Editorial

Training SF: showing, telling – and explaining?

SFCT hosted a very successful and inspiring trainers conference in October 2011. There were around 70 participants from 15 countries and 4 continents. We are very happy that most of the institutes which offer trainings for SF in organisations were represented and contributed to our discussions. This issue of *Inter*Action focuses on the results of the trainers' conference and aims to continue the discussion on these emerging topics.

The opening plenary raised an important issue: how do we help people understand (and therefore do) SF practice? Under the title 'showing and telling', a panel of experienced SF trainers discussed the range of approaches from 'showing' modes of teaching (practice exercises, tapes of sessions, cases) to 'telling' modes (theory, models, cognitive frameworks, heuristics, even metaphors) and ways of combining these modes. There were quite different approaches to the topic, from advertising the value of 'telling of theory / background' to a curious question as to whether such a thing even exists. You will find the various approaches reflected in the short papers on training in this issue.

There are many important issues which link to the question of how or whether we 'tell' people and invite them to work cognitively on what it is that they are learning in an SF practitioners' or coaching course:

Foremost, the issue links to SF's credibility: if people ask what SF is, what do we say? In some ways it would make life a lot easier if it was like Appreciative Inquiry, where there is a widely-known '4D model' or NLP, whose practitioners can refer to a huge body of theoretical and practical literature. We have yet to explore more deeply how we can talk about what it is that we do and why we do what we do in a way that is consistent with our approach. In SF we know that "a meaning

of a word is defined by its use" – therefore establishing a founding theory once and for all would not be the answer.

SF is a subtle and skilful practice, so a definition or theory is very hard to come by without losing this essential part of SF. On the other hand, if we present SF as a vague, ephemeral, ungraspable affair – by refusing to answer the question, then we risk underselling ourselves to the rest of the world. We say we are interested in what works – and yet, if asked *why* it works, we have no coherent answer. This looks, to the educated outsider, like snake oil.

There is a dilemma here, which is to be taken very seriously. To define (or even attempt to define) the field too closely would not reflect the subtle art of the practitioner. Not to define it, or simply to point to the practice while refusing to acknowledge a defining frame, is to deny the knowledge and experience of those attempting to understand us. It's one thing to say 'I don't know. . .' to a client. It's quite another thing to say it to a colleague who is trying to understand what we do. The former is a considered position devised for good reason. The latter is a slap in the face – even if it is a coherent position, it's scarcely an inviting one.

Steve de Shazer used to say that the only way to learn SF therapy was to watch and do hundreds of SF therapy sessions. That may be how HE learned it, but we can surely do better from here. As Ken Gergen pointed out in his EBTA plenary last year, "Open up to other voices or you will be digging your own grave". We think SF has something special and different to offer – so we need to find a way to show that to others in a more engaging way than "I don't know...".

SFCT is committed to developing frameworks to help a wider audience connect with SF ideas and practices. Members are experimenting with practical frameworks like tools and models, as well as more theoretical frameworks to connect with modern Wittgensteinian thinking and enactive/embodied philosophy. We must take care not to take any of these as completely definitive – that would be a step too far. However, for every practitioner who has grappled with SF enough to use it wisely, we fear there may be tens or hundreds who

have stumbled across the ideas, dallied briefly with them and then moved on for the lack of some supportive framework, paradigm or connections.

This issue also features another first – a discussion on the paper from the last issue about the differences between working with organisations and individuals by Christine Kuch and Susanne Burgstaller. We also have the usual range of excellent cases, an interview with SF research gatherer Alasdair Macdonald, and reviews of recent research publications, full member reviews from Germany, Finland and the UK, and books. Our classic paper this time is Steve de Shazer's 1974 work 'On getting unstuck' – de Shazer's first published work. It's fascinating to read it again all these years later and see similarities and differences from his later writings.