June 2024

Storytelling for Evaluation

Development of approaches for use with The OWL Collaboration, a programme of The Ernest Cook Trust

LESTARI

THE ERNEST COOK TRUST

Storytelling for Evaluation

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Why we believe in stories... 2

Understanding experiences through stories 3

Storytelling in practice 4

Framing the discussion 4

Methods 6

What approaches have we adopted and why? 7

The Storytelling Approaches 8

Postcards 8

Reflection Questions 10

Biodiversity Perceptions 14

Observation 16

Before you begin collecting stories: 19

Recording stories? 19

Taking notes 19

Writing Down and Up 20

Collation and Analysis of Stories 22

Choosing what to focus on 22

Themes and narratives 22

Strategic storytelling 23

Choosing our core narrative 23

Choosing our audiences 23

Analysis of strategic stories 23

Core Stories 24

Ethics and Safeguarding 24

Top Tips 25

Be Flexible 25

Less is more 25

Stronger together 25

Useful further reading: 25

Compiled by Lestari on behalf of The Ernest Cook Trust (completed in June 2024).

LESTARI

THE ERNEST COOK TRUST

Introduction

> *"We want to tell our story better – we know we do a good job but how do we talk about that?"* ***OWL Outdoor Learning Centre (OLC) Staff Member***

Throughout the summer of 2022, The Ernest Cook Trust began to develop new approaches to the evaluation of their education programmes, specifically of The OWL Collaboration programme,[1] bringing together the experiences of nine Outdoor Learning Centres and their staff. In order to augment and develop the metrics and measurements already in use, focus began to turn to the role storytelling might play in shaping understandings of young people's experiences while on a residential at the OWL locations.

Working alongside Dr Lewis Winks from Lestari, The Ernest Cook Trust and The OWL Collaboration co-developed and trialed a set of techniques and tools which could be used during busy and diverse farm-based and environmental outdoor education programmes. Staff at The Ernest Cook Trust then analysed the emerging data to create a strategic narrative to reflect some of the transformative experiences of young people on the programme. The result is discussed in this report, with key learnings and next steps suggested.

Now, in their second year of use, the tools have been extensively trialed and honed. Feedback from education practitioners has helped us to adapt the approaches and resources, while the stories they have generated are testament to the usefulness of using evaluative storytelling approaches in these contexts.

We hope that this document is useful in inspiring and guiding others to adopt a similar, mixed approach to qualitative evaluation.

While this report provides a reflective overview of the development of the approaches and the trialing of them in practice, an accompanying instructive document provides a more objective outline of the methods for those wishing to make use of the approaches outside of The OWL Collaboration.

[1] OWL (Outdoor Weeks of Learning)

Choosing the right approach for the evaluation needs of your project is challenging. This is because there is often a gap between what might be ideal and the most practical given time and resources (and the needs of participants). Often the 'default' will be to count, survey and attach metrics to programmes and projects. While these approaches are valid, it is notable that other opportunities are often overlooked.

Stories of people's experiences told by participants themselves offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of programmes and may be collected alongside their quantitative counterparts. They might be told in response to a question, a theme, a photograph, or even another story.

Why we believe in stories…

There are a number of reasons why we might look to the use of storytelling in evaluation, but before we turn to these, it's important to note that we do not see the use of stories to be better or worse than other evaluative metrics, such as those gathered by surveys – rather we see stories as a way of enhancing the understanding of what these metrics might be suggesting. Stories can go deeper into experiences whereas surveys provide us with an across-the-board view. We need both.

We refer to storytelling as a qualitative technique because stories shine a light on the quality of participant experiences. They are contrasted with numerical metrics such as survey data, which are known as quantitative approaches.

We believe stories are important for environmental engagement and Outdoor Learning because:

- Participants can speak from their own experience – enabling it to reveal ideas and insights which may otherwise be overlooked by other evaluation approaches.
- Stories are reflective and reflexive – they can help to shape and inform experiences.
- Stories are useful for articulating difficult-to-grasp or challenging topics (for example, climate change) and can enable otherwise 'dry' topics to come to life.
- Stories are well placed for exploring long-term and gradual change, especially where memories are rooted in places.

It was felt that good stories in Year 1 were really bringing to life the changes we were seeing quantitatively. The NCI score 'pre' an OWL residential in Year 1 was 46 and this rose to 50 'post' the residential - a 9% increase in Nature Connectedness. This rise was particularly pronounced for the 'I feel part of nature' statement which saw a 16% rise (see Figure 1). However, it was collectively felt that this data did not capture the transformational nature of an OWL residential, and it was actually good stories that were bringing this change to life.

Rosie Tudor – Impact and Policy Adviser, The Ernest Cook Trust

Example Year 1 Stories:

"I have noticed that nature has feelings too."

"Will we be allowed to go and see the stars again tonight?" After the evening orienteering challenge, the previous night, the students turned all torches off and gazed up at the stars for the first time. "I counted 42 stars." "I counted a million stars."

"I'll look at nature differently now and I've noticed I can live without the things I live with at home like electronics and stuff."

Understanding experiences through stories

Storytelling is an intrinsic part of human nature – we are a storytelling species. Stories help us to make sense of our experiences, to share them with each other and to pass learning and experience through generations. Across Europe, stories have been told for tens of thousands of years to entertain and educate – oral storytelling is both a reflector and shaper of culture and tradition. Although we now rely more on written and recorded stories, our connection to storytelling remains strong.

Within environmental education programmes, there is a particular opportunity and purpose of foregrounding storytelling to make sense of experiences as they take place. It is like flexing a seldom used muscle and provides a powerful way of reflecting, learning, and understanding. Although this work is focused on storytelling as an evaluative technique to learn more about participant experience, it is important to remember that it is also a tool for reflection, and a way for participants themselves to deepen their experiences of a programme.

Figure 1: *Wheelbarrow family at Jamie's Farm, Monmouth*

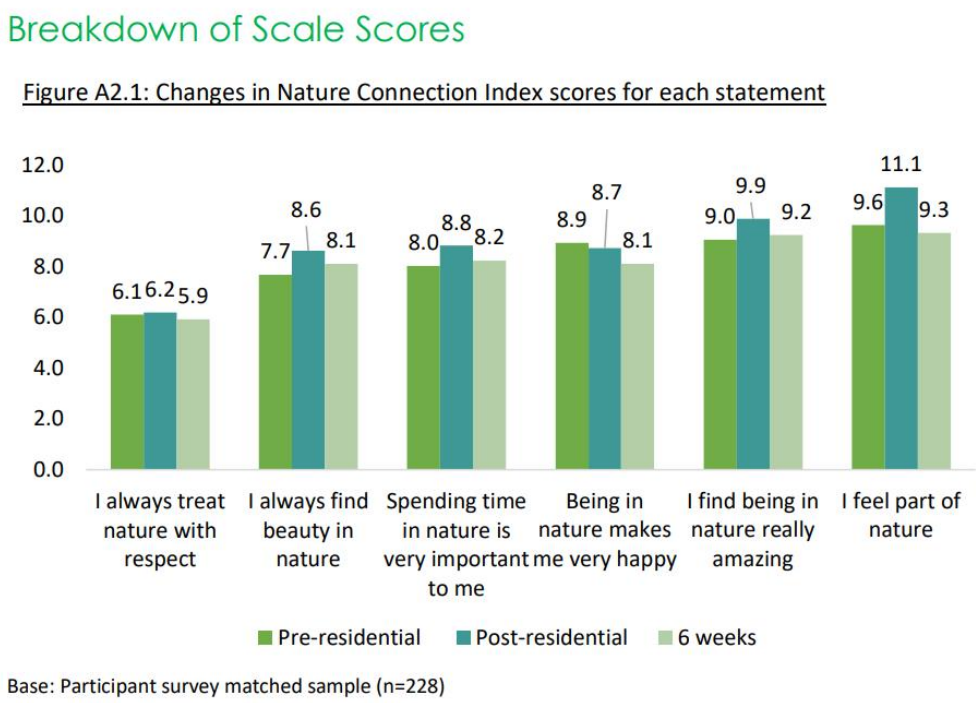


Figure 2: *Quantitative metrics demonstrated that the residentials were having an impact on young people, but storytelling was needed to understand how and why.*

Storytelling in practice

We adopted a flexible and guided approach to strategic storytelling which gave enough of a framework for OWL practitioners to undertake the collection of stories with young people, while allowing enough flexibility to be able to adapt to resources, requirements and prior experience.

Framing the discussion

The framing of the discussion was based on four key questions which were adapted from The Arts At The Old Firestation Storytelling methodology. These questions are:

1. What was your experience of your week of Outdoor Learning?
2. What changed for you (and how did it change)?
3. Why is this important to you?
4. What were the key moments or ingredients?

IMPORTANT: these questions are designed as starting points for creating an evaluation approach particular to the needs of a group, location, programme etc. It's not expected that these questions are directly asked, rather that they indicate the essence of any questioning and reflection which takes place.

Figure 3: *On top of the world at Bore Place*

Methods

There were three broad methods which underpinned the specific approaches and supporting resources that were developed. Approaches could focus on informal discussion, group discussion (e.g. focus groups) or observation. There are advantages and challenges associated with each of these broad methods, and we ensured that OWL practitioners understood what the opportunities and difficulties might be in the context of their work before co-designing the approaches.

Informal Discussion	Focus Groups	Participant Observation
One-to-one interviews with focused questions. Can be carried out in a variety of settings or even while walking. Useful for getting to the heart of matters quickly and staying focused. Disadvantage of only being able to speak to one person at a time.	Small group informal dialogue (3-5 participants optimum). Sometimes structured with loose questions. Participants prompt one another to recount and respond naturally. Can be hard to keep notes and keep conversation on track!	Group observation and discussion over longer periods. Can provide insight into instances which are otherwise unnoticed. No fixed way of observing – use whatever fits with you and participants. Requires lots of note taking during activities.

Table 1: *Comparison between approaches used for storytelling evaluation.*

What approaches have we adopted and why?

Over the course of an afternoon at Jamie's Farm near Bath, OLC partners worked in small groups to identify a range of options from a previously defined 'shortlist'. The suite of available approaches which were examined are displayed in Table 2.

The groups converged on a range of methods and preferred outputs which were then developed by the Ernest Cook Trust team and Lestari into usable techniques (see Table 2).

Group 1		Group 2		Group 3	
Methods	**Outputs**	**Methods**	**Outputs**	**Methods**	**Outputs**
Observation - Individuals	Postcards	Postcards	Postcards with pledge	Observation - individuals	Direct Quotes
Focus Groups	Journal Entry	Interviews	Video Recording (Big Brother Chair)	Observation whole group	Written 'field' notes Written up notes
Reflective Activity	Written 'field' Notes	Observation (whole group)		Paired discussion	Short statements
Journaling	Drawings	Observation - Individuals	Direct Quotes	Reflective activity	Video Recording Postcards
Informal Dsicussion Walking and Talking	Direct Quotes	Walking and Talking		Focus groups Walking and talking	Voice Recording

Groups results:

Three groups agreed...		Two groups agreed...		One group agreed...	
Methods	**Output**	**Methods**	**Output**	**Methods**	**Output**
Observation - individuals	Postcards / W. pledge	Reflective activity	Field Notes	Journaling	Video Recording / big brother chair
Observation - group	Direct Quotes	Focus Groups	video recording	Informal Discussion	Voice Recording
Postcards				Interviews	Journal Entry
Walking and Talking				Paired Discussion	Written Up Notes
				Reflective Activity	Drawings
					Short Statements

***Table 2**: Convergence on methods and outputs was undertaken in three groups at Jamie's Farm in Bath*

From this shortlist, we were able to develop four techniques which were usable by all the programme delivery partners involved with The OWL Collaboration.

The Storytelling Approaches

Four storytelling approaches were developed. These are outlined below, including an overview of each approach, the method of data collection, an example of the type of output generated, and an evaluative reflection of the effectiveness of the approach as it was deployed by The OWL Collaboration.

Postcards

Overview of approach

Postcards are useful tools for personal reflection and offer individuals the opportunity toward the end of the programme to reflect on their own experiences and that of the group. Providing space for short responses, the postcards used in this evaluation centred on sentence starters:

- After my trip I know I can…
- I want to remember that…
- When I get back to school I will…
- Being outdoors makes me…

Postcards are normally given out toward the end of a programme – on the final day or the final evening. There should be no expectation for the young person to share their reflections with the group – and handing in their postcard should be under the understanding that the contents are kept anonymous.

***Figure 4**: Young people individually fill in a postcard with three questions on one side. On the reverse side is a space for them to draw or write some more.*

Example outputs

***Figure 5**: Example excerpt of story evaluation captured as part of a 'Core Story'.*

Evaluation and learnings:

The postcards worked very well – some of the organisations were already using them, while for others it was new. In general, this is an individual exercise, but can also be done in a group setting, or with some group set-up before filling them in. For some of the individuals, the writing was a challenge – and other forms of feedback were more appropriate, but conversely some of the Outdoor Learning Centres found that having a personal written component helped some of the young people to tell their stories.

> *"we often get **real meaning**; it's a really good session. They give each other feedback and they write their postcards with support if they've needed it."*
>
> *"The kids that you that you really want to get feedback from just **struggle with the postcards – with the writing.**"*

It's notable that following an initial trial of the postcards, OWL practitioners provided feedback that some of the questions were not working as well as they could. The original postcards had sentence starters such as 'I want to remember that I am…', and 'when I get back to school…'. The slight change of emphasis of the questions to 'after my trip I know I can…' and when I go back to school I will…' made it more specific and easier for participants (younger children especially) to answer.

Adapting this approach

Practitioners may wish to experiment with different ways of using postcards in their evaluation practice. Here are some ideas from trialling this approach with The OWL Collaboration programme:

- Take photographs of the postcards (or a selection) and allow the young people to take the postcards home with them.
- Put each postcard into an envelope and post it to them in six weeks' time.
- Rather than postcards, you can use natural objects such as pebbles – these can be drawn on or painted and then left behind somewhere special or taken home.
- Use a 'pledge tree' where individuals stick a note to an outline of a tree recording something that they want to take back or try.
- A large plant pot which each child has written on which is planted up and taken back to school.
- Put a series of photographs into a slideshow while the young people fill in their postcards to inspire them.
- Just a single word or one sentence might be enough.
- Use as part of a focus group or peer feedback session where the emphasis is on everyone saying something positive about another person.
- Consider when to place this activity – before or after dinner? At the start of the final day? When back at school?

Reflection Questions

Overview of approach

Key to understanding experiences through story is allowing participants to guide their own narrative and to 'fill in the gaps' of understanding which might otherwise be presumed by the listener or story collector. Using reflective questions which are very open allows for people to tell their own story, within a fixed framework – guided by some key questions. For the purposes of this approach, as used by The OWL Collaboration, we allowed the programmes to determine when was best for them to use this technique – this might be on a one-to-one basis, on a walk and talk, or as a group at the end of the day. The emphasis was very much on practitioners using their expertise to guide individual or group reflections using the 4 key questions as an initial stimulus rather than verbatim.

To record the responses, we encouraged practitioners to take notes and quotes and to write up the conversation in more full detail later – for example, at lunch or at the end of the day.

<u>4 Key questions made up the reflective approach:</u>

1. What has been your experience?
2. What were the key moments or ingredients?
3. What has changed for you as a result, and how did it change?
4. Why is this important to you?

The OWL Collaboration
Reflective Activity

Reference _____ Date _____

Purpose

An activity to give each child / young person the opportunity to talk about their experience of being on an OWL residential, in their own words.

When & How

This should take place towards the end of the residential, on a walk and talk, a fireside chat or at a child's favourite place. Record verbatim notes and quotes.

4 key elements to explore

- What has been your experience?
- What have been the key moments or ingredients?
- What has changed for you as a result, and how did it change?
- Why is this important to you?

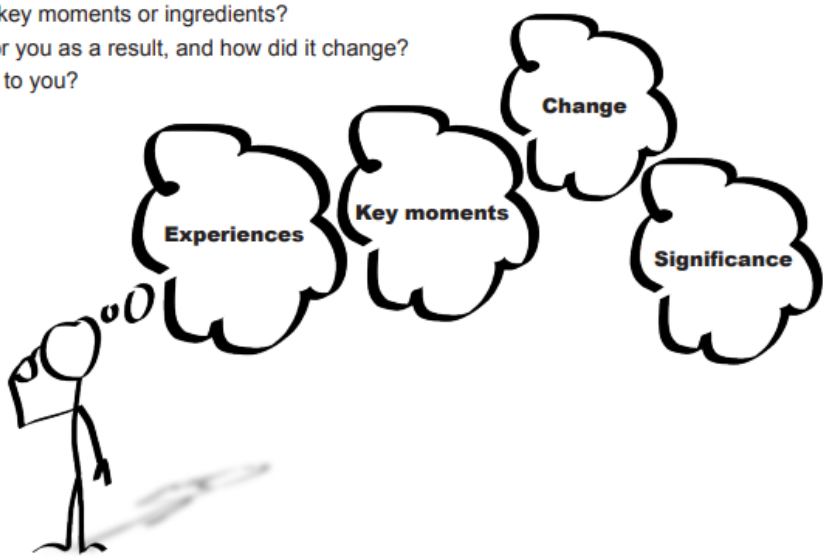


Figure 6: *OWL Reflection prompt sheet.*

Figure 7: *Taking a moment to breathe in the sea and sky at Farms for City Children, Lower Treginnis.*

Evaluation and learnings:

The reflective questions were used with a lot of success by OWL practitioners. The openness of the questions and the flexibility of the technique allowed for it to be deployed in circumstances and in ways which suited the young people, and the programme as well as the staff/facilitation team. The biggest challenge with this technique is the potential to feel overwhelmed with the amount of information which is generated and deciding which stories are written up.

"Those informal conversations about nature were really, really important… the other activities they *just seem to be going through the motions – but with the open conversation, they could be* ***more free to explore what they've experienced.***

"Reflecting on whatever has happened as a group, or in smaller groups has been really valuable – it allows you to explore the things that matter with the children. **It's just hard to capture all of the information".**

“

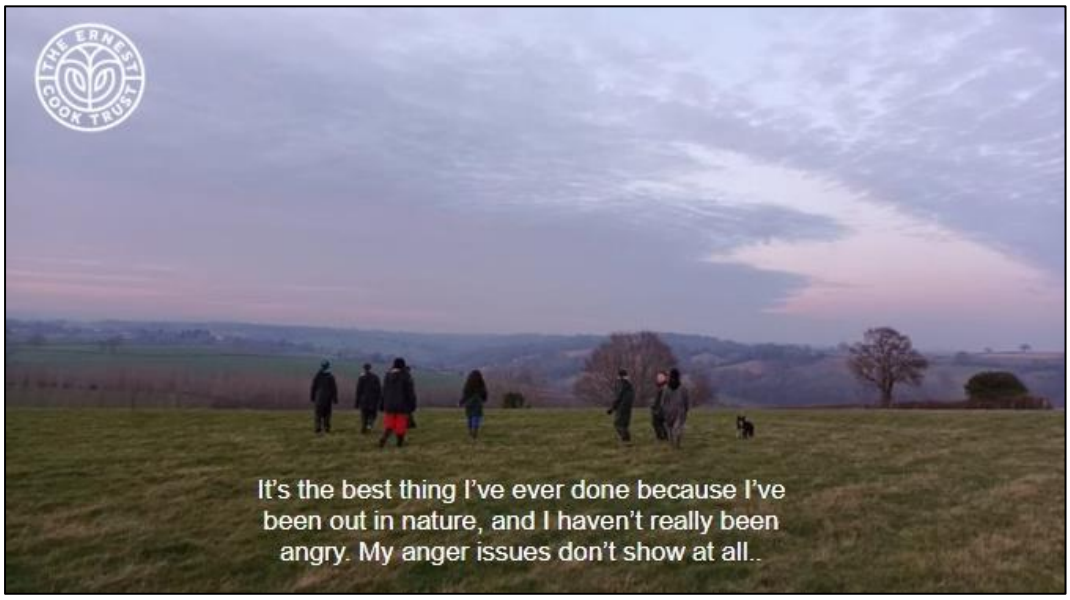


Figure 8: Example excerpt of story evaluation captured as part of a 'Core Story'.

Figure 9: *Example excerpt of story evaluation captured as part of a 'Core Story'.*

Adapting this approach

Practitioners may wish to experiment with different ways of using reflective questions in their evaluation practice. Here are some ideas from trialling this approach with The OWL Collaboration:

- Make use of a 'graffiti wall' where participants can add their reflections in response to a series of questions on a piece of paper on the wall. This can be added to during the residential to build a picture of experiences.
- Blob tree (or similar) is a great activity for starting reflective conversations.
- Start with paired conversations before adding reflections.
- Lead in with the postcard activity before moving into a group reflection.
- Consider a natural conversation around a campfire and how this compares to a purposeful reflection session and choose the appropriate approach for your group.
- Run a reflective group session culminating in a video diary where young people interview each other.

Biodiversity Perceptions

Overview of approach

WHAT CAN YOU SEE, HEAR, SMELL AND TOUCH? DRAW A PICTURE, WRITE SOME WORDS OR DO BOTH!

Biodiversity perceptions provides participants on programmes with a way of recording their observations in pictorial form. This is left very open, so it could be an observation of a particular place, or focusing on senses (for example, it might be that a sound map is drawn, or a sketch of a tree). The drawing itself may also be used alongside other approaches. For example, a discussion might be held after a session focused on drawing, or participants might be encouraged to speak about what they have drawn in one-to-one conversation. So too, participants could return to their drawing toward the end of the week – re-engaging with the original focus and looking for further detail and nuance.

Example outputs

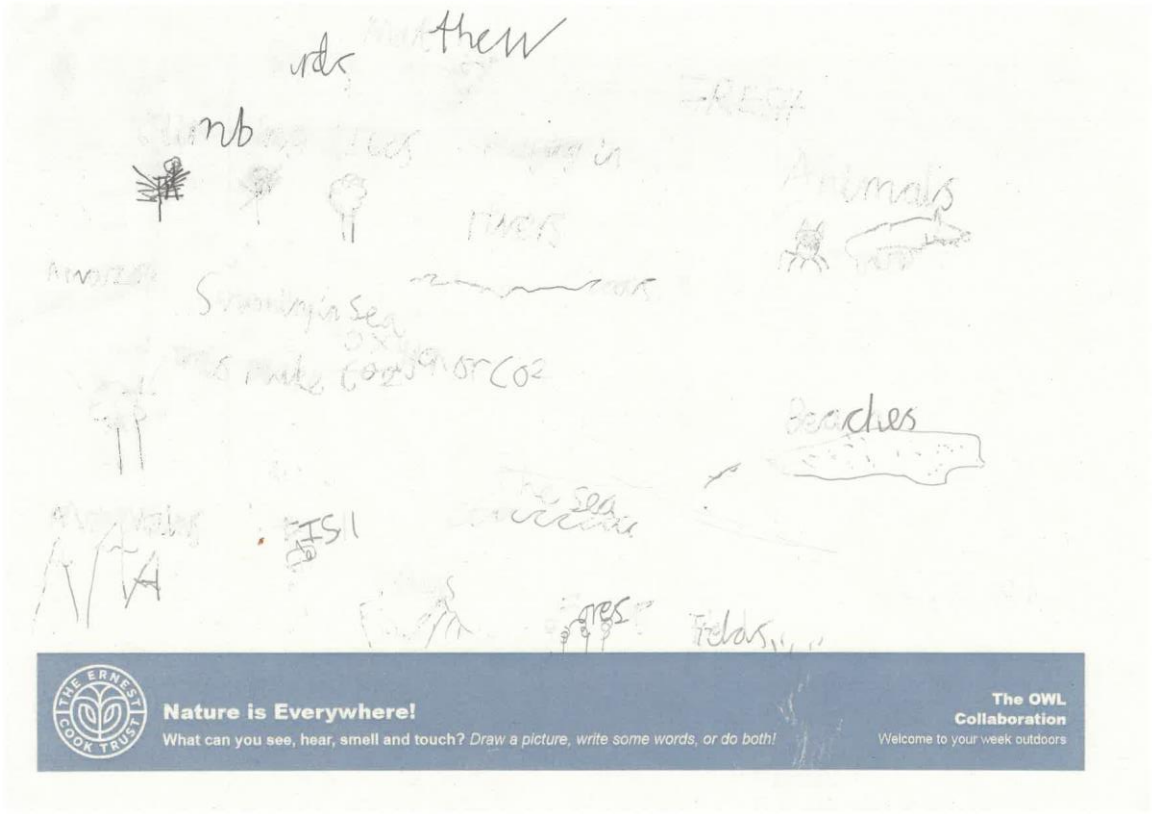


Figure 8: *Biodiversity perceptions at the start of an OWL.*

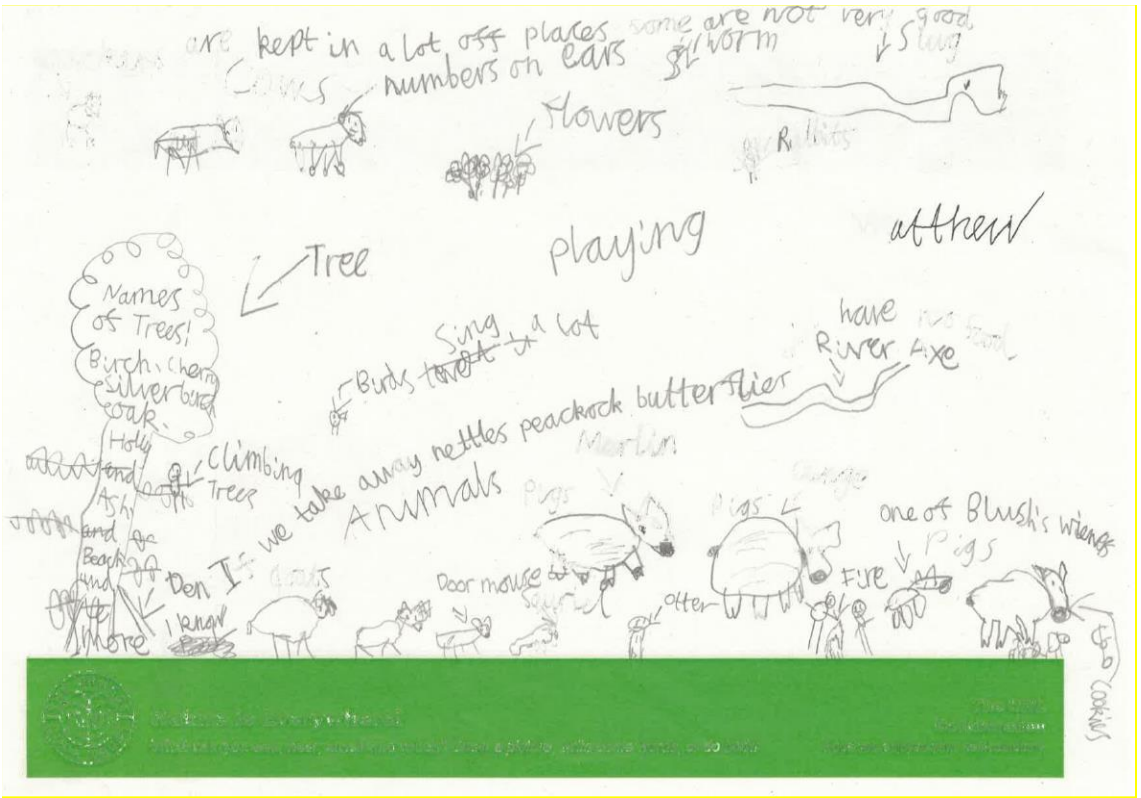


Figure 9: *Biodiversity perceptions revisited at the end of the week. Additional detail and specific animal and plant names have been added.*

Evaluation and learnings:

While this approach is useful as a reflective activity, it can be difficult to analyse. There were also marked differences in experience of facilitation staff with regards to how to hold a drawing session. Some Outdoor Learning Centres had experience of analysis of creative outputs from programmes such as drawings while for others, this was new.

> *"I tried it on our staff before the with the children and we **struggled with the blank piece of paper**… their drawings in terms of before and after – **there wasn't much difference** - they just put a few pigs and donkeys in there and that sort of thing."*

> *"The ones that worked really well are the nature perception drawings. But then **we've done those before so we've always liked to use drawings**, especially for those children at visit us who really **s t r u g g l e w i t h s c r i p t a n d w r i t***

Adapting this approach

Practitioners may wish to experiment with different ways of using biodiversity perceptions in their evaluation practice. Here are some ideas from trialling this approach with The OWL Collaboration:

- Drawings can be added to incrementally over the course of a few days or a week, perhaps as part of a reflective activity.
- Different colours could be used for different themes (or daily if using the incremental approach above).
- If inappropriate to give this out to individuals, groups might want to take part in this activity using a larger piece of paper and responding to one another's cues and ideas.

Observation

Overview of approach

Observation is the most diverse and open of all four of the techniques deployed. Observation entails either the observation of a whole group, or a particular focus on individuals within the group, and can last for a portion, or the whole, of a programme. Observation could also occur across multiple programmes or interactions. Observational techniques make use of conversations with individuals informally, as well as observation from a 'distance', where interactions or moments might be noted.

Methods

We encouraged the observers to take part in the activities and not to 'remove' themselves from participation, and to be honest with the participants about what they were doing.

During and following observation, written notes can be taken which can include circumstantial notes, as well as direct quotations (see 'writing down, up and out'). For The OWL Collaboration, the staff were encouraged to observe for nature connection, engagement with learning, wellbeing, and care and concern for the environment. Observation focused on interactions with others and places, engagement with tasks, emotional responses, remarks and attitudes, intentions, routines and relationships between settings such as school and home. An observation sheet (see below) was used for this task and completed by staff.

Figure 10: *OWL observation guidance sheet.*

The OWL Collaboration
Stories of Change Observation Sheet

Reference _____ Date _____

Nature connection • Engagement with learning • Wellbeing • Pro-environmental behaviours

What to look for

Interactions between individuals and others, interactions with nature and place, engagement with tasks, emotional responses, remarks, quotations, attitudes, future intentions, connection between moments during programme and home/school settings, routines.

Figure 11: *Carding wool at Shallowford Farm*

Evaluation and learnings:

While, undoubtedly, observation is a crucial method for uncovering and understanding the experiences of young people taking part in OWL programmes, is not without its challenges. Compared to more focused activities such as postcards and reflection questions, it has the tendency to yield a large amount of sometimes very broad data which can then be difficult to go through and pull out the most meaningful story.

This means that observation can be time consuming but is often worthwhile. The most important learning to emerge from this is that identifying meaningful stories is as important as collecting the stories in the first place. Working with practitioners to understand what they are looking for in the first instance is likely to be the best way of reducing the time demands on facilitation staff.

> *"We write pages of reports for each young person… And for me it's just been trawling through and finding the best ones to then share …"*
>
> *"It's not always possible for us to observe – there aren't always enough staff, and we don't have time to write everything up."*
>
> *"The teachers have been great at taking notes and building on what we've already talked about."*

Figure 12: *Example excerpt of story evaluation captured as part of a 'Core Story'.*

Adapting this approach

Practitioners may wish to experiment with different ways of using observation in their evaluation practice. Here are some ideas from trialling this approach with The OWL Collaboration:

- Some OLC's taking part in the OWL programme give out observation journals to teachers and visiting staff and task them with observing. This is a good option if OLC staff time and resources are not available.
- It is worth considering whether observation might focus on individual participants, or the whole group.
- Relatedly, you might wish to focus on a different aspect, theme or individual each day.

Before you begin collecting stories:

- Decide what you want to find out. Are you interested in something specific, or do you want participants to generate their own themes?
- What resources do you have? How much time do you have to analyse and interpret?
- Can storytelling / qualitative evaluation be woven into what you are already doing?
- Consider: How will you treat the information you are given? Do you need ethical agreements to be put in place?

Recording stories?

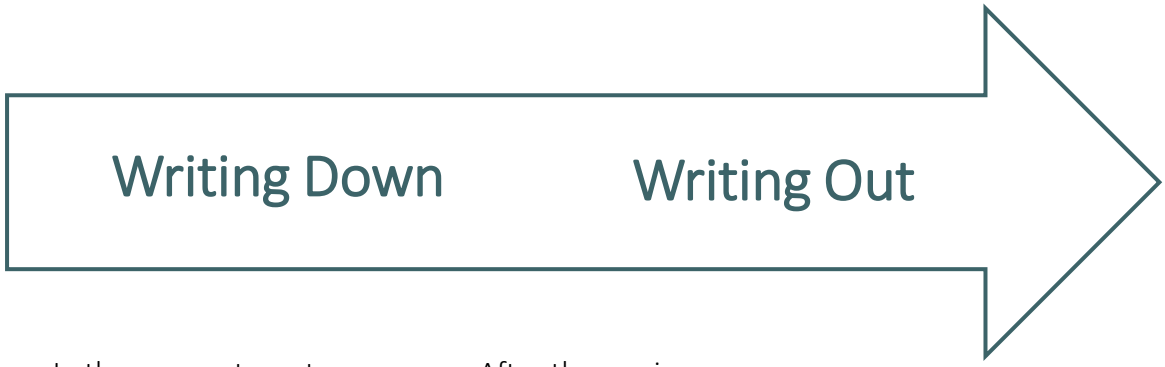
There may be the possibility of recording stories, especially if you are collecting them in an interview or focus group setting. While this can be useful, it also presents a challenge when it comes to writing up the recording (transcribing) which can be very time intensive. Consider if you want to record stories and if you have the resources to make effective use of the audio you will then have. It might be more effective to have a second person taking notes, while the other asks questions. You might even consider asking an accompanying teacher/leader/adult to take on this role.

If you do decide to record stories, it is important to ask for permission and be clear about what you will do with the recording. Consider also if you need to be in person to record the story. If you are conducting interviews online there are free software options for recording and transcribing audio (e.g. Zoom, Teams and Otter).

Taking notes

It can be challenging to take notes when you're busy with the day-to-day of running programmes, responding to the needs of the group, and generally keeping things going. The idea of keeping a record of your observations or writing down what people are saying can seem somewhat overwhelming. As with the challenges of recording stories (see above), consider who might be able to take on the role of notetaking – perhaps an accompanying teacher or another member of staff could do this. Whoever is taking notes, the process of 'Writing Down, and Writing Out' can be helpful.

Writing Down and Up



- In the moment, capture words, phrases and quotes where necerssarry. Make use of drawings and photos.
- After the session or programme, make time to neaten up your notes. Check that it makes sense to others. Split up or merge sections.

Figure 13: *Process of capturing stories in the moment and following up in more detail later on*

When making use of observational or reflective storytelling evaluation approaches, it is important to try to strike a balance between taking notes in the moment and writing them up as soon as possible following the observation/reflection. While some notes in the moment can be useful – especially for capturing details or direct quotes, the storied format, in its fuller form can be attended to later.

For this, a three-stage approach can be useful – whereby notes taken in the field (writing down) can be translated into more detailed, notes (writing out) at the end of the day or the programme.

Figure 14: *Working together at The Countryside Education Trust*

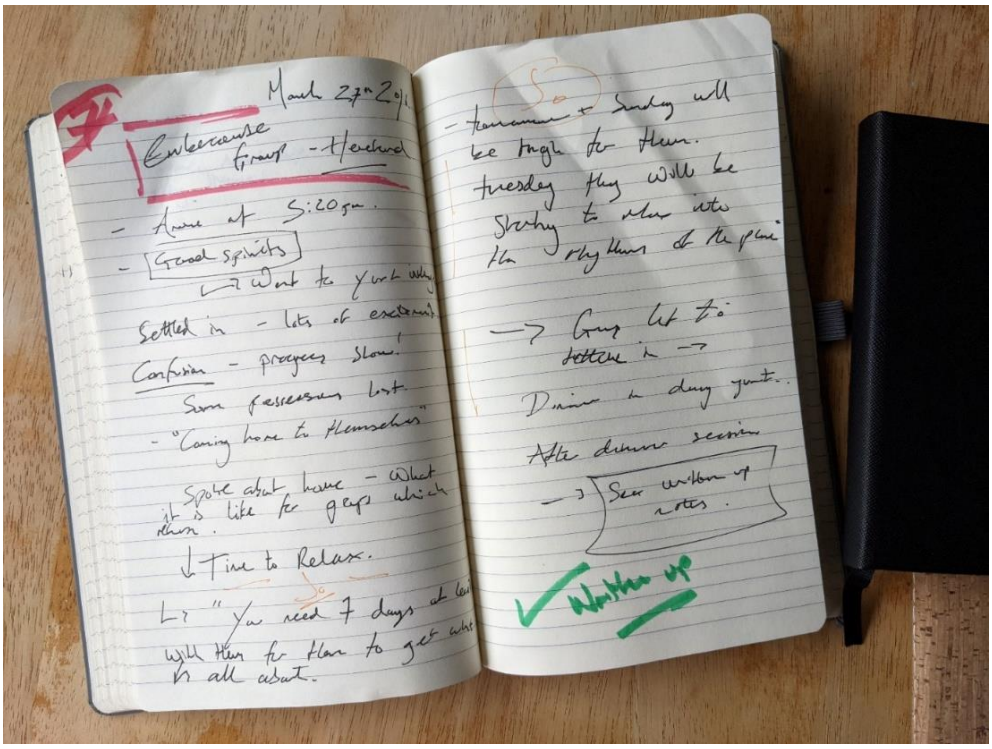


Figure 15: *An example of field notes - very rough notation with occasional direct quotes, which can then be written up later that day.*

Arriving and settling into a new home; rhythms of the place

The group waited in the yurt until time to walk to the east Yurt village where they are staying. They go in small groups, so the progress is rather slow. There was some confusion over bags and where their possessions had gone. It was dark and the general atmosphere was one of confusion but high spirits. I noticed Jo and some of the other facilitators standing calmly in the middle of the yurt village while things settled down. While the kids found their place and the facilitators helped them to light their fires, I had a chance to talk to Jo. He told me about groups who return. He said that sometimes this school send their year 7 and 8 students, and then they return two years later. "it's like coming home for them. They speak of coming home, but it's in a sense that they are also coming home to themselves". He then spoke about the relaxing which takes a while to achieve with groups, as people fumbled their way from yurt to yurt in the dark around us and wood smoke began to rise from the flues… "you need seven days at least with a group for them to get what it's all about. Tomorrow and Sunday will be tough for them, by Tuesday they'll be starting to relax into the rhythms of the place".

Figure 16*: The notes from fig 17 written up more fully. Note that the story does not have to be long, but captures the essence of the interaction or encounter, with some direct quotations.*

Collation and Analysis of Stories

Choosing what to focus on

Storytelling as an evaluative technique generates by its nature a huge amount of information, which then must be written up and analysed. Choosing how to do this is dependent on a range of factors including time and resources at the disposal of the organisation or individual conducting the analysis.

A first important step is to ensure that the range and quantity of data you are aiming to collect is both relevant and proportionate to what you need and can achieve. An organisation embarking on storytelling approaches to evaluation should discuss what resources can be committed to collection, collation, and analysis.

Themes and narratives

A consideration relevant to this is deciding which stories should be written up and how. To help with this, it's possible to use a technique called 'thematic analysis'. Thematic analysis focuses the process by determining which aspects are of primary interest to the people involved. The themes can be broad or narrow. They can be determined together with the participants, or they might stem from the organisational goals, programme objectives or theory of change. However the themes are determined, they offer a guiding light for both those collecting the stories as well as those bringing them together an analysing them.

Another analytical option would be narrative analysis which focuses on the journey of a particular person, group or situation. The most common example of a narrative analysis is a case study captured to portray the developmental experience of participants over time.

Staff at The Ernest Cook Trust opted for a fusion of thematic and narrative analysis given that they compared individual quotations to develop core themes, as well as also using narrative blocks to develop the core stories of the programme.

Both these forms of analysis met their aim to focus on the search for and generation of powerful themes and personal stories in the dataset, as opposed to content analysis which would have involved the classification of data using coding to identify the key categories within it.

What makes a good story?

The stories begin as conversations – informal, often circuitous, and full of lived detail and idiosyncratic voice. It is the conversational nature of storytelling that allows the teller to create meaning and significance, and that gives the stories, in the end, their power.

There are 4 key questions, which frame the conversation between teller and collector:

1. What did they do in relation to the project?
2. What changed for them because of their experience?
3. Why was that change important for them?
4. What were the main things about their experience that made this change happen?

Figure 17: *What makes a good story? Excerpt from Arts at the Old Firestation Storytelling as Evaluation (p.14).*

Strategic storytelling

PRODUCING A STRONG, MANY-LAYERED TAPESTRY OF UNIQUE AND UNITED STORIES TO ADVANCE SOCIAL IMPACT GOALS

Stories, unlike facts and logic, use emotion and engage the unconscious where most decisions are made. They can therefore be very powerful when trying to influence change-makers. Strategic Storytelling is the practice of sharing connected stories to forge, spread, and reinforce beneficial narratives and counter harmful ones. Stories must be aligned to have a cumulative impact and to be effective they must take us on a journey from where we are today to a better future, revealing a new way the world can and should work. It is crucial that strategic stories are distributed at scale through many different medians (e.g. social media, film, poetry, song, dance, photography, press interviews etc).

Choosing our core narrative

A core narrative is typically a few words that encapsulate the change you want to see and the essence of what all the stories are built upon. A core narrative is a broad generalised plotline that will connect thousands of different stories. It is usually never seen by the audience. The Collaboration agreed that our core narrative would be:

FROM (where we are today): The residential is a 'nice to have'.

TO (the change we want to see): The residential is a rite of passage for all children in England and Wales.

Choosing our audiences

Strategic stories need to be carefully tailored to different audiences to create the change you want to see. They must also be distributed strategically so they're seen by the right people and reach the necessary scale. Our key audiences were identified as:

- Policy-makers – DfE, DOH
- Health and Safety Executive
- Ofsted / Curriculum designers / Exam boards
- SLT / Leadership / Governors
- Teachers
- Parents / Communities

Analysis of strategic stories

Strategic stories are designed to advance social impact goals and take people on a journey from where things are today to a better future, revealing a new way the world can and should work. As such data analysis for strategic storytelling will be conducted through a positively inclined lens. In the analysis you will only be looking for the best, most moving or most inspiring quotes/observations/reflections as opposed to a warts and all 'truth' of an experience. Our strategic storytelling process therefore involves the following steps:

- Think about the agreed core narrative (in this case: *the residential is a rite of passage for all children and young people)* and the audience whose mind you wish to change. What might convince them of this other future?
- Read through all the data and immerse yourself in the positive themes coming through that may change hearts and minds. In this case two significant positive themes came through - the residential creating greater nature connectedness amongst children and young people (Core Story 1) and the residential providing the perfect conditions for personal growth (Core Story 2).

- Compare and contrast both individual quotations and larger transcripts to arrive at the rich 'sub-plots' within these core stories. In the case of Core Story 1, these were disconnection, apprehension, thawing, peace, joy, belonging, caring and connection.
- Group all relevant quotes/observations/reflections into these sub-plots in a PowerPoint reel.
- Match photos to verbatim transcripts to amplify the messages coming through. These photos may not be directly linked, the idea is to make the storytelling as powerful as it can be.
- If the data lends itself to it, apply a classic story structure to the core story. In the case of Core Story 1, this was 'Voyage and Return'. Alternatively, think of a metaphor that can help bring cohesion and collective meaning to the dataset.
- Create a graphic visual to represent the whole core story and take people on the journey to this 'better world'.
- Work with a design agency and other storytelling 'specialists' to look at all the ways this story can be communicated.

Core Stories

Two Core Stories emerged from the qualitative data gathered using the analytical process described above. Please click here to access Core Story 1: *A Journey Towards Nature Connection.* Core Story 2: A Pathway to Personal Growth will be added at a future date.

Ethics and Safeguarding

Storytelling offers a great way to understand more fully the experiences of individuals and groups, yet the approaches developed for strategic storytelling rest on the presumption that participants are going to speak about their personal experiences and feelings about particular situations. This requires trust and vulnerability. The settings in which these techniques have been developed and trialled are adept at working in this way, but it should be noted that attention to ethics and safeguarding are particularly important when encouraging young and potentially vulnerable people to discuss matters which are personal to them. In all circumstances learning location's own guidance should be adhered to, but the following points may also be useful to be aware of:

- Introducing any evaluation exercise with clarity about the purpose of the story collection and what will happen to participant generated data is important.
- It should always be possible for participants to opt out of evaluative exercises.
- Listening and speaking exercises are often unfamiliar terrain. Careful introduction, modelling of approaches, and boundary setting is important.
- Setting expectations and ensuring confidentiality where possible is advised, but also letting participants know when and how their words will be used is important.
- A range of approaches are available and not all of them will appeal to all participants. If an approach isn't working, don't worry – try a different one. See 'be flexible' below.

Top Tips

Be Flexible

Our experience of developing and trialling these techniques with the 2022 and 2023 OWL participants has been that while in general they have worked very well; the main challenge has always been the time commitment of undertaking qualitative evaluation. This is especially the case with education programmes which are already stretched and have little capacity to 'do more' in the day.

Undertaking evaluation works best if it is incorporated into the already existing activities and daily routines of the group. Try to find moments where evaluation works alongside rather than something additional to the programme you have developed. This might mean bringing informal reflective conversation into activities and tasks or holding a group discussion during a break. Some of the Outdoor Learning Centres made use of 'storyboards' where the young people could add their thoughts to a wall in their own time or respond to specific questions at lunch or in the evening (rather than holding a specific reflective task). Jamie's Farm make use of video diaries with young people to prompt reflection. At Ufton Court Educational Trust, they give journals out to all visiting staff to take observational notes.

It's important to start from a presumption that 'it's going to work' rather than 'this is too much' – our experience has shown that it can, and does work, but being flexible to your own situation and that of your participants is key.

Less is more

A challenge can be distilling the stories generated into a usable and useful format. For many of the Outdoor Learning Centres, there was a lot of data generated and it was clear that making sense of the stories and identifying which aspects to focus on was key.

Developing a framework for observation and reflection will help with this. While the core questions present us with a broad structure in which to consider experiences of those taking part in programmes, it's important that individual learning locations are able to determine their own focus. In addition, this might be cross-referenced with a theory of change, and any key metrics or targets. The approach used by Ernest Cook Trust examines young people's experiences using 'core stories' which purposefully draw out positive stories of change experienced during residential programmes.

Stronger together

One of the hallmarks of this work has been the regular sharing, updates and reflections on progress. As a group of Outdoor Learning Centres, The OWL Collaboration Network has been able to share insights and offer support to one another.

There is no one-size-fits all approach to storytelling or other forms of qualitative evaluation, and the approaches which have been developed were adapted and flexed by the organisations participating in this trial. Together, the group has been able to develop a robust methodology which is flexible enough to be applied to a range of situations and groups, and which has elicited valuable and rich insights into participant experiences.

Useful further reading:

Storytelling-Evaluation-Methodology-Guide.pdf (oldfirestation.org.uk)
Spotlight On Impact Storytelling (squarespace.com)
Outside voices report (YHA)
Kirk Cheyfitz / Political Narrative — The Science of Winning with Stories
Storytellers'+Guide+to+Changing+our+World+2.0.pdf (squarespace.com)