

Systems Storytelling Initiative

Synopsis of Community of Practice Session #3, February 16 2022

Storytelling Elements

CCL Systems Storyteller Nayantara Sen opened this session by reviewing conventional story structures. She cited Freytag's pyramid of exposition and an inciting incident leading to rising action and a climax, followed by falling action, resolution, and denouement. She also reviewed the well-trod story structure of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey in three acts, which centers around the protagonist's call to adventure and eventual ascension to a higher plane. Contrasting the emphasis on a single protagonist so common in the Hero's Journey to the Hindu scripture Bhagavad Gita, which introduces hundreds of characters in the Srimad-Bhagavatam family alone, Nayantara Sen remarked:

How do we abandon Freytag's and Campbell's structures? They don't serve us in terms of more complex systemic storytelling. What are all the different ways we can imagine stories if we are not constrained by the frameworks of these two particular men? Indigenous, BIPOC, and diaspora communities have incredible story structures that just aren't given as much visibility and as much power as they should be.

Nayantara then presented a "sandbox" of **seven story elements we can play with for telling systems change stories:**

**PROTAGONISTS AND
CHARACTERS**

BACKSTORY AND HISTORY

POINT OF VIEW AND FRAMING


WORLD-BUILDING

TIME MANAGEMENT

PLOT AND STORY ARC

CONFLICT AND TENSION

**Storytelling
Elements**



After brief discussions on the seven elements, Systems Storytellers broke out into small groups focused on 2 - 3 of the different story elements to unpack the following questions:

1. How is this story element typically used in stories about social transformation and systems change?
2. What potential does this story element hold for us to shape more complex and nuanced stories that are more reflective of how systems change actually happens?

During the breakout group discussions and in the full group debrief that followed, several areas for reflection emerged:

1. Storytelling elements help not only shape stories but shape how we make meaning out of the world.

When you're manipulating the clay of a story, you can find ways to intervene in narratives. There are other things that allow you to actually do narrative strategy work too, but when you bridge from story to narrative to culture, you actually are working with the wet clay of what it takes to make meaning out of the world. As social change-makers, crafting stories gives us control over narrating reality and allows us to shape how meaning is created.

2. We need to reconsider who our story characters are and how they find each other.

When characters who are trying to change the system tell the story, the characters might not know each other yet and they have to find each other. How they might do that depends on many things, including the medium of communication. There are mediums of communication that are passive, which might reinforce a top-down narrative. There are also mediums of communication that might be more liberatory or encourage other ways of connecting.

Western storytelling is often anthropocentric. In Indigenous stories we include perspectives from those things labeled as "inanimate". My uncle, a Mohawk, talks to food before we eat. In the Mohawk creation story, all of the food is given a responsibility to nourish human beings because we are the youngest siblings of creation. He speaks to the water, the plants, and the meat, to thank it for continuing to fulfill its role. Then he will speak to our obligation as human beings to continue life on Earth for all beings. So when I was coaching some food system innovators, I asked them, "Did you ask the food what it wants?"

3. To tell systems stories, we must revisit perspective and point of view.

When I think about complexity, it is traditionally in a vertical model - one perspective that goes really deep and is hundreds of pages of long and really nuanced. I don't think that's the only way to think about complexity. What if complexity is not about analysing a single issue to exhaustion but rather using many small stories? The horizontal model of complexity - different perspectives, different points of view - need not all be deep and incredibly nuanced to provide a different point of view. Multiple perspectives do not always have to be lengthy exercises, what about short snappy stories?

Every story is a revision or re-interpretation of history in a way that serves someone's interest - notably those in power. Telling stories is thus a tool of power - a way to revise our collective understanding of history and what happened, to whom, why, and with what effects. How do we give a wider group of people the power to construct history through story and a different perspective and point of view on what happened?

4. How do we play with the experiential and embodied aspect of stories?

Your brain and your body have been interpreting and analyzing stories since you were in infant. Your body knows what conflict in a story feels and looks like. It's the most intuitive thing, the embodied experiential piece of stories.

The physical form of the story is like a dance floor. People bring very different energy and different kinds of movement into that space. Having simple framework tools to begin to understand how to find story in a structure like this creates a sense of delight in the creative possibilities.

"Flashes of conflict" tend to drive towards revelation. How can we depict the energy around moments of conflict? What's happening in the room from an energy perspective? How can we play with the depiction and release of this energy to show that something has shifted in the way the group (or characters) function pre- and post-conflict. Also, what happens when we depict years and years of simmering discontent?

5. Let's break the binary of 'good' and 'bad.'

Either you're good or you're bad. The good is often the force that wins out, and the bad loses. We talked a little bit about this idea of cancel culture and what happens if the stories were more in the middle, which is how most people are. What could be shifted if there wasn't such an opposition between the two forces?

In science fiction, there is always evil versus good. The aim is to stamp out evil or be in opposition to it. But where is the opportunity to learn and grow from mistakes? What about our responsibility to have empathy for people's path?

6. A deeper exploration of non-Western story frameworks and cultures is needed.

Culture leads storytelling. In Africa, stories are told around the fireplace. Grandmothers are revered for telling amazing “fairy tales” about magical mysteries and incidents across the universe. Western fairytales are beautiful, but there’s a lot more to unearth across the world from different cultures.

Additional Resources

- [CCL's Systems Storytelling Initiative Page](#)
- [Meet the CCL System Storytellers](#)
- [Storytelling Initiative Articles and Blog](#)
- [What we believe](#)

