

# SPEAKING BACK BY STORYTELLING – A METHOD FOR INCREASING CRITICAL THINKING AND ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract:** *Storytelling and speaking back are two valuable methods in community development. In sociology, storytelling is applicable in three main forms: to collect data in narrative research, to present research results based on qualitative data and to stimulate people's engagement in social interventions meant to produce social change. Speaking back is a method that consists in involving participants in the process of reviewing their own productions, and then reflecting on their work; it is also used for returning research results in community in order to increase awareness and motivation for change in stakeholders and citizens. In this paper I present the main results of a research based on the combination of the two methods. I show how I used the descriptive style of storytelling in analysing and processing students' essays about their local communities and how I conducted a group thinking session based on the speaking back method. I conclude by highlighting that speaking back by storytelling could be an important tool for increasing critical thinking and reflection on the needs and resources for social change in local communities.*

**Key words:** storytelling; speaking back; critical thinking; community development; local community.

## 1. Introduction

Storytelling is an increasingly valuable method in qualitative sociology. It can be used both for collecting data and for presenting research results. More recently, storytelling has been used as a tool in producing social change and community development, starting from the idea that stories can play an important role in informing, raising awareness and educating the public about global challenges related to sustainable development.

Another highly valuable participative method in contemporary approaches and programs of social development consists of returning the research results back to the community and discussing them with community members. It is called *speaking-back* (Mitchell, De Lange and Moletsane, 2017) or *restitution of results* to community (Pascaru and Buțiu, 2007).

Community development is a process whose main goal is to bring more well-being into our lives, within the communities we belong to. This process consists of practices and models of local intervention that tend to have as main result a *better community*, through the participation of community members themselves (Sandu, 2005). Storytelling and speaking back methods are generally used separately in this process.

In this paper I present the results of a research that I conducted two years ago at a seminar of Community Development, by combining the two methods mentioned above. Starting from this research I then point out that *speaking back by storytelling* could be an important tool for increasing critical thinking and reflection on the needs and resources for positive social change in local communities.

## 2. *Storytelling and speaking back* as tools for increasing critical thinking and engagement in local communities

In a very simple definition, *storytelling* is the process of telling a story. Stories and storytellers have always existed, as universal elements of culture. Human beings are "storytelling animals" Gottschall (2019) and stories have many essential functions for social life,

contributing to education, social cohesion, transmission of cultural values, entertainment, etc. Berger and Quinney (2004) argue that the main role of stories is to "secure us, raise our consciousness, and expand the reality of our experiences" (p. 8). Stories therefore have both a cognitive and emotional function: in general, when people tell stories about themselves or about others, they feel better and strengthen their social self (Atkinson, 2006).

Stories are embedded in our DNA, and storytelling is a social phenomenon receiving interest from researchers in many sciences, like psychology, sociology, marketing, tourism and behavioural science (Moin, Hosany and O'Brien, 2020). According to Harvey (2013), storytelling is a process that includes a three-way relationship among the teller, the story and the audience. In this triangle, "stories are always mediated through a storyteller and exist in relation to an audience" (p. 11). In sociology, this triadic relationship changes depending on the way stories are used. For example, in narrative research the audience is represented by researchers who collect stories, which in turn can reconstruct social reality in the form of stories addressed to academic public (students, other researchers, etc.). In social interventions meant to produce positive change in communities or organizations, the researcher or trainer presents relevant stories to influence certain categories of public (community members, local authorities, employees of a company, etc.)

Storytelling is used nowadays in many fields. In business and organizational communication, compelling stories can be distributed in a written form or verbally through in-person presentations, in order to persuade people to act in certain ways (Boldsova, 2020). Stories are widely used in marketing, where they "sell" products or services. They are also used in psychology, because stories can produce empowerment and positive change in people's lives (Burns, 2012). In education, stories are frequently used as a way to facilitate learning processes (Atkinson, 2006). In the field of local energy policy, storytelling allows stakeholders to understand the others' perspectives and to shape approaches and visions according to different local contexts; thus, storytelling is an innovative and flexible methodology and, in the same time, a valuable tool for policymakers (Mourik, Sonetti and Robison, 2021).

In sociology, storytelling has a triple meaning. It can be used 1) as a technique for collecting data in narrative research, 2) as a technique for presenting research results based on qualitative data and 3) as a stimulus in social interventions meant to produce social change (Csesznek and Coman, 2020). In the first case, qualitative data collected in the field research could have narrative forms: interviews, personal documents, conversations (Silverman, 2004) or, more recently, digital stories (Cersosimo, 2019) and visual stories such as photo-reportage or photo-novella (Purcell, 2007), which tell a story in images. In the second case, the research results are written in the form of a story that describes a social world (Scârnci, 2007); compiling a storytelling of this type involves careful reading of the collected data, processing data by thematic coding, selecting representative ideas, and harmonizing the chosen texts/ideas to give the impression of a unitary story told with the voice of the subjects themselves. It is also called the *descriptive style* of storytelling (Denzin, 1998 apud Scârnci, 2007). Finally, in the third case, recent studies have suggested that stories are very important in informing, raising awareness and educating the public about issues such as global climate challenges, environmental protection and sustainable development. Discussing the role of storytelling in climate change and energy research, Moezzi, Janda and Rotmann (2017) show that stories are used as a means of communication, "to influence and engage the audience" (p. 1).

Referring now to *speaking back*, this is a method that involves "a range of deliberate practices that have resulted in participants revisiting their own [...] productions, reflecting on their work, often changing their minds, and productively challenging and contradicting themselves" (Mitchell, De Lange and Moletsane, 2017: 49). These authors discuss the speaking back method in relation to the visual data produced by the participants in the field research. It can be also used in other types of research that return the results of scientific research in the

community, in languages which are accessible to community members; it is called, in recent literature, "restitution of results" and is seen as an important community development strategy (Pascaru and Buțiu, 2007).

The speaking back method can be applied in workshops coordinated by researchers or trainers, where community members involved in data collection participate in order to present their own perceptions and opinions about the research results. This method has been successfully used in various studies based on visual data (Mitchell and De Lange, 2011; Mitchell, De Lange and Moletsane, 2017). Within these activities the coordinators create contexts for stimulating the engagement of the participants in conversations, discussions, reflexive thinking or reflexive writing.

Restitution of results is "the act by which the researcher shares with their interlocutors in the field, for ethical or heuristic purposes, the provisional and/or final results of the processing of the collected data" (Bergier, 2000 apud Pascaru and Buțiu, 2007: 10). The benefits of such a process are emphasized by Mitchell and De Lange (2011): "The participants clearly highlighted the importance and the need for their own engagement in the process"; moreover, their feedback confirms "the agency of the participants in bringing out into the open 'what is hidden' in their [...] community and what is not talked about or addressed. However, it also affirms the possibility of meaningful participation" (p. 178)

I consider that both methods discussed above have the potential to increase reflection and critical thinking in community members who want to get involved in community actions aimed at contributing to community development. I will further support this statement with an illustration from my own research experience.

### 3. Methodology

Two years ago, in a seminar of Community Development, I applied the two methods in my work with students in undergraduate programs of Sociology and Social Work. It was an optional activity in which 23 students participated. This activity was divided into two group sessions. In the first one, the students' task was to write a short essay (between 150 and 500 words) about how they perceived their local communities, those where they had their main residence, highlighting both the aspects they considered positive and the negative ones. At the end of this session, I collected the essays and then, during the next week, I processed them according to the open and selective coding techniques; afterwards I wrote three stories or descriptive compositions, following the instructions for the *descriptive style* mentioned above. I chose to create three compositions because the students came from three main types of local communities: large urban communities (cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants - 5 students), small or medium urban communities (towns with a population between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants - 12 students) and rural communities (less than 10,000 inhabitants - 6 students). The type of locality was the only criterion according to which I analyzed the research data. The essays were anonymous and students participated voluntarily in this research.

In the second session, a week after the first, I made a short presentation about what storytelling is and how it can be used as a technique for presenting research results in qualitative sociology. I read then the three stories, one by one, asking the participants to make any comments and observations they wished. Practically, during this second group session I used the *speaking back* method and I wrote down all the comments made by the students. As I will highlight below, the participants had a strong positive attitude towards the use of storytelling and speaking back as methods for raising awareness about local issues and for increasing critical thinking and motivation for change in local communities.

#### **4. Students as storytellers and critics of their local communities living conditions. The results came back in the form of storytelling**

I will present below the three stories I wrote based on the qualitative analysis of the participants' essays, then I will show what their main reactions and comments on *speaking back by storytelling* method were.

##### **Story 1: Perception of the large urban community**

*The city where I live is a rapidly growing community that has many opportunities for all ages. It is a vivid community, constantly moving and changing. Many people in my city know how to appreciate it and enjoy the benefits it offers. They are inventive, creative and proud of their local identity. Our city is a magnet for business development and for tourists. It has a very beautiful nature, an extremely interesting and attractive old centre, but also new facilities for residents, such as shopping malls, gyms, restaurants and other places of leisure. New neighbourhoods are developing, where the blocks are no longer built in communist style, but they are very modern and comfortable. The population is growing because more and more young people are moving here. Many of my colleagues from other localities say they will move here after graduation. We rely on mutual respect and do not hesitate to offer it to those who visit us. Because there are many things to visit and do, many tourists come, which is very good, but in the summer and during the ski season, the city and its surroundings are overcrowded. There are some historical places that are not well-valued, sometimes being even closed, such as the medieval fortress on the hill, where, for instance, different types of events for young people could be organized.*

*The city has a lot of industry and is therefore very polluted. Of course, the industry is not a bad thing in itself, but I think more should be invested in reducing industrial pollution. In addition, the population is growing and, with it, the number of cars is increasing. Almost every family nowadays has a car and, during the rush hours, one can notice that most of the cars in traffic have only one person, so the city becomes very crowded and polluted. I think the green areas in the city are far too few. And sometimes you can see garbage thrown in the streets, especially paper and plastic objects. Many neighbourhoods have ugly blocks of flats, those built under communism, but now they have begun to be renovated and seem to look better.*

##### **Story 2: Perception of the small/medium town**

*I live in a small town, quiet and quite clean, which gives me a feeling of well-being. A very pleasant thing in my community is that we have beautiful landscapes, the forest close-by and also fresh air and a lot of relaxation, through walks in the open air. Being surrounded by mountains and nature, it creates a pleasant living environment for the inhabitants. There is easy access to various walking trails and other places of recreation. There are many flowers and also many benches in the town, so you can take a sit when you are tired. That is why my town is welcoming, both for its inhabitants and for those who come to visit us. Although a few years ago the appearance of the town was rather one of degradation, now the officials have managed to give a completely new face to the community. The town centre has been renovated and various shops and restaurants have been opened, which offer both residents and tourists many places to visit and spend their free time. The town hall is also involved in school sports activities and sponsors various community programs. Tourism is developing a lot in my local community and its surroundings. The town has amazing tourist development opportunities. Guest houses and holiday homes are being built, and I think the fact that tourists are coming is a good thing because they make our town known around the world. There are also some traditions, around which beautiful cultural events are created, especially on the eve of the winter holidays. People in my town are very friendly; we know each other and have a lot of communication. People are supportive and offer help to others whenever required. Where we have more ethnic groups, there is good communication and diversity is generally respected. I really feel safe in my community, from a social point of view.*

*There are also many problems and negative aspects. The town has a rather aging population. Quite rarely one can see young people in the street. There are not many employment opportunities, as there are very few jobs. Most likely, you can choose between working in a bank or in a store. Wages are quite low, and consumer products, especially food, are expensive. It is an expensive place in terms of wages. It sometimes seems to me that resources are used where they are not needed, investments are made in half and money and materials are wasted because of the bureaucracy and pride of the people in charge. Instead, they invest in things that we don't really need, such as all kinds of events and commemorations that distract from what is important to do and develop in our local community. Thus, change is difficult or not-existent. The town also has a rather poor infrastructure. There is no asphalt on all streets and there are not enough parking places. There is not much emphasis on repairing and rebuilding streets and roads. I think it is also a problem with the new blocks of flats that are being built on spaces where massive deforestation has taken place. Public transport is not very comfortable either. Buses are not very clean and some of them are old and too small. There are also problems with the medical system. Even if we have a hospital, for certain emergencies ambulances arrive late, sometimes after 20-30 minutes. In the hospital the elevator is very old and many wards are closed because doctors have gone to other cities. In addition, the town is not always very clean. You can often see garbage thrown by tourists and inhabitants, especially in the disreputable neighbourhoods, which are not a reason for pride for us. Unfortunately, children and young people have few interesting activities to do in town. There are no free centres where they could do craft, music, art education, technology or computer courses. There are not enough playgrounds for children either, instead there are at least four sports betting agencies. For young people, the lack of places to go out in the evening and the quite non-existent nightlife make living in the town boring.*

### **Story 3: Perception of the rural community (commune or village)**

*The commune where I live has many advantages for its inhabitants: there is no high pollution, people generally consume food produced in the household, which is better quality than those in stores, people know and help each other on many occasions. I even noticed that people in my community help each other when they have a need in the household or if they have financial difficulties. Living there gives me a sense of security. The community is united, with hardworking people. Houses and courtyards are thriving. We have a school and a kindergarten, and children do not have to travel too many kilometres to reach them. A very good thing is that we have a much cleaner air than in the city and many beautiful landscapes. Recently we have also got a drinking water network, a sewerage system and asphalt. Moreover, the commune is becoming more and more attractive for tourists, also because it is located in a very beautiful area. Guest houses and leisure areas have started to be built for tourists who prefer nature and rural tourism. Another important thing is that houses are being renovated and European funds are being attracted for agricultural and service development projects. Sometimes there are also volunteer actions, such as an action in which I also participated, to plant trees in a place where massive deforestation had taken place. Because many old people live in the commune, a positive aspect is that the tradition is still preserved during the holidays. Another positive thing is that buses have been introduced for people who commute to work in nearby towns.*

*If I were a local authority, I would persuade people to give more importance to street cleaning and environmental protection. This is because people still do not respect the rules of environmental protection, such as waste management or street cleaning. As there are many domestic animals in the households and many of them, like cows and sheep, go to graze to the fields, it is possible to find streets dirty with biological waste. Although a sewer system has been built, not all the people use it, as they usually pour the water used in household activities into the streams which flow in front of the houses. What I really don't like is that streams and rivers are not always clean, because people throw dirt/waste/garbage into the water. Another bad thing is that there are not many jobs in the commune and in the neighbouring areas, that's why many*

*young people have gone to big cities or abroad. Another disadvantage is that we do not have a general hospital, a maternity hospital or a bank and we have to travel many kilometres to reach them. The roads aren't too good either. Some are not paved, although projects for asphaltting them have been around for a long time, but nothing has been done yet. As far as I know, there are people who could work, who could do more for the benefit of the community because they benefit from the local councils social assistance programs. I think they could help a lot if, instead of sitting in vain, they tried to clean the roads, to plant trees and flowers or take care of the benches and the green spaces in which the local authorities invested public money. There are fields in which social assistance beneficiaries and even ordinary villagers could contribute to maintenance and improvement. Instead of destroying them, as sometimes happens, they could help. We also have problems with some groups in the community that do not know how to preserve what has been modernized and even cause destruction and vandalism.*

At the beginning of the group discussions, immediately after I finished reading the three stories, the participants had many positive comments about the style of the presentation and about the stories themselves: *how nice it sounds; it's a cool method; I would like to learn it and to apply it in my work; it's impactful; it seems to be a good combination between science and art.* Then, most comments illustrated the participants' reflections on the potential of the method to raise awareness of community issues and resources, but also on the motivation to produce positive change in local communities: *this makes me think more seriously about how the situation is and how my community could develop; I can see more clearly now which is the right direction for change; the comparison with other similar communities makes me better define local issues; I think I can get involved.* Other comments focused on the potential of the method to reach policy makers and authorities: *if you present the citizens' opinions and points of view to the authorities in this way, I think it is more effective than any protest; I believe that storytelling can make both the citizens and the authorities more aware of local issues and can make them more responsible and involved.* In addition, some comments even referred to the process of writing the essay, required as a seminar task: *I felt very stimulated to write about how I see my community; no one has asked us something like that before.*

Next, students commented, debated and reflected on their local communities. I selected some of the most interesting comments generated during the discussions, based on the three stories.

Comments after reading the 1<sup>st</sup> story (about the large city): *Development brings with it an increase in population, which can be considered both an advantage and a disadvantage; There could be more centres/clubs for young people, where they can meet and socialize other than online; Sometimes development can be a bad thing: land that once served as agricultural areas or orchards is now transformed into tall, crowded blocks of flats which appear overnight and, with them, new members of the community come into the city, perhaps sometimes unwanted; There are some negative aspects that, unfortunately, not many people think about: for example, that there are too many cars and, because of this, the air is polluted.*

Comments after reading the 2<sup>nd</sup> story (about the small/medium town): *The lack of employment opportunities, the phenomenon of aging in community population and the lack of certain developed social services represent a reality that many ignore, but we, as future specialists, have a duty to approach these issues responsibly; Many people say and perpetuate the image that it is a small and "dead" town, but it is not true, there are many things that can be done with a vision based on development; I would like a certain way of collective thinking to disappear, the so-called "peasant mentality": you don't have enough freedom to be yourself, but you seem to be supervised... who you go out with, who you talk to, what you do, etc.*

Comments after reading the 3<sup>rd</sup> story (about the rural community): *Now, hearing what other colleagues have said, I realize that in my commune there are no clear development plans and the mayors are not emancipated and open enough to local development; I think that the people in rural communities should be better informed about the opportunities for community*

*development, especially the authorities, but also ordinary citizens ... I think that more informative activities would be appropriate for rural communities; It is good that we have some tourist attractions, but more should be done to promote them and create facilities for tourists.*

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

The previous research confirmed that the combination of storytelling and speaking back method could be an important way to increase critical thinking and reflection on local community's issues and assets in students. Moreover, it seems to be able to increase the motivation to participate in community development initiatives and projects. Used properly, this combination of methods could be a very useful tool in working with other members of local communities, selected according to research-action or social intervention interests.

The technique of compiling stories using the descriptive style of storytelling has been used, for example, in some studies on social identity, highlighting various *identity experiences* (Little and Froggett, 2010) such as the association that Pakistani women made between their personal suffering and their honourable identity (Grima, 1991 apud Little, Froggett, 2010) or the reconstruction of past identities, associated with communism, by the inhabitants of East Berlin, from the perspective of the post-communist present (Andrews, 2000). More recently, storytelling has been confirmed as an effective means for identifying the differences in perspectives and voices in the field of local energy policies, and then for achieving new pathways on local energy policy issues (Mourik, Sonetti and Robison, 2021).

I have also worked with this technique several times (Șandru and Zanca, 2009; Șandru, 2012) and, although there is no clear procedure for what a researcher has to do, I have learned that the main steps are as follows: first, to carefully read the materials you collected in form of narratives or stories; second, to make a selection of what seems to be essential for describing the studied social world; third, to rearrange the selected materials by themes or categories (defined according both to the research objectives and the content of the materials); finally, to compose a story that is unique, interesting, and rich in information, which seems to be really spoken by a single voice - by the typical, representative subject of the research. It is about a single voice that encompasses all the others and offers a global and intrinsic perspective on the subjective experiences of the participants.

In the cases presented above, storytelling highlights the differences in terms of type of community. The participants belonging to the three types of local communities highlighted different opportunities and issues specific to their places. For example, if in the case of the large city are listed advantages related to attracting new businesses or significant investments in urban regeneration, in the case of the rural community are highlighted aspects related to the organization of economic life, but also typical problems for rural areas, such as household practices that may contravene the current norms of environmental protection and the issue of underutilization of labour among beneficiaries of social assistance national programs.

Thus, the combination of the two methods into one called *speaking back by storytelling* has the potential to significantly contribute to increasing critical thinking and motivation for participation in community development initiatives and activities.

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