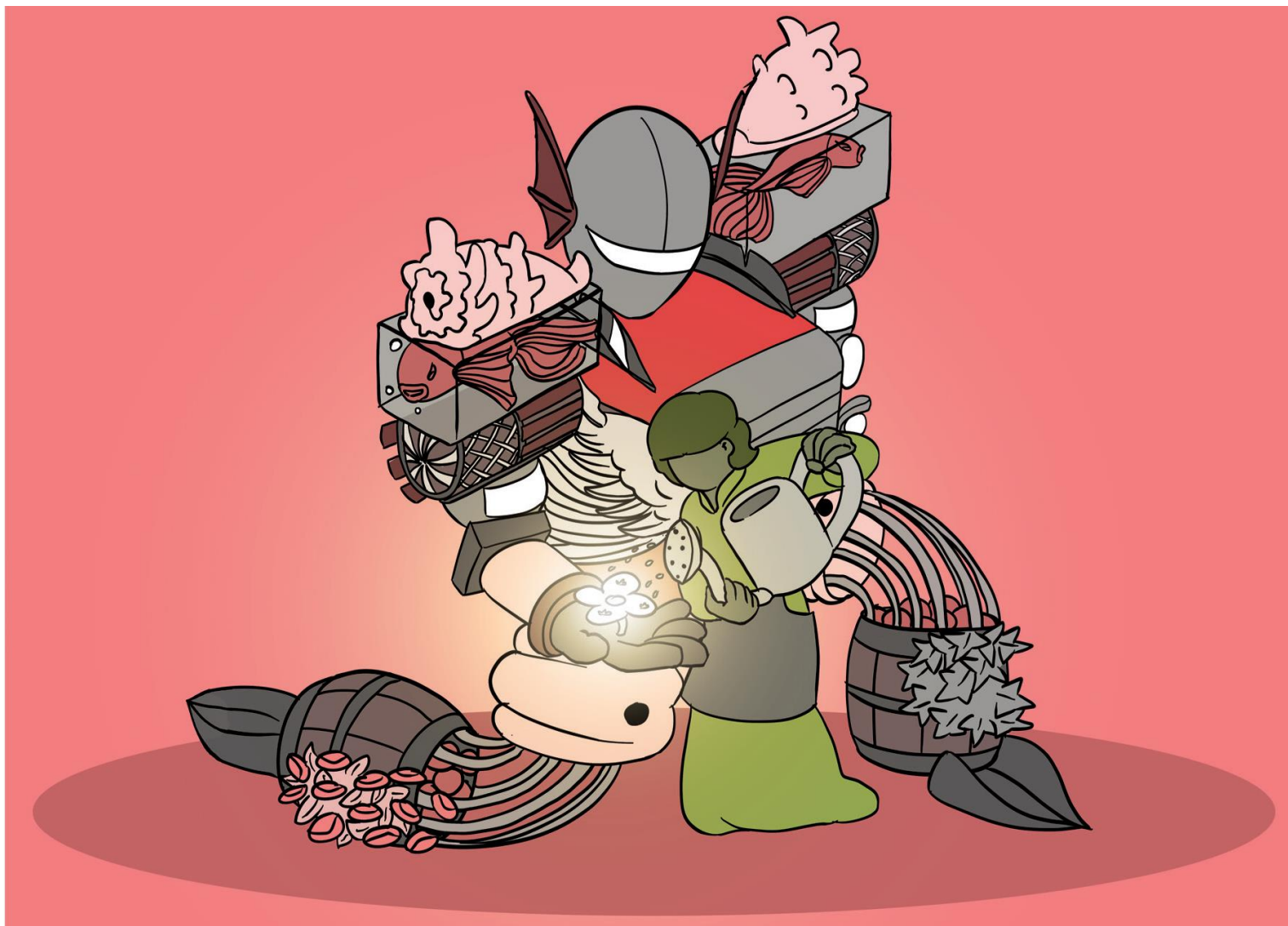


USING NARRATIVES FOR CHANGE: THE TOOLKIT



University
of Dundee



Alannah Krihls



scottish universities
insight institute
mobilising knowledge for a better Scotland



Scottish Communities
Climate Action Network

TABLE OF CONTENTS



HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT	3
ABOUT	4
ABOUT THE CREATORS	4
ARTIST'S STATEMENT FROM ALANAH KNIBB	4
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	4
CONTACT	4
OVERVIEW.....	5
STAGE 1 – INTRODUCING NARRATIVES	6
ASSUMPTIONS.....	7
INTERVENTIONS	7
OUTCOMES	7
STAGE 2 – STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVES	8
ASSUMPTIONS.....	9
INTERVENTIONS	10
OUTCOMES	10
STAGE 3 – UNDERLYING DIMENSIONS OF NARRATIVES.....	11
ASSUMPTIONS.....	12
INTERVENTIONS	12
OUTCOMES	15
STAGE 4 – LINKING NARRATIVES AND ACTION	16
ASSUMPTIONS.....	17
INTERVENTIONS	17
OUTCOMES	17
STAGE 5 – CREATING CHANGE	18
ASSUMPTIONS	19
INTERVENTIONS	19
OUTCOMES	19
REFERENCES	20
APPENDIX.....	21
STAGE 2 WORKSHEET – DECONSTRUCTING STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVES	21
STAGE 3 WORKSHEET – IDENTIFYING UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND NARRATIVES	22
STAGE 3 WORKSHEET – IDENTIFYING MEMES, IMAGERY & PHRASES	23
STAGE 4 WORKSHEET – IDENTIFYING VULNERABILITIES & WEAKNESSES.....	24

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is the output of the *Storytelling for Resilience* knowledge exchange project, funded by the Scottish Universities Insight Institute in 2018-19. Each of the stages found in this toolkit represents a stage from the workshop ‘Using Narratives for Change’, developed by Esther Carmen and Melissa Bedinger in collaboration with Scottish Communities Climate Action Network (SCCAN) working to support social change. This workshop was developed using knowledge from research and action spaces to help equip practitioners and researchers with skills to improve their narrative capacity: the ability to understand and work with narratives. This involved drawing on existing knowledge, for example from the Center for Story-based Strategy.

Along the way we learnt that narratives are messy and complex but also very powerful. At the same time, limiting our imagination may mean we overlook the role of narratives to help us achieve our objectives. This led us to understand – and represent in the illustrations that follow – narratives as a patchwork robot with many moving parts, made up of different visible and less visible elements. It also highlighted that our ability to deconstruct narratives is just as important as our ability to create them.

The toolkit is based on our ‘theory of change’ – our understanding of how learning about narratives can increase capacity for linking narratives and action for social change. As such we have structured each stage into three parts: the assumptions that the stage rests upon, the interventions required at the stage, and the anticipated outcomes as part of this learning journey. In the appendices we have included some materials which were developed for our 1-2 day workshop design for a small group of participants (10-15 people). We include these to offer them as a starting suggestion, with which to experiment and see what works best in your own context.

We invite you to use this toolkit as a guide to help your thinking about how narratives can be better used for change. This version completed in 2019 is by no means a complete ‘how to’ guide. We encourage you to adapt and improve it with practice, then pass that learning on!

Warm regards,
Esther Carmen, Melissa Bedinger, & Alanah Knibb

Funded by the Scottish Universities Insight Institute & illustrated by Alanah Knibb



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Alanah Knibb'.



ABOUT

ABOUT THE CREATORS

Esther Carmen is a researcher with experience in coordinating complex community resilience action-research projects and a background working as an environmental and international development practitioner. She is currently undertaking a PhD at the University of York on community resilience, social capital and climate change and is a research associate at the University of Dundee.

Melissa Bedinger is a Research Associate at Heriot-Watt University specialising in human factors. Currently working on the 'Water Resilient Cities' project, she uses sociotechnical systems methods to model the impacts of future floods and droughts on UK cities. Her research interests include sustainability, transport, urban systems, and human behaviour.

Alanah Knibb holds an MSc in Science Communication and Public Engagement from the University of Edinburgh, with a focus on the development of comics. Her illustrations set big ideas in a familiar, mundane world. Through her illustrations, Alanah invites the viewer to engage with large, important ideas in a context that is familiar and relatable. The viewer can put a face to complicated abstractions, allowing them to think and talk about grand challenges with alternative language which may open up new perspectives and solutions. The mundane backgrounds highlight the ever-presence of these abstractions and the bearing these challenges have on society and our families.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT FROM ALANAH KNIBB

I sketch my ideas on paper before scanning them into Photoshop to add ink and colour digitally.

I set big ideas in a familiar, mundane world. I do this by using illustrated metaphors like patchwork robots (representing narratives), surrounded by moments of human interaction glimpsed in my daily life living in large cities.

Background characters are people you could expect to see in your own daily worlds, they include mothers, grandparents, siblings, colleagues and more.

I invite the viewer to engage with large, important ideas in a context that is familiar and relatable. Through my work, the viewer can put a face to complicated abstractions, allowing them to think and talk about grand challenges with alternative language which may open up new perspectives and solutions. The mundane backgrounds and context are chosen to highlight the ever-presence of these abstractions and the bearing these challenges have on society and our families.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the Scottish Universities Insight Institute for granting the funds to carry out this work, and their flexibility and support throughout this process. Deepest thanks to Philip Revell and Eva Schonveld of the Scottish Communities Climate Action Network (SCCAN) for their engagement with the development of this toolkit. Many thanks to our workshop participants for their earnest participation and valuable feedback and to our colleagues Ioan Fazey, Lee Eyre, Kirsty Lewin, Jade Gunnell, Guy Walker, Julia Bentz, and Ingrid Coninx for their helpful suggestions which were an invaluable part of shaping this project.

CONTACT & CITATION

For further information or questions about the project, please contact Melissa Bedinger (M.Bedinger@hw.ac.uk) or the Scottish Universities Insight Institute (info@scottishinsight.ac.uk).

To reference this work, please use the following citation:

Carmen, E., Bedinger, M. & Knibb, A., 2020. *Using narratives for change: the toolkit*. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.12922235>

OVERVIEW



This overview is an illustrated table of contents. Here, narratives are a patchwork robot with many moving parts, made up of different visible and less visible elements. Each coloured section represents a different stage, to move towards the ability to work with narratives: narrative capacity. The following outcomes, written next to the coloured sections, are what we anticipate you should get out of this toolkit.

In Stage 1, we introduce narratives and why they are important. The outcomes are:

- *to understand the role of narratives in society, and*
- *understand that ‘alternative’ narratives are available to us.*

In Stage 2, we cover the basic structural elements of narratives (conflict, characters, and foreshadowing). The outcome is to:

- *understand & be able to identify the structural elements of narratives.*

In Stage 3, we go deeper to look at the underlying dimensions of narratives. Rather than the ‘things’ the story is made up of (structural elements), these are the underlying factors that make narratives ‘stick’. The outcomes are to:

- *understand & be able to identify the underlying dimensions that convey meaning in narratives*
- *understand & be able to identify the underlying dimensions that shape narrative resonance, and*
- *understand how to deconstruct narratives.*

In Stage 4, we link narratives with action. The outcome is to:

- *understand that action can be a powerful way to expose assumptions & weaknesses in narratives.*

In Stage 5, we begin to:

- *identify & develop actions that are explicitly designed to shape target narratives;*
- *consider group & organisational strategies for action that take account of narratives.*

Together, these outcomes help us move towards **narrative capacity: the ability to work with narratives to shape social change.**

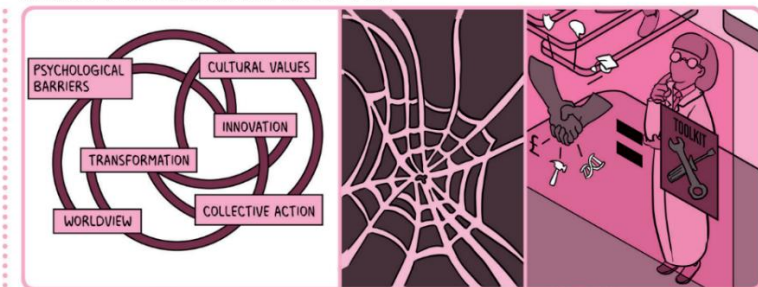
STAGE 1 – INTRODUCING NARRATIVES



THE ROLE OF NARRATIVES IN SOCIETY



NARRATIVES CONNECT WITH DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF LIFE



- | | | |
|---|--|--------------|
| 1 | Participants are willing and able to participate in a group learning process. | ASSUMPTION |
| 2 | Participants recognise the benefits of collaborating across science-practice interfaces. | |
| 3 | Participants have a shared understanding of the need for joined up approaches. | |
| 4 | Participants recognise that many problems are 'systems issues' and social change is a multidimensional, complex process. | |
| 5 | Introduce the system complexity, what narratives are, why they are important and what they do. | |
| 6 | Understand the role of narratives in society. | INTERVENTION |
| 7 | Understand that alternative narratives are available. | OUTCOME |

STAGE 1 – INTRODUCING NARRATIVES

In Stage 1, we introduce narratives and why they are important. This stage is all about setting the scene, warming up the participants to the main ideas around narratives, and starting to grapple with the complexity around them.

ASSUMPTIONS

There are several assumptions about attending participants that are critical to shape a successful workshop. These are depicted in the illustration on page 8. The first assumption (**#1** in the illustration of Stage 1 on p. 6) is that participants are willing and able to participate in a group learning process, such as an action-learning workshop.

The second assumption (**#2** in the illustration) is that participants recognise the benefits of collaborating across science-practice interfaces, and sharing and exploring across different stakeholders and backgrounds.

The third assumption (**#3** in the illustration) is that participants have a shared understanding of the need for joined up approaches and the need for far reaching social change (as opposed to maintaining the status quo) to move towards sustainable pathways.

The fourth assumption (**#4** in the illustration) is that participants recognise many problems are ‘systems issues’ and social change is a multidimensional, complex process that isn’t straightforward or easy.

INTERVENTIONS

The main intervention at this stage is to introduce system complexity, what narratives are, why they are important, and what they do (**#5** in the illustration). This can be in the form of a presentation to explain the role and importance of narratives, in a way that creates an open dialogue with participants.

Narratives (or stories) are shared storylines that connect phenomena to convey meaning. Narratives are all around us. We are interacting with and shaping narratives all the time – individually, and collectively.

Some are deliberately created, but often we construct these intuitively, internally, subconsciously without realising, in a way that makes them universal. Narratives help shape our identities and actions. Narrative and action spaces are dynamically linked and this shapes our understanding of and how we act in the world. This means narratives can be seen as a way of communicating, but they can also be seen as tools of change.

To combat complex systems issues (like climate change and other ‘wicked problems’) no single solution exists. What is certain is that we need to act collectively to effect change. Tools can help but ones that help us engage with deeper socio-cultural dimensions of change processes are often lacking. Taking a narrative approach can reveal connections between key dimensions of social change – like cultural values, psychological barriers, and transformation – in a way that helps us grapple with all of this complexity.

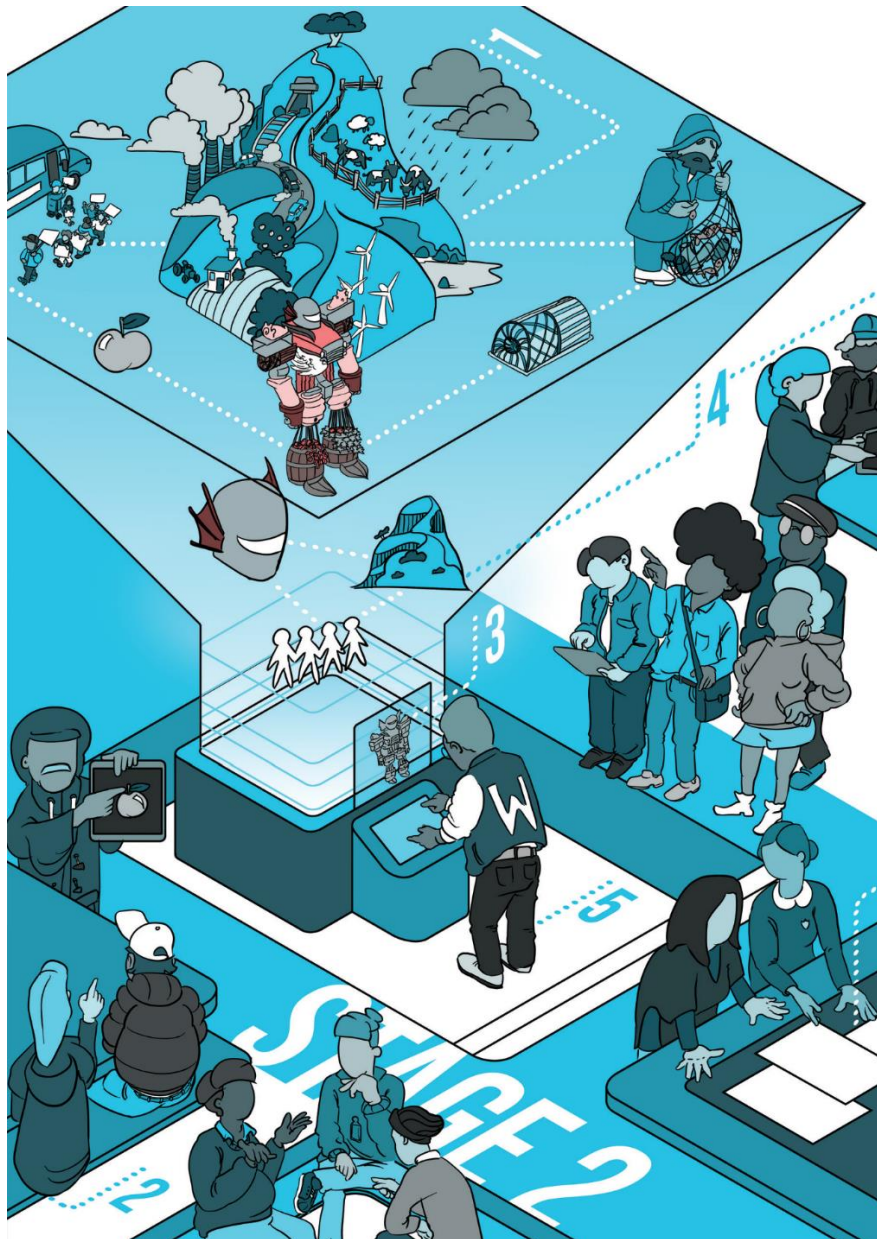
Narratives can be strategically constructed, and harnessed, to do a couple of different things; (1) they can persuade people to move toward a particular way of seeing issues (in other words ‘build the congregation’); and (2) they can also mobilise action, when an aim is agreed by everyone already (in other words, ‘lead the choir’).

In a workshop setting, these points could be covered with a few short presentation slides or a guided discussion.

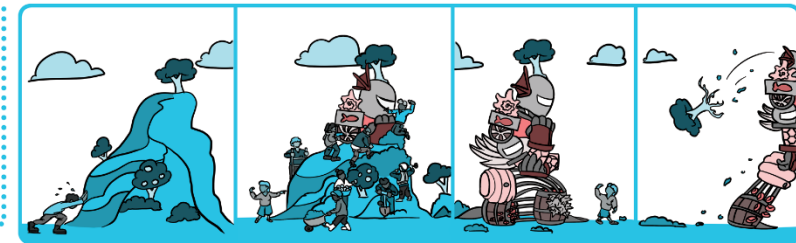
OUTCOMES

The outcomes of Stage 1 are to understand the role of narratives in society (**#6** in the illustration), and understand that ‘alternative’ narratives are available to us (**#7**).

STAGE 2 – STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVES



STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF A NARRATIVE



1. CONFLICT/CHALLENGE
AN INDIVIDUAL ATTEMPTS TO
MOVE A MOUNTAIN.

2. CHARACTERS
PEOPLE FROM THE COMMUNITY
COME TO HELP THE INDIVIDUAL.

3. SUGGESTED FUTURE
THROUGH COLLABORATION,
THE MOUNTAIN MOVES.



PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

- 1 Participants are able to select a specific narrative that is hindering social change.
- 2 Participants are willing to actively contribute throughout discussions, listen and work in groups to shape interactional learning processes.
- 3 Select a 'problematic' perspective that is considered to be hindering social change to explore.
- 4 Identify structural elements of the narrative.
- 5 Understand and be able to identify the structural elements of narratives

ASSUMPTION
ASSUMPTION
INTERVENTION
OUTCOME

STAGE 2 – STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVES

In Stage 2 we introduce the structural elements of a narrative. This stage is about working with a specific narrative to understand its basic parts.

ASSUMPTIONS

There are two assumptions that are essential to a successful workshop in this stage. The first assumption (**#1** in the illustration of Stage 2 on p. 8) is that participants are able to select a specific narrative that is hindering social change. Developing experiential knowledge (or learning by doing) can be a useful approach for improving capacity. From a narrative perspective this involves exploring real world narratives that are relevant to those engaging in the learning process. Narratives are everywhere, varying in their fit to particular settings and scales.

To begin to understand about existing narratives and how to challenge them participants select an action space and associated narrative that they perceive as problematic as an example to begin to learn about working with narratives more broadly in their work. An important part of this is focusing on a specific action space. This is more difficult than it seems! If possible, this involves asking participants to think about this ahead of time.

Questions that could help with this include:

- What is the context, scale or focus for change? (e.g. a community, an organisation, a policy sector, society....)
- What ideas are you trying to weaken or undermine for positive social change? (This may be expressed in terms of a policy or organisational mission/goal).
- What are you trying to change and why? (Who needs to be persuaded and/or mobilised to act?)

It might also be useful to think about what new or alternative stories are emerging – holding in your mind both the stories that you want to challenge, but also what sort of change you are aiming for.

The size of the group will influence how many narratives (or parts of narratives) are identified. Selecting one or two to work with helps participants to examine narrative perspectives and links with action spaces in more depth (of course, it depends on the diversity of participants in your group and whether those with a similar mission are working together in a group.) It helps if you can get participants involved in this decision. Once familiarity with narratives begins to improve the same process can be applied to examine and work with a wide range of narratives.

All of the above help to narrow down the focus to a specific narrative and stick to it, rather than become overwhelmed by several large (connected) social issues or try to do too much too soon. Participant feedback suggested this is easier said than done so this may take time but is important to do before moving on.

The second assumption (**#2** in the illustration) is that participants are willing to actively contribute to discussions, to listen, and work in groups to shape interactional learning experiences. Group learning is a widely accepted way of working in many sections of society, but not all. It also helps if participants are able to attend with at least one other person from their organisation, or be grouped with those working in a similar field to increase the relevance of the discussions to their everyday practice, and take back learning to their specific context.

STAGE 2 – STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVES

INTERVENTIONS

The first intervention in this stage is to select a ‘problematic’ perspective that is considered to be hindering social change (#3 in the illustration of Stage 2 on p. 8). As discussed above, this relies heavily on assumption #1. In a workshop setting, this may involve discussing ideas within a small group (3-5 people) and selecting a specific perspective or narrative to jointly explore in more depth. The second intervention is to identify the structural elements of a narrative¹ (#4). We adapted a simple worksheet from the Centre for Story-based Strategy (found in the Appendix) to help with this, which can be adapted for your own context where necessary.

A conflict or challenge provides the core of most narratives. How conflicts or challenges are presented, and between who and what, helps shape what decision and/or actions are relevant. What is the conflict or challenge presented and who or what is it between?

Characters and their roles in narratives are an indication of how narratives can reinforce and consolidate power. Who are the main characters in the narrative? How are they presented (as victims or heroes)? Who are the messengers or narrators? These may be human or non-human for example a generation (e.g. millennials), an animal (such as a water vole), a group of people (such as blue-collar workers), a natural feature (such as a mountain, framed as a subject as opposed to object), and other entities (such as the economy).

Foreshadowing aspects of a narrative provide a vision for a particular future state, based on the narrative. This is shaped by the actions and decisions aimed at addressing the conflict or challenge in the narrative. How does the narrative suggest how to address the conflict or challenge? What future does this show?

OUTCOMES

The main outcome of this stage is to understand and be able to identify the structural elements of narratives (#5 in the illustration).

¹ Reinsborough, P. & Canning, D., 2010. *Re:imagining change: How to use story-based strategy to win campaigns, build movements, and change the world*. PM Press: Oakland, CA.
<https://www.storybasedstrategy.org/tools-and-resources>

STAGE 3 – UNDERLYING DIMENSIONS OF NARRATIVES



EXAMPLES OF FRAMING



FRAMING CHARACTERS
THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE ECONOMY AS CHARACTERS

FRAMING CONFLICT
THE ECONOMY IS PRIORITISED OVER THE ENVIRONMENT

FRAMING FORESHADOWING/CHOICES
TECHNOLOGY FORESHADOWS A FUTURE WORLD WHERE TECH WILL RESOLVE CONFLICT AND REMOVE TRADE-OFFS



FRAMING ACTIONS AND CHOICES AS A GAIN VS A LOSS
BEHAVIOURAL CHANGES COULD BE VIEWED AS A LOSS (GIVING UP QUALITY OF LIFE) OR GAIN (FOCUSING ON PEOPLE AROUND US LEADS TO COHESIVE COMMUNITIES, INCREASED WELL-BEING AND INCREASED QUALITY OF LIFE)

1	Introduce framing as a key aspect of narratives.	INTERVENTION
2	Identify assumptions behind the narrative.	
3	Introduce memes (images, words, phrases and ideas) as key aspects of narratives.	
4	Identify if there is imagery or phrases associated with the narrative.	
5	Understand that there are underlying dimensions that convey meaning in a narrative.	OUTCOME
6	Participants recognise that society is pluralistic and individuals have multiple values and interests.	
7	Participants can identify the typical narrator of the narrative and put themselves in the place of the target audience.	ASSUMPTION
8	Introduce credibility and relevance as a way to understand narrative acceptance (see next page for examples).	
9	Understand underlying dimensions that shape narrative resonance.	INTERVENTION
10	Understand how to deconstruct narratives.	

STAGE 3 – UNDERLYING DIMENSIONS OF NARRATIVES

In Stage 3 we introduce the underlying dimensions of narratives. Rather than the ‘things’ the story is made up of (the structural elements from Stage 2), these are the deeper dimensions that help make narratives ‘stick’.

ASSUMPTIONS

The first assumption (#6 in the illustration of Stage 3 on p. 11) is that participants recognise that society is pluralistic, involving multiple perspectives, interests and values. If this was not already at the forefront of participants’ minds, this stage is where this may surface. The second assumption (#7 in the illustration) is that participants can identify the typical narrator of their selected narrative, and put themselves in the place of the target audience. You could consider different ways of doing this in a group, for example role play could help examine these aspects of narratives.

INTERVENTIONS

There are five interventions in this stage. The learning points in this stage are all connected, but their order could vary from what we have set out – you may want to play around with the order and emphasis of the interventions to better fit your needs.

The first intervention (#1 in the illustration on p. 11) is to introduce framing as a key aspect of narratives. This highlights that narratives are not just about the structural elements, walking away, and expecting the narrative to take hold. Equally (if not more) important to a successful narrative are what has been selected and emphasised in the narrative, and what has *not*. This selection is what we mean when we talk about ‘framing’.

Framing is an active process that selects particular perspectives, setting what is or is not included/ emphasised. This helps set the terms of the debate and shapes perceptions of what is possible. This can also reveal the distribution of power between different social actors.

Framing is applicable to the different structural elements of narratives:

- Conflicts/issues. For example, climate change as a relevant local issue instead of an ‘out there’ problem for politicians to solve;
- Characters/attributes/responsibilities. For example, characters can be all human or include non-human entities (like a community, economy, or animal);
- Foreshadowing (choices and actions that lead to suggested futures). For example, choices framed as opportunities instead of being driven by fear or threat.

How all of these elements are framed often provides a link to wider overarching perspectives, and larger sets of ideas (meta-narratives).

Framing also includes whether choices and actions in the narrative are framed as gains or losses. Framing choices and actions as ‘gains’ tends to be more persuasive to all audiences (it arguably supports collective efficacy and agency). Choices and actions in terms of loss may be less effective (for example, doomsday narratives, focusing on sacrificing something, or emphasising avoiding sanctions). This does not mean glossing over issues and ‘thinking positive’ in an unrealistic way - we need to be clear about the challenges we face. The emphasis here is on framing our *responses*. These responses should be framed as potential gains, to create a sense of agency and minimise a sense of powerlessness.

If we consider neoliberal narratives to be problematic, it is important that we don’t inadvertently reinforce these ideas in our narratives and action. (These emphasise the primacy of free markets, the need to reduce regulation to deliver continual economic growth.) It is important to use alternative framing in any changed or emerging alternative narrative. This is why developing narrative capacity is key, to avoid inadvertently reinforcing ideas we want to move away from. For example, we may want to reframe narratives to signal greater legitimacy for community actors in decision-making processes, in a way that has traditionally often been lacking in the narratives of formal government actors.

STAGE 3 – UNDERLYING DIMENSIONS OF NARRATIVES

The second intervention is to identify the underlying assumptions behind each structural element of the selected narrative (#2 in the illustration of Stage 3 on p. 11)¹. We developed a simple worksheet (found in the Appendix) to help with this, which can be adapted for your own context where necessary. To better understand how the selected narrative is framed, it is important to ask: What does someone have to believe to accept the narrative? One assumption might be that economic development leads to happiness, or that GDP is a measure of success.

The third intervention is to introduce memes (#3). In this context memes include imagery, words, phrases, and ideas that are key aspects of the narrative. They are basic cultural units, and often invoke specific perspectives or metanarratives. If memes resonate, they spread without attributing authorship from a specific or known narrator, and they often morph over time.

Memes – particularly phrases – can reinforce a set of ideas. This means we should avoid using words or phrases that are linked to the narratives we do not want to support. It's critical to use alternatives. For example some work has already been done in this area and **Table 1**² on the right shows examples of alternative memes.

The fourth intervention is to identify the memes, imagery & phrases associated with the selected narratives (#4) and examine the assumptions conveyed. By understanding memes, we know that narratives are often linked with images, words, or phrases that signal a specific set of values as important. How does the selected narrative convey or show (rather than tell) succinctly what is important? We developed a simple worksheet (found in the Appendix) to help with this, which can be adapted for your own context where necessary.

Table 1 - Core memes in the current/alternative narrative on wellbeing, dignity, and vitality²

Focus	Current Neoliberal / Economic Narrative	Alternative Wellbeing / Dignity Narrative
Systemic orientation	Free enterprise system (economy)	Societies (with embedded markets) in Nature (holistic)
Dominant goals	Growth <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic (GNP/GNP) • Wealth: Financial wealth • Business growth (shareholder wealth/profits) • Consumption and materialism 	Wellbeing and dignity for all, planetary stewardship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wealth: Collective value (Gini, GPI) • Dignity and reverence for humans, living beings, Nature's manifestations
Wealth Capital(s)	Financial wealth	Wealth as vitality, generativity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic/financial • Human/intellectual • Social/relational • Natural/ecological • Spiritual/reverence
Core values	Freedom/liberty (libertarianism) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free markets/economic freedom • Globalization, free trade • Individualism (free, rational, responsible, self-interested individuals) • Private property/goods, consumption, materialism • Competition 	Freedom and democracy within constraints of dignity and an ecologically sustainable social contract <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fair markets aligned with societal/ecological values • 'Glocal'-ism, fair trade, federalism with subsidiarity • Respect for individuals in community contexts, <i>Ubuntu</i> • Private <i>and</i> public goods, harmony, 'enough stuff', restoration, regeneration, generativity • Collaboration and competition
Governmental roles	Laissez-faire <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce/eliminate government and social welfare benefits 	Rule of (fair) law/regulation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid market failures, externalities • Baseline social welfare for all • Balance civil society, governmental, business imperatives
Business purpose and bottom line(s)	Maximise shareholder wealth and profits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scale, efficiency, productivity 	Maximise aggregate wellbeing (prosperity) within ecological constraints without dignity violations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job stability and creation, decent work, restorative businesses, ecologically beneficial • Balance, harmony

² Waddock, S., 2016. Foundational memes for a new narrative about the role of business in society. *Humanistic Management Journal*, 1(1), pp. 91-105. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41463-016-0012-4>

STAGE 3 – UNDERLYING DIMENSIONS OF NARRATIVES

The fifth and final intervention is to introduce resonance (credibility and relevance)³ as a way to understand the success or acceptance of a specific narrative (#8 in the illustration of Stage 3 on p. 11).



These points (credibility and relevance) are used to ‘sense-check’, ‘stress-test’ or otherwise check the narrative you’ve been deconstructing against a wider cultural

context. Understanding these dimensions can also help you strengthen your own narratives.

Credibility has three main points: empirical credibility, perceived credibility of the narrator, and consistency.

Empirical credibility is the fit between the narrative and worldviews. Is there ‘evidence’ that suggest it is believable for the target audience? Is it in the realms of possibility? This does not relate to evidence in the narrow sense (scientific evidence). Instead it is about individual mind-sets and worldviews. For example, remember many people accept UFOs as a confirmation of alien life visiting Earth (**point A** in the illustration to the left), or that the Earth is flat.

Perceived credibility of the narrator is their perceived expertise and status. Is the articulator trustworthy? The narrator matters, but it is their trustworthiness that is key. Thus, the use of celebrities can backfire if they are shown to be pushing a narrative that does not also have ‘consistency’ (as below). Many public relations stunts have backfired in this way. Trust is a complicated social factor, and a good strategy considers the audience and who they trust. One example of an almost universally-trusted narrator is Sir David Attenborough (**point C** in the illustration to the left).

Consistency is the fit of narrative meaning and articulator’s beliefs – in other words, the match between what is said and done. This relates to ‘practicing what you preach’. Does it seem to be authentic? One example of consistency is in the UK’s ‘Big Society’ ideology from the David Cameron era (**point F** in the illustration to the left). This was trying to convey people and communities as an alternative to big government, whilst at the same time reducing public funding to support communities.

³ Benford, R.D. and Snow, D.A., 2000. Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26(1), pp. 611-639.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611>

STAGE 3 – UNDERLYING DIMENSIONS OF NARRATIVES

Relevance also has three main points: cultural plausibility, centrality, and experiential fit.

Cultural plausibility is the extent that the narrative is culturally aligned. Does it contradict dominant views relating to cultural identity? A great example is the set of community and national identity narratives linking World War II history with a no-deal Brexit. Cultural aspects such as the Dunkirk spirit are aligned with keeping back invaders from Europe, and the ‘we can take it’ Blitz spirit conveyed withstanding a no-deal exit. In the illustration above, **point B** in the illustration on p. 14 depicts British citizens drinking tea with ‘Dig for Victory’ and ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ signs.

Centrality relates to how essential the values expressed in a narrative are to the lives of the target audience. We all have multiple values, some more core than others. Common ground is often possible but the narrative must not contain trade-offs or negative consequences for the targets *core* value(s). This idea of a central ‘cog’ (security) connecting to smaller cogs (tradition and development) is depicted in **point D** in the illustration above on p. 14. For example, if an audience’s core values include unity with nature, narratives that are perceived to damage the natural environment are likely to resonate less.

Experiential fit is when the narrative aligns with the personal, everyday experiences of target audiences. One example that arose in a past workshop was a farmer standing in a flooded field (**point E** in the illustration above on p. 14). They have experienced worsening flooding over the years. How they interpret and makes sense of this (as a climate change issue, a technocratic issue due to changes in river management, or something else entirely) will be shaped by how these narratives resonate.

From these six points, not all need to be addressed in any single narrative. However, the ‘stickiness’ or success of a narrative relies heavily on attending to multiple aspects.

To do this requires a very good understanding of the target audience and how they understand the world. This is easier to do for ourselves first, and very difficult to imagine for another target audience, without oversimplifying and stereotyping. How can you ever know what another person thinks? This makes it absolutely critical to know and learn with different social groups.

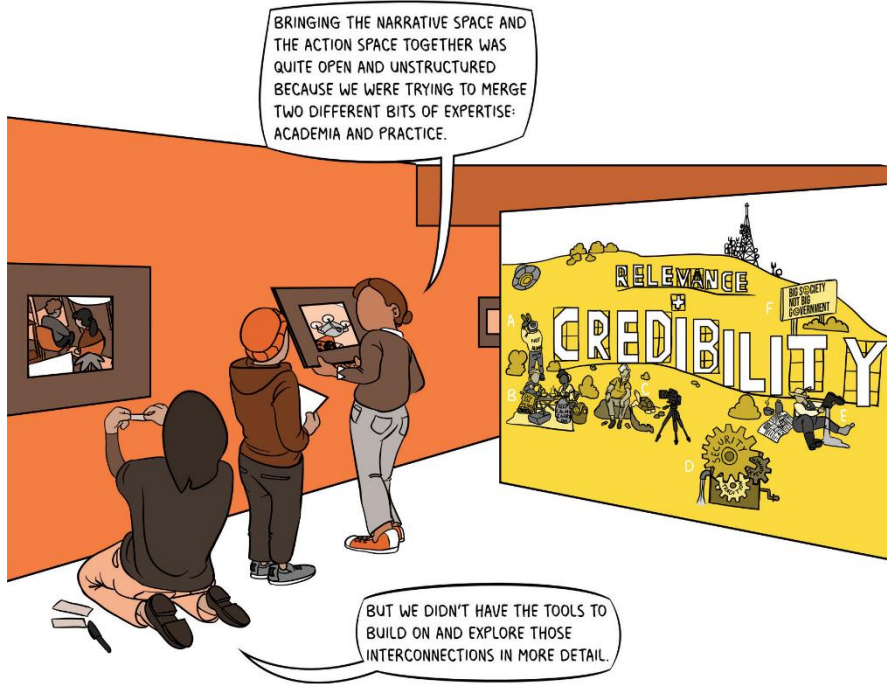
OUTCOMES

This stage has three important outcomes. The first outcome is to understand and be able to identify the underlying dimensions that convey meaning in narratives (**#5** in the illustration of Stage 3 on p. 11). Being able to identify the ‘meaning-making’ elements of narratives (the assumptions behind framing, and memes/imagery/phrasing, not just listing the content in terms of structural elements).

The second outcome is to understand and be able to identify the underlying dimensions that shape narrative resonance (**#9**). This can help understand how resonant and thus successful a narrative may be for the target audience. The aim of this is to help understand how to challenge existing narratives, and also rework or shape alternative, more desirable narratives.

The third outcome is to understand how to fully deconstruct narratives (**#10**) – an overarching ‘waypoint’ outcome, as everything in previous stages has contributed to this outcome.

STAGE 4 – LINKING NARRATIVES WITH ACTION



RELEVANCE AND CREDIBILITY

A. EMPIRICAL CREDIBILITY: HOW WELL DOES THE NARRATIVE FIT WITH REAL EVENTS?

B. CULTURAL PLAUSIBILITY: TO WHAT EXTENT IS THE NARRATIVE CULTURALLY ALIGNED OR CULTURALLY PLAUSIBLE?

C. NARRATOR: IS THE ARTICULATOR TRUSTWORTHY?

D. CENTRALITY WITH BELIEFS AND VALUES: HOW ESSENTIAL ARE THE BELIEFS, VALUES AND IDEAS ENCOMPASSED IN THE NARRATIVE TO THE LIVES OF THE TARGET AUDIENCE(S)? WE ALL HAVE MULTIPLE VALUES, SOME MORE CORE THAN OTHERS.

E. EXPERIENTIAL FIT: DOES THE NARRATIVE ALIGN WITH THE PERSONAL EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE OF THE TARGET AUDIENCE(S)?

F. CONSISTENCY: DOES THE MEANING OF THE NARRATIVE FIT WITH THE ARTICULATOR'S BELIEFS?

1	Identify vulnerabilities or weaknesses in existing narratives.	INTERVENTION INTERVENTION INTERVENTION OUTCOME
2	Identify and discuss examples of actions designed to challenge existing narratives.	
3	Identify and discuss examples of changes in narratives designed to shape outcomes.	
4	Understand that action can be a powerful way to expose assumptions and weaknesses in narratives.	

STAGE 4 – LINKING NARRATIVES WITH ACTION

In Stage 4, we introduce the link between narratives and action.

ASSUMPTIONS

There are no assumptions directly required for this stage; however it does require outcomes from previous stages as ‘preconditions’ for learning and building further narrative capacity.

INTERVENTIONS

The first intervention in this stage is to identify vulnerabilities or weaknesses in the selected narrative¹. Once the structural elements and underlying assumptions in an existing narrative have been examined, it is much easier to begin the process of identifying vulnerabilities. These are potential points of leverage for challenging existing narratives and strengthening emerging narratives. Keeping in mind the narrator and target audience, the credibility and relevance criteria can also help identify some vulnerabilities. This is depicted in **#1** in the illustration of Stage 4 above on p. 16, which shows a drone scanning the narratives patchwork robot, and revealing less visible elements which might otherwise been unknown. We developed a simple worksheet (found in the Appendix) to help with this, which can be adapted for your own context where necessary.

The second intervention is to identify and discuss actions designed to challenge existing narratives. One example is depicted in **#2** in the illustration above: Extinction Rebellion’s garden bridge. This action challenged the assumptions that urban public space is created by the government, simply for motorised vehicles to commute to work. Instead the action affirmed that these spaces can be developed by a wide range of individuals and groups, not just controlled by the government. These spaces can also be used other aspects of life important for our overall wellbeing.

The third intervention is to flip this on its head, and identify and discuss changes in narrative that are designed to shape actions or outcomes. One example is depicted in **#3** in the illustration: the ‘green economy’ narrative.

The ‘green economy’ narrative took off in the energy sector (and connected with actions and successful outcomes) in Scotland. It framed actions as gains, and was also aligned to several relevance criteria.

There are many examples of how action has been designed to challenge existing narratives and how narratives have been reworked to shape alternative outcomes through action on the ground. Examining different types of examples can help show how action spaces and narrative spaces are interconnected, particularly if the examples explored relate to a shared interest or perspectives of the group of participants. Exploring these interconnections focuses on the power of action undermining existing and shaping the development of alternative narratives and thus influence social change. This isn’t easy (particularly as social change is a complex process, influenced by many factors), but working at this level has greater potential for change, rather than focusing on either narratives or action spaces in isolation.

OUTCOMES

The main outcome of this stage is to understand that narratives and action are inherently interconnected with each other. Action can be a powerful way to expose assumptions and weaknesses in narratives, and narratives can mobilise people for action. This is **#4** in the illustration above, depicted as people examining shots taken by the ‘vulnerability-checking drone’, to examine weaknesses, and understand how to leverage them.

It’s difficult to work with merging expertise between academia and practice, but this collaboration is critical for understanding the links between narrative and action spaces and how we can work with these deeper dimensions (framing, credibility, relevance), to leverage social change.

STAGE 5 – CREATING CHANGE



WE NEED TO DO MORE ACTION RESEARCH TO UNDERSTAND HOW TO WORK WITH NARRATIVES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE. WE NEED RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS TO WORK TOGETHER ON THIS.

BUT IT REQUIRES BEING WILLING TO EXPERIMENT AND COLLABORATE AND MAKE MISTAKES.

WE NEED TO EMBRACE THE MESSINESS OF ACTION!

BUILD YOUR NARRATIVE CAPACITY!

WE RECOMMEND YOU START WITH THE ACTION RESEARCH PLUS WEBSITE*, IT'S FULL OF RESOURCES ABOUT ACTION-LEARNING.

THE NEED TO LINK NARRATIVES AND ACTION

NARRATIVES

CONFLICT

ELEMENTS

CHARACTERS

AUDIENCE

NARRATIVES

- Participants are involved in a group/organisation activity operating in action spaces.
- Identify actions that expose assumptions or vulnerabilities in existing narratives or reveal alternative, more desirable futures. Actions that are explicitly designed to shape narratives.
- Group/organisational level strategies for action that take account of narratives.
- Group/organisational level reflective practice to review and learn as they experiment with linking narrative and action spaces.
- Capacity to work with narratives to shape social change.
-

ASSUMPTION
INTERVENTION
OUTCOME
OUTCOME
ASSUMPTION
OUTCOME

*ACTIONRESEARCHPLUS.COM

STAGE 5 – CREATING CHANGE

In Stage 5, we work with narrative-action interconnections to begin creating change.

ASSUMPTIONS

The first assumption of this stage is that participants are involved in a group or organisational activity, operating in action spaces ([#1](#) in the illustration of Stage 5 on p. 18). This could be a specific project, campaign, or collective endeavour, such as creating and maintaining a community garden.

The second assumption is that such groups and organisations have embedded reflective practice at a high level, to review and learn as they experiment with linking narrative and action spaces. This is depicted in [#5](#), where people are talking to each other to discuss what works and what could be done better going forward. In a general sense this necessitates adopting a learning by doing style, and viewing narrative capacity as a ‘muscle’ that you have to keep building and practicing to keep strong. In a more structured, in-depth sense, this might also take the form of workshops run by the organisation to explore how narrative approaches might be useful.

INTERVENTIONS

The main intervention in this stage is to identify and develop actions that will either (1) expose assumptions and vulnerabilities in existing target narratives, and/or (2) create narratives that reveal alternative, more desirable futures. This is depicted in [#2](#) in the illustration on p. 18, where group members are tinkering with a small version of a narratives robot.

The preceding stages throughout this toolkit help to guide participants up to this point. However, identifying and rolling out actions that meet these criteria has not been tested fully in this pilot programme. We’d like to emphasise at this point again that this is under-developed, particularly in Stage 5. A toolkit is helpful to advance practice around building narrative capacity, but is on its own insufficient to achieve this.

We need to better understand how to do this. The ‘action space’ for each participant may look very different, and researchers and practitioners will need to continue learning with and from each other to support this. An important way forward is likely to involve an action research approach. This toolkit, along with guidance from [Action Research Plus](#), is a great place to start.

OUTCOMES

The first outcome of this stage is to create actions that are explicitly designed to shape narratives. This is [#3](#) in the illustration on p. 18, depicted by someone taking the action to water a flower and allow it to grow as a new part of the patchwork robot narrative.

The second outcome of this stage is to move beyond the individual campaign or project level to inform wider strategies across a group or organisation for action that take account of existing or desired narratives ([#4](#)). Working with narrative spaces and linking this with action spaces is likely to involve working in groups with multiple skills.

All of the preceding steps have built to the final outcome of the toolkit, depicted in [#6](#) as people working with each other and being lifted up by narratives to overcome past barriers. This is the capacity to work with narratives to shape social change.

REFERENCES

If you'd like to read more on this subject, the following resources were integral to the development of this toolkit:

Benford, R.D. and Snow, D.A., 2000. Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26(1), pp. 611-639. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611>

Blackmore, S., Dugatkin, L.A., Boyd, R., Richerson, P.J. and Plotkin, H., 2000. The power of memes. *Scientific American*, 283(4), pp. 64-73. <https://www.susanblackmore.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/The-Power-of-Memes-Sci-Am-Oct-2000.pdf>

Bontje, L.E., Gomes, S.L., Wang, Z. and Slinger, J.H., 2018. A narrative perspective on institutional work in environmental governance—insights from a beach nourishment case study in Sweden. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, pp. 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09640568.2018.1459512>

Coninx, I., Bentz, J., Michalek, G. & de Rooij, B., 2018. *How to become a resilience chef and avoid disasters*. PLACARD project, FC.ID, Lisbon. <https://www.placard-network.eu/our-work/how-to-become-a-climate-chef-and-avoid-disasters/>

Gorddard, R., et al., 2016. Values, rules and knowledge: Adaptation as change in the decision context. *Environmental Science & Policy*, Vol. 57, pp. 60-69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2015.12.004>

Hallahan, K., 1999. Seven models of framing: Implications for public relations. *Journal of public relations research*, 11(3), pp. 205-242. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr1103_02

O'Brien, K. & Sygna, L., 2013. Responding to climate change: The three spheres of transformation. *Proceedings of Transformation in a Changing Climate*, 19-21 June 2013, Oslo, Norway. https://www.sv.uio.no/iss/english/research/projects/adaptation/publications/1-responding-to-climate-change---three-spheres-of-transformation_obrien-and-sygna_webversion_final.pdf

Riedy, C., Kent, J. and Thompson, N., 2018. Meaning work: reworking institutional meanings for environmental governance. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, pp. 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09640568.2018.1450230>

Reinsborough, P. & Canning, D., 2010. *Re:imagining change: How to use story-based strategy to win campaigns, build movements, and change the world*. PM Press: Oakland, CA. <https://www.storybasedstrategy.org/tools-and-resources>

Waddock, S., 2016. Foundational memes for a new narrative about the role of business in society. *Humanistic Management Journal*, 1(1), pp. 91-105. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41463-016-0012-4>



APPENDIX

STAGE 2 WORKSHEET – DECONSTRUCTING STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVES

	DECONSTRUCT STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS
CONFLICT Conflict or a challenge provides the core of most narratives. How conflicts or challenges are presented and between who/what helps shape what decision and/ or actions are relevant. <i>What is the conflict or challenge presented and who or what is it between?</i>	
CHARACTERS Narratives contain different characters, that may be human or non-human (e.g. elites, urbanites, politicians, baby boomers, generation x, generation Y, millennials, workers, families, migrants, social support recipients...). The characters and their roles in narrative is an indication of how narratives can reinforce and consolidate power. <i>Who are the main characters in the narrative? How are they presented (as victims or heroes)? Who are the messengers or narrators?</i>	
FORESHADOWING Narratives provide a vision or suggestion for a particular future state. This is shaped by the actions and decisions aimed at addressing the conflict or challenge in the narrative. <i>How does the narrative suggest how to address the conflict or challenge? What future does this show?</i>	

APPENDIX

STAGE 3 WORKSHEET – IDENTIFYING UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND NARRATIVES

	DECONSTRUCT STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS	IDENTIFY UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND EACH ELEMENT <i>What does someone have to believe to accept the narrative?</i>
CONFLICT Conflict or a challenge provides the core of most narratives. How conflicts or challenges are presented and between who/what helps shape what decision and/ or actions are relevant. <i>What is the conflict or challenge presented and who or what is it between?</i>		
CHARACTERS Narratives contain different characters, that may be human or non-human (e.g. elites, urbanites, politicians, baby boomers, generation x, generation Y, millennials, workers, families, migrants, social support recipients...). The characters and their roles in narrative is an indication of how narratives can reinforce and consolidate power. <i>Who are the main characters in the narrative? How are they presented (as victims or heroes)? Who are the messengers or narrators?</i>		
FORESHADOWING Narratives provide a vision or suggestion for a particular future state. This is shaped by the actions and decisions aimed at addressing the conflict or challenge in the narrative. <i>How does the narrative suggest how to address the conflict or challenge? What future does this show?</i>		

APPENDIX

STAGE 3 WORKSHEET – IDENTIFYING MEMES, IMAGERY & PHRASES

	DECONSTRUCT STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS	IDENTIFY UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND EACH ELEMENT <i>What does someone have to believe to accept the narrative?</i>
CONFLICT Conflict or a challenge provides the core of most narratives. How conflicts or challenges are presented and between who/what helps shape what decision and/ or actions are relevant. <i>What is the conflict or challenge presented and who or what is it between?</i>		
CHARACTERS Narratives contain different characters, that may be human or non-human (e.g. elites, urbanites, politicians, baby boomers, generation x, generation Y, millennials, workers, families, migrants, social support recipients...). The characters and their roles in narrative is an indication of how narratives can reinforce and consolidate power. <i>Who are the main characters in the narrative? How are they presented (as victims or heroes)? Who are the messengers or narrators?</i>		
FORESHADOWING Narratives provide a vision or suggestion for a particular future state. This is shaped by the actions and decisions aimed at addressing the conflict or challenge in the narrative. <i>How does the narrative suggest how to address the conflict or challenge? What future does this show?</i>		
MEMES, IMAGERY & PHRASES Narrative are often linked with images and or words/ phases that signal a specific set of values as important. <i>How does the narrative convey/show (rather than tell) succinctly what is important?</i>		

APPENDIX

STAGE 4 WORKSHEET – IDENTIFYING VULNERABILITIES & WEAKNESSES

	DECONSTRUCT STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS	IDENTIFY UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND EACH ELEMENT <i>What does someone have to believe to accept the narrative?</i>	IDENTIFY VULNERABILITIES & WEAKNESSES <i>What are the vulnerabilities, limits, contradictions in the narrative?</i>
CONFLICT Conflict or a challenge provides the core of most narratives. How conflicts or challenges are presented and between who/what helps shape what decision and/ or actions are relevant. <i>What is the conflict or challenge presented and who or what is it between?</i>			
CHARACTERS Narratives contain different characters, that may be human or non-human (e.g. elites, urbanites, politicians, baby boomers, generation x, generation Y, millennials, workers, families, migrants, social support recipients...). The characters and their roles in narrative is an indication of how narratives can reinforce and consolidate power. <i>Who are the main characters in the narrative? How are they presented (as victims or heroes)? Who are the messengers or narrators?</i>			
FORESHADOWING Narratives provide a vision or suggestion for a particular future state. This is shaped by the actions and decisions aimed at addressing the conflict or challenge in the narrative. <i>How does the narrative suggest how to address the conflict or challenge? What future does this show?</i>			
MEMES, IMAGERY & PHRASES Narrative are often linked with images and or words/ phrases that signal a specific set of values as important. <i>How does the narrative convey/show (rather than tell) succinctly what is important?</i>			