

The Hitchhiker's Guide to Narrative Galaxies



By Jochum Stienstra

- Director, Ferro Explore!
- Amsterdam, The Netherlands

In 1989, Hans Ruelle taught that while we do have to ask questions, this might be an inefficient way of getting information; our art is to learn to gain insight the proper way. In due time, I discovered that asking “Why?” will only give you the most directly accessible and socially acceptable answer. With this notion in mind, I worked on ways to minimize answers that were really rationalizations.

Eight years ago, I attended a workshop by Dave Snowden who promoted a narrative type of research that abandons almost all types of questions as well as our normal ways of analyzing and making sense of what research participants tell us. Instead, Snowden offers methods to co-create sense-making between client, researcher, and participants without relying on “rational” analytical thinking.

As I began to adopt Snowden’s approach, I started to better understand how this method differed from traditional techniques. I have built a significant business with narrative projects that break with almost all market research paradigms. I call this narrative method “radically open.” I hope this article inspires you to adopt some of the techniques and radically break with the bad habit of asking questions.

Collecting Stories

PHASE 1: A powerful narrative method incorporates three key principles: don’t ask questions, don’t analyze, and make sense of it all collaboratively.

To be honest, I do ask a few questions. However, narrative questions differ from those in regular qual research. In a traditional qual practice, I start by asking open-ended questions then narrow down to more explicit questioning. To be certain I’ve captured all possible motives, I break up the subject into sub-fields of interest.

In narrative projects, I start with unmonitored storytelling with 25 to 30 participants gathered in one large room and separated into homogenous sub-groups of five. I hire a student for each table to help keep the process on track.

My participants arrive already informed about the subject I want to share with them. I start the session by setting the context, explaining that I am not yet interested in understanding the group’s motivations. I ask the group to come up with as many lively stories as possible. Each anecdote should contain something they’ve experienced about the subject or heard from others and need not be long or fantastic.

Each subgroup passes around “the talking stick” (a recording device). Anyone who feels like sharing a story does so, without discussion or interruption from the other participants. Inspired by the stories they’ve heard, participants come up with their own stories, while the student facilitator numbers and titles each one.

During the session, I use five to six prompts that set the context and elicit stories that inform our research objectives. For instance, in a project about drinking and driving, my first prompt was: “You are at a party and the talk turns to drinking and driving. What experiences or hear-say stories could you share if you wanted to express the sentiment: “That was a close call?” In this way, I typically gather 250 - 400 stories within 90 minutes. All the stories have titles, which might reveal more than the

actual stories.

The narrative process can be used for any topic worth researching. In the beginning, it might be difficult to relinquish the sense of control that comes from asking specific questions and sub-questions, but the stories this process elicits are closer to the hearts of the target group than traditional focus group outcomes. By refusing to moderate or steer the consumer toward self-understanding, the participant feels freer to share.

Making Sense of Stories

PHASE 2: In this second workshop phase, we replace conscious, goal-directed action steps by a collaborative, associative process.

I typically host two separate four-hour workshops, one with the target group narrowed down to 15 participants separated into homogenous subgroups of five, and one with the client. Ideally the latter group comprises nine to 15 participants representing sales, business, research, marketing, etcetera. I select approximately 120 representative stories and tape them on the wall in random order. Each group is given 30 to 40 minutes to read all of the stories.

They need not remember anything special and may take notes if they wish. After this “narrative submersion,” I start two parallel assignments. One follows an associative, seemingly unstructured way of thinking, where none of the participants can influence the outcome too much. The other is an explicit task; its main goal is to satisfy the conscious need for goal-directed action.

Conscious and Side Tasks

I follow the same process in both the participant and the client workshops, using any differences in outcomes as a helpful insight source. Generally, the average marketer and business developer share a rough idea of the challenges for consumers in their category. This conscious, subjective task yields findings comparable to the outcomes of traditional focus groups.

However, the archetypes reveal each group's less conscious thinking, the way they make sense of the world.

This process generates deep insights, not only about the consumer, but also about the client's view of the world and how this view connects or disconnects with their consumers' views. In my experience, this type of learning is much more profound than findings elicited from focus groups. In a narrative workshop, clients are con-

fronted with shortcomings in their assumptions and beliefs about what concerns consumers. In a collaborative sense-making process each participant receives the same contextual information and operates on a level playing field.

I always end with a final workshop to be certain my clients can convert the insights into concrete actions. Instead of offering my own recommendations at the end of the workshop, I collaborate with my clients

in writing a report that analyzes the findings in a meaningful way.

Before using narratives in a profound way, you might utilize snippets of these techniques in a traditional setting, incorporating simple storytelling organized around themes. This approach may give you confidence to adopt the full narrative method, which has the power to transform both your business and your clients' businesses. ▶

The following example demonstrates how I used the narrative method for a bank project about consumer loans. The bankers had heard in focus groups that interest rates were the most important factor in the process. However, in the 315 loan stories, only nine participants mentioned interest rates.

PRIMING THE CREATIVE MIND

The main task starts with a "narrative break-down" of the stories. Each subgroup makes a list of persons, actions and themes on separate Post-it® notes. The list should be as long as possible.

CONSCIOUS TASK

In the banking study, the groups were explicitly invited to come up with their ideal consumer-loan bank. Participants might start by collaging "the ideal loaning situation," then speak for the ideal brand by capturing what the bank should be offering and saying to consumers.

SIDE TASK

While workshop participants develop their ideal consumer loan bank, I ask some of them to work alone on subtasks or create newly combined subgroups. In the end, all of the participants work on parts of the side task. Participants collect the Post-its® into separate groups that can be more broadly characterized as persons, themes or actions. They assign stereotype labels to each of the groups and attribute characteristics, both positive and negative, to the stereotypes. Then I ask them to cluster by type of characteristic and to name those clusters. These represent what Snowden calls "contextual archetypes." Invariably, the result is

between four and seven archetypes that represent "persons with a set of characteristics." By now, the ideal consumer-loan brand has been fleshed out by both subgroups.

ILLUSTRATING THE ARCHETYPES

An illustrator brings the archetypes to life, according to participants' instructions and without adding his own interpretation. Regarded as a whole, the illustrated set of archetypes gives a

perfect view of consumers' less rational tendencies; the archetypes help us see how the target group makes sense of the stories and, therefore, make sense of the subject or category.

The illustration above represents an archetype constructed by a sub-group of non-borrowers they named "greedy." This archetype illustrated participants' feelings about people who borrow because they are incapable of postponing their needs. ▶

Conscious Task

Explicit tasks are an engaging way to co-create ideas such as creating the ideal loaning situation



Start with picture picking and collage to enhance creative thinking



Then use consumers as 'experts'. What should this brand say,? what should it offer?

Useful output, to be compared with a normal creative group setting

input/output

Side Task



Starting to create a massive number of post-its with persons, themes and actions

Cluster the persons as 'metapersons' and giving those a name, and each person will get a set of positive and negative characteristics



Cluster the characteristics to a new person and give that a name (the archetype)

Illustrate the archetype by an artist at hand, per directions of the participants (representing the subconscious layers of thinking and feeling)

