

Transformative narratives: Memes, stories and their role in transformations



Abstract

We are surrounded by narratives that guide and influence our behaviour, shape our ideas of what is possible and govern what we perceive as normal. These narratives both empower and constrain. Right now, at a time when humanity is facing unprecedented environmental and social challenges, our dominant narratives are holding us back. The neo-liberal narrative that values economic growth above all other goals is no longer fit for purpose. It cannot deliver the transformation that will be required if we are to find new ways of living within planetary boundaries while ensuring that all have access to basic human rights.

This workshop draws on work by the Meta-Narrative Working Group of the SDG Transformations Forum (<https://www.transformationsforum.net/>). It will introduce participants to the transformative role that memes, stories and narratives can play in addressing sustainability challenges. Workshop participants will learn about key narrative concepts, explore and develop the content of their own narratives, look for common ground with other participants and gain experience with transformative storytelling techniques. Together, we will explore ways to work with narrative at community scales, in communities that may be experiencing disruption as the world transforms around them.

Workshop activities

The workshop will include the following key sessions, in four blocks of about 90 minute each, with breaks in between:

1. *Welcome and introductions* (30 mins) – icebreaker activities to help the participants get to know each other; introduce the facilitation team and the plan for the day.
2. *Core concepts and frameworks* (60 mins) – introduce narrative theory, including: definitions of memes, stories, narratives and discourses; a framework for how these concepts relate to each other; movement of narrative across scales and theoretical perspectives on how narratives change. This theoretical material will be introduced using a mix of presentation, dialogue sessions and short activities to work with the concepts, so that it is not a dull academic session.
3. *Building common narratives* (90 mins) – this block of the workshop will run participants through a process of developing personal narratives of an ideal future using a guided visualisation activity; packs of photo cards to inspire creative thinking and draw out unconscious preferences; and drawing materials to help with documenting ideal narratives. Participants will be encouraged to document their ideal future narrative in a creative way, using drawing, mind mapping and creative writing. Participants will then roll up into pairs, then fours, then groups of eight to share their narratives and find common ground. Finally, we will hear the common narratives developed by each group and have some dialogue about their content.
4. *Transformative storytelling practice* (120 mins) – this section of the workshop provides practical guidance on transformative storytelling, illustrated via short activities where participants will draw on their own context to embed the learning. Focusing on a context that is familiar to the participants will help to ensure that participants from different cultural backgrounds can find a way to engage with the activities. The session will cover: defining a clear purpose; developing a theory of

change that considers audience, the prevailing memes, stories and discourses, and communication channels; how to use tropes, archetypes and progressive memes to craft transformative stories; ways to capture attention; and ensuring that the audience has agency. Participants will choose a situation that they are trying to transform and will apply transformative principles to this setting. We will contact participants prior to the workshop to encourage them to give some thought to the situation they will focus on in the workshop.

5. *Ethical storytelling practice in a transforming world* (30 mins) – this dialogue session will open up discussion about the ethics of transformative storytelling and what it means to work towards transformation in communities experiencing disruption. Transformation can be a traumatic experience, so how can practitioners work sensitively, without losing sight of the goal of a better world.
6. *The story continues* (30 mins) – this final session will be an opportunity for participants to identify how they will use what they have learned in the session and to make a commitment to further action. We will also invite participants to engage in the ongoing activities of the Meta-Narrative Working Group, including an invitation to submit chapters for a proposed book titled *New Story, New World*.

Language

We propose the following to support participation by people that speak only or mainly Spanish:

- Translation of key materials such as pre-workshop communications, workbooks, presentations and activity instructions into Spanish. While English will be the language for presentations to the whole group, Spanish-speaking participants will have information in their own language that they can follow along with.
- A Spanish-speaking co-facilitator (to be identified) to translate instructions to Spanish speakers and work with them during small group activities
- Recruiting bi-lingual workshop participants to act as informal translators during group activities
- Substantial use of visual, creative activities that work across language barriers.

Participants

The workshop will be of most value to transformations scholars and practitioners who are not already familiar with and working with narrative concepts, but have an interest in expanding their practice to include narratives. It is particularly tailored to those working towards transformations at a community or sectoral scale, where an understanding of the narratives at play could open up new ideas for interventions.

We will invite participation through the membership and networks of the SDG Transformations Forum and Meta-Narrative Working Group. We will also invite participation through the Narratives Cluster of the Well-being Economy Alliance (WeAll). Invitation text will be developed in both English and Spanish.

The structure of the workshop is somewhat flexible, so we would propose a short pre-workshop survey of potential workshop participants (in English and Spanish) to gauge their interests and experience and tailor activities to offer the most benefit.

Less than 10 participants would not be ideal as the diversity of narratives represented would perhaps be too little for some of the activities. Up to 30 participants can be readily accommodated.

Some of the material will be repeated in a proposed T-Practice session, if accepted, so workshop participants will be advised not to also attend the T-Practice session.

Outcomes

Participants will:

1. Learn about narrative theory and the role of narratives and related concepts in transformation
2. Document their own ideal narrative for a transformed world and see which elements are in common with other participants
3. Help a common narrative to emerge with other workshop participants, the elements of which may be useful in their ongoing work
4. Learn principles and practices for transformative storytelling and apply these to a situation that they are seeking to transform
5. Explore the ethics of transformative storytelling and how to work sensitively with communities
6. Meet others with an interest in transformative narratives and build networks that can support their ongoing work in this area
7. Have an opportunity to join the ongoing work of the Meta-Narrative Working Group of the SDG Transformations Forum
8. Potentially develop an essay for inclusion in an edited collection titled *New Story, New World*.

Logistics

The room should ideally be able to be set up with separate tables that can accommodate a group of up to eight people. Round tables would be preferred but pulling together some square or rectangular tables is fine. In most activities, groups will have 4 to 5 people, so we could work with smaller tables if necessary. The larger groups of 8 are only needed for one activity and we could do that by creating circles with chairs.

The room should ideally have the following materials available:

- A whiteboard
- Flip chart paper and a way to stick this up on the wall
- Data projector and screen for presentation
- Markers and pens.

The facilitators will supply other materials, such as sticky notes, pencils for drawing and sketching, photo cards etc.

Facilitators

The workshop will be facilitated by members of the Meta-Narrative Working Group.

Chris Riedy is Lead Steward of the Meta-Narrative Working Group and Professor of Sustainability Governance at the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney. His work draws on sociological and political theory, narrative theory, futures thinking and transformative science to design, facilitate and evaluate practical experiments in transformative change towards sustainable futures.

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Sandra Waddock is Galligan Chair of Strategy, Carroll School Scholar of Corporate Responsibility, and Professor of Management at Boston College Carroll School of Management, and councillor for the Meta-Narrative Working Group of the SDG Transformations Forum. Her current work involves systems transformations, memes and narratives, especially around today's economic narrative.

Karen O'Brien is a Professor in the Department of Sociology and Human Geography at the University of Oslo, Norway. She is also co-founder of cCHANGE, an initiative that supports transformation in a changing climate. With 30 years of experience in climate change research, Karen's work uses an integral approach to explore and promote deliberate transformations to sustainability. Her current research emphasizes the role of creativity, collaboration, empowerment, and narratives in adaptation and transformation processes, including the role of paradigms in generating conscious social change.

Esther Carmen is an interdisciplinary researcher interested in the socio-cultural dimensions of transformative processes. Her current research examines the nature and role of social capital in resilience building and transformation orientated processes at the community level, focusing on the underlying factors influencing how social capital shapes social change processes in the context of climate change. She is also collaborating with climate change activists to create co-learning spaces for exploring narrative approaches to climate change in Scotland. Esther's previous research examine socio-political dimensions of policy processes and science-policy interfaces, building on her background in environmental management and policy and in international development.