

# The Barefoot Guide Approach to Writing Stories of Practice

By Doug Reeler

## The Power of Stories

Life is a story best represented in its telling. In many ways we are living, breathing, moving stories, each of us and each of our relationships an unfolding drama with a past, a present and a future story to remember, to enact or to imagine.



Stories are a portal to fading memories. When we forget important happenings or relationships, we lose sight of pieces of ourselves, becoming dismembered. When we remember, we regain sight, reconnecting the pieces to the whole and making sense of how we unfolded, how the small plays of our day-to-day lives, and the few more dramatic turning points, evolved into the larger narrative of our identity, who we really are and our sense of who we are becoming.

Sometimes remembering and retelling stories can heal, lending forgiving perspective. Sometimes our stories help us to reflect, to learn and to improve, and sometimes to let go, to unlearn things that used to matter but still occupy a hidden space that can now be cleared for new things that matter, even for transformation. When we remember we can reconnect with lost ideals, with the potential we had before the compromises we made, to give us courage to try again.

## Stories and social change

Stories, since the dawn of history, have been at the centre of our conversations and relationships, and are perhaps the most essential processes of our learning and development. Ancient cultures have long recognised the power of story for learning, for healing and for change. They know that people often resist instruction but can embrace stories, whether true accounts or myths and legends containing truths. In peer settings stories can be powerful processes for community learning, for forming collective narratives of origins and identity, giving perspective to current situations and for discovering a common future narrative.

Contained in storytelling is the narrative whole, where experience is reflected intact. Without a sense of story our understanding becomes piecemeal and disconnected, a collection of disjointed facts and unsupported opinions.

How do stories work within us and what explains their power for change? We are empathetic and imaginative beings. We also naturally learn from experience, both our own and other's. If I hear your story, not just as a factual report but vividly told with heart and meaning, it can draw me in empathetically and I can imagine myself there as if it is my own vicarious experience, one I can identify with and thus one I can learn from. Through our stories we imaginatively walk in each other's shoes. As such, stories not only cultivate understanding but also the kind of relationships and mutuality that can unlock the potential for social action and change. Sharing stories of change can also inspire and fire our creativity.

Individual agency is key to social change. If I am encouraged and supported to tell my story well, I may be hearing it for the first time, holding a mirror to myself to see myself anew. My will to act for the good may have been suppressed by experiences that have sown fear, self-doubt and hatred, even self-hatred. But seeing my story in front of me, hearing myself tell it to others can dissipate and dispel these and free my will to act. Doing this in community can have a powerful multiplier effect.

Therapy, conflict mediation and social healing, whether one-on-one or in peer groups, have always had storytelling at the heart. From the past to the present, storytelling can help us to forgive and find resolve, and to imagine a future narrative that is different, offering hope and possibility.

## Stories of practice

There are strong forces that disrupt and distort the use of stories for social change. The Development Aid Industry, with its focus on compliance-based accountability, has squeezed narratives of change into mechanistic project processes that culminate in bland and often dishonest evaluation reports to prove impact. This can nullify the critical importance of learning-based accountability as the vitalising yeast of discovering approaches that work within long-term development processes through action learning or action research-based engagement with experience. The basis for this is the telling of honest and meaningful practice stories of change, not clever reports aimed at securing the next tranche of funding. We need true account-ability, that will and ability to share deeper and more true accounts of practice.

What do we mean by practice here? Practice lies across our thinking and our doing. On the one hand we have our theories, policies, purposes, values and principles and on the other hand we have our working tools and methods (e.g. questions, exercises, rituals and routines). *Practice is that living capacity we have to see and respond in the moment*, with the people in front of us, thoughtfully working with methods, whether observing or accompanying or intervening, in ways that meet the unfolding situation. It is as much a personal as a social process.

Most stories of practice are merely reports that recount what and why we did this rather than that against the contracted project plan, but do not capture that inside drama of practice. Many of the best practitioners and leaders have an intuitive practice working subliminally and effectively with the situation but they struggle to share what they really do.

The key to telling such stories of practice is to get beneath the outer reporting of events-in-sequence, what we call the 'outside story' to surface the 'inside story'. The outside story is important, almost as the exoskeleton of the account, but the real drama lies in what unfolded inside and between people. What were people thinking and how did that change? What assumptions were at play? We experience the world and relate to others most immediately through our emotions and often respond from there. So, what were people feeling (often mixed and paradoxical) and how did those feelings shift and affect the mood and trust? What impact did that have on relationships? Almost all stories of change are about how power shifts, and power is held in relationships, so the story of relationships is key, even the changing relationship we have with ourselves, individually, because that is where agency is born. And what did people really want and act or decline to act from, even if they did not know that themselves, and how did their will shift and affect the drama as it unfolded? We are willing beings and so if people appear to lack the will to change, we may ask what was holding their will captive, be it fear, self-doubt or resentment? And if their will was freed when and how did that happen? Once you can reveal answers to these kinds of questions you can start to reflect, understand and learn at a deeper level.

If practitioners can share their inside practice stories, taking others into their confidence, giving an account of their 'real work', what it is that they are really doing when they do what they do, then others can learn from them, as we learn deeply from good stories, as more conscious vicarious experiences. And these stories can be collectively reflected on and learned from to improve future and wider practices.

## Writing Stories

Writing is an effective way of surfacing, developing and sharing practice stories and making sense of them, but it is more than just a documenting process. Writing makes experience, thinking and ideas visible not only to the reader but to the writer herself who often cannot see it until it forms and lies there on the page.

Collaborative writing makes thinking visible to a group of people in conversation, containing and enriching their co-creation and collective intention. *By coupling the telling of the inside story to the action learning cycle it becomes possible to develop rich reflections, learnings and then implications, guidance and ideas for future practice.* With guidance and support, writing enables leaders and practitioners to share their stories and practices for the wider world to learn from. We share below how we use *writeshops* to enable communities of practice to develop and share writings about their practices.

## Reading Stories

Reading can be much more than transferring information between book and brain. Active reading can have a profound impact on our way of seeing ourselves and the world, through the valuable sharing of stories, perspectives and knowledge horizontally. We lament the dearth of reading, but this is hardly surprising when you see the dreary stuff published in our sector, seldom geared to the practitioners and leaders on the ground, de-personalised and sanitised by academic convention. Making writing accessible has been, from the very beginning, a major emphasis in the Barefoot Guides, using a diversity of voices, perspectives, writing styles, images and layout, with a wide variety of content, from stories to analysis, theory, even to poetry. The readership is diverse, and we require diversity to meet that. We believe that this fuller expression of stories and life can often add to the depth and rigour that academics seek.

## Designing and Facilitating Writeshops

You can ask someone to tell their story and even draw out the inside story with the kinds of questions we shared above. But ask the average social practitioner or leader to now write that down and most will either freeze in front of the blank page or write a two-dimensional report.

Our core method to getting people around this blockage is the *writeshop*, a series of facilitated group processes, face-to-face or online, through which communities of practice work together to develop designs and drafts for publication. The participants in these processes not only learn to write but also write to learn.

We have developed a series of adaptable exercises for individual writing in a workshop setting, feeding into peer feedback and action learning processes, which surface stories and reflections to produce drafts for further working. Peer groups, often as chapter teams, may meet periodically to keep supporting each other and individual coaching is made available where needed.

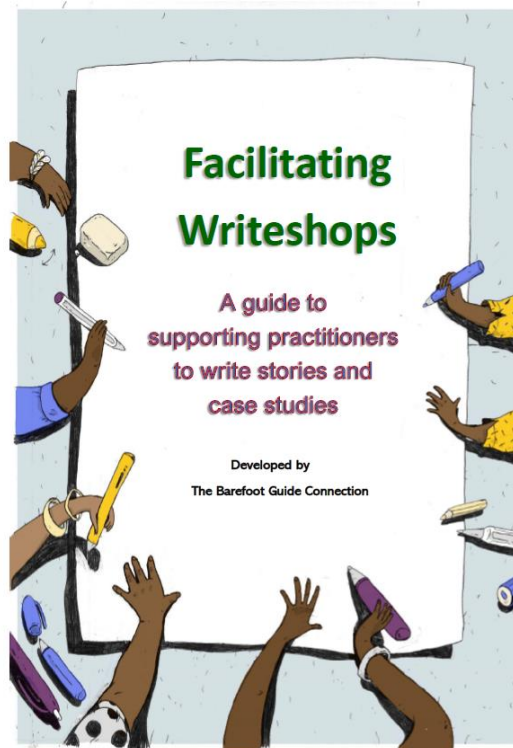
Sometimes people will not or cannot write. Interviewing can draw out their stories, using increasingly accurate and inexpensive automatic transcription services.

Members of the editorial team, brought together from the writers' group, work with chapter teams helping to keep the publication purpose and design intact, guiding the writers and process towards final drafts, illustrations and layout.

## Horizontal learning and collaborative working

Social change work must be increasingly collaborative to meet the complexity and growing interdependence of our world and to counter the fragmentation and competitive forces that divide us. Large social movements like Via Campesina and Shack Dwellers International have clearly shown us the power of horizontal learning, through processes like learning exchanges, again where stories are central, that lay foundations of mutual understanding and trust for the kind of solidarity needed for more active and effective collaboration.<sup>1</sup>

We believe that more processes such as these, including processes like writeshops, where social leaders and practitioners can gather to share, write and learn together, can make a vital contribution, deepening the collective practices of these key social actors and reinforcing vital webs of solidarity and collaboration.



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<sup>1</sup> See Reeler D., 2005, "Horizontal Learning - Engaging Freedom's Possibilities", CDRA, <https://cutt.ly/RhO6f1Z>