

Synopsis of Community of Practice Introductory Session, November 30 2021 Expanding and Evolving Our Project Narrative

We drew on the emerging themes from our first CoP discussion to co-create and expand the project narrative, which will continue to evolve as we collectively learn together.

Sustainable systems change...

- Doesn't happen through one heroic individual
- Is led by multiple actors through a plurality of approaches
- Is relational and not just technical, with the relationship as the most important unit of change in a social system
- Is intergenerational and will not likely follow a linear path on a funder's time horizon

Therefore, systems storytelling should...

- Tell multiple not single stories, illustrating many perspectives and interpretations while illustrating the complex relationships between people, power, and resource flows
- Value I/We stories rather than S/he/They stories, advancing the authorship and ownership of stories by those with lived experience of the changing system
- Be living and evolving representations of community aspirations rather than depictions of community deficits
- Utilise many modes of human expression rather than privilege written language
- Traverse many languages in order to explore different conceptualizations of reality
- Incorporate conceptions of time that are not necessarily linear or truncated
- Allow for the rediscovery of the past in addition to innovation for the future
- Make space for emotion, empathy, and the sacred, using processes that prepare listeners and readers for receiving and truly hearing stories


Themes emerging from the first meeting of the Community of Practice

Why stories matter: storytelling as power

CoP members emphasized that stories carry power and that the role of the storyteller is powerful. We were reminded that the names we give to actors and the terminology we use to describe their actions confer (and inadvertently give away) power.

“The ways that our current narratives reinforce power are problematic, but we should not view the power of narrative in a negative way. The ability of narrative to shake up power or extend power to different groups is why we're interested in it. We think in story, we hear in story, we dream and act in story too.”

“We forget the collective power of the oppressed, the so-called powerless. Power shifts. These are wonderful things to play with when you're telling stories.”



“In the language we use to describe change processes, we give power to people sitting outside of the change process, usually because they bring money and have a particular kind of power. Recipients vs funders. To shift the narrative, do we need to begin to name players in the change process differently?”

Authorship matters: I/we stories differ from s/he/they stories

CoP members discussed the connection between stories and storytellers, highlighting tensions between insiders/outside in authorship, and played with lesser-told interpretations of well-worn stories of famous and heroic leaders.

“How does the conversation change when people who are deeply connected to a particular story get to author and share their own story, rather than outsiders coming in to tell the stories they find? One thing that changes is which stories matter and which stories get told.”

“Stories have more than one interpretation. As a young black South African, people think Mandela saved me, that I was born into freedom. But if you ask my mom, our parents saved Mandela. They stood in front of bullets and pressured the international community to impose sanctions. Beyond stories of heroic individuals, our storytelling traditions need to branch out and offer different perspectives.”

“98% of journalism depicts people through their deficits and challenges. It’s so rare we see communities through their aspirations and their agency. But understanding them through their aspirations rather than their deficits tells you what’s true.”


What kinds of changes do we think are needed?

CoP members articulated the kinds of changes we might explore to tell systems stories in ways that are more reflective of how change happens. The conversation considered ways that we might be inspired to tell stories differently, while still retaining the elements that pique our curiosity and keep us motivated to listen.

“We should ask ourselves, “Stories for what purpose?” If “systems change” is the answer, then the next question is, “So what kind of change is needed?” Is the change we are after who tells the story or how people hear and interpret the story? Perhaps it is both.”

“Our stories are too often anthropocentric. It’s always humans telling stories. In our language, Anishinaabemowin, we don’t have a word for nature, we use a holophrase (a word bundle) *Gidakiiminan* that means ‘everything in Creation, sun, moon, stars, mountains, deserts, forest, waters, animals, and human beings, and our sacred place in Creation.’ That’s where knowledge resides. We borrow it from the land and that’s where it lives.”

“What does it mean to tell systems change stories? If we take our inspiration from nature - biomimicry - the mycelium underground networks between trees is a great example. That is systems change in the deepest reality of it. But who are the characters and how would you frame it? What keeps the curiosity flowing? Where’s the conflict and the agency?”



To tell systems change stories, we need a deeper exploration of language, contextual reality, and the intergenerational nature of stories.

CoP members emphasized the fundamental importance of language and contextual reality in expressing concepts, such as the concept of time. This led to further discussion around the temporal nature of storytelling, including stories that get passed down across generations, cross-cultural linkages between stories of trauma and resilience, and an exploration of stories as living things.

“My conception of time is rooted in my native tongue, and the words we use reflect a different understanding of the continuity of time, how it flows, and how change happens. But the way we currently tell stories - not only are they linear, they are truncated. Your grant report to your funder tells the story of how you changed the world in one year. What does an intergenerational understanding of systems change look like?”

“I’m a child of the equator. In Bantu languages, the way that we name hours is based on dawn because it never changes. It is constant. And yet for other languages, that doesn’t make sense. We can’t hold things that are aliens to us. Context, lived experience, language and reality are the storytelling cues we need to embrace and look for.”

“Perhaps stories don’t ‘belong’ to us—in the same way that a flower, growing in the earth, does not yet belong to person who comes along and cuts it. Stories are living things, not cut flowers. Often stories feel cut because of who tells them and who keeps them, and that is an act of violence. Stories live longer than us. But what does it mean for stories to live? Who tends to living stories? What role do we play in sustaining them?”

Storytelling is not just about the content in the story, but the rituals around how stories are told.

CoP members shared examples of ways in which storytellers prepare to tell stories and audiences prepare to hear them. What is the role of ritual in conveying essential elements of a story and what rituals should we explore further?

“How do you signal that it’s storytelling time? What rituals are used? How do we distinguish between stories that are sacred and stories you can share over a beer? And how do we as an audience listen to stories and retain certain elements, like the “call and response” interaction between a speaker and an audience?”

“In our culture, we have personal stories and legends, or sacred stories. We have rituals to prepare people to hear those stories. Some of them are so sacred they are only told at certain times by certain people, and you have to take medicine to hear it.”