

[Article] Tell Me a Story (Part 2): The Power of Stories for Diffusing Innovations



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1. Introduction

In 1982, Dennis and Susan Malone began a literacy component of their work among the Kaugel people in Papua New Guinea. Because ample literature in the local language is important for newly literate people, the Malones spent considerable time and effort developing a series of graded reading books—authored, illustrated, and edited by members of the local language community. Ten years later, when they left the area, three active preschools taught Kaugel literacy to children prior to their beginning primary school in English. A couple of years later, Dennis and Susan were happy to hear that the Kaugel literacy program had expanded to thirteen schools across the valley. One reason for the growth was that the national government had set up a new department of Village Services to fund qualified local language preschool teachers.

Some time later, unfortunately, problems between government departments resulted in a severe cut in the funding for teachers. However, despite a reduction in their pay—including several months of no pay at all—Kaugel teachers continued to hold classes! In 1995, Dennis went back to the area to learn how Kaugel literacy had persisted despite all the obstacles. He met with the teachers of the Kaugel preschools and asked them why they continued to teach without pay. They answered, “Because the children kept coming to school and begging us to hold classes for them.” Dennis asked, “Why did the students keep coming?” One articulate teacher responded, as the others nodded their heads, “They came for the stories! They loved to hear and read the accounts of how their own and their grandparents’ generation lived and played and worked!” (Dennis Malone, personal communication, November 1, 2022). Stories were critical to the successful diffusion of this innovation—literacy in Kaugel language.

Most of us are involved at some level in efforts to bring about good changes in the world. Parents want their children to make responsible choices. Teachers cultivate and guide young minds. Development workers want to encourage healthier environments and habits in a community. Literacy practitioners work to teach people to read so that they are empowered. Social workers hope to foster problem-solving skills and the ability to maintain healthy relationships. Government employees strive to bring about equity and justice in society. Companies promote products they believe will benefit consumers. Friends share the latest tips or life hacks they discover. All of us, to some degree, are change agents, sharing ideas and encouraging others to try something new. The spreading and adoption of new ideas and technologies can be referred to as the diffusion of innovations. This article describes the role stories can play in the innovation-decision process, notes some challenges with using them, and identifies domains in which they are especially useful.

1.1 The process of diffusing innovations

Rogers (2003), the sociologist who originated the diffusion of innovations theory, described four elements in the process of diffusion: “(1) an *innovation* is (2) *communicated* through certain *channels* (3) *over time* (4) among the members of a *social system*” (11). Gladwell (2000), a journalist and author of popular works drawing on research in the social sciences, proposed that changes come through connectors (people who know everyone), mavens (collectors of knowledge who want to tell everyone what they know), and sales personnel (people with skills of persuasion).

Bringing about change in the world can be challenging. Change involves uncertainty and perceived risk (Rogers 2003).

One of the greatest pains to human nature is the pain of a new idea. It . . . makes you think that, after all, your favorite notions may be wrong, your firmest beliefs ill-founded. . . . Naturally, therefore, common men hate a new idea, and are disposed more or less to ill-treat the original man who brings it. (Bagehot 1873, 169)

“Getting a new idea adopted, even when it has obvious advantages, is difficult” (Rogers 2003, 1). It often takes many years from the time innovations are available to the time they are widely adopted. Individuals, organizations, and governments invest large amounts of capital and energy in trying to promote changes that benefit their communities.

1.2 Stories in the process of diffusing innovations

Stories are effective as tools in the diffusion process because they are believable, memorable, and entertaining (Neuhauser 1993). Stories contribute to meeting the United Nations Development Program’s Sustainable Development Goals (UNDP 2022), including clean water and sanitation, good health and wellbeing, and the elimination of poverty.

My use of “story” in this article refers to the form of communication—either written or oral—that uses narrative rather than propositions. I use the terms “story” and “narrative” interchangeably, referring to a coherent series of events that take place in particular times and settings. Stories are powerful tools for change because of the wide array of characteristics inherent in their form: being human, attracting notice, connecting people, resonating with reality, developing thinking and memory, engaging the senses, simplifying communication, and envisioning the future.¹ Narrative has been called “one of the most ubiquitous and powerful discourse forms in human communication” (Bruner 1990, 77).

1.2.1 Narrative transportation

Stories have the power to change attitudes and beliefs. Getting lost or absorbed in a story is a mental process referred to as narrative transportation, a mechanism that combines attention, imagery, and feelings. In this convergent process “all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative” (Green and Brock 2000, 701). The story’s recipient generates vivid images based on the action in the story, such that they feel they are experiencing the events themselves. Even when they know that characters and events in a

¹ See Walters 2023.

story are not real, transported readers² may experience strong emotions and motivations. People transported into a narrative world may show effects of the story on their real-world beliefs. The degree of narrative transportation seems to be affected both by the reader's individual disposition toward transportability and by the narrative itself (Dal Cin, Zanna, and Fong 2004, 186).

In narrative transportation, the story receiver detaches from parts of the world of origin. This can happen on a surface level physically, such as not noticing someone entering the room. On a psychological level, a person immersed in a story may be less aware of real-world facts that contradict assertions made in the story. Transportation reduces a story receiver's motivation for counter-arguing. Slater and Rounder (2002) contend that being transported in a narrative and counterarguing are fundamentally incompatible, that counterarguing requires disengaging from the narrative. Specific studies showed high correlation between measures of transportation and enjoyment, suggesting that "transportation may be a strong contributor to, but not identical to, enjoyment" (Green, Brock, and Kaufman 2004, 314).

"Just as a leaky boat does a poor job of transporting people across the water, poorly constructed narratives do not help readers enter the story world." (Green, Brock, and Kaufman 2004, 320). Rich story details also correlated with greater transportation and enjoyment. This may be because specific details allow people to form more vivid mental images or because details allow individuals to know more about story characters leading to closer identification with them (Green, Brock, and Kaufman 2004, 320).

Van Laer et al. (2019) found that the narrative transportation effect is greater when a story is received by individuals on their own—a common practice with digital media consumption. Research continues to explore whether a particular medium—for example, written text or film—is better for transportation. Some scholars propose that interactive media, such as video games (Gee 2007), may be especially transporting because they allow users "to easily leave their physical and psychological realities behind and become fully immersed as an active participant in the narrative of an alternate, 'virtual' reality" (Green, Brock, and Kaufman 2004, 323).

1.2.2 Narrative persuasion

Narrative is a powerful persuasive tool. Stories can effectively challenge strongly held attitudes that are resistant to change. Narratives can overcome resistance to persuasion by multiple means: reducing a reader's counterarguing of the message, and increasing identification with story characters (Dal Cin, Zanna, and Fong 2004).

One way that stories persuade is by reducing the listeners' counterarguing. Several factors make narrative persuasion more effective than rhetorical communications such as public service announcements. When information is perceived as having persuasive intent, audiences tend to counterargue the information (Dal Cin, Zanna, and Fong 2004). Narratives may be less vulnerable to selective exposure, that is, tuning out information that is incongruent with existing attitudes. The way narratives unfold—with mystery and unpredictable plots—hinders listeners from avoiding exposure to new messages. Second, narratives center on the lives of characters in a constructed world. It may be harder to counterargue characters' (fictional or real) lived experiences than

² Narrative, broadly defined, extends beyond verbal arts to include other modalities such as movies, pictures, and mime. In this article, terms such as story "teller" and "reader" or "listener" are not meant to be limited but may be construed to include producers and recipients of stories, regardless of the media in which the narrative is presented and consumed.

rhetorical arguments. Third, beliefs in a narrative are often implied, making them harder to refute than specific arguments. Finally, “the cognitive and emotional demands of absorption into a narrative leave readers with little ability or motivation to generate counterarguments. . . . We lose access to real-world facts and suspend disbelief” (Dal Cin, Zanna, and Fong 2004, 172).

A second element that contributes to the persuasive power of stories is character identification. “Attachment to characters may play a critical role in narrative-based belief change” (Green and Brock 2000, 702). Studies have shown a nontrivial association between transportation and positive evaluation of story characters. People reading, viewing, or listening to stories not only enter a narrative world, but they may also become highly involved with the people they find there. Within a story, a protagonist may serve as a source of information or beliefs. Moreover, positive associations with story characters modeling specific beliefs and behaviors can lead to changes in the audience’s assumptions and evaluations.

1.2.3 Entertainment-Education

Combining the power of narrative transportation and mass media led to Entertainment-Education, a communication strategy using engaging narrative to address social issues. Miguel Sabido, a Mexican writer-producer-director, pioneered the formulation of the intellectual basis for Entertainment-Education. He refined his ideas as he wrote and directed multiple TV soap operas. In 1975, Sabido designed *Ven Conmigo* (*Come with Me*) to reinforce the value of adult education and literacy. The first episodes tried a didactic approach to teaching literacy. When that did not work well, Sabido changed to a narrative approach that followed the lives of a dozen adults in one literacy class. The show climbed in popularity. During the year the show was broadcast, 839,943 adults enrolled in literacy classes in Mexico—nine times the number from the previous year, and double the number of the following year (Singhal and Rogers 2012).

In Tanzania from 1993 to 1999, a radio soap opera in Swahili, *Twende na Wakati* (*Let’s Go with the Times*) was broadcast twice a week and promoted economic development, gender equity, family planning, and HIV prevention intervention. Without a vaccine or cure, altering HIV-risky behaviors was the only effective response. A carefully conducted study measured the effects from the radio program, showing a reduction in the number of sexual partners and increased condom adoption. The radio program influenced these behaviors by strengthening self-perception of risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, self-efficacy with respect to preventing it, increasing interpersonal communication about the disease, and identification with the primary characters in the soap opera (Vaughan et al. 2000).

Effects from Entertainment-Education can be strong. Moreover, there can be unintended effects, such as when the sale of Singer sewing machines increased sharply in countries that broadcast *Simplemente María* (*Simply Mary*), a TV soap opera about a rural-urban migrant housemaid who learns to sew and eventually launches a fashion business. Also, failure to anticipate strong effects from Entertainment-Education can undermine hopes for adoption of innovations.

In one episode of *Ven Conmigo*, the literacy students visit the Mexican government’s Adult Education headquarters on Avenida Insurgentes in Mexico City to pick up their free literacy booklets and other study materials. The street address was shown in the episode. Previously, Televisa [the Mexican multimedia company producing the show] officials had queried the government’s adult literacy officials regarding their capacity to handle requests for these booklets from the *telenovela*’s viewers. “No problem,” said the officials,

who had tens of thousands of the booklets in a warehouse at their headquarters building.

On the day following the episode's broadcast, 250,000 newly enrolled adult learners converged on the warehouse to obtain their literacy booklets. The result was complete frustration. Supplies of free booklets were soon exhausted. Then an unprecedented traffic gridlock was created in downtown Mexico City, lasting until after midnight. (Singhal and Rogers 2012, 55)

1.3 The culture-specific nature of stories

People of every language and culture tell stories. We use stories to reflect on and mediate our lived experience. Boomershine (1988) wrote that "Experience has a narrative quality. The episodes of our lives take place one after another just like a story" (18). Stories clothe human experience and can be as varied and beautiful as the fashions worn and admired in different parts of the world. Each language and culture has its own artistic forms of storytelling.

What makes a story good will vary from culture to culture because each language has its own patterns and "grammars" for storytelling that convey culturally embedded meaning (Schrag 2013). To understand stories told by the Nuosu people of southwest China, for example, one needs to have a grasp of certain linguistic features such as the nuance of classifiers, how quotative pronouns are used, what speech act particles convey, and how narrator comment is marked (Walters 2021). These features are particular to the Nuosu language and culture. Even if other languages have similar features, they may function differently. Along with discourse and linguistic features, expressive features used in storytelling—such as vocal modifications and gestures—are specific to the culture. Knowledge of these features is needed to understand a local story form. Explaining how to analyze a culture's storytelling goes beyond the scope of this article. Schrag (2013) and Franklin (2010) offer helpful starting places.

Stories are interpreted through cultural value systems and expectations. For example, the main points people understand in the biblical account of Joseph, sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt, may vary.

Some Africans may point out that Joseph never forgot his family. Some Estonians and Lithuanians may agree, but add that he looked out for his nation. A Thai may claim that the client (Joseph) remained loyal to his patron, Potiphar. Other Thai may note the theme was suffering. Nepalese Hindus, on the other hand, may note that forgiveness superseded revenge. Other Hindus may believe that Joseph must have been a very wicked person in a former life to have all this evil explode upon him. (T. A. Steffen 2018, 145)

Stories can be difficult to translate reliably across cultures. Storytellers use culturally known structures and implied information that are readily understood by members of their cultural community but may be obscure to members of other cultures. Telling a story from another place or in an outside cultural style may have limited resonance or impact on a local language community and its members. A colleague running a multilingual education project for Dai kindergarten students in southwest China told education officials success stories from a similar project in another minority language group in a neighboring province. Often the response was, "What does that have to do with us? Our situation is different here" (H. Cobbey, personal communication, November 15, 2022). To be optimally effective, a story should be created in the local language and stem from the local culture.

It can be especially difficult to diffuse innovations across cultural lines. New ideas may be perceived as culturally inappropriate, irrelevant, or complex. Members of the local language community know best how to develop stories that can support innovations. If readers are to understand and interact deeply with a story, it must be told in a language and culture they're familiar with so that cultural emblems and practices depicted in the story make sense. When that's the case, listeners can find points of resonance and connect on multiple levels.

2. The role of stories in the innovation-decision process

Because of how interesting, fun, and memorable they are, stories can help spread new ideas. Village women in Morocco enthusiastically told and retold a story about dirty houseguests, who turn out to be flies, not people. The story did not teach all the medical details of how disease spreads; rather, it helped people recognize flies as a health risk and think about ways to solve the problem. The story contributed to a change from a resigned, fatalistic attitude—"Flies, what can you do? They are a part of life in the country and you can't do anything about them" (Phillips 2020, 157)—to a new mindset: "We cover food, water, and plates, oil, and the water jugs so that we and the children don't get sick. We chase out flies and close windows" (Phillips 2020, 158).

Evaluations and adoption of new ideas may evolve over long periods of time, cycles of effort, and trials. Moreover, people can at any stage choose to reject an innovation or discontinue its use. Stories alone do not generally fuel the whole innovation-decision process. While the Gamba story (See 2.1) laid groundwork for immunizations being accepted, more was needed to make the innovation successful. There needed to be expertise to develop the vaccines, trained personnel to administer them, a place to store them safely until they were needed, a system of record-keeping to track who had taken which doses, and so forth.

A single innovation may require multiple stories closely related to local ways of thinking and doing. Moreover, "the meaning and value of a story are always a matter of how it stands with or against other stories. There is no story that is not embedded in other stories" (Fisher 1985, 358). People's interpretation of a story and the action it leads to (or not) will also depend on comparisons and contrasts with prior experience and accepted stories.

Nevertheless, narrative's characteristics³ allow stories to strengthen the potential of innovations to spread and be adopted. Rogers (2003) describes the innovation-decision process with five stages:⁴

1. Knowledge: Someone or some group finds out about something new.
2. Persuasion: They form an opinion toward the innovation, either favorable or not.
3. Decision: They choose to either adopt or reject the innovation.
4. Implementation: They put the new idea into use.
5. Confirmation: They look for reinforcement of their choice to either accept or reject the innovation, and they may reverse their previous decision.

³ See Walters 2023.

⁴ Rogers notes that describing the innovation-decision process with these stages is a useful framework for a complex reality although individuals in the process may not recognize when one stage ends and another begins. Most diffusion scholars who have studied how innovations spread have arrived at a similar set of stages.

2.1 Stories in early stages of the innovation-decision process

Different kinds of stories contribute at different stages in the process (See Table 1).

Table 1: *Stories particularly useful at different stages of the innovation-decision process.*

Stage	Purpose of stories
Knowledge	Raising awareness of the existence of an innovation
	Presenting underlying notions that support the innovation
Persuasion	Telling experiences of near-peers who have adopted the innovation
	Allowing people to try out the innovation vicariously
	Offering alternative potential futures with the innovation
(Decision)	-
Implementation	Describing the parts of an innovation
	Explaining steps or details of a new process
Confirmation	Positioning the innovation in a local context
	Locating the innovation with relation to other parts of life
	Sharing stories of innovation adoption by influencers in the culture

2.1.1 Knowledge stage

The way good stories attract notice makes them useful, especially in the first stage, disseminating knowledge that an innovation exists. Stories can contribute to raising awareness of an innovation. Other stories can be used to carry knowledge about the principles underlying how an innovation works, such as the notion of germ theory from which immunizations, water purification, or latrines can be understood. The story of the village of Gamba, explaining how vaccinations work, is an example of a story fulfilling such a purpose.

A long time ago there was a village called Gamba in another place far away from us. It was not a big village. There were not many people living there and the people were very kind but also small and weak. Around Gamba there were six or seven other villages that were much stronger and bigger. These [people] would come into Gamba and steal from their [herds] and from their fields. The people of Gamba only wanted peace and for all families and children to live in security and without fear. The men tried to protect their village but the other seven villages were too strong for them and the people of Gamba suffered greatly. One day a young man came from this village (from one of the seven). He wanted to run away from there and the people of Gamba accepted him. After a while, a boy from this other village came to them. He wanted to marry a girl from Gamba. The good folks of Gamba accepted him as one of their own. And in this way, over a period of time, there was a boy from each of these seven villages that came to live in Gamba for

some reason. The people of Gamba always welcomed these strangers and happily accepted each of them to come and live with them. In time, these seven boys began to teach the people about how to fight against the thieves who came to steal from them and harm them. They showed them how they could protect themselves by building a wall and making Gamba stronger against attacks. So when the robbers came from one of those villages to steal from them they were not able to. After a while those other six villages left them alone because they saw that now Gamba was as strong or stronger than them. Forever after the people of Gamba no longer suffered from them and could live in peace. (Phillips 2020, 295–96)

Simple low-tech stories like this one were told to motivate and empower rural women to make appropriate health decisions. One long-term health care worker in Morocco who used this story said it was the most “engaging” part of the lesson on a topic for which she otherwise struggled to keep the learners’ attention. Before understanding about vaccines, the women received the shots because they were told to, but they did not understand or take initiative in the process. Through this story, the core piece in a lesson about immunizations, the women learned how vaccines work to boost their bodies’ protection, giving them a greater desire to keep the schedule and to make sure they received all the recommended vaccines.

2.1.2 Persuasion stage

Individuals’ and communities’ perceptions of an innovation are critical to whether or not they adopt it. Rogers (2003) proposes five attributes of innovations that affect their rate of adoption. Innovations perceived as having greater relative advantage, compatibility, simplicity, observability, and trialability are more likely to be adopted. Narrative can play a role in boosting these traits. Stories can illustrate potential advantages, show how an innovation fits into a known context, place complex ideas into a concrete setting, and demonstrate how an innovation works. In particular, narrative can give potential adopters a chance to vicariously try out an innovation. Narratives allow people to experiment with other possible selves and futures.

Narrative worlds have the unique benefit of providing simulations of alternative personalities, realities, and actions without any real cost to the individual. . . . A media viewer doesn’t have to take the risk of changing jobs, spouses, or locales to experience another kind of life, but rather can vicariously experience such alternative life choices through the lives of the characters who inhabit the worlds to which he or she is transported. (Green, Brock, and Kaufman 2004, 318)

This characteristic of narrative, inviting trial by identification, enhances the trialability of an innovation, strengthening its likelihood of adoption.

The way stories engage our emotions and involve our senses makes them especially helpful in the persuasion stage. Stories of near-peers who have adopted an innovation can play a part in helping someone form their own attitude toward something new. An NGO developing an adult literacy program for village women in Asia recorded short personal stories from the first group of women who entered the program. In these short narratives, the women each told how they could not read one character before the classes, why they had each chosen to try to learn, what they could read now, and how they felt about the process. Hearing the stories of individuals like themselves enabled other village women to imagine their own scenarios and form an opinion about whether they wanted to try to learn. Many did.

2.1.3 Decision stage

In the decision stage, an individual or a group decides either to adopt or to reject an innovation. The rejection can be a conscious decision not to adopt something new or a passive rejection, meaning that they do not really even consider using the innovation. Stories contribute to all four stages on either side of the decision.

2.2 Stories in later stages of the innovation-decision process

2.2.1 Implementation stage

Stories develop our thinking and aid memory, which makes them helpful during the implementation stage of an innovation. Stories that describe the steps in a new procedure or the parts of a new technology can help people figure out operational problems or learn a new process. For example, people have told various versions of the following short narrative, using simple visuals, to teach people a participatory process for conducting a force field analysis, identifying the forces which help or hinder them in reaching their goal (Hasselbring 2012).

One day a man wanted to take things from his village into town. He hitched his water buffalo to his cart and set off. On the way, he came across many large stones in the road. Some of the stones he removed from the road. He took his sledge hammer and broke others into gravel and used that to fill in gaping holes in the road. Then he came to a hill too steep for the buffalo to climb. He borrowed a second water buffalo and hitched it to his cart. The two water buffalo could pull the cart with more force and made it up the hill. Finally, the man reached town with his things.

The order in which the items appear in the story—man, town, cart, buffalo, rocks, hammer, hole, and hill—helps people understand and remember the steps to discuss in the process: their goal, assets, obstacles, and if any assets could be strengthened or obstacles turned into assets. Also, the concrete events in the story make the abstract concepts of the analysis more tangible and give points of resonance with real life.

Storytellers have used different versions of the story to best fit different communities. In some places, the water buffalo became a donkey. When teaching this force field analysis process in a large Asian city, the story was modified to be about a man carrying things on a motorcycle. He got a flat tire and was almost hit by a truck, but then the truck driver helped him take his motorcycle to a repairman and he finally arrived at his destination. So the story can be adapted for particular contexts.

2.2.2 Confirmation stage

Stories allow for complex reality, and they connect people, which makes them especially helpful during the confirmation stage. At this stage, people seek reinforcement of the decision they have already made. Stories that share examples of opinion leaders who have accepted the innovation or that position the innovation in a local context may lessen the dissonance raised by the adoption of something new. In the children's book *The Lemonade Club* (Polacco 2007), for example, a group of primary students learns about cancer and chemotherapy. The story opens with two best friends from school. Unexpectedly, one of them starts to lose weight and become tired all the time. Narrative features such as conflict, solution, motif, metaphor, symbolism, point of view, and repetition make the story compelling. The author's choice to set the story in a fifth-grade

classroom and her descriptions of leukemia and the effects of chemotherapy make a complicated illness and its treatment more comprehensible for young children.

3. Challenges of using stories for diffusing innovations

Many elements affect the spreading of a new idea. Characteristics of the innovation itself—relevance, complexity, compatibility with current values and beliefs—greatly impact whether someone will adopt an innovation. Stories are not the only factor, but they often aid in the diffusion of innovations. However, there are potential challenges to using stories as well.

Stories require interpretation. A story “expresses its meaning by a certain indirection” (Ryken 1984, 22). Stories do not pound the listener with what they are to think. Listeners of stories connect new knowledge from the stories with their lived experience to co-construct meaning (Rossiter 2002). Because stories allow this freedom, the storyteller cannot control the response of the audience.

Stories are generally longer than propositions. An equation or numeric sum can be seen at a glance. Stories allow for the complexity of reality and carry the reader along from one event to the next. So they may not be the briefest distillation of an innovation. Stories may require time in crafting, telling, and receiving. Responses to stories take time to form as listeners and readers ponder story characters, events, and settings along with what these might mean, and in what ways they are relevant.

Crafting a story takes preparation, work, and practice. Designing a well-told story and delivering it with all its details, mystery, and emphasis at the right points can be harder than memorizing or repeating a short list or formula. “The experience is rewarding and well worth the effort, but [it does not happen] by magic without stress or effort” (Spaulding 2011, 13).

Abstract dictums or policies, not connected to particular people, can be easily promulgated, but not all stories can be mass-marketed. Stories that stem from personal events and personalities are connected to an individual’s particular lived experience. A personal story that might be told meaningfully by the one who experienced it may be incongruous if told by someone else, limiting the success of diffusing an innovation.

As well as these challenges in using stories, it is possible for stories to cause harm. Some stories, real and fictional, are terrifying or deeply sad. As a powerful tool, stories can do much damage as well as much good. Stories have been told to deceive or manipulate. “People can learn evil things as easily as moral ones” (Gee 2007, 216). For example, in northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where former victims of oppression have sometimes become oppressors themselves, it may be unwise for a community to continue to tell vengeful tales (McKee 2010). The power of story to transmit ideas and catalyze change is not a good in itself, nor does it guarantee the achievement of positive outcomes. There is a kind of storytelling that lends itself to building peace and sustaining cultural diversity. However, “destructive storytelling lends itself to the opposite” (McKee 2009, 1).

Leaving out certain stories, characters, or topics can also be dangerous. Stories we fail to tell also form us. Stories have been used to devalue particular groups or people, enforcing a single narrative of those in power (Osler 2015). “The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. . . . The consequence of the single story is that it robs people of dignity” (Adichie 2009). Because stories are so powerful, we must take care in how we use them.

4. Domains where stories often aid the innovation-decision process

Stories are told and read in every domain of life. In this section, I highlight three common areas in cross-cultural work in which stories are particularly useful: literacy and education, Christian faith communities, and interpersonal friendships and mentoring.

4.1 Stories in literacy and education

Stories can be fruitfully used in education, a domain that seeks to bring about changes in knowledge, skills, or attitudes of learners. “The most effective way to reach learners with educational messages is in and through these narrative constructions. Learners connect new knowledge with lived experience and weave it into existing narratives of meaning” (Rossiter 2002, 2). Narrative is a powerful pedagogical tool (Rohse et al. 2013). Scholarly literature about education frequently mentions story-based techniques such as case studies, critical incidents, role playing, and simulations. Stories can also shore up educational work in cross-cultural settings such as community development training programs, instructing local communities in agriculture, human rights advocacy programs, ESL instruction, and literacy efforts. One environmental conservation organization leverages indigenous storytelling to preserve traditional wisdom, promote biocultural conservation and strengthen local communities in the face of environmental challenges (“Mother Jungle” 2019).

Storytelling is particularly prominent in the practice of literacy, language learning, and transformative education. Literacy programs depend on written stories as material for primers and graded readers. Many local communities have used a free software tool, Bloom, to write and share stories in their own languages and scripts (SIL International 2022). In language learning, stories give words and grammatical rules a natural context in which to live. Learning language from stories showcases common collocations, clarifies connotations words have, and allows students to discover what grammar patterns are not only acceptable, but natural. Practical ideas and a method of using stories in language learning lessons are described in Greg Thompson’s (2011) GPA approach. Autobiographical stories or life stories are transformative in enabling adult learners “to bring a sense of order to life, to highlight moments of decision, to bring closure to painful events, and to gain insight into their own development” (Rossiter 2002, 4).

4.2 Stories in Christian communities of faith

4.2.1 Christian Scriptures

The Bible is more than a collection of concepts; it can be seen as a sacred storybook, with a beginning that moves into a turbulent middle toward a culminating climax with a brand new creation. Story is the dominant literary genre in the Bible. Eugene Peterson (1998) wrote:

Story is the primary way in which the revelation of God is given to us. The Holy Spirit’s literary genre of choice is story. . . . From beginning to end, our Scriptures are primarily written in the form of story. The biblical story comprises other literary forms—sermons and genealogies, prayers and letters, poems and proverbs—but *story* carries them all in its capacious and organically intricate plot. Moses told stories; Jesus told stories; the four Gospel writers presented their good news in the form of stories. And the Holy Spirit weaves all this storytelling into the vast and holy literary architecture that reveals God to us as Father, Son,

and Holy Spirit in the way that he chooses to make himself known. Story. To get this revelation right, we enter the story. (3)

4.2.2 Interpreting and applying the Christian Scriptures

Because the authors of the Bible intended the message to touch whole people, not merely convey cognitive meaning, scholars propose narrative as a means of understanding and interpreting Scripture (Frei 1974; T. Steffen and Bjoraker 2020; M. Hill and Hill 2022). “Until an event becomes storied characters where relationships reign within events, theology tends to remain naked ideas having minimal emotional, imaginative impact” (T. A. Steffen 2022, 212). Stories, driven by characters, embody and demonstrate meaning rather than merely defining and explaining it. Moreover, what Steffen calls Oral Hermeneutics⁵—a communal experiential method to understand the narrative of Scripture by focusing on the conversations, actions, and interactions of characters found in the biblical text—opens the door for everyone to interpret the Bible, not just those trained in textual biblical study.

Bible stories show rather than tell, enact rather than explain, illuminate rather than spell out, demonstrate rather than define, embody rather than conceptualize, encounter rather than detail, present rather than assert, thereby leaving much mystery to the imagination, emotions, and conversation to the listening-examining audience. (T. A. Steffen 2022, 221)

In language communities where the Bible has been recently translated into the local language for the first time, the Bible itself is an innovation. Oral Bible storytelling has been effectively used to introduce people in a community to the Bible and its message (Koehler 2010; Stahl 2017). Steffen (2018; 1999; 2006) has written extensively about his work with the Ifugao in the Philippines, where people understood his attempts to explain the gospel only once he changed from teaching a sequence of propositions to presenting a series of stories from the Old and New Testaments.

Multiple versions of materials, methodologies, and trainings for telling Bible stories—particularly in local language communities—are presently in use: Oral Bible Storytelling (Seed Company), OneStory, Simply the Story, Story Together (International Mission Board), BibleTelling, Storyweavers, StoryRunners (Cru), and Craft2Tell. The details of these methods are beyond the scope of this article. However, several chapters in *Translating the Bible into Action* (M. Hill and Hill 2022) present basic, practical steps for getting started.

4.2.3 The spread of Christian teaching and faith

In some language communities where people have only recently adopted Christianity, corporate gathering and worship is an innovation. Stories can play a part in strengthening the church body. Taylor (2019) lists ways that narrative can be used to form a congregation so that they are established as a people by the story of God. The order of worship can reflect and reinforce the narrative of Christ’s life: calling, speaking, feeding, and sending. Sermons can be stories themselves or tell stories, linking them to theological truths or the bigger biblical story. Also, sharing personal stories and testimonies can powerfully bear witness to those outside the Church and strengthen those within.

⁵ Much of Steffen’s work emphasizes the oral aspect of storytelling over other modalities of narrative.

Two significant Bible-based initiatives that have spread to many language communities around the world use stories at their core: trauma healing and Scripture engagement (the work of helping people integrate their own language and culture with the teachings of the Bible). Both of these programs are built on a series of regular group interactions following a practically written lesson book. *Healing the Wounds of Trauma: How the Church Can Help*, adapted into more than 150 languages and used by over 130,000 people in healing groups (Trauma Healing Institute 2020), starts each lesson with a story that depicts the problem the lesson addresses: “In the country of Bingola, there is a pastor named Mark. When Mark was three years old, his father died and he went to live with his uncle . . .” (H. S. Hill et al. 2016, 12). Likewise for Scripture engagement: every chapter in the book *Translating the Bible into Action* (M. Hill and Hill 2022) begins with a story about Pastor Simon and his imaginary adventures in the land of “Sanatu.”

In these and many other ways, stories have been part of how the Christian faith has spread across cultural boundaries. Stories contribute to how Christian faith, teachings, and practices are communicated, understood, and received by local communities.

4.3 Stories in advice, mentoring, and friendship

In daily life, people often ask others for advice, feedback, or encouragement. Knowing the power of stories for communicating change can help someone make the most of opportunities to advise or guide others.

4.3.1 Stories we tell

Questions about finances, parenting, major life issues, and how to manage time, stress, or conflict are all opportunities for speaking with other people in their specific situations. There are times when it is possible to pull up stories on the spot in response to a desired change or someone’s pressing questions. It is also useful to think ahead of time about how to incorporate stories, choosing and carefully crafting a story suitable to a need that is likely to surface. Thinking through our experiences and crafting them into shareable stories, whether written or oral, can prepare us for speaking into these spaces with color and impact.

At times, people may seek the expertise of cross-cultural workers to provide advice on addressing felt needs in the community. In such cases, it is important that local people who know local associations and structures are involved in the process of introducing innovations and in the creation of stories. As mentioned in section 1.3, different language and culture communities tell stories using different features, and meanings are strongly tied to their understandings and expectations (Schrag 2013). Stories should be crafted in the genre best suited to convey the intended meaning, using the features specific to that linguistic and cultural setting.

4.3.2 Stories we hear

Listening to the stories of other people and other communities gives us insight into where they come from, what they value, and how they make meaning of the world around them. Some of these insights would be missed through other means, such as observation and direct questioning. Asking people to tell us their stories is a way of valuing them. As well as deepening our understanding of their world, it affirms their concerns. Telling a story is a creative act that is often meaningful to the teller.

In somewhat more formal roles, such as faculty advising and mentoring students, or pastoral counselors advising congregants, intentionally eliciting stories from those who request guidance can be a fruitful way of helping bring about good change. This story model of counseling begins with the idea of giving autonomy to the person seeking help. In the role of author, a person has the prerogative to change the story as it unfolds, limiting what a counselor controls. Telling a story aloud or in writing often helps the teller gain insight, recognize confusions, and clarify their thinking—all steps toward resolving the issues they want help with (Katz 2011). Storytelling is also a significant processing tool for those healing from trauma (Mollica 2009; Thompson 2010).

5. Conclusion

Stories can contribute to the innovation-decision process in multiple ways. Different kinds of stories are useful at different stages of the process. Stories that raise awareness about the existence of an innovation, present knowledge about notions that underlie an innovation, tell positive experiences of peers who have adopted an innovation, allow people to try out an innovation vicariously, or demonstrate attractive potential futures are helpful during early stages in the process. Stories that describe the parts of an innovation, display details about a new technology, position the innovation in the local context, demonstrate how it relates to existing structures, or show opinion leaders using the innovation support later stages.

Stories can be a powerful tool in the daunting process of communicating new ideas in ways that make sense and show relevance to potential beneficiaries. Moreover, stories can alter attitudes and beliefs. Narratives can overcome resistance to change by reducing counterarguing and increasing identification with story characters. Along with telling stories, eliciting stories from others can produce growth, prompt new choices, and spark change.

We must take care in crafting or choosing stories judiciously and using them appropriately, particularly when crossing cultural borders. Different cultural communities tell stories about different things, for different purposes, using different features. Readers' interpretations of the meanings of stories will be strongly tied to their understandings and expectations. When communicating across cultures, it is important that local people who know these associations and structures be involved in the process.

The power of stories can be leveraged as people work toward a better world. Carefully thinking about the nature of stories, anticipating occasions for their use, and learning their local artforms enhance the potential for stories to support the spread of innovations that contribute to more well-being, wholeness, and restoration.

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