



"In The Tradition..."

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Resource Guide

Tips for Engaging Communities Through Storytelling

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About Storytelling

Storytelling is especially potent because it's an ancient powerful art that builds community. It seeds imagination and strengthens vocabulary. Listening to stories broadens our awareness of other cultures while exploring the commonality of our struggles. It makes us curious and can motivate us to study and discover. It promotes understanding.

“Storytelling applications are answers to communal human needs. The community recognizes the answer storytelling carries for those needs and seeks the people who can carry the task of answering the demand. Applied storytelling is taking storytelling as is and applying it onto a human need.” (Shiponi, Limor, *Storytelling Genres*, 2011).

The notion of sustaining culture and tradition through storytelling goes beyond the themes of preservation. It incorporates awareness of dangerous practices, while sustaining folk life that is beneficial to well-being.

Programs that use storytelling as a primary source of seeking resolution inherently create opportunities for relationship building. Relationships are the key element in empowering communities, creating sustainable environments and fostering peaceful nations.

Calls for storytellers are crisscrossing the nation and much of the world. (Goss, Linda and Marian Barnes, *Talk That Talk*, 1989.)

The Process of Discovery

Incumbent upon the storyteller working to engage the community in sustainability and advocacy issues is the ability to listen, to hear the stories, those that need to be told and those that may need cessation.

People are a community's greatest asset. An asset-based approach to engaging communities fosters trust, authenticity and relationship building between the storyteller as a community cultural ambassador and community members.

The assets and needs will emerge from listening to the stories told by diverse community members.

During fieldwork, with permission, record stories/oral histories and offer interviewees a copy for heritage purposes.

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- Listen respectfully
- If you don't understand something, conduct further discovery

Never tell stories *about* a culture...if you want authentic stories that will resonate with a particular culture, work with the stories the people tell about themselves not the stories other people tell about them.

- Identify stories that speak to the importance of family and community
- Identify stories with female central characters
- Identify stories where the character overcomes difficulties and challenges
- Identify folktales that underscore life lessons
- Identify a central folk hero, trickster or animal character.

Research American stories to underscore cultural values: those that reflect American values with those that reflect local cultural values. Where do they differ? Where do they intersect?

Identify stories that reflect America's cultural diversity

- Select from 3 or 4 traditions such as: African American, Polish American, Irish American, Vietnamese, etc.
- Research stories from each of those traditions and learn one from each to share
- Pick a moment in American history to research and share: i.e., country's founding, the crafting of the constitution, the period of/and end of enslavement, a story from the civil rights movement, women's suffrage, etc.

Be aware that the stories that are part of various cultures might very well be "living things". Treating them as if they are mythology or somehow not as "real" as stories from the teller's culture is a sure way to alienate a group of people.

Community Building

Storytelling can improve understanding about marginalized groups in a community.

Develop partnerships. Involve partners from initial stages of a community storytelling project through to its implementation and evaluation.

Storytelling is a healing tool. It is a great way to mend rifts within a community. Sharing stories and learning other points of view can be helpful.

Do not force anyone to tell a story they are not ready to share.

Conduct storytelling focus groups or listening parties to facilitate the sharing of different points of views from community members of diverse backgrounds.

Sharing stories of your culture with others and finding common links in both sets of stories can help build understanding.

Sample Workshop Technique

- *Sense of Place:* Stories are not about words, they are about images. How the storyteller connects to the audience is by stimulating imagery through the five senses. The storyteller's job is to taking listeners on a journey that they can see, feel, hear, taste and touch.

Have participants close eyes. Instruct that they will experience a smell that may take them to a particular memory. Ask them to think about the people, place and time emoted in the memory. Place distinctive aromas under each individual's nose (i.e. cinnamon, baby powder, frankincense, vicks vapor rub, etc.). Put away all senses. Ask participants to open their eyes. Share the memory as a story. (This may be done in groups or individually). Instruct not to say, "that smelled like" within the sharing of the story.

Repeat same exercise using different sounds, and textures.

Discuss the similarity and differences in the stories, including the values identified and sense of place and belonging.

Value the Collective. Creating common stories help build community. Make sure stakeholders from all socio-economic levels are at the table, telling, listening, and developing a collective vision by creating new stories of hopes and aspirations.

Performance Tips and Techniques

A storytelling event is one amalgamated event between the storyteller, the audience and musicians (if present).

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Imagination and love of language are the muscles of the storyteller.
The voice is the instrument. It must be strong, clear and diverse in its range.
The ability to express emotion and mood with tone, timbre and voice dynamic is paramount
To communicate and connect with the listeners, making eye contact is essential.
Storytelling is most effective when the use of language is creative and descriptive.
Effective techniques used in African American Storytelling are Call-and-Response, Singing, Drumming and Movement to introduce or compliment the story.
Set the tone of the event with an engaging opening (Call-and-Response, warm and embracing dialogue, song, music, etc.)
Invite the audience in by asking them questions that help move the story along.
The Storyteller should use language/rhythm that captivates the community/audience's imagination and enhances their ability to visualize what is happening in the story.
One of the most important tips and techniques in storytelling is using and maintaining a sense of humor.
Enhance stories by using sayings or proverbs particular to the culture of the audience.
A good storyteller is careful to provide great detail and has a special interest in creating strong imagery with her words.
Stories should be appealing, universal and age appropriate.
<p>Sample Practice Exercise:</p> <p>Color My Story: Collect paint cards with names from a home improvement store. Use the name and colors of the cards to define characters in the story. Set voice tones and movements to each selected color. Use the cards to explore different levels of emotions and moods at varying points in the story.</p>

Checklist:

- Review cultural taboos
- Rehearse stories with voice tone, expression and movement
- Communicate with host about audience, sound, lighting
- Water
- Vocal Warm-ups
- Sound Check

Ethics

When traveling, researching, telling, or teaching abroad, respect the existing culture.

The best thing you can do is listen to other people's stories. Learning how, why and under what circumstances they share stories is important.

Be knowledgeable about how groups regard their stories. Become a wise wordsmith by acting and telling appropriately.

Honor people's stories. If a culture doesn't encourage outsiders to tell their stories, then don't tell their stories.

Do Not Talk Down to Children. They are people at a particular developmental level. Some people talk to children as if they are babies...don't do it.

When addressing elders always be respectful. They have been through a great deal of life and though it might be different from yours, they have earned the right to be treated well.

Always give appropriate credit when telling a story.

Do not tell another's person's story without permission.

You are a conduit for the story, not the story itself. The story is not about you. It is about sharing an experience in community.

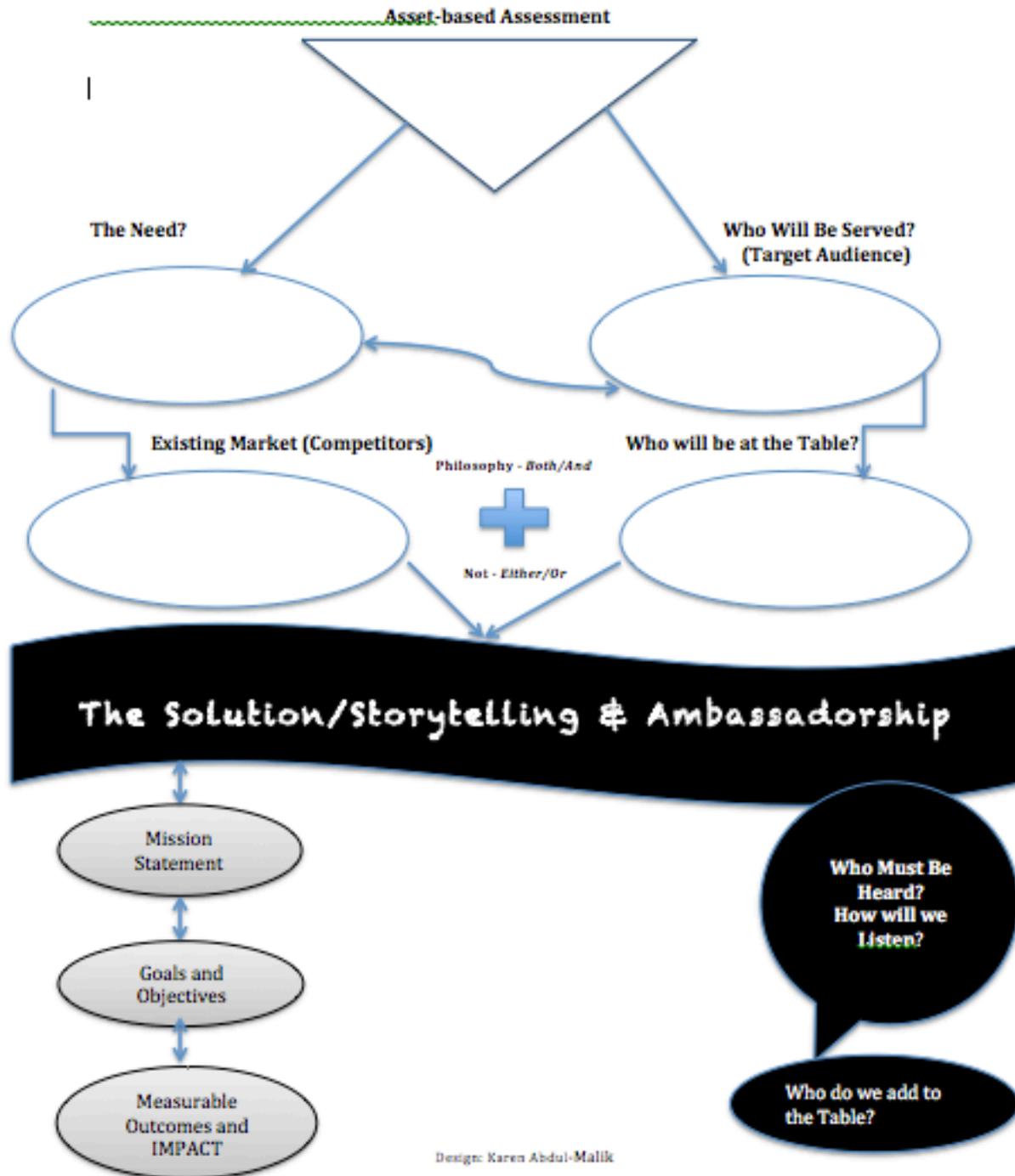
Anecdotal Stories

After performing at the Women of the World Festival in Cape Town, South Africa. A woman shared, "I've lived here all my life. I am classified as 'Colored'. This is the first time I've heard an African story!!" She grew up on Little Red Riding Hood and other European folklore. It affirmed the intense need for such communities to hear and tell their own stories, and re-discover and tell their own cultural and traditional tales. – Charlotte Blake Alston

After leaving the stage Mitch Capel (aka "Gran'daddy Junebug) was embraced by quite a few folks who wished to give thanks for the stories that he had just shared and how they made them feel. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a gentleman who patiently waited his turn. He seemed a bit uneasy and his cap with the rebel flag and tattoos on his hand caused a bit of discomfort in Mitch as well. When his turn finally arrived he grabbed Mitch's hand and while shaking it said that he was very moved by his presentation. He said he had lived his whole life as a racist and that because of the stories his views of people of color had changed. He thanked Gran'daddy for opening his eyes that we are all human beings and belong to the same family and hugged him and cried!

While conducting 4 programs at both VA campuses of the Islamic Saudi Academy - run by the Saudi Arabian Embassy in DC, I was informed (quite respectfully) beforehand that I should not tell stories that have pigs in them, that have magic in them or that speak of dating. I performed the same repertoire of stories and songs, but substituted a goat for the pig in one of my songs. In another, I substituted a reference in song about the days of the week. I changed "Sunday is church day" to "Sunday is Family Day". The faculty representative said I could also sing "Sunday is Prayer Day". We worked together to make the presentation successful. – Charlotte Blake Alston

Engaging Communities: Application of Storytelling in Ambassadorship



Resource List

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WEBSITES

[National Association of Black Storytellers](#)

[NABStalking Blog](#)

[National Storytelling Network](#)

[Language Literacy and Storytelling Blog](#)