



“Exploring the power of story to shape society”¹

Ideas for leading a Conversation

For general guidance in running these sessions see
'Planning a Conversation' also available at www.agoraspace.org

Background

Human beings have always used stories and used them for many purposes. They have been a source of entertainment, a way of passing on understandings of the world, even a place of political negotiation. This is a slightly different form of conversation from those we have published previously and aims to help people understand how stories work as they make an impact on our lives and the life of society. It may best be run in relatively small groups of say 8-12 people.

Starter questions for discussion

- 1. Invite people to think of one story that has made an impact on people's lives. Why did it effect people so powerfully? Was there something about it that was felt to be true or right?**
- 2. Focus on one or more stories to examine in detail.**
 - a) What do you think the motivations of the storyteller/producer were?**
 - b) Can you spot any special ways that story is told that contribute to its power?**
 - c) What does this story do to the society that hears or watches it?**
 - d) What sort of truth or view of right behaviour does it claim?**

¹ These materials are produced by Project Agora, a company limited by guarantee, which is dedicated to creating new spaces in society for the highest possible quality of public conversation, the building of realistic trust and the seeking of vision. Contact Agora at www.agoraspace.org or email enquiries@agoraspace.org

One way through the conversation

Invite people to think of one story that has made an impact on people's lives. Why did it effect people so powerfully? Was there something about it that was felt to be true or right?

This question might best be used as part of the invitation to the evening, so that people have a chance to think about it before they come. Make it clear that if they find it hard to think of something they are still most welcome!

Go round the room and let everyone introduce themselves by answering this question. Don't allow any criticism at this stage. Simply let everyone say their piece.

Then move on to the story (or stories) that you have chosen to examine in detail. This should be a story that is reasonably familiar to most of the group and/or one which you can bring to life for them in some way at the meeting. For example you may choose to watch a few clips from a familiar film, or from a TV show². All sorts of permutations are possible including telling a story or preparing for the group by reading something. The aim is then to facilitate a discussion around key questions. I have shown here how this can be done with Eastenders. Some groups may like to actually study this soap. A very high proportion of the population watch Eastenders. More than always admit it! Others will focus on something else. Other ideas and illustrations that can be used along the way are found in the resources section.

➤ **What do you think the motivations of the storyteller/producer were**

Brainstorm as many ideas as you can about what you think this story sets out to achieve. You will find yourself tapping into ideas about the deepest motivations of the people who produced it. For example, John Yorke the former producer of Eastenders admits that the primary motive of Eastenders is to entertain. Nevertheless he argues that the story also does a social service in portraying difficult situations of everyday life and allowing people to talk about them and come to terms with them. When Kat revealed the sexual abuse of her early years the production team took advice from all sorts of agencies and even set up a phone line to help people for whom the episode had touched a raw nerve. He also argues that the soap has an overall moral character in terms of the 'blitz spirit', whereby the characters go through an immense amount of trauma but they always endure. Let people explore these and other possible deep commitments that underlie the story.

Of course all stories entertain to some degree. They must all attract an audience. But for many this is just a necessary step toward a much bigger purpose. Such stories are actually making an appeal to people to see the world in a new way. These deep level commitments can be revealed simply by asking people to sum up the overall message of the story in one phrase. The resources section gives a set of examples of what this might reveal and the sort of commitments that can be found underlying some of the most important stories in our culture.

² Copyright restrictions may limit this process. Small groups in a home may be least likely to infringe copyright. Particular care needs to be taken with events outside the home. Specialists in this area who sell permission for public showings include www.filmbank.co.uk and www.cvli.org

➤ **Can you spot any special ways that the story is told that contribute to its power?**

If we accept that Eastenders sets out primarily to entertain, the aim is now to search to see how it achieves that. Are there any special storytelling devices that make it such great entertainment? I suggest that there are at least three.

1. It uses a series of intense emotional encounters.
2. It specialises in people not being quite open or truthful and follows the complex relationships that result.
3. It is set in a very small world.

A more detailed explanation of these is to be found in the resources section.

Suggest these three ideas to the group. Then watch an episode of the soap together with one or two people taking note of each of these devices. So some make a list of moments of high emotion, others look for those who are living in some sort of half truth, others notice the context of the story and how gangland makes its presence felt.

Groups who are not studying Eastenders might go through a similar exercise. The key is to work from the primary motivations that you have drawn up and then see how the story is constructed to achieve the producer's intention.

If you are following another story whose primary motive is to entertain then you may discover that broadly similar devices are used as in Eastenders. (See resources note on Friends and Big Brother)

➤ **What does this story do to the society that hears or watches it?**

Stories have the capacity to get behind our radar. In fact that is part of their magic. We can be so taken up with a story that we absorb its messages without thinking. This may be particularly true of stories relayed by film because our minds tend to be less active and imaginative as we watch. Many people 'chill out' to a film today. It asks so little of us. The dangers here are many.

Firstly we can become victims of propaganda, naively absorbing the commitments of the producer. Many who watched 'The Passion of the Christ' for example may have come out thinking 'that was how it was', unaware of how committed the producer seemed to be to emphasising violence unduly. (see resources section for an idea of how to show this to people).

Sometimes the message of the story is so strong it is off-putting. Fahrenheit 911 or the *Left Behind* series are probably in this camp. We say it is not a 'good story'. The reasoning behind this is probably that we are all aware how complex life actually is, how most of the questions of life are actually rather difficult and how there are many different perspectives on human behaviour. If a story is too focussed around one particular message, then we may sense that the characters in it are wooden or caricatures. Their decisions are predictable and hopelessly unsubtle. We may become all too aware of the storytelling devices that make this propaganda rather than story. It is a doctrine dressed up rather than a real search to understand. Someone is trying to manipulate us and we resist.

Stories whose primary motivation is to entertain may carry a different sort of health warning. Here the devices used to entertain may be simply absorbed uncritically and

begin to set the standard of what is normal behaviour in society. This is particularly the case where there is repeated mass exposure such as in a popular Soap.

So in Eastenders

- There is the danger that people will feel their own life is drab and boring in comparison with the high octane emotional experiences portrayed there.
- People may begin to feel that telling half truths and being deceitful is normal and that principled people are odd.
- The small and intense community of Walford may make people feel the lack of community life in our modern society. The Soap may even begin to function as a substitute community.

Of course there are many other ideas along these lines that groups might explore. We have to make judgements here. It is hard to see how you could generate 'hard' evidence about such affects.

One of the most important angles on this subject may come from the sheer quantity and power of TV/film based stories in our lives today. The average person in the UK watches 3hrs 44mins of TV per day. Recent evidence suggests a link between TV watching and hyperactivity in children (see resources). For all of us the big danger may be that we are now watching more than we are living. The stories of others are displacing our own experiences and the development of our own stories, leaving us all feeling both inadequate and manipulated.

➤ **What sort of truth or view of right behaviour does it claim?**

Every story makes some sort of claim to be true. And it does this first of all in its claim to be a certain *type* of story.

A history makes a judgement about past events based on available evidence. And its truth content can be tested to a degree in relation to that evidence. Likewise a newspaper picture implicitly makes a claim to record an event. Piers Morgan appeared to accept the charge that he had published fake pictures of the abuse of prisoners in Iraq. His defence was that this *sort* of thing was actually going on was deemed not adequate. The picture had implicitly claimed a different sort of truth.(see resources for more on pictures as story)

A fictional story is judged in a different way. We might, for example, test a novel by the richness of the characters that it develops. Do they feel true to life? Are they complex enough? Can we believe that a character like that would act in that sort of way and so is the overall plot credible and interesting for what it reveals? Likewise in terms of moral flavour we might ask questions about how people behave and what happens to them in relationship to what we think is right and wrong about human behaviour. A writer like Nathaniel Hawthorne in *Scarlet Letter* might portray the life of feisty adulteress who confronts social norms yet courageously protects the partner to the adultery. Such stories have clear moral intent. They are challenging the moral commitments of the wider society. But they are wrapped up in a story that acts as an appeal saying, 'Consider this person's situation, are they not right to behave like this?' The listener brings their own commitments to bear as they watch the film. They may profoundly disagree. They may be moved to see something in a new light. A process of engagement is going on toward truth and right. Many of the greatest English novels have worked to bring people and situations to light that society was in danger of ignoring, telling their stories in such a way as to evoke social sympathy and moral development.

Using this sort of thinking consider your story. First of all, what *sort* of story is it claiming to be? Given then the truth claims of this type of story, do you consider it powerful? Does it move us, educate us, help us consider truth and right?

In terms of Eastenders, as a fictional story its claim to truth is common to all stories. It provides a vehicle for us to encounter people and their responses to various situations of life. In so doing we reflect on our own lives. To be effective we ask of this type of story, 'Are the characters credible?' 'Do the situations they find themselves in ring true, or true enough, to be interesting and helpful?' I would personally answer a resounding 'Yes' to this aspect. There is little doubt that Eastenders is a major topic of conversation in our society, because the situations it portrays are meaningful to us and ask hard questions about our relationships. I think the consistently high audience ratings might back this up.

Some would argue that the stock of stories that a society considers actually shape the way that people see the world. You could end the session by identifying what sort of overall diet of stories members of the group and the people they know are taking in. Do they think this matters?

Resources

What is the overall message of the story?

Classics

Oliver Twist, Dickens – we are treating poor children badly

Mansfield Park, Austen – those born to high rank are not necessarily the most worthy

Shirley- Charlotte Bronte – women are able and frustrated

Uncle Tom's Cabin, Beecher-Stowe – we cannot treat slaves this way

Modern Novels

The woman who walked into doors, Roddy Doyle – people who suffer domestic violence feel trapped

Other people's children, Joanna Trollope – swapping partners makes for serious difficulties.

The Curious Incident of the Dog at Night Time, - people with Asperger's syndrome see the world differently

More overt propaganda

Fahrenheit 911 – the Bush administration in America is dangerous and corrupt

The *Left Behind* series – believe the Bible, expect the end, support Israel, suspect the UN

The Day after tomorrow – global warming is coming, disaster

Rabbit Proof Fence – indigenous people, their treatment was appalling

You may not agree with all these descriptions. They are there to stimulate you to give your own views on the primary commitments of the producers/storytellers.

Storytelling Devices in Eastenders

- It develops a complex storyline around intensely emotional encounters. The viewer is taken on an emotional roller coaster ride as encounter follows encounter. There may be several separate moments of deep grief in one episode. The viewer experiences this vicariously, able to enjoy an emotional high without having to live the situation out in the real world. It is a great experience, one that many storytellers have worked with down the ages, but crafted with especial intensity through the televisual medium. In a world where relationships are often thin and superficial, what is more attractive than to be able to enter into this close community of people, to share their hopes and fears, and live without consequence?
- Eastenders people are very inclined not to quite tell the other person all that is happening. A series of lies, half-truths and deceits provides a continuing feast of anxiety as the viewer wonders when this or that person will finally be found out. It is highly entertaining, but has a moral edge because the characters involved are not straight-forward with others. This results in the portrayal of an extraordinary community, where the only two characters that clearly work from principle in their lives are given slightly pitiful roles. There is the overtly religious Dot and the diminutive Little Mo. Principles are less entertaining.
- Eastenders, like all good tales, uses a small list of characters so as to enable good character development. This is aided and abetted by a tiny geographical focus, namely life around a market square. The result again has implications for realism. Walford appears to exist as in a bubble. Nothing of the goings on of the outer world impinge. There is little discussion of, or interaction with, any of our society's institutions. Instead the world of Walford is conceived with gangland bosses as the principle structuring authority.

Similar devices used for entertainment elsewhere – Friends and Big Brother

Watch an episode of **Friends** and see how it uses the similar devices to engage the audience as *Eastenders*. Emotional intensity is present though less prominent. Comic situations make up the deficit. Telling half truths is rampant and the world they move in is tiny. The 'friends' don't even seem to work!

Big Brother has actually built its own small cocoon to enact the story and focus on the characters. It has deliberately chosen people who will act up to camera and who are likely to be emotional. The individualistic perspectives offered in the diary room are clearly out of kilter with those presented in the community life of the group. The audience becomes aware of deceptions and plotting and enjoys the process. The diary room is a device for generating entertainment through subversion and betrayal.

The Passion of the Christ – is this 'how it was'?

Review a clip from *The Passion of the Christ* and compare it with a piece from the crucifixion story in Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth*. These two portrayals of Jesus' last hours could not be more different. People might notice that authority figures in the Zeffirelli version are extraordinarily reasonable people. None of them are bad. The crucifixion is shown as a simple tragedy, an unfortunate coming together of circumstances. Likewise, the violence in Zeffirelli is understated. At the end Jesus does not even look ill enough to die! Contrast this with the Gibson's narrative. What would you say were the main commitments of these two different film makers?

Story and propaganda

Fahrenheit 911

Michael Moore is a political campaigner. Fervently antiwar, he takes every opportunity to display what he sees as the corruption endemic in US politics. His latest film *Fahrenheit 911* attempts to blow the cover on the relationships between the Bush administration and the Saudi Royal Family. Moore has accused Disney of trying to suppress the distribution of the film, but this may be another publicity stunt. Watch part or all of this film and consider it in terms of its genre. It is clearly a 'moral tale' with defined and very evident commitments. The commitment to entertain is probably quite low on the list of priorities. Does the lack of subtlety actually make it a poor story?

Left Behind

If Michael Moore's story is shaped by a political commitment, the *Left Behind* series clearly takes its steer from religion. This series of twelve stories, now in book, film and audio tape, has sold some 60 million copies, primarily in the United States. The stories written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins are an attempt to popularise a particular interpretation of the biblical idea of the second coming of Christ. They imagine a world where the supernatural has broken in. Jesus has taken away the faithful and the world is set for a battle between a remnant of recent converts and an Anti-Christ figure. By setting up a worldview of good against evil the storytellers are able to divide the world according to a right wing agenda. So the Anti-Christ is the head of the UN. All liberals are on the side of evil. So are all attempts at international co-operation. And the story is implicitly pro-Israel, even if in the end those Jews who do not convert are eliminated. Gershom Gorenberg in *the American Prospect* describes these stories as 'propaganda in the guise of fiction' and declares that 'read uncritically... they give people an interpretive paradigm in which extreme views seem sensible'. They promote an attitude to the Bible that sees it like a Sherlock Holmes puzzle where the faithful one is to search for clues and which lead to a certain and inevitable conclusion. Tim LaHaye says, 'Our position is essentially what the Bible says. The idea that we could be wrong has not occupied much of my serious thought.' (from a review in the *Washington Times*). Some have argued that these stories have contributed to a violent and arrogant mindset in the US today. Is this fair?

The subversive power of the story

Publishing the Bible in English

Groups that want to read a book might enjoy Brian Moynahan's *William Tyndale*. This is a fascinating read about the struggle to publish the Bible in English. It tells of the attempts to ban its publication, control the printing houses and to threaten and even burn those who dealt in its publication. Why all this fuss and fury? It provided an alternative authority to the religious and social order of the time. In assessing this struggle, imagine the world of Thomas More. Why was he so against this development? The power of story may never have been more evident.

Uncle Tom's Cabin

A woman of particularly small stature was once brought before Abraham Lincoln. He said to her, 'So you are the little lady, who made the Great War'. Her name was Harriet Beecher-Stowe. She had written a book called *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that had made an enormous impact on the people of the Northern States of America. It was the story of a runaway slave and it had developed such a sympathy for black people that, at least in Lincoln's view it had precipitated the civil war.

Read the last chapter or two of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Notice the romantic way that the old man Tom is portrayed and the Christ-like character that he is given. Would this story impress people today? What has changed?

The Power of the Picture

The different media through which stories are told are important to the power that they have. Visual media do not require the same imagination as an oral or text-based story. They can therefore be received much more passively and with less critical reflection. Newspaper pictures make an implicit truth claim, demanding to be received as 'fact'. There have been several recent examples whereby a single picture has become the focus for a powerful story.

Show the picture of the girl Kim Phuc fleeing from the napalm bombing of North Vietnam (available at <http://slate.msn.com/id/1896>)

This picture may have been crucial in turning the American public against the Vietnam war.

Show the picture of Saddam's statue falling in Iraq. (available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_est/3611869.stm) Some say this was a staged photoshoot deliberately designed to tell us that things were 'settled' in Iraq and all the people were happy and free.

Show a picture from the humiliations at Abu Ghraib gaol in Iraq. (available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_pictures/3689167.stm) Could these picture turn the tide against the coalition forces in that country?

Think about how these pictures work. What emotions and deep level commitments do they tap into?

The Daily Mirror recently placed a falsified a picture of abuse by British soldiers on its front page. It is not clear how much the paper was aware that it was false, but it seemed to expend little effort in verifying it. Piers Morgan said that it was OK because this *sort of thing* has actually been going on in Iraq. But others judged that the paper had deliberately misled people. We expect pictures in papers to be actual records of events or, if not, to carry some disclaimer like 'simulation'. This falsification had damaged the reputation of the newspaper, said the Board, and he was summarily dismissed.

Psychosocial affects of TV/film watching

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a recognised problem in young people. Estimates in America suggest that between 5 and 25% of young people suffer from it, though it's diagnosis is a contested area. It is commonly treated with the drug Ritalin.

A recent study of 2500 children by the University of Wisconsin showed that the likelihood of attention disorders increased by 9% for every hour watched of TV between the ages of one

and three. The average TV show flicks to a new scene every 3.5 seconds. Some are saying that exposure to this may have a serious impact on the formation of neural pathways in the developing brain.

In traditional societies the telling of stories was a key social function. It was part of the reason that people wanted to meet together. Today's stories are relayed to us primarily through electronic means. This may be very stimulating to our emotions but does not demand the same level of imagination as traditional storytelling. There may be a danger that we come to feel spectators rather than participants in life. Peig Sayers was a 'storykeeper', as they are known in Blasket Island. An introduction to a book of her work read like this:

'But the storytellers are a vanishing race for they have lost their audience and the flow of words comes thin and seldom now. The radio has taken away their voices just as the printed page has taken away their memories, and the pictures that were once seen in a glowing peat fire are seen more readily on the picture screen today. The world has widened and the imagination of man has dwindled.'

From the Introduction by WR Rodgers to 'An Old Woman's reflections – the life of a Blasket Island Storyteller written by Peig Sayers

Faith perspectives

The Bible as narrative

Consider how the sort of analysis that we have applied to Eastenders might apply to the Bible.

The Bible is largely narrative in form. Its **primary motivation** is not to entertain. Instead its stories have been selected for their **significance** in terms of the development of understanding about God and God's interaction with the world.

In terms of the **devices** that Eastenders uses to tell its stories, the Bible does not play on emotions. It does talk about our anguish and passion – as for example in the psalms – but its stories are mostly concerned with the meaning of the events it records.

It is also significantly different in that it shows an extraordinarily high regard for truth telling. The idea that people exist in a relationship of trust with God draws out a range of laws and moral codes that insist on the telling of truth and work against corruption and all forms of deception.

In contrast to the small world favoured of the conventional storyteller, the focus on God continually exposes readers to the big picture about life, society and its institutions, asking questions and providing vision for a good society.

Yet the Bible may use different storytelling devices.

Exploring biblical storytelling

As a religious text the Judaeo-Christian scriptures contain narratives of many different types with different types of truth claim.

Consider the book of Jonah. What sort of story is this? Concerns about fish and people living inside them can be set aside if it is really an imaginary story with a social purpose, namely confronting religious zealots who thought that the only thing that God could possibly do with such hated foreigners was to kill them. What do you think it is about?

Or take the stories of the resurrection in the four gospels. Study them carefully in turn. Why are they so different? As each gospel writer constructed the story, did they have different **primary commitments** as to the meaning of the resurrection and its application to their situation? Does this help to shape the way that they tell the story? Each of them may have had historical intent, but even so they felt free to shape the story in particular ways. See, for example, how Luke puts all his resurrection events on one day and centres them on Jerusalem. By contrast Luke in Acts records appearances that went on over 40 days and

Mark and Matthew make particular emphasis on Galilee. Look at John 20, which may originally concluded John's gospel. See how his emphasis is on coming to believe (the whole work ending with 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe'). By contrast in Matthew the story concludes with the great commission to 'Go into all the world... Different emphases, different ways of shaping the story, even different storytelling devices, as the writers sought above all to tell of the **significance** of what had happened.