

Storytelling Resources

This document provides information for communities that are developing a storytelling project as part of their Heart & Soul Community Planning initiative. It is a working document, which means that it will be refined over time based on research and the experiences of our Heart & Soul communities. As such, we encourage you to provide feedback on it and let us know if you come across great projects or resources.

Questions to Ask as You Craft Your Community's Storytelling Project

1. What purpose will storytelling serve?
2. Should the storytelling have a narrative focus? Should it also have a thematic focus, and if so, what would that be? Or should the town try to grab any kind of story people want to share?

Possible themes include:

- PLACE: stories about important places to save or to study and why (leading perhaps to a map of stories or visualizations about story-intensive places and those with no stories at all; stories about natural locations as they have changed or remained significant or gained in importance to the town);
 - PEOPLE: the human tapestry of small communities—whose story must be told if the town's full story is recounted? The why-do-you-live-here or stay-here stories.
 - HISTORY: stories specifically about time passing, changes positive and negative in the town.
 - FUTURES: capturing values and future aspirations.
3. What is the approach for gathering stories (e.g. individual interviews, small group discussions, workshops, etc)? Who will do the interviewing? Will students be involved?
 4. What is the right media to use? (Would want to know whether there is a digital divide in the community)
 5. How will stories be shared, distributed and used? (community viewing, publication of some kind, website, DVD, etc) What kind of permissions do you need?
 6. How do you anticipate connecting stories to action?

7. Are there existing stories in the community on which to draw (i.e. have other groups already collected stories that we could build on)? There might already be an active storytelling group (historical society, schools, etc) that you want to collaborate with, learn from, include and point to in the work.

Storytelling and Complementary Approaches

COMMUNITY VIDEO - any type of video documentary or film on a local community could fall into the category of community video. When used specifically as a tool for planning, community videos typically address certain planning topics or issues. **Pros and Cons:** Most community videos require significant time and effort in order to film and interview people, edit footage, and produce a cohesive video. Video equipment can also be expensive, though many community video projects use relatively inexpensive hand-held cameras and equipment is increasingly available through local high schools and colleges. When done well, community video projects create lasting records that are useful for planning, build community spirit, and also may help to boost economic development and vitality of a place.

DIGITAL STORYTELLING combines traditional storytelling with some sort of digital element—whether digital recordings, digital archival and story posting (usually on the web), or a link between stories and other digital media. Web-based stories also have interactive potential where other community members can add to the stories through written or audio comments and by linking related stories. This interactivity can deepen community-based conversation but this approach will also require a facilitator. Digital stories housed on a flexible website also allow for interesting, varied pairings and re-pairings of stories to stimulate community discussions around a theme or locale. Different stories can be showcased depending on the needs of the moment, allowing for these stories to stay fresh and relevant and meaningful in an ongoing way. **Pros and Cons:** Storytelling allows people to describe communities, places, and memories in their own words, which can produce different and more powerful descriptions of community character than other types of tools. Digital storytelling makes the product (stories) more flexible, since it can be stored and easily shared in many formats and also allows the story to be recorded in the storyteller's own voice. The major drawback of digital storytelling is that it usually requires equipment and some technical expertise. Like many participatory tools, storytelling (digital or not) is limited by the number and quality of the participants. If a project collects the stories of a non-representative sample of the population, then the collected wisdom will not represent the community either.

ESSAY CONTESTS are used to collect stories or other writing about a community. They are most frequently used for schools, but can be public contests open to any community members. Contests can be very open-ended or can have specific topics. **Pros and Cons:** Essay contests are an easy way to gain information, stories, and suggestions from a large number of people, and to get a sense of what is important to them. If contests are not highly-directed, then the information received may not be especially useful. Contests are also directed at the "writers," and unlike oral histories, will only bring out the people confident in their storytelling skills.

LOCATIVE MEDIA is information, art, or stories that are linked geographically to a specific place. It ranges from websites with interactive maps to information terminals posted on street corners, multimedia art installations with geographic components to audio recordings posted where they were recorded. **Pros and Cons:** By linking the media directly to the places they represent or originate from, the consumer gains a greater sense of place than she would if the media were “placeless.” Including a spatial element also adds another dimension to stories, images, or information, making it easier to convey the intended message. The more interesting locative media projects tend to be high-tech, which are more complicated and expensive for communities to produce. Even relatively low-tech projects can require significant planning and support.

STORY CIRCLES are an in-person approach that breaks individuals up into small groups to reflect on a question or issue that has been chosen for the session. Each person shares a story in response to the session topic, which must be grounded in personal experience. Other participants are encouraged to listen without interrupting. The group agrees on a time limit for each story, usually only a few minutes for each. After the circle has been completed, participants ask questions and summarize what was learned from the stories. **Pros and Cons:** Story Circles are a great way for folks to get to know each other, build trust and learn about different perspectives. It also allows for face-to-face dialogue so that the group can explore issues in more depth together. Depending on how the information is captured, it may only allow for a set group to contribute (those who participate in the Story Circle). They are also best run with a seasoned facilitator who can draw the most out of the conversation.

SCAVENGER HUNTS have been redeveloped to take advantage of technology and to build community. There are several new versions of scavenger hunts today that are quickly gaining in popularity, many of which are tied to the special places and resources of communities and/or use spatial technology.

Pros and Cons: Many scavenger hunt programs seem to mushroom—community members explore one, then become excited enough to create their own, further increasing the body of work and number of participants. Hunts are an exciting and engaging way to introduce community members to unusual and important aspects of a place, and to gather information about sites that others feel are important. While scavenger hunts (digital or otherwise) are an exceptional way to explore and identify a community’s most important physical places, they may not identify intangible (or even non-spatial) elements of community character. Many hunts (especially geocaching) are also designed in part to be challenging to reach; they are frequently located in state or local parks and may take up to a full day to reach. Scavenger hunts can be created within a community and in areas that are accessible even to those with disabilities. Combining scavenger hunts with other storytelling options can lead to powerful outcomes.

Additional Low-tech Approaches

STORY COLLECTION SITES - People can bring in photos or stories to share around a town-based theme. These can be displayed on a bulletin board in the local library, or published in the newspaper.

STORY EVENTS - A local newspaper can send out a call for photos and/or stories around a theme or to a specific group of people—e.g. farmers or artists or veterans--and publish a sampling, the rest can be made available to the project. Schools can offer across-generational storytelling nights related to a theme of interest to the project. These events can be recorded (students can roam the crowd and do on-the-spot interviews). Storytelling Festivals are popular, too, and work well in conjunction with some of the other approaches. A recording booth can be set up to capture stories. Another possibility is to make a mobile storytelling booth, story-collection site, or storytelling component available to attach to other public events. In other words, I think it is important to get communities thinking about combining approaches to suit their needs and realities.

Storytelling Ideas

Many of these examples combine some of the approaches above in a community context.

Stories of Why Where Matters/The Placemeant Project County Map of Stories – Ukiah, California: The Ukiah Players Theatre, joined with the Center for Digital Storytelling, to create this website. Throughout the spring and summer of 2005, stories were collected from communities around Ukiah, and in October of 2005, they were integrated into a stage production featuring 21 stories, many performed live by the authors. In 2006, an additional workshop collected stories from other parts of Mendocino, leading to a touring production in August and September. Site users can navigate a map of the region to select videos to watch. This project is one of the Center for Digital Storytelling's StoryMapping initiative that works to link narrative and place. <http://www.storymapping.org/placemeant.html>

Saving the Sierras: Voices of Conservation in Action uses media to explore the geographic, political and philosophical boundaries of the new Sierra Nevada Conservancy. Through public media and citizen storytelling, the project documents community efforts to conserve the environment, culture, and economy of the Sierra Nevada. It incorporates educational materials on conservation in addition to allowing users to listen to audio stories about the Sierras. Although users cannot upload their own stories, they can discuss the project through a blog and comment postings. <http://www.savingthesierra.org/>

The Organic City is a community storytelling project focused on the downtown Oakland areas surrounding Lake Merritt. It allows users to search for stories using a map or search function and upload their own stories in text, audio or video. The project seeks to connect with the community through the website and ultimately, for the exploration of the relationships between place, story, and community; as well as the ways in which new technologies can enhance our appreciation for these important components of human identity and experience. <http://www.theorganiccity.com/wordpress/>

StoryCorps is an independent nonprofit project whose mission is to honor and celebrate one another's lives through listening. By recording the stories of our lives with the people we care about, we experience our history, hopes, and humanity. Each conversation is recorded on a free CD to take home and share, and is archived for generations to come at the Library of Congress. <http://www.storycorps.net/> City of Memory is StoryCorps Project combining stories professionally edited and stories uploaded by community members: <http://cityofmemory.org/map/index.php>

Capture Wales is the BBC's award-winning Digital Storytelling project which came out of a partnership formed in 2001 between BBC Wales and Cardiff University. BBC Capture Wales ran monthly workshops from 2001 - February 2008, facilitating people in the making of their digital stories. In this section you can watch the wealth of stories that were created on workshops during that period.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/audiovideo/sites/galleries/pages/capturewales.shtml>

Rural Voices Radio is a production of the National Writing Project. The thirteen-part series features original writings by students and teachers from diverse rural regions throughout the United States. Each half-hour program in the series takes listeners to a distinct location through a blend of stories, essays and poems, local sounds, and music. The programs communicate the significance of place as an inspiration for good radio, strong writing, and effective classroom teaching. Listeners and authors alike agree that Rural Voices Radio renews the spirit of community and connects us to shared personal experiences. Key to the effort was the desire to increase local participation and integrate place-based themes in student learning.

<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/doc/programs/rvr/rvr3.csp>

[murmur] is a documentary oral history project in Toronto that records stories and memories told about specific geographic locations. It collects and makes accessible people's personal histories and anecdotes about the places in their neighborhoods that are important to them. In each of the locations staff installs a [murmur] sign with a telephone number on it that anyone can call with a mobile phone to listen to that story while standing in that exact spot, and engaging in the physical experience of being right where the story takes place. <http://murmurtoronto.ca/>

New Orleans Survivor Council uses Story Circles as one tool to build and maintain a coordinated network of community leaders, organizers and community based organizations with the capacity and organizational infrastructure that can help to meet the needs of people most impacted by Katrina. This link provides a description of this organization's approach to Story Circles:

<http://www.peoplesorganizing.org/Volunteer/The%20Story%20Circle%20Model.doc>

The Vision Vessel is a novel civic engagement tool used by the City of Portland, Oregon to reach people who normally would be unlikely to participate in government. It is multi-media recording booth where residents can share their ideas about the City as it grows and changes.

<http://www.portlandonline.com/shared/cfm/image.cfm?id=117493>

Community Video Archives of Sarasota County, Florida, is a non-profit organization dedicated to archiving community video projects in the area.
<http://suncat.co.sarasota.fl.us/Collections/CommunityVideoArchives.aspx>

Questing is similar to traditional scavenger hunts, but with a greater emphasis on education and a specific place. Organized in the Connecticut River Valley between Vermont and New Hampshire, the Valley Quest project is one of the most extensive examples. It involves a number of small boxes hidden in sites of historical, ecological, or community significance. The individual or organization hiding the box also creates a short set of clues, which are then shared with the public. Valley Quests are available online and have also been published in a book, and quests have been created in many other parts of the country. Vital Communities is a non-profit organization that developed Valley Quest,
<http://www.vitalcommunities.org/ValleyQuest/VQhistory.htm>

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