



Telling Tales of Research - FUTURES2020 Storytelling event

Telling stories is an innate human activity, but not one necessarily associated with academic research... Here, Richard White shares his experience of creating and delivering a personal short story about his work, as part of the [FUTURES2020 Festival of Discovery](#).

“Earlier this year I somehow picked up an email for Storytelling Training as part of FUTURES2020, an event I had already committed to take part in. Perhaps I missed something in the small print, but I discovered myself in a room full of scientists! They were talking



dark matter, self-healing rubber, the atmosphere of the moons of Saturn, and in so many ways I felt wildly out of my depth. And it was all on Zoom, so not much in the way of small talk to begin with. But then as the trainer passed on some tips and techniques, we began to discover the truth of her assertion that humans are pre-programmed for story. Rhythms and cycles we kind of knew became clear, 6 ways in, 6 ways out, taking our specialist knowledge and motivations to a personal moment.

We listened to each other and a rapport developed as if we were in the same room together. My auto shut off on numbers and scientific stuff was eased and I too became fascinated with the possibility of an ecology based on methane and the search for antimatter. Back home, ‘His Dark Materials’ on the telly took on a whole new meaning. Some serious stuff too, engaging differently using the power of story with wicked medical issues and post-traumatic stress disorder. I offered a story about researching for a walk retracing Isaac Newton’s walk to school in Grantham, reflecting on the Enlightenment, Enclosures and another Grantham scholar, Margaret Thatcher.

Another story... Nearly ten years ago I was sitting around a fire in an Iron Age meeting house somewhere deep in the starlit wilds of North Dorset. Occasionally the smoke blew across the space into my eyes, it was dark, cold and damp. But I was entranced, held by the words and immersed in the universe conjured up by a most amazing storyteller. She told stories from a competition of liars within a vast tale of a king settling his inheritance; stories unfolded and unpacked like Russian dolls, each fitting the other, each a perfect variation on the other, bigger and bigger, smaller and smaller. In one evening my utter cynicism and aversion to storytelling and storytellers was shattered!

Our FUTURES2020 Storytelling trainer was none other than the storyteller from that smoky Iron Age house, [Clare Muireann Murphy](#). I had been there researching a walking arts commission from the North Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. My practice has developed considerably since those days, developing a non-extractive research approach and in the last few years taking it into an academic context as research-creation. As a walking artist working with media and developing performative critical heritage interventions, story is a key element in my practice. So I jumped at the opportunity of two days training with Clare!



It was a tremendous experience, brilliant convivial learning as all good learning should be. As well as all the science stuff I learned by just being in the room and all the amazing life stories and motivations of the researchers, I really learned about story telling. And it truly is in the telling., not writing it down, but performing! Getting into the groove of the openings and closings, transitions and cycles, sharing ideas and information in a reasonably entertaining way...

Finally, there was another bit of small print I had not read in my enthusiasm for some storytelling training from a master. We would be taking it through to a live performance! On Zoom. No space for arm waving or walking around. Talking heads more or less and everyone looking at you. This was more terrifying than the prospect of my PhD viva. But the training was good, hold onto the bones, know your way in and know your way out. Feel it, own it. A bit like a walk really. And we survived, in fact just like the viva, in retrospect it was all strangely enjoyable!

I saw Clare perform again not so long ago, at the White Cube in Bristol telling the story of how a French Surrealist artist managed to survive a Nazi Concentration camp. Proving emphatically for me that storytelling does not have to be twee and light and lah-de-daa. Story is about all of life and death, struggle and resistance. We humans are indeed pre-programmed for story."

Richard White (Senior Lecturer in Media Practice, School of Creative Industries, Bath Spa University) is an artist/researcher with a professional background in participatory media and education. He currently leads modules in the undergraduate Media programme, offering an experiential learning approach to exploring participatory cultures. Richard's ongoing investigation addresses the physical, sensory, emotional and intellectual experience of walking in particular places. His creative work generates content rooted in the complex layered mesh of embodied memories/ knowledge/experience emerging through intra-action with the material world. See his artist/researcher portfolio here: [Walknow Tracks](#) and follow him on Twitter here: [@walknowlive](#).

[FUTURES2020](#) is a Festival of Discovery, the South West's contribution to [European Researchers' Night](#), led by the University of Bristol in conjunction with the Universities of Bath, Exeter, Plymouth and Bath Spa. At the Researchers' Tales event the audience was invited to hear the stories behind the research as researchers shared their very personal stories of what has inspired, surprised and encouraged them during their careers in a series of short stories. The event involved researchers from University of Bristol, Bath and Bath Spa and was organised by the [Public Engagement team](#) at Bristol University. If you are interested in getting involved in similar activities in the future, then sign up for our [Connect newsletter](#).

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