

## **Developing a Storytellers' Progress Pathway**

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### ***"What do you want to have happen?"***

In Surrey, we are developing a Storytellers' Progress Pathway to support and develop people as storytellers. This article outlines what we are doing. It's been incremental, may not be the best way and we emphasize that what we do is a tool not a rule. We want to improve and develop and would be interested to hear what others are doing.

I first set up the Surrey Storytellers Guild in 2000 when I was running a storytelling circle in Surrey that lasted about 2 years. A second attempt went the same way a couple of years later and I had my fingers burned and lost money. I didn't want to take the same financial risk again.

In 2008 both Alex Somerville and Caroline Baldock had recently moved into the area and were keen to work with me to get something going. Try, try try again- this time it would work! We started the "Three Heads in a Well" Storytelling Circle in Ewell, Surrey in March 2008. We had no money to pay for storytellers, so we operated on a "love and glory" principle of supporting and developing local storytellers. The first half of the evening would be open mike and the second half of the evening was a local storyteller that we knew could do an hour performance, and who would be willing to do it for "love and glory" i.e. for free. We knew that it was important to get a balance and that local storytellers should get some benefits from their "love and glory". Whilst some people would be willing to do it for exposure- people die of exposure!

The formula worked well for the first year and with the support of the local arts development officer for drama – we bid for some lottery money to develop the range of events, and to be able to subsidise paying for storytellers while we built up our audience. Our first paid guest was Jamie Crawford telling **Arthur**.

The following day, in the same venue, I ran a beginners workshops. At the end of the day, two stayed behind to help me remove the wax on the carpet, from the candles that Jamie had so tellingly used the previous night (!!)

One said to the other- "it would be nice to have a place to practice the stories before telling them at Three Heads." The other replied " Yes, and it could be called Waxing Lyrical" as she finished using the hot iron and brown paper on the candle wax. And thus was born our pathway for supporting and developing new, up and coming and existing local storytellers.

Surrey Storytellers Guild now have a Storytellers Progress Pathway for potential storytellers which enables us as a club to balance our budgets without a grant (our subsequent application failed), but also enables the audience members to see the range of storytelling performed – from the person who has sat next to them, to the professional international storyteller and everyone in between. Hopefully inspiring them to take the first steps themselves on the storytelling path.

Basically the pathway is as follows (and bearing in mind not everyone will do all of this or necessarily in this order!)

<b>Beginners workshop</b>	Held either as a one day workshop twice a year, or as a five evening WEA course twice a year
<b>Practice and coaching group for beginners and improvers – Waxing Lyrical</b>	Monthly group- open to everyone, no need to tell a story but expected to take part in activities. See below for more detail

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<b>Open mic at story circle – Three Heads in A Well</b>	Open to all (max of 10 mins, no reading aloud allowed, priority given to people who did not tell the previous month)
<b>Improvers workshop</b>	Held once a year with one of the paid guests at THIW
<b>Half slot as featured storyteller for “up and comers” at Three Heads in a Well</b>	Two people share an evening slot, who have been telling stories at the open mic, and who have sufficient repertoire
<b>Featured storyteller at Three Heads in a Well</b>	Local storyteller (“love and glory”) has opportunity to develop their material into a performance piece
<b>Practice and coaching group for local storytellers working on performance pieces- Whip the Cat</b>	Small closed group of experienced local storytellers (“love and glory”) meeting ad hoc to work on individual performance pieces.
<b>Club swap storyteller - Exchange programme with other clubs</b>	Experienced local storyteller (“love and glory”) “swapped” with another club for travel expenses. Allows audience to hear new voices, and for storyteller to develop beyond their local group.
<b>Directory entry on website for Surrey Storytellers Guild</b>	Available to experienced local storytellers (“love and glory”) who have supported the Surrey Storytellers Guild
<b>Ad hoc work from enquiries to the Surrey Storytellers Guild</b>	
<b>Surrey Storytellers Guild project work – includes consultancy with community groups, funded projects</b>	

The core of the progress path is the monthly Waxing Lyrical groups for Storytelling Practice and Coaching a forum for beginners and improver storytellers who are working on storytelling skills and wish to tell stories in public- either at open mike at Three Heads in a Well, other storytelling clubs, or other community or family settings. In small groups of between 4 and 12 we provide both exercises to learn the skills of storytelling and a friendly constructive place to practice and get feedback. We now have two groups. One is based in Ewell which is where Three Heads is based, and is mainly targeted at our current audience. This is facilitated by myself and Richard Trouncer. The other Waxing Lyrical group is at Farnham Maltings, on the other side of Surrey, where we are linking in with other spoken word groups and developing a storytelling hub. This is facilitated by Terrie Howey and Belinda McKenna.

Both Waxing Lyrical groups follow the same format (allowing for local variation).

The first part of the evening is an exercise intended to develop storytelling skills looking at words, voice and body and everybody is expected to take part. We have developed a curriculum for the year which we will build on.

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The second part of the evening gives a max of 5 people up to 15 mins of practice and coaching time on their storytelling- the “storyteller”. Everyone takes part in the listening and feedback process, developing their skills by building awareness how words, voice and body contribute to storytelling.

The “storyteller” is asked if they just want to practice telling a story, in which case they have up to 10 mins to tell to an audience with no feedback other than applause. Sometimes people have used the 15 min space to explore a project they are doing, or discuss how they might approach working with a story. If they want coaching –they have 5 mins to tell and that allows for another 10 mins giving feedback and coaching. (Please note- this is not a 10 mins story in 5 mins- they just have 5 mins to tell- and will be timed out at 5 mins if their story has not come to an end). In two years of running Waxing Lyrical – 90% ask for the coaching slot.

We try to keep to a tight coaching formula.

- The facilitator asks **“What do you want to have happen – what is the problem you want help with”**
- Once the person has clarified what they want, they have 5 mins to tell.
- Then everyone in turns says one thing for **“What Worked Well .....**” (relating to one only of words, voice, body). Keeping it positive is important for helping confidence for both “storyteller” and the people commenting as everyone is now developing a wider awareness of different elements of the storytelling process. The facilitator follows up with any additional comments.
- Then followed by everyone in turn saying one thing for **“ AND Even Better If .....**” ie making a suggestion that the person can take on board or not. This allows the people commenting to see something and think how they would improve on it- further developing their own skills and for the “storyteller” it provides valuable feedback. Again the facilitator follows up with any additional comments.
- NB. In both these we have found it is important for the “storyteller” to not get into a discussion or justification for what they did but accept them just as suggestions which they can use or ignore!
- When the “storyteller” is back in their own seat, the facilitator asks **“And when all of that - What do you know now?”** This allows the “storyteller” to identify the key things that they want to work with from the feedback and coaching they have had.

And all in 15 minutes!

We started out using a format similar to Doug Lipman (the Storytelling Coach), but evolved our own based on the metaphor therapy/coaching work I do using “Clean Language.” Questions 1 and 4 are Clean Language, questions 2 & 3 are part of an evaluation and feedback process that I use in schools. It’s a formula that seems to work, and it’s good to see that people who have been on the beginners workshops are now progressing through the pathway. We have had one person as an “up and comer” (half a featured slot) who has moved on through a featured slot, and then onto club swaps. Another has come through the beginners workshops, has done the “up and comers slot”, and is now working on her performance piece. Plus the original local storytellers who did “love and glory” slots now have a framework for their development as well.

We try, and try and try again.

**“And when all of that - What do you know now?”**

**Janet Dowling**

(For Surrey Storytellers Guild)