Questions from Storytelling Webinar 3rd June 2020

Storytellers

Is there prep for the storytellers prior to meeting story collectors?
We meet with the storytellers beforehand to explain the project, what it entails and explain the support available. Beyond this initial conversation, we make it clear that there is no need for the teller to prepare in advance. For more details see page 12 of the guide.

How long are the conversations on average?
Conversations usually take from 45 minutes to 2 hours, but everyone is different. When storytelling takes place over zoom we have found conversations tend to be shorter - 40 minutes to 1.5 hours.

How do you manage when the interviewee does not speak English well? How do you simplify?
See page 13 of the guide - when working with people who speak English as a second language, where possible it can help to have the option for them to tell their story in their first language, to bring a friend or translator, or to have the guiding questions written down for them to read.

Are you just capturing oral stories or are you exploring other forms of storytelling (ie. visual)?
So far we have concentrated on oral storytelling, but we are open to exploring other mediums in the future.

Safeguarding

Has the personal reflection this method seems to prompt thrown up safety issues for those concerned? If someone shares something with a volunteer storyteller that is of concern, what happens then?
The methodology focussed on what has changed, which tends to be positive. However, sometimes this does involve talking about difficult or challenging experiences. It's important that story collectors are prepared for how to manage this situation if it arises. We make it clear at the start that people are welcome to pause or take a break at any point – this is important for both the teller and collector. We also make sure collectors are aware of the safeguarding procedures in place – what to do and who to contact if they are concerned about somebody. It's important that there is the opportunity for both the teller and the collector to debrief with someone they feel comfortable talking to after the session. More details on this can be found on p13/14 of the guide.

How much of the storytelling that you gather stays internal for honest evaluation purposes and how much is ultimately shared publicly? How do you prepare those whose stories you are gathering for the possibility that their story could be made public?

Before embarking on the storytelling process we make sure storytellers are made aware of how we intend to use the stories. This is a really important part of the process. This includes clarifying that we will be sharing the stories publicly, and that the stories will be anonymised with all identifying features removed. We ask them to sign a consent form at the beginning of the process which clarifies this. We also make sure people are aware that once the story is edited it will be shared with them, at which point they can suggest any changes, request details to be omitted, or even pull their story. We don't share anyone's story publicly until we know they are happy for us to do so. See p12 of the guide for more details.

How do you balance keeping the personal/detail/texture with anonymising them?

This is a challenge and different for each story. As mentioned in the guide, we say to people that, while we remove identifying features as best we can, they may still be identifiable to those that know them well. This is something they should bear in mind when they tell and review their story once edited. We don't use anyone's story unless they are happy for us to do so. We usually include details of who the person is in relation to the project – e.g. artist, Crisis member, staff etc. – as this is relevant to understanding the change.

The best way to get a sense of this is to read the stories on our website to see how we try and strike this balance.

Have you done this with young people and do you / would you amend the process for young people?

We haven't used this process with young people specifically. As with any storytelling, I think it would be important to think carefully about the relationship between the teller and the story collector, existing power relations, and who would be best placed to collect the story so they feel able to speak freely. It's also important to think about what the right space and environment might be and how to make them feel comfortable – it might be important to have things on the table (when in person) for them to play with and look at, so they don't feel they have to look at the collector while speaking. See p.13 of the guide for more details.

Story Collectors

Is there training for the story collectors? How to be trained as a good story collector? Any techniques for asking questions/leading conversations?

We carry out a 1 day training for story collectors, as well as refresher training before each new round of story collecting. There are further details on the training, as well as guidance for the collectors on how to approach and navigate the conversation, in the guide on p.12-15.

Do you use a transcription service, or are the stories transcribed by the collectors? Do they need training in this? Are they paid? Have you tried using technology as part of this process?

Where possible we use professional transcribers for this part of the process and pay them for this service. We have in the past used staff and volunteers, but in doing so we had to allow more time for the transcription phase to happen. Staff and volunteers didn't receive training, but had access to an example transcription and discussed with the project lead beforehand. We've also recently found it helpful to use 'Otter', an online transcription software. It is then the job of the transcriber to amend the automated transcription to correct errors and include the idiosyncrasies of voice.

Do you use Active Listening techniques at all?

Active listening is an important part of the story collecting process. For more information on how we approach the conversation see p.15 of the guide.

Bias

What processes do you have in place to reduce bias as there is always potential when collecting/editing/discussing the responses?

There is a positive bias to this methodology as the focus is on what changed for that person, it doesn't ask what didn't change. We are currently still working out what the best methodology is to sit alongside storytelling to capture this important aspect of the learning. At present, where possible, we have discussions at the end of projects with groups to discuss what wider questions on what worked, what didn't and how we can improve in the future.

What training is provided to the story collectors to avoid influencing the storytellers?

For more details on training and tips for storytellers see p.15 of the guide.

How do you avoid bias in the editing process to avoid only keeping the positive aspects of a story?

When editing the stories we focus on capturing in the story what changed for people. Sometimes this does mean including things that weren't positive, or didn't change, but often the focus is more on the positive aspect of the learning. We try and create a different opportunity for people to share what didn't change, and more critical aspects of the project. The edited story is always checked with the teller which we hope reduces the potential of bias.

Is it easy to just ask those who are most engaged (and therefore positive)?

We think it's important to try and open out the opportunity to a range of different perspectives and experiences involved in the project or activity being evaluated. However, it is sometimes the case that the most engaged are the ones that want to take part in the storytelling process. This is one of the reasons it's important to think who would be best placed to introduce storytelling and discuss it with potential storytellers to make the

opportunity accessible to as many people as possible. It is also why it's important that other evaluation methodologies are used alongside it to make sure that the voices of those who didn't tell their story are also heard as part of the learning process.

Editing

Is there a separate story editor to teller and transcriber for objectivity purposes, or is that a skills-based decision?
First and foremost, we think it's simpler for all involved if there is a different person focusing on each aspect of the process - as a teller, it can be hard to pull out the themes in your own story; as a collector, if you have an eye on the edited story, it can influence the questions you ask and the way you listen. We also think all of these stages call on different skill sets.

Were all your editors professional writers? How do you recruit / select editors?
Editing the stories is a real skill. It is something that non-professional writers can do - we trained a staff and volunteer team in story editing, and the stories for ICON and Our Place were predominantly edited by this way. This training was based on the guidance in the guide on p.18-20. We have found that each story takes 1.5-2 days to edit, and it's a big ask of people's time. We also found that having several different editors meant there was a job in making the stories hold together coherently as a collection of stories. Where possible, we have leaned towards using professional editors, as this simplifies and speeds up the process and ensures that the stories are high quality. See p.18 of the guide for considerations around the skills we look for in a story editor.

Do the storytellers get the opportunity to sign on the final transcript before the discussion day? Are storytellers able to have a say or ask to include parts of their stories deleted during the editing process? Is that negotiated?

Yes, this is an important part of the process. Once edited we share the story with the teller and ask them to confirm they are happy with it. At this stage they can request anything they do not wish to be included to be omitted and suggest any other changes.

As an Editor, how do you know what the storyteller actually wants to say?
All the editors have access to is the transcript of the conversation itself. It is usually clear from the transcript what the tellers want to say – there are often themes people repeat or come back to, but sometimes the editor does have to make a judgement call. The tellers themselves have the opportunity to see the story before it is shared publicly, at which point they can say if there is anything in the story they think should be changed, included, omitted or amended.

Discussion day

Do you include everyone's story after the discussion day, or are only certain ones showing the greatest change selected for sharing with the public?
We share all of the stories publicly.

Do the story collectors facilitate Discussion Day? Or who does it?
The day has been facilitated by an external facilitator, but it is something we intend to do inhouse going forward. The collectors attend the discussion days as participants.

How does the discussion day work - how is the discussion facilitated/structured? Do you have a set of questions you tend to use for the sense making/discussion day part?
Yes, we have a specific structure to our discussion day and questions, outlined in the guide on p21.

Do you recompense people for taking part in the discussion day? Particularly people who weren't involved in the project at all and therefore don't have any emotional investment in it?
In the past we have offered to pay transcribers for their time attending the discussion day, but most people we have not compensated. We provide expenses for all volunteers and Crisis members attending. Lunch is also provided for all attendees.

Do participants / storytellers shape the discussion?
For our up-coming discussion day we intend to first hold a separate discussion day with the storytellers, collectors and editors to reflect on and discuss the stories. Their reflections will then be shared and will inform the discussion day.

The Whole Process / Cost

How many story collectors and how many stories do you collect?
We initially trained a team of 8 story collectors and now have 5 actively collecting. The number of stories we collect depends on the project or activity we are evaluating – we collected 11 stories for ICON, 8 for Our Place, 15 for Looking for Change, and now 30 for Oxford Together.

Is the process expensive? It appears to involve a lot of people's time to start to finish - what are the costs of areas of this form of capture that are not volunteer led? Any thoughts on cost vs. benefit?
The cost is largely influenced by whether or not we use paid editors and transcribers, and whether we use an external facilitator for the discussion day. The cost of paying to edit and transcribe 11 stories, provide expenses and refreshments for collectors and tellers, and lunch for the discussion day (without an external facilitators) is approximately £5100 . The cost of buying technical equipment also needs to be factored in – when in person we use audio

recorders which can by bought for £70-£100, and using Zoom it can help to over headphones with mics for the collectors.

How long does the whole process take?
The process usually takes from 3-6 months. To speed up the process it helps to be collecting, transcribing, editing the stories simultaneously, but this also requires more time in terms of co-ordination and project management.

Can you tell us a bit more about facilitating the discussion day and what you want the different participants to get out of that part of the process?
We want people attending the discussion day to be involved in thinking deeply about the stories. Involving lots of people in this process means that people from across AOFS and beyond absorb and contribute towards this learning and the wider discussions. We also want to make sure lots of different voices and perspectives share their interpretations of the stories, and that this is a participative process.

Given the focus on individual interviews and personal stories of impact, have you experienced any challenges using this method to capture evidence of group or community impact?
In preparation for the discussion day we ask people to think about each story in relation to specific questions – we want to capture the learning which emerges that might not fit across a theme, and might be specific to a given story and context. While we do pull out themes that run across the stories, we also try to foreground the voices when we talk about these themes in the report so that the individual voices remain as present as possible throughout the process. To date, we have focussed on individual impact but is interesting to note how themes and impact can be shared across individuals.

Remote story collecting

If you want to talk, do you use a non-verbal cue rather than speak?
We don't have anything as structured as this, we just tend to make sure we mute when not speaking, and show we are actively listening with our body language when listening. Unmuting our mic would be a non-verbal cue that we are going to speak.

When you have several tellers would you organise a zoom meeting to get some quotes/story bites?
We would just organise to speak with the tellers individually for the storytelling session itself – this would be a 45 min – 1.5 hour conversation.

How did you make contact with people who are not online, no phones or no internet?
We haven't yet found a solution to this problem during Covid. We are exploring meeting people in a socially distanced way to record stories but haven't done so yet.

Evaluation / Reception from Funders

How have the data/outputs produced through storytelling been received by different types of funders and supporters. Can you provide any information about this please?
Our funders are universally very supportive and, indeed, for some it has helped motivate them to fund us. Some will, of course, still expect us to report against agreed objectives whilst others are happy simply to read the stories and our analysis of them – or a combination.

If the learning outcomes aren't pre-determined, how do you answer questions in funding applications which want to know about planned learning outcomes and impact*?*
We do still think about outcomes in relation to the stories. For instance, as part of the discussion day we look at the stories in relation to specific outcomes and ask:
- What are examples of this outcome from the stories?
- What seems to make this outcome happen?
- Which story best exemplifies this outcome? Why?
- Are there any things that surprised you about this outcome in the stories?

See p.21 of the storytelling guide for more details.

How does this work alongside other assessment?
We monitor and capture data across different areas of our work – including numbers of participants, and how often they attended. We also aim to facilitate evaluation discussions at the end of projects with participants which speak more broadly about the project and what we can learn from it going forward. We are interested in exploring other models of evaluation we could use alongside storytelling to make sure we are capturing the things that didn't work, as well as what changed.

Other

Is there also meta-story collecting, e.g. collecting stories about the change on the story collectors?
No, but it is something that has been suggested by our story collectors which we would like to do in the future.

One of the things I like about this technique (having used a variant a few times now) is that you can involve people you want to influence or have a think about your work – e.g. funders, local politicians, staff - in the discussion of stories - have you done that too?
Yes, we aim to bring together people with different perspectives and relationships to the project and organisation. This includes a balance of people who have worked on the project and been involved in the storytelling process, along with those that are completely new to either, or both, of these things. Our discussion days have typically been attended by AOFS

staff, Crisis staff, Crisis clients, volunteers, story collectors, artists, trustees, funders and partners who work in different roles, not just those specific to evaluation or management.

See page 21 of the guide for more details.

What are the key differences between MSC and AOFS's storytelling method? Is it just a difference in nomenclature, or are there other differences?
The storytelling methodology is based on MSC, but it is re-interpreted for our own purposes and context. One significant difference is that we do not select the stories we will be using as part of the discussion day from a wider pool, as done in MSC, but we discuss all of the stories collected.

Does/would AOFS provide story collecting training? How would you recommend groups & organisations prepare to try out this approach?
There is more detail in the guide on story collector training and what it entails on p.12. We are open to discussing ways we could support other organisations to train people in this approach and are currently exploring this further.

Do you assume there will have been some impact?
We have found that there is always some impact – for some it might be significant, while for others it can be a subtle, small change.

You don't use the stories to make videos?
We haven't used the stories in this way. We've found the anonymity of the stories to be really important in enabling them to speak freely, and worry that using video could risk compromising this. We are interested in exploring how it could be used sensitively in the future and have used the stories in other creative ways – to create theatre pieces, illustrations, and as an integral part of an up-coming exhibition.

Do we need to collect stories/evidence from different angles/stakeholders to make sure the changes really happen?
The stories are about what individuals believe and understand change to look like for them personally, so whatever they say is valid. Through pulling out the themes, individual stories often reaffirm some of the changes people speak about.

Could we set up a network of interested parties, who could discuss storytelling approaches and support each other?
This is an idea we are currently exploring.

The stories are an arts project in itself. If you weren't all about arts projects (eg if you were a foodbank) would you still do this process just for evaluation?

Yes, while we find the creative aspect of storytelling to be something that really aligns with our organisation and wider work, the Most Significant Change methodology is more commonly used in International Development circles and Strength Based community development work that isn't necessarily interested in the creative aspect of storytelling. It is a considered a valuable evaluation methodology in its own right.

Given the length of the process, are there interim ways to incorporate learning so you can adapt and iterate programming in a responsive way?
With the Oxford Together Stories we are collecting, we are looking at the stories in stages – we're holding a discussion day to think about the first 10 stories, and then another a month later for the next group of stories collected. This means we don't wait until the end of the process to think about all the stories.

Lots of organisations have very little money… what would you suggest are areas that can be DIY?
In theory, the collecting, transcription and editing process can all be done in house with appropriate training. Our team at AOFS have been trained in these aspects of the process and it has been done this way in the past. While this is more cost effective, we've found this has implications for how long the overall process take.