

Outside Story Inside Story

The Power of Stories in Practices of Social Change

By Doug Reeler, the Barefoot Guide Connection, 2023



"In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted — knowingly or unknowingly — in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives." Ben Okri

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 and their value for their practice, very few can offer a ready answer. Indeed, many are not always conscious that they are using stories, though I do believe they know the answer somewhere but just cannot explain it.

So, 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? How can writing our stories down help us to better see and understand our practice?

Stories and life

Stories are the vessels of memory. When we recall something that happened it comes back to us as a story. 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. With story, we gain a sense of consequence, of who we really are and who we are becoming. Past, present, and future.

Stories are in the weave of our daily life. Asking each other "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.

Indeed, life is a story best represented in its telling. In many ways we are all living, breathing, moving stories, and each of our relationships is an unfolding drama with a unique past, present and emerging future.

Healing, learning, unlearning and change

Stories, since the dawn of history, have been at the centre of our conversations, relationships and

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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 will resist instruction but will learn from stories. .

Remembering and retelling stories can heal, sharing the burdens of memory and lending a forgiving perspective.

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 told of the past can help us to unlearn our blockages to change, clearing the path for transformation and opening us for courageous exploration and innovation. When we remember, we may reconnect with lost ideals, with the potential we had before the compromises we made, to renew our courage to try again.

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 and learning in your shoes.

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.

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, 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 can be transformed as we now understand and empathise with them. The chance of us now relating and even working together can be immeasurably boosted.

We are empathetic, learning 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 and learning 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 can foster 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 as the soil in which we can grow committed collaboration.

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.

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.

Storytelling practices of social change

If we are held captive by the status quo this is because we believe the dominant stories or narratives that tell us that “this is how it should be” or “there is no alternative” or “it’s no use trying to change things”. We can only challenge these stories with different stories, helping people to see a different possible unfolding of life beyond the present stuckness.

New stories, or even old stories retold, can question the way power is distributed and challenge 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. 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 wake up and mobilise individuals and communities to address those issues, driving social change and advocacy.

If we want to rewrite history we have to write different stories.

Individual and community storytelling

Individual storytelling can be a 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. 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.





The notion of practice

Before we explore the role that writing and reflecting on stories can play in social change practice, I would like to discuss 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 person, organisation or community 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.

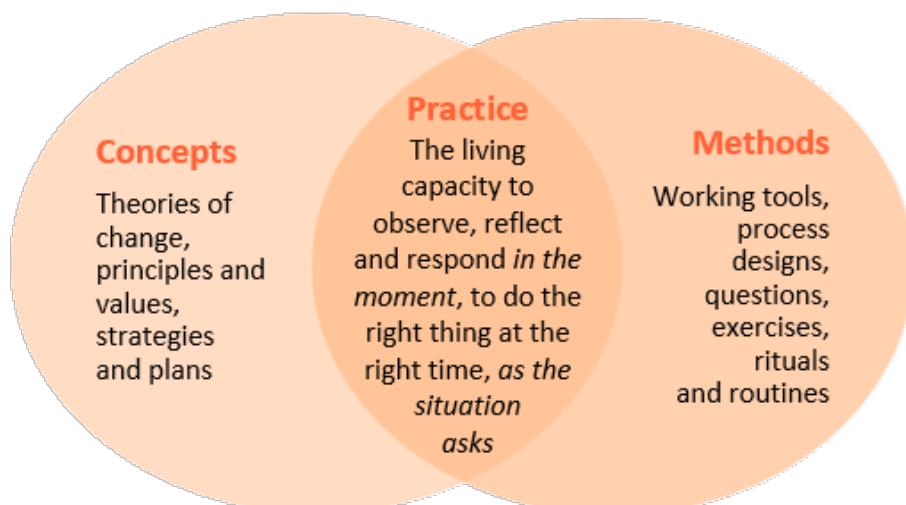
What are the dimensions of such a practice? On the one hand, we have our thinking, conceptual dimension: our theories of change, values and principles, strategies and plans, formed by gathered knowledge, experience and our larger intentions for social change. On the other hand, we have our

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 collaborators 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



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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 account-ability

We need teams of practitioners who can creatively facilitate and support the complex and invisible processes of unlocking the forces of social change that live in communities. Such thinking practitioners must be able to understand and 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 evaluation reports to “prove impact”. This can nullify the critical importance of learning-based accountability as the vitalising yeast of improving practice.

The basis of this learning-based ‘account-ability’ 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 (and therefore impact).

Thomas Merton’s words echo this idea:

Do not depend on the hope of results... you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself.

The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters by Thomas Merton, 1993

Outside Story Inside Story

Telling true stories of practice is key to developing a conscious practice which can be shared, deepened and continuously developed.

But not any story will do. The challenge is to reveal the hidden realities of life and change, to get beneath the visible ‘Outside Story’ and to dig deeper to surface the ‘Inside Story’.

The visible Outside Story is important, almost as the exoskeleton of the account. This needs to be well mapped and described as openings through



which the story of what unfolded inside and between people can surface.

The Inside Story is where the real drama lies. Without this we only get a two-dimensional series of facts and a superficial understanding of causation and consequence.

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

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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.

The Action Learning Cycle – Some Guiding Questions

4. Plans, ideas, implications for future practice, planning or policies

- What should we do differently in future?
- What can we improve?



3. Drawing learning

- What could have been done differently?
- What have I learned about my practice and challenges?
- What questions am I left with?
- What have I learned about how change happens?

1. Action - Telling the story

- The Outside and Inside Stories
(with Head, Heart and Feet!)

2. Reflecting on the story

- What was most interesting in the story?
- What impact did assumptions that people made have on what happened?
- What else contributed to change happening?
- What most helped and hindered the situation?

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

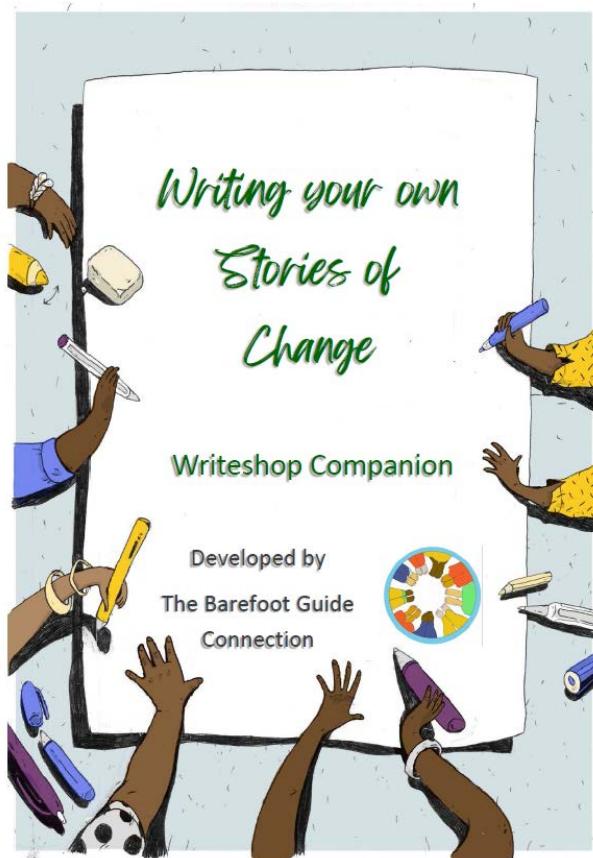
With guidance and support, writing enables leaders and practitioners to share their stories and practices for the wider world to learn from. I share here how we use *writeshops* to enable communities of practice to develop and share writings about their practices.

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.



Doug Reeler works with the [Barefoot Guide Connection](#) and [Tamarind Tree Associates](#) as an organisation development practitioner, writing facilitator, coach and editor.

Click here if you are interested in the [writing support services](#) we offer

We also run [online "Stories of Change" writing courses](#)

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