



An ocean *of stories*

KELLEY JOHNSON

From our first moments of breath (and before) we swim in an ocean of stories: about us, for us, and by us. We learn about ourselves, each other and the world through stories. From ballad singers of medieval times who told the news across their countries, through newspapers to internet stories, fireside spoken stories, and chats around the photocopier, we are truly story-telling animals.

Often it is the story that we remember rather than the accompanying information. For example, when I was at University I attended many English lectures. Now they are forgotten but the memory remains of a personal story by the lecturer of a

moonlit walk through the snow in Vienna. Our stories can be inspirational, motivating others to take action, they can engender feelings and can lead to powerful responses by individuals, groups and government.

People working and participating in projects in the community are in the midst of stories about their work and its effects on those involved with it. These stories make the project come alive. Statistics and figures are important, but the stories are often remembered far longer. Yet while we tell the stories we often don't use them as part of our formal reports and accounts of our work. Sometimes this is because we think that stories are not "real or hard information". Sometimes there

are so many that we are afraid of drowning in them. This article describes some of the ways to stay afloat in the ocean, and how to gather stories in a systematic way.

It is possible to see all written material arising from the work of a project as a story. After all, the writer selects some information to include in his or her account and excludes other material as irrelevant to the purpose. Further, the story of a project usually brings together a range of different sources and information to focus on a particular theme.

Documentation of a project using words can take many different forms: from poetry, to rich descriptions of

places or events or participants; from personal reflections to formal case studies; and from accounts of an individual's life to group responses to particular episodes in the life of the project. Nor should a consideration of documenting words or stories be restricted to written material. Sometimes spoken words are powerful and lasting ways to document the work for particular communities and for funding organisations. Using tape recordings, CDs or providing opportunities for people to meet and hear stories together can be powerful ways to share experiences and to shape the work a particular project is doing. For example, in one Stronger Families Fund project, young mums shared their experiences first by talking about and then only later beginning to write them down.

The main forms of documentation described in this article are: interviews, case studies, journals, and autobiographical accounts. Each has particular uses in documenting aspects of a project and they are not mutually exclusive. For example, an action research project in which I was involved used qualitative research interviews, case studies, journals and poetry to document the experiences of women in relation to preventive health (Johnson, Strong et al. 2002).

Interviews

Interviews can be used as part of a larger survey but they can also be used to provide in-depth, first-hand accounts of individual experiences. Usually interviews used in this way are semi-structured – that is, they have a set of questions which provide a guide to the interview but they are also flexible and conversational in nature. They provide opportunities to explore some of the reasons why interviewees hold the views they do, and they can give a rich account of how the person sees a particular issue.

Usually semi-structured interviews are used with a relatively small number of people because they aim to gather detailed stories and they therefore take longer to do. For example,

one Stronger Families Fund project used semi-structured interviews with service providers in a small town to explore how they saw the impact of a project working with Indigenous families. The information gained from interviews enabled the project not only to gain an overview about how services such as police and schools saw their work but to gain an understanding about differences between interviewees in their views. Direct quotes from these were incorporated into the evaluation report.

Case studies

Case studies use observations; interviews and sometimes questionnaires to present an account that offers the reader a context, details of the subject's life, and an account of the issue which is relevant to the work of the project. Sometimes case studies involve large groups or an organisation. In one Stronger Families Fund project the project worker and a researcher spent a week on a remote mine site as participant observers, talking with miners and management about family and health issues for the miners. This led to the writing of a case study documenting issues affecting workers at that particular site. Again, direct quotes brought discussion alive.

Case studies are usually written by a project worker, an evaluator or someone other than the person or group that they concern. They can sometimes be distancing or objectifying of their subject matter. But case studies can also involve people in writing accounts or providing oral stories about their experiences. They become active participants in the development of the case study. Shorter case studies can be very useful in providing accounts of issues and concerns arising in a particular project or providing an account of its work that is directly focused on one person or a small group.

Journals

Journals provide an effective and exciting way of documenting the work of a project. They can take many

different forms and provide a means for project workers and participants to document their work in creative ways that are meaningful to them and which provide an ongoing account of issues and new strategies (see Holly 1997 for some creative ideas on keeping a journal). One project worker in a Stronger Families Fund project documented her work, impressions and perceptions on a regular basis. At the end of each entry were questions arising from her work which then acted as a guide for further action. Over time this provided a useful resource and gradually enabled her to identify problems which were particularly difficult to resolve and strategies which proved successful.

In keeping a journal it is important that it is seen as personal document which is written for oneself. Honesty is important in journal keeping and if the writer is concerned about the possible audience, compromises may become part of the writing. However, journal entries can be shared with others at the discretion of the writer and they can assist in shaping the way a project develops and the work that the project does.

Communal journals can also be kept as a way of documenting the progress of a project. Some of these are described in the articles on scrapbooking in this Bulletin. Abbreviated communal journals can be kept as wall charts or graffiti boards which provide participants in a project with opportunities to record their perceptions. Journals should be seen as a place to record impressions, stories, case studies, perceptions, records of meetings, poetry, diagrams and pictures.

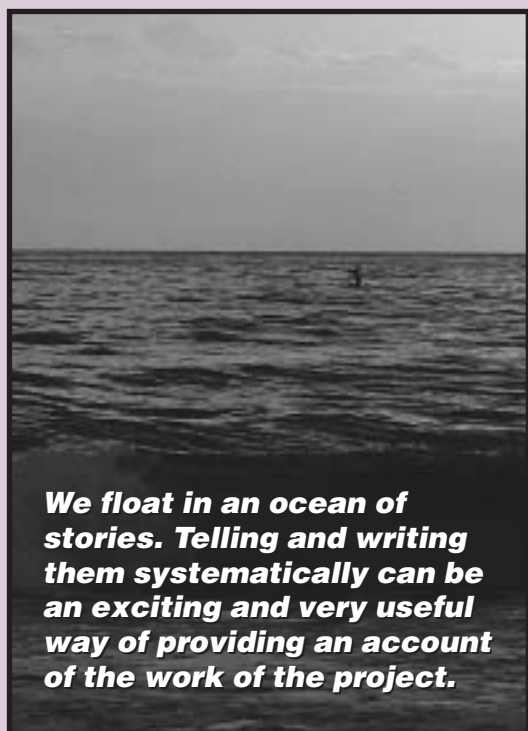
Autobiographical accounts

Autobiographical accounts are those where people discuss their own experiences of life to shed light on the work of a particular issue or their involvement in a project. They are usually designed to provide an inside account of someone's experience. Participants in a project may provide autobiographical accounts through creative documentation such as scrap books, journals or poetry. They differ from case studies in that they are written (or spoken) by the person directly, rather

than their story being mediated by another (see Walmsley and Johnson 2003 for a fuller account).

Considerations in documenting stories

We all gather stories from each other during our day-to-day life. Finding ways to document systematically some of the stories which are relevant to a particular project can be exciting but



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also time-consuming. Documenting stories can also raise ethical issues which need to be considered.

Tell the story from the beginning.

In the chaos that usually accompanies the beginning of a project it is easy to leave documentation until later. But if strategies for collecting stories and participating in them are instituted at the commencement then they provide a record for later reflection and also allow the story strategies to develop over time.

Involve people in the story gathering.

Action research is in part about increasing participation and this should include the gathering of stories about the project. Documentation should not be seen as something that is in addition to the project but as an integral part of its work. For example, using ongoing stories from

participants in parent education groups may shape how these develop over time and may increase the participation of parents as they talk about their experiences and discuss the kinds of learning that they think is relevant to their needs.

Providing opportunities for people to document stories in ways that are meaningful and fun through graffiti boards or communal feedback means that this process does not have to become a chore for the project worker. Rather it is something that most people can be involved in if they wish.

Keeping confidentiality

If people are contributing autobiographical stories, or if the project worker is undertaking case studies or interviews, it is very important that participants see or hear their story and give permission for it to be used. A guide to this can be found on the Stronger Families Fund website. Information which could identify an individual should not be included in stories. This may mean that sometimes it is simply not possible to include a particular story.

Being creative

This article has focused on formal kinds of stories. However, it is important to be creative and to provide opportunities for documenting the project in ways that are relevant to the particular community in which it is sited. This may mean that a combination of words and pictures are used. Or it may mean that different forms of documentation develop. For example in one project a group of Indigenous women developed strength cards which reflected their experiences. They are now keen to publish these so that other people can use them. Such documentation is both an outcome of a project but also provides a record of the issues that were important to the group.

Using semi-structured interviews

Developing questions that will enable people to tell their story in an interview situation takes time. It is useful to develop questions and then talk about them with a reference or advisory group for the project. It is also

important to try the questions out with a group of people before you start interviewing.

Nor does this kind of interviewing necessarily have to be done by the project worker or an external person. Peer interviews where some training is provided to participants in the project who are then involved as interviewers may be a way of both increasing participation and also providing different kinds of stories. However, if peer interviewers are used it is important that issues of confidentiality and privacy are given careful consideration.

Conclusion

We float in an ocean of stories. Telling and writing them systematically can be an exciting and very useful way of providing an account of the work of the project. It can also increase people's participation, lead to the sharing and development of skills. As well it can be great fun.

And don't worry, you won't drown in the stories. Rather they will add richness and depth to the project in which you work. It is the accumulation of such stories and their systematic collection and storage over the life of a project that provides information that is both rich and multi-faceted. They become part of the evidence about the development and the impact of the project.

References

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Kelley Johnson is joint editor of the Stronger Families Learning Exchange at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.