

Connecting the community to waterways through stories

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Abstract

A story well told has a way of truly connecting the listener to the topic. Effective use of stories can help create deeper connections with one another, with our waterways, and with the work many of us do on a daily basis to restore, protect, share and value our waterways and their catchments. This paper explores the use of stories to help connect the community to their waterways, and to one another. Using the 'Appreciative Inquiry' approach, the Stories Project at Melbourne Water is the gathering and sharing of stories about our waterways, and the many people who are actively involved in caring for them. The stories, collected via video interview, support ongoing business improvements by asking the question, what is working well? What are individuals, groups, councils or schools doing well in our catchment to care for our rivers and creeks? Following from this, how can Melbourne Water best support and enhance the continuation of this good work?

Keywords

Appreciative Inquiry, stories, connection, community, waterways

Introduction

Melbourne Water is trialling a project that involves the gathering and telling of stories about waterways in the Port Phillip and Westernport Region. The aim of the 'Stories Project' is to help individuals create stronger and deeper connections with their local waterways, and with the many others who are actively involved in caring for waterways in the region, including Melbourne Water personnel.

For the purposes of this paper, 'waterways' in the Port Phillip & Western Port Region include rivers, creeks, floodplains, wetlands and the Bays (Port Phillip & Western Port). Many of the region's waterways have been impacted by human development and as a result now include pipelines, channels, retarding basins, litter control devices and 'soft' engineering works such as bank stabilisation and revegetation.

The Stories Project developed as a result of a Masters project at Monash University that used storytelling (via documentary film) to explore environmental education. It also grew from a perceived opportunity in Melbourne Water's Waterways Group: to enhance our work by creating deeper connections with waterways; and to promote and encourage the work that Melbourne Water and the broader community does on a daily basis to care for our waterways.

The project is different from others at Melbourne Water, which made it a challenge to get off the ground. The idea of 'telling stories' and 'creating deeper connections' are not easily digestible concepts for many people and challenge traditional approaches as a business method. The Stories Project, while creating deeper connections with those involved, also provided mechanisms for a number of other business functions to be performed.

The stories collected to date include a broad range of 'stakeholders' or people in the community, who are actively involved in caring for their local waterways; private landholders, 'friends of' groups, environment offices at council, Waterwatch participants, schools. Stories have also been collected from Melbourne Water employees, who are equally passionate and connected to their local waterways and the work they do for waterways on a daily basis.

How do local stories help connect the community to their waterways?

The use of oral histories for river management research and data gathering is not new. In 2003, Roberston and McGee explored the contribution of oral history to wetland rehabilitation at Kanyapella Basin, a wetland on the floodplain of the Murray and Goulbourn Rivers, Australia. In addition to its use in gathering ecological information, the histories also proved effective in enabling the values and concerns of local community and stakeholders to be articulated.

Denning (2000) suggests that stories maximise the interaction between the speaker and the listener by encouraging the listener to imagine the story and live it vicariously as a participant. Because the listener imaginatively recreates the story in his or her own mind, the story is not something foreign, or something coming from outside, but rather something that is part of the listener's own identity.

'Stories have the power to reach within us, to command emotion, to compel involvement, and to transport us into timelessness' (Livo & Rietz, 1986). They are also a way of thinking, a way in which we can know, remember and understand. They can also move people to a very young state of awareness that is less analytical, more receptive, and better connected to the unconscious and imagination (Simmons, 2006).

Storytelling doesn't replace analytical thinking. It supplements it by enabling us to imagine new perspectives and new worlds. It's ideally suited to communicating change and stimulating innovation (Denning, 2000).

Simmons (2006) says that stories build connections between people and those they wish to influence. Broader and stronger connections enable broader and stronger communications to flow between you. Influencing is much easier when those connections are wide open. Story connects via our common humanity – both the good/bad duality of our human condition and our common experiences.

Melbourne Water has the opportunity to connect with the community, to learn more and to support the community to care for waterways together through the use of stories.

How are the stories collected and edited?

The story tellers are randomly selected however all have some connection with Melbourne Water, either through our grant programs, via our links with Council or Melbourne Waterwatch. These people are actively involved in caring for their local waterway and live across the entire Port Phillip & Western Port region.

The interview questions were carefully chosen to optimise the storytelling potential and based on the Appreciative Inquiry approach (below). An example of key questions include:

Can you tell me about a time when you felt inspired by a river or creek? Which river/creek was it? Who was involved? What were the elements? What was it that inspired you? Can you tell me about a time when you've worked really well with another organisation (group/individual)? Hopefully it's an example on your local river or creek but it may not be. Who was involved? What were the elements that made it successful?

The stories are collected via video interview with a two-person crew. In this case, one on camera and sound and the other, doing the interview. Oral histories (with tape recorder only) can also be used but digital video was chosen in this case. Storytelling on digital video, as in documentary film, is a very effective method of presenting stories with sight, sound and the luxury of extra images and effects.

The interviews take place at a location chosen by the participant. This location is generally one of personal significance to the person being interviewed or is, more practically, where their project has taken place. A 10-15 minute interview with the pre-determined questions takes place, followed by a 'walk and talk' of the location chosen.

Editing the stories (or analysing the data) is more time consuming and is done with the end use in mind. What are the stories for? And how will they be used? These are questions that must be answered prior to editing and prior to filming to ensure the appropriate data is gathered. Unless the technical skills are available in-house, professional assistance is required for the filming, sound, and editing processes. Effective use of interview scheduling and editing time minimises these costs and in this case, finding one person with all of these skills and a camera reduces the costs again and enables continuity in the project.

What is Appreciative Inquiry and why use it?

‘Appreciative Inquiry’ is a qualitative approach developed at Case Western Reserve University, (Cleveland, USA) which emphasises discussion and participation and encourages organisations to look for what works. It’s a focus on the best practices of an organisation, the things it does well, rather than on the things that are problematic. By identifying and supporting the things it does well, and doing more of what works, the organisation can move in a positive direction. This contrasts a typical problem solving approach in the following way:

Table 1. Appreciative Inquiry Approaches

Problem Solving	Appreciative Inquiry
Felt need— identification of problem	Appreciating and valuing the best of what is
Analysis of causes	Envisioning what might be
Analysis of possible solutions	Dialoguing what should be
Action planning (treatment)	Innovating what will be
Basic Assumption	Basic Assumption
An organization is a problem to be solved	An organization is a mystery to be revealed

Using the ‘Appreciative Inquiry’ approach in the interview questions, we hear about projects and activities that are working well. We build on the life giving forces of these projects and ask the question, what else could Melbourne Water be doing to support the work you’ve done specifically, to support your local waterway or the waterways across the region?

Do stories work to connect the community to their waterways?

Constructing stories in the mind is one of the ways we make sense of things. Putting these stories into words and sharing them with others enable two parties to share their understandings of a topic and bring their ‘mental models’ of the world into closer alignment.

In this sense, the sharing of stories between Melbourne Water and the wider community brings us into closer alignment and strengthens our connections.



Figure 1. Participants of the Stories Project

In the process of collecting stories, a number of themes were discovered. These themes can be divided into business functions.

Within Melbourne Water the stories provide mechanisms for:

1. Creating deeper connections to one another.
Sharing personal stories of special places or projects that are important to an individual helps others see and hear the passion in fellow employees.
2. Connecting people to their context.
Sharing stories of the work we do and why we do it provides the opportunity for employees to re-connect with their passion and the passion of fellow employees.
3. Internal communications
Stories help raise awareness and understanding of the roles of the individuals and groups across the business.
4. Data gathering.
Most stories have practical and historic elements that describe the management or the condition of a particular river or creek that can be very useful for future management.
5. Business Improvement.
Themes come out of the stories when the same interview questions are asked. These themes can be very useful both as an indicator of community perceptions and understanding and a guide for future, more effective waterway management.

In the wider community the stories provide mechanisms for:

1. Creating deeper connections to one another.

- As above, sharing personal stories of special places or projects that are important to an individual helps others see and hear first hand, the passion that exists in fellow human beings.
2. Connecting people to the broader waterway management context.
Through tailored interview questioning, the opportunity arises for people to gain an understanding of how their waterway fits into the larger system of waterways and waterway management.
 3. External communications and awareness raising.
Stories of personal experience and involvement with waterway management including fencing, weeding, revegetation at a very practical level, encourages others to get involved.
In Melbourne Water's case, it also helps encourage the further use of grants program.
 4. Sharing / Promoting the passion
There are so many passionate individuals and groups who are doing their bit for their local river or creek. Sharing this passion and the stories of success is a great way to foster continued passion.

An opportunity for creativity and innovation is also provided with the final interview question: 'If you could have 3 wishes for the wellbeing of waterways, what would they be?'

A sample response: "The wish I would have is that everyone along Main Creek respected it, and saw it as an asset and not something that it was their right to do what they wanted to do with it. Educating I suppose the public that we are only caretakers and we don't own it, we don't own any environment, but we are here to look after it for our next generation."

"My wishes would be large reserves along all of our waterways, mandatory standards for water quality for all developments, not just Greenfield subdivisions, and I'd really like to be able to swim in all of our waterways, I think that would be a nice thing."

Conclusion

Using the 'Appreciative Inquiry' model, stories are a powerful tool for making connections. These connections are made at a number of levels and between a number of people/groups. Levels of connection include those between Melbourne Water employees and their context, i.e. why do we do the work we do? And between the broader community and broader waterway management, i.e. how does what I do on my creek contribute to the health of the river system or catchment?

Internally at Melbourne Water, connections are made between and amongst the employees, between the employees and the work they do and between employees and their own local waterway. Externally, connections are made between and amongst broader community members, between Melbourne Water employees and the broader community and between the broader community and their local waterway.

It is hoped that by making these multi-level connections, the community and employees at Melbourne Water, can work better together for the benefit of our waterways.

Beyond making connections, stories also provide a mechanism for a number of other business functions. These include: internal communications, data gathering, business improvement, external communications and awareness raising and sharing / encouraging the passion.

Acknowledgements

Warm thanks to all of the participants in the Stories Project to date, who kindly and freely gave up their time and shared their personal stories of connection with their local waterway. It was my pleasure and privilege to meet you, to visit your 'place' and to hear your stories. Thank you to Jane Scott for re-introducing me to the power of storytelling, to Eva Migdal for introducing me to Appreciative Inquiry and to David Ryan and Jacque White at Melbourne Water for encouraging and supporting me to try something new. Thank you Sean Meltzer for your can-do, all-in-one production company.

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