

STORYCENTER

LISTEN DEEPLY... TELL STORIES

Storytelling Program Impacts

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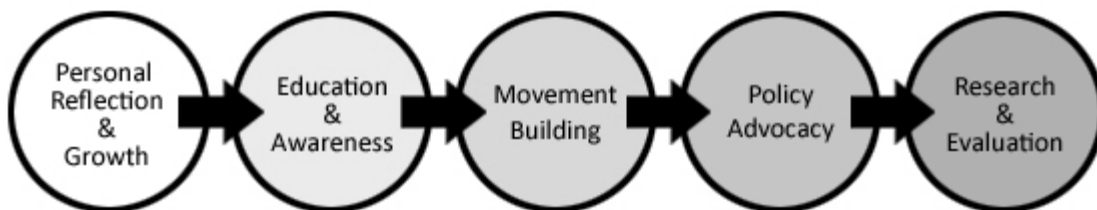
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Why Storytelling?

Over the past 25 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 oral history, popular education, and facilitative filmmaking theories and techniques to develop workshop-based methods for engaging small groups of people in sharing short, first-person stories that document a wide range of culturally and historically embedded life experiences.

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; 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 storytelling 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 storytelling methods we offer (see, for example, Herman, 1992; Pennebaker, 1997). By telling their own stories in their own words, workshop participants connect deeply with themselves and with others, gain an understanding of the power of representing their own lives and issues, 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 supporting learning and awareness in viewing audiences. We work closely with partners to ensure that workshop participants represent the diversity of particular communities. And we work closely with workshop participants to ensure that the social and political determinants of individual experience are brought out, in their stories. Facts, 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 for justice begins with individual action, as people make connections between their own lives and the lives of others (Freire, 1970). Our storytelling 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 voices and concerns of marginalized groups that are typically overlooked into the arena of policy and legislative change for equity and social justice. 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 unless those responsible for enforcement are appropriately trained, 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 newly-adopted policies.

Research and Evaluation.

Whether in an academic or community context, our storytelling methods can be used to assess and document local needs, and to evaluate whether or not these needs are being adequately addressed by existing services. We collaborate with 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, and on efforts to support community change and social justice.

For more information, email info@storycenter.org

StoryCenter is committed to challenging white supremacy and supporting social justice, in every aspect of our work.

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.