

Stories That Build Community: A Typology

Stories That Build Community: A Typology

Monday, June 1, 2015 -- Ben Smith

I see community building as an emergent set of practices that centers around fostering health and vibrancy in communities based on the knowledge and resources already present. How does this work, exactly? Well, like I said, it's emergent. But one commonality seems to have arisen clearly out of the initial confusion. Namely, community building involves some combination of convening and narration.

This combination of convening and narration clearly distinguishes community building from both journalism, which focused solely on the narrative aspect, and community organizing, which emphasized convening. And it is this combination which, I believe, can be one of its great strengths. This is because neither convening, nor narration is sufficient by itself. Both are necessary to support healthy community processes.

If we view
communities as
living systems...
we quickly see
that it is
impossible to
reduce them to
any one
essential
element.

If we view communities as living systems (and, in fact, I think there's a good argument to be made that community itself is an emergent property) then we quickly see that it is impossible to reduce them to any one essential element. Communities are not *just* the people that make them up. They're also their environments, their tools, their customs, and more. Nor are communities *just* the stories they tell themselves as deeply narrative animals. They're also their bodily practices, their knowledge frameworks, their fundamental ways of being in the world.

And it is for this very reason that community building cannot succeed if it focuses on one part of the system alone. But while the range of convening practices has grown — Art of Hosting, Open Space, Skilled Facilitation, Appreciative Inquiry, etc. — providing a number of tools for various situations, no similar development has taken place for narration. In other words, we have a pretty good toolbox for convening, but what about narration?

What I present here are first thoughts about (1) what kinds of narratives communities tell themselves and (2) what use each kind of narrative has in building community. I think that once we have a better understanding of our types of narrative and their utility, we will be in a much better position to help support communities through narrative. Without it, we may just continue stabbing in the dark.

A Narrative Typology

Humans have always told stories and so, before jumping straight into the 21st century, it will be useful to think first about what kinds of stories we are likely to have told since time immemorial.

If we look to preindustrial groups of say 150 — church congregations, small villages, tightly knit neighborhood groups, expat/immigrant communities — then we will find some similarities in how they use stories and information to support their wellbeing, whether written or not.

Stories That Support Identity

Small communities have certain core stories that define their identity: epic struggles, hero's stories, creation myths, fairy tales, and religious stories embody important historical events, founding individuals, and defining crises central to the shared identity.

In these stories, aesthetics and emotion play a big role. They are also open to continual reinterpretation. They must be repeated to have the necessary effect.

These stories answer the question: Who are we?

Reports

All communities have certain important events at which not all members were present that will be narrated so that everyone is “up-to-speed” on what happened. In oral cultures, this can be done on a one-to-one basis; you simply identify who needs to know what and tell them. In larger literate cultures, this is done in the form of news, updates, or reports. In these stories, concision and accuracy play a big role. They are supposed to hew closer to fact.

These stories answer the question: What just happened?

Calls To Arms

There are important moments in the lives of communities that require stock taking, a review of both identity and the current state-of-affairs, and then chart course for a desired future. Such narratives are relatively infrequent and often go unheeded. Nonetheless, they form a third important type and can serve as turning points in the growth of a community.

These stories answer the question: What do we need to do now?

Archives, Annals and Libraries

Communities often keep archives of whatever information they find significant: names, dates, stores, historical records, texts, and today, well, almost everything. While rarely told in narrative form, what information communities decide to keep on themselves is a core form of story telling.

These stories answer the question: What do we want to keep in memory?

Modern Narratives

In modern
societies we
tend to belong
to more than
one community
at once... thus
requiring
narratives that
weave
connections
between them.

In modern societies, narratives take on even more functions. Scale is certainly one main reason for this — the size of our communities requires different forms of narrative to support them. But there are other factors as well. In modern societies we tend to belong to more than one community at once — e.g. a neighborhood community, a school community, a church community, a national community — thus requiring narratives that weave connections between them. And many of our individual communities have grown highly complex in themselves. What other kinds of narrative are then necessary to support the modern conditions of our communities?

Sense Making

One outstanding characteristic of modern communities are their complexity. It's almost impossible to maintain an overview, thus encouraging many to give up trying. Sense-making pieces take what seems to be an incomprehensible situation and make it clearer. In many cases these are situations that community members

know are important and pressing but which, due to their complexity, they just throw their hands up at.

These stories answer the question: What is going on here?

Reminding Us Of What's Important

Membership in multiple communities and their individual complexity can also lead community members to lose touch with the values that attracted them in the first place. Just as we might grow used to the privilege and fortune we experience every day, so too can we forget why a community is important to us. Stories that remind us of this importance can thus be of great help in bring us back both physically and emotionally to a community.

These stories answer the question: Why is this community important?

Personal Stories To Remind Us That It Is A Community

Personal stories of all kinds serve to remind us that a community is made up of people. Large communities run the risk of dissolving into abstraction or being associated with their major institutions. This then makes us care less about them. Personal stories counterbalance that tendency and nurture the personal, authentic connections between community members. While a poor substitute for real conversation, they're much better than nothing at all and often the only choice in very large communities.

These stories answer the question: Who makes up my community?

Stories Of Hope

Stories of hope return us to the inner energy that drew us into a community in the first place. Often this energy is drained over time and by complexity, thus allowing community members to become disengaged or even drift off. As we shuttle between idealism and realism, inspiring stories of the future are a powerful motivator.

These stories answer the question: What could we manifest?

Address Misconceptions

Complexity within a community also creates the problems of misconceptions and destructive generalizations. These often become entrenched ways of thinking about

community issues, thus leading to bad thinking and stagnation. Addressing such misconceptions is important to bolster energy and commitment to a community.

These stories answer the question: How can we best think about our community?

The Next Step

My sense is that as we more fully explore the community-building duo of convening and narrative we will refine our thinking and learn to see what next steps can be the most supportive. But, for me, that is going to require much more nuanced thinking about what kinds of narratives serve what different functions. In other words, we're going to have to get a better understanding of our narrative toolbox.

This is what I hope to have set in motion here. But one thing I'm 100 percent convinced of is that this typology is incomplete. As a dyed-in-the-wool community building, I'm sure that others' contributions are necessary to turn this sketch of a way to think about narrative into a real plan.

So, if this is a helpful way to start thinking about the use of narrative in community building, then great. If you have some ideas about how to add to it, even better.

Comments

Submitted by Nora Smith (not verified) on Thu, 07/16/2015 - 12:12

[Permalink](#)

Delburne Alberta fully agrees!

Hi Ben...

Excellent, excellent article! It is so helpful as it assists my community development mindset grab onto and frameout narrative more readily. Fully agree about investigating which narrative tools best fit with various parts of the community development cycle. Our backbone team is completely willing to

collaboratively research alongside you, "testing and evaluating" tools as we explore creating a community communication strategy within the context of our local community development initiative (Belonging Delburne). This collective impact initiative is an opportunity for the community to come together, create connections and achieve the things that matter most to them. The underpinning is to build and deepen social connections ("Connect people to and within Delburne"). Would love to chat more with you about your insights so when you have a free moment in the craziness, please shoot me an email (delbfcss@delburne.ca). Thanks! Nora Smith

- [Reply](#)