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Martha Bull

University of Massachusetts, Amherst, mlcuomo3@gmail.com

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Creativity, Communication and Leadership through Narrative

Review of *The Story Cookbook: Practical Recipes for Change* by Andrew Rixon and Cathryn Lloyd. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019.

Martha Bull

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Within the world of theater, we don't shy away from the word "games": we understand that play is not indulgent and superfluous, but essential and generative. Even frivolity has value, when it can take the pressure of high-performing off the table. (Because really, who cares if you crash and burn in a game of "Zip Zap Zop" or "Bunny Bunny"?) Theater games create structure that is safe, known, and often fun, then invite participants to engage in a creative process that requires vulnerability and presence.

As an actor-turned-university-acting-teacher, I've participated in and led my fair share of theater and improvisation games. When I facilitate theater-based work for non-theater folks, I begin by spelling out how theater games will boost collaboration and creativity, develop individual soft skills and leadership competencies, and improve group dynamics. In other words, I articulate my relevance. *The Story Cookbook: Practical Recipes for Change*, a wonderfully digestible beginner's guide to facilitating story-based applied theater and improvisation games in corporate settings, begins in the same way, by explaining the importance of narrative in communication, mutual understanding, collaboration, and leadership. I regret that introducing exercises on storytelling from performing arts traditions always requires such an extensive justificatory prologue, and I often ask myself why this is.

The answer, I believe, is in the siloing of the arts. When students and employees are pressured to focus so heavily on data at the exclusion of the arts and other creative endeavors, they lose the ability to take creative risks and follow their intuition, and thus they remain in the realm of what is firmly known and quantifiable. But, as the editors point out, storytelling is inherently human, and an essential tool for communication in and outside organizations (yes, even beyond the marketing department).

The source texts of a lot of the narrative-based exercises in *The Story Cookbook* are canonical theater games, similar to those one might find in Augusto Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* or Viola Spolin's encyclopedic oeuvre of theater exercises. Just as the book's exercises create space for an emergent group narrative that includes a diversity of voices, the fabric of the book's exercises is a patchwork quilt of contributions from numerous practitioners and

authors. Many of these contributors cite central figures of applied theater and improvisation, including Boal and Keith Johnstone.

The book's exercises are coursed like a banquet: Canapés, Entrées, Mains, Desserts, and After Dinner Mints. Whether a facilitator is green or experienced, they can peruse the menu and select a series of exercises based on available time, number of participants, desired energy level, and goals for the work period. In the cocktail hour of the dinner party, icebreaker exercises (the canapés) stimulate exchange, tune up participants' listening abilities and create a supportive and collaborative environment that will support more substantial exchange later on. Some of the entrées and mains bring data to life through narrative ("Re-presenting data through story"), some create safe space to consider and reflect on group dynamics and company culture ("Our culture is the way it is because..."), and others deepen relationships by inviting participants to share their personal stories and listen deeply to others' ("Turning points").

I was relieved to find that the exercises included debriefing notes (except the light icebreakers or the After Dinner Mints which are, in themselves, a debriefing). This gives participants and the group as a whole the opportunity to digest and absorb before moving on to the next course. Debriefing after such exercises is, in my experience, absolutely indispensable: it's a moment when much of the learning takes place and participants have a chance to recognize and formulate for themselves the importance of the work they're doing together.

As the editors, Andrew Rixon and Cathryn Lloyd, note in the introduction, facilitators can expect some push-back from participants new to this kind of work. The editors provide reasons such as data-driven company cultures, limited time and energy, and fear of the emotional engagement that personal narrative work requires. These are certainly part of the equation. In my experience, the fear of being vulnerable, of failing at something new, or of "looking silly" often drives the resistance. A participant with little to no experience in trusting their creative impulses will often doubt that they have any at all.

As a person who has dedicated her career to bringing theater, stories, and their humanizing properties outside the proscenium, I am grateful to *The Story Cookbook* for helping to build a bridge between business and the performing arts. This book is an accessible stepping stone for anyone looking to improve their organization's culture, creative collaboration, and leadership through story-based group exercises. I hope more non-theater folks will adopt these tremendously useful methods to inspire outside-the-box thinking, engender empathy in diverse groups, and improve communication, so that someday soon their relevance will go without saying.

About the Author

Martha Bull holds an MFA in Acting from Columbia University and is a member of the performance faculty at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She teaches voice, movement, and acting to Theater majors, while her research focuses on cross-disciplinary applications of actor training to fields like healthcare and business. She will be leaving her faculty post to pursue an MBA from Yale School of Management, to deepen her applied interdisciplinary work.