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Exploring & promoting Global
Health Design research

Summary from the Early-Career Professionals Workshop 2: The Art of Storytelling for Influencing Policy

18 November 2020

Storytelling is the natural language of persuasion. Stories connect individuals and humanize data. The best stories trigger an emotional response, which is key to provoking empathy in our audience and unlocking decision-making. However, researchers are not trained to employ the required techniques to communicate their findings in a form that is not only plausible but persuasive too. Put simply, most researchers are powerful analysts but weak storytellers. Thus training on storytelling provides researchers with opportunities to develop evidence that makes convincing arguments around the need to act.

As part of UNU-IIGH's strategies to strengthen capacity and to translate evidence into policy, UNU-IIGH and Lancaster University are collaborating on a series of workshops for Early Career Professionals. The series aims to build skills and strengthen South-South collaboration. The first session of this series examined the "who, why, and how" of stakeholder engagement ([report link here](#)). The second instalment of the series was held on 18 November 2020 to provide insights into the power of storytelling for influencing policy.

The main objectives of this workshop were:

1. To understand the definition of stories and the importance of storytelling for decision-making
2. To understand how to create stories (who is the audience, what are the key narrative components)
3. To practice scripted, oral, and visual storytelling

Workshop agenda

The workshop was structured as below:

1. Opening remarks
2. 1st lightning talk
3. Break-out session
Break
4. 2nd lightning talk
5. Break-out session
6. Plenary sharing & reflection
7. Concluding remarks

Opening remarks

The opening remarks were delivered by Dr. Mike Penkunas and Dr. Emmanuel Tseklevs. Dr. Penkunas is a research fellow at UNU-IIGH. He leads the Institute's work focused on strengthening capacity for local decision making. Dr. Tseklevs is the Associate Director of Global Health Design and convener of the Design Research Institutes on Global Health at Lancaster University.

Participants

A total of 45 individuals representing Malaysia, UK, Australia, Philippines, India, Germany, Italy, South Africa, and Nepal, participated in the workshop. The majority of the participants were from non-for-profits organizations or independent research institutes (55.6%), universities (13.3%), Ministries of Health (4.4%), and others (26.7%).

Speakers



Mr. Premesh Chandran
Co-founder and CEO of
Malaysiakini, UNU-IIGH
Board Member

Key points:

- Design the research for creating influence right from the beginning
- Know your audience - their interests, their goals, and how they prefer to receive the information
- Researchers don't need to abandon data; they need to find ways to tell stories with numbers.
- [Interactive graphics](#) can be powerful. Numerous online [tools](#) and [platforms](#) can assist with visualizations.



Prof. Doe Mayer
Mary Pickford Chair,
School of Cinematic Arts,
University of Southern
California

Key points:

- Stories are emotionally compelling and memorable. They inspire us to think differently.
- Why aren't data enough to tell a good story? Data are hard to remember; stories stick with you throughout your life.
- A definition of a story could be: somebody wants something very much but is facing obstacles getting it.
- The Global fund '[Here I Am](#)' Campaign used first-person [videos](#) to highlight the impact they were having and successfully increased fund by 30% in a year (more details [here](#))

Break-out sessions

Participants were divided into ten groups of 4-5 people, each led by a facilitator.

Break-out 1

Activity 1: Participants practised telling a story about themselves. Each story should consist of four key components: character, goal, challenge, and resolution.

Personal Story

Before I joined UNU, I worked for a development organization in Rwanda that worked with the Ministry of Health to develop research skills among the staff. At one of my meetings with the Director General at the Ministry, I asked her, "What is it that you want your staff to be able to do?" She looked back at me and spoke with conviction. She said, "We have so much data available to us, through the clinics, through programs, through surveys, but we don't know what it is saying. I want my staff to be able to listen to their data".

This concept was an inspiration to me. I was captivated by the idea that all this data has a story to tell, but no one knows what it is saying. After this, the organization I ran designed and carried out a data analysis program for the staff at the Ministry specifically to teach people how to speak the same language the data were speaking, so that they could understand what their data was saying, and be able to improve their own health programs.

Mike Penkunas

Activity 2: Participants read an article about Covid-19 and the elderly in Malaysia ([link here](#)) and identified the key research findings that could be of interest to policymakers.

Examples:

- Some groups are "left behind" when it comes to COVID.
- About 62.6% of the COVID-19 deaths are among people aged 60 and above.
- Early treatment can improve the prognosis for the elderly.
- Issues of social isolation and mental health in elderly groups during the COVID-19 period is concerning.

Activity 3: Each group was assigned a 'fictionalized' character - an older adult who concerned about contracting COVID-19; a front-line health worker caring for older adult patients; or a concerned family member of an older adult. Their goal was to tell a story from the perspective of their character.

Each group fleshed out the details of their character. These details were chosen to highlight the research finding and resonate with their target policy or decision making audience.

Participants prepared a narrative arc with the key components of storytelling (character, goal, challenge, and resolution) to inform the policy audience.

Note: For the purpose of this workshop, we developed character personas. It is highly recommended to use real stories when trying to influence policy-making.

Example: A story to be told to the Department of Social Welfare

| | |
|---|--|
|  Character | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Woman, 60 years old, with health problems (diabetes), has mobility difficulties- Originally from Bangladesh but has lived in Malaysian cities for two decades |
|  Goal | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Needs immediate access to health services and basic necessities (masks)- Needs critical COVID-19 information in her first language |
|  Challenge | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Husband is ill, no income and no social support- Has movement difficulties, needs a wheelchair |
|  Resolution | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Local NGO for migrant workers runs door-to-door and community campaign.- Community health workers visited her and brought her to the hospital |

Break-out 2

Activity 4: Each group prepared the script of the story based on the narrative arc and selected a picture for storytelling.

Example: A story about a concerned family member



At 3a.m. on Monday, Najas lay in bed unable to sleep, wrestling with a dilemma she faced on the fate of her grandmother who suffers from dementia. Caring for her was already a challenge before the pandemic, and now with the current situation it has gotten worse.

The thought had crossed her mind to find her a care home, someone professional to look after her. This might have been a difficult choice before, but with COVID-19 spreading throughout elderly communities and care homes in KL, this choice was even more daunting. Najas wished to continue to care for her grandmother, but with the burdens of lockdown, the support from the community and the government wasn't enough.

She'd heard of programs in other countries, at home care provided by visiting nurses, advice from social workers specialized for the care of dementia patients, and wished she had better access to this within Malaysia, allowing her to ensure her grandmother had proper care, and more importantly to keep her safe at home.

Plenary sharing & reflection

Participants thought it was important to be clear what the goal of the story, keep it concise and structured and not too complex. When telling a story of others, we need to think from their perspective/situations. Participants also agreed that stories are 'stickier', as they touch our emotions and stay in our hearts. To use Prof. Doe Mayer's words "numbers numb, stories store". Done well, effective storytelling is a powerful tool for influencing policy making.