

Summary of EATAW discussion on story-telling in science

Many thanks for your contributions to the discussion. They have provided me with much food for thought and brought me a lot further in forming my attitude towards the topic. I promised a summary of the discussion, so here it is (although, because of its length, I'm not sure I can call it a summary). What is written below reflects my opinions on how the discussion went. You may have viewed things differently. If so, I'd be happy to hear your views too.

13 people answered my queries. Interesting for me was that 11 of those answers came from people seemingly working in an English-speaking country (5 USA, 5 GB, 1 AU). The remaining two answers came from Brazil and a colleague working in Belgium/Denmark/UK. From that, it appears to me as if story-telling in science is a topic that is generally being discussed more by those working in Anglo-Saxon countries than by those in other countries. Comments from some of the contributors about researchers in other countries (i.e. not Anglo-Saxon based languages) considering that story-telling might devalue science and is therefore unscientific could be an explanation for this discrepancy. This difference raises difficulties for me, as someone teaching English in a non-Anglo-Saxon country: to what extent should I push the participants to include the story in any research they write about?

From the contributions, I also gleaned that there are two different viewpoints for approaching story-telling in science:

- 1) those who are interested in approaches to making personal stories (and recording/investigating them) into an "acceptable" scientific research method and
- 2) those who focus on how to get the story into the science research that is being written about.

Contributions on the former included the papers

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/13401458_Story_Telling_Is_It_Really_Research,

http://academic.son.wisc.edu/courses/n701/week/sandelowski_tellingstories.pdf,

<https://clt.curtin.edu.au/events/conferences/tlf/tlf2005/refereed/chanock.html>, two of which come

from the nursing world. Thoughts on the latter included three papers that were attached to the original contributions and links on the topic (<http://press.princeton.edu/titles/10769.html>,

<https://scientistseessquirrel.wordpress.com/2017/01/12/my-plodding-journey-to-better-writing-guest-post/>).

In light of these differing viewpoints and the information provided, I found myself asking whether the former is a case of story-telling in science and the latter something to do with telling a story (a distinction offered in one contribution) and how this is related to inductive (story-telling) and deductive (telling a story) reasoning.

Another important difference highlighted in the contributions was the attitude of the HASS (Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences) and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) scientists towards the role of stories in science. In spite of a fairly negative attitude of the latter group towards "dumbing down" research by telling a story, there appears to be some understanding that there is a story behind the results found. The question would be whether and how to get this (currently more oral tradition) into the written research. Some papers, e.g. in Mathematics or Computer Science, always tell a story in the written version as the story unfolds within the paper. Spurred on by the discussion, some of my thoughts on the topic now center around whether telling the story in science would be a particularly good approach for the increasing number of researchers working in interdisciplinary research, where the results have to be explained to a broader audience.

My conclusions: My initial interest in this topic arose from me questioning whether to include the idea of stories in science in my workshops on written academic English. Here is where I now stand: I should add ideas about telling the story behind the science because some of the participants might find it useful – also for funding proposals, for writing about any government funded work

(justification of money spent), for texts for the general public and for writing consultants who might be looking for ways of explaining science writing to their students – but be aware that not everyone will accept the ideas as suitable for research papers in their area of work.

Here are five ideas I picked up from the discussion as to how the topic could be included/treated in workshops: investigate story-boarding, find the protagonist and link to eight-part structure in classic story-telling, use story cards, work with a compelling take-home message and orbit the rest of the article around that, avoid the use of the word “fiction”.

Once again, many thanks for all your contributions. I hope I haven't left out anything too essential.