STORYTELLING
HUMAN-FRIENDLY EVALUATION

OLD FIRE STATION

A guide to using the Storytelling Evaluation Method

Contents

Summary

The Old Fire Station arrived at Storytelling after many years of struggling with evaluation. Too often, we found ourselves wasting time collecting data that didn't help us to learn and got in the way of our work. Storytelling, on the other hand, offered something new.

Storytelling invites people to sit down for an hour or two and tell their own story of being involved in a project or area of work. These conversations are recorded, transcribed, and edited into two-page documents that preserve the storytellers' own voice and words. Once we have a collection of stories, we facilitate a group discussion to identify what can be learned from them.

Storytelling helps us to do justice to the messiness of people's lives in a way that tick boxes and feedback forms never can. It helps us to listen, it's a meaningful and collaborative process, and leads to rich and versatile data rooted in human stories. It's shifted evaluation from being an add-on at the end of our work, to something central to who we are and what we do.

We first wrote 'A guide to using Storytelling to evaluate impact' in 2019. We've since gone on to train and support over 90 (and counting!) local and national partners in using the approach. We've now updated this guide to reflect how our understanding of the method has developed.

The first section explains the background to the method, how it's been used, and its benefits and limitations. The second section outlines step by step how to put Storytelling into practice.

Alongside this guide, you can find further examples of stories and projects on our website: www.storytellingevaluation.co.uk

We want this guide to be available to anyone interested in using the approach. That's why we've made it free and accessible in the public domain. All that we ask is that you credit the Old Fire Station and do not use any material for commercial purposes. If you use this guide in its entirety or make copies, we ask that you keep its original form, but you are also welcome to take ideas from it and adapt them to suit your needs (see copyright notice at the end). If you find the guide useful and would like to contribute to our work, you can donate here.

We hope you enjoy learning about Storytelling, and we look forward to hearing how you go on to use it!

An Introduction to Storytelling
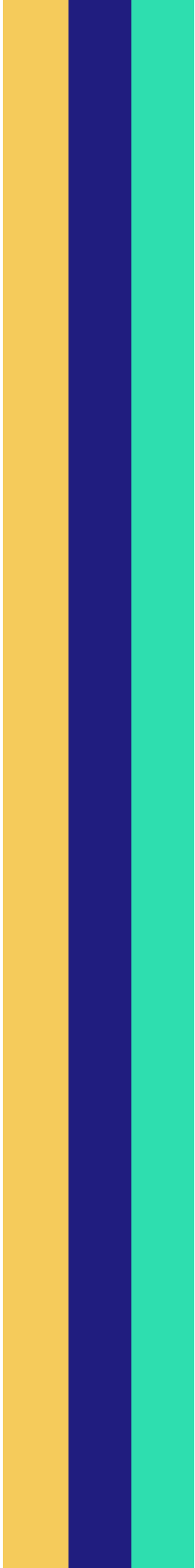
About us

The Old Fire Station is a centre for creativity in Oxford housing two organisations: the homelessness charity Crisis Skylight Oxford (Crisis) and the Old Fire Station arts centre (OFS). We share our building, and we encourage people from all backgrounds to understand and shape the world in which we live through stories, creativity and the arts, and connecting with others.

Oxford is globally renowned for stunning heritage and outstanding research, but it is also a place of profound inequality. OFS offers people who are homeless a space to define themselves by including them in running of the centre. We also look for ways to include other Oxford residents who have been disadvantaged or socially isolated. This improves the quality of what we do, helps develop networks, builds resilience, and leads to more stable lives.

What we do:
- Produce and present across art forms
- Help people to be creative
- Support artists
- Include people facing tough times because of disadvantage
- Work with communities across Oxford

Marmalade and the Meaningful Measurement Action Inquiry

Marmalade is a collaboration involving partners from across Oxford who are focused on making the city a better place. The group leads activities that shift and share power and help to build more human-centred services for everyone.

As part of this work, OFS leads the Meaningful Measurement Action Inquiry. We work with local authorities, voluntary action and lived experience groups, service providers, funders and commissioners, and cultural partners to reflect on what works (and doesn't) when it comes to measurement. We're interested in the role that measurement can play in shifting towards a culture which fosters learning, centres the voices of those at the heart of work in decision making, and shifts power.

You can find out more about the inquiry and what we have learned so far here: https://www.marmalade.io/meaningful-measurement-inquiry

The Storytelling Evaluation Method

Since opening in 2011, OFS has explored different ways to understand the impact of its work. We struggled with traditional methods of monitoring and evaluation, often finding that these distracted from our work, got in the way of relationships that we had built over time, and failed to reflect the complexity of what we do.

In 2017, we asked external evaluators Liz Firth and Anne Pirie to help us develop something new. The Storytelling Evaluation Method (Storytelling) is the outcome of that process.

Storytelling involves collecting stories from people about their experience of a project and the participatory analysis of these stories. It is inspired by Most Significant Change (MSC), an approach developed by Rich Davies and Jess Dart, which is often used in international development and Asset Based Community Development (strengths-based) work.

The Storytelling Evaluation Method includes the following key stages:

1. **Recruit story collectors** – people who are trained in guiding conversations with storytellers about their experience and what it has meant to them.
2. **Identify storytellers** – people who reflect a range of different perspectives on the project being evaluated
3. **Storytellers and story collectors have a conversation** – each storyteller meets with a trained story collector. Their conversation is guided by four open questions: What's been your involvement? What's changed you? Why was that change important? What enabled it to happen? Crucially, this is not an interview but a conversation – relaxed, informal and on the teller's terms
4. **Transcription and editing** – the conversations are recorded, transcribed, and edited into 1–2-page stories that aim to faithfully reflect the teller's insights while preserving their 'voice' – telling it in their own words. The stories are sent to the storytellers for their input and approval before being shared
5. **Discussion session** – a facilitated discussion which brings together people with different perspectives on and experiences of the work to discuss the stories and what can be learned from them
6. **Sharing learning** – this can be in the form of the stories themselves, a written report, creative projects, audio recordings, or any other media that enhance accessibility and reflect the complexity of the original conversations

What are the benefits of Storytelling?

- **It centres the experience of those most involved.** Unlike many conventional approaches to evaluation, Storytelling is not shaped by quantitative indicators developed in advance. It asks people to share what change looks and feels like for them, in their own voice and words

- **It's meaningful, collaborative, and enjoyable.** Telling your story can be a validating and reflective experience. Because it is participatory at every stage, the Storytelling process can also help organisations to listen better, build relationships, and ensure evaluation is collaborative and involves different people and perspectives at each stage

- **It leads to rich and versatile learning.** Storytelling captures rich qualitative data. It's good at measuring change that is unexpected, emergent, personalised, or complex, and understanding the contexts in which change happens. It results in powerful, human stories that help us to learn, and can be used across wider comms, marketing, and fundraising

What are the considerations and constraints of the method?

Positive focus – in asking people to reflect on what changed for them, there is a tendency for people to focus on the positive aspects of their experience. This means that first and foremost, Storytelling helps us to learn from what went well. We believe that what people value most can often come as a surprise, and gaining a deep understanding of what really matters to people is fundamental to offering human-friendly services. This does not mean that the method only allows for positive feedback; very often people do share negative aspects of their experience which are an important part of the story. There is also space for critical reflections within the discussion session. However, the predominately positive nature of the stories means that it's important to consider pairing it with other tools that can capture what didn't go so well. Storytelling itself might even be adapted to collect critical stories, although this would have implications for the management of the evaluation – who would collect the stories, and how would you ensure that storytellers felt able to speak freely?

Capacity and resource – Storytelling isn't a quick fix. Supporting storytellers and collectors, having reflective conversations, transcribing and editing stories, facilitating discussion sessions, writing up learning, and general project management all call for focus and capacity. When we consider the wider benefits of Storytelling – the value of the process in and of itself, and the versatility of the stories and learning, we feel this is time well spent. We've found that quality can be more important than quantity – i.e., focus on fewer stories and use the method selectively (rather than for every project).

Depth over breadth – Storytelling deliberately aims for depth over breadth. We've found that it is particularly good at evaluating longer-term projects, and that focusing on 5-10 stories is enough, rather than trying to capture every voice (although a diverse group of storytellers is still important). Storytelling can then be paired with more scalable evaluation methods to add richness and context to a data set.

How has Storytelling been used?

At OFS, we have used Storytelling to evaluate the impact of our own work and trained and supported over 90 partners (and counting) in using the method. These include local authorities, research institutions, cultural organisations, and community groups, including:

Active Oxfordshire, Aspire, African Families in the UK, Age UK Oxfordshire, Asylum Welcome, Broken Spoke Bike Co-op, CAG Oxfordshire, The Barbican (London), Connection Support, Elmore Community Services, Home-Start Oxford, Lived Experience Advisory Forum (LEAF), Oxfordshire Homeless Movement, Oxford Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA), Oxford Hub, Oxford City Council, Oxfordshire County Council, Royal Exchange Theatre (Manchester), University of Oxford - Centre for Evidence Based Medicine.

Partners have used Storytelling in different ways, including:

To evaluate the impact of an organisation
We first used Storytelling to help us understand the impact of our work at OFS – speaking to volunteers, artists, trainees, staff members, trustees, audience members, partners, and friends. These stories led us to rewrite our mission statement, placing good quality relationships at the heart of everything we do.

To evaluate the impact of a project
The No Recourse to Public Funds Project (NRPF) brings together partners across the homelessness and asylum sectors to provide housing and support to people living in Oxfordshire with no recourse to public funds. OFS is helping NRPF to collect stories from staff and service users over a period of five years, using the learning captured to inform future practice.

To evaluate the impact of a network
LEAF is an independent advisory group run by and for people with lived experience of homelessness. It works to ensure that the input of Experts by Experience is included in commissioning, policy, service delivery, and evaluation. LEAF members have been trained in Storytelling, and used the approach to learn about people's experiences of their work.

To evaluate the impact of a service
OFS worked with Age UK Oxfordshire (AUKO) and a range of other partners in public health research and the cultural sector to evaluate the impact of AUKO's social prescribing services. This evaluation helped AUKO to learn about its own work and was also used as a pilot to explore different ways of evaluating social prescribing.

To evaluate an area of focus shared among partners
OFS supported the Oxfordshire Comms Group, a County Council network focused on mental wellbeing, to evaluate mental wellbeing support in the county. We collected stories from partners involved in delivering a wide range of mental wellbeing services in Oxfordshire and then met to discuss what could be learned from them.

You can read the stories and learning reports from all our projects on our website.

What have we learned from using Storytelling?

While individual projects produce their own insights, when we step back and look at the stories as a whole collection there are several themes which come up repeatedly across projects and organisations:

- Small things matter to people
- Relationships are important
- Active listening is powerful
- Collaboration is key
- Projects need to be able to adapt and be flexible
- It is important to take risks, fail, learn and adapt

As part of the Meaningful Measurement Inquiry, we have also brought together partners to reflect on what they've learned about the method itself. You can find a summary of this learning here.

The six steps of Storytelling

1. Recruit and train story collectors

2. Identify and brief storytellers

3. Storytellers and story collectors have a conversation

4. Conversation is recorded, transcribed and edited

5. Story discussion session is held

Stories and learning is shared!

1. Recruit and train story collectors

"Telling my story, I felt like I was a pressure cooker and somebody was like opening the lid and letting all the steam out. The collector was diplomatic, kind and supportive, which was really important. And actually reading it back felt very profound."

The role of the story collector is to guide a conversation with the storyteller about their experience and what it has meant for them. This conversation should be framed by four open questions: What was your involvement? What changed for them? Why was this change important? How did it happen?

Story collectors should:

- Be relatable for the storytellers
- Be able to confidently guide a conversation
- Be able to put people at ease and build a connection
- Be a good listener
- Be interested in people and their stories

OFS Training: OFS offers a full-day Story Collecting training (plus resources). This is an in-depth look at the story collecting part of the Storytelling method, including how to arrange and support meaningful conversations, how to guide conversations using open questions, and opportunities to put story collecting into practice.
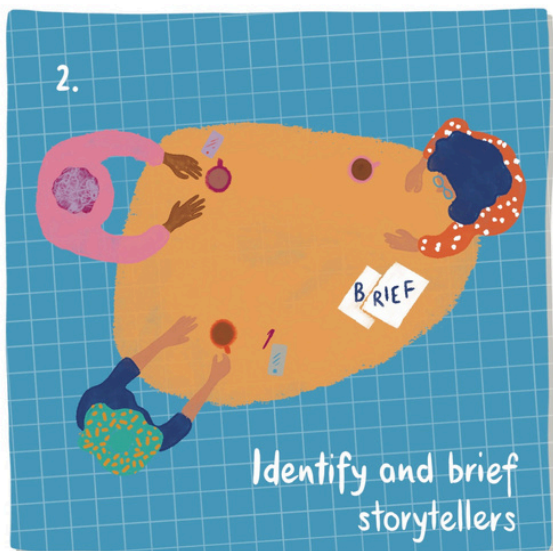
2. Identify and brief storytellers

Storytellers should represent a range of perspectives on the area that you would like to learn about. This might include service users, staff, volunteers, commissioners, and more. By collecting stories from a diverse group, you will be able to learn about different aspects of your work and understand how its impact is felt by those most involved.

You should select storytellers based on:

- What you want to learn
- Whose voices need to be heard
- Who wants to share their story

Briefing: Explain clearly to storytellers what they should expect from this process. Why are you collecting their story? What is it going to be used for? How will story collecting work? Will their name be used, and if not, how will the story be anonymised? It should be clear that they can start the story where they want to and only have to share as much as feels comfortable.

Consent: All storytellers must sign a consent form, which explains the purpose of the project, what the stories will be used for, and procedures for anonymity. The storyteller must also be the first person to see the edited story, have the opportunity to make changes, and know that it will not be shared more widely until they are happy.

Confidentiality and GDPR: Inform the storyteller of your data handling policy. Once the story is edited and the audio recording is no longer needed, it should be deleted. The recording should also only be made available those who need it for the administration of the project.

Storytellers and story collectors have a conversation

3. Storytellers and story collectors have a conversation

This conversation is guided by 4 open questions:

- What's been your involvement?
- What's changed for you?
- Why is this change important?
- How did it happen?

These questions are the ground the story collector must make sure they cover over the course of the conversation, they do not need to be asked in these exact words, and other follow-up questions are necessary. Story collecting shouldn't feel like an interview but should be conversational and on the storyteller's terms.

Top tips for Story collectors:

1. Take time to build a connection and get comfortable
2. Remember it's a conversation, not an interview
3. Be genuinely interested and actively listen
4. Focus on what's changed for them personally
5. Get into the details, ask questions and be curious
6. Don't assume or interpret
7. Go at their pace
8. Give the conversation sufficient time
9. Be OK with silence
10. Don't worry if it doesn't sound like a story yet!

When setting up these conversations consider:

- How will you match storytellers and collectors so that the storyteller is able to speak openly about their experience?
- Who will manage logistics (room booking, travel, greeting, refreshments)?
- Is the environment comfortable and private?
- How will you debrief with both the storyteller and the story collector?

Support: It is important that both the storyteller and the story collector feel supported before, during, and after their conversation. This includes briefing them about the purpose of the project, setting aside adequate space and time for story collection (up to 2 hours in a private, comfortable environment), greeting them on arrival, arranging refreshments, being available for contact throughout in case either the storyteller or story collector needs to stop or take a break, and debriefing afterwards.

You may also need to consider other kinds of support, such as translation for those who speak English as an additional language.

Telling your story can be a validating and enjoyable process, but it can also be emotionally draining or bring up sensitive subjects for both the teller and the collector. It is therefore important to make time for debriefing afterwards, and to make clear to both storyteller and story collector that they can take a break, or stop, at any time.

Timing: When possible, it is good to avoid imposing time constraints on a conversation. Some people take longer than others to warm up, and often the most interesting insights arrive after the storyteller has covered the areas that they initially expected to. We recommend setting aside between 45 minutes and 2 hours for story collecting.

Recording: When collecting stories in person, conversations should be recorded using an audio recording device. Make sure that the story collector is familiar with whatever method you are using beforehand, and check for the volume of the recording and the audio quality. If you are collecting stories remotely, you can record using an online video call platform such as Zoom or MS Teams.
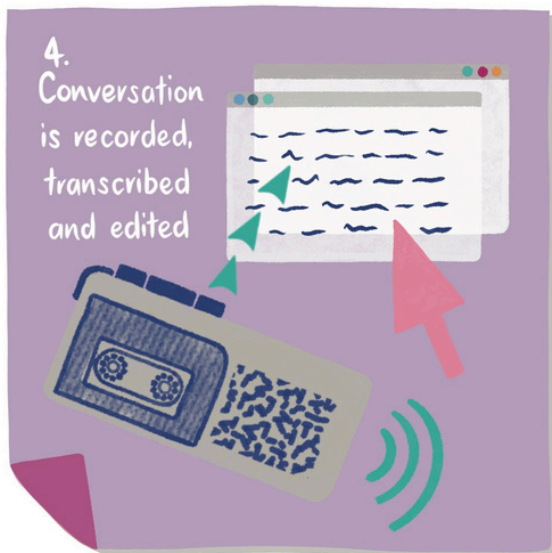
4. The conversation is recorded, transcribed and edited

Transcription

Once you have an audio recording of the conversation between storyteller and story collector, it is necessary to transcribe it verbatim. This ensures that the storyteller's voice and words are preserved for the final edited version of the story. Transcription can be time consuming and fiddly, but there are a few things you can do to make it easier.

Transcription software: You can use a computer programme to transcribe an audio file (e.g. Otter). Once you have run your transcription software on your audio recording, you will need to go through the transcript and correct any errors that you find whilst listening to the story.

Professional transcription services: You can also outsource transcription to professionals. There are organisations and freelancers who offer this service.

Editing

Once you have complete transcripts of your conversations, you will need to edit them down into concise 1-2-page stories that preserve the voice, words, and insights of the storyteller. The purpose of the final edited stories is to:

- Reflect the storyteller's insights into the project or area of focus that you are evaluating, especially their personal experience of its impact
- Preserve the storyteller's voice – so that the edited story is comprised entirely of the storyteller's own words (although these might be sensitively organised into a more coherent narrative)
- Capture the reader's attention – the finished story must be readable and clear

To best achieve these aims, the edited story should have the following key qualities:

- Personal – it should speak about personal change in the storyteller's own words
- Detailed – it should include the real-life details that bring a story to life
- Focused – it should mainly focus on the area or project that you are evaluating

Professional editing services: Editing is a time consuming and skilled job, and the most reliable way to produce well-edited stories is to outsource this task to freelance professionals.

> *"I talked to people, and they said, "Why do you need the arts?" but that's the bit that makes you a real person, and not a statistic. It's like being awakened, isn't it. It's kind of like you've been hibernating for a really long time. And you find that you're existing, you know. And I think what this offers, it's like waking up and it's spring."*

Training: OFS offers a half-day Transcription and Editing training (plus resources). We will show you how to turn an audio recording of a conversation into a concise written story that preserves the voice and insights of the storyteller.

5. Story discussion session is held

The discussion session is a facilitated meeting that helps your organisation to reflect on the stories and what can be learned from them. This session lasts for around 3 hours and brings together 15-30 people with different relationships to the work that you are evaluating. The discussion session is a participative process. As with other aspects of the Storytelling method, it aims to bring together a range of perspectives and foster collaboration.

We recommend that you invite a broad range of participants to your discussion session. This can include those who have worked on your project as well as others who may have relevant experience but were not personally involved – e.g., partners, colleagues from similar organisations, funders and commissioners. Some organisations choose to include storytellers in their discussion session, and others prefer not to. Either option is fine, but if you do invite storytellers, it is a good idea to think about how this might impact the discussion, and any extra support that they might need.

The facilitated discussion allows space for participants to reflect on what struck and surprised them about the stories, and to identify threads and themes emerging. It is also an opportunity to analyse the stories in relation to outcomes that you have decided in advance. Storytelling deliberately avoids using predetermined criteria to shape either the story collecting or transcription and editing stages of the process – at the discussion stage you can retroactively evaluate any targets or outcomes that you have for your work, without prejudicing data collection.

The content of the discussion session can then be used to compile a report on what you have learned during your Storytelling evaluation.

6. Stories and learning is shared

The key themes identified by participants in the discussion session can then form the basis for a report. This is a way to distil the insights of the stories into a shorter, more digestible form.

The best way to learn from Storytelling is to read and discuss the stories themselves. It is a good idea to make this clear in the final report, and to include the stories in full as an appendix. However, not everyone can be expected to read every story, and for the purposes of communication and reporting to funders, having a breakdown of the main insights that the stories have generated is helpful. You can do this in any way that you find best for you, but the aim is to draw on the interpretations of those who attended your discussion session.

The stories can also be shared in other creative ways. For instance, we have made audio recordings of the stories, created a collaborative Storytelling quilt with tellers and collectors, created comic strips, a short film, a theatre performance and more.

Conclusion

We have found Storytelling to be a rich and creative approach to evaluation. It centres the voices of those most involved, is a meaningful process, enriches our wider work, and leads to deep, insightful learning. We've been inspired by the breadth of partners using Storytelling in different ways. If you decide to use Storytelling, we'd love to know how you get on. If you're interested in working together, we can offer training, guidance and support for partners. You can also sign up to our Storytelling mailing list here and see more examples of how partners are using Storytelling to meaningfully evaluate impact on our website.

With thanks to

OFS Storytelling guide 2024, revised by Sarah Cassidy and Will Long