

Telling Tales

I was in the foyer of the UKES conference in December 2003 chatting to Sarah Batterbury and Mark Bitel about how researchers and evaluators should tell more stories when they package their findings for policy makers and practitioners. “Write something about this for *The Evaluator*,” Sarah said.

We had been talking about what counts as good practice when writing up the results of research and evaluation studies. Our conclusion was that the “1, 3, 20” rule has become something of an industry standard: the one-page press release, the three-page executive summary, and the twenty-page technical report. Plus, to count as good practice, the press release and the executive summary need to be written in simple and accessible prose. Not bad advice on the face of it, but closer inspection of many press releases and executive summaries (including my own!) suggests that they are often rather bland: no colourful language, lots of bullet lists, and few images to excite the imagination.

Does this matter? Well, it may do if we want our research to have an impact on those who read it. Studies of the ways in which communities of practice draw upon and use different types of knowledge suggest repeatedly that anecdotes and stories have the greatest impact¹. So maybe as researchers we should begin to place more emphasis on translating the results of our research into good yarns; stories that evoke in audiences a feel for the experience and knowledge of others.

Such stories may use data directly from a research project – as currently happens when anonymous case accounts are provided to illustrate a point – but story telling need not be limited to direct facts. I recently picked up a book on fiction and social research and was struck by the following statement: “Facts don’t always tell the truth, or a truth worth worrying about, and the truth in a good story ... sometimes must use imaginary facts”². This suggests to me that good research stories need to remain true to the spirit of research findings rather than be constrained by them.

Should we be aiming to produce short stories or full-blown novels? My natural inclination is to promote the benefits of the short story, but I recently heard David Walker (journalist with *The Guardian*) speak at a seminar where he bemoaned the loss of the grand narrative in social science³. This, he argued, was a sense of loss shared by many policy makers in Whitehall. So, to have impact, we may need to think at least in terms of themed collections of short stories, if not the full grand novel.

So, should we really give up our careful factual accounts in favour of the ripping yarn? Well, perhaps not yet. However, if we must do so, I am heartened by another

¹ See for example Gabbay et al (2003) “A case study of knowledge management in multi-agency consumer-informed ‘communities of practice’: implications for evidence-based policy development in health and social services”, *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine*, Vol 7(3): 283-310

² Banks A and Banks SP (eds) (1998) *Fiction and Social Research*, London: Altamira Press

³ Walker D (2004) “The descent into solipcism – has academic social research lost contact with society”, Centre for Public Policy and Management Seminar Series 18th February, University of St Andrews. Transcript of talk downloadable from www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~cppm

comment in the book on fiction and social science: “perfectly ordinary people can learn to write good stories”. Maybe research advocates should extend their repertoire and increase their impact by signing up for creative writing instruction!

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