



Digital Storytelling and Participatory Evaluation Tip Sheet

By Beth Berk

As video and digital media become more popular and accessible, many substance abuse prevention providers are looking for ways to use those tools within their organizations. One way that is currently generating interest is **digital storytelling**. A digital story is a first person narrative in which the storyteller works on developing a story within a group. The storyteller then writes and records a script, chooses images and a soundtrack, and edits their own video. Digital stories can be powerful tools to communicate information about prevention programs and the people that they touch. One way they are being used is in **participatory evaluation**.

Participatory Evaluation Overview

Participatory evaluation brings together people—other than an outside evaluator—to conduct program evaluations. Often, the evaluation is conducted partially or fully by interested program participants, staff, board members, and community members. Participants ask the questions, plan the evaluation design, gather and analyze data, and determine actions to take based on the results.¹

"It is an ideal way to ensure culturally appropriate evaluation is conducted," says Christina Borbely, Ph.D., a research consultant at CARS who provides technical assistance to prevention providers across California through the Community



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Prevention Initiative (CPI). She recommends that a community or evaluator consider participatory evaluation as a spectrum. "There can be great success with stakeholders taking on key portions of evaluation design and/or implementation and 'outsourcing' others to a formal 'evaluator.' A hybrid approach allows for the best of both participatory and traditional evaluation." She says participatory evaluation alone is not recommended when the objective is to establish evidence for program/strategy effectiveness.



¹ Zukoski, A. and M. Lulaquisen. (2002). Participatory Evaluation. What is it? Why do it? What are the challenges? Community-based public health: Policy and practice. Retrieved August, 2010 at: http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/pdf_files/Evaluation.pdf

Borbely offers these tips for programs interested in participatory evaluation:

- Make sure the stakeholders want to do the evaluation.
- Develop realistic expectations about roles, responsibilities, commitments and timelines.
- Have a timeline that permits for the “capacity building” process and learning curve.
- Make sure participants have realistic expectations about what participatory evaluation will yield.

Digital Storytelling in Participatory Evaluation

First 5 Alameda County recently contracted with the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, CA to help conduct a unique form of participatory evaluation. First 5 wanted to evaluate their two-and-a-half year capacity building program with their staff who provide parent education, the main component of the program. But they wanted more than a written report. The Center provided several digital storytelling workshops to the parent educators, assisting them as they developed short, 3-5 minute video stories about their experiences, which then became “data.” The Center collaborated with a professor at The University of Massachusetts to do a thematic



analysis of the data. The stories were also digitally imbedded into First 5’s final electronic report, so that they could be further used as a communication tool.

“Digital storytelling is definitely a qualitative tool. I think it’s most useful for gathering the positive aspects of a program because storytellers normally tell really good stories about what worked in a program. So if you’re trying to document best practices and get a more nuanced sense of how people experienced that program and how that program worked for them, then that’s where digital stories work very, very well,” says Andrea Spagat, San Francisco/Pacific Northwest Regional Director at the Center for Digital Storytelling.

Spagat says digital storytelling can be less time consuming than other qualitative methods, such as conducting field interviews. But she recommends that anyone thinking about using digital storytelling in participatory evaluation consider the following:

- **Gather experts.** Find someone who has expertise in helping people create their own narratives. The stories are not interviews; they are first-person narratives.
- **Secure funding.** Make sure you have enough funding to do it. At the Center for Digital Storytelling, it can cost \$5,000 – \$10,000 to capture five to ten digital stories in a custom workshop. That cost can vary by location, and does not include logistical expenses. If you include data analysis along with the workshop, expect to pay about \$30,000. The bulk of the work is analysis, and it often takes a lot of time.
- **Organize the evaluation.** Collaborate with the evaluator to clarify the goals of the evaluation and the questions that the evaluation will have. Organize the storytellers before the stories are told. Make sure there is a calendar of meetings and sessions to create the stories (about five half-day sessions).



- **Leave enough time.** Give yourself a lot of time to plan this. The evaluation will probably take six months from start to finish. You will probably need at least two months of lead time to plan the digital storytelling workshops themselves.
- **Educate the storytellers.** Be prepared to give the storytellers specific information about the workshop and what the expectations are around their storytelling. Plan an orientation session before the workshop gets underway. They will need to think about where the images are going to come from for their stories, whether they will need “releases” (legal permission to use video or photos) or whether they will only use symbolic imagery.
- **Plan a screening.** After the workshop, while the evaluation is being written, it is nice to plan an event in which the community sees the stories. It is really gratifying for

storytellers to bring a wider community into their experience, and it provides a sense of closure.

In that respect, Spagat suggests prevention programs think of how the stories are meaningful to the storytellers beyond the evaluation. “It is much different than interviewing people for a couple of hours and bringing the information back,” she says. “For the storytellers, this is a 20 to 30 hour time commitment. The emotional investment is also much larger.” With forethought, the stories could live beyond the evaluation process and be used as a tool to communicate the best practices and qualities of prevention programs.



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