

Module 3 _____

Structure _____

_____ **-based**

story _____

_____ **interpretation**

Module learning objective:

- Increased awareness of how to understand patients' desires
- Increased communicative and interpretative competencies

This module focuses on the structure of stories – what they might be communicating but not necessarily in words alone. This module gives trainees skills in how to interpret the structure of stories through considering metaphors, positioning, contradictions and plotlines. These skills support healthcare providers to interpret the emotional and imaginative subtexts of their patients' stories.

In this module we will:

- Explore the key aspects of a story's structure
 - Consider the challenges professionals face when thinking about understanding the structure of a story
-

Story Structure

The structure of a story can tell us a lot about the storyteller's aims, by highlighting aspects of how they have put the story together. Here we are focused less on what is told, and more on the choices made in the telling of the story (although this does not mean that we do not attend to the content at all). We are still taking account of the content, but we are also going beyond just what is being said and looking at what the storyteller is doing to persuade us of the truthfulness of their account.

Many aspects of stories can help us better understand this, including:

Imagery/metaphors – the most accessible way to start to think about a story's structure is through focusing on images, either literal images, as in digital stories, or verbal images, as communicated in metaphors. For instance, a story that is full of metaphors of adversity or challenge will be communicating the struggles faced by the storyteller, even if they are not saying that this explicitly in words.

Plot – here we are thinking about the over-arching plot or storyline. For instance, the plot can be a heroic tale of triumph over adversity, communicating the resilience and feelings of strength of the storyteller.

A story that takes the form of a romance can communicate the importance of relational aspects and the primary importance in the storyteller's life or their partner or family, for instance. To give you an idea about plots, Charlie Brooker¹ has suggested that the seven basic plots of all stories are as follows, but this need not be seen as definitive and the idea of genres may also be useful:

- Over-coming the monster
- Rags to riches
- The quest
- Rebirth
- Voyage and return
- Comedy
- Tragedy

1. Booker, C. (2004). The seven basic plots: Why we tell stories. A&C Black.

Positioning – here we might focus specifically on the position that the storyteller takes. This can be revealed through the plot or metaphors, but we may learn even more if we look for extra information about how the storyteller positions themselves. A storyteller who positions themselves as the victim of events or people, can be communicating their lack of agency or feelings of disempowerment, even if they do not state this directly.

Coherence and contradiction – we primarily listen for content and for coherence and in fact stories are largely about organizing and sorting our experiences. But, within our stories, there can be powerful contradictions which remain as points of tension, threatening the coherence and yet carrying a powerful message. Stories of seniors often contain within them contradictory aspects around independence and dependence for instance, the tensions inherent in recognising the need for care and increasing vulnerability, whilst still desiring independence. If we just reduce stories to small thematic elements we can miss this overall structure with contradiction at the core, that might be shaping the story in an important way.

Exercise 3.1

The Plots and Metaphors in Complementary Stories

- Foundation
- Yes
- Medium

In this exercise we are going to watch a digital story and discuss the metaphors in it. Then we are going to watch the associated digital story told by the patient's husband and look at the similarity and difference in plot/metaphors used in the two.

The content of the stories will of course differ somewhat as they are told from different perspectives, but key aspects will also be the same. However, this exercise, in considering the shape and structure of how Tom and Pat tell their stories, highlights the work that structural aspects of stories such as the plot and metaphors do and will help you to focus on these.

-  First, watch Pat's digital story "Learning to navigate"

3.1.1

What are the metaphors that Pat uses in her story to try to convey the changes in her life?

What plot does her story have? Few stories exist on their own. In health and social care there are always many entwined stories which sometimes sit within a more recognisable genre or story plot.

3.1.2



Now watch the digital story made by Pat's husband Tom in the same workshop "I do the best I can"

How do common metaphors link the two stories?

How does the plot of Tom's story differ from Pat's?

Role play a conversation between Tom and Pat on the change in their relationship brought about by his dementia.