



# Scaling Transformative Change

OFFICE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH AND LEADERSHIP

Leadership

Adoption and  
Adaptation

Evidence

**Storytelling**

Networks

Dissemination

Technology

Spread and  
Endurance

## Transformative Change Initiative Overview

The Transformative Change Initiative (TCI) is dedicated to assisting community colleges to scale-up innovations that improve student outcomes and program, organization, and system performance.

***Guiding Principle for Storytelling:** Scaling of transformative change will occur when storytelling is used to facilitate learning about innovation and transformative change.*

Storytelling is a common form of communication and is fundamental to how humans learn. It is also essential to transformative change. Storytelling can be used as a tool to build organizational capacity and culture because we do it naturally (Escalfoni, Braganholo, & Borges, 2011). Storytelling done well builds trust in organizations, and among people, by adding a personal component to often complex situations and creating relationships among those involved.

Community college personnel use storytelling to promote information sharing and expand other people's knowledge about innovative policies and practices in the context that makes each college unique. Faculty tell stories about the success of their students. They share stories about classes that went particularly well, and ones that failed. Students tell stories about courses that made a difference in their lives, and those that didn't. Administrators tell stories about the mission of their institutions and the ways in which colleges can better serve their communities and students. Employer partners tell stories about the graduates they hire, and what they can do on the job. Sometimes, several people who experience a common event combine individual stories to create a group story.

*Students' perspectives, as told by them or through others' stories, are an invaluable resource for understanding the impact of the many innovations being implemented by community colleges.*

Stories play a significant role in communication within networks comprised of hundreds of community colleges across the United States. Stories ignite discussions at the state, regional, and national levels about the potential for innovation and how to bring about transformative change, accelerating the adoption of practices intended to improve outcomes for all students, particularly those that have not traditionally been served. Through storytelling in formal and informal settings, community college practitioners and leaders are shaping a national narrative of what is working and how to address challenges they mutually face.

Critical to storytelling is the ability of storytellers to be good communicators. In order for transformative change to take place, they need be able to tell stories that represent the voice of multiple populations to be well understood by the diverse audiences who listen. The student voice is a particularly important perspective to include. Students' perspectives, as told by them or through others' stories, are an invaluable resource for understanding the impact of the many innovations being implemented by community colleges.

Good storytellers are known for their ability to spread information and knowledge in an inspiring, yet neutral way that is inclusive of a broad range of listeners' interests and diverse experiences. They possess the skills to share the most important and relevant details in such a way that listeners are engaged, inspired to learn more, and sometimes also moved to take action themselves.

The following simple framework helps storytellers organize their thoughts into a concise story that can be understood by most.

1. Descriptions should include all information related to the individual perceptions of the people involved. They can include views, data, hypotheses, or others.
2. Providing some background sets the context of the environment. It can include descriptions of places, persons, artifacts, activities, and other relevant information that is unique to the setting.
3. Facts describe tangible events, difficulties faced, decisions made, and outcomes realized. Facts help the storyteller identify actions taken and decisions made that resulted in both success and failure. Facts help listeners avoid similar problems (Escaloni, Braganholo, & Borges, 2011).

The act of storytelling can also inspire the storyteller and facilitate listeners to think differently than they have before, which can lead to innovation and professional breakthroughs (Perret, Borges, & Santoro, 2004). Telling and listening to stories that are deliberately used as organizational communication tools help people better understand what they are a part of. By reflecting on what they and others have done and what they have learned, people can make decisions and take action that impacts the future.

Storytelling and reflective practice is one way to accomplish what Argyris and Schön (1978) call double loop learning, the process of questioning the thinking that drives actions, starting with one's own. In creating a story, people select the key points they want to make (e.g., what they learned) from the whole experience. The story can include multiple perspectives, or that of a single observant. What is included and what is left out is a selection process that requires self-reflection, and the final story represents what the storyteller believes to be true and wants to be known. According to Senge (1994), "Truly great stories blend head and heart" (p. 293).

Another type of storytelling in organizations is the group story. Group storytelling has been used to support the adoption and spread of innovation in community colleges (Bennett, Bragg, & Kirby, 2012). A group story results in a narrative that always reflects diverse perspectives and as such, has the potential to appeal to a broad range of potential adopters. In creating a group story, each person creates and then shares a personal account about a defining moment or breakthrough about something learned or witnessed as being part of an initiative or adopting an innovation. After individual stories are shared, the team of people who participated in the experience creates a group story that reflects members' individual differences and their commonalities. By combining stories from diverse perspectives, group storytelling often yields a richer story and more comprehensive narrative. One advantage of group storytelling as an organizational learning tool is that it can help ensure that the lessons learned about implementation, improvement, and scaling of an innovation are well understood so that transfer of the reform process is facilitated to other programs and strategies.

As Pratchett wisely wrote, "People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact, it is the other way around" (2009, p. 1). The stories we tell can influence our beliefs, learning, and actions, and the outcomes we are trying to achieve. Storytelling is a critical component of transformative change, without which people and organizations may struggle to move forward or remain isolated. Stories convey important information about the creation and implementation of innovative ideas, the people who have been involved and impacted by those ideas, and the potential that promising innovations can have when shared with others toward the goal of achieving greater success for all students.

### References

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