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Consciousness has been described as both a variety of discrete states and a constantly changing flow. Charles T. Tart has developed a systems approach to consciousness in which he describes a baseline state of “normal,” waking consciousness and multiple altered states induced by a disruption of that baseline. This concept of a system of interrelated components is applicable to the altered state of consciousness associated with listening to a story: the “storylistening trance.” This research was designed to be exploratory and to elicit information concerning the characteristics of the storylistening trance and any influences (positive or negative) that affect it. The methodology was naturalistic, combining interviews and participant observation. The results show that many listeners do experience a qualitatively different state while listening to some stories. The article addresses characteristics of this trance state and influences upon it, and it concludes with a theoretical model of the storylistening trance and the applicability of the findings to library media specialists.

from “The Legend of the Destruction of Kash”

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Statement of the Problem

Storytelling has enjoyed a renaissance in the past twenty years. Books on how to select, prepare, and present stories fill bookstore shelves, and “professional” storytellers make careers of performing stories at festivals, libraries, schools, and conferences throughout the nation. The leading national journal of storytelling, *Storytelling Magazine*, is filled with opinion pieces, but while storytelling has flourished, there has not been a concomitant surge in research of the art form. One element of storytelling has remained nearly unconsidered, and it is, perhaps, the most

“constructivist”

1986; Rosen 1982), I engaged in participant observation of these storytelling events. I looked for, but did not limit myself to:

1. Physiological indications of a d-ASC
2. Noteworthy elements of the telling and the teller (i.e., rhythm, pacing, facial expressions, etc.)
3. Elements of the environment (i.e., climate control, noise, distractions, etc.)
4. Story content and style

There is, of course, a subjective filter for all of this information, as I attend to things that seem important to me and miss things that might appear important to others, but this is the case for all individual research. I used this observation to select participants to interview immediately after the storytelling to decrease the memory decay due to passing time (Thompson 1982), to keep memory as unconsidered as possible (Ericsson and Simon 1980), and to keep the context of memory retrieval similar to the context of memory encoding that aids in recall (Begg and White 1982). I approached listeners who seemed interested in the storytelling (i.e., they seemed to be paying attention) but who did not necessarily show precise physiological evidence of a d-ASC; this helped broaden the descriptive base of the study, and it provided information on what hinders entry into this trance state.

After individuals agreed to participate in the study, they were given a consent form describing the nature of their involvement and their control of the information to be included. I asked each person to complete a personal profile as well to gather basic information. To get a variety of experiential data, I interviewed people ranging in age from childhood (at least eight years old) to the elderly; no attempt was made to use age as a variable because the focus of this study was on one holistic picture, not on individual or group differences. I conducted a total of twenty-two, semi-structured interviews. Each interview was audiotape recorded, transcribed, sent to the participant

(“methods triangulation”), multiple sources of information (“source triangulation”), and multiple theoretical perspectives (“theory/perspective triangulation”). Peer debriefing—sometimes called “analyst triangulation” in which more than one person reviews the data and the findings to see if categories found by the researcher are indeed evident—was accomplished by getting feedback from two experienced storytellers who were interested in the process. They were asked to read one of the transcribed interviews, note anything that seemed pertinent to my research topic, and explain in what way they felt it related. I then gave them a copy of my coded transcription and asked them to note any place that they felt I was misinterpreting data or finding relevance where they felt there was none. The storytellers did not find any new items of relevance, leading me to believe that my analysis was thorough, and their review of my coded transcripts yielded no sense for either of them that I was misguided in my analysis.

After transcribing each interview, I sent it to the participant for member checking, “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 314). Participants were asked to review their interviews and change, delete, or add anything they felt necessary to make

such a dramatic feeling of motion, though there remains an undercurrent of movement. One listener said that it was “the manner of telling that *brought it to the point* that you felt like you were really there.”

Once the listeners passed this initial phase, many experienced a profound shift into an altered state of consciousness. Nineteen of the twenty-two participants mentioned something akin to this phenomenon, and the remaining three may have had the experience but simply did not mention it during the interviews. Participants’ descriptions of this experience were varied though rarely unique. They used phrases like “went with the flow,” “was absorbed,” “in sync with the experience,” “that magic circle that’s cast around,” and “transfixed in listening to the story.” From the poetic idea of a “magic circle” to the quasi-Csikszentmihalyian perception of “flow,” these listeners describe the experience of being entranced by a story; however, it does not seem to be either a total immersion or a complete lack thereof, for several of the participants spoke of *levels* of involvement. One participant said, “it’s different parts of me that get awakened by each of the people,” referring to her appreciation of artistic technique, her identification with the storyteller, her love of particular stories, and her appreciation of the storyteller’s involvement in his or her story. When she was “totally in the story,” however, she was “caught on all levels.”

Characteristics of the Storylistening Trance

Six categories emerged from the listeners’ descriptions of the storylistening trance phenomenon:

1. Realism: the sense that the story environment or characters are real or alive
2. Lack of awareness: of surroundings or other mental processes
3. Engaged receptive channels:
 - visual (both physical watching and mental visualization)
 - auditory (both physical hearing and mental “chatter”)
 - kinesthetic
 - emotional
4. Control: of the experience by the listener, or someone or something else
5. “Placeness”: the sense that the listener “goes somewhere” (often “into”) another space
6. Time distortion: the sense that subjective time moves at a different speed than objective, clock time

Realism

One aspect of the storylistening trance is that some listeners experience it as very real. Eight participants mentioned this perception in some manner. Some of the participants actually used the word “real” to describe this perception: “it’s not flat [like TV], it’s real.” Others used the word “alive” to express this concept: “it brought it alive,” stories “come alive when you relate to

herself as the main story character, said, “I think it was the emotions of how you actually felt at that time when that event happened, versus . . . the fact that you’re right here.” Two other participants spoke of their emotional response to the storylistening experience as a whole.

Control

The participants of this study phrased their perceptions of the storylistening trance in two very different ways. Thirteen participants used active verbs at some point during the interview (“I can zero in,” or “I put myself into”) that conveyed a sense of their control over the process, an effort on their part to enter or stay in the trance. Eighteen used passive verbs (“I get caught up,” or “I’m taken there”) or active verbs relating to the control of the process by something other than themselves (“it made you feel,” or “the storyteller brings you to that point”), which connoted a loss or lack of control, an effortlessness on the listener’s part as the experience takes over. Interestingly, many of the participants used both phraseologies, though the most prevalent stance was the feeling of lack of control.

“Placeness”

A characteristic of the storylistening trance, evident in the participants’ comments mentioned previously, is that it has a definite spatial quality, a “placeness,” which is usually referred to as “in” or “there.” This may be linked to listeners’ sense of the reality of the story, and it is fascinating that thirteen of the listeners interviewed chose these words to describe the experience. They were not beside 0 Td (•(f)3(e)-6 . 0.004S2(or)-7(y)2d)-7(e) ()-2vbes ot, a

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long to me, partly because he went on such a long journey.” She felt that the storyteller “was totally controlling my subjectiv

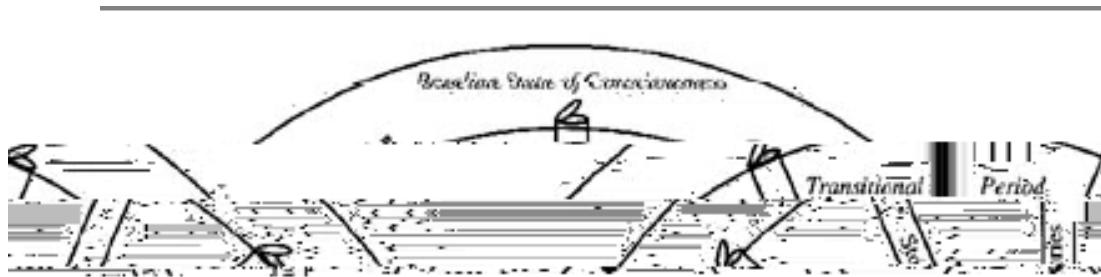
between the story plot or setting and the memory plot or setting; in other words, the stories did not—at least for these participants—recall entirely unrelated memories.

Sense of Comfort and Safety

Of the thirteen participants who mentioned the idea of comfort, nine spoke of wanting to feel emotionally comfortable and safe. One element of this was very individual, a sense of personal comfort (“I was comfortable here and didn’t really have to pay attention to what was happening”), while another part was communal; they wanted to feel part of a community in which they could disappear and not be noticed so that they felt free to enjoy the story without scrutiny or judgment, and they agreed that the storylistening environment provided exactly that atmosphere (“it’s very non-threatening . . . the attention is not called to us, the audience . . . we’re made safe immediately”). Four of them mentioned that their physical comfort was important and affected their enjoyment of, and involvement in, the story (for example, one participant said that he found stories more “transporting” depending on “the environment and . . .



Figure 1.



The model is composed of three concentric circles representing the baseline state of consciousness, the transitional period, and the discrete altered state of consciousness, respectively. I have placed the d-ASC (the storylistening trance) *within* the baseline state of consciousness to follow the figurative language used by the participants as they described the sense of the “placeness” of the storylistening trance as “*in*.” The breadth of each circle is misleading (but prescribed by the typeface of the letters); the baseline would certainly be the largest one, both in size and volume, since people spend the majority of their lives there. The transitional period, for the storylistening trance experience, would best be displayed as very thin; it lasts moments, minutes at the longest. The trance itself would remain its current size; I believe this aptly represents the relative “extent” of the trance.

The spokes of the wheel, as it were, are portals or conduits from the baseline to the altered state of consciousness and are represented in the diagram as tubes. Each “conduit” is equipped with a

“valve” at the end that touches the b-SoC. This valve is generally about half open during normal consciousness, and it represents the ease with which consciousness can slip from one state to the

and the altered state. It is that which, when “caught up in” a story, flows through the conduits into the region of the altered state. There is, however, nothing that requires *all* of this energy to flow through the conduits; some of it might remain in

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this altered state of consciousness to manifest? If students' expectations of school are negative, can they be expected to become involved? Can school personnel use some of the techniques of storytelling to increase the involvement of their students in the subject at hand?

Perhaps the two most important influences found in this study that are relevant for library media specialists and teachers are rapport with the storyteller and the storyteller's involvement. These items surfaced consistently in my interviews with storylisteners. Without a sense of rapport with the storyteller, the listeners did not feel invited to be part of the evolving tale; they were left on the outskirts, watching the tale unfold and not engaging it personally and completely. This feeling of being on the outside rather than enmeshed in the story was indicative of a lack of involvement on the part of the listener. It was also usually a sign that the teller was not involved in the experience either. The involved teller's enthusiasm for the story was contagious; so is that of the involved teacher or library media specialist. If we love the subjects we teach, and if we share that enthusiasm with our students, they are much more likely to join in the exuberant search for knowledge that is fundamental to life-long learning. I am sure there are other connections to be found, and I hope that readers will use this research as a springboard for their own explorations.

Suggestions for Further Research

Though the participants in this study did not mention metaphor as an influence, research to discover the impact of metaphor on the storylistening trance is badly needed. Does increased use of figurative language by the storyteller increase the possibilities of interpretation and thereby increase trance, or does the listener need more concrete images to develop the visualizations so vital to storylistening?

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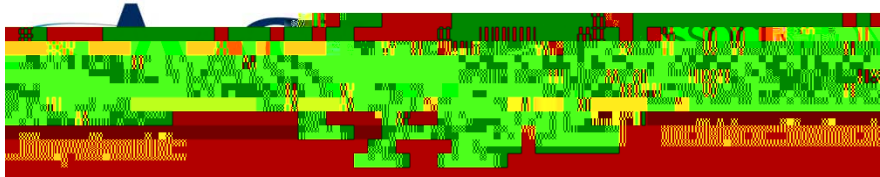
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Appendix: Related Links

1. *Storytelling Magazine* is a benefit of membership in the National Storytelling Association (www.storynet.org/index2.htm). Their Web site contains a wealth of information and links about storytelling.
2. An excellent list of resources as well as some background information on reader's response assembled by Kay Vandergrift can be found at www.scils.rutgers.edu/special/kay/readerresponse.html.
3. More information on Charles T. Tart and his theories of consciousness can be found on his homepage at <http://paradigm-sys.com/cttart/>.
4. A useful set of links to help you learn more about situated learning can be found at <http://scottlab.human.waseda.ac.jp/situated.html>.

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