

STORYCENTER

LISTEN DEEPLY... TELL STORIES

Storytelling Program Impacts

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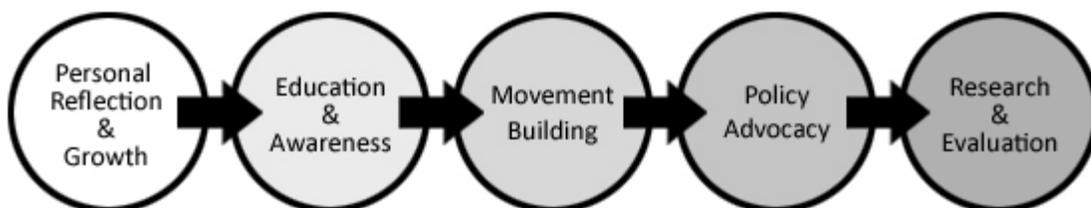
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Why Storytelling?

Over the past 20 years, storytelling and participatory media production methods have been taken up in a variety of community, health, educational, and academic settings. Since we began our work in the early 1990s, StoryCenter has drawn from testimonio, popular education, and facilitative filmmaking practices to develop workshop-based methods for engaging small groups of people in sharing short, first-person narratives that document a wide range of culturally and historically embedded life experiences. We choose to identify our range of methods under the umbrella of “StoryWork.”

Today, storytelling has become a buzz word. It’s increasingly difficult to find much thoughtful conversation about *why* a particular individual or group might benefit from sharing stories; *how* it is that people make decisions about representing themselves and their communities, in first-person narratives; and *what benefits* creating and sharing stories might offer to storytellers and listeners, respectively.

At StoryCenter, *our commitment is to support and nurture projects that capitalize on the transformational capacities of storytelling*, outlined here:



Personal Reflection and Growth.

While change is an inevitable part of being human, people often lack opportunities to share and bear witness to stories of their own struggles and joys, or to listen to those of others. Our array of StoryWork approaches at StoryCenter offer a safe, supportive environment in which participants of all ages and from all walks of life can explore their histories and reflect on how

they got to where they are. Important work in psychology has documented the significant mental health benefits of sharing personal memories in a group setting and writing autobiography, both of which are key aspects of the StoryWork methods we offer (see, for example, Herman, 1992; Pennebaker, 1997). By telling their own stories, workshop participants connect deeply with themselves and with others, access a renewed sense of hope for the future, and develop valuable skills for community and institutional leadership.

Education and Awareness.

Beyond the education on literacy, technology, and leadership that happens in the context of a StoryCenter workshop, our work over the years has proven that personal stories are immensely useful tools for learning and awareness. We work closely with workshop participants to ensure that the social and political determinants of individual “experience” are brought out, in their stories. Facts and timelines and third-person perspectives by “experts” can be useful in describing an issue or problem, but personal stories, when properly contextualized, can bring to life the realities of how individuals experience that issue or problem, day to day. Stories created in our workshops also stand out in the current field of media overload, with their directness of emotional expression. When people see and hear a story that addresses silenced or stigmatized topics, their conception of what can and can’t be said or done shifts, and this is where behavior and social norm change begin.

Movement Building.

Collective action begins with individual action, as people make connections between their own lives and the lives of others (Freire, 1970). Our StoryWork methods offer wonderful opportunities to examine life experiences and issues across chasms of difference – be they cultural, linguistic, political, racial, gendered, age-related, etc. As workshop participants allow themselves to be vulnerable in sharing their own stories, they gain insight into perspectives and emotions they may not previously have considered or felt. This builds solidarity within and across groups and encourages civic engagement. Once stories are completed, the audiences that watch them have the chance to consider how they may be affected by or implicated in a particular issue. With careful facilitation, community story screenings can generate deep and strategic discussion and function as opportunities to map out strategies for how audience members can take action on important issues. This work can be supported by sharing stories online and via social media methods or broadcasting them on local radio to reinforce what people have seen and heard at screening events.

Policy Advocacy.

In an ideal world, local communities would have ample opportunity to express their opinions and needs, and these voices would directly inform public policy debates. Unfortunately, abstract data and special interests all too often dominate. Stories created in our workshops can bring the concerns of those who are typically overlooked into the arena of policy and legislation. Their compact length and ability to zero in on significant topics and themes make them ideal for educating and influencing leaders and decision makers in government and other institutions. Additionally, unless the public is educated about the need for particular policies and those responsible for enforcement are appropriately trained, legislative and policy changes are unlikely to be impactful. StoryCenter stories can function as key components of public awareness raising and institutional capacity building efforts to support responsible implementation of policies that have already been adopted.

Research and Evaluation.

Whether in an academic or community context, our StoryWork methods can be used to assess and document local needs and problems, and to evaluate whether or not these needs and problems are being addressed by existing programs and services. We have collaborated with our partners on workshops that are framed as a form of community-based participatory research or engaged research, to support the gathering of qualitative evidence about issues of concern or local strengths and capacities that are being overlooked. We have also worked with partners to gather stories that document important moments along the way, as a project unfolds, or offer a reflective space where people can discuss what is working and what might be done differently. Our academic partners are also actively exploring how best to evaluate the impact of storytelling workshops and story screening events, on storytellers and audiences.

References

- Freire, P. (1970; 1992). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books.
- Pennebaker, James W (1997). *Opening up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*. New York: Guildford Press.