**Storytelling for a Greener World workshop - language and messages – how the use of language changes emphasis reactions to story content. Jon Cree**

This workshop started with a short story about “St Baglan and the Tree with 3 Fruits” (East, Maddern and Marks, 2003) followed by an exercise of ‘what trees offer us’ through metaphor and how language and words convey messages.

*“Baglan’s parents were chieftains in Wales in the 6th century, but they knew which side their bread was buttered on.  They sent young Baglan to the monastery of St Illtud to learn the new religion and perhaps become a saint himself, who knew?  Life in the monastery was an austere affair but Baglan grew to respect his teacher Illtud.  One day the old saint was praying by his fire when he grew mesmerised by the flames and started to nod off.  Baglan, sitting at his own fire and struggling to concentrate on his own prayer, noticed his master dozing and his fire starting to dwindle.  Wanting to be helpful, he scooped some flaming embers from his own fire into his sackcloth robe and carried them over to Illtud’s fire to get it going again.  As he shook the embers from his robe into Illtud’s fire, the noise woke the saint and he stared up at Baglan.  “Did you carry those in your robe, and it is not in flames?!” he cried.  Examining Baglan’s robe and finding not a mark or burn on it, he fell to his knees and exclaimed, “It is a miracle!  Baglan, you are one of God’s chosen!”*

*Baglan was slightly alarmed – he had just been trying to help – but he listened as his master said: “You are indeed a saint and must found your own monastery.  Take this brass-handled crook, go forth and travel where it leads you, until you reach the place where there is a tree that bears three different fruits. There you must build your church.”*

*So Baglan set off the next morning, having no idea where he was headed but finding that the crook did in fact lead him where it wanted to go.  He wondered what sort of tree it would be that could hold apples, blackberries and plums, or some other combination of fruits.*

*One hot day he saw a mother sow and her piglets rooting around underneath an old oak tree and he paused to watch their comical snuffling.  He heard a lazy buzzing noise over his head and traced it back to a hole in the tree’s trunk where bees were coming and going.  He hadn’t had honey for a long time – life was pretty basic at Illtud’s monastery – so he thought he might rest a while under the tree, then maybe take some honey from the nest afterwards.  He leant against the trunk, closed his eyes and listened to the fluting twittering of blackbirds in their nests in the tree’s branches.  He had nearly dozed off when suddenly – two things hit him.  Firstly, an acorn fell on his head.  Secondly, the idea that THIS was the tree with three fruits: the oak tree bore piglets, honey and birdsong!*

*Fired with enthusiasm, he immediately set about building his church.  He chose a site uphill from the tree, which was nice and flat.  He gathered stones from the area and on that same day managed to build the walls up to knee-height.  Exhausted, he made himself a bed of bracken and fell asleep as soon as he lay down.*

*But the next morning, he awoke to find his walls tumbled down, in ruins!  He wasn’t the sort to give up so easily, so he set to building with even more energy, and by nightfall had built the walls to waist height.  Again he slept soundly, and awoke to find – the same mysterious destruction had occurred!  Still undeterred, he tried one more time.  Working with the energy of three men, he built the walls to chest height before tumbling to bed, every sinew aching.  In the morning, before opening his eyes, he prayed, “Oh please, God, please no….”*

*But the walls had tumbled down again.  “There are two possibilities,” thought Baglan aloud.  “Either the fairies are doing it, or God is trying to tell me this is not the right place.”  Now he was no longer a pagan and so he tried not to believe in fairies.  He wondered if God was telling him to build his church not NEAR the tree, but AROUND it.  It was a wild thought.  But he tried it.  And from the very first stone he laid, the animals helped him in his building!  The pigs helped dig foundations with their snouts.  The bees brought him honey to sustain him, of their own accord.  The birds sang to raise his spirits.  He in turn left a low-down door for the family of pigs to enter and leave, a hole half-way up for the bees to reach their nest, and allowed all the branches of the tree to protrude from the roof so the blackbirds could continue to nest.*

*The church was finished in no time.  Baglan was no master architect, and it was not a specimen of geometrical perfection.   But it was a true harmony of man and nature.  It stood for some centuries, but unfortunately no longer.   We still, however, have this story to remind us of Baglan and the tree which bore three fruits.”*

Following this individuals sat with a tree of their choice to look at what trees offer us as humans and came back together to fill this in on a large sketch of a tree – roots, trunk, branches and leaves. Many suggestions included the roots representing nutrition, the trunk strength and backbone, the leaves joy and energy….and most importantly the whole tree one big community. We then examined how emphasis on certain words on the chart conveyed different meanings.

How do we see story as a call to action regarding sustainability? Language is power and is used as a means of changing reality and can therefore be an agent of change regarding creating a more sustainable world.

There are different ways of speaking to produce reactions, these are often referred to as ‘levels of language’. The levels described in the workshop were taken from Ramsden and Hollingsworth (2013). For example Cameron’s brief conversation with Mr Bloomberg the week before the FSA conference exclaiming that “…..the queen purred down the line” would be a very different use of language if the queen were actually present – i.e. casual versus formal, and would be to different effect. The 5 different levels of language described during the workshop were as follows.

RITUAL

This is the highest and most formal language and used in ritual and ‘heavy’ or serious moments where respect and honour are demanded – nothing is superfluous and every word counts – there is little emotion, words are surrounded by silence to give them emphasis and gravitas – form and gestures are important when setting the atmosphere for this type of language. Many creation stories may start with ritual to pull listeners in e.g. in the Indian Upanishads this passage is full of ritual..

*“In the beginning*

*this universe was nothing*

*but the self*

*in the form of a being.*

*And this being looked around and saw*

*Nothing but itself.*

*And its first cry was ‘It is I’*

*And the I arose”*

COURTLY

This level of language conveys a courteousness and gracious – sometimes seen as old fashioned and polite but can be poetic and can ‘draw an audience in a gentle and enticing way, commending respect e.g. *“….sir knight” said the damsel “..here are adventures near at hand if thou dost prove them”*

NEUTRAL

This type of language is the every day language we use often with little emotion – small talk or telephone language. Words flow easily and it has less ‘distance’ and ‘form’ than the first two levels

SOCIAL

We use this language around friends and family and folks we feel comfortable with. Can lack grammar and form but carries lots of emotion and colour, e.g. *“lets go for a quick jar down the pub I need to get out of my head after the week from hell”*

JARGON

These are specific words and phrases within a group that convey meaning e.g. in the military *“..what’s the eta”* in green circles *“….the natural capital exceeds the resource demand”* in storytelling circles *“….that threshold needs working on”*. This language can be territorial and fast often destroys sacredness!

We then looked back at the Baglan story to identify types of language within the story and the messages conveyed. Then in partners each pair were given a phrase and to come up with a different level of language and add gestures. These were told in an appropriate space in the woods – looking also at how space can affect meaning. The partners then had to guess the new level of language and how it changed the meaning of the piece.

Groups went off to look at certain stories – “Why the sky is far away” (see Ramsden and Holligsworth), “The woodcutter and the Three Eggs” (Gersie et al) “Bird in the Hand” (see Gersie et al). They identified the types of language used and then looked at how changing parts could alter the mood sand meaning of the story.

The five different levels of language help bring authenticity to telling of stories and can give new ideas on how to include laughter, sadness, and shift moods. Understanding these can also help us unfreeze habitual patterns all tellers may adopt when telling stories and adopt different ways of working with characters and moods within stories.

Bibliography

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