

Tell Me a Story: Using Narratives to Illustrate Research Findings

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Abstract

Many become involved in mission research because of a desire to contribute to the growth of God's kingdom. So they are frustrated and disheartened when the findings from a demanding missiological research project sit unused. With this problem in mind, our research team decided to focus on finding ways to ensure that our research findings can be easily utilized by cross-cultural workers serving among Muslims. One of those research products is a series of narrative-based learning tools. In this paper, we explore the rationale for using narratives to illustrate mission research findings and the process by which we turn data and abstractions into easy reading narratives and associated tools. The ultimate goal of presenting data in this way is help field practitioners grow and develop by integrating our research findings into their ministries through missiological reflection.

The authors are members of Fruitful Practice Research, a multi-agency team studying activities that promote the emergence, vitality, and multiplication of fellowships of Jesus followers in a Muslim context.¹ We call these activities "fruitful practices" (Allen, et al. 2009). Most members of the team focus on conducting primary research and analysing the research. Others are tasked with creating tools to help field teams benefit from the research, developing materials to train field teams in reflective practice, or writing and producing materials to make the research accessible to others.

Our first round of research is complete. The team has just finished crunching the data. It's obvious that we have significant findings to report! Team member Bob Fish has collated his charts and graphs into a PowerPoint presentation file and prepared a talk. The international office of his agency has invited him to present the fruitful practice research. Fish, who holds a PhD, is well-equipped to answer any question that might arise from the 30-plus people present. He hopes they will understand how the data should change training and oversight of their teams in the Muslim world.

In the meeting, he describes the basis of our research, explaining the mixed-methods approach and mentioning the implication of "logistic regression models" for the findings. But wait! Eyes are glazing over. Some people are giggling. Perhaps they're embarrassed to say they can't really follow what he's talking about. Despite their visual appeal, graphs can be confusing to some people, especially when they represent complex concepts.

¹ The Fruitful Practices List is the result of an inductive multi-year, multi-agency study. It was distilled from the experience of hundreds of practitioners working among Muslim peoples (Woodberry 2011).

After that meeting, Bob and the rest of the team realized that we would not influence field practice unless we somehow translated our data into more user friendly material. As researchers, our uncovered knowledge would change no lives until we could “sell” our knowledge to other practitioners.

Making research findings useful and accessible is a concern somewhat peculiar to mission researchers. After all, pharmaceutical researchers conducting field trials of a new vaccine don't worry whether their data will be used. Of course it will be! But the ethnographer who painstakingly maps the tribes of her country and records their oral histories may rightly worry that no one will consult her work when they plan new mission strategy for the region. Due to the decentralized and entrepreneurial nature of the modern mission movement, nothing guarantees that the hard work of mission researchers will be applied within their own organizations, much less across wider boundaries. This was the dead end our research team wished to avoid. We had the data. Now how could we publish it in a way that affected field praxis?

In this paper, we explore the rationale for using narratives to illustrate mission research findings — the relationship between narratives and adult learning, the power of learning from experience (even the experiences of others), and the role narratives can play in helping workers better understand non-Western thought processes. Finally, we explain the process by which our research team turns data and abstractions into easy reading narratives and associated tools.

Narratives Are a Powerful Adult Learning Tool

The purpose of any research will indicate the best means of circulating the findings. For the Fruitful Practice Research team, our purpose was clear. The fundamental goal of our research is to see the Muslim world reached with the gospel. Three years into our project, our databases were packed with research that provided insights into how God is working in Muslim contexts. The importance of our task pushed us to do more than simply to publish our statistical findings; we want our findings to change behaviour. In fact, the network of agencies we serve invited us to educate and influence our community to adopt the practices that the research revealed to be most often associated with the emergence of fellowships of Jesus worshippers in the Muslim world. This widened our brief from pure research into such disparate fields as education and marketing.

For researchers to become change agents, we realised that we must become skilful adult educators. Some may object that narratives or other research reports cannot properly be called “education.” However, there is solid evidence that informal education and self-directed learning are important, if elusive, components of adult education (Merriam 2001, 94). Therefore, when we produce research findings that readers are able to easily integrate into their praxis, we are contributing to the adult education of our constituents.

Adult education specialists have long noted that narratives are an effective way to reach learners. As humans, we continuously construct and reconstruct our own life stories. Rossiter says we best absorb new information when we can hook that new information into our own life story: “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).

Narratives Help to Access Experience

Most will recognise the truth in the adage, “experience is the best teacher.” Does that mean that cross-cultural workers are doomed to be ineffective until they have broad experience in their new cultures? Several mission agency leaders realised that their members were reinventing the wheel on each new field or setting. This was poor stewardship of the experience of the many church planters who were already

successful in the Muslim world. (For more on subject, see Torkko et al 2009.) The recognition of this poor stewardship was one of the driving factors behind the formation of Fruitful Practice Research.

Our goal is to find ways to capture the experience of fruitful practitioners and make it available to others. Narratives that describe successful church planting efforts are a natural vehicle for this. The personal stories we select to develop into narratives have come from our research team's in-depth interviews with field workers across the Muslim world.

From a pedagogical perspective, one of the things that makes experience such a good teacher is that it places knowledge in context. For example, telling a teenager learning to drive that she must keep a "safe distance" from the car in front of her during driving lessons is important, but the knowledge of "safe distance" is highly abstract and notoriously difficult to assimilate. Yet let that same young driver experience the fear associated with having to brake hard to avoid an accident and "safe distance" will suddenly have a context and concrete meaning.

In a similar way, engaging with a real church-planting situation through reading a narrative allows the readers of our narratives to "experience" our research findings. By illustrating fruitful practices within some of the narratives from which it was discerned, we help the reader come into close contact with the actual experience. It helps readers to imagine themselves in a similar situation on their field and guess at how their actions might be similar or different. It gives them a vicarious experience, with concrete decisions and associated outcomes – the building blocks of experiential learning. Though this "experience" is not as deep or as rich as ones experienced first-hand, it often has more impact than abstract ideas because it helps people build their own knowledge base through the same processes as in personal experience, by observing and contemplating real life (Merriam and Kim 2008, 78-79).

Also, by illustrating the fruitful practices in real settings, the reader is able to note subtle differences between those contexts and their own. This encourages practitioners to think critically about contextual factors, something we believe to be a key in the development of solid missiological practice.

Narratives Orient Toward Non-Western Learning Style

One of the indirect advantages of using narratives to disseminate data and train missionaries is that it helps westerners move closer to the preferred learning style of their target audiences. Many assume that the biggest barrier to communication that cross-cultural workers face is language, but there may be something much deeper.

Several authors have compared Western and non-Western knowledge systems. One of the key differences is that Western knowledge is propositional: *this fact proves that fact*. However, non-Western knowledge patterns are "the kind of knowledge we carry with us ... embodied knowledge" (Burkhart 2004, 20).

Some Western missionaries may not be comfortable with this kind of thinking. They are often highly educated and likely trained in homiletics or pedagogy. Even if they haven't been formally trained, the years that they have been repeatedly exposed to Western teaching and preaching has indoctrinated them with the "right" way to impart spiritual truth. Even if they are aware of the differences in knowledge systems, it is unlikely that they have taken any time to work toward fluency in the preferred communication pattern of their target audience. Yet our research has shown that when communicating with people from oral cultures, narrative-based communication (often called storying) could be as important an aspect of communicating the gospel as language choice (Burke 2010, 153-154).

Exploring the concept of orality is beyond the scope of this article, but it does bring us back to the narratives. When cross-cultural workers are exposed to research findings embedded in narratives and find themselves learning through these vehicles, they are unknowingly moving closer to the conceptual universe of people for whom orality is not a subject of study but a worldview. When missionaries learn outside of the familiar cues associated with propositional teaching, they are encouraged to think in patterns more like their target audience. Of course, simply reading a few instructional narratives is not enough to transform trained, didactic teachers into fluent storytellers, but it is a nudge in the right direction. Considering the importance of orality in clearly communicating the gospel message, everything we do to move in that direction is an important step.

However, because of the way most Westerners are trained to think, they are sometimes hesitant about trusting narratives because they subconsciously interpret them as anecdotes and therefore unscientific, or inapplicable to their own situation. It might help to compare Fruitful Practice narratives to one of the classic genres of church literature, the missionary biography. Biographies of cross-cultural workers are in fact a form of data presentation, however, despite the many who are inspired by them, they have limited social science value because they are based on a sample size of one.

In contrast, the narratives our team produces are specifically selected to illustrate *practices* rather than personalities, and these practices are derived from a much larger sample size. Thus while there is superficial similarity between missionary biographies and the Fruitful Practice narratives, our selection and development process ensures that the stories we tell are not simply anecdotes but are trustworthy presentations of mixed-methods data, only presented through the vehicle of true stories.

Turning Mixed-Methods Data into Narratives

To facilitate the move to a more narrative approach of data presentation, the research team invited E.J. Martin, a former field worker with experience in editing and journalism, to join the team. This introduced a non-researcher's perspective into the team "DNA" and helped us think more like our target audience. Still, we were faced with the challenge of moving from abstract data to concrete, lucid narratives while ensuring that the narratives were rooted in the methodological validity of the research.

The first step was to compose writers guidelines and recruit skilled story writers. Although some field sources offered to write their own narratives, these offers were politely declined for two reasons: (1) It is a rare thing to find skilful story writers. Those who have been successful at planting churches in the Muslim world have rarely also developed a talent for writing. (2) Some distance and objectivity from the situation would contribute to the narrative being told more accurately. Writers were instructed not to produce journal articles, but something that, while factual, would engage readers as well as a piece of fiction. The target for word count was set high enough to give writers enough space to "waste" words on description to engage the senses of the readers

After several writers had been recruited, they were paired with sources. Selecting the source material was key. The way we handled this would determine whether the narratives were illustrations of solid research or nothing more than anecdotes. A number of factors affected the selection of source material: location, accessibility, willingness of the source and team to have their story told publicly, prior relationship with the writer, and the variety of practices to be illustrated. In keeping with our concern that this should be a form of data presentation, primary among the factors for selection were that the members of the research team affirmed that these sources and their situations would accurately reflect a cluster of the practices that our

mixed methods research had previously discerned. Thus, the researchers were involved in the development of narratives at two key points: selecting sources and later affirming the connection between the narratives and the fruitful practices which they were meant to illustrate.

It was also important to consider that a variety of fruitful practices would be illustrated across the narratives. Our analysis of the research indicated that fruitful practices do not typically occur in isolation, but rather in clusters. It was important that the narratives reflect this reality, because it helps readers to have a more realistic “experience” of fruitful practices.

As with any project, not all of the initiatives panned out. Some writers agreed to tackle a narrative and then proved unable to do so. Some sources were willing to tell their stories but then backed out because of concerns about confidentiality. The veracity of one source came into question and the narrative was pulled from the project.

In each case, maintaining the privacy of the original source was a key concern. Although all of the narratives are true stories about real people, to protect all of those involved, names were changed and locations left unspecific. Minor details were also sometimes changed in order to make the stories read smoothly. Each source had the opportunity to read the final draft to ensure that the facts were accurate and the privacy was maintained as necessary.

As the stories trickled in, were edited and polished, other members of the Fruitful Practice Research team got involved:

- Those who specialize in adult education helped to shape a package of questions to facilitate team discussions.
- Others experimented with ways to present narratives within a team situation.
- Those with expertise in knowledge management helped to think through best ways to distribute the materials across a world-wide multi-agency network.
- Those with art and publishing experience helped to shape the look of the actual printed product and consider distribution, printing, and marketing.

In the end, the production and distribution of narratives that illustrate fruitful practices required as much effort as the gathering and analysis of the original research data. Our hope is that the extra effort means that the original research actually affects field praxis.

Conclusion

For those of us in the mission community, doing research is only one part of a much larger issue. We want to inform, change, or influence field practice through our findings. Yet doing so is often a bigger challenge than conducting the research itself. The members of Fruitful Practice Research are attempting to overcome this hurdle by using narrative learning tools as one of the ways that we disseminate our findings. This approach is driven by a desire to not only make our findings accessible and understandable, but to make them easily assimilated into the lives and ministries of field practitioners.

In this paper we have examined three arguments that support the use of a narrative approach. First we observed that the field of adult education has long noted that adults best absorb new information when it can be hooked into their own life stories. Narrative learning tools facilitate that type of adult education. Second, we saw that narratives help field practitioners access the experience of others. Experience is a good

teacher because it places knowledge in context. By embedding our research findings in narratives, we allow readers to encounter those findings in their natural contexts. We also explored the idea that using narratives helps readers become oriented toward non-Western learning styles. Since many Muslim societies are oral cultures, accessing the research through narratives can help field practitioners work toward fluency in the preferred learning style of their target people, which our research has shown to be of vital importance.

Finally, we explained the approach our team has used to turn mixed methods data into flowing narrative. Some of the keys in accomplishing this were: carefully selecting source stories that illustrate practices strongly supported in the data and inviting the participation of skilled story writers so that the narratives read like stories rather than articles. However, from the perspective of validity, perhaps the most important factor was the recurring involvement of researchers during the development of the narratives to insure that they were illustrating data, not just telling interesting stories.

Narratives are not a panacea for the difficult task of disseminating research findings in a way that influences field praxis, but they can be part of the picture. One mission agency leader put it this way:

Our people need to hear the stories as well as the scientific findings. If these are genuinely fruitful practices, we need to tell those true stories and let the fruitful practices, in a sense, present themselves.

The narratives discussed in this paper have been published as a book, *Where There Was No Church: Postcards from Followers of Jesus in the Muslim World*. To order copies, please visit www.learningtogetherpress.com. These narratives are only one of the ways that Fruitful Practice Research is creatively disseminating research data. We have developed a wide range of materials which help make our findings useful to field practitioners and agency leadership—team self-assessment tools, downloadable presentations, podcasts and other resources. These are available by request from info@fruitfulpractice.org.

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