

Storytelling Approaches to Program Evaluation: An Introductory Guide

Evaluation

Case Studies

Content Analysis

Story Theater

Vignettes

Healthcare Georgia Foundation
grantmaking for health



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NOTE TO THE READER: In 2006, Healthcare Georgia Foundation published *Why We Do What We Do* to capture the results of a statewide needs assessment that was used to inform future programming. This an example of how the Foundation used twelve in-depth stories to enrich its understanding of prominent health issues in Georgia. To download *Why We Do What We Do*, visit www.healthcaregeorgia.org > Grantee Resources > Publications.

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INTRODUCTION

THIS DOCUMENT PROVIDES A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION TO STORYTELLING APPROACHES TO PROGRAM EVALUATION

Storytelling may be an important method or strategy for capturing and communicating results of a program or organization to various audiences.

Traditional approaches to program evaluations--which rely on formal questionnaires and statistical data--fail to give program participants the chance to tell their own stories in their words. The good news is that things are changing in the world of nonprofit program evaluation. Many funders and stakeholders are now encouraging grantees to use stories in their evaluation reports.

Each funding agency has its own specifications for the evaluation reports it requires from grantees, but most health funders want to know similar things: What activities did you conduct? How many clients did you serve? What evidence do you have that the services are making a difference in the health care of both the individuals served and their communities? Statistical information, charts and graphs are very useful for summarizing and documenting health-related activities,

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BUT NUMBERS ALONE CANNOT COMMUNICATE THE IMPACT THAT A PROGRAM IS HAVING ON THE INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES IT SERVES. INCLUDING STORIES IN EVALUATION REPORTS BRINGS THE IMPACT OF A PROGRAM TO LIFE.

The purpose of this publication is to provide nonprofit health organizations with information and suggestions on how to collect and share stories as part of a program evaluation.

GATHERING STORIES

These basic approaches use a simple dialogue or question-and-answer format to gather stories from program staff and clients about the program's services impact. There should always be a clearly designated interviewer or facilitator guiding the conversation. Guiding the conversation does not mean controlling it or imposing topics but helping the participants to share their perspectives in a narrative form. Ideally the conversation will be recorded (audio or video) or detailed notes will be taken. Using these recordings and notes, you will be able to share the stories you have gathered with others. Before you get started, be sure to read "Tips for Gathering and Organizing Stories" (Appendix B, page 11).

STORY CIRCLE

At the end of a staff meeting or session with clients, go around the group in a circle asking for each participant to share a story. To get the conversation going, the facilitator could ask open-ended questions such as, "What have you learned from being part of this program?" or "How has participation in this program changed your life?" You can do the story circle every three to six months to assess the progress of individual clients and of the program. Story Circles are more effective with smaller groups and when there is enough time for everybody to have the opportunity to share his/her personal perspective. While this method is particularly effective for gathering testimonials that demonstrate a program's effectiveness, it can also be used for needs assessment, by changing the cue to: "Please share a story about something this program did recently that either worked or didn't work very well."

Evaluating the impact of programs serving diverse constituents demands the use of innovative and culturally appropriate approaches.

STORY-SEEKING INTERVIEWS WITH CLIENTS

Everyone has a story to tell, but many people need help to get their stories out. One or more staff members can sit down with program participants one-to-one or in small groups to gather their stories. The interviewer can begin by explaining the purpose of the meeting, by saying something like, "Our agency wants to hear from our clients how our programs are helping them. Hearing your experience will help us know how we are doing and give us ideas for improving our services. And it will help us show our funder how we are doing."

The interviewer should ask questions to get the person or people talking, but not interrupt unnecessarily. The interviewer can ask a client to describe:

- the problems she is facing that led her to come to the agency
- the activities in which she has participated and the services she has been receiving
- how these services are making a difference in her life

The interviews should be audiotaped and then transcribed and edited, cutting out comments that are off topic and focusing on the most compelling stories told by the client(s) in the session.

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

Including the voices of the people in a community who have familiarity with its history is a way to gather information on how it has changed over time. Oral histories can help to describe the historical, social and cultural context of your program as well as how the community and the program have evolved over time. In addition, they can help you identify community cultural events that happened in the past that can become resources for the future. Oral history interviews may also be used to collect information on the lives of your stakeholders before you initiate your program activities and then after your program has concluded, to see how their lives may have changed as a result. Oral histories may take more than a single interview and it is important to respect the perspective of the narrator. Interviews should be audiotaped, transcribed and edited, cutting out comments that are off topic and adding relevant information to assist in the contextualization of the oral history.

Storytelling is an ancient human activity. Humans are natural story-tellers and story-listeners. In every culture, stories are used to understand, entertain, transmit values, and mobilize action.

INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY

Collecting and cataloguing stories not only from participants but also from staff can be an excellent way of recording the history and charting the progress of a program and the growth of an

organization. For example, staff members can be asked to tell stories about how the program has evolved over time. These stories can be recorded and transcribed. This process can provide program staff with a growing archive of stories that can be analyzed to chart growth in individual program participants, staff members, the program and the organization as a whole.

GETTING CREATIVE: Documenting Stories in Pictures, Theater, and Online

STORY THEATER

Storytelling and drama overlap; it is hard to distinguish where one ends and the other begins. Before literacy became widespread, stories were told, rather than written, which is to say they were performed. Theater has been used effectively in the fields of health and mental health services and in social movements. Techniques such as Teatro Campesino, or Participatory Theater have been used extensively to dramatize the concerns and demonstrate possible solutions by ordinary people who are trained neither as playwrights or actors. Using these dramatic techniques, people are asked to develop stories that they turn into scripts and then perform. Most often, the script emerges from role-play exercises. Elements of story theater can be adapted into program evaluation. For example, clients can be asked every month or two in a year-long program to role-play solutions to problems and these role plays can be video-recorded, providing a running record of growth. Or a community-based program can present a report on its activities in the form of a play, to be presented both within the local community and to current and potential funders.

SCRAPBOOKING AND STORY QUILTING

Collecting artifacts and images and placing them in an album to document an event is a very old practice that has recently become a popular hobby. Clients and staff can be asked to keep a scrapbook throughout their participation in a program to document their activities and growth. These scrapbooks can then be used as a form of portfolio assessment in program evaluation. Quilting is another folk craft that can be used for telling stories and can be used in a program evaluation. For example, in a quilt making activity, each participant can contribute a square that contains a personal reflection on the program. The participants can discuss how to organize their squares to make a quilt that tells the story of their individual and collective experience.

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PHOTOVOICE

Stories can be told in pictures as well as words. Program staff and clients can be given cameras and asked to take pictures of relevant aspects of their community and program or to create visual record of their participation in the program. These photos can be organized into a montage on a poster or presented in a digital slide show to demonstrate program activities and growth. Even young children, with some mentoring and access to cameras, can take photos that document key issues in their life. One such participatory evaluation approach is called "Photovoice." This approach utilizes photographs as a tool for needs assessment, discussion, and reflection, for social change, and for communicating results with various audiences, including policymakers.

A good example of Photovoice is described in the project www.kids-with-cameras.org that was portrayed in the Oscar award-winning documentary, "Born into Brothels" directed by Ross Kauffman and Zana Briski.

A version of photovoice can be done with video cameras. When photos and videos are shared online, this approach is called "Digital Storytelling."

The AJA Youth + Photography Project partnered with The Mid-City Access to Health Care momentum team, a community group advocating for in-person interpretation services to be available at all clinics and hospitals in San Diego. The project helped refugees from North Africa use Photovoice to document their stories of how the absence of an interpreter prevented them from receiving effective health care.



"I worry about the medications. For my children I concern that it is poison."

<http://ajaproject.org/blog/2012/11/28/aja-partners-with-mid-city-can-on-new-participatory-photography-project/>

DIGITAL STORYTELLING

As our society moves increasingly from print to digital media, the documentation, archiving, and communication of storytelling is also moving to digital formats. The increased access to audio and video recorders, the proliferation of digital editing software, and the rise of online video-sharing sites has facilitated the production, archival and distribution of narratives and stories to wider and broader audiences.

Digital media can be used in program evaluation in a variety of ways. Program staff or participants can be asked to tell stories about their program by talking directly into the camera. Another form of digital storytelling is the creation of short videos that dramatize how a program works for its participants. Such videos can either be documentaries (edited video of actual events) or dramatized (true stories that are scripted, acted out, and recorded).

Websites have become important portals for programs to communicate with funders, policymakers, and current and potential clients. Websites can also be used to electronically archive and share stories gathered in case studies, oral histories, story circles, photos, plays, and videos. For example, one innovative use of the web is to create a blog, a Facebook page or a dropbox where program participants can post stories, and share comments of their involvement with the program. Some healthcare and social service organizations have pages on their websites that allow visitors to access narrative accounts of the stories from clients who have benefited from the agency's services.

Funders, clients, and policy-makers increasingly are using the web to learn about organizations. It's therefore important that your website presents

your program in a thoughtful, clear way and communicates the value of what you do. Using compelling stories, whether told with words, images, or both, is a vital component of the online presence of a nonprofit health organization.

ONLINE RESOURCES FOR DIGITAL STORYTELLING

- Photovoice: www.photovoice.org
- The Center for Digital Storytelling www.storycenter.org
- Photovoice: Giving "the picture of health" a whole new meaning http://info.kaiserpermanente.org/communitybenefit/html/our_stories/global/our_stories_4.html

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THREE WAYS TO INCORPORATE STORIES IN EVALUATION REPORTS

CASE STUDIES

Case studies are in-depth written stories of the lives of your stakeholders. Case studies of individual clients may include some biographical information, a description of the reason the client came for services, the services provided, and the outcome. For example, a case study might begin, "Rosa Hernandez came to Atlanta from Oaxaca, Mexico, with her husband and two young children in the summer of 2010. In

July of 2011, a concerned friend brought her to our agency for help. Rosa at first was reluctant to talk about her problems. But eventually she confided to a caseworker, Gabriela Sanchez, that her husband had hit her. Gabriela helped Rosa understand her options and eventually arranged for Rosa and her children to move temporarily into New Beginnings, a domestic abuse shelter. Lucy Smith, Rosa’s caseworker at New Beginnings, helped Rosa find a new place to live and line up childcare and a job...” Case studies needn’t be long or comprehensive—a few paragraphs, focusing on a key issue, is more effective than a case study that is pages long and lacks focus. By including evaluation reports in case studies of individual clients, agencies can help funders understand how they operate and personalize the impact of the services the agency provides.

VIGNETTES: STORIES AS ILLUSTRATIONS

One approach you can take in your evaluation reports is to add vignettes – short, compelling stories that illustrate and contextualize the points you make with facts and numbers. For example, after presenting a list of workshops you offered to clients in the past year, you can add a vignette told by a staff member that describes a particular event. The account might begin, “On a rainy Saturday morning in November, in a small town in South Georgia, a dozen African-American mothers and their young children gathered in a room in the basement of the Shipley Ebenezer Baptist Church. After juice and coffee and doughnuts were served, Gloria Johnson, a staff member with the Helping Hands Rural Health Care Program, opened the meeting by asking each woman to introduce herself. Gloria told a personal story about the difficulties she experienced when her son was born to get health care information. Gloria then asked each of the mothers, in turn, to share their biggest worry about their children’s health care. . .”

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Another approach to including stories in your evaluation reports is to summarize the stories you gather from your clients in terms of key themes and issues. Social scientists who use interviewing in their research often analyze stories told by their interviewees by employing a technique called content analysis. In this approach, researchers or evaluators develop coding categories they then use to organize the contents of stories told by their clients. For example, a researcher evaluating a program that offers help to young mothers could do a content analysis of stories told by the clients in which coding categories might include “sources of childcare information,” “help with childcare from family and neighbors,” “visits to doctors and hospitals,” “biggest concerns about their baby’s health,” and “experiences of feeling overwhelmed.” By categorizing statements made in stories in terms of problems encountered and strategies used to overcome these problems, a content analysis of stories can give a sense of the needs of the community being served.

BEYOND EVALUATION

Your participants’ stories can serve as a powerful tool for furthering your organization’s goals. Think about the particular audience that you want to address, from funders and policymakers to the media and the general public and select stories accordingly.

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND FUNDRAISING

Storytelling can be an effective tool for publicity, fund raising and recruitment of new participants, stakeholders, volunteers, and staff. The same

narratives that a healthcare organization used for evaluation can be adapted to explain who you are, what you do, what you have accomplished, and what your needs are to potential participants, other community service organizations, potential funders, and the media.

POLICY ADVOCACY

Compelling stories will strengthen your policy advocacy campaign. Stories of your participants' struggles and how your program helped them to deal with these problems can be used to raise awareness of your program impacts. Narratives of participant resiliency and of the gains they make in your program can be used not just for fund raising, but also for advocating for social and systemic change.

For reaching out to the community: Weave stories into your organization's publications, such as newsletters, brochures, and annual reports. Write an article for a community newspaper, newsletter, or blog. Use story-theater to dramatize community concerns and potential solutions.

For explaining your services to potential clients: Prepare a pamphlet that concisely explains the services your program offers and illustrate these services with a couple of stories (with photos if you have them) of how particular clients have benefited from getting involved with your program.

Everyone has a story to tell,
but many people need help
to get their stories out.

HOW TO DISSEMINATE YOUR STORIES

For reporting to funders and impacting policymakers: Include in your program's webpage, Facebook page, evaluation reports and policy briefs case vignettes showing the impact of your program on individual participants, along with facts and figures.

For getting covered by the media: Write press releases including one or more compelling stories using direct quotes from participants. Include case studies, with photos. For radio, provide audio files of clients talking about how the program has changed their lives. For television, provide video files.

APPENDIX A: Sample Consent Form

We would like to assess the impact of participation in our activities and services by making audio or video recordings of your stories. Through this assessment, our organization will learn what worked and what did not work and why. This learning will help us improve our programs and services.

We may also share the stories we collect from you and others in the reports we write for our funders and for spreading the word about the impact of our program. We may use our stories, photographs, and video images on our website and in publications. Examples of these publications may include newsletters, brochures, websites, slideshows, newspaper stories, and public service announcements.

Please complete and return this form to our office.

Your name/youth's name _____

Date of birth _____ Today's date _____

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_____ I give _____ (organization's name) permission to publish my name/my child's name, image, written work, and/or artwork for the purposes stated above.

_____ I do not give permission to publish my name/my child's name, image, written work, and/or artwork for the purposes stated above.

Signature _____

Program participant or parent/guardian

Print name _____

APPENDIX B: Tips for Gathering and Organizing Stories

1. BE CONSISTENT AND SYSTEMATIC

Like keeping a diary, you need a place to record your stories; you need to decide if you are going to record them digitally, or write them. In any case you need to allow time to record them and write your reactions about them; and you need to keep at it, doing a little at a time rather than waiting until a lot of time has passed and trying to remember and record weeks or months of stories all at once. It's easier to record the stories and your reactions about them when they are fresh in your mind than to go back and re-construct them.

2. DESIGNATE STORYTELLERS AND STORY-COLLECTORS

Everyone has a story to tell, but not everyone is a good storyteller. Identify the good storytellers among your staff and clients and encourage them to tell their stories and also to help other, less skilled storytellers, to get their stories out. You also need to identify someone who takes primary responsibility for collecting the stories. Story-collectors are the people who record, write, and transcribe stories about your program. This takes time and energy. You may want to designate a staff member to be the story-collector for your agency or you may want to rotate the responsibility each month or for each event.

3. BE STRATEGIC IN YOUR CHOICE OF STORIES YOU INCLUDE IN A PROGRAM EVALUATION

Everybody has a story to tell, but this does not mean that every story told to you by staff members and clients needs to end up in your report. Stories may be interpreted by readers in ways you do not intend and end up doing more harm than good in your evaluation. Strategically select the stories that are most appropriate for the task at hand. Some stories are best suited to being used as examples of problems, others of needs, and others of successful interventions.

4. STORIES ARE NOT "THE WHOLE STORY"

It is important that you complement the stories you include in your evaluation report with other sources of information. Stories should be combined with surveys, focus groups, observations, and others methods of evaluation. Providing multiple forms of data and including the perspectives of the full range of your participants will enhance the quality of your program evaluation.

5. CONSIDER THE ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SHARING PERSONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL STORIES

Always ask for permission to share the stories told to you. It is a good practice to have written consent and to assure confidentiality in the use of personal narratives. See Appendix A for a sample consent form.

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