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Stories and Storytelling in Extension Work

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Abstract: *Deep budget cuts, increased accountability, and the growth of anti-government and anti-intellectual sentiments place Extension systems in a defensive position. In response, we're engaging in organizational change exercises, restructuring, regionalizing, rewriting mission statements, and developing strategic plans. We're spending considerable time counting and measuring our efforts to defend the public impacts and value of our work. In this article we argue that we also need to become better storytellers by learning how to craft and strategically communicate stories that capture important truths about the public value, meaning, and significance of our work.*

Deep budget cuts, calls for increased accountability, and the growth of anti-government and anti-intellectual sentiments in the United States have combined to place those of us who work for Extension in a defensive position. In response, we're engaging in organizational change exercises. We're restructuring and regionalizing. We're rewriting mission statements. We're developing strategic plans. And we're spending a good deal of our time counting and measuring inputs, outputs, and outcomes to document, assess, and defend the public value and impacts of our work.

In this article we turn people's attention to a few other things we can and should be doing in this context of challenge and change. We need to improve our understanding of the power and importance of storytelling. We also need to learn to be better storytellers. More specifically, we need to learn how to craft and communicate stories that capture important yet underappreciated truths about the public value, meaning, and significance of our work.

We begin by explaining why we need to cultivate the art and discipline of storytelling in Extension. We then identify and briefly illustrate three kinds of stories we must learn to tell better. We conclude with a few cautions about the development and use of stories in Extension work.

Why Stories and Storytelling?

Many people—particularly in research universities—question the value of stories. Or they dismiss them altogether as journalistic, unscientific, untrustworthy, and unscholarly anecdotes. Yet as scholars in many fields and disciplines are demonstrating, the rigorous construction, analysis, and interpretation of stories and narratives—a process that is referred to as "narrative inquiry"—offers a powerful and sophisticated means of learning and discovery (Ospina & Dodge, 2005; Clandinin, 2007; Riessman, 2008). Utilizing stories in teaching and research is not somehow faulty because it isn't "scientific" enough. Rather, it is (or can be when done well) a valuable approach to incorporate into the work of learning and discovery *precisely because it isn't scientific*. A narrative approach to teaching and research taps into a way of knowing that is different from science (Bruner, 1986). Of course, science is enormously valuable. But we learn and communicate things through stories that we can't learn and communicate through science.

For an Extension-related example, here's a one-paragraph story that was told by North Carolina's first "home demonstration" agent, Jane Simpson McKimmon (1945, pp. 25-26), in her 1945 memoir, *When We're Green We Grow: The Story of Home Demonstration Work in North Carolina*:

In 1912 there was no assistant provided to help me, and I was out almost constantly, traveling to each of the fourteen counties. One day as I came down a long red clay road with the August heat shimmering in the dust before me, the driver flicked the flies from his horse and I wondered what I had done in this life that I should be traveling on that dreary road, with the thermometer hovering around ninety degrees, to teach somebody how to can tomatoes. But as the old horse and I rounded a bend in the road, the answer came in the smoke curling from two big canners which were puffing away on the courthouse green and in the fifty or more girls peeling fruit, filling cans, and getting ready for my coming. What did trials behind and obstacles ahead matter to these eager young people? Difficulties were just things to be climbed over or thrust out of the way by the tremendous urge that was driving them. It wasn't just canning; it was an opportunity to do something and to be something, and I have never regretted that the means provided for its accomplishment was a plain, everyday garden with which country girls were familiar. It was also a knowledge of how to turn the products of that garden into an income from which came spiritual as well as material blessings.

In this paragraph, McKimmon tells and interprets a short story that reveals truths about the personal and public value, meaning, and significance of Extension work. Importantly, the truths she reveals can *only* be communicated through stories. Dates and names, charts and graphs, statistics and bullet-pointed lists of outcomes are valuable. But they can't help us see and appreciate how rich and large the meaning and significance can be of a small thing like teaching girls how to can tomatoes. We simply can't know what our Extension work and experiences mean and how and why they're valuable without stories.

We have an even larger point to be made about stories: we can't *live* without them. One of the main ways we make meaning of our lives and experiences, our society and its institutions and the broader natural world we inhabit is by telling and interpreting stories about them. As William Cronon (1992, p. 1374) has argued, stories are "our best and most

compelling tool for searching out meaning in a conflicted and contradictory world." In telling stories and constructing narratives we reach beyond the simple recitation of facts and the reporting or chronicling of events. We *story* them. We situate them in a setting or scene and in the unfolding of a plot with characters who act and react in particular ways. It is by *storying and restorying* facts, events, and actions that we communicate and come to know or assert or contest their meaning and significance. This is what Jane Simpson McKimmon is doing in her little one-paragraph story. She's not just reporting an activity. She's telling a story in order to teach us what a seemingly small and trivial piece of Extension work *means*.

In short, the reason why we need to cultivate the art and discipline of storytelling in Extension is because *stories matter*. And so, too, does the way we tell them. As Richard Kearney (2002, p. 145) has written, narratives and the narrative process are not only "world-disclosing"; they are "world-making." According to William Cronon (1992, p. 1375), "Narratives remain our chief moral compass in the world. Because we use them to motivate and explain our actions, the stories we tell change the way we act in the world."

Three Kinds of Extension Stories

In our lives and work, we tell many different kinds of stories, for different audiences and purposes. Here we want to highlight three of the most important kinds of stories we need to learn to tell better in Extension.

Origins Stories

We begin with a key foundational story: the story of when, how, why, and by whom the national Cooperative Extension System (and/or individual state Extension systems) was created. We think of this as Extension's *origins story*. Because the centennial of the passage of the Smith-Lever Act will be marked in 2014, we'll likely be telling, hearing, or reading this story a lot in the coming months and years.

The history of Extension's founding is long and complex. But in most contexts, time doesn't exist to tell or write it in long and complex ways. So we make it short and simple. Most often, we write or tell it with a plot that goes something like this:

By the early years of the twentieth century, agricultural scientists were producing a lot of useful information and practical innovations related to farming and what used to be called "home economics." But most people who lived on farms or in rural communities couldn't access and use the information and innovations. The Extension system was created in 1914 to address this problem. Using an approach that Seaman Knapp invented called the "demonstration method," new county-based Extension agents and campus-based Extension specialists were hired to disseminate the useful information that was being produced by academics, and to encourage rural people to adopt new innovations and practices. The main purpose of this work—and its main outcome—was economic. It was to increase the efficiency, productivity, and profitability of farming and farm home life. And it worked! It simultaneously benefited rural families and communities, urban consumers, states, and the nation as a whole.

This short and simple story is often reduced down to a single sentence. For example:

With the 1914 Smith-Lever Act, the colleges took on a third

function, called "extension," which was designed to disseminate agricultural college-generated knowledge beyond the campus to farms and consumers (National Research Council, 1995, p. 8).

The Smith-Lever Act was designed to help higher education disseminate information about agriculture and home economics to communities throughout each state (Ward, 2003, p. 26).

We suspect that most people who are familiar with Extension might not see what the problem is with the origins story that these sentences imply, or with the substance of the story we outlined in greater detail above. After all, the sentences and short story do communicate some truths. But they also leave some truths out—and not all of them are pleasant.

A fuller story of the origins of the Extension system would be more complex, less heroic and self-congratulatory, and less unambiguously positive (Peters, 2002a, 2006, 2010). The story would attend to troubling dynamics related to the workings of power and issues of race, gender, and class. The story would include attention to disagreement over whose interests Extension was supposed to serve and advance, what its purposes were, and what methods should be used to pursue them. The story would not present one-way transfers of information and innovations from experts to consumers for economic benefit as the only focus and purpose of Extension's mission and work.

Instead, it would tell us that Extension was established for purposes that were not only economic but also cultural, political, and even spiritual in nature. And it would help us see why and how many women and men pursued this larger set of purposes as agents and specialists through building two-way reciprocal relationships with farmers and rural community members—people they didn't see as the ignorant and helpless clients, but as resourceful citizens with intelligence, knowledge, aspirations, and capacities to be tapped and developed. All this, incidentally, is visible in Jane Simpson McKimmon's little one-paragraph story. But it's not even imaginable—let alone visible—in the dominant Extension origins story.

Questioning Extension's origins story is not a new idea. Paul Warner and James Christenson did so in 1984, in their comprehensive evaluation of the Cooperative Extension System. Reflecting worries about Extension's future in a rapidly changing society and world, they asked: "Can an organization conceived in 1914 as a way to get farmers to adopt improved agricultural practices continue to be relevant when it celebrates its 100th birthday?" (Warner & Christenson, 1984, p. 125). They concluded that it could not. But perhaps, they suggested, the challenge of imagining Extension's future is tied to a problem with how we imagine its origins and early history. "It could be argued," they wrote,

that Extension's early history was not at all as it is now being portrayed. Extension played a key role in improving agricultural production, but it also stressed improved utilization of resources within the family, personal development, improved quality of life, and the improvement of the total community (Warner & Christenson, 1984, p. 126).

Today, as we prepare to celebrate Extension's 100th birthday, we think such an argument not only can but also must be made. We need to learn and tell a better origins story in our conversations with our stakeholders and funders, in new staff orientations, and elsewhere—one that isn't just factually true, but also morally and civically rich and resonant, reflecting the deep human and community development commitments many of the women and men who founded the system held, commitments that—

despite the passage of a hundred years—are as relevant and compelling today (but perhaps less appreciated) as they ever have been.

Practice Stories

A second kind of story we need to learn and tell better in Extension is about our work and experiences as engaged educators and scholars. We refer to these as "practice stories." The dominant official culture in Extension requires staff to provide reports of their activities that feature numbers (e.g., how many people attended their workshops and programs, the results of evaluation surveys, etc.). Practice stories run against the grain of this culture. They aren't reports of activities, and they don't feature numbers. They're first-person stories of Extension work with characters, plots, actions, and lessons instead of numbers.

As we've discovered and shown elsewhere (Peters, 2002b; Peters & Hittleman, 2003; Peters, Jordan, Adamek & Alder, 2005; Peters, Connell, Alter & Jack, 2006; Peters, 2010; Franz, 2003), good practice stories help us to see things that numbers, official job descriptions, and program goals can't. They do this by providing us with richly detailed accounts of what practitioners do and experience in their work. They give us an appreciation of the multidimensional complexity of Extension work, including the kinds of challenges and problems it involves and how practitioners manage (or not) to deal with them. By inviting practitioners to make sense of their work and experiences, they serve as critically important tools for individual and collective learning and reflection. And perhaps most important, they help us discover, understand, and assess the meaning, significance, and value of Extension work in ways that numbers, reports, and statistics can't. (On the development and use of practice stories in teaching and research, see <http://courses2.cit.cornell.edu/fit117/>.)

Practice stories have also been used to address the demand for accountability by public organizations. Extension systems are moving from a reactive stance in providing quantitative information on program success to a proactive and more holistic and narrative process of continually determining, creating, and sharing program impact. One Extension system catalyzed this change by using storytelling to move from telling private value stories to telling public value stories about programs (Franz, 2011; Kalambokidis, 2004). The Extension specialist charged with leading this culture change around program practice used a combination of song and personal stories about her father as a public stakeholder to help faculty and staff understand the urgency, importance, and details of more fully measuring and sharing the public value of Extension work.

Organizational Change Stories

Stories can also be strategically told internally and externally to help guide and catalyze organizational change processes. For example, one Extension system wanted to move from an academic disciplinary programming approach to an issues-based approach. Field educators in this system found it difficult to move coworkers and clients towards issues-based work. In response, an educator developed characters and made them come alive through stories to help others understand and value an issue-based approach to education. The educator focused on issues of solid waste management and water quality that were of concern to local decision-makers and residents. In the first instance the story included a raccoon in a garbage can that helped audiences see the need to reuse and recycle items in the waste stream to sustain landfill space. For the water quality issue a frog described changes in nitrogen levels in her lake that were making it less productive for fishing and tourism. Through these stories, people were moved to address these issues in ways that engaged a variety

of disciplines.

Another example shows how organizational change stories can help faculty and staff to become more comfortable working across disciplines. An Extension administrator told a set of stories about successful interdisciplinary projects that attracted revenue and the attention of decision makers and resulted in high-quality scholarly products. The stories of exemplary programming helped motivate faculty and staff to develop more interdisciplinary thinking, processes, and products. Program teams reconfigured to move from disciplinary to multi-disciplinary and finally interdisciplinary membership and approaches to problem solving and programming.

Finally, organizational change for some Extension systems includes integrating program units. One program leader charged with guiding integration used storytelling based on an analogy of building houses. The history of each unit was shared by describing the changes in Extension housing/buildings on campus over the years. Blueprints for building a new house together were shared, and construction plans for new joint housing were suggested. The use of the house analogy in a storytelling format helped faculty and staff understand and feel more comfortable with the pending integration of their units by realizing this change was actually a return to their joint history of being housed together as units.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we offer a few cautions. First, stories and storytelling shouldn't be approached merely or only for "public relations" and marketing purposes. Stories are a way of knowing. They are not just a way to sell or spin our organization and make people feel good about us (or make us feel good about ourselves). As a way of knowing, narratives and the narrative process call on us to think and reflect in ways that are both appreciative and critical. Narratives from our work and experience should not be sanitized to make them "pretty" and "safe." Life and work are full of ambiguities, contradictions, and rough edges. They include things that give us hope and things that trouble us. If we rush to clean or airbrush troubling things out of our stories, we'll lose a great deal of their value. And what we end up with will be untrustworthy and misleading. Of course, we do and can use stories for public relations. But we must be mindful of the reasons and ways we do so and strive to be honest, truthful, and trustworthy.

Finally, we shouldn't miss the fact that honest storytelling is risky when it is done or presented in public settings. In organizations like Extension, it's also countercultural. This means that we have to be politically savvy and smart about the stories we tell, and how, when, and where we tell and interpret them. Making a commitment to develop an organizational culture that is safe for honest storytelling will help us realize the full benefits of this way of knowing and assessing our work.

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