The Power of Stories in Practices of Social Change

Exploring the role of stories in social change and how writing and working with stories of change can transform practice

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What are stories, and what part do they play in the unfolding of life, transformation and social change? When we tell our stories, what happens to the tellers, the listeners and their relationships?

And when, as social change practitioners, we write our stories, recreating them and seeing them reflected back to us, visible on the page, what happens? When we share them with our peers, how do our collective thinking processes and understanding of why and how life happens shift? How could this improve our social change practices?

I know of many social change practitioners who work with stories of change in various ways, yet when I ask them why they do so and what is the power of stories, very few of them can answer. Indeed, many are not conscious that they are using stories. I believe they know the answer somewhere but cannot explain it.

This writing explores these questions to arrive at a clearer understanding of the nature and power of stories in our lives and the role that the telling and writing of stories of change can play in transforming social change practice.

Stories and life

Every time we remember something that happened, it comes back to us as a story. We tell stories to each other every day in one form or another. “How was your weekend? How did the meeting go? How are you feeling?” will likely prompt stories. Even “What are you planning to do next year?” may lead to a sequence of intentions that is a story of the future.

Stories live in the DNA of our being and living. Indeed, life is a story best represented in its telling. Without story, there is no sense of life. We are all living, breathing, moving stories, and each of our relationships is an unfolding drama with a unique past, present and emerging future.

Stories are a portal to the past, a way of reliving our experiences. When we gather our stories together, we reconnect the pieces to the whole like a patchwork quilt, helping to make sense of how we unfolded, how the small plays of our day-to-day interactions and the bigger chapters of our lives with their more dramatic turning points, have evolved into the larger narrative of who we are.

Without story, we are a set of disconnected and random happenings and facts. With story, we gain a sense of our becoming, an identity...
of who we really are and whom we are becoming. Past, present, and future. Remembering and retelling stories can heal, sharing the burdens of memory and lending a forgiving perspective.

Learning, unlearning and change

Sometimes our stories help us to reflect, to learn and to improve. Sometimes they help us to let go and unlearn things that still occupy hidden and difficult spaces that need to be freed for new stories to find room. Thus stories of the past can help us to unlearn our blockages to change, helping to clear the path for transformation and open us up for courageous exploration and innovation.

Learning from the past does not always help to solve current problems. If I lock my keys in the car, the story of how this happened will not help me get them back, though it might help me not repeat the mistake.

When we remember, we may reconnect with lost ideas, with the potential we had before the compromises we made, to renew our courage to try again.

Stories, since the dawn of history, have been at the centre of our conversations, relationships and identities. They are at the heart of our learning and development. Ancient cultures have long recognised the power of stories for learning, conveying values and wisdom, healing and change. It has long been known that people often resist instruction but can embrace stories, whether true accounts or legends, that hold eternal 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 exploring and discovering common futures.

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?

When we first meet someone, how many of us quickly make assumptions about the person, sometimes forming judgements that make us cautious and mistrustful (often based on someone they remind us of)? But when we hear their life story, our attitude is transformed as we now understand and empathise with them. The chances of us now relating and even working together can be immeasurably boosted.

We are naturally empathetic, imaginative, learning, and social beings. We learn from experience, both our own and others. If I hear your story, not just as a factual report but vividly told with heart and soul, it can draw me in empathetically as I am transported into your experience, walking in your shoes. I am allowed to see the world from your perspective and gain a deeper understanding of your struggles, triumphs, and motivations. I can move closer to you, to know you and trust you.

This empathetic connection fosters tolerance, compassion, learning and a willingness to challenge our biases and prejudices.

Stories cultivate not only understanding but also the kind of relationships of mutuality that can unlock collaborative social action and change. Social movements like Via Campesina and Shackdwellers International have long used stories in their horizontal learning exchanges to build collective understanding and solidarity. If we learn together by sharing our experiences and knowledge through real stories, we enrich the empathy and common perspectives in which we can grow committed collaboration.

Storytelling practices of social change

Thus we see how practices of therapy, conflict mediation and social healing, whether one-on-one or in peer groups, have always had storytelling at their heart. From the past to the
present, storytelling can help us to relive and to rethink, to change the narrative, to forgive and find resolve and, from there, to imagine a future narrative where things can be different, offering hope and possibility.

Stories can challenge the stories that society often tells us, what we often call the dominant narrative. They can question the way power is distributed and the norms that we easily accept, the things we see as normal. By sharing the experiences and perspectives of marginalised people who have challenged the status quo, stories can encourage us to rethink the world we live in more deeply. They offer different ways of looking at things, sparking our curiosity and prompting us to reconsider what we take for granted as normal, those things that we accept as true.

Stories can inspire and motivate people to take action. By presenting characters overcoming obstacles or achieving great feats, stories can instil hope, resilience, and a sense of possibility. Narratives highlighting social injustices or societal problems can mobilise individuals and communities to address those issues, driving social change and advocacy.

Individual storytelling can be a key catalyst for social change. Experiences that have left me fearful, self-doubting or filled with hatred, even self-hatred, are likely to sap my will for change. I become stuck. But if I am encouraged and supported to tell my story well, to get a different perspective, this can help to dissipate and dispel these torments through understanding and forgiveness, even self-forgiveness. This can liberate my will to change, to act. Doing this in community can have a powerful multiplier effect.

Teams of social change practitioners can have the same experience when they tell each other stories of their practice, walking and learning in each other’s shoes to collectively reflect on and develop their real work and grow a collaborative and co-creative practice.

I worked for over twenty years in an organisation where, every month, we put aside a day and a half to write and share reflective stories of practice. These powerful collective learning processes not only deepened our organisational practice and collaboration but provided a joyful collegiality that nourished my work and life experience in many ways.

Notions of practice

Before we explore the role that writing and reflecting on stories can play in social change practice, I would like to explore the notion of practice itself. The understanding of practice that I describe is largely true for all professional practices, e.g. teachers, doctors, architects etc., where the client being supported or served is unique, in a unique situation, requiring a unique approach. This is distinguished from work that delivers standardised services or products.

What are the dimensions of such a practice? On the one hand, we have our thinking, conceptual dimension: our theories of change, values and principles, strategies and plans, formed by gathered knowledge, experience and our larger intentions for social change. On the other hand, we have our methods embodied in our working tools, process designs, questions, exercises, rituals and routines. Practice is when we put our concepts and methods into action together as a living capacity to observe, reflect and respond in the moment, to do the right thing at the right time, as the situation asks.
A colleague once said, “Practice is what you are doing when you do what you do.” I like to call it “the real work” behind our visible actions and tools.

There are many versions of practice (in practice) depending on how conscious the practitioner is of these different dimensions of their craft. In most civil society organisations I have worked with, this practice capacity is often intuitive and unspoken. Sometimes the best practitioners work like this, instinctively knowing what to do, in the moment, unable to explain their thinking or why they do what they do. They can tell you about their methods because those are largely visible, but not much about their choices. They are often lone-ranger practitioners, valuable to have out there but not so valuable as team members or mentors to emerging practitioners. I have also seen that for some, their practice only grows to a certain level.

I have also seen too many practitioners in organisations who are more like cooks with recipes for a fixed menu. They are given one “Theory of Change”, a sub-contracted project plan and a set of methodologies with little or no concept of practice, just boxes to tick and funders to please. The tragic irony of the Development Industry is that the very project approach donors use with their partners, largely to manage mistrust, is the key reason for their widespread failure. When practitioners are able to shake off these mechanistic approaches, I have seen that their practice comes alive with sensitivity and creativity, unconstrained by the boxes that seem designed to keep them compliant and tame.

**Thinking practitioners and learning-based accountability**

We need to develop civil society organisations with practitioners who can creatively facilitate and support the complex and invisible processes of unlocking the forces of social change that live in communities and their leadership. This complexity requires collaborating teams of thinking practitioners, learning and working together. Such thinking practitioners must be able to explain why they do what they do, to share their experience and help each other learn, deepen and refine their practices.

This is where writing stories can help.

There are strong forces that distort the use of stories for social change. The Development Aid Industry, with its focus on compliance-based accountability, enforces mechanistic project processes, with lifeless monitoring and evaluation processes that are only interested in stories that are bland and often dishonest evaluation reports to “prove impact”. This can nullify the critical importance of learning-based accountability as the vitalising yeast of exploring and discovering approaches through participative and creative action learning or action research-based engagement with experience.

The basis of this learning-based accountability is the telling of honest and meaningful practice stories of change. True accountability is the ability to share deeper and more honest accounts or stories of practice. If impact can be gauged, then it will appear along with an understanding of its origin and meaning. The point is not just to measure impact (or its absence) but to understand and learn from it to improve future practice.

**Outside Story Inside Story**

Telling true stories of practice is key to developing a conscious practice which can be shared, deepened and continuously developed. The challenge is to get beneath the visible ‘outside story’ and to dig deeper to surface the ‘inside story’.

The outside story is important, almost as the exoskeleton of the account. This needs to be well mapped and described as openings through which the real drama of what unfolded inside and between people can...
surface. What were people thinking, and how did that change? What did they want? What agendas did they arrive with? What assumptions were at play? What feelings were aroused? We experience the world most immediately through our emotions and often respond from there. How did those feelings shift and affect responses and relationships?

Almost all stories of change are about how power shifts. 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 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, 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 so that they could express their agency, 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.

In all of this, where was the practitioner with their observations, dilemmas, reflections etc.? If practitioners can share their practice “inside stories”, taking others into their confidence, giving an account of their ‘real work’, what they were doing when they did what they did, then they and others can learn from the experience. And these stories can be collectively reflected on and learned from to improve future and wider social change practices.

Writing, reflecting on and learning from 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. The writing process itself is a reflective and creative one. We can learn to write, but we can also write to learn.

Writing makes visible experience, thinking and ideas not only to the reader but to the writers themselves, who often cannot see what really happened or what they think until it lies there on the page to reflect upon.

Stories can be told orally, and that has its power. But not only can we develop stories more deeply in the process of writing them, but in their reading and discussion, it can help immensely to have them collectively visible. Having stories there in writing means they can linger for more reflection, for re-reading, for reference, and to share further.

The Action Learning Cycle

The Action Learning Cycle is an effective design for both writing a reflective story and collectively reflecting and learning from it to deepen practice.

Unfortunately, many civil society organisations that put aside time for learning make a series of typical mistakes. Firstly, they don’t surface the inside stories, merely skimming the surface of what happened. Then instead of first reflecting on the experience (because without the inside story, there is not much there to reflect on), they jump to the question of “What do we learn from this?” which yields only obvious lessons unlikely to make a difference. And so, without gaining much value from this, it is quite likely that they will drop the exercise in future. And so practice stagnates.

The Action Learning Cycle is an archetypal learning process in our DNA as learning beings. Following its discipline can lead us through a fruitful and satisfying process of harvesting experience to deepen our understanding of practice.
Designing and Facilitating Writeshops

With guidance and support, writing enables leaders and practitioners to share their stories and practices for the wider world to learn from. I share here how we use writeshops to enable communities of practice to develop and share writings about their practices.

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 write that down, and most will freeze in front of the blank page or write a two-dimensional report.

The Barefoot Guide 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 of stories and perspectives for publication.

Writeshops are explorative, creative processes where the participants not only learn to write stories but also write stories to learn.

We have developed a series of adaptable exercises for individual writing in a workshop setting, combining peer feedback and action learning processes, which surface stories and reflections to produce drafts for further work. 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.

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 shown us the power of horizontal learning through processes like learning exchanges, where stories are central, that lay foundations of mutual understanding and trust for the kind of solidarity needed for more active and effective collaboration. (See See Reeler D., 2005, “Horizontal Learning - Engaging Freedom's Possibilities”)

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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