CO-CREATING STORIES:
A COLLABORATIVE EXPERIMENT IN STORYTELLING

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an experiment in collaborative storytelling which started at the 11th Storytelling Seminar at Royal Holloway, University of London. The experiment was inspired by the Japanese art of ‘renga’, a form of Japanese collaborative poetry. A renga consists of at least two ku (句) or stanzas, often many more, each composed by a different poet. The point of the exercise is that each poet must find his/her own voice within a text that is jointly created and jointly owned. The chemist Carl Djerassi (1998) has argued that by co-creating a prose version of the renga, a community of practitioners can express dilemmas and views that would be unacceptable otherwise. He refers to this type of text as a genre he terms ‘science-in-fiction’ – one in which fiction as a way of gaining poetic licence to potentially embarrassing, dangerous or taboo topics. Following Djerassi’s approach, the author co-ordinated a renga composed by 15 participants of an earlier seminar who agreed to use the genre to explore the ethical dilemmas created by story-based research. The paper presents the co-authored story and discusses some of the issues that it raises, linking them the genre of fictionalized ethnography pioneered in organizational studies by Tony Watson (2000; 2004) and Barbara Czarniawska (1999; 2004). He also offers some reflections comparing story co-creation in spontaneous social interactions with his experience of doing so in the highly controlled parameters of the renga experiment.