

## **Using Stories for Evaluating Community Based Information and Communication Technologies in Developing Countries**

Part of the Report of the PANAsia Telecenter Learning & Evaluation Group's (PANTLEG) visit to Mongolia, June 2001.

### **Introduction**

The PANAsia Telecenter Learning & Evaluation Group (PANTLEG) is a network of telecenter practitioners and development organisations for learning and sharing strategies using ICT as a tool for social and human development in rural communities in Asia. It has performed visits to four of its member organisation telecentre projects, in India, Malaysia and Mongolia. As part of its deliberations, the Group works to develop methods for evaluating the impact of community-based telecentres on rural populations. The Group has adopted the use of stories as a means of evaluating telecentre outcomes and for sharing the learning experiences that its evaluations make possible. During its meeting in Mongolia, the Group considered a variety of issues related to the development of a methodology for using stories as a formal means for evaluating the impact of telecentres on rural communities. This report summarises the Group's assessment of the major components of such a methodology. The purpose of the report is to define the learning of the Group so far in terms of how a methodology for story telling should be approached as well as to foster further work in the direction of building a formal tool for evaluating the impact of telecentres in rural development.

### **Definitions of Stories**

The stories that we are interested in retell accounts of personal experiences and reflections of people in organisations and communities that tell of activities and events describing something of importance to them and which are useful to us in assessing their response to the telecentre intervention. Such stories can be told by an individual or by several people together and they can describe single or multiple events.

A story will transmit knowledge, facts and experiences as well as non-factual material. All these will be mixed together with no apparent distinguishing characteristics to tell fact from fantasy and knowledge from guesswork. Stories will be told orally or in writing or in some other visual form. They will be of variable length. They represent highly subjective representations of reality, but as reality is subjective anyway, this does not make them any less useful or meaningful. For a story to be told, it needs a teller, a communication channel and a listener. When stories are told, they are usually a good source of documentation, even though it may not be apparent at the time of the telling exactly how good or for what reason the story may be useful.

### **The Story as a Concept**

In addition to the retelling of experiences and events, stories are records or accounts of individual or group learning processes, experiential occurrences, emotions and reflections on events. They tell not only of the substantive content but also of the response of the teller(s) to that content. The stories themselves and also the re-telling of the stories will incorporate their context. Contexts of both stories and their re-telling will include the people involved and those present, characteristics of the place

of the story and its re-telling and also that which has taken place prior to the story's events and its re-telling.

A story usually has a target audience, which may or may not be the audience present at the re-telling. Storytellers will likely be aware that ownership of stories is transmitted with the telling; that stories are re-told and that successive tellers have the freedom to introduce modifications and to hijack the story for their own purposes. The same story might be told from different angles, according to the point of view, motivation and interpretation of the storyteller. Objectivity is hard to find among stories, but objectivity is not the only goal of an insightful evaluation. Stories are recordable, replicable, understandable by everyone and are familiar within the cultures that generate them.

### **Why Stories?**

Stories are people centred. They represent the human response to a situation. They reflect life as people see it being lived, incorporating as they do, feelings, emotions, and the dynamics of the situation of both the events of the story as well as its re-telling. Even seemingly simple stories are capable of revealing complex situations, especially the impact of social interventions. They are a way of sharing knowledge, with the mode of sharing under the control of the storyteller. Stories are easily able to capture experiences and to help people understand how they are affected by the actions of others. They are useful to explicate the reasons behind events and behind the reactions of people to the actions of others. Stories can illuminate community processes. They can induce a rich picture of how people interact, and how the repercussions of interventions ripple throughout the communities in which they occur.

Stories provide opportunities for inputs to decision-making to the stakeholders who will be affected by the decisions. Moreover, the shape and form of these inputs are under the control of the stakeholders themselves, i.e., the stakeholder tells his/her own story in the way he/she wishes. Stakeholder responses are not pre-judged by the shaping of survey questions or by the collection of certain data. Consequently, stories can contain new ideas, and new perspectives that had not previously emerged. Story data is rooted in the perceptions of the primary stakeholders of community interventions, i.e. the communities themselves.

Stories can be re-told, endlessly, and their potency seems not to decay with time. Historically, they have transmitted knowledge and wisdom through successive generations and have retained their relevance over long periods. Consequently, the contribution that stories can make to an evaluation situation is cumulative, in that the entire history of the context of an intervention can be represented at the time of its evaluation. Given the significance of context to the outcome of interventions, any means of its edification is potentially useful for evaluation of the intervention.

Stories, at least those telling of recent events, are verifiable and they add value to alternative tools for learning and evaluation. They can be used to solve problems, to pass knowledge, to facilitate understanding, and to highlight or downplay the importance of such knowledge and understanding.

### **What Makes Stories Valuable?**

Stories are based on experience and they represent empirical evidence of events. They capture an otherwise unobtainable richness of events and the circumstances of the people involved in the events, their emotions and perspectives of reality. They also relate life histories and the connection between personalities and events. In describing how things actually happened, stories offer learning opportunities for understanding causalities and the shifting dynamics that occur between people, events, institutions and the environment. Besides, stories evoke a response from the listener and this can add depth to the communication that is taking place during the re-telling. Stories can summarise multiple events that are linked in some meaningful way in a cumulative manner that helps to identify trends so that future behaviour can be directed towards desirable outcomes. Hence, stories cultivate social change, becoming part of the intervention, not separate from it. As the outcome of story-telling is in large part determined by the context of the telling, stories can be infinitely re-used within multiple contexts, thereby serving multiple purposes.

Whilst it is improbable that statistical analyses can contain stories, it is possible for stories to contain statistical analyses. Moreover, stories collect data that is difficult to represent in statistics, such as emotions and evidence suggests that such factors are influential in determining community-based reactions to social interventions.

### **Measurable Indicators in Stories**

Measurable indicators can be built into stories without expressing them as numbers. The effects of interventions on peoples' lives can be described in stories that depict improvements in community-based factors that indicate the degree of participation of the interventions in bringing about those improvements. Stories can elicit changes in self-esteem, community aspirations, levels of education, access to job markets and changes in income and wealth distribution. By personalising these factors in stories, evaluations can hint at the long term possibilities that might be opening up for communities, even though the short term statistical improvements appear insignificant. Stories are more amenable to a longer-term perspective, which is typical of community responses to interventions, than are statistics, which are more amenable to a short-term perspective typical of external stakeholders such as donor agents.

Stories contain information that is usable by the storytellers' peers. Successes that relate the details of action and response can be replicated when both the teller and the listener understand the context of the story. In view of the subjectivity of stories, intimate understanding of the implications of a story depends on familiarity with its context. Ultimately, story-telling among peers, therefore, carries more benefit within communities than between communities and external actors, further adding to the value of stories as part of, not separate from, the intervention. This characteristic, of stories being integrated with the intervention, fosters the ultimate purpose of the evaluation of an intervention, that of maximising its benefits. Stories, therefore, are not extractive or summative, as statistics often are, but they are inclusive and additive. In this sense, further value is yielded from stories in that they readily accommodate the unexpected, another characteristic of community interventions. Predetermined measures may not contain sufficient scope to capture unexpected outcomes, and experience suggests that these can be as, sometimes more, beneficial than the expected outcomes.

### **Points to Consider**

The use of stories for evaluating and improving community interventions raises serious methodological concerns if such use is to satisfy the requirements for rigour in both academic research and professional practice. Many aspects of story telling and collection offer opportunities for the introduction of bias and a systematic process has to be capable of eliminating as many such opportunities as possible. The method of collecting stories, for example, should be considered. Such issues as who collects the stories, when they are collected and how they are recorded need to be considered. The collection process inevitably contains aspects of selectivity. Personalities will influence decisions in story collection, as well as aspects of trust and honesty between the teller and the recorder. Stories are likely to emerge in a more or less random fashion, at any time, by any teller, depending on the situation. Also, any particular story may contain information that relates to multiple outcomes. Consequently, it is difficult to classify stories whilst they are being collected. Stories may refer to community-wide outcomes, or to results that concern only one individual. They may relate to long-term or short-term outcomes. Stories may describe extended community experiences or small anecdotes. They may contain a mix of facts, observations and interpretations. There will be primary sources and secondary sources of stories and those that are far removed from the original telling. Storytellers will have their own motivations, and the same story can vary from teller to teller. Moreover, story collectors have a tendency to find what they are looking for, and might only hear the stories that they want to hear. The circumstances of story telling will influence the telling, both on the teller's side and the listener's. The impact of the story may not be appreciated at the time of the telling, perhaps it is under- or over-estimated, or both simultaneously. There will possibly be a factual gap of some sort between the story and the events it depicts, although neither teller nor listener may be aware of this. Finally, story lengths and content can vary according to the teller, i.e. the same story can be told differently by different people, and the language of story telling introduces a further variable when it is different from the language of the listener and/or user of the story.

### **Relationship between the Storyteller and the Interviewer**

The act of telling and collecting stories creates its own dynamic. In particular, the storytelling encounter becomes a factor in the relationship between the teller and the listener, and the characteristics of this relationship can influence both what is told and what is heard. Sharing experiences in a storytelling situation will likely change the nature of the relationships among those involved. Storytelling itself is often a deliberate act of relationship building, so the purpose of collecting stories for evaluation cannot be disassociated from the relationships between the people involved. Often, storytelling will invoke the trust that exists in a relationship, benefiting from one of rapport and respect rather than one that is based on power. Stories become more usable when the relationship between teller and collector is open and honest, free of manipulation, non-transient and held in confidence, if necessary.

### **Representation of Stories**

After collecting stories, decisions have to be made as to how they can and should be used. It is necessary to acknowledge that the stories that have been collected are of other peoples' activities, and should be treated sensitively. Representation of stories should be honest to the teller's version and intentions. In this regard, it is possible that there will be representations of stories by outsiders and by insiders that might be

in conflict, both in the substantive content of the story itself as well as in its interpretation. Whatever form of representation of a story is made, inevitably, it will include some elements of interpretation. This may only be implied by the context of interpretation, or it may be more overt and explicit.

Honest representation of a story is more achievable when it is shared with the storyteller and when the storyteller has an opportunity to contribute to or modify the representation of his/her story. Whatever method is used to represent a story, there may be a temptation to colour it more closely towards a particular desired effect. Representations should be ethically appropriate, according to the sensibilities of the teller as well as to the context of the representation.

Methods of representing stories are wide and varied. A simple narration is possible, but the impact will be enhanced when multimedia is used. There is a wide range of media available to effectively put across the meaning of a story; video, audio, radio, drama, music, text, oral and graphical methods. Appropriate choice of media in a particular context will add value to a story.

### **Interpretation of Stories**

Stories will often contain an interpretation of the events within the story and if several people tell it, there may be several interpretations and they may be at variance with each other. Furthermore, an individual's interpretation may vary as the story unfolds, perhaps in the light of the telling by another person. Variable interpretations should not imply the existence of one correct interpretation and many other incorrect ones. Any interpretation is valid, within reason, to the person who makes it and at the time it is made. Just as stories themselves have their contexts, so do interpretations, and these are likely to have an influence on how the interpretation proceeds. The key to interpretation is to surface the meaning of a story, or at least one meaning, as there may be several. For an interpretation to be useful, the meaning that it returns will contribute to the interpreter's intentions in the context of listening to or re-telling the story. Interpretations should elicit knowledge about how the events and the actors of the story interacted to produce some form of outcome. A useful interpretation will explain why the story is important to the interpreter's intentions and it will therefore be embedded in the interpreter's background, either as a researcher or project leader or as some other stakeholder. Subjectivity here is hard to escape of course, but a good interpretation will freely acknowledge it as so and will incorporate it into an explanation of what the interpretation means for the interpreter, i.e. as a contextual component of the interpretation. Interpretations should also be sensitive to the actors in the story, their culture and sensibilities.

### **The Subjects of Stories**

What should stories be told about, in the context of telecentre learning and evaluation? What events that took place, either in the telecentre or within the community, will expose issues of interest? The following topics offer a checklist of topics of interest, although it should be treated as an exhaustive inventory:

- *Education.* How did learning occur in the community and among the telecentre personnel?
- *Employment.* What has been the impact of the telecentre on employment opportunities in the community?

- *Rural development.* How has the community developed in a way that can be demonstrated as having been at least partially influenced by the activities of the telecentre? Development here means proceeding from one state to another state that is generally agreed to be superior by those who have experienced it.
- *Community benefits.* What benefits have the community experienced? What dis-benefits?
- *Project initiation, goals.* How has the telecentre been involved in the initiation of community development projects? What community goals have been achieved at least partially on account of the telecentre?
- *Project introduction to community.* What has the telecentre introduced to the community that was intended by the project initiators? What has the telecentre introduced to the community that was not intended by the project initiators?
- *Use of ICTs.* What has been the impact of the use of ICTs in the community? What examples illustrate the effects of introducing ICTs?
- *Recruitment of staff.* How were staff recruited, how were they retained, what did they do in the telecentre, how do they feel about what they do?
- *Community processes.* What impact has the telecentre had on the dynamics of community processes, such as its unity, organisation, leadership, etc.? Has the distribution of influence shifted, for example?

In addition to the above topics, stories are useful when they describe how people in the community have been affected by, or how they affect, the activities of the telecentre. These could include:

- *Telecentre users.* Who are they and what aspects of their lives have changed as a result of using the services of the telecentre?
- *Opinion leaders.* Who are they? Have new leaders emerged, or have existing leaders changed their opinions as a result of the activities of the telecentre? What has been the effect on the political and religious leadership of the community?
- *Major beneficiaries.* Who are they? How have they benefited? Have they benefited at the expense of others? How has the distribution of assets and advantages in the community been affected? Are there gender-related differences, or any other differential distribution of benefits that reflects pre-existing class or group differences? Has the situation of marginalised or minority groups been affected by the telecentre? Have the power relationships within the community been affected?
- *Major benefits.* How has the community benefited from the telecentre? How have people been able to solve, or attempt to solve, the problems of the community? How have their aspirations changed and the processes they use to address problems and opportunities?

### **The Target Community**

Stories that are useful tell not only of events that took place within the community and its telecentre. Decisions elsewhere, made by the range of stakeholders, politicians, government officials and project workers, will help determine telecentre outcomes. Influential groups, either within or outside the community, may shape telecentre outcomes, sometimes unwittingly. Such groups may include students, teachers, NGOs, private organisations, community leaders, policy makers and their advisors.

Additionally, professional bodies, tribal associations and political parties may affect how telecentres are installed and used. Such influences are best illustrated through the telling of stories.

### **From Whom to Collect Stories**

It is not helpful to be rigid about who should be approached for useful stories. Nevertheless, a helpful guideline might include the following as a good starting point; local volunteers, project co-ordinators, telecentre users and non-users, operators, and managers, community opinion leaders, village officials, representatives of community organisations, national and regional offices of community organisations, government departments with responsibility for rural development, community members who are more economically and socially successful, and those who are the least successful, NGOs, children, political and religious leaders, marginalised people, women, etc.

### **When to Collect Stories**

Stories can be collected at any time, but some form of organisation will likely add value to the stories, especially if they depict unfolding events. By adopting the perspective of telecentres as interventions within an existing social process or system, a collection of stories that highlights the components and the dynamics of the system will be most useful. Consequently, stories that tell of telecentre initiation will reveal the entry point of the intervention into the community system. Interviews at pre-implementation will help to reveal pre-existing assumptions and aspirations, as well as the opening position of the relationships between the telecentre actors and the recipient community. Events that occur during telecentre implementation may also provide useful stories, and can be collected during project visits, stakeholder meetings and other milestone events. When changes in the community begin to take place that can be attributed to the telecentre in some way, then it is a good opportunity to collect stories relating to how the changes came about. Stories should also be collected after the telecentre is implemented and the implementation project is considered complete. In this regard, story collection can usefully be considered as a continuous process, especially as the timetable of telecentre outcomes seems to be more subject to the influence of internal community dynamics than it is to the activities of external activists and promoters. What this means is that the stories get better over time.

### **How to Collect Stories**

Some discussion of the practical issues concerned with collecting stories is worthwhile. A variety of information sources and collection methods will contribute to story collection processes. Existing registers of telecentre activity as well as data collection forms can be useful for identifying where useful stories might be found. Interactions with volunteers, operators and users will probably yield useful stories, as well as meetings and informal discussions with community members, consultants and project staff. Interviews are best recorded using tape or digital recorders and questionnaires are sometimes useful for ensuring some form of structure to the stories that are recorded. Existing documents and reports might trigger useful sources of stories. Participant diaries are also a good way of recording stories for later analysis or elaboration.

Story collecting should begin with the building of friendships and trust between the teller and the listener. The quality and extent of trust will be reflected in the quality and usefulness of the story that emerges. Interpersonal skills are necessary for

success with story collection, and this will include cross-cultural sensitivity and communications skills. A people-centred approach is mandatory, with a willingness and desire to listen carefully without forming judgements. Some skill in developing rapport with potential storytellers will generate more useful material. Stories must be told in confidence when the teller so requires, and in the style of the teller. The most appropriate location for storytelling is the teller's natural environment, usually at his/her home or farm. Stories can be collected by anyone involved with the telecentre, ranging from the users to independent social development workers.

### **Validation, Verification and Triangulation of Stories**

Amongst the weaknesses of the story-based approach to telecentre learning and evaluation, the possibility of having the wool pulled over one's eyes is probably the most serious. Consequently, it is advisable to secure some form of validation to a story that is likely to play an important role in determining telecentre outcomes. The method of validation can vary from skilfully asking repeat questions of the same storyteller, to visibly checking accounts that have been told. It is often useful to obtain independent verification from another informant. Validation of stories is also useful in order to obtain different viewpoints and opinions and to accommodate interpretations that might be at variance. Anthropologists know this as the "Rashoman Effect" after the famous Kurosawa film which depicts the precept that reality exist in the mind of the beholder. Verification of a story can also enrich its contents as well as achieving a representation of reality that is more widely acceptable to those involved.

### **Conclusions**

The telecentre evaluations that PANTLEG has performed have been primarily designed to assist the individual project implementers that form the Group. Yet the Group's deliberations have exposed wider issues concerning the process of evaluating community interventions aimed at development in general, and specifically those involving the deployment of ICTs. In the process, the Group's findings serve to highlight the wide-ranging potential effects that ICTs can have on the social dynamics of communities that in turn seem to influence development outcomes. The evidence that the Group is still collecting seems to underline the observation that when ICTs are introduced to communities, they do not of themselves induce development. The effect of technologies is felt when they are used to foster and strengthen processes of community mobilisation, and it is these processes that lead to development. The complexities of the social life of even small communities and their interactions with new technologies, coupled with the difficulty in forecasting the outcomes of these interactions, renders story telling a useful and viable means of discovery, learning and understanding in the situations that the Group has been studying. However, in order to be fully effective as a replicable and reliable technique of enquiry, with the rigour that is required of academic and professional practice, story telling needs the methodological validity that is expected of measurement instruments in the social sciences. This report summarises the Group's assessment of the major components of such a methodology, with the expectation that further development will eventually yield a fully-fledged means of assessing the outcomes of development oriented community-based ICT interventions.