

The Story of Stories

By Julie Lindahl
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It all started a decade ago in a small primary school of less than one hundred children in the Swedish countryside outside of Stockholm. I was an outsider who had come to settle there, and asked myself how I could make a difference in this otherwise seemingly self-sufficient little community. I had come to this place with an academic background in English Literature and International Affairs; an entrepreneurial venture in health and wellness; a life lived in many countries; a fervent belief that we can all live together peacefully; and a passion for stories. As English is compulsory for all children in Swedish schools, I offered to read English stories to children between the ages of nine and eleven once a week. I am sure that it was partly because I always brought a tin of home-baked cookies with me, but I also like to believe that it was the universal appeal of the classic tales I tried to bring to life that made these sessions increasingly popular. Parents of children in the pre-school heard about the sessions and asked whether I could read for their children, who were as young as two years of age.



The stories became a dialogue. I would read a bit of English, translate into Swedish, and then we discussed what was happening in the stories and why. For the very young children, I had paper and pens in the middle of our story-reading circle on the floor, so that they could express their thoughts about the stories directly and wouldn't become bored. The children learned a few words in English, but what was most important was that they were able to express and discuss things that were on their minds, provoked by happenings in the stories. The sessions became less about story-telling than story-making. Frequently, I found that the thoughts about life and growing up provoked by our sessions were some of the most essential and also the most complex: Am I good enough? Are we different or the same? What happens when we die? Over time it became clear to me that the opportunity to discuss such issues in the safety of a story could play an important role in the intellectual, emotional and even physical development of children.

As the summer holidays approached some of the older children expressed the desire to continue the sessions during the summer. In response to this, I set up a summer camp at my island home, where the children could spend one day a week listening to and discussing English stories and playing a range of games related to them. Our adventures were many, and through these days together on the island we learned many things about one another and ourselves. Through these experiences, we began to weave our own stories together.

After one of these summers, I became convinced that group story-making could make an important contribution to enjoyment in learning and the quality of teaching, if only there was a method that teachers and students found accessible and possible to use with some frequency. Foremost in my thoughts was that stories could help to develop socialization skills that were not only good for

emotional health, but also critical to success in social and working environments that the children would later on find themselves in as young adults. In other words, story-making with others was in itself a 21st Century skill.



I approached the principal of the school I had worked in and a friend of mine, MaiBritt Giacobini-Arnér, who at that time had founded an important new children's psychiatric clinic in Stockholm, Prima Barn och Ungdomspsykiatri AB. The goal of this three-way collaboration was to come up with a group story-making method that could be used in the classroom for the purposes of learning in specific subject matter areas, as well as for supporting healthy social and emotional development. The experience of

group story-making on the island during the summers had been so strong, that I fashioned the method around the core ideas of a group, an island and a visitor, a model which has subsequently proven to be extremely useful to address diverse topics. Subsequently, rules of engagement were added to keep a magical safe space of openness and caring.

After one year of method development with our partner school and Prima Barn, there were many indications to suggest that the method was useful and that we were onto something. Stories for Society was formally established as a Swedish-based non-profit with a remarkable board and network of co-workers. The fact that Swedish schools were making a transition to a new national teaching plan that integrated new guidelines and goals for teaching and learning, which our method had incorporated from the beginning, was an important advantage. We moved onto other schools. As we ran group story-making sessions using our Island Method, we came to the conclusion that the best way to make our method as widely accessible to schools as possible was to train teachers. In collaboration with our partner school, we ran our first teacher training, a 2-day theoretical session followed by 8 weeks of support, once a week, in the classroom. We were delighted to find that the collaboration with our partner school was considered to be one of a small handful of most innovative school projects in the country by Scandinavia's largest school fair, *Skolforum*.

During the teacher training, we realized that adults could benefit as much from our Island Method as children and youth. The method offers unique opportunities for problem-solving and team-building that quickly become obvious to those who try it. The rare chance to access latent knowledge by providing a new playing field where new creative possibilities and collaborations open up is one of the most important dynamics of the method. It occurred to us that the radical new approach of our method could provide a means of tackling hitherto seemingly intractable problems. We created internal working groups to test this thesis with outcomes that were surprising to all involved, and subsequently moved out into other organizations.

In 1969 Margaret Mead wrote: "*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*" This aspiration is at the heart of each of the many trainings and story-making processes that we have facilitated in Sweden and elsewhere. Our method is never 'ready' and takes a new step forward with each new project.

What if you could change the world by telling a story? We offer you the possibility.