# Stories in conversations and presentations – a comparative study

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**Abstract:**

Students receive little guidance on how to give the oral presentations that increasingly feature in third level modules. It has been observed that several communication tools employed effectively in conversation – in particular stories – are not used in presentations. The aim of this study was to demonstrate this effect and explore possible reasons for the omission of stories in student presentations.

Postgraduate students (sample size 17) attended a three-hour presentation-skills training session where they prepared and delivered group presentations. The conversations during preparation and the presentations were all recorded. The difference between story-use in the two settings was marked. Three of the four presentations contained no stories, whereas the conversations were characterised by frequent story-use, sometimes clustering with a frequency of four or five a minute. It seemed that stories perform a dual-role in conversations - 'social interactive' and 'meaning building' – that does not naturally occur in a presentation.

**Background:**

Group work and oral presentations are valued as learning experiences by students (Zulfiqar & Shah, 2013). Likewise, the academics who set these exercises and the practitioners who seek to employ graduating students concur that oral communication skills are extremely important (Gray & Murray, 2011). In this paper, two thirds of employers surveyed said they 'always' take oral communication skill into account in hiring decisions. One of the many reasons cited was globalisation, whereby 'an increased speaking flexibility and cross-cultural adaptability' are now considered particularly valuable. This has led to a marked increase in the inclusion of oral presentations as part of assignment submissions.

However, many of the academics who set presentation tasks are not well informed in these communication skills themselves. Kemp & Seagraves, 1995, noted that, 'From the responses of the lecturers through both questionnaire and interview, a picture emerged of an incoherent approach to the development of these skills. There were wildly different assessment criteria and regimes being applied by lecturers to the same students.'

This lack of clear instruction stems from the fact that there is no agreed body of knowledge academics can draw on (Erkaya, 2011). The author has observed, through nearly 15 years of consultancy experience, that there seems to be a series of hidden biases that lead presenters to communicate differently in presentations than they would in a conversation. One bias is the so-called 'curse of knowledge', where more expertise leads to poorer judgements on how difficult it is for novices to learn about a topic (Camerer, Loewenstein & Webter, 1989). The current paper examines another such bias: the reluctance to use stories when making a presentation that you would otherwise use (with the same audience members) in a conversation.

It is difficult to find a foothold in the literature for a study that marries storytelling and oral presentations. An extensive search on 'oral presentations' produced literature in related fields – memory, problem solving, visual perception – but very little that was directly applied to

presentations. This may be because it extremely difficult to measure either the 'effectiveness' of a presentation or to control the many variables which may have a bearing on its effectiveness. The approach often taken has been to carry out experiments in more easily controlled scenarios and extrapolate the findings to a presentation situation.

The field of Cognitive Load Analysis provides some such studies. One illustrative example (Mayer, Heiser & Lonn, 2001) presented scientific material to subjects in audiovisual format (videos, images, text and voiceovers) and measured learning of the subjects by means of a number of post-presentation questions. It was found that learning a scientific explanation from a narrated animation was adversely affected by the addition of on-screen text that contained the same words as in the narration. The authors referred to this as the 'redundancy effect'. In short, listening to words while viewing images is complementary, whereas listening to words while viewing those same words in printed form, caused a processing overload and impeded learning.

Another example comes from the work of Elizabeth Loftus who demonstrated (Loftus & Doyle, 1987) the power of eyewitness stories in courtroom trials. The witness story presented a more coherent account than disparate, factual testimony even when that testimony discredited what the witness had said. In Loftus's own words, 'Perhaps it is easier for jurors to work with a smooth account, modifying it here and there depending on subsequent evidence, than to take small fragments and weave them together into a coherent image' (p. 26). This work points, indirectly, to the power of stories in presentations.

Others have tried to sub-divide presentation effectiveness into components – eye contact, clarity, self-efficacy – and infer successful presentation performance by measuring these components individually (De Greza et al., 2014; Adams, 2004). Although such studies produce significant data, the assumptions on which they are based are questionable at best.

Turning our attention to stories, Ritchie, 2010, points out that, 'Storytelling is apparently a central part of how we organize both our social interactions and our understanding of the world, and theoretical attention to literary storytelling dates back at least as far as Aristotle. However, until quite recently conversational storytelling has been largely ignored or discounted in the social sciences' (p. 124).

Catherine Kohler Riessman (1993) looks at how people cast experience into narrative as a primary way to make sense of that experience, particularly for difficult life transitions and trauma. However, we are not interested, here, in the particular content of stories but in how predisposed people are to telling them at all.

It is useful, in examining when stories are likely to be used, to better understand what stories are used for. Stories forge links between the exceptional and the ordinary (Bruner, 1986; Bruner, 1992; Abma, 2003). Thus they provide a 'meaning-making' function, making sense of new events in the context of what is already well understood.

He also points out that telling a story involves taking a moral stance in relation to the events that story depicts. 'You cannot argue any of these interpretations without taking a moral stance and a rhetorical posture.' This personal aspect of stories may suggest why they are less frequently employed in presentations than conversations given the fear that most people experience when making a presentation.

Another role of stories is a social-interactive one. A speaker's apparent intention can be collectively transformed by the entire group, and a new intention collaboratively generated (Ritchie, 2010;

Greenhalgh and Hurwitz, 1999). This too may suggest reasons why stories can flourish in many-sided conversations but not in one-sided presentations. In conversations, one story often prompts another and results in story clusters (Sidnell, 2010). Boje (1991) has also studied the collaborative aspect of stories, referring to a story as, 'a joint performance of teller(s) and hearer(s).' Sidnell also cites the work of Sacks (Sacks, 1987) on how a storyteller, at any given time, will examine their own 'entitlement' and 'credibility' relative to a given audience. Again, this is harder to do in a presentation.

Pinker (Pinker, 1995) echoes this point in reflecting on the process of subliminal self-checking before the conveying of any piece of information to another person. Referring to the field known as 'pragmatics', he points out that the speaker, having made a claim on the ear of the listener, implicitly guarantees that the information is relevant: that it is not already known, and that it is sufficiently connected to what the listener is thinking that he or she can make inferences to new conclusions with little extra mental effort. Again this would be easier to do in a conversation than in a presentation and may lead to less audience connection, and maybe less stories, in a presentation.

The role of stories in communication – meaning-making, opinion-stating, social interaction (Bruner, 1992; Ritchie, 2010) - may suggest reasons why storytelling is more common in conversations than in presentations but these functions are no less important in a presentation. The job of this current work is to highlight that there is a different – largely subconscious – attitude to the inclusion of stories in conversations and presentations as evidenced by the numbers of stories told in each situation.

**Method:**

The aim was to look at the frequency of story-use in conversations and compare this with the frequency of story-use in presentations. Students were invited to 3-hour training session where they were asked to work in groups, develop ideas for a group presentation and then give this presentation at the end. Each of the group conversations was recorded (with video cameras and in one case a Dictaphone) as were the final presentations.

The participants knew that they were being recorded but the cameras were placed as unobtrusively as possible. One group, in the centre of the room, was recorded by means of a Dictaphone on the table. It seemed, from analysing the conversations qualitatively, that the participants quickly forgot about these devices.

Attendees were told that some aspect of how people construct and deliver presentations was being studied but not which aspect. There was no mention of storytelling as a topic of interest. They were asked to treat the session as a useful training course and try to get as much as they could from it. Lunch was also provided.

The final analysis would simply involve counting the number of stories – as defined in the later section *Definition of 'story'* – used in the conversations and comparing this with the frequency of story-use in the presentations.

Participants

The participants were all postgraduate or postdoctoral students from the University. A recruitment letter was sent out to heads of school and it was requested, where possible, that groups who already knew each other should attend. There were 17 attendees on the day.
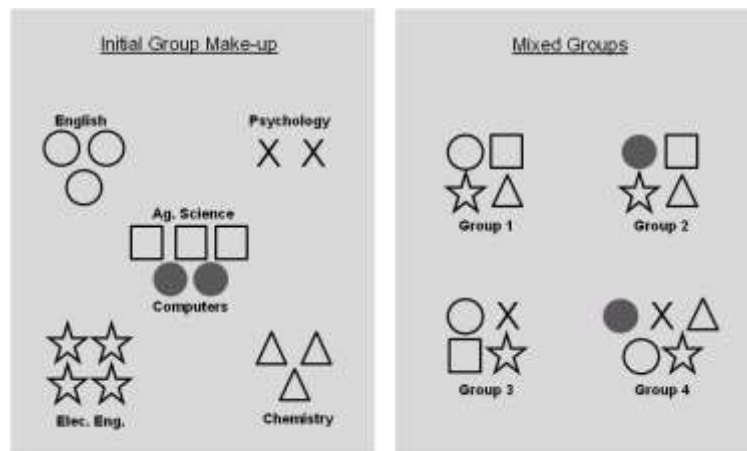


*Figure 1 – Schematic showing participant disciplines and discussion groups.*

The breakdown of the participants, by discipline, is shown in Figure 1. Of these groups, the participants from Psychology, Electronic Engineering, Chemistry and Agricultural Science knew each other, whereas the others did not. The first set of group discussions were carried out in the initial homogenous groups. The second set of discussions were carried out in the randomly assigned mixed groups denoted on the right of the figure.

Secondary Aim

As well as making a comparison of the use of stories in presentations and conversations, a secondary aim was to explore a thesis that emerged in a pilot study where it was observed that some people volunteered more stories in conversation than others, and this seemed to correlate with the confidence of the speaker as well as the rapport within the group. Put another way, when people seemed more comfortable (due to innate confidence or because of a supportive group environment) they volunteered more stories. It was proposed, then, that one of the reasons for the absence of stories in presentations is discomfort or fear.

To this end, the group discussions were carried out in two stages. Firstly, groups were arranged according to department/school from which they came in the hope that participants might already know each other. The recruitment letter asked people to come in pre-formed groups. The first set of brainstorming exercises was then carried out in these 'homogenous' (same school) groups. The second set of discussions was carried out with randomly mixed groups.

There is a large body of literature on group work and on the behavioural and emotional components of group dynamics (Linnenbrink-Garcia, et al., 2011; Barron, 2003) but no literature could be found on the effect of emotion or fear and the disposition of group members to tell stories.

Design

For the 'conversation' recordings, several discussions were initiated by the instructor, with the aim of brainstorming ideas for – and later preparing – a group presentation.

For the comparative 'presentation' recordings, the final presentations these groups made at the end of the workshop were recorded. The frequency of story-use in these two settings – conversation and presentation – were compared.

<u>Definition of 'story'</u>

A story was simply any instance where one of the participants drew from their anecdotal experience to make a contribution to the conversation. It is not simply an opinion but rather a past experience shared in order to aid communication. An example is as follows (note, English was not the speaker's first language):

*But, to be honest, last year from September till June...2011...2012...I attend every week…there is…we have a seminar series for the PhD students and I attend every Tuesday and I never get benefit from any presentation.*

Another example (related to the presentation topic of foreign nationals in Ireland) was:

*Well actually I'm from Galway, so technically I was accepted into Dublin as well. I still get a lot of teasing from Dublin people who think I'm from the country and think I grow potatoes in my back garden and…I do grow potatoes in my back garden*

The stories varied in length. Some were as long as half-a-minute or more:

*A friend of mine…she's living in Greece…and she married a Greek man so they had the wedding there. So…beautiful. And the food – we just spent the whole five days eating and eating and eating. It was…I came home half a stone heavier. Everything had garlic in it or fish or tzatziki…so I could talk about food for five minutes...*

Whereas others were just a sentence or two:

*I went to Cyprus once…and Turkey. (laughs) That's not the same, though.*

Obviously the word 'story' can mean different things to different people and this definition may disagree with others. But this is a comparative study where the instance of 'stories', as defined in a particular way was compared in two different settings. As long as we were consistent, the definition is viable and useful.

Other authors faced with the challenge of defining 'story', have used a 'grounded theory' approach. Thorne, Korobov and Morgan (2007) describe such a process to define, in excerpts of audio-recorded conversation, such things as what constituted a story, when it was initiated and what it was about. This study was focused the effect of personality on storytelling. In particular, a comparison of introverted and extroverted pairs of friends was made to see if the quality of storytelling – type, length, topic, shared telling – varied with these personality traits. In order to conduct this analysis, the three authors and four research assistants used the grounded theory approach to iterate towards a coding manual that produced reliable results. There was, then, no formal semantic definition of a story so much as an agreed set of guidelines to essentially recognise one when they saw one.

Haigh and Hardy (2011) acknowledge that there are different definitions of storytelling although, tellingly, they do not provide any specific definition, themselves. Wilkin and Ball-Rokeach (2006) examined stories in socio-cultural health context. Although this is very different to the setting described in this study, it is interesting to note the similarities in the roles stories perform with what was defined above, namely: providing information, connecting people to information and ressources, and promoting peer discussion within the group (Wilkin and Ball-Rokeach, 2006).

Our own study bypasses such differences by taking the simplest definition possible. It is not concerned with the qualities or mechanisms of stories (Norrick, 1998) but simply in whether stories are being used at all.


Topics

The groups were free to choose their own topics for the final presentations. One presentation was on the nutritional value of potatoes. Another was on branding of coffee. These presentations varied in length from three to six minutes. The aim was to allow the presenters to be as natural and knowledgeable as possible.


**Results and Discussion:**

The video and audio footage of all group conversations and presentations was examined. Any time a story – as defined above – was told, this was noted by a black line on a timeline. These timelines, for group conversations and presentations, can be viewed in Figure 2.
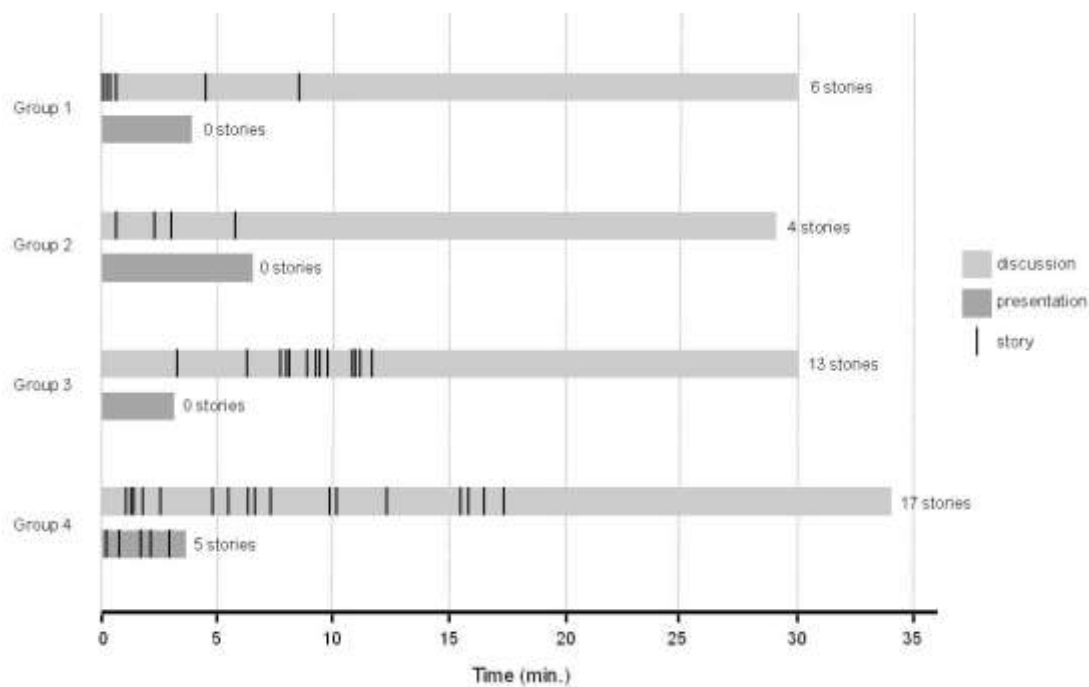


*Figure 2 – Incidence of stories in small group discussions compared with presentations.*

Note that no account is taken of the length of the stories in this Figure. It can be seen that there are many stories in the small-group discussions but none in three of the four presentations. Indeed, for the one presentation that did contain stories, the topic was 'Foreign Perspectives on Ireland', based

on the perspectives of the group members who were from, respectively: Iraq, Greece, Galway and Dublin. So the topic was personal by default and the use of stories was unavoidable. But in the three presentations on abstract topics, there were no stories at all.

Also observable in Figure 2 is that most of the stories arose in the early stages of discussion. It was observed that once agreement had been reached on a presentation topic, the group moved onto the process of putting material together and the incidence of stories died away. This is shown in Figure 3 which marks the point, in each group discussion, where the choice of topic was made.
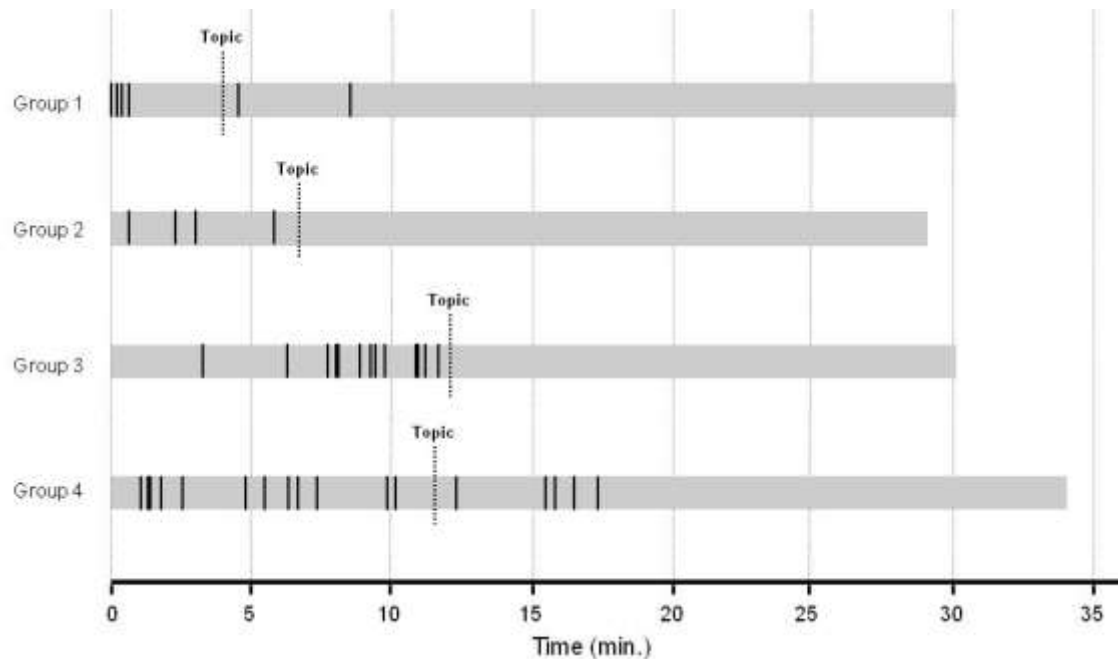


*Figure 3 – Mixed group conversations with time where the topic was finalised is marked. The incidence of stories diminished greatly when this decision was reached.*

In practice, it was easy to note the exact time at which this decision was made. For example, the discussion in 'Group 2' proceeded as followed:

> A – Or we could have a very surprising topic: how to give a presentation.
> B – Yeah, yeah.
> C – That has a connection with glossophobia.
> B – Glossophobia, yeah. And we could talk about challenges...
> C – OK, it's decided.

In 'Group 3' it ran as follows:

> A – So...but I don't know how we could turn that into a presentation.
> B – I think we just have.

This observation may have its roots in the fact that two of the functions of stories - 'meaning-building' (Bruner, 1992) and 'social interaction' (Ritchie, 2010) – become less important once the presentation topic has been finalised and work is proceeding. Essentially, the groups now know each other and know what they want to achieve, so the need for stories diminishes. Indeed, as the recordings proceeded, conversation ceased or became sporadic as participants clustered around computers and worked, often individually, to prepare content.

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So the difference in the number of stories between conversations and presentations is even greater when we compare just the portions of conversation that took place before the topic was chosen and the work divided up. The table in Figure 4 makes this comparison.

| Group | Discussion | | Presentation | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Time | Stories | Time | Stories |
| 1 | 4'01" | 4 | 3'55" | 0 |
| 2 | 6'43" | 4 | 6'29" | 0 |
| 3 | 12'05" | 13 | 3'06" | 0 |
| 4 | 11'30" | 12 | 3'39" | 5 |
| Totals: | 34'19" | 33 | 17'09" | 5 |
| Freq: | 1 per 62" | | 1 per 206" | |

*Figure 4 – Number of stories told in 'meaning-building' portion of conversations compared to the presentations.*

Effect of Nerves

One of the reasons proposed as to why stories are not used in presentations is that fear discourages presenters from exposing themselves by volunteering personal anecdotes. Evidence of this came from an earlier pilot study which indicated that members of groups which exhibited a better rapport told more stories. Of course, the judgement of 'better rapport' was subjective and it may be that the use of stories was a cause rather than an effect of this rapport. However, interesting additional evidence for this thesis came from the observation that seemingly more self-confident individuals told more stories in conversations. One example was a woman in the current study who, in a group of five, told 14 of 26 stories recounted in a particular discussion. At one stage this participant reflected:

*I don't actually mind giving presentations but I just speak way too fast.*

It may be that people who are unafraid to stand up and make a presentation are also unafraid to share personal experiences in a conversation with strangers.

In order to look more closely at the negative correlation between nervousness and the use of stories, the group discussions were carried out in two stages. First, participants were grouped according to discipline in the hope that they might know each other in advance and thus be comfortable in one another's company. Referring to the summary of participants in Figure 1, the following groups knew each other in advance: Psychology, Electronic Engineering, Chemistry and Agricultural Science. This was not the case, however, for the attendees from English and Computer Science.

For the second stage of discussions, groups were randomly mixed. The aim was to explore if this less familiar situation would result in less stories, reinforcing the idea that we tell more stories when we feel secure.

On analysing the results, however, this could not be concluded. The number of stories and how they clustered together did not seem to depend on group members having known each other in advance.

If anything, the opposite was true. Figure 5 shows excerpts from the discussions in the first pre-mixed groups. Despite the three people in the 'English' group having not met before, there were 46 stories exchanged in 34 minutes. This compares with just 2 stories in a 14-minute period for the Chemistry group. [Note: the difference in length of the recordings is due to the fact that some groups took coffee breaks at their desks where these conversations could also be recorded whereas others moved to other locations in the room. Also, the camera, in one case, was turned off accidentally during an exercise.]
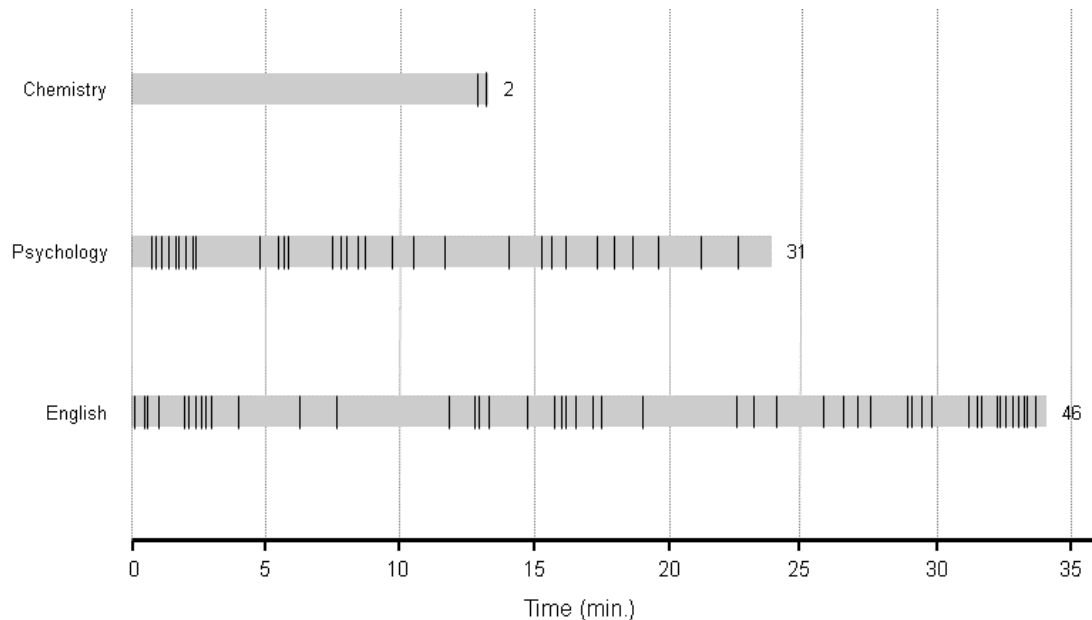


*Figure 5 – Stories told in the pre-mixed group discussions. The Chemistry and Psychology groups knew each other from before whereas the English group did not.*

In the Chemistry group (as well as in the Electronic Engineering group, not shown above) there was laughter and joking between the participants and it was obvious that they knew each other from the casual way they interacted.

This study seems to show that stories are used more often in conversations but is not discriminating enough to examine why. It is possible that the functions of stories – meaning-building, social interaction and opinion-stating (Bruner, 1992; Ritchie, 2010) – offset each other. So, for example, participants might feel more inhibited about stating their opinion in a group of strangers but this may be offset by a greater need for social interaction and meaning-building in a group of people working on a shared task. It is also possible that other personality traits, such as introversion or extraversion, influence the predisposition to telling stories (Thorne, Korobov & Morgan, 2007).

Indeed, in one of the group discussions between strangers, the social interaction function is quite obvious from the type of stories being told as two participants orient their past experiences in relation to one another.

A – I went to Maynooth before... I got a bit lost this morning
B – That happens to me.
A – Have you been here before?
B – Not in this building, no, but I've been in UCD for a long time because I did my degree at night over the last few years.
A – I see what you mean.

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*B – And it took me about three years before I was able to find where I was going first time.*
*A – I knew there was no hope because I used to get lost in Maynooth. I think if you get lost in Maynooth, you're going to get lost in UCD.*
*B – Really?*
*A – Well, no, towards the end I got it but every time I'd go to the library I'd end up, like, in the Art's block.*

One further comparison was made, namely that between the premixed group and the mixed group as recorded by the same camera, shown in Figure 6. There was no obvious link between how well people know each other and the number of stories told.
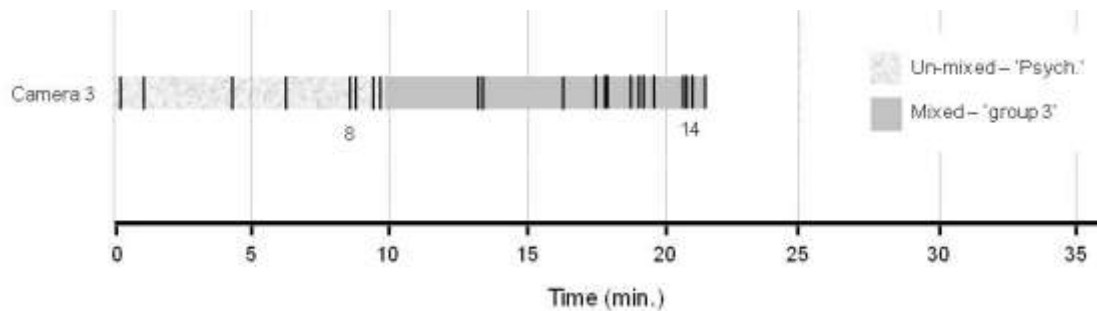


*Figure 6 – Stories told in a pre-mixed group discussion compared with those told in a mixed group.*

Of course, there is nothing remarkable or sophisticated about these stories. They occur in everyday conversation all the time (Ritchie, 2010). What is remarkable, however, is the way these personal experiences are discarded in presentations. The tasks that stories perform – meaning-building, social interaction, opinion stating – are just as important in a presentation as they are in a conversation, if not more so. Always the question is being asked of a presenter: 'Who is this person and what do they know?' Experience-based stories are very valuable in answering these questions and yet are frequently omitted from presentations.

**Strengths and Limitations of Study:**

Although this study makes interesting observations on the incidence of stories there is no measure of how damaging it might be to leave them out of presentations. Put another way: so what? The study suggests that there is a subconscious discarding of stories but does this matter? To find out, a larger study could be commissioned where the audience could be asked to grade the effectiveness of the presentations and some correlation drawn between these grades and the use of stories.

The difficulty would come in trying to disentangle storytelling from the many other elements that affect presentation effectiveness. One way around this might be to give the same presentations twice, with and without stories, to two different audiences.

**Conclusions:**

In a study carried out on four groups of postgraduate students (group sizes: 4, 4, 4 & 5), the incidence of stories in conversations when preparing a presentation was compared with the incidence of stories when those same groups were giving the presentations. The difference was significant. In group discussions stories were told at an average rate of about one per minute.

However, there were no stories in three of the four presentations. The frequency of stories in the presentations was less than one every three minutes.

In an effort to find out why the above findings might arise, two sets of group discussions were conducted. In the first, the groups were from the same discipline and in three of the five cases, knew each other from before (volunteered for the study as a pre-formed group). In the second, the groups were mixed randomly. The aim was to see if increased nerves/inhibitions, brought about by being in a less familiar social situation, would lead to a lower frequency of stories. This part of the study was inconclusive.

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