

# Authentic Interactivity

## Judith Black

By

One of the great joys of our regional New England storytelling conference, *Sharing the Fire*, is the opportunity to explore innovative workshop topics with your peers. When employed by a festival, educational institution, or professional organization, you are called upon to teach subjects that have a broad, well-worn appeal. *Sharing the Fire* cries out to us to 'Be Bold,' 'Be Innovative,' 'Be Edgy.' With this in mind, and in keeping with the adage "we teach what we need to learn," I proposed a workshop that would explore the spontaneous, immediate, 'authentically' interactive aspects of storytelling: *Authentic Interactivity*. Much more than a chant or collective rhythm, *authentic interactivity* is the magic that elevates storytelling into a unique communal experience. Our time will be spent identifying the range of interactivity and playing with the possibilities that exist in shaping our stories around the listeners who come to hear them. Bring a story you know well.

I know what authentic interactivity feels like. The teller is present, relating completely through the story to the listeners before them. With it, stories told hundreds of times are still vibrant because we are listening to our listeners and shaping the experience for them. How can one actually set authentic interactivity as a goal and create a workshop to help others walk towards it? Workshop, by definition, is the learning of new techniques and skills through 'hands on' participation. Thus I had to define the goal of the workshop, present ideas and techniques that would enable participants to walk towards that goal and then get out of the way and let them play with both the conceptual and actual tools offered. My plan was this:

1. Define *Authentic Interactivity* and offer a broad range of examples.
2. Suggest and model the variables necessary for interactivity to become part of the teller's modus operandi (a wonderful term that means your usual way of functioning). Introduce and invite participants into exercises that will enable them to experience the flexibility and spontaneity that interaction often

- emerges from.
3. Use the stories that participants brought and invite them, in small groups, to play with *Authentic Interactivity* within their telling.

Given the narrow time frame provided (90 minutes), I make some immediate decisions. The first is to dispense with certain inductive teaching techniques. For instance, one could ask, "What do you think interaction means?" and create a long list of interesting responses that would be discussed. If the goal of this session was theoretical development, that would be a good choice. In this case it is not, so goodbye list. Knowing that the workshop was to take place mid-conference and was designed for communications professionals, I didn't worry about the potpourri of 'comfort zone' exercises that most of us employ for helping people warm up their bodies, and imaginations, creating a sense of safety in the environment. I simply begged everyone to imagine that we'd taken an hour to do these things and moved on. If, however, it appeared that the group needed and wanted these exercises I would be a fool to not reverse myself and provide them. If hearts, minds, and bodies are not open to the experience then you might as well have been drinking coffee instead of sharing a workshop. I will greet people and get right to #1.

What is *Authentic Interactivity*? It's almost easier to define what it is not. Many tellers utilize audience participation as a very effective telling tool. Participation is when the listeners, invited by the teller, become an active part of the storytelling. The teller generally teaches a song, chant, or movement for the audience to complete at specific times in the tale. Sometimes a teller will introduce props and costumes and call for volunteers to play out parts. If the 'actors' are given lines and actions with no room for deviation or invention, then this is participation. Participation is an essential technique to have in your repertoire of methodologies, particularly for young audiences. A squirmy preschool audience of sensory-motor learners is much happier campers if each member can sing, stomp, and clap along with the tale. An elementary audience can be sent home with a deeper message when it is cleverly included in a song that they sing with you throughout the telling. Teens enjoy finishing rhymes and helping to decipher riddles, and adults, that wild and crazy bunch, will do almost anything, just for the fun of it. Participation

heightens the energy, investment, and sense of community that storytelling can create. However, when it is created and orchestrated by the teller, participation is not interactive. It becomes interactive only when the teller, taking a cue from something in the given environment, resculpts the telling in response to those stimuli.

Interactivity is not 'shtick.' Shtick is often discovered as a result of *Authentic Interactivity*. A teller will respond in the moment to a person, part of the story, or something in the environment and it will resonate with both them and the listeners. For instance, in the telling of a Papa Anansi story *How the Moon Got in the Sky*, at the story's end, when Papa is mulling over which child should receive the moon, a teacher once yelled out, "He should give it to Momma." This is not the story's answer, but seeing that this woman, Mama Anansi, bore him six children, it felt a kind, funny, and truly logical one. Thus this observation was not rejected but included: "Momma should have gotten it, but she didn't want to have to carry around another single thing!" Everyone laughed and this authentic moment worked so well that I kept this little observation for the next tellings. It became a shtick: a funny addition to the tale, but no longer an example of *Authentic Interactivity*. Folk singers have great shtick that they share between tunes. (You know it needs to be updated with a little here and now authenticity when they are still joking about Bill and Monica while our government is bombing Baghdad.)

*Authentic Interactivity*. When we, the tellers, are able to create spontaneous bridges between our listeners, ourselves, and the story<sup>1</sup>. It is a matter of pride that we can conjure a unique experience that happens only when a skilled teller wraps a tale they know as well as the quilt they sleep with around a given audience. It is often the spontaneous responses, additions, subtractions, and adjustments that make both the story and the experience so very compelling and memorable for both the listener and the teller. This process is more often than not a subtle one that cannot be dissected, but can be detected:

- A group of rowdy adolescents are pretending to do the famous sports field 'wave,' during a tale. Rather than scolding or scowling the teller says "The entire village waved the hero off on his adventure," encouraging the teens to stand and accentuate their activity! The teller

- used AI to throw the net of the story around the rowdy crew, including, rather than excluding them.
- A shy child, hiding behind a chair, finds that her shirt and shoes are the same as those on the story's heroine, and she slowly emerges to enter the world of the tale. The teller used AI to help a child relate to the tale.
  - A hero, in the telling, suddenly gains a warm chocolate complexion. The teller uses AI to make the story both a window and mirror of their world.
  - A sound system is crackling and giving feedback and an audience member yells up "Hit it!" You respond, "I hope that's not how you solve your problems at home!" The teller is using AI to respond to the obvious and lighten up a difficult situation.

The story is barely touched, it remains whole in sequence and characters, but something has occurred that binds this story and you to that particular group of listeners and creates a unique experience<sup>ii</sup>.

It is at this point there will be some space created for a discussion and examples of both *Authentic Interactivity* and participation. We will define the times when participation is interactive versus when it is teller controlled, along with the endless gray area in between, and explore the various results of the techniques. We shall also remind folks that like any good spice, *Authentic Interactivity* is not for every story, every audience, or every situation. We will give some time to discussing when we should edit our authentic responses.

The problem: What types of exercises could best predispose us for being open to and using *Authentic Interactivity*? Years ago at a national conference, Heather Forrest explored the concept of 'stage presence' and reminded us that it emerged from the word 'present.' Being present, living in the moment, not going over your shopping list, thinking about lunch, worrying about who didn't come to hear you tell, is essential. You cannot respond appropriately to people and environments unless you are completely present with them. My task here was to develop exercises that create a state of presence, so that participants would have a base from which begin. This games section of the workshop was designed to open participants up, physically, creatively, and intellectually to possibilities in the environment around them. I employed a number of wonderful old theater games that establish the

need to look and listen, and steadily increased the level of skills required. I was also conscious to begin the participation with simple teams of two. Since there was no time for warm-ups, the one-on-one grouping that began the exercises would create both a relationship and a small safety net for folks as our game groups grew in number.

Playing With *Authentic Interactivity* is the section of the workshop where we bind the theory of Part 1 with the readied state we created in Part 2, and try to integrate some Authentic Interactivity into our telling. I had a number of objectives for this section of the workshop:

- Create a telling opportunity for everyone who wanted to play with this technique.
- Create a safe space to play with absolutely new ideas.
- Structure the experience enough so that each teller could utilize and get a feel for how they would/could employ *Authentic Interactivity*.

I asked each willing participant to use a story that they knew deep in their bones. (It feels unsafe to take little detours if you aren't sure of your road and where it goes.) The definition of Authentic Interactivity employed for this workshop's purposes does not include improvising major parts or entire tales. It is about adapting your well-loved stories to the people and environment you are working in, and thus for our practice session, a well-worn tale should be used.

The safety, time, and numbers issues required that we work in small groups. Each teller was given a specific amount of time, and I would warn them with a drum beat when they had one minute left and a double beat when their time was up and the next teller was to share. (I find that nonverbal interventions have proven less obtrusive and more successful in structuring than yelling out.) In each of the small groups, the teller was to begin sharing their tale, while integrating details from this environment and their particular listeners. If the teller was not using the immediate world for this telling, the listeners were encouraged to 'remind' them to do so. One listener would be the physical environment prompter, pointing to an object, noticing a sound, drawing some attention to a uneasily flashing bulb, and the teller would try to integrate that detail into the telling. Another listener would be the unruly child or rude adult and

require some attention from the teller. A third listener would be the sad or shy soul that the teller should try to draw out of themselves and deeper into the tale. All these plants were in service of the teller. The objective was to give the teller the opportunity to play with wrapping their tale around this group in this setting. Creating the workshop forced me to put into words and action a concept/technique long observed and admired. It represents the bare beginning of an exploration, but a worthy one.

---

<sup>i</sup>This story triad of Teller/Tale/Listener was first discussed by Doug Lipman.

<sup>ii</sup>Please be advised that this is all of my own invention. Like a scientist observing a natural process, I am simply trying to understand a magical variable of good storytelling and figure out how we can consciously develop our skills to practice it.