

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,
not extractive

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

using stories to
think together,
not just
collecting them

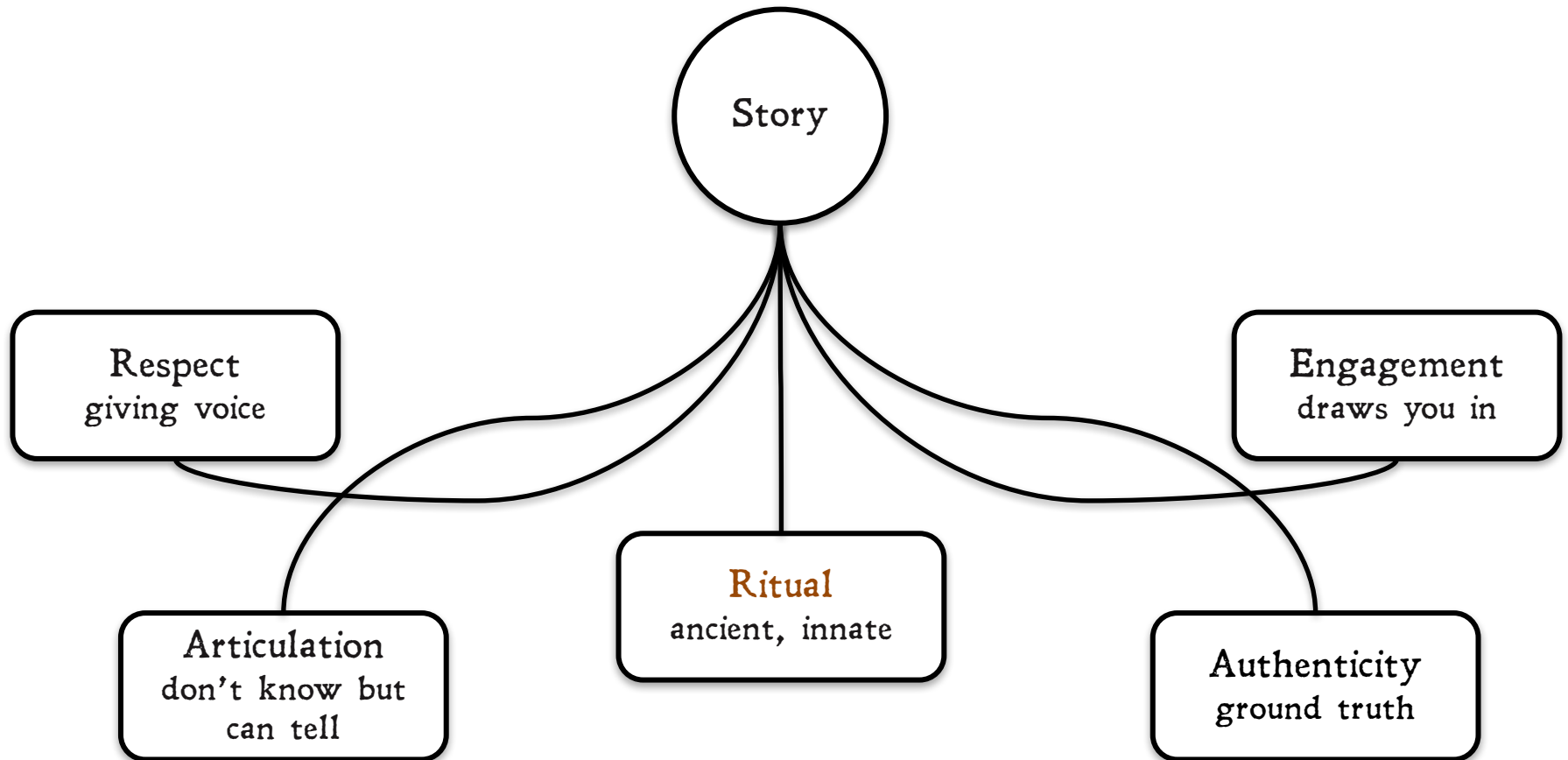
everyday
anecdotes, not
polished
performances

deep
exploration,
not surface
level

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

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?

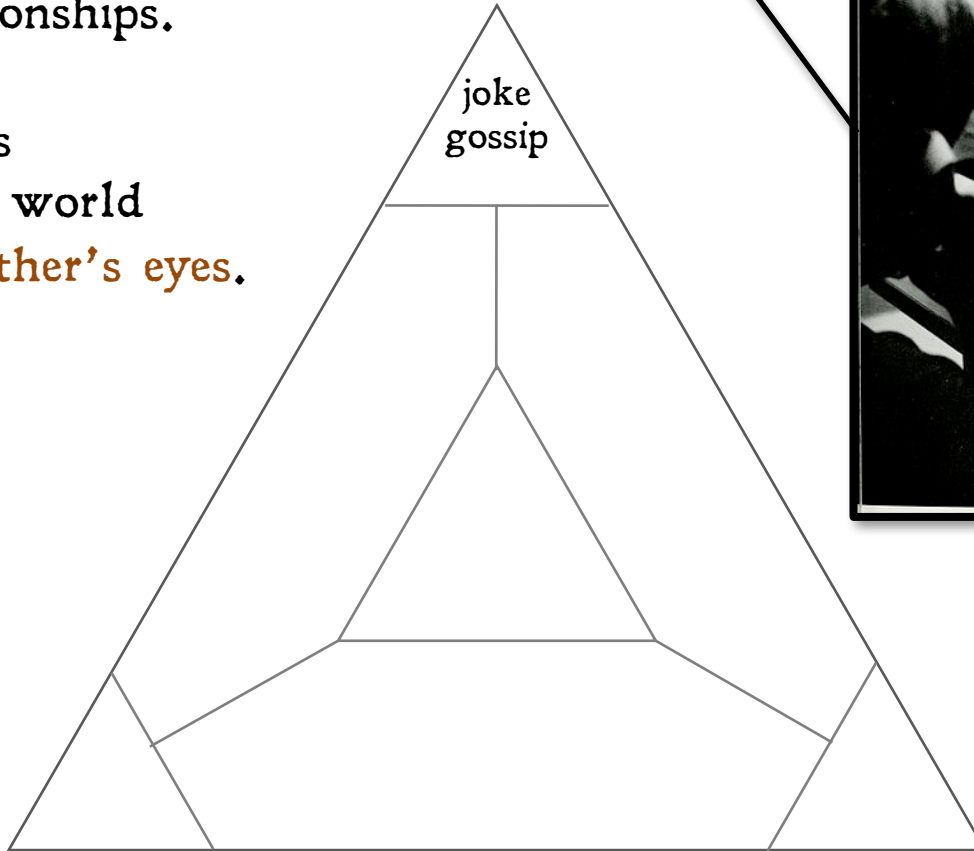
A story is a **connection**
we create
to get to know each other
and build relationships.

The best stories
help us see the world
through **each other's eyes**.



connection

joke
gossip



What are stories for?



connection

joke
gossip

lesson

history
account

mental structure

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.

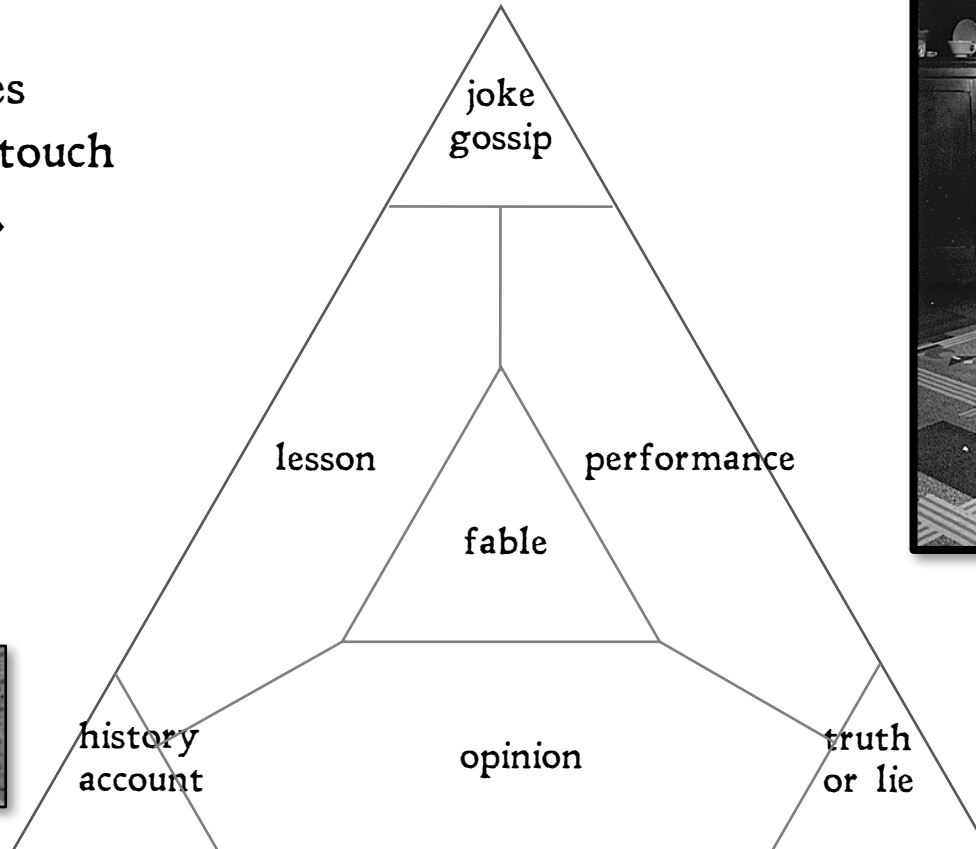
The best stories **reach out** and touch their audiences.



connection



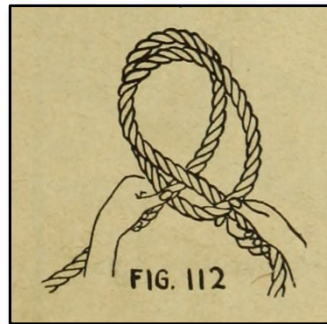
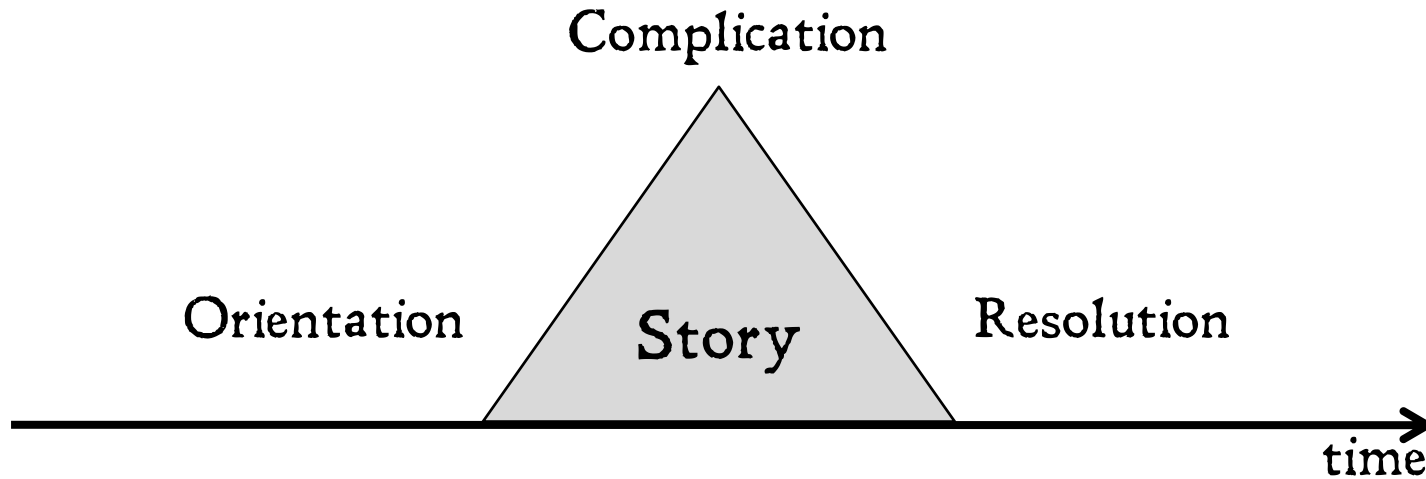
mental structure



communication

How do stories work?

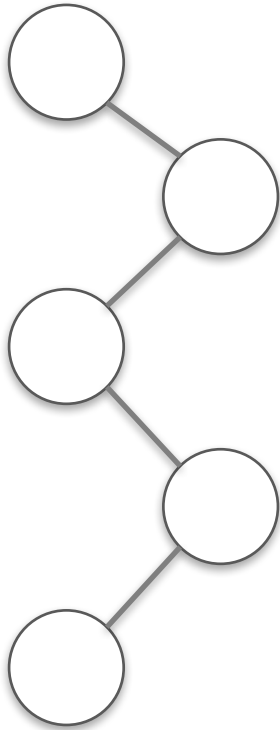
The shape of a story



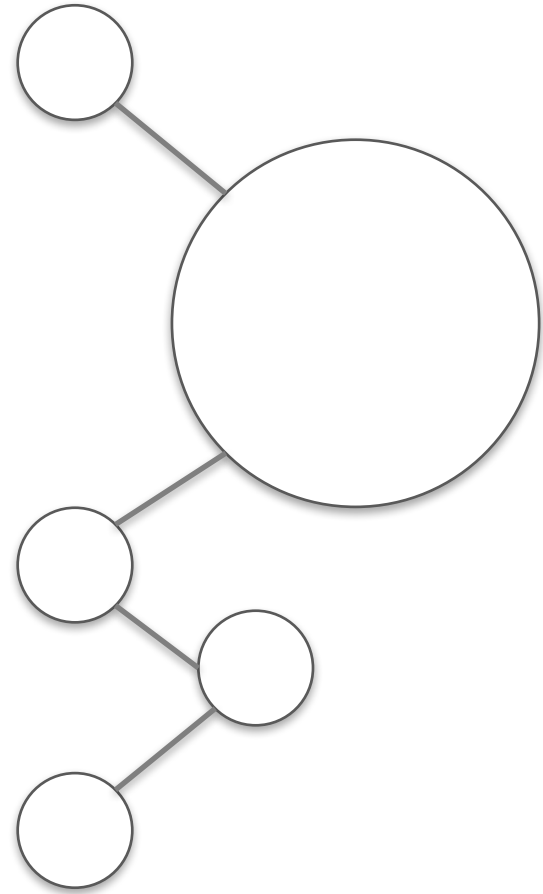
It's like a knot. We tie it, then we untie it.

How do stories work?

The rhythm of a conversational story



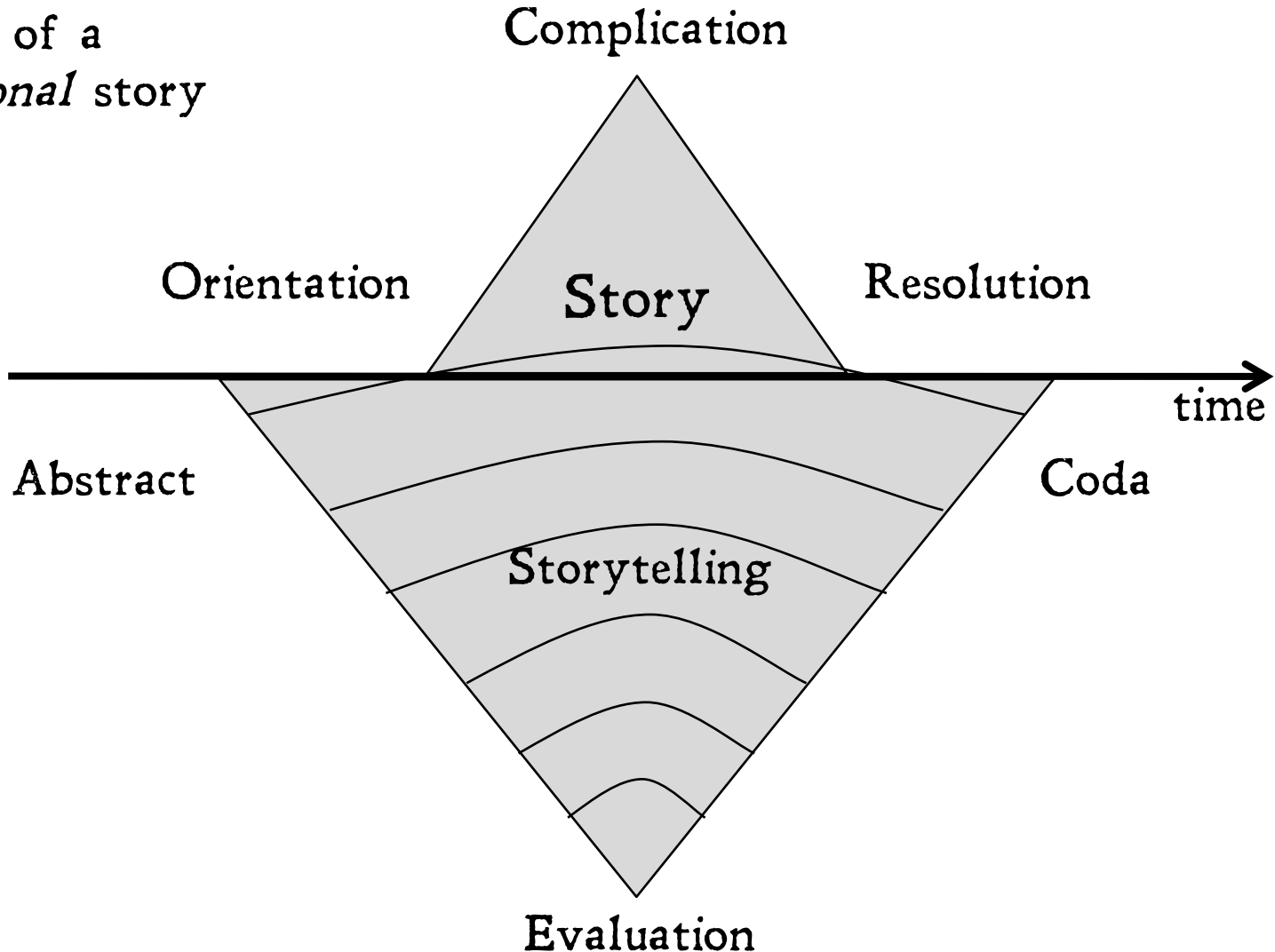
Conversation = tick-tock
Turn taking



Story = holding the floor
Privilege + danger = ritual

How do stories work?

The shape of a
conversational story



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?

More storytelling rituals: co-telling



Stories told by multiple people:

- show we were part of what happened
- strengthen connections

Like “going together” on a gift.

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?

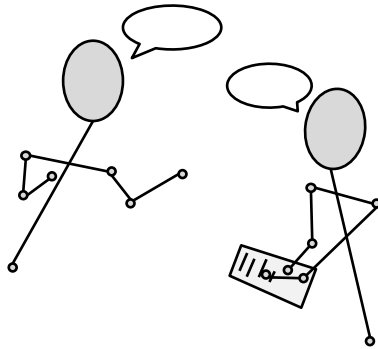
When story sharing is healthy, **it's easy to find:**

- Response stories
- Co-tellings
- Retellings
- Elaborations
- Mistake stories
- Counter-stories
- Sacred stories
- Condensed stories

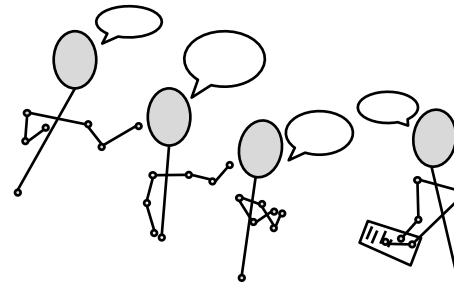


How does PNI work?

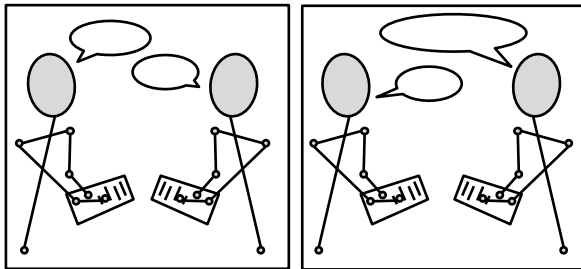
Gather stories



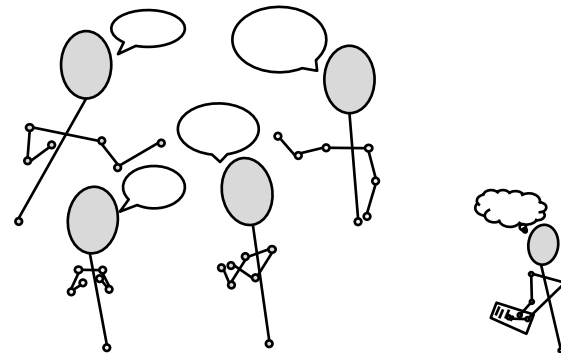
One-on-one interview



Group interview



Peer interview



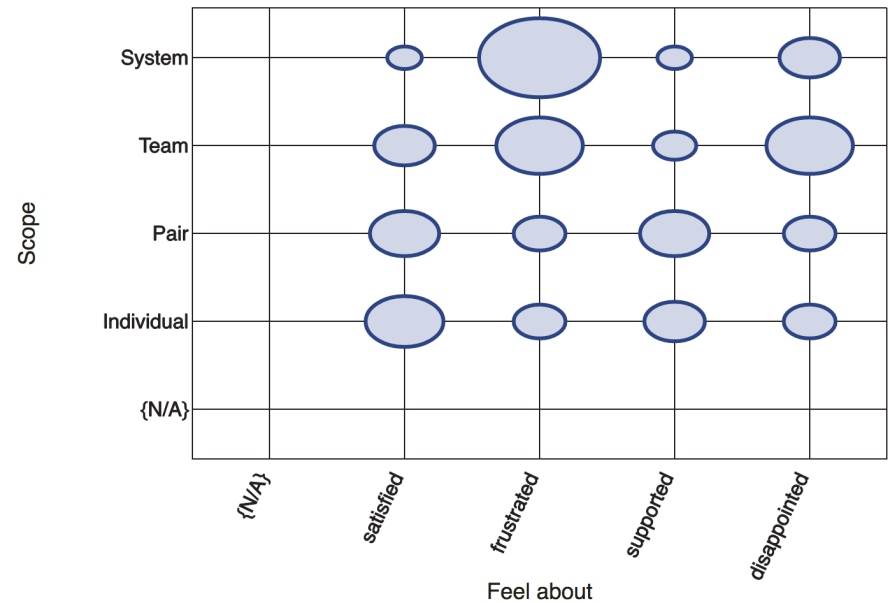
Group story session

How does PNI work?

Find patterns (in answers to questions about stories)



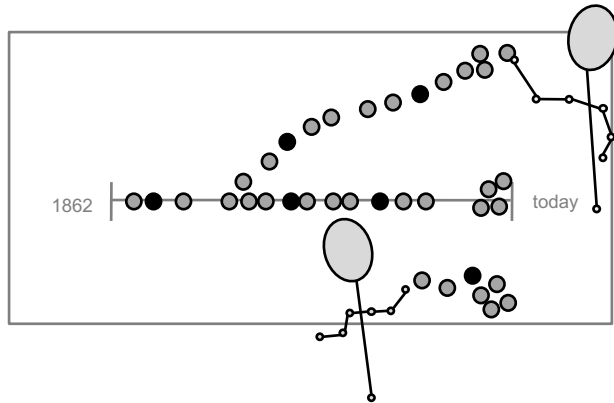
By hand



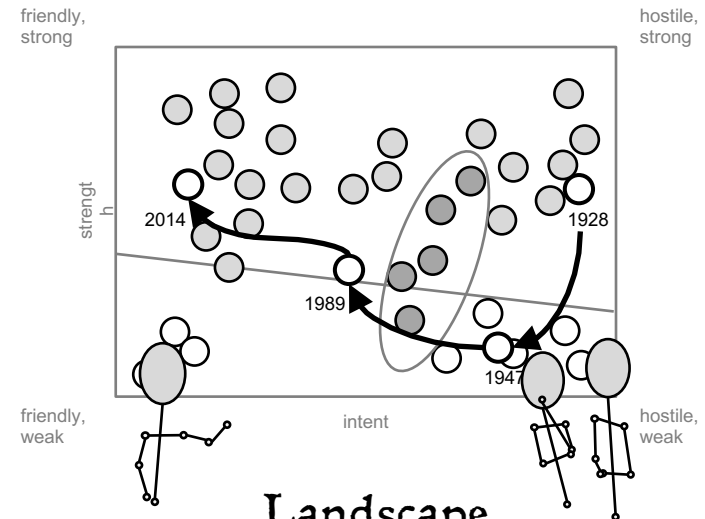
With a computer

How does PNI work?

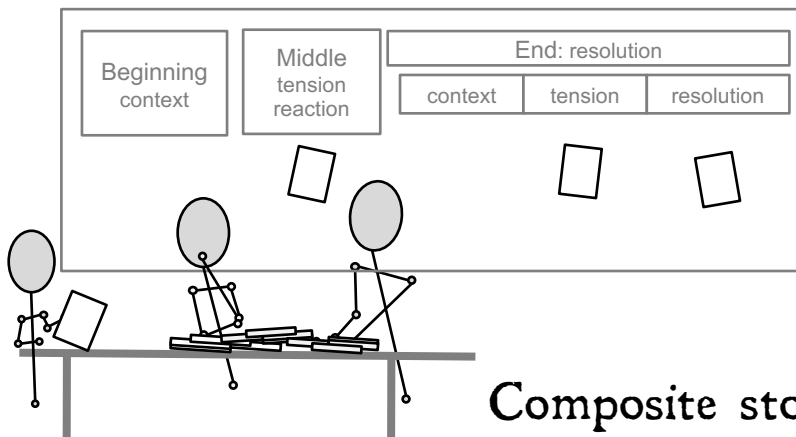
Build stories out of stories



Timeline



Landscape



Composite story

Discover:

- ✓ 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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