

Gathering Stories

The art and power
of storycatching in
human service work

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Introduction

Welcome to Gathering Stories: The art and power of storycatching in human service work.

This resource is designed to assist community and human service workers with gathering stories.

These could be the stories of people who access your service—stories of the work you have done with them—or your stories, where you reflect on your own practice.

Stories have the power to improve service. They can take us on a journey of discovery, have benefits beyond the individual - useful to all who are connected to a service and, have great value to the wider community.

To all those who access services and the practitioners who work alongside them: May your stories be heard and valued.

We hope this resource both encourages and supports you to 'catch' and share stories, from your work with people.

“ Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here? asked Alice.
That depends a good deal on where you want to get to, said the cat.
– Alice in Wonderland Lewis Carroll ”

Every story will be based upon **strengths-based**, **solution-focussed** and **narrative** approaches. Like the ingredients in a soup, these three approaches belong together; they have natural synergies. While they never ignore problems or the impact of problems upon the lives of people accessing services, they all assert that:

- Solutions to difficulties are more likely to lie in what is working rather than what isn't.
- It's better to focus energy on where people want to go rather than where they have been (i.e. focussing on goals and aspirations rather than on problems and their causes).
- The solution may be quite different to the problem.

What is strengths-based practice?

Strengths-based practice is essentially a philosophy for working with people to bring about change in ways that respect people's dignity, capacities, rights, uniqueness and commonalities. It looks for ways in which people can control and direct the process themselves by using the strengths and resources that they already hold, could develop, or that exist around them.

- All people have strengths and capacities
- People can change and grow
- People change and grow from their strengths and capacities
- People are experts on their own situation
- The problem is the problem, the person is not the problem
- Problems can blind people from noticing and appreciating their strengths and their capacity to find solutions
- When people appreciate their strengths they are free to learn and grow.

(Adapted from: McCashen W 2017, *The Strengths Approach*, p.40, St Luke's Innovative Resources)

What is solution-focussed practice?

Solution-focussed practice asserts that the solution to a person's problem may not be connected to the problem itself and that it is better to focus on what people are doing when the problem is absent, or less dominant, than on its causes. Solution-focussed work is more about working towards a goal, aspiration or exception to a problem than on working away from what has caused difficulty for someone.

It is more about what people might be doing differently in a 'preferred future' rather than on doing less of something.

Like strengths-based practice, solution-focussed work does not ignore problems and will always validate a person's experience of what can be very difficult, or even traumatic, experiences. It will acknowledge that solutions to a person's problems will lie in the resources that are existing or available, rather than in its causes.

What is narrative practice?

Narrative practice, like strengths-based, solution-focussed work, focusses on people as the experts in their lives. Non-blaming is its essence. This approach will attempt to separate people from the problems they experience by emphasising the stories that can be told about people's experiences.

A key principle of narrative work is that 'problems are problems, people are not problems' and that we can see through the various narratives or stories that exist, and how there can always be exceptions to what can initially be a problem-laden story. In this way, narrative practice also invites the possibility of 're-storying'—i.e. opening to the possibility of other interpretations. Narrative practice will also not ignore problems, but seek to place them within a wider story context.

Notes

Whatever practice approach is used, stories can be thought of as falling into three main groups: **narrative stories**, **consumer stories of service** and **practice reflection stories**.



What is a narrative story?



Key words

hopes
dreams
ambitions
challenges
celebrations
disappointments
family
whole-of-life

A narrative story usually has a person at its core. While it may concern the experiences of someone who is using a service, it is about the person using the service rather than the service alone.

This means it will often include more biographical details about the consumer's life and personal circumstances before entering the service, the meaning the interactions with the service has for them, and perhaps how the service fits within an overall life-story.

A narrative story is where you are more likely to hear about a person's hopes, dreams, challenges, disappointments and aspirations—and how these became part of the work that took place. Because narrative stories often express the unique language, personality and circumstances of the individual, the person may still be identifiable, even though their name may have been changed.

Narrative stories play an important role in maintaining a person-centred approach to the work we do with people. Understanding service delivery through a holistic, 'whole-of-life' lens can open the door to identifying strengths and resources the consumer may already hold or be able to develop further. This supports a more collaborative relationship as well as helping to create conditions where the consumer can effectively become their own agent of change.



What is a consumer story of service?



Key words

process
procedures
targets
research
allocations
key performance
indicators
events
timeframes

A consumer story of service normally focusses on how a particular program functions by using the experiences of consumers and workers to tell the story of the service provided.

A consumer story of service is an important means of finding out what is or isn't working, looking for areas of improvement or for supporting funding applications. Usually describing facts rather than personal opinion, a case study uses the experiences of a consumer and worker to tell a program-related story.

Consumer stories of service are less focussed on a person's unique, individual experiences than narrative stories; they may use the experiences of one person to describe the experiences of many. The subject of the consumer story of service will usually remain anonymous, with their real names and other possible identifiers such as gender often being disguised in the story.

What is a practice reflection story?



Key words

values
beliefs
culture
assumptions
hypothesis
meaning
conceptualising
exceptions
analysis
learning

While a narrative story can be seen as person-centred and the consumer story of service as service-centred, a practice reflection story is overtly worker-centred. Practice reflection often involves the worker examining how they affect, and are affected by, their work.

Unlike a consumer story of service, and even a narrative story, a practice reflection story will look into not only what happened and why, but what can be learned from it.

Even though practice reflections are predominantly worker-centred, they are of great benefit to both the service and the consumer because a conscious, self-aware worker is more likely to deliver a well-considered, effective service to consumers and better able to monitor their own self-care and wellbeing.

Practice reflection stories usually include some examination of how a worker's own values, beliefs, culture and assumptions play a role in the work they do. They also usually include some hypothesising about how reflection itself could lead to different outcomes for them and the consumers they support. Practice reflection stories helps create a dynamic culture of continuous learning within an organisation.



Reflective question

*Is there one type of storytelling that you feel confident using?
How might the other storytelling options be used in your practice?"*

Turn to Page 15 for more ideas



Notes

Why collect stories?

Every story, whether a narrative story, consumer story of service or practice reflection story, can improve service. Thinking about our service as a whole, stories can help us discover more about:

- How services work
- What we're getting right
- What we're getting wrong
- What we could do differently
- How policy gets translated into action
- What resources we need or could do without

At the level of the individual, storytelling and recording can have other, far-reaching benefits:

- Storytelling can be therapeutic, especially if strengths and exceptions are acknowledged within the story, and the person is listened to with interest and respect.
- Consumers are given a voice.
- Being included in service improvement can be empowering and affirming for consumers.
- Stories can highlight areas of concern for worker self-care.
- Practice reflection is a form of self-care that generates professional and personal satisfaction, and helps build cultures of learning and support.

All stories are useful to everyone connected to a service:

- Workers benefit from understanding the narrative written by, or about, the consumer, or how their practice forms part of a case study.
- Consumers are more likely to feel involved within a service that respects and values them on a holistic, person-centred level rather than simply seeing them as a client of a service.
- Consumers have the right to a worker who reflects on their practice.
- Consumers have the right to contribute to knowledge.
- Organisations can learn from the practice reflections of workers.
- Organisations can show transparency of service.

Stories are also of great value to the wider community because they can:

- Build empathy, understanding and connection between people.
- Educate the community.
- Demonstrate how to build resilience.
- Challenge stigmas and stereotypes, promote social justice and support advocacy.
- Publicise services and encourage people to seek help when needed.



**Reflective
question**

What do you want to achieve by collecting stories?

In what settings can stories be used?

Stories add rich layers of meaning, connection and learning. They can be:

- Shared at staff, team or network meetings
- Included as part of an organisation's Quality Improvement Cycle
- Used as evidence of current practice in funding submissions or reports
- Part of staff inductions, workshops, training and staff development days to illustrate the work and humanise clients
- Included as a regular part of supervision
- Featured in promotional activities such as newsletters, blogs and websites
- Published within annual reports
- Celebrated at award ceremonies and other occasions
- Featured in conference presentations.

Who can collect stories?

Provided there is respect, genuine interest, and the person telling the story feels safe with the storycatcher, stories can be collected within human services by people in a variety of different roles including:

- Staff at any level
- CEO, management and the leadership team
- Volunteers
- Consumers interested in capturing or sharing their stories
- Students on placement
- People engaged specifically to collect stories.

How do I manage confidentiality?

Whatever form the story takes, protocols around confidentiality must be observed for a range of reasons:

- People have a right to privacy and safety.
- The story of a person belongs to them.
- Effective practice is more likely in a relationship built upon trust.
- Ensure you are aware of processes in your organisation to manage confidentiality.



Reflective question

Have you considered how the story will be used?

How do I manage safety?

Stories are often connected to a person's sense of identity, values, culture, and self-worth. Feelings of vulnerability can arise when recalling past events:

- Are there any risks in asking this person to tell or re-tell their story?
- Have you checked through the questions you will ask?
- Have you considered how a person will be supported if telling the story gives rise to strong emotions?
- Does the person know they have a 'right to pass' on a question or withdraw at any point in the process?
- Is any follow up needed with the person a few days later?

What should I consider before collecting stories?

- Has an agreement regarding confidentiality (where necessary and appropriate) been discussed and signed?
- Does the person know how the information will be stored?
- Does the person know how the information will be used?
- Do you have a safe place to store the information (whether hard copy or digital)?
- How will you check with the person that the story has been represented correctly before it is published or shared i.e. How will they sign off on it before it is published?
- Has provision been made for the person to decline publication of the story or remove it once it has been published?
- How will acknowledgements be made to a named person?
- Is there clarity and agreement about copyright?

 **Notes**

What are some methods for recording stories?

The method used to record the story will most likely depend upon the preferences of the storycatcher, the type of story as well as the purpose for which the story is being collected. While simple digital documents are perhaps the most accessible and easily modified for use down the track, other forms of storycatching might be considered because they capture the story in greater detail or in a manner that transmits the person's voice or the meaning of their experience more fully.

Most importantly, the person themselves could be asked for their preferred method, and wherever possible, they can be actively involved in designing their own questions as well as managing the actual recording. You may choose to use:

- Traditional pen and paper including diaries, journals and notebooks
- Word processing programs on computers, laptops, ipads and other electronic devices
- Voice recording and voice recognition software on computers, laptops, ipads and other electronic devices
- Smart phones to capture voice and/or visual images as movies or photographs which can be edited using the phone's own software or freely available downloadable programs
- Skype or Zoom to record meetings, interviews and conversations
- Podcasts made with popular free apps such as 'Podbean' which allow for simple recordings to be stored on a phone, then edited and/or distributed later.

No matter which form of recording is used, it should be administered respectfully and checked for accuracy by all concerned. This is vital because you may have inadvertently misunderstood or misrepresented what the person meant, the person may have changed their mind or remembered something important that should be included, or they may no longer want their story to be read or heard by others. It is their right to withdraw or change their story.



Reflective question

What method do you think will best capture the story?



Notes

What are some techniques for getting stories to flow?

There are many simple, creative techniques for gathering the story. Capturing the person's unique 'voice', including expressions and vocabulary is important for the authenticity of the story, especially in narrative stories. So take that into consideration when choosing your techniques. Here are a few simple techniques:

- Simple sentence starters are a great way to generate the conversation. If you wish, the whole story can be gathered using sentence starters! Here are some ideas to spark your imagination:



Great ideas

The day I decided to get some support was important to me because...

The most useful thing that this service did was...

A turning point for me was...

I really appreciated...

I felt worried when...

I felt hopeful when...

I laughed when...

One thing that didn't work so well was...

I will never forget...

One thing that I would tell someone else about this service is...

What I learnt from working with this person was...

My practice changed because...

My lightbulb moment was...

- A **series of questions** could be submitted to the person for answering in their own time, place or method. If the person is responding in writing, keep in mind that it may be more difficult to capture the unique expressions of the person as people often write more formally than they speak. The advantage of this technique is that it is often a relatively quick way to gather the information.
- An **interview** is a classic way to gather a story. The interview can then be written up and checked with the person.
- Using **themes** or **summaries** as headings can be a useful way of structuring the information.
- **Letter writing** can be used as a record of contact between a worker/service and consumer. These letters can be a rich source of storytelling.
- **Six-word stories** (a story kept to six words only e.g. 'A thousand wrinkles, a thousand smiles') was invented by Ernest Hemingway. There are many books with wonderful examples of these stories. Google examples.
- **Diaries, journals** and **scrapbooks** can be kept as records of the service.
- **Consumer resumes/CVs** can also contribute to the story.

When people think of stories they often think of words—spoken or written. There are many other highly-visual ways of 'telling' stories including artwork such as photography, drawing, painting, sculpture, printmaking, collage and music. Visual elements such as these can be combined with words or stand alone as an entirely visual way to tell the story.

What resources can I use to encourage storytelling?

Many resources have been developed for encouraging storytelling. As the saying goes: 'A picture is worth a thousand words' and sometimes a simple visual image can provide a great entryway for people to tell their story.

Some simple questions to use with card-based tools include:

- Can you pick a card for how you felt before you came?
- Can you pick a card for how you felt at the end of the service?
- Can you pick cards for what is most important to you about the work we did together?
- Can you pick cards that represent sad/funny/hopeful/anxious moments for you during the service?
- Can you pick a card for a significant turning point?
- Which cards express how you feel about the service overall?
- Can you pick a card for where you are heading now?
- Can you pick a card that reflects how your work has made a difference to you?
- Can you pick a card that reflects how you made a difference to someone else?

St Luke's Innovative Resources publishes a range of highly visual resources featuring photographs, cartoons, paintings and tactile materials including:



Great ideas

Storycatching
Symbols
PaperWorks* (photocopiable images for writing on)
Picture This (photographic images)
The Bears, Funky Fish Feelings, Ups and Downs (tools for exploring feelings)
Body Signals
Reflexions
Self-Care Cards for Home & Work
PostCards
Rainbow Talk (conversations about gender, sexuality and biological sex)
... and digital tools such as the Scaling Kit and the Growing Well apps.



Notes

Part 2

Gathering the Story

By now you might have a clear idea of the kind of story you would like to record. You might have decided to tell the story from the perspective of the consumer and want to include personal elements or connections to the consumer's broader life experiences (Narrative Story).

Or, you might want the story to be mostly about the service, but from the consumer's point of view (Consumer Story of Service).

Or you might want the story to be a way of reflecting on your practice—how your work has made a difference to you and how you make a difference to the experiences of others (Practice Reflection Story).

You might also have decided upon a method. Perhaps an interview, an audio recording, a video, a typed document, a document using tables or columns. Or perhaps a series of drawings or photographs created by you or the person accessing the service—or any other method (or combination of methods) that works well for you, the person and the service.

Whether or not you have decided these things, it can be helpful to plan ahead. This will maximise your chances of choosing the most appropriate form for the story and gather the most important aspects of the work you do and the people with whom you do it.

“ When we share our stories, we are reminded of the humanity of each other.

When we take this time to understand each other's stories, we become more forgiving, more empathetic and more inclusive.

– Michelle Obama

”

Getting started

Completing the following statements will help you choose the right story form or category to best meet your purposes.



Question

The story reflects a change in the way we...



Question

The story reflects my work principles/approach by...



Question

The outcome of the story had an impact on...



Question

The story provides value to the audience by...

Brainstorming the Story

Using a storyboard can be a useful way to start constructing your story. Below is a brainstorming exercise that will assist you to establish the skeleton of the story you will develop.

Before

The background/situation

- What was the situation (before?)
- What were the 'pain points' for the consumer/s and/or the organisation?
- Why was this an issue?
- Who were the people involved?
- What may have happened if it wasn't addressed?
- What were the symptoms and causes of the problem?

During

The actions/solutions

- What were you hoping to achieve? (goal)
- How did you do it? (tasks/actions)
- What other ideas/solutions did you consider?
- What made this idea the best option?
- Who was involved? (staff/volunteers/family)
- What were the timeframes?
- What were the challenges?

After

The impacts/outcomes

- What were the outcomes/results?
- How did this impact/benefit the consumer and/or the organisation?
- How did the principles/approach make a difference?
- Were there unexpected benefits or learnings?
- Learnings: What tips could you provide other organisations considering using this approach?



Great idea

Using the voice of the people telling the story can help the reader identify with, connect or believe what they are reading/hearing/seeing. Consider how you might record and use quotes from the person, to focus attention on the authentic voice within the story.



Constructing the Story

The questions on the following pages, have been grouped into the three story forms or categories, outlined in Part One:



Narrative Story



Consumer Story of Service



Practice Reflection Story



Great idea

As previously mentioned, stories may contain elements of all three forms, even though they tend to fall mainly into one of these categories. For this reason, please feel free to select questions from any section.

The background/situation



Narrative Story

- Can you tell me a little about yourself before you came into contact with... (worker/service/organisation)?
- What would you like us to know about your culture?
- What would you like us to know about your identity (gender, sexuality, faith, spirituality)?
- What would you like us to know about your family or community?
- If your life was made into a movie what roles have you played in your life? Who would play you?
- If we collaborated to write your autobiography what would the chapters about your life before coming into contact with ... (worker/ service/organisation) be about? What would the illustrations look like?
- Who is important to you? Why?
- What is one thing you could teach me?
- What is important to you? What do you value? What do you believe?
- What does independence mean to you?
- How did you come into contact with us?



Consumer Story of Service

- How did the consumer come into contact with... (worker/ service/organisation)?
 - Via referral from another service • Family • Self-referral • Phone call • Visit
- What other services were involved?
- What was the main reason for contact?
- How would you describe the family structure?
- What is the main reason your service exists?
- What were the main points of the referral?
- Why was the referral made?
- What was the purpose of the work?
- Why did you or your service make the decision to work with the consumer?
- What else was happening?



Practice Reflection Story

- Why do I do the job that I do?
- What is important to me?
- What helps me determine the 'right' thing to do?
- How do my values and beliefs play a part in my work?
- If this is a reflection upon a significant event:
 - What was happening within the service or program before the event took place?
 - What was happening for me before the event took place? Personally? Professionally?
 - What is the context? What constitutes the big picture? How about the smaller one?
 - Who else was involved? What part did they play?
 - What were my predictions for what would happen?
 - How similar or different was this context?

During

The actions/solutions



Narrative Story

- What were the first things you noticed when you started working with us?
- What were the first feelings or thoughts that you had?
- What were/are your hopes?
- How would you describe your worker or the people who you spoke to?
- How does our service fit with your life story?
- What was the sequence of events that took place?
- How would you describe your relationship with your worker or the service overall?



Consumer Story of Service

- What was the sequence of events?
- Who was involved and when?
- What was the timeframe?
- What decisions were made?
- What steps were taken?
- What other ideas did you consider?
- What influenced your decision?
- What made this different? The same?
- What were the biggest challenges? Opportunities?
- What approach did you take?
- How does this connect with the service system?



Practice Reflection Story

- Can you describe the events that took place?
- Can you describe your thoughts and feelings?
- Can you describe what was happening in your body (your 'body signals')?
- What assumptions did you make about what was happening?
- How did these assumptions affect what happened?
- Did any values 'compete' with each other (e.g. duty-of-care v self-determination)?
- How did your culture play a part?
- How would the client have experienced your values and beliefs?
- Would they know what these values and beliefs are?
- How does the event connect with the bigger picture?
- What theories informed what you did or did not do?
- What assumptions or predictions did you make during the event?

The impacts/outcomes



Narrative Story

- What did we do well?
- What should we improve?
- Did you feel respected?
- How well did we listen?
- What advice would you like to give your worker?
- If you were CEO of our organisation what changes would you make?
- What difference has working with us made for you (and your family)?
- Did we live up to your expectations?
- Were your best hopes realised?
- What was the best/worst/funniest moment?
- What made you feel like a person and not simply a client?



Consumer Story of Service

- What were the outcomes/result?
- How did this impact/benefit the consumer and/or organisation?
- How did the principles/approach make a difference?
- What were the expected/unexpected benefits or learnings?
- What got in the way? What did you have control/no control over?
- Learnings – what tips could you provide other organisations considering using this approach?
- What quotes could you include in your story? Could one of these be the title?
- What difference did the organisational principles make? Were the organisational mission and values evident in everything that happened?



Practice Reflection Story

- What was the most important thing that you took away from your work?
- Have your values or beliefs changed in any way?
- Do you know now anything you did not know before?
- Given what you know now what would or could be different next time?
- Was the solution different to the problem?
- What could this event teach others?
- What difference did you make to the consumer's story?
- What difference did the consumer make to the story?
- How confident do you feel about sharing this story? What affects this?
- Did you think that you did the 'right' thing?
- Have your feelings about the job changed in any way as a result of what you experienced?
- Do you still feel that you are 'in the right job'?

 Notes

Ruled lines for writing notes.

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