



SYSTEMS STORYTELLING INITIATIVE

Systems Storytelling Initiative Synopsis of Community of Practice Session #7, June 22, 2022

We think in story. We process information through narrative, we transmit information through story, and we remember what we hear through narrative and story as well. We even make sense of patterns that are not inherently narrative - such as shapes moving around in two dimensional space - by narrativising them. It works in the other direction as well: not only do we make sense of information through story, but the stories that we hear shape the way we think. Not only that, but the choices we make in how we frame the stories we tell shape our thinking.

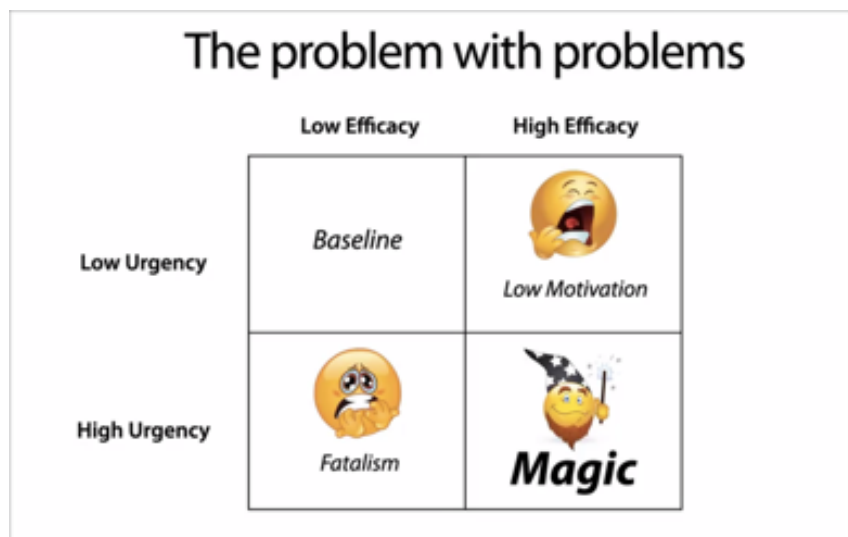
- Nat Kendall Turner, CEO of The FrameWorks Institute

As the quote above illustrates, stories are central to how we as humans make meaning and understand the world. In the seventh and penultimate session, CCL System Storytellers engaged in a lively exploration around the question of: what do we believe stories have the power to do in the context of systems change? The stimulating discussion was introduced with a presentation by Nat Kendall Turner, who shared what he has learned in the study of framing over the past quarter century.

When I think about framing, I'm interested in the choices that we make and how we present information - the decisions that we are aware of and those that we are unaware of when we communicate ideas. Big things like our values, and small things like pronouns. Do we say "them" - as in, those people over there? Or do we say "we" and talk about our? All of these choices affect how people understand information, what emotions they feel when interacting with ideas, and most importantly, how they act.

So the frames we use hold the power to unlock the ability of our stories to have the effect we want them to have - like encouraging people to engage in the ideas we want to advance. Or avoid motivated reasoning. Sometimes that is also referred to as confirmation bias - which is when we misconstrue information in line with our political ideology to advance ideas or solutions we already believe to be true.

How do we increase engagement with idea we want to advance? Social psychologists have found that when stories are framed as high in terms of urgency - e.g. a description of the problem, how bad the problem is, lots of data about the problem - but low in terms of efficacy - e.g. the degree to which solutions are possible - then people overwhelmingly disengage. Their reaction is, 'You just told me about another big problem that we can't do anything about, so I'm moving on.'



On the other hand, balancing a robust sense of urgency with an equally robust sense of efficacy is a powerful narrative persuasive strategy. Creating stories that balance urgency with efficacy pulls people in, provides tension, but gives them a place to do. They can see there's a path forward that warrants their attention, their participation, their engagement. Adding in a robust example of a solution makes the story even more powerful.

So this brings us back to that question: what do we want stories to do? Is our goal helping people see how systems affect their lives? Or increasing people's motivation to become involved in the process of changing systems? To do that, we need to avoid a sense of powerlessness and convey a sense that systems can change for the better.


In our work, to “work” means:

Build understanding of how systems affect our lives (THINK)

Boost motivation to change them (FEEL)

Increase demand/support for systemic solutions (DO)

Stories are about giving people an alternative way to see the world - how it works and how it could work. The only way to shift mindsets is to offer a steady diet of narratives that offer a different way of thinking about the world. It's not about advocating for a particular policy or solution; it's about changing the context in which people consider policies and solutions. As we continue thinking about and exploring what “works,” this notion of shifting mindsets is provocative and ambitious.



Building on these two interventions, CoP members wrestled with the implications of frames and continued to unpack what we want our stories to do.

Avoiding single solutions or pre-determined courses of action

I wasn't able to put my finger on what was making me feel uncomfortable except the word manipulation was in the back of my mind and this idea of using narrative. I was just imagining if all organizations, all media, had this formula where they are identifying a problem, they're selling it in this very beautiful narrative way that tugs at the emotions. I was just imagining myself at the impact of all of that coming at me. If these organizations or media or people have a solution to a problem, do we even know that that's the problem?

One of the challenges I have with framing strategies is that it instrumentalizes narrative. It's like, let's frame the story in a certain way so we can elicit a specific interpretation leading to a particular course of action, or so that we can propose a specific solution.

Engaging with complexity while maintaining efficacy


*Also, I'm really struck by the idea that the more you increase the complexity, and the more systems awareness you increase in a story, the more it affects the question of efficacy. The author who wrote *The Little Prince* [Antoine de Saint-Exupéry], there's this one piece where he talks about, "If you want to teach someone to build a ship, you don't ask them to drum up the wood and gather the resources and divide the labor. You teach them to yearn for the vast and endless immensity of the sea."*

Telling stories is almost a limitation to the complexity. How do you capture the complexity in the form of story? I think about the methods that are helpful for people to hear different aspects of thinking systemically - these little micro stories, these micro examples, I've found to be very effective and powerful for folks.

Staying together while learning

Sometimes, when we look at a situation, we can prematurely come to a conclusion. We just run with things "the way they are," or close off other options, or are afraid we might offend someone if we ask questions and dare to change things. What do you want your story to teach people? We have to teach people to be open-minded to learn.

Let's get there together, regardless of the way we come up with solutions. Not that solutions aren't important. But it's that forward-pulling motion.



Sometimes we just close off things. We make up our own conclusions of things and we just run with them as are. That is not a very good way for us to tell our stories. The question of what do you want your story to be or what do you want your story to teach people? I think nothing beats wanting to learn and being open-minded to learn. Even when you are introducing something, you cannot introduce something to anyone or anywhere without first exploring it and finding out.

Shifting deeper cultural narratives

The outcomes you're interested in determine the kind of stories and strategies you should be thinking about telling. We are trying to create shifts at the deeper levels of a system's culture, which means that a singular story is not the answer. It's the aggregate of stories that are framed somewhat consistently to nurture a different perspective about how the world works.

For me, I want people who engage with the storytelling work that I do in order to be in a place of awareness, to be in that spot where now that they've heard about something, or engaged with another truth, they won't be so quick to be on the side of negativity.

Activating the yearning for entirely new futures

I am reminded of an Octavia Butler quote: "There's nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns." When things seem universal and "just the way things are," could there be a whole other way of existing? What could that look like? Could our stories pull us out of this current system into another one?

What's the strategic function of yearning? How can we spark a yearning or desire for an alternative future? Yearning bypasses all of the pitfalls and challenges of what systems change actually involves. Not that there won't be obstacles - there will - be if you have enough yearning, you will find your way. For me, that's the answer to the question, "what do we want stories to do." Stories should generate a yearning that is so immense, so clear, with such drive and momentum, that no systemic barriers will be sufficient to stop you.