

Stories in conversations and presentations – a comparative study

- Barry Brophy, UCD, February 2013 -

Abstract:

Making oral presentations is a poorly understood process. There is a perception that many presentations in the workplace are dull or ineffective. Through 14 years of consultancy experience, the author has observed that several communication devices employed effectively in conversation – in particular stories – are not used in presentations. The aim of this study was to quantify this effect and explore a possible reason for the omission of stories.

Postgraduate students (group size 17) were invited to attend a 3-hour presentation-skills training session. Initially they were grouped according to discipline (5 groups of varying size) and through several brainstorming exercises, their conversations were videotaped. The groups were then randomly mixed, further exercises carried out and the discussions were again recorded. Finally, the groups made short presentations to the class. The incidence of the use of stories was compared between the conversations and presentations. Further, the incidence of story-use in the initial homogenous groups (from the same discipline) and the subsequent mixed groups was compared to see if discomfort (as brought about by working with strangers) was a factor in volunteering personal stories. If this were seen to be the case, it may suggest a reason why stories are used less frequently in the nerve-inducing setting of a presentation.

The difference between story-use in conversations and presentations was marked. Three of the four presentations contained no stories at all whereas the conversations were characterised by frequent use of stories, sometimes clustering with a frequency of four or five a minute. The comparison of story-use in the mixed and unmixed groups was not conclusive. However, a further idea emerged: that stories perform a dual-role in conversations - 'social interactive' and 'meaning building' – that does not occur as naturally in a presentation.

Background:

It is difficult to find a foothold in the literature for a study that marries storytelling and oral presentations. The literature on storytelling is spread over many fields whereas the literature on presentations is scant, distributed almost nowhere.

Looking at the literature on oral presentations, first, an extensive search produced literature in related fields – memory, problem solving, visual perception – but very little that was directly applied to presentations. This is doubtless because it so difficult to measure either the 'effectiveness' of a presentation or to control the many variables which may have a bearing on this effectiveness. The approach often taken has been to carry out experiments in more easily controlled scenarios and extrapolate the findings to a presentation situation.

The field of Cognitive Load Analysis produces many such studies. One illustrative example (Mayer, Heiser & Lonn, 2001) with the intriguing subtitle: 'When Presenting More Material Results in Less Understanding', presented scientific material to subjects in audiovisual format (videos, images, text and voiceovers) and measured learning of the subjects by means of a number of post-presentation

questions. It was found that, 'Learning a scientific explanation from a narrated animation was hurt by the addition of on-screen text that contained the same words as in the narration.' The authors referred to this as the 'redundancy effect'. In short, listening to words while viewing images is complementary, whereas listening to words while viewing those same words in printed form, caused a processing overload and impeded learning. There are many other studies along the same lines.

Another example of how you have to reach into other fields of cognitive research to find insights relevant to oral presentations comes from the work of Elizabeth Loftus. She demonstrated (Loftus & Doyle, 1987) the power of eyewitness stories in courtroom trials. The witness story presented a more coherent account than does disparate, factual testimony even when that testimony discredited what the witness had said. In Loftus's own words, 'Perhaps it is easier for jurors to work with a smooth account, modifying it here and there depending on subsequent evidence, than to take small fragments and weave them together into a coherent image.'

This power of the ordinary person with his or her earnestly told stories has implications for presentations but it requires a creative, analogical leap to make the connection. Studies of the transfer of content through presentations are rare in the extreme.

Turning our attention to stories – applied to conversations, as we were looking at the comparison of story-use in presentations vs conversations – the literature is also sparse. As Ritchie (Ritchie, 2010) points out, 'Storytelling is apparently a central part of how we organize both our social interactions and our understanding of the world, and theoretical attention to literary storytelling dates back at least as far as Aristotle. However, until quite recently conversational storytelling has been largely ignored or discounted in the social sciences'.

One reason for this is the difficulty researchers have faced in turning meandering, personal narratives into firm, logical propositions. But as Katherine Kohler Riessman comments (Kohler Riessman, 1993) 'A primary way individuals make sense of experience is by casting it in narrative form. This is especially true of difficult life transitions and trauma.' Kohler Riessman has essentially developed a guidebook for doing this but we do not have to go that far. We are not interested in the particular content of stories but in how predisposed people are to telling them. We quantify this by counting the use of stories, not by analysing each in detail.

It is useful, in examining when stories are used, to try to better understand what they are used for. Jerome Bruner notes that stories 'forge links between the exceptional and the ordinary' (Bruner, 1992). Thus they provide a 'meaning-making' function, making sense of new events in the context of what is already well understood.

He also points out that telling a story involves taking a moral stance in relation to the events that story depicts. 'You cannot argue any of these interpretations without taking a moral stance and a rhetorical posture. Any more than you can univocally interpret the stories on both sides of a family quarrel or the "arguments" on both sides of a First Amendment case before the US Supreme Court.' This personal aspect of stories may suggest why they are less frequently employed in presentations than in conversations. In an already very fearful situation, presenters may not be inclined to expose themselves further by sharing personal stories.

Another role of stories is a social-interactive one. 'Storytelling is often accomplished collaboratively... A speaker's apparent intention can be collectively transformed by the entire group, and a new intention collaboratively generated' (Ritchie, 2010). This too may suggest reasons why stories can flourish in many-sided conversations but not in one-sided presentations. In conversations, one story often prompts another and result in story clusters, as Jack Sidnell (Sidnell,

2010) observed: 'Stories often come clumped together like this and, when they do, subsequent stories are specifically designed to display a relation to previous ones.'

The social aspect of stories may be suited to conversations for another reason. In an intimate group setting, a storyteller will be better able to appraise the needs of his or her small target audience. Sidnell also cites the work of Sacks (Sacks, 1987) on how a storyteller, at any given time, will examine their own 'entitlement' and 'credibility' relative to a given audience. It is harder to do this in a presentation.

Pinker (Pinker, 1995) echoes this point in reflecting on the process of subliminal self-checking before the conveying of any piece of information to another person. Referring to the field known as 'pragmatics' (developed originally by philosopher Paul Grice and then refined by anthropologist Dan Sperber and linguist Deidre Wilson), he says, 'The speaker, having made a claim on the precious ear of the listener, implicitly guarantees that the information is relevant: that it is not already known, and that it is sufficiently connected to what the listener is thinking that he or she can make inferences to new conclusions with little extra mental effort.'

In a presentation, it is much harder to gauge if the information is relevant, unknown and sufficiently connected to what the audience already knows, not just because there is more than one person present but also because it is not feasible to converse with each one to find out what they want from you. This may lead a presenter to communicate objective facts in preference to subjective stories.

The role of stories in communication – meaning-making, opinion-stating, social interaction - may suggest reasons why storytelling is more common in conversations than in presentations but these functions are no less important in a presentation. However, before we can start to unpick the inhibitions that affect storytellers in different situations, it is first necessary, in some way, to try to quantify these differences. This is the main job of the current study.

Procedure:

The aim was to make a comparison of the use of stories in conversations and presentations. Students were thus invited to 3-hour presentation skills training session where they were asked to work in groups, brainstorm different aspects of making presentations and then develop ideas for a group presentation which they gave at the end. Each of the group conversations was recorded (with video cameras and in one case a Dictaphone) as were the final presentations.



Figure 1 – Recordings of group conversations.

Figure 1 shows one such group discussion with three of the other groups visible in the background. The participants knew that they were being recorded but the cameras were placed as unobtrusively as possible. For example, the camera for the group in the top right of Figure 1 can just be seen on the window sill. The group in the centre of the room were monitored by means of a Dictaphone on the table. The group in the top left were recorded by means of a camera on an adjacent shelf. It seemed, from analysing the recordings, that the participants quickly forgot about these devices.

Although all attendees were aware that they were part of a study, they were incentivised to attend (and not to think about the investigation in which they were playing a part) by the receipt of free training in this important area. They were observed to work continuously on the tasks set and ultimately on the presentation they made at the end of the session. This was observed by the two experimenters on the day and by examining the video footage after the event. Lunch was also provided.

Who were the participants?

The participants were all postgraduate or postdoctoral students from the University. A recruitment letter was sent out to heads of school and it was requested, where possible, that groups who already knew each other should attend. There were 30 interested parties of which 17 were available on the date that was finally decided.

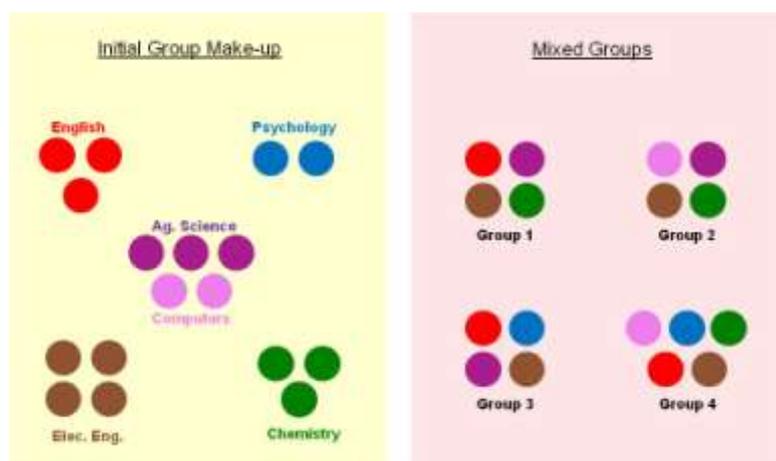


Figure 2 – Schematic showing participant disciplines and discussion groups.

The breakdown of the participants, by discipline, is shown in Figure 2. Of these groups, the participants from Psychology, Electronic Engineering, Chemistry and Agricultural Science knew each other from before, whereas the others did not. The first set of group discussions (consisting of two brainstorm discussions as well as the conversations over lunch) were carried out in the initial homogenous groups. The second set of discussions (comprising one longer brainstorm leading into preparation of the group presentation) were carried out in the mixed groups denoted on the right of the figure. These mixed groups were randomly assigned.

Secondary Aim

As well as making a comparison of the use of stories in presentatons and conversations, a secondary aim was to explore a thesis that emerged in a pilot study where it was observed that some people volunteered more stories in conversation than others, and this seemed to correlate with the

confidence of the speaker as well as the rapport within the group. Put another way, when people seemed more comfortable (due to innate confidence or because of a supportive group environment) they volunteered more stories. It was proposed, then, that one of the reasons for the absence of stories in presentations is discomfort or fear.

To this end, the group discussions were carried out in two stages. Firstly, groups were arranged according to department/school from which they came in the hope that participants might already know each other. Indeed, in the recruitment letter, interested parties were asked to come in pre-arranged groups. Although this happened in a few instances, it wasn't the case for every group. The first set of brainstorming exercises were then carried out in these 'homogenous' (same school) groups. The second set of discussions was carried out with randomly mixed groups.

How was the training course conducted?

The instructor would introduce a topic and ask the groups to discuss it among themselves for several minutes. Then the ideas of the groups would be pooled and fed into a class-wide discussion. Finally the instructor would present some insights and examples to tie the ideas together.

An example of such a topic was: 'What is a presentation good for?'. The instructor posed the question of what can be done in a presentation more effectively than through any other means (report, email, meeting). Groups were given several minutes to discuss this. Then the instructor then chaired a group discussion where ideas generated were pooled and different arguments debated. Finally the instructor presented some examples of his own to show where oral presentations are most effective and where they are often misused.

For the purposes of this study, only the small-group brainstorming sessions – not the class-wide instructor-led discussions – were analysed.

What is a 'story'?

A story was simply any instance where one of the participants drew from their own anecdotal experience to make a contribution to the conversation. It was not simply an opinion but rather a past experience shared in order to aid communication. An example is as follows (note, English was not the speaker's first language):

But, to be honest, last year from September till June...2011...2012...I attend every week...there is...we have a seminar series for the PhD students and I attend every Tuesday and I never get benefit from any presentation.

Another example (related to the presentation topic of foreign nationals in Ireland) was:

Well actually I'm from Galway, so technically I was accepted into Dublin as well. I still get a lot of teasing from Dublin people who think I'm from the country and think I grow potatoes in my back garden and...I do grow potatoes in my back garden

The stories varied in length. Some were as long as half-a-minute or more:

A friend of mine...she's living in Greece...and she married a Greek man so they had the wedding there. So...beautiful. And the food – we just spent the whole five days eating and eating and

eating. It was...I came home half a stone heavier. Everything had garlic in it or fish or tzatziki...so I could talk about food for five minutes...

Whereas others were just a sentence or two:

I went to Cyprus once...and Turkey. (laughs) That's not the same, though.

Obviously the word 'story' can mean different things to different people and this definition may disagree with others. But this is a comparative study where the instance of 'stories', as defined in a particular way, was compared in two different settings. As long we were consistent, the definition is viable and useful.

Topics

The groups were free to choose their own topics for the final presentations. One such presentation – on the 'nutritional value of potatoes' – is shown in Figure 3. These presentations varied in length from three to six minutes.



Figure 3 - Final presentations.

As well as choosing their own topic, each group was free to organise its presentation (number of speakers, visual aids, props) as it saw fit. The aim was to allow the presenters to be as natural and knowledgeable as possible

Results and Discussion:

The incidence of stories in presentations as compared with conversations was the primary focus of the study. To that end, the video and audio footage of all group conversations and presentations was examined in second-by-second detail. Any time a story – as defined above – was told, this was noted on a timeline. These timelines were constructed for group conversations and for the same group's presentations and can be viewed in Figure 4.

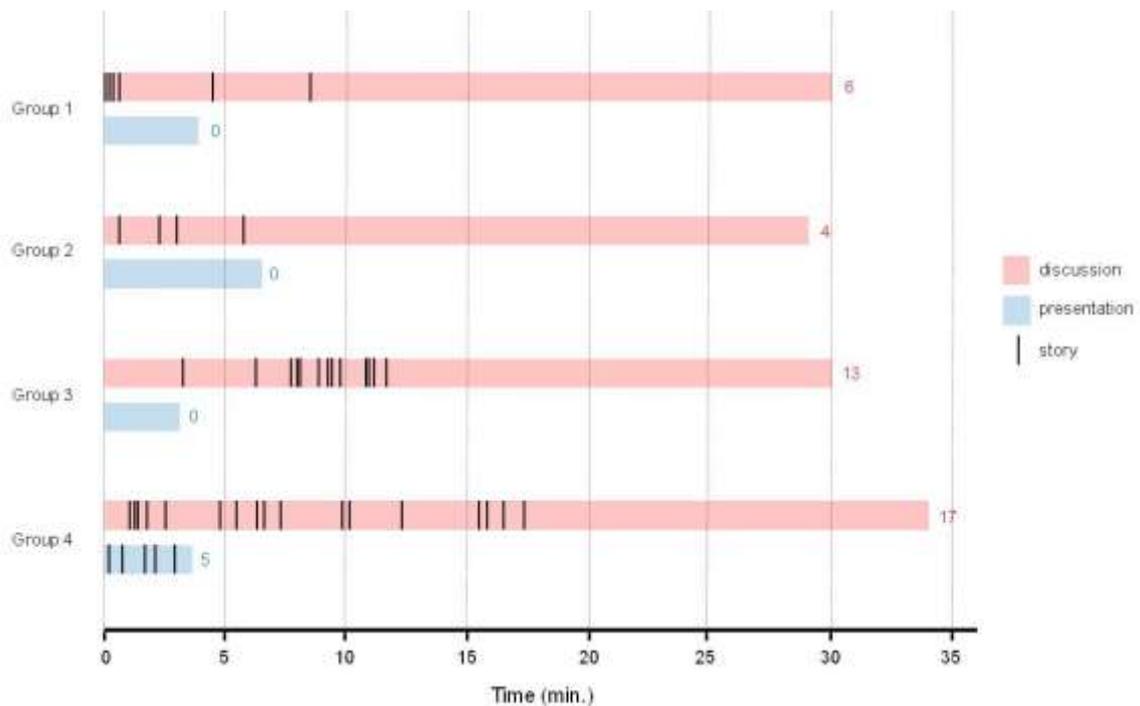


Figure 4 – Incidence of stories in small group discussions compared with presentations.

Each instance of a story is denoted by a black line. Note that no account is taken of the length of the stories in this representation. It can be seen that there are many stories in the small-group discussions but none in three of the four presentations. Indeed, for the one presentation that did contain stories, the topic was 'Foreign Perspectives on Ireland' and was based on the different perspectives of the group members. These were from Iraq, Greece, Galway and Dublin. So the topic was personal by default and the use of stories was unavoidable. But in the three presentations on abstract topics – 'Nutrition of Potatoes', 'Branding of Coffee' and 'How to Make a Good Presentation' – there were no stories at all.

Also observable in Figure 4 is that most of the stories arose in the early stages of discussion. Examination of the content of the recordings suggests why. The groups were tasked with coming up with an idea for, and then preparing, a short presentation. It was noticed that once agreement had been reached and a topic chosen, the group moved onto the process of putting material together and the incidence of stories died away. This is shown in Figure 5 which marks the point, in each group discussion, where the choice of topic was made.

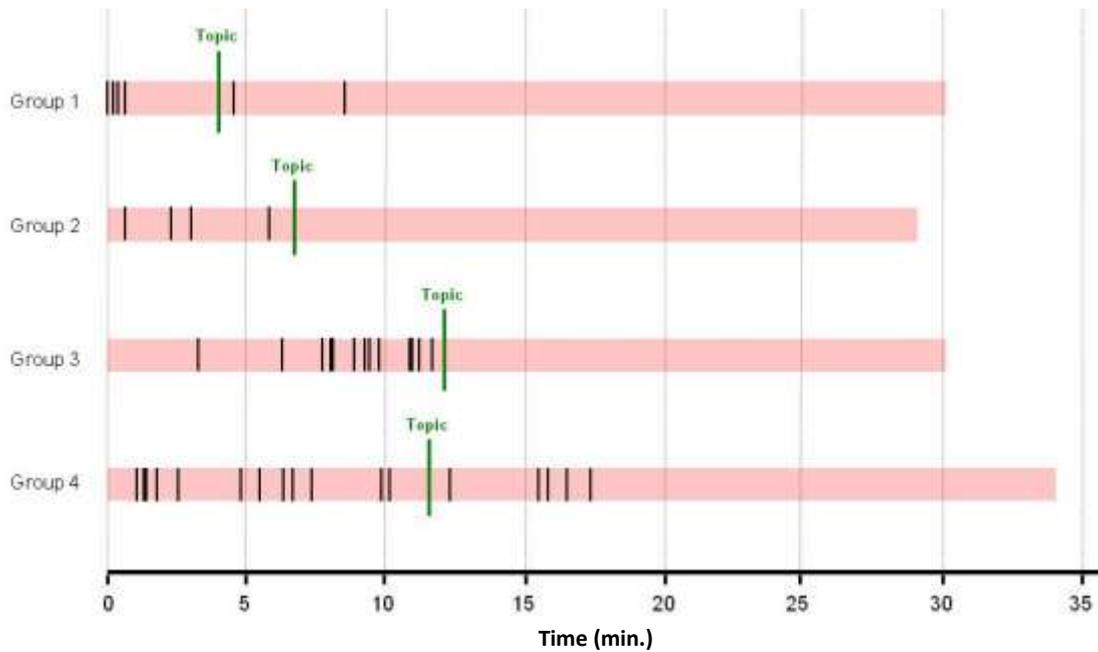


Figure 5 – Mixed group conversations with time where the topic was finalised is marked. The incidence of stories diminished greatly when this decision was reached.

In practice, it was easy to note the exact time at which this decision occurred. For example, the discussion in 'Group 2' proceeded as followed:

- A – Or we could have a very surprising topic: how to give a presentation.
 B – Yeah, yeah.
 C – That has a connection with glossophobia.
 B – Glossophobia, yeah. And we could talk about challenges...
 C – OK, it's decided.

In 'Group 3' it ran as follows:

- A – So...but I don't know how we could turn that into a presentation.
 B – I think we just have.

This observation may have its roots in the fact that two of the functions of stories - 'meaning-building' and 'social interaction' – become less important once the presentation topic has been finalised and work is proceeding (against the clock) on seeing the task through. Essentially, the groups now know each other and know what they want to achieve, so the need for stories to perform these two tasks diminishes. Indeed, as the recordings proceeded, conversation ceased or became sporadic as participants clustered around computers and worked on the audiovisual content, or splintered to prepare their own parts of the talk. The difference in the early and latter stage of one of the conversations is shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6 – Contrast between early ‘meaning-building’ stage of the conversation with high incidence of stories (left) and later planning phase of the conversation (pictured right) with few stories.

Given that a presentation is, essentially, a ‘mean-building’ exercise, where the knowledge of the audience and that of the presenter are initially mis-matched, it would seem logical that stories should serve the same communication purpose in presentations as they do in conversations. And yet, as the table in Figure 7 shows, this does not happen. It compares the number of stories told in the meaning-building phase of the conversations (prior to reaching a decision on what to present) and number used in the presentations. Although the group members have used this communication device to essentially explain their ideas to each other, they have not done so when explaining the same ideas to someone else.

Group	Discussion		Presentation	
	Time	Stories	Time	Stories
1	4'01"	4	3'55"	0
2	6'43"	4	6'29"	0
3	12'05"	13	3'06"	0
4	11'30"	12	3'39"	5

Figure 7 – Number of stories told in ‘meaning-building’ portion of conversations compared to the presentations.

Effect of Nerves

One of the reasons proposed as to why stories are not used in presentations is that fear discourages presenters from exposing themselves by volunteering personal anecdotes. Evidence of this came from an earlier pilot study which indicated that members of groups which exhibited a better rapport told more stories. Of course, the judgement of ‘better rapport’ was subjective and it may be that the use of stories was a cause rather than an effect of this rapport. However, interesting additional evidence for this thesis came from the observation that seemingly more self-confident individuals told more stories in conversations. One example was a woman in the current study who, in a group of five, told 14 of 26 stories recounted in a particular discussion. At one stage this participant reflected:

I don't actually mind giving presentations but I just speak way too fast.

It may be that people who are unafraid to stand up and make a presentation are also unafraid to share personal experiences in a conversation with strangers.

In order to look more closely at the negative correlation between nervousness and the use of stories, the group discussions were carried out in two stages. First, participants were grouped according to discipline in the hope that they might know each other in advance and thus be comfortable in one another's company. To encourage this, when the recruitment letter was circulated, participants were asked to attend in pre-formed groups. Referring to the summary of participants in Figure 2, the following groups knew each other in advance: Psychology, Electronic Engineering, Chemistry and Agricultural Science. This was not the case, however, for the attendees from English and Computer Science.

For the second stage of discussions, then, groups were mixed randomly. The aim was to explore if this less familiar situation would result in less stories, reinforcing the idea that we tell more stories when we feel secure.

On analysing the results, however, this could not be concluded. The number of stories and how they clustered together did not seem to depend on group members having known each other in advance. If anything, the opposite was true. Figure 8 shows excerpts from the discussions in the first pre-mixed groups. Despite the three people in the 'English' group having not met before, there were 46 stories exchanged in 34 minutes. This compares with just 2 stories in a 14-minute period for the Chemistry group. [Note: the difference in length of the recordings is due to the fact that some groups took coffee breaks at their desks where these conversations could also be recorded whereas others moved to other locations in the room. Also, the camera, in one case, was turned off accidentally during one exercise.]

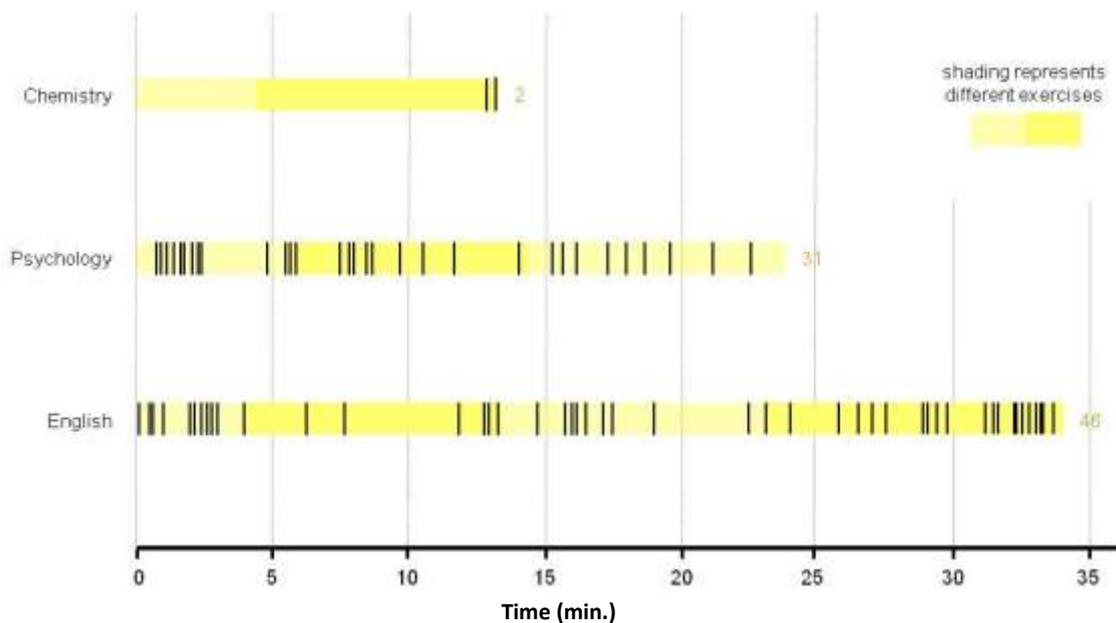


Figure 8 – Stories told in the pre-mixed group discussions. The Chemistry and Psychology groups knew each other from before whereas the English group did not.

In the Chemistry group (as well as in the Electronic Engineering group, not shown above) there was laughter and joking between the participants and it was obvious that they knew each other from the casual way they interacted.

This study would seem to show that stories are used more often in conversations but is not discriminating enough to examine why. It is possible that the functions of stories – building meaning, social interaction, and opinion-stating – offset each other. So, for example, participants might feel more inhibited about stating their opinion in a group of strangers but this may be offset by a greater need for social interaction and meaning-building in a group of people working on a shared task. A more extensive study would be required to unpick these different factors.

Indeed, in one of the group discussions between strangers, the social interaction function is quite obvious from the type of stories being told as two participants orient their past experiences in relation to one another.

A – I went to Maynooth before... I got a bit lost this morning
B – That happens to me.
A – Have you been here before?
B – Not in this building, no, but I've been in UCD for a long time because I did my degree at night over the last few years.
A – I see what you mean.
B – And it took me about three years before I was able to find where I was going first time.
A – I knew there was no hope because I used to get lost in Maynooth. I think if you get lost in Maynooth, you're going to get lost in UCD.
B – Really?
A – Well, no, towards the end I got it but every time I'd go to the library I'd end up, like, in the Art's block.

One further comparison was made, namely that between the pre-mixed group and the mixed group as recorded by the same camera. As has already been said, there was no obvious link between how well people know each other and how many stories they told.

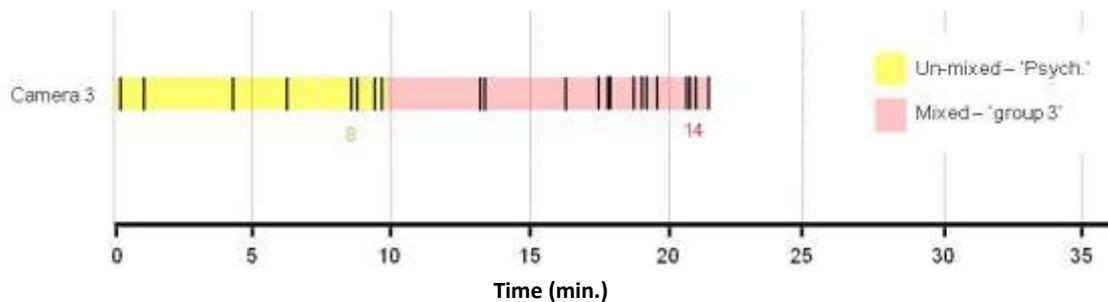


Figure 9 – Stories told in a pre-mixed group discussion compared with those told in a mixed group.

Of course, there is nothing remarkable or sophisticated about these stories. They occur in everyday conversation all the time. What is remarkable, however, is the way these personal experiences are discarded in presentations. Building meaning, stating your opinion and being accessible to your audience (social interaction) are just as important in a presentation as they are in a presentation, probably more so. Always the question is being asked of a presenter: 'Who is this person and what do they know?' Experience-based stories are very valuable in answering these questions and yet are frequently omitted from presentations.

Strengths and Limitations of Study:

Although this study makes interesting observations on the incidence of stories there is no measure of how damaging it might be to leave them out of presentations. Put another way: so what? The study suggests that there is a subconscious discarding of stories but does this matter? If it could be shown that the omission of stories is damaging then a study like this would have greater merit.

To this end, a larger study could be commissioned with many more participants. The audience could be asked to grade, in some way, the effectiveness of the presentations and some correlation drawn between these measures and the use of stories.

The difficulty with trying to derive such a correlation is in disentangling it from the many other correlations between content and effectiveness. One way around this might be to give the same presentations twice to two different audiences. The increased use of stories could then be encouraged in a selection of the presentations the second time around. Results could be normalised – to account for different audiences – to see if some rank-order of quality had changed.

In any case, with such variability in the results – particularly in terms of the numbers of stories different groups exchanged – this current study could benefit by simple repetition on the same or on a larger scale.

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