

## Share to Connect

### storytelling and visual language as a tool for system intervention

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Storytelling as a tool for system intervention within the PICS project. What is this PICS project? Well - in brief - it's a project in which we, the partners, have developed a method which aims at the behavioural change of young people in order to establish more respectful, resilient and peaceful communities. In this method we make use of storytelling techniques and picture language. In other words: PICS aims to change the system by means of storytelling techniques supported by picture language. The next speaker will shed a light on the 'picture language' part; I would like to introduce you to storytelling; in general and focused on the use in this project. But before doing so, I'd like to say something about 'the system' we aim to change.

In our urban society - as in almost all urban societies in Europe - youth from various backgrounds - religious, ethnic or cultural - live together. And let's not forget to mention the differences in economic terms; the *haves* and the *have nots*. This kind of society is referred to as a heterogeneous society. And without wanting to be too negative, these kind of societies are at risk of conflict.

Let me explain this ... I am not referring to conflict as in war zones, but to conflict that endangers the peace in a society like the one we are living in. Not all conflicts endanger this peace; conflicts are actually part of our society. As a former drama-student I am fully aware that my vocation would not exist without it and I even dare to say that life does not exist without conflict, whether inner and outer. But conflict becomes a danger when we do not know how to handle it. Or, as Bart Brandsma states in his publication *Inside Polarisation*: Peace is not the absence of conflict, it is the way we deal with a series of conflicts in a constructive way.

Thus, when I say our society is at risk of conflict, I don't mean the conflict itself is the risk. It is about the way we deal with it. In the following I'd like to first zoom in a bit on the dangers a heterogeneous society is facing and then focus on how storytelling can help to deal with conflict in a constructive way.

In heterogeneous societies, groups are divided by walls. These may be physical walls – I've read somewhere after the fall of the Berlin Wall even more walls were erected all over the world– but most of them are invisible. Or mentally. These walls cause a typical human way of thinking, namely in terms of we vs them, which is linked to a certain behaviour. Instead of talking with each other, we are talking about the other. We create assumptions and labels to

identify the other, but meanwhile we are just reinforcing our own identity. This we vs them thinking has more to do with ourselves than it has with the other. And, as the before mentioned Bart Brandsma explains: it is often about similarities instead of differences, though we focus on the latter. To put this more strongly: we are inclined to focus on the differences between us and them, because the idea that the other is equal to us is unbearable.

I would like to illustrate this with a personal memory.

I cringed when an Israeli lady was sitting next to me on the plane proclaiming that all Palestinians were terrorists and were after the extermination of her Jewish people.

I do not think that the Israeli woman, who lived in a *settlement*, surrounded by her self-proclaimed enemies, has ever really talked to a Palestinian. She probably doesn't want to do that because an even greater danger than the encounter itself, is that the sharing of stories could shake her firm conviction.

Moreover, we are facing a conflict here based on similarities. I will not dive into the religious aspects, in which Isaac and Ismael, Jitshak and Ismail, share the same mother and father. The core of the conflict is the fact that both groups believe that they have the rights over the same piece of land. They both want to live there. They both want to own it. What if they would acknowledge that they have a similar aim and start to think about sharing the land instead of fighting each other and accusing each other of all kind of things, based on perceived differences, identities and stereotypes.

It requires courage to come out of your trench and stop shooting at the other, either verbally or physically. It also demands a change of behaviour, which implies making an effort. And when the result of such an effort is not always immediate and easy to measure, we - humans - in general prefer to not make it.

And this is exactly why we have started the PICS project: to encourage young people to climb out of their trenches and overcome their differences and possible conflicts by connecting with each other through storytelling and by learning how to deal with differences and conflicts in a constructive way. Not only for their individual benefit, but also - on the long run - for the benefit of their communities. By taking out the risk of conflict in the sense of what I've said before, communities will become more resilient, more peaceful and safer environments. And as many studies point out, people perform better in such environments.

Now I will focus on the contribution of storytelling techniques to establish this. As I've already said the next speaker will underline the impact of picture language. Please, keep in mind that in our method the two are combined and the one strengthens the other.

Storytelling is about sharing. That's why I often prefer to use the word story-sharing when I explain what we do. It is about sharing between two people, the teller and the listener.

Sometimes there are more listeners, you could call it an audience, but that's not important for what I am going to make clear. What is important is that sharing stories is all about 'the other'. I would like to quote Limor Shiponi, narrator and orchestral conductor:

*Storytelling is a dynamic oral communication activity in which ideas are shared in a group by a messenger who is able to combine text, voice and movement to recreate a story in the imagination of his or her listeners. That's the only place where the story exists.*

A good storyteller – and with this I mean every human being with the ability to speak and listen – is always aware of the resonance of his or her story in the mind of the other. A good storyteller is not delivering a monologue. No! He or she shares his or her values, insights and emotions with the other and registers the reaction of the listener.

A good story is a journey, taking us along opposing and supporting forces. A journey containing personal, emotional and universal information. True and authentic information, often expressing the vulnerability of the teller.

Wait, I hear you thinking. True and authentic stories? Do they still exist? Isn't everybody too busy showing her or his better self to the world? Is our reputation or image not more important than who we really are? Is convincing the other not more important than sharing our vulnerability?

You are probably right, but I refuse to believe that true and honest sharing is something from the past. Besides, I wasn't talking about a story, I was talking about a good story. In addition to that, I would like to add: a good oral story, because I am convinced that there is a huge difference between sharing information digitally and a face to face. In the latter we can feel, smell and touch each other. 'Touch' may sound strange when we talk about storytelling, but be aware, sometimes a touch means more than a thousand words. Read the Flemish psychiatrist Dirk de Wachter's recent book, *the Art of being Unhappy!*

In the end it comes all down to empathy and this is exactly what a good story can evoke. The teller takes the listener on a journey and as soon as the two are on this journey together, there is every chance they will find a common ground. And with common ground I mean something that connects the teller and the listener emotionally.

It is rare for this to happen because both have experienced exactly the same 'thing'. More often the story takes the listener back to own memories. To give you an example: someone shared a touching story about the death of her grandfather with me. Though I did not know the man, listening to her story took me back to the moment my own grandfather passed away. And though we, the teller and the listener, thought of different people, we felt connected, because we recognized the feeling of losing someone dear to us. This is the same with moments of joy and happiness. For sure, when it comes to feelings, there are way more similarities that

connect, than differences that divide us.

If you are not convinced yet, I would like to share one striking example with you; the parent circles of the Palestinian/Israeli organisation Crack in the Wall. This organization brings together people that have lost loved ones in the conflict. I wondered why people would like to join such a circle. 'Oh, that's simple,' the organization replied 'They come here because they want to yell at each other; You killed my daughter; you killed my son! And so on. But after a while, they find each other in their shared grief. And unbelievable as it might seem, sometimes even friendships grow out of this. When people find others that have experienced the same emotions - in this case - of loss, it doesn't matter whether you have an Israeli or Palestinian background.'

Crack the Wall has changed the system. It made people leave their trenches and start looking for connections instead of staying at their side of the imaginary wall. Empathy is the magic word.

If it is that simple, why isn't this the norm instead of the exception? Well, as I already stated we, human beings, in general tend to prefer the path of least resistance. And also, it requires courage to open up in front of a stranger and to share something as personal as your story.

So, let's say most people need some help to start sharing, especially with strangers or people belonging to another group in their community. That is why we have developed our PICS method to encourage people to share stories, and some other ones.

If time would allow me, I would like to make you familiar with the different phases of a storytelling workshop, from teambuilding to triggering creativity to raising awareness. But since there is no time for that, I refer you to the manual that soon will be published on our website. Time does allow me though to stress the importance of a safe environment. A group without limitless confidence in each other will not be able to share on a deeper and equal level. Believe me, I experienced working with a group in which mutual trust was non-existent and I would rather marry an elephant than experience this again.

Mutual trust is imperative for a successful workshop. Team building activities should therefore be part of every workshop and not only at the beginning, but also between activities that emotionally may require a great deal of the participants in order to have some fun together and relax a bit.

When we solely focus on the storytelling parts of a workshop, we can distinguish two types of activities: Triggering and Creating/Crafting the stories, usually done in this sequence.

Triggering can be considered as the first step of sharing, leading to common ground. We are not dealing with structured stories yet; we limit ourselves to triggering memories.

Often, already in this stage, deep emotions - varying from extreme happiness to extreme sadness and everything in between - are shared and empathy is built up. Sometimes, this step alone is enough to fully connect the members of the group. This is when they dare to cross a threshold and gain the courage to share and experience the wonderful feeling of being heard, when they have the feeling they've really learned something about each other. Consequently, the group dynamics change for the better, *we vs them* turns into *we*.

In one of our PICS workshops we established this by using pictures on the participants' own phones. We asked the participants to look for an image that really means a lot to them. Then we invited them to show it to the others in the group and to share the memory it triggered.

The effect of this was very significant. Young people started sharing information they'd probably not have shared in an ordinary conversation with relative 'stranger'. However, nobody judged and therefore was judged. After everyone had shared a memory, the young participants couldn't believe what had happened to them, which gifts they'd got from their peers. And just to inform you: this was in all aspects a heterogeneous group of young people: different cultural backgrounds, gender, sexual preferences and even some handicaps. None of these differences mattered anymore; this one evening they were a group of equals. And I am sure that by joining this workshop they have invested in becoming a stronger, more respectful and resilient community.

Whenever a workshop which is limited in time is this successful you do feel satisfied. But it is even more satisfying when time is given to deepen this result by creating and crafting the participants' stories; when they have the time to really work on their stories for a couple of hours or even for a couple of days. This creating and crafting requires a little more information about the art of storytelling and imagery, about the narrative structure or hero's journey I referred to earlier. I do recommend to first take notice of this narrative structure if you want to work with storytelling.

Creating and crafting a story leads to way more depth than just sharing memories. The story becomes a friend who walks along with you for some time. A friend who is sometimes a mentor, but who can be a mirror as well. Working on a story for a longer space of time leads to self-reflection and the sharing of the final result leads to pride and self-confidence, and to approval of the listeners, who realize what the teller has gone through to come up with this story. They'll respect the effort and are willing to listen to every word of the story. Thus, the journey of the teller easily and truly becomes the journey of the entire group. The '*we vs them*' or '*me vs the other*' sentiment will disappear and be replaced by a simple *we*. The system has been changed and the foundation for behavioural change is built. I, together with - fortunately - many others, am convinced that this foundation can and will lead to a sustainable impact, beneficial to an entire community.

It goes without saying that this process needs facilitation and sometimes some steering. Methods like PICS are very useful in delivering an applied storytelling workshop aiming at

connecting people and at contributing to more peaceful and resilient communities.

Thanks to the Erasmus+ program of the EU we were able to test our method and to prove its effects. The next step is to convince more people of the strength of using our method as a tool for system interventions. It needs some courage, but we have enough good examples to help encourage many more to cross the threshold, to start sharing and really meeting 'the other'.