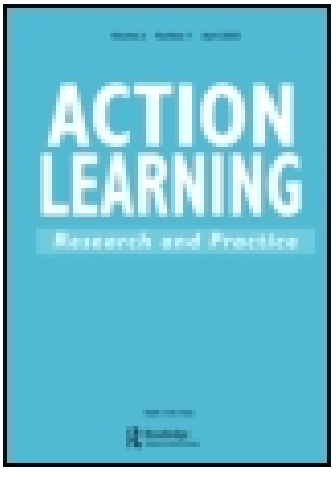
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Beyond you and me: stories for collective action and learning? Perspectives from an action research project

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Beyond you and me: stories for collective action and learning? Perspectives from an action research project

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This paper explores the combination of storytelling and reflective action research as a means to effect change and learning within and across communities and organizations. Taking the complex challenge of 'pro-environmental behaviour change' as an example, the paper reflects on the experiences of a pilot project run for the UK government that took place over two years with five community groups in rural England. The research question centred on how the stories of 'older' (aged 50+) community advocates might be amplified and inspire wider change via a systemic action research approach. This paper describes the project and shares insights into how behaviour change might occur in this action-based learning context challenging more Newtonian conceptualizations of change. Some of the methodological and practice challenges and conundrums that arose are discussed including authenticity, ownership and ethical issues of voice and ownership. Parallels and distinctions between story-based action research and action learning are identified and the role of narrative in inducing action is considered. The paper concludes by reflecting on future directions and the overall potential there is for 'narrative action learning' to address those wicked systemic problems that transcend organizational boundaries and that are faced by real people in our communities and society as a whole.

Keywords: digital storytelling; action research; learning history; behaviour change; narrative

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Introduction – setting the scene

Growing up in rural Ireland in the 1970s accultured me to a life lived within and surrounded by stories. Stories did not just happen at bedtime, but were woven through the fabric of everyday life. 'What's the story?', was a common way of greeting, and 'Wait 'ntil I tell ya . . . ' a conversation starter that bated your breath. And with all this came a finer tuning about what a story was, what it

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was not and how to behave around it. You did not sit there pernickety and petulant if the facts did not quite stack up as an aunt or uncle told a hilarious account of a mishap at the local doctors. Yet to be found 'telling stories' at school was to have a blot on your copybook. Stories were for entertainment, for sharing and making sense of life in a bearable way. They were *not* for accounting for yourself when the absolute truth was needed. This grounding in story as a way of learning about the social world is one I am sure many people will recognize. And one that is now well justified by theories of knowledge, psychology and organizational studies. And yet when it comes to researching our individual, organizational and community lives, stories have sometimes sat uneasily, needing to be justified and placed alongside the more scientific and conceptual way of knowing that pervades the make-up of a 'grown-up' world. In this article I want to consider that uneasy relationship. I will describe an action research project where stories were centrally figured as potential catalysts of wider-scale pro-environmental change. Before introducing that project and describing some of the tensions that arose there, I want to situate story a little more and distinguish its role in conventional research, action research and action learning settings. This article is principally about stories and their potential for change at individual and also collective levels. However note that it is also seeking connection between two related but slightly different disciplines. The action research project in question will be considered in terms of some key action learning concepts in the hope of opening up some interesting links to be explored.

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The narrative turn

There has been a turn to narrative in social research in the past 15 years or so. Organizational learning experts from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) were not alone in noting in the late 1990s that the formal communications of our organizations are devoid of stories. They are 'mythically deprived' (Roth and Kleiner 1998). Yet this may have shifted. Stories are 'no longer exotic guests in the discourse of organizations' (Gabriel, Geiger, and Letiche 2011, 365). They are framed as an essential facet of organizational life, 'tropes of organizational communication' (365). There is increasing recognition that narrative methods can get into the crevasses of experience in ways that other approaches do not. Bruner proposed in the 1960s that humans have two distinct modes of thought (Bruner 1986). One – the narrative mode – dives into the vivid, contextualized detail, the highs and lows of human experience in a manner familiar to a child as young as five. The other – the logico-scientific mode – established later in our teen and adult lives is an abstract and conceptual way of thinking that is rooted in the scientific method. Whereas narrative thinking has folded into it the features of complex systems such as non-linearity, unpredictability and emergence, logico-scientific thinking has underlying it a linear, causal view of the world (Tsoukas and Hatch 2001).

Bruner argues that at any one time an individual will be in one mode or the other (Bruner 1986). The 'narrative turn' has increasingly been well justified across disciplines. Geertz in anthropology, Czarniawska in organizational studies, Polkinghorne in the human sciences, Coles in psychology to name but a few are some of researchers who have built a case. Arguing for narrative inquiry as an approach, Clandinin and Connelly put it simply thus: 'We might say that if we understand the world narratively, as we do then it makes sense to study it narratively' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 17).

Narrative approaches in action learning and research

Note the emphasis thus far is on narrative as an instrument of research, leading to expanded understanding. Narrative techniques help extend knowledge to include that which is tacit and experiential. By tacit we mean those valuable and highly subjective insights that guide us and that are difficult to share as we carry them in our heads (Nonaka 2007). In action learning and action research the narrative is situated differently. In action learning, where 'there can be no learning without action' and 'no action without learning' (Revans 2011, 85) stories are linked more closely to practices in the set. The act of dialoguing and reconstituting stories in learning sets can transform an individual's sense of agency in the world, and by extension open the door for shifts in organizational narratives (Chivers and Yates 2010). Narratives in this case link to action as well as understanding.

As with action learning, the field of action research also foregrounds action. Kurt Lewin, one father of the field, said famously 'If you want truly to understand something, try to change it'. This echoes Revans' epigram above and also highlights a slight difference in emphasis whereby action research focuses on understanding while action learning is centred around learning. In action research narrative sits comfortably with notions of the extended epistemology, where the well of experiential knowing has primacy and must be expressed through forms of presentational knowing that include among them storytelling, theatre and other forms of art (Reason and Bradbury 2008; Seeley 2011). But action research also judges its quality by actionability (Bradbury 2007). In contrasting action research to other constructivist approaches, Reason and Torbert draw attention to the importance, ultimately, of the action element:

> These are times when the question is how to act, not (or not only) in a universalizable fashion, but rather (or also) in a timely, idiosyncratic, ecologically sensitive fashion that catalyzes self or other transformation when appropriate. And when is this not the question? (Reason and Torbert 2001, 5)

Indeed. When can this not be the question? The consideration of transformation of 'others' as well as 'self' in the quote above is notable. In this article the role of narrative is being explored not (only) as an expression of self but also as a

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potentially catalytic device for wider change. The research I will outline was built on the notion that if human stories of such timely actions, projects or initiatives can be told then these might not only serve the storyteller's learning, but also they might inspire change and agency in those that engage with such stories. This potential had been shown – via action research – in the context of issues of climate change and the adoption of low carbon technologies. Over a period of three years, it was shown how practitioners from the UK local government and other sectors were inspired to take action when they collectively engaged with storied 'histories' of successful low carbon projects elsewhere (Gearty 2008, 2009; Reason et al. 2009).

Storytelling and agency

The link between narrative and agency is an important one and yet hitherto has not been widely articulated. Bruner recognized that stories must convey intention and so have within them always an element of agency. Bruner reminds us that even inanimate objects (like Thomas the tank engine[1]) can become characters if they take on intention and this leads then to choices of action (Bruner 1991). Yet narrative in the academic literature is more readily constructed as a research instrument or mode of expression. Ganz sets out a strong argument for an agentic view of storytelling and, taking the mobilization of Mexican agricultural workers as one example, suggests that a sense of narrative is central not only in terms of individual agency but in the building of social movements for change (Ganz 2001). Ganz highlights that it is through storytelling that 'we learn to exercise agency to deal with new challenges, mindful of the past, yet conscious of alternative futures' (2). Chivers and Yates also draw on Ganz's ideas and show in the context of their work in the health service how working with narrative in an action learning setting naturally gives rise to questions about the relationship between individual and collective agency (Chivers and Yates 2010).

The possibility for stories to stimulate collective and individual action and advocacy on important issues was at the heart of the action research project described in this paper that I will now introduce.

Introducing the DEFRA project: context

This two-year project was commissioned in 2009 by the behaviour change unit at the UK's government Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). The research set out to explore how storytelling, specifically the emerging medium of 'digital storytelling', might enable people in the 50+ age group to advocate for pro-environmental behaviour in a fresh and compelling way. DEFRA's Sustainable Behaviours Unit had, through a decades' long research, built understanding of attitudes to pro-environmental behaviour in the UK (DEFRA 2008; Collier et al. 2010; DEFRA 2011). Through a programme

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of action-based research (ABR) they wished to trial a range of different approaches to bringing about pro-environmental behaviour change that built on their research base.

DEFRA's recent research had identified seven segments of the population whose attitudes range from those who were very willing and able to make changes (called positive greens) to those who had little interest or ability to do anything at all (segments such as 'cautious participants') (DEFRA 2008). One such segment, the 'waste-not-want-not' segment had within it a large proportion of older people – the post-war generation who naturally enacted conserving, pro-environmental behaviours though many did not see it as such. Their advocating voice and those of others in the admittedly non-homogenous 50+ age group were, DEFRA believed, muted in the entire debate. They had the hypothesis that this older age group represented an untapped source of potential pro-environmental advocates who might influence other people towards increased environmental action and wanted to test this with ABR.

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Digital storytelling – learning history

This raised interesting possibilities for narrative and the role stories might play. Responding with the methodological hypothesis that a range of action research approaches centred on storytelling could be an interesting approach to support such advocacy and change led to an action research programme being set up by a small team at the University of Bath in partnership with the University of Glamorgan's Storyworks team who specialized in digital storytelling. Digital storytelling was chosen as the story form. This shorter, film-based form combines taped voiceover with still images. The result is akin to a thoughtful, evocative slide show with the storyteller's voice alongside. It contrasts with longer written forms of story such as learning history (Roth and Kleiner 1998; Roth and Bradbury 2008) and yet the spirit of the digital story is entirely in tune with the idea of 'learning history in an open system' where the aim is for stories to travel around a wider system with the not unambitious aims of inspiring systemic change that responds to the issues of our times (Gearty, Bradbury-Huang, and Reason 2015).

An action research approach

Figure 1 shows how the research was positioned ultimately to DEFRA and is extracted from the final report (Gearty et al. 2013). Typical of an action research programme, twin aims were sought. Two key lines of inquiry were pursued – in order to lead not only to research evidence but also to learning outcomes for participants and communities in the field. While Inquiry 1 centred methodologically on the potential of digital storytelling to develop advocacy in the over 50+ age group, Inquiry 2 explored how such stories might catalyse change by looking directly at outcomes as they happened. The figure illustrates how

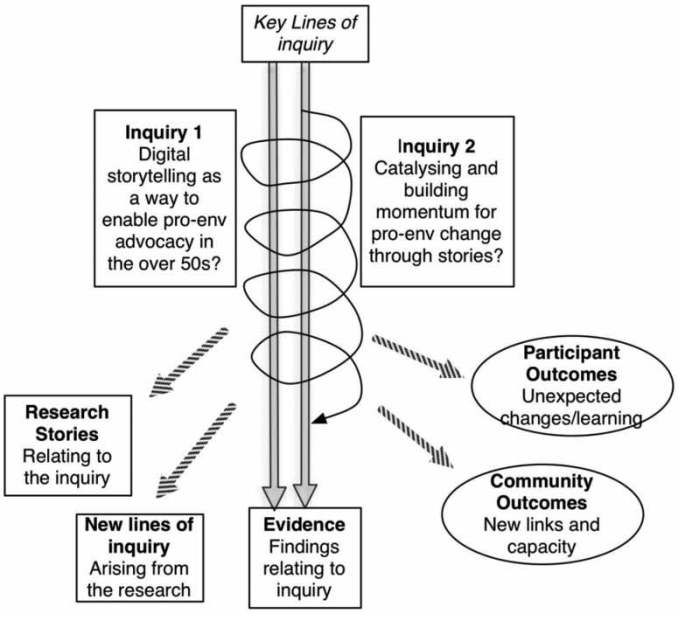


Figure 1. Formulating an inquiry *and* evidence-based research.

cycles of inquiry developed and deepened over time and it highlights some of the tensions arising from these multi-layered and, at times, conflicting aims that we will return to later in the article.

The project aims and context of this action research project might not as yet seem to link well to action learning. The idea of drawing out general findings sits more comfortably with standard qualitative research approaches. However, it is the parallel attention to change and learning *in the field* where the worlds start to meet. Action research projects are typically conceived of as working at the first- (individual), second- (face-to-face group) and third-person (wider system) level whereby sustained reflective practice leads to new questions and lines of inquiry emerging that can be explored through experimental action (Marshall 1999; Reason and Torbert 2001; Reason and Bradbury 2008). This project worked at all three levels and, as we shall see, as we move into the individual (first-person) and group (second-person) domains, the practices, ideas and intentions of what we were doing start to link up closely with action learning.

Research methodology

At the heart of this project lay eight, simple 3-minute stories that were recorded on film and that were personally narrated by storytellers drawn from a rural community in Somerset. A local environment group worked in partnership to recruit 8 volunteers who were over 50 and as much as possible representing

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a variety of age, gender and lifestyle. The stories they produced depicted a broad range of nine key 'sustainable' behaviours that had been identified in DEFRA's Sustainable Lifestyles Framework (DEFRA 2011) and these ranged from the large-scale (solar panels on a local school) to the everyday (shopping locally). With kind permission of our storytellers, their stories can be viewed on the Internet by following this link: http://www.vimeo.com/album/1469229

The question being explored was whether these stories might travel. Might they play a role in inspiring others to act? Five audiences were convened to test this and they participated in two workshops – one where they viewed and discussed the stories and the other two to three months later where we reviewed together any actions that had resulted. Audiences were selected on the basis of age/life-stage (one teenage group, one young mothers group and one 65+ age group), location (two audiences were in the originating community, three were in external Wiltshire communities) and opportunity – where partners or contacts were willing to help us recruit an audience.

The approach in session was one of inquiry where we worked overtly with the reality of people's experiences and allowing therefore for a fuller exploration of the actual outcomes or any actions taken. The social nature of the storytelling space was crucial. Our workshops were spaces that were designed to allow social learning to occur. Drawing on Kemmis's idea of 'communicative space' we set out to create trusting conversational space in the workshops, where participants felt able and willing to express their thoughts and feelings honestly (Kemmis 2001). Here the links between action research and action learning start to appear. The workshop spaces were akin to the 'relatively safe spaces' advocated by Pedler and others from the AL community (Pedler 2011). From their experiences working with public sector leaders, Fox, Rigg, and Willis (2003) concluded that without an emphasis on first-person space within the action learning set, wider issues might continue to be obscured (140) by hidden individual issues. Similar links are made in action research whereby the potential for a group to collectively inquire – what Torbert calls second-person inquiry (Torbert 2001) – relies on an environment where individual first-person differences and assumptions can be expressed safely. By collectively engaging with the digital stories, and by having space to reflect on any barriers to action they faced, a group could start to question its own hidden assumptions and so develop strategies, changes and new lines of inquiry together.

This then was the set-up and background of project one that was rich and nuanced in what it was attempting to do. And as such, it was replete with various tensions as the research team walked a line between doing something quite instrumental and ambitious on the one hand and inquiring and learningful on the other. In 2012 Vince talked of the contradictions of impact that can arise in action learning and noted that 'power is an over-arching organizational force arising from the interplay between structure and agency' (Vince 2012, 211).

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Such contradictions were felt keenly in this project and at times I recall asking ourselves: 'what are we trying to achieve or prove?' In the remainder of this paper I will share some experiences from the research and reflect on a number of themes, questions or dilemmas that arise and make sense of them.

Research stories

In the spirit of storytelling that underpins this work, I now introduce three vignettes, short tales from the field of the research to illuminate the discussion. The term 'tales from the field' follows the ethnographer Van Maanen's description of realist, narrative approaches to presenting the experience of research (Van Maanen 1998). As such these are authored, reflective and subjective vignettes. Informed by field notes and research material they have some integrity but do not purport to present you a 'true' or comprehensive account of events. Equally my choices are not rigorous. I have chosen to zoom in on three particular moments – several other moments might have been equally interesting, and each might have been storied differently. Provisional though these vignettes are then, the thought is that they are nevertheless indicative of a tone, an essence in the project that is worth dwelling on – and an invitation to you (reader) to reflect and inquire with me on what they might be saying.

Vignette 1: creating the story

It is a warm June day in 2010 and we are sitting in a small and hot porta-cabin on the outskirts of a Somerset village working with our volunteer storytellers on the stories they might tell. P, one of the storytellers, is a community-minded volunteer in her early 70s and has come into the process with lots to say. She loves feeding the wildlife in her garden and this is leading her often to reminisce about her childhood and her particularly fond thoughts about her father and the walks they would go on together. This is emotional territory for her. One of the researchers is sitting with P chatting with her, while on a storyboard adjacent, Lisa is trying to capture the themes of her story. Lisa and I are aware the story needs to fit the sustainable behaviours framework – 'ok so we've the wildlife theme, the local shopping theme and the volunteering theme' says Lisa as we stand back from and survey the board 'Right, so which direction will we take it?', I reply. I feel some discomfort and think Lisa does too. 'Whose story is this?' I wonder. We both are deeply committed to storytelling as a personal process where the individual gets a chance to voice what matters to them. P meanwhile is not aware of this unspoken mood behind her and chats merrily on – she is enjoying the process. Months later, after the films are produced, we return to the village hall to show them to the storytellers. I feel some trepidation. There has been so much negotiation with DEFRA and self-questioning among ourselves as a research team. P.'s film does not mention her father but it does show her in action in the community – volunteering and shopping locally.

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The films are shown as storytellers laugh, cringe a little ('I can't believe I sound like that – listen to my accent!') and react and reassure each other. P and all the others are delighted with the result. Seeing the suite of eight stories together they note 'we feel part of something'. One storyteller says 'my actions make more sense when I see them alongside the others'.

Reflection

Here I was bringing my reflexive, ethical sensibility to a situation that was arising in the field. That sensibility said that voice matters. And, I was also adopting a critical theorist's position of being acutely aware of the power circulating in that moment. For a moment it seemed like the vast edifice of government research was bearing down on P.'s precious and unique lived experience and this was something I felt impelled to protect. Yet reflecting now, it seems my sensibilities were, to an extent, unfounded. At the storytellers' viewing session I wondered afterwards 'what had all my worry and hand-wringing been about?' I have two reflections now on this. First, I was fixating on the notion of 'story ownership' and this was impeding my judgement. Later I read Connelly and Clandinin's advice that though 'concerns [within narrative inquiry] are often framed in terms of ownership', reframing these into 'concerns of relational responsibility is a more useful way to think about the matter' (Connelly and Clandinin 1999, 177). Thus, while adopting a critical action learning position (Vince 2008), for example, was helpful in making me alert to the issues of power at play, considering these in terms of P.'s relationship with the research team and taking care of her enrolment in that research was a more generative stance to adopt. This plays into a second reflection which is that 'instrumentalism', what hitherto I have wholeheartedly eschewed, may be acceptable if the storyteller is aware of and bought into it. Any number of stories could have been told. Loosening away from the idea that there was but one story to be told by P opened up the possibility that she too could participate in the overall aims of the project – and if these were instrumental – then so be it. All storytellers talked about how the instrumental nature of the research – the fact that their stories were serving a wider purpose – led to them feeling empowered and gave them the confidence to speak up more for the issues they had recorded on film.

Vignette 2: reflective questioning – in the storytelling space

It is November 2010, a freezing cold evening with the threat of snow, and we are upstairs in an old restored barn on the outskirts of a Wilthsire town. Twenty or so members of a local environmental group are clustered around five tables. The lights are dimmed and they are viewing the digital story films. The mood is quiet and attentive. I love this part of the workshops; the quality of the stillness and attention. The first story finishes – a brief pause while participants

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diligently note their top of mind reactions in booklets we have provided. And then, in silence we move on to the next 3-minute film. I look around the room. Dotted around the walls are posters about environmental behaviours and attitudes that they have earlier populated with much energy and discussion. Red dots on an earth poster show that all but two here present believe there is an urgent need to act in response to the climate crisis. And the action posters recording what people already do for the environment are replete with a wide range of behaviours. One couple do not even run a fridge, several have solar panels, water and energy conservation is second nature to most of those present. 'Maybe this is the wrong audience. What on earth can they get from these simple story films?', I think, 'they're way ahead of what we're showing here'. And yet they seem very engaged watching the stories on film. The lights come on and we move to discussion. The group has responded appreciatively to the films and – as to be expected – pick up on nuances and contradictions in them too. 'So the country market lady buys her jam locally but then flies it to her son in Malaysia!' The discussion moves on to the digital story that featured 50-year-old Andy. The main theme of his story is how he fixes things and does not like to buy new consumer goods – however later he mentions how much he likes to travel. Earlier we had invited the group to reflect and be as open as they can in the discussion. In the midst of the discussion, F., who has shared these thoughts in his smaller group, stands up, and dramatically pushes the table away saying humorously: 'I am having an "AA moment"! Being part of a group like this, we need to set an example . . . and yet . . . . I have to admit it here and now, I like to fly'. Several others respond reassuringly and then open up to say they feel similar dilemmas. In the closing round of the night a participant says that, though they meet often for talks or campaigns, they rarely have the chance to just sit and talk together and the stories have helped them to do that.

Reflection – 'inquiring storytelling spaces'

The primary purpose of the workshop described above was to gauge how well stories from one community might inspire and motivate pro-environmental action in another. Yet I share it here to highlight the rather more subtle finding arising in the research, which was that stories and the reflective learning environments around them are inextricably linked and need to be considered together when seeking change from stories. People often talk of storytelling as an end in itself. Yet without the reflective environment there would have been little to take from the stories themselves. This active environmental group essentially had nothing to learn from the 'content' of the stories. Nevertheless the act of witnessing the stories together and inquiring into the implications of them for their environmental choices and actions both individually seemed to boost them as a group. The context of the 'inquiring storytelling space' created around the stories is therefore not accidental but important.

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In action research terms it relates to the theoretical concept mentioned earlier that Kemmis (2001) calls 'communicative space'. He defines this as the space between so-called 'systems' and 'lifeworlds'. Systems are those features of modern society concerned with 'material reproduction, where commitments to efficiency, predictability, and control are paramount'. 'Lifeworlds', according to Habermas are 'given shape through the media of value commitments and influence, are qualitative, and enacted and reaffirmed in communication' (quoted in Gayá Wicks and Reason 2009, 243). In the 'communicative space' there is potential for transformative change. And in this example we see how the group was in a space to voice what previously had not been discussable, and to challenge their own norms.

Revans' formula for how learning is generated is also in evidence in the vignette. He defines L (learning) = P (programmed knowledge) + Q (questioning insight) where P refers to existing knowledge and Q is that insight gained when action is taken and is reflected upon in a questioning way. No doubt that participant who was willing to stand up and talk freely about his dilemmas is in the territory of Q in this vignette. It may be 'an act of questioning insight' (Coghlan 2008) – yet note how the insight arising is not from reflecting on one's *own* actions but on the actions of *others*. And this has been effortlessly mediated by stories. Thus 'inquiry storytelling spaces' are, I would contend, the site of learning where, through narrative, the actions of others fuel a richer, and perhaps safer, learning.

Acknowledging the primacy of 'action' in learning, Vince (2012) warns us nonetheless that 'both emotional and political dynamics shape' the ability to take action (212). Here stories depicted well-intentioned, human and therefore complex and flawed attempts to act. The knowledge in play is less explicitly programmatic – it remains contained in stories. Might we label these S?

The tacit nature of knowledge in the stories was for some audiences hard to access. By way of contrast with the environmental group featured in this vignette, our audience of time-pressured, young mothers sought 'information' and 'knowledge' from the stories they witnessed. 'We are open to adopting more pro-environmental behaviour' was their message 'we just don't have time or headspace to figure out what to do'. The group questioning (Q) they engaged in was in terms of sharing practical ideas and encouraging each other to act. They said they found the stories were good at inspiring them to do things but they still lacked adequate information or, at times, imagination ('headspace') to act. This group seemed to look more to the S part of the equation for their learning and, to an extent, found it lacking.

I will return to the equation in the conclusions. For now it is enough to say that different audiences drew learning in quite different ways. Repeatedly in the research we found that it was by a process of identification (or in some cases disidentification) with the stories/storytellers that participants could consider, from a distance that felt safe to them, the complexities of their own life and actions (Gearty et al. 2013). This feels akin to the questioning insight (Q) of

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Revans' formula – though the boundary between individual and collective learning feels a lot more blurred. With narrative, the site of learning is necessarily social – the learning flows through connection between stories – between 'I' and 'we' – in much the same way as a story resides between its teller and its audience.

Vignette 3: stories for change – the big 'so what'?

It is now March 2011 – almost a full year since our last community workshop with participants. The last year has been spent drafting and re-drafting the report back to DEFRA. The research team has dwindled; so now just two of us sit tentatively at my dining room table with V., the research agent who we have just met. She is enthusiastic about the report and, gratifyingly, has read it in great detail – she pulls a neat booklet version of it from her bag and it is covered in careful highlights of different colours. 'One reviewer loved it', she says, 'they say all research should be like this'. 'The other, well, it's more problematic – they really want a chain of evidence – how can you show the change that occurred?' 'Did these stories bring about change or did they not?' I no longer bristle with this question. I repeat what has become a mantra through this project – that action research is as much about learning in the field as extracting 'findings' from it – but even as I say this I know it is not enough. The question is a valid one. Did anything happen?! Well yes and no. How can I adopt a line here that is neither entrenched nor compliant for the sake of it? I feel caught between the paradigms. 'The thing is', I reply,

> we went into this inquiring into how stories might lead to change and how they might help the 50+ age group build advocacy – and we pursued that – but while we're doing that – well that leads to effects and lots of things happening in the field – in communities, in individuals – we can't possibly claim that – but it is relevant.

I sketch out on a piece of paper the bones of our inquiry, our cycles of workshops and then the expected outcomes alongside everything else. This later became Figure 1 in this article. 'That's it', says V. 'we can live with this . . . . ' . . . and then she says . . . . 'now show me your chain of evidence'.

Stories for change – the big 'so what?'

Whereas the first two vignettes look at how stories impacted upon participants and communities in the field, this last vignette is intended to draw attention to the wider, and often political, questions of how change actually occurs and what we take as 'evidence of that' in a project such as this. Here we were straddling at least two different paradigms each with different epistemological and ontological views. DEFRA, like other UK governmental departments, is allied strongly

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to the notion of evidence-based decision-making. Knowledge is rooted in evidence that has been gathered systematically over a decade or so of scientific and qualitative research. Change in this world is conceived of as being in some way controllable and observable. This is close to the Lewinian view that thorny problems can be addressed in a logical, linear, stepwise fashion. And within this world it was entirely reasonable to ask our research team to quantify the change our storytelling workshops had made.

Our action research approach on the other hand was building on a different view of both the knowledge we wanted to create and the change it sought to stimulate. The action research perspective meant giving importance to the practical knowledge generated in the field, being alert to new questions and unexpected effects arising there and being wary of over-stating the evidence. Our model of change was more 'Confucian, cyclical, processional and without an end state', to borrow these terms from Weick and Quinn's comprehensive summary of the different ways change is conceived of in organizational life (Weick and Quinn 1999). Underpinning the research was the view that stories play into concepts of 'visionary' rather than 'logical' change (Gearty 2008). Not only that, but the idea being developed here was the notion that stories can work to 'inspire' rather than to 'effect' change and that the best way to do this is to 'amplify and celebrate' them (Gearty 2009; Gearty, Bradbury-Huang, and Reason 2015). This follows the work of Gustavsen and others who suggest that by creating multiple sites of conversation across a system, change can be effected (Gustavsen 1992; Reason 2003; Gustavsen, Hansson, and Qvale 2008).

This is a notion of macro-level change that lies, at best, far away from that which underlies much of instrumental policy-making. At worst it cannot co-exist with it. The vignette highlights one moment of tension arising from such clashes – one that was constructive and generative. As action researchers we adopted an inquiring approach. We embraced the call for evidence by systematically gathering research data relating to changes participants experienced. Simultaneously we explored and made visible the deeper questions of what constitutes change and impact that were arising.

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Findings, conclusions and implications

Findings – did storytelling lead to change?

To recap now, the aims of the research were to explore to what degree digital storytelling might be a vehicle to accelerate and cascade pro-environmental change within and across communities and age groups. As I have outlined, these two lines of inquiry were explored in an embedded and participative approach. Over the course of two years the research team worked with over 90 participants whose ages ranged from 12 to 90 and from across four rural communities around Somerset and Wiltshire who told and listened to stories

and who explored their own and collective environmental behaviours in relation to them.

So what happened? There was no doubt that some actions and learnings were stimulated by the intervention. When participants were asked to report back in the second workshop on what they had done in the intervening period, several could identify actions that related directly to their participation at the first workshop. For example, two young teenagers reported badgering their parents to conserve water and save petrol and so on. In another audience, a young mother reported how she was inspired by the story on the subject of 'make do and mend' and proudly showed off a cardigan she had asked an older neighbour to knit for her. These were small everyday actions, commensurate with those of the originating stories. Notably, they were not examples of the behaviours in the stories being 'adopted' – they were rather more nebulous and 'related' to the stories. The participant had interpreted action her own way. The story and workshop process had simply played a part.

Highlighting this point, other audiences reported the link between the workshops and any actions they took to be tenuous or subtle. The over-65 group reported many actions they had taken and yet were icy to the suggestion that the workshop or the stories might have played any part in this. 'We do that anyway', said one. 'I can't even remember the stories', said another. In another audience group several participants reported how they were inspired by storytelling itself. Actions they had taken were more related to trying out storytelling in new settings. From looking across all the notes, the data, the quotes and the worksheets the conclusion could be drawn that the stories led not only to a series of actions, but that the telling of the stories had impacted on the storytellers quite significantly and their ability to advocate for the environment. The question arising was how such an approach might apply more widely? And did it measure up to the scale of the challenge being addressed?

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Insights and questions arising

This question remains. The spirit of this work was ambitious. And yet the execution of it was, as often is the case, under-resourced and thinly spread. Each community only had two 1.5-hour workshops to view the stories and report on their actions. While initial signs were promising, the research highlighted that for sustained change, more cycles of inquiry and storytelling would have been needed. One onward path from this work might be to refine and develop the methodology with specific attention to the system – looking at how stories might more easily be told and how communities might more naturally be enabled to come together and discuss them. The move here is further into the realm of third-person systemic action research, away from the micro, attentional focus on story in this project – where we explored storytelling as a relational process and drew some insights into how stories might or

might not 'work' to inspire learning and new actions in others. It is here that there are some interesting lessons learned and questions to be posed to both the action learning and action research communities alike.

How might a story help people learn?

The project showed that narrative and storytelling can play an important role in both action research and action learning by helping individuals not only learn through the telling of their own stories but also through their engagement in the stories of others. Cortazzi writes that storytelling is 'an interactive process of jointly constructing experience with others' (Cortazzi 2001, 364). Time and again participants reported that the digital stories they saw reminded them of someone they knew or led them to recall their own experiences. The story therefore resides in the space between the teller and the audience and as Vignette 2 showed, to think of it as being 'owned' by the storyteller is a constraining idea. This action research project found out more about how stories work – that they help by mediating experience between people – in a relational way and in the space between 'I' and 'We'. This readily responds to those in the action learning community who suggest a focus more on learning as a social process (Lawless and McQue 2008) and away from the more limited focus on the reflective, but separate, individual (Trehan and Rigg 2005).

Opening the door for collective action?

An interesting continuing line of inquiry is how narrative, when combined with inquiry, might open the door for collective action. Stories necessarily reside between the teller and the audience – between 'you' and 'me'. The research described in this article shows the potential for stories to move beyond 'you' and 'me' to 'we' both inside and outside the room. Situating storytelling in action learning/research settings allows groups to reflect on themselves and opens up discussions as to what they might think can be said or is possible as a group. Notably in this research, the storyteller was brought into the room on film. This move is a different one to participants telling stories themselves. The digital story becomes a catalyst for discussion. It can travel easily and therefore have a greater reach. There is a political potential for a group or an individual to speak 'out' from the safety of a learning set or community of inquiry. And with that potential come both ethical and practical questions. The storyteller(s) engaged in telling a story that will travel is participating in something wider that they cannot see. The action researcher must mediate that by creating spaces around the story that are respectful to the travelling story and true to the shared intent. As Vignette 1 showed, connecting to a wider movement can be a very positive experience for the storyteller.

The question of collective action and wider impact is recognized within the action learning community. Lawless and McQue (2008) ask how learning

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conversations beyond the 'set' might occur. Speaking out from the set via stories could be one way for learning and action to move *out* from the 'set' to the organizations and communities in which they reside. Many questions arise. How might this occur? How does collective action play alongside individual learning in different action learning settings? How might the safe, generative space of the storytelling space be impacted if the 'collective' is being challenged more actively to speak out to the world and to themselves about what they might do?

Narrative action learning/research in practice – benefits/challenges

The telling of stories opens up the space to be human and this can feel natural and easy. It might even be fun! However the work of embedding storytelling in an action research or learning setting is a serious and artful endeavour. The act of narration is significant. Telling a story can help someone make sense of their world and so build understanding of themselves and what they do. By encapsulating their everyday actions in a digital story our storytellers became more confident in their pro-environmental advocacy. At the simplest level the research I have described shows that creating the space for stories to be created, shared and listened to in a reflective environment opens up safe and interesting pathways to individual inquiry and learning. The art and challenge for the practitioner lies in the framing and facilitation of this space.

By capturing multiple stories on film, this action research has also opened up questions of how collective and issues-based storytelling might work. This brings to the surface some deeper questions of how narrative might link to agency, learning and knowledge. Vignette 1 illustrates how the collective nature of storytelling boosted not only the storytellers' confidence, but also their sense of *agency* by connecting them with others in a 'movement' for change. Vignette 2 highlighted how, in terms of action, the digital stories had no new *knowledge* to offer to an already knowledgeable environmental group. And yet the combination of stories with reflective discussion opened up the space for new *learning* and possibly new action. By way of contrast, our audience of time-pressured, yet open-minded young mothers sought new practical *knowledge* from the stories. They developed an ability to act – their *agency* – through their discussions of *not knowing* together.

To conclude I want to relate these insights about narrative learning to Revans' well-known action learning equation:

$$\mathrm{L\,(learning)} = \mathrm{P\,(programmatic)} + Q\,(\textit{questioning insight}).$$

The equation clearly has some resonances with what has been described. As Vignette 2 described, questioning insight was in play strongly in this project. However, the idea of stories as programmatic knowledge is problematic.

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Recall our young mothers who reported feeling inspired but not quite able to grasp the information in the stories. Further the equation does not capture the plurality of stories as a resource that is being created and re-created in a social process. If we were to pursue an equation I would propose instead a complementary equation whereby learning derives from engaging with stories and questioning around them:

$$\mathrm{NL}\,(\textit{narrative learning}) = S(\textit{stories}) + Q.$$

The concluding suggestion is that narrative learning could complement and play alongside action learning and research with a number of benefits including: creating a shared well of stories; creating a safe and trusting space for inquiry; mediating experience through the stories of others; building confidence and 'showing' pathways to action. However there are challenges as Vignette 3 has highlighted. Once we enter into the world of story, the idea of causal linear impact becomes fuzzier. Narrative learning and stories seem to create potential rather than directly reportable learning and this is both the benefit and the challenge of doing this work.

That final point is key. And it is well illustrated by a young woman participating in one of the research workshops. When asked to report on any new actions she had taken since viewing the digital stories weeks before she replied:

> Well I can say I shopped differently which I did, but the main thing is I now have these stories in my mind, they're always there, they're part of me and they're something I will draw on – we just don't know when.

This captures beautifully the idea that narrative learning might be more a 'potential' than an explicit moment that can be pinpointed.

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Supplemental data

The underlying video research materials for this article can be accessed at http://www.vimeo.com/album/1469229. Supplemental data for this article can be accessed http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2015.1005572.

Note

1. A much loved children's storybook train character who is a train engine.

Notes on contributor

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