting them in a way that “makes sense” of them. A somewhat uncomfortable, Post-structuralist implication of this is that language does not represent reality, it constitutes it, frames it and brings it into being.
- People’s meanings are “socially-constructed”. For example, most readers are likely to hold the Western notion of the primacy of the individual with discrete interests. In contrast, many cultures value communality and mutuality more highly.

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<sup>3</sup> Some common examples of Structuralist thinking include:

- Diagnosing internal states: “He is resourceful”
- Pathologising: “She has low self-esteem”
- Making judgements: “That’s not what happened!”

- People's lives are multi-storied – there are many levels, many ways of selecting and linking together the events we experience. This offers an opportunity for helping people change stories that are not productive for them, or with which they are not satisfied.

While I have presented these tools as being “useful” within an interest-based approach, they have quite different foundations and assumptions. This contributes to their strength as alternatives to the other tools a mediator is likely to have already, and offers a challenge for further development of approaches to mediation.

### ***Helping parties find and tell a different story***

*“As humans, we are interpreting beings. [Our stories] are created through linking certain events together in a particular sequence across a time period, and finding a way of explaining or making sense of them.”*

Morgan 2000 p5

When Robyn and Lynne were describing the problem to me, they selected particular experiences from their past, and threaded them together. They each “made sense” of those events by blaming and denigrating the other person. This left little space for complexity, no allowance for contradictions, and no chance to notice alternative ways of viewing the other person and finding a new way of relating to them! Faced with this situation, a mediator can help the parties relax the grip that the problem story has on them. The goal is then to help the parties find a different “story”, comprising different events, different ways of threading them together, and different ways of explaining and making sense of the story. When the parties find such an alternative story, they have new ways of relating to each other, which hastens improved outcomes to the mediation, and makes those outcomes more robust.

## ***Externalising conversations***

According to the Narrative approach, there is not just one “true” statement of the problem,

*“but a series of descriptions of the problem, that can evolve with time ...  
[E]xtract people from a close attachment to the problem.”*

Winslade and Monk 2000 p142

This is reminiscent of Fisher and Ury’s well-known admonition to “Separate the people from the problem”<sup>4</sup>. To help the parties get some distance from the problem, it is useful to hold an “externalising conversation”.

Key methods for doing this are:

- Reify - Turn adjectives into nouns (If a party says “I’m angry”, the mediator replies; “How does The Anger find its way into your day?”)
- Personify - Help the parties find a name for the difficulties
- Scrutinise - Ask the parties how it enters their day, about its tricks and strategies
- Historicise - Uncover the history of its effects on the relationship
- Deputise - Make the “problem” another party in the matter, ascribe it malicious designs on the parties
- Catechise - “Interview” it!

In the example above, involving Robyn and Lynne, it was useful to ask these externalising questions:

1. If the difficulty that exists between you had a name, what would it be?  
(After some discussion, Robyn and Lynne settled on the name: “Hitting Out”)
2. How does the Hitting Out enter your day?
3. How does this problem catch you both in its clutches?
4. What did the Hitting Out get you thinking about the other party? (Notice that this implies that another way of thinking is possible)
5. How did the Hitting Out manage to take over your feelings in such a strong way?
6. To what extent is Hitting Out stopping you from resolving your difficulties?

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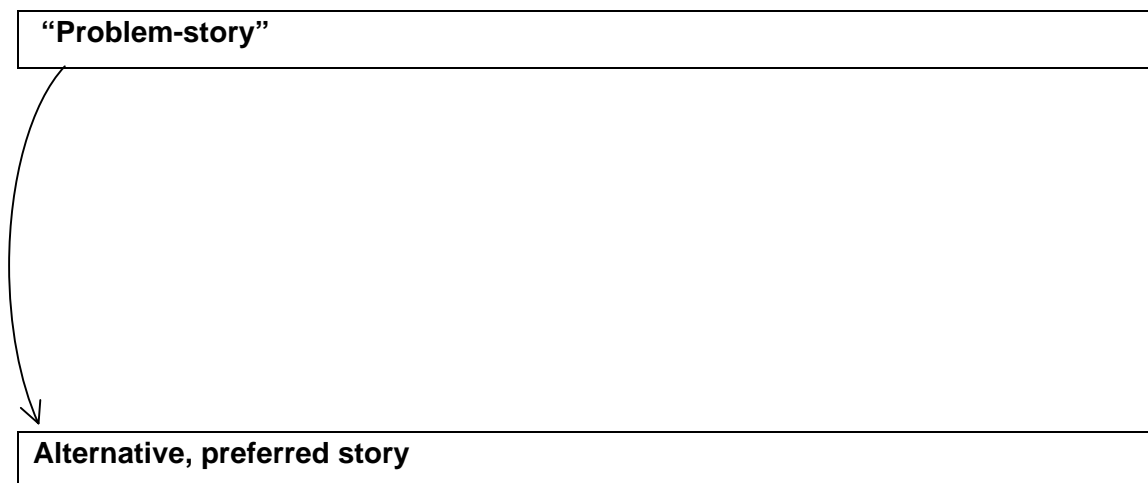
<sup>4</sup> Fisher and Ury *Getting to Yes* Random House 1991

7. When did you start to notice this idea of not being able to trust the other person? What sequence of events took place?
8. When s/he [did that], what did the Hitting Out invite you to do in response?

These questions constituted a rhetorical move that transferred the blame off each other and onto the problem itself, providing some loosening of the problem-stories that each of them had been telling about the other.

### ***Scaffolding***<sup>5</sup>

One way of picturing what we are trying to achieve is shown in this diagram. It shows a “problem-story” and an alternative story the parties prefer because it offers a way out of the dispute or difficulties they are facing. Seen this way, a mediator’s role is to help the parties find and tell this alternative preferred story, as suggested by the arrow.



However, people typically find it quite difficult to move from their problem-stories. These stories often support and validate the teller (“I am fine – it’s them that is the problem”), and have strong explanatory power (“No wonder things are so bad between us – she’s such a bitch!”).

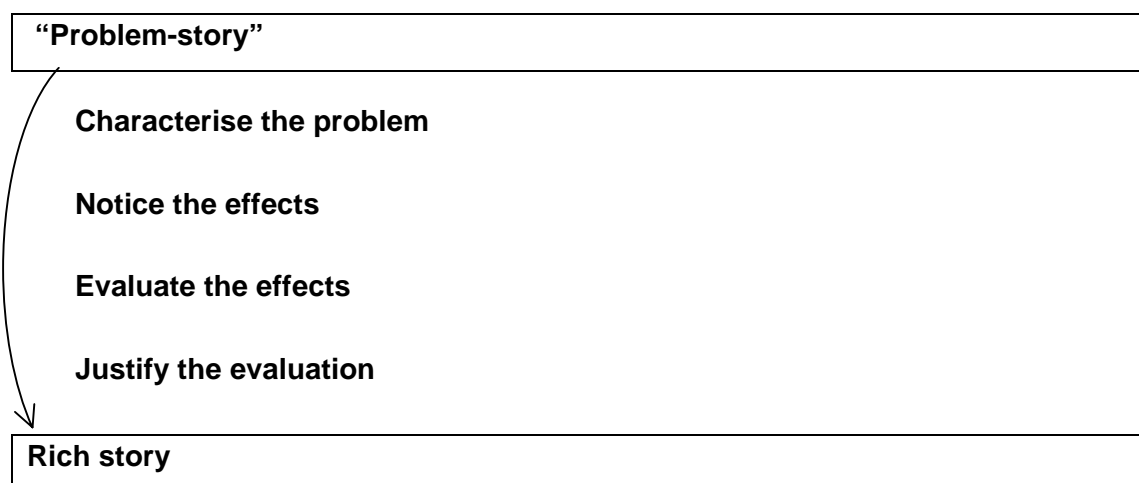
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<sup>5</sup> This also referred to in the literature as the “Statement of Position Map”.

The diagram represents this by showing quite a gap between the two stories. The parties have not been able to jump that gap on their own (or they would not be needing a mediator!). Jumping that gap requires the parties to take a very big leap!

A mediator can make that leap easier by providing a “scaffold”. The scaffold consists of small “rungs” which help the parties from one story to the other. (Astute readers will notice the frequent use of metaphor and analogy in the narrative approach: scaffolds, rungs, leaps. Indeed, Post-structuralists argue that metaphors are more frequent in our use of language than we usually recognise.)

The rungs of the scaffold have been given various names; this is a rapidly-evolving field, and has yet to settle on an accepted terminology. One particular set of names is shown here:



In the example of Robyn and Lynne, the externalising questions posed above were focussed on helping the parties across the first two rungs.<sup>6</sup> While it is most usual to start with those, there is no prescribed order or sequence. Here are a number of other questions that a mediator could ask, grouped by the rungs:

<sup>6</sup> Questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 7 and 8 above helped to “characterise the problem”; questions 4 and 6 helped “notice the effects”.

### **Characterise the problem**

*The intention is to help the person clarify their own understanding of the difficulty, and to “externalise”, separating it from the people involved:*

- If the problem had a name, what would it be? (We will say the person calls it “X”)
- How does X enter your day?
- How did the X manage to take over your feelings in such a strong way?
- To what extent is X stopping you from resolving your difficulties?

### **Notice the effects**

*To help the person let go of the problem story, this rung helps the person identify the impact that it is having on them.*

- How does the X make you act? What does it make you do?
- What does the X get you thinking about the other party?
- What does s/he do because of it?
- What has X been taking from you?

### **Evaluate the effects**

*This is often an important turning point in the conversation, and the work in the previous rungs has been leading to up to this moment. It helps the person realise, clearly and distinctly, that things must change. In some ways, though, it runs the risk of seeming a little silly: the party has been telling you how awful the problem is, and now you ask how it is for them! To avoid the impression of being inattentive or dull-witted, some therapists say: “Now, I have a question that may sound a little odd, but it is important that I check with you:...”.*

- How does that suit you?
- What is your experience of that – positive or negative?
- Is that something you would like more of or less of?

### **Justify the evaluation**

*The person is becoming clearer about what story they prefer, and the events which help establish this in their lives, and the skills they have that help achieve more it.*

- What does it tell you, that you have such a reaction to X? (This question “builds a safe place to stand”)
- If you are not wanting X in your life, would you prefer more of something else? What would you call it? (Y, say)
- What would it look like if there was more Y in your relationship?
- What times has it been different, and you have had Y?
- What skills do you use to get Y?

In using these questions, mediators need not feel constrained to use them all, nor even to use them in any particular order. Of course, mediators must use all their skills to pose these and other questions using the appropriate tone, register and lexicon, so that they seem natural to the parties.

### **Further Narrative tools**

We have explored just two of the narrative tools that have become available to mediators. A great many more are in use within the therapy context, offering a further challenge for those who would wish to translate them into the mediation context:

- Curious, De-centred and Influential – honouring each person’s perceptions of events; confronting the challenge of being useful without being directive
- Unpacking the Dominant Discourse – the parties are likely to share certain assumptions which underpin or perhaps even define the problem (eg staff should obey instructions from their supervisor)
- Unique Outcomes / Glittering Moments – strengthening the rich story by locating occasions which exemplify the preferred way of being

- Absent But Implicit – helping locate the alternative story they would prefer
- Re-authoring – asking who in their lives supports the alternative story they are telling
- Re-remembering – promoting (or demoting) those “members of your Club of Life” who strengthen (weaken) the alternative story
- Outsider Witnessing – A structured active-listening approach to find and strengthen the alternative story
- Co-researching – a joint approach to locating and telling the alternative story, while remaining de-centred.

### ***Conclusion***

The fixed, negative views that parties hold of each other can hinder and even de-rail difficult conversations. Adding to the tools that Mediators can use in such circumstances, we have explored how people “make meaning” by constructing stories.

When people are locked in conflict, they are often telling themselves “tightly bound problem-stories”. Using externalising questions, and the scaffold, a mediator can help people move to an alternative story which they prefer because it offers new ways of relating and working together.

### ***References***

- Charing Cross Narrative Therapy Centre: <http://www.charingcrossnarrativetherapy.com>  
 Dulwich Centre: <http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au>  
 Morgan A *What is narrative therapy?* Dulwich Centre Publications 2000  
 Winslade J and Monk G *Narrative mediation* Jossey-Bass 2000

## ***About the Author***

Phillip Hart is Principal of Hollier and Hart, a consultancy specialising in mediation, facilitation and workplace education. Phillip has many years experience in a wide range of contexts in the private, public and non-government sectors in:

- resolving issues that have arisen amongst staff and clients
- helping communicate more effectively
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His previous presentations include such topics as: “What randomness and deliberation can do for community engagement”, “Connecting with a hostile audience” and “Riding the Tiger: Resolving complex many-party issues”.