



cheX

'BEYOND THE ANECDOTE'

Chex Briefing on story dialogue as a means of community inquiry and sharing lessons across public and community/voluntary sectors

Current Climate – Relevance of Story Dialogue

Partnership working seeks to harness the added value gained from those with different roles and responsibilities working well together. Community Health Partnerships (CHPs) within the health sector provide the opportunity to build on 'natural' collaborations, but also force others to work together in new ways, which can be alien to their traditional approaches. If we are to maximise the potential of different public sector agencies and community and voluntary organisations working well together, we must ensure that processes and decision-making are informed with a good understanding of what each partner does and can contribute. But, how best to investigate, capture and share the

Story Dialogue in Action



learning of all agencies and organisations to maximise the full potential that brings real added value to health improvement?

Sharing knowledge and lessons within and between different sectors that has any lasting legacy is a significant challenge. While there is constant encouragement to do this, getting under the skin of what actually makes a difference can often seem elusive and not easily understood or accepted by different partners. Story-dialogue has proven to be an excellent method in enabling inquiry into different experiences/ways of working, sharing values, lessons and creating the opportunity to validate approaches. Its use by audiences such as Health Boards, Health Agencies and community and voluntary organisations demonstrates the method's versatility and accessibility as well as its popularity in a range of contexts and disciplines.

This briefing is designed to give people the confidence to try using the method themselves. Ideally it is better to attend a story-dialogue training day or event to see how it works in practice but it should be possible to use the method from this briefing sheet alone. Details of how to access training in and support for using story-dialogue are included on page 8.

What is Story Dialogue?

Most practitioners are motivated to improve their practice – story-dialogue is a useful method for reflecting on what we do, whether individually or collectively – this is sometimes called reflective practice or action inquiry. Often 'reflection on doing' and evaluation of practice is approached only as a mechanism to demonstrate to funders that aims and objectives have been met (or not met) thereby losing the opportunity to reflect on and share learning. The Story-dialogue brings validity and readdresses the balance for the limitations of the traditional approach to research which often assumes that numbers are 'hard', objective facts and that people's accounts of their own lives are 'soft' subjective opinions.

Academic and other institutions tend to control what is deemed as 'legitimate knowledge' and people's experiences tend to be dismissed as 'anecdotal evidence'. Story-dialogue challenges that position by putting people's stories at the centre of the method and providing a rigorous framework within which we can collectively learn from and build knowledge about our practice – whether we are paid workers or members of a particular community. Furthermore, the method has its

own validity, in research terms so it cannot be dismissed as 'unscientific'. Story-dialogue can also be used very effectively to involve communities in a consultation or inquiry process, which does not need to be 'scientific' or simply to open up a dialogue between professionals/organisations and communities.

Because story-dialogue takes place in intimate, small groups, it also gives access to voices other than those who are conventionally heard in places where people share knowledge - typically conferences designed for professionals or organisations - people formally recognised as 'experts'. Ron Labonte (one of the two architects of story dialogue) describes the third-person voice and style of most of these presentations as 'show and tell' where the real learning is often hidden behind an airbrushed version of 'what was achieved or discovered' (usually formatted by PowerPoint or computer generated 'posters'), without telling us about all the messy stuff in between. When seeking qualitative data, we will often learn more from the story of the journey rather than merely hearing about the destination or the outcomes of that journey. We also learn at least as much from the challenges and the wrong turns along the way as from the successes. As the stories related in story-dialogue are told in the first person, with no apology for 'subjectivity', the nature of what is shared has an entirely different quality and people are liberated from the requirement to be dispassionate and to share only 'the facts'.

The Structured Dialogue

Story telling about practice is essentially a dialogue. One person shares their experience with another, who then engages in critical and respectful questioning about the experience. A dialogue is different from a discussion. Discussions often ramble around topics in an informal, unstructured way. A dialogue is intentionally structured. The structure allows the story telling to

- provide a "rich" or detailed description of what happened;
- offer one or more explanations for what happened;
- synthesize the key lessons from our 'insights' and
- plan new actions based upon our insights.

A structured dialogue takes place through the use of open questions.

Open-ended questions invite people to reflect upon what the issue or concern means in their daily lives, as practitioners, activists, citizens, parents, users of a project for example.

Too often practitioner discussions or project evaluations leap from description to action, with little time devoted to explanation. We hear about a “successful” activity and immediately want more details so that we might try out the idea and/or method that are relevant to our own work. But without asking why the activity was successful, without probing more about the context and the relationships involved in the activity, we may draw the wrong conclusions. Those listening also tend to want to give advice rather than to continue reflecting collectively on the story by asking opening questions.

1. WHAT do you see happening here? (Description),
2. WHY do you think it happens? (Explanation),
3. SO WHAT have we learned? (Synthesis)
- 4 NOW WHAT can we do about it? (Action)

Although questions do not need to begin with ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘so what’ or ‘now what’ they should progress from getting more detail from the story-teller to more reflective questions on the specific incident and then to synthesising the lessons from that story into the implications for the practice of everyone in the group.

A structured dialogue around a case story takes 30-40 minutes. During this time, facilitators will ensure that questions progress from what/why questions on the specifics of the story to taking a broader perspective on the implications of the story for our new action as practitioners – the synthesis and action questions. Often it is difficult for the group to move from descriptive and explanatory questions on the specifics of the story to standing back from the specifics of the story to explore its relationship to the ‘generative theme’ e.g. building partnership working, engaging with community members and what we could do differently as a result of the insights form the story. But given that story-dialogue aims to be action research or inquiry, the synthesis/action questions are the most important questions to ask and it is important to make time for them. ‘Where’, ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions are solely directed towards the storyteller, but ‘so what’ and ‘now what’ questions are asked of the whole group. The danger here is that the group goes off at tangents and does not address

these more challenging questions, therefore is it important that this part of the discussion is effectively facilitated.

Suggested Goals of a Story-Dialogue Event

The suggested goals of story-dialogue event include:

- Share practice experiences in a caring, critical and reflective way.
- Learn practice strategies from one another to improve our work generally.
- Experience a story/dialogue method with applications to our practice.
- Generate common lessons about good practice to inform future practice and programme development.

In practice however, the goals of a story-dialogue event will vary according to context, history and purpose. Sometimes the predominant goal is to learn about the method and at other times the method is merely a means to an end. For Example: the goals of the Dumfries and Galloway event - 'Whose Mind is it Anyway?' in March 2004 were to:

- try out story-dialogue as an approach to participatory planning
- share and learn from stories on the theme of community wellbeing in Dumfries and Galloway
- act as a foundation for a community wellbeing partnership in Dumfries and Galloway

What makes a good story

A good story is one that relates well to the 'generative theme' eg the impact of Community Health Initiatives on Community Health Partnerships and that it is 'meaty' enough to merit unpacking by others in the structured dialogue. Storytellers need to feel safe enough to reveal something of themselves in the story and to tell the story in the first person. Often this can be particularly hard for people in senior positions who are

accustomed to the relative anonymity of third person presentations using PowerPoint or other high-tech tools. The same rules of telling a story in the pub or round the dinner table applies. In common with all stories, it should have a beginning, a middle and an end and contain enough dramatic tension to keep your audience's attention. As it should be no more than 10 minutes long, it is important not to spend too much time on 'setting the scene'. It is recommended not to write the story out in full, as that tends to lead to reading from the page. Preparing some notes to act as a prompt is sufficient for most people but preparation processes will vary according to the confidence of the storyteller.

The story is meant to elucidate the generative theme using real life examples so the story-teller should be clear what the theme is and provided with a short description of the theme or sub-theme to which his or her story relates. The story does not need to be neatly resolved by the end but should contain some reflection as well as description. The reflection process will be continued however, in the context of the small group 'structured dialogue'. Most storytellers report finding the experience cathartic and affirming in the way that telling your story and being listened to attentively almost always is.

Storytellers are usually suggested by members of the planning group and approached in the first instance by someone who knows them to ask if they might be willing in principle to contribute a story at the forthcoming event. This is normally followed up by a telephone call from the event facilitator to clarify in more detail what would be involved and to assist the storyteller to select a possible story. Short briefing notes (see page 11) could be distributed including a description of the generative theme.

Outline of a typical Story-Dialogue event

The day will start and end in the large group but unlike most conferences, the majority of the day will be spent in the same small story group. Participants will either have been assigned to groups in advance, which is sometimes necessary if a story-teller wants to avoid being in the same group as a particular person, or sign up to a group on the day. The latter option is preferable given the unpredictability of 'no-shows' on the day. When learning about the method is the primary purpose of the event, more time is spent in the large group outlining key stages in the process.

1. Purpose of Day/ introduction of method in large group (30-45 mins approx)

2. First Round of Stories in small groups (approx 1 hour)
3. Break
4. Second Story Round (approx 45 mins)
5. Introduction to Insight cards and categories in large group
6. Story groups generate insights and categorise (45mins- 1 hour)
7. Feedback to large group – story groups share key lessons and their experience of the method
8. Clarify next steps and close

Stages in the Story-dialogue process

The first time you participate in a story-dialogue event is a bit like playing Monopoly – until you know how the game works you concentrate on the rules rather than enjoying the game. But after the first story round and with a skilled and confident facilitator, most people will relax and start to enjoy the process, which is in essence very simple. You have ‘generative theme’, which is of interest to everyone there; stories to illuminate that theme and a framework for unpacking the stories for new insights into the theme. The underlying logic of the method is to move slowly from the particular, from the first-person story and the dialogue on exactly what happened, why, and what was learned, to the general, the lessons or “insights” about practice that each person might take with them to their future work or lives.

*** Story Dialogue in practice is outlined in Appendices 1, 2, and 3, which highlight the different stages through the role of facilitators, storytellers and a checklist for an event.

Feedback to the Big Group and Next Steps

If there is going to be a record of the day’s event or if it is feeding into an ongoing process such as an evaluation or the production of a strategy, you will need to have clarified who has responsibility for writing up the story groups conclusions. It helps enormously if the insight cards for each category are numbered accordingly and taken away by the nominated person. The feedback should include a précis of the story

WITHOUT identifying characteristics or repeating the stories, followed by a description of each of the categories developed from the insight cards and sharing a few of the key insight cards from each one.

One of the strengths of this method is the verbal, spontaneous nature of the stories confided and shared but for writing up purposes, this does of course, presents challenges for anyone having to provide a written summary. The stories are not usually easy to capture on paper unless the storyteller is willing to give you a short written synopsis, outlining what the story was about as context for the insights and discussion generated. Quotations can be used as long as permission is sought from contributors and/or contributions anonymised, but this might strip them of their meaning somewhat.

The **insights** from each group are the **key learning** that should be shared wider than those participating in the event. These could be written up and used to inform different decision-making arenas around policy and practice related to health improvement and addressing health inequalities.

Further Information - About the Author

Áine Kennedy has facilitated Story-Dialogue Sessions in a range of health settings and at the CHEX Seminar 'Tales from the Field' (Stirling, 2002). Aine provides one-day courses in story-dialogue through the Scottish Community Development Centre's 'Doing it Better' programme, (dib@scdc.org.uk) and the Royal Bank of Scotland's Centre for Community Arts Research and Practice (www.community-arts.org.uk). She can also be contacted independently on ainekchc@aol.com or tel: 0141 942 4443.

Further Reading

Kennedy, A. (2001) *Stories, Identity and Community – a practical guide to using stories with groups*

Labonte, R. & Feather, J. (1996) *Handbook on Using Stories in Health Promotion Practice*, Ottawa, Health Canada

Labonte, R., Feather, J.& Hills, M. 1999 'A Story/Dialogue Method for

Health Promotion Knowledge Development and Evaluation' Journal of Health Education Research 14(1):39-50,1999

People for Action (2004) Learning from Stories

<http://www.peopleforaction.org.uk/services/library/storytell>

***APPENDIX 1**

Briefing for Facilitators

As well as the quality of stories and story-tellers, the success of your event depends significantly on how well prepared and confident your facilitators feel with the method. Ideally they should have the chance to get together for a couple of hours before the event with the event facilitator to be introduced to the method and have their role clarified. Facilitators are usually provided with some simple written instructions to use on the day as a reminder/safety blanket.

Get participants to briefly introduce themselves. Stress that we will all get more out of the process if the story-tellers feel that this is a safe place in which to tell their story and if participants feel that the discussion will be confidential. Story-telling can feel like a risky business and we should respect the willingness of the story-tellers to share their story with the group and reward them with our discretion. We will however, be discussing some of the themes arising from the stories and group discussion in the course of the day but the material should be anonymised and the names of project, organisations, individuals concerned should not be revealed.

Recruit 2 reporter to record highlights of the dialogue around –

- i) What (descriptive) and why (explanatory) questions to do with the specifics of the story and
- ii) so what (synthesis) and now what (implications for new action) questions that move back from the specifics of the story to its implications for the generative theme

Although there are 2 note-takers everyone should take a note of their own key insights (ah-has!) as they will be useful later.

Story teller is invited to tell their story for 7-10 mins. It may be worth working out a signal for 'wind up now' in advance.

Reflection Circle – a brief personal/gut response to the story (couple of sentences each). 'How did the story make you feel?' can be a good trigger question here. Important to keep to time and not allow people to tell their own story here.

Structured Dialogue: Start moving through the 4 types of questions in the order outlined above. If in doubt about what sort of question it is, just ask it anyway. The shift from questions on the specifics of the story (what and why) to questions about the implications of the story for the generative theme (so what and now what) requires a shift from hot-seating the story-teller to asking questions of the group as a whole. Try to keep opening questioning mode as far as possible and not moving too quickly to conclusions. Avoid advice giving or lapsing into old debates. The rigour of the process rests in the emerging theory being linked to the particulars of practice. The facilitator's role is to use the time available to move people through all 4 categories of questions.

Creating Insight Cards: Give out paper and felt tip pens and ask people to write down their key insights from the story in big writing. Try to be as specific as possible in the language used so that someone who had not been part of the discussion would understand. As they complete an insight, put it on the floor so that the rest of the group can read it. Try to avoid truisms. Ensure that the insight cards reflect the so what (synthesis) and now what (new action) discussion and not just the particulars of the story. Ask the recorders and the group if there are any gaps i.e. additional Insight cards needed to reflect the discussion

Creating Categories: Spread all the insight cards out on the floor to get an overview. Start to try to group into categories. Name the category and have a few words that would define or explain the category to someone else. Share these as well as a few So What or Now What insights from each category at the feedback session.

Take away notes and Insight cards to synthesise into a short summary of the context (no more than a paragraph on each of the 2 stories) and the key lessons or themes from your group's discussion.

**** APPENDIX 2**

Briefing for Story Tellers

Tell the story in the first person - I did, I felt etc The story needs to be your personal story as well as saying something about the theme.

Use a mixture of subjective and so-called 'objective' content. It's your story from your perspective. The more of you that is in it, generally the better the story will be. Take some risks, if you feel comfortable about doing so.

You only have 7 –10 mins to tell your story so roughly 3 mins for the beginning, the middle and the end. Once you have decided on the focus of your story, think about where you want to begin, what the meat of your story is, and (the middle) and the conclusions or reflections you want to draw at the end. The reflections process does not need to be complete, as it will be continued in the small groups on the day. You might find it helpful to give your story a title.

Write no more than a page of notes for the day. It is not necessary to write your story out in full or to share it with anyone other than those in the group - it doesn't work if people read their story off a page. The same rules of telling a good story anywhere apply. You need to engage with your audience. The story should reveal something about you as well as the broader theme. It should resonate for the audience in some way and have some inherent dramatic tension.

Your story will be used as the basis for unpacking some of the issues around the following theme.....



*** APPENDIX 3

Story Groups

(a) Structure

Between 7 and 10 people participate in each story group with two stories shared in each story group. The more stories shared, the more robust, or valid, the analysis and synthesis created by the group. Sharing stories involves some risk-taking and vulnerability. It is worthwhile suggesting some ground rules such as the following before the story circles start.

(b) Story Group Norms

We Will Be (constructively) Critical, asking and answering probing questions about our work in order to do it better.

We Will Be Caring, careful to ensure that our questions and our answers are generated in a climate of respect for the values that motivate us and for the skills and knowledge we already possess.

We Will Be Confidential, respecting the confidences of those story tellers who are taking the risks to share their experiences.

(c) Note-Taking During the Dialogue

It is important that all story-listeners (everyone in the story group except the story-teller) take some form of notes during the structured dialogue both as a basis for questions they want to ask and for the insight cards that will be generated later.

Your notes should be just detailed enough that, when you look at them later you will be able to remember the dialogue and parts of the story that sparked them.

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