

Collecting better information from a story

One of the reasons we find it difficult to reflect more deeply is that we struggle to collect good enough information to reflect on. Often the missing information we need is hard to collect because it is not very visible – like the feelings, unspoken thoughts, assumptions, relationships and motivations of different people. But if we do not access and understand these things then we are just skating over the surface.

Relating experiences or telling stories is the key approach to action learning. Here is a simple technique to help us to get a better quality of information or data from our stories:

Getting Out the Inside Story

- A. Tell or write down the story. If you are telling it you could ask someone to write down what you say **on the left-hand side** of a flipchart. If you are writing down the story yourself then do the same on a page. This is **the Outer Story** (see below).
- B. After this has been done go back and, **on the right-hand side** or column, tell or write down some of the feelings, unspoken thoughts, assumptions, relationships and motivations of different people that you remember. Do this for each part of the story that you wrote in the first column. What were the less visible things happening – this is the **Inside Story**.
- C. Now, in the right-hand column you have better, deeper information to use in your reflection and learning process.



A simple example:

The Outer Story

Do this first (look)

(the events as they unfolded, the more visible things that happened)

We were invited to a meeting with the women's group. They welcomed us warmly.

We brought some agenda items, questions and a typical MOU and asked for their ideas. We had some interesting discussion and talked about some possibilities. They looked at each other but not at us. They seemed shy.

The women were polite and did not say much. They said they were glad we had come and would contact us. The meeting was not long.

We have not heard from them, which has puzzled us. We are wondering if we should visit them again.

The Inside Story

Do this second (look again)

(the feelings, unspoken thoughts, assumptions, energy, relationships, metaphors)

We were so excited – I think the women were also excited.

They seemed surprised when we brought our agenda, questions and MOU (we assumed they needed them). I felt a bit uneasy. Maybe they were disappointed. Looking back, I think we brought too much.

They were still being polite but they were not so warm. I imagine now that they saw us like the other NGOs whose projects they had joined.

I think we are more interested in this than them. I feel like a shopkeeper with no customers.

Can you see that the Inner Story helps you to get behind the scenes to where the real action was?