

SHARING STORIES, SHARING LIFE



Research Report

Key findings of the pilot study

Background of the project

Sharing Stories, Sharing Life was a project developed under the umbrella of Erasmus+ KA2 - Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices and KA203 - Strategic Partnerships for adult education between September 2018 and August 2021. Partners from the Netherlands, UK, Austria and Luxembourg worked together to develop a narrative method, didactic training support material, and digital and analog tools to equip volunteer 'Story Listeners' with skills to support older adult 'Story Tellers' to share their life stories and increase their feelings of emotional and social connectedness. Professionals and volunteers who work with older people and older individuals themselves were involved in different stages of the project. All Sharing Stories materials and information on the project is available on the website www.story-tree.eu

General aspects of the pilot

A pilot study to test the materials and method took place between 1 March and 31 May 2021. The Partner organisations implemented clear defined field studies in their respective countries to:

- evaluate the training material developed by the project team
- assess the impact of training on Story Listeners
- assess the socioemotional impact of the storytelling on the Story Tellers
- evaluate online and off-line tools developed by the project team to support the recording of stories (web-based application and paper-based booklets).

A total of 39 Story Listeners were recruited by the participating organizations¹. Story Listeners participated in a formalized training course to learn about the philosophy of the project and to gain skills in how to implement the storytelling approach. They were also trained in how to use the digital tools developed by the project (e.g. website and app) to aid the recording of stories.

¹ The recruitment strategy for Story Listeners in the pilot consisted mainly of approaching experienced volunteers who were already linked to the participating organisations.

A set of standardized quantitative and qualitative questionnaires² were used to systematically monitor the progress at multiple levels during the pilot phase. In addition, regular meetings were held with focus groups³ to discuss the materials during the development process and to adapt them to the needs of the participants. The focus groups discussed the impact of the training on Story Listeners, how user-friendly the training material and digital tools were, and the impact the story-telling experience had on the socioemotional wellbeing of the Story Tellers.

Procedure

In the first phase of the pilot, all partner organisations recruited and trained their Story Listeners. Procedures were adapted to the specific situation of the COVID-19 pandemic in each of the partner countries. With the exception of Luxembourg, all partners implemented the training exclusively online. In Luxembourg COVID-19 safety rules allowed for the training and storytelling sessions to be face-to-face in small groups. Each participant signed a “Data Privacy Information and Declaration of Consent” in the context of the project. A “Certificate of Participation in Volunteer Training Activity” was handed out to the Story Listeners on completion of training.

Profile of Story Listeners

The Story Listeners in the pilot were mainly female, white and retired. Their average age was 55+ years. With respect to their personality and interest profile they were already engaged in voluntary work and had experience of working with or for people. Good social and communication skills, open-mindedness, interest in other people and good listening skills were common traits among Story Listeners. Most were confident users of digital tools, however some reported problems with handling the Stor-E Tree app.

² All qualitative and quantitative questionnaires and surveys are listed in the annex

³ Steering groups were composed of professionals and volunteers

Remark: The sample in the pilot study showed little cultural diversity. For the implementation of the project in other sociocultural contexts, it is important to take this into account and adapt the Story Listener training in a culturally sensitive way.

Profile of Story Tellers

The typical Story Teller in the pilot sample was female, white, aged 80+. Some still lived in their own home independently, others in supported living facilities or care homes. Older Story Tellers lacked social contact and were very interested in telling their stories to someone and being listened to. In general, their digital skills were very limited and they were not interested in learning digital skills or in using the Stor-E Tree app. This was most noted in people who were over the age of 90 and/or those who had serious health limitations. In order to meet the needs of Story Tellers from all walks of life and with different skills and interests, a paper-based booklet for Story Tellers was developed for people to record their stories. It is available on the website for download as well as the web-based Stor-E Tree app.

Remark: **Storytelling is not something that just interests people who had an eventful life full of adventures. Every life contains treasures of memories worth sharing.** Any older person feeling lonely and wanting to connect with other people can benefit from becoming a Story Teller. When developing Story Listener training it is important to consider local socio-cultural contexts and prepare Story Listeners to engage Story Tellers in a culturally sensitive way.

Story Listener Training course

The Story Listener training course and its materials were developed as part of the project. Any organisation planning to use the Sharing Stories method can adapt the training course to their own needs and context. Based on our experience during the pilot we recommend two 3-hour long training sessions to be delivered in person if it is possible. The materials available on the website can serve as a starting point for organisations to adapt the training for their own purposes and target group. Organisations can either deliver the training course online or in a face-to-face format.

For further details on the training course, content and lesson plan, please check our website: <https://www.story-tree.eu/downloads>

Evaluation of training content and tools

On completion of the training course Story Listener participants were asked to complete a survey to evaluate the impact of training and to give feedback on the didactic support materials. The overall feedback on the training content, didactic approach, and the support materials was very positive. This can be seen in the statements below:

"They are well laid out, with clear examples of what to expect and what to look out for".

"I personally found them useful as a back-up for the training sessions and as an aide-memoire".

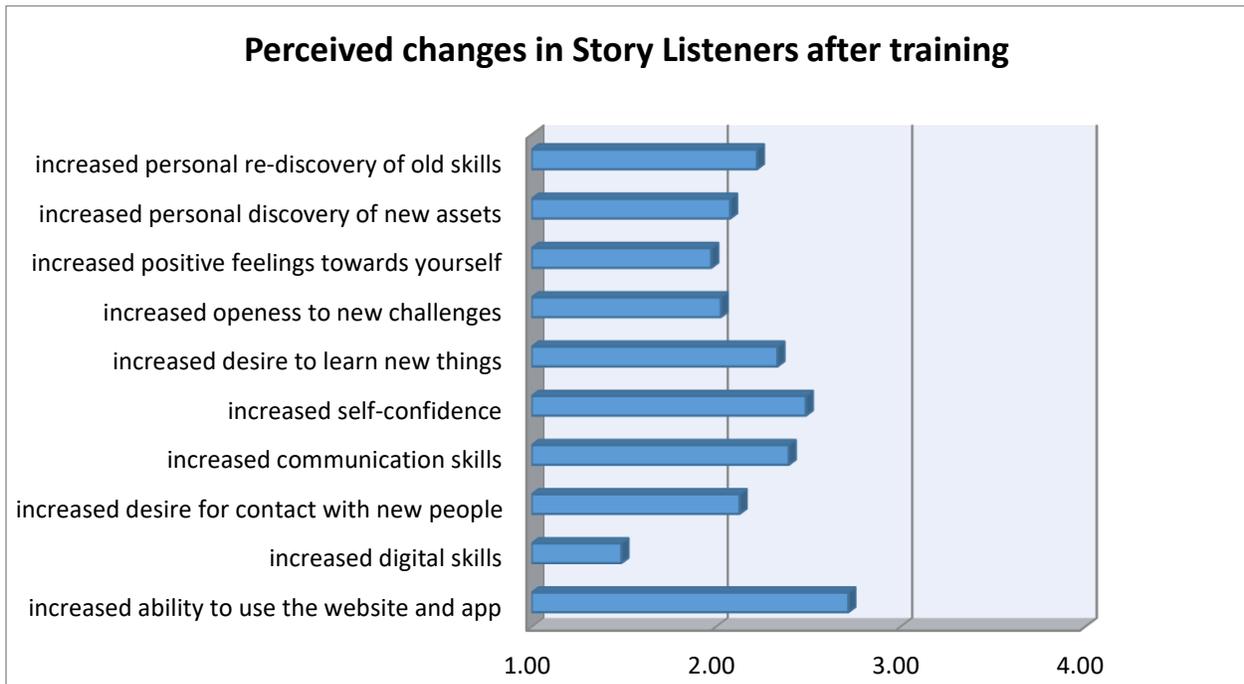
"Resources were useful, particularly to get ideas about what to talk about and keep the stories coming."

Story Listeners reported a few issues regarding the Stor-E tree app, including difficulties with the registration process. Some said the app was not user-friendly enough. These claims were considered by the technical team following the pilot. They resolved the reported issues making the app simpler to use and more user-friendly.

Impact of the pilot experience: The Story Listeners' perspective

Impact of the Story Listener training

The perceived impact of the training across the listed domains showed a consistently *positive* picture (see Graph 1). The biggest improvements were reported with respect to the "ability to use the website and the app" (M=2.72, SD=.72), followed by changes in soft skills such as "increase of self-confidence" (M=2.49, SD=.71) and "increase of communication skills" (M=2.39, SD=.59). The smallest improvement was noted for "digital skills" (M=1.49, SD= 0.68) meaning Story Listeners reported no or small improvement in their skills. This result is not surprising, as the respondents already had good digital skills beforehand. Their skills were simply not further improved by the Story Listener training.

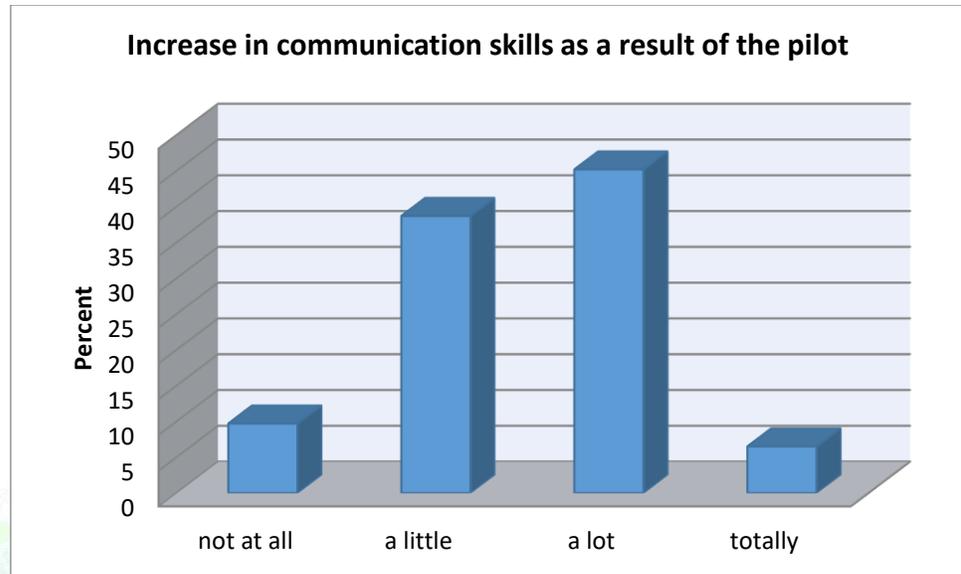


Graph 1: Mean values of the Story Listeners Training Evaluation Survey (1= not at all, 2= a little, 3=a lot, 4=totally)

Perceived changes in Story Listeners as a result of the pilot experience

Story Listeners gained new theoretical knowledge and practical skills during the training course. These skills and knowledge formed the basis of their skillset and Story Listeners applied their learning in the pilot phase that followed the training. Contact with Story Tellers was either in person or where this was not possible via telephone or video calling. The pilot proved that the concept and approach of the Sharing Stories method worked both for Story Listeners and Story Tellers, despite the difficult circumstances due to the pandemic. At the end of the pilot - when Story Listeners completed four to six sessions with their respective Story Tellers - they were asked to fill in a survey to evaluate their experience as a Story Listener and, if applicable, comment on the perceived changes in different domains (e.g. skills, self-perception, interests) that may have occurred over time.

The graph below summarizes the main quantitative and qualitative results.



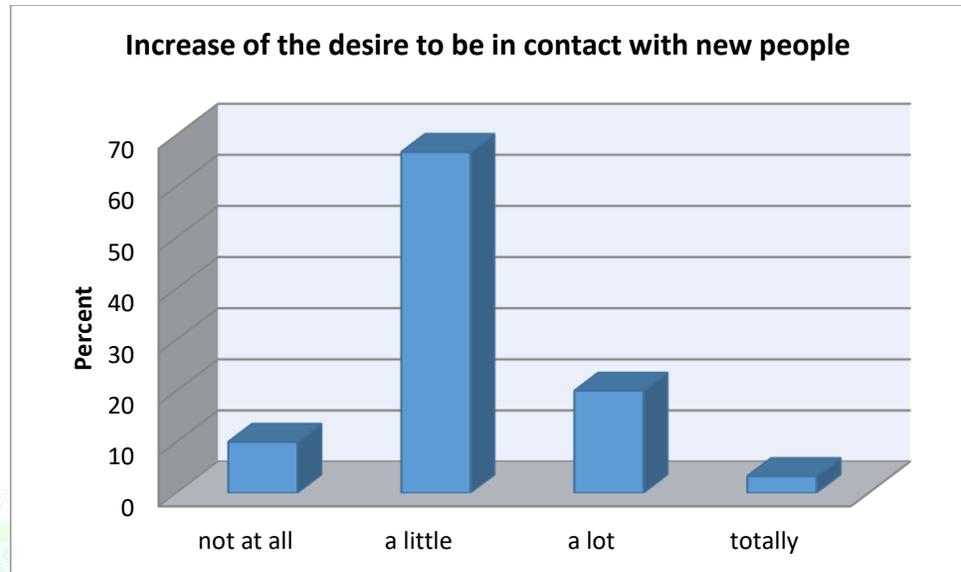
Graph 2: Descriptive answering pattern of N=39 Story Listeners regarding increase in communication skills

The majority of Story Listeners (over 90 percent) reported having experienced at least “a little” increase in communication skills due to the pilot experience. 45.2 percent indicated “a lot” of improvement in their active listening skills, asking questions and dealing with emotions. The practical implementation of the method made the learning effect tangible, including in challenging situations.

In the words of the Story Listeners:

“I learned that it’s ok to leave a pause or silence in a conversation. I really enjoyed listening to the stories and hearing about other people’s experiences”

“Keeping personal boundaries and time requirements are sometimes challenging”



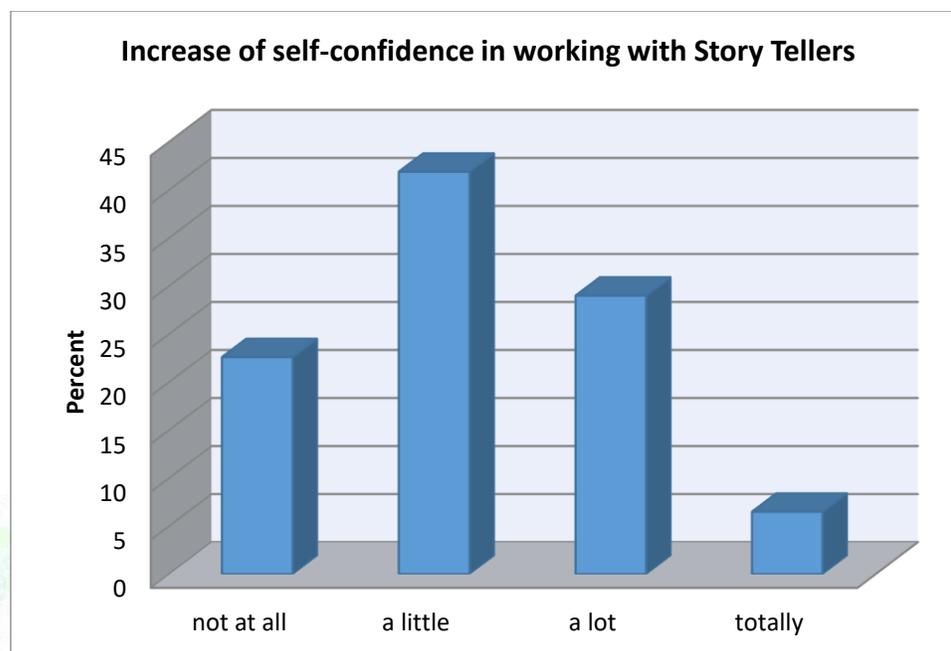
Graph 3: Descriptive answering pattern of N=39 Story Listeners regarding desire to be in contact with new people

Another important impact of the pilot experience to be pointed out is the “increase of the desire to be in contact with new people” which was reported by over 90 percent of Story Listeners. This result suggests a reciprocal effect: participating in storytelling sessions not only benefits Story Tellers but also Story Listeners. The motivation of Story Listeners increased their openness towards new social contacts and activities.

In the words of the Story Listeners:

“Taking part in the pilot made me interested in similar volunteering opportunities”

“Using the Sharing Stories method gave our meetings a focus. Using the method made it easy and comfortable to meet and talk to a stranger as the meetings had a focus”.



Graph 4: Descriptive answering pattern of N=39 Story Listeners regarding self-confidence in working with Story Tellers

Another domain to be highlighted is the impact on Story Listeners' self-development. Results from the evaluation of the pilot suggest that Story Listeners benefitted from the experience as their awareness of their personal competencies increased, as well as positive feelings towards themselves. They also reported being more open to face new challenges such as working with new Story Tellers in the future.

Being a Story Listener does not mean that one is simply on the receiver's end. It is a profound human experience that creates mutual contact and connection. Both Story Teller and Story Listener benefit from the experience. According to the participants, the Sharing Stories method has an invigorating and fulfilling effect on both sides that helps people to reframe their view of life.

A Story Listener said the following about their experience with a person with mild dementia:

"The sessions often started with him being confused or distressed but he very quickly calmed once he started telling his stories as he was in control of his own stories and he could decide what we would talk about".

"I learned how important it is to stay calm and just listen, to resist the impulse to speak for the other person when pauses occur and to allow time for memories to unfold".

Perceived changes in Story Tellers as a result of taking part in the pilot

One of the objectives of the Sharing Stories method is for the storytelling interventions to have an impact on the socioemotional well-being of the narrator. As positive memories resurge, feelings of loneliness can fade and curiosity and interest in activities and social contacts may resurface.

The results of the pilot showed that Story Tellers very much enjoyed the process of telling their stories. Having spent 4 to 6 storytelling sessions with a Story Listener, they unanimously reported that narrating their experiences had a very positive effect on their emotional well-being. Even if these experiences were not always nice or easy. Some quotes from the Story Tellers:

"Helpful"

"Lovely experience"

"Surprised that I still could remember so many things",

"Good to share memories about good and bad experiences"

The experience of sharing their personal memories with a person who listened in a non-judgmental and attentive way was very positive and enjoyable, sometimes also relieving and therapeutic in a certain way. The method helped some people to have a positive retrospective and find a way of coming to terms with negative experiences. In the words of a Story Listener:

"She's been thinking about life and reflecting on her experiences and the experiences of her family. Writing down the sad stories helped her to come to terms with the difficult parts of her life to help to get bad feelings and memories out of her system. It's a positive way to deal with it."

A clear pattern emerged from the feedback received from Story Tellers: they expressed a strong desire to tell their stories and be listened to. Most people reported that the opportunity to have a conversation with a trusted person was very important to them, whilst documenting their stories (digitally or on paper) had less importance to them. People of advanced age in general and those with cognitive decline or visual impairment were less interested in their stories being written down. Nonetheless, for some Story Tellers capturing sparkling moments from their life was important. They wanted to preserve their stories for their families or the next generation. It was appreciated when the Story Listener offered to assist with recording stories as this proved difficult for some Story Tellers for different reasons.

One of the key findings of the pilot was that the Sharing Stories method which is based on narrative therapy principles, created a feeling of acceptance and empathic human connection between Story Teller and Listener. In the words of a Story Teller:

“The method provides a trigger which makes it easier to think about life in the past by emphasizing the sparkling moments buried in memory”.

Story Tellers reported an increase of positive feelings and connectedness, sometimes a reconciliation with life and the past and amazement at their life achievements.

The findings of the pilot evaluation clearly demonstrated that taking part in storytelling sessions is beneficial for both Story Tellers and Story Listeners. Sharing and listening to life stories can have a positive impact on people and can help reduce feelings of loneliness and increase emotional wellbeing.

