Ethical Storytelling
The Role of Ethical Storytelling in Evaluating Extension’s Impact

Chantal Rose, Extension Assistant
Karen Franck, Assistant Professor
Department of Family and Consumer Sciences

INTRODUCTION

Evaluation in Extension uses both quantitative and qualitative data to inform programming, prioritize funding, and demonstrate stewardship and impact. While numerical data (quantitative) is important for tracking efforts and demonstrating outcomes, the narrative (qualitative) is critical to provide connection and context. Because stories are personal, it is important to follow ethical guidelines to ensure that participants and community partners have a voice about how their information is collected and shared. Given that Extension audiences can include vulnerable and marginalized participants, there is a responsibility as professionals and educators to use personal data and stories with trust, respect and transparency.

Created by Rachel Gable and a group of social-impact professionals, ethical storytelling is about creating a culture where people feel empowered, and their stories are portrayed with dignity and strength (Ethical Storytelling, 2018). Ethical storytelling is a method to get to the core of what is true and what matters by centering people and participants and avoiding exploitation (Swerdlow, 2019).

The mission is succinctly described on the ethicalstorytelling.com website:

“We believe people’s stories are more than emotion-generating machines. That story consumers are more than guzzlers of emotion. And that stories should always be constituent first, donor second. We aspire to tell stories that are truthful, nuanced, educational and empowering. Not just for donors or for branding, but because stories shape our humanity and our world.”

Ethical storytelling can be used by Extension educators and professionals to ensure the information and stories shared are welcoming, accurate, empowering, consensual and respectful and, thus, allow communities to collaboratively imagine solutions to problems and co-create a different future (Swerdlow, 2019).

An ethical storytelling approach asks questions like:

• Have we asked the storyteller for consent to use their story?
• Does the storyteller know how and agree how their story will be shared?
• Do we include stakeholder input and ideas throughout the process?
• Does the storyteller have agency in the story?
• Do we depict our services as a “rescuer” or as partner/supporter that empowers the individual?
• Does our version of the story reinforce harmful stigmas and stereotypical narratives?
• Are we using strength-based language?

The following are several methods for collecting and communicating stories that demonstrate impact and success while showing respect, acceptance and dignity of program participants.
WHEN COLLECTING STORIES

Seek Continuous Consent
• Always get consent and continue asking throughout the collection and creation process (Klykken, 2021).
• Maintain the privacy of all participants and partners.
• If the quote or story belongs to a child, a guardian or caregiver must give consent, and the child must provide assent.
• Be respectful if people choose not to share and DO NOT be coercive.

Practice Transparency
• Go to the source of the story (partners and participants). Don’t make assumptions about someone else’s experience.
• Explain why you want to share their experiences and perspectives. Explain how their story will be used and where it will be shared. Share the updated media release form.

Exhibit Conscious Curiosity
• Take a posture of humility and learning.
• Be aware of your own assumptions, biases, reactions and emotions. Strive to be respectful and non-judgmental.
• Use a trauma-informed approach to asking questions, since sharing stories about life can increase vulnerability.

WHEN SHARING STORIES

Co-Create Stories
• Invite diverse perspectives from all stakeholders involved.
• Practice “member checking” (Livari, 2018), where you allow the people in the story to review your work and continue to check in about accuracy.
• Seek the opinion of leaders and cultural liaisons to ensure ethicality.

Use Empowered Writing
• Use strengths-based language.
  Frame personal challenges as a temporary issue, not as a defining characteristic. Be aware of how sharing a person’s story could place the sharer at risk for harm.

Avoid Simplifying and Over-Dramatization
• Include the nuance and complexity of each story because people and groups of people are not all the same (monoliths).
• Don’t twist, morph or exaggerate a story into something it is not.

Avoid Stereotypes
• It is crucial to avoid depicting yourself or your organization as a ‘savior’ that ‘rescues’ a person from their challenges.
• Be intentional and avoid perpetuating misinformation, stigmas or hurtful stereotypes.
• Remember that you are a partner that supports an individual’s journey — it is the individual who empowers themselves.
EXTENSION EXAMPLE:
PROBLEMATIC STORYTELLING

I taught a class at a rehab center where drug users were struggling with drug use, and I became more than a teacher; I became a close friend. This poor homeless man, who reluctantly checked himself into rehab after being a meth addict for five years, trusted me, and I mentored him during his time at the house. I taught him everything he knows about eating healthy, and we still talk to this day. He said he always loved my classes and depended on me to bring him new tricks and tips. It brings me joy to know that I saved his life and helped him get back on his feet. Since taking my class, he has left rehab, gotten a job, lives in a trailer, and is working towards getting custody of his child.

- No direct quote

ETHICAL STORYTELLING

Before finding the ABC recovery center, Dan was unhoused and unemployed. Wanting to overcome his addiction and take control of his life, Dan enrolled in a rehabilitation center. It was there that he began participating in nutrition education classes provided by UT Extension. He and the educator became fast friends.

Dan started engaging with the material, asked questions and was determined to make healthier food and physical activity choices. The educator continued to support Dan in learning and adopting healthy habits.

Through the classes, Dan was empowered to take control of his health by eating more fruits and vegetables and walking more. Dan has since found housing, has a steady income, and is making healthier choices in all aspects of his life. Dan and the nutrition educator are still great friends, supporting and encouraging one another on their wellness journeys.

“I am grateful for the lessons I learned about hydration and eating healthy foods and am motivated to continue making healthy choices in my life.”

- Dan, participant

COMMENTS:

• Drug users - Don’t identify people as their struggle. Use language like “he is working through addiction” instead of “he is an addict.”
• The phrase “poor homeless man” reinforces the victim narrative stereotypes, and positions the author as someone with power; it comes across as a judgment.
• “I taught him everything he knows” is an exaggeration.
• “He said he always loved my classes...” Whenever possible, try to use a direct quote.
• Avoid language that places Extension as the hero or savior, such as “It brings me joy to know that I saved his life and helped him get back on his feet.” Instead, shine the light on the participant’s efforts.
• “…lives in a trailer and is working towards getting custody of his child.” These details are ancillary to the story and reinforces stereotypes.

• Dan is not the actual participant’s name. WE are using a pseudonym to personalize the story.
• The term unhoused is preferable to homeless; the term homeless tends to be associated with personal identity.
• The phrase “wanting to overcome” helps frame personal challenges as a temporary issue. “Dan enrolled” shows the person isn’t an object, but an actor with agency.
• The phrase “educator continued to support” emphasizes the importance of the relationship without suggesting a power imbalance.
• The phrase “take control of his health” centers the story on Dan and his efforts.

Make sure you are telling a story WITH AND FOR that individual and community.
CONCLUSION

Extension professionals must be careful when framing and communicating stories to the public. It is essential to keep in mind that we are not the ‘saviors’ of an individual or community. Still, we are catalysts through which partners and participants can gain knowledge, obtain resources and find a network of support - from people and the environment - necessary to do the work themselves. Furthermore, we need to be careful about the perspectives, biases and judgments we bring to the story and its actors. We need to share stories that celebrate triumphs and lessons learned in ways that accurately represent the complexities of being human. We need to use language that empowers individuals and communities while also demonstrating how Extension programming and Extension educators can be a resource and support improved health and wellbeing. Ethical storytelling goes far beyond words. These methods can be applied to photos, videos, other visual images and even music.

At best, storytelling has the power to move people to action, inspire hope, influence connection and change, and highlight the strengths and dignities that can be found within our communities and humanity at large. At its worst, stories can sensationalize, stereotype, marginalize and cause harm to those we serve. Ethical storytelling equips Extension to move towards more responsible qualitative methods that promote equity, belonging and humanize our outcomes and impacts.

WHEN YOU ARE IN THE POSITION OF STORYTELLER, ASK YOURSELF:
WOULD I BE PROUD TO SHARE THIS STORY IF IT WERE ABOUT ME?

To learn more about ethical storytelling, visit: ethicalstorytelling.com

REFERENCES


