

The “creative documentation” of the work of community-based projects is important for three reasons: it involves participants and community members in contributing their expertise and interests and in learning new skills; it provides information which is relevant to specific community needs and so increases ownership by the community of the work being done in the project; and it provides interesting information and reports about the project which can be of use to government, policy makers and other communities.

This section of the Bulletin focuses on some of the forms of creative documentation discussed at the Stronger Families Fund National Workshop and others, which have been used by projects in their work.

# *Gathering information to inform action*

In the context of action research and evaluation, information is gathered on a variety of topics, for a variety of reasons. MAYA HAVILAND discusses some of the reasons for gathering information about a project, and provides some ideas about ways to select what to gather information about.

## **Why gather information?**

Gathering information about a project and its impacts can help a project in a variety of creative and strategic ways. Gathering information can help to: observe what is happening in the project, its activities and effects; provide material with which to reflect on the project and its effects; provide evidence to help inform future planning of the project; communicate about activities and impacts, including reporting to funding bodies and auspice agencies; include multiple perspectives about the community and the project; and increase participation in the project.

At the Stronger Families Fund National Workshop, held in April 2003, some further reasons were given for gathering information about projects. Information gathering helps to: draw out themes and strengths in a project; reshape myths and stigma about a community and its work; identify what's working and what's not; inform future policy; plan new services or the next components of a project; build up a history of what has happened; and draw all the bits of a project together.

## **What is information?**

Usually in a research context, the word “data” is used when talking

about “information”. Some people get confused or intimidated by the word data, so here the word information is used instead.

In the context of a community action research project, kinds of useful information can be:

- minutes from meetings;
- stories people tell about their experiences with the project;
- observations by project workers, such as daily logs, case notes, and other daily records;
- correspondence and communications such as emails;
- newspaper articles;
- photographs;
- responses to surveys, questionnaires, and interviews;
- drawings and paintings;
- project records; and
- statistics.

## **What information should be gathered?**

When doing action research and evaluation in a community context, one of the challenges faced is selecting what information will be useful. In an effort to represent the complexity

of a project, it is possible to end up with massive amounts of information, much of which is of limited value in learning about or evaluating the work.

As gathering, sorting, storing and analysing information can be very time consuming, it pays to be selective in choosing an amount of information that's manageable, as well as broad enough to tell a rich story and allow the discovery of the unexpected.

Choosing what to document and gather information about requires making some considered choices about what would be most valuable to future needs. Often information may be gathered only to suit the accountability needs of the project, at the expense of gathering information that may inform in other ways, such as helping in critical reflection and learning about the work's effectiveness.

When trying to select what information to gather, one way is to think about the major themes in a project; the other is to think about significant stories, especially stories of change. Together, information on significant themes and significant stories make up a rich picture of a project.



## What are the main themes?

Identifying the key themes that your project is working on is a good way to choose what kinds of information to gather. Once you know the main themes you are looking for you can easily keep those in mind as you go about your daily work. Places where these themes are expressed are in project objectives or goals, in performance indicators, and in the principles that guide your project.

For example, in a project that is about improving the social skills, networks and confidence in young parents, themes on which information could be collected would be networks and networking, improved confidence in participants, and improved social skills

When thinking about themes it is helpful to map them out so that you can see them visually. The themes that you pick are the different aspects of your project that seem important.

One way to do this is to draw a circle to represent your project (see figure 1). Divide it into six pieces of pie. Each piece of pie represents a different theme of importance to evaluating or researching your project. You can make as many pieces of pie as you like, but four to six is a manageable number. It may take a few goes to come up with exactly the right themes. It is worth spending some time chewing them over and talking to colleagues about the main themes in your project.

Themes are not examples but broader concepts that can be illustrated in different ways, and you need to ensure that project themes are expressed

in ways that do not dictate how the theme is illustrated. For example, it is better to use “improved social skills” rather than “lots of new friends”. If you were looking for information on the theme of “improved social skills”, examples could include someone making many new friends *as well* as someone volunteering at the local school.

You may find that over time, as you get further into your project, some patterns will emerge within the nominated themes, and you may want to make some sub-groups. But beginning with four or six strong themes is good.

As you work through your project keep those themes in mind. If you come across an experience or an idea that fits into those themes, then jot it down, or snap a photo. Themes can be useful in regular project reflection sessions. When reflecting, or having a team meeting, you can look at your pie and note any bits of information that fit into your themes.

## Include the context and the unexpected

Another useful step is to draw a big squiggly line around the outside of your pie (see figure 2). This can represent the environment, or the context of your project. In this area put bits of information that relate to your project but do not fit into your themes. An example could be a newspaper article about changes in your community, or something that has come out of the project work that was quite unexpected. This kind of information is really important to include in the process of gathering

and documenting information on your project.

The kind of information gathered on themes need not be consistent, and can include a mix of photos, stories, graphs, statistics, notes, observations, feedback, or letters.

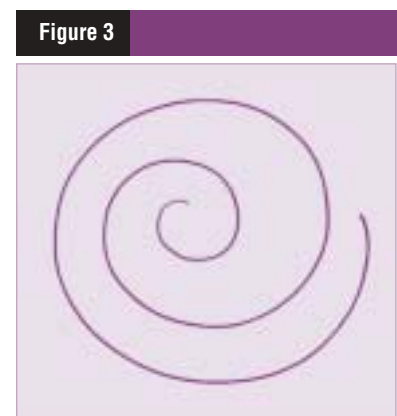
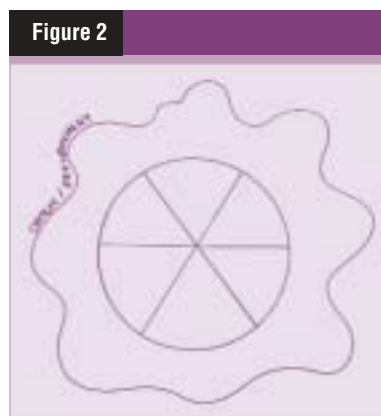
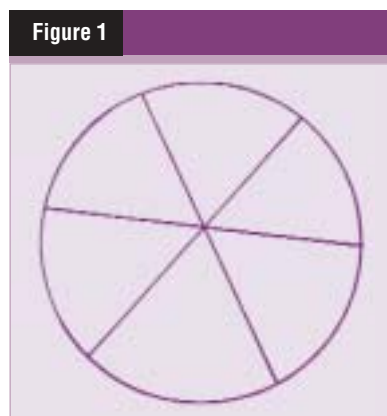
Information does not have to be positive. If early in the project, when you are trying to increase the social skills of young parents, the people you are working with are all shy and quiet, you may want to include a photo of someone’s back to document how they feel about social interaction at the time.

## Think about the stories

In a project there are many stories to be told, and another way of choosing what information to gather is by thinking about the story of a project. The first is the big story of the project as a whole. The story of a project may be thought of as a spiral, which starts then moves around in cycles growing bigger over time (see figure 3).

When gathering information on a project, one of the easiest ways to begin is to document the thread of the project’s story. There are many ways to do this. Some people keep a daily log or journal of just a few lines that over time adds up to a rich picture. Some keep photo diaries. Other projects can tell much of their story through minutes of meetings.

Remember to keep an eye out for smaller stories that provide some insight or illustration of particular aspects of your work. The example above of taking a photo of someone’s





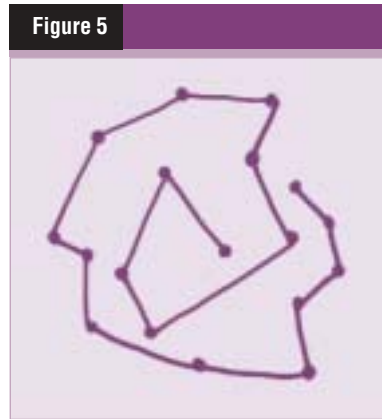
back rather than their smiling face may be a really good way to begin documenting the story of working to improve the person's confidence and social skills. These stories may grow into case studies over time.

Sometimes that spiral line feels more like a squiggly line (see figure 4), not so ordered as an even spiral. Sometimes it feels more like a dot-to-dot picture made up of a series of events or landmark moments that are connected over time (see figure 5).

The story of a project is not often neat and easy to track. For this reason, try to find ways to keep track of the thread of a project's story through a regular form of information gathering. Practices such as keeping a daily log or a journal can help when you want to remember how you got from one point to another.

The significant events or stories of a project, the dots on the dot-to-dot line, can often be placed in particular themes. The creation of a new project partnership may be a significant event in the project story that would obviously fit into the theme of "creating partnerships". As the relationship develops between the stories of your project and its key themes, you can see the richer picture of your project emerging in your information gathering and documentation. Events, ideas or bits of information that are not part of the main narrative of your project can be recorded in the theme areas to which they relate.

Figure 6 shows an example of how these different methods of mapping useful information about a project can take shape.



**Conclusion**

Obviously, choosing information to gather is just the first step in the process. Next you need to think about the best ways of gathering information in your context, how to gather this information, and who should be involved in gathering and analysing information. However, this first step of identifying what information to gather will make these next steps much easier.

**Further reading**

Norman Denzin & Yvonna Lincoln (eds) (1998), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.  
 Peter Reason & Hilary Bradbury (eds) (2001), *Handbook of Action Research:*

*Participative Inquiry and Practice*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks CA.

Shankar Sankaran, Bob Dick, Ron Passfield & Pam Swepson (eds) (2001), *Effective Change Management Using Action Learning and Action Research*, Southern Cross University Press, Lismore, NSW.

Yoland Wadsworth (1997), *Everyday Evaluation on the Run*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW.

Yoland Wadsworth (1997), *Do-it-Yourself Social Research*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW.

Annie Bolitho and Mary Hutchinson (1998), *Out of the Ordinary: Inventive Ways of Bringing Communities, Their Stories and Audiences to Light*, Canberra Stories Group Littlewood, Murrumbateman, NSW.

Carol Caro-Bruce (2000), *Action Research Facilitators Handbook*, National Staff Development Council, Madison, USA.

**Useful websites**

Community Tool Box, *All sorts of great resources on gathering information, evaluation and reporting, From the university of Kansas.*

Community Arts Resource Collection (CARC), *An archive of community arts resources, publications and projects, www.vca.unimelb.edu.au*

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