PRACTICAL ACTION
Technology challenging poverty

STORYTELLING

technical brief

Human beings across the world have told stories as long as they have had language, and storytelling remains a living tradition that continues to evolve and flourish today. Storytelling is often considered to be a highly appropriate communication method for developing communities because it is based upon the fundamental and familiar use of speaking and listening. The content of the story itself will often convey experience, knowledge, wisdom and values which are handed down through generations. Stories can easily be adapted or newly devised to incorporate development issues.

Advantages of Story Telling

- Stories can be devised to suit the local situation, such as a particular problem facing the community.
- Stories can evoke immediate responses and discussion from the listeners.
- Storytelling is free; it requires no costly resources and can take place in any location.
- Stories can be told in the local language (audience does not need literacy skills).
- Storytellers can reach all community members including those (such as girls and women) who are often left out.

Children listening to a story in Kajiado District, Kenya. Practical Action East Africa

How to use Storytelling

Some organisations may offer ready written stories which convey development lessons, but there is also scope for development staff to work with local storytellers to devise stories to suit the local context. The story does not have to be factual, but the development workers should ensure that the storyteller fully understands the issue and represents it accurately in the devised story. The incorporation of local characters, places and humour can be very effective.

- The story should be engaging and hold the attention of the audience.
- The story must be well and carefully told. Ensure that the crucial development message in the story is not altered.
- Visual aids can be used to help reinforce the message.
- Opportunity should be given to the listeners to express their thoughts and opinions on the issue raised in the story.
- Stories can also be integrated into dance, music and theatre events.
- Stories can be recorded on audio tape / disk or video for wider use.
- Select an appropriate time and place for the storytelling.

Constraints of Storytelling

- Storytelling relies heavily upon the individual ability of the storyteller.
- It reaches only the immediate local audience.

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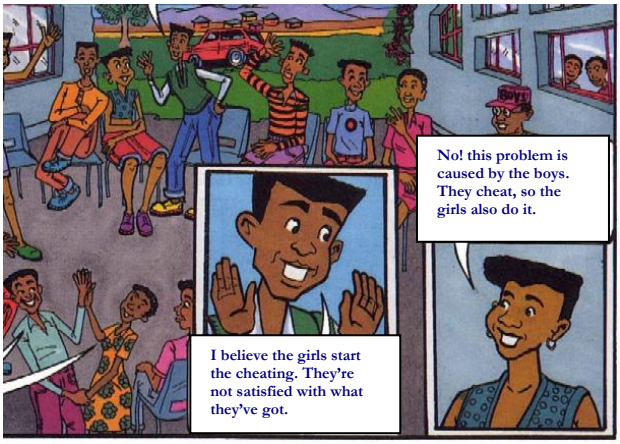
Real Life Story

Storytelling for Change

A high school storytelling group in South Africa has carried out groundbreaking work, using comic stories as a tool to explore the dimensions of violence within adolescent dating relationships. The use of an innovative methodology shows how it is possible to diffuse the conflict between the need to reflect the realities of young people's lives and the need to transform harmful behaviour.

Within the storytelling group, students aged 16 to 20 from Acornhoek High School in Mpumalanga Province were asked to write a love story about a boy and girl in a rural village. Reflecting their own experiences, the students treated domestic violence, forced sex and having multiple partners within a relationship as the norm. The students devised scenes from their own stories which they acted out, and they started questioning and debating the legitimacy of the actions they had given the characters. The students explored previously undiscussed topics such as rights over one's body, male violence, sexual double standards, teenage sexuality and traditional gender roles. Thus a new story, in comic form, emerged, with an educational agenda, yet still retaining its popular status by remaining true to the social conditions created by the students.



Part of a cartoon illustrating the discussions which were stimulated by the storytelling.

Real life story by kind permission of id21, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK. Website www.id21.org.uk and Dr. Patricia Shariff, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.

Further reading

Singing and Dancing Practical Action Technical Brief
Community/Street drama Practical Action Technical Brief
Puppetry Practical Action Technical Brief
Public Gatherings Practical Action Technical Brief

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Practical Action is a development charity with a difference. We know the simplest ideas can have the most profound, life-changing effect on poor people across the world. For over 40 years, we have been working closely with some of the world's poorest people - using simple technology to fight poverty and transform their lives for the better. We currently work in 15 countries in Africa, South Asia and Latin America.

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