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Youth Storytelling for Social Change: Guiding Questions for Effective and Ethical Delivery

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Youth Storytelling for Social Change: Guiding Questions for Effective and Ethical Delivery

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Abstract. Storytelling is a powerful medium through which to nurture and amplify youths' voices. When employed effectively and ethically, storytelling has been shown to foster connection, improve intergroup relations, promote socioemotional well-being, and motivate social action. Drawing on foundational research, Aristotle's three rhetorical appeals, and our experience pilot testing the #PassTheMicYouth curriculum, we developed ten guiding questions for effective and ethical youth storytelling for social change. 4-H professionals can use these questions with youths to guide them through social impact storytelling creation and delivery.

INTRODUCTION

A vast and growing body of research shows that youths thrive emotionally, socially, and academically when they are encouraged to use their voice to enact positive social change (Lerner et al., 2005; Search Institute, 2018). Storytelling is a powerful pedagogical tool for nurturing and amplifying youths' voices (Aldana et al., 2016; Checkoway et al., 2016). Indeed, research demonstrates that storytelling can reduce prejudice, nurture self-worth, and drive social action (De Vos, et al., 2003; Gonzalez & Kokozos, 2019). 4-H programs use storytelling to cultivate self-reflection, build leadership skills, and drive youth-led community engagement (Bollinger et al., 2020; Kotzian & Wiley, 2020).

One Extension initiative with a strong storytelling focus is #PassTheMicYouth, a program aimed at amplifying youth voices through a youth-centered podcast, blog, and corresponding curriculum (Gonzalez et al., 2019). Grounded in a Critical Positive Youth Development framework (Gonzalez et al., 2021), the curriculum aims to foster youths' critical reflection about social justice issues and encourage their belief in their capacity to create meaningful social change (i.e., political efficacy), ultimately driving informed action through storytelling and coalition building. Data from pilot tests indicate that participants benefited from structured guidance, facilitator feedback, and peer review.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE AND ETHICAL STORYTELLING

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (367–335 BCE/2005) established three rhetorical appeals for effective storytelling: an appeal to emotion (pathos), an appeal to logic (logos), and an appeal to ethics or establishing credibility with the audience (ethos). Drawing on these three appeals, key research, and our experience piloting the #PassTheMicYouth curriculum, we developed ten guiding questions to assist youths in creating and delivering compelling and credible social impact stories (see Table 1). These questions are intended for use by 4-H professionals and youths as a reflective tool to assist in story creation and delivery for social change. We encourage youths and facilitators to reflect on these questions before, during, and after the story creation process. Below, we further elaborate on each question.

Table 1. Guiding Questions for Effective and Ethical Storytelling

What is the primary focus of your story?
What do you hope to accomplish by sharing your story?
What medium will you use to tell your story and how does the medium you are using shape the intended impact of your story?
How are your identities and lived experiences shaping the focus of your story and how you choose to tell it?
How are you establishing legitimacy as the storyteller?
How might your story connect with people emotionally?
Is your story informed by credible sources?
Is there anything in your story that could be interpreted as offensive or divisive?
If you are integrating a secondhand account(s) into your story, what are you doing to ensure your interpretation of the subject's experience is accurately represented?
With whom might you collaborate to expand the scope of your message?

WHAT IS THE PRIMARY FOCUS OF YOUR STORY?

Youths should anchor their stories with a main idea and substantiate them with evidence, supporting details, and personal anecdotes (as appropriate). Main ideas should be broad, with room for nuance via methods such as contrasting differing perspectives, sharing firsthand experiences, and focusing on lesser-known angles. Pinpointing a main idea prevents a meandering message and allows the youth to focus on the method and medium of communicating the story.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH BY SHARING YOUR STORY?

Storytelling can inspire, educate, and serve as a call to action (Neile, 2009). Whatever youths hope to accomplish, they should begin with the end in mind by reflecting on the overarching aim of their story and ensuring that every step of their process supports their end goal.

WHAT MEDIUM WILL YOU USE TO TELL YOUR STORY AND HOW DOES THE MEDIUM YOU ARE USING SHAPE THE INTENDED IMPACT OF YOUR STORY?

There are many ways to tell a story; poetry, visual art, music, and presentations are all methods of communication suited to storytelling. Different people have used various forms of media throughout history for different purposes. For example, spoken word poetry developed out of the Civil Rights Movement and is associated with marginalized voices (Weinstein, 2018). Youths should select a medium they feel comfortable with and consider how their choice of medium will affect their audience and facilitate their storytelling goals.

HOW ARE YOUR IDENTITIES AND LIVED EXPERIENCES SHAPING THE FOCUS OF YOUR STORY AND HOW YOU CHOOSE TO TELL IT?

Youths' backgrounds and social identities—as they relate to age, ability, class, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity—affect what stories they choose to tell, the angles they take, and the worldviews they adopt. It is important to encourage youths to engage in a continuous cycle of reflection as to how their identities, lived experiences, and biases shape the storytelling exchange. According to Carter et. al (2014), considering and reflecting upon how personal, political, and ideological assumptions shape stories allows the storyteller to appreciate their multifaceted dimensions and deliver stories in a more ethical manner.

HOW ARE YOU ESTABLISHING LEGITIMACY AS THE STORYTELLER?

Youths should consider how they will integrate aspects of their experiences into the story itself—for example, through personal anecdotes. Establishing legitimacy means helping the audience understand why they're hearing this particular story at this particular time. Are they concerned about homelessness because of a friend's experience? Have they been bullied at school because of their identity? Legitimacy also comes from youths showing that

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they have reflected on their experiences in light of credible sources (a point addressed by a later question) and can place their story in the context of social systems and society at large.

HOW MIGHT YOUR STORY CONNECT WITH PEOPLE EMOTIONALLY?

The power of storytelling rests largely in the notion that even if we may not fully comprehend another's story, we can connect with the universal emotions conveyed through their experience, both joyful and painful, that highlight commonalities and foster understanding. Indeed, research has found that listeners' brain waves during emotional parts of a story mirror those of the storyteller, signaling connection (Wallentin et al., 2011). Youths should seek a genuine bond with the audience and be careful not to exploit listeners' emotions through the use of hyperbole and scare tactics.

IS YOUR STORY INFORMED BY CREDIBLE SOURCES?

Ensuring that youths use reputable sources in the formation of their stories is key to truthful storytelling and will reinforce a practice of healthy media literacy. Identifying trustworthy sources, supporting claims with data, and appropriately crediting and attributing all help improves the quality of a story while building trust with the audience.

IS THERE ANYTHING IN YOUR STORY THAT COULD BE INTERPRETED AS OFFENSIVE OR DIVISIVE?

Youths' stories should focus on the stated problem and concrete solutions; their message should be nuanced and void of generalizations and inflammatory language. For example, content guidelines for popular TEDx events encourage speakers to reach a broad audience—including those who may be resistant to their message—by seeking to find common ground, staying focused on their overarching idea and corresponding goals, and avoiding divisive topics such as religion and partisan politics.

IF YOU ARE INTEGRATING A SECONDHAND ACCOUNT(S) INTO YOUR STORY, WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO ENSURE YOUR INTERPRETATION OF THE SUBJECT'S EXPERIENCE IS ACCURATELY REPRESENTED?

Accurately and respectfully representing someone's experience is a tremendous responsibility and may require soliciting input from the subject or those more knowledgeable of the topic. Seeking informed consent, when possible, ensures that the subject knows how their story is being communicated and can include affording the subject an opportunity to provide feedback before their story is shared (Ferrer et al., 2021).

WITH WHOM MIGHT YOU COLLABORATE TO EXPAND THE SCOPE OF YOUR MESSAGE?

Facilitating collaborative processes assists youths in moving beyond creating awareness and toward creating sustainable social change (Aldana et al., 2016). As part of our #PassTheMicYouth program, we encourage youths to take stock of overlapping themes across their stories and identify ways they can build coalitions with each other and the community.

CONCLUSION

Stories have the greatest impact when they are substantiated by credible sources, resonate with a broad audience, generate dialogue, and motivate action (Neile, 2009). These questions above serve as a reflective or peer review tool for practitioners and youths as they create and deliver social impact stories. Currently, our team is measuring the impact of storytelling on youth critical reflection, political efficacy, and contribution through critical action. In the future, it is necessary to further study and assess the role of youth storytelling as a mechanism for social change within Extension.

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