

Information Telling

Information telling is getting over the context for what you are about to tell. You are giving the audience what they need to know in order to understand, get and care about the bit of story you are about to give them.

The fundamental quality of information telling is clarity. The style is simple and direct and the gaze is often focussed on the audience (I've got a whole item on gaze for you in a later instalment). The place you find it most frequently is in the introduction... 'Once there was a woman who wanted nothing more than to have a child...' 'Once there was a boy called Jack who lived with his mother and a lazier lad you have never seen in your life...'

The quality of information telling typically brings us into the here and now. Even when the storyteller uses physicality to demonstrate the relative location of people and objects in space it is done with clarity and an emotional coolness. There is no emotional stuff hovering around - that will come later.



The emptiness of this style can be quite a challenge for some tellers who feel that they should be working harder and they will try and telegraph a certain feeling into the telling. This really doesn't work and is confusing for listeners who just want the context so that they can relax into the story. When someone gives you directions to somewhere they often use the same skills (in fact all our central storytelling skills are socially embedded, which is why they work. More of that another time) and they attempt to be clear above all else and their descriptions tend to be factual rather than emotional or full of detail. So, they'll say something like 'Carry on past the house with all the flowers in the garden and then turn right' rather than 'Carry on until you see the startling array of flowers swaying in the late summer breeze, with bees lazily buzzing from one bloom to the other heavy with pollen, and then turn right as the scent of the flowers fades behind you.'

In an introduction, the information is usually given in what I was taught to call the 'imperfect' at school (I was going...) as well as using 'would' and 'used to' in order to convey habitual activity in the past (Everyday Jack would/used to go down to the sea and sit on the same rock...). Once the scene is set and we move into actual narrative there is typically an abrupt change into the perfect

tense frequently signalled with a connective (One day, he was by the sea, and *suddenly* he heard singing...)

Don't get too hung up on all that grammar (especially because all the names of the tenses have been changed since I was a lad!) Just be really clear when you are giving information and how, once it's done, there is a launch into things actually happening. Do not overlook those little connective words (and then... the next day... suddenly etc). They are the things that make the story articulate, dynamic and comprehensible. If you are stuck for something to do in your practice just grab a connective and keep going. Just saying the connective with intention will unblock you and then you can try again with a different connective so see what change that makes.



Try this...

Working with a partner take it in turns to give real directions to a real place. Try and think of a real place that is worth going to (a great pub, a friend's house, your favourite bit of the park...). Notice that this information giving contains a lot of physical 'orientation' gesturing and the gaze of the teller is frequently turned to the person who is receiving the instructions to check that they get it. I say 'get it' rather than 'understand' because the listener is turning the direction-giver's experience into their own experience. (For more on how this works see the Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia book 'Mirrors in the Brain').

Now try this...

Find a personal story. Once it comes (I'll be talking in a later post about the moment a story comes into your head and what happens when it does) tell your partner the introduction and you will probably end up telling the story (which is fine - go for it). Once you've done that refocus on how you each told the introduction and the differences and similarities between this version and the previous one where you just gave directions.

Now have a go at this...

Work out where the main information giving parts of your story are. If you are telling a conventional folktale you will probably have one at the beginning but if the story is over ten minutes long you'll probably find more than one. Make a list of the information bits of the story and name them. Focus on one of them and work out how it begins and ends. This could be actual

words, or an image or an action. Once you've both done this and had a bit of a practice (I have a lot to say about practice, but it will have to wait for another time) just tell each other your section, swapping over three times before you make any observations. Things that come up often are observations on clarity, engagement and wanting to know what happens next. Keep going with other the other information bits of the story.

Giving and taking feedback

Don't get too hung-up on feedback. By far the most valuable thing you can give your partner is your undivided attention. When talking about your friend's telling concentrate on what is positive and what you liked and surprised you. Resist the temptation to fix or improve anything. If you are working in a situation of peer support you do not have permission to unilaterally 'improve' your partner's telling (it's different with a coach/dramaturg/director). If you have ever done a workshop with me you'll know I encourage a high level of wonkiness tolerance. The alternative is 'trying to get it right while not really knowing what right is' which looks, feels and is just horrible.

Once you've done your first information section try the next one.

Have a go, have fun and let me know how you got on.