

Case study 5: The power of storytelling to connect

Stories as a way to connect people, encourage engagement and find potential.

Storytelling is about the creative power of our community and our place and what's possible.

Rachel, Make/Shift

The Storytelling strand of work shows how 'narrative' can be used to tell the stories of individuals, communities and places – and in doing so connect people, encourage engagement and draw out potential.

This case study covers a strand of work rather than one specific project, drawing together the story of the work across the whole phase and considering the learning and adaptation that has occurred. This strand recognises that 'narrative embodies and communicates values, rather than just talking *about* them'. This is a 'values-led' approach which includes five key components:

- Understanding where stories begin
- Creating conditions to grow stories
- Supporting collaborators to share invitations
- Bringing stories together to communicate a place-based story of creative power
- Ensuring an appropriate rhythm to the sharing of stories

Over the next phase, Make/Shift aims to ensure that storytelling is embedded within other strands of their work, through reflecting and learning activities (see Wayfinding case study), and sharing the stories of those in their communities more widely, such as through community sharings, events, regular newsletters, podcasts and blogs.

We revisit *Storytellers in Residence* and the *Golden Glue Awards* which formed the basis for case studies in the 2023-24 evaluation report. We expand on these and include related projects like *Val & Friends Community Living Room*, as we explore the learnings that arise from the project strand.

The Strand

The Storytelling strand aimed to test an approach to 'making visible everyday creativity' through collecting and sharing stories over a two-year period. The 'discovery' phase began with *Storytellers in Residence*, a six-month storytelling residency in 2023-24. The original call out for collaboration set out the principles including an emphasis on 'making' as the focus (**rather than 'art' or 'creativity' even**); **on recognition of local assets, and on the wish to 'reveal and celebrate' the hidden, through playful and accessible formats.**

Maison Foo led this work, which initially worked with three community groups: Sew Lovely, Swanwick Men's Shed and South

Normanton and District Amateur Radio Club. Maison Foo built relationships through talking, sharing stories and producing a photo and audio sharing of what the different groups mean to members and the community.

The *Golden Glue Awards* were developed out of the residency, an event that brought together friends and collaborators in a celebration of those local people who 'glue' the community together and a chance for the different partners and participants of Make/Shift's work to date to meet and share.

At the Golden Glues Maison Foo first 'shared' the character Valerie of the Gallery – 'Val' (and her husband Trev) – who had been developed to act as intermediaries and facilitators of the storytelling approach.

Val & Friends Community Living Room was then developed as a pop-up 'home from home', used as a vehicle for sharing the stories and running craft workshops, and appeared at events like Derbyshire Makes in Heanor, Making of Amber Valley in Ripley, and represented the Amber Valley communities at the Timber Festival in Leicestershire.

Storytelling work continues as a theme within Make/Shift's delivery, most specifically as a way of framing how Make/Shift ensures that all collaborators can join in the process of speaking about the work. One strong element of this over 2025-6 was to work with Jamie Reece to co-create a values-led storytelling communications process and plan. Project outputs included:

1. A values-led Storytelling process for Make/Shift
2. Prompts for building Storytelling into the planning of work
3. Principles for nurturing Stories alongside Collaborators

4. A series of micro-plans that support the homing of Stories across Make/Shift's communications channels
5. Recommendations for next steps which embed the work into Make/Shift delivery as part of the sharing, reflecting and learning.

Approaches

Trust the process

Trusting the process is an invitation, to 'learn through doing', rather than pre-defining set goals and objectives. The Storytelling strand exemplifies this ethos, as the act of telling a story to another is as much about reflecting as it is about sharing, teaching and connecting. For example, Beth and Ian gathered a photographic and audio records of participants' stories, forming a small archive for future reuse.

Make/Shift and Maison Foo set out without a clear plan for the project, trusting that it would grow to respond to community interest. The initial call out focuses on finding people to share and celebrate:

We're on the lookout for ordinary people doing and making extraordinary things as part of their everyday lives.

Storytelling call out via Make/Shift team

From the initial story gathering, the value of talking about making (rather than 'art' or 'creativity') was clear as was the enthusiasm with which people responded to being recognised as connectors within their communities. The character of 'Val', developed by Maison Foo responded to this as she is so excited about the wealth of making and connecting and wants to share it – which she does via a story archive

and ways of sharing which suit 'light-touch' involvement – for example the invitation to have a bit of a sit down in Val's Living Room and chat about what you do, or look at photos and listen to what others do. Rather than needing to sign up for a workshop.

Start with strengths

This project recognised and celebrated community strengths by drawing out cultural stories as assets, using listening conversations to uncover motivations and talents unique to people and place.

The Storytelling strand serves as a practical project for asset-mapping in local community contexts – capturing unwritten knowledge and experiences that official records overlook. Through *Valerie's Gallery* – 'a listening gallery sharing stories that celebrate the extraordinary power of everyday making in our local communities' – the words of the community were presented back at events like Derbyshire Makes in Heanor (2025). Working with storytelling as the core of communications within and out of the Make/Shift ecosystem also emphasises existing assets, and uses local stories and skills to ensure space for mutual understanding and sharing of values.

Ecosystems not empires

By assembling a collection of stories, Make/Shift and Maison Foo have transferred the ownership of the local history to residents. The storytelling 'power' shifts from 'experts' to local people – no longer managed by an official archive or out-of-town researchers. This is demonstrated by *Valerie's Gallery*, which created a space where the public could listen to the stories, or contribute their own. The stories they share are done so by choice, with no guardianship or curation as to what a 'good' story is – the community members can choose what is important or interesting to them.

Mutual exchange

Inviting people to share their stories was also intended to promote exchange of knowledge, talents, and experiences, where participants are able to teach and learn in a more mutual way.

I feel it is a gift, but I don't think that it always comes with something tangible in return. That return gift might be a connection, a spark, a conversation, a reflection.

Beth (Val), Maison Foo

Make/Shift see stories as a way to 'share values', and as stories are deeply personal to those telling or receiving them, it is impossible for the exchange of stories to have the same mutual 'value' for everyone. The characters created by Beth and Ian are like brokers – assisting and facilitating these exchanges – able to use 'eccentric and public' performance to amplify the voices and to reach more people.

The development of the Golden Glues Awards introduced another space for this exchange. The format was a spoof awards ceremony, hosted by Val and Trev. Groups won an award to acknowledge they were using 'making' as a means of 'sticking their communities together'. This exchange is framed as a 'giving back' to people that often work in their communities in unseen ways, recognising and ensuring that their gifts are reciprocated in the form of awards (that require no further gift in return).

Weave from inside out

The focus of the Awards was not promoting Make/Shift but rather people's creativity. It was also a way to highlight, and talk about, the importance of using a 'relational model': working in this way, slowly, and making time to build relationships (and the need to invest in it).

Beth explains how comedy is often central to her relationship building – it enables a light-hearted approach to building communal experiences without feeling forced. For example, at a 2025 Open House event, they invited attendees to write on plates what was holding them back. Val took everyone outside, put on some goggles, and smashed the plates with a hammer. Beth describes how this ‘comedy therapy’ generated tangible ‘communal moments’.

Demonstrate possibilities

Part of the thinking behind *Storytellers in Residence*, and later the *Golden Glue Awards*, was if people see others like themselves being celebrated for being creative, they might want to engage in creativity themselves.

This aligns with the key principle of demonstrating possibilities, moving participants from what is ‘holding them back’, towards the realm of possible action or change.

Outcomes

Making

Recognise the value of arts and culture for making change

The story of the communal plate-smashing event reveals how Make/Shift’s Storytelling strand fosters cohesion, through disrupting existing narratives (smashing plates), and generating new shared and collective experiences. Once the participants can see the change their creativity can make, their continued engagement is more likely. In an interview with a member of the Swanwick Men’s Shed they described

how, following bereavement, the group had brought them new purpose:

It’s different to talk to other people – they all know what’s gone on [in my personal life ...] but I always say, life goes on, so ... I carried on with it. [...] I really enjoy [the Men’s Shed]

Men’s Shed member

Reflecting on the process itself, the very fact that this Men’s Shed member was open to being interviewed is evidence itself of overcoming isolation and introspection. The time and care that goes into developing these relationships has been central to the effectiveness of this outcome.

Beth also describes the different qualities of Make/Shift’s approach, such as a ‘soft, beautiful, neighbourly way’ of asking what change might be possible with the assets each of us holds. This demonstrates how care can create change, and that change need not be fast or seismic in order to be effective. Make/Shift now have both a set of stories and a collecting methodology that they can use to help model and effect conversations around the value of creativity and the role of everyday making and creativity in people’s lives. As a whole, the project has been a validation of Make/Shift’s approach and way of working.

Prepared to have a go

Another anecdotal story further illustrates the impact of the Storytelling activities on community building and wellbeing. Beth tells of how a young boy singing karaoke at a Make/Shift event brought person change:

[M]um said, “he's so shy, he struggles with confidence”, and she's just “blown away” that he felt so safe in our crazy, bright, welcoming community that he would get up and sing [...] I bumped into him randomly. He'd auditioned for Derby Theatre's *Oliver* [...] such a legacy story!

Beth (Val), Maison Foo

Beth identifies the power of activities happening outside, in communities, where they are both visible, and without barriers to access. What becomes more evident a year on is the capacity for Make/Shift's community-centred work to unlock and engage small, localised communities.

Connecting

Sense of social connection

Events like the *Golden Glue Awards* or *Derbyshire Makes* were an opportunity for different people to meet, share stories and create connections. People were able to find common ground, help one another, or just become aware of other projects.

A Men's Shed member reflected on the *Golden Glues* explaining that they'd 'made a lot of friends' from the three other groups who were there, and how one of the Sew Lovely group wanted to send her husband to Men's Shed. The cross-connection between groups is testament to the building of cohesion and shared experiences.

For communities to see their individual creative potential is compelling, but Make/Shift have also done this at the community level. Everyone attending the *Golden Glues*, for instance, seemed very proud to be involved. As identified in our 2023-24 Report, those

receiving awards enjoyed being appreciated, both by others and those within their own organisations. This was particularly true where perhaps they previously got little recognition or had limited visibility:

The ladies at Sew Lovely [...] were getting very emotional because Tracy who runs it, I don't think she realises what she does [...] It was nice for her get recognition at the Golden Glues

Golden Glues attendee (23-24)

Sense of stewardship of place and nature

Make/Shift inspire local people to take ownership over their place, by seeing it in a different light. *Derbyshire Makes* in the market square in Heanor (where *Val's Community Living Room* was presented) is one example where local people expressed their surprise, at seeing the possibilities that were on their doorstep. Beth reflected:

[Y]ou could see that shift in their perspective: “Oh, we're worth this, we're allowed this as well, we don't need to be in London or Derby or wherever, and it can happen in Heanor”.

Beth (Val), Maison Foo

Through a combination of encouragement and fun, the projects within this strand have broken down the blocks to access and engagement:

The second I was not the expert [as Val] is the second we could build on an equal footing.

Beth (Val), Maison Foo

Investing the time to develop Valerie and Trev as characters to retell the groups' stories validated what the groups were doing and they felt more visible. What is more, these characters gave validation for Amber Valley itself. Val and Trev evolved through a process of meeting people and learning more about the community groups' motivations.

For example, Val's brightly coloured patchwork jacket reflected the crafts made by Sew Lovely and her character embodies the banter within that group is embodied. In essence, the group and Beth co-created the character. Trev was also partly co-created, his reserved nature and love of details reflecting those taking part in Men's Shed.

While this approach raises some concerns about the tone these characters, such as how some people may view them as comedic *at the expense of* the communities they represent, the suggestion is that when they met her at the *Golden Glues*, they felt like they were already in on the joke.

Shifting

Ignited curiosity and shifted perspective

The Men's Shed showed exceptional growth as a result of their changes in perspective. They joined Make/Shift and Val (Beth) at the Timber Festival to deliver a workshop, and have developed further over the two subsequent years.

Reflecting back, Beth recalls her earlier encounters with the group and how one member was quite emotionally guarded. She developed a relationship with him, initially as herself, then as Val. By the time of the Timber Festival, he had decided that not only was he going to come along, but he'd also planned to get a t-shirt made for the event.

Beth explains how her approach is to say "this is a journey I'm going on. Do you want to go on it with me?" This is like an invitation to engage with a making activity. What makes this part of the 'storytelling' method is the curiosity it inspires to be a part of the journey, the process, and to see what changes it can make.

Confidence to make a difference and lead on change

This growth in confidence observed in the Men's Shed has led to tangible change. They've since grown in size, acquired new equipment and even tailored their tools to suit participants of different ages. The very fact that the Men's Shed have grown is a clear testament to their new-found confidence as a result of both Beth's (Val's) encouragement, and the connections she has enabled them to build.

Without a doubt we wouldn't be half as good as we are. Without Beth coming around and inviting us out – another thing we did was the Museum of Making, in Derby. So, we went there and made robots – little, tiny robots, in kit form; boxes of arms and legs, bodies and heads [...]

That came about because the man who runs it, we [had] seen him at another thing with Beth where we were making bird boxes. And he came over and went, “really fantastic, would you like to come and do something for us”. We got through 190 robots in one day...

Men’s Shed member

The Men’s Shed continue to make future plans, and continue to collaborate with Beth (although she admits this is less frequent as they are now much busier than ever). Their visibility has inspired others, as there has been interest voiced in a possible Men’s Shed in Heanor.

Tested and can articulate what approaches work in achieving Make/Shift’s aims

Speaking about the *Community Living Room*, Beth articulates how it ‘gives people permission to stop the pattern they’re in and to shift into another pattern’.

If we can start gathering stories from people that tell different things and tell them back to the community: do we shift how we see the place we live in?

Beth (Val), Maison Foo

By focusing on the process, it allowed the artists the time and space to meet people, experiment and see what developed in an organic way, without undue pressure from (traditionally) prescriptive funding requirements.

[I]t's been very rare to have that opportunity to grow together and to be able to challenge each other [...]: “let's keep leaning into *not knowing* and trying things, and see what comes out”. That's been such a gift to me as an artist, really energising.

Beth (Val), Maison Foo

From this beginning, both communities and facilitators can ‘feel more empowered to be big and bright’. What is more, Beth articulates how the role of Val as a barrier-breaker and a democratising figure (making everyone feel like an expert) is central to catalysing the shift:

By disrupting we leave a little gap for something different to happen

Beth (Val), Maison Foo

By being a ‘character’ – eccentric, larger than life but based in reality – Val subverts the everyday and creates permission for people engage. It’s an invitation: you don’t have to be as eccentric as her, but you might meet her half way.

[I]t's like a pebble in the water and the ripples happen because people stop, listen, reflect, connect, and so that's what I feel story can do, and we've been thinking a lot about how it can be a ‘gentle disruptor’.

Beth (Val), Maison Foo

Evidenced the value of Make/Shift's work to secure future resources

The longer-term aspiration of Make/Shift to extract themselves further from the hierarchy of 'funder-producer-public' has a potential that is now visible in the Storytelling strand of work. Make/Shift express this in terms of value – articulating how community members can do the value-spotting themselves, suggesting that 'they'll be much better at it because they're much closer to the real value'.

Furthermore, there is a clear understanding that this 'value' presents itself in varying ways. For instance, as a result of the confidence Men's Shed developed, (in part because of the Storytelling strand of work, and Beth's larger-than-life collaboration), their activities selling bird boxes, and running workshops have multiple values - it's allowing them to share their skills, it's allowing them to further build their confidence, but it's also bringing in income.

Without the Make/Shift process groups like theirs may not have identified their value to others, or even their *values* and what ultimately makes them 'do what they do'. As Make/Shift move towards a more cross-project use of storytelling methods, their intention for this process to be 'values-led' may well be a central consideration.

Learnings

- Stories can act as a way of **sharing values, knowledge and understanding between different groups** in a way that disrupts some of the structural imbalance of power.
- Power shifts when cultural leaders **transfer the ownership of local history and narratives to the residents themselves**. This means moving away from 'experts' or external researchers and allowing the community to decide what is important or what constitutes a 'good' story.
- **Publicly recognising community efforts validates unseen labour**, and recognises those who are often overlooked. When people see others like themselves being celebrated for creativity, it demonstrates possibilities and encourages them to engage in creative action themselves.
- **Small acts of 'gentle disruption' can break existing patterns of isolation** and generate new communal moments, or shared experiences that foster social cohesion.
- **Creative approaches act as a barrier-breaker**, when they subvert everyday norms and create space or permission for people to engage on an equal footing.
- **Recording diverse voices creates more inclusive historical records** that can strengthen social ties and common values and goals, such as those that cut across political or class divides.