

# Using drama to learn from stories

by Dr Esther Walker

## Introduction

This exercise was originally developed to enable health care staff to learn from the experience of those who use their service (e.g. patients, relatives). However, although the story example used comes from this environment, the techniques and process described can be applied to any kind of story that you, in your organization, have an interest in learning from (or in assisting others to learn from).

## About this exercise

This exercise applies simple drama techniques to explore a story that describes a patient's experience. It will introduce you to the potential such techniques have for helping staff to use the experience of patients and relatives to learn from and to develop practice.

The story was chosen because it describes something that could happen in any hospital setting across NHS Scotland. The story represents one piece of a jigsaw. These drama techniques will help you to use your creative imagination and apply your knowledge and experience to build up the other pieces of the jigsaw.

The story we are using is given below. It is followed by a set of steps to follow which guide you through the drama techniques. You can elaborate and extend these techniques in lots of different ways. You could experiment to find what works best for you and for those you are working with. Any feedback (or questions) you have can be shared with me (contact details given at the end).

## The Story

Martha describes herself as a young 77 year old. She was in a four bedded room. Her present condition had affected her mobility. She had been asked by the doctor to drink plenty of fluids but found this difficult to do because the water jug was not always filled up. However, her visitors brought her bottled water and fruit juice.

As she was taking in more fluids, so she needed the toilet more. She did not like to buzz for the nurses to help her because they always seemed so busy. She managed by holding her urine in for as long as possible, waiting until a member of staff was in the room on other duties, before asking for help to get to the toilet.

On one occasion however, she was bursting and buzzed. A member of staff popped her head round the door, listened to Martha's request for help and said she would be back in a minute. Some while later, Martha buzzed again. Another member of staff responded and said the same thing.

Time passed. Martha could hold it no longer and wet herself and the bed. She was mortified. She sat for ages in the wet bed, too ashamed to admit what she had done and fearing a reprisal for her carelessness.

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A third member of staff came in, saw her distress, comforted her and, with a colleague, organized for her bed to be changed and for Martha to be cleaned up.

## The Instructions

1. Facilitator reads out the story to the group.
2. Facilitator gives each person a piece of paper on which is written "I feel..."/"I think..." (Appendix 1). Each person records their responses to the story and puts the piece of paper face down on the table. Facilitator mixes them up.
3. Each person picks up a piece of paper (making sure it isn't their own) and reads out what's on it.
4. Discussion: Who are the characters in this story (Appendix 2)?
  - a. The daughter who sees Martha during visiting time that evening.
  - b. The first member of staff who responded to the buzzer and said "I'll be back in a minute" and who later discovered Martha in a state of distress.
  - c. The second member of staff who responded to the buzzer and said "I'll be back in a minute".
  - d. The doctor who told Martha that she needed to drink more fluids.
  - e. The journalist who gets wind of the story.
  - f. The senior charge nurse in the ward who first speaks to the daughter.
  - g. The complaints officer who receives a letter of complaint from the daughter.
  - h. The director of nursing who receives a call from a member of the board who has read about it in the evening paper.
  - i. Martha herself (who has now returned home).

If, as a group, you can think of any others, please write each on a piece of paper (in the same way that I have done).

5. Each person picks up a piece of paper with a character written on it (choose one that you are interested in). Give your character a name. Write the story from your character's point of view (using "I").
  - a. What happened?
  - b. How do you feel?
  - c. How did you contribute to Martha's experience? (You may consider yourself blameless.)
6. The group chooses a character to focus on (e.g. the senior charge nurse). The group member whose character this is tells the group the story from their point of view.
7. The group then hot seats that character: this means that the group asks the character questions (to explore

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further, to challenge) and the character answers (using “I”).

8. You can not seat as many characters as you like.
9. Discuss: What are the scenes that would or could have taken place in and around this story? For example:
  - a. The daughter's initial complaint to the senior charge nurse;
  - b. Or the first member of staff challenging the second member of staff following her discovery of Martha.
10. Choose one. The characters concerned improvise the scene.
11. Discuss: what is the group's response to this imagined scene? What does it reveal about the story?
12. You can improvise as many scenes as you like.
13. Discuss & review: Having applied these simple techniques:
  - a. How has your understanding of the original story changed?
  - b. What have you learnt?
  - c. What implications may there be for practice?

## Notes

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## Important Point

It is important to see this kind of process as a group exploration in which all members take part in order to pool knowledge and experience. So anything you do that helps to free people up is useful. Liberate people from those things that they find scary by using the support of the group. A good indicator is if people are enjoying themselves.

Here are some examples of how you can make this process a group responsibility rather than a personal responsibility:

- People can write their story and then put it face down on the table so that it is another person who then takes on that character. Anything that enables people to express themselves without having to 'own' their words is supportive for those who are unconfident about sharing their views or talking in a group.
- People can work in pairs to create characters and when one person is being 'hot seated' the other can be their support (or they can swap in and out of the 'hot seat').
- You can raise or lessen the degree of challenge when 'hot seating' a character. If the person being 'hot seated' is uncomfortable with the degree of challenge, someone else can take their place.

For more information on this or related learning resources, please contact me at [esther@foruminteractive.co.uk](mailto:esther@foruminteractive.co.uk) or through our website

[www.foruminteractive.co.uk](http://www.foruminteractive.co.uk).

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## Appendix 1

In response to this story, I feel....

I think that....

In response to this story, I feel....

I think that....

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## Appendix 2

Character: The daughter who sees Martha during visiting time that evening.

My name is:

This is my side of the story:

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Character: the first member of staff who responded to the buzzer and said “I’ll be back n a minute” and who later discovered Martha in a state of distress:

My name is:

This is my side of the story:

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Character: the second member of staff who responded to the buzzer and said "I'll be back n a minute".

My name is:

This is my side of the story:

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Character: The doctor who told Martha that she needed to drink more fluids.

My name is:

This is my side of the story:

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Character: The journalist who gets wind of the story.

My name is:

This is my side of the story:

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Character: The senior charge nurse who first speaks to the daughter.

My name is:

This is my side of the story:

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Character: The complaints officer who receives a letter of complaint from the daughter.

My name is:

This is my side of the story:

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Character: The director of nursing who receives a call from a member of the board who has read about it in the evening paper.

My name is:

This is my side of the story:

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Character: Martha herself (who has now returned home).

My name is:

This is my side of the story:

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## Additional Notes