

Learning Partners

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Tapping the Power of Our Stories

By Marilyn Darling; adapted from the session, "Learning From Each Other's Stories" at the Learning for RESULTS conference in New Orleans, May 16-17, 2007

Many grantmakers capture and disseminate best practices and tools as a core component of their learning and knowledge strategy. Too often, however, we over-invest in this component of the knowledge equation and under-invest in the weak link — making sure that we collectively *apply* what we're learning.

We can tell each other as individuals what we know, or even gather and share knowledge that we've learned as a community. But such knowledge is an artifact of another time and place. Put another way, you can try out my recipe in your own work, but you may come away uninspired by the cake you've just baked.

If you see me as the expert and replicate my solution as if it's "right," chances are it won't work in the same way for you. Even if you succeed, you're not set up to continue to learn. This is why capturing and sharing "lessons learned" too often comes up empty.

So how can grantmakers do a better job of learning from each other and their grantees and collectively *applying* what they've learned in a way that produces a body of robust knowledge for the whole community?

What's in a Story?

Stories can be powerful sources of learning in a community. We convene in gatherings — conferences, communities of practice, regional meetings — to learn from each other. Sometimes we tell stories to celebrate our success — the "ain't we great?" stories that showcase our accomplishments. Most often, we tell stories to inspire or convince people to do something — to inspire others to follow a leader or advocate for a particular vision; to educate others about an approach or solution. Our aim with these stories is to move or enable the audience to "Do X" or to "Stop doing Y and start doing Z."

There is a third, and quite powerful, intention we can have for telling stories — to help everyone in the community create greater impact in their own work that's consistent with their *own* vision and purpose. In the process, we create a body of knowledge that effectively addresses the range of situations we all face in our real work.

It's this third kind of story that creates space for meaningful peer learning. With this intent in mind, the storyteller has no stake in which solution or tool participants choose to use. The storyteller aspires to tell a story that sheds new light on the listener's situation or raises a question or a new approach the listener had not thought of before.

The storyteller cannot predict what insight the story will ignite. It could come from any part of the story and will probably not be about replicating the path or solution exactly. And that's actually the point. Done right, this kind of storytelling can create knowledge that exceeds the grasp of what any one expert could produce by educating or inspiring someone to "do X."

Rubbing Our Stories Together

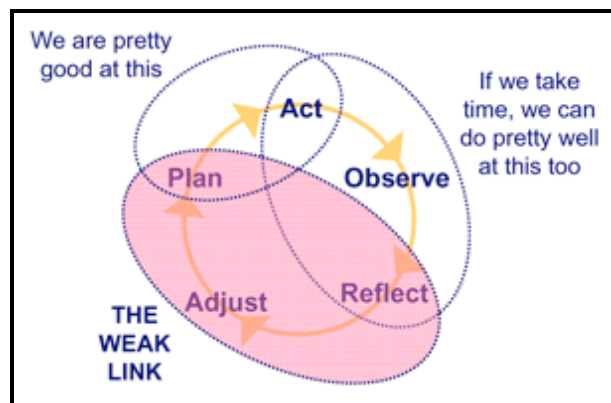
It's difficult to create robust learning from a single story. The likelihood that our situations and challenges are exactly the same is infinitesimal.

Storytelling for this third reason, therefore, gets even more powerful when, rather than focusing on telling a single story, we come together, pose a powerful "Framing Question," and tell two or more stories with the express intention of noticing what's similar and what's different. This process enables us to create an even more robust theory of success that applies to a broader range of situations.

Emergent Learning — learning that emerges from your own work as opposed to coming from an expert model — supports learning in community. We created EL Maps™ to help support this kind of conversation (see "**Emergent Learning Maps Chart Path to Results**" in the February issue of LEARNING for more on EL Maps™). But grantmakers can begin to do this kind of learning in their own organizations and with their grantees even without the formality of an EL Map™ by convening internal meetings and grantee gatherings to share two or more stories around these "Framing Questions."

While we must caution that there is an art to creating a powerful learning environment, here are a few simple steps you can take to set the stage for an effective learning conversation:

1. Choose a question that everyone in the room cares deeply about. Finding the right question and the right group is often an iterative process — both the question and the group may evolve



- before the actual meeting.
2. Frame the question as a future, positive aim. Start with "What will it take for us to...?" or "How can we...?"
 3. Look for stories that address this question most powerfully: both successes *and* failures; stories that have similarities and/or important differences that might provoke new thinking.
 4. Focus more on the journey than on the end-point. What you created (the typical focus of our PowerPoint presentations) is an artifact of a journey. What situation did you face? What caused you to take action? What happened along the path that took you toward your goal? What bumps in the road did you encounter?
 5. In the gathering, devote as much time to talking about what meaning we make from the stories as in the telling of them, and devote lots of time to letting each participant come up with their own plan to take their new insights forward. If there is time, ask each participant to share with the whole group what they plan to do.
 6. Perhaps most important, realize that everyone in the room is an "expert" and everyone has something to learn. No one gets top billing in an Emergent Learning session!

If we compare our experiences in sessions like these to create a shared theory of success, *then* go out and continue to test what we think works and make adjustments accordingly, soon enough, we'll learn things we could never have imagined. In essence, we become a community of social scientists.

For more information on EL Maps™ and to access materials from Marilyn Darling's remarks at the Learning for RESULTS Opening Plenary, "Emergent Learning: Peer Learning for Improved Results," and break-out session, "Learning From Each Other's Stories," visit GEO's [Learning for RESULTS Web page](#).

Marilyn Darling is a founding partner in Signet Research & Consulting, LLC. EL Maps™ are a trademarked tool of Signet. www.signetconsulting.com.