

# **The Stories Hothouse - a model for creative storymaking**

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## **Abstract**

We present a creative storymaking model called the Stories Hothouse. The model forms a supportive group environment that stimulates, accompanies and eases the development of the individual's textual expression. The model aims at strengthening the growth of the self and at widening the literacy, imagination and thinking capacities of the participants.

Recently, teachers in Israel have adopted the model for the benefit of all ages.

The Stories Hothouse consists of two stages: inspiration and emergence. The inspiration stage uses the arts to stimulate the participants. The somatic and transitional quality of artistic expression enriches creativity through imagination and unconscious materials. The emergence stage is a storytelling improvisation by an individual, who is supported by one or more participants. The involvement of the hothouse group with the storymaker is regulated by discourse roles. The supporting group functions as a dynamic container, which holds the story for the teller, arouses and enriches his inspiration.

Both stages are built upon known Narrative and Gestalt principles, which lead the storymaker to a rich and qualitative text.

## **Introduction**

This article presents a novel creative-writing model called the Stories Hothouse (SH), which suits a wide range of ages, from early childhood to mature students. The SH model is characterized by a unique approach. The primary goal of the model is creative writing.

However, unlike common techniques, here the story is created orally. The final product is an individual text, but it is worked out together by a team. The SH model introduces two aspects that contribute to literacy and literary education. One is the use of somatic art expressions to arouse the imagination; the second is a group collaboration, which results in fruitful interaction and enriched texts. We fuse narrative principles with both the artistic stimuli and the group interventions, to support the storymaking and valuable texts.

The Stories Hothouse model is a creative group activity. It forms a supportive environment of participants that stimulates, accompanies and eases the development of individual written expression. The model aims to strengthen the growth of the self and to widen the literacy, imagination and thinking capacities of the participants. Recently, teachers in Israel have adopted the model for the benefit of all age groups.

The Stories Hothouse model grew out of my experience as a storytelling therapist and a creative writing teacher. I learned a great deal from my M.A. students in expressive arts therapies and creative education, as well as from courses I led for experienced kindergarten teachers. The major inspiration for this model was my studies and collaboration with Avi Hadari, coordinator of the Storytelling and Drama Therapy Department at Lesley University, Israel. Hadari is a Gestalt and storytelling therapist. Studying the Dr. Stern (Greenberg & Shoshan, 1988) method with psychologist Rachel Shamir contributed to the developmental and artistic aspects of the model.

The focus today on electronic media has brought about a shift in textual consumption habits. Technological progress has brought the issue of literacy education to the forefront all over the world. Nurit Peled (1996, 2000) dedicated two anthologies to literacy development, from storytelling to written texts. Rosalind Horowitz in her anthology, *Talking Texts* (2007), insists on the importance of talking and telling stories in schools and kindergartens. Their common focus on oral telling strengthens my belief that there is great importance in maintaining eye to eye contact communication. The SH model proposes a storymaking phase, which is based on the ancient artistic communal activity of storytelling (Keen, 1988). The subsequent text-writing phase can get a positive push by the handiness of computer typing.

Although there are clear distinctions between an oral text and a written one, Peled shows that there is a direct linkage between talking and writing (1996).

The SH oral text is closer to a written one than a free discourse because it arises from the talk of one person. Since the SH storymaker leads the telling, she can incorporate literary forms and complex discourse schemes (Peled, 1996). Still we suggest that the storymakers take time to transform their oral product into a written text by typing it.

White and Epston (1990) draw a comparison between logical thinking and metaphoric-narrative thinking. While logic utilizes precise analysis and categorization in order to support general theories, the soundness of stories is evaluated by their attachment to life. A story contains lively templates that create meaningful connections between the details of events and their time context. There is a difference in responsibility between the two thinking modalities. Scientific descriptions portray certain external and internal forces that affect human life. In contrast with this deterministic point of view, narrative thinking views the individual as the main figure in his world. The story is a world of interpretations, since metaphoric and multifaceted language encourages readers and listeners to have their own point of view, thereby enriching the narrative. "In the space between storyteller and listener images will arise... the words are collective, the image individual" (Gersie&King, 1990, p. 31).

The SH model functions as a modular infrastructure, which is open to the creativity of teachers. A teacher can utilize the model for a variety of teaching purposes. Teachers are already creating lessons and curricula based on the SH model.

The Stories Hothouse consists of two stages: *inspiration* and *emergence*.

In the beginning of the activity, art experiences serve as a source of inspiration. This is followed by the emergence stage, a storytelling improvisation by an individual, who is supported by one or more participants.

Our methods are: (i) art expression according to a narrative rationale, (ii) improvising with narrative elements, (iii) making up a text in a form of storytelling to a partner, and (iv) guiding a team to be supportive for the creator and to intervene according to discourse and narrative principles.

## **Elaborating the Stories Hothouse model**

### **The Inspiration stage**

Since a blank sheet of paper usually arouses students to write or paint their familiar patterns it is not considered to be creative inspiration. I believe that the art of presenting the stimulus is extremely important in education and creative writing. A semi-open stimulus arouses and enhances the creativity of one's hidden inner world. Over time we have developed a bank of artistic inspiring triggers for creative writing. The 'trigger bank' for storymaking is categorized according to narrative elements, such as figure and ground. We offer a narrative trigger to a creative writing group. At the same time, we mediate art materials according to their developmental and dynamic characteristics (Orbach & Galkin, 1997).

### **Element-triggers:**

#### **Figure trigger:**

Since the figure is the center of a story, we start by demonstrating a scale of stimuli that focus on the figure element.

The first example is a somatic trigger, where the figures emerge from unknown or subconscious psychic zones. Such figures are usually imaginative. We offer children and adults an experiment of a non-judgmental art activity, e.g. pouring paints from bottles. The goal of this activity is to create a multilayer and rich platform for the next step: figure emergence. The students identify objects or creatures in the diffused and abstract work. This process is similar to the projection process of the Rorschach test (Weiner, 2003). To obtain newer psychic materials, the guide encourages participants to dig out more than one figure from the rich matrix. Then participants start to write monologues of their selected figure. The guide then asks some questions to further develop the figures. From this individual inspiration stage we move to the team emergence stage.

Another trigger, unlike the previous one, starts from a conscious zone. Nevertheless, participants receive input from unconscious imaginative areas that are awakened by the artistic stimulus. For example, the guide suggests building a figure from a collage of

fragments from illustrated magazines. Dramatic means can also be used as an inspiration for interesting heroes.

Another possible trigger, introduced by Avi Hadari, is a collection of several figures proposed by the group. Out of this pool of figures, participants build diverse stories. Each one then proceeds to individual writing, sometimes combined with drawings. After the emergence phase, we look over the variety of the figures and interactions to sharpen the sense of uniqueness of each of the participants. These stories concretely demonstrate a group's variety of writing styles, and make possible a discussion about general writing modes.

### **Ground trigger**

Environment is an important trigger for our affective memory and directly influences our feelings (Stanislavski, 1936). A clearly developed background can evoke the emergence of a figure in conformity, or in contrast, to it. A tangible background supports the creation of a real and believable fictional figure. Such a figure reveals his or her character in a plastic way.

Abstract grounds are potential settings for adventures in the unconscious or subconscious zones. Concrete environments tend to lead to more familiar territories. Let me give an example of a thoughtful mediation given by an early childhood kindergarten teacher of a combined group of deaf and normal children. She utilized a concrete environmental trigger for the purposes of literacy development. She used pictures of indoor rooms like a kitchen and a bathroom and asked the children to tell little stories about those familiar places. She reported that the stimulus successfully supplied a safe path to verbal communication.

Parallel to the abstract-figurative scale, we suggest, as we previously shown, the use of inter-modal art triggers with respect to their developmental and dynamic level.

## **Structure triggers:**

### **Dyad trigger**

A simple narrative structure is a dyad between two plot components. We now present an activity which has always evoked successful responses. It uses a compound trigger of two basic narrative building blocks: ground and figures. We ask participants to create abstract or figurative backgrounds. After they finish portraying their settings, we ask them to write three names of figures on three little notes. They are asked to give thought to the linkage between figure and ground. The creator places his figure notes on his drawing. In this way a mini-theater is formed. I recommend that the group guide leaves the options for the figures open. A participant can invent a figure or borrow the name of a hero from stories or movies. In addition, I suggest that writers characterize their figure by adding an adjective. In this activity, participants are inspired by the potential relationships between figures and background. Moreover, they naturally construct the three figures' dynamics. Both children and adults report that these kinds of open structures ease their way to writing creatively. We can also encourage the artistic creation of other dyads as a key for storymaking, e.g., antagonist versus protagonist, time versus a figure, a dilemma versus a figure, two tellers with different point of views, and a main figure versus a secondary figure.

### **Triangular trigger**

In the inspiration phase, we might use also triangular structures, e.g., a trio consisting of a magic object, a problem and a hero. Another example is a triad of a figure, a complication and a coping strategy. These triangular triggers are usually developed in an individual writing mode; participants then continue their inventions by joining SH teams.

## **Transformation triggers:**

The advanced part of our bank of stimuli is based on the understanding that a storyline contains transformations. A narrative might contain shifts in any of its parameters, such as the transformation of points of views or of locations. Texts usually embrace the appearance of new figures and the disappearance of others. Climates or political situations can be changed. Magical and unexpected events may occur and steer the plots. Unexpected transformations contribute to the attractiveness of narratives, due to the natural curiosity of

humans. These transformations also address the human survival instincts for resolution of troubles (Bruner, 1990). From the Gestalt point of view, this is the urge to bring the disturbed scenario to a gestalt. There is strong evidence that transformation triggers for storymaking help students to write good narratives that create suspense and arouse interest. Meaningful texts are built from changes, modifications and alternatives, which are the seed of vitality.

Let us now elaborate on one transformation trigger, which can then be extended and applied to any component of a text. Moving from one location to another in a story is a result of the tension between figure and ground. Following a figure's transitions from place to place advances the narrative. Figures search for backgrounds that nourish their needs. For example, frustration evoked by an unsatisfying environment often leads to tension between the figure and the ground, which then arouses the figure's vitality and encourages him or her to embark on a journey or undertake heroic actions (Jung, 1964). Such actions add drama and interest to a storyline.

After the structure trigger of ground versus three figures is demonstrated to the group, they write an initial paragraph or chapter of a story. They then tell it to a partner, who drew a different background. Now the facilitator can challenge the writers by asking them to make a switch between the two partners' backgrounds. Each participant stays with her figures, who are now present in a new surrounding; she now has to relocate the figures in their new background and to continue the storymaking. The unexpected shift in the ground challenges the participants ("someone moved their cheese"), and they are forced to struggle with the change. The writer should clarify the transformation by a reasonable shift in the plot. The shift is presented as an intellectual challenge for the writer and her heroes. Participants are reminded that such shifts are common in plays, movies and stories.

To conclude, we have seen how artistic experiences serve as a source of stimulation in the SH model. However, one must to respect developmental and dynamic principles while considering the time, space and props of the suitable trigger for a given group (Knill, 1978). Moving from regressive, elementary materials to controlled resources is equivalent to moving from unconscious to conscious creative zones. A more controlled stimulus might arouse the participants' focus and tendency to deal with familiar materials, while a diffused art trigger might lead to regression and at the same time to new ideas.

The artistic activity is structured to inspire creative writing by attuning the writer to narrative principles. We can offer a trigger bank consisting of **narrative elements** like time, background, figure, or a theme. Other artistic triggers contain **narrative structures**, such as the Gestalt dyad of figure versus ground or the triangle of a problem, a hero and a coping strategy (Von Franz, 1970). The most challenging stimuli are composed of **narrative transformations**. Arbitrary shifts which are offered by the instructor of the creative writing group have the potential for complications, resolutions, nonsense, new ideas and an opportunity to reveal the hero's character.

## **The emergence stage**

After the artistic inspiration stage, an internal world of images, themes and relations surfaces and awakens. Now that the SH participants are ready to express their inner worlds by storytelling, the SH model offers them an interactive setting of storymaking.

Human beings are storymaker creatures who know how to organize a kaleidoscopic experience in terms of story templates. "Stories are means of finding oneself in events that might not otherwise make psychological sense at all" (Hillman, 1974, p.43). Storytelling opens the world to inspiring interactions, warm contacts, and productive collaborations. Through the act of storytelling, our subtexts get oxidized. Schank claims that interactive storytelling is the human way of digesting and processing life experiences (1990). The raw material is transformed into a coherent story, thanks to the attentive ear of the other. One senses that a good listener receives a part of the energy of the storyteller's original experience. This common relief emotion supports Schank's view of the storytelling as a maintaining process.

We now move from the inspiration stage to the emergence stage, where the storyteller improvises to develop his story. What makes the SH a unique model is the fact that the creative writing is not a quiet act carried out in solitude. The teller's improvisation is actively supported by a group or team and regulated by carefully designed discourse roles. These include roles such as listener, reflector, questioner or muse, which function as a dynamic container that holds the story for the teller and arouses and enriches his inspiration.

The Stories Hothouse model is, in fact, one realization of the Discourse Space model (Cohen-Or, 2006), which is a regulating discourse tool for productive conversations. The Discourse Space model is modular, multi-structured and built from a set of seven basic roles and seven auxiliary ones. The casting of roles shares similarities with the Six Thinking Hats model of Edward de Bono (1985) and the Characters Theory of Landy (1993).

Since literacy education begins in kindergarten, the basic SH roles, which serve the development of storymaking and other social skills, can be taught in kindergarten. We start with the central roles, namely, a storyteller, a listener/collector and a questioner, then gradually advance to the muse, feedback provider and sharer roles.

### **The SH roles**

Below we expand on the SH roles that contain, support and inspire the speaker. The SH guide directs the process towards a narrative orientation and assigns roles to the whole group or to small teams of two to six participants.

**The Storyteller** is the storymaker, the protagonist of discourse. She is the one who speaks the text. In contrast to a person who writes a text, a storymaker needs company. The listener plays a critical role in the process. Therefore, in the SH model beside the speaker, the listener pays full attention only to the storyteller. The listener functions also as a “collector” who usually writes the text of the storymaker. This action frees the creator to go to her imagination, to close her eyes or to attend to her audience's response.

**The Listener** provides the storymaker with a safe place to practice and develop her literary abilities. Moreover, listening to a child's talk allows her to feel meaningful and contributes to her psychological development (Bion, 1962). Many struggles in school and in families derive from lack of listening. Listening requires making an effort to pay focused attention and keep maintaining eye contact. It also requires tolerance and patience, because we cannot understand everything all at once. It is better not to interrupt with too much questions and remarks, since this does not give the space in which the speaker can develop her ideas. An open-minded listener tries to keep himself neutral without forming an opinion

in advance. Listening with patience involves a process of ego-borrowing, which empowers the speaker's focus and potentate (Winnicott, 1971).

**The Collector** reflects the words that usually vanish into thin air. In contrast to the plastic arts, storytelling, like dance and music, are modes of expression that cannot be preserved. We express word after word and cannot see the gestalt of our own text. Thanks to the collector, who repeats or paraphrases the words of the speaker, the teller can listen to her own text. In this way, she can evaluate the wholeness of her product. Attentive listening and collecting of the spontaneous text provides the storymaker with a containing and holding environment. Moreover, the reflection serves as living proof for the teller, by showing that someone has listened well to her story.

The collector role is essential for young children, because such empathic inter-subjective mirroring builds language sequence and memory skills, and strengthens the self-identity of the teller (Kohut, 1977). The listener and collector roles go together. A collector should be a very careful listener. His listening involves a memorizing task, which requires extra concentration. The motivation of the collector to memorize and to reflect encourages him to listen attentively. Our experience shows that the dynamic role of the 'collector' motivates a child-student to accomplish the difficult and seemingly passive task of listening.

Kindergarten teachers who are experienced with the SH model claim that before they improve the storymaker's language, it is important to first reflect her story back as is. Although the reflectors try to mirror the speech as closely as possible, the teacher or peers cannot be exact. Therefore, it is worthwhile to preface the reflection with a statement that releases the collector from the need to be perfect and meets the expectations of the teller. A possible phrase would be: "Correct me if necessary. I will reflect your story as I remember it, but please tell me if I forgot something ". In kindergarten and early primary classes we train children to reflect words or short sentences to promote listening skills.

**The Discourse-Guide:** Violent and noisy climates are caused by lack of talking space. Discourse norms should be clear. There is a discourse guide; the others have to raise hands if they want to talk. It is possible that a child-participant would lead the discourse for a while. Children regard the role of the leader as an honor, it is important to enable each

participant to become a storyteller. At the same time we continually switch roles in order to widen the discourse repertoire of each participant.

**The Questioner:** Another function that assists the storyteller is the questioner. A questioner asks the teller questions to encourage him to express his ideas and advance his story. Questioning is an excellent evoking tool, as it develops the story interactively. Our knowledge of classical narrative structure can direct our questions. For example, a good story is constructed on sensory familiarity with figure and ground (Stanislavski, 1936). Examples of questions regarding figure and ground are: Tell me more about the desert. What does the princess' life in her castle look like? Because the goal of the SH team is to support the storyteller's flow, we have to be careful with our questions. Our natural tendency is to ask direct questions which are like a beam of light or a magnifying glass. We need discipline, knowledge and experience in order to know how to ask open questions. Children enjoy asking questions. By using this model, we train them to ask effective questions. Experimenting with the questioner role encourages thinking, curiosity and attention to the speaker.

Other important roles are the **Muse**, who makes suggestions aimed at giving verbal or non-verbal inspiration and enrichment (the muse's ideas are only an option for the storyteller, who is at liberty not to use them) and the **Feedback Provider**, who brings the external world to the speaker. A good releasing role for all the team members is the **Sharer**, who expresses her own experience, associations and thoughts in response to the storyteller's story.

### **Moving the storymaking foreword**

Since the Hothouse's team mainly supports the advance of storymaking, understanding the powers which move a plot is a key for their work.

Erickson (Erickson & Rosen, 1982) claims that when a person imagines a story in his mind, a special state of consciousness is opened, called the "telling imagination". This trance-like state of mind enables one to see without understanding. In this imaginative state of consciousness authentic contact is made with sensations and associations relating to the story.

According to Gestalt theory it is important to give attention to three perspectives of a figure: body, mind and emotion (Zinker, 1977). The SH team utilizes diversified questions in relation to the three gestalt dimensions of the figure. One might ask what the hero feels, does or thinks. If there is not much action in reality, we can move to the hero's mind. In White's narrative terminology, development of a landscape of consciousness (internal thoughts and feelings) triggers the landscape of action (external actions) of a figure (White, 1991). In other words, if a storymaker elaborates on the internal world of her hero, it leads to a hero's action. This is an effective technique to carry on the storymaking.

There are dynamic relations between components of a story. Movement and relationships between narrative dimensions move a plot forward. The SH questioner and muse can encourage the storymaker to expand on the relations between components. Developing figure and ground relations moves the hero between locations. If two figures serve in opposing roles, writing deeply about their relations develops the conflict between them.

Campbell (1988), Bettelheim (1975) and McKee (1997) all claim that entanglement and release shape a plot. Stories have the classic sequence of harmony, chaos and reconstruction, leading to a new equilibrium or a new tragic setting. The establishment of complication creates interest and action in the heart of a story (McKee, 1997). Therefore, in the SH setting, we give attention to those transformative events by questioning, mirroring and telling.

How do we move a story from a point of immobilization? In White's method a patient is encouraged to pay attention to his "landscape of consciousness", thus arousing his "landscape of action" (White, 1991). The SH guide can adopt this option and suggest that the storymaker broaden her knowledge about the thoughts and feelings of her imaginative figure as he moves towards the obstacle. Usually when we take the time to stay in the immobilized spot, tension emerges and a potential journey is being brewed.

Another technique is termed by Avi Hadary (2001) "moving and parking" (after the biblical expression in Exodus and Deuteronomy). The collector or the storymaker can suggest a break in the storymaking flow. Listening to the reflection of her unfinished story enables the storymaker to stay in a "being phase", before advancing the story continuously ("doing phase") (Winnicott, 1971). A break enables the listener to understand the additional

information on the figure. By diving into the figures' mind, the storymaker engages her figures to affect the narrative. These stops contribute to the story's believability. After parking and refreshment, many children and adults find better ways to continue their story. Slowing down the storymaking tempo also prevents experienced writers from getting into automatic templates.

Muses can release a fixation in storymaking by offering ideas. Two muses can tell two scripts for a story that feels stuck. The author can listen to their ideas and accept one or more of them, or she might even have an idea of her own, thanks to the new references.

To sum up the emergence stage, it should be noted that it emphasizes team work for the support and inspiration of the storymaker. At the same time, the group should not be overly active, because the lead should remain in the hands of the storymaker. Their purpose is to solely help the creator to develop a good, coherent story.

The SH team guide has a bank of operations to help a stuck storymaker. Beyond storymaking, an intimate space is created among the SH participants. They share the excitement of participating in a birth of a story, almost like midwives. After the story's birth, participants return to the individual work of rewriting and transferring the oral text to a written one. Since the SH stories are individual products, in a linguistic sense, they are closer to a written form than to the products of interactive conversations. Yet, while guiding students in rewriting SH texts, one should consider the differences between oral and written texts (Peled, 1996).

## **Conclusions**

The Stories Hothouse model develops a "story awareness", which is a prognosis for psychological health (Hillman, 1974). In that sense, it can serve the both education and expressive therapy. In the SH model we propose two stages of storymaking. In the first, a storymaker uses art stimuli for inspiration. In the second, the emergence stage, the storymaker is encouraged to improvise a story accompanied by supportive peers and facilitators.

The narrative and discourse principles of the model yield a qualitative textual-product that is often imaginative, thanks to the transformational quality of the arts. Such imaginative

activities strengthen the metaphoric perspective of our selves and our worlds. A spirit is born by de-realization of awareness and re-accommodation of our contexts to metaphoric and mythic templates (Hillman, 1974). Thus, imaginative storymaking activities can prevent one from being trapped in a belief or a literal statement that binds the soul.

The Stories Hothouse experience contributes a comfortable container to practice the art of storymaking in a way that elicits curiosity. They can then apply their enhanced storytelling abilities to real life.

From feedbacks, we have learned that the main contribution of the Stories Hothouse model is its ability to facilitate creative writing by the interactive and somatic communicative modalities. We have also discovered that the artistic and group work of the SH model significantly increases and enhances the students' creativity. At the same time, the discourse and narrative principles reinforce their ability to write structured and high-quality literary texts.

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