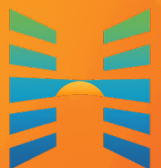


NARRATIVE ENGAGEMENT ACROSS DIFFERENCE

**PRACTICE GUIDE:
EXPLORING HOW NARRATIVES
SHAPE THE WORLD WE SEE**

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**HORIZONS
PROJECT**





Why Narrative Landscape Mapping

The following Practice Guide is part of a training module on Narrative Engagement Across Difference within a broader curriculum on [Block, Bridge and Build Organizing for Lasting Democracy \(BOLD\)](#).

The Guide explores how the stories people use to make sense of the world shape what becomes visible, legitimate, and possible in democratic life. This work is based on a central premise: both individually and collectively, we act not only on facts, interests, or values, but within narratives that shape what we can recognize, imagine, and do. In this way, narratives can expand or constrain our individual and collective agency. You will be invited to surface the narratives shaping how you read a given situation, recognize the narrative conditions shaping democratic life, and come away with concepts and practices you can bring into your own work toward a more pluralistic, democratic future.



WE EXPLORE:

- ✦ **Why narrative matters**, and how the stories people live inside shape what they notice, trust, and treat as realistic, so you can recognize the narrative conditions shaping a conflict or change effort.
- ✦ **Key narrative concepts**, including narrative maps, dominant narratives, and legitimacy, so you can see how a story comes to feel like reality itself and shapes what is treated as common sense and legitimate.
- ✦ **Narrative engagement as a practice**, working with the stories beneath conflict, strategy, and identity, so you can approach difference with curiosity about how others make sense of the world

LEARNING AIMS:

- ✦ **To recognize** the narratives shaping how you understand a situation, conflict, or opportunity, including the assumptions that have come to feel self-evident.
- ✦ **To examine** how dominant narratives shape what is visible, legitimate, and actionable, both in your own thinking and in the contexts where you work.
- ✦ **To engage** difference with more curiosity about how others make sense of the world, so that narrative change can open new possibilities for action and collaboration.



Reflection: Think of a situation where you and someone else look at the same events and reach very different conclusions about what is happening. What underlying assumptions might each of you be taking for granted?



WHY NARRATIVE MATTERS

Democratic societies depend on people's ability to navigate difference, disagreement, and complexity. Yet many of the challenges facing democratic renewal today are not simply disagreements over facts, policies, or values. They are also conflicts between different ways of understanding how the world works, who belongs, what matters, and what kinds of change are possible.

Many efforts to strengthen democracy focus on changing what we're aware of on the surface: policies and practices, institutions, behaviors, or public opinion. These efforts are indeed crucial. Yet, they often encounter a recurring challenge: people can look at the same event, the same information, or the same problem and come away with very different understandings of what is happening, what matters, and what should be done.

Narratives help explain these differences.



Narratives are not simply stories people tell. They are broader systems of meaning that shape how people interpret the world around them. Narratives influence how we understand identity, responsibility, belonging, conflict, and social change. They shape what we notice, what we ignore, what we trust, and what we believe is worth pursuing.

Because narratives often operate beneath surface awareness, they can become difficult to recognize. Over time, a narrative can become so familiar that it stops feeling like a story and begins to feel like reality itself. Strategies that fit the dominant narrative appear practical and obvious, like “common sense.” Strategies that do not fit – no matter how beneficial they might be – may seem unrealistic, naïve, or even threatening.

This matters because democratic renewal depends upon people’s capacity to act. Yet people do not act only based on resources, opportunities, or interests. They also act based on what they are able to imagine. When dominant narratives obscure possibilities for action, collaboration, or change, people’s sense of individual and collective agency can narrow. They may struggle not only to imagine alternatives, but also to find language for experiences that fall outside the dominant story.

A narrative approach does not require agreement with different ways of understanding an issue. Instead, it encourages curiosity about the experiences, concerns, and assumptions that shape how people make sense of the world. This shift can help us move beyond explanations that rely primarily on ignorance, irrationality, or bad intent and toward a deeper understanding of the narrative conditions shaping conflict.



Reflection: What is a belief in your field that gets treated as simple “common sense”? Where might it have come from, and what does holding the belief make harder to notice?



KEY CONCEPTS

Narratives

While we explored the concept of narrative in the above section, it's worthwhile to repeat a brief definition: Narratives are systems of meaning that shape how people interpret and act on the world around them. They are not simply "a story;" rather, they are the recurring ideas and themes that run through and connect many separate stories. Narratives' relationship to stories runs in both directions: a narrative can emerge from a set of stories, and narratives supply the templates, or "maps," that shape new ones. ^(1, 2)

Stories

Stories are specific tales about particular events, people, and institutions. Where a narrative recurs across many tellings, a story has a beginning, middle, and end. Stories draw from existing narratives, and many stories together can shift existing narratives or form entirely new ones. ^(1,2)

Stories vs. Narrative: Example

The Bootstraps Narrative: A person starting with nothing (usually imagined as a man) faces long odds, outworks them, and rises through sheer effort and refusal to quit. (1)

- ✦ The bootstraps narrative turns up across all kinds of individual stories, for example: In Carl Barks' 1952 comic "Only a Poor Old Man," Scrooge McDuck explains that he earned his fortune by being "tougher than the toughies and smarter than the smarties," and adds that he made it square.
- ✦ The TV show *Empire* depicts a family that rises from poverty to run a successful record label. (1)
- ✦ In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Christian Grey describes building his company into what it is entirely on his own (though he omits mentioning that Elena Lincoln put up the capital he started with).

Each is its own story: a particular person, particular obstacles, a particular rise. What makes them part of one narrative is the pattern they share.



Narrative Maps

People move through the world using inherited “maps” that help them make sense of reality. These maps are made up of stories, assumptions, experiences, and cultural understandings that shape how we interpret what we encounter.

There is a saying about maps: “the map is not the territory.”⁽³⁾ Put another way, a perfectly accurate map would perfectly replicate the whole landscape at life-size and therefore be perfectly useless. Maps are helpful because they focus on roads, population density, ore deposits, etc., whatever the map is for. But the same focus that makes a map useful also selectively omits the rest of the landscape.

Narrative maps work the same way. Different narrative maps make different aspects of reality easier or harder to see and shape our reactions accordingly. For example: Someone who carries the narrative map that “teachers indoctrinate our children into harmful ideologies” may resist raising school funding; while someone with the narrative map “teachers are hardworking heroes who care deeply about their students” may oppose stricter teacher evaluations.

Dominant Narratives

Some narratives become so widespread and familiar that they stop feeling like stories and begin to feel like reality itself.

Dominant narratives shape what is considered common sense, realistic, and legitimate. They influence not only what people believe, but also what they are able to notice and take seriously.

One example of a dominant narrative in the US is “rugged individualism,” a widely employed narrative that functions as “common sense” in mainstream culture. It gives strict instructions for how to make it in America: when you meet hardship, you handle it alone, and you build your success without any help. In this narrative, your worth is measured by whether you needed anyone. Standing on your own becomes the mark of a serious adult, and asking for help marks you as a failure and, perhaps worse, as an outsider. In practice, it shapes which policies feel legitimate: a mortgage deduction reads as a reward for planning ahead, a housing voucher as a handout, though both are federal housing subsidies. It also makes building things together look like weakness, which raises the cost of the collective action democratic life depends on.



Legitimacy

Narratives do not simply shape what people think. They also shape what becomes recognizable as legitimate.

Some experiences, concerns, identities, relationships, and possibilities fit comfortably within dominant narratives and are readily understood. Others remain difficult to recognize, explain, or validate. As a result, aspects of reality may be present and meaningful while remaining difficult to acknowledge within the prevailing story.

Legitimacy matters because what is recognized as legitimate often influences what can be discussed, supported, organized around, or acted upon. Narratives help determine whose experiences matter, whose voices are heard, and which possibilities are taken seriously.

When new experiences, concerns, or possibilities become visible and legitimate, people's sense of what they can say and do may expand as well.

A narrative perspective encourages us to remain curious about what our own stories help see and what they may make harder to recognize.

Narrative Engagement

Narrative engagement is the practice of working with the stories that shape how people understand themselves, others, and the world around them. As authoritarianism rises and democratic norms erode around the world, the very people and movements working to defend them often struggle to collaborate across their own differences of ideology, identity, and strategy. Narrative engagement treats that struggle itself as the site of the work. ⁽⁴⁾

Rather than focusing only on persuasion, narrative engagement invites us to examine the assumptions operating beneath conflict, strategy, identity, and social change. The goal is not necessarily agreement. Rather, it is to better understand the narrative conditions shaping what people are able to recognize, imagine, articulate, and act upon.



An example of this practice could be building connection through something other than shared ideology. The Milk Tea Alliance, a pan-Asian network of pro-democracy activists, organizes across national and political lines not around a shared platform, but around a shared cultural reference, letting people with different beliefs and priorities work side by side without first agreeing on politics. ⁽⁴⁾ Narrative engagement seeks to expand what becomes visible, legitimate, and possible within a given situation. Part of how that expansion happens is through collective imagination of a shared future. Research on futures thinking shows that inviting people to imagine a positive, longer-term vision together, rather than only reacting to immediate threats, tends to expand who counts as “we” and increases people’s willingness to act collectively toward that future. In this sense, narrative engagement can generate possibilities: it builds the story of what a situation could become, together with the people who will have to live it. ⁽⁴⁾



Reflection: In your context, whose concerns and experiences tend to be easy to raise and take seriously, and whose tend to get waved off? What story makes that difference feel normal?

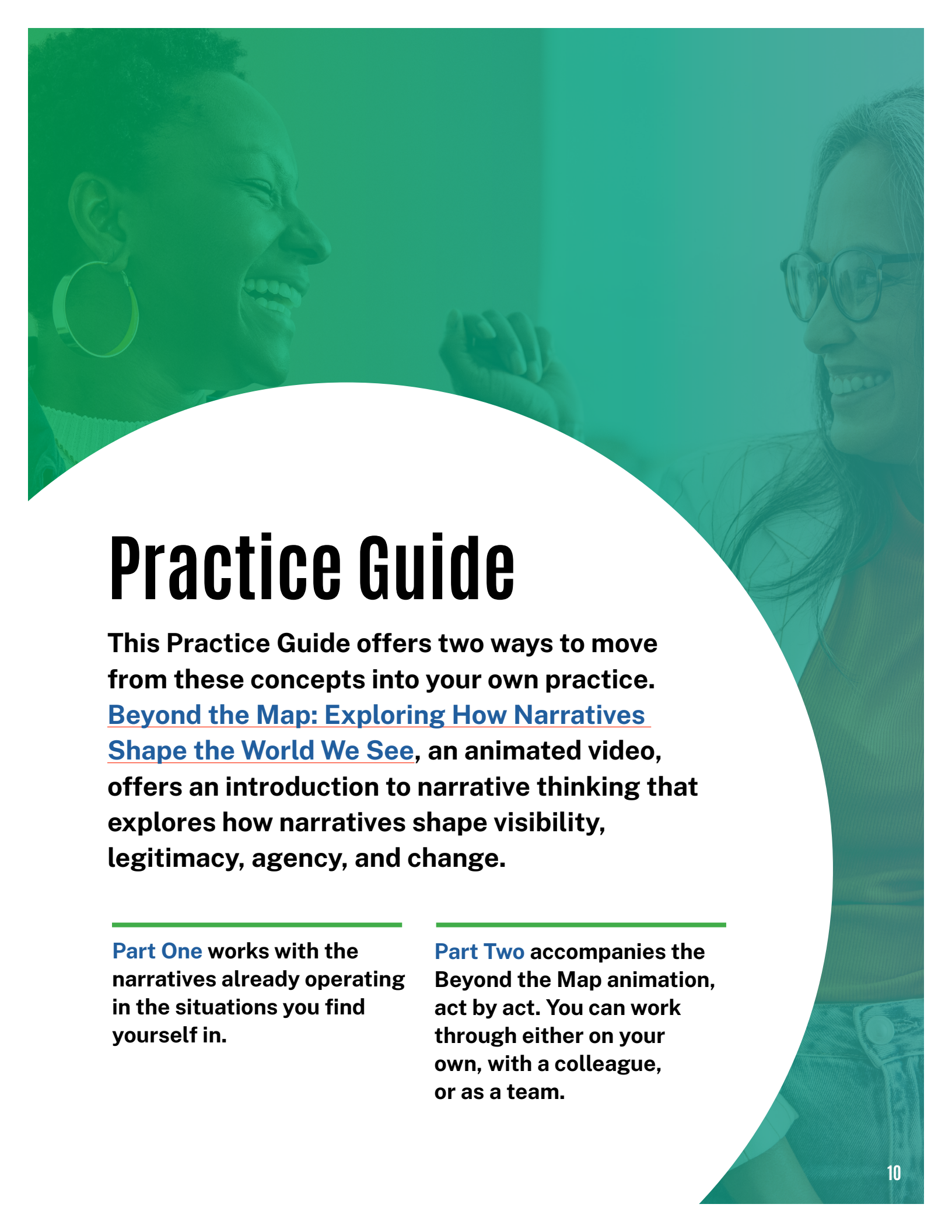
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¹ FrameWorks Institute. (2021). The features of narratives: A model of narrative form for social change efforts. Retrieved July 16, 2026, from <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2021/09/The-features-of-narratives.pdf>

² Narrative Initiative. (no publication date available). What is narrative? Retrieved July 16, 2026, from <https://narrativeinitiative.org/what-is-narrative/>

³ Commonly traced to Alfred Korzybski (1933), and often attributed to Gregory Bateson or Michael White, the phrase now circulates widely across narrative and systems practice.

⁴ Cobb, S., Sultanli, J., & Castel, A. (2023). Collaborating across differences to reduce authoritarianism: A literature review. The Horizons Project. Retrieved July 16, 2026, from <https://horizonsproject.us/resources/literature-review-collaborating-across-difference-to-reduce-authoritarianism/>



Practice Guide

This Practice Guide offers two ways to move from these concepts into your own practice. [Beyond the Map: Exploring How Narratives Shape the World We See](#), an animated video, offers an introduction to narrative thinking that explores how narratives shape visibility, legitimacy, agency, and change.

Part One works with the narratives already operating in the situations you find yourself in.

Part Two accompanies the Beyond the Map animation, act by act. You can work through either on your own, with a colleague, or as a team.



NARRATIVE ENGAGEMENT IN YOUR OWN WORK

These practices ask you to work with the stories already shaping your context. You can choose to move through them in order – they are designed to build upon each other. Or you can choose one or more that fit your situation best.

Turning Your Map into a Story

Bring to mind a current stuck point in your work – this could be a disagreement, a project that seems to be dragging on, a point of confusion between you and possible collaborators, or any other stuck point that comes to mind. Instead of weighing who is right, first describe the situation as a story:

- ✦ Who are the actors?
- ✦ What is the problem facing the actors?
- ✦ How do each of the actors approach the problem?
- ✦ What would a “happy ending” look like to you in this story? What would a “happy ending” look like to each of the other actors? Where are there differences and similarities?



Reflection: What surprised you? Is there anything on their map that your own map leaves off? Where do your two maps overlap? Where do they diverge?



Noticing Your Reactions

The next time you meet a view that you disagree with, pause before you respond and bring your attention to your body.

- ✦ Notice where the reaction shows up as physical sensations: Do you notice a tightening in the chest? A held breath? Heat in the face? Tingling in your feet? Let the sensation itself be the information, without adding words at this time.
- ✦ Take one slow breath and stay with the sensations, a moment or two longer than you normally would.
- ✦ After you have stayed with the sensation, begin putting words to it: “I feel angry” or “I’m scared of getting hurt” or “I feel excluded” or whatever comes up for you.

Often, that physical activation is the first sign that a different narrative has met your own, coming in before our conscious words and thoughts. The act of intentionally feeling, and then naming, the sensation to yourself can open just enough room to stay curious.

Getting Curious About a Different Map

Choose one person whose approach to your shared work consistently puzzles you. Pick something specific: a stance they keep taking, a priority they keep returning to, a reaction you don’t fully understand.

Before you talk to them, try sketching their map on your own first:

- ✦ What does their map seem to make easy for them to see?
- ✦ What might it make harder for them to see?
- ✦ What experiences (a past project, a professional training, a personal history) might have built this map?
- ✦ Then, if you can, ask them directly what experience shaped how they came to see it this way. Listen for the story underneath the position, not just the position itself.



Then Reflect: What surprised you? Is there anything on their map that your own map leaves off? Where do your two maps overlap? Where do they diverge?



Widening What Counts

Think of an idea or possibility in your context that tends to get set aside before it is seriously considered.

- ✦ Who is usually in the room when this idea comes up, and who isn't?
- ✦ What reasons tend to get given for setting it aside? Are they about resources and timing, or something less examined?
- ✦ Whose experience would need to be taken seriously for this idea to land differently?
- ✦ What would have to become sayable, legitimate, or fundable for it to get a real hearing?

Finally, name one small thing you could do to make room for it. As you name this, reflect: What did you notice in yourself while thinking through why this idea keeps getting set aside? Is there any hesitation of your own about pushing for it?



Reflection: Which of these practices felt most uncomfortable to try, and what might that discomfort be pointing toward?



BEYOND THE MAP

This is a self-guided practice to accompany “Beyond the Map: Exploring How Narratives Shape the World We See,” a short, animated introduction to narrative thinking that explores how narratives shape visibility, legitimacy, agency, and change. You can complete it on your own, with a colleague, or as part of a team discussion.

The purpose is not to arrive at the “right” interpretation of the animation. Instead, the goal is to explore how narratives shape what feels true, possible, and worth doing in your own work and life.

As you move through the animation, pause after each act and spend a few minutes reflecting on the questions below.



Beyond the Map: Exploring How Narratives Shape the World We See



ACT 1: Inherited Narrative Maps

In the opening of the animation, Kai and Ori move through the world using different maps. Their experiences invite us to consider how our own assumptions shape what we notice and how we make sense of what we encounter.



Reflection: Think about a challenge, conflict, or change effort you are currently involved in.

- ✦ What assumptions do you hold about how change happens?
- ✦ What approaches feel naturally effective or legitimate to you?
- ✦ What approaches feel less realistic or less useful?
- ✦ Where did these beliefs come from?
- ✦ How might someone with a very different experience understand the same situation?

Practice: Complete the following statements

- ✦ Change happens when...
- ✦ People respond to...
- ✦ Progress is most likely when...
- ✦ A successful strategy usually requires...

Review your responses. What story about change seems to be operating beneath them?



ACT 2: The Pull of the River

In Act 2, the current feels natural and inevitable to Kai. The same current feels very different to Ori. The animation invites us to notice how dominant narratives can become so familiar that they stop feeling like stories and start feeling like reality.



Reflection:

- ✦ What beliefs in your field, organization, or community are rarely questioned?
- ✦ Which assumptions feel like “common sense”?
- ✦ What strategies are treated as obviously correct?
- ✦ What ideas or approaches are often dismissed before they are seriously considered?

Practice: Think about your current challenge or area of work.

Complete the following:

- ✦ An alternative possibility that feels difficult but intriguing is:
- ✦ If this possibility were taken seriously, we would:
- ✦ For that to become possible, we would need:

What narrative assumptions would need to shift for this possibility to feel legitimate?



ACT 3: Becoming Cartographers

Act 3 explores what it takes for something outside a dominant story to become visible. Narrative change often begins when people encounter experiences, relationships, or practices that do not fit their existing map.



Reflection:

- ✦ What approaches or possibilities currently sit outside the dominant story in your work?
- ✦ What makes them difficult to see, consider, or pursue?
- ✦ What risks come with moving beyond familiar assumptions?
- ✦ Have you ever experienced a moment when something you once dismissed became meaningful or important?

Practice: Think about your current challenge or area of work.

Complete the following:

- ✦ An alternative possibility that feels difficult but intriguing is:
- ✦ If this possibility were taken seriously, we would:
- ✦ For that to become possible, we would need:

What narrative assumptions would need to shift for this possibility to feel legitimate?



ACT 4: Living Inside Questions

The animation ends without providing a new master map. Instead, it invites us to navigate a richer and more complex landscape. Thinking narratively is less about finding certainty and more about expanding what we can see.



Reflection:

- ✦ What assumptions feel less solid than they did before?
- ✦ What questions are emerging for you?
- ✦ What new possibilities have become visible?
- ✦ Where are you noticing complexity that you previously overlooked?
- ✦ What would it mean to work with that complexity rather than trying to eliminate it?

Practice:

Write a brief reflection on the following prompt:

What story am I currently living inside, and how might that story be shaping what I believe is possible?



INTEGRATION REFLECTION

As you conclude, spend a few minutes considering the animation as a whole.

◀ Looking Back

- ✦ What idea stayed with you most strongly?
- ✦ What challenged you?
- ✦ What surprised you?

🧘 Looking Inward

- ✦ What narratives shape how you understand your work?
- ✦ Which of those narratives feel most powerful?
- ✦ Which feel most limiting?

▶ Looking Forward

- ✦ What is one narrative assumption you want to continue exploring?
- ✦ What is one action you might take differently as a result of this reflection?
- ✦ What is one question you want to keep alive?

💬 Closing Thought

The goal of thinking narratively is not to find a final or perfect story. It is to become more aware of the stories shaping what feels true, necessary, and possible. As those stories become more visible, new forms of understanding, relationship, and action can emerge.