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The power of storytelling

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[Newsletter feature](#)

Stories have been used to hand down learning and knowledge for thousands of years. A good story engages our curiosity, emotions and imagination. We spoke to Clare Patey, Director of the Empathy Museum, and Cathy Irving, Director of Communications at the Health Foundation, about the transformative power of storytelling and its potential to bring about change.

What is storytelling?

Perhaps the first thing that springs to mind when you think of storytelling is a childhood experience of being told a story or a story that you have told a child, doing a different voice for every character. We're all familiar with traditional forms of storytelling, such as fairytales and legends, and these oral and written stories continue to evolve as they are retold and brought to life in different forms.

But storytelling does not just take place within a pool of lamplight in a nursery or round a campfire. Stories are part of our daily lives, in the anecdotes we tell to our friends, the books we read and the films we watch. Stories are also recognised as an important way of connecting with any audience and storytelling is increasingly used in workplaces, advertising and fundraising.

'Stories are the way we understand and make sense of the world we find ourselves in.' says Clare Patey, Director of the Empathy Museum.

In health care, stories are proving to be a useful tool in engaging people with quality improvement work. Telling the story of one patient's experience of care can memorably illustrate improvements or problems in a care pathway. Statistics and data have an important place in monitoring and understanding services and facilitating improvement, but the right story can also have the power to motivate and change minds.

Sharing the story of a patient or frontline worker with a board or with a team can quickly and effectively bring a situation to life and focus discussions around quality improvement and patient experience. (You can read about the impact one patient's story had in our recent blog

on [improving whole system flow](#).) At the Health Foundation, we find that storytelling helps to communicate in a powerful way the lessons emerging from some of the projects we fund in the NHS.

‘Storytelling approaches help us inform debate and discussion, raise awareness of the work of our grant holders and people we work with as well as help bring key issues to life.’ says Cathy Irving, Director of Communications at the Health Foundation. ‘They can help us appeal to hearts as well as minds.’

Stories take many forms, but they usually have some elements in common. Rather than a list of dry facts, stories have a narrative or sequence and they introduce people or characters. We respond to stories, particularly when there is emotional detail, and remember information given in story form much more vividly.

Why is storytelling important?

The Empathy Museum’s Clare Patey says, ‘Stories have a transformative power to allow us to see the world in a different way than we do if we just encounter it on our own. Stories are an entry point to understanding a different experience of the world.’

This aspect of storytelling – presenting a different perspective of the world – is important when it comes to connecting with each other. It gives us an opportunity to learn from another person’s experience and it can shape, strengthen or challenge our opinions and values. When a story catches our attention and engages us, we are more likely to absorb the message and meaning within it than if the same message was presented simply in facts and figures.

When someone tells us their own personal story, we catch a glimpse of a view of the world that may be slightly or radically different from our own. When we see the world as they see it, or walk in their shoes, the experience can inspire empathy within them.

Clare says, ‘We can relate to an individual much more easily than a group. First-person narratives are helpful in seeing people as individuals rather than as a group, like ‘patients’, ‘refugees’ or ‘the homeless’. Storytelling and listening is a two-way process. There’s some evidence from neuroscience, which suggests that when I’m telling you a story and you’re listening to my story, our brain patterns begin to mirror one another. We are connecting, and the empathy is on not just an emotional but a physical level.’

The art of powerful storytelling

Everyone has stories to tell, but storytelling is a skill that can be developed and as a tool it can be used to powerful effect. Developed and used purposefully, storytelling can contribute to inclusion and connection, build confidence, and bring about change.

[A Mile in My Shoes](#) is one example of storytelling used in a creative and memorable way. For Clare, there’s no one thing that makes a powerful story – each story and storyteller is unique.

‘The storyteller is sharing their experience of the world for the listener. Lots of things make a story powerful – the way that it’s structured, the skill of the storyteller, the content of the story, the way that a voice is used. Different things come together. If people are inspired to use storytelling in their work, I’d recommend working with people who know about storytelling, such as artists and audio producers in the case of A Mile in My Shoes. They can help you to look at how you can use storytelling in a way that is going to help you meet your aims.’

Cathy reflects on the experience of the Health Foundation, ‘Storytelling is an important communications tool for us. It can capture people’s attention, and hopefully provoke them to think differently about an issue. We use storytelling as a way of encouraging people to delve deeper into the evidence about what works and doesn’t to improve health and health care.’

‘From our work with the Empathy Museum on A Mile in My Shoes, to our [Power of People](#) films, our blogs and [animations](#) – we’re experimenting with different approaches to engaging people with our work. We also encourage those we fund to use storytelling to help share the learning from their improvement work and have created [resources](#) to help them.’

To explore the A Mile in My Shoes audio stories online, visit: listen.health.org.uk.

For more information on using storytelling in health care improvement, visit our online toolkit, [Communications in healthcare improvement](#). Section 3 includes advice on [Using storytelling in health care improvement](#).

For more information on the Empathy Museum visit: <http://empathymuseum.com>

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