NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

Living Storytelling as an Impetus for Organizational Change: Towards Connective Observing and Writing[1]

Alexander Maas
University for Humanistics / Erasmus University Rotterdam

This paper examines how to use storytelling as impetus for organizational change. A saying goes that "lasting change starts with me, not with someone else." The problem of many change processes is that a change agent writes a change report but the actual implementation by actors in the organization fails. The question becomes how a researcher can relate to participants in an organization in such a way that the change process becomes *their* process. For many change agents, storytelling is a powerful way for exploring an organizational setting and for putting ideas into an organization. In this paper, I elaborate some aspects of a relational inquiry stand (McNamee & Hosking, 2012), in which I use storytelling as an intervention method. As a consequence, participants are activated; "connective observing" and "connective writing" emerge. It opens the possibility for multi-layeredness and "living storytelling." Will the researcher and active participants in the change process exchange positions?

Relating as Prerequisite for Inquiring and Storytelling in Change Processes

In 2001, the manager of a small branch of a European multinational visited me to discuss some problems that were taking place between her branch office and head office. We decided to explore the problem together and to have conversations with branch managers as well as visiting head office managers. Our main question was how to change the knowledge exchange and creation process in the company concerning products, services, and clients. After we had collected various pieces of

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[1] I gratefully acknowledge the valuable feedback and insights provided by Dr Rouven Hagemeijer, the two editors of this special issue, and the reviewers of this article.

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conversation, we first sat down together to discuss our data. We decided to make a story about the findings for the organization. We made a storyboard, a plan for figuring out the story we both wanted to tell. Then, each of us wrote our respective part of the story, sent it to the other for comments and reflections, and then rewrote the parts. After we had processed all the data we had collected, we together wrote transitional phrases for the various paragraphs. In this way, we composed a story about the various stories that we had gathered. The first draft of this "story of stories" was read and critically commented on by a reading team consisting of her colleagues. We rewrote several pieces, and became connected in writing as well as reading. After three weeks of hard work, both the writers and the reading team together created a piece of work that was subsequently printed. The hundred copies in question sold out the day the manager started to distribute the story and its analysis. In the week that followed the writing, she found out that people were talking about the story and liked its richness and profundity. Different stakeholders knew or recognized parts of the story, but large parts of the story were new to them. They talked about the other, unknown parts and some started to add stories of their own or, alternatively, started conversations with people who had inspiring or imaginative ideas. In this way, in these conversations with these people, we heard stories and these stories became sparks for further relating to people. A "living storytelling" process emerged that, in the end, became an impetus for change, first at the branch office and later at the multinational as well. But that is another story.

This case became the starting point for a long trajectory of change situations in which we, the researchers, tried to find out what actually had happened; piece by piece, we came to learn that change asks for another methodology, one that reflects the interactive experience. Newbury and Hoskins (2010) refer to this approach as "relational inquiry." In the daily practices of an organizational setting, this approach means that researcher and participants become related to and connected with each other (McNamee & Hosking, 2012); they are cooperatively exploring, constructing, and changing the situations that occur. In the complexity of contexts, this approach continuously considers and reconsiders the dynamic of relationships between inquirers and participants in the various contexts of an organization. For a change agent, the relational and cognitive dynamic between people becomes central to an understanding of the setting. This dynamic refers to various contexts in which people "live" different repertoires and experiences. For example, participants

work with various colleagues and clients, have their own family, friends, sports, and religious contexts. As a change agent, questioning the relationship between different colleagues, between clients and other contexts, becomes important. These "spaces in-between" do make a difference (Amado & Ambrose, 2001) and explain a lot of the dynamic that is going on in an organization. Likewise, these context variations influence the phenomenon under study, in most cases a problem that must be solved.[2]

In this paper, I elaborate on some consequences of this relational stand for storytelling as an intervention method.[3] When doing a relational inquiry, researchers and participants reflect on their positions in the storytelling and change process (Maas et al., 2010). Inquiry becomes a relational process generated by both a research team and the active participants, who are all included in various (other) contexts. In fact, in a relational inquiry, both actors learn to play with and to relate to different perspectives and contexts they are in, on an ongoing basis. In the storytelling process, the question becomes how to develop a "connective observing." Here, we use a painting by Belgian artist James Ensor as metaphor for the dynamics in an organization. This painting enables us to show how actors in storytelling, together, keep exploring the fluidity and complexity of relational processes in an organizational setting and connect to the contexts they are involved in.

In doing so, researcher and participants explore and create an intriguing web of knowledge: about the system, the various contexts, the actors and their interests, as well as about the knowledge-generation process itself. In the storytelling process, the question then becomes how to develop a relational writing approach that fits a relational inquiry context and has an impact in and on the organization. Here we will elaborate on three dimensions that, taken together, form a basis for relational or "connective" writing. Based on the writings of an English novelist and journalist from the Victorian era, George Eliot, I first introduce some lessons that can help writers to write a vivid, rich and social story within an organizational context. Second, I elaborate how

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[2] At the start, this phenomenon is often perceived as "a problem" that, as it finds its way along the other actors, will move into a complexity of problems (and becomes like a moving target).

[3] The storytelling is based on events and conversations from the real life of an organization, gathered by an inquiry team in conversations with actors in the organization, during participative observations and by examining documents. I refer to this kind of inquiry as *living storytelling* (Maas, 2006; see also Ochs & Capps, 2001).

connective writing can be used in an organizational setting and discuss what methods can be developed to ground the writing process in the organizational setting. I develop an approach that not only facilitates stakeholders in an organization to get involved in the storytelling process but also allows them to actively address the consequences of living storytelling in their practice. Finally, I return to the inquirer's positioning. In the storytelling, the question becomes how the inquirer's position in relationships with and to the participants in an organization changes as part of the connective writing process and, in addition, may change, depending on the context and circumstances.

In the Beginning Is a Multi-Layeredness that Asks for Connective Observing

One of the major problems that a change agent faces when beginning an inquiry in(to) an organization is that the variety of contexts are taken for granted. "That's the way it goes!" "It's always the same people who tell us what to do—nothing changes here!" are some of the statements that show people's inactivity and even apathy. In this status quo, a change agent will try to involve and activate people in and through communication. By raising questions, he or she makes room for ongoing interaction and inquires into understandings and opportunities, differences and similar patterns in organizations (Gergen, 2009). In this interacting, the different "actors" in an organizational setting are connected with both the researcher and later, hopefully, to each other as well. How are both able to cope with the diverse perspectives that emerge during these processes, especially when these are conflicting? And, what's more, how can they analyze the ongoing social processes that occupy a prominent place within an organization, in a change process, and especially in the conversations that are the basis for what will come?

Because changing as a relational process can be read like a visual story, I sometimes show clients, as a metaphor, a painting by the Belgian artist James Ensor (1888), *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*, to answer this question. How can we look at and understand this painting? Can we understand it as a dynamic?

A first look at the painting shows a vast amount of grotesque figures that spill out of the background; up front are masked characters and clowns. It seems that Ensor mocked these people: an arrogant judge, grinning soldiers, fishermen's wives in traditional garb, the self-satisfied middle class, a ridiculous-looking couple in love, a doctor with a wizard

hat, Death wearing a dress suit, a set of musicians carry a banner reading "Fanfares doctrinaires toujours reussi" (Doctrinaire fanfares always succeed). Up front, we see a cleric who plays the drum major and finally various costumed men and older women. On the right, on a platform, one can find the mayor and aldermen in their clown costumes. On the left, we can spot different people standing on a balcony, some even vomiting and defecating. At the top, a painted banner that says "Vive la Sociale" takes the cake. How can a painter commit such a crowd to his canvas? It becomes chaos—or does it reflect the dynamic present? And to what end? Is it a Catholic procession? Is it a carnival, Halloween, a demonstration, a parade for a Belgian festival, a cartoon, a caricature, or a piece of history? (Berman, 2002).

In this first encounter, the different layers of the painting impress the client-as-a-spectator; it is as if he or she is looking through a magnifying glass at a panorama of a society with ambiguous references to individuals. It happened to me as well. Then a pressing question presents itself: where is Christ? When I raise the question, the client double-checks the title. Shouldn't Christ stand in the foreground and lead the parade? The client studies the immense canvas again, and is confused because unable to find him in the second instance either…; then the client discovers him, on a donkey, slightly right of center from people in white clothes, verily "the color that highlight things without betraying them" (Ollinger-Zinque, 1999). The client, who takes a closer look at the painting and even makes a study of it, has to note that the painter, as in real life, tries to put the viewer on the wrong track in many ways. The perspective of the painting is the most obvious aspect. As a spectator, you are inclined to follow the boulevard, starting with the foreground figures on the left right past the military band; if you follow that line, you will end up in the upper-right quadrant of the painting, right underneath the banner. But if you, as a spectator, follow the line from the figures in the foreground on the right, you discover a second promenade that ends just on the left side of the painting. You will even discover a third line: right where the Christ figure is located in the painting, a crowd emerges from the side streets in a vertical line (see also Leonard & Lippincott, 1995). In other words, each perspective focuses on a different crowd and each crowd has its own perspective on the depicted scene. Only by communicating about the painting will this change of perspective be experienced.

Ensor paints on the canvas like a writer "tells" his stories: he tries to invite us to observing connectively. In reflecting on the painting

together, his message becomes clear to us: “watch out, things aren’t what they seem to be and they aren’t that, either.” In Ensor’s imagination, the world is multi-layered. In the same vein, an actor participating in “relational practices” (Bouwen, 2001) takes part in what statisticians succinctly summarize as the construction of a “multivariate world.” It is a world of multi-layeredness that we explore by relating to each other. And even in this joint dialogue we will sometimes be confused. Whereas Ensor attempts to condemn the Belgian institutions, his image of Christ the Redeemer offers an ambiguous representation: on the one hand, he is a moral compass but, on the other, he may as well be one of the costumed participants in the carnival parade, or an artist who has been discarded. Or, as Berman (2002) concludes, “Ensor’s Jesus figure carries a suggestion of meaning in itself, but no explanation” (p. 105).

What, exactly, does this conclusion mean for the spectator? That differs. From a change agent perspective, in many books on storytelling, the writer is presented as and acts like the Christ in this painting (as, in fact, Ensor does): he retreats to the wings, appears to be unfindable, and thereby withdraws himself from a thorough consideration and analysis. Relational inquiry wants to break away from this attitude and raises some questions related to the possible positions of a change agent—especially as writer in the writing process that becomes living storytelling (Maas, 2006).

Methods for a Connective Writing Process

Much research presents the understanding of the researcher as the sole writer. In the writing, writers are positioned as “readers of multiple texts, making use of other writers’ work, as they produce their own. They write within a context of other texts” (Nelson, 2008, p. 545). The suggestion in these sentences that texts are not told or related to someone, and more exciting, that the same texts will have different meanings depending on the context in which they are spoken or read, is a questionable one (Verweij, 2011). It means that the inquirer becomes acutely aware of the social context in which a story or a series of *petit* stories (*micro storia*; see Boje, 2008) are written down. What kind of focus does the inquirer need? As Gergen (2007) puts it: “*Writing* is fundamentally an action within a *relationship*; it is within *relationship* that *writing* gains its meaning and significance” (p. 1; emphasis added). The problem is that, during the writing process within an organizational context, this relationship is not a singular one, as in a therapeutic or

narrative situation (Clandinin, 2007). In an organizational setting, many healthy people are involved in a dynamic in which positions will shift—a dynamic that sees an appreciation of, as well as a need to deal with, different perspectives, which are sometimes derived from parallel worlds as one of the basic characteristics of the process. How should we express these various cognitions, relationships, and undifferentiated emotions properly in this setting?

In addition, where does this leave contemporary storytellers if they are not "lonely cowboys" writing about a fictitious world? In relational inquiry, they write with, about, *and* for actors with whom they actively communicate and converse, with whom they collect contrarian information, interpretations, and codes, in an organizational context that can best be summarized by multivoicedness, multi-layeredness, and the "company of many" (codes, plots, intrigues, incidents, conflicts). In relational inquiry, the researcher becomes an inquirer who becomes "connected" to participants in the organization. Here, the important question becomes how to structure the writing of stories in such a way that they challenge and inspire all actors actively in, and sometimes even beyond, the organization (Boje, 2011).

In a change process, connective writing starts in the design phase of the inquiry and asks for an inquiry team (consisting of at least two scholars). The question then becomes how to relate to the actors who are present in the organization. In the above-mentioned case, the storytelling was organized by putting together two circles of "inquiry": one consisting of the inquiry team and the other of actors from the actual organization. A basic rule for each circle of people is that *one uses at least three active participants as well as existing difference* pertaining to the research area. The inquiry team is focused on the storytelling process, which always covers two dimensions: storytelling (the role of narrator in a story, concerning the change process) and an analysis of the organizational contexts. For an effective writing process, different storywriters are active as a writing circle. Indeed, during the activity of writing, both the inquiry team and the writing circle have to simultaneously deal with multiple voices and multiple logics. The earlier the inquiry team gets its writing circle organized, the better. In the abovementioned case, the inquiry team tried to involve actors who came from different backgrounds within the organization. Some of these actors will be, as part of the writing circle, involved in the writing-concept of the storytelling. Their involvement can differ: from "giving comments during a conceptual phase" to "actual writing episodes or passages of the living story." In addition, the other

participants in this writing circle were asked to discuss, in small groups, a draft version of both the storytelling plus analysis. (Indeed, we consider these two parts of a story of stories as inseparable.) After a second revision, we distributed a concept of the storytelling plus analysis for broader discussion in organized panels throughout the organization. As we found out, it was then that the living storytelling began.

Comments and questions posed by these panels are collected and used by the smaller circle of writers. They discuss these remarks critically, revisit the original material, and, in exceptional cases, have another conversation with actors in the organization. Then, they rewrite parts of the original story again, compose their final story of stories, and add new passages to the analysis. This rewriting process does not imply that the former text is discarded. Rather, it explores new insights gained during the discussion processes in the text or in footnotes, alongside the existing stories. In this case, the inquiry team and the writing circle took seriously the process of interaction between the teams that were carrying out the inquiry and the participants in the organization. The reason for this is that during these exchanges of ideas, new perspectives and sometimes even new logics can emerge.

For the scholars partaking in the writing circle, this process of amending the original story is a serious matter that requires *dedication, disinterest, and engagement*. Through these remarks, they will become more dedicated to the organization than expected, especially because they are sort of drawn into the "continuity of organizational argumentation," parts of which scholars are unfamiliar with or which are even new to them. It makes them search for a form of counter-attitude: scholars will become without interest in the context under study. Scholars find that they slow down during the writing process, become "slow" questioners, "slow" listeners, and open to chitchat in order to build up trust and make the discussion and writing work. In the dialogues between scholars and participants questions and counterarguments are discussed to explore new opportunities. They take time to sort out difficult issues (an attitude that scholars already have displayed during the data collection.) The resulting process can be seen as *authentic conversations* that enable them to get to the *heart* of what is really going on in a situation and combine "heart and mind." Besides, the inquirers become engaged in the writing circle. They talk about the progress and the multiple voices they discern in an organizational context. They read texts, look and discuss (audio and audiovisual) recordings of the conversations, discuss the course of the process together and co-write. During this process, the writing gradually

becomes a connective writing process, during which the teams bring the multiple voices, the strong and weak voices that can be heard in the organization, to the fore. In this way, they provide insight into how the stories have evolved and under what circumstances *acting* and *interacting* people can become a core focus.

Little by little, inquirers and participants realize in what respect they can mobilize people in the organization and inspire them to take action. The scholars in the team must realize that they write for (sometimes unknown) actors in the organization: it is *their* organization, *their* change process in which this living storytelling will unfold.

Dimensions of a Connective Writing Process

An important question that can be raised is *how* to write in a relational inquiry. Throughout the years, I had experimented with many different writing styles. Then, I read the novel *Middlemarch*, written by an English novelist, journalist and translator from the Victorian era, George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans; 1871/2003). The book challenged me. The novel paints a panoramic view of provincial life. Some readers suggest that it conveys both a panorama of social life and a harmonious ideal of that social life (Neale, 1989). Others emphasize the dynamic character of the novel: "The penetration of its psychological analyses presents an equally sure grasp of individual character, and the steady control of its narrative movement presents both the self and society as 'a process of unfolding' of change and interaction" (Garrett, 1980, p. 135). Eliot constructs, just as is done in an organization, a multiplicitous narrative. How can we learn from her experiences with narrating a fictitious world and apply it to our living storytelling concerning "the real world?" An analysis of the scholarship on her writing methods helps to distill some guiding principles for co-writing in the relational mode. In this section, I present these principles and elaborate on the consequences of each of them for living storytelling in organizational surroundings.

Beaty (1960) identifies a first guiding principle for constructing a connection to a real world story: in most chapters of *Middlemarch, the social relationship is the common denominator for storytelling*: "Eliot first noted incidents, i.e., 'what happens.' She then concerned herself with the effects of the events on one or more actors, filling in necessary details of their recent histories to bring these effects into focus. These details in turn suggested other necessities or relationships which serve as links or transitions" (p. 69). In this way, Eliot traces a web of interactions, a

network of interpretations, and a network of meta-communication. For her, the relational mode between two or more people is the beginning and most valuable one; most of the time, it is the starting point for an infinite web of meaning and action, argument and counterargument.

What does this first statement mean for organizational storytelling? It means that an inquiry team, in the various episodes of the *storyboard*, or *image board*, focus parts of the story on at least two, but usually more actors, who are interacting. So a narrative movement that presents both individual characters and their contexts emerges as the consequence of this social relating, an unfolding process of change and interaction that can easily be extracted from the conversations in an organization. The content of these interactions are, in the story, always based on the conversations held, while the behavioral processes, emotions, circumstances, and events usually are taken from real life, and are fictional in only a few instances (in the case of characters and character descriptions due to the demand for anonymity within the organizational context).

By taking the interaction between actors as the starting point of a story that slowly develops between other actors in the same organization, a second guiding principle presents itself: *everything that is part of the storytelling becomes related to everything else.* Thus, there arises an organic form that results in an intricate web of interrelationships, interwoven strands of action, themes, and images. In this way, each one redefines the meaning of the whole story "with a certain difference." "To enforce this awareness, the narrative must present each situation from more than a single point of view, each character [in an organization, this might be an anonymous actor] both as he or she is perceived by others (such as Celia and Sir James) and how they perceive themselves" (Garrett, 1980, pp. 136-137). A constantly shifting focus is the outcome. It results in numerous possible points of view, but also limitations, distortions, and claims belonging to several perspectives. As a consequence, Eliot teaches us that (a) a multiplicity of interpretations emerge; (b) both perspectives and lines of development are multiplied; and (c) each character becomes somebody with his or her own point of view and his or her own story.

In the case of organizational storytelling, this second statement means that an inquiry team, based on a thorough analysis of the conversations and discussions with the writing team in the organization, identify five to seven configurations of people (and their interpretations and codes) that play a crucial role in the situation being studied. These

configurations not only consist of people who can be seen as having a dominating presence in the organization (management level), but also of people who have a marginalized or weak position in the processes under study (professionals, experts, clients, outsiders). Then, based on the conversations, the inquiry and writing team have at their disposal the relevant perspectives, as well as a multiplicity of interpretations and codes with which they can construct various interactive situations and storylines that are woven into a coherent story later on. In this way, actual dominant and weak signals in the organization are elaborated upon in the storytelling. During the writing process, the story sometimes develops as a kind of check on the conversations, and vice versa. That is to say, the writing team raises the following question: do we recognize the underlying theme, or themes, present in the storytelling in the other conversations? Or: how can an extraordinary conversation be woven into the storytelling?

Of course, Eliot did not forget that she once started out as a journalist and had to construct the missing, but connecting text(s) for her newspaper articles. Her main objective was to collect and disseminate information about current events, people, trends, and issues. Besides, her work was intended to recognize demands, misrepresentations, reconfigurations and codes that were produced or could be established. In such instances, the journalist is like a third person. It is the reason that *Eliot gives a narrator a prominent role in her writing*, a third guiding principle. The narrator can identify claims and turns that are made in the various perspectives. For Eliot, the narrator mediates between the individual and the universal, balances between involvement and detachment, is engaged in "a perpetual process of 'checking' one perspective against another, …is really 'protesting' against the logic of her own narrative" in order to recognize someone else's perspective. So, "the narrator offers privileged access to each 'intense consciousness' and provides a larger context which contains them all" (Garrett, 1980, p. 139). In doing so, she treats all characters as equal and considers their roles against the backdrop that is the wider provincial context of the narrative she tells: "This tension of centering and decentering impulses runs through the whole novel" (Garrett, 1980, p. 140). In this way, the narrator maintains the rhythm of the story.

In storytelling in an organizational setting, the narrator helps the reader to recognize everyone's context, while the characters can never recognize one another's context in the story. The narrator connects the various episodes of the story and introduces or foreshadows new

characters, circumstances or contexts to the reader. In short, then the narrator becomes the "bridging factor" in the writing.

It is at this point that we come across a fourth guiding principle in Eliot's writing: *watch the rhythm of a story*! The figure of the narrator helps to shift the story from one perspective to another, moving back and forth between general and particular, similarity and difference. In this way, Eliot manages to achieve continuity instead of merely presenting a montage of contrasting viewpoints of the narrator. Garrett (1980, p. 138) compares this rhythm of expansion and contraction with the rhythm of the heart: the focus shifts away from a "systolic contraction" ("the microscopic scrutiny of particular scenes or states of mind") to a "diastolic expansion" ("more general assessments of the characters and beyond to still wider generalizations of perspective"). What results is a basic writing method that is a movement between perspectives that "corresponds to the developmental structure of separate yet interrelated, distinct yet comparable plot lines" (Garrett, 1980, p. 138). For example, attention is paid to the commonplace elements and to the moral and psychological states that link all characters to each other. Various examples could be added.

In organizational storytelling, this fourth statement introduces a difficult aspect of the writing: how to shift the scope. In living storytelling, the extent to which this particular aspect will be successful is fully dependent on the experience and expertise present in the writing circle. This precondition is one of the reasons for an inquiry team to search in the organizational setting for people with either a background in journalism, with an expressed interest in writing, or who have taken a course on creative writing.

A fifth guiding principle of Eliot's design of *Middlemarch* is, in her words: "to show the gradual action of ordinary causes rather than exceptional" (quoted by Haight, 1954). The narrator can stress this effect by first applying the strong lens of a microscope to detect the unfolding action as a tight fabric of causation and subsequently the lens of a telescope to carry out the required close and further analysis (see also Garrett, 1980, p. 141). *In this way, she constructs a situation through cumulative causes, effects and consequences of numerous small decisions and lapses.* In each episode of the book, she emphasizes the result rather than the process of convergence, and puts greater emphasis on similarities than on differences. These similarities leave room for a large range of variation: "a close and shifting interplay of similarities and differences, and they can therefore always be read with different emphases" (Garrett,

1980, p. 144). More relatively independent main plot lines arise that "form the grounds of George Eliot's narrative parallelism in *Middlemarch"* (Garrett, 1980, p. 143). In this way, Eliot succeeds in writing a novel that, for each character, fleshes out a degree and quality of openness and a potential for growth or delineation and limitation. Besides, *in every episode* we get to "see the different roles played by intentions and circumstance" (Garrett, 1980, p. 147).

In organizational storytelling, this construction of a situation through cumulative causes, effects, and consequences is based on the analysis carried out in advance of the writing process. In the above-mentioned case, we used cause maps (Weick, 1979; Bryson et al., 2004), and produced cyclical maps (i.e., cause maps that are inter-connected but originate from a different perspective) that become the "artery" of the story that is often already visible in the first storyboard phase of the writing; it can, however, be reflected upon and amended during the storytelling itself. This trunk line is the source for developments in and of every episode.

When we read *Middlemarch*, it is as if in every story another story is hidden. One moment, a story moves into the foreground and all the other stories become a context for interpreting this story. At a different point in the novel, another story is suddenly brought into the foreground and the same process is repeated (but with different information and contexts). This refers to a sixth guiding principle: *Eliot has no single center, no single focus in her multiplicitous narrative.* Of course, such a thing is impossible in a world with multiple and shifting foci that seek centers of consciousness, which can enact a process of interpretation like the reader's: "The intersection in the novel's web of meanings engages the character, narrator, and reader in comparable problems of interpretation, though…the differences between these readings are also important. … There is…the bond between reader and character formed by their participation in a common process of interpretation, a process which is not aimed at a final truth but, like the lives of the characters themselves, remains open to change and development" (Garrett, 1980, p. 149-150). In short, *Middlemarch* is "about" interpretation and context; that is what connects writer(s), character, and reader.

In an organizational setting, the conversations offer us the material to search for different foci in the stories. These perspectives often become apparent during the early stages of the actual writing, springing forth from the *storyboard* or *image board*. In the interaction between the inquiry team and the writing circle, the different positions or perspectives from

which the story will be told are sketched out and elaborated upon. Both the inquiry and writing team propose characters and both help to deepen the various characters and their perspectives by raising questions and making observations about people who take the same position in the actual context. In retrospect, in this stage a writing circle, whose team members are also active in the organization, often is still involved in the process as a reader.

For a change agent, *Middlemarch* is a pleasure to the eye over and over again because it inspires one to engage in "outside the box" writing, thinking, and acting. Reflections on unpredictable consequences or unexpected behavior of one of the characters leading to unsuspected results are examples of this "outside the box" writing. For an example of change, I will provide two examples taken from *Middlemarch*. When Raffles picks up Bulstrode's letter after having wedged it earlier on in his brandy flask, Eliot remarks wryly: "Who shall tell what may be the effect of writing?" (p. 391). Of course, she knew: crisis! Or, "looking out of the window wearily" (p. 571) gradually becomes a culmination of another transition in the novel in her writing. This search for "a transitional space" in her writing helps writer and reader to enter this different, to-be-expected other juncture, and refers to a seventh guiding principle: *watch your text in a transitional space*.

It is obvious that, in organizational storytelling, this seventh statement is an important one (Amado & Ambrose, 2001), especially with regard to the construction process of the storytelling. The collected conversations, most of the time, offer up all kinds of opportunities for "outside the box" thinking. It is in the discussion about the storyboard, as well as in the writing process itself that opportunities emerge. In the writing process and in the pre-publication period, the inquiry and writing team share a responsibility to choose their words carefully and, in addition, to carefully consider how to use any controversial passages.

An eighth guiding principle for this narrative with multiple plot lines is the following requirement: *the novel's plots should explore different stylistic and temporal modes for which difference is the common denominator*. "Each story is illuminated in comparison with the others but each also unfolds according to its own logic and must be read in its own terms" (Garrett, 1980, p. 166)—even the final one, which of course leaves a reader with the impression that the story will be continued: "Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending" (Eliot, 1871/2003, p. 571). The relational process will continue.

In organizational storytelling, the multiple plot lines offer the writing circle and the readers the opportunity to construct and read about and experience the various perspectives and plots in the organization. Usually, living storytelling is used as a prelude for change. Therefore, most stories end with a passage that invites the reader to reflect on the multi-layeredness as sketched out in the storytelling. The analysis of the storytelling raises questions for the participants in the organization because the actual relational process in the organization will continue. It means that the storytelling possesses a constructive undertone, something that the writing circle can test at any time in the process, especially when the story is still under construction. It is my experience that the happy few in the panels who read and like the story in its pre-publication form usually bring the storytelling report under the attention of the broader organization, in order to prepare their colleagues for the story to come.

It leaves future storytellers with one last question: how did Eliot create this novel in two years? Did she become another (aesthetic and worshipping) person, as her husband Cross (1885/1938) suggests? Or did her best writing well up, as Beaty (1960) concludes, "in a process of evolution and discovery?" (p. 123). Beaty formulates a ninth guiding principle when he emphasizes that "Eliot carefully and consciously worked out not only what she was going to say, but the way in which she was going to say it before committing herself to paper" (p. 107). So, *prepare yourself well*. The organizational setting asks for interactions, or a method of co-creating that was elaborated earlier.

Positionings in the Connective Writing Process

For some, the inquiry team is an outsider in an organization. Verweij (2011), in a thorough analysis, summarizes the various understandings of the way the outsider is positioned in the literature. He refers to Derrida (1998) who explores the dynamic relationship between strangers as both guest and as host. From the perspective of hospitality, stranger-hood is first and foremost characterized by asking questions, answering questions and justifying oneself. The ritual of asking and answering questions from both sides lies at the core of the encounter between the stranger, finding him- or herself in unfamiliar territory, and the insiders, being confronted with an unknown person who requests access. As Verweij (2011) summarizes one of Derrida's (1998) arguments, "It all starts with welcoming and being welcome, but even the host receives his welcome from his home—which in the end does not

belong to him" (p. 38). In addition, Verweij concludes that "inviting" is an ambiguous concept: does an invitation to a guest not already imply that a guest is expected? And doesn't it also mean that the welcoming host expects that his guest does not surprise him? Or does an invitation create for a guest the obligation to abide the rules of the house? Or does an invitation offer a guest the very freedom to go his own way and to break, surprisingly, the rules of the house? In what sense does a guest feel invited? From the perspective of a participant in an organization, these questions become relevant ones.

Verweij notes that Simmel (1950) explores how the stranger, "the person who comes today and stays tomorrow" (p. 402), can be instrumental in helping the insiders to resolve their conflicts and revitalize their interaction process. Does the stranger, in specific situations, become a third, a bridge between actors? Simmel answers this question affirmatively and argues that the phenomenon of the stranger can be characterized by a number of distinct features—mobility, objectivity, or freedom of action and judgment, openness, and abstract or impersonal relationships—that enable him or her to play a particular role in problem solving, change, conflict resolution, and the like, a role that insiders could not play. Verweij raises the question of whether, in a situation of stagnating interaction between insiders (actors), the role of the third party is not only a temporary one. After all, isn't intervening in this particular situation a finite activity that aims to create possibilities for change?

In Bauman's philosophy (1991), the core element of stranger-hood is ambivalence (or ambiguity, the impossibility of being defined and determined). As such, stranger-hood is the unintended, but unavoidable, refusal that remains in the ongoing quest for order. In Bauman's view, this quest for order is what constitutes each community or system. The stranger is unclassifiable within the established order, the undecidable, a hybrid, and therefore embodies the horror of indetermination and the danger of chaos. The stranger, as the inevitable remainder of the continuous quest for order and control, is doomed to act as a disturber of the order that fails to define and embrace him—and thus somehow rejects him. As a disturber of order, he is both socially constructed (Bauman, 1991, p. 53ff)—as the waste of the ordering project—and self-appointed, embodying what Bauman calls "the self-construction of ambivalence" (p. 75ff). Verweij (2011) questions this view when he challenges Bauman's fixation on the stranger as a "rejected person" (p. 55). Isn't the stranger always different, and also in other social contexts included, and as such *not* rejected? Thinking about change and intervention, actors create a

finite game by enacting the boundaries that define the game—very much so in a self-limiting manner. Does it, in such a game, take a stranger who is not domesticated to reveal the finiteness of the game? Is this stranger always "unaccustomed," or "unfamiliar" with the situation, or does a stranger also play other roles simultaneously?

To explore this question from a relational inquiry perspective, we are reminded of the story of Rome and the abduction of the Sabine women that meant a war between the two neighbors. The women intervened in the battle between their Sabine fathers and Roman husbands to reconcile the warring parties. With their outburst—"Better for us to perish rather than live without one or the other of you, as widows or as orphans" (Livy, 27-25 BCE/1905, Book I, 13)—they build a bridge between their fathers and husbands. Why can the women move in both positions with such ease? Because they don't make the choices the men make? That is too easy: because they have understood why each of them has good motives to go to war with the other, isn't it? After all, they are not caught up in either argument for fighting, are they? On the contrary, they find a reason for father and husband *not* to fight with each other. Immediately, Livy tells us, each husband understood what he would inflict on his wife. Simultaneously, each father suddenly saw that he was trying to kill the husband of his daughter. They could play a "host role" because they were connected to both worlds.

Beforehand, in both teams, the relational inquirer behaves like a journalist, a third person that can play different roles: he or she is *both* an outsider that reads the state of affairs like a stranger *and* becomes the insider that is involved in the situation. This is always a balancing act in connective writing. After all, the storytelling plus analysis aim to surprise actors in an organization with a panoramic story of the organization, which mentions both dominant and weak signals from within and outside the organization. For many, such multi-plotted storytelling will work just like Ensor's painting affects its audience: people are surprised, even astonished by the complexity and dynamics of the organization. They sometimes feel hindered by the multiplicity and multi-layeredness but are also often challenged and inspired by unexpected, not previously known, even unthought actions. Connective writing through storytelling becomes an intervention *avant la lettre.* Writing no longer is the activity of a hermit; it is and becomes an action in relation to other people within a complex and hybrid field of interactions and relationships in an organization, where the scholarly writer will not only act as stranger, intruder, or "order-crasher" who has, in his or her repertoire, the aspects

Verweij mentioned and the questions we raised. He or she can also act as a host, just like the Sabine women, who can socially connect and know how to re-connect various “worlds” by offering a third context that is *dormant* in the situation but binds the various worlds.

Which position the scholarly writer will take in the connective writing process is dependent on a number of factors. Of course, a scholar will inevitably assume the role of inquirer in the inquiry team and writing circle. However, during the pre-publication phase, the role depends on the social situation that he or she is currently involved in. Then, sometimes the inquirer just sits in on a meeting, as a guest, listens to the activities the actors propose and plan for. The inquirer sometimes raises a question, provides coffee and tea, and, from the wings of the organizational theater, offers a sympathetic ear to those who need instructions. In that situation, an inquirer realizes that the intervention (with the storytelling plus analysis as booster) has had its first success: people in the organization are activated by the way the connective writing has evolved (see Maas et al., 2010).

Some Reflections

Most organizational and change processes ask for an interactive setting, in which the actors in an organization are challenged and inspired (sometimes seduced) to “become connected.” In this paper, I have elaborated on some of the consequences of this position (concerning relational inquiry) for storytelling, especially for the interpreting, writing, and positioning carried out by the change agent. First, we become aware that the connecting starts even before the process itself by helping people to engage in “connective observing.” Can people look at other people’s behavior and explore multivocality, multi-layeredness, and a variety of foci and perspectives?

Second, in order to involve, invite, inspire, and activate the broad assemblage of stakeholders in an organization, the organization and the dimensions of the writing process are of particular concern. In order to use storytelling as part of a change practice as a powerful impulse for change, *connective writing*, that is, the linking of the various actors and the differing worlds of the writers and the organization, is proposed. Writing also refers to introducing “relatedness” in the process, as the novelist Eliot shows.

Finally, it is not only the story plus analysis that attracts participants to, and inspires them in, a change process. In relational

inquiry, the positioning of an inquirer should be mixed, ranging from outsider to host, and possibly even guest. An inquiry team is *both* an outsider who reads the state of affairs like a stranger *and* becomes the insider who is involved in the situation. This is the balancing act in and of connective writing that facilitates actors in an organization to become connected with a change process.

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Alexander Maas, PhD, received his BA in Sociology from Tilburg, his Master of Business Administration from Delft, and completed his PhD at Erasmus University Rotterdam on the topic of Organization Studies. He holds the Humanitas endowed chair in Humanizing and Change of Care at University for Humanistics (Utrecht). In addition, he is an associate professor in Organization Change and Social Integration at Erasmus University, Rotterdam. He has published and co-edited a dozen books and articles, which have been published in both international and Dutch journals. His primary research interests are social constructionism, organizational theory, and change theory.