Scottish Universities Insight Institute

Knowledge Exchange Programmes

Final Report Form

Storytelling for Resilience – Communicating Systemic Approaches to Climate Change

Summary

The Storytelling for Resilience programme explored and tested different narrative approaches to dealing with climate change. The collaborative research-practice team – consisting of researchers from Heriot-Watt University and University of Dundee, practitioners working in climate change and social action such as the Scottish Communities Climate Action Network, and illustrator and science communicator Alanah Knibb – found the following insights:

(1) Scottish actors involved in climate change want to know how to 'do' storytelling to shape social change, preferably with an accessible practical toolkit which does not yet exist
(2) The underlying aspects of narratives (such as assumptions, framing, etc.) are equally, if not more, important than the structural aspects of narratives (such as characters, conflict, etc.)
(3) Identifying and deconstructing existing real-world narratives must happen before we can effectively create new narratives or 'change the story'
(4) Building narrative capacity requires time and participant investment.

As a result of these insights, the programme developed and tested the following outputs:

(1) A workshop designed to take people through the steps of building narrative capacity (understanding, deconstructing, and experimenting with narratives for creating change)
(2) An illustrated toolkit to communicate central programme concepts and guide others through the process of leading their own workshops.

Through deep engagement across research and practice, the programme has generated a substantial amount of interest in leveraging and expanding these outputs going forward.

Background

Climate change is an urgent issue, and a symptom of systems that are failing. These systems are driven by human actions – by researchers, decision-makers, practitioners, and the public – and those actions are connected to underlying goals and values. In other words, responses to climate change do not exist in a vacuum separate from social and cultural influences. From this perspective a positivist, information deficit approach to social change is insufficient. We must find ways to navigate this complexity in our climate change research and practice, and to understand and deliberately work with traditionally neglected social dimensions of change.

Narratives are shared storylines that connect phenomena together to convey meaning. They are prime candidates for climate change activities for three reasons. The first is that narratives are all around us. Some are deliberately created, but often we intuitively and internally construct narratives without realising this consciously. This means narratives are embedded in and integral to socio-ecological systems and potentially provide an important resource for different types of actor (versus highly technical 'expert' knowledge outputs typically deployed to enact behaviour change). The second is that narratives relate to norms, values, beliefs, assumptions, and otherwise less tangible socio-cultural aspects of systems. The third is that they shape systemic connections. Narratives shape how we perceive the system, and how we act within it, whilst also being shaped by actors experiences as they move through the world. Therefore, narrative spaces and action spaces are linked, involving feedback loops between how we conceptualise and act in the world.

Storytelling techniques have been highlighted as a promising way to develop more meaning from climate resilience research, and better work across science -practice interfaces. However, this is still an emerging area with few such transdisciplinary real-world applications that bring together researchers and practitioners to better understand this latent resource for social change. In this programme various narrative approaches were introduced in a Scottish context to explore their utility and future potential as a resource in social change processes to respond to complex challenges, such as climate change.

Approach

Programme design

Initially the main aim was to explore storytelling as a way to integrate local knowledge at the community level with research findings to improve communication from research to better inform practice. This was framed around highly technical findings emerging from an existing research project (Water Resilient Cities) examining system connections that shape resilience of cities to water related hazards. The aim of workshop 1 was to draw on existing expertise in narrative approaches and bring together different national level actors across Scotland (from research and practice based communities) to introduce and collectively explore various aspects for using narrative approaches, effectively moving from traditional, technical communication styles towards more creative and emotive approaches to build specific stories for improved communication. The aim of workshop 2 involved understanding and working with community level narratives, providing a space for community level actors to explore their own narratives. At the same time the researchers could then also apply this narrative understanding to better convey research findings to feed into decision making process.

Reflective practice

During programme delivery, following a group reflection session immediately after workshop 1 (involving researchers and practitioners with a particular interest and or some experience of narratives), it became much clearer that the usefulness of narratives approaches extended further beyond developing narratives to improve communication across science-practice interfaces. Providing information, even in a creative and accessible format, does not always influence decision making and action. Narratives can of course be used to deliver key messages in accessible formats but how people relate to new information is much more relevant to how it is utilised and this involves a process of interpretation that is closely linked with existing understandings of the world. This to work with narratives it is also important to understand existing, widespread narratives. From this perspective exploring narratives also presents opportunities for understanding how people connect with climate change issues, and how this connection snowballs into action and wider change. Following workshop 1 there was a shift away from storytelling as an approach to improved communication towards more explicitly developing 'narrative capacity' to better understand narratives and their role in social change processes by working collaboratively with those actively engaged in deliberately shaping more sustainable futures across communities in Scotland.

The updated aims and objectives of the programme are shown in Table 1.

A range of narrative approaches were introduced and tested with Scottish stakeholders having some connection to climate change adaptation or resilience. These spanned a wide range of workshop exercises (e.g. creative writing; narrative deconstruction), developed by multiple research and practitioner projects

(e.g. EU PLACARD project; Centre for Story-based Strategy), with a diverse set of stakeholders (e.g. participants from Scottish Government; Scottish Communities Climate Action Network; Development Trust Association Scotland). A full list of the trialled methods can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1. Updated aims & objectives of the programme (removals from the initially proposed programme are shown in strikethrough text; additions are shown in bold and italicised text).

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
	Workshop 1	Workshop 2	Illustration & Dissemination of Toolkit
✓ Aim 1	Underscore the importance of social factors and 'bottom-up' responses to climate change		
✓ Aim 2	Facilitate an upsurge in the communication & engagement skills of climate change professionals across Scotland		
✓ Aim 3		Demonstrate the importance of narrative skills to effecting real-world impact, by applying them in existing work with a ~~flood prone community~~ ***Scottish community activist organisations***	
✓ Aim 4	Encourage deeper engagement with (and effective new responses to) complex climate change scenarios, from policy-makers and the wider public		
✓ Objective 1	Deliver training specific to storytelling for climate change adaptation		
✓ ***Objective 2***	***Develop a toolkit for developing 'narrative capacity', based on cutting edge narrative research, and co-created through action learning in Workshop 2***		
✓ Objective 3		Facilitate workshops with ~~local community flood groups~~ ***Scottish community activist organisations***, to ~~co create stories surrounding flood impacts~~ ***deconstruct and analyse narratives surrounding climate change adaptation***	
✓ Objective 4			Produce illustrations based on ~~these co-created narratives~~ ***the 'narrative capacity' toolkit***
✓ Objective 5			Disseminate graphic outputs ***and invite further collaboration to continue to develop the toolkit and narrative capacity in Scotland in the future*** ~~to local flood groups, climate change and resilience professionals, and the general public~~

Methods

Workshop 1 – Understanding narratives through construction

Workshop 1 was held on Monday, November 26th 2018 in Glasgow at the Scottish Universities Insight Institute venue. This was facilitated by Julia Bentz and Ingrid Coninx from the EU PLACARD project, who delivered a one-day primer on storytelling for climate change for up to 30 participants. These participants were invited based on their national-level insights into a broad spectrum of climate change related activities in Scotland. 25 invitees attended. Backgrounds ranged from strategising the planning of metropolitan areas; government flood and climate change groups; facilitation of community networks; creative arts for climate change adaptation; environmental conservation; and cutting-edge research in climate change, public health, and resilience. The workshop involved four sessions which generally introduced and explored storytelling aspects. Topics included a timeline of events related to climate change in Scotland; emotions and senses in stories; story writing, and; character building. Details of specific exercises can be found in Appendix A.

Figures 1, 2 & 3. Clustering senses, Non-Human Stakeholders Exercise, & Workshop 1 Participants.

Based on feedback from Workshop 1 and dialogue with a climate change activities from the Scottish Communities Climate Action Network (SCCAN) a collaborative approach was established to develop and test the basis of a toolkit to set out a basic process for developing narrative capacity and understand the links between narrative and action spaces. This brought together the researchers ability to draw on existing knowledge (e.g. from peer reviewed literature and narrative expertise in research communities) alongside activists understanding of and focus on shaping social change, existing tools (e.g. in particular resources developed by the Centre for Story-based Strategy).

Workshop 2 – Understanding narratives through deconstruction

Workshop 2 was targeted to organisations actively involved in shaping change at the community level with links with climate change issues (e.g. local climate action groups, faith-based sustainability groups). The workshop day was preceded by an information session held via Zoom on March 26th 2019. This was to introduce participants to narrative concepts, and ask each interested organisation key questions that would help identify an existing narrative relevant to their goals, thus decreasing time required on the workshop day. Importantly, this was also to explicitly establish the approach to Workshop 2 as a collaborative action-learning process, and acknowledge that these organisations are experts in the practitioner space (i.e. the specific 'action space' that their narratives are connected to). This set the tone to encourage feedback about what participants would like to see covered in the workshop, and what they find useful (or not) through the day.

Workshop 2 was held on Wednesday, April 3rd 2019 in Edinburgh at the Scottish Storytelling Centre. This was facilitated by Melissa Bedinger and Esther Carmen (programme leads) as a one-day session for up to 15 participants, based on the format developed with the Scottish Communities Climate Action Network. 13 participants attended. Five main sessions were held: sharing answers to the key questions and clustering into groups with similar narratives; deconstructing structural elements of the narrative; learning about the 'stickiness' of narratives; identifying assumptions and weaknesses in the narratives; and discussion around possible ways to 'change the story'. Details of specific exercises can be found in Appendix A.

Figures 4, 5 & 6. Using tools in small group discussions in workshop 2

Both the verbal and written feedback from Workshop 2 was incorporated and an adjusted, step-by-step process for building 'narrative capacity' was finalised by the programme leads. Freelance illustrator Alanah Knibb collaborated on initial ideas for visualisation of this process, and completed # pages in a full-colour, graphic novel format. This formed the basis of a basic toolkit to guide future activities and invite further development for improving narrative capacity for social change in Scotland and beyond to help address complex socio-cultural issues such as climate change.

Insights

Several insights were made possible by the flexible and exploratory nature of SUII funding. These are high level insights regarding the creation of a toolkit for narrative capacity.

Insight 1 is that **Scottish actors involved in social change across levels want to know how to 'do' storytelling to shape social change, preferably with an accessible practical toolkit which does not yet exist**. When asked if this is a worthwhile approach to adapt and apply in a Scottish context, participants from Workshop 1 indicated that there is a genuine need for, and interest in, delving further into narrative activities. 65% of feedback respondents gave a wholehearted 'yes' to this question, 73% said they learned something new, and 80% found the workshop useful. However participants also indicated that *"I'd need to see it used in practice"*, *"it needs to be refined into a practical tool that can help with community engagement"*, and they *"attended the workshop to learn more about HOW"*.

Insight 2 is perhaps the largest: that **the 'stickiness' of narratives is equally, if not more, important than the information content or structural aspects of narratives**. Stories contain specific structural elements (e.g. characters, conflict, foreshadowing of actions), in a variety of structural orders (e.g. orientation, complicating action, resolution). However, a story containing all of these structural aspects can be technically complete, while existing in a vacuum that does not connect with its intended audience. To be accepted and internalised by an audience, a narrative must go deeper to look at factors contributing to 'stickiness' (e.g., assumptions & framing, imagery & memes, credibility, relevance). This was picked up in feedback from both workshops. One participant wrote that Workshop 1 activities could be improved by "*creat[ing a] stronger emotional container so that people are able to explore more difficult (and probably more realistic) stories*". Feedback for Workshop 2 indicated that participants desired a more contextualised understanding, rooted in as many real-world examples as possible.

Thus Insight 3 is that **scoping and deconstructing existing real-world narratives must happen before we can effectively 'change the story'**. In Workshop 1, story creation was encouraged before choosing a specific issue or narrative to change. This neglected the wider context by which stories may be accepted or rejected. While the generated stories were thought-provoking, the larger question of who these stories were for, and how they will enable adaptation or resilience to climate change, was left open-ended for participants to navigate for themselves. When asked how Workshop 1 could be improved, 90% of participants indicated more structure and guidance was needed. Feedback reflected this, e.g.*: "it may have been beneficial for all groups to have been provided with a little more structure to help guide the construction of the first story e.g. who is it intended for and what are the expected outcomes?"* and "*find out which stories need to be told*".

Insight 4 is that **building narrative capacity requires time and participant investment**. Securing participants for storytelling workshops is in tension with the busy and demanding work schedules of practitioners. In this programme workshops were limited to one-day sessions, and invitees were already known to have interest

in novel and creative approaches to climate change (such as storytelling). However, a longer session or a series of sessions spread over several weeks would be ideal, and further consideration would need to be given on how to apply this for different aims (e.g. climate change issues vs. social movements) and stakeholder types (e.g. community organisations vs. the general public) with different levels of interest and commitment. As per feedback from Workshop 2, *"perhaps too much was packed into it"* and *"I wonder about how the workshop would have worked if some of those participating understood less about climate change or were not moved to action?"*

Outcomes, expected impact, & planned follow-up activities

The main output for the programme is a toolkit aimed at building the narrative capacity of actors interested in shaping social change processes. This introduces complex narrative concepts, by first addressing how to scope and deconstruct narratives, and thus resolves issues identified in the Insights section above. This toolkit sets out an illustrated process to support groups to better understand narratives and their role in shaping social change. This provides a starting point to understand narrative potential: developing narrative capacity also requires an ongoing process of learning and reflection in and for practice at the level of specific campaigns and initiatives and at a strategic organisational level. Illustrator and science communicator Alanah Knibb collaborated deeply on the development of this toolkit and created the final outputs – a 16-page illustrated booklet, and accompanying A1-size posters which can be exhibited at relevant dissemination events.
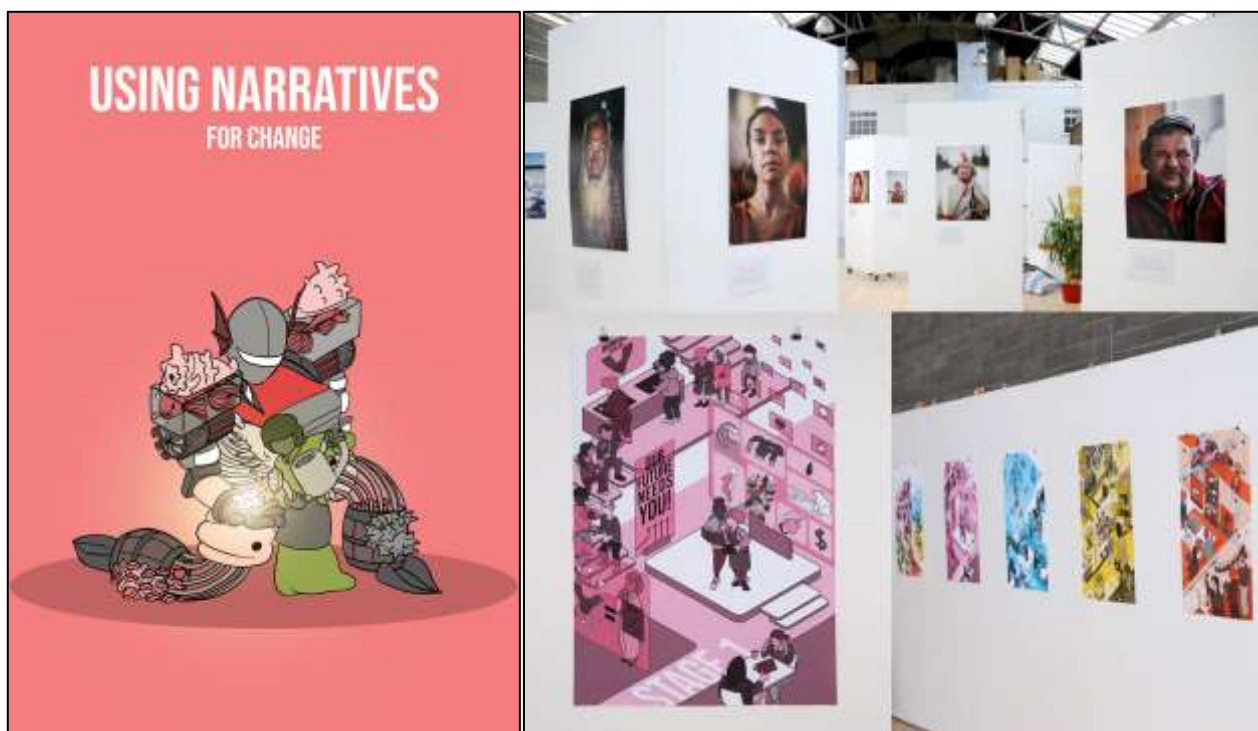
Figures 7 & 8. 'Using Narratives for Change' Illustrated Toolkit, 'Climate Reflections' Exhibition at the Out of the Blue Drill Hall

Outputs were disseminated at the Climate Challenge Fund Gathering at Our Dynamic Earth on November 6th, 2019 (https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/climate-challenge-fund-gathering-2019-tickets-72529909913#) and several organisations (e.g. Croft Carbon College) have subsequently been in touch to ask for access to the toolkit.

In collaboration with the Scottish Communities Climate Action Network and the Environmental Justice Foundation, outputs were displayed at the 'Climate Reflections' exhibition at Edinburgh's Out of the Blue Drill Hall from November 18th – November 22nd 2019 (https://www.outoftheblue.org.uk/climatereflections/). This collaborative exhibition was featured in the press (https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/news/multimedia-exhibition-leith-tell-human-stories-climate-change-920282) and key attendees have already expressed interest in taking the exhibition to other locations pending discussions with the main organisers (SCCAN) in 2020.

Toolkit outputs were also presented at the Water Resilient Cities stakeholder meeting in Edinburgh on November 25th, 2019, where delegates from climate change science and planning organisations (e.g. Scottish Flood Forum, SEPA, Scottish Water) expressed an interest in using this to engage with their customers. Further discussions to enable this are scheduled for January 2020, affording a prime opportunity to carry out the originally intended aim of the SUII proposal: to work on local climate change narratives with a flood-prone community.

Going forward, the toolkit will be made available as an online resource via the Scottish Communities Climate Action Network and will be circulated to science-practice interface actors and through practitioner networks (e.g. focusing on arts & climate change activities; community action; resilience networks). Organisations such as Creative Carbon and Keep Scotland Beautiful's Climate Challenge Fund are also interested in promoting this version of the toolkit.

It is important to note that this toolkit is an early prototype and proof of concept which brings together scientific and practice-based knowledge, but it is not a complete guide. Future development could extend this from the initial stages (demonstrating *why* and *how* narrative capacity is important for instigating change) and test specific applications to the 'action space' (e.g. exploring *how* narrative capacity shapes campaigns, initiatives and organisational strategies). Workshop participants expressed an interest in taking this forward, and follow-up discussions to pursue this are planned (designed explicitly around trans-disciplinary, action-research methodologies). At the Transformations Conference in October 2019 (http://www.transformations2019.org/en/), this potential was promoted within an emerging network of narratives researchers who may be interested in collaborating on future funding opportunities, to enable exploration of SUII programme themes on an even larger international scale.

Acknowledgments