Not Any Story Will Do: Storytelling for Social Change

Presented by Kelly Stainback-Tracy
Adapted from a presentation by Hanna Nichols, The Civic Canopy
And a workshop by Lynne Davey, Davey Strategies
Desired Outcomes

• Participants will understand how stories can promote (or inhibit) the social change we seek.

• Participants will understand the concept of the “wide angle lens” vs. a close-up picture in storytelling.

• Participants feel empowered to begin re-framing their own stories to promote social change.
FrameWorks Institute

Advancing the nonprofit sector’s communications capacity by conducting, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for framing the public discourse about social problems.
Stories provide powerful forces behind social change

• Stories appeal to us on an emotional level, are memorable

• They are more powerful than facts or arguments in influencing behavior

• Policymakers rely heavily on stories from their constituents in making decisions about legislation, funders use them to make decisions…

…but not any story will do.
Going beyond using any story to what will promote CHANGE

Any Story Will Do

What Will That Story Do?
Schema and Frames

• Mental shortcuts of preconceived ideas, assumptions and beliefs that help us efficiently make sense of new information and situations (Lynn Davey)

• What has four legs, a tail, and lives on a farm?
  • Horse
  • Dog
  • Miniature horse

• Frames activate our schema
  • Gender study
  • The “frame” is how the person was presented
  • The responses demonstrate “schema” or mental shortcuts related to gender
Frames in the US (Lynn Davey)

• Individual responsibility
  • America is the land of opportunity, and personal responsibility is all that’s needed to succeed
  • Fairness is proportional to effort

• Privacy and personal freedom
  • Inequities result from lifestyle choices and habits

• Broken government
  • Government is the problem, not the solution
Dominant Frames in the U.S.

**Individualism**
Success and/or failure is a result of personal actions and responsibility
Individual is the fundamental focus of moral concern

**Tribalism**
Needs of one group are paramount to needs of other groups
Identity group is the fundamental focus of moral concern

**Fatalism**
Whatever happens is unavoidable
Social problems are too big and complex to be solved
Close up vs. big picture stories
How can we widen the lens of our stories?
Personal attributions

• As humans, our default is personal attribution of responsibility
• With people we identify with, we are more likely to attribute success to personal characteristics and failure to situational issues.
• With people we don’t identify with, it’s the opposite.
How is this related to health equity?

• Equity is about systems and structures
• If we want to promote equity, we need our stories to highlight the systems and structures issues that contribute to inequity
• Personal stories may miss the mark if they trigger a “personal attribution” response, rather than highlighting system issues
Communicating social issues

• It is not sufficient to apply the same communications strategies used to sell products or influence elections
  • These rely on changing individual behavior
  • In America, the default tendency is “personal attribution of responsibility”
  • “You need to give your audience a reason to reconsider the default tendency toward personal explanations, and to think about situational explanations” ~ Lynn Davey

• The “wide angle lens” approach promotes systemic solutions
## Close-up vs. Wide-Lens Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Close-up</th>
<th>Wide-Lens</th>
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<tr>
<td>Begins with the individual (usually a victim or a hero)</td>
<td>Story starts with big picture context before moving to individual stories.</td>
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<td>Primary goal is resonance and emotional connection</td>
<td>Primary goal is to elicit change...in thoughts, feelings, and action.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paints a partial picture of the whole story</td>
<td>Includes a complete story.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May leave out important solutions</td>
<td>Solutions! Early. Often.</td>
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Example (excerpted from Daveystrategies.com blog)

• "The Hell of American Day Care: An investigation into the barely regulated, unsafe business of looking after our kids"

  • **Who** is this about? Kenya Mire
  • **What** happened? A tragic fire at the day-care she’d chosen for her 20-month old daughter, Kendyll, that also killed three of the seven other children there that day
  • **When**? February, 2011
  • **Where**? Texas
  • **Why**? The center director had left the children alone and unsupervised, and the fire started in her absence

• “When social problems are portrayed with episodic stories, non-experts are far more likely to attribute responsibility for solving the problem to the individuals portrayed, not to policy or public action”

• The “How” is also described:
  • Directly: Sub-standard regulations and inspections of day care.
  • Indirectly: Lack of public will for the prioritization of quality day care for American children
Thematic approach to story telling

• Focus on Why, What, and How:
  • Why does this matter?
    • Appeal to shared values
  • What’s the problem or challenge?
    • What are the contributing issues?
    • What are the consequences?
  • How can it be solved?
    • Whenever possible, present concrete and specific solutions
Example

• A Tale of Two Children

• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mA8dLQSsEE
Thematic approach

• Why does this issue matter?
  • Our society is more prosperous when all of our children do well.

• What is the problem?
  • Resources vary by zip code, resulting in different levels of opportunity for different children.

• How can we solve this problem?
  • Assure access to quality preschool in every zip code
  • Assure access to quality schools, well-trained teachers, and appropriate support staff in every zip code
Early Childhood Message Bank

Early Childhood Colorado Partnership Shared Message Bank

• Value-based messages provide examples for “Why this matters”
• Metaphors both describe “What is the problem” and “How can we solve it”

• Estes Valley Investment in Child Success
When crafting your own story…

- **Provide context** - Begin with problem definition: what bigger systemic, factors are at play? If we want to change the system, we have to identify what elements of the SYSTEM are the problem vs. individual behavior.

- **Explain problems** – what isn’t working well? Be specific.

- **Advance solutions** -- We need to highlight our solutions early, and repeat them often!

- **Widen the lens** – Provide a “big picture” perspective so your audience can see how they and everyone plays a role
Bottom Line on Wide Angle Stories

- We should not remove humans from our stories. Individual stories have a powerful impact on how people think and feel.

- HOW we craft our stories is also hugely impactful on how people think and feel

- Making sure our stories align with our systems-change efforts will make it much more likely we will be successful.
Questions?
Resources

FrameWorks Institute
http://frameworksinstitute.org/storytelling.html

Racial Equity Tools
http://www.racialequitytools.org/act/communicating/framing-and-messaging

Lynn Davey
http://daveystrategies.com/blog/